

MONTAGE AS THE FOUNDATION OF CINEMATOGRAPHY

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Source: Translated by Ronald Levaco, in Ronald Levaco, ed., *Kuleshov on Film: Film Writings by Lev Kuleshov*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974, pp. 42–55. (Originally published as *Iskusstvo Kino*, 1929.)

The purpose of my book is to familiarize the reader with my work—the work of the Kuleshov group.

I will not deal with the state of this method at present, but rather with how this method developed and what forms were found for it. The fact is that the work which my group and I carried out in cinematography began eleven or twelve years ago, and only in recent years, thanks to the revolution, thanks to changes in production organization, did it become possible for us to achieve meaningful results.

At first these were gained with great difficulty, and I consider it necessary to note those stages through which our work developed.

At the beginning of the First World War Russia's cinema was fairly large-scale, it had begun to produce merchandise, which went to the marketplace and returned a definite profit. Any number of people leapt into cinematography—actors, directors, scenarists, cameramen, all thirsty for easy earnings in a fresh field, but the film industry in Russia was so disorganized that some of questionable intent leapt into it. Thus, filmworkers consisted of a conglomerate of bandits, chiselers—people without any education whatsoever, who were eager to squeeze money out of cinema but who were uninterested in its cultural growth.

What is more, filmmakers became obsessed with writing about their work in newspapers and magazines. Some said it was a real art, others that it was not, that it was altogether nonsense, and so on.

Shallow articles and superficially enthusiastic reviews appeared. Even what seemed to be a critical controversy emerged, but it was not serious.

It was at this time that a group of people, interested as was I in serious cinematography, posed for itself a whole series of problems and took up

their solution. Above all, we reminded ourselves that in order to determine just what cinematography was, it was necessary to find those specific characteristics and those specific means of impressing the viewer, which are present only in cinema and no other art.

Let us say if we are to examine any other form of art, such as music for example, that we should find a definite auditory content in it. Sounds abound in nature, and these sounds, this musical material, are fixed by composers into an ordered arrangement, placed into a prescribed relationship to each other (i.e., organized into a certain form) which is harmonic and rhythmic and thus emerge as a musical work.

Similarly it was quite clear to us what happens in painting: color too has a material form and it is this which is organized; so, in all other artistic crafts, it was equally possible to determine exactly the material of any given art, the means of its practice, and the method of its organization.

Yet when we began to analyze the filmic picture, it was very difficult for us to determine *what* emerged as its material, how this material was organized, what is the integral, basic impression-making means of cinema, what sets cinema apart from other forms of performance and from other arts. But it was quite clear to us that cinema has its own special means of influencing its viewers, since the effect of cinema on the viewer was radically unlike the effect of other entertainments and spectacles.

We then examined how a motion picture is constructed. In order to determine the main strength of the cinematographic effect, we took one strip of film, cut it apart into its separate shots and then discussed where the very “filmness” which is the essence of filmic construction lay.

Imagine that we have taken a passage of film in which superb actors played superb scenes in superb settings. The cameraman shot this scene very well. We projected this film onto a screen, and what did we see? We saw a living photograph of very good film actors, a living photograph of splendid sets, a well-filmed scene, a well-conceived plot, beautiful photography, and so on, but without cinema being in any one of these elements. It became perfectly apparent that cinematography is a specific thing, a photographic device that gives the illusion of movement, while what I was just describing has nothing in common either with the concept of cinematography or with the motion picture itself. In this example, we saw no specific methods of affecting the viewer cinematographically. Having arrived at these rather nebulous conclusions—that what we had viewed was not cinema, that it had no characteristic peculiar to it—we continued our research.

We went to various motion picture theaters and began to observe which films produced the greatest effect on the viewer and how these were made—in other words, which films and which techniques of filmmaking held the viewer, and how we could make him sense what we had conceived, what we wished to show, and how we intended to do this. At that time, it was wholly unimportant to us whether this effect was beneficial or even harmful to the

viewer. It was only important for us to locate the source of cinematographic impressibility, and we knew if we did discover this means, that we should be able to direct it to produce whatever effect was needed.

We decided to begin our observations at the city's central cinemas, but it became apparent to us that for our purposes these were not the right places. First, a fairly wealthy public patronized these cinemas, and in a wealthy and well-educated audience it is considered in poor taste to display emotions: one must be reserved, and try to respond to what is taking place. Second, at that time people interested in romance frequented the more expensive theaters—where it was dark, where there were loges, and this whole setting was a convenient place to pass the time with a lady friend. And third, a rather large number of psychologically disturbed viewers went to the more expensive theaters, the “soul of Polonsky,” the “soul of Maximov,” “darling Kholodnaya—or Coralli,” etc.¹

The public in cheaper theaters, less educated, much rougher and more spontaneous, was not as neurotic and therefore reacted much more directly to the effect of the action and entertainment on the screen. Because of this, if that public was pleased by a particular scene in the picture, it applauded, shouting its approval; whereas if something in particular displeased it, it whistled and demonstrated its indignation unmistakably. It was easier for us to observe this public and to make our observations. Then it became apparent, first of all, that it was not Russian films but foreign ones that were the most popular.

It was foreign films that attracted the viewer most of all and forced him to react. This was easily understood. The point was that the technique of foreign films was finer than that of Russian films. The photography in foreign films was considerably clearer and sharper, the casting of actors more precise, the direction richer and more absorbing. Hence, in their clarity and in their technical aspects, foreign films attracted a larger audience than did Russian ones. Of foreign films it was the American ones that elicited the maximum reaction, the greatest noise and applause. When it became apparent to us that American films were best in terms of their influence on the viewer, we took them for our study.

We began to analyze not only the separate shots of a film but studied its entire construction.

We took two films, for example—an American and a comparable Russian one—and we saw that the difference between them was enormous. It became apparent that the Russian film was constructed of several very lengthy shots photographed from a single position. The American film, on the other hand, at that time consisted of a large number of short shots filmed from various positions, because, it might be explained, for the price of admission the American viewer demands in return the maximum impressions, the maximum entertainment, and the maximum action. It was necessary in the American film to pack into the required number of reels the

devil-only-knows how many incidents and to display them in the most interesting way since, I repeat, the American demands a full show for his dollar.

Thanks to this commercial determinant of the American film, thanks to the very tempo of American life, much more accelerated than the tempo of Russian or European life, thanks to all this, what caught our attention in the American film is that they consist of whole series of very short shots, of whole series of brief sequences joined in some predetermined order, as opposed to the Russian film, which at that time consisted of a few very long scenes, monotonously following one after another.

Working further, on comparing an American film to a Russian one in order to test its effect on the viewer, we became convinced that the fundamental source of the film's impact on the viewer—a source present only in cinema—was not simply to show the content of certain shots, but the organization of those shots among themselves, their combination and construction, that is, the interrelationship of shots, the replacement of one shot by another. This is the basic means that produces the impact of cinematography on the viewer.

The content of the shots in itself is not so important as is the joining of two shots of different content and the method of their connection and their alternation.

In American films, where shots very quickly alternate one with another, the combination of these changes is clearly perceived by the viewer. In a Russian film, shots changed very slowly, and the power of the effect which should come from these alternations was, in Russian films, incomparably weaker than in American ones.

Let us imagine, say, a fence ten miles in length. The first half is painted red, the second half green. The person who painted this wishes to elicit from a passerby a realization of the change of these two colors—the interrelationship of green and red—an understanding of how they vibrate together and are perceived.

Imagine too that for five miles you are walking beside the green color, at which point it changes and for five miles you walk along the red. Now imagine the fence is still longer—and another five miles is painted blue. By the time you reach the blue section, you will have forgotten that previously the fence was green, because you will have spent so much time perceiving one and the same color. If this fence were to change its color every yard—green, red, blue, red, blue, and so on, for fifteen miles—you would perceive a *combination* of these three color relationships all along the way.

The same happens also in cinema: during a long sequence, a lengthy alternation of scenes, you are not aware of the whole construction, the whole organization of the cinematographic material. During short sequences, during brief alternations, the relationships of separate sections, the general organization is made exceptionally clear for you. You immediately perceive it.

Thus, we came to realize that the source of filmic impact upon the viewer lies within the system of alternating shots, which comprise the motion picture.

The joining of shots into a predetermined order from which a film is made is technically called *montage*. Thus we announced in 1916² that the fundamental source of cinematographic impact upon the viewer, that is, the means on which it was necessary for us to work prior to anything else (leaving for a given period all other cinematographic elements, perhaps for several years ahead) is *montage*, that is, the alternation of shots.

Montage is the organization of cinematic material.

Hence, it became perfectly clear that separate shots, separately connected pieces of film, still did not constitute cinema, but only the material for cinema. We knew, of course, that for the preparation of this material it would be necessary to apply the strictest discipline and that extremely intense work would be needed in order that the quality of this material be of the highest order. But then we could not find time for this, since everything was so filled with theatricality, a false approach to cinematography, and such a total lack of understanding of the cinematic process, that temporarily it was necessary to set aside work on the actual material, to label it extraneous for the moment, and to direct all our attention and our labor toward the organization of material, toward the organization of the film, that is, toward *montage*.

For these reasons, we then proclaimed something that was not entirely accurate, namely, that it was not important *how* the shots were taken, but *how* these shots were assembled, how the motion picture was assembled. Let the material be wretched; the only importance was that it be well organized.

At the time that was a definite political step. Otherwise it would have proved impossible to bridge the gap in those minds upon which our work depended, because they were simply unable to grasp the grand scale at one swoop. We could not win on all fronts at once. The basic battle of our cinematographic faction, we announced, was the battle for *montage*, for the very *basis of cinematography*, and not for separate shots, nor for the material, which had to wait to be studied.

Fast montage was then called American montage; slow montage, Russian.

Moreover, by means of constructing their films according to the principle of rapid montage, the Americans produced effects never before seen by us. Let us visualize a scene: a person sitting at a desk, begins to think black thoughts, decides to shoot himself, takes a pistol from the desk drawer, puts it to his temple, presses the trigger, the pistol fires—the man falls.

In Russia the scene would be shot in the following way: the camera was set in place, facing the set, and it was reasoned thus: The man lives in a room, therefore it is necessary to build a room. We can't build four walls so—let's build three. In the room we must have windows and doors. The room must have wallpaper, flowered wallpaper, let's paper the walls. Paintings are hung on the walls. Flowers are placed on the windowsills. There must be a chest and a stove. We place all this in the room. The desk has writing implements, just as in reality.

An actor sits at the desk, imagines that he is feeling terribly despondent, takes a pistol from the desk drawer, brings it to his temple and fires. The cameraman films this entire scene, develops it, prints it, projects it onto the screen, and when the viewer looks at the screen, he simultaneously sees the curtain on the windows, the paintings on the wall, and so on. He sees a tiny actor among a large assortment of things, and while the actor is performing the juiciest psychological suffering, the viewer might be examining the leg of the writing table or the painting that is hung on the wall—that is, the spectator receives an extraordinarily distracted account of what is taking place on the screen.

The Americans filmed things completely differently. They divided each separate scene into montage sequences, into a series of shots that made up each sequence; in addition, they shot each separate moment in such a way that only its action was visible, only that which was categorically essential. Even in a long shot they constructed scenery so that details were not noticed. If they needed to achieve the impression of a room, they would achieve it by some simple detail. If the wallpaper design did not have a particular function, walls were darkened, or blackened, and only those objects were left in the light which were essential to the incident.

Besides that, everything was shot in what is called close-up, that is, when it was necessary to show the face of a person suffering, they showed only his face. If he opened the drawer of a desk and took a pistol from it, they showed the desk drawer and the hand taking the pistol. When it came to pressing the trigger, they filmed the finger pressing on the trigger, because other objects and the surroundings in which the actor worked, were irrelevant at that particular instant. This method of filming only that moment of movement essential to a given sequence and omitting the rest, was labeled by us the "American method," and it was thus placed in the foundations of the new cinematography which we were beginning to form.

Consequently, before beginning our experimental work and attaining any new results, we found our first working slogan contained in the following: "Separate shots of cinema film constitute cinematic material. Since we do not yet have the opportunity to work on the content of film material, we proclaim that for a period of time content will virtually cease to exist for us, and it will even be irrelevant for us. For the present we are working on a method of organizing the given material, that is, on montage, since montage is the main source of the power of cinematic effectiveness. That effect is evident only in cinematography and the optimum impression is attained only through the montage, when that montage is not merely of ordinary scenes, but of scenes filmed by the American method of shooting, that is, employing scenes in which every given sequence shows what is essential for the viewer to perceive, and shows them in the closest and clearest shots possible."

These were the basic conditions which we set forth prior to beginning our work. That was about ten or eleven years ago.

Now we are studying something entirely different in cinema. Yet, all that we are now concerned with grew from these basic premises.

The method that I am discussing yielded rather prodigious results: all that is well done in Soviet cinema is made by this method. All European and Soviet cinematography works according to this method but the Americans originated it. Now, having developed and used what was conceived by the Americans, we are carrying the work to a new frontier—the frontier of cinematic culture. But if the basis of cinema's effective influence had not been in our hands, then, of course, we would have never been able to achieve any results, for without mastering the material of film, we would have been unable to contribute anything.

Having established the work on montage as being foremost, we began to analyze montage itself and to establish its basic properties and methods.

What I am going to deal with now will, I think, appear simply amusing to everyone, it is so naive, so primitive, and so obvious. But at that time (and that time was rather recently) it seemed to be such incredible "futurism" that a bitter battle was waged against it. It was often necessary for our group, for my colleagues as well as myself, to discontinue our work because we were such formalistic revolutionaries. In my own case, it went so far that I had no money at home, no shoes to wear, and all because I was developing a particular cinematographic principle, which was simply "not acceptable."

The primary property of montage, which is now perfectly clear to everyone, but which had to be defended rabidly and with inordinate energy then, consists in the concept that montage creates the possibility of parallel and simultaneous actions, that is, action can be simultaneously taking place in America, Europe, and Russia, that three, four or five story lines can exist in parallel, and yet in the film they would be gathered together into one place. Ten years ago this elementary concept demanded an incredible struggle for it to be firmly established.

All the fundamental principles of montage, which I shall discuss, were first used by me in the film *Engineer Prite's Project* [1917–1918]. In shooting *Engineer Prite's Project* we encountered a certain difficulty. It was necessary for our leading characters, a father and his daughter, to walk across a meadow and look at a pole from which electric cables were strung. Due to technical circumstances, we were not able to shoot all this at the same location. We had to shoot the pole in one location and separately shoot the father and daughter in another place. We shot them looking upward, talking about the pole and walking on. We intercut the shot of the pole, taken elsewhere, into the walk across the meadow.

This was the most ordinary, the most childlike thing—something which is done now at every step.

It became apparent that through montage it was possible to create a new earthly terrain that did not exist anywhere, for these people did not walk

there in reality, and in reality there was no pole there. But from the film it appeared that these people walked across a meadow and the pole appeared before their very eyes.

A few years later I made a more complex experiment: we shot a complete scene. Khokhlova and Obolensky acted in it. We filmed them in the following way: Khokhlova is walking along Petrov Street in Moscow near the 'Mostorg' store. Obolensky is walking along the embankment of the Moscow River—at a distance of about two miles away. They see each other, smile, and begin to walk toward one another. Their meeting is filmed at the Boulevard Prechistensk. This boulevard is in an entirely different section of the city. They clasp hands, with Gogol's monument as a background, and look—at the White House!—for at this point, we cut in a segment from an American film, *The White House in Washington*. In the next shot they are once again on the Boulevard Prechistensk. Deciding to go farther, they leave and climb up the enormous staircase of The Cathedral of Christ the Savior.³ We film them, edit the film, and the result is that they are seen walking up the steps of the White House. For this we used no trick, no double exposure: the effect was achieved solely by the organization of the material through its cinematic treatment. This particular scene demonstrated the incredible potency of montage, which actually appeared so powerful that it was able to alter the very essence of the material. From this scene, we came to understand that the basic strength of cinema lies in montage, because with montage it becomes possible both to break down and to reconstruct, and ultimately to remake the material.

Now to proceed: After we shot this scene, at the time of editing, we found we were missing one piece—we did not have the meeting between Khokhlova and Obolensky, who by that time were no longer available. So we then took Obolensky's and Khokhlova's overcoats—and, against the background of Gogol's Monument, shot two other people's hands being clasped in greeting. We intercut a shot of these hands and, because prior to this shot we had shown Obolensky and Khokhlova, the substitution remained absolutely unnoticeable.

This brought a second experiment to my mind. In the first one we had created an arbitrary earthly terrain; along a single line of movement we created an arbitrary scenic background. In the second experiment we let the background and the line of movement of the person remain the same, but we interchanged the people themselves. I shot a girl sitting before her mirror, painting her eyelashes and brows, putting on lipstick and slippers.

By montage alone we were able to depict the girl, just as in nature, but in actuality she did not exist, because we shot the lips of one woman, the legs of another, the back of a third, and the eyes of a fourth. We spliced the pieces together in a predetermined relationship and created a totally new person, still retaining the complete reality of the material. This particular example likewise demonstrated that the entire power of cinematic effect is in montage.

With the material alone one can never achieve such unique, seemingly incredible things. This is impossible in any other spectacle excepting cinema, in addition to which none of this is achieved through tricks but solely by the organization of the material, solely by bringing the material together into this or that order. Let us take a simpler test: A person stands near a door. This is filmed in a long shot. Next, we go to a close-up, and in the close-up the head of another person is photographed. In this way, you can splice the face of Alexandra Khokhlova with the body of Nata Vachnadze, and again this will not be through trick photography but montage—that is, by the organization of the material, rather than by a technical gimmick.

After we had obtained such real achievements, after we felt a particular strength within ourselves, we established two other things. Before this, we had an argument about whether the particular psychological state an actor experiences is dependent or not on montage. There were those who said that here is something which could not be altered by montage. We had a dispute with a certain famous actor to whom we said: Imagine this scene: a man, sitting in jail for a long time, is starving because he is not given anything to eat; he is brought a plate of soup, is delighted by it, and gulps it down. Imagine another scene: a man in jail is given food, fed well, full to capacity, but he longs for his freedom, for the sight of birds, the sunlight, houses, clouds. A door is opened for him. He is led out onto the street, and he sees birds, clouds, the sun and houses and is extremely pleased by the sight. And so, we asked the actor: Will the face reacting to the soup and the face reacting to the sun appear the same on film or not? We were answered disdainfully: It is clear to anyone that the reaction to the soup and the reaction to freedom will be totally different.

Then we shot these two sequences, and regardless of how I transposed those shots and how they were examined, no one was able to perceive any difference in the face of this actor, in spite of the fact that his performance in each shot was absolutely different. With correct montage, even if one takes the performance of an actor directed at something quite different, it will still reach the viewer in the way intended by the editor, because the viewer himself will complete the sequence and see that which is suggested to him by montage.

I saw this scene, I think in a film by Razumny:⁴ a priest's house, with a portrait of Nicholas II hanging on the wall; the village is taken by the Red Army, the frightened priest turns the portrait over, and on the reverse side of the portrait is the smiling face of Lenin. However, this is a familiar portrait, a portrait in which Lenin is *not* smiling. But that spot in the film was so funny, and it was so uproariously received by the public, that I, myself, scrutinizing the portrait several times, saw the portrait of Lenin as smiling! Especially intrigued by this, I obtained the portrait that was used and saw that the expression on the face in the portrait was serious. The montage was so edited that we involuntarily imbued a serious face with a changed

expression characteristic of that playful moment. In other words, the work of the actor was altered by means of montage. In this way, montage had a colossal influence on the effect of the material. It became apparent that it was possible to change the actor's work, his movements, his very behavior, in either one direction or another, through montage.

When we began making our own films, constructed on this principle of montage, we were set upon with cries of: "Have pity, you crazy futurists! You show films comprised of the tiniest segments. In the eyes of the viewer the result is utter chaos. Segments jump after each other so quickly that it is thoroughly impossible to understand the action!" We listened to this and began to think what method we could adopt to combine shots so as to avoid these abrupt shifts and flashes. Let us say that in a certain shot we have a moving train. Moreover, let us say it is swaying from right to left on the screen, while in the final frame of the previous shot the train occupied a position in the left-hand corner of the screen. However, in the first frame of the next sequence, the new subject took a prominent position in the right-hand corner of the screen. If you join these shots together, that visual leap from one side of the screen to the other will produce the sensation of an abrupt jump, will produce a nervous irritation which will disturb the viewer, not giving the impression of a smooth transition. Therefore, the direction of motion of the last frame of the preceding shot and of the first frame of the successive shot must coincide; if they do not, an abrupt jump necessarily takes place.

If one shoots a round object and intercuts it with a square one, then this should be borne in mind. If one shoots a close-up of a face but intercuts it with a face slightly smaller, watch out for these involuntary flashes and jumps.

Notes

- 1 These were the most popular screen stars of pre-Revolutionary Russia. R.L.
- 2 Kuleshov's first theoretical essays appeared in *Vestnik Kinematografii*. R.L.
- 3 This was the greatest cathedral in Russia and once stood opposite the Moscow Art Museum and Lenin Library, but was demolished on Stalin's orders, to make space for a gigantic Palace of the Soviets, which however was never built. On the site now is a large open-air swimming pool. R.L.
- 4 *Kombrig Ivanov*, 1923, shown in the U.S. as *The Beauty and the Bolshevik*. R.L.