

# INTRODUCTION TO FILM ANALYSIS VOCABULARY

## Session 9: EDITING EFFECTS

### CONCEPTIONS OF EDITING

Editing is undoubtedly the element in cinematic language that has given rise to the most commentary and debate. Filmmakers and film theorists have taken varying stances on the topic. We can compare the development of editing rules in classical aesthetics – and its famous analysis by the film critic, André Bazin, – with how it was used by Soviet filmmakers in the 1920s, particularly Eisenstein.

#### 1. Classical “transparency” and “continuity editing”

The use of editing in classical cinema typically seeks the greatest possible “continuity” between shots, in line with the overall aesthetic approach that André Bazin described using the term “transparency”. The aesthetics of transparency corresponds to a conception of cinema whereby the *mise-en-scène* has to make us forget it is there, become “transparent” and disappear into the diegesis, so as to heighten the illusion of reality.

On the notion of transparency and classical editing, in addition to *Aesthetics of Film*, J. Aumont, University of Texas Press, 1992 (original French: *Esthétique du film*) and *Film Art: An Introduction*, D. Bordwell and K. Thompson, McGraw Hill, 2008, see Bazin’s *Orson Welles: A Critical View*, Acrobat Books, 1991 (original French: *Orson Wells, A. Bazin, Cerf, 1972*), and his article “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema”, in Marc Furstenau (ed.), *The Film Theory Reader: Debates and Arguments*, Routledge, 2010. (Original French: *L’évolution du langage cinématographique*, in *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma ?*, Cerf, Paris, 1990, re-edition).

Some filmmakers and schools of thought consider, on the contrary, that editing is the essential dynamic element of cinema. They value editing effects *per se*, without conforming to the logic of continuity editing, and place emphasis more on its fragmentation. The best example of this is certainly Eisenstein, whose practice of montage is inseparable from the development of a coherent theoretical system.

#### 2. Montage in S. M. Eisenstein’s films

The Eisensteinian conception of editing is based on a premise radically opposed to that of Bazin: cinema is not meant to reproduce the “real” or give an illusion of reality, but rather to produce a discourse. Editing becomes an instrument that helps to build this discourse – in his case, one underpinned by Marxist ideology.

In formal terms, Eisenstein’s core notions involve the idea of “fragment” and “conflict”.

The production of meaning through editing results from a collision, a conflict between the different fragments. Discontinuity is deliberately exploited to create an effect on the viewers and give birth to the ideas that the filmmaker wants to communicate to them.

On Eisenstein’s montage, see Aumont’s *Aesthetics of Film*.

In his critical study, “*Le Cuirassé Potemkine*”, *S. M. Eisenstein* (Nathan, collection Synopsis, 1992), Barthélémy Amengual analyses the different types of conflict used in the famous Odessa Steps scene.

#### 3. “Productive montage” and the “Kuleshov effect”

Even in the early days of film theory, emphasis was on the idea of “productive montage” (or the “montage-effect”): this denotes the specific effect that is produced when two images or, more broadly, two filmic elements are associated, and which could not be produced by just one of the elements taken individually. This effect however is not the preserve of any one type of editing. It is coextensive to editing itself. Certainly, we can recognise it more easily when it is used for

rhetorical functions than for narrative functions: an analogy, by definition, can only be made by associating two terms. Yet, some editing devices whose prime function is narrational can also clearly show this "productivity". For example, crosscutting is used in a chase scene to build up suspense. In other words, it creates a specific kind of tension for the viewer which springs from the wait to find out which of the plot's alternatives will prevail: will X catch up with Y or not? This emotional effect is produced by crosscutting an image of X with an image of Y. The suspense would be absent were either of these images taken on their own.

A striking example of this "productive" montage comes from the experiments of Lev Kuleshov in the 1920s. One of these involved showing an audience three film montages, in which he edited the same close-up of the expressionless face of actor Ivan Mozzhukhin with three different endings: a bowl of soup, a dead body and a child at play. Although the same close-up shot was used, the audience allegedly read a different expression on the actor's face in each of the three montages. In fact, their perception was entirely shaped by the confrontation with the object he was supposedly looking at: hunger in the montage with the bowl of soup, sadness in the case of the dead body and tenderness in the case of the child. Whether this experiment actually took place is questionable, but the legend set in and gave rise to the notion of the "Kuleshov effect", which received great critical acclaim and is repeatedly used to show the powers of montage. Hitchcock himself referred to it in his conversations with Truffaut when analysing how his eyeline matches in *Rear Window* functioned.

On the notion of "productive montage", see Aumont's *Aesthetics of Film*. For a detailed history of the "Kuleshov effect", see François Albéra, "Koulechov en effet", in *Brûler les planches, crever l'écran*, Gérard-Denis Farcy and René Prédal (eds), L'Entretiens, 2001, pp.97-113. Hitchcock's remarks on the Kuleshov effect in Hitchcock, F. Truffaut, Faber & Faber, 2017 (original: Hitchcock / Truffaut, Gallimard, 2003).