

Cinema, poetry, pedagogy: Montage as metaphor

MARK REID

Education Department, British Film Institute

ABSTRACT: This paper is an exploration of the ways in which the concept of montage (a principle of film editing developed first by a group of Russian film makers in the 1920s) might be mobilised in support of the teaching of English, in particular the teaching of poetry. I will argue that montage can be used as the basis of a different kind of pedagogy in English, one that is able to explore the multi-modal dimensions of literary texts and sponsor critical enquiry.

KEYWORDS: Poetry, montage, pedagogy, Eisenstein.

PROLOGUE: EISENSTEIN'S BRAIN

After his death, the doctor conducting the post mortem on Eisenstein's body opened up his skull and asked a colleague, "What did this guy do for a living?" His colleague said he made films. "How many did he make?" asked the doctor. "Eight," came the reply. "What a pity! With a brain like this he could have discovered a new theory of relativity."

BEGINNING – WHAT IS MONTAGE?

Many readers will know of Eisenstein's reputation as a filmmaker. He made eight completed films in a 28-year career, of which his three "revolutionary" films, *Strike* (1924), *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1928) are perhaps the best known. He came originally from the theatre, his work in the early 1920s drawing on commedia dell arte, Japanese Kabuki theatre, cubism and the Russian Futurists. These influences shaped ideas and practices that were threaded through much of his film work – in particular *typage*, or the abolition of individual characterisation as presented through naturalist means, and *montage*, the pursuit and provocation of ideas through the juxtaposition of concrete things – shots, actions, gestures, in fact something like the *staging* of ideas. His work in "agit-prop"¹ theatre, developing these practices, foreshadowed the work of Bertolt Brecht, another theorist-practitioner who still has much to say to educators.

Editing is the kernel process specific to film, what gives it its dynamism; but there are different systems of editing. Contemporary with the Soviet filmmakers of 1920s, the American D. W. Griffith was developing an editing system built to maintain the seamless continuity of the story – one that bound the spectator into the world of the film – called "continuity editing". This system built up a "grammar" of choices for the filmmaker, a series of conventions for making editing decisions that move the story through space and manipulate time, but whose overall effect is to disguise the fact that

¹ The term "agit-prop" is a contraction of the two words "agitatsiia" and "propaganda" and was a widespread activity in post-Revolutionary Soviet Russia. It was a means of inculcating and promoting appropriate social class values among the proletariat and was a power means of political education.

shots have been edited at all. The “continuity system” of editing is the basis of much mainstream story-telling in film today.

Montage is different. Lev Kuleshov claimed to have “discovered” the principle (“I was the first in Russia to speak the word ‘montage’,” quoted in Bergan, 1997, p. 87) by showing that editing two unrelated shots together created another, new meaning. The principle is almost the opposite of continuity editing. Far from being seamless, the editing together of discontinuous elements is meant to shock, to jolt the viewer into a new understanding.



[Click on icon for Kuleshov experiment] [Size: 62MB]

The link here is to one version of Kuleshov’s “experiment”, demonstrating how the juxtaposition of unrelated shots might work on a viewer. In the first part of the sequence, a shot of a bowl of soup is followed by a shot of a man’s face; we read his expression as one of “hunger”. When the same face is juxtaposed with a shot of a girl’s body in a coffin, we read his expression now as sorrowful. The face is actually the same in both shots; the difference lies in the juxtaposition of the preceding shots.

One can see how, this principle having been discovered, possibilities immediately opened up for an artist mixed up in the ferment of revolutionary Russia in the 1920s. Eisenstein saw montage as an opportunity for something politically active, rooted in agit-prop and dialectics. It was not just a case of $1+1=2$ (or shot A plus Shot B = AB) but, as he quotes Livingstone Lowes of Coleridge,

Give him one vivid word from an old narrative, let him mix it with two in his thought, and then, out of three sounds he frames, not a fourth sound, but a star (Eisenstein, 1943, p. 13).

However, the star isn’t Eisenstein’s chosen image for the outcome of montage in 1926:

Soviet cinema must cut through to the skull!...cut through to final victory, and now, under the threat of an influx of “real life” and philistinism into the Revolution we must cut through as never before! Make way for the cine-fist! (Bergan, 1997, p. 83).

Montage for Eisenstein became an active political instrument. The juxtaposition of unrelated shots into new relations would jolt the audience out of a kind of political somnambulism and into a new awareness of the political relations of things. Montage would punch people into political consciousness.

HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL MONTAGE

Eisenstein wrote tirelessly throughout his career, promulgating and propagandising on behalf of his ideas. He was an embodiment of the practical intellectual. He theorised, taught, and practised as an artist, and wouldn't acknowledge a distinction between those three roles. The principal source of his ideas about montage, the place where he elaborated them most thoughtfully, is the book he published in 1943: *The film sense*. Here he develops two ideas around montage: the difference between vertical and horizontal montage, and the role of the audience or spectator in squaring the montage circle.

The process whereby elements of the film are cut together in linear sequence in time (time is the third element in film that makes up its specificity as a medium – it is audio, visual, time-based) Eisenstein called “*horizontal montage*”. It is how, in those early evolutionary terms, film was made to “punch”. By 1943, however, formalism had been outlawed by the cultural commissars, and writing in the Social Realist mode was how you made a living – and stayed alive. The Realist mode, as I've indicated in reference to D. W. Griffith, emphasises seamless narrative continuity and disallows distancing techniques. Eisenstein was forced, pretty much, to fall in with it, and away from his notion of film-making as provocation and montage as fist.

But also, by the late 1930s, around the time he was making of his film *Alexander Nevsky*, he had become interested in how elements in film combined simultaneously, rather than in linear sequence. In contrast to the latter, he named this combination *vertical montage*. He chose a metaphor from music to explain it – the vertical arrangement of elements on an orchestral staff, as opposed to the linear, melodic line. The two dimensions (horizontal and vertical, melody and harmony) work together in what he called polyphonic style, “through a simultaneous advance of a multiple series of lines, each maintaining an independent compositional course and each contributing to the total compositional course of the sequence” (1943, p. 65).

The vertically arranged elements – the simultaneous music, actor's gesture and voice, the choice of where to put the frame of the shot, the set, geometric composition in line, colour, arrangement – all have the potential to resist the linear sequence, as well as co-operate harmonically. If the horizontal is analogous to Saussure's syntagmatic organising principle of language, where addition rules, then vertical montage works laterally, paradigmatically, by substitution.

Incidentally, Eisenstein had a particular interest in the way that an actor “produces” a role in film – or indeed in theatre – in that s/he combines voice (timbre, pitch, projection), gesture, movement, facial expression, with dress and props vertically: “The actor's performance is montage in character” (1943, p. 29).

POETRY IS MONAGE: MILTON

Reading *The film sense*, one expects illustrations of the theory of montage to come from film. Instead, Eisenstein looks at poetry: “*Paradise Lost* is itself a first rate school in which to study montage and audio-visual relationships” (1943, p. 54). He

goes on to quote this passage from Book VI, where the rebellious angels are cast into hell:

I The overthrown he raised, and as a Heard
 II Of Goats, or timorous flock together thron'g'd
 III Drove them before him Thunder-struck, pursu'd
 IV With terrors and with furies to the bounds
 V And Chrystall wall of Heav'n, which op'ning wide,
 VI Rowl'd inward, and a spacious gap disclos'd
 VII Into the wastful Deep; the monstrous sight
 VIII Strook them with horror backward, but far worse
 IX Urg'd them behind; headlong themselves they threw
 X Down from the verge of Heav'n, Eternal wrauth
 XI Burnt after them to the bottomless pit

Nine dayes they fell...

Eisenstein imagines this as a shooting script, a list of shots, taken verbatim:

1 The overthrown he raised
 2 and as a Heard of Goats, or timorous flock together thron'g'd
 3 Drove them before him Thunder-struck
 4 pursu'd with terrors and with furies to the bounds and Chrystall wall of
 Heav'n
 5 which op'ning wide, rowl'd inward
 6 and a spacious gap disclos'd
 7 into the wastful Deep
 8 the monstrous sight strook them with horror backward
 9 but far worse urg'd them behind
 10 headlong themselves they threw down from the verge of Heav'n
 11 Eternal wrauth burnt after them to the bottomless pit

His reading focuses on the interplay between images (which he imagines as “shots”) and line breaks. Some images, for example, cross several lines (“pursu'd/With terrors and with furies to the bounds/And Chrystall wall of Heav'n”), while some lines contain more than one shot (“Rowl'd inward, and a spacious gap disclos'd”) but he finds that the number of images, cast as shots, conforms in the end to the number of lines in the sequence.

One small part of Milton's genius, then, is to cut between images as a film editor or director would, balancing out the relative length of his shots within the metrical structure he had chosen, and also to make his cuts dynamic – cutting on movement, with changes of direction and impulse, and scale. The principle of montage is to cut between images, within and sometimes against the structure of the form you're working with. In fact, the dynamism comes partly as a result of the background against which the “cuts” are made. In Milton's case, the constraints of form – iambic metre, 10-syllable lines, blank verse as a whole – enables the pace, movement, scale, almost to be felt by the reader. The technique – metaphorically speaking now – is very like Eisenstein's combination of vertical and horizontal montage.

One can see clearly the debt Eisenstein owed to Milton in extracts from a couple of his films. It wasn't just Milton's genius as editor that Eisenstein admired, but the

purposes he put montage to, especially as above, in the way he handled crowds: “Milton is particularly fine in battle scenes,” he says (p. 54), and so is Eisenstein himself.



[Click on icon for clip from *Strike*] [Size: 10MB]

One can see here something analogous to Milton’s account of the “timorous flock together throng’d” throwing themselves headlong “down from the verge of Heav’n” – the way the strikers’ movement is orchestrated across the frame, now one way, then another, with a constant interplay between actors and set. The film critic Mark Cousins talks about how one of the premises of film is the interplay between actor and space, a relationship he says which is increasingly neglected in cinema. The clip from *Strike*, and the extract from Milton exemplify what he means. The actors in both cases are not just situated against a setting – they move through it, they react to it, it circumscribes what they can do. Space and agent act out a dialogue with each other, a dialogue facilitated by the montage. In both examples, one gets the feeling of chaos, but within an overall design; Satan’s army, and the strikers, are being herded, manipulated, as both author and director orchestrate the action.

Eisenstein is early cinema’s master of the movement of large groups of people – he had already moved beyond D. W. Griffith, in many ways his mentor in film practice: “Look at his film *Orphans of the Storm*....Notice the crowd scenes. You will see his work lacks particular plastic development of given content, and the crowd scenes are extremely chaotic” (Bergan, p. 98). And Eisenstein’s is a political, not just an aesthetic, interest – to represent a class of people en masse, so that the proletariat becomes a character in its own right, while the bourgeois are represented, critically, as individuals.

Both the passage from Milton and the clip from *Strike* exemplify Eisenstein’s two notions of montage: the linear horizontally developed axis of action, of succeeding shots or images, and the vertically arranged elements of people, gesture, space and movement all orchestrated against each other. The sense of the “vertical” arrangement of elements in poetry is more metaphorical, maybe, since those dimensions of movement and scale, sound and action, are represented at one remove, in language, rather than being directly represented as in film, but the principle maybe illuminates something of poetic method in a slightly different way:

- Montage as a process of combining elements in a poem horizontally, juxtaposing and developing ideas, images, themes, narratives;

- Montage as a way of “vertically” combining separate elements of a poem – images (“shots”), words, (implied) sounds – and within the image, as a means of orchestrating implied movement, gesture, relations with setting, colour, and of changing the scale and focus between images;
- Montage as a means of working within the economies of poetic form: balancing line length, syntax, stanza shape, against the content – the image/shot, the sound, the word – and thereby constructing poetic rhythm;
- Montage as orchestral construction – balancing the linear movement of a narrative, a theme, an argument, against the vertical combinations of parallel narratives or themes, and the integration of other modes.

I would like to now look closely at another poem to test this method a little further.

POETRY IS MONTAGE: MULDOON

I hadn't read much by Paul Muldoon, but when I went to a reading he gave last year I remembered a friend saying that when Hugo Williams had been asked which of the current poets he rated, he had said that Paul Muldoon was “reshaping the landscape of poetry in English”. The poems in Muldoon's *Moy sand and gravel* (2003) do just that, I think. And the final poem in the collection, “At the Sign of the Black Horse, September 1999”, is a kind of apotheosis of his method.

The poem on one level is an account of the poet standing beside a river in flood, having brought his new-born son out in a pram for a walk. He watches and recounts the flotsam being carried past him; the river has a linear motion that mirrors the form of a narrative. But the poet weaves into this several “vertical” layers of theme and story – first of all the changing expressions on his son's sleeping face, seeing in them a similar kind of stream, the eddying of the gene pool his son is immersed in, and the family histories that accompany them: “behind Asher's sleeping lids. The A-, B-, and C-lists of forebears in his glabrous face/Hanff. Wolf. Reinhart. Abrams. A Reinhart beginning to fuss”.

Asher's mother being Jewish, and his forebears being European, together with the sight of “Ton upon ton of clay, hay, hair, shoes and spectacle frames,” leads Muldoon to imagine another more sinister species of flotsam, and this in turn is interwoven with the memory of his stillborn child: “something about that clay and hair going down the sluice/ brought back an afternoon in St Louis./ Something about raking the ashes of the barbecue at the end of the verandah/ and turning over the loin and flank/ of a young peccary, its loin so lean and lank.”

The effect is of layers: surface events, his son's changing expressions, the poet's memories, family histories, political histories, synthesised within the poet's own stream of consciousness, which carries its own cultural flotsam, often hilariously signified by phrases cut out of contemporary public signage: “Please Examine Your Change as Mistakes Cannot....Please Use The Hammer To/ Break The Glass....Contents May Have Shifted During Flight.” Like Milton's, and Eisenstein's, battle scenes, Muldoon conveys the impression of chaos orchestrated, though here he is consciously orchestrating the various linear movements of river, baby's expression, his own consciousness, all within a vertically or laterally integrated series of imagined

worlds and memories. And poetry being his chosen medium, the flotsam floating by is studded with erratics – words lifted from some other sphere which re-appear periodically as motifs, some of them consciously appearing from other poems in the collection: autoclave, the white-lipped peccary, killdeer, berm, poile, trebucket, glabrous, quantongs, as though the poem were carrying the detritus of a dozen semantic fields in its own flood waters (and sending the reader off to the dictionary, surely the best and most active form of participation of reader in poem).

I would like now to develop the notion that montage can be used as a technique for illuminating poetry a little further, by looking at more active combinations of poetry with other media, and other modes within those media, and the example I would like to work with is that of film.

POETRY/FILM: MONTAGE

In this section I want to look at a film called *Dal: Yma/Nawr* (translated as *Still here now*) (Wales, 2004), a film about the heritage of Welsh poetry from around the Sixth Century to the present day. Made by director Marc Evans (previous credits include the chiller *My little eye*), the film is, I think, extraordinary because of the treatment of its poetic material. Rather than simply making literal film versions of the poems he chooses, he “sets” them to film, rather like a musician might “set” poetry to music. The relationship between the two media is thus more equal – the film isn’t a debased form, serving the language, nor does it reduce the poetry by literally translating it; instead the viewer oscillates between the two. And it helps perhaps that the poems are never merely read out: they are performed.

Evans himself has said that he wanted the film to explore a simple notion – that all poetry is cinematic, and that all cinema should be poetic. In an in-service workshop with a group of teachers recently, we explored the twin notions of “poetic” and “cinematic” and found that these ideas were just that: twins, both connoting some sense of artfulness and deliberation, of implicitness and allusiveness, of excesses of scale – whether in miniature or in grand gesture – of surrounding space, of ambiguity.

The extract I want to focus on here is the film for the poem *Ystafell Cynddylan*, a ninth-century lament for the death of the warrior Cynddylan, whose hall, or homestead (“Ystafell”) is now empty. The poem’s narrator is male, a liege warrior of Cynddylan, and the form is haunting in its repeated statement “Cynddylan’s hall is dark tonight” at the opening and closing of six of the eight, three-line stanzas. Watch the extract here and think a little about how much or how little of that synopsis comes across in the film version.



[Click on icon to play movie clip] [Size: 19.6MB]

A number of things strike me about this combination of film and verse. First of all, the combination is more concretely vertical, as opposed to metaphorically vertical as in the poetry example above; one can attribute different contributions to meaning being made by each of several different modes, all playing out simultaneously. The speaking of the poem by a woman's voice re-interprets the poem as a more personal lament, possibly taking us closer to the original intimacy of the relationship. We live, and teach, after all in a context where intimacy between heterosexual men is difficult to articulate. The setting of the film – a ruined, post-apocalyptic school – is a radical departure from the poem, but again it connects with something submerged in the original, the sense of a hall being the centre of a community, not just an impressive building, and maybe even allows us to connect with something about schools that is often submerged – their role, similarly, as the heart of a community of people. My first viewing of this film came in the week after the carnage in Beslan. There was a school whose communal role had been ripped from it!

An affordance in the recording medium also allows the original to be interpreted in an expansive way. The repeated echo of the woman's phrase "Ystafell Cynddylan" enacts a kind of equivalent to the written form of the poem, and its repetition of the same phrase at the opening and closing of stanzas.

I think that the vertically arranged combination of elements in this piece of film – setting, actor movement and gesture, sequence of shots, voice, original poem – between them extend each other. Rather than re-inforcing, underscoring and ultimately reducing the possibilities in the poem, the film expands it into new territories. The poetic is translated into the cinematic. I want to suggest next that the relationship between semiotic modes that montage affords offers us ideas for working with texts in English.

TEACHING AS MONTAGE

The academic and writer Dan Fleming (1992), recalling an attempt to teach a group of 14-year-olds in what is termed a sink class, remembers showing them a magazine advertisement for a new car, obviously aimed at men, which was structured around the notion of "cool", which his students, as students do whenever they're confronted with media texts, had no problem in dissecting. They knew its operational structure, its offered values and so, on one level, the lesson was successful. They were able to deal comfortably with the text, they were expert, they could show their expertise. But Fleming had a problem. In accepting their expertise, he didn't know what to do with it. He didn't actually have anything to teach them, or anywhere to take them next.

What he realises in effect is that he hadn't actually constructed a curriculum for them. He had rather opportunistically shown them one text, one product, out of context, and asked them to decode it. Later in the book he explores the kinds of direction he might have gone in:

[from the magazine advert] to the notion of "cool" in Tom Wolfe's book *The Right Stuff*, from these to the cinema version of the book, then to a TV advertisement for Levi's Chino jeans (which borrows from the film) and back to the original magazine advertisement...reframing each element in this sequence with the next until the whole sequence reframes the original element (1992, p. 14).

What he's discovered, and named, is a process he calls "placing" or "reframing". It's the process of putting one text next to another, and then a third, then revisiting the original with the idea that the act of juxtaposition will create new meanings. "Placing" or "reframing" seems to be the pedagogic equivalent of horizontal montage (or intellectual montage, as Eisenstein's work is often called), in that placing one text next to another produces new insights into both; when combined with a third, all three texts are transformed, and for each transformation, there are different readings for each student.

I would like to take the metaphor of montage as a kind of pedagogy a little further. As well as the horizontal placing of texts, we could also use vertical montage as the teaching metaphor. At a workshop recently I carried out the following activity from Dal: Yma/Nawr (above) with a group of students. We watched the film without sound, leaving the teachers with three English translations of selected poems to work from, only one of the poems being the one being used by the film. They then had to see if they could pick up cues from the film that matched with one of the poems. Alternatively, we could have played the film with the voice and asked, Does the spoken verse, in Welsh, offer any more clues to the identity of the poem?

The principle is like vertical montage in reverse: take away one of the vertical layers of meaning – the mode of spoken language and the medium of voice, or the printed poem – to highlight how the remaining modes and media operate, then put the missing pieces back in. Even without the film, just listening to a voice speak poetry in another language, with a choice of translated versions to match it to, makes one listen to the "grain" of the voice – its timbre, pitch, personality – in a more focused way.

Another dimension of this approach lies in creatively combining different texts in different modes and media that already exist. In the session mentioned above we watched a short film called *The most beautiful man in the world* (Duffy, 2002), a haunting, ambiguous film, no more than five minutes long, in which a small girl has an encounter with a stranger in the field beside her house. The film seemed to lend itself to a kind of narration, or parallel text, one colleague said, for Tennyson's "Mariana in the moated grange" – a creative combination of separate texts, with each text enhancing and extending the other.

The possibilities offered by vertical montage as a teaching technique are exciting, as the examples in this paper I hope show: putting an extract of *Paradise lost* on the same Powerpoint slide as two minutes of Eisenstein's *Strike*; analysing the "montage"

of a piece of verse; watching “cinematic poetry”; finding new combinations of existing poetry and film. Putting different media, with their different attendant modes, next to each other, enables them to speak *to* each other, rather than *for* each other. Vertical montage used in this active way avoids the foreclosing of either text and in pedagogic terms has the potential to become a mode of critical enquiry.

NOTE ON PERMISSIONS

The author has made every effort to secure permission to reproduce a clip from the film *Dal: Yma/Nawr*. If the rights holders read this Mark Reid would appreciate they contacting him.

REFERENCES

- Bergan, R. (1997). *Eisenstein: A life in conflict*. London: Little, Brown.
- Burn, A., & Parker, D. (2003). Tiger’s big plan: Multimodality and the moving image. In C. Jewitt & G. Kress (Eds.), *Multimodal literacy* (pp. 56-72). New York: Peter Lang.
- Cousins, M. (2004). Location, location, location. *Prospect Magazine*, 105, 65.
- Duffy, A. (Director). (2002). *The most beautiful man in the world* [Motion picture]. London: Breakthru Films.
- Eisenstein, S. (Director). (1924). *Strike* [Motion picture].
- Eisenstein, S. (1943). *The film sense*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Evans, M. (Director). (2004). *Dal: Yma/Nawr* [Motion picture]. Cardiff: Fiction Factory.
- Fleming, D. (1992). *Media teaching*. London: Blackwell.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2001). *Multimodal discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication*. London: Arnold.
- Muldoon, P. (2002). *Moy sand and gravel*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Oldham, G. (1992). *First cut: Conversations with film editors*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Manuscript received: February 2, 2005

Revision received: April 5, 2005

Accepted: April 20, 2005