Montage

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Montage in anthropology

Montage as an analytic tool was introduced to anthropology in the late 1970s and 1980s in response to the so-called crisis of representation (Marcus 1994). As a destabilizing heuristic in ethnographic analysis, montage was applied to allow for a greater openness to other perspectives than those of the ethnographic observer and as a way of accommodating inconsistencies and tensions that would otherwise easily be left out in more traditional modes of academic argument. Montage was proposed as a manner of "interruptedness" and a device for provoking "sudden and infinite connections between dissimilars … which on account of its awkwardness of fit, cracks, and violent juxtapositionings can actively embody both a presentation and a counterpresentation" (Taussig 1986, 441–43; see also Trinh 1982). Hence, anthropologists applied montage to produce analytic zones of vacuity where traditional claims to ethnographic authority and the hierarchical relations between scholars and ethnographic others could be turned upside down and made strange.

Within realist schools of anthropological writing and filmmaking, montage has often been regarded with suspicion because of its potential to obstruct the correspondence between scholarly representations and the social world and the ability of scholarly representations to adequately describe and translate the meaning of social interaction across cultural boundaries. Proponents of montage have claimed the opposite; namely that in order to expand and enhance cross-cultural understanding and communication, anthropologists need to shatter commonsense understandings of what constitutes the real and that montage is an effective means to this end (Suhr and Willerslev 2012). In recent years, montage has also been applied as a way of describing global interconnectedness and the simultaneity of social processes (Kiener 2008; Marcus 1994; Willerslev and Ulturgasheva 2007).

The surplus and gaps of montage

The pioneering filmmaker and theoretician Sergei Eisenstein described how a certain form of surplus is produced when incongruent elements are brought together in montage. In Eisenstein's conception, "intellectual montage" refers to the juxtaposition of dissimilar objects, which when put in confrontation with each other provide the viewer with a reality that is *more real* than the objects seen in isolation: "if montage is to be compared with something, then a phalanx of montage pieces, of shots, should be compared to the series of explosions of an internal combustion engine" (Eisenstein

1949, 38). Through such "shock effects," montage has the potential to produce the classic Hegelian–Marxist dialectic of thesis–antithesis leading to synthesis (Willerslev and Ulturgasheva 2007, 81). Thus, according to Eisenstein, the building blocks of montage are not to be placed next to each other but, rather, on top of each other so that each juxtaposition results in a qualitative and transformative leap (Deleuze 2005, 38).

The "extra thing" that is created through montage can, however, also be conceived in terms of a "gap"—that is, as the opening-up of a kind of incongruence, fuzziness, or vibrating dissonance erupting through the confrontation of unlike elements. Building on Gilles Deleuze's theory of cinema, Bruce Kapferer (2013) analyzes the mechanisms of ritual through the prism of montage and argues that the "virtual" and transformative potential of ritual works through producing perceptual gaps in a similar way as the fracturing juxtapositions of montage.

Montage in film

In film, montage is often used to describe the technical process of film editing. The cut from one shot to another can convey action and reaction, give a sense of continuity or time passed, establish a shift of perspective between people in a scene or from the whole to a specific part of a scene, indicate a flashback, show parallel simultaneous action, or simply contrast that which was seen in the first shot with that which takes place next. Thus film montage allows the viewer to jump between different perspectives. Many of these techniques can be traced back to the early American film director D. W. Griffith, who used montage to show how protagonists with different perspectives act on and react to each other, threaten each other, and enter into conflict before unity is eventually restored (Deleuze 2005, 31).

In Griffith's well-known film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), we are moved back and forth between a group of black men raiding a house of white women and the approaching rescuing team of Confederate soldiers. Griffith's extensive use of shot-reverse-shot to couple divergent viewpoints within the film rebels against the idea, predominant since the Renaissance, of human subjective perception as centered in the eyes of the beholder. In Griffith's montages, the perspectives of film viewers are tangled with other perspectives, which become part of their vision. Vision is thereby revealed as a reciprocal process that occurs as much outside as inside the perceiving subjects.

Griffith's montage, as with much American cinema, draws our attention to what goes on in the films but not to the fabricated nature of film itself. Thus, part of the seductive power of these films lies in their suppression of how the images they contain were selected and produced.

Early Soviet filmmakers such as Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, by contrast, sought to expose the devices of film production in order to encourage viewers to reflect critically on what they saw. They experimented with speeding up film footage, slowing it down, making shots overlap so as to repeat actions, or violently shortening the real-time duration of events through jump cutting. By employing such montage effects, they forced the viewer not simply to stare through their films to the things they depicted but to realize something of the image's own relative, artificial status as well (Willerslev and Suhr 2013, 6–7).

In the words of Eisenstein: "The spectator is compelled to proceed along that selfsame creative road that the author traveled in creating the image. The spectator not only sees the represented elements of the finished work, but also experiences the dynamic process of the emergence and assembly of the image just as it was experienced by the author" ([1942] 1957, 32). According to Eisenstein, montage offered a new and powerful instrument for denaturalizing social life by recasting it through unfamiliar eyes—thereby allowing for a clearer and fuller understanding of the world.

Perhaps the finest example in which the world presents itself differently to the movie camera than to the naked eye is Vertov's (1929) *The Man with the Movie Camera*. The film exposes its own making by showing us sequences of film footage crosscut with other sequences that show the assembly of the same footage. We see the cameraman as he is shooting and then we see the product of his shots. We also see the editor at work; she pulls clips off the shelf that suddenly fill the screen before us. Vertov, being a devoted socialist, is communicating that film is not magic but labor, the very labor we see on the screen. However, Vertov's aim extends beyond demystifying filmic representation. He also wants to create a new reality modeled on a Soviet industrial utopia, a futuristic reality where man and machine work together in perfect symbiosis. We see this vision of "peace between man and machine" in several scenes, such as when saws are made to dance at a sawmill or when our eyes are made to spin like the propellers of an airplane as well as in the film's recurring logo of the human eye superimposed on the camera lens.

The emancipative potential of montage

Montage operates in multiple ways by intentionally or unintentionally spurring fractures between established perceptual orders. The sweeping breadth of definitions and applications may give rise to the assumption that montage could be almost everything. Often it is assumed that the principle of montage somehow by itself carries an intrinsic power of emancipation. While montage is a powerful tool for rupturing commonsense perceptions, new visual orders often appear to take form on the other side of such ruptures.

Arguably, this happens to some extent in the classic works of montage by Eisenstein (1928) and Vertov (1929) but even more so in Leni Riefenstahl's artistically crafted *Triumph of the Will* (1935). Here every shot and juxtaposition seems to contribute, not to a shattering of vision, but to a unified image of a nation joyfully celebrating and submitting itself to its Führer. Hence, montage in Riefenstahl's film is not applied to create fissures in established forms of perceiving and understanding the world. Rather, it conceals fissures so as to combine all shots into a spectacular visual display of a single ideal world. As Riefenstahl's film exposes, montage as a principle does not in itself offer any guarantee for setting free the human spirit and it does not by necessity result in destabilizing the will to power in social, economic, and political life.

The subversive potential of montage lies in its capacity for altering the obvious first sense of an object, image, or perspective by combining two or more elements. As Walter Benjamin argued, montage thereby facilitates a "denaturalization," which may convey just how deeply questionable that which we tend to take as reality actually is

(Buck-Morss 1991, 71, 218). Yet, montage is not only the splintering of preestablished orders of perception and significance but is also the reassembling—and beyond these assemblages, new order may appear.

Since montage consists just as much in the construction of connections as in taking things apart, and since the outcome of montage can point in a virtually infinite number of directions, it is only through close observation of how montage operates in actual artistic and scholarly orchestrations that its effects can be discerned.

In his classic essay on the modernist sensibility in ethnographic writing, Marcus argues that the sacrifice of coherence may be too great in extreme forms of supposedly disruptive montage: "The larger problem becomes how to retain the equivalent of a storytelling coherence while retaining the powerful critical advantages of montage" (1994, 46). Here Marcus points to the fact that the most radical and abstract montage is not by necessity the most subversive—neither politically nor in terms of challenging established anthropological schools of thought. Rather, it seems that the subversive capacities of montage depends crucially on maintaining a tension between a strong sense of reality and its occasional, and therefore only then effective, disruption through montage (Suhr and Willerslev 2012, 283).

In an essay from 2013, Marcus asks why we need to pay special attention to the techniques of montage. Why not one of its avant-garde cousins like pastiche, collage, or assemblage? For Marcus, as for the early Soviet filmmakers, the power of montage lies in its way of opening our view up into the very "combustion chamber" of knowledge production and cinematic presentation. Montage can in its broadest definition consist in the juxtaposition of any pair of dissimilar elements. Yet, for Marcus, montage importantly also includes the juxtaposition of one's claims to knowledge along with the traces of the path undertaken to arrive at these claims. Vertov's persistence on filming the cameraman filming, while also filming the camera's struggle to film independently of the cameraman, by its own power, are all efforts to evoke the coming into being of the image, which is both manmade and beyond human determination and control. In Marcus's view, none of the cousins of montage shares this insistent focus on autoethnographic reflection within the very process of knowledge production.

SEE ALSO: Anthropology: Scope of the Discipline; Cognition and Communication; Cross-Cultural Aesthetics; Digital Anthropology; Ethnographic Film; Ethnography, Experimental; Experimental Method; Extension, Communication, and Education; Fiction, Anthropological Themes in; Filmmaking, Collaborative; Geertz, Clifford (1926–2006); Globalization; Liminality and the Liminoid; Marxism; Media Anthropology; Modes of Communication in Cross-Cultural Contexts; Narrative and Storytelling; Observational Cinema; Postcolonialism; Reflexivity; Representation, Politics of; Ritual; Senses, Anthropology of; Skilled Vision; Socialism, Marxist–Leninist–Maoist; Surrealism; United States, Anthropology in; Virtual Worlds; Visual Anthropology

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