Montage and Assemblage: an Aesthetic Shock

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Abstract

The notions of montage and assemblage applied to the field of art can appropriately be applied to collage. At the beginning of the twentieth century, cubism, Italian and Russian futurism, dadaism, and surrealism, each with distinct aesthetic objectives, practiced collage; this was in order, for example, to deconstruct object and space or for political and ideological purposes, with the aim of impacting social reality. The practice of collage 'exploded' the classical aesthetic based on *mimesis*. In an unpredictable diversity of practices, collage allows for the creation of gaps, giving access to a multitude of possibilities and opening on unsuspected artistic horizons. Collages, montages, and assemblages have been so widely represented in the artistic practices of the twentieth century that they appear inseparable from artistic modernity. However, these practices are not limited to Western art - they can also be observed in other cultures, with different objectives. As contemporary art can be seen as an extension and deepening of modern art and as its realization[1], the practices of the twentieth century were prolonged into, and developed at, the beginning of the twenty-first century, even as other concepts were introduced and new practices emerged.

Montage and Cinema

Excerpts from Glumov's Diary is Eisenstein's first film, 1923. Screenshot by Christiane Wagner.
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Montage (editing), in general, is associated with cinema. Anne Souriau indicates that in cinema, montage is, "a material operation [allowing one] to adjust together strips made separately, to form the final band [...]. Montage is essential to the cinematographic aesthetic, since it is this that regulates the sequences, the effects determined by the passage from one scene to another, the rhythms, and the correspondences between image and sound."[2] Montage is, therefore, the organizing of different shots to form sequences. Dominique Chateau, in 'Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage' (Contribution to the History of the Concept of Montage)[3] tried to show how montage (editing) has transitioned from concept to concept; in the writings of young Soviet filmmakers, who themselves produced a theory of cinema, montage (editing) becomes one of the essential concepts of film theory. The book reminds us that it is Lev Kuleshov to whom we owe, from around 1917, revival of the French word montage; this he appropriates and transforms into a concept (the concept of film montage), that is to say, that it loads of rich theoretical content.

The montage praised by Chateau is related to cinema both in technique and concept. It is defined by Kuleshov in 1918, in his article 'The art of photography,' as the thing that characterizes cinema[4]. In 1917, Kuleshov presented montage in the following way: "The essence of cinematographic art [...] rests entirely on the composition. To make a film, the director must combine different filmed, unordered, and unrelated fragments into a whole and juxtapose the different moments in the most advantageous, the most coherent and the best rhythmic order [...]"[5]. Montage thus comes from the collage, according to a certain order, of filmed fragments. The sequence of these fragments contributes to producing

an artistic impression. What is interesting to observe is that behind this reflection on montage and assemblage of fragments, there is a political approach, a militant slogan. For Kuleshov, the function of cinema was to "break through the gaps."[6] There is in *montage court* (short editing) a search for narrative efficiency. With montage, everything becomes possible.

Dominique Chateau (2019) explains that by the method of montage, we can create a semblance of heterogeneous elements of reality; the efficiency of this mode of composing is the fact that the spectator "sees what the montage suggests."[7] Montage is thus strategic. Fragments are not elements derived from a kind of database, but must be created from the perspective of their assemblage. This is equivalent to saying: "the filming of fragments anticipates the whole [...]."[8] Cinema is not reality but produces the illusion of reality. It creates a simulation of reality. Effective montage gives the impression that what in reality is feasible and achievable is improbable and impracticable: "What characterizes cinema is not the restitution of reality, but its production,"[9] states Dominique Chateau (2019). The montage, as presented by Kuleshov, makes it possible to assemble "parallel and simultaneous actions"[10] and to interweave them, to create what exists nowhere else. In the words of Dominique Chateau, Kuleshov, through montage, is a "creator of the world".[11] It should be noted that the contradictory debates between Kuleshov, Pudovkin, Vertov, and Eisenstein on the subject of montage must be seen in the context in which they were born - that is, the Soviet Union of 1917-1940. Montage assumes the selection of fragments, their combination (approximation), and the construction of a set. It makes it possible to join what is disjointed, to build a whole from disparate fragments. Thus, it supposes the discontinuity of elements and aims at an internal continuity. Montage reduces gaps and produces rhythms. It breaks with the mere recording of raw reality.

Excerpts from Glumov's Diary is Eisenstein's first film, 1923. Screenshot by Christiane Wagner.
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Dziga Vertov, an author of a documentary, and an experimental, militant form of cinema sees the camera as a "cine-eye"(*Kino-Eye*) - more sophisticated than the human eye, that requires emancipation from the habit of servile reproduction: "Now we release the camera and run it in the opposite direction, away from the copy,"[12] he writes. It is for him to create a "new perception of the world. This is why I am deciphering, in a new way, a world that is unknown to you."[13] For Vertov, cinema was an instrument of knowledge. After his report and documentary, he embarked on creating a poetic form of cinema, moving from the idea of randomness through a montage of film pieces into control of the image sequence, developing a theory of intervals in an analogy with music. The intervals are presented as "passages from one movement to another" that "lead to action as kinetic outcome;"[14] in addition to movement, the intervals are also concerned with time and space, as well as "all kinds of visual parameters."[15]

Dominique Chateau indicates that the notion of the interval "is at the same time gap, correlation, and transition, that is to say, work on images which, based on their fragmentation, seeks to establish between them semantic-visual links inscribed in the overall dynamics of the work."[16] In what Vertov calls the "battle of montage," this is about playing on the gap between two images to create a link between them.[17] For him, it is the binding of fragments. Montage is an addition, an aggregation of fragments in response to particular modalities and objectives. The various theoretical differences between Soviet filmmakers all indicate the aim of reception, on the part of the spectator, of a particular purpose and

effectiveness in the goal. Eisenstein, speaking of the "montage of attractions,"[18] declared: "You must not create a work; you must mount it with ready-made pieces, like a machine. Montage is a beautiful word: it means putting together pieces that are there ready"[19]. However, this montage of pieces must be made according to a certain method and a certain objective, according to the filmmakers. Thus, we find ourselves at the heart of the debate on the form-content relationship. Montage, in general, is the active appropriation of fragments, in combinations producing dynamic oppositions, stimulating contrasts, and fertile disjunctions. Sometimes unexpected links are created between heterogeneous elements that were not intended to meet. Contacts are formed, and new relationships occur. Montage makes it possible to organize chaos, to invent new relationships, to shape "augmented realities" - to increase. From a technical point of view, the linking of two or more elements, either of the same nature or alien to each other, produces effects not present in the original items. Eisenstein said of montage that it is an "idea born of the clash between two independent fragments."[20] In this space of shocks and tensions, filmmakers can create anachronistic links. Montage allows approximations, joinings, connections. This process opens on a multiplicity of possibilities and an infinity of results.

Excerpts from Vertov's Three Songs of Lenin (1934).
Screenshot by Christiane Wagner. Public domain.

Excerpt from Vertov's Three Songs of Lenin (1934).
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Montage: an aesthetic and political challenge

If montage is in general associated with cinema, it naturally concerns other fields such as painting, collage, photomontage, installation, happenings, theater, dance, poetry, literature, music, and so on. In the past, the question of montage has given rise to quarrels between authors in the Marxist sphere, such as Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Theodor W. Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. In the twentieth century, Jean-Marc Lachaud, in 'Collages, montages, assemblages'[21], analyzed these divergent conceptions. Lukács, for example, considers montage as 'foreign' fragments, "torn from their context,"[22] assembled together. In his opinion, it is a technical subterfuge inadequate to the task of showing objective reality." Avant-garde works are, in his eyes, incapable of representing real social relations. His taste for tradition and deep sense of the futility of the artistic avant-garde show his inability to grasp the importance and value of new technology in undermining the foundations of capitalist society. He even considers these novelties as an expression of literary and artistic decadence.

While Lukács condemns innovative works as being antirealist, Brecht, in contrast, defends innovative practices because they "favor the transformations of the social function of art that the triumphant revolution will concretize,"[23] writes Jean-Marc Lachaud. Brecht's position on realism is radically different from that of Lukács. The dramaturge thinks that realism must be "cleaned up before use, as old notions, many of which have already been used and abused for too many and diverse purposes."[24] Brecht favored a theatrical novelty, and new form, considering the installation a challenge to the idea of a harmonious and closed form. The old forms are no longer of interest because they are no longer effective. We must innovate and experiment with new forms.

Adorno, in 'Aesthetic Theory', and especially in the pages concerning "the crisis of the senses," also deals with the issue of montage. First, it is worth recalling an advanced idea at the beginning of the book, that "If art is opposed to empirical reality by the time of the art form - and the mediation of form and content cannot be understood without their distinction - this mediation must be [...] sought in the fact that the aesthetic form is sedimented content."[25] This idea is fundamental, notably in being opposed to other Marxist positions, in which the form must be at the service of the idea, the (revolutionary) content. Here, in contrast, the process of formatting asserts itself as an opposition to established reality, and

art, by its very existence, is critical *vis-à-vis* existing reality, manifesting itself as a resistance to, and negation of, this reality. It is the manifestation of freedom. Adorno saw in less realistic works (less realistic socialist works), or those less accessible and less explicit, the mark of the most effective critical power. Its enigmatic aspect makes the work irreducible to a closed interpretation; as such, it resists what tries to define it, or to recover it for ideologically integration.

Modernist works show the "signs of dislocation." "Works of art that negate meaning are also necessarily dislocated in their unity," writes Adorno. On the function of montage, he goes on: "… just as it disavows unity by the apparent disparity of the parties, [it] contributes as a formal principle to its restoration."[26] Montage is thereby both the disavowal of the unit and the reconstruction of it. Thus, Adorno saw the artist of modernity grappling with a kind of oscillation, between a desire to put in crisis unity and sense, while working for their reconstruction. For the author, even that which stands against the cohesion of meaning nevertheless produces meaning.[27] Adorno distinguished "authentic art, which takes care of the crisis of meaning," and the art of "resignation," in which the negation of meaning "adapts to contingencies."[28] The author goes on to say: "the principle of montage, as an action directed against organic unity obtained surreptitiously, was based on shock."[29] When the shock dulls or disappears, the interest of the montage is neutralized. Adorno thinks of the work of art as a process, as a phenomenon in the making, "essentially concerning the parties at all."[30] For him, a work of art is neither "stable" nor "definitive" but "in motion." The parties are not; they are neither inert or dynamic. They are "centers of forces tending to totality."[31]

Montage, Modernity, Assemblage

Anne Souriau defines montage as: "the action of assemblage, or the way in which are assembled, to form a whole, parts first made up separately. [...] In general, and in all fields, a montage is an aesthetic fact, since one is an editor of an overall form and influences the aspects that the different parts adopt to each other's elements."[32] Montage, therefore, consists of putting together heterogeneous elements of various origins, to obtain a particular result, employing adapted techniques.

Moreover, as already discussed, montage is based on the shock of fragments, themselves linked to artistic modernity, which is the manifestation. Adorno stated that, "according to its microstructure, all new art should be called montage"[33] insofar as it uses the montage process, Jean-Paul Olive writes: "any modern work can only be conceived if in response to the shock phenomena characteristic of the modern era. To the exploded experience of modernity [...], to this experience of flying, corresponds an art that breaks, and can no longer - and no doubt no longer wants to - resolve to a unified appearance."[34]

Assemblage, for its part, supposes a non-homogeneity of the work, an interruption of the spatial continuity. It involves the juxtaposition, the superposition, the simultaneity of various structures and materials. It also affirms a break with the illusionist conception of art. It disrupts traditional artistic codes, ignores conventions, and produces displacements, disturbances, the unpredictable, the unexpected, the strange. It is in total rupture with the partitioning intrinsic to classical aesthetics. It is a work of construction that passes through choices and which refers to the intention of the artist who relates heterogeneous elements. It is about creating relationships and encounters, producing echoes, shocks, tensions. The artwork is constructed as and when dialogue is established between the fragments.

Through assemblage, the artist explores areas of coexistence and encounter, organizing the heteroclite, arranging the varied, bringing together fragments to produce connections. In short, it is part of a poetics of encounter and relationship. The artist is thus reshaping the boundaries of art by creating new geographies. In these fortuitous, unexpected encounters, in these outbursts of unexpectedness, in these impulses that invent a whole, the gaps are reduced and ever new universes arise. Assemblage allows for displacements, permanent changes, combinations ever fruitful for the artist and unpredictable for the spectator. The assemblage of the various gives a place to open works, which also belong to an aesthetic of meeting. Through montage and assemblage, art breaks with the obligation to represent, to represent reality. In 'Still Life with Chair Caning' (1912), Pablo Picasso revealed that the artist no longer represents the real. However, artists present art through a collage of oilcloth pieces in painting compositions and a piece of rope forming a kind of frame. The cubist collages, Dadaist and Surrealist photomontages, assemblies (combined paintings) of Rauschenberg, Tinguely, and many others, offer diversions, deviations. These gaps and ruptures open up new horizons to new possibilities, new realities.

The Fragment

It is naturally impossible to speak of montage and assemblage without evoking the mounted and assembled elements that are the fragments. Montage and assemblage use various fragments, pieces of the world, of reality, that the artist then combines, associates, and organizes to evoke surprise, astonishment, the unknown. The purpose of these processes is to bring out the unusual, the unexpected. These combined fragments are, in the eyes of the defenders of classical aesthetics, a symbol of impurity, regrettable intrusion, discrepancy, and dislocation; they are therefore the antithesis of harmony, unity, coherence, and everything they defend. The assembly of fragments is thus the mark of refusal and emancipation *vis-à-vis* representation, *déjà-vu*, of the established order.

The fragment appeals to a particular thought - that of the diverse, the exploded, of discontinuity, loss, tension. It announces the irruption of the unexpected, of uncertainty, of instability. It is a rebellion against totality, harmony, unity. The fragment is the result of dislocation, bursting, fracture, tearing, breaking, cutting. It symbolizes violence. It is a break with continuity, the disappearance of everything, the defection of coherence and annihilation of a whole. The separation of the fragment leads to the destruction of the totality. It is indicative of a crisis of unity. The fragment also suggests the absence - what is missing. It is what is missing that gives rise to the sense of no more unity; hence the feeling of incompleteness. It refers to incompleteness, but the fragment is fundamentally ambiguous. In its incompleteness, it can be self-sufficient and establish itself as a homogeneous whole. This is how the German Romantics of the School of Jena envisioned seeing the fragment as a totality. As Alain Brunn says, the fragment "is both unfinished completeness and finished incompleteness."[35] The fragment is not inert or frozen. In work, articulated with other fragments, it imposes itself by its dynamism. It is also the germ of work to come. It has its energy detached. It throbs with internal dynamism. Besides, fragments interact together in their implementation and create a dynamic in their relationship with other elements.

In the space of the work, the fragments are put in tension, create echoes, friction, articulations, dialogues. The gathering and organization of fragments that pass through the work of montage and assemblage allow for constitution of a new whole. The fragment no longer appears as a reminder of a lost unit, as the debris of the world, as a residue of the real, but as part of a new whole. The association of heterogeneous fragments contributes to the development of a homogeneous whole. Fragments appear as moments before possible encounters. In the context

of the work, they are at once lonely and in solidarity. Assembled, they have a strength, a form, producing meaning. Brutal connections, tensions, telescoping between fragments, surprise the viewer. These assemblages can confuse, disturb, disrupt, destabilize. The assemblage produces transgressions. Montage and assemblage are at the origin of an art form which reveals other realities, ferments of possible. Jean-Marc Lachaud brings together these practices of collagists, "montagists," and "assemblagists" under the term "aesthetics of non-coherence", having "to do with a concrete utopia, thus with the prospect of emancipation (individual and collective)." [36]

This aesthetics of non-coherence, which is also an aesthetic of the encounter, is part of what Adorno called a "frightening process" of the arts. In July 1966, he began his speech at the Berlin Academy of Arts with the following words: "In the most recent evolution, the boundaries between artistic genres flow into each other, or more precisely: their lines of demarcation are frightening."[37] The process that Adorno was already observing in cubists was seen to develop throughout the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, contemporary art has been characterized by a limitless hybridization of artistic practices, with extra-artistic domains as varied and unusual as genetics, robotics, and computer science, offering works that question, sometimes fascinate or discourage, but do not leave indifferent.

Author Biography

Dominique Berthet is a University Professor, he teaches aesthetics and art criticism at the University of the French Antilles (UA). Founder and head of CEREAP (Center for Studies and Research in Aesthetic and Plastic Arts). Founder and director of the magazine Recherches en Esthétique (Research in Aesthetics). Member of CRILLASH (Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Literature, Languages, Arts, and Humanities, EA 4095). Associate Researcher at ACTE Institute (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne). Art critic, member of AICA-France (International Association of Art Critics). Exhibition curator. His research focuses on contemporary and comparative aesthetics, contemporary art, Caribbean art, and Surrealism. He has directed more than 50 volumes, published more than 110 articles and ten books among which: *Hélénon*, "Lieux de peinture" (Monograph), (preface Édouard Glissant), HC Éditions, 2006; *André Breton, l'éloge de la rencontre. Antilles, Amérique, Océanie*, HC Éditions, 2008; *Ernest Breleur* (Monograph), HC Éditions, 2008; *Pour une critique d'art engagée*, L'Harmattan, 2013.

Notes

1. Catherine Millet in French: *"L'art […] est devenu contemporain quand il a commencé, d'une certaine façon à réaliser le projet moderne au sens où l'entendait Baudelaire"* and *"J'ai suggéré d'entrée que l'art contemporain était une réalisation de la modernité. Plus exactement, il réalise le programme de la modernité"*, in *"L'art contemporain. Histoire et géographie"* (Paris, Flammarion, coll. "Champs arts" 2006), 32 and 159.

2. Anne Souriau (dir.), in Étienne Souriau, "Vocabulaire d'esthétique" (Paris, PUF, coll. Quadrige, 1999), 1025.

3. Dominique Chateau, *Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage. Kouléchov, Poudovkine, Vertov et Eisenstein* (Paris, L'Harmattan, coll. Champs visuels, 2019).

4. In French: *"Le mot "montage" a été utilisé ici depuis les premiers jours de l'existence du cinéma russe. On ne sait pas qui l'a prononcé le premier – évidemment un des opérateurs français qui vinrent en Russie. Mais c'est moi qui ai défini le "montage" comme une propriété spécifique du cinéma dans mes articles et dans le livre L'Art du cinema"*, interview by Lev Kuleshov with "Film Culture au printemps 1967, in Chateau, *Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage*, 29.

5. Kuleshov, in French: *"L'essence de l'art cinématographique […] repose entièrement sur la composition. Pour faire un film, le réalisateur doit combiner différents fragments filmés, non ordonnés et non reliés en un tout, et juxtaposer les différents moments dans l'ordre le plus avantageux, le plus cohérent et le mieux rythmé […]"*,
in Chateau, *Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage*, 30.

6. Kuleshov, in French: "percer une brèche dans les esprits", in Chateau,
Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage, 41.

7. Chateau, *Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage*, 53.

8. Chateau, *Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage*, 55.

9. Chateau, *Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage*, 72.

10. Kuleshov in *Chateau, Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage*, 42.

11. Chateau, *Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage*,22.

12. Dziga Vertov in *Chateau, Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage*, 83.

13. Chateau, *Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage*, 84.

14. Vertov in *Chateau, Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage*, 94.

15. Vertov in *Chateau, Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage*, 95.

16. Chateau, *Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage*, 97.

17. In French *"L'intervalle, c'est l'utilisation de l'écart sur le plan du référent entre deux images pour constituer un lien sémantico-visuel entre elles sur la base d'un ou de plusieurs paramètres visuels et en vue de participer à la dynamique du discours qu'ils actualisent ponctuellement"*, Chateau, *Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage*, 113-114.

18. Sergueï Mikhaïlovitch Eisenstein in Chateau, *Contribution à l'histoire du concept de montage*, 118.

19. Eisenstein in Aumont, "Montage Eisenstein" (Paris, Images modernes, 2005), 211.

20. Jacques Aumont and Alain Bergala, *Esthétique du film* (Paris, Nathan, coll. Arts Université, 1990), 60.

21. Jean-Marc Lachaud, *Collages, montages, assemblages au XXe siècle*,
vol. 1 L'art du choc ; vol. 2 Le fragment à l'œuvre (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2018).

22. Lukács in Lachaud, "Collages, montages, assemblages", vol. 2, 250.

23. Lachaud, "Collages, montages, assemblages", vol. 2, 258.

24. Bertolt Brecht, "Popularité et réalisme." In *Écrits sur la littérature et l'art* 2, trans. A. Gisselbrecht
(Paris, L'Arche, 1970), 116.

25. Theodor W. Adorno, *Théorie esthétique*, trans. Marc Jimenez (Paris, Klincksieck, 1974), 14.

26. Adorno, *Théorie esthétique*, 207.

27. In French: *"[…] il est impossible de penser une œuvre d'art qui, tout en intégrant en soi l'hétérogène et en se tournant contre la cohésion propre de son sens, ne produise pas malgré tout du sens."* Theodor W. Adorno, L'art et les arts, trans. Jean Lauxerois (Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, coll. Arts et esthétique, 2002), 71.

28. Adorno, *Théorie esthétique*, 206.

29. Adorno, *Théorie esthétique*, 208.

30. Adorno, *Théorie esthétique*, 237.

31. Adorno, *Théorie esthétique*, 237.

32. Anne Souriau, "Vocabulaire d'esthétique", 1025.

33. Adorno, *Théorie esthétique*, 208.

34. Jean-Paul Olive, "Fragments épars, fragments dynamiques", in Amey and Olive (dir.),
"Fragment, montage-démontage, collage-décollage, la défection de l'œuvre ?", coll. Arts 8
(Paris, L'Harmattan, 2004), 11.

35. Alain Brunn, "Fragment", "Dictionnaire des notions" (Paris, Encyclopædia Universalis, 2005), 500.

36. Lachaud, *Collages, montages, assemblages*, vol. 2, 339.

37. Adorno, *L'art et les arts*, 43.