

# The Application of Montage in Films by Eisenstein

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**Abstract.** Eisenstein believes that films should reflect the reality, and montage is the means of realizing the will of the director and the function of the film. Eisenstein always creates films between experimental formalism and realism. His documentary film *¡Que Viva Mexico!* which represents his bold exploration and attempt of formalism aesthetics develops a new thinking on the deep relationship between image composition elements, structure methods and the deep meaning transmission of images.

**Keywords:** Montage; Eisenstein; *¡ Que Viva Mexico!* ; Montage of Attraction.

## 1. Introduction

"Of all arts, the most important one for us is film" [1]. This is Lenin's most famous comment on the art of film. The most direct reason why Lenin said it in 1922 was that for the Soviet regime at that time, it is necessary to make films be developed into a tool that could create special social atmosphere and educate the masses. Due to the same reason, it was no accident that the Soviet montage school emerged in the early 1920s in the newly established Soviet Union, where "how to make films play a role like written language" was an urgent social issue. In the meantime, the artists devoted to the film industry including Lev Kuleshov, Dziga Vertov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, or Sergei Eisenstein, known as the father of montage are the creators and researchers of the montage school in the Soviet Union, striving to create a new world for the film as well as their own language for the film. They believe that only when films are used to express the creator's attitude towards things and the influence of events on the creator, can it be called art, and it is montage that they found to control the audience's thoughts and associations.

Montage is a transliteration of the French "montage", which was first used in architecture, referring to "installation and assembly", and later was used in the film and television art language. Montage is a kind of film and television language with differences in broad sense and narrow sense. In a broad sense, montage is a unique way of thinking in film and television art, including the combination and connection of shots and pictures, as well as the whole creation process from the beginning to the end of the production of movie and television play. In a narrow sense, montage refers to the way in which multiple elements are arranged and combined such as lens frames, sound, color and others, namely, in the post production of film and television, the filming materials are carefully arranged according to the literary script created by the screenwriter and the director's overall design requirements, so as to create a complete film and television work. At present, montage has become an indispensable approach and technique for the narration and expression of film and television works.

As the most representative member of Soviet montage school, Eisenstein's exploration of is the most typical. The montage of attraction plays an important role in Eisenstein's theoretical framework, however, it has been criticized for a long time by Soviet literary and art circles as the characteristic of formalism theory. Montage of attraction, also translated as " montage attraction,[2] refers to a way of performance adopted and theoretically proposed by Eisenstein in his drama and film creation practice in the early 1920s, aiming to choose a more influential way and make appropriate combinations to influence the audience's emotion so that the audience can accept the ideas and conclusions of the author. [3]

Eisenstein explained in *Montage of Attraction* that attraction is "all the elements that can move the audience both emotionally and psychologically, and what is used to move the audience aiming at the specific emotions of the audience is verified by experience and calculated with scientific precision." In terms of the receivers themselves, it is likely that through all the sensations they have felt they will accept the concepts which the drama performance particularly prompts them to accept

-- the ultimate ideological conclusion. [4] Instead of statically reflecting specific events matching the theme, and solving it with the infecting method related to this event, it is to put forward a new way in which the arbitrarily chosen (and it works apart from the established structure and scene) and independent way of performing infection are freely combined into montage in order to realize a clear goal and the final theme effect, which is called the montage of attraction." [5] In fact, the study on the montage of attraction is a process in which Eisenstein explores how the film expresses the author's social thinking and value judgment in the form of audio-visual language. He rarely uses the montage as the function of complete narration. In his montage structure, what pushes the scene forward is not the plot action but the thought, and the key point conveyed by continuous images is not the event but the theme meaning. Therefore, Eisenstein's image structure is characterized by pure rationality. When the powerful emotional effects of this montage of attraction are sublimated into the transmission of concepts and ideas, it reached what Eisenstein called the highest stage of the montage, which is called intellectual montage. The montage of attraction mainly has impacts on the audience's emotion, while intellectual montage mainly focuses on the audience's intellectual cognition, aimed at making the film more convincing with more guiding force. Eisenstein's film creation and research contains a lot of information, however, his main characteristics are very clear. Faced with the great social changes, he has always been exploring between the uncertainty of formalism with leading experimental color and socialist realism.

## 2. The Development Process of Montage

Griffith was the first film artists to really use montage in the early stage. In *Villa Triste*, his first use of parallel montage, also known as cross-cutting, creates a strong suspense effect. Although Griffith used a lot of parallel montages in his film, he did not systematize, theorize and specialize montage. Moreover, it seems that Griffith used montage relying only on personal intuition and one film creation method, and he was not even aware of the existence of these principles and theories. He just thinks that montage is a tool and a method for his narration. In a word, he hasn't realized the great potential of montage or he hasn't developed its related functions. Although Griffith was the first person to use montage, it was the former Soviet filmmakers who really put forward the concept of montage and perfected it, such as Goldin, Kuleshov, Eisenstein, Pudovkin and so on. During and after World War I, the filmstrips were scarce throughout Europe. Unexpectedly, the lack of filmstrip led to the establishment of the world-renowned Kuleshov Studio, where Kuleshov guides the students to carry out many editing experiments. The most famous experiment was the Kuleshov Effect. By means of a series of editing experiments, Soviet filmmakers eventually discovered the "montage".

However, it is only proposed theoretically and it was the film theorist and director Eisenstein who put this theory into practice. Applying montage to film creation, Eisenstein filmed *Strike*, *Old and New*, *October*, *Battleship Potemkin* and so on. In *Battleship Potemkin*, the application of montage has reached a perfect state, especially the chapter of "Odessa Steps" has become a classic example of the use of montage in the history of film. Eisenstein developed the concepts and theories of montage. He believed that montage showed conflict and struggle, through which a new concept different from the two individual lenses themselves was presented. What he emphasized was the splicing of two shots, not their sum, but the product. With the systematic generalization and analysis of montage theory by Kuleshov, Eisenstein and Pudovkin, the montage theory has gradually taken shape. Generally speaking, montage can be divided into the following four categories: (1) Narrative montage. Narrative montage is mainly reflected in the use of montage to create a complete space and time or show a complete plot, which is completed through the combination of different images, scenes, shots and sound in the film; (2) Emotional montage. This montage method is to connect the shots of different time and space in the film according to the inner connection of the images, so as to form a complete storyline, and express the deep emotional connotation or meaning of the story through contrast and shock. (3) Intellectual (also known as thought) montage. It is not only an effective film technology approach, but also a unique artistic thinking. The pure concept and

abstract thinking mode it possesses has great advantages in the expression of rich and profound ideological connotation of the film. (4) Other montages: that is, the montages inside the lens, also known as single-lens montage. Simply speaking, it is the use of long lenses.

### 3. Montage in Eisenstein's Works

Of all Eisenstein's works, *¡Que Viva Mexico!* is not only the most outstanding work, but also the most difficult work in creation. It took nearly half a century to complete the film creation from the very beginning. For Eisenstein, it was a work that was far from home and social environment. It is a work created in an almost ideal place in "the first period of freedom in his life". This state can be seen from the record of more than 70,000 meters of filmstrips. [6] This state of creation enabled Eisenstein to make bolder explorations and attempts on formalism in his film creation, making Eisenstein's distinctive aesthetic pursuit shown in his films. In the 1960s, a film historian George Sadoul boldly commented that the documentary "is an unfinished great monument and it would be Eisenstein's most aesthetically significant work " without seeing the full-version *¡Que Viva Mexico!*, through only some fragments of the film "it can be seen that the film should be Eisenstein's work" [7]

#### 3.1 Formalism Aesthetics

Eisenstein shocked the world with *Battleship Potemkin*, however, the turbulent political situation in the Soviet Union frustrated the talented young film director. Due to the delicate political situation, the desire for new film technology and the invitation from his western European counterparts, Eisenstein began his trip to Europe in 1929. After visiting Germany, France, Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland, Eisenstein was invited to the United States by Paramount Pictures, Inc. The business model of Hollywood is very different from that of Soviet revolutionary artists. After the failure of several creative projects, the Eisenstein team finally arrived in Mexico in December 1931 and *Que Viva* completed this documentary about the land of eagles and cactus, *¡Que Viva Mexico!*

Eisenstein will make the audience have a wonderful feeling in the creation of *¡Que Viva Mexico!* that being in different parts of Mexico is like being in different periods of history. In Yucatan, where time seems to stop, the religious tradition over thousands of years is still lively, and in the tropical area of Tehuantepec, the folk customs before the invasion of the colonists are still retained. The film is expanded spatially, with Eisenstein painting different periods of time in geographic space. He compared the film to the colorful striped scarf of Mexicans called "Silarbi". Different short stories constitute six chapters according to the spatial relationship: "Prologue", "Sandunga", "Fiesta", "Maguety", "Soldadera", "Calavera" . Different parts filmed in different areas represent different times or eras: primitive society, before the invasion of the colonists, after the invasion of the colonists, Diaz's dictatorship, during the revolutionary war and after the revolution. The combination of diachronism and synchronicity makes the film endowed with strong surreal and stylized features, while the rich formalistic aesthetic style of the film not only bears the ultimate aesthetic pursuit of Eisenstein but also presents the most typical image characteristics of Eisenstein

Eisenstein's image pursuit is obviously influenced by Russian formalism. As an important school of literary theory at the beginning of the 20th century, Russian formalism promoted the text language to the focus of literary research, which played a direct role in promoting the emergence of film theory, especially the Soviet montage theory. Eisenstein and Russian formalists kept exchanging ideas on film issues from the mid and late 1920s to the 1930s. It is believed that although Eisenstein suffered from the increasing pressure of the "socialist realism" in this period, his film theory works on the track of Russian formalism. [8] Eisenstein montage theory emphasizes the realization of the meaning construction of films through the rhetorical methods such as metaphor and symbolism generated by montage. This way of thinking about films from the perspective of language is clearly enlightened by Russian formalism. With emphasis on stimulating

the audience to a state of passion through conflict, the essence of Eisenstein's montage of attraction is closely related to the core concept of "defamiliarization" of Russian formalism.

A large amount of Eisenstein-style montage of attraction was used in the film *¡Que Viva Mexico!*, in which a stunning facial expression and perfect shooting skills makes the film endowed with a way of expressing emotions rarely seen in films". [9] The composition of many key shots in the "Prologue" presents a typical thinking of montage of attraction. The living people in the scene are placed together with the indifferent stone statues. The human's posture is deliberately arranged like a stone statue, and they also chose the local people with faces similar to those of the stone statues. This potential montage "breaks through the limitations of the frame by increasing the intensity, throwing its own conflicts on the splice junctions between the clips that have been edited, and then diffusing the conflicts into a series of shots, through which we put together the scattered events. And it represents the perspective we observe things and the views on the phenomena. [10] The metaphorical montage with strong Eisenstein features often plays an important role in the film. For example, in "Sandunga", he cut together two similar-shaped objects, the necklace around the girl's neck and her lover's hammock through the way of superposition of shots, indicating that the necklace is the necessary dowry of the local young girls for marriage and the hammock obviously means good love and happy life. The superposition of the two symbols generates new meaning, that is, in order to realize a happy life, a precious necklace is necessary. Eisenstein made a variety of bold attempts to use the montage of attraction in his creation. For example, in the bullfight clip of Fiesta, he placed a bull's head on the cart on purpose to create a visual effect that it was shot on the back of the bull, and inserted a subjective shot of "bull" between the matador and the audience to create a novel and strong visual impact. In terms of the relationship between art and reality, *¡Que Viva Mexico!* didn't make a distinction between recording and processing, and the documentary materials and manually arranged scenes and actions are mixed together to form a fictional and real plot. A great deal of montage of attraction was used to create a closed meaning connotation, and the director used direct concepts and objects to clearly express the theme, which also blocks the way for readers to interpret the text and understand the society. [11] For immediate political effects, Eisenstein had a lot of exploration into the form of expressing his ideas through images, and the above-mentioned hammock and necklace is of a strong semiotic meaning, so is the Calavera at the end of the film. However, after the skeleton mask was removed, what capitalists, landlords and others presented were still skeletons. Although this kind of processing can certainly generate significant dramatic effects, this compulsive analogy may not be accepted by the audience easily.

### 3.2 Content as a Form

There are two opinions in Russian formalism on the relationship between content and form: First, eliminating content with form; second, classifying content into form. Form can create content, and content is content of form. Eisenstein's film view is essentially dialectical. He strived to break the binary opposition between perceptual thinking and rational thinking, logical language and image language, and emphasized that the infection of works of art is based on the two-way mechanism of the transmission of works. On the one hand, the audience's perceptual thinking got into the film along with the plot structure of the film. On the other hand, the film structure leads the audience's rational thinking. He paid special attention to the audience's emotions in the film creation, and to the comprehensive processing of the internal components of the film, taking the film as a self-contained organism. In the creation of *¡Que Viva Mexico!*, its form pursuit is like a big tree, which is not only rooted in the soil of its meaning, but also provides shelter for the soil of content expression, making the two closely combined as a whole.

The theme of *¡Que Viva Mexico!* can be condensed as death and life, love and revolution. These themes not only run through the various parts of the film, but also have an inner and deep connection. The key to understanding these themes can be concentrated in Day of the dead in Mexico.

Day of the dead is a symbolic exchange between death and life. Mexicans believe in the eternal cycle of birth and death. On day of the dead, the living need to find the dead and communicate with

the lonely ghosts to comfort them. At the same time, they can also find their own afterlife through the conversation. In addition, Mexicans also express their satire on the colonists with the carnival on the day of the dead, containing inside their spirit of resisting oppression and pursuing freedom. The carnival phenomenon in festivals essentially means their subversion of the hierarchical order, and then the concept of "order" disappears. The society gets rid of the imposed rules through the festival. It is showing the strength of life through eulogizing the death that is behind the carnival phenomenon. The "revolution" shown by Eisenstein in this film is not only the result of class oppression, but also the result of the vitality of Mexicans full of passion and freedom spirit. As a result, in the eternal cycle, the time in this film is non-linear without obvious beginning and end. It begins with the stone statue and people in the prologue, followed by the individual's death and the funerals of the young man. The new life emerges upon death, and new life is indispensable from the marriage of Sandunga and the birth of a baby. The arrival of Spaniards brought Fiesta of suffering and enslavement to the Mexican Indians. And then the intolerable farm laborers finally fought against them and the revolution broke out. At last farm laborers defeated the Spaniards. After war, Maguey and Soldadera mocked death to show they defeated death on Day of the dead. At the end of the film, the smiling face of the child symbolizes the new-born and growing Mexico. In such a structured and free space-time structure, Eisenstein presents the unique Mexican society, the past, present and future of history and culture.

However, Eisenstein's exploration of formalism has brought long-term and great trouble to him. Formalism was absolutely regarded as a derogatory term in the Soviet Union at the time, and even had the nature of original sin, therefore, Eisenstein's persisted exploration of formalism made him upset in his creation for a long time. In the *Bolshaya sovetskaya entsiklopediya* published in 1932, the entry of Eisenstein says, "Although he has excellent talents, he turned to formalism experiments." When he was criticized by others and by themselves in 1935, the most frequently used name of crime for Eisenstein was also "formalism". In 1936, Eisenstein became a living target of a Soviet campaign against "formalism" and "naturalism" in art. His first film with enough exploration spirit filmed after returning to the Soviet Union from Mexico was *Bezhin Meadow*, which suffered the fate of being destroyed before the final film was completed in this political movement.

Filmed in 1935, although *Bezhin Meadow* was not completed, it clearly foreshadowed some prototypes of modern films-focusing on psychological depiction instead of plot arrangement and event description; neither the positive character nor the negative character is portrayed in a single tone; adopting expressionism, surrealism, symbolism, metaphor, metonymy, hypothesis and other methods; especially highlighting the function of modeling elements, taking environment, setting, natural scenery, props, lighting, contrast of light and shade as an important drama method; weakening the dramatic conflict and drama structure, strengthening the author's subjective consciousness, and narrating the attitude towards the real life instead of reflecting the real life itself. The film is evaluated in the second volume of the *Soviet Film History* published in 1959 that "many scenes in this film are amazing with their novel and exquisite composition, transparent and stereoscopic shooting and real picturesque scene." After the film has been shot for several months, the script was required to be rewritten and most of the film scenes was required to be revised. Boris Shumiyatsky, director of the Soviet Central Film Administration, presented the film to members of the Member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee so as to demonstrate Eisenstein's "formalism" and "irresponsibility." As a result, Eisenstein was criticized and the second redesigned shooting was not completed. In March 1937, he was finally ordered to stop shooting this film. Eisenstein later published an article entitled *the Mistakes of Bezhin Meadow* in the Soviet Art Daily for public self-criticism. Many well-known filmmakers were organized to discuss the film. Udilyanov criticized that this film had the mistakes of "formalism" and "naturalism". Avinarius believed that the film has "anti-realism" and "anti-Soviet". Kuleshov pointed out Eisenstein's mistakes were as much the result of his own "withdrawal from life", "self-absorption", "self-appreciation" and "self-obsession" as they were of his own. [13]. The authority of ideology drove Eisenstein into ruin, and made him become a person that is not needed by the times." [14]

What confused Eisenstein all his life was that he didn't know what people expected him to be in a new era of socialist realism, and what seemed realistic to him was merely an experiment in the eyes of others, while he regarded what seemed realistic to others as static and unnatural works created by superficial and ignorant people. [15]

The spontaneous pursuit of formalism leads to confusion on the realization of the ultimate value of artistic creation, which is obviously not an individual problem of the talented filmmaker Eisenstein. Such problems are so common in Soviet art creation of various fields that Andre Gide, a French writer who visited the Soviet Union for a short time had a deep thinking. He believed that in the Soviet Union "any artist who pays more attention on form rather than content was wrong and should be accused of formalism. Only the oriented content is considered to be a meaningful work of art, otherwise it will be condemned as a work of formalism." [16] In fact, Eisenstein never rejected the ideology of montage, instead, he took Marxism-Leninism as the philosophical standpoint for his film research and creation and regarded dialectical materialism as the theoretical basis of film. He firmly believed that the typical characteristic of montage development is dialectics, which is not the unity of external plots, but the unity of internal contradictions, thus viewing film creation with monism and dialectics. [17] He realized that "there is no conflict between the production of publicity materials and the powerful aesthetic effects. Only after propaganda materials achieve the artistic effects, the structural unity, the ability to stimulate perception, extremely vivid feelings, can these materials play a role in politics effectively" [18]

What Eisenstein's creation exploration and long-term creative dilemma represented by *¡Que Viva Mexico!* left for today lies in the deep relationship between the image components, the structural methods and the deep meaning conveyance of the images explored by formalism.

#### 4. Discussion

Like other Soviet directors, Eisenstein also emphasized the social function of films that films should reflect reality and serve social development. After returning to the Soviet Union, Eisenstein consciously followed the principles of socialist realism in his artistic creation. However, Eisenstein said, "I am not a realist. I am a materialist and I believe in the real things, because it is the things that give us all feelings. I need to use reality to avoid realism ". [19] He believes that montage is a way to realize the will of the director and the function of the film, so as to make the film achieve the assumed truth. As a director of the Soviet montage school, Eisenstein has a different understanding of montage from Pudovkin et al. He thinks it is harmful to consider montage only as a combination of lens elements. The superposition of two shots is not addition calculation but multiplication calculation, because it can generate new conceptual meanings or generate new images, thus guiding the audience to rationally think. In Eisenstein's philosophy, the unity of opposites is the permanent form of material existence and movement. The conflicts between shots and the sublimation generated by the conflict will finally be unified under the theme. The "dialectics" of this image is the essence of montage. Eisenstein's montage concept based on dialectics is of methodological significance. In a way, *¡Que Viva Mexico!* seems to be the best proof of this dialectic.

Firstly, it is the unity of reason and passion. Mexico's unique charm and passion, especially the unity of death and life, awakened Eisenstein and helped him break through the limitations caused by his excessive rationality. No matter it is in *Strike* or *Old and New*, Eisenstein would control himself due to various social factors when presenting his emotion or passion, while the trip to Mexico became an important turning point in Eisenstein's creation. In other words, Eisenstein tended to be a revolutionary with high artistic attainments in the Soviet Union, while in Mexico, he was closer to a revolutionary film artist. Although *¡Que Viva Mexico!* still talks about the revolution, this understanding and expression of revolution are not restricted by any political ideas. Here, Eisenstein's understanding of the revolution changed from an undercurrent in his heart into a rushing river. One of his friends, the biographer Mary Seaton, dissects Eisenstein's inner heart in *Eisenstein Critical Biography* " it can be said without exaggeration that the enlightenment he experienced in Mexico were so profound to himself that it was as if the 'soul' of a nation moved his

soul and became a part of his soul" "his scientist's identity is hidden and his epic writer identity has emerged." [20]

Secondly, it is a compromise between revolution and art. Heinrich's premonition that communism will destroy his art seems to be verified by the fate of many Soviet poets in the 20th century including Mayakovsky, Pasternak, Bunin, Brodecky, Mandelstam. Did Eisenstein realize that he might be like those Mexicans carrying cacti on their pilgrimage when he shot the scene? In his autobiography *From Revolution to Art, From Art to Revolution*, Eisenstein said that he was inseparable from revolution. In fact, he could not get rid of the vortex formed by the revolution and art all his life. Influenced by structuralism painting and drama, Eisenstein conducted a deep study on the surrealism and avant-garde. At the same time, under the deep influence of Russian formalism, Eisenstein devoted himself to promoting social change with his films. He once imagined making *Das Kapital* into a film according to the scenes in Karl Marx's book. His enthusiasm to change the society with film is unquestionable, but his artistic interest makes it difficult for him to keep pace with the development of socialist realism and literary creation methods and theories. Faced with the collision of passion and reason, Eisenstein was often trapped in a special situation in the Soviet Union, Western Europe or the United States: On the one hand, he enjoyed a very high reputation, on the other hand, he was alienated. Only in Mexico can he display his talents. This freedom both in politics and economy is precious and fragile, which not only makes the film amazing but also implies the tragedy of the film.

In fact, *¡Que Viva Mexico!* was not completed by Eisenstein himself. However, Mexico was not only the place where his excellent work was shot, but also the turning point in Eisenstein's creation in his life. It was not long before Eisenstein suffered from economic, political and moral pressure during his creation in Mexico, and eventually he had to give up filming the planned part of *Soldadera* and returned to the Soviet Union in 1932. Since then, he has never touched the film material expected to be a great work. However, this regret was finally made up by his friends. After many years of efforts of his best friends, Alexandrov, Kesai and other filmmakers, the Soviet Film Library purchased most of the filmstrips that Eisenstein filmed at that time from the United States in the 1970s and finished the incomplete and amazing *¡Que Viva Mexico!* based on the script Eisenstein wrote. No sooner had this film presented to the audience in 1979 than it won the honorary award of the Moscow International Film Festival. It can be seen from this incomplete work that Eisenstein has extremely high aesthetic attainments.

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