

Preface. Montage principle and the semiotics of culture

Montage as a structural principle in the modernization process of Russian culture and as a significant element within the semiotics of culture was mentioned already in the *Theses for the Semiotic Study of Cultures (as Applied to Slavic Texts)* forty years ago, in 1973. Fortunately, the following important passage was included in the newest English translation (2013); thus, I shall provide it here completely:

The orientation toward cinema is connected to such traits of twentieth century culture as the dominance of the montage principle (beginning with cubistic constructions in painting and poetry, chronologically preceding the ascendancy of the montage principle in silent film; cf. also later “cine-eye”-type experiments in prose, consciously imitating the montage principles of documentary films in their construction; another characteristic example of this is the parallelism of the combination of different temporal segments in cinema, contemporary theatre, and prose, e.g. Bulgakov’s), the employment and opposition of different points of view (the increase in the relative amount of narration, free indirect speech and inner monologue in prose is related to this; such artistic practice also coincides with the pervasive and, in the case of a number of researchers, conscious parallelism in the conceptualization of the meaning of point of view for the theory of prose, theory of painting, and theory of cinema), the prevalence of concentrating on details presented in close-ups (the metonymic trend in fiction; this stylistic dominant is also related to the importance of detail as a key to narrative structure in popular literary genres, such as detective fiction). (Lotman *et al.* 2013: 77)

The montage principle was indeed a significant feature, discernible in various Modernist, post-Symbolist and avant-garde art forms and texts. It appears that the Russian Revolution served as a catalyst for different art forms striving for a similar structural code, and in this the language of cinema played an important role. The conflictual and complex relationship between the old and the new cultures was manifested in different sign systems of early Soviet Russian culture, dealing with the artistic alternation between differentiation and unification, deconstruction and

reconstruction, separation and reassembling, fragmentation and integration, or dissolving and recomposing.

Already at the beginning of the 1920s the montage theoreticians posed the hypothesis that the vehicle is not exclusively a cinematic phenomenon, but should rather be understood as an intersemiotic principle applicable to different arts. One of the conclusions was Viktor Shklovskij's exclamation: "*Mir montazhen!* The world is montage! The world is chained. The ideas do not exist separately" (Shklovskij 1983: 445). This is one of the reasons why Sergei Eisenstein became so important for the semiotics of the 20th century. He suggested that each artistic image is created as montage, which is related with artistic juxtaposition in general (Eisenstein 1964: 157).

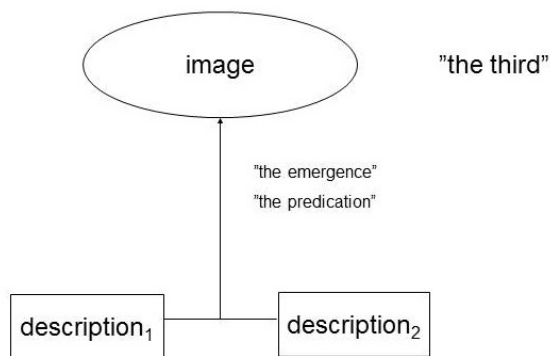


Figure 1. The combination of two semantically potential elements provides a new quality.

In the “effect” that Lev Kuleshov discovered in his early cinematographic experiments and in Eisenstein’s further theory, the combination of two descriptive elements (*izobrazheniya*) provide a new quality, “the third”, which is not related with any of the juxtaposed elements as such (see Figure 1). Eventually, in Eisenstein’s theory the reader/viewer appears in a decisive role as a reconstructing subject: the author has an idea of the original image, which he/she deconstructs into fragments within the artistic text. The reader is then supposed to reintegrate the image the author had had in mind (Eisenstein 1964: 162).

In his semiotics of the artistic text and, especially, in *Semiotics of Cinema* (Lotman 1973/1976), Juri Lotman emphasized this idea of the general montage principle. According to him, the studies of the Soviet theorists lead to more broad problematics of the dynamic narrative text. For Lotman, the central features of montage theories – such as juxtaposition, conflict, or reassembling – are closely related with all artistic texts. As a universal principle, related with any artistic

signification, montage should be understood as a method of organization in which something complete is expressed via its discrete elements. Thus, montage as a semiotic composition principle can be found on different levels of culture: as a structural principle in culture texts, as a feature of certain languages of culture, as well as a semiospheric phenomenon.

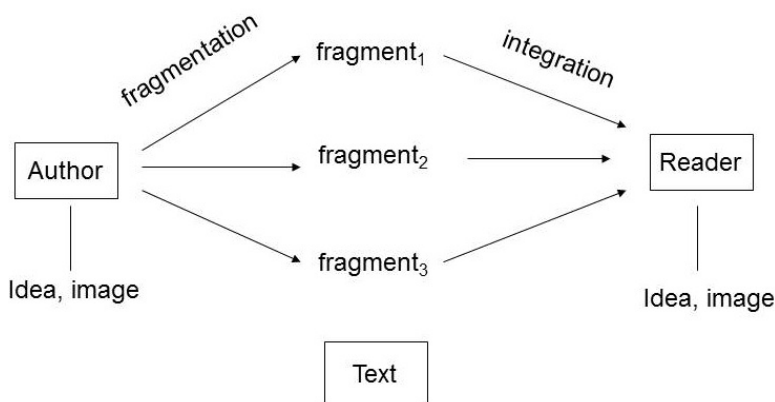


Figure 2. Reader-response montage theory, according to S. Eisenstein.

Therefore it is not surprising that montage has often been reflected upon in different works of the Tartu-Moscow School semiotics of culture: for example, in studies by Yuri Levin (1964), Vyacheslav Ivanov (1976, 1988), Yuri Tsivyan (1988) and Roman Timenchik (1989). As to the general cultural principle of montage, one should mention also Mikhail Yampolski's (1993) thorough analysis of intertextuality in cinema, as well as the text-book on cinematic "grammar" (1994) co-authored by Juri Lotman and Yuri Tsivyan. The same idea served as a starting point for a late Soviet article collection dedicated to montage in literature, art, theatre and film (MLITK 1988), which in a way was able to synthesize the universal montage principle within Russian cultural studies. Similar attempts were made in the volume edited by Matthew Teitelbaum (1994) and P. Adams Sitney's book (1990) which was dedicated mainly to the relationship between literature and film.

The current special issue aims at continuing the constantly topical discussion about montage as part of, and as a vehicle in, the modernization process of culture – Russian culture in particular. Several articles deal with the context of the historical avant-garde. As the 1973 *Theses* already indicated, montage as a structural principle in avant-garde art was a phenomenon related with the alternation between analytics and synthetics (cf. Döring-Smirnova, Smirnov 1982). Historically,

representing the uniform tendencies, rather than differentiation, between the cultural languages, montage became a metonymical device. This cultural-historical aspect, as well as the semiotic theoretical evolution, leads us eventually to the ever-arising question of about the difference between montage and collage. A semiotician's answer to this question would be: while collage deals with representation, montage is always more about signification.

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