

Dissociative Montage

In his book Into the Silent Land, Paul Broks wrote, “A human being is a story-telling machine. The self is a story.” Broks, who is a neural physiologist, believes that we make sense of our experience from moment to moment by constantly linking the moments into a story, which we call the self. I find this fascinating in relation to early film theory and in particular Lev Kuleshov’s early experiments in the late 1910’s and early ‘20’s. Kuleshov took one image of an expressionless actor and placed it in a filmstrip next to an image of a bowl of soup, and then repeated the same image of the actor next to an image of a child and then next to an image of a child’s coffin. What he discovered was that the audience not only believed the actor’s expression changed in relation to the image that followed, but that the audience seemed to project their own emotions and assumptions onto the images and their relationships. This became known as the “Kuleshov Effect” and was a major influence on Sergei Eisenstein’s own theory of “Dialectical Montage.”

Eisenstein’s theory proposes that when two images are placed next to each other there is the possibility of a dialectic relationship, where the first image is the thesis and is followed by the second image, which is the antithesis. Upon viewing the two images in order, the audience then creates the third term, which is a synthesis of the first two. What is fascinating about this theory is that the synthesis is never shown on screen but only occurs in the viewers mind. Further, he conceived his theory before the advent of synchronous sound, which he believed was a waste of sound’s dialectical potential, and called for a contrapuntal use of sound with image rather than synchronizing of the two.

Perhaps because of his time or perhaps because of his political focus, I believe Eisenstein missed the greater implications of his theory, which relates back to Broks. The way we actually perceive a film as a “moving picture” is by a trick of the mind and eye. In general, a film is a succession of 24 still images a second, and by presenting them in a darkened room, we take advantage of first, the eye’s natural tendency to maintain a persistence of vision. This means, especially in a dark environment, if a bright image is flashed briefly, the image tends to persist in our vision even after the image itself is gone. Secondly, the cinema takes advantage of a trick of the mind called the “Phi Phenomenon,” which is well exemplified in a child’s flipbook. Basically, if the mind is presented a rapid succession of still images of a ball falling to the ground, the mind will apply its own experience and expectation to fill in the spaces between the actual images. The effect is that we perceive an optical illusion that the ball is actually falling when in reality the ball is still in each separate image.

I believe Broks is basically applying the Phi Phenomenon to our moment-to-moment experience. To maintain a sense of self, the mind strives to maintain a constancy of perception, sometimes making illogical or untruthful leaps, as in seeing the ball falling in the flipbook, in order to satisfy the story of the self. In much more extreme cases, such as experiencing trauma, the mind can choose to disassociate itself from the reality by forgetting what happened (amnesia) or by disassociating the self from the body (depersonalization disorder) so that the person does not perceive the trauma to be happening to themselves, while simultaneously experiencing it happening to their body. Understanding this potential and our innate desire to

maintain a constancy of perception or story is, I feel, the key to a much more poetic narrative cinema.

I have basically fused Broks, Kuleshov and Eisenstein and developed a method of editing I call “Dissociative Montage.” Eisenstein proposed a dialectical collision of image against image and then added sound as a second element with its own potential for a dialectical relationship with the image. Rather than just two elements, I am proposing that there are five elements to narrative cinema: image, sound, time, space, and what I call the narrative stream. The predominant method of editing in narrative film today is called “Continuity Editing,” which presents the narrative by using image and sound to maintain the illusion of a constant time and space. This method tends to fuse together image, sound, time and space in service of the narrative, and by so doing, tends to be very literal in its visual syntax.

Inspired by what I have learned about dissociative disorders from Broks, I am proposing that as long as the narrative stream is maintained by at least one element, the other elements can disassociate from the narrative stream and from each other. This, in effect frees them to make their own statements or work in a dialectic relationship with another or several elements. This potentially stretches the Kuleshov effect to cover all five elements and relies much more on the audience’s innate desire to make a cohesive story out of the separate elements it is presented. I believe this desire and the audience’s proficiency at synthesizing dialectical elements have greatly increased, keeping pace with the evolution of our visual language. However, I think modern narrative cinema has failed to take advantage of this proficiency and has only

begun to test how far the viewer's mind is willing to stretch to maintain a cohesive experience.

I must reiterate that it is essential for the film to maintain its narrative stream in order for Dissociative Montage to work effectively. I chose the term "narrative stream" carefully because what I intend is something more than simply the narrative story and its characters, actions and plot points. Yet at the same time, the narrative stream is more ephemeral and hard to put one's finger on. Like its namesake, a stream is in itself a thing, but its borders are fluid and it is made of a collection of elements, none of which are a stream on their own. In this way the narrative stream becomes a mysterious element that is redefined by each film. But in general I believe it is the sense of a story being told and progressing even if the story is not being presented chronologically.

The important point is that the audience must never completely lose its connection with the narrative stream. Once this connection is broken, the editing method becomes something other, and in my opinion devolves into confusion and endless arbitrary interpretation. There must be a through line, something the audience can follow from moment to moment to feel a sense of continuity, much like the rhythm in modern music which may evolve within a song but holds the song together so that the other instruments can work in harmony, discord or improvise on their own. However, I believe this continuity or narrative stream can be held together by much less than modern narrative cinema has realized.

Dissociative Montage does not have new or unique techniques, and its execution is going to be different for each filmmaker. As I have put this method into

practice, I use techniques such as the jump cut that other filmmakers have used, but I will argue that I use them with different intent and effect. The jump cut is an excellent example in this case as it highlights another way Disassociative Montage breaks from the past. A jump cut is defined as “A cut between two shots that are so similar that the subject appears to jump from one position to another. A disjunctive, disorienting cut . . . that – unlike the match cut – calls attention to itself” (Mast, 648). Jean-Luc Godard is often credited as the filmmaker to first use the jump cut artistically, but he was using it in a very different context and, like Eisenstein, he was interested in its political implications. Godard was attempting to interrupt the audience’s identification with the characters in an attempt to push the audience out of the film and back into their theater seats so that they may remain objective and view the film for its political content. This modernist idea was likely influenced by the dramatist, theatre director and poet, Bertolt Brecht, who became known for his principle called the *Verfremdungseffekt*, which translated means the “defamiliarization effect,” or “estrangement effect.”

I bring up Godard and Brecht simply because we use similar techniques and the term “dissociative” may seem dangerously close to defamiliarization, but again these men were interested in the political and I am more interested in the psychological and perceptual. As I stated above, I don’t believe Dissociative Montage works if the audience loses the narrative stream. I am not looking to estrange the audience from the drama, nor am I hoping to fight their natural tendency to identify with the characters on the screen. Rather, I am counting on the audience’s identification, suspension of disbelief and need to make connections where there is

little support for them. I am attempting to dissociate the five elements making up the film while maintaining the audience's immersion in the narrative stream. Often I find that the effect of Dissociative Montage is to reorder the individual elements that are maintaining the narrative stream in a way that reveals the emotional or psychological truth of the scene, a truth that otherwise may not be present. Or, another way of saying this is, allowing the interior truth of the moment to trump the physical/temporal reality or logic of the scene.

An example of this from *Somewhere West* is at 41 minutes and 45 seconds. Ian is returning from the waterfalls and has refused help from Ryan after tripping and falling on the path. As Ian arrives at the truck, Ryan is sitting in the passenger seat when Ian opens the driver's side door and begins verbally abusing Ryan who finally agrees to be dropped off at the next town. In this scene, I alternate between having the image and sound synched and non-synched along with using a series of "L" and "J" cuts. In a "J" cut the audio from the next shot begins before the image does, and an "L" cut is when the audio continues as the image from the next shot begins. The scene is also entirely made up of jump cuts, as there is only one camera position and the perspective changes very little from shot to shot, causing Ian to seemingly jump in space.

In this scene it is impossible to determine if all the shots are diegetic or if some of them are imagined. An example of this ambiguity is when Ian stands with his back to Ryan and is physically not speaking but we hear his voice. Or perhaps the best example is a very powerful moment after Ian has said "What are you going to do with your next month, next year, five years? Nothing . . . nothing." Then there is a

jump cut to Ian in a slightly different position but in an entirely different emotional state as he angrily yells the same word for a third time: “NOTHING!” This shot is also unusual in that it is the only shot in the scene where Ian seems to lose his composure completely. Further, I believe the



diegesis becomes unimportant in this moment as we understand the emotional truth of the shot and understand that regardless of whether or not Ian has actually spoken the word a third time, the anger he expresses is what he is feeling and thinking.

Space is relatively clear in this scene in that the characters don't change location but they do alter their position, which conversely makes the continuity of time unclear. However, what seems to hold the narrative stream together is the audio. Even though we aren't entirely sure if the audio is all diegetic, there is a continuity to it that carries us through the scene, allowing us to feel the unsettling dissociations, but in the end revealing an emotional truth as well as a great deal about the characters.