SOVIET MONTAGE THEORY

Soviet Cinema came to being from its painful post war experience. With a strict control by the Government on film making and import of films it was in 1924, Sergei Eisenstein and Lev Kuleshov with other major directors like Diziga Vertov formed a group called "Association of Revolutionary Cinema" (ARC) which eventually broke up but with the aftermath of the revolution, it brought forward a style called Montage that made the world pay attention to their cinema.

Evolution of Soviet Montage

The war and the restriction brought a change in the Soviet Cinematic style. The primary principle of the montage style was invented by Lev Kuleshov in 1918 is bringing the shots that do not have any relation but makes a connection by what comes before and after the shot. This effect is called as "Kuleshov Effect" which was the initial stage of evolution of montage.

This effect can be better explained with an example from Kuleshov experiment where he juxtaposes shots from several films and edit it into a sequence that narrates its own story.

Montage

Eisenstein who was also making his own experiments exceeded "Kuleshov Effect" giving out montage which is also called "Soviet Montage". 'Montage' means bringing the conflicting images/shots together that gives a unique contrast leaving a shock and anticipation for the audience. Eisenstein believed that more the conflicting the shots are the more it is intellectual leaving its audience in shock which also stirs their inner emotions.

Categories of Montage

Sergei Eisenstein categorized montage into five different types

Metric Montage

It is a simple montage style where the long scenes are shortened to a length called as 'absolute length' of the shots without affecting the essence of the original story or its emotion. This type of montage is used to create a suspense and tension which is usually fast paced and has abrupt cuts that doesn't have continuity but makes sense of the complete length of the shot.

Rhythmic Montage

In contrast to metric montage, this style of montage focuses on the rhythm of the action taken place which is equal to the actual length of the shot. This type eliminates the abruptness and the unexpected jump from one shot to other. The best example of rhythmic montage is "Odessa steps" from Sergei Eisenstein's "Battleship Potemkin", a Russian classic. The relationship made with soldiers marching down the steps towards the protesters. Each step taken forward shows the emotions of the group of protestors who are trying to flee from the soldiers pouring bullets.

Tonal Montage

Tonal Montage concentrates on the emotion of characters that is sequenced with other shots. For example if the heroine of the film commits suicide after a huge emotional imbalance it is shown with drifting piece of cloth in the air that reaches the hero while he tries to reach. The drifting piece of the cloth conveys the message of the fallen heroine. Such type of scenes brings in emotional quality to film.

Overtonal Montage

The simultaneous use of all the three above montages in a combination forms the overtonal montage creating conflict between the shots.

Intellectual Montage

Intellectual montage involves the use of all the four montage styles that arises not only conflicts between the shot but also arises a complex emotion to the audience that will make the audience the plight of the characters on the screen. This style of complex editing can be seen in Sergei Eisenstein's film Strike, 1925.

Major Directors

There are four primary directors who used soviet montage in their cinema

1. Sergei Eisenstein
2. Lev Kuleshov
3. Dziga Vertov
4. Vsevolod Pudovkin

Classic Movies of the Time

1. Strike, 1925
2. Battleship Potemkin, 1925
3. The end of St. Petersburg, 1927
4. October, 1928
5. Citizen Kane, 1941
6. Casablanca, 1942

Example

Soviet Montage Theory – Battleship Potemkin

A silent film directed by Sergei Eisenstein in 1925 that depicts the rebellion that occurred in 1905. The most famous scene like Odessa Steps had the power to pull the audience into the mutiny that the film was banned in most countries even Soviet Union, and today even though it seen as an art of brilliance. The revolutionary propaganda that portrayed the outrage of the public with limited dialogues wouldn't have had the effect if not for the juxtapositions and the momentum that during the breath taking sequences that formed a story in its own style. As a film of all times Battleship Potemkin, the film's focus on the bloodshed and the victim plight and the social situation of the Soviet Union brings the primary focus. Battleship Potemkin is a milestone in the history of film studies.