

# How Cinema Works in Your Mind

## The Film Editing Technique of “Montage”

---

Perhaps the most essential characteristic of the motion picture is **montage**, from the French *monter*, “to assemble.” Montage refers to the editing of the film, the cutting and piecing together of exposed film in a manner that best conveys the intent of the work. Montage is what distinguishes motion pictures from the performing arts, which exist only within a performance. The motion picture, by contrast, uses the performances as the raw material, which is built up as a novel or an essay or a painting, studiously put together piece by piece, with an allowance for trial and error, second thoughts, and, if necessary, reshooting. The order in which the segments of film are presented can have drastically different dramatic effects.

Several major contributions to the theory of montage were made by Soviet directors. After the [Russian Revolution of 1917](#), [Soviet](#) films were encouraged for their [propaganda](#) value, but film stocks were scarce. Soviet directors carefully studied the films of [D.W. Griffith](#) and other masters to make the most effective use of their own meagre resources. One of those early Russian directors, [Lev Kuleshov](#), conducted an experiment involving identical shots of an actor's expressionless face. He inserted it in a film before a shot of a bowl of soup, again before a shot of a child playing, and still again before one of a dead old woman. An unsuspecting audience, asked to evaluate the actor's performance, praised his ability to express, respectively, hunger, tenderness, and grief.

[Sergey Eisenstein](#), who excelled both as a director and as a teacher, based much of his theory of film on montage, which he compared to the [compounding](#) of characters in Japanese writing. The character for “dog” added to the character for “mouth,” he noted, results not merely in “dog’s mouth” but in the new concept of “bark”; similarly, film montage results in more than the sum of its parts. Still another great Russian director, [Vsevolod I. Pudovkin](#), also stressed the importance of the carryover in the spectator's mind. Only if an object is presented as part of a synthesis, he said, is it endowed with filmic life.

Three types of montage may be distinguished—narrative, graphic, and ideational.

### **MONTAGE**

**Montage** (mōntāzh', Fr. mōNtāzh'), the art and technique of motion-picture editing in which contrasting shots or sequences are used to effect emotional or intellectual responses. It was developed creatively after 1925 by the Russian [Sergei Eisenstein](#); since that time montage has become an increasingly complex and inventive way of extending the imaginative possibilities of film art. In still photography a composite picture, made by combining several prints, or parts of prints, and then rephotographing them as a whole, is often called a montage or a photomontage.

—*The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed.  
Copyright © The Columbia University Press

In **narrative montage** the multifarious images and scenes involve a single subject followed from point to point. In a fiction film, a character or location is explored from multiple angles while the audience builds a [comprehensive](#) image of the situation being explored or explained.

**Graphic montage** occurs when shots are [juxtaposed](#) not on the basis of their subject matter but because of their physical appearance. Some avant-garde works depend on the spectator's ability to match the graphic relations of assorted images, such as the people, the objects, and the shapes of numerical and alphabetical figures in [Fernand Léger's](#) *Le Ballet mécanique* (1924) or the torpedoes, swimming seals, and blimps in [Bruce Conner's](#) *A Movie* (1958). In graphic montage, cutting usually occurs during shots of movement rather than ones of static action. This cutting on motion [facilitates](#) the smooth replacement of one image by the next.

In **ideational montage**, two separate images are related to a third thing, an idea that they help to produce and by which they are governed. In *Stachka* (1924; *Strike*), for example, the director Eisenstein, to whom the theory of ideational montage is credited, effectively conveys the idea of slaughter by intercutting a shot of cattle being butchered with shots of workers being cut down by cavalry.

[...]

In all, montage appears to be the most extraordinary factor [differentiating](#) the motion picture from the other arts, and it is the one often singled out as the basis of the medium. Nevertheless, many films, including those of [Mizoguchi Kenji](#) of [Japan](#), [Roberto Rossellini](#) of Italy, and Jancsó Miklós of Hungary, rely not on montage but on the medium's unique qualities of luminosity, movement, and realism to convey their power and beauty.

---

SOURCE: <https://www.britannica.com/art/motion-picture#ref508558>