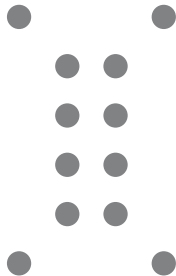


brandon taylor

does montage have a future?



● 'For some sections I use the diary form. For others, it proves necessary for me to change the point of view. The montage method of the points of view of two fictitious authors incorporates my point of view. I suppose that this sort of thing ought not to have proved necessary. Somehow it does not fit the intended pattern. But this technique has proved to be necessary for a firm grasp of reality, and I have purely realistic motives for adopting it'.

Brecht is assembling his thoughts on the literary technique suitable for his novel *The Business Affairs of Herr Julius Caesar*. The date is 1935 or 1936 - and his target is the theory of literary realism developed by Georg Lukacs, recently moved to Moscow.

'We shall take care', says Brecht a few pages later, 'not to describe one particular, historical form of novel of a particular epoch as realistic - say that of Balzac or Tolstoy - and thereby erect merely formal, literary criteria for realism. We shall not speak of a realistic manner of writing only when, for example, we can smell, taste and feel everything, when there is "atmosphere" and when plots are so contrived that they lead to psychological analysis of character. Out concept of realism must be wide and political, sovereign over all conventions'.

'By adopting the forms of Balzac and Tolstoy without testing them thoroughly, we might weary our readers - as much as these writers often do themselves. Realism is not a mere question of form. Were we to copy the style of these realists, we would no longer be realists'.

'Time flows on ... Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation also change'.

At the time when Brecht was writing, the task of aesthetic theory was to discover a path between the vision of totality presented by Fascism in Germany, at the same time as to respond to another version of totality - administered proletarian totality - that was emerging simultaneously in the USSR. These classic formulations, now some sixty-five years old, still haunt us today for their ability to raise questions, not just about the stimulus-value of art, but about the political and social functions which art is called upon to fulfill. Yet it is an interesting fact that these texts were not in fact published until the Suhrkamp edition in 1967, when they became suddenly rele-

vant to another dialectical situation, that of the pan-European protest movements that culminated in May 1968.

May 1968 in turn led by a series of reversals to a yet more complex form of administered totality - that of a reconsolidated consumer ideology of the 1980s, the Reagan and Thatcher decade - and to an apparent stabilization of liberal consumer ideology shakily subsumed under slogans of 'the end of ideology', 'the reign of the market', and the promise of the satisfaction of all necessities, all desires, not only across the NATO alliance but potentially across the globe. 'Post-modernism' in that decade - or under that dispensation, which in fact lasted for more than a decade - was often presented as an aesthetic method characterised by easy stylistic mixing, the mobility of distinctions between high and popular forms, quotation, irony and pastiche. My question today is how montage, the technique that modernism devised as a counterweight to totality, has survived or could survive this rather brief sequence of events.

When Hannah Höch produced her pasted paper montages of the later 1920s she took as her target the creeping standardisation of gender relations - especially the modes of representation of gender relations in official publications - that formed at least the outward rhetoric of German fascism, if not its inner reality. She explored the possibility that to represent human relatedness in a language of fragments - playful and even absurd as these are - was to establish a technique of counter-representation of a scurrilous and virtually illegible kind. Höch's later montages - those from the 1960s - inserted themselves into the glossy consumerist world of that era in order precisely to expose its underlying anxiety and paranoia: especially the anxiety of the female fashion icon who was now conscious of herself primarily as commodity and spectacle (in this case perhaps as a ghostly, subliminal form of her real self).

'Reality changes', says Brecht; 'in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change'. Obviously we are aware that administered consumer totality, of almost every phase of modern capitalism, made free use of montage methods for the circulation of goods, services and information: hence it became a condition of successful montage techniques in art to turn those techniques against themselves in ways that the viewer could use and reflect upon.

Careful retrospection can uncover several cases of a montage techniques used effectively against totalising languages separate from but linked to that of the consumer field. In Britain, at least, one could present the graphic art of the Sex Pistols group from the mid-1970s as powerfully anti-authoritarian and in this case as unquestionably popular forms. The carefully controlled visual representation of the British royal family as a contented middle-class family here received its abrasive comeuppance from Jamie Reid, who interrupts a once benign expression with a traditional monarchist slogan: God Save the Queen. In the well-known Sex Pistols image it appears as a blindfold (of course, punk anarchism also had its nationalistic, far-right affiliations too).

Two decades later and the newspapers are full of stories of child abuse and genetic engineering - both powerful triggers of popular disquiet about sexual aberrations very different from the traditional perversions, on the one hand, and the unregulated development of biological science, on the other. It is not terribly clear how these anxieties interact - if at all - but Jake and Dinos Chapman construct spectacular physical impossibilities that stem directly, if I am right, from the traditions of radical counter-representation in montage that constitute some of the most powerful devices of modernism.

What do we say about montage after September 11th - the date on which, to quote an observer of the tragedy in New York, the whole world seemed to turn into one ghastly montage? What can be said about the power of montage to disturb in a world which has itself become, not only a montage of attractions (to quote Eisenstein) but a montage of destructions, of ideological and strategic incompatibilities too complex and too inscrutable for us yet to understand. Fifteen minutes is not enough to provide even the beginnings of an answer to this question. But I fear we may have to admit that montage as a device belongs to a visual tradition from a rapidly vanishing past, hence one that will need to change as reality changes. It is not only the recent appearance of 'cut-and-paste' instructions on our computer screens, from San Francisco to London, from Baghdad to Tokyo. It is not even the fact that Bin Laden and Sesame Street's Bert character appeared together unaccountably on the

banners of anti-American marches (in the press recently). Perhaps the truth is that montage as a once-radical radical technique belongs to a Newtonian physical world of conflicting forces, of pushes and pulls, of physical levers and pulleys - it may even consort with a post-Newtonian universe of quantum jumps and indeterminacy (the two languages are after all related), or to the Freudian world of spatial relations made out of the elements of the dream-work: condensation, substitutability and displacement.

But the language of international power, of espionage and diplomacy, is in the near future more likely to be moulded in the concepts of micro-analysis, of topological complexity, biology and morphological fluidity - of hybridity, fluidity and interactivity; of invisible networks, of micro-information, of inscrutable data. It seems to me this new conceptual world has arrived or will shortly come into view. And I fear that in this new universe, the traditional terms of art criticism, and the claims made with them for montage techniques in particular, will have to undergo inevitable and rapid change. ●

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