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## **The Concept of the Vertical Montage**

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The concept of *vertical montage* goes back to Soviet Russian film director and film theorist Sergei Eisenstein (1898 - 1948) who can be called the "Father of Montage". In his films and in his theoretical writings Eisenstein explored the fundamentals of narration and editing which he saw as not only the temporal arrangement of joining or opposing the various film shots into sequences (the horizontal montage) but also as the synchronous arrangement of the various aspects within the frame or shot, or as the productive combination of the film picture with sound and music (the vertical montage).

Due to his general dialectical stance Eisenstein was particularly fond of contrasts or even contradictions within the frame, and he saw vast possibilities in using sound as a sort of counterbalance to the picture. This focus on the use of different simultaneous voices or layers of significance turns narration and the production of meaningful communication into a rather complex phenomenon.

Within modern media the possibilities seem even greater for combining heterogeneous but significant elements: written texts, animations, pictures within pictures, sound effects and music. Multimedia and software applications, web sites and games are being constructed in depth and width, the flow of information seems more dynamic than ever and there is usually a lot going on simultaneously within the frame. So the dynamic impact of modern media is not just a question of the speed of transmission but also of the dynamics of the moment. It is the result of the ever more sophisticated processes of vertical montage: designing phenomena for the screen and loudspeakers that will show and tell us many things simultaneously and carry out a variety of communicative functions at the very same time. Each moment is loaded with drama, tension, moods and meanings. Several stories and messages, several types of communication are competing for our attention.

However, our theoretical vocabulary for grasping these aspects - the immense possibilities of the vertical montage - seems somewhat under-developed. Classical film theory or musical theory may offer us a few terms: thus we can speak of a "counterpoint" arrangement of a film scene e.g. with happy music accompanying a sad goodbye. But generally the significance of film music is reduced to being just some emotional underscoring of whatever appears in the

picture. And this may have some relevance for a theory dealing with trivial and traditional movies and TV-programs, but it is not telling us much in detail about how this underscoring is actually taking place, nor does it help us in analyzing the more creative and advanced applications. However, it is obvious that in many music videos it is the music that is taking the lead structuring both the rhythm and the story of the whole production. So we are in the need for a theory that can grasp the complexity of the balance between music and picture.

As for the mixing of pictures and written texts (on paper or on the screen) one may try to conceive this (inspired by Roland Barthes) as a matter of fixing the otherwise uncertain signification of images by the use of language (supposed to be usually more clear!). Sometimes pictures and texts are allowed to support or even enrich each other on a more equal basis, and also a three-step model can be employed according to which picture and text can be either parallel in their signification, or expanding, or contradicting the meaning or message of each other. But even so the whole conception rests on the - as I see it - rather dubious assumption that we should be looking for only one main message or reference and not for a variety of communicative functions. In their combination pictures and texts are not just adding up their intrinsic denotations, as it were, but producing new qualities and connotations. And any actual linguistic utterance can in itself be seen as a product of a vertical montage (specific words are chosen (from the paradigmatic axis, as some would call it) and voiced or written in a specific way and accompanied by other signs or traits in the situation (context).

When theories of narration are applied to film or multimedia productions they often tend to focus on the sequential or temporal order of things, i.e. on how the dramatic events are revealed one by one. However it should be quite clear that the art of narration rests not only on the ability to create a successful "order of appearance" of the various scenes. Everybody knows that the climax of the action in a narrative film should usually be placed towards the end of the film and not at the beginning. But that rule of thumb does not in itself create an exciting scene nor a climax nor an interesting film. There has to be something exciting, tense, dynamic, intriguing or fascinating within at least some of the scenes or shots. And this has all to do with the vertical montage: the sound effects, the music, the lighting, the colors, the camera movements, the camera angles etc., and of course with the psychological depth of the characters and their performance. But this again, the complexity of the heroes state of mind, is revealed perhaps not just by the words he is saying, but by his tone of voice, his posture and gestures as he is saying them, the light and mood of the scene...and so on. So what is it that makes up the mood and aesthetics of a film scene and as such has an impact on how we interpret the whole development of the story?

Sometimes a conflict has been seen to exist (at least in theory) between narrative principles and interactivity in multimedia productions such as computer games with a treasure hunt, or the like. One way of viewing it, however, is to find a suitable balance between the drive of the dramatic action and the mood and aesthetics of the settings. Exploring the moment may at times be just as interesting as getting quickly to the end. Indeed, the success of the computer games industry points to the fact that a successful combination of narration,

interactivity and aesthetics is quite possible, even though it may at times be hard to coin out the theoretical principles of the design in a few rules. What appears on the screen at a given moment might be experienced as organized into a harmonious or a disharmonic whole. In watching a particular scene in a TV-program or film we might get the feeling that this is meant in a humorous or ironic way. But what is the method behind this modality, this complexity of what is actually being communicated in a scene?

Designing for the screen and speakers of today involves many "channels" or "voices": written texts, spoken words, graphics, photos, moving images, sound effects, music, navigation and feedback options, and so on. And as we are watching or using such sites we find that windows may open within other windows, buttons may become active, texts are parts of hypertexts, new mail arrives and we are perhaps on the phone, "skyping", and talking to someone in the kitchen at the same time. It is important that theoretical models are not trying to reduce or oversimplify the complexity of these modern communication processes. Indeed concepts and theories trying to grasp the complexity of the many layers of meaning, of simultaneous signification and events in the new digital media can help us to understand better what has always been there in the old media of film, writing and speech: the dimension of vertical montage.

It is amazing how many changing texts and images, signs and design we can understand and respond to at the same time, and it is perhaps not surprising, that it is hard to describe the principles of vertical montage shortly. But it is a nice challenge and my best advice would be that we should not just look for the "happy ending" but also read carefully between the lines in modern media.