A NEW TWENTIES: NOTES ON INSTAGRAM AND THE RETURN OF THE CENTRALITY OF MONTAGE AND SLAPSTICK IN CONTEMPORARY MOVING IMAGE

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Abstract:

According to many early film theorists, the novelty and aesthetic potential of film was based on montage – something which lost its edge when film was taken over by the 'talkie' in the late 1920s. Theorists of the 1920s also accentuated the originality of slapstick as a form of expression. These days an incredible number of clips with moving images circulate in social media, often based on slapstick, but even more on not just montages made by the people who make these films, but also the machinery itself which distributes and cuts together this spectacle. Have we not somehow entered into a situation which seems to call for a look at the last 20s? Have we now suddenly realized the old potential of film which e.g. Gilbert Seldes, Henry Parland and Sergey Eisenstein wrote about?

Keywords:

Instagram, Film theory, Film studies, TikTok, Montage, Slapstick

> Later on, when you look at that take, all you can remember was the hateful moment it was shot, and so you may be blind to the potentials it might have in a different context. The editor, on the other hand, should try to see only what's on the screen, as the audience will. Only in this way can the images be freed from the context of their creation.
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> Walter Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye*[1]

Once we cut by hand – gluing tapes together like kids in a craft club. Then we cut with the help of machines, big enough to fill entire rooms, mechanical, analogical, and noisy. Then cutting went digital. In the end, some of us started cutting small films on

our mobile phones, instantly publishing them on-line, and getting them montaged by a digital system, based on an algorithm, anchored in the totality of clips circulating on-line, glued together with 'whatever' was next.

If the 15-second clip is about someone jumping into a pool, it becomes montaged together with other pool and jump films – besides the usual product tests and all other forms of everyday slapstick (someone eating the bun of a friend when he's not watching).

While it took months for films to travel in the old days, now they move from Turku to Tokyo, from Shanghai to Stockholm, and from Bogota to Nairobi in seconds.

Just taking a look at Instagram, which has quantitatively the leading user-base in social media moving image, shows the excessive breadth of this contemporary practice. Instagram reels, an answer to the earlier dominance of TikTok (which still leads when we talk about child users) in the distribution of everyday video clips, was launched on August 5, 2020. It features video editing tools (speed, audio, effects, timer, background music), which make anyone better equipped than filmmakers a hundred years ago, when cutting was hectically discussed for the first time. The people of India alone post 6 million reels per day. The most popular Instagram reel has over 289 billion views. And 2 billion people interact with reels every month. The sheer exchange, the amount of material online, the number of viewers – surpassing the numbers than any moving image has had the possibility to reach during the history of film to day – might even feel sublime, too much to conceive for our minds.[2] In the ocean of clips, 'the clip ocean,' as I like to call it, we could swim forever, watching (beautiful) people dressing, dads slipping on banana peels, and elegant people walking by in fashionable clothes.

"In many ways, the film editor performs the same role for the director as the text editor does for the writer of a book," Walter Murch writes about cutting,[3] of course accentuating the nature of traditional feature film making, not Instagram. As traditional film had one level of cutting, there are of course two in Instagram, the cutting by the producers and makers of the video, and then the machinery which distributes the reels, the mechanical cutting montage-machines, which make up the distribution systems of film clips in social media (connecting clips to each other), and which would have given Eisenstein and the Russian formalists an adrenaline jolt that would have rocked them to within an inch of their lives.

Montage, montage, montage… The endless repetition on the centrality of montage in old film theories might strike film students as weird or, I'm assuming, it sounded weird before the advent of social media's 'reels,' but has started to feel homey again. Montage is back, somehow, as a cultural issue, and we can see the connection to what life with film was 100 years ago.

But why was montage so important in the beginning? It was a new artistic technique, for sure. Of course, it might have also felt radical for the audience of the new art form, although some of them might have already experienced the development of moving images in its earlier forms, the variety of scopes which were the central entertainment in many fairs and cultural centers, especially in Paris, whose parks, leisure joints, and theaters, hosted these early visual spectacles before the arrival as film as we now know it.[4] And, of course, already before film we had abruptions and "cuts," sort of, in theater and literature (breaks, blank/darkened moments, fast changes), but they did not stun the senses of the audience in the same way as cinematic montages, changing sceneries, closeups.

Montage became the key artistic form of conscious expression at least in some film circles and/or scenes very early, most radically in the Russian avant-garde.

The work of Sergey Eisenstein, whom we especially remember for *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and the at least partly more radical and fast-paced *October: Ten Days That Shook the World* (1928)[5] – without forgetting some of the cinematic experimentations, which this group did, most famously the (Lev) Kuleshov effect, which featured tests of whether montage could make people see a shot of a *blanco* face differently, i.e. if the same face was cut to see different images would it make the viewers project different emotions in it;[6] all this was about the fascination with cutting, and its potential.

This did not go unnoticed by film theorists, some of whom belonged to the same group. In this historical context, montage was seen as a pioneering form of development for human beings, together with close-ups and slow motion, as documented in Walter Benjamin's film theory.[7] Habits of perception, and understanding more about the world through new forms of perception, supported by new media, were issues for Benjamin – i.e. understanding how horses run (slow motion; Muybridge) and experiencing leaps in time and place in a way which truly must have challenged and changed some perceptual habits and fostered new techniques of vision in the 1920s and 1930s when Benjamin wrote.[8]

New media always bring new forms of understanding which are related to perception. Photography, among many others, made us visually more aware and sensitive, e.g. by seeing closeups on insects (they gained hair and 'faces'), and film must have done the same, while also touching upon our sense of time.[9] Furthermore, in the beginning, it was highly probable that film shocked people (one of Benjamin's main interests) by bringing close not just things that aroused fear, but simply having trains speeding towards us, and the like, dreadful objects of the world becoming like flesh, very close to us, our brain basically interpreting them to be real, although our consciousness would have it differently.

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Gilbert Seldes, whose aspiration it was in *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924) to support the development of a new institutional framework for the new artistic practices which evolved in late 19th and early 20th century, discussed the energetic world of vaudeville and the rhythm of jazz, but also the special nature of film, the new art form. In each section, the author, who later worked on analyzing middlebrow taste (Seldes 1957), came up with a discourse on film's artistic potential, often through its central *artists*, and thus, George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* and Charlie Chaplin's work became key examples supporting the idea that comics and film had reached the artistic level needed for us to call them art. They showed that artistic genius was possible in them.[10] Seldes wrote about slapstick as something which film really had only to itself, something which theater or literature, nor music, could never handle. He was also worried that the talkie would diminish the potential of film to go its own way.

In the Nordic Countries, Henry Parland (1908-1930), mainly known as a writer, worked hard on grasping what was going on in the new world, where these 'mass arts' (fashion, shop window decorations, film, jazz) ruled,[11] not unlike the way Roland Barthes studied them in the late 1950s (*Mythologies*, 1957), but more theoretically (semiotically, as Parland had family ties to Russian formalists through his uncle Vassili Seeseman).[12] In his novels, e.g. *Sönder* (*Broken*, posthumous 1970), the story of the existential abyss of modern man was told through technological allegories in arts, e.g. a broken record player and a misfit discussion with a date about American movies.[13] Also *Idealrealisation* (1929), the only poetry collection Parland was able to publish during his short life, took as its starting point man's life with objects, from tea cups to film, e.g. *Sonny Boy* (original name, *The Singing Fool*), the first voice film which reached Finland.[14] The new arts were to change life for good.

Eisenstein, Kuleshov and many other Russians took it as their mission to really, really work on montage, and Eisenstein even studied it in his own writing theoretically (commenting also on e.g. Chaplin). While Seldes was the one who made the point of slapstick being something particular to film (he forgot e.g. Neapolitan street theatre, though, as one preceding art[15]), Parland was the first to point out that there was the Western and Eastern filmmaking thing in Western Culture, and that the East side, the Russians on the front, had really taken over film with montage (a way of thinking that many scholars attributed to Andrè Bazin's work in the 1950s).[16]

Parland is actually an interesting thinker in the history of film theory. In his essay *Den psykologiska filmens bankrutt* (*The Bankruptcy of the Psychological Film*, my translation) he discussed film's essentially filmic nature. He attempted to criticize the way literary classics were adapted into film,[17] and in this way he agreed with Gilbert Seldes, who in *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924) debased new film as using very little of film's originality, e.g., its slapstick potential, in order to be taken seriously as 'art,' often by copying theater and literature. But Parland was not just into acting. Like Seldes, as he concentrated on cutting, which of course was natural for a film theorist living close to the Soviet Union in the 1920s, he wanted to support film's distance from theater and literature.[18] And he felt that the way film gained its voice, the new tech, was just one attempt to kill its original soul and make it more than just theater.[19] The talkie made us forget cutting, Parland thought. The technological development was so against film as art, in the end. Also, Parland was fond of Chaplin's work, where new forms of mimicry had started to flourish in film. (He also praised Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd.) One had to give film the freedom to develop by itself, and not as one of the old arts, sharing their forms, traditions, and ways of expression. Seldes had the same intention in his book which portrayed new arts and their peculiarities in the hope of supporting their institutional development

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into autonomy from the classical arts. Parland called film a *mechanical* art.[20] Fair enough, he also said that film endangers literature, which had to compete with this new experientially effective art.[21] In jazz, Parland was waiting for the messiah who would start composing jazz, not just improvising and circulating hits.[22] He also discussed the artistic value of propaganda.[23] The modern way of life was his target, the "Movie Theaters / which slept during the day / and opened their jaws in the evening," so that the "grey mass" could walk in to see movies.[24] He wrote about the intensity of Russian film, its social impact (or what he believed that it had for the masses) which he believed was based on this intensity, which was based on the new culture of montage.[25]

All of these stray thoughts are of course reactions to the rapid changes in culture. Chaplin was at the center of an interesting discussion. We find all of these 1920s theorists naming him, and one even stating that film is art because of his accomplishments (Chaplin), i.e. that Chaplin is the sign that one can be genius in film (i.e. Seldes). In Chaplin's ouvre we of course also find the keys for the theories of the time, witty and fast cutting, slapstick, and mimicry, the sort of acting which the early film theorists were fond of, the new way of producing art.

If Chaplin had lived to our time, he would probably have felt a déjà-vu when reels started to make it in contemporary culture. As already 'posted' at the beginning of this article, now it is the 20s again – and also film, theoretically speaking it, makes sense to say this. Users of Instagram, as well as Facebook users (sometimes the same group of people), are allured by video reels. They contain mini films, filmed and cut by film amateurs, albeit sometimes professionals in fashion or vlogging, and with the help of algorithms, the program keeps curating for us an endless montage, where these small films – pandas climbing, women testing handbags and people playing pranks on each other – keep changing, without any long term

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aesthetic/artistic program, based on tags or key words like fashion, food and art, and, of course, the preferences of the users.

In many films there is a sort of acting, very much alike the last 20s – something that Parland and Seldes would have liked – as the background music or silent viewing dominates the media (the 'non-talkie'), and one could talk about the return of pantomime, although we are not talking about the old art form which found new ways of surviving in silent film (which had its end in the end of the 1920s). Soundtracks take away natural sound. Also pranks, visual tricks, and all sorts of slapstick practices are very much central to these miniature films we see on Instagram and TikTok.

And as we spoke about new media and their effects on our understanding of the world, Instagram has certainly made us more sensitive visually, through its visual-based allure. The random nature of the music makes the music feel more detached – as it is just something you cut-and-paste on your clip with the help of a program offering you different pieces, and in a way it often feels as if there had been no audio at all. Often, we also watch these reels without audio.

If Kuleshov had been right, we'd get a lot of meaning by piecing things together by this montage-machinery. But we can somehow separate clips in our mind, or just watch the flow of them – does it not seem so? I cannot recall that I would have ever started to build a story between videos. They are montaged, but kept separate experientially speaking.

"Why do cuts work?" Murch, one of the foremost authors on cutting, asks,[26] if we let him take the lead again. Often they do not even work on Instagram, at least in relation to each other, but the format, the machinery, the media is something that we are used to, and its cutting, montaging nature is something that works.

Reel montage is not about making sense, but producing a pleasant flow of cuts, and like early film, it is somatic, things happening, speed, pranks, slapstick and very often just dancing, people sharing a choreography which has become fashionable. Like discontinuity in our field of vision, our blinking, this automatic blinking, the endless flow of miniature films from an ocean of film clips, blinked by the eye of the machine, is where we are today, and I believe we are theoretically lost in terms of what to do with this material and situation. A dive into the 1920s might at first glance look like a search for analogies, but I believe in more, in asking if film now, finally, really moves the masses (as Parland dreamt, and Eisenstein wanted, and Chaplin made true for the masses, but on another (smaller) scale and in another historical context), and that slapstick, the original essence of film, is suddenly taking over again, together with a new centrality of montage, and old friend of film theory.

What to do with this change? It feels like a waste to celebrate the way the moving image has somehow turned back towards its roots, but theoretically speaking, how it has happened, and how we don't still, for some reason, seem to have noticed it is at least interesting. It is absolutely beyond the scope of this paper to search for deeper continuities and discontinuities, nor does it matter that we are back to square one, just on a massive and more mechanical scale, or in a situation which the theorists of the 1920s wished for, but for sure, it is something that we should note when we think of the history of film, and maybe even more, the history of film theory.

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[1] Walter Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1995), 24.
[2] See Sagar Khillar's neat demonstration of the differences between Instagram and Tik Tok at Differencebetween.net: www.differencebetween.net/technology/difference-between-tiktok-and-instagram; India

Times: Https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/desis-make-6-million-insta-reels-per-day-fb/articleshow/86662101.cms. The most viewed clip is made by Pathofex: Https://pathofex.com. See also Demand Sage: Https://www.demandsage.com/instagram-reel-statistics/. For the sublime, see e.g. Simon Morley, *Sublime* (London: Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art, 2010), for an eye-opening take on the sublime nature of today's global technology community.

[3] Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye*, 26.

[4] For this history, see e.g. Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion: Media Archeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2013).

[5] *Battleship Potemkin*, directed by Sergey Eisenstein (Goskino, 1925), 1: 15. Https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0015648/; *October: Ten Days That Shook the World*, directed by Sergey Eisenstein (Sovkino, 1928), 1: 55. Https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0018217/.

[6] See Daniel Barratt, Anna Cabak Rédei, Åse Innes-Ker and Joost van de Weijer, "Does the Kuleshov Effect Really Exist? Revisiting a classic film experiment on facial expressions and emotional contexts," *Perception* 45 (8) (2016): 847-874, for a critical take – where the famous experiment (for which we do not have the original material) is tested anew.

[7] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *Selected Writings: Vol 4, 1938-1940*, edited by Michael Jennings et al., 251-283 (Cambridge MA: The Belknapp Press of Harvard University Press, 2003). For a discourse accentuating Benjamin as a theorist of perception (no accent on habit), see e.g. Noël Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), Chapter 1.

[8] Rudolf Arnheim wrote in the 1920s and 1930s extensively about the way film was not totally fresh with its 'cuts'. He also accentuated that theater had done voice on its 'film' already for long. Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (London: Faber, 1969), see especially 165-174.

[9] This is what Gilles Deleuze suggests to focus on (partly basing his thoughts on Henri Bergson's philosophy of time) in Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

[10] Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1924); Gilbert Seldes, "The People and the Arts," in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, edited by Bernard Rosenberg and David M. White, 74-97 (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959).

[11] See Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art*, where Carroll defines mass art as mass produced, mass distributed and easily interpreted art. (Mainly chapters 3-5.)

[12] Eero Tarasti, "Scenes in the Semiotic History of the Baltic Countries." *Siksi: Nordic Art Review* 1990: 2, 12-19, ref. on page 16. See also Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972). The difference between Parland and Seldes and Barthes is that Barthes does not confess to being much of a fan of popular culture, which the earlier film theorists really did. The idea of *Mythologies* (1957) was to unveil the language of mass culture pretty much in a critical fashion. For example, he says that *joussance* cannot exist in mass culture.

[13] Henry Parland, *Sönder* (Malmö: Författarlaget, 1987), 106.

[14] Henry Parland, *Idealrealisation* (Helsinki: Söderström, 1929). For Sonny Boy's distribution, see Ari Honka-Hallila, "Laulavan jääkärin mykkä morsian: Teknologia ja elokuvan historia," in *Elokuva ja analyysi*, 13-14 (Helsinki: Elokuva-arkisto, 1994).

[15] See e.g. Dario Fo's study on Totò: Dario Fo, *Totò: Manuale dell' attor comico* (Firenze: Vallechi Editore, 1995).

[16] See e.g. Henri Broms, "Henry Parland semiotiikan edelläkävijänä Suomessa." In *Alkukuvien jäljillä: Kulttuurin semiotiikkaa* (Porvoo-Helsinki-Juva: WSOY, 1984).

[17] Henry Parland, *Säginteannat* (Helsinki: Söderström, 1970), 83-89.

[18] Parland, *Säginteannat*, 84.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Parland, *Säginteannat*, 84.

[21] Ibid. 87-88.

[22] Parland, *Säginteannat*, 39-41.

[23] Parland, *Säginteannat*, 90.

[24] Parland, *Säginteannat*, 179. Translation by me.

[25] Ibid., 91.

[26] Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye*, 58.