

Art of Association-A Reinterpretation of Montage and Symbol in Movies

Taking *Sheep Without a Shepherd* as an Example

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ABSTRACT

The author aims to reinterpret Mitry's conclusion on film being the "art of association" by examining the similarities between film and memory through discussion of intellectual, expressive montage and symbols. The paper includes philosophical discussions on Schopenhauer, Cassirer and Parfit's theories, and montage, symbols used in the film *Sheep Without a Shepherd*. The paper concludes the film as the recreation of memory, while intellectual, expressive montage and symbols are inspiring narrative and cinematic tools that associate the audience's consciousness with the film.

Keywords: Montage, Association, Representation, Consciousness, Psychological connectedness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Film has never been a new, futuristic art form, but an ancient tradition recently returned to the contemporary world. Before entering the age of agriculture, human ancestors gathered in their caves after a strenuous day of hunting and adventure, watching the shadows and reflection of the wildlife, chanting and dancing, recounting their ancient tales. At the dawn of civilization, human ancestors already mastered the film and montage: they imitated the sound of the beasts, painted them inside the cave, and later "montaged" different fragments of their impressions into a new creation and symbols that formed the essence of their culture. They made mental connections between the past and present, myths and reality; they passed down their stories to their posterities, cultivated the youth while recollecting their past. However, art was either ephemeral or static before the invention of the film, inhibiting the full engagement of human consciousness. The desires to preserve, re-experience memories are not fulfilled before the invention of film. Jean Mitry, a well-known French film theorist in the 20th century concluded film as "an art of association" through symbolistic meanings expressed through intellectual and expressive montage, engaging the audience's consciousness. The paper aims to deduce Mitry's

conclusion through reconstruction of Schopenhauer, Cassirer, and Parfit's memory theory along with *Sheep Without a Shepherd*, a remake of Indian film "Drishyam" that is also inspired by the Korean suspense film "Montage," is directed by Wenli Ke and screened in 2019. The story takes place in Thailand, where desperate measures are taken by Weijie, the protagonist, to save his family from prosecution after accidentally murdered the son of the antagonist, Suchat, who violates his daughter, Pingping. The use of montage is unique and essential both visually and narratively in film and it is frequently used to intensify conflicts, connecting between story lines and even incorporated in plot.

2. FILM AND MEMORY: DISCONTINUITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

2.1 Plato — Film as Imitation of Memory

Film and art have never been new in our lives. Back in 4 BCE in Ancient Athens, Socrates and his student has already ignited a discourse on art. In Part X of the Republic, Plato defined art as an imitation of illusion. He claims that artists, such as poets and carpenters, are the lowest in the hierarchy (with philosopher being the highest). Material

existence, instead of being considered an independently existing object, is an illusion that imitates its eternal, original form in the abstract world (world of understanding) and partakes certain qualities (of the form). For instance, every table must partake "tableness," *q* (the quality of being made solid material, has legs, and elevate from the ground) to be a table. If 'f' is made of solid materials and has legs but does not elevate from the ground, which is not *q*, it does not partake tableness, and is not a table. In the Platonic view, the universal form is before the particular object. However, instead of imitating the form (understanding) of the abstract world as the philosophers did, the artists imitate the imitation (imagination), such as a particular table [1].

2.2 Parfit — Memory and "Psychological Continuity"

Although the Platonic theory of art is limited from a contemporary view, the concept of imitation does partially apply to film. The famous film Krauer believes "film is the reflection and replay of reality" that embodies characteristics (especially narrative elements) of human experience to be valid. Parfit, in his objection and revision of Locke's argument, suggests "continuity of memory" is how most people (not including amnesia patients) are aware of the continued existence of their brain and body, the composite of their identity [2]. Then he appeals to the concept of an "overlapping chain of experience-memories". He indicates people's identity is formed through connections made between different experiences, which he refers to as "psychological continuity". Therefore, if a film is to be a convincing imitation of human experience (consists of psychological continuity), it must be composed of an overlapping sequence of experience of causally dependent events. Then the events must be logically and lucidly perceived by its audience.

The presence of "psychological continuity" also made the film into "quasi-memory", a seemingly, causal experience capable of engaging its audience. The film aims at creating a "seamless dream", where people can emerge themselves into the visual, auditory experience. While watching a movie, people's emotions fluctuate with the protagonist, and our mind continually preparing for the upcoming conflict. At some moments, films become so close to reality that people cannot recognize the validity of the experience. At the beginning of *Sheep Without a Shepherd*, when the

top of coffin is suddenly closed, the screen fades in the dark with the noise of the character smacking scratching and breathing anxiously inside the coffin, the audience may sense the same desperation, helplessness, and trepidation as if they partake the experience. Through careful manipulation of the visual, auditory elements, the artist ensures the fluency and credibility of the movement, eventually creating a "seamless-dream", implanting a quasi-memory in the audience's mind.

2.3 Schopenhauer — Edited Consciousness

Manipulation of visual and auditory elements is often done by film editing. However, it often reconstructs time and space, which seems to affect the continuity and reliability of the sequence, weakening the connection between the film and the audience. Surprisingly, skillful, appropriate film editing helps strengthen and broaden the movie as well as boosts audience's engagement. The positive effect of film editing is due to the unique characteristics of memory.

As Schopenhauer suggests, people's consciousness is "not stationary but fleeting" due to its rhapsodical and often fragmented nature, in which it "apprehends only successively, and to grasp one thing it must give up another, retaining nothing of it but traces which become weaker and weaker" [3]. This is because impressions are only recognized through representation 'C' (time, space and causality); but in order to be memorized, they must be associated together through intentions and inner cause of the will. Therefore, being intention-orientated (consciousness dictated by will), one's consciousness is prone to eliminate details of representation 'C' if it is not tied up with personal interest/the motives. This made memory and experience (which sums up people's identity) is not a complete, permanent chain, but rather the sum of broken up rings [2]. Similarly, Parfit describes identity as the sum of an infinite number of interconnected, continuous chains shaped like a mail armor that can reconnect, grow, and filter and collapse. Therefore, identity is capable of creating and reducing associations and remains valid as long as it consists of psychological continuity. In Chapter 10, Parfit illustrates a psychological connection between time Y and X, and Y is two decades before X. He suggests if one at time X still maintains some psychological continuity at time Y, such as remembering feeling astonished and jumping from a roof, then X still consists of some

of her identity at time *y*. He then claims psychological connection, which links between two intentions, is more crucial to the continuance of identity than having direct memory connections, such as remembering the reason of going for a meaningful trip is more necessary and easier than remembering putting on a red dress back at 7 am at home for one's identity [4]. Similarly, film editing preserves and enlarges the most important intentions and eliminates redundant, aimless actions to further engage the audience, such as removes the act of entering the elevator and opening the door and cutting straight into the house, making the film more continuous and concise.

2.4 Creating an Alibi — Memory Editing in *Sheep Without a Shepherd*

As Schopenhauer suggests, "whoever wishes to call up a reminiscence always looks first of all for a thread on which it hangs through the association of ideas" [3]. To preserve psychological continuity between impressions, C is sometimes eliminated to retain the connectedness between intentions. The intention orientated nature of memory gives ground to montage: the reorganization, and reassociation of time and space in film. In *Sheep Without a*

Shepherd, the protagonist "Weijie" uses "montage-" to edit people's memories, moving the events that happened on the 3rd to the 2nd (Sunday to Saturday) to create an alibi (see "Figure 1") after Pingping and Ayu, Weijie's elder daughter and his wife accidentally murdered Suchat who intends to violate Pingping again. After hearing the murder from Ayu, who is calling him with enormous apprehension, Weijie immediately returns from Thai boxing and without checking out of the hotel. The next day, after destroying all Suchat's properties and evidence in the morning, he immediately takes his family to the hotel and planned a family tour. After arriving at the same hotel, he clears all the hotel record on the 2nd when repairing their monitor system and created a series of false proofs by manipulating the impression the witnesses have for them. For instance, when watching Thai Boxing at night on the 3rd, Weijie hits the seller's popcorn advertently and shows the ticket on the 2nd to obfuscate the seller's memory, relocating this particular event from 3rd to 2nd. This evidence further justifies C, especially time, which is not essential to people's psychological continuity but rather impressions. Through Weijie's circumspect maneuvering, people mistaken the time when their impressions occurred.



Figure 1 Creating an Alibi.

3. MONTAGE AS UNITY OF REPRESENTATION AND WILL

3.1 Montage vs. Editing: Similarities and Differences

People frequently hear that "all montage is editing, but not all editing is montage". Though the expression may be imprecise, it does briefly outline the relationship between editing and montage. Admittedly, most montages are created by editing, the action of removing and reconstructing footages. However, montage, instead of engaging the audience in the seamless dream and presents in the form of quasi-memory, aims at imitating the process of association. Unlike other types of editing that aims at maintaining the psychological continuity by using C, expressive, intellectual montage breaks up continuity in C, such as cross editing between different space and narrations. By creating a discontinuity in C, montage links two indirectly related rings on the mail armor by the

"thread," creates new connections and meanings between two independent impressions. Association, by Cassirer's definition: "the action of integrating all key factors into the unity of time and space ... and into a sequence of several events where the factors are associated by causality according to its mean and intention" [5]. Through association, a sequence of events became guided by specific intention and mean. The intention and events became unity, where the events were being defined and connected, and the intention is being manifested through the events. With some planned "discontinuity", the audience is invited into a blank, mysterious mind space where they can incorporate their consciousness into the film. Therefore, unlike standard editing that manipulates the audience in a seamless dream, montage deepens the story by activating the audience's imagination; if standard editing is one ring being added to the previous ring to create two connected rings, montage ties two seemingly discontinuous rings with the "thread of association" that leads to a new creation.



Figure 2 Expressive Montage: Thai Boxing and Conflict.

3.2 Expressive Montage in *Sheep Without a Shepherd*

One example of montage as "1+1>2" is demonstrated in the first major conflict in *Sheep Without a Shepherd*. To intensify the adversity and anger between the protagonist and the antagonist and to foreshadow the desperate confrontation between the protagonist and the antagonist (Suchat's mother) after their manslaughter, their combat with Suchat is being montaged with intense Thai Boxing: every stroke during their fight is

closely paralleled to the pummel on the field in action and pace. Thai Boxing (see "Figure 2"), besides being known for its ferocity, also has an absolute rule: no tie in the game--one must win his/her opponent to end the round; during the conflict between the protagonists and the antagonist, the antagonist must die to end their conflict. When Ayu slapped on Suchat's face in resentment and ignominy, the blue boxer, symbolizing the protagonists pounds on the red boxer's (antagonist) face, making him colliding with the iron fence. When Pingping bludgeons Suchat's head desperately under his coercion and Suchat falls onto

the ground unconscious, the red boxer received a sudden, violent thrash and drops on the field heavily. When both of them are vanquished, a slow-motion 90 degree tilt is used to prolong their defeat, signifying the end of conflict in first act. The precise, intense parallel between the dispute and Thai Boxing does not only intensify the audience's emotion but also creates an association between the conflict and Thai Boxing. By breaking up the continuity of the film, the artist strengthens the theme of the film, allowing the audience to actively engage in the film with their unique understanding, feelings and creativity.

3.3 Schopenhauer — Montage, Will and Representation

As Schopenhauer suggests, the will, defined as "thing-in-itself" and the sum of all-natural intentions, emotions, etc., and representations, things exist and being recognized by C are essentially unified [3]. The representation is the object and the appearance of will. The relationship between representation and will is similar to that of an image and the brain. For an image of apple to be perceived, it first has to be recognized by one's eye, which creates a reflection of the image and then presents to one's brain. If the image is being defined as "apple," it continues to present as apple, an object, and realization of the will. Without the brain's definition, the image of an apple is invalid (not-apple) or meaningless. Without the image, the will cannot be manifested [3].

Similarly, film, when not being displayed to engage audience, becomes merely a sequence of random, meaningless footages. Notice the artist does not "attempt to fashion a story in order to present a philosophical position... [that] leads to cliché, propaganda, and lifeless character," but rather let the characters and conflicts to present their themes [4]. In other words, the artist creates possibilities for the engagement of audience instead of including her consciousness in the art piece. The film is genuinely animated when the audience's consciousness is actively engaged in the endless possibilities created by artist. Montage, which engages consciousness through arranging the footage, allows consciousness to merge with the film. Therefore, montage is a process of association, unity of representation and will — most importantly, the thread connecting the audience and the movie.

4. ASSOCIATION DONE BY SYMBOL AND METAPHOR

4.1 *Three Themes in Sheep Without a Shepherd — Faith, Sacrifice, and Vulnerability*

As previously defined, montage is the association of film and audience. Though not done through editing, the sheep in *Sheep Without a Shepherd* is also a crucial, perhaps the most crucial association created in the film. The repeated presence of sheep, instead of creating an opportunity of engagement through discontinuity, inspires and associates the audience as a metaphor, which is considered the "genuine translation," in which "the two concepts between which it obtains are fixed and independent meanings, and betwixt them, as the given terminus a quo and terminus ad quem, the conceptual process takes place, which causes the transition from one to the other, whereby one is semantically made to stand proxy for the other" [6]. The metaphor itself is a process of association, in which two representations are connected by one consciousness. As a metaphor appears in the film eight times, the sheep are associated with multiple meanings and themes that exist in reality. As one of the earliest kinds of domesticated animals, they are known for their tameness, dependence, and innocence. In Christianity, sheep is a common symbol with a variety of meanings. When John the Baptist beholds Jesus coming at him, he says: "Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1: 29). Jesus Christ is described as the Lamb of God, where he is sacrificed for salvation. Meanwhile, Christ is also the shepherd that guides his disorientated, spiritually vulnerable people out of the darkness. The sheep are also the symbol of apostles, as well as the newly baptized [7]. In Chinese culture, sheep embodies virtue and divinity, where the word beauty (Mei), justice (Yi), and "kindness" (Shan), is derived from the quality of the sheep. For instance, "Shan," defined initially as "commending the virtue of sheep," now has the connotation of beneficence, prosperity, and just conduct [8]. Some other connotations for sheep are passiveness and vulnerability since they are the target of sacrifice and are powerless in front of wolves. Overall, sheep often symbolizes the martyrs, the vulnerable ones, and forgiveness and kindness.



Figure 3 Weijie seeing sheep in religious settings.

The sheep's first and last time appears in *Sheep Without a Shepherd* are both in a religious setting. When Weijie donates and asks for the monk's blessing, three sheep follow them. In the end, when he is praying for forgiveness in tranquility, he sees a sheep beside him again. In both scenes, the sheep are presented as the witness of Weijie's intention

and embody faith and divinity. When Weijie donates the second time in film thinking of saving his family from the investigation, the sheep are not present. On the contrary, when Weijie prays with genuine kindness, the sheep are present. In these two scenes, the sheep symbolizes forgiveness, wisdom, and faith, which can be seen in "Figure 3" and "Figure 4".



Figure 4 Scapegoat in the coffin.



Figure 5 Classroom, teenager and sheep.

In other scenes, the sheep represents scapegoats, where the sheep got shot accidentally when the police officer attempts to shoot Weijie (see "Figure 5"). The sheep later appears in the coffin as a substitute for Suchat, ending the investigation unexpectedly. In both scenes, the sheep are scapegoats the victim where it lies helplessly and passively on the cold, dirty ground with a scar from gunshot and appears "unexpectedly" in a chaotic, agitating scene. As it becomes the scapegoat, it becomes the target of attention and anger.

The last two examples use the analogy of the sheep, revealing the two most important groups of people in the film, namely teenagers (Pingping and Suchat) and residents in poverty/without power (Weijie's family, the majority). In the classroom, the teacher was lecturing about the sheep's property

in which "the herd with bad vision can easily astray," and predators can easily deprive their lives. In the scene, the theme of teenage education and the disoriented, vulnerable connotation of the sheep are being associated, making the audience reflect on the current situation of teenagers in the film and their life. Suchat, born in a wealthy, famous family but with a pampering mother and indifferent father, became arrogant and amoral, which lead to his violation of Pingping and eventually his end. Pingping, lacking communication with her father, and not resigned to her family in poverty, has left her endless regret (see "Figure 6"). In reality, teenagers are at the most impulsive age. They yet are the most vulnerable and disorientated ones, inappropriate communication, such as indifference either from the parents or children, may lead to unwanted consequences. Another scene takes place

in the interview, where the interviewed in poverty areas claim: "As long as you give them (the sheep) grass, they don't care if you shear their wool." This example also illustrates the predicament of people in poverty. As long as the government and authority

do not abuse their power to threaten people's life and dignity, they will not easily revolt. Even though the sheep are considered vulnerable, they still enjoy equal rights to life, property, freedom, and dignity.



Figure 6 Interview: "They don't care if you shear their wool."

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as the "art of association," is not only capable of narration and special visual, audio effects, but is "a close relative of memory" that people can resonant and actively engage in with the help of montage and symbols. This theory also suggests that engagement of consciousness is the essence of the whole watching experience: montage creates a thread between two seemingly unconnected footages, and animates the film with audience's consciousness; the presence of symbol reminds audience to connect their impressions, allowing them to understand, resonate with the cinematic theme. Film is never complete on her own, but with the consciousness of the audience and when representation and possibilities are combined with will, she becomes animated, radiant, and perceptualized.

In fact, association does not only exists in montage and symbols, but also exists in the field of art, linguistics, and science. Cognitively, people learn and create from connecting representation and will. Language, art, and all knowledge came from conceptualization. As Plato suggests, one moves up from imagination to understanding, from a particular image to the universal essence. Our language, initially developed from our observation, slowly expands into a unique system that constructs the way people think. From the unity of representations to people's consciousness, the endless possibilities and sparkling imagination has extended our consciousness beyond reality, giving birth to art a long, beautiful chain of human adventure, creativity and wisdom that extended to our present days.

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