Adaptation and Montage

We teach adaptation at The Open University on an undergraduate creative writing course. Students submit a story for assessment and then have to adapt it for stage, radio or film. Significantly they are not given the option of adapting an existing text written by an established author. Not being allowed to do so is perhaps more helpful for them professionally because in the real world the difficulties of gaining the rights and permissions for an adaptation can be prohibitive. The course doesn’t advocate adaptation as a career route; adaptation isn’t taught in and for itself but as part of a general stylistic programme. The premise is that the more ways of writing you are aware of, the more your writing style is likely to benefit. Students go on to deploy some of the methods they learn. Some try further film, radio and stage scripts; some incorporate dramatic techniques and approaches in their fiction, poetry and life writing.

Montage is a key aspect of the way in which we teach adaptation. It is a method which nominally comes from screenwriting but which is also influential in other genres – having historical links both to fiction and poetry. It has slightly different meanings dependent on context. Within the world of film, advocates of montage like David Mamet and Sergei Eisenstein suggest that screenwriters should strive to make movies in which juxtaposed, uninflected images drive the narrative. As Mamet says –

The story is ... carried by the shots. Basically the perfect movie doesn’t have any dialogue. So you should always be striving to make a silent movie. (72)

For many, David Mamet advocating silent scripts may present something of an irony. Yet his recommendation admits to the primary narrative tool of film – the image. The power
of the spoken word to carry the story is significantly reduced in film, compared to stage.

Montage plays to the strengths of the medium. The screen tells its stories through pictures. It is a concise method – based on the storyteller giving only partial information.

In one of several starting points in coming to theorise montage, Eisenstein referred to Manet’s painting, the Bar at the Folies-Bergere. His other pre-filmic reference points included Zola, Balzac and notably Dickens – a point to which I will return. In the Manet painting we see a character, a female figure in a specific setting. According to Eisenstein, this woman is severed in half by the counter, only part of her is there. Perhaps this is the same with all characters in paintings – they are only partial representations, we have to invent the rest of their bodies, their histories and personalities. And yet,
Eisenstein proposes, we never see them as ‘anatomically half-people’ (in ‘Lessons from Literature’, p.82). Showing partial images is a way of creating paradoxically full characters – something about the partial image engages the audience’s imagination. We don’t see that she is only half there. We see from what Eisenstein called the ‘clots of real detail’ (ibid) a glimpsed and fragmented, but vivid view of a character. What we get from that image is an imaginative spark. The viewer starts to tell a story about the context - the woman’s work situation - but also the story about the woman’s regard for that context: the flush in her face, and the saddened, uneasy, downward look in the eyes. These features ignite the storytelling and the viewers’ invention of her as a character. The partial nature of the image is key to the pact between the two sets of imaginations, that of the painter and that of the painting’s viewer. The implication is that if too much of a character is revealed, the storytelling will not be so readily initiated and may not be possible at all.

Eisenstein suggested different types of montage effect, but for him the essence of montage consisted of juxtaposed images. In character creation this meant showing partial juxtaposed images of characters in different situations. Returning to the notion of adaptation, we feature examples in our teaching of the ways in which montage can be used in adapting stories. One of these examples is the start of the film adaptation of Janet Frame’s autobiography, *An Angel at My Table*, scripted by Laura Jones and directed by Jane Campion. The opening scene briefly captures the writer as baby, lying in the grass. Then we see a very partial picture – an older baby’s legs learning to walk. This cuts to a much older girl, eight or nine perhaps, walking on a path on her own. The viewer knows these are depictions of the same character over several years, despite the fragmented,
fleeting and partial images. The picture of the older girl is followed by a succession of shots showing the young Janet on a train with her family and then moving into a new house. This quick succession of partial uninflected images culminates in the first dramatic scene in the film. This scene involves Janet stealing money and buying chewing gum and sweets for her classmates. The film’s cutting method allows the viewer to invent the story, by virtue of the elements that are not shown. The connection between the shots and scenes is never spelt out. This is the shot list for the scenes involved with the chewing gum incident –

- Janet steals money from her father’s trousers as they hang on a chair;
- Janet distributes chewing gum to children in her class, some rest on her shoulder;
- Janet’s teacher catches the gum chewers in the lesson and starts an inquiry;
- Janet is found out as the source of the chewing gum;
- Janet is punished by being made to stand on her own facing the blackboard;
- The punishment continues while the other children go to play;
- Janet finally confesses;
- Janet returns to her desk hearing the real or imagined taunts of ‘thief, thief, thief’ from her classmates.

These juxtaposed images allow the viewer to climb into the narrative and invent the story. We imagine missing information –

- how Janet bought sweets with the stolen money;
- the economic climate and how rare sweets must have been for children to be dressed as they are and react to sweets as they do;
• the culture, given the severe way the teacher reacts;
• how Janet was possibly attempting to buy friendship, having just moved to a new town and school (information provided to the viewer in the preceding images of a train journey and ill-arranged furniture);
• the nature of Janet’s initiation into guilt and shame.

This is an example of montage’s economy the sequence is only a few minutes long. Campion’s film is a felicitous adaptation. Jones was true to the episodes in the memoir, though there is fair amount of swapping around from her original script to the final version. The eventual chronology is slightly different. Yet in Frame’s book this is the first dramatic episode, as it is in the film; there are marginally more scenes in the book but not many. For instance, Janet goes to the shop to buy the chewing gum in the book, but in the film this is deemed redundant – the viewer invents that particular detail.

The scene involving the chewing gum in the classroom contains the first real dialogue exchanges in the film, as it does in the memoir. The speech is rendered almost exactly as it is in the book. Overall the adaptation inevitably loses the type of reflective interiority which is beyond the scope of specific dramatic scenes. For instance, Frame’s preoccupation with, and use of, language is not represented in the film. This is a propensity which finds expression in Frame’s idiosyncratic and infantile ideas about song lyrics. She thinks the national anthem goes ‘God save our gracious tin’ (the result of a convoluted rationale based around a kerosene tin). She pronounces ‘is’ in island – ‘Is – Land’ – making her idea of where she lives intimate and special, but also revealing an important clash between oral and written realms.
This preoccupation with language is missing in the film. Jones scripted several voice overs which were faithful to the memoir, attempting to adapt Frame’s narrative voice, but Campion cut all but the opening voice over. Viewers of the adaptation are not given the book’s explicit interiority and autobiographical voice. Instead they are given close-ups of the three actresses who play Janet in the different stages of her life. These faces offer partial but magnified glimpses of mental life, images which viewers have to interpret and further imagine. The intertextuality of Frame’s early reading, prominent in the memoir, is lost, subsumed in the film version by an ongoing dialogic relationship with the original autobiography. Linda Hutcheon describes the attractiveness of the ‘multilaminated’ storytelling (p.21) present in adaptations. In An Angel at My Table, the film’s audience appreciates this referenced narrative, the layers of storytelling provided by Frame’s oeuvre as well as her memoir. Yet, as Hutcheon (p. 58) also suggests, text and verbalised thought do not translate well to the screen. The close-up is film’s main, and perhaps most powerful (i.e. more powerful than voice over) method of achieving interiority.

Whether in close-up or otherwise, the partial and incomplete nature of the characterisation typifies the filmic and montage method. These partial images accumulate, inviting the audience to invent and perform the surrounding clips and story, and to complete the characterisations. Of Eisenstein’s different types and definitions of montage perhaps the one that is most famous is the sort which involves cross cutting from one narrative strand to another, often with a trajectory of convergence. The audience is kept alert by speculation about when and how these spliced strands are going
to meet. This is what Eisenstein called ‘the montage of parallel action’ (‘Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today’), and he detailed the origins of this method.

One such first usage was in Edwin S. Porter’s short docudrama *Life of an American Fireman*, with shots of the fire crew racing from the station to the fire, cutting to the woman and child trapped in the smoke-filled room. The two strands converge when the firemen arrive and rescue the woman and child. Eisenstein also, and more prominently, traces the routes of this type of montage to another early film maker, D.W. Griffith. It’s intriguing to read in Eisenstein’s essays how perplexed and almost outraged the movie executives were at Griffith’s suggestion of a film cutting between a woman waiting at home and her husband stranded on a desert island, longing and plotting to get to her. It is the sort of cross cutting method we take for granted nowadays. This sort of montage creates tension – one strand promises to reach a climactic peak, then cuts to the next strand, so delaying the viewer’s gratification. You see a man walking by the cliffs on a windy day, getting ever closer to the cliff’s edge, then cut to a woman waiting in a pub looking at a mobile phone, waiting for a call, and in turn being watched by lecherous barman; cut back to the cliffs, and so forth.

This is a technique very much related to the way nineteenth-century novelists told their stories. D.W. Griffith was aware of this and cites the explicit influence of Dickens. Eisenstein also acknowledges Dickens’ uncanny cinematic vision, as well as explaining that this spliced strand of fiction writing is a method used by many other nineteenth-century novelists – Thackeray, George Eliot, Trollope, Meredith, Hardy.

The juxtaposition of uninflected images can also create mood. David Mamet gives the example image of a twig snapping, then cutting to the fawn perking up its ears. This
instantly gives the viewer the image of fear (see the start of On Directing Film). Leitmotifs can also be used in cutting between shots and scenes. These provide poetic echoes that link narrative strands and serve to unify the whole film. Such motifs often work subliminally; the convergence of such strands can be hard to imagine immediately, though the viewer is constantly straining to do so.

A prime example of this is the opening montage sequence used for the credits at the start of The Hours – written by David Hare, directed by Stephen Daldry. In this adaptation of Michael Cunningham’s novel of the same name, there are three narrative strands: one biographical, about Virginia Woolf and set during her life time; one set in the nineteen fifties; one set in the modern day. All three strands are launched in this opening montage. The clip of each storyline involves a woman rising in the morning. The use of several leitmotifs holds the tone together; common objects and activities of everyday life recur to unify the overall narrative and subliminally convince the viewer that these three disparate strands are linked. These motifs include flowers, clocks, wallpaper and dress design, the novel Mrs Dalloway, washing, brushing hair, mirrors, cogitation and self regard. The creation of unity is an important challenge for scriptwriter and director in such an adaptation because these three narrative strands and eras don’t converge in a conventional or straightforward way. Stephen Daldry admitted that the film and its triadic structure was made as if it was thriller; it made full use of ‘parallel montage’ and the tension of suspended gratification.

This opening credit sequence is what is often termed a ‘montage sequence’. This isn’t exactly the same as any of Eisenstein’s definitions of ‘montage’, but an accelerated and exaggerated version of several of them. Montage sequences are widely deployed in
modern film but often derided by screenwriting orthodoxies. They can be overused but are often aptly deployed to quickly establish the passage of time or a shift in location. As seen in the opening of *The Hours*, such sequences can be incredibly effective in rapidly establishing very different visual narratives, while at the same time lending them points of similarity and contrast. The effect of poetic, visual echo is striking and compels the audience to wonder how such different narratives might eventually converge and interact.

As mentioned earlier, we teach montage as part of an approach to screenwriting, but also in a wider generic and stylistic context. Film method has wider repercussions and has influenced other genres and media, as well as being influenced by those genres. Brecht’s brief, episodic scenes show the influence of film, as do the stage scenes of later Brechtian adapters. For instance, the one line scenes in Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Our Country’s Good*, appear to be cut and juxtaposed like cinematic shots. In fiction, parallel and converging narrative strands and the splicing of those strands, has a long history, as Eisenstein elucidated. In our teaching, in elaborating on the relationship between fiction and such film methods as montage, we stress the technical and aesthetic benefits. Compared to word-heavy descriptive passages using a filmic or montage-influenced method offers a potentially concise, poetic narrative which trusts a reader’s imagination to fill in the gaps and make connections. Its strength resides in the fact that it directly involves readers’ imaginations.

In film terminology, montage has almost become interchangeable as a term with ‘cut’ and ‘cross cut’. This suggests, by accidental association, that it is a method arrived at in the editing suite. Yet with *The Hours*, for instance, both Hare and Daldry insist that the final product accurately resembles the production script. I would hazard that it is a
method that can be preconceived or one that can be created through editing. Both are possible approaches. There is surely no harm in making the suggestion to student writers that editing can be a creative act, and that the editorial process will help shape their final narrative in a fundamental way.

When we teach this form of montage in the context of its relationship with fiction we emphasise that it is also used by contemporary novelists. It is a method which has a proven track record. It works because it creates such gripping narrative tension - one narrative is left pulsing as another begins, so delaying reader gratification. We refer students to contemporary models of splice-strand approaches to the novel. These include Graham Swift’s *Last Orders* and Jane Rogers’ *Mr Wroe’s Virgins* – the latter, consisting of four separate narrative strands, each strand written individually in order to maintain the consistency of voice for that strand; the intercutting achieved in the editing. Swift’s novel, by his own admission, was written consecutively, as it appears in the published novel. He declares in interview (in Baker), that he knew intuitively where he had to switch narrative strands, to another character’s point of view, or to a different point in the time frame. These two models reinforces the notion that montage is a method which might equally be preconceived and executed or arrived at via editing.

Using montage, adaptation and dramatic scripting methods to enhance general writing style has helped our students produce some excellent work. The majority are excited by the contrast in storytelling methods and respond accordingly. Many go on to write original film, radio and stage scripts using some of the taught adaptation techniques. They gain much from learning something of the interconnectedness of literary and film history. This widens their reading habits and horizons, which is a major
learning aim with writing students. On the negative side, the modus operandi of creative writing teaching is predominantly configured around the short story. Excessive cutting and use of montage methods can be problematic in short narratives. Such approaches are more suited to substantial, longer stories or novel-length narratives. Students do learn this lesson and the better ones are judicious in their approach. They often find that other aspects of these methods are highly relevant – for instance, those aspects concerned with partial characterisation, cutting from one aspect and action of a character to another in an almost symbolic manner. These dramatic methods of concise characterisation are highly relevant to short story writing, and to prose style in general.

References

An Angel at My Table (1990) script – Laura Jones; director – Jane Campion – film.


Hare, David (2002) The Hours (screenplay based on the novel by Michael Cunningham), New York: Miramax

Jones, Laura (1990) *An Angel at My Table* screenplay based on the autobiography of Janet Frame, London: Pandora


Neale, Derek ed. (2009) *A Creative Writing Handbook: Developing Dramatic Technique Individual Style and Voice* London: A&C Black (this contains further discussion about teaching approaches and excerpts of the scripts discussed in this article)

Rogers, Jane (19??) *Mr Wroe’s Virgins*, London: Faber.


*The Hours* (2002), script – David Hare, dir: Stephen Daldry – film

DN March 2011