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Voice and Vision: Langston Hughes Enriches Perspective With Montage

Montage can be defined as a collection of independent, seemingly unrelated images comprised to make a whole and different impression. Surely this is invoked in Langston Hughes' *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, further than in just the title. Beyond the interest in contrapuntal arrangement is a deep interest in the cinematic form throughout his collection of poems. This can be seen in numerous works in the compilation by his use of formal screenwriting elements, such as indentation denoting dialogue, parenthetical bodies inferring stage direction and brief character type descriptions. "Tomorrow", a poem of the set, does not embody all of these elements described, but it does the best of the group to evoke the ideas of montage. "Tomorrow" uses the image of a picky cigarette machine to represent the present state of things in the speaker's environment while next to it contemplates the hopeful change to come. The use of montage here not only reinforces the importance of the still picture portrayed, but also adds to the intellectual effect on the reader.

To further explain, montage is a manipulation tool that provides a stark counterpoint to be set against a previous, seemingly unrelated idea in order to challenge the receiver. "Tomorrow" utilizes this in nature. Upon first glance the poem seems to be spilt into two parts. The first and the last "stanzas" appear to be more abstract comments on time, while the middle three sections seem to be dealing with an entirely different, more concrete subject (the cigarette machine). With closer reading one observes that

there is a colon placed after the first stanza relating the seemingly different observations. These are not different thoughts; the first stated observation is made as a result of the speaker's recognition of the cigarette machine. Like in film montage, two seemingly different images are fused by the editing process.

Rhyme scheme gives further insight into the organization of the poem. The scheme is as follows: aba cd efe. Through this structural detail one notices that the poem is centered around the lines: "says the particular/ cigarette machine". At the end of these lines come the first period mark and the first break in the poem. The comments concerning the machine may appear like a deviation thematically, but grammatically they are proven not. What is particular about this poem is that its core is a specific and discriminatory machine. The machine will not take the whole ("TWO DIMES AND A NICKEL ONLY" versus a quarter) and will only accept parts or pieces. It would be simpler and more fruitful to be more liberal in acceptance, but this mechanism, in bold, denies such ease.

In accordance to collection of poems surrounding "Tomorrow" it is clear that what is being highlighted here is not the intolerance of a certain cigarette machine, but an intolerance that permeates throughout the environment depicted by Hughes. He describes, in a slice of life manner, discrimination often to do with money and most to do with race. Through the incorporation of this ready-made Hughes is using a natural element of Harlem to comment on the whole. The vending machine, much like pre-desegregated United States, is too specific in demands and limited in explanation. Through brief impressions, Hughes conveys the condition or quality of life for African Americans in Harlem. He borrows images and character foils from his setting and creates

a realistic portrait. In “Tomorrow”, Hughes employs a cigarette machine in order to contemplate the present state of things and the relative future, which seems to be on hold.

The use of stock footage was common in early Soviet cinema for the purchase of new film stock was too expensive for the communist film industry. Like much creativity the montage form blossomed under this restraint. Editing became the art and focus of film. Emphasis was on raising political awareness despite strict censorship. Using stock footage allowed the filmmakers to compose metaphors using previously approved images. Similarly Langston Hughes employs everyday and found images to depict larger ideas. His “Tomorrow” utilizes the constraints noted on a vending machine to reflect upon the state of segregation in his environment. He edits with the tools of punctuation, spacing and font to create a multilayered impression.

Hughes’ experience with cinema, specifically Soviet cinema, is one that is first hand. He was involved in a production entitled *Black and White* twenty years prior to the publication of *Montage Of A Dream Deferred*. The film was to illustrate, to an international audience, the “problems of organized labor and race in the Deep South” (Hughes, 99). In Hughes’ autobiography, *I Wonder As I Wander*, he speaks of being frustrated with the scenario of the film which was written by Soviets who had never visited the south: “All I can see to do for this film is to start over and get a new one, based on reality and not imagination” (Hughes, 79). Without screenwriting experience, he unofficially edited the script and had veto power over the drafts. This allowed for much familiarizing with the form of screenplay. The problems with realism in the film’s scenario resulted in the dismissal of “about half of the studio executive staff” and the abandonment of the project (Hughes, 77). This month and a half long experience in the

Soviet Union brought him into contact with various ways of life, which were unfamiliar to the native of the prejudice United States. Hughes describes the acceptance from the Soviets with surprise and in detail: “the reception accorded to us twenty-two Negroes who came to make a movie could not have been more cordial had we been a Theatre Guild Company starring the Lunts” (Hughes, 87). He continues by saying that, “the twenty-two colored folks from Harlem were lionized no end and at cultural gatherings we were always introduced as ‘representatives of the great Negro people’” (Hughes, 87). This brief encounter with respect and not just equal, but special treatment of his all African American group certainly had an effect on the poet. Perhaps in the poem “Tomorrow” the “others” is a reference to the Soviets. Though the center of the poem is the picky cigarette machine, it also notes different types of machines that “take a quarter straight”. Without prejudgment, but rather excitement the Soviet people accepted their “Negro Comrade[s]” (Hughes, 74). Not excluding them for their skin color or class, but recognizing them as people with different and rich experiences that should be acknowledged.

Along with feeling much regard in the Soviet Union, Hughes also gained direct exposure to Soviet montage and its theorists. Hughes mentions, in his autobiography, contact with the filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein, who wrote frequently about and created films featuring montage: “after [*Battleship Potemkin*] at the height of his fame as a film director, [Eisenstein] gave a party for us shortly after our arrival in Moscow” (Hughes, 81). Hughes explains enthusiasm for his work when speaking of his stay in Odessa: “And not far from our hotel were the famous white steps to the sea where *Potemkin* had been filmed. The water front that served as a background for portions of this famous film

was within distance” (Hughes, 93). The Odessa steps he is referring to are the location of the most highly quoted montage sequence in film history. Most definitions of montage feature an allusion to what is referred to simply as the Odessa step sequence. Hughes, in these statements published five years after the release of *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, admits his awareness of other media and its influence on him. He not only viewed Eisenstein’s work, but also had a personal relationship with him and recognized the importance of his film and its effect. Just like Hughes openly samples elements of jazz and blues music, he also experiments with editing techniques inspired by the cinema.

Hughes’ *Montage of a Dream Deferred* is the literary equivalent the montage theory developed in film. Found images or ready-mades are utilized much like stock footage, in Soviet film, is edited contrapuntally. The seemingly contradictory set of images and impressions, of “Tomorrow”, and then the grammatically splices that hold them together lend the best evidence toward filmatic influence on the poem, an influence that was later discussed in Hughes’ autobiography. Hughes was not uneasy about borrowing from different medias of art in order to enhance his own. With *Montage*, he created a sense of Harlem through brief images and impressions of his surroundings. The result is a dense understanding of tone, appearance and frustration of the city and its inhabitants.

Work Cited:

Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*. New York: Vintage Books, 1959.

Hughes, Langston. *I Wonder As I Wander*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1956.