The "Rosebud" Enigma: Rethinking American Montage in the Classical Age of Cinema

Youngjeen Choe

(Department of English, Chung-Ang University)

Parallel montage is a typically American way of constructing a seamless narrative line which is anchored on the logic of linear causality. It opened up the grand stage of American cinema when D.W. Griffith released *The Birth of A Nation* in 1915. This method is still very powerful in the current Hollywood films. On the other hand, however, there was one single film in the history of American cinema that tried to put the logic of linear causality into question and thereby, to provide a possibility of new thinking. This film was Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941). The film can be characterized by the way that Mr. Welles manipulates various virtual images of the past on the screen that the witnesses of Kane's life actualize from their memories. Here, the issue is on Orson Welles' new technique of montage. With these speculations, I will survey how the parallel montage operates in the early stage of American cinema, and then I will inquire about how Welles's montage technique evokes a possibility of new thinking.

American Montage: Porter and Griffith

When Edwin Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) was released
to the American audience during the pre-nickelodeon era, it quickly
became the most popular and commercially successful film of the time.
Along with its commercial success, the most remarkable achievement
of this film was its use of parallel montage by which Porter success-
fully laid out a thematic paradigm of good and evil in the film
narrative.

Composed of fourteen scenes in all, *The Great Train Robbery* devel-
ops three separate sequences. The first sequence (arranged from scene
1 to 9) deals with a chronological ordering of the bandits' robbery and
escape. The bandits threaten a telegraph operator in a rural railroad
station and force him to stop an approaching train (scene 1); they at-
tack not only the messenger in the mail car but also the fireman and
the engineer in the locomotive, disconnecting the engine from the pas-
senger cars (scene 2 to 5); after holding up the passengers outside the
coaches, the bandits move off into the distance, first by the dis-
connected locomotive and then on horseback (scene 6 to 9). The sec-
ond sequence (scene 10 to 11) comes back to the end of the first scene
and develops the opposite side of the robbery situation. The telegraph
operator, who has been tied, gagged and unconscious on the floor, is
now rescued by his young daughter (scene 10) and rushes to the
dance hall where the members of the town posse are dancing to their
pleasure (scene 11).

The first and the second sequences develop two separate situations
that take place simultaneously in two different locations. For the first
time in the history of narrative cinema, Porter uses a parallel editing

technique to make this temporal repetition possible in the narrative structure of the film. The effect of this innovative technique was to set up a thematic paradigm of good and evil leading to a duel between them. The chasing scenes of the third sequence (scene 12 to 13) are the culminating points of the duel where the posse chases the bandits and finally punishes them by death. Thus, the overall structure of film narrative converges on the duel between good and evil, ending up with the final defeat of evil. This type of narrative was very popular in theaters at the time, but Edwin Porter was the first filmmaker to adapt it successfully on the screen by using an innovative editing method.

A few years later, the new techniques that Porter introduced for the first time in his short films were used for full-length feature films in America. D.W. Griffith was one of the leading pioneers in the compositional method known as "parallel montage." In *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the climax sequence is typically referred to as exemplary of this method. Culminating with the battle between the Klansmen and the black mob, this sequence develops three simultaneous situations in parallel: (1) in his office, the black Lieutenant Governor (George Siegmann) forcibly threatens the Congressional leader Austin Stoneman (Ralph Lewis) and his daughter Elsie (Lillian Gish); (2) the black mob attacks the Cameron family who have taken refuge in the cabin; (3) the Klansmen led by Ben Cameron (Henry B. Walthall) ride to the rescue not only of Elsie and her father but also of the Camerons in the cabin. The three situations alternately cut back to one another, accumulating the filmic tension resulting in the climax where the Klansmen defeat the black mob both in the town and in the cabin. Here, the first two situations are given as the culminating points of

conflict between the white and the black, developing through the tragic stories of two white families (the Stonemans and the Camerons). These culminating points of conflict converge on the duel between the Klansmen and the black mob. Accompanied by the fast horse-galloping of the Klansmen, the accelerated rhythm of parallel montage reaches its highest point in the duel of the third situation. This duel ends up with the Klansmen's victory over the black mob. And this victory restores the hierarchical relationship between the white and the black people presented at the beginning of the film.

As above, Griffith's method of parallel montage operates in two ways. First, in the technical aspect, parallel montage speeds up the rhythm of the filmic sequence by alternating each simultaneously occurring segment rapidly. This rapid alternation of segments provides the effect of heightening the narrative tension between segments. Second, in the thematic aspect, parallel montage divides the original situation into two opposed sides (e.g., Black vs. White in *The Birth of a Nation*). The opposed sides of the situation proceed in parallel, but they come across each other in the form of a duel. All the forces of the conflict are removed during the duel, and the original unity of the earlier situation is restored. Viewed from these two aspects of parallel montage, Griffith not only constitutes the narrative structure as the assemblage of alternating segments rather than as the chronological linkage of actions, but he also sets up "a great organic unity"[1] of the narrative structure which Deleuze sees as the essential feature of Griffith films.

---

1) Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 30.

> The organism is, firstly, unity in diversity, that is, a set of differentiated parts; there are men and women, rich and poor, town and country, North and South, interiors and exteriors, etc. These parts are taken in binary relationships which constitute a *parallel alternate montage*, the image of one part succeeding another according to a rhythm······ [T]he parts must necessarily act and react on each other in order to show how they simultaneously enter into conflict and threaten the unity of the organic set, and how they overcome the conflict or restore the unity. From some parts actions arise which oppose good and bad, but from other parts convergent actions arise which come to the aid of the good: through all these actions the form of a duel develops and passes through different stages··· The convergent actions tend towards a single end, reaching the site of the duel to reverse its outcome, to save innocence or reconstitute the compromised unity.[2]

Basically, Deleuze analyzes the narrative structure in Griffith's films by three stages of development: the original unity, the conflict, and the restored unity. Deleuze sees this type of narrative development as "organic," because the narrative proceeds linearly in removing the conflict and reconstituting the original unity at the end. Here, the function of parallel montage is to develop the intermediary stage of conflict placed between the original unity and the restored unity.

This method of parallel montage, which had been called "American montage" since the first generation of American cinema, was challenged later by the Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s, notably by Sergei Eisenstein. In fact, Eisenstein also conceived of montage as the essential method to achieve the organic unity of the film structure, but his approach to montage and organic unity was quite different from what

---

2) Ibid., pp. 30-1.

Griffith and other American filmmakers attempted. In his critical re-
sponse to Griffith's notion of parallel montage, Eisenstein wrote,

> [T]rue rhythm presupposes above all organic unity. Neither a successive
> mechanical alternation of cross-cuts, nor an interweaving of antagonistic
> themes, but above all a unity, which in the play of inner contradictions,
> through a shift of the play in the direction of tracing its organic pulse?
> that is what lies at the base of rhythm. This is not an outer unity of
> story, bringing with it also the classical image of the chase-scene, but
> that inner unity, which can be realized in montage as an entirely different
> system of construction, in which so-called parallel montage can figure as
> one of the highest or particularly personal variants.
>
> For us the microcosm of montage had to be understood as a unity,
> which in the inner stress of contradictions is halved, in order to be re-as-
> sembled in a new unity on a new plane, qualitatively higher, its imagery
> newly perceived.[3]

For Eisenstein, unlike the American method, montage should not
eliminate a part of the parallel sides in order to restore the original
unity from the conflict in the duel. Instead, it should create a new uni-
ty from all the contradictions by transforming the contradictions
"qualitatively" from a conflicting situation into a new unity. The crea-
tion of a new unity is a dialectic process because this unity is gen-
erated by translating one opposite into another, not by juxtaposing one
after another in parallel. Consequently, all the contradictory segments
are "qualitatively" transformed into a new organic unity through this
translating process creating what Eisenstein calls "absolute change of

---

3) Sergei Eisenstein, "Dickens, Griffith, and Film Today," *Film Form*. Trans. Jay Leyda
(New York: HBJ Book, 1949), pp. 235-36.

dimension."

It is generally agreed that Eisenstein's theory of dialectical montage plays a key role in the classical notion of montage. However, we should not ignore the fact that his theory began as a reaction against what Griffith already accomplished with the parallel editing in the early American cinema. Furthermore, as Deleuze points out, the editing methods of Griffith and Eisenstein equally operate within the same paradigm of organic unity. In this sense, both editing methods paved the way for the composition of an organic whole, which characterizes the classical cinema.

Montage as the Manipulation of Time: Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*

In cinema, montage is a specific way of expressing the mode of time by which the images on the screen are manipulated. According to Deleuze, the cinematic image, like an image produced in a mirror, has two sides: the actual and the virtual. The actual refers to the physical and the real, which describes the states or movements of things in space through perception. The virtual refers to the mental and the imaginary which come up through memory.

In the classical montage, the actual image of the present is cut off from the virtual image of the past because it operates only in a chronological succession of movement in space. Thus, virtual image cannot coexist with actual image, and it is replaced by another actual image representing its past-ness. A typical example is the recollection-image

given in the form of a flashback in the classical Hollywood cinema. In a flashback, the actual image of the present goes back to the virtual past by way of a recollection-image, but the sensory-motor extension restores its linearity by turning the virtual past into a sequential part of the actual present in causality. In fact, the flashback of the classical montage is a process of seeking out an image (a recollection-image) from the past "to restore the sequence of images that led ineluctably to [an actual image of the present]".[4] This is why "the recollection-image is not virtual, [but] it actualizes a virtuality."[5] In this manner, the past is contrasted and discernible with the present, and it cannot coexist with the actual present. It exists only as "the former present that the past was".[6] This former present is actualized in the recollection-image.

However, in a new situation where the sensory-motor schema of the narrative breaks down, it becomes difficult to decide what is actual and what is virtual. Since perception no longer links to the motor extension in the form of linear succession, an image forms a circuit or a "mobile mirror which endlessly reflects perception in recollection".[7] Here, perception constitutes an actual side of an image, while recollection constitutes its virtual side. They coalesce into the smallest circuit of a crystal image to the extent that "perception and recollection, the real and the imaginary, the physical and the mental, or rather their images, continually follow each other, running behind each other and

---

4) D. N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), p. 91.

5) Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 54.

6) Ibid., p. 54.

7) Ibid., p. 81.

referring back to each other around a point of indiscernibility".[8] The crystal image always operates on this small internal circuit constituted by the actual and its virtual image. It has two 'distinct' poles in various axes? objective and subjective, real and imaginary, physical and mental, limpid and opaque. But, at the same time, we cannot distinguish one pole from the other, since the optical (and sound) image of one pole is 'indiscernible' from that of the other. Here, indiscernibility is the point where "the actual optical image crystallizes with *its own* virtual image".[9]

With the indiscernibility of the actual and the virtual, the crystal image provides "the ceaseless fracturing or splitting of non-chronological time".[10] In a sensory-motor situation, the present is clearly distinguishable from the past and the future. It moves in one direction (from the past to the future), producing a causal linkage between perception and action. Thus it is considered as the "presence of something, which precisely stops being present when it is replaced by *something else* [i.e., the past and the future]".[11] But, in a new sound-image situation, time *splits* the present in two different directions: the present passes on to the future on the one hand, and it also returns to the past on the other. Accordingly, time is no longer bound to a chronological sequence, and the relationship between the present and the past becomes indecidable. Now, the past is considered as co-existing with the present on the same plane (*plan*), and thus, it constitutes "purely virtual circuits"[12] at each present moment.

---

8) Ibid., p. 69.
9) Ibid., p. 69.
10) Rodowick, p. 92.
11) Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 100.
12) Ibid., p. 294.

One typical case of this new situation deals with the present in re-
lation to the past, rather than the present considered in itself. Here, the
images on the screen appear as layers of the past. The present can
pass on, but only if it preserves the past in its infinitely contracted
form.

> In short, the past appears as the most general form of an already-there,
> a pre-existence in general, which our recollections presuppose, even our
> first recollection if there was one, and which our perceptions, even the
> first, make use of. From this point of view the present itself exists only as
> an infinitely contracted past which is constituted at the extreme point of
> the already-there. The present would not pass on without this condition. It
> would not pass on if it was not the most contracted degree of the past···
> The past appears, in contrast, as the coexistence of circles which are more
> or less dilated or contracted, each one of which contains everything at the
> same time and the present of which is the extreme limit (the smallest cir-
> cuit that contains all the past).[13]

When the past appears as "pre-existence in general" and the present
as "infinitely contracted past," all the circles (or layers) of the past are
constituted into multifaceted strata, "each with its own characteristics,
its 'tones,' its 'aspects,' its 'singularities,' its 'shining points' and its
'dominant' themes".[14] In this case, the present functions as a layer of
transformation which "weaves a network of non-localizable relations

---

13) Ibid., pp. 98-99.
14) Ibid., p. 99. The notion of "sheets of the past" comes from Bergson's comment on
    memory in *Matter and Memory*. Bergson argues that the past is preserved as a non-
    chronological coexistence in time, even though it constitutes its regions (i.e., childhood,
    adolescence, adult life, etc.) in a chronological order. Bergson explains this by the
    model of the inverse cone. See chapter three ("Memory and Mind") of the book for
    details.

between [several layers of the past]".[15] In other words, the present constantly leaps into various layers of the past in a non-chronological way, and formulates 'the smallest circuit of the real and the imaginary' which operates as 'indecidable alternatives' between layers of the past.

Viewed from this perspective of time that Deleuze develops, Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) is a good example to show how Welles's novel montage technique manipulates various layers of the past that the witnesses of Kane's life revive from their memories. In fact, innumerable references to this film have been made by people from film industry, media, and film scholars.[16] Of all these responses and comments, one sentence from Jorge Luis Borges would concisely summarize this film: Citizen Kane is just "a centreless labyrinth".[17]

The opening sequence that depicts Kane's death already alludes this labyrinth structure of the film. The film begins with a mobile shot where the camera penetrates the inside of Kane's bedroom. When the camera closes in on a close-up of a snow scene and pulls back in the following shot, it reveals that the snow scene is contained in a glass ball which Kane (Orson Welles) is holding. Kane's whole face with a

---

15) Ibid., p. 123.
16) From the time of its release, the film had drawn a huge attention from journalism through the gossips about the personalities of Orson Welles and William Randolph Hearst, to whom the character of Charles Foster Kane was supposed to attribute. For a detailed comparison between William Randolph Hearst and the Kane character, see Charles Higham, *The Films of Orson Welles* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1970), pp. 21-24. Also, some academic research and scholarship provoked a debate on the film's production history. Robert Carringer's book *The Making of Citizen Kane* provides a panoramic view of the production history by delving into the processes of scripting, art direction, cinematography and postproduction. His research on all these processes of making *Citizen Kane* brilliantly exemplifies the complexities of Hollywood studio system.
17) Luis Borges, "*Citizen Kane*," Ed. Ronald Gottesman, *Focus on Citizen Kane* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1971), p. 128.

close-up of his lips show him murmuring the word "Rosebud" as the last word he speaks. Then, he drops the ball from his hand and dies on his bed. The glass ball falls off the last step and breaks on the marble floor. Kane's image in this opening sequence is the only actual image of Kane which appears "as a dying shadow and as a frag-ment",[18] creating the "Rosebud" enigma that persists through the re-mainder of the film.

The opening sequence showing Kane's death is followed by a news digest offering a public version of Kane's biography: his transition from poverty to great wealth, his career as a newspaper publisher, his first marriage with the President's niece, his desire and failure for a political career, his scandal with a singer who becomes his second wife, and the myth of Xanadu. The news digest articulates Kane's im-age as that of "a bigger American," as Mr. Rawlston (Philip Van Zandt), the editor of the news digest, calls him after the screening. However, it doesn't reveal any personal motivation concerning what Kane did throughout his life. And then, Mr. Rawlston asks the editors and reporters in the screening room:

> What made Kane what he was? And, for that matter, what was he? What we've just seen are the outlines of a career - what's behind the ca-reer? What's the man? Was he good or bad? Strong or foolish? Tragic or silly? Why did he do all those things? What was he after?

Seeking out a conclusive answer to these questions, the film jumps out of the newsreel version of Kane's life, and slides into a series of different people's personal memories. In fact, from the moment of his

---

18) Rodowick, p. 94.

death, Kane becomes a ghost figure. He resides only in the virtual
spaces of other characters' memories. He is no longer alive in the ac-
tual world where a magazine reporter named Mr. Thompson (William
Alland) is searching for hidden meanings of his life.

  "Rosebud" is the main focus for this inquiry. In order to determine
what "Rosebud" is or what this word means, Mr. Thompson traces
five stages of Kane's life. First of all, he visits Thatcher Memorial
Library to read the one section of Thatcher's journal which describes
how this wealthy financier could take a young boy Kane from his
Colorado home. And then, Mr. Thompson interviews four witnesses
who knew Kane personally: Bernstein (Everett Sloane) who was Kane's
devoted assistant in *The New York Enquirer* throughout his life; Jed
Leland (Joseph Cotton) who was Kane's college friend and worked for
Kane in the newspaper until an incident ended their friendship; Susan
Alexander (Dorothy Comingore), Kane's second wife, who was bitterly
disillusioned by her disastrous marriage life as well as her miserable
opera career; Raymond (Paul Stewart), the butler at Xanadu. At each
sequence of Mr. Thompson's inquiry, a conversation with a particular
character leads us to a flashback which actualizes a character's virtual
past. Bernstein narrates two stories: Kane's career as the owner of *the*
New York Enquirer and Kane's marriage to Emily Norton (Ruth War-
rick), the president's niece. In the following sequence, Leland unfolds
stories about Kane's second marriage to Susan, stressing how dis-
astrous it was. Susan's narration recounts her scandalous affair with
Kane and her joyless life at Xanadu. Lastly, Raymond's flashback nar-
ration depicts the last unhappy days that Kane and Susan spent at
Xanadu.

  Mr. Thompson's inquiry reconstitutes Kane's life by juxtaposing dif-

ferent memories of different characters. In the process of this inquiry, different memories, or different layers of past "are all coexistent, each containing the whole of Kane's life in one form or another".19) One image of Kane becomes actual from a character's virtual memory, but each image of Kane is actualized under a different sensory-motor situation. For example, Kane's image in Bernstein's memory is actualized in a flashback when he narrates Kane's relation to Thatcher and Leland in his early days working for *the New York Enquirer*. In this sequence, Bernstein is in control of the sensory-motor schema to develop Kane's story from his memory. However, when Mr. Thompson's interview moves to another character, Bernstein is no longer in control of Kane's story. This time, Leland draws upon his own virtual memory to create an aspect of Kane's life. Both Bernstein's memory and Leland's memory actualize different aspects of Kane's life respectively on the screen, but these actual images are articulated under two different sensory-motor schemas. In fact, all the stories of Kane are manipulated by different sensory-motor schemas. Thus, there is no "sensory-motor whole" which can thread through all the sequences of the film. Kane's death at the beginning of the film already makes it impossible to totalize all the sequences of Kane's life with one and the same sensory-motor schema. Consequently, each sequence remains a fragment with respect to others, only to be juxtaposed from one to another.

The lack of a sensory-motor whole in this film raises the question of indiscernibility of different layers of the past as juxtaposed in a chain of actuality and virtuality. All the facets of the past can be

---

19) Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, p. 105.

placed in a chronological order, but it is impossible to thread these facets in terms of a single totalizing point of view. Charles Foster Kane disappears after the first sequence of his death and exists only as a virtual image among various recollections by other characters for the rest of the film. Even though these recollections of Kane's life are juxtaposed in a chronological order, they do not conform to a single logic of truth which might give a conclusive answer to the "Rosebud" enigma. The actualized image of Kane in each flashback holds true only within a small circuit of each character's memory. Juxtaposing a series of different circuits of the past, the whole film places Kane's life in a chain of actuality and virtuality.

In this film, one point in the present realizes the indiscernible relations of the actual and the virtual. Namely, Thompson's inquiry is repeatedly situated in the spaces between flashbacks. The spaces leaping toward the past are not chronological, since each present point in the "Rosebud" inquiry brings back a different layer from each character's past. Thus, in this reconstructed version of Kane's life, the sequences are simply juxtaposed in a series of crystal images actualized from the virtual images in different layers from the past. Throughout this process, "Rosebud," the object of inquiry, is never fully actualized. Even though we see it marked in the sled in the closing scene of the film, no character in the film actually sees it before it is thrown away into fire. Each flashback in the "Rosebud" inquiry actualizes different layers of the past connected to Kane's life, but "Rosebud" itself never explains Kane's life. As Rodowick mentions, the sled with "Rosebud" marked on its bottom functions as "the sign of the impossibility of a stable identity or a totalizing life-narrative".[20] In Deleuze's category of time-image, this sign of "Rosebud" is understood as an image of pure

recollection which is residing in Kane's objective past but could not be presented in any other forms because of his death. This is why "Rosebud" in Citizen Kane stands as a hinge between the classical mode of time and the modern mode of time by placing itself in a line of flight.

---

20) Rodowick, p. 94.

Bibliographies

Bergson, Henry. *Matter and Memory*. Trans. Nancy Margaret Paul &
W. Scott Palmer. New York: Zone Books, 1991.

Borges, Luis. "*Citizen Kane*." Ed. Ronald Gottesman. *Focus on Citizen
Kane*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971.

Carringer, Robert. *The Making of Citizen Kane*. Berkeley: Univ. of
California Press, 1985.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tom-
linson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Min-
nesota Press, 1986.

_____. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson
and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,
1989.

Eisenstein, Sergei. "Dickens, Griffith, and Film Today." *Film Form*.
Trans. Jay Leyda. New York: HBJ Book, 1949.

Higham, Charles. *The Films of Orson Welles*. Berkeley: The Univ. of
California Press, 1970.

Rodowick, D.N. *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine*. Durham: Duke Univ.
Press, 1997.

【Abstract】

The "Rosebud" Enigma: Rethinking American Montage in the Classical Age of Cinema

Youngjeen Choe
(Chung-Ang University)

This essay aims to explain how the parallel montage operates in the early stage of American cinema, and then to argue how the novel montage technique in Orson Welles's Citizen Kane manipulates various layers of the past that the witnesses of Charles Foster Kane's life revive from their memories, and thereby, his montage technique evokes a possibility of new thinking.

Citizen Kane exemplified how the lack of a central subjectivity led to the question of indiscernibility in all different layers of the past. Each sequence of the film remained a fragment to others, because Kane's death at the beginning of the film already made it impossible to totalize all the sequences of Kane's life with one and the same sensory-motor schema. Thus, even though all the facets of the past were placed in a chronological order, it was impossible to bind these facets in terms of a single totalizing point of view.