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Montage as a Space for Resonance. Between Dialectical Praxis and Theoretical Tensions

Benjamin and the flower pictures

Almost 100 years ago, Walter Benjamin gave birth to some remarkable observations on the relationship between flowers and photography in his review of Karl Blossfeldt's photobook. In those pages Benjamin praised one capacity of photographic art: the one that is able to reveal hidden universes to us, true "new worlds", through exponential zooms and enlargements. Benjamin emphasised the way Blossfeldt's photographs were able to take us to explore worlds that were previously unknown to most: the microscopic details of flowers. Parts of the world, which until then had been invisible, suddenly came to occupy the centre of our attention due to their sudden super-visibility. In this way Benjamin comments on the unveiling of those hidden universes: «Whether we accelerate the growth of a plant through time-lapse photography or show its form in forty-fold enlargement, in either case a geyser of new image-worlds rises up at points in our existence where we would least have thought them possible»¹. The subject's practices of *control and manipulation* over the image give rise to the emergence of unexplored and unforeseen territories.

From the "background", from the "margins", the object of our interest, of our gaze, moves to the centre of the image: from invisible it becomes visible. In this way, the photographic medium described by Benjamin redefines the compositional hierarchy of the spectacle before our eyes and transforms our way of seeing. It reveals uncontrollable (because unforeseen and unknown) aesthetic universes, through an intensified exercise of *technological control* over the image.

So, if in a single photograph, according to Benjamin, we can already witness an extension of our perceptual horizon and thus a complication of our relationship with the images that present themselves to us, what happens with cinema? What happens with montage?

¹ W. Benjamin, *News about Flowers*, in M.W. Jennings, H. Eiland, and G. Smith (edited by), *Selected Writings, Volume 2 Part 1 1927-1930*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London 2005, p. 156.

Abstract

The article employs the concept of the "Resonance Relationship" to examine the theoretical and practical tensions inherent in the process of artistic creation as it pertains to the practice of film montage. A re-reading of the film *Blow-Up* will facilitate an examination of the interplay between the two conceptual poles of control and uncontrollability as they manifest in artistic practices. The study will be supported by an analysis of various perspectives on interrelated issues, including the "photographic zoom" as described by Walter Benjamin, Walter Murch's approach to montage, and the concept of the "aporia of art" as articulated by Theodor W. Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*.

KEYWORDS

BLOW-UP
-
(UN)CONTROLLABILITY
-
PHOTOGRAPHY
-
RESONANCE
-
THEODOR W. ADORNO



Karl Blossfeldt:
Heliotrope.
Inflorescence, n.d.

-
© Courtesy Sammlung Karl Blossfeldt im Archiv der Universität der Künste Berlin & Die Photographische Sammlung/SK Stiftung Kultur, Köln

From photo to film: multiplying the unpredictable

For the moment, the focus will be on the *process* that brings this dynamic (dialectical?) reversal of forms of control into uncontrollable manifestations to occur also in cinema. The final stage, which will be analysed in the film montage, is not a randomness, a contingency, a “happy accident”²; but more like the realisation of a “promise” that was already present, in nuce, in the technical operation of photography³.

² The notion of the “happy accident” is strongly linked to that of the “controlled accident” put into practice and discussed by filmmaker and theorist Maya Deren. For a detailed reconstruction of her work see S. Keller, *Maya Deren. Incomplete Control*, Columbia University Press, New York 2015. On the role of contingency in cinema and filmmaking see M. Carboni, *La mosca di Dreyer. L'opera della contingenza nelle arti*, Jaca Book, Milano 2007.

³ This is in no way intended to suggest the idea that cinema is a mere amplified manifestation of something that was already present in photography; rather,



Bruno Forestier
(Michel Subor) while
photographing Véronica
Dreyer (Anna Karina).

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Le Petit Soldat,
Jean-Luc Godard, 1963

In a scene of the film directed by Jean-Luc Godard *Le petit soldat*, the protagonist, engaged in photographing Anna Karina, reveals something important to better frame this relationship between photography and cinema: “Photography is truth. Cinema is truth 24 times per second”. In this context, this mathematical principle of “multiplication of truth” (which will not be discussed here) is applicable to the multiplication of those “new worlds” detected by Benjamin.

The “unexplored lands” we have arrived at through photography are multiplied 24 times per second in film. In this context, the difference between photography and filmmaking lies in the fact that in the latter, the aforementioned “multiplication” of the unexplored and unforeseen does not stop at the single frame; on the contrary, it transcends the single frame and *invests the entire process*, right up to the editing phase.

«You could sit in one room with a pile of dailies and another editor could sit in the next room with exactly the same footage and both of you would make different films out of the same material»⁴. For various schools of thought, the montage has always represented the most emblematic phase of the long filmmaking process and, as a metonym, has also symbolised cinema tout court through the exhibition of its practical and theoretical

it is intended to highlight a precise relationship of continuity between the two media in manifesting a “specific tension” inherent in the process of technological progress.

⁴ W. Murch, *In the blink of an eye*, Silman-James Press, Beverly Hills 2001, pp. 12-13.

possibilities. «[...] *any* kind of cinema is a cinema of montage. For the simple reason that the basic element of cinema - the mobility of photography - is a phenomenon of montage»⁵. Ėjzenštejn's vision has not always been the most influential or even the most shared in the cinematic tradition⁶; but certainly, in its "extremism" it has expressed "limit conditions" that have pushed the general debate to develop in a certain way⁷.

The importance Ėjzenštejn attributed to editing allows me to frame this very delicate phase of *final re-control* as a highly favourable place for the observation of that discovery of "new worlds" that was already present, as technological promise, in the photographic medium. And if it is true that, as Ėjzenštejn states, in cinema montage in a certain sense "came home" after having already inhabited other artistic or mythological/religious forms⁸: then perhaps even that dynamic relationship (which I have only briefly mentioned so far) between *control and uncontrollability* lands in a place where it can be observed in a privileged (and maybe exemplary) manner.

Before arriving at a study of montage from this perspective, it is appropriate to try to shed more light on this dynamic between control and uncontrollability which has already been mentioned.

5 S.M. Ėjzenštejn, *L'Urphänomen cinematografic. Dai fotogrammi all'immagine in movimento*, in P. Montani (ed. by), *Teoria generale del montaggio*, Marsilio, Venezia 2021, p. 129 (translation is mine).

6 Already in the years when he was alive Ėjzenštejn shared the space of practical/theoretical debate with a vision opposite to his own: that of Dziga Vertov. See A. Somaini, *Ėjzenštejn. Il cinema, le arti, il montaggio*, Einaudi, Torino 2011, pp. 30-35.

7 Other "limit conditions", from an opposite perspective, were elaborated and expressed afterwards by the French critic André Bazin.

8 Ėjzenštejn refers to the epic poetry of Homer and Whitman, the novels of Dickens, the myth of Dionysus and the communion of Christ.

Resonance, (un)controllability, montage

Hartmut Rosa's "Resonance Theory"⁹ studies have created an interesting and lateral (outside of the purely aesthetic field) space for reflection on how the interplay between control and uncontrollability develops in the different types of relationships we can establish in our everyday life with material or spiritual elements. According to Rosa, the "Resonance Relationship", which is hindered by material and structural conditions (constant acceleration process¹⁰, economic drive, instrumental approach), can offer a concrete alternative to the way we relate to the world around us and to ourselves¹¹ and describes «[...] a mode of relationship in which the subject and the world are in a *responsive relationship*»¹².

Resonance necessarily includes a moment of *loss of control* and thus of *autonomy* (Autonomieverlust) and, in this sense, always carries the possibility of *being overwhelmed* by another. This is exactly what is meant by the concepts of uncontrollability (Unverfügbarkeit) and transformation¹³.

For this reason the relationship theorised by Rosa enables us to frame the editing phase from a new and interesting per-

9 See H. Rosa, *Resonance. A sociology of our relationship to the world*, tr. eng. J.C. Wagner, Polity Press, Cambridge 2019 and H. Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the world*, tr. eng. J.C. Wagner, Polity, Cambridge 2020.

10 See H. Rosa, *Social Acceleration. A new theory of modernity*, tr. eng. J.T. Mathys, Columbia University Press, New York 2013.

11 Rosa offers a wide range of examples ranging from a more transcendent plane (such as history and religion understood as indefinite totality) to a more immanent plane (such as our body, a pet or a friend).

12 H. Rosa, *Was heisst Resonanz? Annäherungen an einen Modus der Weltbeziehung*, in L. Scheuermann, W. Spickermann (eds.), *Religiöse Praktiken in der Antike*, Uni-Press Graz Verlag, Graz 2016, p.13 (translation and emphasis are mine).

13 H. Rosa, *Resonanz als Schlüsselbegriff der Sozialtheorie* in J.-P. Wils (ed.), *Resonanz. Im interdisziplinären Gespräch mit Hartmut Rosa*, Nomos, Baden-Baden 2019, p. 17 (parenthesis, emphasis and translation are mine).

spective: in montage we can witness a sense-making activity in which the loss of autonomy and control is displayed in a creative manner. According to Rosa, one of the fundamental prerequisites for there to be space for a “Resonance Relationship” is the following: our actions must take place in a dimension of “semi-controllability”. We must not have total control over what we are doing, «In fact we are only able to resonate with other people or things when they are in a way “semicontrollable”, when they move between complete controllability and total uncontrollability»¹⁴. In this sense, Rosa can open up space for a reflection that is also fundamental to artistic practices in their *twofold nature* as deliberate acts with results that are unobtainable at will¹⁵.

Cinema is a field of research that is highly sensitive to this dimension of the “semicontrollable” precisely because of its radically dialectical nature in constant oscillation between two poles (control and uncontrollability)¹⁶: the director’s project on the one hand and production accidents on the other, the screenwriters’ idea on the one hand and the uncontrollability of the set on the other etc. For this reason, then, studying the dynamics of control/uncontrollability present in the medium of cinema can benefit greatly from Rosa’s approach to “semicontrollable” phenomena. «[...] no meaningful work or artistic practice is such if it does not produce, through controlled techniques, something that transcends such control»¹⁷.

14 H. Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the world*, cit.p. 40.

15 S. Velotti’s work in this field is pioneering in its lucidity and revelatory in showing, in the vein of Adorno, a very strong co-dependence between social dynamics and artistic practices. See S. Velotti, *Dialettica del controllo. Limiti della sorveglianza e pratiche artistiche*, Castelvecchi, Roma 2017 and Id., *The Conundrum of Control. Making Sense through Artistic Practices*, Brill, Leiden 2024.

16 Cfr. M. Carboni, *La mosca di Dreyer. L’opera della contingenza nelle arti*, cit., p. 18: «From its beginnings, cinema – much more than any other technical-artistic practice – is both control, mediation, and immediacy, contingency (hence uncontrollability)» (parenthesis and translation are mine).

17 S. Velotti, *Dialettica del Controllo. Limiti della sorveglianza e pratiche artistiche*, cit., p. 50 (translation is mine).

Of course, it is not as simple as it might sound. The aesthetic experience of Resonance *may* happen during the making of a film, during its editing, but to aspire directly to that result very often produces contrary and unsatisfactory effects¹⁸. Rosa emphasises several times that one of the fundamental elements of the Resonance experience is in fact its profoundly uncontrollable character (*Unverfügbarkeit*)¹⁹ and it is precisely this dimension of radical uncontrollability (different from the anarchy of chance) that can be highlighted in the practice of editing.

“Blow-Up”: still frames in motion

There is one film that succeeded in staging in an exemplary way the cinematic potential of re-composition of reality already present in the photographic medium: “*Blow-Up*”, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni. One scene especially displays, through the medium of photography, some pivotal elements of the final stage of the filmmaking process: the montage.

We find ourselves shortly after the middle of the film, Thomas (the protagonist) has taken several photos of what looks like a happy couple walking in the park and now, back in his studio, having developed them, he sets about analysing them. Enlargements (blow-ups) of the newly developed photos are hung around the perimeter of his living room: the protagonist finds himself literally surrounded by the scene he had witnessed during the morning. These blow-ups allow him to study the details of the photos that had not emerged at first glance and, in this

18 A similar experience has been explored from a different and interesting perspective by J. Elster in his studies about “States that are essentially by-products” in *Sour Grapes. Studies in the subversion of rationality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983.

19 Cfr. H. Rosa, *Beyond Control. A Note from the Author on the Key Term of This Book* in Id., *The Uncontrollability of the world*, cit.: «For me, *Unverfügbarkeit* is one of the key elements of every experience of being in resonance with someone or something. [...] It is not just about non-predictability, but about non-engineerability».



Thomas (David Hemmings) surrounded by the collected material.
- Blow-Up, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966

sense, we are faced with something akin to the phenomenon already described by Benjamin on the details of flowers in Blossfeldt's book; but in Antonioni's scene there is also something more.

Through the orderly arrangement of the photos in a chronologically coherent manner, Thomas creates a cinematic sequence of the event he witnessed: a kind of *ex post* "photo-roman". It is "*ex post*" because Thomas' initial goal was not the creation of the aforementioned photo-roman but, rather, the mere collection of photos to finish the photo book he was working on. It is also important to emphasise the *a posteriori* nature in which the action takes place because it is one of the key characteristics that also constitute film editing.

The perimetric arrangement of the photographic sequence developed in its entirety surrounds the protagonist in much the same way as, at least according to the Nordic myth, the serpent Jörmungandr surrounds the Earth: it overwhelms him. There is a dimension of extreme physicality in the relationship between Thomas and his photos: not only because of the manipulation practised manually photo by photo, taking them in hand one by one; but also because of the *spatial dimension* that the scene in the park occupies in his living room. The fragments of the scene have a physical body that Thomas must deal with.

This "media landscape" reminds me of the words used by the famous film editor Walter Murch to describe his editing of Philip Kaufmann's film "*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*".

But in addition to the usual procedures, I also would select at least one representative frame from every set-up (camera position) and take a still photograph of it off the workprint. We then had these photos developed and printed at the local “one hour” place, like family snapshots, and they were put onto panels arranged according to scene²⁰.

Even Murch in his “dark room” is confronted with a series of photographs “hanging” around him: they help him to reconstruct the scene in its minimal structure and will serve, in the more advanced phase of the editing, to resolve the doubts and perplexities that will arise from the confrontation with the director²¹. This practice of enlargement and prolonged exposure of the photographs hanging in the studio does not at all appear to be an artistic quirk or a casual event for Murch; on the contrary, it seems to constitute the very genesis of the editing process as he intends it. «What this photo system does is just tip you up out of your chair a bit. It is an encouragement to do what you should be doing anyway. And it is *the beginning* of the editorial process. You are already beginning to edit at the point that you say, “I like this frame rather than that frame”»²². For Murch, this is the beginning of editing; for Thomas, it is the beginning of a discrepancy between reality and appearance/representation, between conscious intention and its uncontrollable consequences. We find ourselves at the beginning of what we might call a paradox, an *aporia*.

The material “grows” in proportion to the increasing control Thomas exerts over it. The more the photo is enlarged, the more Thomas’s uncertainty about the subject in front of him increases, the more the zoom strives to give him a grasp of min-

20 W. Murch, *In the blink of an eye*, cit., p. 32.

21 Cfr. *ivi*, p. 33: «The photographs are a great help in later discussions with the director about what was shot and how it was shot – they resolve those kinds of discussions very quickly».

22 *Ivi*, p. 42 (emphasis mine).

ute details, the more the photographic grain increases, making any kind of deciphering impossible. We seem to be facing Zeno's paradox in which it's impossible for Achilles to reach the tortoise because there will always be an infinitely small portion of space to mark their distance. The closer we get, the more the object disappears.

Ėjzenštejn had theorised the dialectical form of montage in similar terms, a conflict between industry and nature, between artist and material (between control and non-control): «[...] its nature is a conflict between natural existence and creative tendency; between *organic inertia* and initiative tending towards *a purpose*»²³. Thomas experiences first-hand the “organic inertia” mentioned by Ėjzenštejn, and Antonioni himself emphasised the paradoxical situation that the protagonist faces. «The photographer in *Blow-Up*, who is not a philosopher, wants to take a closer look. But it happens to him that, when he enlarges it, *the object itself breaks down and disappears*. So, there is a moment when you grasp reality, but the next moment it escapes. That's kind of the point of *Blow-up*»²⁴.

The scene of two lovers strolling in the park begins to turn into something else. Zoom after zoom, glance after glance, from the initially marginal background emerges an *unexpected detail* that changes the meaning of the whole scene. The material is revealed in a different light due to Thomas's *technical control* over it: the dark silhouette of a man with a gun in his hand makes its way through the dense grain of the bushes exacerbated by Thomas's repeated zooms. The sense of the image *transforms unpredictably* before Thomas's (and our) eyes: the story of the photoman that Thomas was building up takes *an unexpected turn*.

23 S.M. Ėjzenštejn, *Drammaturgia della forma cinematografica [1] (L'approccio dialettico alla forma cinematografica)* in P. Montani (ed.), *Il Montaggio*, Marsilio, Venezia, 1986, p. 20 (translation and emphasis are mine).

24 M. Antonioni, *Il regista sul film*, Il Cinema Ritrovato, <https://distribuzione.ilcinemaritrovato.it/per-conoscere-i-film/blow-up/il-regista-sul-film> (accessed 20/04/24 - translation and emphasis are mine).



An unexpected detail
emerges from the
bushes.

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Blow-Up, *Michelangelo
Antonioni, 1966*

Montage: an open door to dialectics

In artistic practices we are not doomed to the dramatic consequences Thomas faces in the movie; on the contrary, very often in them we can find a privileged place for reflection to rethink those dynamics that, in daily life, do not find an answer and, sometimes, do not even find the right expression. Rosa developed the idea of the “Resonance Relationship” also as an alternative to the approach generally shared in our relationship to the world: «[...] for late modern human beings, the world has simply become a *point of aggression*. Everything that appears to us must be known, mastered, conquered, made useful»²⁵. This approach driven by the desire for *absolute control* generates, according to Rosa, a two-headed monster in the guise of Janus. On one side we face the fear of the world «falling mute»²⁶, while on the other: «this desire for control produces, behind our backs, a world that in the end is utterly uncontrollable in all relevant aspects»²⁷.

The control exercised by Thomas does not reduce the material to a mere “means to”; on the contrary, it elevates it to a dialogue from which the unexpected, the unforeseen can emerge. «Yet art mobilises technique in an opposite direction than does domination»²⁸: and it’s precisely this “opposite direction” that is

25 H. Rosa, *The uncontrollability of the world*, cit., p. 6 (emphasis mine).

26 *Ivi*, p. 28.

27 H. Rosa, *Beyond Control. A Note from the Author on the Key Term of This Book* in Id., *The Uncontrollability of the world*, cit.

28 T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, tr. eng. R.H. Kentor, Continuum, London-New York 2002, p. 54.

showcased in an exemplary manner by the “two-faced” motion of montage.

«Sometimes, during this long working phase (montage), *something new and unexpected* may happen. Frames, or even entire scenes, may be eliminated, modified or placed at a different moment in the story than when they were originally planned»²⁹. Rondolino and Tomasi highlight one of the most fascinating features of the editing phase, its constitutive openness to re-thinking and rewriting: its *porosity*³⁰. Murch does not merely emphasise the porosity inherent in the editing phase, but rather highlights precisely how it is the latest *technological developments* that guarantee a more extensive and deeper “listening phase”: more lasting. «Instead of “speed” digital systems would be more honest to advertise “increased options.” They will allow the work to *remain flexible* longer, meaning the moment of decisive commitment can be delayed»³¹. Keeping the process flexible longer means increasing the editor’s possibilities of *listening to the material*, and this does not happen despite technical control but precisely *by virtue of it*: therein lies the engine of the “contradiction” to be studied, which Adorno calls «aporia of art»³².

Montage increases the director/editor’s ability to control the film down to the tiniest frame; but, at the same time, it unveils unexplored and uncontrollable territories to them. In editing, therefore, the editor has (seemingly) total control over all the material filmed up to that moment and, although it may seem contradictory, it is precisely in this very delicate phase of strict control that s/he can listen to the work in all its completeness and in every detail and, consequently, let it speak «with its own voice»³³. The montage, precisely by virtue of its ordering and controlling nature, allows the editor to look at the film under

29 G. Rondolino, D. Tomasi, *Manuale del film. Linguaggio, racconto, analisi*, Utet, Novara 2018, p. 187 (translation, emphasis and parenthesis are mine).

30 See W. Benjamin, A. Lacis, *Napoli porosa*, tr. it. di E. Cicchini, Dante & Descartes, Napoli 2020.

31 W. Murch, *In the blink of an eye*, cit., p. 111 (emphasis mine).

32 T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, cit., pp. 54-55.

33 H. Rosa, *Resonance. A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, cit., p. 167.

the microscope and, in doing so, reveals previously hidden and secret significant universes: new possible combinations are discovered over and over. A *dialogue* arises between the material and the editor, and a *different exercise of control* is exhibited: the “new worlds” highlighted by Benjamin are fully revealed by the infinite re-combinatorial possibilities of montage.

Walter Murch addresses this phenomenon quite directly. «Whereas the advantage of the KEM’s linear system is that I do not always have to be speaking to it - there are times when *it speaks to me*. The system is constantly presenting things for consideration, and a *sort of dialogue takes place*»³⁴. Which dialogue is Murch referring to? Between him and the film material or between him and the KEM³⁵? Probably embraces both, but it should certainly be emphasised that it is precisely the KEM that makes this dialogue possible on two levels. The *technical apparatus*, in this case, extends the possibilities and methods of access to the material and in doing so expands the possible “relationships” between it and the editor³⁶.

This “dialogue” appears to be a coherent manifestation of the “Resonance Relationship” theorised by Rosa. The editor has a (more or less) precise idea of the film s/he wants to make but nevertheless remains “listening” to the possible variations and suggestions coming from the material itself. «Rather, art emerges from the conflict or *conversation* between the capable and forming subject, who has at her disposal instruments, knowledge of form, and expressive abilities, and the independent source that confronts her»³⁷. This “independent source” is the “organic inertia” referred to by Ėjzenštejn, but if we look

34 W. Murch, *In the blink of an eye*, cit., p. 46 (emphasis mine).

35 KEM: one of the most common brands of flatbed editing machines.

36 The media (and mediated) dimension of the relationship between the subject and the world is perhaps one of the most important aspects that are not investigated in Rosa’s theory, and a study of filmmaking from this perspective could open up an interesting space for reflection also in rethinking the “Resonance Relationship” in its more problematic aspects.

37 H. Rosa, *Resonance. A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, cit., p. 282 (emphasis mine).

closely at the dynamics of montage, we realise that the material that confronts the editor is *not inert at all*.

Every film has (or should have) a unique way of communicating, and so you struggle to learn its language. But the film can speak its own language better than you can! So, in the mechanical, linear search for what I *wanted*, I would find instead what I *needed* – something different, better, more quirky, more accidental, more ‘true’ than my first impression. I could recognize it when I saw it, but I couldn’t have articulated it in advance³⁸.

Murch explicitly highlights the dimension of (apparent) contradiction that permeates the entire field of artistic practices. The artist’s will directed towards the attainment of the set purpose only finds its fulfilment through the recognition of a “second purpose”: born out of the process of pursuing the initial goal. For Murch, therefore, what the artist *wants* helps him/her find what s/he *needs*. The will remains at the centre, it is indispensable in producing “side effects” that are unobtainable on command and that, in retrospect (*a posteriori*), become the outcome s/he did not know s/he wanted. What Murch is telling us is that in creative action, the artist does not merely shape the object s/he is working on (in this case, the film) through his/her own efforts, but comes to shape his/her own will, his/her own intentions: him/herself.

«“By dint of building”, declares Eupalinos, “I am inclined to think that I have built myself up”»³⁹. In “building him/herself”, the artist comes to re-shape his/her own intentions and vision on the project in general: a «dynamic organization»⁴⁰ takes place. «If the artist does not perfect *a new vision* in his pro-

38 W. Murch, *In the blink of an eye*, cit., pp. 108-109.

39 P. Valery, *Eupalinos. Or, The Architect*, quoted in M. Carboni, *La mosca di Dreyer*, cit., p. 95 (translation is mine).

40 J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, Perigee Books, New York 1980, p. 55.

cess of doing, he acts mechanically and repats some old model fixed like a blue print in his mind»⁴¹. Stefano Velotti focuses on this “conundrum” of the artistic practices from a Kantian perspective.

Beautiful works of art, although they are produced through a process aimed at “seeking” the best solution to give body to the “intentions” of the artist, can be successful works of art only through the production of imaginative matter whose subjective purposiveness *is not controllable* by the subject, but is dependent on the principle constituted by the free play of imagination and understanding⁴².

In the case of montage, this “imaginative matter” arises from the encounter between the artist’s intention and *the resistance of the material* to it: “is not controllable” because it is not predictable how it will develop. The artist applies deliberate control, the consequences of which are, in their entirety, unknowable: we cannot predict, from the outset, which figure will emerge from the bushes of the London park where Thomas was taking pictures. Murch explicitly warns us about the risk of *total control* in the work of the editor.

“Get instantly where you want to go. All you have to do is tell the machine and it will give it to you instantly, like the perfect assistant”. Yes, true enough, but that’s actually something of a drawback because the machine gives me only what I ask for, and *I don’t always want to go where I say I want to go*. Wanting something just gives me the starting point. *I expect the material itself to tell me what to do next*. [...] But it’s so easy to use random-access that, by default, *it rules your decisions*. How do you control

41 *Ivi*, p. 50 (emphasis mine).

42 S. Velotti, *The Conundrum of Control. Making Sense through Artistic Practices*, cit., pp. 33-34.

your impulse to be immediately satisfied? I want what I want, so the machine – like the genie in the lamp – gives it to me. But *something has been lost*⁴³.

On the importance of the “material resistance”, John Dewey had already expressed himself, from an apparently distant point of view, while outlining a kind of phenomenology of the “An experience”. «Resistance is treated as an obstruction to be beaten down, not as an invitation to reflection»⁴⁴. It is evident that Murch’s approach is opposite to that criticised by Dewey and for him, in fact, the resistance of the material is something to be maintained at all costs.

We now find ourselves at the crossroads of two major theoretical “contradictions” that, in a sense, comprehend each other. On the one hand, there is the «performative contradiction»⁴⁵ of wanting something that is not obtainable through deliberate intention, and on the other hand, there is the (apparent) contradiction of obtaining unexpected and uncontrollable results through deliberate control operations. To overcome this impasse, we must take on the perspective of *Janus* looking forward and backward at the same time and assume a *dialectical gaze* able to keep the tension without resolving it into a simplification⁴⁶.

The aporia of art, *pulled between* regression to literal magic or surrender of the mimetic impulse to thing like rationality, *dictates its law of motion*; the aporia cannot

43 W. Murch, *In the blink of an eye*, cit., p. 109 (emphasis mine).

44 J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, cit., p. 45.

45 S. Velotti, *The Conundrum of Control – Making Sense through Artistic Practices*, cit., p. 92.

46 On the dialectical perspective needed to approach T.W. Adorno’s texts see S. Petrucciani’s introduction to *Dialettica Negativa*, tr. it. di C.A. Donolo, Einaudi, Torino, 2004: «Proper to dialectics is not to try to defend one of the two positions in the field (any entrenchment in philosophy is always a loss, argues Adorno), but on the contrary *to take advantage of the antithesis, grasped in its necessity*, in order to penetrate deeper into the ‘thing itself’» (translation and emphasis are mine).

be eliminated. The depth of the process, which every artwork is, is excavated by the unreconcilability of these elements; it must be imported into the idea of art as an image of reconciliation. Only because no artwork can succeed emphatically are its forces set free; only as a result of this does art catch a glimpse of reconciliation. *Art is rationality that criticizes rationality without withdrawing from it*; art is not something prerational or irrational, which would peremptorily condemn it as untruth in the face of the entanglement of all human activity in the social totality. Rational and irrational theories of art are therefore equally faulty⁴⁷.

The concept of the “aporia of art” is of vital importance for understanding Adorno’s view of the theoretical structure of artistic practices. Underlying this structure is a conflict, a two-faced force, a paradoxical kinetic energy that walks towards the future while looking back to the past. Just as Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* interpreted by Benjamin, who flies towards the future with his gaze chained to the past he leaves behind, likewise the aporia highlighted by Adorno carves the form of artistic practices by following the shape of Janus’ skull. Montage manifests this two-faced drive of artistic practices in a plastic and exemplary manner: its compositional and re-organising principle responds to practical needs that are also present in our everyday life, but the consequences of its operations go far beyond the mere satisfaction of those needs and *inaugurate new ones*.

Artistic practices for Adorno are not something external or alien to the process of disenchantment of the world highlighted by Weber; on the contrary, they participate in it⁴⁸. The difference with the rationality specific to the “administered society” lies in the fact that artistic work, while running on the same track, turns its gaze elsewhere, it flies on the same wings of the technique but looks “backwards” and never forwards. Herein

47 T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, cit., pp. 54-55 (emphasis mine).

48 *Ivi*, p. 54.

lies the two-faced movement of montage, torn between the tendency to “regression to literal magic” and “the mimetic impulse to thinglike rationality”: it extends the perceptive horizons of the director/editor and complicates their relationship with the film, our relationship to the world.

Conclusion

In the light of this dialectical force inherent in the technical drive of montage, I think it is necessary to rethink and problematise some theoretical positions taken by Adorno regarding cinema as art and montage as a techno-artistic tool⁴⁹. Already in his judgement on *Odysseus*, Adorno had proved to be too severe, and I think that the dialectical operation of montage and *Odysseus*' way of proceeding relate to each other.

For *Odysseus*, the finishing line to be crossed is the starting line. The Greek hero, all the time he is moving forward, with all his inventions and technical tricks, is just trying to get back home, to Ithaca: to his wife Penelope and his son Telemachus. His future lies in the past. This fundamental feature of the character of *Odysseus*, at the basis of all his actions, seems to be missing in the analysis of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and I consider it a rather serious lack, because it seems evident that all *Odysseus*' actions are illuminated by a different light if we place them in this new teleological perspective: his going forward is actually a moving back. And it is even stranger to think of this oversight of Adorno and Horkheimer if we bear in mind what they state in the preface to their work: «What is at stake is not conservation of the past but the fulfillment of past hopes»⁵⁰.

49 *Ivi*, pp. 56-57 On the differences in perspectives between Adorno and Benjamin regarding art, see: L. Hieber and S. Moebius (eds.), *Avantgarden und Politik*, Transcript, Bielefeld 2009.

50 M. Horkheimer, T.W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. eng. E. Jephcott, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002, Preface 1944 and 1947.

Which kind of hopes raised with the birth of cinema? Which ones were born with the advent of montage? Moving forward while looking back can help us better understand if we are still on the right path to fulfil those hopes and, in this case, can help us understand whether, as Adorno and Horkheimer feared, progress has actually turned into regress. The montage, which moves at the same time inside and outside of the process of “disenchantment of the world” highlighted by Weber, becomes day by day (by virtue of its technological progress) one of the privileged places to try to understand whether the hopes of the Enlightenment have turned into barbarism or whether there is still room to renew them. Cinema is a mirror capable of reflecting the scattered and fragmented images of society and mirrors, as we know, let us look forwards and backwards at the same time.

