

# KABUKI'S INFLUENCE ON FILM THEORY AND PRACTICE : EISENSTEIN'S DISCOVERY OF KABUKI'S POTENTIALITIES FOR THE FILM

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As previously pointed out in "The Unexpected Meeting with Kabuki: Eisenstein in the Twenties and His Theatrical Experiences"\*

written for this Academic Reports in 1990, Eisenstein's study of film and theater was regenerated by the Kabuki theater, which visited Moscow in 1928 while he was working on the film. The glamour and enchantment of Kabuki in all its aspects never failed to capture the eyes of Eisenstein. Since this debut in Moscow, Kabuki has come to be internationally recognized as a unique theater of artistic value. Eisenstein was one of the first persons who discovered the intrinsic value of Kabuki and the first who recognized the potentialities of Kabuki for the film. This paper will examine how he applied Kabuki to his film theory and practice.

## 1. Kabuki's Influence on Film Theory

### a. Monistic Ensemble

The Kabuki theater has often been likened to the Shakespearean theater of the West, but such a comparison cannot possibly express the full scope of this Japanese theatrical art. As Donald Keene indicates, the literary beauty of the Kabuki plays is no more important apart in the performance than all the other elements that combine to make a spectacular production — "Kabuki as a theater is above all theatrical."<sup>1)</sup> The costume, the movements of the actors, the language, the sets and the music of Kabuki are all "actors" in the creation of an atmosphere.

Eisenstein's discussion on the Kabuki in "An Unexpected Juncture" begins with this extremely interesting form of ensemble. He stresses the way in which the song-dance-drama (the literal translation of Ka-bu-ki) function as a single "*monistic ensemble*": "Sound, movement, space and voice *do not accompany* (or even parallel) one another but are treated as *equivalent elements*."<sup>2)</sup> This perception is based upon the performances of Kabuki which he saw when the Sadanji Troupe visited Moscow in 1928.

Eisenstein also observes that the Kabuki actor "bases his calculation on the final sum of stimulants to the brain,"<sup>3)</sup> easily transferring his appeal from one sense to another or from "one category of 'stimulant' to another."<sup>4)</sup> To illustrate this, Eisenstein describes a performance of Kabuki that he witnessed:

Yuranosuke leaves the besieged castle and moves from the back of the stage to the very front.

Suddenly the backdrop with its life-size gate (close-up) is folded away. A second backdrop is visible: a tiny gate (long shot). This means that he has moved even further away. Yuranosuke continues his journey. A curtain of brown, green and black is drawn across the backdrop indicating that the castle is now hidden from Yuranosuke's sight. Further steps. Yuranosuke moves out on to the 'flowery way.' This further distancing is emphasised by the *samisen*, i.e. by sound!!!<sup>5)</sup>

Eisenstein discovers in this succession four removals in stage technique — spatial in the steps of the actor, artistic in the changing background, an intellectual removal suggested by the effacing curtain, and synthetic through music.

Kabuki provides Eisenstein with the supreme theatrical experience. Every element he sees is exploited to yield the most intense possible dramatic effect. Visual and aural images appeal to his sense and his perception. He can actually "hear movement and see sound."<sup>6)</sup> Furthermore, Eisenstein writes:

Occasionally (and then it seems as though your nerves are about to *break* with the tension) the Japanese double up their effects. With the *perfect* equivalent of visual and sound mirages at their disposal, they suddenly produce *both*, 'squaring' them and aiming a brilliantly calculated blow of the billiard cue at the audience's cerebral hemisphere. I do not know how else to describe the unique combination of the *hand movement* of Itsikawa Ensio as he slits his throat in the act of *hara-kiri* with the *sobbing sound* off-stage that *graphically* corresponds to the movement of the knife.<sup>7)</sup>

The staging of Kabuki freely uses all kinds of effects. Sound effects and visual effects are integral and integrally related. The most unique combination of these two effects is produced by the wooden clappers known as *hyoushigi* or *ki*. The crescendoed, accelerative clapping lends a tense excitement to the opening or closing of the curtain, to the moment when the stylized pose (*mie*) is struck, and to the curtain which is slowly or rapidly according to the tempo. When the hero goes into climactic *mie* or something is thrown on stage, or again at the climactic fighting scene, the clapping known as *tsuke* increases the driving tension of the action.

As a drama develops, the drum also plays the important role of producing exquisite effects. The drum usually brings out natural elements like rain, wind, snow, even mountains, sea or river scenery. Another remarkable use of the drum is described in Kinugasa's reminiscence of Eisenstein as cited in the previous report. Sitting next to Kinugasa, Eisenstein watched a performance of *Chushingura* (The Forty Seven Loyal Ronin). Kinugasa recalls:

When it came to the scene where Wakasanosuke (played by Chojuro Kawarazaki) looks fiercely at Moronao showing his disgust and not even waiting to exchange words, kicking back his long *hakama* (pleated trousers, an official attire), and turning to make his exit to the inner palace accompanied by the sound of a drum — he (Eisenstein) was impressed, saying this is the "talkie," the sound film itself and he was so happy to see that the feeling of anger was shown by the

long *hakama* tips at the same instance as the sound of the drum.<sup>8)</sup>

This is a lesson, Eisenstein declares, for the film, a “contrapuntal method of combining visual and sound images” which leads to a new artistic sense — “*the capacity for reducing visual and aural perceptions to a ‘common denominator’*” — and “this,” he adds, “is possessed by Kabuki to perfection.”<sup>9)</sup> For Eisenstein, the Kabuki offers a kind of Wagnerian synthesis of the arts which links it with the film: the sound film “can and must learn from the Japanese what to it is fundamental.”<sup>10)</sup>

## b. Kabuki Acting

The point of Eisenstein’s discussion on the Kabuki in “Beyond the Shot” shifts from the “monistic ensemble” of all theatrical elements in the Kabuki to Kabuki acting itself. He finds in Kabuki acting the methods of montage which he calls “cut,” “disintegration,” and “slow-motion.”

The “cut” is a non-realistic type of “transitionless acting.”<sup>11)</sup> Fear may change to hope by flashing from one actor’s face to another’s, rather than by picturing one face in change. Eisenstein describes this by giving an example from a Kabuki play:

...the play *Narukami* is resolved by Sadanji’s transition from drunkenness to madness. Through a mechanical cut. And a change in the range (arsenal) of coloured stripes on his face, emphasising those whose duty it is to demonstrate that the intensity is greater than in the first make-up.<sup>12)</sup>

The second cinematographic method from Kabuki acting is “disintegration.” The death agony of a character in *Yashao* (The Mask-Maker) shows Eisenstein how an actor might have various members of his body “act” non-realistically in sequence and suggested film — integration by “decomposition”<sup>13)</sup> into separate shots of different parts of the body of an actor. Eisenstein describes the effect of this disintegrated acting:

Freed from primitive naturalism and using this method, the actor wins the audience over completely ‘with his rhythm’, which makes a scene based in its general composition on the most consistent and detailed naturalism (blood, etc.) not only acceptable but extremely attractive.<sup>14)</sup>

The stylized Kabuki acting of suicide in *Chushingura* pictures for Eisenstein a kind of disintegration in time — the third cinematographic method, “slow motion” — which is not naturalistic but which nonetheless would succeed in film. Eisenstein writes:

Take the famous hara-kiri scene in *The forty-Seven Samurai*. That degree of slowing down is unknown on our stage. Whereas in our previous example we observed the decomposition of the links between movements, here we see the decomposition of the process of movement, i.e. *Zeitlupe* [slow motion].<sup>15)</sup>

Eisenstein finds in Sharaku’s prints of the Kabuki actors “monstrous disproportion between the parts” — “close-up” of hands and “big close-ups” of faces.<sup>16)</sup> The actors Sharaku printed

have eyes that are invariably small, oval and slanting. The faces are contorted with the intensity of their expressions. The poses are dramatic — at times the head is thrust forward and the hands express the same tense emotion as the face. The most distinct pose of these is what is known as *mie* in the Kabuki.

The *mie* is one of the most celebrated patterns of Kabuki acting in which a conventionalized series of movements culminates in a picturesque pose that is held for a few seconds. Characteristically, this pose requires intensely energetic motion; just before a *mie*, there will be a crescendo of violent emotion at the very peak of which the actor or actors freeze into stillness. Here one may detect another remarkable cinematographic method from this *mie* pose, that is, “freezing shots” or what is called as “stop-motion” in Japan. When a single frame of the action is printed repeatedly, the picture appears to be absolutely still on the screen. This striking method of “freezing shot” is effective in conveying extremely strong emotion to the spectators. Film can learn the mastery of this method from Kabuki acting.

### c. The Actor's Role

Kabuki teaches Eisenstein many of the methods of montage, or supplies a theatrical basis for the methods of montage. Eisenstein found in the theatrical elements of the Kabuki a single monistic sensation of theatrical provocation. And he extracted “cut,” “disintegration” and “slow-motion” from Kabuki acting. Thus, one might say that all the aspects of the Kabuki penetrate deeply into Eisenstein's theory of montage.

There is, however, a fundamental difference between the Kabuki and Eisenstein's theory of montage, that is, the actor's role. The Kabuki places the primary emphasis on the actor. It is to the actor that the Kabuki's chief greatness is due. And the Kabuki's requirements of the actor are exacting. Since the theatrical art of the Kabuki is based on its special formula of representation, every Kabuki actor is required to have fundamental preparatory training. In short, the Kabuki actor is truly professional. On the other hand, Eisenstein's theory of montage lessens the importance of the actor. Eisenstein completely ignores the professional actor's performance. Now let us examine Eisenstein's attitude towards the actor.

The introduction of montage theory radically affected the status of the actor. Eisenstein, in his first three films (*Strike*, *Potemkin*, and *October*), took the mass as hero and used non-professional actors to interpret impersonally his given themes. He writes:

I do not pick my actors from the profession... They do not act roles. They simply are their natural selves. I got them to repeat before the camera just what they have done in reality. They are hardly conscious of any artificiality, of any make-believe... And in the mass action of my films, different as the individual persons are from each other, they are significant not as separate human organisms, but as parts working together in a social organism, like the separate cells working together in the human body.<sup>17)</sup>

The use of amateur actors, while it adds immensely to the reality of the film, also places the burden of getting adequate performances entirely on the director. In the article called "Eisenstein and I," Shiro Kido states the problem and Eisenstein gives the solution:

Eisenstein and I debated on the montage theory...What Eisenstein advocated and what are discussed was montage that caught scenes from various angles and by stacking one upon another one gets an effect. Therefore there was no need for professional actors, but by editing the film will show full effects.

Then I asked him if professional actors were not needed, in a scene where a pickpocket appears, wouldn't it show more reality if a professional pickpocket was used? But when a real pickpocket stands in front of a camera, he is no longer a pickpocket unless he is caught by a hidden camera...which would be difficult to do in a drama.

To this Eisenstein answered that it is your quibble and what I call montage theory does not concern itself with such trifling matters.<sup>18)</sup>

What Kido asked Eisenstein here is not a quibble nor a trifling matter but an unceasing theme of debate for the artists of film: What is reality in the cinema? How can film reality be obtained? But montage was, to Eisenstein in those days, everything. He firmly believed that reality and adequate performances were created entirely by the director through montage, and therefore there was no need for professional actors.

For the first time, Eisenstein included a heroine (Marfa Lapkina) as the focus of the film's events in *The General Line*. But the heroine was not a professional actress; she was a real milkmaid and montage obliterated the distinction between the heroine and the setting in which she performed. Eisenstein declares: "I do not believe in stars system. My main characters in *The General Line* are a milkmaid, a bull, and a milk-separator."<sup>19)</sup> And he is actually worried lest his actors will become "artists":

I am always afraid high salaries and their new metier will cause my players to turn "Bohemian" so I never let them live like stars or in any way change their mode of living. They are always peasants working part time in the films. I give them parts to correspond with whatever they do in real life and never let them feel that they are artists for fear of spoiling their type.<sup>20)</sup>

It is noteworthy here that Kabuki, which Eisenstein greatly admired, exists because of "stars" and "the star system." Much of the dramatic technique in the Kabuki performance is not what the contemporary actors have acquired by themselves, but is the fruit of accumulated effects contributed by their ancestors and handed down to them as a family inheritance. The very nature of the Kabuki art with its vast requirements of training and experience made such a family system ideally suitable. And it is this system that has made it possible to a great degree to preserve the art of Kabuki.

Limitation on the use of non-professional actors coincided with the coming of the sound film. "The addition of sound to the film," writes Ernest Lindgren, "enabled personality to be portrayed, as it were, in a new dimension," <sup>21)</sup> Furthermore, he writes:

It enabled characterisation to be drawn with greater depth and greater individuality. In the silent it was the portrayal of emotions that had received the main emphasis; speech, with all the fine shades of meaning and feeling it could express, added a new element, primarily an intellectual element, which the film had till then been unable to compass.<sup>22)</sup>

Into this new world of characterisation in depth the non-professional actor found it more difficult to enter, for the moment he spoke he revealed his limitations; he became awkward and self-conscious. The use of the non-professional actor was abandoned by most of the directors in the world. Eisenstein was not an exception. He used well-known professional actors in all his sound films after the abortive *Que Viva Mexico* (Boris Zakhava, an actor trained by Meyerhold and the Director of the Vakhantangov Theater, and Elena Telecheva, an actress of the Stanislavsky school from the Moscow Arts Theater, in *Bezhin Meadow*; Nikolai Cherkasov, a member of the Supreme Soviet, in *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*).<sup>23)</sup>

Professional actors maintain the art of Kabuki. The Kabuki provided Eisenstein with many methods which are organic to the sound film. The sound film forced him to use professional actors. Thus the Kabuki indirectly taught him the use of professional actors in the sound film. This is the last contribution of the Kabuki to Eisenstein's art.

## 2. Kabuki's Influence on Film Practice

When the first part of *Ivan the Terrible* was released, reactions to the film were strangely mixed. Eisenstein's old friend, Maxim Shtraukh, later told Marie Seton he was entirely baffled, "How can Eisenstein come to fashion every character like a marionette? What was the purpose of such stylized movement and formal make-up?"<sup>24)</sup> Seton concluded that "he (Eisenstein) had created a film in which every detail was enlarged like the gestures of the Kabuki Theater."<sup>25)</sup>

The beauty of formalization is one of the aesthetic principles upon which the art of Kabuki as a whole is founded. It is most effectively demonstrated in the acting. When a Kabuki actor prepares himself for a role in a classical play, it has long customary for him to begin by studying the model style perfected by his predecessors. Such a model has been highly formalized and became symbolical in the course of the development of Kabuki. In *Ivan the Terrible* and in the second part in particular, the quality of the acting reached a very high level. The individuality of each actor was revealed in an entirely new fashion, with extraordinary expressive force. The style of acting was slightly heightened, emphatic, at times outwardly conventional. But actors were not required to have the fundamental preparatory training as in the Kabuki theater. Instead they were forced into the styles and shapes demanded by Eisenstein's visual composition and designs. The formalized and stylized acting in *Ivan the Terrible* seems to be modeled to a considerable degree upon the Kabuki acting. It was, however, not the actors but Eisenstein who created the beauty of formalization in *Ivan the Terrible*. The actors were only

marionettes manipulated by Eisenstein. This is verified by the following statement by Nikolai Cherkassov, the actor chosen by Eisenstein to play Ivan the Terrible.

Eisenstein modeled his scenes like sculpture. But it was sometimes difficult to introduce content into the form he wanted to present. In certain scenes whose design and composition were quite clear, the actor's muscular tension did not always agree with his emotional and mental state. So the actor had to contend with a great difficulty: he had to reinforce the exterior design proposed by the director. Eisenstein demanded that actors immediately execute what he wanted. His persuasive power was contagious, he forced us to believe in him, and we often followed along, dragged after him by his enthusiasm.<sup>26)</sup>

The influence of Kabuki on *Ivan the Terrible* is more specifically seen in the ensemble of acting and music. Almost every gesticulation in Kabuki is accompanied by music. Dialogues and monologues are also recited to the accompaniment of music. This renders the coinciding action on the stage even more rhythmic, with the movement assuming an appearance more like a modified form of dancing. Music is an integral part of the art of Kabuki acting. Like Kabuki, music and acting in *Ivan the Terrible* are integral and integrally related. Eisenstein made his actors speak in declamations often with a musical accompaniment. The unique collaboration of Eisenstein and the composer Prokofiev was developed to its height, with Prokofiev using a similar contrapuntal technique to mold the score to the images.

### **Conclusion—Treasure Box of Kabuki: How to Adapt in Japanese Films as Demonstrated by Eisenstein**

Eisenstein writes in "Beyond the Shot" (the afterword to N. Kaufman's pamphlet, *Japanese Cinema*) that Japan is "a country that has an infinite multiplicity of cinematic characteristics but which are scattered all over the place...with the sole exception of its cinema."<sup>27)</sup> He also accuses the Japanese cinema of striving "to imitate the most appalling examples of the most saleable mediocre American and European commercial trash."<sup>28)</sup> Then he warns: "Understand and apply its specific cultural quality to its own cinema...that is what Japan must do! Japanese comrades, are you really going to leave this to us?"<sup>29)</sup>

Japanese films in their early stages were often cheap imitations of Kabuki. But the Kabuki influence on Japanese films in their more recent stages is almost non-existent. For one thing, the Kabuki depends entirely on the actor's performance, and the style of Kabuki acting is simply too big for film. The exaggeration and overstatement the Kabuki actor has to employ become quite unnecessary in film. All that is essential and effective on the Kabuki stage, the wide sweep of gesture, the make-up, the style of modulated speech, becomes false and ridiculous on the screen simply because it is out of place. For another thing, the Kabuki incorporates and relies greatly upon dancing and singing, neither of which are appropriate to the realism of Japanese films. The use of Kabuki elements is a very rare occurrence indeed.

Since this century passed its midpoint, there has been an increasing tendency to realism and naturalism in the Japanese cinema. The great tradition of formalism and symbolism in the Japanese theater seems no longer necessary in the Japanese cinema. And no attempt to extract the principle and technique of the acting from Kabuki has been made by Japanese film artists. Eisenstein is still the only one to draw dramatic criteria from the theatrical tradition of Japan.

However, there are still possibilities from the rich source of Kabuki to be applied by the Japanese themselves. As younger generation started to frequent Kabuki plays attracted by such "young" actors as Kankuro Nakamura, Takao Kataoka, Kichiemon Nakamura or Tamasaburo Bando, there seems more interests and attention by the general audience. Furthermore, Kabuki actors themselves, Tamasaburo and Ennosuke Ichikawa for example, are experimenting and "changing" Kabuki styled stages and their performances. Such experiments by the actors might possibly affect the future of the Japanese films. What Eisenstein attempted in his works might become a "new tradition" — a lesson learned as the result of "internationalization" of Japan. Young people are learning the tradition of formalism and symbolism in their own way, it appears. The treasure box is still to be exploited, but with promising future.

#### NOTES

- \* Koichi Nakamura, "The Unexpected Meeting with Kabuki: Eisenstein in the Twenties and His Theatrical Experiences," *Tokyo Kogei Daigaku Kiyō* [The Academic Reports, Tokyo Institute of Polytechnics] vol. 13 no. 2 (December 1990): 29-38.
- 1) Donald Keene, "Introduction to Kabuki," in Masakatsu Gunji, *Kabuki*, trans. John Bester (Tokyo: Kodansha International, Ltd., 1969), p. 9.
- 2) Sergei M. Eisenstein, "An Unexpected Juncture," in *S. M. Eisenstein Selected Works*, vol. 1: *Writings, 1922-34*, ed. and trans. Richard Taylor (London: BFI Publishing, 1988), p. 117. Formerly translated by Jay Leyda as "The Unexpected," in *Film Form* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1949), p. 20.
- 3) Ibid.
- 4) Ibid., p. 118.
- 5) Ibid.
- 6) Ibid.
- 7) Ibid., p. 119.
- 8) Teinosuke Kinugasa, "*Eisenstein Kaisō* [Reminiscence of Eisenstein]," in *Eisenstein Ten*, p. 59. This direct quotation was translated from Japanese into English by the author.
- 9) Eisenstein, "An Unexpected Juncture," p. 119.
- 10) Eisenstein, "Beyond the Shot," in *Writings, 1922-34*, p. 149. Formerly translated by Leyda as "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram," in *Film Form*, p. 44.
- 11) Ibid., p. 148.
- 12) Ibid.
- 13) Ibid., p. 149.
- 14) Ibid.
- 15) Ibid.



- 16) Ibid., p. 141.
- 17) *Revolution in the World of Make-Believe*, quoted in Marie Seton, *Sergei M. Eisenstein : A Biography* (New York : A. A. Wyn, Inc., 1952), p. 81.
- 18) Shiro Kido, "*Eisenstein to Watashi* [Eisenstein and I]" in *Eisenstein Ten* [Exhibition of Eisenstein] (Tokyo : Asahi Shimbun Co., 1973), p. 54. This direct quotation was translated from Japanese into English by the author.
- 19) Dwight Macdonald, "Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Others," in *The Emergence of Film Art*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York : Hopinson and Blake, Publishers, 1969), p. 134.
- 20) Ibid., p. 135.
- 21) Ernest Lindgren, *The Art of the Film* (New York : The Macmillan Co., 1970), p. 215.
- 22) Ibid.
- 23) Eisenstein, *The Complete Films of Eisenstein*, trans. John Hetherington (New York : E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1974), pp. 89-99.
- 24) Seton, *Eisenstein*, p. 426.
- 25) Ibid.
- 26) Leon Moussinac, *Sergei Eisenstein*, trans. D. Sandy Petrey (New York : Crown Publications, Inc., 1970), pp. 190-191.
- 27) Eisenstein, "Beyond the Shot," p. 138.
- 28) Ibid., p. 150.
- 29) Ibid.