

"The Dynamic Square" and Japanese Prints and Paintings: Eisenstein's Proposal for the Dynamism of the Screen

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Introduction

In September 1930, The Hollywood Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences called a special meeting of all their members to discuss new screen dimensions suggested by the wide films recently introduced. Sergei M. Eisenstein, who had been staying in Hollywood for a study of sound-film techniques in the world's best-equipped film studio, was requested to attend the meeting as a special guest speaker. He complained that a wide screen would deny access to all the aggressive male shapes like trees and factory chimneys. The discussion led to his famous essay, "The Dynamic Square," in which he called for a screen that could change shape according to the composition best suited to the nature and context of the image required to be shown. To explain further, Eisenstein cited the landscape prints by Hokusai, Japanese horizontal scroll paintings and vertical hanging pictures.

The size of Japanese paintings is regulated by the use to which they are put. The proportion between length and breadth is not in accordance with the "gold cut" of Western paintings; the works of Japanese painters appear either as horizontally long paintings, such as *emakimono* (picture scrolls), or vertically long ones, such as *kakemono* (hanging pictures). The framelessness of these Japanese paintings provided Eisenstein with the concept of the dynamism of the changeable screen.

The following discussion of the dynamic square and Japanese prints and paintings will examine systematically four aspects of Eisenstein's article called "The Dynamic Square": proportions of painting; Hokusai and French impressionists; horizontal perception; and vertical perception. These four issues will lead us to discuss the dynamism of screen and frame and the relationship between film aesthetics and the convention of Japanese painting.

1. Proportions of Painting

Eisenstein, in the article, draws attention to the fact that, though at present vertical film compositions are impossible, they have played an important part in the development of man. When man acquired a new footing, his progress was always "higher,"¹⁾ he looked up into the heavens to God, and manifested his aspiration in Gothic arches, spires and windows. In the new industrial age he typified the spirit of materialism in factory chimneys, skyscrapers and pylons.

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But though the vertical is dominant, the lure of the horizontal is not dead. Horizons, plains and the boundless stretches of the sea still breed nostalgia, bringing memories of lands untouched by the urgency and speed of modern life. To resolve this conflict, Eisenstein advocated the "dynamic" square screen— "one providing in its dimensions the opportunity of impressing, in projection, with absolute grandeur every geometrically conceivable form of the picture limit."²⁾

Eisenstein demolished convincingly the arguments in favor of the existing proportions; that statistical investigation of the shapes of large numbers of paintings shows the average ratio of base to altitude to be 1.5:1; that the "whirling square" rectangle (also known as the "golden cut"—1.667:1) has predominated in the arts for centuries because of its inherent dynamism; that the normal visual field tends to be horizontal because it is easier to "pan" the eyes than to "tilt" them. These arguments are refuted by contending that (1) averages have no value for such a purpose when the dispersal about the mean is so wide; (2) the dynamism inherent in the cinema (e.g., rhythmical montage) needs no assistance from a peculiar proportion in the single shot; (3) the eye is assisted to "tilt" by movements of the head, so that it turns as easily on one axis as on the other.

2. Hokusai and French Impressionists

At a vital point in the opposing argument against the statistical study of the proportions of painting that is mentioned above, Eisenstein focuses on purely pictorial problems of impressionistic painting which, he says, "abolishes every form of aperture."³⁾ He is particularly concerned with the framelessness of a Japanese impressionistic drawing and draws a parallel between the drawing and photography. He writes:

Notice the relationship between Hokusai's *Hundred Views of Fuji* and so many camera shots made with so pronounced a tendency towards shooting two planes of depth—one through another—especially *Fuji seen through a cobweb* and *Fuji seen through the legs*, or Edgar Degas, whose startling series of compositions of women in the bath, *modistes* and *blanchisseuses*, is the best school in which to acquire training in ideas about space composition within the limits of a frame.⁴⁾

In his method of painting landscape prints, Hokusai departed from the conventional rules followed by the illustrators of the *Yamato-e* school of art in painting landscapes. The objective he aimed at is to be true to nature and the distance is accurately proportioned. Of Hokusai's numerous sets of prints, the finest are *Thirty-six Views of Fuji* (not *Hundred Views of Fuji*—Eisenstein confuses *Thirty-six Views of Fuji* with *Hundreds Views of Edo* printed by Hiroshige, another master of landscape prints). Here is true landscape art as seen by a man with a "camera eye." Hokusai made his landscapes with a new relation between large foreground figures (at times "cobweb" or "legs") and the landscape background (Mt. Fuji). The figures blend with the background and vice versa. The defined contrast proves his superiority. The method of this space composition makes his prints of landscape an artistic reproduction of nature only rivaled by "photography." Here,

Eisenstein's perception is to the point of the essential quality of Hokusai's landscape prints.

Space composition is, however, only one of the devices which Hokusai invented. His landscape prints exhibit two more remarkable devices, one of which is the fine effects of light. In his *Fuji* viewed in the setting of dashing waves, one of the *Thirty-six Views of Fuji*, Hokusai succeeded in giving the impression of the strong light of mid-day at the height of summer. This he achieved by the strong contrast between the deep indigo blue of the waves and the bright yellow of the boat. More distinguished is another of his *Fuji* prints, popularly called *Aka Fuji* (Red Fuji). In this, *Fuji* is painted delicately with trembling lines, towering against a clear sky. Its beautiful shape sets a new type of beauty for *Fuji*. It reflects the glorious light of the setting sun and shines in crimson radiance. The picture catches the fleeting impression of twilight gray deepening and stealing over the extensive forest which covers the mountain at its base.⁵⁾ Lighting effects as a device in art reaches a high watermark in this print. The other device is interesting atmospheric effects. These effects are not of a scientific nature where, for instance, the subtle effect of reflected light is taken note of and an attempt is made to translate in the print the atmosphere which veils the surface of an object. Rather it is chiefly the humidity of the air that Hokusai wanted to depict in his print, probably because it served as a means of relieving the monotony of the landscape. Prints by Hiroshige showing this atmospheric humidity are more numerous than those by Hokusai. In Hiroshige the atmospheric humidity is combined with a sort of poetic sentiment peculiar to the Japanese.⁶⁾

The latter device is suggested in Eisenstein's next discussion in which he refers to the typical shape of a typical Japanese landscape print. We find:

This is the only type of standardised (not occasional) composition known,...typified in its vertical limit by a shaded narrow strip from lowest white to, at its topmost, darkest blue, rushing in this limited space through all the shades of this celestial color.

This last phenomenon is explained as the impression of the shadow falling on the eye from the upper eyelid, caught by the supersensitive observation of the Japanese.⁷⁾

From my point of view, "this last phenomenon" is a special effect caused by the humidity of the air which serves as a means to relieve the monotony of the celestial color. The use of a natural phenomenon in art is to be accounted for partly by the delicate sensitivity of Japanese artists in the atmosphere, but mostly by mere technical necessity. On the other hand, Eisenstein's approach to this phenomenon is truly "impressionistic." This reminds me of the fact that Eisenstein loved painters of the French impressionist school, particularly Edgar Degas and Vincent van Gogh.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Japanese color prints created a sensation among French impressionist artists. It is very likely that these impressionist artists derived some hints from the Japanese prints. What they owed to the Japanese prints was the manner in which light and atmosphere were captured in the landscape prints by Hokusai and Hiroshige. As is well known, it is the unique treatment of light and atmosphere that

is the essential feature of the impressionists. The landscape prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige slightly antedate the rise of the impressionist movement. We know Degas tried to capture the elusive and strange line of Hokusai's prints in his painting.⁸⁾ And van Gogh made exact copies of Hiroshige's *Drizzling Rain on Ohashi at Dusk* and *Kameido Plum House* in oil.⁹⁾ Eisenstein's approach to the Japanese landscape prints relied on these two impressionists' observation of the prints.

3. Horizontal Perception

Going back to Eisenstein's discussion in "The Dynamic Square," he now turns to another remarkable phenomenon of Japanese painting. He describes:

...the materialization on paper of the...absence of side boundaries in the form of the horizontal roll picture, born only in Japan and China, and not prevalent elsewhere. I would call it unroll picture, because, unwound horizontally from one roll to another, it shows interminable episodes of battles, festivals, processions...¹⁰⁾

The roll picture (usually called a picture scroll, a horizontal scroll painting or *emakimono*) is a *yamato-e* painting. It cannot be hung but is unrolled horizontally on the mat from the left and gathered in by the right hand. It usually illustrates (with text) romance stories, legendary tales, biographies or, of course, "episodes of battles, festivals, procession." Eisenstein's description of the picture scroll is, so far, precisely to the point. There is, however, another important feature more closely related to the film medium.

Since the scroll medium is used to maximum advantage in representing movement and action through a succession of scenes, the effect is not unlike that of a film strip (or the movie screen). Backgrounds change as one progresses with the moving figures in the scroll, but one's own motion of unrolling perhaps adds a convincing sense of progress and one can arrest the moving figures for further examination or can look across and beyond them to relish the countryside where they walk. Actual time elapses as it does in the film. But one instinctively pauses here and there to examine and to enjoy. Such shifts are made not only by the spacing of the subject but when the artist, by a well-calculated emphasis of color and of detail or with long sloping lines, carries on or delays the eye and insensibly regulates the unrolling hand.¹¹⁾ As a result the scroll became a dynamic form of telling a story as well as adding the time element to pictorial art. To clarify the origin of movies one must hark back perhaps seven hundred years before the invention of the movie camera to consider the earliest example of the film strip.

4. Vertical Perception

Eisenstein's final discussion of Japanese painting concerns a unique type of vertical picture derived from "illogical" (as it may be according to the psychological view)¹²⁾ vertical perception. He writes:

The Japanese, with their supersensitive artistic feeling, then created...*the opposite form*—as a matter of purely aesthetic need for counterbalance, for Japan (with China) is also the birthplace of the *vertical roll picture*. The tallest of all vertical compositions (if we disregard the Gothic vertical window compositions). Roll pictures are also found to take the form of curiously shaped colored woodcuts of upright composition, with the most amazing compositional disposition of faces, dresses, background elements and stage attributes.¹³⁾

It is not exactly known how this vertical tendency of perception was evolved in China and Japan. It is only said that the vertical shape of the hanging picture (or *kakemono*) is devised to fit the shape of the *tokonoma* (vertically long alcove). It is, however, more likely that the vertical tendency is caused by the influence on the painting of Chinese calligraphy where the script is written from above downwards on the vertical paper—not by the “purely aesthetic need for counterbalance” as defined by Eisenstein. His description of “colored woodcuts” indicates Sharaku’s actor prints.¹⁴⁾ Of three categories according to size, his print of upright composition is the smallest and is called a narrow *hose-e*, which measures about 13×6 inches. As compared with the *oban* (large heads or bust-portraits on dark grounds covered with mica, 15×10 inches) and *aiban* (single bust-portraits on yellow backgrounds, 13×9 inches), *hose-e* prints are not highly appraised and three out of the eighty-three *hoso-e* prints are not accepted as authentic.¹⁵⁾

Conclusion

Japanese artists are free within the infinite horizontal latitude of the landscape print or the picture scroll, or the considerable vertical latitude of the hanging picture or the actor print. The framelessness of these Japanese prints and paintings provides Eisenstein with the concept of the dynamism of changeable proportions of the frame. And this concept develops into his supposition of the dynamic square screen that would treat impartially compositions which are internally either vertical or horizontal. Besides the contribution to the dynamic square screen, Japanese landscape prints, which have already contributed to the art of the French impressionists, supplied Eisenstein with ideas about space composition within the limits of the frame. Moreover, the picture scroll, viewed from new angles, contains features that can teach something of value to film artists. Film, therefore, owes a debt to this unique convention of Japanese painting.

In spite of Eisenstein’s proposal for the application of dynamic square screen, Hollywood authority never seemed to have had any intention to change their ways. The wide screen became the standardized size, and films in wide scope increased in production. Even in the new age of visual communication with the aid of computer science, nothing in the area of proportions of the frame has changed. The aspect ratio of newly developed high-definition television has become more horizontal in width. The artists in their visual expressions do not have the freedom to choose their sizes suited to their images, but are limited in their choice. Thus, Eisenstein’s proposal is still ignored to the present waiting for the future years to be explored and to be speculated.

NOTES

- 1) Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Film Essays and a Lecture*, ed. Jay Leyda (New York : Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1970), p.50.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- 4) *Ibid.*
- 5) Tokuzo Sagara, *Japanese Fine Arts* (Tokyo : Japan Travel Bureau, Inc., 1985), p. 198
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 199.
- 7) Eisenstein, *Film Essays*, p. 57.
- 8) Sadao Kikuchi, *Ukiyoe*, trans. Fred Dunbar (Osaka : Hoikusha Publishing Co., 1964), p 119.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- 10) Eisenstein, *Film Essays*, pp. 57-58.
- 11) Langdon Warner, *The Enduring Art of Japan* (New York : Grove Press, Inc., 1952), p 47.
- 12) Eisenstein, *Film Essays*, p. 58.
- 13) *Ibid.*
- 14) Eisenstein's interest of Sharaku's prints appears in his another essay, "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram." Eisenstein, *Film Form*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York : Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1949), pp. 32-34
- 15) Harold G. Henderson and Louis V. Ledoux, *The Surviving Works of Sharaku* (New York : E. Weyne, 1939), pp. 21-22.