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Japan as Montage¹

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Today, I would like to speak about the issue of "aesthetics" in contemporary Japanese pop cultures, particularly in manga and animation. In other words we could say that I am going to talk about "method".

There are today two [competing] explanations about the origin of Japanese popular cultures' aesthetics. The first one argues that Japanese popular cultures' aesthetics are based on [visual] traditions like the tradition of picture scrolls in the middle ages and the tradition of ukiyoe in early modern in Japan. The second one argues that Japan's pop cultures were established as a reflection of the unique postmodernism [that developed in] contemporary Japan.

While at first, these two explanations may look contradictory, it is clear that they maintain a complicit relationship. The former reflects the old Japonism and the latter reflects a new Japonism. What they have in common is that they reflect a way of thinking according to which Japan is a Galapagos island at the very end of Asia, which has been cut off from the West and probably also from Asian countries like China. Accordingly, these two explanations are easily connected: Japan has a strange history of jumping directly from the early

¹ This lecture was translated from Japanese by Dr. Mika Levy-Yamamori (Tel Aviv University) and Dr. Michal (Miki) Daliot-Bul (The University of Haifa). All errors which may have occurred in interpreting and translating the original manuscript are ours. Square brackets include additional comments that we have included, thinking that they may facilitate reading the text.

modern period to the postmodern period.

This is how post modern theories of cultural critics like Takashi Murakami and Hiroki Azuma, explain the connection of contemporary forms with traditional forms. This connection between the early modern era and the post-modern present, leads to the erasure of the modern period from the history of Japan's popular cultures. To begin with, the first half of Japan's modern history unfolds the colonialist invasion of Asia, while the latter half of Japan's modern history is that of the defeat in World War II. Because both of these historical periods are hard to come to term with for contemporary Japanese, this straight connection between the traditional period and the postmodern period, which erases the modern period, is discussed passionately in Galapagos Japan. It is also the reason why the Japanese government's "Cool Japan" policy [produces a narrative that] connects pop culture [products] with traditional [products].

I guess that those who live outside Galapagos Japan may also think that "Japanese manga" are probably supported by graphic traditions like "ukiyo-e" and [picture scrolls like] "Choju-giga" [Scrolls of Frolicking Animals]. However, when we compare the characters of Osamu Tezuka who is considered to be the pioneer of Japan's contemporary manga with the characters of "Choju-giga", a picture scroll which is often considered as the traditional origin of manga, are they really similar? (figure 1). For me, characters like Atomu from "Astro Boy (Tetsuwan Atom)" or Leo from "Kimba the White Lion (Jungle Taitei)" which Tezuka produced after World War II, look very similar to the mass-produced characters by Hollywood after 1920, like Mickey Mouse or Felix the Cat.

From a historical view point, the [style of] expression of characters in Japan's contemporary manga was established when Disney animation, which had swept the world after the 1930's, reached the islands' country in the Far East. Japan shares with the West, both Disney and modernist culture. (Actually so does China). The "tradition– post-modern explanation" erases these self-evident facts from history, and it makes Japan look like a Galapagos island cut-off from the West.

My own research of manga and animation is underlined by the assumption that modernism had reached also the Galapagos of the East just as it had reached the rest of the world, and Disney was not the only [expression of] modernism that had reached Japan. Russian avant-garde and Eisenstein's montage theory had also reached Japan during the latter half of the 1920's. In fact, Japanese culture was particularly affected by Eisenstein's montage theory. The result is that Japan's manga and animation were established in forms that

integrated Disney's aesthetics and Eisenstein's montage theory. The montage theory remade [reinterpreted] the Japanese [traditional] culture as "montage", and it has been since embedded in Japanese culture, especially in pop cultures' forms, as a transparent theory of aesthetics, or as a "thought circuit".

Please allow me to conduct an "experiment" so that you realize what I mean.

This is picture scroll named "Shigisan-engi" [Legend of Mount Shigi] from the Twelve century (figure 2). A famous animator, Isao Takahata argues that this scroll uses methods that could make us think of methods used in films or in animation. Let's examine his argument.

Can you replace this "Shigisan-engi" with "manga"?

Actually, this is not difficult for those who can draw manga. It was easy for the students I once taught. (figure 3).

Was it easy because "picture scrolls" have the characteristics of films?

The answer is No. What my ex-student did was, figuratively speaking, no more than to bring a movie camera into the imaginary space that is the picture scroll, film it, and then edit it.

Japan's manga is composed of "frames" of manga exactly as films are composed of "cuts" (a movie "cut" is not one frame but one shot). The frames are "montaged" together to create a manga story.

The following quote is from Eisenstein montage theory:

"...This is an "extraction" [of the whole view] with the camera, it is "composing" with the camera, a removal of one fragment of reality with the lens.

(Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein, *Eiga no Bensho-ho* (Dialectic of Film). Translated by Norio Sasaki, 1932, Oraisha)

This is exactly what my students did. They sliced the "picture scroll" into units of [movie's] cuts, and montaged them. This way of thinking is prevalent among people who draw manga, as one method or aesthetics. Manga artists montage together still images made by an imaginary camera, and thus draw manga [stories].

Let us discuss this in further details.

Two cultural streams [movements] arrived to Japan from the 1920's to the 1940's. One is the avant-garde art movement. Within it, the impact of Russian avant-garde was particularly significant. It included Soviet film theoreticians such as Eisenstein. The other one is Hollywood-made animation such as that of Disney.

Historically speaking, avant-garde theory was fashionable in Japan, in the domain of arts in the 1920s, and in the domain of films in the 1930's. An active avant-garde artist, Michinao Takamizawa (figure 4) who changed his name into Suiho Tagawa, created a character called "Norakuro" based on Mickey Mouse (figure 5). Since then however, the drawing style of Japan's manga characters was replaced with a Disney drawing style (figure 6). It was not long before Osamu Tezuka who was familiar with Disney-style characters since childhood, was further refining the Disney-style, as exhibited in the characters of "Atomu" and "Leo" that we saw at the beginning of this lecture.

Tezuka in his later years, defined his drawings as follows:

Only very recently I began thinking that for me [my manga drawings] are not pictures.

So what are they? I think that they are some kind of pictographs. In my drawings, when the characters are surprised, their eyes become round. When they are angry, they get wrinkles around their round eyes like Higeoyaji [a staple character in Tezuka's manga] and their faces pop out. (laughs)

Yes, there are [symbolic] patterns. In short, there is one symbol [for every emotion]. Therefore, when I combine one pattern with this pattern and that pattern, something that looks like a completed picture is formed. In my head, I have several hundred patterns which can be thus combined. But according to my view, the result is not really a picture but rather a very simplified symbol.

("Interview with Osamu Tezuka, Till very late at night with coffee and black tea....." planned and arranged by Chiseko Katsuki, *Manga Senmon-shiPafu*, 1979, 10, Seikeisha)

This way of thinking is called the "the symbol theory of manga" [The semiotic theory of manga]

(figure 7).

Tezuka's statement is actually based on the following passage from Eisenstein's "Dialectic Approach to Film" in which Eisenstein wrote on Montage theory (figure 8). It is very likely that Tezuka came across this book before 1945:

The main point is as follows: The outcome of the coordination (or combination is the more appropriate word here) of two pictographs with the simplest structures, is not the total sum of two things, but a [different] product, a different category, a different class. If you separate this combination, each part corresponds with a certain object or fact. However the result of their combination corresponds to a [different] concept. Ideographs are created by interfusing different pictographs. That [concept] which could not be described with a [simple] picture, can be brilliantly expressed by combining two separate images [symbols].

For example, the combination of a picture of water and a picture of an eye means "shedding tears", and the combination of a picture of an ear and a picture of a gate expresses "listening".

(S. Eisenstein. *A Dialectic Approach to Film*. Translated and edited by Norio Sasaki, 1953, Kadokawa Shoten)

In other words, Eisenstein used "kanji" as an example for his montage theory (figure 9), and Tezuka said that his drawings are [the products] of montage. Tezuka was fifteen years old when World War II ended. He was strongly influenced by the montage theory which was widely spread in Japan during the war. The terms Tezuka used to theorize his own manga drawings were terms often used for films during the war. Manga artists in the 1930's understood Disney drawings as the combinations of symbols. They created new characters by combining similar symbols. (figure 10).

Eisenstein argued that not only kanji but also other forms of Japanese art such as Nō theater, Haiku and Japanese-style painting are made as montage in which new meanings are produced by combing different components. Since the modern era, Japanese are under the strong impression [impact or influence] of foreign theories on Japanese culture [nihonbunkaron]. [It is with Eisenstein] that the theory on Japanese culture as montage was formed.

The following episode demonstrates how the Japanese masses widely accepted Eisenstein's montage

theory:

One of the titles in the movie "Reimei izen [before dawn]" by Teinosuke Kinugasa, is "Consumer culture in Edo period" . For this title, a procession of oiran [courtesans], a Daimyo's procession and temple rituals, were used as cutaway shots [In film and video, a cutaway shot is the interruption of a continuously filmed action by inserting a view of something else]. When someone from the audience said "montage, montage", the cinema was suddenly filled with an atmosphere of respectable attention.

(Hisakazu Tsuji, "Pudovkinin memory", *Eiga Hyōron* April 1938)

This occurred during the second half of the 1930's. The general public in the movie hall watched eagerly that scene that used an Eisenstein-style montage technique. It is indeed important to point here, that not only intellectuals but also the general public was familiar with the montage theory.

But montage was not only accepted where films were concerned. One example is the formation of the popular entertainment art called "kamishibai" (picture story show) [along the lines of the montage theory]. Kamishibai is a popular street entertainment show, in which a story is told with picture cards that are replaced one by the other. There is evidence that proves that montage theory was used for the formation of kamishibai:

The reason for the popularity of "Tenchugumo" [a kamishibai story entitled The Heavenly Punishment by a Spider] was probably that I started reading film theories and applied the montage theory to my kamishibai stories just for the fun of it. Under the influence of my young friend, Chikuo Yamamoto, I read the montage theory of Kuleshov. This was an early montage theory founded on materialistic dialectic, which influenced everyone from Pudovkin to Eisenstein, and it was very useful for the making of kamishibai in terms of [ideas for the] structures of the picture cards and their switching. Usage of close ups heightened the effectiveness of kamishibai. Until then, flashbacks and close-ups were not used in the sword fight scenes [chanbara] in kamishibai. Influenced by Kuleshov's theory, I pioneered the use of such methods in kamishibai. Later I learned the theories of Pudovkin and Eisenstein, and before long I used montage methods for expressing contradiction, confrontation, conflict, discord and sublimation in kamishibai.

(Koji Kata, *Kamishibai Showa History*. 1979, Obunsha)

This is an extract from the memories of Koji Kata who played a vital role in the formation of kamishibai in Japan.

Kamishibai is performed for children on the street. It is considered the lowest cultural form possible. [The kamishibai example shows that] this kind of remaking and interpretation of culture by montage, extended to various [artistic] fields.

Indeed, even poems were being "montaged" as in the following example:

- 1 A lift with repeatedly opening and closing door. No one is there.
- 2 A flower thrown on the floor. A flower without petals.
- 3 Shoes, shoes and shoes [kutsukutsukutsu] running up stairs . Women's shoes.
- 4 Among them shoes that lost their heels.
- 5 Try to pick with the tip of your fingers the precious stones' necklace that wiggles in the mirror. A beautiful jewel has the same stubbornness as that of a beautiful snake.
(The sharp ray of light there is as deep as looking into a well.)
- 6 A dapper calculator sticks out its tongue, sticks out its tongue.

(Iku Takenaka, "Hyakkaten (department store)". *Shi to Jiron* (Poem and one's cherished opinion). June 1929)

This is a poem written using a method called "Cine-poem", in which each line is viewed as a film cut to be montaged with the other [poetic] lines. It is thus that even poems and novels were using montage methods.

Tadashi Iijima, one of the influential critics in Japan at that time said the following about "montage literature":

In accord with what I said up-till-now, it is not good at all to bring film montage [methods] "as is" into literature. However it is not bad that the concept of montage which formed in the particular field of films, is being reconsidered [or rethought] from various angles.

(Tadashi Iijima, *Shin Eigaron* (New theory of movie). 1936, Saito shorin)

As Iijima argued "it is not bad that...", and "montaging" progressed beyond literature also in

kamishibai, as mentioned above, as well as in photography. The graph-montage technique, which was created in Europe and Russia was also brought to Japan. (figure 11). Within this [cultural developments], the characteristics of films were immediately associated with the word "montage".

Meanwhile the interpretation of Japanese culture in line with the montage theory was spreading as well. The most representative example is that of "e-makimono" (picture scrolls). This began when Eisenstein used as an example for his montage theory the case of Japanese style paintings text books, as shown in figure 12.

About this point ---- the method for teaching drawing adopted by schools in Japan is very film-like.

How about our [Western] teaching of drawing?

While choosing a regular square white paper.....in many cases even without using the corners of the paper (usually the edges of the paper get greasy due to long and hard work), we just cram it with boring caryatid [sculpted female figure serving as an architectural columns], Corinthian pillar top, or plaster figures of Dante.

However, the Japanese approach [to drawing] is the exact opposite.

Assuming that we are talking about a landscape drawing composed of the branches of a cherry tree or of a sailing ship, the Japanese students choose a frame for the drawing that may be square, round or rectangle, and [within it] they abstract the constitutive elements of the whole [subject of their drawing].

In other words, the Japanese take upon themselves a frame!

(Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein, *Eiga no Bensho-ho* (Dialectic of Film). Translated by Norio Sasaki, 1932, Oraisha)

Eisenstein was mistaken in thinking that the Japanese comprehend each drawing as its constitutive elements which are cut by a "frame". However, this misunderstanding became one way of looking at traditional pictures like e-makimono [picture scrolls]. Fuyuhiki Kitagawa offered one of the earliest montage theory analysis of e-makimono, as follows:

Especially "Dōjōji-engi" [The history of Dōjōji temple] was indeed almost perfect.

At first, Anchin and Kiyohime are walking separately. Kiyohime sees Anchin and Anchin begins to runaway. Kiyohime chases him. Of course, there are some textual inserts between the images,

but what I thought was very interesting is that in between the images is inserted a scene with people walking a road and a tree grove, in which Anchin and Kiyohime are not seen. This is consistent with the montage method of films.

(Fuyuhiko Kitagawa. *Junsui Eiga-ki* (Pure Movie notes). 1936, Daiichi Bungeisha)

More precisely, this is an editing method called insert shot. To make it easily understandable, let's look at how it is done in manga frames. (figure 13).

I would like to make clear again that Kitagawa's argument does not prove that montage is used in e-makimono. The imaginary space of e-makimono is cut by camera, and then the cuts are montaged. It is exactly what my students did. However, the e-maki montage theory was systematized again by Hideo Okudaira in the art magazine *Atelier* published in 1940. (figure 14). [Grounding his theoretical approach] on Soviet film theory, he talks about the film characteristics of e-makimono. The previously mentioned argument by Isao Takahata is [actually] based on Kitagawa's analysis.

The Japanese culture has been thus, continually montaged, or reinterpreted as montage, as in the following passage:

So far we repeatedly pointed out that the modern nature of film art is actually a newly developed form stemming from the primitive nature of art. This primitive nature remains characteristic of every genre of Japan's arts. For this reason, I do not think that it is a coincidence that [Japan arts] are said to be film-like. Already those like Fuyuhiko Yoshimura pointed out to the relationship between e-maki, Haikai Renku [comic verses] and films. When it comes to Eisenstein's montage theory, we can point to the entirety of Japanese culture and say that it is film-like.

(Taihei Imamura, *Nihon Geijutsu to Eiga* [Japan art and film], 1941, Sugeshobo)

As mentioned above, the word "montage" came to mean "film-like" [eiga-teki]. And as [this text tells], the primitive nature (essence) of "Japan's arts" is that they are "film-like". The scheme of montage = film-like = Japanese style, was established in the first half of the 1940's.

The following passage that interprets e-makimono within this scheme is important:

Therefore, even if it is true that the drawings in e-maki are still images, by connecting the still images, there is [we produce] an indication of a concept of flow, it is an expression of flow just as is done in films. In films too, each shot stands still and by connecting the shots motion is created.

(Ibid)

In other words, the writer understands e-maki as still images that are montaged.

Another interesting point in this passage, is that the writer understands a film shot (one cut) to be a still image. In fact, film shots (cuts) move. However, the argument here is that both films and e-maki express the "a concept flow" by connecting still cuts or shots.

I mentioned earlier that "manga" is formed by by montaging still images. This archetype of manga as montage of still images was formed around 1940. It is Osamu Tezuka who brought it to the postwar period and refined it. In 1945, Osamu Tezuka, then a young boy, a fan of Disney and acquainted with Eisenstein's and other film theories, started drawing manga composed of nine cuts = nine frames in his notebook. (figure 15). This manga conceptualized each frame [of manga] as one cut [of a film] and montaged them. This became the basic method of Japan's postwar manga called "the film-like method" [eigateki hōhō]. In other words, manga was also "montage-fied". This method as well as the way of thinking about manga as film-like or as montage-like, have determined the basic terms of expression in postwar Japanese manga. The reason why young people who are drawing manga in contemporary Japan can replace e-makimono with manga style drawing, namely, with montage style, is that this way of thinking was embedded into Japan's culture consciously during the first half of the 1940's.

And yet, montage doesn't mean only the montage of different cuts. As we saw earlier, the drawing of the characters is also built upon the montage of symbols. In addition, montage is embedded in visual media on yet another level. From the beginning when talking about the "montage of still images", there were two schools of thought. According to one, the montage of still images is done on a time line [temporally], as is expressed in the continuity of manga frames. According to the other, montage is done "spatially".

Figure 16 is one scene from the war time animation "Momotaro: Umi no Shinpei" [Momotaro:

Sacred Sailors] (1945). This work exhibits several thought-provoking issues, such as a mode of thinking according to which in animation different cuts are montaged (the number of cuts is higher than in Disney's animation), and the fact that while characters are Disney-like, weapons are drawn realistically. Today however, I would like you to please pay attention to how the characters and objects in this scene are drawn [with depth] going from those at the "the front " to those at the "back" in overlapping layers.

The characters, objects, landscape and the background skies which are situated [on a depth's perspective] from the front of the image to its back, were drawn on separate transparent sheets made of celluloid, they were placed in a multiplane camera as multiple overlapping layers, and filmed (figure 17). This overlapping of layers expresses depth.

Multiplane camera was used for "Snow White" by Disney. The reason Japan adopted that camera at that time was not only that the creators wanted to create long animation films like Disney's. Another reason why they adopted the multiplane camera, has to do with the re-formation of expression in animation with montage [techniques], as we have discussed.

As we saw in "Umi no Shinpei", pictures composed of multi layers [forming a depth's perspective] from the front to the back, were actually being refined by Japan's contemporary animation and visual media. See for example this page, from wartime Japan's propaganda media "FRONT" (figure 18). As a matter of fact, characters and cannons in the front of the photo, and the battleships in the back, were taken from separate photos. These photos were magnified or scaled down, cut by scissors and glued together. This is just a "collage", a "graph montage". This method was used in Soviet propaganda journals and "FRONT" strongly persisted with this expression of spatial depth.

This is one scene from the silhouette animation, "Malaya Kaisen" [The Naval Battle off Malaya] (figure 19). And this is from "Umi no Shinpei" (figure 20). Although the former is shadow animation, it manages to express depth by using multiple overlapping layers. Such overlapping layers cannot be filmed in animation unless a multiplane camera is used. By montage-ing still images [with a depth perspective, composed of layers that begin in] the front and move to the back in each cut (shot), spatiality is created.

This kind of aesthetics which must be named "layers' montage aesthetics" is actually found in the works of Eisenstein. (figure 20). In Eisenstein's movies, items and characters are positioned [in different depths] from the front to the back in every shot. For example, this picture was taken at the time of filming "Battleship Potemkin" (figure 21), and you can see here as well, the aesthetics of overlapping layers of items,

characters and landscapes.

Two kinds of images and sounds montage according to Eisenstein are known: "montage of cuts" and vertical montage". However, we may say that wartime Japanese saw a third kind of montage in Eisenstein's [movies] and in Russian propaganda's photos, namely, "the layers montage".

This is the background factor for the adoption of multiplane cameras in Japanese animation.

In the early 1940s, until around the end of World War II, the "montage-ification" of Japanese culture progressed. We can say that the aesthetics of montage became immanent methods of manga and animation in at least three different ways, the drawing of characters, the montage of frames, and the montage of layers with a multiplane camera. I don't have the time to expand on this, but limited animation which Osamu Tezuka established in Japan, is also a postwar development of these aesthetics and methods.

Among the researches of manga and animation in North America, the school of thought that sees the aesthetics of manga and animation as based on both temporal and spatial montage of still images is set forth by researchers like Thomas Lamarre and Mark Steinberg.

Thomas Lamarre attributes great importance to the aesthetics which the multiplane camera brought to Japan. And he argues that there is a strong tendency in Japan's animation to repeat the layers editing of images composed with overlapping celluloid layers. He calls this aesthetics "Animetism" and thinks that it has been determined by the "animation machine" embedded in Japan's pop cultures. This "machine" is a concept of Guattari. I have no time to speak about it today, but the wartime avant-garde art theory in Japan was closely tied with a "mechanical art theory". Fascist Japan attempted to "mechanize" everything in Japan, including daily life, weapons and art, in accord with the scientific enlightenment [school of thought]. This "mechanical art theory" was also called "mechanism". It is thus important to remember that the "mechanical art theory" was part of wartime avant-garde, and the aesthetics of montage and layers were included in it.

Mark Steinberg thinks that this kind of "editing of layers" does not exist only in animation but also in still images imprinted character goods, and in-between character goods. He argues that it is the essence of the so-called media mix in Japan.

What is important is that the "animation machine", which is embedded according to these researchers in Japan's pop culture, is a historical product formed during the war. What they see as the essence of the aesthetics and methods of Japan's pop cultures are the products of Japan's fascism [and not of Japanese visual

traditions]. This is one point that Thomas Lamarre and Mark Steinberg do not discuss enough.

If Japan's pop cultures have any outstanding characteristic, it might be that of the aesthetics of "too much montage". The avant-garde art movement which began in the 1920's has reached fascist Japan, becoming an artistic method and a school of aesthetics. As it became isolated from the rest of the world, modernism and avant-garde were transformed within Japan. The issue of the remaking of Disney style characters was part of these transformations.

Contemporary Japanese manga and animation products are "malformed Disney [products]" and "malformed Eisenstein [products]". Because manga and animation are based on the universalized aesthetics of Disney and montage aesthetics, even though they have been malformed in Galapagos Japan, they are [successfully] spreading across the world. The "prejudiced impression" that this [montage culture] is "Japanese culture" was formed under fascism rule with the mediation of Eisenstein's montage theory which was universally accepted in Japan. This [prejudiced impression] is also part of the mechanism [that creates the image] of "Japan as a Galapagos island".