Japan as Montage$^{1,2}$

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

There are currently two [competing] explanations about the origins of the aesthetics of Japanese popular culture. The first argues that they are based on [visual] traditions, such as the picture scrolls of the Middle Ages and the ukiyo-e of Early Modern Japan. The second claims that Japan's pop culture came into being as a reflection of the unique postmodernism of contemporary Japan. While at first, these two explanations may seem contradictory, they do in fact maintain a complicit relationship: the former reflects the old Japonism, while

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the latter reveals a new Japonism. They both, however, reflect a similar way of thinking, namely that Japan is a Galapagos island at the very end of Asia, cut off from the West and probably also from Asian countries like China. And accordingly, these two explanations are easily connected in the sense that Japan has a strange history of jumping directly from the early modern period to the postmodern period. This is how critics of postmodernism, like Takashi Murakami and Hiroki Azuma, explain the connection between contemporary and traditional forms. This linkage between the early modern past and the postmodern present leads to the erasure of the modern period from the history of Japan’s popular culture. The first half of Japan’s modern history comprises colonialist invasion of Asia and the latter half Japan’s defeat in World War II, and because both of these historical periods are hard for contemporary Japanese to come to terms with, this direct connection between the traditional period and the postmodern period, with the blotting out of the intervening modern period, is discussed enthusiastically 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].

Those who live outside Galapagos Japan probably also think that "Japanese manga" are supported by graphic traditions such as ukiyo-e and Choju-giga [a famous set of picture scrolls known as the "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, which is often considered the traditional origin of manga, are they really similar? (Figure 1).

Figure 1
In my opinion, characters like Atomu from *Astro Boy (Tetsuwan Atom)* or Leo from *Kimba the White Lion (Jungle Taitei)*, produced by Tezuka after World War II, look very similar to the characters mass-produced by Hollywood after 1920, like Mickey Mouse or Felix the Cat (Figure 2).

![Figure 2](image)

A. Left: Tezuka Osamu's "Astro boy" (1951)
   Right: Tezuka Osamu “Jungle Emperor” (1954)
B. The Scroll of Frolicking Animals (12C)
C. Upper: *Steamboat Willie* (Walt Disney, 1928)
   Lower: *Felix the Cat in Arabianics* (Pat Sullivan, 1928)

Figure 2

From a historical viewpoint, it is fair to say that the [style of] expression of characters in Japan’s contemporary manga was established when Disney’s animation, which swept the world after the 1930s, reached the Far East island country [i.e. Japan]. Japan shares with the West both the culture of Disney and modernism. (Actually so does China). This theory of tradition-to-postmodern erases these undeniable facts from history and 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 reached the Galapagos of the East just as it reached the rest of the world. But the [expression of] modernism that reached Japan was not only Disney. In fact, the Russian avant-garde and Eisenstein’s montage
theory also reached Japan during the latter half of the 1920s. Japanese culture was particularly affected by Eisenstein which resulted in the integration of Disney aesthetics and montage theory in Japan’s manga and animation. Montage theory remade [reinterpreted] Japanese [traditional] culture as "montage" and has been embedded in Japanese culture ever since, especially in the invisible aesthetics or thought processes that exist within pop culture.

Please allow me to conduct an "experiment" to help you understand. The picture scroll below named Shigisan-engi [Legend of Mount Shigi] is from the twelfth century (Figure 3). The famous animator Isao Takahata argues that this scroll uses methods reminiscent of methods used in films or animation. Let’s examine his argument.

![Figure 3](image)

Can you replace this Shigisan-engi with manga? For those who can draw manga, this is not difficult. It was certainly easy for some former students of mine (Figure 4).

![Figure 4](image)
Was it easy because picture scrolls have the characteristics of films? The answer is no. What my students did, figuratively speaking, was no more than bringing a movie camera into the imaginary space that is the picture scroll, filming it, and then editing it.

In the same way that films are comprised of "cuts" (a movie "cut" is not one frame but one shot), Japanese manga is composed of "frames" which are "montaged" together to create a manga story.

The following is a quote from Eisenstein’s montage theory:

This is an "extraction" [of the whole view] by means of the camera, it is composition by means of the camera, and it is a removal of one fragment of reality by means of the lens. (Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein. Eiga no Bensho-ho [Dialectic of Film]. Translated by Norio Sasaki. Oraisha, 1932.)

This is exactly what my students did. They sliced the picture scroll into units of [movie] cuts and montaged them. This way of thinking is prevalent as one method or aesthetics among people who draw manga. Manga artists montage still images made by an imaginary camera and thus draw manga [stories].
Let us discuss this in more detail. Two cultural streams arrived in Japan between the 1920s and the 1940s. One is the avant-garde art movement, the impact of the Russian avant-garde, including Soviet film theoreticians such as Eisenstein, being particularly significant. The other 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 1930s. An active avant-garde artist Michinao Takamizawa (Figure 5), who changed his name to Suiho Tagawa, created a character called Norakuro based on Mickey Mouse (Figure 6). From then on, the drawing style of Japan’s manga characters was replaced by a Disney drawing style (Figure 7).
It was not long before Osamu Tezuka, who had been familiar with Disney-style characters since childhood, was further refining the Disney-style, as exhibited in the characters of Atomu and Leo seen at the beginning of this lecture.

In his later years, Tezuka 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, in my opinion, the result is not really a picture but rather a very simplified symbol. ("Interview with Osamu Tezuka, until very late at night with coffee and black tea" by Chiseko Katsuki. In Manga Senmon-shi Pafu, October 1979, Seikeisha)

This way of thinking is called the "the symbol theory of manga" [The semiotic theory of manga] (Figure 8).
Tezuka's statement is actually based on the following passage about montage theory from Eisenstein's "Dialectic Approach to Film". 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." (Sergei Eisenstein. A Dialectic Approach to Film. Translated and edited by Norio Sasaki, Kadokawa Shoten, 1953.)

In other words, Eisenstein said that kanji were an example of montage (Figure 9), and Tezuka said that his drawings were also montage.
“TEAR” is formed through the montage of WATER and EYE

Figure 9

Tezuka was fifteen years old when World War II ended. He was strongly influenced by montage theory which was widely circulated in Japan during the war. Tezuka often used terms used during the war for movies to theorize his own manga drawings. Manga artists in the 1930s understood Disney drawings as the combinations of symbols, and they created new characters by combining similar symbols (Figure 10).

Mickey Mouse as montage
A semiotic montage “Mickey-style”

Characters made through montage
Mitsuyo Seo, *Arichan* [Arichan the ant], 1941. Animated by Mochinaga Tadahito

Tezuka’s characters and the “Mickey-prescribed-form”

**Figure 10**

*Japan as Montage*
Eisenstein argued that not only kanji but also various forms of Japanese art such as Nō theater, haiku and Japanese-style painting are made as montage in which new meanings are produced by combining different components. Since the modern era, the Japanese have been guided by foreign theories on Japanese culture [nihonbunkaron] and thus, in the same way, the theory on Japanese culture as montage was formed.

The following episode demonstrates how the Japanese public 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 gravity. (Hisakazu Tsuji, "Pudovkinin memory," Eiga Hyōron, April 1938)

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

But montage was not only accepted where films were concerned. Another example is the evolution of the popular entertainment art called kamishibai (picture story show). Kamishibai is a popular street entertainment show in which a story is told showing picture cards one after the other. There is evidence that montage theory was used in the development of kamishibai:

The reason for the popularity of Tenchugumo [a kamishibai story entitled 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 dialectical materialism 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 *chanbara* [sword fighting scenes] 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 was using montage methods for expressing contradiction, confrontation, conflict, discord and sublimation in *kamishibai* (Koji Kata, *Kamishibai Showa History*. Obunsha, 1979.)

This is an extract from the memoir of Koji Kata who played a vital role in the development of *kamishibai* in Japan. *Kamishibai* is performed for children on the street. It is considered the lowest form of culture. [This example shows that] this kind of remaking and interpretation of culture by montage extended to various [artistic] fields. Even poems were "montaged" as in the following example:

1. A lift with a repeatedly opening and closing door. No one is there.
4. Among them shoes that have lost their heels.
5. Try to grab with the tip of your fingers the precious stones' necklace that wriggles in the mirror. A beautiful jewel has the same stubbornness as that of a beautiful, wriggling snake. (The sharp ray of light there is as deep as looking into a well.)
6. A nimble calculator sticks out its tongue, sticks out its tongue.

(Iku Takenaka, "Hyakkaten [Department Store]." Shi to Jiron [Poetry and one's cherished opinion]. June 1929.)

This poem uses a method called "cine-poem" in which each line is viewed as a film cut to be montaged with the other lines. Thus, even poems and novels used montage methods.

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

In accordance with what I have said until now, it is not at all good 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 from various angles. (Tadashi Iijima, *Shin Eigaron* [New Film Theory]. Saito shorin, 1936.)
In the same way that Iijima argued that "it is not bad," "montaging" progressed beyond literature to kamishibai, as mentioned above, and also to photography. The graph-montage technique, which was created in Europe and Russia, was also brought to Japan (Figure 11). Within this [cultural development], the characteristics of films came to be associated with the word "montage."

Meanwhile, the interpretation of Japanese culture in line with the montage theory was also spreading. The most representative example is that of e-makimono (picture scrolls). This began when Eisenstein used the case of Japanese-style painting text books as an example for his montage theory (Figure 12).
Regarding 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 piece of white paper.....in many cases even without using the corners of the paper (usually the edges of the paper get greasy due to long, hard work), we just cram it with boring caryatid [sculpted female figure serving as an architectural columns], Corinthian pillar tops, 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 on a frame! (Sergei Eisenstein, *Eiga no Bensho-ho* [Dialectic of Film]. Translated by Norio Sasaki, Oraisha, 1932.)
Eisenstein was mistaken in thinking that the Japanese comprehend each drawing as 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.

Especially Dōjōji-engi [The history of Dōjōji temple] was almost perfect. At first, Anchin and Kiyohime are walking separately. Kiyohime sees Anchin, and Anchin begins to run away. Kiyohime chases him. Of course, there is some text inserted between the images, but what I thought was very interesting is that inserted in between the images is a scene of people walking down a road and a grove of trees 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]. Daiichi Bungeisha, 1936)

More precisely, this is an editing method called insert shot. To make it easier to understand, let’s look at how it is done in manga frames (Figure 13).
I would like to re-emphasize that Kitagawa’s argument does not prove that montage is used in e-makimono but rather that the imaginary space of e-makimono is cut by means of the camera, and the cuts are then montaged. This 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.
Japanese culture has thus been 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 Japanese arts. For this reason, I do not think that it is a coincidence that [Japan arts] are said to be film-like. Already people like Fuyuhiko Yoshimura have pointed out the relationship between e-maki, haikairenku [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], Sugeshobo, 1941)

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

The following passage which 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 "concept of flow" by connecting still cuts or shots.

I mentioned earlier that "manga" is formed by montaging still images. This archetype of manga as montage of still images was formed around 1940. It is Osamu Tezuka who brought it into 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).

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 which sees manga as film-like or montage-like, has 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-makimonō with manga style drawing, namely with montage style, is that this way of thinking was consciously embedded in Japan's culture during the first half of the 1940s.

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 a 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
created on a time line [temporally], as is expressed in the continuity of manga frames; according to the other, montage is created "spatially."

Figure 16 is a scene from the wartime animation *Momotaro: Umi no Shinpei* [Momotaro: Sacred Sailors] (1945). This work exhibits several thought-provoking issues, such as the fact that in animation a central idea is the montage of different cuts (the number of cuts is higher than in Disney's animation), and the fact that while characters are Disney-like, weapons are drawn realistically.

![Image of animation frames](image1)

*Mitsuyo Seo. Momotaro: God Warriors of the Sea .1945*

![Image of animation frames](image2)

*eisenstein. the general line. 1929*

*Figure 16*

Today however, I would like you to 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 perspective] from the front of the image to the back, were drawn on separate transparent
sheets made of celluloid, placed in a multiplane camera as multiple overlapping layers, and filmed (Figure 17). This overlapping of layers expresses depth.

A multiplane camera was used by Disney for *Snow White*. The reason why Japan adopted the multiplane camera at that time was not only that the creators wanted to create long animation films like Disney’s, but it was also connected to the reorganization of expression in animation using montage [techniques], as we have discussed.

As we saw in *Umi no Shinpei*, pictures composed of multilayers [forming a depth perspective] from the front to the back, were actually being refined by Japan's animation and visual media at that time. See, for example, this page from wartime Japan’s propaganda media "FRONT" (Figure 18). The characters and cannons in the front of the photo and the battleships in the back were actually taken from separate photos which were magnified or scaled down, cut out, and glued together. This is just a "collage," or a "graph montage," and it is a method used in journals of Soviet propaganda. "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 the next is from *Umi no Shinpei* (Figure 18).
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.

Figure 19
Ofuji Noburo "Malaya Kaisen"
[The Naval Battle of Malaya]

Figure 20
Mitsuyo Seo. Momotaro: God Warriors of the Sea
This kind of aesthetics which should be named "layers' montage aesthetics" (Figure 20) is actually found in the works of Eisenstein. In Eisenstein's movies, items and characters are positioned [in different depths] from the front to the back in every shot. For example, the picture in figure 21 was taken at the time of filming Battleship Potemkin, and here too you can see the aesthetics of overlapping layers of items, characters and landscapes.

![Old and New/The General Line.1929](image)

**Figure 21**

Eisenstein’s montages are known as "a montage of cuts" and "vertical montage" and are two kinds of image and sound montages. However, it can be said that wartime Japanese saw a third kind of montage in Eisenstein's [movies] and in Russian propaganda photos, namely, "a layers’ montage." This is the background to 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. The aesthetics of montage became intrinsic methods of manga and animation in at least three different ways: the drawing of characters, the montage of frames, and the montage of layers using a multiplane camera. I don’t have the time to expand on this, but "limited animation" established in Japan by Osamu Tezuka is also a postwar development of these same aesthetics and methods.
Among North American studies on manga and animation, researchers such as Thomas Lamarre and Mark Steinberg have claimed that the aesthetics of manga and animation are based on both the temporal and spatial montage of still images.

Thomas Lamarre attributes great importance to the aesthetics which the multiplane camera brought to Japan, arguing that there is a strong tendency in Japan's animation to repeat the editing of overlapping celluloid layers. He calls this aesthetics "Animetism" and believes it to have been determined by the "animation machine" embedded in Japan's pop culture. This "machine" is a concept of Guattari. I have no time to speak about it today, but 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 accordance with the scientific enlightenment [school of thought]. This "mechanical art theory" was also called "mechanism." It is thus important to remember that "mechanical art theory" was part of the wartime avant-garde and included also the aesthetics of montage and layers.

Mark Steinberg claims that this kind of "editing of layers" exists not only in animation but also in and among character goods which are imprinted with still images. He argues that it is the essence of the so-called media mix in Japan.

What is important is that the "animation machine," which according to these researchers is embedded 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 culture is the product of Japan's fascism [and not of Japanese visual traditions]. This is one point that Thomas Lamarre and Mark Steinberg have not discussed enough.

If Japan's pop culture has any outstanding characteristic, it might be called the aesthetics of "too much montage." The avant-garde art movement, which began in the 1920s, reached fascist Japan where it became 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 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 and mediated by Eisenstein's montage theory which was universally accepted in Japan. This [prejudiced impression] is also one part of the mechanism [that has created the image] of "Japan as a Galapagos island."