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Japanese talking pictures: magic lanterns, silent cinema and *kamishibai* in the context of *etoki* storytelling tradition

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the relations between three different visual media with inherent oral narration which have coexisted in Japan at the beginning of the 20th century – magic lanterns, silent cinema and *kamishibai* (paper theater). The figures of the oral narrators present in these three media, most notably represented by the *benshi*, are intertwined with each other and derive from a much older, transmedial storytelling practice, which in Japan became known as *etoki*. The author explores different roles and modalities of these three media, highlighting their performative aspects and examining the relations of power between all of their agents, including their socio-political background. They are also treated as representatives of a performative visual spectacle. Although the paper focuses on the local context of Japan, the media under discussion come across as significant for the evolution of both the local and international media landscape, fitting the methodology of media archaeology.

KEYWORDS: *etoki*, magic lanterns, *kamishibai*, silent cinema, *benshi*

Introduction

The figure of the oral narrator accompanied by imagery is, on the most fundamental level, connected to two vast and independent histories of human storytelling practices – visual and audial. The primordial figure of the oral narrator served as a carrier of legends, myths, religions, and histories or biographies, helping countless groups or societies to develop a bond and form cultural identity; and visual representations often assisted

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such narrations, facilitating the creation of more distinct mental images of the conveyed story, the construction of visual archetypes and viral effigies. Images are also much more stable and tactile, with a higher chance of surviving through the extensive eras and epochs, contrasting with oral stories, which for the most part of history could only be relayed and received live and on the spot. The technology of sound registration was developed only in the 19th century, millennia after the first visual carriers emerged. Somewhat ironically, in the historical coalescences of those two different but complementary traditions, it is the pictures that usually served a supplementary role. For the majority of human history, narrators were the main aspect and attraction of the spectacle.

In Japan, the “magic quality of voice projection goes back at least to the intoning of Shinto ritual players (*norito*), and the reciters of history (*katari-be*) with roots in prehistory” (Ruch 1977: 305). Carefully nurtured throughout the ages, the oral tradition often coincided with visual aids – one of the oldest forms of this type of practice is *etoki*, which was propagated by Buddhist monks as early as the 8th century. This paper will focus on three different, yet heavily correlated media, which seem to be pivotal examples of a marriage between the visual and the audial modalities – Japanese practices with magic lanterns, silent movie projections with the concomitant figure of the oral narrators known as *benshi*, and paper theater known as *kamishibai*. Although they will be presented in the local context of Japan, they come across as significant for the evolution of both the local and international media landscape. They will be argued to be a part of a longer *etoki* tradition, as their histories are so strongly intertwined that they seem to be directly and intrinsically “related” stemming (or maybe crystallizing) from different parts and aspects of each other’s legacy.

Another important factor in each of the media under discussion is their performative value, partly derived from their connections to the numerous genres of Japanese theatre. The terms *performance* and *performative* will be crucial for their portrayal. Erika Fischer-Lichte defines them both effectively below:

A performance is ultimately created by everyone present and escapes the control of any one individual. In this sense it is contingent. The concept of contingency emphasizes the involvement of all participants and their influence on the course of the performance, including the interplay between these influences. (...) The interplay of their actions and behavior constitutes the performance, while the performance constitutes them as actors and spectators. It is only when they take part in the performance

that individuals turn into actors and spectators. This particular quality of performances is termed “performative” (Fischer-Lichte 2014: 20).

In other words, performative actions always convey some kind of agency, and influence the elements of the spectacle, the audience included. Philip Auslander’s term *liveness*, treated superficially as “bodily co-presence of actors and spectators” (Fischer-Lichte 2005: 23) for the needs of this paper, will also serve to distinguish live spectacles from more mediatized experiences. Through various modes or modalities, the media under discussion create a web of relations between the narrator (performer), the audience, and the socio-political background from which they have both emerged.

The paper will first delineate the definition and short history of *etoki* as a specific medium and as a practice present in Japan throughout the centuries, highlighting its diversity, crucial aspects, and modalities, which will serve as a guideline for understanding other media under discussion. The second section will focus on Japanese magic lantern shows, describing their development, noting the balance between their audial and visual elements, and highlighting the socio-political roles they served. The third section will be devoted to *kamishibai*, a form of paper theater, and its development from an independent street show into a powerful, nation-wide propagandist tool. The last section will focus on silent cinema, accompanied by the figure of narrator-performers known as *benshi*, whose vocal narration initially was the main attraction of the movie projections, only to be gradually superseded by legal standardization and the increasing independence of visual storytelling.

1. *Etoki*

Etoki (絵解き), in its broadest sense, is the practice of vocal narration conjoined with some kind of imagery. It is a performative art, with a strong division between the performer (narrator), who recounts the story contained in the visual medium, and the audience, who gather around to watch and listen. *Etoki* has a long and rich history in Japan, and has undergone a lot of changes throughout the centuries of its popularity, resulting in a plethora of heterogeneous forms, often contradicting one another. The atmosphere during the performances could be relaxed or strictly sacred. *Etoki* could take place in temples or in private noble houses to entertain audiences drawn from the upper classes of society. Or it could be performed in the streets for everybody to see and hear, or even near pilgrimage paths, with the content deeply involved with magico-religious themes. Interactions between the

audience and the narrator were common, often by having an emotive character influencing viewers' feelings and channeling their attention, which left room for manipulation and propaganda.

Because of this diversity, *etoki* can serve as an excellent general taxon² for establishing one branch of medial genealogy – other media, which share crucial elements with it, could be said to belong to the same type or group. That is the case for all of the three media practices under discussion: magic lanterns shows, silent cinema projections accompanied by the *benshi*, and *kamishibai* performances. Each of them could be said to follow the notion of *etoki*, be a part of it, or even be directly called *etoki*, especially in the Japanese context. Even though their histories outside of the country may be less related, judging by their medial ontology, they follow the same or very similar principles. Their Japanese relationships are heavily interconnected, yet not without some crucial differences.

1.1. *Etoki* – history and ancestry

Details about the history of *etoki* are still shrouded in mystery. It has probably been present in Japan since the 8th century, but the oldest mentions of it come from the 10th century³, while the oldest surviving examples date from the middle of the 12th century: the diary of Fujiwara no Yorinaga mentions an *etoki* of the *Pictorial Biography of Prince Shotoku* in 1143 (Kaminishi 2006: 24).

Etoki is certainly not a solely Japanese medium or practice – it came to Japan through Chinese Buddhist monks, and Buddhist themes representing doctrines or biographies of prominent figures were deeply ingrained in its initial topics. The oldest traces of *etoki* as a medium seem to lead to India, where picture-storytelling was practiced by *śaubhikas* in the 1st century BCE (Mair 2019: 1–9), and there are claims (yet doubtful) it could even date as far back as the 5th century BCE. Naturally, much like the figure of the narrator, *etoki* is affined to two huge, separate and primordial traditions – vocal and visual storytelling, both of which have been present in human history for tens of thousands of years. Their various connections are unavoidable, and, unfortunately, in some cases untraceable.

² This is a term derived from the biological way of classifying groups of organisms sharing some common traits. It fits the concept of media genealogy and serves as a good way to understand the relationship between media (and their kindred), but due to differences in cultural and biological evolution, it is unlikely to be applied directly without causing additional nomenclature issues.

³ The diary *Rihō Ō Ki* mentions spontaneous *etoki* given during prince's Shigeakira visit to Jōganji in 931 AD (see Kaminishi 2006: 20).

1.2. Three types of meaning

Before delving into the specifics of *etoki* practices, it is important to understand the term better. Ikumi Kaminishi describes it as follows:

The term *etoki* is made up of two words: *e* ('painting, images') and *toki* ('decipherment, elucidation'). The way the word *toki* modifies the word *e* is grammatically ambiguous so that the conjoined term can be rendered as an 'elucidation of the picture' as well as an 'elucidation by the picture' (Kaminishi 2002: 191).

Kaminishi also lists a third option, based on a property of medieval Japanese – a lack of distinction between the act and the actor. Because of that ambiguity, the term *etoki* can denote three different things at once: the oral performance of explaining; the narrators, who explain the pictures to the live audience; and the images utilized during the performance. The last refers to the idea that images, if they are based upon some kind of text, serve as an explanation of a given text so the text is elucidated *by* the pictures (see *ibid.*, 192). The first *etoki* in Japan were essentially visual sermons, enacted in order to disseminate Buddhist beliefs. Because of that, every element of the performance was inextricably related to the sutras or other Buddhist writings. The images were most often created independently of the narrators by a separate master or groups of masters, who faced the challenge of visually adapting holy texts or hagiographic biographies. The narrator, on the other hand, faced the challenge of *ekphrasis*, or orally describing a picture, which is also an act of adaptation. Because of these tripartite, intersemiotic translations, *etoki* creates a web of complicated relations between its agents – texts, paintings, and performers, all of which have idiosyncratic characteristics and can influence the recipients in distinct ways. The figure of the narrators, their relations with other agents, and the amount of power they have over the audience is of the utmost importance in this paper. *Etoki* narrators (or rather, at this early stage, preachers) had almost total power over the performances. First, they were Buddhist monks of various ranks, so they were well acquainted with Buddhist beliefs. Next, they had to study the holy texts, which were the basis of the images, so they knew exactly what stories were depicted visually, and of what elements they were comprised. And, last, they had to familiarize themselves with the images beforehand in order to effectively guide the audience through the visual landscapes, which were sometimes organized into very complicated structures. Each of those elements could be difficult or impossible to understand without proper guidance or explanation, and that is why *etoki*

were indispensable for the effective proselytizing of Buddhism in Japan and were one of the primary elements of its success.

Etoki began as a religious, liturgical tool, performed by the clergy, and occurring mainly in monasteries. Even at that point, there was a dichotomy among the performers – they could have been high-ranked, elegant monks (*etoki sō*), wearing formal robes, and performing for aristocracy and royalty, or they could have been *etoki hōshi* – lower-ranked monks or monastery brothers without the clerical status, presenting *etoki* for a common audience, often outside the monasteries (Kaminishi 2006: 27–28). From the 13th century onwards, the latter monks evolved into itinerant performers, and, as such, marked a strong rupture in the character of *etoki*.

Over time, these itinerant monks increasingly resembled street performers and showmen. Their performances began to resemble entertainment more than liturgical sermons; the form of the spectacle itself began to be prioritized over the content. The itinerant monks received payment for their performances, which radically altered the relationship between the audience and the performer – they needed to impress the audience or at least be captivating enough to receive payment. Therefore, the attention shifted even more towards the spectacle – it *had* to be more entertaining and enticing.

1.3. Imagery and the performer's power

Three types of images were most commonly used for staging *etoki*. The first type is wall paintings or murals, used mainly in monasteries during the sacral era of *etoki*. They often filled up the whole room, creating a “picture hall” containing religious images related to the Buddhist faith. The second type was *emakimono* – painted hand-scrolls, with a long international history dating back to ancient China and Java (Mair 2019). Most often, they had to be unrolled during the spectacle, but they were sometimes placed on the floor or hung vertically, already fully unrolled. Picture halls oftentimes used a series of vertical hanging scrolls instead of wall paintings. The third type, called *kakejiku* or, more broadly, *kakemono*, can describe any kind of erected imagery, be it unrolled scrolls, mandalas, or simple posters⁴. Each type effectively evoked a different relationship between the performer, image, text and audience.

Etoki preachers used fragmentation to guide their audiences' gaze through the images. The main technique for that, which was possible to achieve in all of the listed types of images, was simply pointing – either with the hand,

⁴ European counterparts of *etoki* from the 14th century, called *Bänkelsang* or *Cantastorie* would fit into this third category. They used printed graphics or posters, and performers usually sang stories depicted in them (see Mair 2019).

or with a long stick, often topped with a feather in order not to damage the picture. By pointing, preachers could further emphasize their narration, governing at which fragment of the picture the audience looked at a specific moment. It is worth noting that *etoki* oral narration followed the chronological order of the story – it was meant to be linear and easily comprehensible. On the other hand, the narrative order of the images could have been problematic to unveil. Wall paintings are especially known for their complicated, non-linear structures and confusing visual traits such as counter-intuitive perspectives (or rather: projections), as well as “juxtaposed and superimposed temporal distances (present and past stories) with geographical distances (domestic and foreign lands)” (Kaminishi 2006: 36). Hence, even when the audience had immediate and continuous access to the picture in its entirety, it was overwhelming and almost impossible for them to fathom without fragmentation, oral narration, or textual instructions. Consequently, the content of the story went through layers of intermedial translations: from the biographies, legends, or myths, to linear Buddhist texts; to non-linear, atemporal paintings; only to be driven back into linearity by means of *etoki ekphrasis*, which helped to unravel their enigma (ibid., 41).

Fragmentation was strongest in the case of *emakimono*, and it is one of the few examples of performers having direct, manual power over the image. By alternately rolling and unrolling the hand-scroll, the narrators were able to create a “frame” of a chosen size for the audience to see. By doing so, they could dictate what, when, for how long, and how much the audience could see, and could further constrain their gaze via pointing. Using *kakemono* could be perceived as the most balanced way of presenting the story – the images were more freely accessible and not overly complicated to comprehend. But they were still comprised of many elements, which *etoki* could elucidate to the audience, leaving them with a full or at least better understanding of the content.

Emakimono epitomizes one more crucial aspect of *etoki* – the presence (or lack) of text during the spectacle. Only a few types of *emakimono* were composed purely of images (those were called *rusōgata-shiki* or *renzoku-shiki*): most of them incorporated some kind of intrinsic text. Some hand-scrolls contained alternations between texts and paintings, and in some, the text was placed inside the paintings; e.g., if the painting depicted human figures, the text could appear above them in the manner of modern-day speech balloons. Intrinsic text left the *etoki* performer with three options: read it aloud on the spot, without changing a word; memorize it before the spectacle and orate it; or improvise, changing the text to satisfy the

audience's needs. Additionally, speech balloons gave the performers a chance to imitate the character speaking, anticipating later *etoki* practices such as the *benshi*'s "dubbing" – *kowairo*. The presence of text has the possibility of confining performers if they were to follow it word by word, but it also leaves space for their imagination and showmanship to come to the fore if the text lines are delivered impressively. Both of these traits became even more important in the history of *kamishibai* and *benshi*.

1.4. Power of reinterpretation

One specific type of *etoki* serves as a good example of the already described properties, as well as serves a representation of the performer's power over the content of the told (and shown) stories – their ability to reinterpret and add meaning to the original substance in response to the audience's needs. *Kumano bikuni* can be regarded as the female counterpart of *etoki hōshi*, and are the last significant category of *etoki* performers. They were Buddhist nuns, present in the region of the Kumano mountains, most prominently in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Their role in Japanese society was complicated – as *kanjin hijiri*, or fundraising religious practitioners, they served by both disseminating Buddhist beliefs and collecting contributions to shrines and temples. This role was also important for the faithful – making donations was believed to result in vicarious merits, improving chances for a better rebirth. Consequently, *kumano bikuni* served a mediatory role between religion and the masses. This transitive state also found its reflection in their status as *etoki* performers.

During the height of their popularity, *kumano bikuni* underwent a strong secularization; as a result, they began to use Buddhist icons and myths instrumentally. They often used mandalas, especially the *Kumano kanjin jikkai mandara* ('Kumano Heart Contemplation Ten Worlds Mandala'), which contained visual depictions of the human life cycle and spiritual pilgrimage, in accordance with Buddhist doctrine, but *kumano bikuni* focused mainly on two aspects of the mandalas – images of hell and messages of hope aimed at women. For the audience, those were the most attractive and resonant themes and images, and the nuns used it for their profit, enticing the audience and playing on their emotions.

Barbara Ruch denotes that *etoki* falls into the category of Japan's literary arts, "whose basic strength lies not in conforming to theoretical aesthetic

codes but upon capturing an audience and delivering an emotional impact”⁵. She elaborates further that this type of literature

is represented by arts that have no history of aesthetic codes, no body of criticism upon which practitioners based their activities. Their primary aim was to draw the listener deeply into an orally delivered narrative and to cause, above all, an emotional response (nostalgia, tears, laughter, pride, joy, astonishment, gratitude, religious conversion) in an audience. Such literary arts were transmitted from practitioner to practitioner mainly through repertory texts and were taught by oral mimesis alone. Perfection was sought in the verbal, aural, and in some cases visual techniques which elicit emotion, not in recondite wording employed to demonstrate erudition nor in the mastery of poetics that ensure the creation of an aesthetic atmosphere (Ruch 1977: 284).

Kumano bikuni developed various strategies for delivering *etoki*, all of which had the common goal of influencing the audience emotively. One of those strategies was choosing and adjusting their stories depending on who was listening, as well as deliberately postponing the most important or interesting parts until a desired sum of money was collected from the audience (Saka 2013: 100). Their hell stories were full of torture and misery that awaited sinners if they did not follow the religious duties required (e.g., manipulating the audience into fear of hell because of infidelity). They also recounted historical tales, most notably *Soga Monogatari* and *Heike Monogatari*. In the latter, the stories weaved by the nuns started to incorporate previously absent love themes. The nuns also changed characters of the Gempei war, especially those hostile to women, into men capable of love (Ruch 1977: 301), serving a much disputed feminist role (see Tokita 2008).

Finally, *kumano bikuni* often presented their narration in the form of confessions or memories, plotting themselves into the fabric of the story. It is possible that they narrated the stories from a first-person perspective. Consequently, by using themselves as a storytelling means – for example presenting themselves as women who were guilty of romantic love, full of contriteness for their sins (Saka 2013: 103) – the nuns *acted* and played a specific role, in order to impress or manipulate the audience. Adding the recitation of poems, songs, and an aim for a specific look, their practices

⁵ Ruch puts in the same category also *heikyoku*, *sekkyō bushi*, *kowaka bukkyoku*, *kojōruri*, *kayō*, and later *bunraku* and *kabuki* (Ruch 1977: 284).

became much more embedded into theatrical customs and had a much higher performative value than earlier instances of *etoki*.

For millennia, the hallmark of oral narrator figures was to assume “the seat of religious authority through the ‘magic’ act of decipherment” (Kaminishi 2006: 11)⁶. But *etoki* history proves that this magico-religious authority can shift and still prevail in a more secular and performative environment. *Etoki* narrators, even while using altered, non-religious means, still possessed power over the deciphered pictures and the gathered audiences, imposing on them a new, reinterpreted version of the textual or visual content. The stories of three different manifestations of *etoki* will show how diverse modalities and forms it can adopt while still possessing conterminous traits.

2. Metamorphoses of the magic lanterns

The history of magic lanterns in Japan begins roughly where the *etoki* halted its trail – in the streets, somewhere between the sacred and the secular. Conditions for magic lanterns’ arrival developed in Japan through a combination of two other practices – the already mentioned *kanjin* displays, whose goal was to collect alms from Buddhist practitioners, and *kaichō*, or public exhibitions of relics (Głownia 2019: 34). These two practices gradually underwent secularization, mixing carnivalesque entertainment, food vendors, and freak shows with the sphere of Buddhist sacrum, ultimately leading to *misemono*. In short, *misemono* was the practice of “private exhibitions of unusual items, individuals, or skills, conducted (...) for the purpose of financial gain” (Markus 1985: 501). This type of public, eclectic display of everything new or attractive, served as a fecund basis for introducing and assimilating magic lanterns into an otherwise secluded country.

Magic lanterns are projecting devices that originated in the Netherlands around the year 1659 by the hands of Christiaan Huygens (Mannoni 2000). In the 19th century, they developed into a blooming industry, producing lanterns in the thousands along with various optical equipment needed for a plethora of projection types. Magic lanterns (also called *laterna magica* or *sciopticon*) used glass slides as their primary image carriers. The images were initially made by hand using water paint, but were later mass-produced in millions using lithography or even photography. Slides contained visual representations of any topic imaginable, from simple comic characters to historical figures, abstract patterns, or complicated visual effects or sceneries. The main function of the lantern is to project and enlarge the

⁶ The figure of *dalang* in Javanese *wayang beber* serves as a good example of this in a different culture (see Mair 2019).

content of the slides onto a wall or screen, so that everyone gathered in the room can see them – the very essence of the word “projector”. They were nothing less than a visual hegemon, dominating Europe and America, fertilizing the ground (and technical equipment) for the gradual arrival of cinema at the end of the 19th century.

Magic lanterns came to Japan around the year 1770 – more than a hundred years after their development. They were firstly presented at crude *misemono* exhibitions, serving as an entertaining technical curiosity from abroad, as the Netherlands was the only country permitted to export scientific equipment to Japan under the *sakoku* policy. The lanterns were quickly adopted, and by 1779 they had been modified to better suit Japanese realities. Made from light wood rather than heavy and more thermally conductive brass, they became known as *kage-e megane*.

The development of magic lanterns in Japan can be divided into three main periods. In the first period, which lasted up until the first half of the 19th century, lanterns were used mainly for entertainment purposes. They were then called *kage-e dōrō* and *saishiki kage-e*, denoting equation to the tradition of shadow plays, or called *yōtō*, emphasizing the magical character of the projected pictures (Kusahara 2021: 182). In this period, lanterns were capable of creating interesting, magical illusions and transformations and of showing famous landscapes and tales (ibid., 184). Two next periods, *utsushi-e* and *gentō*, will be described in more detail.

2.1. *Utsushi-e*

The beginning of the second period is generally dated to the dawn of the 19th century, and associated with Kumakichi Kameya – a kimono designer and *rakugo* storyteller. Because of his artistic background, storytelling skills and knowledge about Western science, he was well oriented to cultural needs at the time, and had every ingredient needed to create a new format of audio-visual entertainment, which he had called *utsushi-e* (see Kusahara 2021). This format contains crucial differences from the European tradition, making it a distinctly Japanese version of the magic lantern shows.

Firstly, *utsushi-e* was heavily influenced by the theatre. The stories presented were often taken directly from *kabuki* or *bunraku* plays, serving as a cheaper and more accessible counterpart to the otherwise exclusive theater. Furthermore, the exhibited stories were much longer than those in the first period, containing popular legends and stories about warriors, samurais, or ghosts (Głównia 2019: 36).

Secondly, the visual techniques were greatly improved. The shows took place in darkened rooms, and the lanterns were placed behind the screen

in order to hide their mechanisms from audience sight. As a result, the audience saw only floating, ephemeral shapes or characters made from light, without any trace of their origins. Those pictures were far from static – because they were made from wood, Japanese magic lanterns were very light and could be easily picked up and operated manually. Thus, images exhibited in *utsushi-e* spectacles were characterized by their mobility and liveliness. The operator-performers often had the lanterns attached to their bodies, so that when they moved, the picture projected from the lantern moved as well, conjoining the visual with the corporeal. The overall effect is that every component visible on the screen was made live on the spot by the performers' actions, resulting in a kind of real-time animation. Utilizing two to eight lanterns at once, the visual arsenal of *utsushi-e* was very broad – Kobayashi Genjirō lists 11 different ways to manipulate the visible picture, including zooming, fading, and changing light intensity (Kusahara 2021: 192). Utilizing overlapping images, *utsushi-e* could create a scenography and a “multiplane” made from light, adding depth to projected scenes – some images could serve as a background or landscape, and some as foreground characters.

Lastly, *utsushi-e* exploited vocal narration, music, and sound effects, again in a manner similar to *kabuki* and *bunraku*. The narrator was most often a standalone figure, seated at the side or beneath the screen, visible to the audience. Sometimes there were multiple narrators interchanging the oration, as spectacles could last up to a couple of hours. The narrator(s) not only explained what the currently displayed pictures depicted, but acted alongside them, mimicking the characters or various sound effects. Sometimes they would also play a percussive instrument to create rhythm or further highlight the visual action – in a way, playing the same role as the pointing practices described earlier.

The crucial aspect of *utsushi-e* is that the aural components of the spectacle did not dominate it. In most instances of *etoki*, it is the oral narration that creates the main axis of narrative reference – the visuals serve merely a supportive role. *Utsushi-e* developed a balanced experience between the new, complex and attractive visual strategies and the older, well-established oral traditions. The narrators also had a broad arsenal of techniques at hand, including, for example, *jōruri*, a melodic narration accompanied by a *shamisen*, or *rakugo* storytelling, which employed changing pitch and tones or producing various onomatopoeia to enliven the spoken story, further immersing the audience. Certainly, there were situations during *utsushi-e* spectacles where it was only the vocal narration that pushed the story forward, with nothing visible on the screen. Because of the slides'

limitations, both in number and in content, it was the narrator who had to either fill in the story or fuse together otherwise unrelated sets of slides into a coherent narration⁷.

Their plasticity notwithstanding, the visual track of the spectacle had to be obeyed by the narrators. The presented narration was the effect of teamwork and preparation during the production, most probably involving multiple rehearsals. Slides were numbered and shown in a specific order, in a planned sequence (Kusahara 2021: 184), so it is highly probable that the narrators used scripts, and, as in the manner of *etoki*, the presence of text effectively confined the narrator's actions.

In one of the many handbooks written about European professional magic lantern projections (more lectures than spectacles), the authors underline the aspect of communication between the orator and the lantern operator; they propose that some kind of signals should be established or prepared beforehand, to avoid showing improper slides or confusing their order (Gage and Gage 1914: 19–20). It is hard to imagine the situation being different for *utsushi-e* – the strong need for synchronization between sound and picture, especially with more dynamic projections of dozens of elements, almost ruled out the possibility of improvisation on either end. The projectionists had to visualize what the narrator was saying, but the narrator also had to follow the formerly established story created with available visual resources. So, although the spectacle itself was conducted live, the preparations must have been strictly structuralized and organized beforehand in order to ensure a smooth performance. As a result, *utsushi-e* is an intriguing example of dynamic relationships between subjugated oral narration and ever more complicated, yet not fully independent imagery.

2.2. *Gentō*

The third period of magic lantern development in Japan began around the second half of the 19th century and reintroduced European, heavy, immobile types of lanterns. They were more technically advanced and referred to as *gentō*. This period exemplifies two important characteristics of the *etoki* tradition while being tailored to the realities of the Meiji era.

New types of magic lanterns were imported from the West and introduced to Japanese audiences by Sei'ichi Tejima, a technical educator, around 1874. He advocated for the educational use of the magic lantern throughout the country. By the end of the decade, the Ministry of Education took up his plan, introducing *gentō* as an official tool for education in schools,

⁷ Once again, the aspect of fragmentation and seamless conjoining noted in *etoki* is present here.

in universities, and for the general public, sometimes even free of charge (Głownia 2019: 38). This is a radical shift from the entertainment-oriented spectacles, and a comeback to the original *etoki* application. Even the Buddhist entourage implemented *gentō*, as a tool for proselytism.

However, there was an important difference: with the approval of the country's officials, *gentō* underwent national institutionalization involving production and distribution of lanterns and slides. Shows and performances turned into lectures, and various images projected from the stationary, visible lantern served a supplementary role to the "narration" of teachers or public orators. The audience, now in the form of children, students, or citizens, was expected to stay passive and focused during the presentation, as opposed to the earlier, rather lively and engaging mode of reception. For *gentō* lectures, it is the content that served a dominant role, although it can still be considered as *etoki* and as a performative situation. That being said, more spectacular shows (now called *gentō-kai*), conducted in a Western manner, still subsisted. This was the same with *utsushi-e*, and these three different types of projections coexisted for at least four decades⁸.

Institutionalization combined with education often can be a fertile ground for national propaganda, and this is the last important notion of *etoki* usage. *Gentō* lectures developed during the period of the Meiji restoration, and hence were widely used as a way of presenting Japan's history as well as the ethical and moral values that fitted the "enlightenment" era and its various consequences.

During the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5), the propagandist possibilities of *gentō* were most heavily exploited. In those cases, the government used visibility as a tool for disseminating patriotic values and filling the public space with images of the ongoing war in order to develop a collective national mentality (Głownia 2019: 39). *Gentō* projections were the perfect tool for national nurture, and this time the audience was encouraged to take part in the spectacle. Various sources mention exuberant, communal reactions like collective singing, screaming, clapping, crying of joy or stamping in anger (ibid., 40). The narrator's role in these kind of *gentō* "shows" (or rather: "gatherings"), is similar to the *kumano bikuni* practices – they were influencing and channeling the emotions of the audience, inciting their attention, and promoting desirable beliefs: this time only patriotic and national rather than

⁸ Overhead projectors, used widely for lectures to this day, can also be argued to be a small technical advancement from vertical magic lanterns. In Japan, overhead projectors have also been integrated into *kamikiri* spectacles.

Buddhist. Some spectacles also functioned as a fundraising tool, transferring collected donations to charities or using them to support military operations.

3. *Kamishibai*

Following the chronological order of the discussed media, *kamishibai* should be placed last. But its connections to magic lanterns are in many ways stronger than to silent cinema, so it is best to describe it beforehand.

Kamishibai literally translates to ‘paper theater’ and this term perfectly describes it. Having existed in the Meiji era under the name *tachi-e*, it used rectangular, paper cutout puppets⁹ contained in a small and portable wooden proscenium called a *butai*. Borrowing themes and characters from *bunraku* or *kabuki* theater, it served as a miniature and more accessible counterpart. Due to its small size and the character of materials it used, *tachi-e* was inexpensive to make, stage and view.

The short era of *tachi-e* was quickly occluded in 1929 by a new, similar version – *hira-e*, which substituted individual cutout figures with bigger, flat paper pictures, shown in a succession, serving as a slideshow. Both of those spectacles could and had been named *kamishibai*, but it was *hira-e* that became prevalent and popular.

Kamishibai represents the type of *etoki* in which the narrator-performer can manipulate the images, in this case by changing the boards with paper drawings. As a result, they also have power over the viewers’ gaze, constricting it to the individual “slides”, which themselves were surrounded by the wooden frame of the *butai*. Performers can also use pointing as another method of fragmentation, and have the possibility of changing the boards more quickly or slowly, creating smooth or dynamic changes adapted to the oral narration. To further emphasize vital moments of the story, instruments like drums, gongs, or *hyōshigi* were used. The performers were also dressed similar to the chanters in *kabuki* spectacles – theatrical customs and nuances were still very much present (McGowan 2010a: 5).

3.1. *Gaitō kamishibai*

Because of its small size and poor visibility, *kamishibai* was better suited to being performed on the streets rather than in parlors, fitting the *misemono* phenomenon. This street form has been baptized *gaitō kamishibai* (‘street

⁹ Thanks to the use of paper cutouts as puppets, *tachi-e* spectacles are deeply related to puppet and shadow theater, and are visually similar to *utsushi-e* because, just as in lantern shows, figures displayed on a black background seemed like they were floating. *Kamishibai* in general is also linked to the peep-show *nozoki karakuri*, which used a series of changing pictures but was viewed more individually through the openings and lenses, which enlarged pictures located inside a wooden construction.

paper theater'), thereby initiating the true history of the paper theater. The best audience turned out to be children, and this fact heavily influenced *kamishibai*. Due to its mobility and the public entourage, the payments for shows were not based on an entry fee but rather gathered by selling candies and snacks to the preadolescent audience before the spectacle.

An important feature of *kamishibai* is its position on the peripheries of society. The storytellers, known as *kamishibaiya*, often came from the lower classes, as exhibiting paper theaters was a comparatively easy way to make money. The only things needed for performances were a few paper or cardboard sheets for drawings, a small wooden theater with two doors (*butai*), and a way to transport them, which most often turned out to be a bicycle. *Kamishibaiya* performed their spectacles for a couple of hours daily, travelling through different neighborhoods, almost as itinerant forms of *etoki* or *utushi-e* did. This cheap production process turned out to be crucial during the Great Depression in the 1930s, which also afflicted Japan. With unemployment rates escalating, hundreds of new *kamishibaiya* emerged, making use of the unofficial status of the street theater to make a living.

Children in the audience and the storytellers were often from the same neighborhood – hence from the same socio-economic background – which greatly facilitated a local and communal atmosphere of the spectacles. Partly because of that, *kamishibai* established unique interactions between the audience and the performer, making use of its liveliness aspect – for example, performers commissioned quizzes and verbal or visual puzzles between the stories, and children who answered them correctly were rewarded with additional candies. The aspect of emotive impact and enticing audience attention, known from the *kumano bikuni* practices, is clearly prevalent in *kamishibai* – single performances usually consisted of stories from three different genres, e.g., exciting action adventures, sentimental melodramas, and comic stories (McGowan 2015: 14), to fulfill the whole range of the audience needs. The somatic aspect is also worth noting – children gathering around the small theater scene often had to amass together, forming a tight cluster (Orbaugh 2015: 41).

Instead of adapting well-known tales or theater plays like *tachi-e*, stories for *hira-e kamishibai* were often created anew. This gave birth to more opportunities for inciting the attention of the audience by presenting new, captivating characters that had a chance of becoming viral – especially popular were admirable child-heroes like Golden Bat, often acknowledged as one of the first illustrated superheroes. *Kamishibai* also used an episodic format for its stories, which, thriving on anticipation, guaranteed children

would come back the following day to hear the rest of the story. This was vital during the Great Depression – living on the verge of poverty, the performers’ chances of survival hinged on their ability to entertain their preadolescent audience.

The performers most often did not create their own drawings, but rather had them rented from various rental places or artists. What is important is that the “scripts” for those rented images (and hence – stories) were passed to the *kamishibaiya* orally and rather cursorily, so most often a considerable amount of improvisation was involved in the performances.

3.2. Education, propaganda and further standardization

The unofficial character of *gaitō kamishibai* spectacles lasted for less than two decades. By the second half of the 1930s, as in the case of *utsushi-e*, educational practices eclipsed the entertainment period. Yone Imai, inspired by *gaitō* techniques, started using *kamishibai* for disseminating Christian topics in a way more fitted and attractive to children; and Ken’ya, Matsunaga seeing the growing educational (and commercial) potential of the spectacles, in 1938 formed the Educational Kamishibai Federation.

More institutionalized entities started to appear, producing and distributing *kamishibai* suited for more elaborate environments, like schools and households. Matsunaga began publishing his stories in educational journals, “with instructions on how to color and cut out the pictures and the text and then apply them to stiff cardboard. This innovation allowed educators even in rural areas of Japan to ‘recreate’ Matsunaga’s stories in their classrooms” (McGowan 2015: 16), laying the foundations for what will become *tezukuri kamishibai*, or hand-made versions of *kamishibai*. Because of that popularization, more than 30,000 *kamishibaiya* were in operation nationwide by 1931 (McGowan 2010a: 6).

The advent of published *kamishibai* attracted the government’s attention and resulted in further regulations concerning the content of the stories. The form also underwent a crucial change – from 1938, the authorities “demanded the stories be written on the backs of the cards so that they could monitor content” (ibid.). Requiring the narrators to read the text verbatim radically changes their ontology – from storytellers, they turn to merely a medium (or rather a tool) for conveying the desirable message. This further facilitated educational and propagandist content.

In the first half of the 1940s, during the second Sino-Japanese War and the dawn of World War II, censorship and propaganda intensified. During this period, 70% of *kamishibai* produced were destined for adults rather than children (McGowan 2010b). Teachers and local authorities were specifically

trained to deliver *kamishibai* “properly”, and “audiences were expected to listen in silent reverence. Any unsolicited interaction with the storyteller might have suggested political unrest” (McGowan 2015: 18). With the financial backing of the government, the total number of published *kamishibai* had reached over 800 thousand by 1942 (ibid.). The formerly cherished communal aspect of the performance-ritual was transformed into an idea of national togetherness (*kyōkan*), creating a countrywide spectacle, with the government in the role of the omnipresent *etoki*, dispersing and elucidating its dogma through the pictures.

4. *Benshi* and silent cinema

The history of silent cinema and its relation to the *benshi* narrator-performers combines many topics already discussed in the case of other media, but in a way highly interwoven and condensed only to around four decades. The key difference lies in the scale of organization needed for the proper existence of cinema; it requires a much higher level of industrialization and institutionalization, involving numerous entities like production houses, distribution and advertisement systems, guaranteed imports and exports, and more robust places for projections. Proper, dynamically changing technical conditions must also be assured for each of those aspects. Understood broadly in that manner, the cinematic apparatus involves thousands of people and an immense amount of organization in order to endure.

The Kinetoscope and the Cinematograph were imported to Japan around 1896 as the first devices for projecting films, and, once again, fitted the *misemono* practice as one of dozens of technical novelties at the time. Because the first films presented lasted from only a couple of seconds up to half a minute, their exhibitions were often elongated by supplementing with an orator who explained the mechanisms involved in projection. Those orators are considered to be the predecessors of the *benshi* figure.

The ongoing association of cinema with *misemono* determined its social role and modes of recipience. In accordance with the European notion of *cinema of attraction* (Gunning 1990), silent films projections were not focused on the narrative and filmic content, but rather on the performative aspect. The overall experience itself was crucial, brimming with a live and communal atmosphere. Unlike in European history, the first instances of cinema in Japan were rather expensive, aimed at the higher strata of society, especially those interested in the Occident. After some development, motion picture content lasted up to twenty minutes, but the shows ranged from two to three hours because of the complicated procedures needed for projection. In this first period, *benshi* greeted the

audience, introduced them to potentially unfamiliar concepts (such as the projection mechanisms) and shared background knowledge related to the content of the movies. During the many breaks in the spectacles (caused, for example, by changing movie reels) *benshi* served as entertainers, guaranteeing a continuous experience.

The precise role played by the *benshi* dynamically shifted in tandem with the development of cinematic apparatus and advancements in its storytelling capacity. Treated syncretically, *benshi* performers are akin to the narrators in previously described media – other than describing the mechanisms, they could elucidate the content of the pictures. This was especially important in Japan, because of the sudden introduction of movies with mostly foreign content; this act of explaining was labeled with the term *setsumei*. Their narration was not always neutral; *benshi* supplemented the screenings with their personal comments, being able to impose on the audience their own feelings and (re)interpretation of the projected films. Through voice modulation and mimicry (called *kowairo*), as well as melodeclamation or singing, they could enliven the ongoing action, intensifying the viewer's immersion. Furthermore, the music and sound effects affiliated with their performances, in the form of *hyōshigi*, flutes, *shamisen* or even full orchestras, should not be omitted¹⁰.

4.1. *Benshi's* power

Overall, *benshi* served a mediatory role between the audience and the content of the picture, channeling their understanding and inciting their reactions. It is easy to imagine that *benshi* could consolidate short movies created and shown independently, similar to the *utsushi-e* practice of creating a coherent story from different slide sets. This power also encompassed the content – moving pictures did not have to have a fully coherent structure because of the *benshi's* superimposed explication.

It is true that *benshi* dominated the way of experiencing the new medium and became the very first stars of the industry, forestalling and outmatching the importance of actors and the other personas involved in film production. They were an indispensable part of projections and advertising practice – participating in a movie with a different *benshi* could result in an entirely

¹⁰ It is worth noting that *benshi* was a profession that required certain physical predispositions and a lot of preparation before the show. They performed four to five times per day, each day of the week (Dym, n.d.), operating without the microphone and moving between the theaters or cities. In the history of European magic lanterns, there was a similar position of professional lecturers, who were hired to give speeches and presentations about a variety of topics, preparing or memorizing dozens of scripts and travelling hundreds of kilometers per day (see Borton 2015). *Benshi* may be seen as a very close relative of this kind of itinerant compe-re-performer profession.

different experience. But the audience also possessed some power – much like in the case of *kamishibaiya*, the *benshi*'s performance and delivery (called *bensetsu*) were constantly judged by the participants. Numerous *benshi* competed for fame and popularity, but their success depended on the whims of the audience, and only a fraction of the performers managed to become truly recognizable.

The *benshi* figure was in many ways authoritative and sovereign, and (partly because of the weak social status of motion pictures) *benshi* were not regulated in any way for around twenty years, leaving them free to orate anything they wished. But, much like *kamishibaiya*, they could not avoid regulations forever. As early as 1911, a study regarding the educational use of cinema was conducted. Citing various problems with its social role, it included the dangers of the *benshi* being “unfit in language and attitude”, advising against showing movies to children, and exhorting that films and the *benshi* should be carefully selected (Gerow 2010: 69). Another essay from 1910 criticized the *benshi* for “drinking” and “lechery” (Fujiki 2006: 78).

In 1917, the Tokyo Police Department introduced a licensing system, holding certifying examinations for the *benshi*, testing their cultural knowledge and the social roles of cinema (ibid.). The regulations increased to the point of police officers attending the theaters to monitor whether or not the *benshi* were “changing the plot of the movie into something immoral” (Omori 2021: 201). It is important to highlight that, initially, *benshi* were not inherently connected to the film industry but were rather affiliates, hired specifically for the exhibitions. But after the licensing system and regulations, they started serving the contradictory roles of educators and narrators, simultaneously gaining importance and losing freedom. They became an official part of the industry but also started getting more and more subordinate to elements outside of their power and control.

4.2. The textualization of the *benshi*

The problematic relationship of power between the text and the performers, always important and regulative in the *etoki* tradition, is probably most vivid and dynamic in the case of the *benshi*. The introduction of intertitles – text boards inserted into the films' structure, transcribing the dialogue or explaining action – perforce intervened with *benshi*'s power over the image. With the textual narrative embedded in the moving pictures, *benshi* could no longer impose their own interpretation but began to be subdued by the movies. Conversely, the introduction of written dialogues, visible to everyone, helped to develop the *kowairo*, or mimicry practice, delivering

the lines of different characters with modulated voices. In the first years of the practice, *kowairo* was performed by a group of four to six narrators, and “sometimes even the [movie] actors themselves sat behind the screen and delivered their lines alongside the *benshi*” (Dym, n.d.), which resembles modern-day dubbing, but conducted live.

One more force impacted the *benshi* through the use of text – the Pure Film Movement (*jun'eigageki undō*), spanning from 1915 to 1925. Inspired by global cinema aesthetics and standards, its members, such as Norimasa Kaeriyama, wanted to renovate the “anachronistic elements of Japanese cinema” (ibid.), which included theatrical borrowings such as female impersonators and the *benshi*. Their efforts to improve the cinematic “language” focused not only on the visual aspects, but also on the organization and status of the film industry, with a strong emphasis on the textual layers of cinema. They favored the frequent use of intertitles and demanded screenplay renovations and regulations in order to supersede previous habits, theatrical and simple, written in a style fitting *benshi* performance manners. Kaeriyama also introduced a new term for denoting movies – *eiga* (‘projected picture’), instead of *katsudō shashin* (‘moving picture’) used thus far, liberating cinema from the connotation with *misemono* practices. As Chika Kinoshita phrased it, the sphere of exhibition was to be deprived of control over the significance of film, endowing it with full textual autonomy (Kinoshita 2011: 24).

When it comes to the *benshi*, one of the direct effects of the Pure Film Movement was the abolishment of introductory remarks (*maesetsu*), stripping the *benshi* of the authority of being the “host” of projection. The result was an eclectic *setsumei*, encompassing narration, commentary, and mimetic dialogue all at once, while the film was being projected (Dym, n.d.). Somewhat ironically, this initiated the so-called Golden Era of *benshi* performances, the peak of their popularity and strength, partly resulting from the government’s legitimization. But the effects on the overall industry were more drastic. As Aaron Gerow (2010: 18) lists: the modes of cinematic narration were altered, the star system was solidified, the institution of the author-director formed, the screenplay was established and codified, and in 1925, national censorship was constituted, radically changing the cinema’s status and organization. Because of the regulations, film distributors were required to submit the film’s print and two copies of the *benshi* script (Kinoshita 2011: 15), further ensnaring *benshi* within the borders of text¹¹. Even though *benshi* were still expected to go beyond those

¹¹ One more practice can be of value here, namely the film transcriptions and synopses published in various movie magazines (see Bernardi 2001: 172–178) which further textualized cinema and

scripts during the performance, the sheer fact of having a textual basis (and censorship) normalized the experience to some extent, stripping from it dissimilarity and performative value.

4.3. The mediatization of the *benshi*

The popularity of the *benshi* gradually faded away after the introduction of sound cinema in the 1930s and 1940s. Yet, there is one aspect of their slow demise that seems crucial for the *etoki* tradition, and it is the matter of mediatization. In the 1930s, silent films with *benshi* narration and sound films coexisted, but also two transitory formats emerged, involving something called a ‘sound band’ – an audio track, which was post-synchronously added to an otherwise silent movie. One format of those sound bands used music and sound effects, still leaving intertitles to convey dialogues and narration, but the other format replaced intertitles with a recording of the *benshi*’s narration (Freiberg 1987).

The existence of *benshi* narration as an audio recording marks the beginnings of mediatized *etoki* – an audio-visual display involving a narrator or performer inseparably merged with the image. The vocal narration turns internal, synchronous and almost subordinate to the visual. By discarding the *benshi* and gradually switching to sound cinema, the moviegoing experience became more of a *séance* rather than a spectacle. Utilizing the visual “language” to convey a story independent of the exogenous narration¹², it confined the aspects of *liveness* and communality. *Séance* guarantees a technologically mediatized yet complete sensory engagement, immersing viewers in a vastly different, often more individual and tacit mode of reception.

Conclusion

Japanese magic lanterns, silent cinema and *kamishibai* coexisted and crossed paths in Japan during the 1920s and 1930s. Conjunctions between them were

benshi narration. It did not have a strong direct impact on the *benshi*, but allowed every reader to know the content of movies outside of theaters and without the *benshi*’s influence.

¹² One point in the history of the European visual media landscape can be thought of as a starting point for the independence of the image as a narrative force in audiovisual spectacles (Jarosz 2021). The 18th century introduced the development of theater hydraulics, as well as a medium called *eidophusikon*, and technologies involved in at least four different kinds of panorama paintings (on this topic see also Huhtamo 2013). This was a unique moment when the scenography in theaters began to be an attraction on its own, equal with the spectacle or actors. The visual media, probably for the first time, did not need narrators to convey their sophisticated stories. In the Japanese context, perhaps the advancements in *kabuki* scenography could also be treated as such. Special effects, hydraulics, and perspective backdrops all strengthened the illusion and immersion guaranteed by the visual side of the spectacle. Cinema certainly follows (or concludes) this process, with the ongoing development of a visual storytelling “language”.

inevitable, influencing presented themes or topics, their forms or modes of recipience. They have also infused the national visual and aural imagination in similar, yet different ways. Each of them carries various traces of the *misemono* practice and the opulent theater tradition, serving as new carriers for centuries-old epics, legends and folktales. Each of them can also be understood and categorized as either a medial relative of the *etoki* tradition or a direct representative of it, while still possessing its autonomous characteristics.

In the case of *etoki*, the fundamental, dynamic coalescence of oral and pictorial layers, both with independent and rich histories, results in a plethora of possible modes of spectacle, serving explanatory, educational, or entertaining roles. Treating media as members of the same medial group can highlight various convergence points, which are sometimes difficult to trace individually. Through their mutual analysis, general schemes of functionality and development can be deduced, even with media stemming from different socio-technological backgrounds, either local or global. In the Japanese context a good example of a contemporary relative of *etoki* could be anime voice-actors, *seiyū*, whose practices resemble *benshi*'s *kowairo* or *kagezerifu*, but achieved in a fully mediatized manner, embedded into the visual layer of animation. Treating *etoki* as a wider medial practice or strategy for supporting visual media with vocal commentary, an inapparent connection could also be projected onto audio-visual media currently present globally, such as television anchors, sport commentators, or let's players, especially in a form of live broadcasts or livestreams.

The perplexing aspect of intersemiotic translation was highlighted here – oral narratives in *etoki* always redefine pictorial narratives to some extent, and the pictures can possess a dual character: of an independent narrative source, and of a pictorialization, a redefinition of written texts or separate oral narratives, which have preceded the act of *etoki*. Those translations are fueled further by interactions between the audience and the performer, resulting in virtual “texts” – live spectacles. Additional themes mentioned in this paper, like the consequences of affiliating narrators with the written texts serving as scripts, and detailed power relations between the performer and the audience are undoubtedly important, and can be fruitful for further studies.

The narrator can be placed at the very center of the discourse about *etoki* practice with regard to their social status, specific roles, and capabilities. Their repertoire consisted of oral techniques and variables like rhythm, volume, intonation, tempo, clarity, accuracy, fluency (Fujiki 2006: 71),

wordplay, melodeclamation, or chanting; but also, of performative aspects like clothing, choreography, or, most notably, various interplays and interactions with the audience, which could influence and incite them directly or implicitly. If the stories relayed by narrators were of national provenance, they turned into important disseminators of culture, an effective medium for the audience to cultivate their cultural identity.

The narrators served contradictory roles. Their impact could be miniscule and benign, or it could serve an immense religious, national, or broadly propagandist agenda. They were subjective interpreters as well as objective explainers; authoritative figures and educators, as well as prestidigitators; powerful, sovereign storytellers, mere gods' servants, or tools in the hands of the government. Their social status was, surprisingly, for the most part, low, contrasting with their function and on-stage (or while-performance) status. As a result, they gave their services to all of the social strata. Falling somewhere between beggars and gurus, between the textual, the visual and the auidial, between the communal and private, *etoki* storytellers filled many contingent niches, creating a heterogenous amalgamate of medial and social practices.

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