Introduction

Modern Japanese literature has traditionally been divided between “pure” or high literature, grounded in literary referentiality and “seriousness,” and popular literature, which appeals to more immediate sensory experience and incorporates elements such as mystery, suspense, and dramatic surprise. With the rise of mass culture in the 1920s, this distinction between high literature and popular culture began to blur. The era saw many works by “serious” writers that played upon readers’ love of suspense. Doubles and doppelgängers, visual illusions and deceptions, trickery and crime, and mental derangement and obsessions, brought to effect through the ingenious use of vision technologies, began to appear in stories by well-established writers such as Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, Satō Haruo, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Miyazawa Kenji, Uno Kōji, and others.¹ Edogawa Ranpo, whose work was heavily influenced by Tanizaki, Satō, and Uno,² incorporated all of these themes into his stories, and in a way that was more sustained and radical than those of any of his contemporaries.

The modern visual revolution, engendered by the spread of technologies such as advanced astronomical telescopes, microscopes, cameras, panoramas, and motion pictures, introduced viewing perspectives that entailed thrilling new subjective experiences of space and time. In an age of machine production that made exact duplication possible, the public hungered for specular amusements offering optical illusions that looked “exactly” like the real thing.³ The double consciousness of knowing that something was only “play” while enjoying the thrill of the deception was a novelty that urbanites were eager to experience. These entertainments that incorporated illusory experiences reflected the
indecipherability of modern city life while offering respite from the tedium of work in surroundings that were often congested, confusing, mechanized, and noisy.

For masses of city dwellers, panoramas and, later, motion pictures in particular, ushered in a whole new level of surrogate experience. Unlike the magic lantern (*gentōki*),⁴ which projected images upon a two-dimensional surface viewed in the dark from a stationary position, the panorama drew viewers into a large, circular space and surrounded them on all sides with spectacular paintings whose lifelike nature was enhanced by the natural, indirect sunlight illuminating them from above. Ramps between the viewing platforms and canvases that prevented visitors from going too close to the paintings further ensured their realistic effect. The scale of the painted canvases was enormous, and the impact of their landscapes was made all the more dramatic by the sudden transition into the light from the darkened corridor and staircase through which visitors passed to access the high viewing platforms—passageways that removed them psychologically from the streets outside where they had been walking just minutes before. These “gigantic, movable toys whose mechanism had been stuck”⁵ enabled average men and women to travel vicariously to exotic places and witness scenes of epoch-making events. Positioned at eye level above the horizon line of the landscapes depicted there, and surveying the landscape with the long horizon in the distance, the observers enjoyed a sense of visual power and control they could never hope to experience while being swallowed up in, distracted and consumed by the busy, noisy, confusing metropolises in which they lived.⁶

Japan, like the United States and European countries, experienced a panorama boom, although one that was relatively short in duration.⁷ The first hall housing a panorama in Japan was constructed in Ueno Park in Tokyo at the time of the Third Domestic Industrial Exposition in 1890. Famous battles were a favorite
Introduction

subject of nineteenth-century panoramas, and Japan’s first one treated visitors to scenes of the Boshin War (1868–1869).8 Half a year later, the famous Panorama Hall of Asakusa Park opened in the Sixth Ward of the park in a spot that had once been occupied by a man-made replica of Mount Fuji. The white wooden building with sixteen sides was accessed by means of a dark, subterranean passageway leading to a winding staircase. Thirty-seven meters in diameter and 16 meters tall, with a ridgepole 29 meters high,9 it featured “phantom-like scenes from the Battle of Gettysburg to the accompaniment of a music box”10 and was open all day long continuously throughout the year. With admission fees of ten sen (one-hundredth of a yen) for adults and five sen for children and military personnel, it attracted over a million viewers in a year. The year after it opened, other panorama halls sprang up in Kanda in Tokyo, Namba in Osaka, and Kyoto. Famous Western-style artists such as Koyama Seitarō, Asai Chū, and Yata Torakichi, assisted by huge crews, were engaged to paint grand scenes that stirred martial sentiment. Koyama, for example, directing the work of two hundred painters, completed a painting depicting a scene from the Sino-Japanese War 15 meters tall and 114 meters long in 120 days.11 Like newsreels that later accompanied motion-picture shows, panoramas combined instruction and entertainment and were thus all the more effective as a form of propaganda.

Motion pictures, which entered the country at the turn of the century with the introduction of the Lumière Cinématographe in 1897, brought even more radically different experiences of space. Audiences paid for the novel sensation of sitting in a dark three-dimensional space, looking at a two-dimensional screen illuminated to create the illusion of a three-dimensional world. Not only were they simultaneously in two different places—the world of the theater and the world of the film—but the variety of spaces experienced through the eye multiplied at a dizzying pace as the camera
moved from angle to angle and segued from long shot to close-up, still shot to pan, and zoom to dissolve. Film editing dramatically increased the number of visual perspectives, breaking up the spatial coherence of the visual field and offering viewers yet more sensations of moving in space. For instance, they could simultaneously experience time in new ways as they were taken backward through flashbacks, or suddenly moved forward, and, through parallel editing, exposed in rapid succession to the juxtaposition of nonchronological moments. Further, through the technology of film, with its ability to present the same actor in different films with different settings at the same time and to distort appearances through camera techniques, the stability of personal identity was rendered more fluid and unpredictable than ever before.  

Edogawa Ranpo (born Hirai Taro, 1894–1965), known best as the father of the modern Japanese detective novel, responded to and fed the burgeoning interest in the relativity of space and identity more than any other writer of his time. In his stories he played with spaces of different sizes. In his first short work, “The Two-Sen Copper Coin” (Nisen dōka, 1923), he dwelt on the tiny concealing space of the interior of a hollow coin. In his first major work, Strange Tale of Panorama Island (Panoramato kidan, 1926–1927), he played with space as large as an island and toyed with unusual viewing angles. In “The Walker in the Attic” (Yaneura no sanposha, 1925), a man hides himself in the crawl space of the attic of a lodging house and, peering through knotholes to spy on unsuspecting lodgers below, enjoys a vertical perspective that departs from the horizontal plane on which most people conduct their lives. In “A Human Chair” (Ningen isu, 1925) a furniture maker devises a hollow space inside the armchair he is making, inserts himself in the secret space, has himself transported to a hotel lobby, and thrills to the tactile sensation of the bodies of a succession of unsuspecting women who sit on his lap.
Ranpo's stories that introduced novel perspectives located within unusual spaces also incorporated assorted optical instruments. In “Mirror Hell” (Kagami jigoku, 1926), a man shuts himself up in a sphere whose inside is a continuous convex mirror. In “The Man Traveling with the Brocade Portrait” (Oshie to tabi suru otoko, 1929), a man transports himself to another place and another era through a pair of old-fashioned binoculars. The ultimate use of an enclosed space for the purpose of concealment is the skin of another person, and this Ranpo exploited in stories about stolen identities, such as “The Twins” (Sōseiji, 1924) and Strange Tale of Panorama Island.

In freeing his writings from the dictates of commonsense perceptions of quotidian reality, Edogawa Ranpo, like Tanizaki, Satō, and Uno, frequently employed the themes of the double and the doppelgänger. Some of his characters have double identities. In other instances, men have identical appearances but radically different characters. Typically, one of the pair represents a socially conventional personality while the other embodies a reckless criminal self. Ranpo's duplicitous doppelgängers share the adroit cunning and brazen nerve of Zigomar, the clever, daring master thief of the immensely popular Zigomar films that Ranpo saw when he was a middle-school student. In Strange Tale of Panorama Island, a story of doppelgängers and social deception runs parallel to an obsession with visual illusions inspired by panoramas.

Ranpo wrote for a youthful audience. Most of his stories were published in Shinseinen (New Youth, 1920–1937/1940?–1950), which began as a magazine to educate rural youths with practical articles about how to get along in a modernizing world while entertaining them with adventure and detective stories, many of which were translated from Western languages. Within a few years of its founding, its readership had shifted to urban youths in their late teens and twenties and the magazine had become a “stylish magazine for men” (haikara na menzu magajin) that had the “new
sense” (shin-kankaku) “to publish works in the emergent genre of mystery/detective fiction and to report on the latest sociocultural trends for ‘modern boys’ during the late Taishō to early Shōwa eras.”

Ranpo not only wrote for a young audience but was himself young in his outlook and interests. He loved playacting, illusions, tricks, and surprises. Some critics have traced his taste for the bizarre and the fantastic and his sense of theatrical timing to the visual violence of the misemono (sideshows) that he enjoyed attending as a youth in Nagoya. Around the time that he serialized Strange Tale of Panorama Island he wrote about the impact that a misemono depicting the famous sea battle at Port Arthur in Manchuria had had upon him when he was thirteen years old. The daring night attack on Russian ships by a Japanese naval squadron ushered in the Russo-Japanese War, which ended in the defeat and the ultimate collapse of Czarist Russia. It was celebrated throughout Japan for years to come and was the subject of many sideshows, stories, and other entertainments, including the traveling show that Ranpo describes in his 1926 essay, “The Port Arthur Sea Battle Hall” (Ryojun kaisenkan).

The kineorama was a fairly large mechanism for its time. When the curtain opens, the surface of the stage is a giant sea. Blue sky above the horizon line and deep-blue undulating water beneath it. The kineorama lights create the illusion of waves moving on the sea. A high whistle blows and a sailor delivers a brief introduction. Then from one side of the stage a squadron of ships, led by the flagship the Mikasa, advances boldly, parting the waves. A fluttering Rising Sun flag, puffs of black smoke rising into the air, toy warships on the panorama-like stage—as I look it all seems real.

Then a squadron of enemy ships appears from the opposite side. Slowly in the beginning and gradually more violently, the artillery duel is begun. The sound of gunfire assaults the ears.
Introduction


After that comes the night battle scene. The moon appears. The kineorama creates the illusion of clouds passing in front of the moon. Lights on the ship gunwales go on. A beacon shines. It reflects on the water and rolling waves gleam. Each time the cannon is fired streaks of red sparks appear. The beauty of the ships on fire.

That was all there was to the show, but I was enchanted by it.16

Delighted by the spectacle, the next day Ranpo set about reenacting the sea battle with his friends. In his four-and-half-mat tatami room, they improvised a small stage a tenth of the size of the original. They assembled fluttering strips of cloth to represent waves, toy ships, a toy pistol for the sound of the ships’ cannons, a flashlight for the moonlight, and cotton balls soaked in alcohol to produce the ships’ fires. Small neighborhood children were invited to view the show, for which they provided resounding sound effects from behind a black curtain. Ranpo concludes the description by saying that, even now, he would like to try making such toys again and that the tendency to enjoy play of that sort was an inborn trait of his, one that he had indulged in many times since he was a small child.

And indeed, a taste for playacting and theater animates his stories. They are often presented as if on a stage, with a dramatic buildup leading to a surprise ending that is presented abruptly, as if to the clatter of wooden stage clappers signaling the finale of a show. Endings are sometimes gory, like those of the misemono that Ranpo saw as a child. He recalls one such show that featured the dismemberment of a person who had been struck by a train. “A neck, a torso, hands and feet tumbling like potatoes or giant radishes, and copious amounts of blood flowing from cuts were displayed so realistically as to make one want to throw up.”17
In the same essay, Ranpo also describes the panorama *mise-mono* that fascinated him when he was a child:

A building resembling an oil tank suddenly rising into the sky could not but arouse the curiosity of a child. A narrow entryway. A dark, narrow tunnel-like passage. And when you pass through it, suddenly a universe looking absolutely real and completely unlike any you have ever seen before opens up from the sky to the horizon line. It’s an incredibly marvelous trick. I recently read in a book an account of the labors of the panorama’s inventor. He designed that invention from a desire to create a universe exactly the way he wanted it in a round, enclosed building. His plan to double the world is really interesting. Because the background is circular, there is no end to the horizon line painted on it. The sky is blocked by the canopy over the spectators’ seats, and the sunlight shines on it from above, producing a feeling of infinity. It creates the illusion of an actual wide world inside a small circle. Outside that small enclosed world is another, real world. It’s a fairy tale brought to life.18

In the essay “One More World” (*Ima hitotsu no sekai*, 1926) Ranpo reiterates his fascination with the way in which a universe can be created within the confines of a single building through the illusion made possible by an unbroken, circular background and a ceiling that conceals the sky but admits sunlight from above. He expresses delight with the paradox of two worlds existing simultaneously in the same place, at once both inside and outside the building. He concludes the essay by referring to his view of art as “panoramism” (*panoramashugi*) and saying that his dream was to create on paper with words a panorama, a real other world.19

The desire to escape the tedium and monotony of everyday life and flee to an alternative world is a recurring theme in Ranpo’s essays and stories. He posits this impulse as a fundamental desire
that exists widely in modern Japan. Children escape by reading fairy tales. Youths seek escape through adventure tales. Adults find respite from the enervation of the everyday routine in geisha parties, theater, music, painting, and novels. For scholars, scientific and historical discoveries that engage the imagination transport them to other realms. Creators of utopias and philosophers and religious thinkers are also in quest of alternative worlds. Ranpo confesses that he has attempted to fulfill his lifelong desire to create another world in the clumsy execution of stories describing life in the interior of an attic and from the inside of a chair—efforts that he disparages as “next to comic failures.”

His first long work would be far more successful.

When Ranpo began serializing *Panoramato kidan* in *Shinseinen* in October 1926, public interest in Manchuria was high. Images of its vast plains filled the media of movie screens, magazines, and newspapers, beckoning readers to a continent that was being turned into a panoramic spectacle in the popular imagination. Ranpo, in his novella, transformed the expansionist vision of Manchuria into a literal panorama spectacle, complete with a “gory battle frightening to behold.” As few other Japanese writers managed to do, he conveyed the way in which mechanized visions of the twentieth century fed dreams of greatness, and how those dreams might lead to destruction and death. Foremost of those technologies of vision to which he was exposed as a youth and by which he was inspired as a writer were panoramas.

A panorama, which by 1916 was a faintly anachronistic viewing device, having been surpassed in popularity by the motion picture, serves as a model for realizing the other world of which the protagonist of *Strange Tale of Panorama Island* dreams. A remote island is transformed into a giant panorama with a tower in the middle that provides a commanding view of the entire island. Access to the island is through an underwater passageway akin to
the dark passageway leading to a panorama. A glass tunnel fitted with electric lamps functions as a lens that magnifies and distorts the appearance of strange, phosphorescent fish and sea plants at the bottom of the sea. The voluptuous underwater phantasmagoria in which naked women swim past the glass echoes the visual fantasies of early twentieth-century film productions such as Georges Méliès’ 1907 *Under the Seas*, an adaptation of Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, in which mermaids create arabesques with upraised arms and coiled tails against a cavernous recession covered with lily pads.

The underwater tunnel ends in a staircase that the travelers ascend to reach the lighted area, and they step out of the darkness and into the dazzling daylight to behold a vista of breathtaking beauty. Panoramas are carefully constructed to create a sense of hyper-reality, and Ranpo’s panorama island is filled with cleverly designed optical illusions. Staircases are made to appear longer than they actually are by making their top ends narrow. Trick scenery induces one to think that one is climbing when one is actually descending, to think that one is moving forward when one is actually returning to the starting point. Low land changes suddenly into a mountaintop. A wide plain is unexpectedly transformed into a narrow path. An undulating horizon line produces strange, erotic sensations in the travelers who walk through the landscape. Nothing in this landscape is ordinary, predictable, or boring.

The scenes on the island that greet visitors are as amazing as the fantastical sets of the motion-picture extravaganzas of the day. A staircase rises into the sky. White-feathered “birds” speak in women’s voices and offer to serve as vehicles. Clusters of naked men and women romp on slopes carpeted with rainbow-colored flowers. Women lolling on tree branches dangle their limbs in time to sensual music filling the air. The naked bodies dancing and reclining in the open fields evoke the motif of the Arcadian
garden found in early twentieth-century painting such as Matisse’s dreamlike, mythical landscape  
*Bonheur de vivre* (1906). The wildly churning mechanisms in the panorama of machines, on the other hand, predate by some thirty years the meta-mechanic motion sculptures of the Swiss avant-garde artist Jean Tinguely, who parodied the meaninglessness and absurdity of the overly mechanized environment of modern life in his iron assemblages with erratically moving parts.22

The unnatural perfection of the spectacular ravines, cliffs, and woods with not a leaf out of place has a literary precedent in Poe’s “The Domain of Arnheim” (1847). Like Ranpo’s island, Poe’s is an artificial landscape designed by a creative genius who inherits a massive fortune and grasps the opportunity to realize a fantasy landscape, using elements of nature to create it on land the way an artist uses paint to give shape to his vision on canvas. On Poe’s perfectly constructed island, as on Ranpo’s, the visitor is “enwrapt in an exquisite sense of the strange. The thought of nature still remained, but her character seemed to have undergone modification; there was a weird symmetry, a thrilling uniformity, a wizard propriety in these her works. Not a dead branch—not a withered leaf—not a stray pebble—not a patch of brown earth was anywhere visible. The crystal water welled up against the clean granite, or the unblemished moss, with a sharpness of outline that delighted while it bewildered the eye.”23 Travelers are transported over water in mysterious vehicles in both works: swan boats that are actually women disguised as water birds in Ranpo’s and, in Poe’s, a crescent-shaped canoe of ivory that “lies on the surface of the bay with the proud grace of a swan.”

The spectacle awaiting the visitors to Ranpo’s panorama island is wrapped in an atmosphere as mysterious and imposing as that which greets the fairy boat of Arnheim as it “glides magically into a winding channel and slips between two gates and commences a rapid descent into a huge amphitheatre entirely begirt with purple
mountains, whose bases are laved by a gleaming river throughout the full extent of their circuit.”

Like Poe’s Arnheim, too, Ranpo’s utopia is filled with “entrancing” music and redolent with a “strange, sweet odor.”

In addition to mystery and fantasy, Ranpo’s writing, particularly in the early period, is filled with elements of humor and play. This aspect of his creativity is often overlooked. (*Shinseinen* magazine, in which he published many of his stories, also offered its young readers many humorous stories by Western authors such as P. G. Wodehouse and Stephen Leacock.) Ranpo’s style of play often manifested itself in irony. It is notable in the beginning of *Strange Tale of Panorama Island*, where the mysterious island is introduced through the eyes and ears of the local inhabitants. The opening is reminiscent of Uno Kōji’s “Two Aoki Aisaburōs,” in which an insignificant, isolated spot far from the nation’s capital becomes the site of outrageous deceptions. A faint note of sardonic humor underlies the quiet, prescient tone that prevails in the initial description of the small, uninhabited island, which “floats like a green *manjū* [sweet bean-jam bun] turned upside down,” where I Bay juts out into the Pacific Ocean. The scene is notably unremarkable; “practically no one takes note of the island save for occasional fishermen who go ashore on a whim.” But in this remote setting, events of unimaginable, incredible excess will soon unfold. The first sign of disruption in the ordinary, uneventful world of the poor fishing villages comes with rumors of strange construction taking place on the island—rumors that grow more “fairy-tale like” as one moves farther away from the location. For instance, Ranpo’s narrator teasingly withholds the explanation of what it was that prevented the completion of the large concrete pillar in the center of the artificially landscaped island.

His humor darkens as the measures the protagonist takes to carry out his scheme of impersonating his former classmate grow increasingly more outlandish and bizarre. In the scene where he
fakes his suicide by jumping off a boat, Hirosuke crawls to the edge of the deck and climbs over the railing “like an enormous lizard.” In a ghoulish cemetery scene that comes across as more laughable than horrific, he feels “like the old granny of a penny-candy store trying to catch pieces of jelly floating in water,” as he lifts the dead body out of the grave and struggles with the fine skin of the corpse, which clings to his palms “like gloves made of jellyfish” that won’t come off no matter how vigorously he shakes his hands. The humor reaches a climax in the buffoonish scene in which Hirosuke wraps himself in a sheet and lies down in bushes by the roadside, to be discovered by a group of sniveling, runny-nosed peasant children who scream upon seeing “his lunatic figure in a shroud.”

The tension between the horrifying and the laughable—a hallmark of the grotesque imagination—is fully on display in the animal imagery of the penultimate chapter, in which a man and a woman are locked in a death struggle under a dark sky lit by brilliantly exploding fireworks. The woman is described as “displaying her fangs like a gorilla” and “sinking her sharp canines deep into his arm.” Struggling in the mud, the nude couple “are stuck together like sea slugs.” The man closes in on her “like a cat,” and she breaks away from his grip and plunges into the water with the “vigor of a seal.”

Ranpo’s ludic tastes were also evident in his manipulation of proper names. The writer who devised for himself a pen name that plays on the syllables “Edgar Allen Poe” liked to insert word puzzles into his stories. In *Strange Tale of Panorama Island* the main character, an impecunious student with poor eyesight who is given to daydreaming, is named “Hitomi,” written with the graphs for “person” (hito) and “see” (mi). This name, which is also the Japanese word for “eye pupil,” calls attention to the primacy of the visual sense, which dominates the story from beginning to end. Hitomi’s first name, “Hirosuke,” written with the graph for “wide” (hiro), hints at the breadth of vision of the panorama. His full name is a
play on the idea of “Panorama” (literally, “all horizon,” or “entire view”).

Hitomi’s great venture relies upon a visual deception, the fact that he looks exactly like his former wealthy classmate, Komoda, whose identity he usurps in order to gain access to the Komoda family fortune that will enable him to construct the island of his dreams. The word for “came” (kita) and the word for “see” (mi) appear in the name “Kitami,” the detective who comes to the island toward the end of the story and uncovers Hitomi’s true identity. Kitami’s first name, Kogoro, written with the graph for “small” (ko), offsets the graph for “wide” in Hirosuke’s name. In contrast to Hitomi’s project to construct a panorama-like island, a huge undertaking entailing the labors of hundreds of workers, Kitami’s act that leads to the collapse of Hitomi’s project is tiny. It consists of catching sight of a single hair sticking out from the concrete pillar that rises in the center of the island. Kitami had also discovered the key to Hitomi’s scheme in the unpublished manuscript of the novel that Hitomi wrote while he was a university student. In a series of reflections, the utopia in Hitomi’s novel is mirrored in Hitomi’s project; and the RA in the title of the novel, “The Story of RA,” reflects the RA in RAnpo’s own nom de plume. Kitami, who was the editor of the school magazine that rejected Hitomi’s manuscript, ironically turns out to be Hitomi’s “ideal reader”—attentive and alert to every authorial gesture.24

Ranpo wrote in an era before television, the Internet, and cell phones created an environment in which events are made instantly visible and constant disclosure and demystification are staples of public discourse. It was a more leisurely age, when life moved at a slower pace and people had more leeway to imagine and dream about the possibilities of other worlds. Japanese readers who grew up in the 1920s recall the anticipation of returning home from school and reading the stories of Edogawa Ranpo, which transported them
to peculiar imaginary spaces. His great appeal to readers resided in the depth of his desire to transcend the utilitarian, bureaucratic rationalism of modern society that relegated people to predetermined lives. At a time of anxiety created by economic depression, mass migration into the cities, colonial expansion, and political upheaval, Ranpo’s stories dealt with the fearsomeness of the unfamiliar by giving it shape and containing it in entertaining ludic forms. Readers and audiences of those years of “ero guro nansensu” (erotic, grotesque nonsense) were drawn to his strange dreams and violent fantasies that were, after all, only play.25

Significantly, Ranpo also succeeded in creating a new literature that moved the reader’s imagination beyond the printed word and into the freer, image-based realm of the media.26 His first major work has proven to be remarkably prescient in its references to kinds of technologies that did not exist when he wrote.27 Today, when IMAX theaters envelop viewers in simulated landscapes, sea worlds enable visitors to experience the ocean from the vantage point of the bottom of the sea, and robots and autonomous machines are transforming the way in which humans live, his visionary stories are being rediscovered by another generation of readers and taking on new relevance as they continue to fascinate and delight youthful dreamers.