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# **Practice as Research: Philosophy and Aesthetics of Chinese Landscape Painting Applied to Contemporary Western Film and Digital Visualisation Practice**

Christin Bolewski

Loughborough School of Art and Design, Leicestershire, UK, LE11 3TU

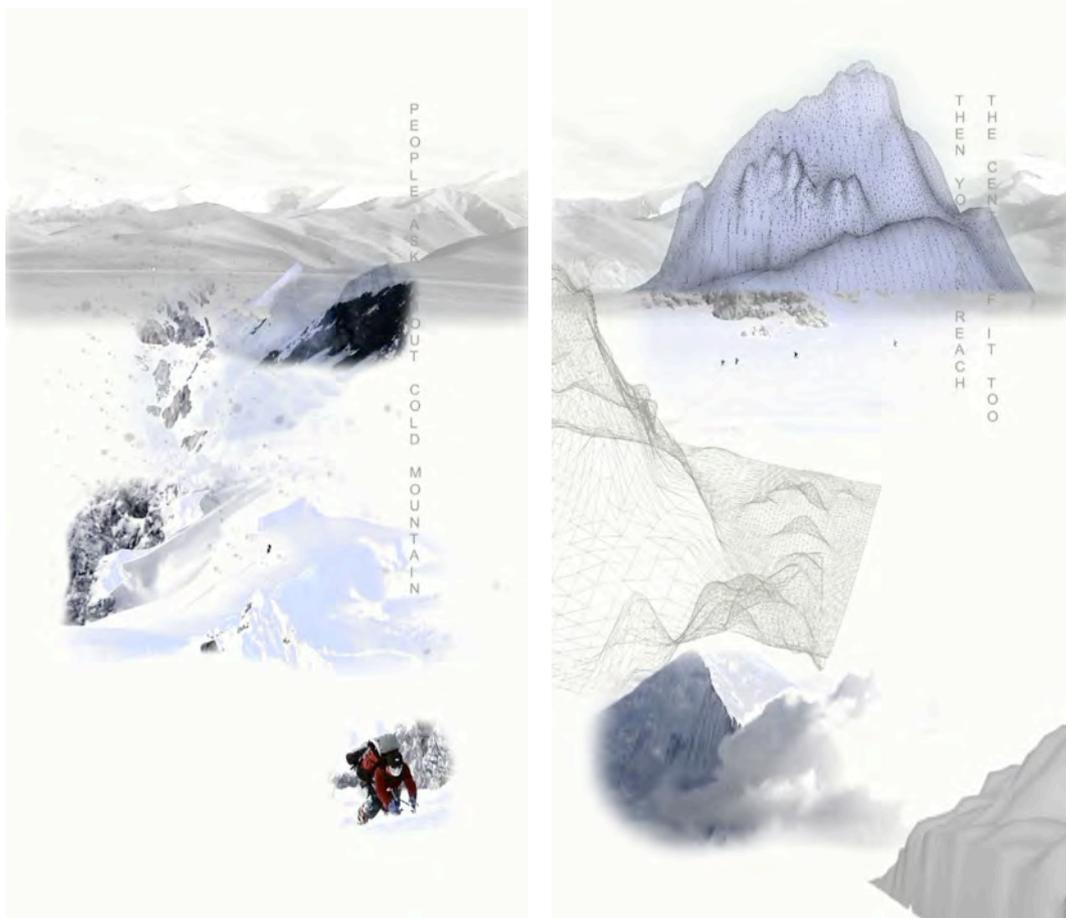
**Abstract.** This practice-led research project investigates how East Asian Art traditions can be understood through reference to the condition of Western contemporary visual culture. Proceeding from Chinese thought and aesthetics the traditional concept of landscape painting 'Shan-Shui-Hua' is recreated within the new Western genre of the 'video-painting'. The main features of the traditional Chinese landscape painting merges with Western moving image practice creating new modes of 'transcultural art' - a crossover of Western and Asian aesthetics - to explore form, and questions digital visualisation practice that aims to represent realistic space. Confronting the tools of modern computer visualisation with the East Asian concept creates an artistic artefact contrasting, confronting and counterpointing both positions.

## **1 Introduction**

This paper is based on a practice-led Fine Art research project and includes the demonstration of video art. It presents an explorative art project and explains how the visual and the verbal are unified in this artistic research. It investigates how East Asian art traditions can be understood through reference to the condition of Western contemporary visual culture. Proceeding from Chinese thought and aesthetics the traditional concept of landscape painting 'Shan-Shui-Hua' is recreated within the new genre of the 'video-painting' as a single (flat) screen video installation. The main features of the traditional Chinese landscape painting merges with Western moving image practice creating new modes of 'transcultural art' - a crossover of Western and Asian aesthetics - to explore form, and questions digital visualisation practice that aims to represent realistic space. Confronting the tools of modern computer visualisation with the East Asian concept creates an artistic artefact contrasting, confronting and counterpointing both positions.

The process and outcome of the practice-based and theoretical research is discussed and evaluated in academic papers. The paper presentation aims to present the conceptual and philosophical ideas of the traditional Chinese landscape painting and its application to contemporary digital film practice. It introduces the new genre of the 'video painting' and provides a definition and description of its main features as a

new artefact in Western contemporary moving image practice in relation to the theory of Remediation of Bolter and Grusin. It argues that the concept of the traditional Chinese landscape painting is privileged to be represented as a video painting and it relates Eastern philosophy and aesthetics to Western principles. It defines how temporality, space and (multi)-perspective is used in traditional Chinese art and design practice and relates this to contemporary digital film, computer animation and 3D visualisation practice.



**Fig. 1 + 2.** Video stills from 'Shan-Shui-Hua' video painting, single screen (flat) screen video installation, 2D/3D computer animation, HDV 15,19 min video loop, © author (2008)

## **2 The Relationship of Chinese Art and Film**

Chinese landscape painting is called 'Shan-Shui-Hua' the three characters standing for respectively mountain, water and painting and multi-perspective as well as temporality are important features for both East Asian aesthetics and the medium of film. The Chinese horizontal hand scroll is referred to as the first motion picture: it unrolls in time and space and is enjoyed as a progression while the painting is revealed foot by foot. Once the Russian avant-garde filmmaker Sergej Eisenstein was inspired by this commonality and by the Chinese open metaphorical language in the development of his theory of film montage. [1] He studied Japanese language and art and concluded that all the various branches of Japanese art were permeated by the same cinematic element, so that it was appropriate that the cinema should learn from other forms of Japanese artistic practice. Besides extracting techniques from Chinese characters and the Japanese Kabuki theatre, Eisenstein had also drawn on traditional scroll paintings that fused in his mind a combined image of close-ups and composition in depth.

From the perspective of a contemporary digital media artist and film maker it is very challenging to look closer to the relation between East Asian aesthetics and the medium film and to consider the early observations of Eisenstein in an approach to digital film practice and to apply it to the condition of digital visualisation technologies.

## **3 Research Methods: Materials, Methods and Conceptual Framework**

A theoretical framework is developed, applied and tested to create a piece of video art in an experimental approach. General aims of the project are to transfer and apply knowledge from different disciplines, from theory to practice-based experimentation and back to a theoretical analysis and interpretation, which is transmitted and translated to a set of diverse interdisciplinary audience groups via different academic papers, journal publications and public exhibitions of the artefact.

Main research questions are:

- How can the Shan-Shui-Hua (traditional Chinese landscape painting) be reinterpreted in Western contemporary video art?
- How can the concept of temporality and the multiple perspectives of 'Shan-Shui-Hua' be transferred to Western moving image practice?
- How can the concept of the 3 perspectives ('San-e-ho' - distance of height, width and depths) be applied to the Western concept of linear perspective?

The development and progression of the theoretical framework includes the following literature and textual background research to inform breadth and depth of research:

- Theory of remediation (Bolter and Grusin)
- Theory of traditional Chinese landscape painting and Chinese philosophy
- Western philosophy related to Chinese philosophy and aesthetics (Francois Jullien)
- Historical relation between Chinese art and film
- Theory of film montage and film language
- Theory / principles of digital visualisation practice
- Theory of video painting

Research Methods include the analysis and application of knowledge/research to the creation of the practice-based artefact. A set of parameters is generated to advance a preliminary definition of the main structure and form of the video painting. The experimental development of the video painting progresses through the process of video and sound montage and digital computer animation according to set parameters. Then the process and outcome of the theoretical and practice-based research is discussed and evaluated in a critical analysis. Knowledge is transferred between, translated for and exchanged with a diverse and interdisciplinary audience group by targeting different academic conferences, journals and digital media events and exhibitions that aim to gather an audience from traditional art, film, digital media arts and culture, science and the humanities, etc. Depending on audience group academic papers focus on different aspects of the research.

#### **4 Dissemination and Presentation of Research Outcomes: Practice-based Artefact and Theoretical Analysis**

The research project has been disseminated so far in three different modes:

1. Academic papers presented at international conferences; the creative work - the video painting is presented as illustrative material.

- EVA Conference London (Electronic Visualisation and the Arts) 2008
- FILE Symposium 2008 - Electronic Language International Festival, Sao Paulo Brazil
- Design Cinema Conference 2008 - Art Exhibition, Istanbul Turkey
- NORDES 09 - Engaging Artefacts Conference, Oslo Norway
- CHINA EXPOSED, IMPOSED, PROPOSED", 5th International Sinology Forum 2010, Oporto Portugal

Other conference presentations are targeted:

- 7<sup>th</sup> annual iDMAa (International Digital Media and Arts association) conference conference at Ball State University Muncie, Indiana USA
- OBJECT AND IDENTITY IN A DIGITAL AGE, CHArt (Computers and the History of Art) Twenty-Fifth Annual Conference, Birkbeck, University of London
- THE ART WORK BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY AND NATURE, International conference at Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

2. Video painting: single screen video installation presented at digital media art exhibitions and festivals. The creative work is exhibited as an artistic artefact without the presentation of a theoretical framework.

- SIGGRAPH Asia 2008, Art Gallery Exhibition, Singapore
- Traverse Video 2009: Interstice et Porosité, Toulouse France

3. Linear video art tape: the video installation has been modified into a single screen linear video tape to be included into international video art and film festival screenings. The creative work is exhibited as an artistic artefact without the presentation of a theoretical framework. The artefact is a separate piece of art, because it does no longer exist within the framework of the video painting. It focusses on the relation of Eastern and Western philosophy and the aspect of temporality within traditional Chinese landscape painting.

- Naoussa Short Film Festival Greece 2009
- Back\_up Festival Weimar Germany 2009
- Images Contre Nature Marseille France 2009
- Animator Festival Poznań Poland 2009
- Tenderpix & Rushes Experimental Filmfestival London UK 2009
- Split International Festival for New Film Croatia 2009
- Canary Warf Film Festival London UK 2009

## **5. Conceptual Framework**

The following chapter explain the conceptual and theoretical framework and discuss first analytical reflections from the practice-based research process.

### **5.1. The video painting**

The use of new technologies has almost inevitably led to the blurring of established definitions, roles, and taxonomies of visual art. The video painting is a new form of contemporary video expression based around the latest developments in High Definition Video and flatscreen displays providing a high-quality platform for the presentation of the moving image. As Jim Bizzocchi, Assistant Professor at Simon Fraser University's School of Interactive Arts and Technology, Canada describes, 'video paintings are video works, which are presented on LCD panels. They are wall-mounted in the same manner as traditional paintings. Content in this emergent form is designed to work at all times as either a highly aware foregrounded experience or as passive background. Like traditional paintings, video paintings hang on the wall to be viewed or ignored - depending on individual viewer preference in the moment.' [2]

The video painting is a hybrid concept between the still and the moving image using traditional patterns of film narration and painting practice, quoting different

genres such as the still life, landscape, portrait or the abstract painting. In 2005, I created my first video painting 'Still life in motion' in cooperation with SONY Germany as part of the 'SONY BRAVIAmotionart' project. 'Still life in motion' connects the tradition of the still life painting with the moving image. The canvas is replaced by a large flatscreen expanded by perspective of time and space, reconstructing and deconstructing the issues of the still life genre at the same time. [3] The video painting 'Shan-Shui-Hua' is the second work investigating a traditional art form within the new genre of the video painting. Whereas 'Still life in motion' emphasizes the concept of montage and time, it is the different use of space and perspective in traditional Eastern and Western art that gets investigated in this work.



**Fig. 3.** Video still from 'Still life in motion', video painting, single screen (flat) screen video installation, 2D computer animation, HDV 8,23min video loop, © author 2005

## 5.2. Remediation: Reworking Traditional Art Forms

In the pivotal book 'Remediation - Understanding New Media' published in 2000, the new-media specialists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin coined the word 'remediation' to refer to the ways in which any new medium is always both a refashioning of an earlier medium and a novelty understood through previous media. They note that earlier media have also refashioned one another: 'photography remediated painting, film remediated stage production and photography, and television remediated film, vaudeville, and radio.' They come to the conclusion that 'for our (Western) culture, mediation without remediation seems to be impossible'. [4] Any new medium

develops step by step from the emergence of a novel technology and through the articulation of a specific media language and semiotic system by reworking, remodeling and sampling various elements of differing other media into newly converged forms to successfully establish its own aesthetic vocabulary. Once such a media-specific set of means of expression is established, it becomes a medium that can be distinguished from other, already existing media, presenting itself as an improved version of other media.

Therefore the aim of this research project is also to explore the basic characteristics of the video painting, how it reworks traditional themes, not only from painting but also from film practice, and if there is the potential for it to develop into a new medium.

### **5.3. The Ambient Character of Video Paintings**

The video painting emerges as a supremely pictorial form. It is a meditative art form and has a slow flow of manipulated time, which provokes irritation in the viewer's perception, whether s/he sees a real, still, or moving image. 'It creates a visual aesthetic, which relies on high visual impact, the subtle manipulation of image, and the play of gradual transitions. It is a smooth temporal flow, always changing, but never too quickly. The piece is an exploration of concepts of ambience, time, and the liminality of image and of narrative.' [2] Due to its ambient and meditative character the video painting seems to be privileged to represent the conceptual and philosophical ideas of Shan-Shui-Hua.

The Chinese landscape painting is not a representational image of a specific place or landscape, it is a metaphorical or spiritual vision. Chinese art is based on philosophical ideas; main school of thoughts are Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism and simplicity, minimalism and emptiness or the void are very important features. The contemporary French philosopher Francois Jullien and the Chinese French writer Francois Cheng translate Chinese aesthetics for Western understanding: in doing so examining and exploring the creation of a meditative space, the tension and harmony between the elements mountain and water, between the compact and fluid, the vertical and horizontal, the white emptiness against fullness, or the bland comprising the harmonious union of all potential values.

These ideas are inspirational and in opposition to the distinct use of images, narrative and the high acceleration of fast moving key visuals overloaded with meaning and message in the current mainstream genres of Western moving image practice. In his film 'Tokyo-ga' made in 1985, as a homage to the Japanese film author Ozu, the German film author Wim Wenders says: 'If only it were possible to make a film like that... Just looking, not trying to prove anything.' [5] The video painting is capable of doing so.

#### **5.4. 'Detour Over China' - Chinese Philosophy Interpreted for Western Understanding**

Whereas a lot of contemporary Eastern artists incorporate principles of Western art into their work creating artefacts that merge Eastern and Western culture the attempt to incorporate Eastern aesthetics into Western art is rarely investigated. Chinese is a symbol language, ambiguous and open for multiple interpretations. Therefore Chinese art is also open to varying interpretations and it is often regarded as esoteric with its emphasis on suggestiveness. The presented research is an attempt to turn around this focus and it contributes to a recent development: Through the rise of China as a global economic force the interest in Chinese culture has increased in the Western world which is evident in a lot of publications and public discussions. An important reference to this research project is the oeuvre of the French philosopher Francois Jullien. In his book 'The detour over China' (free translation of the German title 'Umweg über China') Jullien attempts to create a new approach to Western culture: A 'local change of thinking', a process of distancing from Western thinking as an effective strategy where Chinese philosophy functions as an 'outside' from which to see more clearly the values and preoccupation of Western culture. [6]

This research project is not the research of an art historian, it is an individual response of an artist and includes artistic freedom. In the sense of Francois Jullien I make a 'detour over China'. Emphasizing to some extent pictorial concepts and practical aspects of the Chinese painting process enables to distance and to take a fresh approach to Western film and digital visualisation practice, but at the same time using software tools that generally have been devised to create 2D and 3D artefacts from a Western cultural perspective avoids the pitfalls of echoing and imitating Chinese landscape painting too closely. The concept of multi-perspective and the endless scroll are explored through digital filmmaking, video compositing and virtual camera, depths and particle systems. Challenging the Western preoccupation with narrative and distinct meaning the work contains no complex narration and attempts to be a meditative open art work - a detour over China - combining and contrasting Western and Eastern culture.

#### **5.5. Man and Nature in Eastern and Western Culture**

The theme of the journey is an enduring theme in Chinese landscape paintings. This means yearning for the spiritual, the remote, or the unattainable. The artist frequently portrays himself as a lone figure, a romantic fugitive, wandering into the uninhabited parts of nature where he can linger forever. Chinese landscapes usually include small human figures that blend harmoniously into the vast world around them. Man and nature interact and complement each other to reach a state of balance and harmony. The video scroll transposes this traditional relation of man and nature into a different, more contemporary Western manner: it uses the figure of the Western mountaineer equipped with special tools and protective clothing to vanquish the highest peaks in order to conquer nature rather than searching for harmonious existence, thus counterpointing Eastern and Western ideals.

The ambient video scroll presents two poems of the famous Chinese poet Han Shan. (translated by Watson 1970 [7] ) He was a hermit and poet of the T'ang Dynasty and most of his poems were written when he lived alone in caves and primitive shelters in the far Eastern mountains of China.

Chinese poetry is also open to varying interpretations and within the video scroll it is presented as a reflection on the Western mountaineers fight against nature ascending and descending the highest peaks counterpointing the Chinese attempt of spiritual harmony.

### **5.6. Space and Perspective in Eastern and Western Visual Culture**

The creation of real or hyper-real space is one of the main objectives in film and 3D visualisation practice. Based on the Renaissance tradition, achieving the effect of realistic space by the employment of linear perspective is a major preoccupation of Western visual culture. In the construction of a virtual 3D space the Cartesian grid is used to reconstruct this geometrical perspective, whereas Eastern culture has a concept of using multiple vanishing points that within which the creation of a realistic space is not one of its aims. So unlike the Western painting tradition, which under the strong influence of science emphasized proportion, perspective and realistic depiction of form, the Chinese artists never felt compelled to restrict themselves to this limited view. Because a painting is not a window, there is no need to imitate the mechanics of vision and view a scene from only one spot. Instead, they developed a more abstract and free spirited attitude towards art. 'The Chinese artist inspects the world from unrestricted, shifting points of view and is essentially different from the strict and realistic western 'single perspective'. This unique feature enabled Chinese painters to free themselves from the limitations of human vision and permitted more freedom to improvise using ones imagination.' [8]

'And so like a century old guiding principle reads that the painter must have seen a landscape from several viewpoints in order to fathom its being, we find in one and the same picture several perspectives. One and the same figure is not rarely to be seen repeatedly in a scroll. We accompany it more or less in its migration. The artists of the traditional Chinese landscape painting do not show us a moment in time, but rather a time span.' [9]

Chinese landscape painting is composed through a system of multiple vanishing points called 'San-e-ho' (or 'Sanyuan'), the three distances i.e. high distance ('Gao-yuan'), deep distance ('Shenyuan') and level distance ('Pingyuan'). This was first established by the painter Kuo Hsi in his famous book 'Sublime notes by forests and rivers': 'Mountain has three distances. Looking at the top of a mountain from its base shows distance stressing its height. Looking at the back of a mountain from its front shows distance stressing its depth. Looking at the mountain beyond from a mountain close by shows distance stressing its leveled broadness.' [10] An artist can combine two or three expressions of distance in a single landscape. The composition of a hanging scroll usually places the foreground at the bottom of the scroll with the middle and far distances moving upward toward the top of the scroll. 'Next to a mountain of great height he might place a valley, creating the illusion of immense depth. Or he might illustrate a panoramic scene with different expressions of space in different parts' [11]

## **6. Discussion of Outcomes / Application of the Theoretical Framework: The Digital Video Scroll**

The video scroll 'Shan-Shui-Hua' is a combination of a vertical and horizontal scroll. It is presented on a large flatscreen monitor, wall-mounted in vertical position as a video painting or a vertical video scroll. The horizontal scroll unrolls in time and space, but only in the moment of projection. The video presents a permanent virtual camera movement gliding through an indefinite landscape. This imitates the conception of spatial representation of an original hand scroll where multiple points of view are spread horizontally, parallel to the scene. Whereas in the original hand scroll within the order of space, the order of time introduces a sequence of individual scenes, which gradually unfold, in the video version the order of space can only be introduced in the order of time. Of course, the viewer cannot influence the speed in the same manner as it is possible with the 'interactive' traditional hand scroll; a pre-assigned speed has been set by the artist previously during the creation process and cannot be influenced in the moment of observation. But within the vertical direction the viewer is free to move at h/er own speed and in the combination of the vertical and horizontal scroll a playful interaction takes place between composition and movement in both directions expanding and combining the possibilities of the two different traditional scroll formats.

The horizontal scroll of the video is composed and animated from right to left in analogy to the East Asian principle. For the Western eye this is an unusual form of composition, because our images are composed with a left to right direction and especially within video and film the movement of approaching or departing objects and camera is determined from left to right. Both cultures also differ in the general treatment of the images. In the Western world, paintings are framed and permanently fixed at a firm place at the wall while Chinese paintings are only enjoyed for occasional viewing pleasures. This corresponds with the non-permanent visibility of film or electronic images only to be observed in the moment of projection or through that consciously turning on of a video monitor. Only the blank screen or projection surface is all time visible and highlights the temporality of the moving image. The video scroll is designed to run endlessly as a permanent looped video sequence without beginning and end, so one could decide to have the work permanently visible on screen serving the Western viewing tradition.

The subject of the Chinese landscape is taken from the material world of three-dimensional space, but it exists only in the two-dimensional space of a painting, where volume and depth are illusions. Film / video is a two-dimensional medium as much as painting, but through the addition of the dimension of time movements of objects and camera and therefore the shift of perspective can be captured. This allows the artist to create a simulation of the third dimension of space on the two-dimensional screen. In 3D computer visualisation a simulation of the third dimension can be established through a virtual camera and the creation of 3D objects animated in time. The landscape of the 'video scroll' contains original video recordings as well as 2D / 3D computer generated images and animations of landscapes. Whereas in the original paintings the journey within the third dimension of space is simulated through a careful arrangement of 'San-e-ho' and the repeated appearance of the figure

of a solitary traveller (for the viewer to identify with being on a journey) the 'video scroll' additionally uses camera movements along the x- and y-axis as well as camera zoom and virtual camera movement along the z-axis as an extra layer to push and question the perspective composition of the traditional Chinese painting.

Software for 3D visualisation allows the user to create multiple cameras and view-points. Shifting perspective, looking at the scene from different angles and distances can be easily alternated during the process of constructing a virtual space and is an important requirement in software design. Most software solutions offer a split screen mode where 4 different perspectives can be monitored simultaneously. During the process of construction the user is free like the Chinese artist to move in space and in his imagination of a landscape, but when it comes to the moment of finally rendering an image or a sequence as a final output there is suddenly only one camera perspective possible at one time. One image can only contain one perspective. The constraints of the software are limited to the laws of linear perspective and the Cartesian Grid. The integration of different viewpoints in one image can only be achieved in a later process i.e. with a compositing tool where different images and perspectives can be composed as a 'collage' through the layering and keying of separate image information. Here it is obvious that the software is designed towards creating artefacts corresponding with 'real' space rather than imaginative space.

In his book 'The Tao of Chinese Landscape Painting' the contemporary artist Wucius Wong creates an interesting analogy to digital visualisation practice: 'But as he paints, the Chinese artist prefers to rely on his own imagination, and arranges the elements as though he were building a model. From his mind-heart he selects mountains, which he can then rotate and reshape; directs water to wind as springs, jump as waterfalls, or flow as rivers along folds; and combines these elements in a harmonious orchestration displaying vital breath.' [11] Wucius Wong uses terminology that sounds more familiar describing the construction of a virtual landscape within a digital software application rather than the traditional Chinese painting process. Painting from memory using templates for mountains and waterfalls from a kind of 'construction kit' is strongly reminiscent of the prefabricated models, effects or particle systems of digital software solutions that are ready to be used quickly and only partially adapted for individual use. The 'video scroll' uses templates of mountain models, especially wire frame models, and particle systems for snow, mist or clouds. As the Chinese landscape traditionally does not represent a single landscape rather than an ideal and symbolic form of it, the different elements become a set of 'metaphorical templates' similar as the templates in 3D construction.

In the Chinese landscape as well as in the video scroll different parts of the image sit separately designed within a large empty space. Water, mist, or clouds divide the scene naturally through the interplay of mass and void. Mass and void is an important principle of composition. 'The mist is also empty space, and empty space contains the possibility for transformation. Transformation is central to Taoist thought. It is like being in meditation, when the entire cosmos looks like a white mist, and one finds oneself in a world of white light. Here, time and space seem to be annihilated.' [11] But it also supports the creation of the impression of a continuous landscape although conflicting perspectives are used within the image.

The use of writing that harmonizes with the picture is a further peculiarity of the Chinese painting. The great painters of China were traditionally the same men who

were highly educated in the chosen literature. They have long recognized the expressive power of poetry, considering painting as poetry without words. During the Southern Song period (1127-1279), painters were frequently exploiting the connections between poetry and painting, either by making a painting to capture poetic lines or writing a new poem to bring out features of a painting they had done. The poetry inscribed in the void ('the sky') of the painting is not barely an artificially added commentary; it introduces the dimension of time and animates the space. It refers to a lived experience of the painter and represents his thoughts in the moment of creating the painting. It extends the painting through the echo that it evokes in the viewer and adds another level of temporality to the traditional Chinese painting.

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