

Transcultural Vistas: Window Metaphors in Painting and Film Narratives

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Abstract

This article explores the metaphorical use of "windows" in the visual narratives of painting and film, juxtaposing their symbolic meanings within Western and Chinese art traditions. The window is examined as a threshold of potentiality and longing, a concept that challenges viewers' perceptual limits. The study employs a comparative analysis of historical and modern works, incorporating theoretical frameworks by Alberti, Friedberg, and Sobchack. Western art portrays windows as symbols of openness and connectivity, while in Chinese art, they represent the interface between the material and spiritual realms, reflecting Confucian and Taoist philosophies. The article further investigates the window's role in cinema, particularly its use in character introspection and the blending of reality with illusion. The impact of technological advancements, such as augmented reality and virtual reality, on the cinematic window is also discussed. The research highlights the window as a cultural mediator that influences visual aesthetics and cultural identity. It concludes with a call for interdisciplinary and cross-cultural dialogue to enhance the understanding of visual storytelling.

Keywords: Window Metaphor, Visual Culture, Painting, Film Art, Cross-Cultural Aesthetics

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1. Introduction

The window, as a symbol, has been represented and interpreted diversely across cultures and historical periods, with its artistic depictions evolving from antiquity to modernity. This evolution is significantly influenced by the traditional perspectives of European and American art, as well as the profound philosophical traditions of Chinese Confucianism and Taoism. As science, technology, and societal norms advance, the exploration of the relationship between the act of viewing and the concept of perception becomes increasingly relevant. This exploration is particularly focused on the realms of painting, film, and other artistic media. Central to this inquiry are the aesthetic and imaginative differences that arise from a transnational cultural perspective, which are crucial for a comprehensive analysis of cross-cultural variations in visual and perceptual understanding.

This article delves into the diverse visual representations of the "window" metaphor as seen in the artistic traditions of Western European and American countries, as well as within the context of Chinese painting art. It leverages examples from notable works such as *Dongzhuang Picture*, *St. Jerome in His Study*, and those by Antonello da Messina to dissect and juxtapose the visual perspectives prevalent in these regions. Additionally, the article examines the confluence of Taoism and Confucianism within the Chinese context. The analysis extends to the cinematic portrayal of the "window" metaphor, as evidenced in films like *Raise the Red Lantern* and *In the Mood for Love*.

Research has consistently shown that an individual's perspective is significantly influenced by their social and cultural milieu. While Western nations tend to prioritize an objective approach to visual construction, China has a more nuanced focus, emphasizing the emotional undercurrents within material media. Visual and perceptual knowledge, once distinct, are now increasingly intertwined. This integration of sensory experiences is facilitated by the ongoing advancements in science, technology, and the arts. The primary objective of this article is to elucidate the distinctions between Chinese and Western viewing cultures through the lens of the "window" metaphor. Subsequently, the article adopts a cross-cultural perspective to examine film art, particularly how the window metaphor is employed across various film genres. This includes avant-garde Asian films and Hollywood blockbusters, which illuminate the intricate interplay between cultural influences and visual narrative strategies. The article posits that the window metaphor not only enhances our grasp of visual aesthetics, cultural identity, and narrative imagination but also transcends time and space. It advocates for an interdisciplinary approach and cross-cultural dialogue, thereby fostering a more profound understanding of the human experience.

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2. Methods

The article synthesizes the perspectives of Leon Battista Alberti on the concept of perspective, the insights of Anne Friedberg and Vivian Sobchack on the symbolic meanings of windows within the framework of vision and narrative, and augments these with the scholarly contributions of other eminent thinkers. It also incorporates the philosophical underpinnings from traditional Chinese Confucianism, Taoism, and excerpts from classical texts.

Alberti, in his seminal work *De pictura*, underscored the significance of perspective and composition in crafting the illusion of space and depth within a two-dimensional canvas. Alberti's metaphor of painting as a window (Alberti, 2008) serves to highlight the window's role as a conduit between various existential realms within a visual narrative, thereby accentuating the tension between illusion and reality. In the Western artistic tradition, windows are often emblematic of openness, enlightenment, and the interconnectivity between interior and exterior spaces. A case in point is Caspar David Friedrich's *Woman at the Window*, where the figure beyond the window piques a sense of introspection, yearning, and existential reflection. Similarly, the vibrant hues and assertive forms in Henri Matisse's *Red Harmony* (*The Red Room*) project an aura of vigor and vitality, with windows acting as symbolic gateways between the domestic sphere and the external milieu.

Friedberg, in her influential volume *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, expands upon Alberti's metaphor to scrutinize the function of windows within cinematic spatiality. She posits that windows are more than mere architectural fixtures; they are symbolic dividers that demarcate the real from the imaginary, thereby influencing our perception of space, identity, and representation. This enhances our comprehension of how windows function as visual metaphors in the synthesis of painting and film, acting as intermediaries in our engagement with the narrative world. Sobchack, in *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, delves into the symbolic significance of images and windows in cinematic narratives. She posits that the window symbolizes the dichotomy between cinematic expression and perception, elucidating the nuanced interplay between the spectator, the screen, and the cinematic gaze through an in-depth examination of framing techniques. A quintessential example is Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, where the window becomes a metaphor for the cinematic screen, blurring the boundaries between reality and illusion, and between public and private spheres.

The window metaphor is deeply intertwined with the cultural fabric of Chinese Confucianism, Taoism, and a multitude of Chinese classics. The window motif, influenced by Confucian introspection and Taoist transcendence, carries multifaceted meanings, symbolizing the demarcation between the internal and external realms. The reinterpretation of the character "guan (观)" in *Shuowenjiezi* exemplifies the sophisticated understanding of vision and perception in Chinese literature and art, encapsulating cautious observation and implicit metaphor. Wen Zhengming's *Thirty-one Scenes of the Humble Administrator's Garden* utilizes

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windows to invite contemplation of the enduring beauty of nature and the ephemeral nature of human existence, serving as a metaphor for the interconnectedness of humanity with the natural world. Conversely, in Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*, windows symbolize the protagonist's yearning for connection and intimacy within the confines of societal norms and expectations. Filmmakers adeptly employ windows as a narrative device to evoke emotion, provoke thought, and engage the audience on a profound level.

Adopting a transcultural perspective is indispensable for discerning cross-cultural disparities in visual and perceptual understanding. Prior research has often focused on the viewing history and culture of specific ethnic groups or within the traditional history of a single nation. However, few studies have explored the evolution of viewing forms across cultures and media, using the "window" as a point of observation. This article adopts a holistic approach, emphasizing the significance of window symbolism across various cultures and art forms, from Eastern and Western paintings to cinematic explorations, and the evolution of installation art. It considers the confluence of culture, history, and artistic expression, shedding light on the complexity of human experience, cultural identity, and perception, memory, and identity. The article advocates for interdisciplinary discourse and a profound understanding of visual aesthetics and narrative techniques, among other aspects.

3. Results

As a metaphor, the window encapsulates a liminal space, marking the boundary between the familiar and the enigmatic. Artists have often employed the window to evoke a sense of potential, to stir feelings of longing, and to allude to the mysteries that lie beyond our ken. It prompts viewers to extend the boundaries of their perception and to weave narratives within their minds.

In stark contrast, Chinese paintings guide the viewer's gaze along an artistic axis that extends from a distant panorama to an intimate foreground, embodying the principle of "turning back and being sincere" as articulated by Zong (1997). This approach signifies a reflective journey that leads to self-contemplation and introspection. Conversely, when engaging with Western paintings, the viewer's gaze is projected outward from a close vantage point, with the window frame acting as a conduit that disperses sight into the vastness of the scene. This technique evokes the sentiment that "the heart does not return, and the emotions are lost in illusion," as described by Zong (1997).

The metaphor of the window acquires an enriched layer of meaning when transitioning from the realm of painting to that of film. It serves as a conduit that offers a glimpse into the lives, dreams, and the very milieu of the characters depicted. The metaphor's significance is heightened by the evolution of cinematic technology. The window morphs into a gateway to immersive storytelling, blurring the line that distinguishes the tangible from the illusory, particularly when experienced through the medium of augmented reality and virtual reality.

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4. Discussion

4.1 Window in Picture in Western Painting

In the context of an artwork, a window serves a dual purpose: it delineates the spatial composition and imbues the piece with symbolic depth, while also admitting light and setting the scene. The window's strategic positioning within a painting acts as a metaphorical device and a realistic depiction of naturalism. Post the Byzantine era in Europe, the rise of humanism profoundly influenced painters, who endeavored to craft more "realistic" works. Concurrently, advancements in perspective endowed artists with the means to portray more accurate and objective dimensions, leading to an increase in lifelike settings in paintings, with windows often featuring as a key motif.

Tracing back to the Pythagoreans' initial musings on sight and their relative neglect of light, through Plato's characterization of vision as a "secondary cause," and acknowledging the contributions of medieval scholars from the Arab and Latin West, the concept of perspective was born. Its aim was to "illustrate how human senses and reason apprehend and comprehend the external world" (Wang, 2019) by establishing visual activity as a cognitive process. Alberti, in the inaugural chapter of "De pictura," pledges to elucidate the art of painting through mathematical terms. This approach, rooted in Greek tradition and the era's rationality, utilized mathematics to substantiate cognition, thereby transmuting painting into a domain governed by mathematical precision. However, given the focus on the visual impression of objects, the analysis calls for a more intuitive, sensory intelligence—what Alberti refers to as "la più grassa minerva" (Alberti, Trans. Hu, Jun & Xin, Chen, 2012)—rather than purely abstract mathematical reasoning.

Antonello da Messina's *St. Jerome in His Study* (1475) exemplifies this principle, where windows are strategically placed to dissect the image into foreground, middle ground, and background, meticulously representing the relative sizes of near and far objects. The artwork's exceptional quality is attributable to its ingenious architectural arrangement, which articulates the character's attributes. The painting is methodically divided into three distinct planes: the exterior study, the interior study, and the view beyond the window. The Renaissance perspective, a hallmark of Messina's oeuvre, is employed here. The viewer is guided along the perspective lines formed by the furniture, arcades, and floor tiles, culminating in the focused gaze on St. Jerome's downcast eyes and the open Bible before him. Notably, the foreground window acts as a realistic representation and a framing device, suggesting a "picture within a picture" effect. The use of perspective to create distance between the primary figure and the backdrop subtly introduces a sense of divine justice. The windows, by allowing a visual journey from the material to the spiritual, enhance the narrative's verisimilitude and connect the viewer with the external environment.

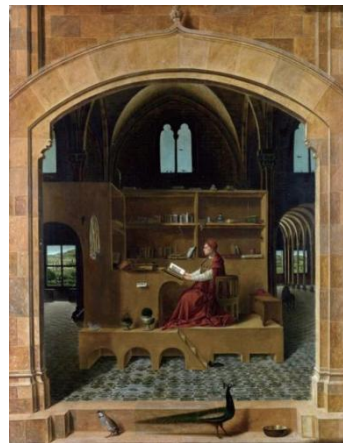
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Within this pictorial space, the composition's ingenuity holds dual aesthetic significance: narrative and pictorial. The narrative significance is pronounced when "istoria" (Alberti, 2008), or the telling of a story, is the ultimate goal within the 15th-century neo-humanist "pictorial space." Meanwhile, the pictorial significance shapes the formal logic of the composition.

Figure 1: Antonello da Messina, St. Jerome in His Study(1475)



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Jerome_in_His_Study_%28Antonello_da_Messina%29

Furthermore, the use of windows as a backdrop in portraiture has become increasingly prevalent, crafting an impression of spatial depth where the natural world and human figures intersect. The luminous interior features, often highlighted by the window's frame, became a central focus for Romantic painters, who favored depicting subjects gazing into the distance beyond the window. This motif carries contradictory symbolism, reflecting a yearning to transcend the banality of daily life, the limitations of domesticity, and the unattainable desires of the heart, while also acknowledging the inescapability of ordinary existence. The window thus acts as a narrative device, allowing the story to unfold and positioning itself as the epicenter of the scene. During the Renaissance, realistic portrayals were de rigueur, and the depiction of women was often shaped by the societal constructs of the time. Women, post-marriage, were often seen as extensions of their husbands, with the window serving as a metaphorical gateway through which the external world could perceive them (Kent, 2001). This is evident in the way windows were used in paintings to frame women, suggesting a dual role as a medium of connection and a symbol of confinement. The window, in essence, functioned as a barrier isolating women from the broader world while also serving as an artistic device to capture and convey their experiences. Artists naturally gravitated towards including windows in their compositions when the intent was to represent women in a manner that would resonate with both the outer world and the painting's viewers. This artistic choice not only provided a literal view into the private lives of the subjects but also offered a commentary on the societal norms and expectations imposed upon women.

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Figure 2: Caspar David Friedrich, *Woman at a Window* (1822)



Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woman_at_a_Window

The Fauvist painters embraced the window as a metaphor, symbolizing the mutable nature of the universe. In Henri Matisse's 1908 masterpiece, *Harmony in Red* (also known as *The Red Room*), the window expands the viewer's perspective, integrating the interior space with the landscape beyond. The confined indoor setting, with its walls, is juxtaposed with the expansiveness of the outdoor vista. The viewer is not only granted the ability to visually appreciate the distant scenery but is also invited to immerse fully in the unique experiential realm that Matisse has crafted. Matisse's use of color and form within the window frame creates a dynamic interplay between the interior and exterior realms, suggesting a harmonious coexistence of the man-made and the natural. The window, in this context, is more than a mere architectural element; it is a conduit for sensory experience and a bridge to the broader world, allowing the audience to engage with the artwork on a deeper, more visceral level.

Figure 3: Henri Matisse, *Harmony in Red* (*The Red Room*) (1908)



Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dessert:_Harmony_in_Red_\(The_Red_Room\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dessert:_Harmony_in_Red_(The_Red_Room))

Robert Delaunay's "Window" series (1912-1914) marked a pivotal shift from the physical to the abstract representation of windows in the art world of 1912.

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Kazimir Malevich, captivated by the simplicity of the "square," created groundbreaking works such as *Black Square* (1915) and *White on White* (1918), which deconstructed traditional forms, colors, materials, and substances, leaving a profound impact on the art world. Artists like Dan Flavin, Frank Stella, Donald Judd, and Robert Rauschenberg have continued to honor Malevich's "square" emblem for over a century. Through their distinct practices, they have redefined the "lattice" and imbued it with new meaning, as the abstract movement reimagined the window's form and endowed it with a spiritual significance that transcends its literal appearance. As Romanyshyn (2003) posits, Alberti's linear perspective involves a two-step process: establishing a vanishing point and a distance point. This technique manipulates the viewer's focus, causing it to visually dissolve and disperse, while also physically reducing the perceived distance between the viewer and the artwork. The act of "seeing" and "feeling" becomes a disassembled and restructured experience when the window evolves from a concrete entity to an abstract concept.

Modernist paintings of the 20th century defied the traditional perspective technique, forgoing narrative elements but retaining the formal integrity of the painting space. The conventional significance of shape, color, material, light, and shadow in visual perception was diminished, as the tangible objects of the external world were no longer the primary focus. Instead, they were supplanted by intentional, spirit-driven activities that engage the mind rather than just the eyes. Non-figurative shapes took precedence, characterizing the content of paintings and emerging as the new protagonists of the canvas when narrative was eschewed. This shift transformed painting from an "object space" to a "shape space."

In Western art, windows are often central to a painting's composition, with the viewer positioned as the active observer peering through the window into the scene depicted. The viewer's gaze extends from the intimate interior to the broader exterior, with the window acting as an objective boundary that completes the visual composition. Windows act as both barriers and conduits for light, universal in their existence yet reflecting the unique sensibilities of the artist's culture. As Romanyshyn (2003) describes, the condition of perception is marked by a formal separation between the perceiving subject and the perceived world. The window's condition establishes a boundary between the observer and the observed. This perspective continues to shape our understanding of how visual representation transforms the eye into an instrument, the world into a spectacle, the self into an onlooker, and the body into an object of study.

4. 2 The Visual-perceptual Artistic Conception of Chinese Ming Dynasty Painting

However, the Ming Dynasty's enthusiasm for horticulture in China also inspired artists to incorporate windows into their paintings. These artists were not only painters but also garden designers, contributing to the creation of the landscapes they depicted. The "Wumen School" is renowned for such works, with Wen Zhengming's *Thirty-one Scenes of the Humble*

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Administrator's Garden and Shen Zhou's *Dongzhuang Picture* among the most celebrated. Chinese calligraphy and painting, distinct from Western approaches, prioritize the essence and integrity of the subject. Rather than focusing on the meticulous details of each window, Chinese artists typically render the schematic, freehand rectangles that suggest the presence of doors and windows. The art of Chinese painting leans more towards the "rhythm of the line" (Zong, 1981), a concept that emphasizes the fluidity and movement inherent in the brushstrokes, rather than the interplay of light and shadow that characterizes much of Western art.

This stylistic choice reflects a deeper philosophical inclination in Chinese aesthetics, one that values the harmony and unity of the composition over the meticulous replication of individual elements. The windows in these paintings, therefore, serve not as isolated focal points but as integral parts of a larger, cohesive scene, inviting the viewer to appreciate the artwork as a unified whole.

Figure 4: Shen Zhou, *Dongzhuang*(1473)



Source: <http://yrdart.com/guandian/2202.html>

Figure 5: Wen Zhengming, *Thirty-one Scenes of the Humble Administrator's Garden*(1533)



Source: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA5NTY3NDEyMw==&mid=2659587683&idx=6&sn=f4695036f7d9a25d49904d8192e207ae&chksm=8bc97c07bcbe511976db1bc0cbe048ee02593c1b29cd9fb59c273514cd5751a830720846517&scene=27

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The literati painting style of the Ming Dynasty was profoundly influenced by the historical, cultural, social, and economic shifts of the era. In the early Ming Dynasty, a highly organized government fostered a retro-realism painting movement that served political propaganda. However, as the feudal authoritarian culture waned and the commodity economy rebounded in the middle and late Ming Dynasty, the realm of literary and artistic thought emerged as a beacon of rebellion. Concurrently, the focus in painting began to shift towards human subjectivity and the essence of human nature. There was a call for the awakening of the individual's consciousness, particularly the expression of "emotion, temperament, heart, and mind" (Shan, 2004), and the concept of "abandoning the form and skimming the shadow" (Xu, 1983). This approach was evident in the works of painters like Shen Zhou and Wen Zhengming, who were influenced by philosophical theories such as Wang Yangming's "ontological theory" and Li Zhen's "childlike theory."

Taking *Thirty-one Scenes of the Humble Administrator's Garden* as a paradigm, Wen Zhengming employs a simplistic composition technique, arranging elements such as pavilions, pine and bamboo, and cascading water on a single plane. The majority of doors and windows in the work are depicted as unadorned, freehand rectangular spaces, devoid of intricate details. This minimalist approach to window craftsmanship contrasts sharply with the elaborate floral designs of the period. The Jiangnan garden, noted for its dynamism, features moon gates with patterns of string moons, plum blossoms, laurel leaves, and vases, demonstrating a higher degree of intricacy. In these paintings, windows are not the central focus, allowing the viewer to engage with the artwork's primary subjects—people and landscapes—without distraction. The window, when present, does not serve as a medium for interpreting the subject's state or mood; instead, it liberates the viewer's gaze, encouraging a broader, more holistic appreciation of the artwork. This approach cultivates a natural, immersive experience, where the viewer is guided to engage with the painting purely through visual perception, unencumbered by the need for intellectual mediation. In this context, the window acts as a non-intermediary element, an objective feature that completes the emotional landscape and integrates the subject with the environment.

The term "guan (观)" in Chinese culture carries profound connotations, denoting not just the act of observation but also the process of analysis and contemplation. In *Shuowenjiezi*, it is interpreted as "scrutiny" (Xu, 2012). Craig Clunas initially translated "guan (观)" as "contemplate," but later recognized the need for a more nuanced understanding that encompasses the non-physiological visual expression of Ming Dynasty literati painters, which extended beyond mere depiction to include historical and religious symbolism (Clunas, 2011). The concept of "insight meditation" as translated by Isabelle Robinet (Robinet, 1989) and the future notion of "Visualization" by religious scholars suggest a form of introspection that is both constructive and imaginative. This aligns with the philosophical underpinnings of Chuang Tzu's "self-forgetfulness" and "spiritual liberation from the body" (Chuang, 2004), as well as

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Confucius's "the doctrine of the mean," which advocates for a harmonious balance between objective rationality and emotional integrity (Confucius, 2001). Such spiritual depth is reflected in Ming Dynasty paintings like *Thirty-one Scenes of the Humble Administrator's Garden*, which facilitate a profound introspective experience for the viewer. The act of "guan (观)" enables viewers to delve into their innermost feelings and reflections, with the painting's window serving as a mirror for the viewer's aesthetic contemplation.

4. 3 The Cross-cultural Presentation of the Perceptual form of Visual Viewing in the Cinematic Narrative

The discourse surrounding the window's visual structure extends from its figurative representations to abstract interpretations. The significance of the window, however, extends beyond its physical and metaphorical boundaries. The window, previously characterized as a "picture frame" and "framing frame," represents a significant evolution of the concept. As the window's role and perception shift, they are often accompanied by the emergence of new technologies, which in turn foster innovative artistic media and novel modes of expression. This evolution of the window as a motif reflects the dynamic interplay between artistic innovation and technological advancement. As new forms of expression are explored, the window's function in art is redefined, offering artists new avenues to explore and express the human experience. The window, thus, becomes a canvas for creative experimentation, a medium through which artists can challenge conventional perspectives and invite viewers to engage with art in multisensory and immersive ways.

4.3.1 Window in Western Cinema

A pivotal concept that has evolved throughout the history of cinema is encapsulated by the metaphor of the "window" within a film. This metaphor has matured alongside cinema as an art form and is deeply entrenched in our perception and interaction with this medium. In the nascent stages of cinema, the window metaphor resembled a "peephole" or "magic lantern," offering audiences brief, uncut scenes viewed through a small aperture, akin to stealing a glance into another universe.

With the advent of narrative filmmaking and the standardization of cinematic frameworks, the "window" metaphor took on a more formal definition. The movie frame acts as a window, granting the audience a view into the world of the film. The viewer, while physically situated in the architectural space of the theater, is in tangible contact with the immaterial, virtual world presented on screen (Friedberg, 2009). The concept of cinema as a transparent window is rooted in the visual language of classic Hollywood films, which act as windows into the realities they portray. As the craft of filmmaking evolved, directors like Eisenstein and D.W. Griffith experimented with expanding or dividing the frame, challenging the passive window concept of movie theaters. For example, Eisenstein's use of montage in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) creates dynamic sequences that transcend the traditional window's limits.

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Over time, the "screen" metaphor began to diverge from the window concept, particularly noticeable in the 1950s and 1960s with the adoption of widescreen formats. These broader screens expanded the visual experience, offering a larger canvas that filmmakers could utilize. The growing possibilities in filmmaking, including the use of screens within screens, allowed directors like Jean-Luc Godard and Orson Welles to use screens and framing as a means for social commentary and to engage audiences intellectually and emotionally. The advent of interactive media and digital cinema marked a significant shift in window metaphors, enabling audiences to engage more actively with the narrative through immersive technologies. Virtual and augmented reality provide an additional "window" for users to explore and influence the narrative, fostering a "moving virtual gaze" (Friedberg, 2023).

In Orson Welles' 1941 masterpiece, *Citizen Kane*, the film's framework reveals the personal narrative of Charles Foster Kane, with the movie opening on a close-up of Kane's lips uttering his enigmatic final word, "Rosebud." The film unfolds through a series of flashbacks that gradually unveil Kane's life, using the picture as a window into the enigma driving the story. Hitchcock's *The Rear Window* (1954) is a quintessential example of how a movie frame can function as a window within a window, with the protagonist, confined to his apartment due to a broken leg, leading the audience to experience his perspective as he observes his neighbor through a rear window. The film's frame operates as a textual window, offering the audience a view into the adjacent flat's activities. In Buñuel's adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* (*Abismos de pasión*, 1954), the window plays a crucial role as a conduit for longing and a gateway to a glimpse of civilization. The visual structure of Damien Chazelle's *Whiplash* (2014) enhances the story's emotional resonance. Additionally, the window serves as a narrative device in *The Woman in the Window* (2011) and *The Neighbor's Window* (2019), providing a glimpse into and bridging the two worlds.

4.3.2 Window in Chinese Cinema

Chinese windows are steeped in a cultural significance that extends beyond their mere physical presence, drawing from traditional aesthetics and philosophical underpinnings that are more profound than the window's portrayal in Western cinema. Filmmakers in China use the window as a device to delve into the dichotomies of existence, such as the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the ethereal, all of which are deeply influenced by Taoist and Confucian philosophies. The window, therefore, is more than a visual element; it is a carrier of profound cultural meanings.

In traditional Chinese architecture, the intricately latticed windows are not just structural elements but also serve as symbolic frames that characters interact with as they navigate complex social structures and confront their inner desires. The interplay of light and shadow, often accentuated by these windows, transforms the architectural frame into a canvas rich with emotion. Zhang Yimou's 1991 film *Raise the Red Lantern* is a testament to this, using windows as a visual metaphor that adds a layer of poetic depth to the narrative. The film was celebrated

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for its cultural richness and symbolic resonance, earning accolades such as the Best Feature Film Award at the 16th China Hundred Flowers Film Festival and the Silver Lion Award at the 48th Venice International Film Festival.

The film's use of traditional Chinese cleft windows provides an elaborate framework that facilitates the exploration of social hierarchies and personal desires. The window's frame becomes a canvas for emotion through the dynamic interplay of light and shadow. A striking feature of the film's composition is its extreme symmetry, which imbues the scene with a sense of grandeur and order. The central character, Song Lian, is often framed by the window in a manner that evokes a sense of imprisonment, foreshadowing her tragic fate. The layered depths of the set, with doors and walls stacked one behind the other, serve to heighten the characters' feelings of helplessness and insignificance against the backdrop of oppressive feudal structures.

The film's cinematography, particularly the use of overhead shots, further accentuates the stark contrast between Song Lian's diminutive figure and the vast, imposing environment of the Chen Mansion. This technique enhances the eerie, ghostly atmosphere of the setting. Whether Song Lian is isolated in the courtyard, dwarfed by the symmetrical architecture that dominates the frame or appears as a lone figure within the confines of the fence at the film's conclusion, the composition underscores her isolation and the oppressive nature of the society she inhabits.

The window frame composition is a subtle narrative tool that conveys the character's powerlessness, highlighting the stark contrast between her and the feudal forces that governed China at the time. It illustrates the tragic reality of being ensnared by the constraints of a feudal family, with no avenue for rebellion.

Figure 6: hang Yimou, Raise the Red Lantern (1991)



Source: Fragment of movie Raise the Red Lantern

In Chinese cinema, the window often assumes the role of a silent witness, quietly observing and framing the narrative as the story unfolds. Directors like Wong Kar-wai have skillfully employed the window as a narrative device to convey subtle emotions and desires that remain unspoken.

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In his 2000 film *In the Mood for Love*, the awareness of their husbands' infidelities instigates nuanced emotional changes in the characters Zhou Muyun and Su Lizhen. A moment of poignant hesitation is captured when Su Lizhen opens the window, her silence echoing the unvoiced turmoil within. This act is a response to the landlord, Mrs. Sun, who, noticing the change in their relationship, indirectly addresses Su Lizhen's behavior, which is deemed socially inappropriate. The film's visuals shift to a more vibrant and clear tone at this juncture, hinting that the temporary relief from the "pseudo-cheating" weighs less heavily on Su Lizhen's heart. Yet, the window remains ajar, not fully open, suggesting that the joy of release is incomplete, and foreshadowing the continuation of the complex narrative involving her and Zhou Muyun.

The changing seasons visible through the window mirror the fluctuating internal emotional landscapes of the characters. Through the window, characters exchange furtive glances, their reflections merging with the wet glass, creating a poignant image that captures the essence of their difficult circumstances.

Figure 7: Wong Kar-wai, *In the Mood for Love* (2000)



Source: Fragment of movie *In the Mood for Love*

The window in Chinese cinema transcends its physical presence to become a dynamic canvas, reflecting the emotional ebbs and flows of the characters' lives. It serves as a temporal symbol that encapsulates the transition from the hopeful blossoms of spring to the stark desolation of winter, prompting viewers to contemplate the passage of time and adding depth to the narrative. Often, the window symbolizes the dichotomy of captivity and freedom. It is a visual juxtaposition that embodies both the longing for liberation and the reality of confinement, as evidenced in the barred windows of Zhangke Jia's *A Touch of Sin* (2013) and the expansive landscapes of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000).

In Lee's film, the window-like frames within the scenes are reminiscent of traditional Chinese garden design, showcasing the beauty and harmony of nature and architecture. The film is replete with beautifully composed scenes, reflecting the transparency and subtlety characteristic of ancient Chinese aesthetics. The director's choice to leave the meaning outside the frame open-ended encourages viewers to engage in more profound contemplation, allowing

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them to immerse themselves in the artistic conception and interpret the narrative through their own cultural and emotional lenses.

Figure 8: Ang Lee, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000)



Source: Fragment of movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*

In contemporary Chinese cinema, the role of the window evolves in sync with societal transformations. It reflects the new perspectives introduced by urbanization, migration, and globalization. As our exploration of Chinese film concludes, we recognize the window's multifaceted role as a silent storyteller, a visual metaphor, and a cultural emblem. Through the creative vision of Chinese filmmakers, the window is endowed with a distinct narrative life, acting as a bridge between the symbolic and the real, and between tradition and modernity.

John Berger suggests that touch is the act of establishing a relationship with an object through physical interaction and subsequent analysis of that relationship (Berger, 2008). This concept of engagement extends to the act of viewing, which, according to Vivian M. Sobchack, a renowned phenomenologist of cinema, involves the whole body in experiencing film. Sobchack posits that spectators perceive, comprehend, and emotionally engage with a film through a holistic, embodied experience (Sobchack, 1992). This perspective suggests that the experience of cinema extends beyond the direct interaction between the gaze and the action on screen. The act of viewing immerses us in a realm where perception's boundaries are tested, and multiple perspectives are integrated. The act of seeing becomes an experience that intertwines reality with imagination (Burnett, 1995), paving the way for innovative forms of creative expression within the film industry.

4. 4 The Wide Application and Connotation of the Narrative of the Window

The concept of "view" has transcended traditional viewing habits and is now intricately woven into various aspects of life, acquiring practical significance through advancements in science and technology. In contemporary culture, the practical application of "view" has broadened to include diverse forms, with individuals often engaging in acts that symbolize breaking through the window to experience, observing from the window, and feeling through the window.

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An installation like *Pixel Forest* (2016) by Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist exemplifies this expanded concept of view. The space, filled with hanging LED lights that mimic a pixelated forest, invites viewers to explore an ethereal environment. Video projections on the walls and floors create a dreamlike atmosphere, where screens and framing elements work in concert to heighten the immersive experience. This immersive quality blurs the line between the projected images and the physical space, crafting an environment that encourages complete viewer engagement. In this installation, the boundaries between interior and exterior, body and screen, and the real and digital are effaced, as visitors engage in a transient interaction with the visual narrative presented through the screen.

Similarly, Hito Steyerl's cinematic installation, *Factory of the Sun* (2015), obliterates the distinctions between film and virtual reality. This work delves into themes of identity, surveillance, and internet culture, utilizing the screen as a metaphorical window into an alternate, fantastical realm. In the 360-degree immersive experience, the viewer's sense of self is submerged, merging them with the narrative and awakening a heightened, almost otherworldly, perception. Steyerl deconstructs the viewer's physical presence, disassembling it into its constituent parts, only to reassemble it within a different, shadowy plane. The installation aims to create a profound sense of depth, enveloping the viewer in a surreal ambiance where desires are projected onto the visual landscape, and self-conception is shaped through reflective engagement.

Figure 9: Hito Steyerl, *Factory of the Sun* (2015)



Source: <https://kunstharcharlottenborg.dk/en/udstillinger/hito-steyerl/> Photography by Anders Sune Berg.

Virtuality complicates the interplay between the body and the senses, as posited by Friedberg (2009). The act of "seeing" extends beyond the mere projection of visual perspective; it becomes an immersive experience that engages the viewer's sensory feedback. This shift signifies a form of "enlightenment" wherein the body's experience is integrated through the interplay of projection and imagination, thus redefining the modalities of visual perception. The inception of modern perception is marked by this scenographic view, where the viewer is no longer a detached observer but an active participant in the visual narrative.

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The evolution of visual perception reflects a transformative approach to engaging with the world through sight. It suggests that our understanding of what it means to "see" has been enriched by the inclusion of emotional and sensory responses that are triggered by the act of viewing. This enrichment leads to a more holistic understanding of visual stimuli, one that is not confined to the physical realm but is also informed by the intangible aspects of human experience.

5. Conclusion

Each representation of the world encapsulates a unique worldview. Western visual-centric theory, which prioritizes rational analysis and interpretation, is founded upon the default principle of perspective that is characteristic of Western thought (Lin, 2009). Western audiences often focus on the formal aspects and aesthetic preferences of artworks, treating them as visual objects that necessitate scrutiny and analysis (Arnheim, 1954; Freedberg, 2013). In contrast, traditional Chinese culture places a premium on emotional resonance and intuitive understanding in viewing, encapsulating the Taoist concept of "wuwei (无为)", which advocates for a natural, unforced approach, and emphasizes the spontaneity and fluidity of expression (Qian, 2004; Lin, 2009). Chinese viewers frequently interpret other forms of art as reflections of mental and emotional states, engaging with paintings and films through the lens of philosophical ideas and cultural symbols (Freedberg, 2013; Arnheim, 1954). This approach underscores the notion that the value of viewing transcends mere observation and comprehension, evolving into an immersive, heartfelt experience that transforms "seeing" into "feeling," and ultimately, "enlightenment." This divergence is partly attributable to the cultural disparities and artistic traditions that distinguish Chinese and Western artists, as well as the dominant influence of Western painting, which can overshadow the diversity of global artistic perspectives.

The medium of visual art is shaped by the various social and cultural contexts that dictate the limitations and methodologies of sight, be it a window in a painting or an object depicted on a screen. The evolution of painting from a singular point of view that integrates composition and narrative to a more complex arrangement with hidden narratives and prominent configurations marks a significant transformation in the art form. In film, the perceptual center is dispersed, dislodging screen elements and spectators from their fixed positions and orientations, culminating in a chaotic universe that cannot distinguish between individuals or identify a central focus (Crary, 1992). The field of vision becomes an invisible concept, with installation art extending its perceptual reach throughout the entirety of the exhibition space, creating a fully immersive, dispersed environment. In the contemporary world, the perception of matter is not only clear and understandable but also communicated to the observer through a myriad of sensory experiences. The theory underpinned by visual metaphors is no longer bounded by distinct borders and divisions when examined through the lens of two distinct

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perceptual habits and appreciation techniques. Cross-cultural visual and perceptual forms are increasingly merging, demanding a deeper reevaluation, especially as traditional cultural influences on visual expression persist. The exploration and development of visual culture and perceptual imagery from a cross-cultural perspective are instrumental in advancing cognitive understanding and contributing to a new dimension of human knowledge.

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