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VIEWS OF MODERN AND POSTMODERN TOKYO: DEHUMANIZATION, URBAN, SOCIAL AND BODY CHANGES

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Indoor and Outdoor Modernity in Cinematographic Tokyo

The urban space of Tokyo is a recurrent landscape used by many filmmakers throughout history to show various changes in Japanese society. The purpose of this diachronic film analysis is to extrapolate a sociological view of Tokyo in the frame of Modernity and the new concept of Postmodernity, the redefinition of the historical period beginning in the late 1970s.

The choice of the capital, Tokyo, is not accidental. The city has been the core of profound global changes of the last century which have particularly been traumatic for Japanese society, especially if we keep in mind that the world's second largest economy has passed from a feudal system to a postmodern one in a little more than one hundred years. Thus, Tokyo has very often been used by the film industry as the best place to reflect these conflicts. After Commodore Perry's arrival at Uraga Harbour in 1853 near Edo, (now known as n Tokyo), Japan was forced to sign an unequal trade treaty and open its market. Some sectors in Japan rapidly understood the necessity of an urgent modernization to save the nation from European colonialism. Modernization usually meant Westernization too, an unavoidable consequence of the Meiji Revolution (1867). Westernization spread throughout all spheres of Japanese society and it was a cultural shock to the people who for the first time had direct contact with the West. Even the centre of the country was moved from Kyoto, the ancient capital, to Tokyo, the new symbol of Modern Japan. Modernization was so fast that in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), Japan became the first Asian country to beat a Western power in a war. Less than forty years after the arrival of Commodore Perry, Japan had become an industrialized country with a dizzy growth totally unexpected by Western powers.

The beginning of the 20th century was a period of tension between tradition and modernity that has been portrayed by the "Early Masters," to use Audie Bock's terminology.[1] Tokyo illustrates what we can call "indoor Modernity" in Japanese classicism, treating social changes as a process manifested in private life: new ways of life, destructured relations within the family… This vision of Modernity was determined in part by the specific characteristics of studio productions at that time, where scenes were mainly shot on stage.

Three events of the last century dramatically transformed Tokyo's urban space. Research on the city's narrative functions in Japanese films should take these events into account. The first one was the tragic Kanto earthquake which took place September 1, 1923. More than 100.000 lost their lives and over 570.000 homes were destroyed primarily because of the subsequent fire which swept the cities of Tokyo, Yokohama and the surrounding prefectures of Chiba, Kanagawa, and Shizuoka. As a consequence

"very little of the Tokyo film industry was left. Most theatres and studios lay in rubble"[2] and most of the films produced before 1923 were lost.

After the earthquake the *jidai-geki* genre (period dramas) productions were transferred to Kyoto studios and *gendai-geki* (contemporary dramas set in the modern world) remained in the studios of Tokyo. Thus, Tokyo, which has historically been the engine of Modernity, also became its cinematographic set, while Kyoto was established as the landscape of tradition in cinema. *Tokyo Story* (*Tokyo monogatari*, 1953) is a good example in which Yasujiro Ozu shows a conflict between the old and the new as the conflict between spaces. He defines a clear dichotomy between tradition – the rural area where the elderly couple live – and modernity – the city of Tokyo where their children live and work.

The second devastation of the metropolis occurred during the World War II. The Tokyo air raids, the most destructive bombing raid in history, started in February 1945 and lasted for seven months, causing more immediate deaths than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs. The night of March 9, 1945, fire bombs destroyed some 40 square kilometres of the city and some 100.000 people are estimated to have died in the resulting firestorm. However, according to Mark Selden "the number might have been larger since Japanese and American authorities both had reasons of their own for minimizing the death toll."[3] During American Occupation, which lasted until 1952, filmic images of Tokyo's devastation that did not shape the ideas American authorities wanted to project during the postwar period were censored. The landscape of Tokyo could only be shown with positive characters having the will of reconstruction.

The response to these representations of the capital came through a youth group of filmmakers in the 1960s. A generation that would become the so-called Japanese *nuberu bagu* (New Wave). Their revolutionary works showed the dark side of the capitalist society of the new democracy that the United States had left after the occupation. Their films focused on showing political corruption, provocative views of youth, linked to prostitution, organized crime of *yakuzas* (Japanese mafia) and all which was considered politically incorrect during the Japan of the economic miracle. The slums of Tokyo became the urban landscape of the New Wave's plots often following the two strategies of its brand of style: sex and violence.[4]

The reconstruction of the city in the postwar period was followed by massive student and labour demonstrations in the sixties. Unlike the Early Masters who depicted Modernity as an inner change, some New Wave directors (belonging to the Japanese New Left) introduced it in the public sphere. They felt forced to take the cameras out to the streets and to shoot on location in order to be closer to the current affairs of the time and to get involved in the political movement. Thus, during the 1960s and 1970s, Tokyo served as an urban space which depicted what we can call "outdoor Modernity."

Nagisa Oshima's *Cruel Story of Youth* (*Seishun zankoku monogatari*, 1960) – the first New Wave film according to Japan's specialized press – like *Funeral Parade of Roses* (*Bara no sōretsu*, 1969) by Toshio Matsumoto inserts real newsreel images of student demonstrations against the US-Japan Security Treaty (called *ANPO* in Japan) to link fiction to its historical context and to obtain "aesthetic implications of narrative defamiliarization."[5] *Self-reflexivity* became one of the main features of the new wave's idiosyncrasy. The best example of this would be Shohei Imamura's *A Man Vanishes* (*Ningen Johatsu*, 1967) where the boundaries between documentary and fiction become blurred and cinema's ability to show reality is questioned.

Massive protests in Tokyo could not stop the Security Treaty from being signed and the city became a place of disillusionment and resignation. New Wave no longer

show idealized images of Tokyo, but on the contrary, they portrayed the recurrent desire of escaping from the metropolis. Unlike documentary-style wide shots and romantic views of Paris seen in François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*, 1959)* or Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (*À bout de souffle*, 1960), the uncentered takes and claustrophobic shots of their Japanese counterparts show the idea of chaos that challenge individual freedom and suggest the visual *deconstruction of Tokyo* as opposed to the *construction of Paris*.

In *Cruel Story of Youth* – like other of Oshima's first films– violence is the language that everybody seems to understand, while sex is the protagonist of *Funeral Parade of Roses*. To Matsumoto, Tokyo is not only the city of political revolution; it is also the urban place for sexual experimentation. It is the only space where taboos and moral values could be attacked (through homosexuality, transvestism and even incestuous relationships). Nonconformist acts came from a will to break with the old morals and conservative values that ruled Japan. Matsumoto's iconography of this urban sexuality making Tokyo's Shinjuku district the space for experimentations and sexual metamorphosis must also be also seen as a sign of resistance.

The third urban transformation of the metropolis was carried out before the Tokyo Olympic Games in 1964. The renewal of the city was aimed at introducing Tokyo as a leading city of the developed world; this transformation recorded by Kon Ichikawa in the documentary *Tokyo Olympiad* (*Tōkyō orimpikku*, 1965). In the feature film *Tokyo Drifter* (*Tōkyō nagaremono*, 1966) Seijun Suzuki offers essential images of the *New Tokyo* in the very moment of its metamorphosis, combining desolation and euphoria.[6] He shows a contradictory view of the capital opposing fragmented images of spectacular highways, train stations and other infrastructures to *yakuzas*, marginal characters and the problem of social dislocation which could be interpreted as a sign of political criticism. However, the main concern of this iconoclastic filmmaker is using aesthetic matters and all elements available to achieve his flamboyant style.

Postmodernity in Tokyo through Japanese films

In the late 1970s sociologists started to rethink the concept of Modernity and defined a new social model called "Second Modernity" or "Postmodernity."[7] A number of causes provoked the need for a new paradigm such as the oil crisis of 1973 and the restructuration of the production systems, from so-called "Fordism," the modern model of mass production to "Toyotism," the new concept of "just-in-time" production.

Neo-liberal thinking was at the core of this post-industrial revolution which first developed in the automotive industry and was later applied to the Japanese electronics industry, particularly nanotechnology and biotechnology. The development of these sectors exported an image of Japan as a highly technologized society while technologization itself became a symbol of Postmodernity worldwide.

The omnipresence of computer science and electronic technology in everyday life made different artists and filmmakers show physical body adaptation to the new environment, an idea which Marshall McLuhan proffered.[8] The *cyberpunk* genre of the 80's deals directly with this question. *Cyberpunk*, a mixture of the punk underground subculture and cybernetics, is a reference to Willian Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*[9] (1984) but its real origin is Bruce Bethke's short novel *Cyberpunk* (1980).[10] These novels explore the role of the human body in the urban space dominated by technology. Shinya Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo* (*Tetsuo, the Iron Man*, 1989) shows the body metamorphosis as the human response to adapt to the new postmodern environment.[11]

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Here the human body is not functional anymore. Tsukamoto uses the concept of the *new flesh* – which has its precedent in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983) – a fusion of flesh and metal that would erase the borders between organic and mechanic.[12] The film's sequel, *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* (1991) depicts this metamorphosis through a painful process of evolution to a *superior stage*, to a kind of *post-human*: a metaphor of vital dissatisfaction with current urban life. The *new flesh* is combined with a very distinctive style. Metallic percussion sounds in the soundtrack, high-contrast lighting and black-and-white film to obtain a chromatic approach to industrial trash.

Technologization and Neo-Tokyo are the quintessence of *cyberpunk* visions in Japanese animation. The futuristic portrayals of Tokyo are also used to project, in an imaginary place, deeply rooted fears in the Japanese collective conscience. The destruction of humanity by a natural force out of control is especially recurrent with images created from the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Katsuhiro Otomo metaphorically raises this question in *Akira*, 1988. This example of *cyberpunk anime* holds a sort of mystic message by means of a hidden power behind a military experiment. This power could, on the one hand, bring a kind of salvation for humanity, but on the other hand, get out of control and cause the total destruction of Neo-Tokyo, the symbol of civilization. This kind of absolute and universal energy may be easily seen as a metaphor of nuclear energy.

Another fear projected on the imaginary stage of Neo-Tokyo is the representation of "the Other" in a country with a fairly low percentage of immigration becomes very striking.[13] The "Other" is a genuine Japanese fear; it threatens a long-cherished sense of ethnic homogeneity that might be untenable under the forces of globalization. In *Metropolis* (2001) Shigeyuki Hayashi (better known as "Rintaro") uses robots as an allegorical representation of what could easily be identified with an immigrant collective, a group of working class beings, living on the lowest rank of the social structure with the worst working conditions. Postmodern social structure is represented by the Zigurat, a huge skyscraper whose inhabitants are vertically divided encoding "the class-based and ethnicity-based differences among people."[14] Human beings live on the upper level while *infra-humans*, the robots, live and work on the lowest one.

A low, robot working class is also the storyline of Mamoru Oshii's *Patlabor* (*Kido keisatsu Patoreiba*, 1989). Here Oshii questions what would happen if this exploited working class mass rose against their lords. The futuristic police would fight against the uprising to avoid the collapse of Tokyo, once again the symbol of civilization. The condition of the cyborg/robots in these science fiction films make the spectator reflect upon the human condition itself. Therefore, in *Metropolis*, the Sun's disturbance, which affects only robots (and not humans), can be thought of as a metaphor of dehumanization in contemporary urban life.

Society of worldwide interconnection through new technologies has also caused other scholars to coin the expression "Network Society."[15] Kiyoshi Kurosawa applied the ubiquity of communication technologies in Tokyo to his original Japanese Horror film, *Pulse* (*Kairo*, 2001), a film about ghosts moving by way of Internet, mobile phones and CDs. Kiyoshi Kurosawa's ghosts bring sentiments of loneliness to the characters that finally end up committing suicide. Through this postmodern horror film he describes an excellent paradox of the solitary relations individuals have with communication technologies.[16] To return to the Network Society, the French scholar Jean Baudrillard had already reflected in the 1980s on the confusing but at the same time very inspiring idea of "simulacra."[17] Baudrillard considers the current human

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experience to be a simulation of reality rather than reality itself and relying on the "simulacrum" makes us lose contact with the real world. Simulacra precede the original and create a parallel reality, which would be called "hyperreality." Shunji Iwais's feature film, *All About Lili Chou* (*Riri shushu no subete*, 2001) and Satoshi Kon's animation film, *Paprika* (*Papurika*, 2006) are the best cinematographic expressions of Baudrillard's ideas of simulacrum. As a result of information technology and the media, it is no longer possible to differ between reality and simulacra.

In *All About Lili Chou*, high school students escape from a reality of extortion and harassment to cyberspace where they experience a kind of social entropy caused by psychological implosion, a rapid internal disorder. Hyperreality and implosion are further developed in Kon's *Paprika*, a thriller about an experimental device used in treatments for anxiety that allows therapists to become part of the dreams of their patients. The film is a constant crossover between virtual reality worlds through the advent of advanced technology implanted in people's heads.

In conclusion, Japan has been one of the countries which have suffered the most traumatic crash between tradition and Modernity. Tokyo is the urban space that has been the core of these social changes and its cinematographic representations can be very relevant to understand these processes. When facing the question of Postmodernity we easily notice that most of its elements originated in Japan. They were first considered in the West as so called elements of "Orientalism," but were quickly acknowledged as an important part of the Postmodern model. Hence, the paradox that film studies help to illustrate is that while Modernity was considered a process of "Westernization," Postmodernity can be analyzed to a large extent as a process of "Easternization."

Notes

[1] Audie Bock classifies various Japanese filmmakers throughout history in three different paradigms, and calls the Classic Japanese filmmakers, Mikio Naruse, Kenji Mizoguchi and Yasujiro Ozu "Early Masters" in Audie Bock, *Japanese Film Director*s, Kodansha International, New York 1978.

[2] Jeffrey A. Dym, *Benshi, Japanese Silent Film Narrators, and Their Forgotten Narrative Art of Setsumei*, Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston 2003, p. 170.

[3] David McNeill, "A Forgotten Holocaust: US Bombing Strategy, the Destruction of Japanese Cities and the American Way of War from World War II to Iraq," in *The Asian-Pacific Journal*, Japan Focus, <http://japanfocus.org/-David-McNeill/1581> (accessed 2 June 2010).

[4] David Desser refers to those two elements in the title of his text centred on the Japanese New Wave. David Desser, *Eros Plus Massacre: An Introduction to The Japanese New Wave Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1988.

[5] Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, *Chapter 12. Cuestions of the New: Oshima Nagisa's Cruel Story of Youth (1960)*, in Alastair Phillips, Julian Stringer (eds.), *Japanese Cinema: Texts and Contexts*, Routledge, London-New York 2007, pp. 175.

[6] Stephen Barber, *Projected Cities. Cinema and Urban Space*, Reaktion Books, London 2002.

[7] The notion of Postmodernity was popularized among scholars by the works of Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard and it refers a historical or social condition that marks the end of Modernity in the late 20th century. However, in the Postmodernity debate, other authors try to place current society in a second phase of the modern project, which would still be Modernity or the so-called "Second Modernity." Proponents of this position are Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman, Manuel Castells or Anthony Giddens among others.

[8] McLuhan's definition of technology as "extensions of the human body." Marshall McLuhan *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw-Hill, New York 1964.

[9] William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, Ace Books, New York 1984.

[10] Bruce Bethke's short novel *Cyberpunk* was written in 1980 but not published until 1983 by the magazine *Amazing Science Fiction Stories*, vol. 57, no. 4, 1983.

[11] Tom Mes, *Iron Man. The Cinema of Shinya Tsukamoto*, FAB, Surrey 2005.

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[12] Beatriz Martínez, "Shinya Tsukamoto. Mr. Selfdestruction," in *Cine Asia*, vol. 21, 2008, pp. 32-35.

[13] According to the 2005 *World Population Policies* survey, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, March 2006, Japan had an immigration rate of 1.6 % of the total population in 2005. This figure is low when compared to other countries in the developed world, e.g. 12,8% in USA, 12,3% in Germany, 12,2% in Spain, 10,2 % in France or 9,0% in U.K.

[14] Steve T. Brown, *Cinema Anime. Critical Engagements with Japanese Animation*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2006.

[15] "Network Society" is a term developed by Manuel Castells in *La Sociedad Red*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid 2005.

[16] Diane Arnaud, *Kiyoshi Kurosawa: mémoire de la disparation*, Rouge profond-D.L., Pertuis 2007.

[17] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation*, Galilée, Paris 1981.