

Urban Landscape and the “Disinhabitation” in Japanese Cinema

Maxime Boyer-Degoul, Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium

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Abstract

Postwar Japan continued the wave of modernization and industrialization as an inseparable element of the Japanese “miraculous” economic and social rebirth. One of the symbols of this renewal is the new middle-class embodied by the *salaryman*, the very new face of bright future and success. However, postwar intellectuals such as artists and filmmakers quickly stated the emptiness of promises symbolized by this fallen idol, even more especially through recent years of great depression like the 1990s, accompanied by terrible and tragic events like Kobe’s earthquake or the attack in Tokyo’s metro, both in 1995. Consecutive events figure modern and urban landscape as the reflection of a growing social and identity insecurity. The great city of Tokyo becomes an unsafe place, potentially hostile, unraveling the underside of its symbols of success through evaporation as a consequence of “disinhabitation” of places made uninhabitable and unlivable. As a symbol of prosperity, the *salaryman* used to be associated to a comfortable way of life pictured by the new modern residential complex, known as *danchis*. However, in their own way, many filmmakers from the 1960s to the 1990s exposed such places in the very exact opposite of what they are meant to be. In this way, this presentation will draw a comparative analysis of “disinhabitation” through Ozu Yasujiro’s *A Hen in the Wind* (1948), Teshigahara Hiroshi’s *The Face of Another* (1966), Tsukamoto Shinya’s *Tokyo Fist* (1995) and *Bullet Ballet* (1998) and Kurosawa Kiyoshi’s *Tokyo Sonata* (2008). These movies share the picture of insecurity as a result of a modern society built on the ashes of war and defeat. This picture is especially highlighted through the representation of both places made unlivable and people no longer able to dwell those places, leading them to wander in uncertainty.

Keywords: Japan, cinema, Tsukamoto, Kurosawa, Ozu, Teshigahara, disinhabitation, modernity, dwelling, evaporation

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Martin Heidegger established a connection between environment and inhabit by pointing that dwelling is “the basic character of Being”¹ and that “man’s relation to locales, and through locales to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, thought essentially”². Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro based his *fûdo* concept on Heidegger’s *dasein* but focused more on the importance of the individual that shapes and is shaped back by the space he dwells in a process of self-dependency and self-identification. “When we feel cold, we already ourselves inhabit the coldness of exterior air. To relate ourselves to cold is none other than being out there in the cold”. From this kind of example, Watsuji concludes that “by being-outside, we face ourselves”³. Augustin Berque, geographer and Orientalist who led the edition of Watsuji’s works, highlights this philosophy of *fûdo* in his book *Le Sauvage et l’Artifice*, by attesting that “the structural occasion of human existence is milieu”. As a result, “history only becomes flesh through milieu”⁴.

Through the way he materially invests a space, an individual illustrates the way he inhabits this space. Which is why the way he invests space is the way to illustrate the crisis between him and his environment, that is the crisis of inhabit. Japanese filmmaker Teshigahara Hiroshi’s *The Face of Another* (1966) focuses on a man named Okuyama whose face was burnt during an industrial accident. Consequently, he is forced to cover his head with bandages. This condition deeply upsets his relationship with his wife. In the same time, his doctor and psychiatrist proposes a special offer to him: to affix an experimental artificial mask to replace his disfigured face in order to find his place back in society. Teshigahara illustrates a parallel between facial reshaping process and the postwar rebuilding of Japan, especially through a shot framing Okuyama looking at a construction site from the window of a café (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Okuyama (*The Face of Another*, Teshigahara Hiroshi, 1966)

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking*, in *Basic Writings: from being and time (1927) to the task of thinking (1964)*, HarperCollins Editions, 1993, p.362

² *Ibid*, p.359

³ Watsuji Tetsuro, *Fûdo le milieu humain*, Paris, CNRS Editions, coll. « Réseau Asie », 2011 [1935], pp.41-42

⁴ Augustin Berque, *Le Sauvage et l’Artifice. Les Japonais devant la nature*, Editions Gallimard, coll. NRF, 1986, p.53

At some point, Okuyama looks for a place to hide the “mask” and in that way, rents two *manshons* under his two separate identities. The movie plays the two scenes in identical ways, frame by frame (Figure 2). The repetition of the same action under two different faces illustrates the schizophrenia of a society of the Same through Okuyama’s, a society made of interchangeable people and places. Okuyama considers these places not as dwelling but as temporary which reflect the dehistoricization, dehumanization and artificiality of this type of modern buildings raised on the ashes of a Japan whose history has been wiped out by war bombings. An explanation to this crisis appears in the conclusion drawn by Heidegger that is, “the *proper plight of dwelling* does not lie merely in the lack of houses” but “is indeed older than the world wars with their destruction”. It “lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the essence of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*”⁵.



⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking*, op. cit., p.363



Figure 2: Doubling (*The Face of Another*)

Modern buildings complex as *danchi* or *manshon* overruns Japanese spaces. It establishes a reflection of the side effect of the excessive consumerist urges of postwar Japanese miracle which eventually gives birth to an urban desert gradually turned into desolated places improper to dwelling. It is certainly not a coincidence if Teshigahara frames Okuyama and his brand new face walking in some mall after renting his new place.

In more recent movies, Kurosawa Kiyoshi's *Tokyo Sonata* (2008), focusing on a Japanese modern family, illustrates how such a plight of dwelling still endures in contemporary Japan by depicting Japanese traditional house as a space of disruption. During a dinner scene, Kurosawa frames the family through a banister which isolates the family's members from each other in fragmented spaces (Figure 3). Fragmentation of spaces into isolated cells depicts familial place as a disrupted world, especially through the desecration of the father authority whose representative character, Ryûhei, remains mostly invisible in this scene, hid behind the newspaper he reads. This desecration is emphasized at the beginning of the movie with Ryûhei quitting his job but refusing to admit it to his family. So he continues to pretend he is going to his office every day. This is how he embodies "a being filled with the nothingness of his post ideological world elaborated like a performance". This nothingness fills him and eats him at the point of the unleashing of irrational violence⁶.

⁶ Raphaël Josset, *De l'individu au dividiu*, in Michel Maffesoli & Brice Perrier, sous la direction, *L'Homme postmoderne*, p.97



Figure 3: The family in shattered spaces. On the left, Midori and Kenji. On the right, Ryuhei and Takashi (*Tokyo Sonata*, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, 2008)

When Ryûhei learns that his son Kenji takes piano classes without his consent, he refuses to let him continue only in a futile way to express his responsibility as the father authority. His action tends to look even more pathetic as he tries to keep control on his son and family by force. However, this performance fails when Megumi admits to him that she knows about his unemployment situation. Kenji comes back from his room and throws to his father his piano keyboard he used to practice. Ryûhei runs after Kenji at the second floor, which results in the son brutally falling down the stairs (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Fall of a model, home becomes a hostile place (*Tokyo Sonata*)

This fall echoes Ozu's *A Hen in the Wind* (1948). The film sets on a postwar Japan still struggling with the scars of the war. As a parallel, a young mother struggles for her ill 4 year-old son. As she is on her own, still waiting for her husband, Shuichi, to come back from the war, she is eventually led to prostitution in order to pay his treatment.



Figure 5: The burden of postwar legacy (*A Hen in the Wind*, Ozu Yasujirô, 1948)

When Shuichi finally comes home, he eventually finds out what his wife has done. In spite of understanding what she's been through, he cannot help getting upset at her. As Tokiko tries to keep him, Shuichi accidentally pushes her in the stairs (Figure 6). As Shuichi admits he is also wrong, the two end by reconciling each other.



Figure 6: Fall unravels family as a play (*A Hen in the Wind*)

In a book dedicated to Ozu, Japanese filmmaker Kijû Yoshida writes the duality of the depiction of family. On one hand, only crisis can create a consciousness of the family as such. On the other hand, the more actors play their role, the more they appear as strangers for each other⁷. This double aspect frames the characters of the movie as none but characters stranger to the space they invest such as familial house. In the same way, family depiction is framed like none other but a depiction of family, which reinforces the artificiality of the family depicted on screen: Ozu is not showing a family, he is showing the play of a family crisis and the family crisis as a play. He doesn't show the crisis of a couple but the crisis of people who are strangers to each other and to a space they invest but fail to dwell, to inhabit as they don't know how to dwell. Something that both Teshigahara and Kurosawa depict in their own movies.

Something similar that occur in Tsukamoto's movies like *Tôkyô Fist* (1995) and *Bullet Ballet* (1998). Both movies focus on characters played by the filmmaker himself. In the first movie, the quiet life of a *salaryman* named Tsuda and living with

⁷ Kijû Yoshida, *Ozu ou l'anti-cinéma*, Arles, Institut Lumière/Actes sud – Arte Editions, 2004, p.83

his fiancée, Hizuru, becomes upset with the intrusion of an old classmate from high school named Kojima. As a rivalry grows between them along with Hizuru leaving Tsuda, the figure of the *salaryman*, often associated to bright futures as well as professional and personal success, is heavily desecrated. This downfall is accentuated through Tsuda's home that is some apartment in some *danchi* like the ones he visits at the beginning of the movie (Figure 7).



Figure 7: *danchi* (*Tokyo Fist*, Tsukamoto Shinya, 1995)

Even before Kojima's coming, the apartment is depicted as a cold and dehumanizing space in which the couple barely shares conventional discussions at the cost of the expression of true emotions and warmth. The failure of the *salaryman*'s aura of success occurs in the same time than this "home" gets gradually emptied of its occupants: Hizuru first who runs away from his partner's abusive and oppressive behavior; and then Tsuda who goes to lose himself by wandering in Tokyo's suburbs (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Living places are revealed unlivable and get empty as their occupants disinhibit them to lose themselves and evaporate (*Tokyo Fist*)

Bullet Ballet portrays a similar situation in the first minutes of the movie. As Goda, the character played by Tsukamoto, goes home, the police inform him of his girlfriend's suicide with a gun. From there, Goda spends time to get a gun on his own

in order to understand how his girlfriend felt before her death, leaving his apartment at the favor of nocturnal wanderings (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Evaporation as a reflection of a meaningless existence (*Bullet Ballet*, Tsukamoto Shinya, 1998)

In both movies, the character's home associated to the Japanese brand and modern life gets "disinhabited" by its occupants only to emphasize the crisis of dwelling between people and space. The filmmaker doesn't portray the process of a home becoming a strange place: he portrays the process of a consciousness, the realization of a home as a strange place all along, realization even more highlighted through the artificiality of the cinematographic media. This reminds the spectator that the movie he's watching is not the reality but a manufactured vision made of scattered pieces of reality.

Facing the "disinhabitation" of space through the disinhabited, desolated home, the characters portrayed by Teshigahara, Ozu, Kurosawa and Tsukamoto wander in temporary places such as streets or malls, investing spaces but unable to dwell any of them as well as their own home. Crisis of dwelling doesn't occur through the lack of space but the mutation of this space in which people fail to build an identity. This process of "disinhabitation" highlights the loss of stable milieu, of a strong human existential identification through dehistoricized and dehumanizing spaces. But more important is that through their artificiality and their manufactured structure, cinema itself as a representative of modernity creates a disruption effect between people and the spaces they invest. Cinema wipes out the reality it frames at the favor of a rewriting of the space in which the characters build themselves in a present of action, which deprives them of any history and structural occasion of human existence. War sounds more like a reminder of the modernization of a society that wiped out its history such as the Japanese traditional house at the favor of sterile and dehumanizing buildings made of glass, steel and concrete.

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Contact email: lheaven@hotmail.fr