

Exploring the City through Kōbō Abe's *The Ruined Map* and Yutaka Takanashi's *Toshi-e*

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“down to the left ran the main road [...] the streetlight suddenly eerily went out [...] perhaps too it was time for the light to go out” (Abe, 10)

In this essay I will discuss how the city is explored in Kōbō Abe’s novel, *The Ruined Map* (1967) (hereafter *Map*) and in Yutaka Takanashi’s photo-book *Toshi-e* [‘Towards the City’] (1974). Takanashi’s photo-book is a collection of photographs which are tied together by similar overarching themes and it consists of two volumes, *Toshi-e* and *Tokyo-jin* [‘Tokyoites’]. Both artists focus on the urbanisation of post-war Japan during the mid-twentieth century, depicting it as alienating, deceptive and disorientating. These themes are explored through both the landscape and the people presented in *Map* and *Toshi-e*. Through their comparison, my aim is to show how these works convey each of these themes through reverse processes: *Map* by gradually absorbing the reader into the madness of the detective’s mind as a means to experience the city, while *Toshi-e* by slowly pushing the viewer away in fear after gradually revealing the city’s dangers.

The theme of alienation in *Map* is most effectively explored using the frames the detective repeatedly looks through in an attempt to understand both himself and his surroundings. In the opening section of the novel, after examining his surroundings while entering the danchi complex, the detective admits, “I had had enough of distinguishing myself. For this human filing cabinet with its endless filing-card apartments was merely a



Figure 1



Figure 2

glass frame” (5). Expanding on Oba’s idea that the frame around the “Picasso lithograph” is what constitutes the meaning of the image (Oba 154) and using Derrida’s definition of a

frame as “a parergon, [...] an outside which is called to the inside of the inside in order to constitute it as an inside” (Derrida 63), the “glass frame” here suggests an inability to provide significance to the interior subjects of the apartments, as its transparency constitutes it as a false frame. This false frame is what the detective continually struggles with throughout the novel. In his attempt to decipher the mystery of the missing husband, the detective looks through frames to help him gather clues, “the panes of glass were small, but the aluminum frame left the view unobstructed” (10). However, the city-scape seems to overwhelm and distract him as he ends up getting lost in his own thoughts with no advancement in his findings: “down to the left ran the main road [...] the streetlight suddenly eerily went out [...] perhaps too it was time for the light to go out” (10). Similarly, when coming across a half-frame created by “a white pole perpendicular in the dry grass” (96) which outlines the overwhelming violence of the gangs fighting below in the embankment, he cannot decipher it even though it “was pregnant with meaning” (96). His inability to grasp any information from his surrounding urban setting, even when looking through frames which are expected to provide meaning, highlights the alienation and discord between the city and its people, while also eerily suggesting that the artificial landscape might be devoid of any meaning at all. The detective’s inability to decipher the meanings of the framed landscapes thus intrigues the reader, unconsciously coaxing them to try to “piece together a new provisional map of their own to reassemble the disparate fragments” (Prichard 52).

In Takanashi’s photos, alienation is similarly explored through sight. However, here it is achieved by denied eye contact between the photographed subjects as well as between the subjects and the viewer. In Figure 1, a young woman is captured in profile absorbed in something which is denied to the viewer’s gaze. As she looks ahead, the female figure behind her initially seems to be looking directly at the camera. It is only after closer inspection that the viewer distinguishes the soft blur which completely shadows her eye-socket, repelling the

viewer with the spectre-like blur which similarly surrounds her whole body. The eeriness created by the woman's indistinct features and blurred gaze thus creates alienation between the two subjects within the photograph while also repelling the viewer. In Figure 2, the two central women who are facing the camera have their eyes softly closed. Their gaze is equally denied to the reader while they stand with their legs crossed, a pose which gives the impression that they are swaying dreamily, indifferent to the other people around them as well as to the viewer. Moreover, the people in the background are similarly not exchanging glances with anyone. Only the eyes of the two women in the far left and the one in the far right can be clearly seen, yet their gaze too is empty of any interaction. As Abe notes during his interview with Hardin, "people [...] can never separate *to be seen* and *to see*. Only one combined entity exists. There is always *to see* and *to be seen* together" (447; italics mine). In Takanashi's photographs, the people are unable to look at each other since by doing so, they would have to come face to face with their own identities, or lack of, symbolising the trauma of the people in post-war Japan. The denial of any gaze between the photographed subjects as well as any gaze between them and the viewer, makes the observer feel just as alienated as the photographed subjects, while the crowdedness of the images enhances the feelings of loneliness and isolation. The fact that, through close inspection, the photos reveal less clarity than they did from a distance repels the viewer as they feel increasingly isolated. This makes them starkly aware of their desperate human need for interaction and belonging, marking the necessity of a unified community in the process of forming a personal as well as a national identity.

Deception is another theme which exposes the unsettling nature of urban life. Both mediums explore the deceptiveness of the urban space by exuding the feeling of suspicion and apprehension. In Abe's *Map*, the detective's suspicions repeatedly prove to be unfounded. For example, when he is wary of being followed – "someone was following me"

(43), “the faster I walked the more I realized that still another step was pursuing me” (184) – it is always revealed to be the harmless Tashiro. Yet, when he is in the locus of danger, he “remains unmoved by the tensions that give all signs of a violent storm unfolding around him” (Prichard 67). Right before the outbreak of the gang-fight in the embankment, the detective thinks to himself, “if I were forced to find something worrisome, it would be, I suppose, the number of men wearing work helmets” (90); “even if something were brewing, it would be at most some unpleasant words or a demonstration” (92). The unreliability of the detective at predicting imminent danger keeps the reader in constant tension throughout the novel. Furthermore, when violence erupts, such as with the gang-fight or his ambush at the Camellia, the narrative style and tone remain the same; there is no change in sentence length or punctuation use and his tone remains equally apathetic and detached: “It was unclear who struck out first [...] the girls, like sacks of potatoes, were hoisted on shoulders, several men to each one, and carried away” (94); “My face was struck or I was kicked, but I felt no particular pain [...] Unfortunately I was unable after all to see the faces of the men who had manhandled me” (206). The dissonance created between the events described and the description of their experience, as well as the absence of a climax and a resolution in these scenes, heightens the tension of the reader even further, causing them to be even more wary and alert. In this way, through his novel, Abe gradually forces onto the reader the feelings of suspicion and hostility evoked by urban society and its unpredictability.



Figure 3



Figure 4

Contrastingly, in Takanashi's photographs, suspicion is not evoked gradually but rather with a shocking suddenness as the viewer's eye suddenly catches hints of hostility and imminent violence hidden in the background. Looking at Figure 3, the viewer's eye is immediately drawn to the men covering the centre to right side of the photo who are being entertained by something behind the viewer, drawing their gaze diagonally towards the centre-left of the photograph. However, as the viewer follows their gaze leftward, they fall upon a strange figure with a towel covering their whole upper body. Moving downward to inspect the figure, the viewer is shocked to find a boxing glove and pulls back at the dissonance created between the expected entertainment, anticipated by the absorbed expressions of the two men in the front, and the violence symbolised by the hidden boxer in the high-contrast shadows of the photograph. Similarly, in Figure 4, the viewer's eye is first caught by the man's face in the window frame but, almost immediately, the gaze is drawn down to the ominous countenance of the girl reflected in the man's back. This unsettling, spectre-like figure which induces the feeling of surveillance and impending danger is also

complemented by the smaller details revealed after a closer look, such as the wire, which fragments the man's face, and the serpentine hand looming above the man's head. Thus, through their hidden elements of threat Takanashi's photographs enhance the feeling of hostility exuded by urban life, causing the reader to retreat in shock and distress.

In Abe's *Map*, the city is also portrayed as disorientating primarily through the chaotic narrative structure of the novel and the fragmented memory of the detective. The stream of consciousness narrative form is repeatedly disrupted as the detective's mind jumps between fragmented thoughts – “at the same moment my reasoning took such a sharp curve” (57) – and memories – “suddenly I remembered something I had forgotten” (95). At the same time, the detective is haunted by “the feeling that somewhere, some place, I had witnessed precisely the same scene” (85-86) while his mind seems to go “round and round in depressing circles” (89), “producing more of a fiction” (87-88). These phrases, taken from various sections of the novel, convey the labyrinth-like structure which underlines the whole narrative, as well as the structure of the urban landscape. The chaotic trajectory of the detective's mind precisely resembles the maze-like maps of the city drawn by Tashiro, with “sharp curve[s]” (map 1, 45) and “depressing circles” (map 2, 62). However, the detective's fragmented memory also conveys the city as disorientating. Literary critic Michael Sheringham argues that memories are inevitably tied to one's present state of mind and that they are constantly being reconstructed through our present experiences. Moreover, he suggests that memory's fragmented quality allows “endless negotiations” (297) between past and present. As a result, he redefines the act of remembering, not as an immersion into past images, but as the process of establishing connections between those images. Since the detective's present experiences are so chaotic, the negotiation between his past and present memories is disrupted and thus, his memory remains fragmented. This is reflected in the abrupt change of narrative styles between sections, as he jumps from prosaic narration to



Figure 5



Figure 6

detached reporting (26, 61, 107), to an interview transcript (122-126), as well as his abrupt change of locations. For example, after losing consciousness during the gang-fight, he is conversing with the client in her apartment in the next section (97-99), or similarly jumps from being in his client's home, to a section which starts in mid-conversation with Tashiro (167). In this way, Abe ensnares the reader into the same disorientation experienced by the detective due to the chaos of the city.

Contrastingly, the theme of disorientation in Takanashi's photographs is conveyed through the tilted framing of the photos and the juxtaposition of light and darkness, achieved through over or under-exposure, as well as by capturing direct light sources. The over-exposure in Figure 5 creates a faded tonality which obscures the buildings in the background, evoking a sense of nowhere-ness and depicts a city "losing its colors, diverse saturations, and distinctive identities" (Kim 242) alluding not only to the physical disorientation of urban life, but also the disorientation experienced by the loss of personal and national identity. This loss is also further emphasised through the tilted angle of the image which generates instability or even the feeling of falling. In Figure 6, the blinding light ray which burns the top right side of the image is cut by the edge of the tilting floor. These two sections of the image seem completely incongruous, as the blinding light which shines from behind the rest of the image gives the impression that the floor is a displaced floating platform. Moreover, the floor and the legs are illuminated by a different light source, whose

rays form a water-like surface before being completely absorbed by the dark platform. This leaves the bottom-left side of the image completely black, similarly creating a sense of placelessness which confuses and repels the viewer in frustration. However, one can also interpret the disorientation in the photographs as a mechanism that “equalises, that is, works against hierarchy and perhaps against injustices” (Martin et al. 7). Perhaps, in this way, the placelessness evoked by the photographs can be interpreted as a rebellion against the city landscape; a placelessness which erases the urban and allows a less hostile place to be imagined – the same blank slate made available to the detective by losing his memory, which will finally allow him to be named.

In conclusion, Abe’s novel and Takanashi’s photographs both express the alienation, wariness and disorientation generated by the city through completely opposed processes. *The Ruined Map* initially repels the reader with its disjointed narrative structure and misleading clues. However, through the detective’s obsessions and conspiracies, the reader is reeled in by their own curiosity, immersed in the madness of city life through the detective's own mind. This also reveals the identity of the novel as a medium which conveys its meaning by replicating the feelings of experience, and forcing them onto the reader through its narrative techniques. On the other hand, Takanashi’s *Toshi-e* immediately attracts the viewer’s eye through the harsh tonalities of his photos and candidness of his subjects. However, through close inspection, the reader draws back in fear once the details of the images become clearer to them, subtly evoking a sense of imminent danger either through the tones, the tilted angles, or suspicious figures in the background. In this way, through the subtle undercurrents of eeriness and hostility, the viewer is exposed to the unsettling aura of the city. The identity of the photograph as a medium is thus conveyed as a condensed, immediate experience, held in a palimpsest of meaning which “revitalizes language” though its posed “challenge to the established system” (Abe 2013, 64). Evidently, the shared task of these works is to reveal the

dangers of the city. However, when working together, their shared achievement is the creation of a perfect labyrinth, “a bounded infinity” (1), for both viewers and readers: curious enough to lure one in, yet unsettling enough to constantly be aware of their dangerous entrapment as they struggle to find the exit without any help from an Ariadne or her golden thread.

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