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Watching Tokyo Through the Eyes of Outsiders

By Moeko Fujii | December 16, 2019

Chris Marker's film "Sans Soleil", 1983

I grew up watching foreigners film Tokyo. Every morning, on my way to school, I met my friends in front of Shibuya Crossing, the city's notoriously crowded intersection. Each time the lights changed and the car-clogged expanse cleared, Tokyo stretched ahead like a catwalk. We would strut forth, flanked by tourists, until people pummelled us from five directions. By the time we reached the far sidewalk, most of us looked shipwrecked. I liked seeing white men sprinting past us to film the scene. Some would hold cameras on their foreheads, following actors through the swarm of black hair. Others would plant a ladder in the middle of the intersection, as though our city was the moon. Once, I heard shouts and saw a ladder keel over with the slow, graceful arc of a monument toppling during a revolution.

The list of auteurs who have trekked to Tokyo is long: Wim Wenders, Chris Marker, Bong Joon-ho, Leos Carax, Werner Herzog, Sofia Coppola, and Abbas Kiarostami, among others. During the past month, I saw much of their work at the Japan Society, which hosted a film series, "Tokyo Stories," that studied the city's place in the global imagination. Three modes seemed to emerge onscreen: the foreign filmmaker who goes to Japan as a tourist; the foreign filmmaker who resists being a tourist; and the foreign filmmaker who goes to Japan and doesn't make a film about foreigners at all. After some of the films, a friend would elbow me, whispering, "Was that *your* Tokyo?" Sometimes Tokyo seemed to be made out of cardboard, such as in Max Ophüls's "Yoshiwara," from 1937, a "Madame Butterfly" homage shot in a Japanese garden in Paris. Despite the film's yellowface, I couldn't help but like its blunt honesty. In one scene, a group of Russian officers head out to visit the red-light district, and a short,

hammy man asks his friend if he speaks Japanese. His friend laughs: "You think you need to *speak* to geishas?"

Speaking Japanese is not required in the Tokyo-tourist film, a genre that includes Sofia Coppola's "Lost in Translation," Justin Lin's "The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift," and wryer works such as Doris Dörrie's "Cherry Blossoms" and Alain Corneau's "Fear and Trembling." These films act almost as brochures, and their narrative beats are as predictable as those in a romantic comedy. Their protagonists are usually white and, at some juncture in their lives, go to Tokyo. They are either positioned very low, down in the street, feeling swallowed by the city, or very high, on an expensive floor, staring at the urban forest. The Japanese people they meet are either sterile, or soapy and naked, or satirized as types: a bowing suit, a kimono clutching a designer handbag. This new Japan is chased with extracts of the old—Mt. Fuji, Kyoto, bonsai, ikebana. Finally, there's a chance encounter with another foreigner, who is more seasoned, more cynical; together, they turn Tokyo into a playground and leave when the fantasy fades. When I talk to my friends from home about this kind of movie, we tend to return to "Lost in Translation," which we both love and hate. Despite the film's tropes, Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson's sense of loneliness is so finely drawn, the relief they find in each other so palpable, that we, too, long to see the city as they do.

If this first type of Tokyo film functions as a guidebook, reverential and rote, Chris Marker's "Sans Soleil" embodies a second type, in which the filmmaker pursues something more than spectacle. Marker looks for Tokyo when it yawns, when no one else is looking. The narrator reads letters from a fictional cameraman visiting Japan. "One could get lost in the great orchestral masses and the accumulation of details," she says. "But that yielded the cheapest image of Tokyo— overcrowded, megalomaniac, inhuman. He thought he saw more subtle cycles there." For Marker, Tokyo is full of familiar places—he made several films about Japan—but he's interested in how even the familiar can shift, revealing strange new patterns. He tracks the syntax of the city: the nods of a salesgirl, the sway of wrists on a train, boys bowing as they mourn at a memorial for a dead panda. "Sans Soleil" wouldn't satisfy the often blunt metrics of representation: Japanese people don't talk in the film. Yet this feels like a deliberate choice, one meant to acknowledge the limits of a foreigner's gaze. Marker sticks to observing surfaces—the expressions on Japanese faces that are walking, browsing, or waiting for a light to change—because he doesn't presume to speak for what lies beneath. He understands how easily love can become predatory.

And must every film about Tokyo be a love letter? Marker is also willing to confront the city's darkness, its difference. Some of his first shots of Tokyo are of Koreans, whom the film marks as outcasts. Throughout "Sans Soleil," Marker returns to footage of extreme right-wing nationalists spewing imperialist rhetoric on megaphones, their words drawing on Japan's history of colonial and racial violence. Leos Carax, another French filmmaker, sharpens this critique in his short film "Merde," which is a story of a green-suited, red-haired creature that emerges from the sewers to wreak havoc on pedestrians in Ginza. The creature slips down a manhole and finds, in the bowels of Tokyo, a tattered imperial flag, grenades from the Sino-Japanese War, and a sign supporting the imperial forces of Nanking. He climbs up into Shibuya's bright night and hurls the grenades into hordes of unsuspecting—and un-remembering—Japanese faces. Both Marker and Carax depict a public that can walk unfazed through a legacy of injustice. They ask us to look at Tokyo and its people without thinking of them as the enchanted, the exceptional.

As these two Tokyos—one neon and innocent, the other shaded, more implicated—slipped before me, I fought a strange urge to claim a place in these films. What would it be like, I wondered, to let the Japanese speak in a foreign film about Tokyo? One answer came from "Like Someone in Love," one of the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami's last feature films. In an interview, Kiarostami said that he made

a single promise to his producer—"My film won't show that it's been made by a foreigner or by an outsider in Japan." To make good on his word, he hired an entirely Japanese cast. Other foreign directors have done this—Bong Joon-ho with *hikikomori,* or social recluses; Werner Herzog with Japan's rent-a-family industry—but their films often turn Japanese characters into allegories for social issues. Kiarostami is interested in more intimate questions. His characters aren't problems as people; they're people with problems. The film follows a newcomer to the city, Akiko, a college student who is a sex worker on the side, and a lonely, retired professor who books her, not for sex but for conversation. Kiarostami, in other words, understood that not all outsiders in Tokyo look foreign.

Early in the film, Akiko gets into a taxi at night, planning to meet the professor. When she puts in her earbuds, there are seven messages on her phone. In the first, which was left in the early morning, we learn that her grandmother is visiting from their rural home town and trying to reach her. "Aki-chan, I'll be leaving on the 11 *P.M.* train," the grandmother says. "I'll be sitting and waiting for you at the benches near the entrance. I hope I'll get to see you today." The rest of the messages follow, each left several hours apart, and through them we hear her grandmother's experience of Tokyo: at first from a bench at the station, then from a soba shop, and then from a telephone booth with advertisements for call girls taped on the door. A girl in a photograph, she says, looks just like Akiko, but it can't be, can it? Onscreen, Ginza and Shinjuku slip past, leaving slats of neon-blue light on Akiko's face.

One sees a lot of Tokyo through taxis in these movies—foreigners like to take cabs, unlike the locals—but in Kiarostami's hands the Tokyo we see isn't Tokyo-as-style. This city is not a site of escape or irony; it is simply what a girl is concentrating on, what she needs to hold back her tears. When we hear the last message, Akiko's grandmother is waiting in front of a bronze statue near the entrance of Tokyo Station. Akiko asks the driver if it's on the way. It's close, he says. A minute passes, and through Akiko's window we see a little old woman, using a suitcase as a cane, eagerly checking the faces of the strangers walking by. Akiko must make a choice: to get out of the car and face her grandmother, or to slip away unseen. Kiarostami holds the shot on her face. The driver's going too fast, and a van blocks her view of her grandmother. Here, finally, we hear a Japanese girl speak—not as type, not as allegory, but as herself: "I'm sorry, do you mind going around it once more?" Her voice is cracked, desperate. In it, we hear the tale of outsiders to Tokyo—those who can't stop seeing, in the city, all the selves they thought they could be, and all that they have left behind.