MYTHS AND BINARIES IN DISCOURSES ON JAPANESE PHOTOGRAPHY

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Myths

The most recent contribution to contemporary Japanese photography has been the 2008 exhibition *Heavy Light* at the International Center of Photography in New York, claiming that it is the “first major survey of contemporary Japanese photography by a US museum since 1979” (Fuku and Phillips 2008: 10). By emphasizing the *contemporary*, the curators Noriko Fuku and Christopher Phillips thus neatly exclude other, far more relevant surveys on Japanese photography, such as Anne Wilkes Tucker’s mammoth exhibition and book project *The History of Japanese Photography*, touring the US in 2003. The *double entendre* in the exhibition title *Heavy Light* refers to the etymological root of the word *photography* (from Greek *phos graphis* or lit. *light drawing*) while at the same time alluding to the curators’ methodological framework in conceiving the participating artists’ work based on the construction of binary oppositions (such as heavy vs. light). This method is also evident in the three thematic areas that Fuku and Phillips felt the chosen works fall in, described as “the heightened tension that exists in the present day between human culture and the forces of the natural world,” “the contest between individual and collective identity” and “the relation of the adult to

1 The 1979 exhibition referred to here is *Japan: A Self-portrait* also held at the International Center of Photography.
the child” (10-13). The binaries chosen here are as follows: culture/nature, individual/collective, adult/child. As such oppositions are applicable to any society, we must ask then why specifically these ones have been chosen to describe contemporary Japanese photography specifically?

The method of breaking down elements within a society into corresponding categories, such as high and low, strong and weak, big and little, etc. is a familiar one: working in the Saussurian tradition, the structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss comments that the “most abstract levels of thought … are also those with the greatest rigour and logical simplicity” ([1984]: 35). In seminal studies, such as The Raw and the Cooked it is the overriding culture/nature binary, similar to Fuku and Phillip’s approach, that was used as a methodological device. As Jacques Derrida noted, this method “has been passed on to us by a long historical chain” going back to the Sophists (physis/nomos) ([1967]: 357). Critical of the overriding nature/culture opposition, however, Derrida also remarks that one “perceives in [Lévi-Strauss’] work an ethic of nostalgia for origins, an ethic of archaic and natural innocence, of a purity of presence” (369). Above all, it was nature that signified this innocence and purity, which Lévi-Strauss found in the “exemplary” societies in South America.

If we examine the Heavy Light binaries further, we can recognize that this notion of purity and innocence is similarly employed by choosing to juxtapose culture with nature, but perhaps more tellingly, adult with child. While the authors remain vague why these particular categories have been chosen to describe Japanese society, they do, however, give a clear indication in regards to the opposition of the individual and the collective: they write that to be an individual “is very difficult in a country as homogeneous as Japan” (Fuku and Phillips 2008: 13). It should be recognized that such a statement is culturally marked, whereas being (tribal) collective is perceived to be inferior to an (enlightened) individual. If we were to invert the cultural bias as it was applied above (e.g. the collective is stronger than the individual), one can recognize that such juxtaposition is inevitably flawed due to a propensity towards generalisations. Yet what is the most striking here is a reference to one of the greatest and most persistent myths that exist on Japan today: the widely discredited “myth of the homogenous nation” (Oguma 2002: xxx).

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2 Phillips’ propensity towards binaries is also exhibited in his now classic essay The Judgement Seat of Photography from 1982, in which he evokes pace Walter Benjamin the terms “cult value” and “exhibition value” in his discussion of how photography “has … been subjected to the transfiguring gaze of art’s institutional guardian: the museum” (30). With considerable irony then, it should be noted that Phillips himself, as curator at the International Center of Photography in New York, has become an integral part in such transfigurative (and connoisseurial) processes described by himself so many years earlier.
Lévi-Strauss recognized the potential for myths in the establishment of binaries when he writes that opposing categories can be “differently coded”, that “high and low can be translated into the form of an opposition between the elements Sky and Earth” ([1984]: 35). In the case of Heavy Light then, in addition to what the word collective signifies, it is also a reference to Japan’s presumed homogeneity. As early as 1955, Lévi-Strauss described this process as constituting a “third referent which combines the properties of [langue and parole]” (1955: 430). He continues:

There is a very good reason why myth cannot simply be treated as language if its specific problems are to be solved; myth is language: to be known, myth has to be told; it is a part of human speech. [original emphasis] (430)

Similarly, in Mythologies Roland Barthes points out that “myth is a system of communication” or a “mode of signification” ([1957]: 109). He even goes as far as saying that myths are a language in their own right, a second language, which he defined as a metalanguage. Barthes writes

In myth, we find [a] tri-dimensional pattern…: the signifier, the signified and the sign. But myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system. That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second. We must here recall that the materials of mythical speech (the language itself, photography … etc.), however different at the start, are reduced to a pure signifying function as soon as they are caught by myth (114).

Apart from Lévi-Strauss’ and Barthes’ apparent idiosyncratic interest in Mythologics (Lévi-Strauss) and Mythologies (Barthes), what is relevant here is the inclusion of an historical element; that myths belong to a previously existing semiological chain of myths. Furthermore, Barthes is specific when he writes that “everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse”

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3 Two years after Lévi-Strauss’ article The Structural Study of Myth, Roland Barthes writes in Mythologies: “… what must be firmly established at the start is that myth is a system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form” ([1957]: 109).

4 Barthes’ claim to have established the term metalanguage (“myth itself, which I shall call metalanguage” ([1957]: 115) should be considered with suspicion. If one can trust the accuracy of Lévi-Strauss’ transcript of lectures, the term metalanguage or paralanguage was already in circulation as early as 1954 ([1984]: 205).

5 Similar to Barthes, Lévi-Strauss writes: “It is that double structure, altogether historical and un-historical, which explains that myth, while pertaining to the realm of the parole and calling for an explanation as such, as well as to that of the langue in which it is expressed, can also be an absolute object on a third level which, though it remains linguistic by nature, is nevertheless distinct from the other two” (1955: 430).
Therefore, in addition to questioning the notion of Japanese homogeneity and how this myth has been applied to Japanese photography, we must consider how this myth is a part of a larger discursive formation. In Japanese Studies, the notion of homogenous people belongs to *nihonjinron*, literally, discussions on Japanese people, a vast discursive body, which claims the “uniqueness of Japanese culture, people, and language” (Nara 2007: 1). One of the key pillars of this discourse is built upon the notion of “pure blood” which evolved into the idea of a “homogenous nation.” In this context *nihonjinron* has also expressed a form of “cultural nationalism” (Befu and Manabe 1991: 129). Far beyond that, however, *nihonjinron* encompasses the notion of inscrutable language and culture, which, it is claimed, outsiders cannot understand. Other aspects of this discourse can be seen in the promotion of an intrinsically harmonious society and, related to that, a society without class differentiation.

A prominent example of *nihonjinron* appearing in contemporary Japanese art is Murakami Takashi’s well-known and often referenced notion of *superflat*, a term that seeks to establish that Japanese cultural products originate from and reproduce a uniquely homogenous national ideology in itself (Murakami 2000). In his scathing and equally brilliant criticism of *superflat*, cultural critic Mōri Yoshitaka writes that “most of the arguments over ‘superflat’ have been disappointingly nationalist in terms of assuming Japanese culture as homogenous and pure entity” (Mōri 2006: 189). The danger of doing so, Mōri argues, could even lead to “an imperialist desire to organize the world by putting Japan at the centre” (188). Stuart Hall has similarly pointed out that the “myth of national culture” is “operating very powerfully in Japanese culture” and warns that it is indeed a “dangerous one” (1998: 370). I am arguing that a keen awareness of this particular myth, the myth of Japanese uniqueness, is necessary in order to assess Japanese art and photography critically. As the example of *Heavy Light* shows, however, (the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue were conceived by both, an American and Japanese curator) it would be incorrect to assume that *nihonjinron* always originates

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6 Foucault defines discursive formation as following: “Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such as a system of dispersion, whenever … one can define a regularity … [then] we will say … that we are dealing with a discursive formation” ([1969]: 41).

7 An early formation of the “superflat” theory can be found in Murakami’s 1999 *The Meaning of Nonsense of the Meaning* exhibition catalogue in which Matsui Midori recalls his lecture “The Super Flat is the Spirit of the Japanese” delivered at the Mitaka City Center for Art, March 7th the same year. It should be noted that Murakami’s discussion of the “Japanese spirit” and recalling the art forms that were “a source of national pride” contribute to the larger discursive body of *nihonjinron* (Matsui 1999: 22).
from Japan itself. In fact, *nihonjinron* is at times hard to detect partially because it can originate from a wide variety of sources on an even wider variety of topics: Japanese photography is not excluded. Consequently, the mythologists’ attention should be directed to the potential for myths to be *naturalized* in (photography) history through these notions of Japanese uniqueness which in itself requires us to pay attention to “the markers with which the nation stakes its claim to identity” (Morris-Suzuki 1998: 209).

Myths confront us with another phenomenon regarding Japan: not only fantasizing about Japan’s presupposed homogeneity or its inscrutable culture, but rather, related to that, Japan becoming a myth itself. After the hype of *Japonisme* swept over Europe in the early 1870s, Oscar Wilde famously wrote in 1889 that “the whole of Japan is a pure invention” ([1889]: 97-98). Similarly, Barthes discussed this idea in *Empire of Signs*, in which he begins the following: “If I want to imagine a fictive nation, I can give it an invented name, treat it declaratively as a novelistic object... It is this system which I shall call: Japan” ([1970]: 3). Importantly, both these arguments have been made with regard to images from Japan: Wilde has been led to his remark after coming in contact with the *ukiyo-e* by “Hokusai, or Hokkei, or any of the great native painters” (98) and Barthes studied photographs, maps, Chinese characters and other signifying systems. Thus in order to “imagine” Japan, to have the tangible image from Japan, an aspect, that Karatani Kōjin called aestheticentrism, plays an important role (1998). In this regard, one should consider that the words *stereotype* and *cliché* originate from the printing press and photographic processes respectively. If we were to follow the etymological roots of these words, the stereotype and cliché in their colloquial use today suggest the

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8 The context of Wilde’s comment is worth taking in further consideration as he makes a specific reference to Japanese art: “I know you are fond of Japanese things. Now, do you really imagine that the Japanese people, as they are presented to us in art, have any existence? If you do, you have never understood Japanese art at all. The Japanese people are the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists. If you set a picture of Hokusai, or Hokkei, or any of the great native painters, beside a real Japanese gentleman or lady, you will see that there is not the slightest resemblance between them. The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say, they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them. In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people” ([1889]: 97-98).

9 With a high degree of certainty Oscar Wilde was referring to *ukiyo-e* prints and not paintings. His remark on other “painters” is therefore misleading, as Hokusai and Hokkei were predominantly printmakers.

10 In seeking to avoid what he called “aestheticentrism,” Karatani writes that Edward Said’s “lessons present that there are others, namely, individuals, who cannot be mere objects of analysis or beauty, and that it is necessary to fight against any power – whether Western or Oriental – that suppresses individuals” (1998: 160).
reproduction of multiple copies based on an original. One should also realize that ukiyo-e prints themselves are copies, the original of which is the woodcut, and that Japonisme and the parallel imagination of Japan, as pointed out by Oscar Wilde, is partially based on the very reproducibility (and global distribution) of the ukiyo-e. Similar to the printing type, (analogue) photography is also based on the conception of an original (negative) and multiple copies (prints). What I am therefore arguing is that the mythologist is not only required to study how myths have been naturalized but also how specifically photography (as another type of cliché or stereotype) has aided this naturalization, such as in the curators’ presumption of Japan as a “homogenous” country in the Heavy Light exhibition. Described earlier as a second-order semiological system by Barthes, this case shows how the signification system of photography itself is also utilized in the spreading of myths in addition to its discursive formation, specifically in regards to Japanese photography.

**Binaries**

The use of binaries to categorize Japanese photography is a surprisingly common feature in literature on this topic. Apart from Heavy Light, this is most bluntly displayed on a linguistic level in the very titles of recent photography and contemporary art exhibitions, such as Inside Out (Leach 1994), Desire and Void (Weiermair and Matt 1997), Fast and Slow (Osaka 2001) and Out of the Ordinary/Extraordinary (Kasahara 2004). A closer look at literature on Japanese photography as a whole will furthermore reveal that establishing opposing binaries has become modus operandi. 11 While similar discursive tendencies are noticeable in regards to photography from

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11 There are too many cases to list here where binaries are established in regards to literature on Japanese photography. The crudest example of such inquiry I came across is the following: “On the one hand there is the common historical view of geisha girls and Fujisan, of Madame Butterfly and the Kamikase [sic]; on the other, there is the present realisation that Japan has become the meeting-point of contrasting cultures, with miniaturised television sets existing alongside Kabuki theatre, Coca Cola with ritual tea—taking, jeans with kimonos; and beyond all these generalised perceptions is the sense of Eastern inscrutability. A similar evasion occurs in considering Japanese photography; though brand-names such as Canon, Fuji, Minolta, Nikon and Pentax represent an unavoidable technical and industrial reality, there is little reference to the country’s equally impressive output of photographic works or to the visual traditions that have informed the works” (Colombo 1979: 11). The author’s reference to various photographic brand names, starting with Canon, is no coincidence here as Canon was the principal sponsor for the accompanying exhibition.
other, mostly Asian countries, it must be underlined that the use of binaries is specifically most common to Japanese photography. Consider, for example, these remarks about the photographer Sugimoto Hiroshi, whose photographic books are described the following:

With work as austere, precise and elegant as a Zen garden, Sugimoto has a natural propensity for deluxe, limited-edition books, as precisely engineered as a machine (Parr and Badger 2004: 271).

While this particular example exhibits the familiar characteristics of the nature/culture opposition (garden and machine), it also juxtaposes perceived cultural specificities by reemphasizing later on that Sugimoto is “Combining the Japanese tradition with Western conceptualism” (271). This is insofar problematic, as it suggests that conceptualism is intrinsically Western in itself. It confronts the reader with a paradox that perceived Eastern and Western characteristics coexist in Sugimoto’s work. Ian Littlewood observed that this notion of paradox is a dominant feature in a whole variety of literature on Japan, which he traces back to some of the first accounts of Japan by Portuguese Jesuits shortly after their arrival in 1543 (1996: 4). Littlewood makes a compelling case that the dominant use of binaries and paradoxes relate to a desire to differentiate cultures but also to create boundaries between them. He writes:

To call Japan a paradox is really to say that it threatens the existing boundaries and therefore our definitions of ourselves. It is for this reason that the language of paradox has always been counterbalanced by a language that reaffirms these boundaries as empathically as possible (8).

Therefore, not only should one consider what the word Zen signifies, but perhaps more importantly what it does not signify. It is thus no coincidence that specifically a belief system was chosen for one end of the binary, as it refers to an implicitly non-Christian, non-European and, therefore, non-Western identity. It is thus by difference that the Zen/machine opposition marks one of the more explicit examples of East/West binarism, a discourse Stuart Hall describes as follows:

Far from the discourse of “the West and the Rest” being unified and monolithic,

12 See, for example, the exhibition catalogues for Chaotic Harmony: Contemporary Korean Photography (Tucker, Sinsheimer, and Koo eds. 2009) and Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China (Hung and Phillips eds. 2004).

13 Michael Mann writes that the understanding of what constitutes “the West” is deeply rooted in “Christian identity [which] provided both a common humanity and a framework for common divisions among Europeans” (1986: 381).
“splitting” is a regular feature of it. The world is first divided, symbolically, into good-bad, us-them, attractive-disgusting, civilized-uncivilized, the West-the Rest. All the other, many differences between and within these two halves are collapsed, simplified – i.e. stereotyped. By this strategy, the Rest becomes defined as everything that the West is not – its mirror image (1992: 308).

While the splitting that occurs in the Zen/machine opposition is most obviously geographical in nature (East/West), it is important to recognize two distinct historic periods, such a binary is also alluding to: one characterized by the comparative lack of contact with the West during the Edo period (1603-1868) and the other marked by Japan’s rapid westernization, following the Meiji Restoration. 14 In attempting to pinpoint a historic junction where these two periods converge, historians usually refer to America’s “black ships”, arriving at Japan’s shores in 1853 after a long period of sea restrictions imposed by the former rulers of Japan, the Tokugawa Shogunate. For the establishment of the Zen/machine binary then, the notion that a specific moment in time can be referred to (black ships) is of great convenience, as Japanese culture can thus be distinctly marked as existing before and after trade began with the West on a large scale. This opposition, however, functions on the premise that Japan was completely isolated during the Edo Period, another widely discredited myth (Screech 2002: 1), which is best exemplified in the exaggerated conception of sakoku, or literally the “closed country.” While Japan’s relatively limited amount of contact with the West during the Edo Period cannot be denied, the notions of “national isolation” tend to underestimate the level of cultural import that did occur. In addition to that though, similar to Derrida’s critique of Lévi-Strauss, the assumed “national isolation” of Japan expresses a pure and innocent “exemplary society,” which is perceived to be unspoilt by the Westerners. Consequently, for most historians of Japanese art, Edo presents itself as a more attractive period compared to Meiji or more recent periods, resulting in the common perception that Japanese art is also necessarily early modern Japanese art.

One could assume that since photography is a modern practice (coincidentally almost exactly as old as the modern Japanese nation-state), the notions of “national isolation” and a subsequently crude differentiation be-

14 While I am critically referring to the term Westernization, I am aware that terms such as Americanization or Europeanization are equally used by modernization theorists. Naoki Sakai writes that it is “[o]bviously, utterly besides the point to ask which vision if modernization [that is Americanization or Europeanization] is more authentic. What this reading hints at is that, although the modernization process may be envisioned as a move toward the concretization of values at some abstract level, it is always imagined as a concrete transfer from one point to another on a world map” ([1988]: 157).
between modern and pre-modern would not affect photographic discourses as such. In this context, consider, for example, Alexandra Munroe’s discussion about the photographer Moriyama Daidō when she writes:

It is as if his photographs were constructed as a double exposure – one aspect reflecting the information of a passing moment (images of contemporary Japan), the other penetrating into the elusive meaning of Japanese cultural identity (evocations of a premodern Japan) (1999: 39).

Uncannily similar to the remarks above are those by the anthropologist Marilyn Ivy on Naitō Masatoshi’s flash photography of Tōno claimed to be “the most famous site of the folkloric in Japan:”

… the *ambiguity* or difference between available light and flashed light recapitulates the temporal divide between past and present … [and is] deeply allegorized by the thematic topoi of Naito’s gaze: conventionalized, but not stabilized, Japanese sites of darkened premodernity (and, in the case of his photographs of Tokyo, of putatively enlightened high modernity, now rendered explicitly darkened) [original emphasis] (2009: 239). 15

Similar to the Zen/machine binary, the historical opposition of the premodern and modern are firmly established in these remarks. In regards to the theme of this publication “Japan as Image,” the constant opposition of the pre-modern and modern is so persuasive that even the most respected academic publishers sometimes revert to cover photographs, such as the clichéd image of *kimono*-clad women (signifying the traditional) talking on their mobile phone (signifying the modern) (Willis, and Murphy-Shigematsu 2009). Travel guides to Japan similarly make use of such photographic juxtaposition by using an image of a busy street crossing next to an image of a quiet temple site (see for example *Tokyo City Guide* 2008). I am consciously referring to such banal and popular examples to highlight how far reaching this binarism is carried to. In addition to that, though, it should be considered how specifically photographs create an image in which such binaries

15 In the very same volume of *Photographies East: The Camera and Its Histories in East and Southeast Asia*, another case were such premodern/modern binaries are evoked is in an essay on the films of Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, whose work is described as following: “overlap dissolve and double exposure … are [cinematic] techniques of combining opposites or contraries in a single image; just as the close-up promised to make the unsightly [Japanese] face [sic] exalted, so overlap dissolve and double exposure allowed the viewer to see two apparently contradictory states at once: past and present, tradition and modernity, Oriental and Occidental, modesty and sexual appeal” (Lamarre 2009: 278-279). Such binarism is likely related to the author’s reductive understanding of colonialism, as he writes earlier: “Postcolonial theory suggests that, even as the non-West strove to copy the West, imitation failed for historical, material reasons, resulting in a copy whose differences from the original show the fault lines of the original (Western) modernity” (272).
become expected in regards to Japan. This aspect is particularly discernable in the work of Sugimoto: on the one hand, his photographic *oeuvre* includes a series on the *Hall of thirty-three Bays* in Kyoto, while on the other hand, he turns his camera towards cinema interiors in North America. One could even speculate, whether or not Sugimoto consciously plays exactly into this expectation of a binary construct by choosing subjects that are geographically and historiographically at such opposite ends. The likelihood of a conscious participation in a dominant discourse is underpinned by Sugimoto’s past life as a New York based antique art dealer, having “seen and sold some of the most sophisticated examples of East Asian art available in the last few decades” (Rousmaniere 1997: 8). In an unusual convergence of economic interest and cultural production, Sugimoto sells his own photographs to the same British art collectors who also acquired Japanese art from him dating back to the 6th century from him a year ago.16

Here, what I wish to point out is the use of such words as *elusive* (Munroe) or *darkened* (Ivy) in discourses on Japanese photography. This is not unusual in the literature on Japanese photography, or indeed on Japan as a whole, with authors commonly referring to a society that is “murky”, “mysterious”, “insular”, “complex” or “enigmatic” (Zielenziger 2006: 1).17 Edward Said described this phenomenon as follows:

> A certain freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner’s privilege; because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery, as Disraeli once called it (1978: 44).

While the reference to an elusive identity thus underlines the Orientalist notion of an “Asiatic mystery,” it also alludes to an elitist view, the “Westerner’s privilege,” as Said describes it, potentially involved in observing foreign cultures. As such observations also conform to the greater discourse of Japanese uniqueness (*nihonjinron*), it would be incorrect, however, to assume that such

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16 I am specifically referring to the case in which Sugimoto sold Japanese antiques on separate occasions and “three photographs from his *Seascapes* series for their collection” to Sir Robert and Lady Lisa Sainsbury from the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts (Rousmaniere 1997: 16).

17 These adjectives are quoted from Michael Zielenziger’s *Shutting Out the Sun*, a problematic book from the very first page when he writes about Princess Masako and Crown Prince Naruhito’s wedding in 1993: “Not once during the austere fifteen-minute ceremony did the newlyweds touch or kiss.” Here too, referring to the wedding as *austere* is furthermore underlining the assumed mysteriousness of Japanese customs. More troubling however, why does the author point out the lack of kissing and touching? Is that a particularity to be expected of any wedding anywhere in the world? If the author feels it is relevant to point out the lack of touch and kiss at an imperial wedding, why does he do this presuming that this would take place publicly, live, in front of millions of TV viewers.
particularity exclusively originates from the West. Ueno Chizuko, for example, describes a counter-discourse to Orientalism that follows the same logic of imposing uniqueness to the Orient. Here too, in what Ueno calls “reverse Orientalism,” the myth of Japanese inscrutability is commonly applied in order to differentiate Japan from other cultures. Ueno writes:

Such clichés as the following are still in circulation: “Foreigners cannot understand the essence of Japanese culture;” ”Japanese literature is impossible to translate into foreign languages”; and the like. Though undeniably colonial, such ideas reflect an effort to restore national pride at some level, however humble (2005: 235).

Here is where Orientalism, reverse Orientalism and nihonjinron can be seen to align by absolutely differentiating Japan from the West on a geographical, ideological and even cognitive level. While binary oppositions remain useful in the analysis of Japanese photography, one should also recognize their propensity to oversimplify and sometimes even exaggerate the differences between cultures. Facing a similar dilemma, Joshua Mostow suggests to “break out of binary constructions” such as Orient/Occident, modern/pre-modern, or Japan/world, binaries which he calls “overdetermined” (2003: 7). As a way out of this overdetermination, Norman Bryson, with specific reference to Japanese photography, goes further by arguing pace Homi Bhabha for “a space between the obsolescent, dying binaries, a space of hybridities and disjunctions, a third space of cultural activism, dissidence, a reinvention” (1996: 162). As Lévi-Strauss was already keenly aware, binaries attract myths, which, as pointed out here, have substantially affected literature on Japanese photography. Henceforth, in addition to a closer examination of presupposed cultural differences, another aspect of in-depth studies into recent Japanese photography will have to involve a greater awareness of myths, particularly when they subscribe to the discourse of Japanese uniqueness, the absolute differentiation of cultures, the absolute differentiation between the pre-modern and modern, and how these myths have been naturalized by the history of Japanese photography.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have pointed to many instances in which myths, binaries and a crude understanding of cultural translation has been applied to photography from Japan. As a result of this discourse, I argue that a
number of photographers, most chiefly among them Sugimoto Hiroshi, became synonymous with what is referred to as “Japanese photography.” The unfortunate outcome of this discursive formation is that other photographers, the ones that might not play into a myth of Japanese uniqueness, that avoid binary constructions in their chosen subject and whose work might not be considered elusive, have been comparatively neglected. By pointing out many preconceptions and expectations about Japanese photography and how they relate to a much wider discourse, concerning perceptions of Japan as a whole, I propose that the categorization of Japanese photography in accordance to readymade sets of beliefs, must be drastically reconsidered. Following this, we might re-evaluate the work by Japanese photographers critically, yet also this shift in perception might lead us to turn our view towards a younger generation of photographers who have been working largely undetected by Western academics and the art establishment alike.

Bibliography


Abstract

In this paper I examine how Western discourse on Japanese photography has been dominated by the use of myths, binary oppositions and a crude understanding of cultural translation. Instead of reaffirming often incorrectly perceived cultural boundaries and moving away from assumed preconceptions, I propose that a new set of paradigms is needed in order to analyze and disseminate Japanese photography. While I focus my analysis on exhibition catalogues and books on Japanese photography, I believe that the discursive formation described throughout this paper has far wider reaching implications than just those concerning photography. Indeed, this paper is not only about the perception of Japanese photography in the West, but beyond that, how the construction of “Japan as Image,” such as in photographs, directly feeds into a highly problematic discourse that relies on the constant binarization of a topographical, linguistic and cultural Other.

Mitai ir opozicijos diskursuose apie japonų fotografiją

Santrauka

Šiame darbe tyrinėjama, kaip vakarietiško pasaulio diskurse apie japonų fotografiją dominuoja mitai, opozicijos bei paprastas, nesudėtingas kultūrinio vertimo supratimas. Užuot prisijungęs prie tų, kurie teigia dažnai neteisingai suvoktas kultūrinės ribos ir atsisakymas išankstinių nusistatymų, manau, kad reikalinga nauja paradigma, kad galėtume analizuoti bei skleisti japonų fotografiją. Nors koncentruavau iš parodų katalogų bei knygų apie japonų fotografiją, esu įsitikinęs, jog šis darbas siekia daugiau nei vien fotografiją. Iš tiesų jis nėra vien apie tai, kaip japonų fotografiją suvokiamą vakaruose, bet ir kaip „Japonijos įvaizdžio“ konstravimas, pavyzdžiui, per fotografiją, tiesiogiai tampa labai sudėtingo diskurso, kuriame atsiskleidžia nuolatinis topografinis, lingvistinis ir kultūrinis supriešinimas „sava – svetims.“