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# Tokyo MA: A City at 24 fps

**Meedo Taha**

**Abstract**

Tokyo is a boundless synthesis of many cities and villages. In this and in many other respects, Tokyo is a celebration of motion. And with motion comes rapid change. Today, the metropolis thrives on this almost ritualistic phenomenon of destruction and rebuilding. This is a city of no beginning and no end, where stories are spliced together and juxtaposed, sometimes in harmony, but more frequently in chaos. How can one possibly begin to conceive of urban space in the midst of all this apparent confusion? How can one claim to hold memories of Tokyo when the locus and language by which they are painted are in perpetual flux? The question must involve a rigorous redefinition of Western notions of space and its representation. Ever so slowly, amidst the clutter emerges an immutable harmony that, like almost everything about Tokyo, spurns words for the silences in between—a naked urban haiku that washes transparent dreams over this jungle of concrete, this tangle of time. Space seems to merge with its representations, buildings shed their facades and forms jut into a skyline of multifarious screens and resplendent banners. And so we ask, how does Tokyo rewrite our memories? What is the nature of memory in a city that so swiftly assimilates into its mutable aesthetic all inscriptions of the previous, the already, the long ago?

## Prelude

*A piece of chalk to follow the contours of what is not, or is no longer, or is not yet.*  
Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil*.

Early one Sunday morning, I took the first train on the Yamanote loop that embraces central Tokyo. The ride from the nightclub quarter of Shibuya to my home in Komagome normally took 20 minutes. However, on the train my thoughts drifted back to the previous night as I slid into deep uninterrupted sleep. I woke up six hours later and casually got off at my stop. I still wonder how many times I passed my home in that circular journey as I slept. And I wonder if it really matters.

Tokyo is a boundless synthesis of many cities and villages. It began life as a labyrinthine castle town, and so it remains: a dense urban network that never truly reveals itself. It is in a perpetual process of spontaneous change that thrives on a highly erratic ritual of destruction and rebuilding. A city with no beginning and no end, Tokyo is where stories are spliced together and juxtaposed, sometimes in harmony, but more frequently in apparent chaos. The Japanese word for space is *ma* 間 which combines gate *mon* 門 and sun *hi* 日. The literal translation of *ma* is “interval” or “space in between”—the light that shines through an open gate. Ever so slowly, amidst the clutter emerges an immutable harmony that, like almost everything about Tokyo, spurns words for the silences in between—a naked urban haiku that washes transparent dreams over this jungle of concrete, this tangle of time.

So we ask: How does Tokyo rewrite our memories? What is the nature of memory in a city that so swiftly assimilates into its mutable aesthetic all inscriptions of the previous, the already, the long ago? To frame the question in more specific terms: Where does the event (the *spectacle*) end and the act of remembering (*resistance* against forgetting) begin? This text locates itself in the moment between spectacle and resistance, in a city measured less by urban space than by urban time.

## Introducing Tokyo: A Look Around (and Around...)

### *City of Circumference*

*I've been around the world many times. And now, only banality interests me.*  
Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil*.

The first visit to Tokyo is an assault on the senses, which is to say, of course, that it is a hyper-sensual experience full of color, sound, and motion. But more than that, it is an assault because the fabric of the city is highly resistive to the processes by which we assimilate urban space into smaller, comprehensible parts. The city, to a great degree, is devoid of vistas which one would normally almost unconsciously use to orient oneself. To tourist and native Tokyoite alike, the key to making some sense of this urban conglomerate is a small sheet of glossy paper with brightly colored lines: the subway map of Tokyo. At first glance, this diagram is something of a relief, for though the map is a jumble of segmented lines resembling a bowl of buckwheat noodles, it is quite similar to that of other cities in that the lines are most jumbled near the center and then spread out towards the edge.

Cutting across the spider-web like tangle of lines on the Tokyo Subway map is a hatched loop representing the Yamanote: an overground train line that goes around and around and intersects the colored lines at significant points. These points are sub-cities, or rather self-sufficient urban nodes within the metropolis. Tokyo is the outcome of stringing together a series of semi-independent cities with a railway line. The center is nowhere. Or rather it is everywhere. This is a city of circumference.

The next step in analyzing the morphology of Tokyo city would be to look at these smaller "sub-cities" individually. Exit any station on the Yamanote line and you are in what the Japanese call *eki-mae*. Literally "the front of the station," *eki-mae* is actually the busiest and liveliest spot in a sub-city, Tokyo's answer to the city square of a Western city. *Eki-mae* is the spot where people meet and around which the life of the sub-city unfolds. In this respect, the Yamanote connects the many hearts of Tokyo. This is not a city of monument, but of movement. Tokyo a city of event, a city marked not by landmarks of space, but of time. However, it is a different kind of time from the one the western urbanist might expect, one that, as this paper will argue, conflates (and perhaps confounds) the event with its memory, the spectacle with the resistance.

### **City of No History**

*Coming, going, the waterfall  
Leaves not a trace,  
Nor does it need a guide.*

Dogen, Japanese Zen Master (Stryk and Ikemoto 63).

Legend has it that underneath Tokyo bay sleeps a giant catfish, which tosses and turns causing the many tremors felt almost every day in the city. The big fish awakes every seventy years, causing a devastating earthquake (Dodd and Richmond, ix, x). This has happened as regularly as clockwork through the city's history, and the last big one, the Kanto Earthquake of 1923, completely leveled the city. Another major disaster in recent history was the blanket bombing of the Second World War (Taylor 185). Most of the Tokyo that exists today, then, was constructed during the post-war years. The effect of the frequent city-scale destruction on the Japanese notion of urbanism cannot be understated. History, at least in physical form, does not exist; and with the exception of idealized, romantic wood-carvings, neither do its representations in the collective memory of the inhabitants.

Tokyo has assumed the attributes of "short term memory," where tradition and custom are eradicated, while modernization and change are embraced by the politic of the "salaryman." One can see them flood the streets of the city every morning, during noon lunch hour, and again in the early hours of evening, dressed in a white shirt and tie, expressionlessly being squeezed (literally by officials wearing white gloves) into train and subway cars. On their minds is one goal: to achieve economic stability beyond anything else, and to serve and honor the company that allows them to do so. As for historical notions of nationalism, these were all but completely dissolved after the country's defeat in World War 2. Today's generation scorns ideals represented by the national anthem and the flag of the rising sun, concepts lying beyond the immediate concerns of family and work circle, as taboos not to be discussed in polite society. Western notions of steadfast resistance are taboo in Japanese society. The island-country has, however, devised more sublime, subliminal, and subversive forms of resistance.

### **City of No Profile**

*Space was off-limits. The only hope for survival lay in Time.*  
Chris Marker, *La Jetée*.



Fig. 1. *Size Matters*. Tokyo is rich with collisions of scale. Tokyo, Japan, 2005. Photo credit: Meedo Taha.

Though Tokyo has one of the most advanced subway and train systems in the world, its labyrinthine street network means commuting by car is a nightmare; some streets become too narrow half-way through for a vehicle to negotiate, so one has no choice but to back up the entire length! Tokyo is the most populated city in the world (Tajima 7, 8) and land value is extremely high. As a result, idle space is very scarce, seemingly incompatible functions are interdigitated (yet function healthily), and the urban landscape is compact and

very tightly integrated (Fig. 1). The profusion of areal utility lines is a miniature example of the Japanese approach to urban design: a utility line is installed right where it is needed, with little concern for aesthetic consequences. Utility lines run almost entirely above ground because it makes maintenance easier, and old lines are not discarded; rather new lines are added when needed. The principle exemplified here is that functionality comes prior to aesthetic concerns.

A conventional figure/ground study of Tokyo would betray little information about the complex relation between built mass and urban space in the city. In fact, the Gestalt concept of figure/ground for determining the limit of form, or the line that divides object from space, is limiting, deterministic and reductionist—in a word, irrelevant. For while the Western bias is towards clarity and distinction in the midst of apparent complexity or even confusion, the Japanese favor ambiguity and non-committal to extremes. The profile of the city is likened to the coastline, which is subject to tide and the rise and fall of water, where the line dividing land from sea is in constant flux (Ashihara 51-4). What the West might consider merely appendages to built form—projecting signboards, rooftop advertising towers, electric poles, bedding draped over balcony railings—is integral to Japanese architecture, blurring the edges of buildings. The line between mass and void, and even the sense of orientation itself—front back and side—is all but completely obliterated. If the Classical tradition of clarity was born from the black and white contrast of those spaces lit by the direct Mediterranean sun and those left in dark shadow, the Japanese city was born from a misty climate of grays. Changing shapes in Tokyo is the result of recognizing the potential for latent shapes where there is no apparent shape (Ashihara 53-4). Even the outline of the city itself is fringy and ill-defined, and building codes are relatively unrestrictive. Tokyo has a recognizable shape that, like the flame of a candle, is in constant change, yet somehow still the same. Spectacle resists the erosive effects of time not through the erection of defiantly permanent reminders of the event, but through a reverberation of the event itself in the form of repetition and ritual.

## City of Signs

*Even if the street was empty, I waited at the red light—Japanese style so as to leave space for the spirits of the broken cars. Even if I was expecting no letter, I stopped at the general delivery window for one must honor the spirits of torn up letters. And at the air mail counter to salute the spirits of unmailed letters. I took to measure the unbearable vanity of the West that has never ceased to privilege being over non-being, what is spoken to what is left unsaid.*  
Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil*.



Fig. 2. *Squeezed In*. Buildings seem to compete for space. Tokyo, Japan, 2005. Photo credit: Meedo Taha.



The Western notion of monumentality relies on contrast, achieved primarily through scale. A Western landmark is large enough to assert itself at the scale of the city, or is placed as a sole accent in a vast open space. Contrary to this notion, principles of Japanese architecture always stress harmony with the surroundings. The symbols of the city have a very strange and contorted history of change over the years. One example of landmark is the aforementioned Edo period Imperial Palace, which, in the symbolic heart of Tokyo, is what Roland Barthes called an "empty center" or "sacred nothing" (Barthes 30-32).

In the Japanese city, content is prior to form. The modernist dictum "form follows function" applies to Japanese architecture in a rather distorted way. One might say that form is created in such a way as not to interfere with function. Form is unimposing or unpretentious enough to work itself around function. The usage of space in a city like Tokyo is highly complex so form must disfigure and contort itself, it must squeeze itself into the little gaps between things to keep out of the way of function (Fig. 2). In this regard, the Japanese notion of semiotics and meaning differs greatly from that of the West. Put simplistically, Western urban design seeks to create, alter, or imply meaning through the manipulation of signifying form. It is an intellectual process. It is applied. It is what we may call design. In Japan, however, form is more of a byproduct, a non-thing that is born rather than designed. The process does not end there, however. To counter ambiguity and doubt, form is then relabeled (over and over again) in the biggest, most glaring way. It is like sticking a sign on a cow saying "This is a cow" (as people stricken with amnesia did in Garcia Marquez' *A Hundred Years of Solitude*). Words in Japan are spectacles of resistance in their own right, a culturally encoded system of stories that integrates history in the very building blocks of language: its letters.



Fig. 3. *Language Language Everywhere*. Semiotics Abound. Tokyo, Japan, 2005. Photo credit: Meedo Taha.

In a city where the organicity of these born forms becomes too complex to comprehend, built matter almost fades into the background, into a mist of steel and concrete and the bold signs pop out, forming a complex semiotic network that multiplies itself and seems to be in constant dialogue (Fig. 3). The fact that these signs are bright does not necessarily mean that what they say is clear, and so this network actually sheathes the city with another layer of non-committal signification, another skin of ambiguity. Tokyo is a city of floating screens where advancements in technology have allowed the moving image to become a hologram, a sheath, a piece of skin (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. *Consume!* This street marks the entrance to Kabukicho, the red-light district where fantasies are bought and sold. Tokyo, Japan, 2004. Photo credit: Meedo Taha.

## Tokyo Forgets to Remember

### *City Scale Mass Consumption*

In a city like Tokyo, more tragic than the loss of memory would be the loss of forgetting. The kanji for "forget" *wasureeru* 忘れる depicts a lid 亡 placed on the heart/mind 心 preventing thought and emotion from escaping. What is forgotten is simply "the forgotten thing" *wasuremono*. In other words, a sensation that is forgotten is of no significance; it is a thing *mono* left behind. Oblivion is destruction: fashion, architecture, music, are alive to the extent that they liberate feeling and are consumed instantly when they cease to do so. Tokyo evolves at the speed of thought. There is no time for history to be created since yesterday's product is today's waste.

Tokyo is a spatial patchwork of opposing styles and forms, buildings born of the city-scale strife to embrace tomorrow. The city is an additive process of constant change, like a second hand car whose owner is never quite satisfied, "Maybe if I add a sticker here... The exhaust pipe looks bad... Or maybe I should repaint the whole thing." The fact that the city has no definite master plan means this process can respond quite faithfully to the need/desire mechanism of social and economic space. The Japanese have a talent for composing forms and colors that would by any Western standard be considered blatantly bad taste. However, in Tokyo the image or impression produced is never static, even for an instant, but cinematic: different styles exist simultaneously and in apparent harmony because change never stops to wait for a perfect match. If ritual is a form of resistance, then shopping is the ultimate form of revolt.

### *The Power of Nothing*

Tokyo is not a post-modern city, though the aspects being discussed here might be mistakenly labeled as so. Globalization and consumerism, in their Japanese guise, are ingrained in the aesthetic values of the culture itself. In fact, these effects of what has been called "the post-modern condition" in American and European cities must be relabeled: what may seem like globalization can more accurately be labeled as "assimilation" and consumerism as "transience." Japan has been assimilating Western ideas since the Meiji period; it does not create, but rather imports, improves and exports. Consumerism is but a facet of a much wider, more permeating aesthetic value: the notion of transience, which emphasizes the essence of things rather than their material being. Impermanence is considered a variation of elegance, for exquisite beauty is fragile and fleeting. Japanese poetry never modifies, rather things are accepted as they present themselves, no matter how lacking or incomplete. In the words of filmmaker Chris Marker, "placing adjectives on things is as rude as leaving price tags on purchases."



Fig. 5. *Hole-in-the-wall*. Tiny, semi-legal eateries fill pockets of the city. Tokyo, Japan, 2005. Photo credit Meedo Taha.

Buddhism, with its emphasis on life's mutability, merges with this ideal. Time is not something to be overcome by struggle; it is rather to be lived with through acceptance of its laws. The Japanese value *mono no aware* is the sad, ephemeral and transient beauty of things. *Mono* is Japanese for "object" and *aware* is the sound of the sigh uttered when experiencing beauty (Andrews 29-30). The cherry blossom is of great cultural importance; it blooms for only about a week a year and its ephemeral beauty is celebrated by night long celebrations called *hanami* 花見 or "flower viewing." An object that ceases to function is more likely thrown away than repaired, since it has already lost its value anyway by ceasing to be new. Similarly, a building that requires serious renovation is more than likely replaced by an entirely new one, for the "the world is but a transient abode," and nothing must strive for permanence. Tokyo is organic, formed by the perpetual formation and reformation, even severing and discarding, of its parts. Like a hole-in-the-wall *yakitoriya* built (and subsequently demolished) by its owner, transience itself is a spectacle (Fig. 5).



Fig. 6. *Blurred Lines*. The edge between architecture and nature, permanence and transience is fluid. Tokyo, Japan, 2005. Photo credit: Meedo Taha.

The transience of all things and the erosive power of nature and time over man and matter are tragedies that the West attempts to defy. The Western values being over non-being and its architecture (at least that of symbolic value) is built to stand the ages. Transience in Japanese philosophy, however, is not tragic and emptiness is not feared, but embraced: Zen speaks of the void as rich and full of meaning and possibility and of *mushin* 無心 or "anti-mind," which is unity with nature and the resignation to fate (Michihiro 227). *Mushin* are the gaps between things: spaces in a painting, blanks between lines in literature, silences between spoken words, stillnesses in motion. The teachings of Judo, Japanese martial art, derive from the related notion of *mui* 無為 or "anti-action" to defeat the opponent by using his own strength against him. The way of nature (*shizenkan*) is the unaffected and automatic power of spontaneous self-development and what results from that power (Andrews 17). While the West stands stubbornly in the face of the storm, Japan resigns itself to the power of *shizenkan* and lets itself be carried away by its winds. Traditional Japanese architecture is built with wood, which embraces nature and yields to time. Communication itself is highly non-verbal, *higengo* (literally "anti-word") and relies more on silence and ellipsis than on words and utterances (Fig. 6).



## A Prototype of Permanent Transience

*Most wonderful when  
they scatter—  
the cherry blossoms.  
In this floating world,  
does anything endure?*

*Tales of Ise* by courtier Narihira, c 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century (Bognar, np).

Western people acknowledge the religious power of creation by offering sacrifice to the Higher Order in structures of stone (churches, mosques, synagogues) that demarcate sacred sites of worship (Fig. 7). If being in the West is celebrated with this holy architecture that defies time and stands the ages, how are the sacred values of the transient and the ephemeral celebrated in Japan?

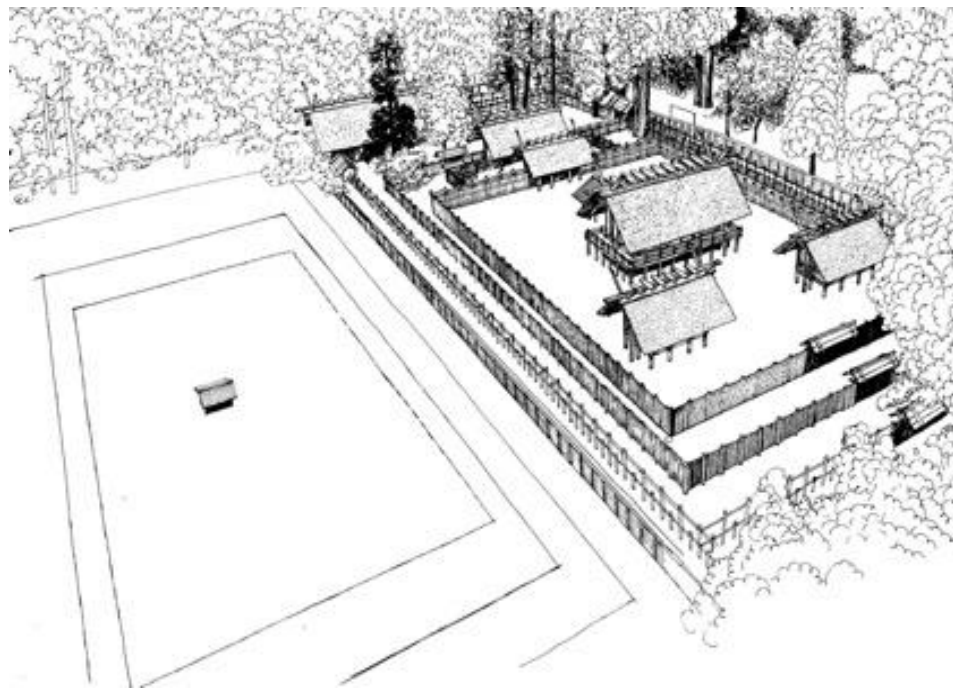


Fig. 7. *Fear of Stagnancy*. The Ise Shrine is destroyed and rebuilt on alternating adjacent sites every twenty years. Source: Nishi and Hozumi, p. 41.

First, we must recall that Japan favors event over substance, and so monumentality is quite irrelevant to the nature of faith and the values it prescribes. Rather, the Japanese offer thanks and pray to be blessed with wealth and long life in *matsuri*, huge festivals dedicated to the indigenous Shinto religion that predates the importation of Buddhism from China in the sixth century. Shinto is an animistic religion based on powerful beings (*kami*) that reside in natural objects like rocks and trees. Shrines are built in natural locations to provide shelter for the resident *kami*. To ensure the purity of the site, the *kami* are regularly moved on special occasions by means of a "portable

shrine" to a new location (after all, transience is divine and stagnation is profane). This mobile form of architecture is an intricate, massive structure of wood that is pulled by four or five people and that carries musicians playing small *taiko* drums, *shamisen* (Japanese-style stringed instruments) and bamboo flutes. The *matsuri* involve everyone in a spectacle of music and color that parades the city celebrating life and spreading blessing over the people. What is celebrated is not a permanent holy site but rather an event: the rite of passage of the spirit from despair and doubt to enlightenment.

Similar in nature to the mobile shrine is the *Daijingu* (The Grand Shrine of Power) also known as the Ise Shrine, located in Mie prefecture. It is the ancestral shrine of the Japanese Imperial Family and guardian of the Japanese nation. Dating from the third century, the shrine is a well-preserved example of one of Japan's earliest architectural types, the granaries of prehistoric Japan, which were raised on platforms by wooden stilts to remove them from dampness and covered with simple but massively overhanging thatched roofs, a style prohibited in other shrines. The site of Ise consists of two compounds, with only one used at a time. Every 20 years the shrine is demolished in a special purification rite (*kannamesai* "offering of first fruits"), and a new one is then erected in the alternative compound using traditional construction techniques. This cyclic process of destruction and rebuilding is known as *shikinen sengu* meaning "the rite of shrine removal." The Ise Shrine standing today is not the same physical structure that stood in the third century, yet the process of ritual reconstruction enables the expression and spirit of this unique piece of architecture to resist time — the absolute transience of the shrine makes it permanent. This is precisely the paradox of the Japanese city: It survives by complying with time and submitting to the eroding power of change. The ultimate form of resistance to time is to bend to its will.

## Tokyo Remembers to Forget

*Remembering is not the opposite of forgetting but rather its lining.*  
Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil*.

### **Postulating Remembrance**

The Western notion of memory involves image, structure, and meaning. Image is sight, sound or other sensation; structure is narrative and commentary applied to the image; and meaning is the sense derived from the process. Though this sounds highly intellectual, the process of remembering can be sensual and even unconscious. The recalled image must be restructured in the present, for the image cannot be remembered with its own structure and so a memory can never function the same way twice. In fact, the more an event is remembered, the more likely it is that what is being recalled is a memory of previously remembering and so on. In this sense, memory actually leads to forgetting by replacing what happened with our altered and re-altered images of it.

A more complex form of memory is that which first recalls structure and then, if at all, image. This can be seen in German filmmaker Wim Wenders' cinematic essay "Tokyo Ga." Wenders films the same Tokyo scene twice, once with a standard lens and then with a 50mm lens similar to that used by renowned Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu. Though the locale itself probably never featured in Ozu's films, the second sequence instigates strong memories of the director's form. Recollection occurs not only by reliving past images but by reliving past ways of seeing. We remember events, but more, we remember the means by which they unfold.



### **Memory in the Absence of History**

*Nothing sorts out memories from ordinary moments.  
Later on they do claim remembrance when they show their scars.*  
Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil*.



Fig. 8. *Terrain Vague*. One of a small handful of empty lots in the city, this one just off Ginza Street. Tokyo, Japan, 2015. Photo credit: Meedo Taha.

In Japanese, the basic word for “memory” is *kioku* 記憶 which combines the kanji *ki* 記 meaning “account” and *oku* 憶 meaning “supposition.” The closest literal translation of the word being “recollection,” *kioku* is used in situations when the speaker wishes to convey recalled facts in an objective, non-committal fashion. There is no feeling involved, only an attempt to the best of one's ability to recount past events as accurately as possible.

A much richer and certainly more frequently used word is *omoide* 思い出. The kanji *omoi* 思 is pregnant with meaning; it combines “rice field” 田 and “heart/mind” 心 and signifies “thought, feeling, wishes,

desire, expectation, intention, and will." The kanji *出* is "come out, appear." There is no literal translation for *omoide*, which signifies a rush of emotion, a sudden overwhelming of the senses with images and ideas. The Japanese notion of memory has power over time, and the late radical author Yukio Mishima who once wrote that "Memory sometimes makes hours run side by side for us, or pile on one another." (Mishima, 17). An empty lot in the fabric of Tokyo is lined with traces of every condemned building that occupied it (Fig. 8).

For the Japanese a recalled event has *yoin* (余韻)—literally, "reverberation," or "resonance"—which denotes an incomplete situation that inspires the imagination and lingers in the mind (Michihiro 123-5). The act of remembering is a continuation of the event itself, or rather an after-effect that, perhaps with different altitude and frequency, phases on and on. The fact that remembering actually instigates forgetting was argued above, however the notion of *yoin* is quite different from conventional notions of remembering: *yoin* involves no applied thought structure, no conscious effort to organize and comprehend recalled sensation. As the kanji for Japanese notions of memory imply, the mind is quite helpless in the rush of past images that flood it. In the shifting city of Tokyo, locations where experience is lived are frequently altered or even obliterated and a concrete lived reality which might be used to structure recalled images is less readily available than in Western cities. Phrases like "we met on the Champs-Élysées" do not apply when remembering Tokyo because locations of such relative permanence do not exist. Indeed, reliving recalled images in the present destroys memory, replacing it by a more recent and vivid version that is quite counterfeit. Thus eradication of the site of experience makes memory unique, the recalled image lives in the past, it cannot be re-enacted in any form, what remains is its resonating trace, its *yoin*. In Asian culture, ghosts can only travel in straight lines, and therefore a grid formation is only ever seen in cemeteries, the living places of echoes (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. *The End of Rationalism*. Today the only grid-like arrangement to remain in Tokyo is the cemetery. Tokyo, Japan, 2005. Photo credit: Meedo Taha.

History and memory are incompatible. Transcription of socially or political occurrences that are then regurgitated into what is commonly labeled as "culture" has a similar effect on memory as the blanket bombing of WW2 did on the city of Tokyo. History eradicates, obliterates, destroys memory. History and memory involve different conceptions of what is "past" and what is "present," and reading recent history, one is always under the impression that "this is not how I remember it." The event is still alive in the cultural consciousness, its resonance is still felt, and yet it is written down, transcribed, taught to young children at school. As Chris Marker asks in *Sans Soleil*, "Do we know where history is really made?" Less recent history is simply old enough to be considered "past," it falls outside our realm of experience and is foreign enough to be labeled "history." Tokyo is a city with no immediate past, and hence no recent history. Post-war events are still quite alive, and these still-vivid images can be traced in various aspects of the social and economic fabric. This is purely the realm of memory, the *yoin* of the nuclear bombs that drew a bold line between the nation's immediate present and very distant past. The threat of global oblivion is all but forgotten (i.e. relegated to the realm of history), but the personal wound lives on (it is in the realm of memory).

## Coda: Rewriting Memory

*We do not remember, we rewrite memory.*  
Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil*.

Tokyo prescribes a form of memory that is divorced from place. During my second visit, I unlearned all I thought I knew about the city, but my memories were not unmade. All I knew was that I was there again—and I knew it to such an extent that walking downtown, I was terrified that I would run into an older incarnation of myself. This is a city where “memory”—what is remembered—is the antithesis of “memory”—the ability to remember. Tokyo makes me think of the future as prescribed and inevitable. It cannot be any other way. On the other hand, though the city’s past reveals itself as an assortment of truisms and impressions that have consequences in the present, “now” is but a fleeting moment and the validity of the past is without witness. Memory is under my control. It is infinitely transfigurable. It can be anything. I see. I re-write. I re-see. I re-(re-write). I re-(re-see) (Fig. 10.)



Fig. 10. *Box Man*. A figure that has fascinated authors like Kobo Abe, this is the archetypal inhabitant of Tokyo, the city of rewritten memory. Tokyo, Japan, 2005. Photo credit: Meedo Taha.

Soon the process of rewriting becomes too complex: images from different times merge and the nested structure collapses under its own weight. The city effects a different notion of time to the one I apprehend. My home city Beirut is being built and rebuilt before my eyes; I am witness to the slow process of change and I can consciously trace its

evolution like a father watching his child grow day after day. Tokyo, on the contrary, does not wait.

One may ask how we had the ability to remember before we taped, filmed and photographed. Rather, I think we should ask, "Do we have the ability to remember in spite of what is taped, filmed and photographed?" It is a city in motion analogous to a film that flickers at a speed much faster than 24 frames per second, the speed at which images register on the retina. What our eyes see are only jump-cuts of that motion: a new image every  $1/24^{\text{th}}$  of a second much altered from that which preceded it. The line between object and nothingness is blurred. Tokyo is where memory and change, once proverbial enemies, have finally made peace. Every frame of this rapid tempo is unique. Our vision cannot persist long enough to connect the flickering images into a meaningful sequence, so the gaps are filled with recollections. Tokyo creates memory by murdering the image of which it is produced. What is left of the image is its resonance, its trace, its *yoin*. In Tokyo, resistance is its own spectacle: a circular journey from event, to forgetting, to memory rewritten.

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### **About the author**

Meedo Taha holds a PhD in Architecture and has worked in projects across Europe and the Middle East. He followed that with an MFA in Film Production from UCLA. In the interim, he has taught Directing and Cinematography at various universities and in between projects he makes time to work in theater, film and writing projects. Email: [meedot@me.com](mailto:meedot@me.com)