

The concept of centre-periphery in the work of Daido Moriyama

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Abstract

This text analyses the concept of centre-periphery in the work of the photographer Daido Moriyama. The objective is to study how the binomial centre-periphery becomes blurred in postmodern society. The work explores how difficult it is to distinguish centre from periphery in the postmodern era, to know where one starts and the other finishes. It's a Japanese vision on the theme, which sees beauty in darkness and shadows, unlike the western world, where aesthetics is typically built around light.

Keywords: Street photography, Japan, city, centre, periphery, shadows.

Introduction.

This article studies the work of the Japanese photographer Daido Moriyama (Osaka, 1938) and its relationship with the concepts of centre-periphery. The photographic discourse is based on Japanese aesthetics, where beauty is constructed through the shadows. Through the analysis of his work, we find that, nowadays, the concepts of centre-periphery are becoming increasingly blurred in the urban context.

An approximation to the concept of centre and periphery

The postmodern city - a reflection of the own contradictions of the human being - is continuously being transformed. The concept of centre-periphery is constantly confronted with the essence of the city, which defines that city from an anthropological point of view (not architectural) and makes it different from the rest. The traditional compact city grows and is dissolved in peripheries, these being gradually more extensive. The boundaries between city and periphery are each time more diffuse. Decentralization has produced new centralities in the periphery (Garcia, Palomares: 2007). This leads to an urbanization of the periphery, in which the peripheries will constantly and continuously become urban centres.

In his famous essay "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" (2003), Walter Benjamin explains the concept of loss of aura of the works of art due to the emergence

of media, which enabled their technical reproduction. This concept of aura could be applied to our cities. We can affirm that cities have lost a large part of their aura due to globalization, but they still maintain a part of it. Although we live in a globalized world, where urban spaces tend to be homogenised, all cities maintain some of their essence, their history, their aura.

Cities are places of interaction and encounters with strangers; a reality that causes a threat and anguish to the human being (Bauman, 2002). They are places in which we constantly interact with strangers, spaces where heterogeneity rules and it causes situations of sadness, anxiety and stress. Large cities function as elements that generate and support human individuality.

Cities are, at the same time, places of loneliness. This vision has caused blindness and has moved us away from reality (Morin, 2007). "Blindness", the novel by Jose Saramago, shows us that we live in a society of "blind people" that promotes loneliness and individuality of the human being. In the postmodern society we are faced with a constant and systematic denial of the human being:

"(...) of the blind eyes sprout two tears, for the first time he asked himself if he had any reason to go on living. He found no response, responses do not always arrive when one needs, it often occurs that waiting is the only

possible response” (Saramago, 1996, p. 193).

“I don’t think we did go blind, I think we are blind. Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see” (Saramago, 1996, p. 243).

When speaking of spaces in the periphery, blindness is still present. According to Careri (2013), these spaces were seen by the American architects of the sixties as a cancer of the city. Places of chaos and disorder, impossible to understand.

Centre and periphery in Japan: The work of Daido Moriyama

Daido Moriyama (Osaka, 1938) constructs his works according to two fundamental concepts: city and darkness. The vision of Daido Moriyama dwells in the heart of darkness (Goldberg, apud Koetzle, 2011, p. 282). His pictures show us a dark world, chaotic, consumerist; a world where sex and eroticism have a primary role.



Figure 1. Daido Moriyama “Eros or Something Other than Eros” (1969).

Source: <URL: <http://www.luhringaugustine.com/artists/daido-moriyama/artworks/modern-prints>>



Figure 2. Daido Moriyama "Italy" (2011).

Source: <URL: <http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-entertainment/article/1865475/daido-moriyamas-knack-finding-extraordinary-image>>

The dark world showed by Daido Moriyama is a reflection of the philosophy of the east. In his famous essay "In Praise of Shadows", Tanizaki argues that shadows have always formed part of beauty in Japan. Against this, beauty in the western world has been linked to the idea of light. In the west, shadows have always had a negative connotation, associated in many cases with death, something sinister and darkness:

"In the West, the most powerful ally of beauty has always been the light; in the traditional Japanese aesthetics, the essential thing is to capture the enigma of the shadow (...) What is beautiful is not a substance in itself but a game of chiaroscuro, produced by the juxtaposition of different substances that form the subtle interplay of the modulations of the shadow"

(Tanizaki, 2014, p. 1).



Figure 3. Daido Moriyama "Kariudo (Hunter)" (1972).

Source: <URL: <http://www.luhringaugustine.com/artists/daido-moriyama/artworks/modern-prints?view=slider#10>>



Figure 4. Daido Moriyama "Strait" (1971).

Source: <URL: <http://www.luhringaugustine.com/artists/daido-moriyama/artworks/modern-prints?view=slider>>



Figure 5. Daido Moriyama "Provoke n° 2" (1969).

Source: <URL: <http://www.stevenkasher.com/artists/daido-moriyama#8>>



Figure 6. Daido Moriyama "Kariudo (Hunter)" (1971).

Source: <URL: <http://www.luhringaugustine.com/artists/daido-moriyama/artworks/vintage#8>>

Interestingly, the term "photography" comes from the Greek $\phi\omega\varsigma$ (*phōs*, "light"), and $\gamma\rho\alpha\phi\acute{\eta}$ (*grafē*, "set of lines, writing"); this means we can define photography as the art of "painting with light". Photographs of Daido Moriyama could be defined as the art of "painting with shadows". His work reflects a dichotomy between the definition of photography (painting with light) and the very act of photographing. His imaginary universe builds

a world of beauty from the banal, a cosmos of shadows that reflect postmodern society.

The work of Daido Moriyama shows that there is a suburb within each city and a big city within each suburb. His photographs try to find the "limits" of society: urban slums, alleys, prostitutes. One of the most interesting aspects in the work of Daido Moriyama is that he is always looking for the peripheral contexts within the urban core:

"When I walk around I probably look like a street dog because after walking around the main roads, I keep on wandering around the back streets" (Hampton, 2012).



Figure 7. Daido Moriyama "Hikari To Kage (Light and Shadow)" (1982). Source: <URL: <http://www.luhringaugustine.com/artists/daido-moriyama/artworks/vintage?view=slider#4>>



Figure 8. Daido Moriyama "Untitled (from the book Journey for something)" (1982). Source: <URL: <http://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/daido-moriyama>>



Figure 9. Daido Moriyama “No title (from the book Hunter)” (1971). Source: <URL: <https://framethirtysix.wordpress.com/2013/04/05/daido-moriyamas-largest-and-most-comprehensive-american-exhibition/>>

Daido Moriyama seeks to reflect the most profound essence of the city, what we might call the “soul” of the city. As in the people, this essence is not found in appearances. To reach this essence, it is necessary to make a journey to the “deepest” and most hidden part of the city:

“I can’t photograph anything without a city, I’m definitely addicted to cities” (Hampton, 2012).

His photographs are a constant search of the soul of the human being and his/her desires. His work reflects the savage capitalism and globalization of the city, where individuals are often moved by the impulse to satisfy personal desires:

“For me cities are enormous bodies of people’s desires and as I search for my own desires within them I slice into time, seeing the moment” (Hampton, 2012).



Figure 10. Daido Moriyama “Misawa” (1972). Source: <URL: <http://www.luhringaugustine.com/artists/daido-moriyama/artworks/modern-prints?view=slider>>

Daido Moriyama transforms these wishes into images. In his work, this idea of desire is continuously linked to eroticism. For him, black and white photography is a way to reflect eroticism:

“I have always felt that the world is an erotic place. (...) The reason why I think black and white photography is erotic is completely due to my body’s instinctive response (...) Monochrome has stronger elements of abstraction and symbolism. There is perhaps an element of taking you to another place. Black and white has that physical effect on me. Colour is something more vulgar because the colour is making the decisions, it feels vulgar, and that seems to me to be the difference” (Hampton, 2012).



Figura 11. Daido Moriyama “How to Create a Beautiful Picture 6_Tights in Shimotakaido)” (1987). Source: <URL: <http://www.luhringaugustine.com/artists/daido-moriyama/artworks/modern-prints?view=slider#13>>

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Figure 12. Daido Moriyama “Tokyo” (1969). Source: <URL: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/daido-moriyama-21>>



Figure 13. “Kariudo (Hunter)” (1972). Source: <URL: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/daido-moriyama-kariudo-hunter>>

Black and white photography is erotic in an implicit way, since it always implies more than what meets the eye. It places the image in a more abstract mental level, because we are obliged to think, imagine, and feel differently from when we observe a colour photograph. The concept of beauty in Japanese philosophy implicitly contains the idea of eroticism, creating a world of shadows full of sensuality, where imagination and desire are the fundamental elements in the construction of beauty:

“Where does the key to this mystery lie? Well, I am going to betray the secret: on balance, it is nothing more than the magic of the shadow” (Tanizaki, 2014, p. 26).

In his book “The Fall of the Public Man”, Richard Sennet defined the city as a “human environment in which strangers meet” (Sennet, apud Medeiros, 2012, p. 90). The city showed by Daido Moriyama is a city of strangers, and on many occasions unknown to ourselves, where everything is superficial, fast, dirty; a world of anonymous people that make us feel like “strangers” in our own city.

On the other hand, in the work of Daido Moriyama we constantly find Walter Benjamin’s idea of a city as a “place of a crime” (Benjamin, apud Trachtenberg, 2013, p. 233). Modernity sets an opaque curtain between the public and the private sector. Daido Moriyama sends us this feeling in each one of his photos. Places where illegality and darkness converge, where the things that we do not want to see can be found: Daido Moriyama unmask the criminal that exists in each one of us:

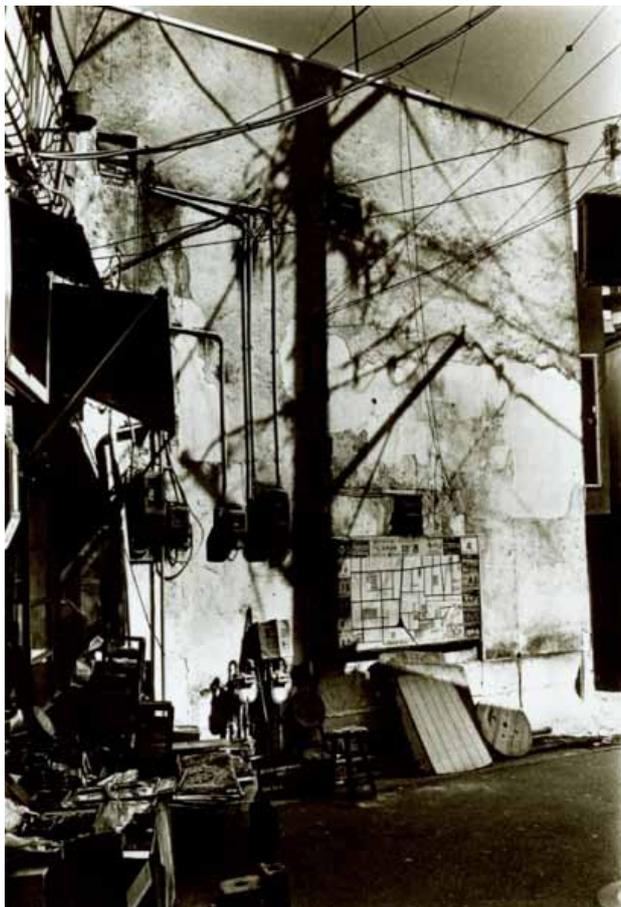


Figure 14. “Letter to Myself 2, Hayama, Kamakura” (1988)
Source: <URL: <http://www.stevenkasher.com/artists/daido-moriyama/featured-works?view=slider#17>>

“Not in vain have some photos of Atget been compared with those of a place of the crime. But isn’t every corner of our cities a crime place?; isn’t each passer-by a criminal? Shouldn’t the photographer (...) discover guilt in his images and identify the guilty person?” (Benjamin, apud Trachtenberg, 2013, p. 233).



Figure 15. “Kagerou (Mayfly)” (1972) Source: <URL: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/daido-moriyama-kagerou-mayfly>>

In his book “The Night in the Big City: Paris, Berlin, London 1840-1920”, Joachim Schlör writes about the big city and its dangers. As Schlör says, “no other issue takes us so far in the confusion of the boundaries between imagination and reality” (Schlör, apud Medeiros, 2012, p. 90). These limits are continuously crossed in the work of Daido Moriyama. Many times we do not know what is real and what is fiction. It shows us the dark side of the city, a side that many do not know, but that is really very close to us.



Figure 16. "One More Peek" (1966) Source: <URL: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/daido-moriyama-one-more-peek>>

Conclusion

The work of Daido Moriyama shows the city with an eastern look. It reflects the essence of the city, its truth, its dark side, as well as the essence of individuals. It shows us the superficiality and the speed of daily events. It reflects how, nowadays, the human being feels like a foreign citizen in his own city. An underworld of shadow, seen in the Japanese philosophy as beauty, sensuality and desire.

Through the study of the work of an artist, the way in which the concept of centre-periphery is blurred these days is revealed. When you are observing the images of Daido Moriyama, many times it is difficult to distinguish the centre from the periphery. His work shows us that there is a suburb within each city and a big city within each suburb.

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