Dreams of Prosperity in 1930s Tokyo:

The Photography of Hamaya Hiroshi before *Yukiguni*

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Introduction

Hamaya Hiroshi was born in Tokyo in 1915. In 1939 with a commission from the magazine "*gurafiku* (Graphic)", Hamaya visited Niigata to photograph the winter training exercises of Army ski troops. This chance was the moment of turning his photographic interests from urban life to ethnographic research by his blind female musician pictures. Hamaya first visited the Kuwatori Valley in 1940, and went on to document the "Little New Year" rituals for more than 10 years. These photos were published in 1956 as *Yukiguni* (Snow Country).

When Hamaya first visited snow country, as many urban Japanese, he found life in Tokyo increasingly fragmented, ephemeral, and superficial. The last remnants of traditional life style preserved in small villages in the 'snow country' of Niigata had disappeared elsewhere.

Hamaya's *Yukiguni* could be seen as the most successful realization of documentary photography in the pre-WWII period, and was a manifestation of his intention to escape from the power, deception and ostentatiousness that Tokyo had become twisted with.[1] However, Hamaya's career had started with documenting Tokyo in the 1930s influenced by Kon Wajirō's 'modernology' studies, and emphasized the spiritual conflict between the rapid change of the city and traditional Japanese culture.[2] That is, from the 1930s, growing up in the modern metropolis with its glittering allure and gorgeous lifestyle, Hamaya tried to focus on the lives of ordinary Japanese people and concerned himself with the ambience and 'intimacy' of everyday life.

1. Urban Tokyo and the Modern Girl (moga)

He wandered like a flâneur on the streets of Tokyo where he found different scenes of contrasting times and spaces, and this was especially true of Ginza, which was inhabited by diverse mix of people. Stylish geisha in Ginza vividly embodied the presence of the past in the modern city, and they evolved into the 'modern girl', or modan gāru (moga) who was carefully made up and coiffured. The background of the 'moga' was the café and the dance hall where the carefree movement of dancing was indicative of the freedom of both the individual and society.[3]

The 'moga' as the focus of society was symbolic not only of the material consumption of fashion, cigarettes, alcohol, but also activities such as watching movies and dancing. They epitomized the new 'floating world', and typically had short haircuts, wore bright lipstick, western clothes and a confident bearing.

In the mass culture of cinema, song, and visual image, 'moga' are related to the aesthetics of "erotic, grotesque, nonsense" (ero-guro-nansensu) that represented a mix of sex and satire. Critical of current social conditions and superficial adoption of occidental culture, the popular subjects of 'ero-guro-nansensu' were actresses, cabaret dancers, and café-waitresses. A broader target was the superficiality of modern culture symbolized by the moga's western make-up.[4]

2. Cafés and Dance Halls as Fields of Modernity

'Moga' were defined not merely by their looks but also their lifestyle; smoking, drinking and dancing represented not only western modernity but liberation from the constraints of patriarchal society. These performances of modern identity usually took place in the environments of the café and dance hall where the women worked to please male customers, but in these spaces, for their own entertainment, women could come alone or with male companions. The café and dance hall were a manifestation of the complex roles of modern women, who were objects of consumption and also themselves consumers.

After the Kantō earthquake of 1923, architects and engineers gradually rebuilt the physical infrastructure of Tokyo, while artists and writers set about creating a new urban culture. For example, novelist Tanizaki Junichirō predicted a "nightless city of pleasure facilities to rival those of Paris and New York," with elegant "soirées", "the seductive laughter of street-walkers" and "weird crimes".[5]

A periodic theme in Hamaya's work is an interest in people's living or working environments, as is sensitivity to female subjects. The image "Dancer Looking at Herself in a Mirror" combines a superficial lust with a dark anxiety. In order to show the ambivalence of dazzling beauty and the tawdry underside of modern urban life, the dance hall was obviously a suitable subject. In an increasing authoritarian age, however, dance halls became more associated with the double evils of luxury and debauchery.

Conclusion

Compared to other contemporary photographers, Hamaya was especially attracted to cafés and dance halls, and illustrated the spectacle of modernism as anarchic and glamorous theatrical performances. These pictures unquestionably convey to viewers the intersection of conspicuous consumption and pleasure in modern Tokyo. Hamaya's photographs of daily life in Tokyo can be seen as a manifestation of the general phenomenon of bewildering

change that developed in Japan's major cities.

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1 Hamaya Hiroshi, "My Showa History [Watashi no Showa-shi]," *Niigata Daily Paper [Niigata Nippō],* evening edition, February 19, 1965. from *Hiroshi Hamaya: Photographs 1930s–1960s* (Tokyo: Crevis Co., Ltd., 2015), 9.

2 Jonathan M. Reynolds, *Allegories of Time and Space: Japanese Identity in Photography and Architecture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 6–7.

3 Kendall Brown, "Social Expressions: The Floating World Transformed," *Deco Japan: Shaping Art and Culture 1920–1945,* edited by Kendall Brown, essays by Tim Benton, Takanami Machiko, Kitamura Hitomi, Vera Mackie (Art Services Intl, 2012), 219.

4 Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 1-9.

5 Tanizaki Junichirō, *Setsuyo-Zuihitsu (Osaka Essays)* (1935), 229–233, quoted in Edward Seidensticker, *Low City, High City* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 15.