CHAPTER 1

Tanizaki Jun’ichirō, or Photography as Disturbance to Middle-Brow Life

Many readers of Tanizaki Jun’ichirō would agree, following the lead of Kōno Taeko,¹ that in novelistic discourse he uniquely and compellingly represents physical sensations produced by sensory stimuli, to the end of affirming a fulfilling and fulfilled life. This estimation of his work can be simultaneously verified and contested by considerations of photography represented in his fiction. While his characters value photographs as both visual images and material objects, pictures and their production processes in his stories often contribute to a destabilization of present reality, leaving the viewers feeling disoriented rather than steady in space-time. Photographic images mentioned or described in Tanizaki’s narratives (ordinarily not shown on the printed page) often seem incongruous with the viewer’s memory or expectation. Serving neither to confirm the portrayed person’s identity nor the represented thing’s authenticity, instead they instigate the viewer’s interest in the radical reconfiguration of personal or familial history.

Photographers, both amateur and professional, make their presence strongly felt in Tanizaki’s stories, but in a way that may challenge the reader’s expectation. Not content to function as eyes for observation, they fail to stay behind the scenes and out of the frame. Tanazaki’s narratives encapsulate the intense bodily intersection between photographs’ objects and observers. He elaborates the material details of photographic equipment and technical maneuvers that are often obliterated by the perception of photographs as finished, flat and framed. This chapter will measure the effects of photography in Tanizaki’s fiction that urge us to complicate our understanding of three elements of his work: his textual representation of the visual and material; his handling of time, space and the body; and his positioning of representation (textual or otherwise) vis-à-vis the desire for life or death.

In the context of this book ‘photography’ refers to the various acts that constitute the photographic process: not just the taking of the pictures, but the development of the film; the modification, framing and archiving of the prints; and the viewing of images and accounting for them. Consequently,

¹ Kōno Taeko, Tanizaki bungaku to kōtei no yokubō (Tanizaki’s Literature and Desire for Affirmation; Tokyo: Bungei shunjūsha, 1976).
my engagement with photography focuses on various agents involved in the making and remaking of the photographs, who may not be visible in the end product. While the photographic image is conventionally taken to be ‘dead,’ I propose to restore the scenes that have taken place outside the frame—or in the “space-off,” in Teresa de Lauretis’s terminology, reapplied by Marianne Hirsch: “the ‘space not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible’.”2 The materiality of photographic prints is also important in my study. Photographs are not only about what they represent or what they mean but also, and more importantly, about how they exist in the time and space shared with their viewers—the space-time that is not shared with the photographed objects.

When Tanizaki’s narratives engage photography, they characteristically elaborate material details of the photographs along with the corporeality of the acts surrounding their production and reproduction. Characters who take or view photographs are engaged in fetishism and voyeurism, to the extent that they let photography disturb their quotidian lives, which are predicated upon the conventional perceptions that time is linear (with the past neatly archived as intact) and space is geometrical (where each person’s identity and place of origin/residence/profession are discretely defined). Even though Pierre Bourdieu has rightly labeled photography a “middle-brow” art, it does not necessarily follow that photography is always the acquiescent servant of bourgeois family life. Rather, its complex and ambiguous exploitation of time, space and the body can contest assumptions about the everyday world.

As Thomas LaMarre extracted the cinematic from the genre of cinema and revealed the cinematic orientation in narratives, I would like to isolate the photographic parameters of photography as they are manifested in Tanizaki’s texts. I will, of course, work my argument around passages that specifically reference photography. But my intent is to go well beyond the identification and annotation of references to photography, to account for the ambiguous and dynamic relationship between image and text that Tanizaki brings to our attention as he writes about (or around) photographs. My procedure will be informed by theories of photographic relations beyond the frame of a printed image expounded by Christian Metz, Mieke Bal and Victor Burgin, among others. I will address one narrative at a time in a given section, arranging the discussions in the order of the historical time represented in each work rather than the text’s publication date.

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