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## Imaging the Rural: Modernity and Agrarianism in Hiroshi Hamaya's Snow Land Photographs

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyses the *Snow Land* photographic series by Japanese photographer Hiroshi Hamaya [1915–1999] in relation to issues of modernity, nostalgia and discourses of agrarianism in 1940s and 1950s Japan. Hamaya is one of Japan's most celebrated and influential documentary photographers at both a national and international level. His *Snow Land* series presents an idyllic view of life in the small mountain villages of Japan's Niigata Prefecture, emphasising a sense of community and spiritual meaning that Hamaya perceived to be lacking in modern society. In this sense, *Snow Land* constituted a critique of modernity. Through engagement with theorists such as Heidegger, Foucault and Barthes, as well as critical writings on agrarian ideology, this article investigates the underlying assumptions that govern Hamaya's depiction of snow country, demonstrating that the series is shaped by a modern worldview and is tied to ideological discourses of agrarianism.

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### KEYWORDS

agrarianism; Heidegger; Hiroshi Hamaya; modernity; nostalgia; photography; post-war; representation

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Hiroshi Hamaya [1915–1999] is one of Japan’s most celebrated photographers.<sup>1</sup> Born in a working-class area of Tokyo, he taught himself photography in adolescence before briefly undertaking formal studies. In his first professional position he was tutored by Yoshio Watanabe [1907–2000], also one of Japan’s most revered photographers (Reynolds 2013, 18). Before photographing the snow country landscape of Niigata Prefecture—a project that is the central object of analysis in this essay—Hamaya was mostly known for portraying modern life in his native Tokyo. His Tokyo photographs cover a variety of subjects, from Asakusa dance halls and other Western-style entertainment venues to subjects on the margins of society, including homeless people and street-peddlers. Jonathon Reynolds (2013) has argued, however, that despite what must have been Hamaya’s awareness of the economic hardship experienced by many residents of Tokyo at the time, his photographs of the marginalised tend to “romanticise the conditions in which these people lived and worked” (19). Reynolds also notes that these images show little indication of either the rise of militarisation in Japan or the approaching war (2013, 19–20). As I will argue below, this tendency to omit from his photographs some of the harsher political and social realities of the era is also a central feature of his *Snow Land* (雪国 [Yukiguni]) photographic series.<sup>2</sup>

Hamaya commenced photographing the *Snow Land* series in 1940 and completed the project ten years later. All of the photographs in the *Snow Land* book (1977), which was first published in 1956, were therefore taken either during wartime or in the most acute period of post-war recovery. *Snow Land*’s portrayal of village life in remote snowy areas of Niigata Prefecture, however, contains little trace of the war or its subsequent impact. Instead, the images convey nostalgia for a vanishing way of life in Japan. While one may justifiably criticise Hamaya for this shortcoming, it is not the principal intention of this article to do so. Rather, I consider these photographs in relation to theoretical work on how landscapes are represented in modernity, with a view to demonstrating how the singularity of *Snow Land*’s representation reflects a worldview on the part of Hamaya that is grounded in the rationalising logic of modernity. In this worldview, the rural landscape stands as a peripheral, objectified and imaginary space ready for access by the modern, urban observer. Following from this, I discuss how in wartime Japan this modern view of the pastoral was incorporated into state discourses in a way that highlighted the paradoxical nature of the urban/pastoral binary. The article thus considers Hamaya’s *Snow Land* not only according to a putatively universal experience of modernity, but also in the context of particular socio-political discourses in Japan both precedent and contemporaneous to the series’ creation. In other words, I aim to situate the *Snow Land* photographic collection within the international and local discursive systems that operated during the time of its creation.

1 At a national level, Hamaya received the 1958 Japan Photographic Society’s annual award and the 1981 Japan Art Grand Prix. Internationally, he received the 1986 Master of Photography award from the International Center of Photography; the 1987 International Photography Prize from Sweden’s Hasselblad Foundation; and honorary membership of the Royal Photographic Society of England in the same year (Orto 2003, 340). In 1960, Hamaya became the first Japanese invited to join *Magnum*, the prestigious photo agency. Even today this is considered a benchmark of success for documentary photographers.

2 The series title is also often translated as “Snow Country,” however the bilingual edition to which this article refers uses the translation “Snow Land.”

In his essay, *The Age of the World Picture*, Martin Heidegger (1977) defines modernity as the age in which representation becomes the principal means for humankind to understand the world.<sup>3</sup> In modernity, the world becomes a rationalised object organised and explained according to multiple, intertwined scientific schemata. In this way, fundamental notions of the world are constituted in accordance with the centralised standpoint of humankind. The modern age, in other words, understands the world as a picture, an always-already posited image. This contrasts with the Middle Ages, for example, at which time the world was understood according to divine creation. During that period, “to be in being” meant “to belong within a specific rank of the order of what has been created” (1977, 130). Heidegger argues that although the world as a preconceived image is ontologically constituted through a variety of representational forms, the most pervasive are the sciences, all of which are unequivocally grounded in research. Thus it is through research that the world is made to stand before humanity in the modern age (1977, 118). One such science that informs the world-as-picture in modernity is ethnography, a discipline heavily reliant on documentation and data collection. Ethnographic documentation was a central imperative for Hamaya’s photographic expeditions into the rural snow country spaces of Niigata Prefecture, as demonstrated below.

Hamaya’s *Snow Land* can be seen as both creative work and ethnographic research. While the series contains many dynamic and expressively composed images, the book is also a carefully edited and organised documentation of life in a small Niigata village. The project sought to record “the depth and richness of a spiritual life with a long history behind it” (Hamaya 1977, n.p.). This way of living was conceived of at the time by figures such as Shinji Ichikawa [1901–1982] and Keizō Shibusawa [1896–1963] as both exceptional and endangered. Hamaya met Ichikawa, an ethnographer, in Takada, a snow country town where the former was employed to photograph Japanese military training exercises. Ichikawa introduced Hamaya to Shibusawa, a wealthy amateur ethnographer who, with Ichikawa, persuaded Hamaya of the scholarly importance of photographically documenting life in the Niigata snow country (Reynolds 2013, 20).

As an ethnographic work, *Snow Land* accords with Heidegger’s account of scientific research. Heidegger defines research as the enactment of procedures bound to a “ground plan” which is conceived in advance and subsequently guides these procedures (1977, 118). In Hamaya’s case, the preconceived “ground plan” is an idea of socio-historical development that positions the rural and the urban according to a teleological schema. Hamaya’s “procedure” is the rigorous production of images captured and arranged in a way that locates the snow country and its people within historical progression. In this sense, *Snow Land* is also an historiographical work, as Hamaya—a modern urban subject—essentially sought to capture a way of life that he perceived as a “primitive (始原的な)” remnant of a past “Japan (日本)” (Hamaya 1971, 35).

<sup>3</sup> This essay first appeared in a German-language publication of Heidegger’s essays entitled *Holzwege* [1952]. The first English translation, to which this discussion refers, was first published in *The Question Concerning Technology* (1977), a collection of Heidegger’s essays.

This links the photographer with a long genealogy of Western anthropologists and ethnographers who documented other cultures as part of research into the historical development of humankind. According to anthropologist Johannes Fabian (2002), a fixation on human development often blinded anthropologists to the contemporaneity of their research subjects. The human subjects of research were objectified as living relics and thus inferior iterations of humanity in comparison to the modern researcher (2002, 25–35). Like these early ethnographers, Hamaya's project attempts to capture a disappearing culture. However, where anthropologists depicted their subjects as inferior, Hamaya valorised Japan's snow country as the site of an ideal lifestyle.

According to Heidegger, it is no accident that in the modern age research is fundamentally anthropocentric. He argues that "the more effectually the world stands at man's disposal as conquered", that is, as possessed through knowledge of it, the more persistently the world is understood from an orientation that centralises humanity (Heidegger 1977, 133). Consequently, "observation of and teaching about the world" increasingly becomes "a doctrine of man" (1977, 133). Humanism, therefore, "first arises where the world becomes picture" (1977, 133). The study of humankind was of central concern for Hamaya, who said that throughout his career, "what captured and held my interest as a photographer was people and their problems. My work... began with the main "object: man"<sup>4</sup> (Hamaya 1971, 214). On an international level, Hamaya's photography became linked to a mode of humanism prevalent in the early post-war era that arose to counter the nationalism which had led to World War I and World War II. Blake Stimson (2006) notes how, in the decade following World War II, public intellectuals such as Franz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre advocated a concept of identity that transcended cultural and national boundaries. Rather than the nation-state or even a United Nations, "what was desperately needed", according to these thinkers, "was a world community integrated organically, morally, and politically through the development of a new *idée-force* that gave form to new thoughts and new sentiments in the figure of a postmodern, postnationalist citizen of the world" (Stimson 2006, 15). Stimson goes on to argue that photography was seen as an integral medium for this new concept of global identity, largely because of a general belief that the photograph was an unbiased and democratic mode of representation. Photography, it was claimed, could provide a new "sense of belonging...distinct from race, language, region, and other national markers, and distinct from that of the transcultural marketplace" (2006, 20).

Hamaya's links to this broader global movement are evident from the fact that his work featured in the 1955 *The Family of Man* exhibition curated by Edward Steichen [1879–1973], the director of photography at the prestigious New York Museum of Modern Art. It is important to evaluate Steichen's exhibition in order to compare Hamaya's *Snow Land* with the particular kind of representation found in *The Family of Man*. This exhibition toured internationally for 8 years, attracting around 9 million viewers and symbolising an apex of post-war universal humanism in photography. The exhibition was a large collection of images taken throughout the world by various photographers

4 「写真家としての私の関心を、つねに把えて離さなかったのは、人間の問題だった。私の写真は人間を対象にすることからはじまった。」

and grouped under universal themes like birth, death and work. In Steichen's own words, it was designed to present "a mirror of the essential oneness of mankind" and to communicate a "basic human consciousness rather than social consciousness" (Steichen 1955, 3, 4). Stimson has argued that the *The Family of Man* was intended to counter a recurrence of the horrors brought on by the divisive nationalism that fuelled World War II. Despite such laudable intentions, the exhibition was nonetheless a "hopeless attempt to reconcile universal with particular", in which "political vision was understood to appeal directly to something universally human and primordial" (Stimson 2006, 11). Roland Barthes (2009) describes this type of humanism as a "very old mystification" founded upon the belief that "in scratching the history of men a little, the relativity of their institutions or the superficial diversity of their skins...one very quickly reaches the solid rock of human nature" (122).

In spite of critiques such as those of Stimson and Barthes, it is important to acknowledge the good intentions behind this effort to diffuse cultural conflict by downplaying cultural differences. The problem, however, is that the resultant universalism inevitably ignores the distinctive historical particularities of given cultures, as well as real injustices. The exclusion of the latter is especially problematic given that some of the images were created during wartime. Barthes argues that the ultimate effect of *The Family of Man* was to:

...suppress the determining weight of History: we are held back at the surface of an identity, prevented precisely by sentimentality from penetrating into this ulterior zone of human behaviour where historical alienation introduces some 'differences' which we shall here quite simply call injustices.  
 (Barthes 2009, 122)

Hamaya's representation of the snow country often exhibits the type of sentimentality that is criticised above. Specifically, the landscape and its inhabitants are depicted as symbolising harmonious community and hardy self-sufficiency. A 'surface' Japanese identity is produced in the *Snow Land* series that obscures the tensions that beset any community, such as those surrounding class and gender relations.

However, Hamaya's *Snow Land* is different from *The Family of Man* in one important sense: Hamaya was not trying to promote an idea of transnational unity, but rather, a culturally specific notion of Japanese identity. Yet there are still resonances with Steichen's exhibition in his work: Hamaya's *Snow Land* posits a sentimental and unifying ideal of authenticity for Japanese society that not only ignores the particular influences of history, place and culture in the rural landscape but also elides a sense of cultural diversity within Japan. In this sense, both of these photographic projects symbolise a modern worldview that renders the world as picture. In each instance, despite aspirations towards objectivity, the world is constituted as a subjective representation of a universalised sense of being that overwrites contingencies and particularities.



The sentimental representation of the snow country in Hamaya's photographic series clearly reflects a modern mode of subjectivity through its emotive appeal to a unified sense of Japanese identity. This representation signifies the extent to which Hamaya was at that time embedded within modern systems of knowledge production. In modernity, the physical landscape becomes ontologically peripheral to the human subject, and the rural landscape in particular is conceived of as exterior to the modern urban centre. This space is produced through the aforementioned sentimentality and also through a scientific mode of representation. A scientific approach is particularly evident in *Snow Land* in that many images in the collection display a clear attempt by the photographer to objectively document his subject. This reflects the influence of his encounter with the ethnographer Ichikawa, who inspired Hamaya's documentation of village rituals in the Kuwadori Valley through immersive fieldwork which required him to "walk, observe, and feel (歩いて、見て、感じる)" (Hamaya 1971, 36). In his efforts to represent the snow country space as objective fact through observation, Hamaya also responded to his feelings by positing an imagined space that grounded his sense of identity both as a modern individual and as a Japanese person. In this sense, the photo series produces an imaginary site that Foucault entitles a "heterotopia": an externalised utopic space anchored to multiple physical locations. Heterotopia simultaneously affirms identity and calls it into question (Foucault 1986, 24). In Hamaya's representation, the snow country is experienced as modern society's peripheral opposite, the pre-modernity of its modernity. In a moment of *différance*, to use Jacques Derrida's term, the qualitative meaning of modern existence is confirmed by the positing of its opposite, but at the same time is undermined by a longing towards a seemingly superior utopic rural space (Derrida 1976, 23). It is not difficult to imagine that despite being physically present in the snow country for extended periods, Hamaya, as a modern Japanese subject, was not necessarily at home in this space. Instead, his time in the snow country must have been both stabilising and destabilising to his own sense of self.

To draw out the connection between 'objective' representations of modernity's external spaces and identity as they appear in Hamaya's *Snow Land*, it is useful to consider the example of colonial knowledge production. The space presented in *Snow Land* evokes a particular way of seeing the Middle East and Asia that is characteristic of 19th-century Europe. Using the example of world exhibitions held in Europe during the late 1800s (and drawing on the same Heidegger essay discussed above), Timothy Mitchell (1989) relates how, in a literal sense, Europeans constructed the Orient in a series of exhibits that re-created actual geographical spaces such as a busy street in Cairo, in order to be "viewed, investigated, and experienced" (220). In these exhibitions, the representation of the world-as-picture took a three-dimensional form. The Cairo street was reproduced as a life-sized diorama, a generic experience of the Orient created for exhibition visitors. Mitchell's example demonstrates one

of the ways in which European nations scientifically “observed” alien spaces in the colonial era that they then judged as retrograde in order to affirm the identity of Europe as superior to its opposite, the Orient.<sup>5</sup>

Hamaya’s documentary photographs of the snow country are clearly not constructed in the manner of a museum exhibit, nor are they an exercise in colonial discursive power. Nonetheless, like these exhibits of the Orient, *Snow Land* reflects an experience of life in Japan’s remote mountain villages, a singular representative space that combines various geographic locations. Hamaya produces this effect through a range of narrative devices. The image below, for example, is an overview shot that commences one section of the book (Figure 1):



**Figure 1:** Plate 47 from *Snow Land* (Hamaya 1977). © Keisuke Katano. Reproduced with permission.

The photograph resembles a diorama, an impression that is attributable to both the high angle from which the image has been taken and the distanced perspective; each aspect makes the landscape seem to be a miniaturised version of itself. The land is spread before the viewer to give a sense of the stage upon which the ensuing photographic narrative will take place. Furthermore, the manner in which the various lines and shapes in the landscape are carefully balanced gives the impression of a mapped space. Landscapes such as these are relatively rare in the book, with the majority of images depicting people undertaking preparations for traditional New Year celebrations. Within the context of the photo series, this image presents as a kind of “ground plan” (to use Heidegger’s term) for Hamaya’s more detailed documentation of village rituals (Heidegger 1977, 118). The photograph establishes a macro perspective

<sup>5</sup> This way of seeing and representing the Orient by the West is most famously explicated by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (2003). See in particular his concept of ‘imaginative geographies’ (49–73).



to contextualise the images of human subjects that follow, which are taken from a much closer vantage point. The landscape presented seems external yet knowable to the viewer, and thus presents as an objective display.

The photograph above (Figure 1) begins a section of the book that focuses entirely on New Year celebrations and is structured as a narrative through chronological sequencing of images and montage. Given the book's intention as an ethnographic work, it is not surprising to see these techniques being utilised in order to govern the viewer's experience. Chronological order, in particular, organises the various rituals and ceremonies conducted by the villagers, giving the impression of a meticulously produced spectacle, as in the European exhibitions referred to above. Below (Figure 2) is an excerpt from a sequence of twelve photographs that document a villager performing the *wakagi mukae* (若木迎え)<sup>6</sup> ritual:



**Figure 2:** Plates 14–17 from *Snow Land* (Hamaya 1977). © Keisuke Katano. Reproduced with permission.

The sequence from which the above montage is taken begins with an intimately close portrait of the man, after which the perspective shifts back to that of observer. The montage reflects Hamaya's self-assigned role as documenter. This is achieved in three ways. First, the photographer has withdrawn to a distance so as not to disturb what is unfolding before him. Second, the chronological sequencing creates a temporal narrative that reflects the photographer's wish to distance himself as narrator. Third, the absence of dramatic angles or other expressive framing techniques produces an objective aesthetic. The combined effect produces a 'factual' representation of the snow country space (much like the display of the Cairo street). Here, the snow country is carefully delineated and organised according to the rationalising logic of temporal sequencing. The space is presented to the viewer as a piece of objective information that can be incorporated into the broader world picture of modernity.

<sup>6</sup> The *wakagi mukae* ritual involves the cutting of a young tree in order to use it as an ornament in Japanese new-year festivities.



The images discussed above (Figures 1 and 2) demonstrate how the rural landscape is produced as a space peripheral to modernity's centre through rationalising logic. One consequence of this is that rural landscapes are also often represented according to the developmental logic of modernity as a retrograde past. This logic grounds a common perception of the rural landscape and its inhabitants as less civilised than those in urban spaces (Williams 1973, 1). More importantly for this discussion, such logic also contradictorily engenders nostalgia for an ideal lifestyle deemed lost. In the following section, I discuss the particular way nostalgia for the pastoral lifestyle in Japan features alongside attempts at pure documentation in Hamaya's *Snow Land*.

It is important to note that idealisation of the countryside is not unique to the modern age nor to Japan. Raymond Williams (1973), for example, has demonstrated how nostalgia for pastoral life and fear of its extinction can be traced to antiquity. In his example of modern writings about the English countryside, Williams observes a general shift beginning during the Renaissance whereby "the landscape becomes more distant, becomes in fact Arcadia, and the Golden Age is seen as present there" (1973, 16–17). As Britain became increasingly industrial and urban, recognition of the hardships of rural life present in earlier works began to disappear: "step by step, these living tensions are excised, until there is nothing countervailing, and selected images stand as themselves: not in a living but in an enamelled world" (1973, 18). This tendency to render the pastoral as a symbol detached from material and historical contingencies reflects a new way to produce meaning in the face of modernity's increased rationalisation of daily life. Due to rapid development starting in the Meiji era [1868–1912], many in Japan experienced not only economic and social upheaval, but also an existential crisis. The sense of dislocation in the Meiji era became even more pronounced in the Taishō era [1912–1926]. Alan Tansman articulates this phenomenon as follows:

...a time of 'blankness' lacking former myths and other objects of unselfconscious worship. Lost are previous forms of sociability and the rituals binding them, artistic forms sanctioned by tradition, and a sense of continuous time stretching back into the past and promising to continue without interruption into the future.

(Tansman 2009, 8)

In the face of modern logic, the legitimacy of old forms of knowledge and meaning became "a receding echo", retreating "steadily into a remaindered world of irrationality and ghosts" (Harootunian 2009, 83). Stefan Tanaka (2004) argues that this distancing of traditional from modern knowledge, and subsequently a distancing of humankind from the natural world, is symbolised in the Meiji-era replacement of the indigenous lunar calendar with the foreign solar (Gregorian) calendar. This new calendar was at odds with the timing of traditional events such as festivals and ceremonies, so that the experience of time in everyday life became disconnected from traditional

practice. Daily life was now organised around the logic of the solar calendar, and events that had punctuated the old lunar calendar were displaced and became illogical within the new organisational context of modern time. As a result, Tanaka argues, “what had constituted experience and common sense... [was] now evidence of a lack of understanding and reason, immaturity, or childhood” (2004, 82). Thus, the imposition of the solar calendar by the Meiji regime had the effect of condemning “the very organisation of people’s lives” as “evil customs of the past” (2004, 9).

It is clear that Hamaya himself keenly felt that something important had been lost in modern Japanese society. It was therefore important for him to record and evaluate the disappearing traditional systems of knowledge (Hamaya 1971, 152). Hamaya also saw the snow country as holding the promise of a collective identity he felt to be slipping away in the face of modern individualism. He has referred to his many field trips to the Niigata rural space during the creation of *Snow Land* as “like my return to [the nation of] Japan (日本への回帰とでも)” (Hamaya 1971, 38). This idea of an authentic Japan found in the snow country emphasises old systems of knowledge, most notably religious practice as a source of meaning and the virtues of close human relations that arise through shared activities. In the essay that accompanies the *Snow Land* images, Hamaya emphasises the importance of religion for both unity and resilience: “The farmers who built up the narrow, infertile and poor Japanese islands into a fertile land required deep faith in their gods to an extent inconceivable in the modern scientific age” (1977, n.p.). A sense of the resultant communal harmony is communicated powerfully in this image (Figure 3) that spreads across two pages of Hamaya’s book:



**Figure 3:** Plate 83 from *Snow Land* (Hamaya 1977). © Keisuke Katano. Reproduced with permission.

The wide frame of the image is crowded with people, yet none stand out as separate from the group. They all seem to be interacting with each other in different ways, suggesting a shared sense of purpose. Possibly through the use of a flash, the photograph has been exposed in a way that blackens

the background and erases the contextual details, while at the same time highlighting the human subjects. This sharp division between foreground and background not only makes the image dynamic, but also seems to isolate the group of men, imbuing the scene with a timeless sense of community. These visual effects produce a surface impression of communal identity as fundamental to an authentic Japanese landscape. In the modern sense that Williams (1973) notes, the landscape has been divested of a sense of the real hardships of life in a mountainous and bitterly cold landscape. Instead, it is a nostalgic representation of an originary Japan that promises to be a salve for the loss of meaning noted by Tanaka (2004) and Harootunian (2009). As will be discussed below, this sense of the snow country as a rejuvenating space is one important way in which Hamaya's *Snow Land* connects with the Yasunari Kawabata [1899–1972] novel of the same name.

## ALIENATION AND REJUVENATION IN YASUNARI KAWABATA'S *SNOW COUNTRY*

There are clear differences between the representation of the snow country in Hamaya's *Snow Land* and Kawabata's novel, *Snow Country* (雪国 [Yukiguni]).<sup>7</sup> Kawabata's representation is intensely personal and aesthetic, whereas Hamaya generally strives for objectivity. Despite this, however, there are important similarities between Hamaya and Kawabata's protagonist, Shimamura. Both are men, native to Tokyo, who venture into the snow country in search of redemption. Throughout his novel, Kawabata emphasises Shimamura's status as an urban male hollowed out by modernity. We are told, for example, that he is a dance critic who has slowly moved from critiquing Japanese dance forms, with which he became disillusioned, to studying Western ballet, performances of which he has seen only in books. This deliberate choice, made because "nothing could be more comfortable than writing about ballet from books", suggests Shimamura's detachment from the real world (Kawabata 2011, 17). Like Shimamura, Hamaya seemed also to experience a sense of disconnection from the real world in his urban life. This is most apparent from the fact that after making several trips to the snow country, he perceived his earlier photographs of Tokyo as superficial and meaningless. In a dramatic turn of events, he burnt almost all of his Tokyo film negatives in a traditional New Year's bonfire held in one of the snow country villages he visited (Reynolds 2013, 21).

For Hamaya and Shimamura, the snow country was an antidote to alienation. Shimamura "lived a life of idleness, [and therefore] found that he tended to lose his honesty with himself, and frequently went out alone into the mountains to recover something of it" (Kawabata 2011, 12). In Kawabata's novel, Shimamura seeks rehabilitation in the small *onsen* town of Echigo-Yuzawa, in Niigata Prefecture. This is apparent the moment he steps from the train: "Shimamura's nose had been stopped by a stubborn cold, but it cleared to the middle of his head in the cold air, and began running as if the

<sup>7</sup> The original Japanese novel was begun in 1935 and completed in 1937; the definitive version was published in 1948. The first English translation (by Edward Seidensticker) was published in 1956. This article refers to the 2011 edition of Seidensticker's translation.

matter in it were washing cleanly away” (2011, 9). The most lucid moments of reconnection to authenticity are found in communion with other people in the village. Shimamura articulates this in conversation with his lover, Komako: “I’ve had to come into the mountains to want to talk to people again” (2011, 15). Yet for Shimamura, the people of the village do not necessarily exist separately from the landscape; rather, they are a part of it. With respect to Komako, the narrator goes on to tell us that Shimamura’s “response to the mountains had extended itself to cover her” (2011, 14). This reflects how ultimately Shimamura’s attraction to Komako is based less on her qualities as an individual and more on what she symbolises for him. This is evident, too, at the time that the pair first meet in the novel:

The impression the woman [Komako] gave was a wonderfully clean and fresh one. It seemed to Shimamura that she must be clean to the hollows under her toes. So clean indeed did she seem that he wondered whether his eyes, back from looking at early summer in the mountains, might not be deceiving him. (Kawabata 2011, 13)

Komako, a geisha living a traditional life, provides Shimamura with access to a visceral experience of ‘authenticity’ based in nature, through emotional and sexual union. This is articulated later in the novel when Shimamura, while listening to Komako play music, observes that “practicing alone, not aware herself of what was happening, perhaps, but with all the wideness of nature in this mountain valley for her companion, she had come quite as a part of nature to take on this special power” (Kawabata 2011, 50).

Although Hamaya strives for objectivity in *Snow Land*, at times he nonetheless reproduces Kawabata’s romantic representation of the snow country—in particular, the author’s habit of eliding snow country inhabitants’ individuality and simply depicting them as part of the protagonist’s experience of the natural landscape. The following photograph from Hamaya’s series (Figure 4) similarly appears to embed the depicted human figures into the surrounding landscape. In this dynamic image, the men seem to dissolve into nature, an effect engendered by the way the figures are arranged around the as-yet unlit bonfire, in a manner that incorporates them into the bonfire’s pyramid shape. This is reinforced by the vertical graduation of tones in the photograph, which integrates the men into the natural landscape’s tonal palette. This begins with the white snowy ground that blends into the mid-grey of the straw bonfire and the men’s coats, and culminates in the sky’s inky blackness. The distinction between human and landscape is further blurred by swirling white snowflakes. The subjects’ distinguishing features are not visible given both their distance from, and position in relation to, the camera. All of this evokes an impression that the men and the landscape have merged to form a dynamic visage of nature. Despite at times striving for objectivity—as in the previously discussed landscape image (Figure 1) and the *wakagi mukae* montage (Figure 2)—this photograph suggests that Hamaya, like Kawabata, was also motivated by a sentimental and romantic notion of life in the pastoral landscape of the snow country. As discussed below, this connects Hamaya’s *Snow Land* with particular discourses around rural life in pre-war twentieth-century Japan, one of the most persuasive of which was agrarianism, or *nōhonshugi* (農本主義).





**Figure 4:** Plate 81 from *Snow Land* (Hamaya 1977). © Keisuke Katano. Reproduced with permission.

## IDEOLOGICAL DISCOURSES OF THE PASTORAL: *NŌHONSHUGI*

So far I have discussed how Hamaya's representation of the snow country constitutes a preconceived, bounded and idealised space. In *Snow Land*, the Niigata landscape reflects the photographer's notion of rural life as both foreign and superior to modern, urban ways of living. Although this is an understandable response to a modern crisis of meaning, the fact that this series was created during the period in which the war and its aftermath were most acutely experienced in Japan cannot be overlooked. As an ethnographic work, the series connects with the folklore studies discipline in which Hamaya was keenly interested. Marilyn Ivy (1995) has noted that folklore studies ultimately "contributed to the chauvinism and cultural nationalism of the wartime period" despite trying to distance itself from state discourses (94). *Snow Land* also connects with agrarian movements that valorised the pastoral. As Tom Brass has demonstrated, the discourse of agrarian myth was "an almost universal national response to the capitalist crisis" of the 1920s and 1930s (2000, 3). He argues that although these responses naturally varied in form from country to country, in each instance the agrarian myth was constituted at that time as:

a 'pure' (or middle) peasantry engaged in smallholding cultivation within the context of an equally 'pure' village community (that is unsullied by an external capitalism) is presented as embodying all the positive and culturally specific

attributes that are constitutive of a 'pure' national identity, which is protected in turn by these same peasants (=warriors-who-defend-the-nation). De-essentialization of the peasantry corresponds to alienation from an 'authentic' selfhood and thus estrangement from a 'natural' and ancient identity by a combination of 'foreign' others: capitalism, socialism and/or colonialism. (Brass 2000, 36)

*Nōhonshugi*, as the Japanese iteration of this agrarian myth, emerged as an ideology in the wake of the Meiji Restoration [1868] and Japan's consequent rapid modernisation (Havens 1970, 250). This ideology held that agrarian practices underpinned both the economic state and a unique Japanese spirit. As expressed by its leading thinker and practitioner, Kanji Katō [1884–1965], *nōhonshugi* was the suppression of "one's ego through devotion to growing crops, an enterprise best performed by self-sufficient villages composed of patriarchal families" (Havens 1970, 254). According to Katō, there were several facets to the agrarian lifestyle that characterised Japanese essence. These facets include: physically disciplining the body through hard labour on the farm; resurrecting the fading practice of shrine worship; and practicing traditional martial arts. Farming and combat had to eschew modern implements and methods in favour of tradition, such as the hand-drawn hoe and the sword respectively (Havens 1970, 256–57). A central motif of *nōhonshugi* was the idealised rice farmer, largely due to an historical association with rice as food and the aesthetics of Japan's rice paddies. The Japanese rice paddy was considered to embody not just rural Japan, but Japan itself (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 81–95). The rice farmer became so central to Japanese identity in the era between wars that by 1935, the Japanese anthropologist Kunio Yanagita [1895–1962] had come to define the "common people" of Japan solely as rice farmers (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 92).

There are no depictions of rice farming in the *Snow Land* book, primarily because Hamaya's series focuses on winter, during which the Niigata rural landscapes are mostly submerged in snow. He did, however, produce iconic images of rice farming in *Uranihon* (裏日本; lit., 'Japan's Back Coast'), a book published in 1957 as a follow-up to *Snow Land*. Incidentally, *Uranihon* also contained an introduction written by Kawabata, author of the *Snow Country* novel (Hamaya 1957). One of the most iconic images in *Uranihon* is the below image (Figure 5).

Although this image is from 1955, long after the end of wartime, it nonetheless symbolises some key aspects of *nōhonshugi*. It conveys an impression of the rice farmer as a person of individual discipline and self-reliance, while at the same time emphasising the communal working rhythms of the harvest. The former is achieved by the centralised presence of the two women who fill the image's frame, while a sense of coordinated harmony is produced by the manner in which the eye is drawn from the front figure towards the woman behind her. Harmony is further suggested by how the women are captured in symmetric pose while performing identical harvesting actions. These two aspects of the image position the women as archetypal figures, an impression accentuated by the fact that each woman's face is covered. This has the effect of erasing context and subjectivity from the scene so that the women become generic signifiers of the idealised Japanese rice farmer.



**Figure 5:** Plate 88 from *Uranihon* (Hamaya 1977). © Keisuke Katano. Reproduced with permission.

## FASCISM'S PROMISE FOR MODERNITY

Brass notes that in many modernising nations, agrarianism became incorporated into fascist ideology (Brass 2000, 20). It is therefore important to assess whether traces of agrarian fascist discourses might be found in Hamaya's *Snow Land* photographs. Like agrarianism, fascism emerged in Japan as a response to growing dissatisfaction with capitalist modernity, endeavouring to provide new meaning via a foundational mythology of the nation state. Maruyama (1969) notes that, although there were clear formal differences between the Shōwa [1926–1989] regime and the regimes of Germany and Italy, the ideological underpinnings of each were ostensibly the same. One structural difference between Japanese and European fascism resided in the fact that Japanese fascism did not emerge as a populist movement. Rather, it was driven by a small but powerful presence in government and civil society which exerted a disproportionate influence on the state (Maruyama 1969, 52–57). Despite this difference, Harootunian notes that in the final analysis



each regime sought to “save capitalism from itself, from the excesses of civil society, and from the class conflict it was capable of producing”, largely by erasing the notion of social divisions and individual identity (Harootunian 2005, 140–41).

The particular national mythology espoused in Japanese fascism is worth exploring more fully to understand the discursive context in which Hamaya’s *Snow Land* was produced. It will also help with assessing whether or not Hamaya was influenced by state discourses. Dislocation from old patterns of living—in conjunction with the failure of the global economy that led to the worldwide depression of the late 1920s—confirmed growing doubts about capitalist modernity to many in Japan. Nina Cornyetz notes that, unlike Germany following defeat in World War I, in Japan there was no single definable event to which a prevailing feeling of loss could be attributed. Nonetheless, there still existed “a sense of cultural crisis that was widely experienced as loss” (Cornyetz 2009, 337). This was engendered by the fear that Japanese civilisation was overrun by the Western influences that had become intertwined with modernising efforts in Japan since the Meiji Restoration (2009, 337). By holding the promise of replenishing a sense of community and unifying purpose, fascism emerged as one response to the crisis of modernity. The disenchantment and isolating effects of modern life were addressed in Japan through the renovation of ancient mythology and emphasis on connection with nature (Tansman 2009, 2–5). As already discussed, the ideology of *nōhonshugi* was central to this discourse because it promoted agrarian life as an intrinsic feature of national identity. In this way, fascism sought to unite the population, to provide a sense of superior cultural uniqueness that connected individuals and communities together. It thus appeared to provide an antidote to the fracturing of old family structures brought about by modernisation.

While fascism promised a sense of unity, it also required significant sacrifice by Japanese citizens. The Emperor, as the symbolic head of spirituality and the state, embodied the higher force to which sacrifice should be made (Skya 2009). The national body was subsequently rendered sacred through its association with the emperor, and the emperor’s status as supreme *kami*—the apotheosis of nature’s power—meant that a nexus formed between the emperor, the state and nature (Picken 2004; Karatani 2012, 61). As a consequence, a central motif in Japanese fascist aesthetics was the frequent association of nature and the rural with an essential national identity. This extended beyond the realm of ideological discourse and into politics; for some political thinkers, agrarianism was a foundation for a new state model.

Maruyama (1963) notes that among major political thinkers in the 1930s there existed a concept of the village model as an ideal upon which to base the Japanese state. For example, Seikyō Gondō [1868–1937], a central figure in the reactionary May 15 Incident of 1932, was highly critical of state exploitation of the provinces in the process of modernisation.<sup>8</sup> This criticism was driven

<sup>8</sup> The May 15 Incident was an attempted *coup d’état* carried out in 1932 by ultra-right factions of the military and some civilians in order to supplant the democratically elected government and replace it with a military state headed by the emperor. This included the assassination of then-Prime Minister Tsuyoshi Inukai [1855–1932]. Despite assassinating the head of state, the perpetrators received only relatively light punishment.



not only by Gondō's outrage at the abject poverty in rural Japan, but more importantly by his belief in the village model. According to Maruyama, Gondō wanted the state to be "based on the native-village community" and "built up from the bottom like a pyramid" (Maruyama 1963, 56–57). Kōsaborō Tachibana [1893–1974], another key figure of the May 15 Incident, argued that agrarian life was an essential state of being for Japanese. In his *Principles of Japan's Patriotic Reformation*, he wrote: "what is tilling the soil if not the very basis of human life?" He further claimed that "only by agrarianism can a country become eternal, and that is especially the case for Japan" (cited in Maruyama 1969, 43).

Maruyama shows how agrarianism's proponents (such as Gondō and Tachibana) were at odds with others in the Right who believed in industrial development. This led to a contradiction in the fascist state in that it sought wholesale industrial development on the one hand—thus privileging the urban centre over the rural periphery—while positing agrarianism as a cultural ideal on the other. For this reason, Maruyama points out that "as 'fascism' descends from the realm of ideas into the world of reality, agrarianism is bound to turn into an illusion" (1969, 52–57). In other words, the fascist state—inherently militaristic and aggressively expansionist—could never subsist on agriculture alone, but must rely on the tools of modernity to achieve its expansionist aims at the expense of those who supposedly represented the agrarian ideal. In this instance, the instability at the heart of the urban/pastoral binary was made apparent in a material sense in the fascist state that relied so heavily on industrial modes of production. In the context of Hamaya's *Snow Land*, it is important to note that the fascist state's exploitation of the rural landscape and its inhabitants is not depicted in the photographs, an omission which further demonstrates how socio-political tensions are elided in his representation of the space.

The illusory nature of agrarianism did not lessen its power in fascist discourse. As discussed previously in this article, the agrarian ideal of a close union between humans and nature is fundamental to fascism's promised anti-modern utopia. This is because the agrarian ideal is the obvious antithesis to capitalist modernity in its communal-social formation. The connection to traditional mythology and folklore, and a relation to nature that was lost to urban subjects, became key ideological tools through which fascist discourse—utilising visual and literary art mediums—sought to mobilise the public. This discourse not only took the form of state-driven cultural productions, but ultimately *governed* cultural production.<sup>9</sup> It thus came to shape works such as Kawabata's *Snow Country* novel, and, I would argue, Hamaya's photographic depiction of the snow country.

In suggesting this I do not mean to imply that Hamaya consciously produced a work of propaganda. Rather, I argue that given the power of the Japanese state discourses and systems of knowledge operating at the time, it would have been almost impossible for these not to have in some way influenced his photographic work. We might note, for example, that Hamaya was employed

9 Important discussions of this can be found in Peter B. High's book, *The Imperial Screen: Japanese Film Culture in the Fifteen Years' War*, and in Alan Tansman's *The Aesthetics of Japanese Fascism*, which examines literature and other popular entertainment. Please see bibliography for publication details.

by several state-sponsored wartime publications, including *FRONT*, a propaganda magazine intended for foreign audiences that showcased the various military aspects of Japan's war efforts, alongside romantic portrayals of agrarian life in Japan's colonies.<sup>10</sup> Although Hamaya's involvement in these projects can be explained by the fact that much work for freelance photographers during the war period came from the state, it is also clear that he was at times swept up in the militarist discourses of the era. He recounted later how he was intoxicated by the displays of military power he photographed: "Being in the midst of the explosive noise of the bombers and the deafening roar of the tanks set my blood racing. My sluggish spirits were swept away. I was wildly enthusiastic, thinking, 'arrows or bullets, bring them on'" (cited in Reynolds 2013, 22). This enthusiasm seems to have been short-lived, however. Reynolds speculates that Hamaya's decision to resign from *FRONT* after just one year was motivated by "growing frustration with the military and disgust over the duplicity of wartime propaganda" in which he had played a part (2013, 24).

## CONCLUSION

Hamaya's *Snow Land* was clearly motivated by a sense of dissatisfaction with the state of modern Japan in the 1940s and 1950s. This dissatisfaction was not only attributable to a hollowing out of daily life considered to be a universal experience of modernity, but also disillusion with the promises of the fascist state. In that sense, *Snow Land* can be understood as a critique of modern life, and an attempt to rediscover a more fulfilling mode of living for Japanese society. On one level, therefore, we might dismiss this project as a simplistic and "well-known habit of using the past, the 'good old days,' as a stick to beat the present" (Williams 1973, 12). However, as the discussion above demonstrates, the manner in which nostalgic representations of the rural in *Snow Land* elide historical contingencies is the product of a particularly modern way of seeing the world as a pre-formed picture. The space depicted in the book reflects not so much the material realities that Hamaya photographed, but the idealised notion of the rural space as a heterotopia, a singular utopia distilled from real physical spaces in Japan. It can therefore be argued that Hamaya was deeply embedded in a modern consciousness which, as Heidegger contended, objectified the natural world as a picture, an already-posited conceptual space available for observation and recording by the modern subject.

We can interpret Hamaya's depiction of the snow country as constituting an unconscious iteration of both universal discourses of modernity, and discourses specific to the 1940s and 1950s Japanese context. By representing the countryside as an icon, Hamaya channels discourses of nostalgia for a pastoral golden age in Japan. In the context of wartime Japan, such discourses of agrarianism served state ideology: they were intended to unite the populace according to state imperatives. In fascism, the inherent contradiction at the heart of the binary relationship between centralised, teleological modernity and an externalised, ahistorical understanding of the countryside became apparent. In order to fuel progress, the modern centre must consume its rural

<sup>10</sup> *FRONT* was published between 1942 and 1945 by Tōhōsha, a publishing company set up at the behest of the military command and funded by private corporations. Its principal intended audience was the countries that comprised the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (Shirayama 2003, 382).

periphery in both a material and ideological sense. As a product of Japan's urban centre, Hamaya perceived the snow country space according to the worldview of a modern individual. The photographic representations that he created offer a pastoral landscape that stands before modern individuals as a peripheral and objectified space. This space is produced by those in urban centres as a salve for the crises of meaning and identity in modern life.

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