

A CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION



A Criminal investigation © Yukichi Watabe. Courtesy Ed. Xavier Barral and LeBal

Black. Framed at either end by negative space, but most certainly an uninterrupted plane of deep black. Turn. Second page. The view remains, unchanged. Black. A sense of quietude, laced with anticipation. When the first monochrome image appears on the third page, it does so with a jarring abruptness: that pensive blackness not so much overlaid with image as seemingly obliterated by the luminosity of a white-accented palette of grey tones that occupy virtually the entirety of the frame. The eye adjusts, registers the wide view, and shifts to the focal point of the image. A smartly-dressed man stands amidst a large expanse of marsh reeds. He is pointing down at something, invisible within the dense growth. The gesture is evidently intended for someone else present at the scene; his face is turned the opposite direction, presumably engaging his off-camera company. Turn. Mid-shot of the same man, apparently making his way out of the reeds. The black is reinstated as abruptly as it disappeared. Turn.

The allusions to a cinematic experience are confirmed by way of a brief paragraph that establishes the context of the mysterious opening images and those to follow. In January 1958, a disfigured corpse was found near a lake in Ibaraki prefecture, Japan. Sato Tadashi, a 30 year old Tokyo resident, had been murdered by strangulation. A special investigation unit was formed, and Yukichi was granted rare access to photograph the unfolding investigation.

In light of this introduction, the wide expanse of reed marsh lightly encountered takes on the role of an establishing shot, marking the temporal order of events. Thereafter, the linear-narrative conventions of a police-procedural drama come thick and fast. Immediately after the special “case-office” is established as the location, the detective partners with whom Yukichi is to work are introduced. One veteran, all sunken eyes and chain-smoking. His partner purse-lipped and youthful, the default rookie. Such a trope effectively re-affirms the project’s parallels with cinema; for near-identical setups in motion pictures of the modern era, for example, one need only to look to Akira Kurosawa’s *Stray Dog* (1949), Jules Dassin’s *Naked City* (1948) or countless other movies before and since. After a series of four photographs that function as a basic montage, the action begins. Pictured crossing a (symbolic) bridge, the detectives leave the world of formality and bureaucracy and enter the *Shitamachi* (downtown) districts to sniff out their suspect’s trail among railroad embankments, dingy bars, the washing-lines of back alleys and other netherworlds of modernity. Later, an epilogue explains the eventual resolution of the case. The murder had been a case of identity theft; one of several on the part of the perpetrator.

The success of *A Criminal Investigation* as a book is founded largely on the strength of its editing; for which the nature of the detective work—uncovering an identity—and the crime seems to have provided a solid framework. The theme of a problematized identity seamlessly extends beyond the subject matter and into the wider contexts of society and photographic representation in Japan at the time.

In terms of the former, the late 50s constituted something of a liminal phase for Japanese society; an urban fabric suspended between new and old (in which the architecture of the postwar reconstruction had adhered to outdated pre-war planning systems) coupled with a momentous shift towards new heavy-industrial economics providing little stability for a national psyche already traumatized by war defeat and foreign occupation. It would be several years, yet, until the rapid expansion of Japanese industry, infrastructure and exports during the “Golden 60s” would allow the New Japan to re-emerge on the world stage, nationalist pride reinvigorated in its new status of “economic superpower”.

As for the latter, it is important to note that cinematic preoccupations are not the editor’s alone; Yukichi unabashedly re-staged several events of the real investigation for visual effect. His practice in general located him outside of the dogmatic Photo-Realist and Subjectivist “schools” of the 1950s Japanese photography scene; this movie-inflected project, arguably finding its media-merging precedents in the like of Kiyoji Otsuji’s sculptural *objet* photographs or Yasuhiro Ishimoto’s Bauhaus re-envisioning of traditional architecture, rendered the identity of the “photographer” more multifaceted and interdisciplinary than that proposed by those schools.

Accomplished design and fine materials complement the book’s content. Coarse beige linen, stiff book-boards, a thick elasticated closing strap render its exterior appropriately folder-like, with a little luxe-finishing in the tipped-in title panel and black, debossed spine text. Typography throughout the book’s (economical) text accompaniments is, appropriately, typewriteresque. Uncommon *Fukuro –Toji* (or Pouch) binding of creamy, off-white paper stock allows the (aforementioned) rich gravure-blacks to envelop the folded outside-edge characteristic of this binding method, creating a far smoother visual transition from page to page than if this space was left white. This thoughtful design feature actually plays a significant role in enhancing the sense of narrative connection throughout the sequence of photographs, yet is wonderfully subtle.

The combination of Le Bal’s intelligent *Tokyo-e* exhibition and Xavier Barral’s quality publication of *A Criminal Investigation* will likely put Yukichi’s name on people’s lips for a long time to come. Perhaps it will spur on further digging into various archives, too. Who knows what other instant classics languish there, missing from photography’s histories?

— Kevin J. Clarke



A Criminal Investigation
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