

Trovare conforto nella cucina della nonna: narrazione architettonica per osservare il lutto a casa

Finding Solace in Grandma's Cooking: Architectural Storytelling to Mourn at Home

Una serie di scene familiari. Una cucina in un sobborgo giapponese. Una nonna sbuccia le verdure, tenendo gli occhi e l'orecchio su sua figlia, che chiede consigli di cucina. Il tempo passa. I suoi nipoti e suo genero si riuniscono, aprono il frigo, bevono tè freddo. La cucina è piena di vecchi utensili, pentole e padelle appese alle pareti. Le piastrelle bianche brillano con il sole del mattino, riversandosi proprio sopra il lavandino attraverso la finestra che si affaccia sul giardino esterno. Un tavolo centrale è usato come una superficie di raccolta, dove più tardi, i chicchi di mais saranno preparati in tempura. Questo è un rituale funebre di famiglia. Si sono riuniti per commemorare l'anniversario della morte del figlio maggiore della famiglia, lo fanno cucinando e mangiando. La casa dei nonni diventa un santuario, un santuario funerario dove l'atto del ricordo si svolge ogni anno. La scena appartiene a Hirokazu Kore'eda's Still Walking (Arutemo Arutemo), un regista nel cui lavoro "la morte incombe"¹, esplorando costantemente ed esprimendo l'assioma: "la vita è spesso vissuta all'ombra della morte".

A familiar set of scenes. A kitchen in a Japanese suburb. A grandmother peels vegetables, while keeping eye and ear on her daughter, who is asking for cooking advice. Time passes. Her grandsons and her son-in-law gather around, open the fridge, drink iced tea. The kitchen is filled with old utensils, hanging pots and pans on the walls. White tiles shine with the morning sun, pouring in right above the sink through the window that looks out to the exterior garden. A central table is used as a gathering surface, where later on, corn kernels will be prepared in tempura. This is a family mourning ritual. They've gathered to commemorate the anniversary of the death of the family's eldest son, they do so by cooking and eating. The grandparental home becomes a sanctuary, a funerary shrine where the act of remembrance unfolds every year. The scene belongs to Hirokazu Kore'eda's Still Walking (Arutemo Arutemo), a director in whose work "death looms over"¹, constantly exploring and expressing the axiom that "life is often lived in the shadow of death."²



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Parole chiave: film, atmosfera, sintonia, abitazione, rappresentazione, narrazione

Keywords: film, atmosphere, attunement, domestic dwelling, representation, storytelling

A familiar, domestic scene: a kitchen in a Japanese suburb. A grandmother peels vegetables, while keeping eye and ear on her daughter, who is asking for cooking advice. Time passes slowly. Her grandsons and her son-in-law gather around, open the fridge, drink iced tea. The kitchen is filled with old utensils, hanging pots and pans on the walls. White tiles shine with the morning sun, pouring in from the window and landing above the sink, the light emits a greenish hue, that comes from the exterior garden. A large, wooden table is used as a gathering surface, where later on, corn kernels will be fried in tempura. This is their mourning ritual. They've gathered to commemorate the anniversary of the death of the family's eldest son. The grandparental home becomes a sanctuary, a funerary shrine where the act of remembrance unfolds every year by cooking and eating. The scene belongs to Hirokazu Kore'eda's *Still Walking (Aruitemo Aruitemo)*³, a director in whose work "death looms over";⁴ constantly exploring and expressing the axiom that "life is often lived in the shadow of death."⁵ The director's particular way of dealing with death allows for a poetical, yet oddly familiar and ordinary approach to the notion of dwelling one's home through mourning.

Is it possible then, for domestic architecture, to become a place for grief and mourning after the moment of bereavement? Is it possible for the home to be part of the process of reframing oneself in the world after the loss of a loved one? Toyo Ito's U-White house, specifically designed for his sister and her daughters as a place for grieving the loss of her husband and father, an architectural design is put in the service of mourning. The house was demolished years later, as the family moved out, one by one, completing their emotional reconstruction, giving

simultaneous closure to both the grieving and the purpose of the house⁶. The house was designed to be a place where every member of the family would be able to look after each other, a design composed of a single corridor surrounding a courtyard. Immersed in itself, it is a house of absolute introspection for its dwellers. It was designed for grieving a single, specific death, and was lived-in as a story with a very clear ending. A house meant to be returned to dust when the grieving had been fulfilled.

But what about the architecture of everyday life? The case of Ito belongs, not without merit, to the realm of very specific architectonics verging into the realm of conceptual art/architecture. But it is also important to carefully consider the architecture belonging to our everyday lives, the mundane built environment that allocates our quotidian beings. The homes that are built in a shared intimacy with loved ones; and once they're gone, is it possible to find solace at this very same place, where no architect has brought upon a conceptual design of spectacular forms, higher ideals with an artistic intention beyond the good life and dwelling of its owners? It has been the dream of many in history to find poetic dwelling in the ordinary. The portrayal and analysis of quotidian scenes in houses to frame and find meaning for our lives is particularly commonplace in storytelling. From the *Hôtel Particulier* of Nicolas Le Camus de Mezieres' *The Genius of Architecture* in the 17th century, a treatise where the main role of the architect is that of a set designer, that puts the architectural in service of eliciting emotions in the dwellers of a house; the poetic dwellings portrayed in Gothic and Romantic literature, like Edgar Allan Poe's Fall of the house of Usher; to the "home drama"⁷ in Japanese cinema, a term used by Japanese film industry to allocate a series of stories

that focused on the "leveling of class differences and an emphasis on women, particularly the matriarchal family"⁸. One of the fathers of this "genre", Yasujiro Ozu, makes movies grounded in world-making within the confines of the ordinary. He tells stories of lives as lived by many of us everywhere in the world. Every drama of his is framed in conventional spaces: houses, restaurants, offices and alleyways. In most of his films, Ozu sets the mood of each scene using establishing shots of the environment. An authentic creation of emotional atmosphere for us to attune to the place and the emotions of the characters. As we witness these scenes and thus, spend time with his characters, we familiarize ourselves with these places, to the point of being able to traverse them in our imaginations. Hirokazu Kore'eda, a younger contemporary director, following the footsteps of Ozu, uses similar techniques to frame his own imaginary worlds, to tell stories mostly about death and family dynamics.

It is through these fictions that we can see how film effectively portrays and understands poetic dwelling. It relies on the creation of atmospheres and moods to produce a shared place between the characters and us, observers who become passengers within the film. These places, made manifest in film, are part of an embodied experience and can affect our consciousness and emotional well being. As we draw and project our own experience of family and home into the filmmaker's narrative, we participate as temporary dwellers of the storied world and in an act of empathy, we can share the emotional transformations of the characters and bring them into our own embodied selves. As we see these characters relate to their homes, there is potential to understand how our built environment, our attunement⁹ to

these places is able to affect our spatial, embodied consciousness and emotional health.

The Film, any film, is here regarded as a co-viewing subject, an embodied observer that takes us along to share the world it is perceiving. A concept developed by Viviane Sobchack in her phenomenology of cinema¹⁰, where she describes the relationship of our body with the film's body as something that we "...share in an allegorical-illusional world, made to represent and entice our emotions."¹¹ According to Sobchack, every film has a body, invisible to us and separate from its technological body, that perceives the world created by the filmmakers, this perceiving body shares with us its specific way of seeing, and hearing that world. It shares with us, the spectators, that world. Film is, like the spectator, an observer that opens up a world of atmospherical representation and emotional attunement through its perceptual organ: the frame¹². We become passengers on the experience that is presented to of us on the screen, the place where we "meet" the film. Film bridges our emotions to the ones being elicited and enacted by the story, it is "an affective transport"¹³. But for us to actually partake and affectively engage with the narrative onscreen, a sense of place must also be created. The act of world-making through storytelling and the use of architectural atmospheres to frame this stories is paramount to enable empathy in the spectator using our embodied, pre-reflective (emotional) knowledge(experience) to engage in it. German filmmaker and theorist, Christiane Voss, explains how this sharing of perceptions produces an experience where our emotions, and by consequence, our attunement to space, is opened up:

"(A) certain degree of affective entanglement

is necessarily part and parcel of the cinematic formation of illusion" and second, that the spectator is neither object nor viewing subject of a technique of illusion that could be described independently of him or her. Rather, the film spectator constitutes, as a resonating body in need of further determination, the illusion- forming medium of cinema. Reflection on the formation of illusion by means of and in the cinema thus leads to a new, expanded concept of cinema itself that includes the spectator's body - a concept of cinema that emphasizes the relevance of intertwined sensations, and the interpretation of these sensations, for the aesthetic experience of the medium."¹⁴

The films of Kore'eda are embedded with a very specific sense of place-making, using mood, atmosphere and time. A filmmaker trained in Japanese television, started his career filming short documentaries that dealt with every-day, contemporary living in Japan. His years as a documentary filmmaker have perhaps influenced his way of looking at the quotidian. The mundane, the details that compose our lives when we seem to be not paying attention, constitute these atmospheres that pivot and frame every story. The environment he chooses are photographed with careful attention to detail, the spaces show signs of wear and the objects placed within them contribute to a feeling of lived-in-ness, constituting the environment for the characters to exist and add depth to their personas. His establishing shots are long, encouraging us to spend time in the depicted places, to get acquainted with them. Still lives that become diegetic, ever present as we follow the plot. Most scenes are intertwined and articulated with this kind of shots, attempting to frame the atmosphere of the space, sharing with us how the space feels

like. The light pouring through the windows, the dents in furniture, flowers withering on a vase. These images, as they are shared by the film, draw from our own experience of space, from our memories and imaginations to elicit a sense of place. Yet, when the action happens, he places the camera in such way to welcome us to the table, as if we were sitting there with the characters.

Death and family dynamics are the other two structural elements upon which Kore'eda builds his stories. In Maboroshi (1995), his first film, the main character mourns her loss by traversing the landscape on foot; in After Life (1998) he envisions a surreal setting where filmmaking is akin to re-living memories; in Still Walking, the act of grieving is portrayed as a communal experience in a grandparental home. This last movie is, in itself, an act of mourning, written and filmed by Kore'eda after the passing of his own parents.

Merleau Ponty's theories of embodiment and habit, of the chiasmatic bind of our consciousness, body and the world, allow us to think of grief as an embodied response to loss, not unlike the one we experience as phantom limb pain¹⁵, as James Krasner explains: "Because the neurological phenomenon known as 'body schema' suggests that we experience our loved ones' bodies as contiguous with our own, grief can be understood as bodily dismemberment, and the pain of grief as phantom pain"¹⁶. Grieving occurs in a "rich affective environment of lived emotion"¹⁷, where losing a loved one, another embodied consciousness that we have extended ourselves into, is severed from our lived-in environment, the home we inhabit and our own physical body. We are of the world and extend towards it. As we do, we also extend towards others.

When we share a home with a loved one, dwelling becomes a shared experiences of home-building, we become physically and emotionally co-extensive into this world. The domestic becomes a world, co-authored by its dwellers. When one of the co-authors of that world is lost, we sense as if we had been violently severed from something that has defined our embodied experience of that home, that defined our motions in our domestic geography. As if we had lost a limb, the other becomes a ghostly, uncanny presence¹⁸. Thus, producing an uncanny space, one that resembles our home but is lacking its alchemical qualities of place. The well rehearsed dance of dwelling in ensemble, defining space by the motion of bodies, interrupted. We experience a phantom pain. To mourn at home is to rebuild its familiarity from within. It requires a ritual reconstruction through time in space to reinstate our capacity to dwell, to re-ignite its homeliness. A search for memories to rebuild it within our own memory palace.

What is it about a home that can house such a ritual reconstruction? Do the architectonics, walls and columns, of this particular house invite the family into gathering, or does it come from somewhere else? Perhaps, the passage of time, spending it at home, living-in the house provokes a special bind between bodies and building too, and drove this family to return annually to a meal of remembrance. The act of dwelling for Heidegger (“poetically the man dwells”) entails the construction of a shared home, which happens “in the mutual coalescing that gives us a world. For Heidegger, poetic dwelling occurs once we are intentional in co-creating a world and requires that we co-respond with the things that we assemble around us.”¹⁹ The home, the dwelling, is the product of a shared responsibility between the architect and

the dwellers who, through time, slowly fill the space with their use of language, with the stories that they build together, the bodies that share the home carry and pour in these memories in order to let the space be transformed into a personal place. Gaston Bachelard explains that as time is spent in houses, projecting our memories in the places we dwell into, we create a phenomenological bind with the place that we call home²⁰. Thus, time is inherently linked with the emergence of an emotional bind with the places that we make, and the people that we make them with. The film shows a slice of this cyclical, temporal mourning in the family’s life. It composes its plot around two main activities, repeated three times (not coincidentally, a typical story structure for a film is also made of three acts, here presented as cyclical) cooking-eating and walking. The plot begins with a walk, followed by dinner, then an afternoon walk and supper, the following morning breakfast and a final walk close the story (with an epilogue also, that happens in the future, where the family is seen, yet again, walking the same path).

The home is presented in carefully and patiently shot scenes. We’re allowed to spend time there with the family, in their yearly reunion. The house doubles also a representation of the memory and emotions of the parents who lost their son, a physical manifestation of their affective state. The objects that assemble their environment, are charged with multiple readings, they make manifest that the family has lived long enough within it, filling its walls with mementos, furniture and utensils. Its materiality shows too, the passage of time and the markings of someone who has lived there. The interior scenes show a production design made with care and attention to the way a house feels like when its been lived in for a long time. In the emergence of

Romanticism, buildings started to be used in literature as linguistic representations of the emotional states of characters. Mood was used to create an empathic bind with the reader. Romanticism developed the concepts of *Stimmung* and *Gemüt*, as Perez-Gómez recently explained in his book *Attunement*, concepts that sought to put in front the role of our emotions as a true source of knowledge and wisdom, concepts that phenomenology will eventually refer to as fully emotional understanding (pre-reflective cognition)²¹. Now, by cinematic means, a home is portrayed as a house sharing the bind between its body and the one of those who live in it. It has aged gracefully, like the grandfathers, but shows signs of subtle decay like the loose tiles in the bathroom, the most intimate and personal space in the house. Or visually showing their loss, like the drawer missing in the cabinet next to the deceased son’s shrine, symbolizing the empty space left after his death, or the vase with withering flowers.

Kore’eda focuses then in spaces that seem mundane, where most of our lives unfold daily and the formal aspect of architecture is working mostly as a backdrop. Architecture is perhaps then, not necessarily the building that we often seek as a material, built iconic design, but the actual act of transforming these structures into places with meaningful resonance for a family, that not only lived a happy life there, but that is trying to make sense of a painful loss. Architecture, as Perez-Gomez has said, was historically understood before Vitruvius as the dance that took place in the theatre and made sense of it, not just the building by itself. It emerges in the act of dwelling, in the *place* where our emotions unfurl. It is the atmosphere we are affectively attuned to. In the film, the places where the memories are called upon are those of encounter. The kitchen, a centripetal room for the rest of the activities

and center of the narrative is populated by a myriad of objects and details that put a special focus on role the mother's character as a center of not only this family, but the whole narrative. Its objects, the sink, the cutting board, the large wooden table and the stove, serve the purpose of staging the interactions between her and the rest of the family, enabling conversations that seem more casual and relaxed. The dining room, where most of the plot unfolds, is framed either by the threshold of the kitchen or the opening from the garden, and is the place where the shrine devoted to Junpei the deceased son is installed, thus simultaneously housing his character, looming over every meal and conversation. The dining room leads to the garden, a place for the kids to play and where the family takes a group photo. The doorway, the hinge between the street and the home, is dimly lit and has an air of reverence. Then, the neighborhood, which is by extension part of the grandparent's home and from which the community of neighbors bring gifts for the celebration. The Grandmother cooks with her son, daughter, grandchildren and in-law relatives, who reminisce as they hear the sound of the crackling corn kernels when fried, peel radishes and mix batter, thinking of days past in their childhood. The smell of tempura, the freshness of a cooled down watermelon, a sip of cold lemonade, the lazy moment when the heat rises right before sunset, the sharing of leftovers the next morning are moments we are drawn into by the atmosphere. They happen with ease, unfold slowly, the film takes its time. As the movie progresses, we begin to be able to retrace each step inside the house, we know where the kitchen is, where the corridor leads to or where the father hid after a tantrum. We have created a map in our empathic imagination of their house.

The movie uses synesthetic devices to entice both

memory and imagination. The grandmother's cooking arouses the sense of smell and taste, inherently linked with our mnemonic system, as they help bring forth the family's past through tastes, odours and sounds. Time is made cyclical, and the absence of Junpei, made part of the everyday life. In different cultures, food is too part of a ritual, like cooking for the dead in Mexican *Día de los Muertos*, it is a form of bringing together imagination and memory, of making the ghosts present for a day and imagine that our limbs are all in place, and yet making their absence more present. In the supper scene, music played on a record as they eat. The song, Blue Light Yokohama (the chorus in this song inspired the title of the movie), takes the parents back to their years of youth, even before their descendants had been born. From that point on, the more intimate catharsis happens, and the wounds opened up throughout the day begin to close and heal.

According to Giuliana Bruno, "cinema and memory have been linked since the inception of film history and theory."²² The ritual of remembrance and re-habitation, is unveiled as the plot moves along. Movement and emotion are intrinsically connected, and in every step the home, and even the city, constitute stations where this ritual of motion performed. Walking is yet another device in the film to bring back memories to the present. The act of reconstruction of an emotional geography by the characters, constitutes a substantial element for the plot. Every stroll in the film is a journey from the maternal hearth to the resting places (either the beach or the cemetery) for Junpei and back home. The movie opens with the father on his habitual morning stroll, where he greets neighbors, as he walks towards the beach. The father, feeling responsible for his son's demise, is haunted by a silent, held back

grief. He tries to alleviate his grief by visiting the places that hold meaningful memories with his now dead son. He strolls from his house to the seashore to look at the ocean, which holds special meaning for the father, it's on that beach that he used to play baseball with his son, an extension of their home. Its a place where a memory was shaped and given meaning in their personal story. But, it is also the place where Junpei, his son, died trying to save another child from drowning. Just as in the picturesque gardens in France and England in the eighteenth century, where the promenade was an act of re-enactment through the traversal of space, the act of walking in the movie, is an act of using one's body to find meaning. To move across a personal memory palace, to look for catharsis by projecting memory and imagination, transforming isotropic spaces into meaningful, personal places.

Closing paragraph, the kind that eventually writes itself at the end.

Notes

1. Lim, Dennis "A Death in the Family"-supplementary essay in the Blu-Ray release of Hirokazu Kore'eda, *Still Walking (Aruitemo Aruitemo)*- (Japan: Criterion Collection, 2008). p. 4
2. idem
3. Hirokazu Kore'eda, *Still Walking (Aruitemo Aruitemo)* (Japan: Criterion Collection, 2008)
4. Lim, Dennis "A Death in the Family"-supplementary essay in the Blu-Ray release of Hirokazu Kore'eda, *Still Walking (Aruitemo Aruitemo)*- (Japan: Criterion Collection, 2008). p. 4
5. idem.
6. Stefano Boeri, "A House for Sister Nabuko and Her Small Daughters Sachiko and Fumiko," *San Rocco* (Venezia, 2010)
7. Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, "A Dialogue Through Memories: Still Walking," *Film Criticism* Vol. 35, no. 2/3 (2011): 110-26
8. Ibid. p. 115

9. See: Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement: Architectural Meaning After the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016)
10. Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye* (New Jersey, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992)
11. Christiane Voss, Inga Pollmann, and Vinzenz Hediger, "Film Experience and the Formation of Illusion: The Spectator as 'Surrogate Body'" 50, no. 4 (2016): 136-50
12. Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*. p.134
13. Ibid. p.25
14. Ibid. p.136
15. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), p. 78-89
16. James Krasner, "Doubtful Arms and Phantom Limbs: Literary Portrayals of Embodied Grief," *Pmla* 119, no. 2 (2004): p. 218-32
- stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty. -Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (128)
17. Ibid. 219
18. Idem
19. Daniel Boscaljon, "Dwelling Beyond Poetry: The Uncanny Houses of Hawthorne and Poe," *Resisting the Place of Belonging: Uncanny Homecomings in Religion, Narrative and the Arts*, 2013, 47-59. p. 48
20. Bachelard, Gaston, M Jolas, and John R. Stilgoe. *The poetics of space*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1994. Print.
21. Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement: Architectural Meaning After the Crisis of Modern Science*. p. 86-89
22. Giuliana Bruno, *Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p 4

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