



Article

"That Day Does Not Belong to Our Generation": Komatsu Sakyō's Affective Futurities

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Abstract: Commentary that observes the frequency of the appearances of images of disaster pervades much of the discourse surrounding postwar Japanese popular culture, and especially Japanese science fiction. Against such approaches, I argue that it is more productive to read these narratives of disaster through the critical lens of the genre's engagement with the problem of futurity. My contention then is that these narratives of disaster do not merely function as imaginative repetitions or re-enactments of past events, but also take on an anticipatory quality, affectively preparing and the ground for and pre-empting responses to future events. I examine the work of Komatsu Sakyō (1931–2011) in particular, whose writing makes for an illustrative test case for articulating the premediative dimension of disaster narratives in postwar Japanese science fiction.

Keywords: Komatsu Sakyō; disaster; premediation; affect

1. Disaster and Futurity

Commentary that observes the frequency of the appearances of images of disaster pervades much of the discourse surrounding postwar Japanese popular culture, and especially Japanese science fiction (hereafter, SF). Susan Napier, for example, points to popular cinematic examples such as *Godzilla* and *Akira* to suggest that "Japanese science fiction, whether in prose, comic, or film form, has tended to revel in what Susan Sontag has called 'the imagination of disaster'," that they center around a vision of disaster, of social, material, and sometimes spiritual collapse" (Napier 1993, p. 329). In a similar vein, Motoko Tanaka identifies the apocalyptic as a key motif of postwar Japanese SF, tracking its developments through the decades in response to radical changes in conceptions of national identity since 1945 (Tanaka 2014, p. 3). Indeed, William Tsutsui has gone so far as to suggest that "There can be little doubt that, in the years since World War II, fictional apocalypse has been visited upon Tokyo more frequently (and often with much greater thoroughness) than any other location on the globe" (Tsutsui 2010, p. 104).

A common conceit that runs through these various observations is the tendency to link this perceived popularity of images of disaster in popular culture with the frequent historical experience of mass destruction experienced by Japan, be it in the form of wars or natural disasters. To be more precise, while some reference is made to various historical events—ranging from the Kobe earthquake of 1995, the 3.11 tsunami and nuclear contamination crisis, to the terrorist attacks perpetrated by the Aum Shinrikyo, among others—typically, the common historical frame of reference for interpretation is, perhaps not surprisingly, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In this respect, while the details of their respective discussions may differ, an argument can be made that these analyses broadly align with a discursive framework for reading postwar culture in Japan that Marilyn Ivy once diagnosed as mythologizing the atomic bombings and the subsequent defeat of Japan at the end of the Second World War as a kind of traumatic break that has since set the trajectory of postwar cultural practice, with these repeated narratives of disaster staging an imaginative compulsion to repeat the moment of disaster as a form of acting out (Ivy 2008, pp. 145–47).



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There are obvious criticisms that can be leveled against this approach, not the least of which is how the mythologizing of the atomic bombings and Japan's war defeat facilitates historical periodizations that draw a stark dividing line between Japan's prewar and postwar periods in alignment with Cold War prerogatives to rehabilitate Japan's image. This has the consequence of potentially downplaying Japan's history of colonial expansion and thus preparing the ground for the disavowal of historical war responsibility. Insofar as much of the commentary on these disaster narratives often classify them under the broad umbrella of the SF genre, such a gesture becomes especially noteworthy given how the formation of the genre of SF is intimately intertwined with the history of empire, that, as John Rieder has put it, "early science fiction lives and breathes in the atmosphere of colonial history and its discourses" (Rieder 2008, p. 3). In this respect, the discourse on disaster narratives aligns with a tendency in the existing writing on the history of Japanese SF to follow a set pattern of acknowledging the existence of a few prewar precedents, while nonetheless locating the beginnings of the genre proper in the period of the postwar US occupation. This then, in turn, also obscures the formative role of the imperial imaginary in the emergence of the SF genre in Japan.

More fundamentally though, regardless of the position of one takes on the question of continuity or break between the prewar and postwar periods in Japan, emphasizing the impact of the atomic bombings as the point of origin for the proliferation of such narratives of disaster ascribes to these images of destruction a political valence that is based primarily upon their status as historical allegories. By no means is this unusual in itself. Commentaries on SF frequently argue that the genre engages big political issues such as bioethics, technological change, and various forms of social oppression. Yet all too often, discussions of the politics of SF tend to remain at the level of allegory, such that their significance is recognized only insofar as they are really about something else. However, such an approach to the genre offers only a weak account of how SF works qua SF. To emphasize the allegorical function of science fiction as the site of its political expression is to privilege precisely what is not science-fictional about the texts classified under the genre.

For this reason, I want to suggest here that a more productive approach to these narratives of disaster is to consider them through the critical prism of the SF genre's engagement with the problem of futurity. By futurity here, I mean more than just "the future" as a simple, singular temporal marker. Rather, I refer to the conceptions of the future formed out of a constellation of uncertain multiple potentialities that, in the words of Steven Shaviro, "haunts the present, pointing beyond it [. . .] futurity is potentiality: something that is not actual, because it hasn't happened yet—but that may be actualized (be made actual) at some point—though it does not have to be" (Shaviro 2018, p. 2). My contention then is that these narratives of disaster do not merely function as imaginative repetitions or re-enactments of past events, but also take on an anticipatory quality, preparing and the ground for and pre-empting responses to future events. To be more precise, they take on the function of what Robert Grusin has called "premediation," a form of media proliferation that seeks to colonize the future itself by mediating in advance a range of possible futurities so as to pre-empt any possibility of shock, any possibility of a corporeal or affective experience that has not already been mediated in advance (Grusin 2010, p. 58).

2. Premediations of Disaster

The work of Komatsu Sakyō (1931–2011) makes for an illustrative test case for articulating the premediative dimension of disaster narratives in postwar Japanese SF. Komatsu is widely regarded as one of the pioneering figures of postwar SF in Japan, with Tatsumi Takayuki naming him (alongside Abe Kōbō, Hoshi Shin'ichi, and others) one of the key figures of the first generation of SF authors (Tatsumi 2000, p. 107). While he has quite prolific during his career, and his full body of work features a wide range of different styles of SF novels ranging from post-apocalyptic adventures such as *Nihon apache zoku* (The Japanese Apache, 1964) to epic space operas such as *Hateshinaki nagare no hate ni* (At the end of the endless stream, 1966) and *Sayonara Jupitaa* (Bye-bye Jupiter, 1982), it is with

narratives of disaster that his writing is most strongly associated. In part, this can be traced to wild success of his now classic novel about a series of earthquakes and large tectonic shifts causing the territory of Japan to sink into the ocean and the Japanese population to evacuate and become a new global diaspora, the aptly titled *Nihon chinbotsu* (Japan sinks, 1973), which became a bestseller with over 4 million copies sold and has since subsequently seen multiple adaptations not just into film but also television dramas, manga, animation, and others.

Not surprisingly, given the aforementioned patterns of discourse surrounding postwar Japanese disaster narratives, much of the commentary about *Japan Sinks* adopts an allegorical approach to its interpretation. For example, Thomas Schnellbacher suggests that the novel is one of a lineage several Japanese SF texts that employ the topos of the ocean as a site for interrogating both prewar imperial and postwar national identities, articulating a desire to sink the Japanese empire to preserve a cultural identity for the Japanese people (Schnellbacher 2008, p. 42). Along similar lines, Jessica Langer argues that the sinking of Japan depicted in Komatsu's novel (and the multiple adaptations of it that followed its publication) uses the narrative of a physical loss of national territory to restage the loss of empire at the end of the Second World War, writing that "Komatsu encapsulates the imperial dilemma of Japan, ironically transforming it into the diasporic dilemma. No longer an imperial power, the Japanese are a homeless, diasporic people, not powerful but ultimately powerless" (Langer 2009, p. 48). In contrast, Toba Koji reads the novel's significance in slightly different terms, emphasizing instead its appearance at the end of the postwar economic miracle in the wake of the 1973 oil shocks, suggesting that its continued popularity reflects the return of nationalist discourse in the era of the lost decades (Toba 2010, pp. 24–25). Indeed, even Komatsu himself subscribes to such interpretations of his work, as evidenced by his preface to the novel wherein he writes that his intention is to question the historical trajectory of postwar Japanese identity (Komatsu 1995, p. 5).

In more recent years though, especially in the aftermath of the triple disaster of the 3.11 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown in Tohoku, Komatsu's work has seen notable reappraisals, calling attention less to the historical resonances of his work and more to their perceived prescience. One clear sign of this turn is the appearance of the book *3.11 no mirai* (The future of 3.11, 2011), which collects the commentaries of various SF authors and critics about the 3.11 triple disaster. Notably, the editors Kasai Kiyoshi and Tatsumi Takayuki invited none other than Komatsu to write the brief preface to the volume—which turned out to be his final published piece of writing prior to his passing in 2011—hinting at a perception that his voice continues to be relevant in the contemporary moment. Indeed, this notion is further punctuated when, in one of the included discussions in the volume, between Tani Kōshū, Morishita Katsuhito, Ishiwa Yoshiyuki, and Kotani Mari, the participants observe how Komatsu's novel turned out to be quite prescient in its depiction of the political and social response to a natural disaster in Japan (Kasai and Tatsumi 2011, pp. 147–93). Such a shift in the novel's appraisal is perhaps only apt, given that, as William Gardner has observed, one of the central concerns of Komatsu's novel is the exploration of the dynamics of forecasting risk, with one of its key characters able to foresee the impending catastrophe before anyone else (Gardner 2020, pp. 78–79).

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic several years later only further cemented the sentiment regarding a certain prophetic quality to Komatsu's writings on disaster, albeit this time, with attention shifting away from *Japan Sinks* to his earlier pandemic novel, *Fukkatsu no hi* (Virus: Day of Resurrection, 1964), which depicts a mass extinction event caused by the spread around the world of a deadly respiratory virus. Set in the midst of the Cold War, Komatsu's *Virus* tells the story of the global outbreak that ensues when a spaceborne microbe dubbed MM88—which infects other microbes to make them more virulent—is accidentally released into the wild after an American biowarfare research plane carrying a sample of the pathogen crashes into the Italian Alps. Even as it cryptically spreads and infects local communities, it is only with the sudden death from a heart attack of an Italian celebrity that the outbreak received media attention. Soon enough, outbreaks

of extremely deadly versions of polio and influenza are reported worldwide, and this new disease is eventually given the name of “Tibetan Flu.” Before the end of the year, a mass depopulation of the planet ensues, until only some 10,000 survivors remain, all of whom flee to Antarctica, where the inhospitable polar climate protects them from the contagion. But even as this new Antarctic community of survivors begins researching vaccines to protect against this new “Tibetan Flu,” they learn of a new problem facing them. An impending earthquake in North America threatens to trigger the automated launch system of the nuclear arsenal of the United States, which, in turn, will also set off a response from a similar system in the Soviet Union. Teams are sent to disable the respective systems, but they are unable to accomplish their missions. However, it turns out that the neutron radiation unleashed by the Soviet weapons had the effect of disabling the MM88 pathogen, allowing the Antarctic survivors to begin to repopulate the world.

In its depiction of a rapidly spreading respiratory contagion, there is certainly much that appears prophetic in retrospect in Komatsu’s *Virus*. While the scale of the crisis differs, many of the specific scenes describing the flailing governmental response, the scientific challenges involved in trying to contain the spread, or the day-to-day experience of the outbreak read as premonitions of the realities experienced by many during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in one sequence describing the city of Tokyo in the midst of the pathogen’s spread, Komatsu’s description could easily be mistaken for scenes of various lockdowns around the world, writing “In these mostly empty rush-hour cars, people remained as silent as the dead, as if they were afraid of looking at one another’s faces. Tibetan flu was already spreading its wings over these people as an unmistakably sinister omen” (Komatsu 2012, p. 157). A later scene speaks to the challenges surrounding vaccine development, not unlike what was seen in the real world, with the words “Even though the people who have been vaccinated present somewhat lighter symptoms, we’re still seeing deaths in that group. The vaccine is weak and doesn’t work at all unless you take three times the usual dose in three separate injections” (Komatsu 2012, p. 164). It is therefore not surprising when both political scientist Nagasaka Toshihisa and historian of science Tsukahara Togo open their respective discussions Komatsu by noting the odd coincidence that the date of publication of *Virus* aligns with the first Tokyo Olympics of 1964, while the COVID-19 pandemic kicks off when Tokyo is slated to host the Olympics again (Nagasaka 2020, p. 76; Tsukahara 2021, p. 265), suggesting an uncannily prophetic quality to Komatsu’s writing.

But perhaps the most instructive of these commentaries about the prescience of Komatsu’s *Virus* comes before the COVID-19 pandemic even happens, with a brief note authored by Miyabe Miyuki as a part of a tribute on the occasion of Komatsu’s passing. In this note, Miyabe recounts a time when she had come down with a serious flu, describing a scene of her whole household falling ill, their debilitated bodies sprawled on the floor or wobbling about as they try to move. For Miyabe, this experience immediately brought to mind a similar scene from *Virus*, writing “Even now, that bit still flits through the back of my mind from time to time—with nightmarish detail and with such clarity I can almost smell it—like reliving a trauma” (Komatsu 2012, p. 8). This became a common reference point among members of her household, providing a language to make meaning of their shared experience of illness.

I bring up Miyabe’s comments here because they speak to what I see as the key point of significance to the purported prescience of Komatsu’s writing. It is telling that what Miyabe recalls from *Virus* are not its larger plot structure or historical resonances, but how it captures the sensations, that is, the corporeal and affective experience of illness. In other words, it is not the content of the described events that matter here, but how they provide a language for narrativization or meaning making of future experiences in advance. In this regard, Miyabe seemingly aligns Komatsu’s *Virus* with Richard Grusin’s conception of premediation. In his book *Premediation: Affect and Mediality after 9/11*, Grusin observes that the aftermath of the shock of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States came with a shift in media practices organized around centralized control to one based on

encouraging their proliferation. The function of this proliferation of narratives is to create a media environment that can anticipate all potentialities, such that all possible futures have been mediated in advance, primarily in an effort to forestall any possible disruption to the present, any repeat of the sensation of shock and narrative breakdown experienced during the 9/11 attacks. In other words, the point is not merely to produce a singular, accurate prediction of the future, but to modulate in advance the affective intensities that might be engendered by all these potential futurities. In Grusin's words, "Premediation entails the generation of possible future scenarios or possibilities which may come true or which may not, but which work in any event to guide action (or shape public sentiment) in the present [. . .] While individual scenarios can often take the rhetorical form of game-planning or predicting the outcome of future geopolitical events, such medial formations also contribute to the production of a collective affective orientation both towards particular futures and towards the future or futurity in general" (Grusin 2010, pp. 47–48).

While Grusin's discussion homes in on the American media environment after the 9/11 attacks as one site in particular wherein this practice of premediation as a form of narrative pre-emption becomes especially salient, it is by no means exclusive to this moment. Indeed, in certain respects, an argument can be made that the event of 9/11 only crystallizes a longer tendency in media practice that is perhaps associated most strongly with the genre of disaster. This is certainly what Despina Kakoudaki suggests when she makes the point that much of the discourse in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York revealed a sense of recognition, a sense of familiarity with the visual conventions of its media representation, which arguably drew upon the preceding decade of disaster films. As Kakoudaki puts it, "The real scenes of the disaster zone, around the Twin Towers especially, and the photographic and filmic reporting of these scenes shared an uncanny similarity with the preexisting fictional depictions of disaster movies" (Kakoudaki 2002, p. 110). It is therefore only to be expected that the subsequent response was a call to national unity and military mobilization given the structural demands of the disaster genre as a narrative framework. After all, as Kakoudaki points out, disaster scenarios are not only about the disaster, but also the subsequent restoration of the status quo through the production of a unified national subjectivity (Kakoudaki 2002, p. 113).

3. Invisible Disasters

While Kakoudaki's account focuses primarily on American cinema of the 1990s leading up to the real-world disaster spectacle of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a similar visual logic can also be recognized in Japanese disaster media. Referencing the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Akira Lippit, for example, once noted that "Since 1945, the destruction of visual order by the atomic light and force has haunted Japanese visual culture" (Lippit 2005, p. 4). Indeed, an even earlier disaster, namely the 1923 Kanto earthquake that leveled much of Tokyo, arguably set the terms for the visual mediation of disastrous events in Japan. As Gennifer Weisenfeld aptly documents, a proliferation of visualizations followed the event of the 1923 earthquake, and "This visual lexicon played a critical mediating role in the production of the historical narrative of the quake and the solidification of its legacy [. . .] Collectively, their work transformed a tragic event into a historic landmark, contributing to the production of a world culture of public disasters" (Weisenfeld 2012, pp. 4–5). Fictional disaster narratives, including much of Komatsu's own writing, can therefore be understood as one part of this broader media ecology whose function is the premediation of affect via the visual spectacle. However, when read in this context, Komatsu's *Virus* immediately presents some complications. Whereas both Grusin and Kakoudaki focus their attention on visual media, Komatsu's novel is not only a literary text, but as I discuss further below, arguably goes out of its way to present a narrative of disaster that is decidedly non-visual in its orientation.

Certainly, there exists a 1983 film adaptation directed by none other than Fukasaku Kinji. Produced as a part of the then nascent Kadokawa media mix strategy and filmed internationally as the most expensive and elaborate production in Japanese cinema at the

time, the film was certainly an ambitious project. However, unlike the case of *Japan Sinks* with its multiple iterations and reinterpretations through the years, there is only this single one for *Virus*, in part because it is widely regarded as a critical and commercial flop. While one can ascribe this failure to all manner of reasons, for my part, I believe that at least one key issue is that *Virus* fundamentally does not lend itself very well to the visual conventions of disaster films, especially when compared to *Japan Sinks*. As Kakoudaki points out, central to the visual logic of the disaster film is its staging of a technological sublime, which it produces via a combination of long-distance shots and hyper-realistic special effects, allowing for the spectator to witness scenes of mass destruction (usually of real-world landmarks) at an affectively safe and controlled distance while still recreating a sense of real-time immediacy. In her words, “The represented disaster (for example, the volcano, tidal wave, or collapsing building) is rendered safe through the known, publicized, and celebrated use of digital effects.” (Kakoudaki 2002, p. 144). In the case of *Virus*, however, it is notable that the disaster does not primarily register visually as a real-time event. After all, what characterizes a viral pathogen if not precisely its invisibility, its microscopic size?

Indeed, *Virus* is notable for the near total absence of such scenes. Instead, much of the novel is devoted to long expository passages explaining the situation of its world or scenes of talking heads discussing the workings of the various bureaucracies addressing the Tibetan Flu outbreak all over the world. When the few moments showing the impact of the pandemic do appear, they take place after the fact, as more of a static tableau. Consider, for example, a scene in the opening prologue of the novel when the Antarctic survivors send a submarine to Tokyo Bay to survey what remains of the world some years after the Tibetan Flu outbreak.

Only the sun shone cheerfully, warmly, mockingly, above the ruined street, pouring down radiance like warm bathwater. The yards and vacant lots were wild and overgrown, filled with spring flowers in bloom. At one corner of a four-way intersection, Yoshizumi noticed a small tricycle, dark red with rust, left untouched where it had stopped. His chest constricted involuntarily—beside the tricycle was something that looked like a white scrap of cloth, lying flat against the earth. Straining his eyes, he finally realized that he was looking at bleached bones wearing tattered clothes. (Komatsu 2012, p. 19)

Although at first glance, this may appear to follow the usual conventions for depicting spectacles of disaster. However, some of the details speak to how Komatsu’s novel diverges from such generic expectations. Notably, the scene is static, with the devastation having taken place years prior, which is only being witnessed by the survivors after the fact. All that is left is the aftermath of the slow-moving process of decay, a process whose temporality does not align with the kind of punctuated moments of spectacular destruction associated with the visual logic of disaster films.

In the absence of such moments of sheer visual spectacle, what Komatsu’s *Virus* offers instead are long, detailed descriptions of bodily sensations, of the corporeal experience of illness of death, especially in those scenes set in the hospitals and homes of Tokyo as the Tibetan Flu rips through the population. One such sequence is worth highlighting here:

In the bedroom of a three-room luxury apartment, a woman was at the point of her last breath. She burned with fever, her lips were dark and cracked, and from time to time, violent convulsions ran through her entire body.

Beside a bed that smelled strongly of sweat and fever was a transistor TV-radio that had been left on.

The woman’s hollowed eyes were closed and her breathing was uneven. Occasionally, her eyes would snap open suddenly as though she had remembered something, and she would stretch out her dry hands as though in a mad desperation to change the television channel or turn the dial on the radio. But the television’s cathode ray tube showered her nothing but ghostly static. The radio as well only offered the susurrus of white noise. (Komatsu 2012, p. 219)

Two key details from this scene are significant. First, much of the description emphasizes non-visual elements. One might even go so far as to say that it specifically foregrounds their exclusion through such details as the calling out of the closed eyes of the woman or the lack of legible images on the television beyond static. Instead, what is emphasized is the experience of the body in itself: the heat of a fever, the convulsions and unevenness of breath, the scent of sweat. Put differently, instead of a singular spectacle of disaster, what *Virus* presents is a more diffuse version of disaster, with every single body itself a site of destruction. Such a shift substantially transforms the relation between reader/viewer and the scenario before them. Insofar as the classic disaster scenario in cinema positions the viewer as a potential future witness (and hero) of a disaster, they engender a doubled response: first, a sense of dislocation and horror at the mass scale of destruction, juxtaposed with the reverse shot of the individual heroes, thus inviting an identification with such a position. However, by placing its emphasis on the slow but progressive corporeal experience of disease, Komatsu *Virus* shifts its identification to that of the victims, to the dead and dying.

What is therefore striking about *Virus* is how, in contrast to the view from nowhere associated with the visual aesthetic of the disaster films, it instead seemingly revels in the reproduction in advance of an excessive and corporeal affective response uncontained by the distancing effect of the spectacle and narrative conventions of the genre of disaster. Such scenes in the novel are significant for activating in the reader what David Herman has called a text's storyworld, that is, the surrounding affective environment in which a given text's events take place in so as to enable the reader to inhabit and embody the same affects and sensations. As Herman puts it, "Interpreters do not merely reconstruct a sequence of events and a set of existents, but imaginatively (emotionally, viscerally) inhabit a world in which things matter, agitate, exalt, repulse, provide grounds for laughter and grief, and so on—both for narrative participants and for interpreters of the story" (Herman 2005, p. 570).

4. Genre and Slow Violence

The stakes of this emphasis on the bodily experience and affective intensities of disease staged in Komatsu's *Virus* can be better articulated by considering it in conjunction with another dimension of the novel that marks its divergence from the usual logics of the disaster genre: the slowness of its narrative progression. Initially, the novel's opening pages appear fairly conventional, with its purported protagonist Yoshizumi (a young Japanese Antarctic researcher) aboard the American nuclear-powered submarine Nereid as they travel to Tokyo Bay to investigate what remains of the planet some years in the wake of the Tibetan Flu ripping through the global population. But this soon gives way to a structural shift in the narrative, with Yoshizumi largely disappearing from view and becoming just one of a vast cast of characters. For much of the novel, rather than focalizing the narrative around one character's perspective, it moves from one location to the next, with the omniscient narrator jumping from scenes set in poultry farms in various parts of the world, to the offices of the World Health Organization, to the bioweapons research labs at Fort Detrick in Maryland, the centers of power in Washington DC, hospital wards flooded with patients in Tokyo, and more. It is not until the mission to disarm the American nuclear arsenal near the novel's closing that Yoshizumi once again takes center stage. As William Gardner notes, unlike the more conventionally structured narrative of *Japan Sinks*, Komatsu's *Virus* is "an atypical science fiction narrative in that it lacks the exceptional, heroic figure of the scientist or intellectual who is able to make the crucial connections or recognize the underlying pattern necessary to prevent or even warn of the disaster" (Gardner 2020, p. 77).

The structuring logic of these traversals of locations and characters can be found in a pivotal scene near the beginning of *Virus*. In the aftermath of an Italian celebrity catching the MM88 pathogen and dying of a sudden heart attack that leads to a car crash, the following passage appears summarizing the vectors of the spread of the Tibetan Flu all over the world:

The railway that passes by Italy's northern entry point of Torino ran west by way of Milan, passing through Venice, Trieste, Beograd, and Sofia on the way to Istanbul, gateway to Asia, then turning southwest, past Genoa and the eastern coast of Italy on the way to Rome and Napoli. To the east, it ran through Lyon and Dijon to Paris, heading into the very heart of Europe. From Milan, there was also a line that ran through the famous Simplon Tunnel to arrive at Lausanne and Geneva in Switzerland. All of middle and eastern Europe was bound together in a net of railways. In the great cities of Europe—Rome, Paris, Geneva—there were international airports where streams of people flew down from the sky and back up into it, flowing like great rivers . . . (Komatsu 2012, pp. 48–49)

Brian White has perceptively observed that this scene maps the novel's subsequent narrative progression via the dynamics of viral spread, travelling across the world through the same transportation nodes mentioned in the passage. Indeed, while the first chapters remain fairly self-contained, from this point in the novel, it substantially enlarges in scale, spreading out to the aforementioned multiple locations and settings. As White puts it: "Komatsu visualizes railways and air traffic routes as circulatory vectors for disease transmission. At the close of the first chapter, the biological superweapon has been released into the world—fittingly, because the spy plane carrying it has crashed in the Italian Alps—when the focus of the narration drifts away from the site of the wreckage, as though the text itself is the virus, being carried up and dispersed by the jet stream" (White 2021, p. 44). The effect of this is to give the novel an almost journalistic, almost documentary-like quality, with no real main character or plotline to follow, but instead shifts from one character to another, following the impact of the MM-88 virus in different parts of the world. Viewed in this light, one might go so far as to argue that if anything plays the role of focalizer of perspective in *Virus*, it is the MM88 pathogen itself as it travels from one location to another.

For White, the primary function of this feature of the novel's narrative organization is to serve Komatsu's interest in the place of Japan (and Japanese SF) within the world formed under the Cold War system existing at the time of its writing. By regularly shifting from one perspective to another, it juxtaposes the open and egalitarian character of the Antarctic researchers against the paranoid and closed-off nature of the military leadership of the Cold War nuclear powers, in effect positing scientific intellectualism as the utopian model of a human community. Through the image of the virus crossing national boundaries from one corner of the world to another, the novel suggests that a similar post-national cooperation is also needed for humans to properly win against the threat of the pandemic. As White puts it, "for Komatsu, it is not the fact of global connection itself that holds the emancipatory potential, but the ability and willingness of human beings to recognize that potential and pursue it" (White 2021, p. 45).

White's reading of Komatsu's *Virus* is certainly compelling, especially in its recognition of a certain sentiment of post-national political alignment pervading the politics of the novel. That said, I believe this "non-alignment" of the novel takes another dimension when read against the context of the generic conventions of disaster narratives. Insofar as the standard template of narratives of disaster operates on the basis of modulating the affective response to crisis, training the viewer to desire the sight of destruction by rewarding them with the sense of relief at the subsequent restoration of the status quo, what is interesting about the structure of Komatsu's novel is its seemingly endless deferral of this reward. By refusing to immediately align, to focalize the narrative around a specific human protagonist, it functionally refuses to mediate the reader's affective response to the scenes of disaster; it refuses to encode these sensations and affective intensities into legible, individuated emotions, leaving the reader dislocated and unmoored.

One key way this manifests in *Virus* is in the tempo of the narrative progression. Combined with the dry and expository language of the text, the sprawling and at times seemingly ever-expanding scope of the narrative of the unfolding of the Tibetan Flu outbreak has the effect of grinding much of the narrative momentum to a halt, creating a marked slowness to the experience of reading. Now, it would be easy to find fault

in this quality, to view this as a stylistic deficiency in Komatsu's prose or emplotment. However, this slowness also brings attention to the limits of the conventions of disaster narratives. Relevant here is Rob Nixon's discussion of the challenges surrounding the representation of the temporal scales and tempos of the forms of structural violence that exceed what the conventions of human narratives can capture or apprehend, or what he terms "slow violence." Nixon defines slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all [. . .] a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (Nixon 2011, p. 2). It presents a problem, in large part, because the contemporary media environment privileges forms of representation that emphasize the immediately spectacular, raising the question of "how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world?" (Nixon 2011, p. 3).

While it does not, strictly speaking, depict the kinds of ecological violence that Nixon addresses in his work, it seems to me that this work is precisely what Komatsu's *Virus* undertakes, albeit with an attention to disease outbreaks and pathogens with pandemic potentials. Much of the novel's shifting perspectives and multiplicity of locations appear as attempts to map the larger social and political structures that facilitate this invisible violence of the Tibetan Flu. Indeed, I do not think it is mere coincidence that the final chapter of the first part of the novel opens with long expository passages that call attention to larger scales of perception beyond the human.

The temperature fell again, and again it rose. The earth revolved around the sun another paltry twenty or thirty thousand times. Savage, giant animals died off yet again, and the little ones walking around on two legs survived and began to form groups. Another ten thousand revolutions, and these life-forms had attained a degree of power on the surface of the earth's thin crust. Even so, in terms of both numbers and power, they were nothing when compared to the other group-oriented animals. However, during the next few thousand revolutions, the bipeds quickly multiplied and began to organize themselves in ways somewhat similar to those of insects such as ants and bees, though not nearly as thoroughly or logically. (Komatsu 2012, p. 208)

For this reason, even as Mario Sluga, observing the increasing use of such terms as "pandemic movies" in film discourse following the onset of the COVID-19 outbreak, lists the Fukasaku film adaptation of *Virus* as one of the examples for what he sees as a "coalescing of the pandemic genre" (Sluga 2022, pp. 891–92) as a subcategory of disaster films, I believe that going back to the source novel reveals that its most interesting quality is its probing of the limits of the genre, articulating what exceeds the genre's ability to apprehend. In this regard, one might even go so far as to call it an anti-disaster text that foregrounds the ideological work of disaster narratives, in particular its effacement from view of the kinds of slow violence that Nixon speaks of in favor of visual spectacles whose affective potentials can be more readily contained.

That may be an overstatement, however. While the invisible, slow-moving disaster of the Tibetan Flu pandemic dominates the first part of the Komatsu's *Virus*, the novel returns to a more conventional heroic narrative in its shorter second part. Once again, the protagonist from the prologue Yoshizumi takes center stage; once again the narrative emphasizes his individual heroism as he joins the mission to infiltrate the now abandoned White House in Washington DC for the purpose of disarming the automated launch system of its nuclear arsenal, which may be triggered by an impending earthquake. Although he fails in his mission and the missiles are eventually unleashed, in the end, it is revealed that the result of the nuclear exchange is to mutate the MM88 pathogen into a less harmful strain. If Yoshizumi begins the novel as just one relatively passive character among many, he is

nonetheless elevated to a hero by the end of the text. It would therefore appear that, though long deferred, in the end *Virus* returns to the structure of crisis followed by restoration demanded by the disaster genre.

Yet, even then, there is something oddly hollow about this ending. The slowness of the crisis, that is, the long deferral of this titular “day of resurrection”, engenders less a sense of triumph and more sense of relief. Indeed, the closing lines of the novel only accentuate this sentiment, seemingly suggesting that close of the novel is not really the end, but simply a further deferral of the expected restoration of the world following the disaster. The final lines read: “Tomorrow morning, we head north. We have to breathe life back into the country of the dead. The road north runs far into the distance, and our Resurrection Day is even farther. And the tale of that day does not belong to our generation” (Komatsu 2012, p. 312).

In their *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant writes of the conditions of the neoliberal present as characterized by an undeniable sense of impasse. Many of the so-called “good life fantasies,” the narrative conventions that set the terms for how one makes meaning of one’s life, have increasingly become untenable. For Berlant, this sentiment is a manifestation of what they term a “waning of genre,” not just in a literary or aesthetic sense but as the forms that “provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art” (Berlant 2011, p. 6). Yet, despite the fact that the familiar and comforting genres that provide structure to the stories we tell of ourselves are becoming increasingly unworkable, there remains an affective attachment to them, a relation of cruel optimism.

Might the ending of Komatsu’s *Virus*—its return to the familiar narrative trajectory of the disaster scenario—be understood as this kind of cruel optimism? Even as the novel pushes the boundaries of its genre to its limits, unmooring and dislocating its reader through its engagement with the unfolding of slow violence that exceeds these genre conventions, it nonetheless returns to the scene of a fantasy of restoration. Viewed through this lens, perhaps it is this sensibility marked by the simultaneous failure of a familiar genre while at one continuing to be affectively attached to its narrative expectations and trajectories that marks the contemporary conjuncture that *Virus* anticipates. If the novel, now more than half a century old, remains resonant in the present, perhaps it is because it premediates our present not by providing it with a familiar set of narrative devices with which one might make sense of the world (as so many disaster narratives do), but by precisely capturing the nascent recognition of the increasing untenability of such attachments to old narratives and old structures of feeling.

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