

***IMA DESHŌ: THE VACUUM OF IMMEDIACY IN  
CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE LITERATURE AND  
POPULAR CULTURE***



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This thesis is dedicated to my parents  
Fabio and Simona  
for their everlasting love and support

*People do not give up their loves and hates as long as life lasts. Waves of feeling come and go with the passage of time. Throughout Musashi's lifetime, there were those who resented his victory and criticized his conduct on that day. He rushed away, it was said, because he feared reprisal. He was confused. He even neglected to administer the coup de grace.*

*The world is always full of the sound of waves.*

*The little fishes, abandoning themselves to the waves, dance and sing and play, but who knows the heart of the sea, a hundred feet down? Who knows its depth?*

YOSHIKAWA EIJI, *Musashi*

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## Abstract

The value of literature in the contemporary age is a controversial issue. The challenge posed by the interpretation of this era is expressed by the provocative remarks of critics such as Karatani Kōjin and Suzuki Sadami maintaining that after the 80s modern “pure” literature died (*History and Repetition*, 2012; *The Concept of “Literature” in Japan*, 2006). Reading Karatani and Suzuki’s comments as merely provocative, signifying that a form of literature has died, this study enquires into how literature (and the arts) have changed and found new ways of expression after the historical break of 1989.

The dissertation offers immediacy as a possible answer. Immediacy is a theme, a literary device stressing the present moment submerging clear notions of past and present. The precondition for immediacy is an ideological vacuum, experienced by characters across age groups and genders, where they do not share social ideologies or collective purposes. In this isolation, they concentrate only on their local realities, on what they perceive directly (physically and emotionally), acting quickly and repeatedly in the absence of critical thought. The constant action is often carried out in response to corporeal stimuli, specifically violence and sex, that grant immediate gratification in the vacuum. However, at the core characters indulging in immediacy long for inter-personal connections. Building a community based on critical thought and mutual understanding is the solution to escape from immediacy.

The dissertation explores manifestations of immediacy in contemporary Japanese literature and popular culture (manga and anime) published or broadcast between 1995 and 2011. Through the analyses of cultural theories, literature by Takahashi Genichirō, Taguchi Randy and Hirano Keiichirō, and influential works in manga and anime, it shows the theme’s relevance and discusses how it contributes to the broader fields of contemporary Japanese

literature and popular culture. By doing so, the dissertation also provides a study of the current artistic panorama in Japan, one that is often neglected critically, but that speaks of its culture with great force and imagination.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 Problematics of immediacy

Fundamental traits of immediacy are prominent in the popular manga *Death Note* (2003-2006), an exponent of the creativity of the *zero nendai* (generation zero, referring to the decade between 2000 and 2009). It is the story of the brilliant and affluent high-schooler Yagami Light, who comes across a magical notebook enabling him to kill other humans simply by writing their names on it. Enthused over this new power, Light sets out on a killing spree to purge the world of all evil, which he feels the too lenient society and justice are not punishing efficiently. The need for constant violence stands out, motivated by a loss of faith in contemporary Japan. In a society that alienates him because it does not provide any solid ideologies or collective identities, nor does it clearly envision common future developments by which he may orient his life, Light needs to kill repeatedly and instantly to make his personal values prevail. Since no social or judicial models satisfy him, he needs to take action cyclically to guarantee immediate survival for a moment in the void of existence. This need for repeated action in the present moment, against the background of an ideological vacuum, is at the core of immediacy.

Through investigations into instances of repeated action in the absence of shared ideologies, it has become clear that *Death Note* is merely a starting point to illustrate a broader trend of immediacy in contemporary manga, anime and literature. Immediacy is defined here as a textual or visual manifestation, a literary device emphasizing the present moment in the absence of clear categories of past and future.

The analysis of immediacy in the narratives covered here is articulated through four main points. First, the precondition for immediacy is an ideological vacuum, felt by characters across age groups and genders. Without any shared social or political ideology, or sense of collective purpose by which they can orient their existence, the characters can only concentrate on what they perceive immediately (physically and emotionally) in their thus localized, proximate realities. In order to survive and feel alive in the vacuum, they act quickly and repeatedly, since they need to constantly fill the void of their existences deprived of overarching metanarratives. The characters carry out this second stage of repeated action in the absence of critical thought, that is without enquiring into the structure of the world and society, nor considering other concerns outside their own. Thirdly, the action predicated on immediacy is often performed in response to corporeal stimuli. The characters indulge in violence and sexual activity, often involving extreme violent practices, to find immediate solace in the vacuum. They obtain a fleeting sense of being alive through experiences that provide real tangible gratification. However, the constant action and the satisfaction of individual stimuli also result in a sense of emptiness and isolation in the characters, who are confined to the repetitiveness of the immediacy in their lives. The fourth point theorizes community as a possible resolution, showing that the characters in the end long for inter-personal connections that may enable them to shape a solid structure outside the vacuum and outside the endless tyranny of the present moment. Although a sense of community is not always achieved (or envisioned) in the narratives, it still remains a tantalizing possibility showing that a failure to forge new ties based on mutual understanding results in the characters' impossibility to escape immediacy.

Scholars in a variety of disciplines have reflected on this issue of immediacy, especially regarding the emphasis on the present. In *Regimes of Historicity* (*Régimes*

*d'historicité*, first published in 2003), French historian François Hartog argues that the current age is characterized by a sense of short-terminism, or “presentism” (coined in contrast to futurism), where time is experienced as a never-ending present, and where only the immediate counts. He argues, for example, that politics and the economy exist in their own time and cannot adapt to the notion of split-second time dictated by the markets, which in turn they influence. As such, they become entangled in a cycle of repetition where every moment resembles the other:

Political leaders are required to “rescue” the euro, for instance—or the whole financial system, for that matter—every month or so, or at least to declare they are doing so. And this raises an even more fundamental problem: our old representative democracies are beginning to realize that they don’t really know how to adapt their methods and rhythms of decision making to this tyranny of the immediate without sacrificing precisely what made them democratic in the first place. (xiv)

Presentism, Hartog writes, is the consequence of a process of perceptions of rifts in time and questioning of its orders that began earlier in the century. In the face of a world that had changed forever after the war, the philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote of a gap between past and future, an “odd in-between period [...] in historical time, during which one becomes aware of an interval in time which is entirely determined by things that are no longer and by things that are not yet” (Arendt 3, 9). The 1968 protests against capitalism expressed a loss of faith in time as progress, as a process overturning the present. The economic turmoil of the 1970s, such as the oil crisis, seemed to confirm this perception of zero growth. In a country like France, this resonated with the end of the three decades of postwar reconstruction and economic boom. Another example of a temporal break is the diffusion of memory in the 1980s. The issue of cataloguing and protecting historical memory (especially of World War II) became widespread, with memorials and museums being erected, and particular memories

attached to places.<sup>1</sup> By stimulating viewers to become witnesses themselves, and thus effectively evoking the past in the present, the documentary film *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann (1985) aimed to dispel the distance between past and present. From the 1980s and into the early 90s memory generally became a concept that shocked societies with the weight of the reminiscences of the war crimes of the twentieth century (Hartog 3–8). Memory became a comprehensive term: “A metahistorical and even at times a theological category. It seemed that everything had the makings of memory, and in the duel between memory and history, the former quickly won the day” (ibid. 7).

Following this period, presentism has emerged in the wake of groundbreaking events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the collapse of the communist ideal, and the rise of fundamentalist movements that have shattered suddenly and irreversibly people’s relations of time.<sup>2</sup> Hartog writes that it has now become arduous to articulate past, present and future with the simultaneous rise of fundamentalist groups that, mixing modern and archaic features, try to remedy contemporary evils by referring to traditions that are invented, and are therefore incapable of being effective for the future (ibid. 3).<sup>3</sup> This stagnation of a sense of history had already been highlighted in 1995 by historian François Furet, who wrote that after the fall of communist ideals, humanity and history had become isolated from the future:

[History has once again become] a tunnel that we enter in darkness, not knowing where our actions will lead, uncertain of our destiny, stripped of the illusory security of a science of what we do. At the end of the twentieth century, deprived of God, we have seen the foundations of deified history crumbling—a disaster that must somehow be averted. To add to this threat of uncertainty, there is the shock of a closed future. (Furet, *The Passing* 502)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 1984 the historian Pierre Nora introduced the concept of a “site of memory” (*lieu de mémoire*), emerging from his evaluation of France’s present.

<sup>2</sup> See: Pomian; Gauchet.

<sup>3</sup> “Invented” is to be intended in the sense outlined in: Hobsbawm and Ranger.

<sup>4</sup> However, for Furet the condition of a closed future also has positive connotations, because it frees men from the need to envision a subsequent age through ethological approaches. The human desire for a democratic society will make it possible to find another society beyond the capital, with new means: “For its own existence, democracy builds the need for a world beyond bourgeoisie and Capital, where a true human community may

According to Hartog, the result is that the present now functions like the *tota simul* mentioned by St. Augustine, and by Plotinus before him, to define eternity: “Nothing passes away but the whole is simultaneously present” (Hartog 203). The present is a constant dimension conflating past and future into itself, making them indiscernible from one another. Burdened with both, the present has become entropic, fated to be gone and forgotten after an instant for the sake of the immediate (*ibidem*). This “omni-present present” has different consequences depending on social strata. In a world where only the immediate has value, the emphasis on the present moment may mean emancipation for an ever-evolving market, but it could also mean stagnation and closure to the future for occasional workers, for whom every moment is the same, without hope of career developments (xviii).

The American political theorist Fredric Jameson has also theorized the supremacy of the present time in the current postmodern age. He argues that in late capitalism space has become omnipresent to the detriment of orders of time: “Today” he writes, “all politics is about real estate. Postmodern politics is essentially a matter of land grabs, on a local as well as a global scale” (“American Utopia” 13). In a Marxist view, these land competitions have originated from the commodification of land, and the demise of feudalism and peasantries, replaced by industrial agriculture (“End” 699). At this point, overwhelmed by space, time has been reduced solely to the present moment, with actions having validity only in the instant they occur: “[Time] is to be found in the new flash crowds enabled by cell phones and texting: the new mass demonstrations of Seattle and of Eastern Europe, of Tharir Square and of

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blossom. [...] The end of the Soviet world does not change the democratic request for another society, and exactly for this reason chances are high that this vast collapse will continue to thrive in the opinion of the world of extenuating circumstances, and will probably enjoy renewed admiration. Not that the communist idea may be reborn in the form in which it died. [...] But the disappearance of its familiar figures from our century closes an era, rather than shutting the repository of democracy” (Passé 809).

Wisconsin and of Occupy. [...] They are no longer the politics of duration, but the politics of the instant, of the present” (“American Utopia” 13).

Only action on the moment counts, to the point that the physicality of the immediate submerges notions of past and future: “Postmodernity in general is characterized by this new kind of present time, a reduction to the body. In this new dialectic of omnipresent space and the living or temporal present, history, historicity, the sense of history, is the loser: the past is gone, we can no longer imagine the future” (ibidem). Jameson writes that the relevant time frame has been narrowed to the present, with the immediate personal experience being equated with collective time, with the consequence that the perception of historical past has diminished. This “end of temporality” entails non-chronological patterns of immediacy, such as the current streamlining of TV news, where events are condensed in a summary for the immediate benefit of new audiences, without spending time covering each single event. The condition affects the arts too, which need to find ways to respond to it: “This situation has been characterized as a dramatic and alarming shrinkage of existential time and the reduction to a present that hardly qualifies as such any longer, given the virtual effacement of that past and future that can alone define a present in the first place” (“End” 708).

As for the causes for the postmodern reduction to the present, Jameson indicates modern existentialism’s theory of imprisonment in the present away from notions of destiny, and the multiplicity of lives unraveled by the various Holocausts of the twentieth century, that caused millions of victims. Confronted with such an overwhelming proliferation of otherness, the individual is expropriated of his sense of unique self and destiny: “The stripping away of that form of temporality—the security of the ego or the unique personal self [...] leaves me alone with my unique present, with a present time that is anonymous and no longer belongs to any identifiable biographical self or private destiny” (ibid. 710).

In postmodernity, this process leads to a new privatization, explained through two symptoms of the reduction to the present. The first is the notion of “ideal schizophrenia”, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Outlined in the *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), the ideal schizophrenic, referred to as the “true hero of desire”, lives in a perpetual present, in a new kind of freedom liberating him from the past (family in the Oedipus complex) and the future (the repetitive labour process of capitalism). Opposed to the ego-fortress of the paranoid, considered as a source of fascisms and authoritarianisms, it is considered a political and ethical ideal.<sup>5</sup> Jameson lists the aesthetic “suddenness” as the second theory prophesying latent tendencies in capitalism. Elaborated by the German critic Karl Heinz Bohrer, suddenness (*Plötzlichkeit*) theorizes the specificity of the aesthetic based on its independence from the past and the future, creating a new temporal dimension beyond history where the aesthetic suddenness is identified with violence. Jameson argues that in both these approaches the attempt to avoid being situated in the past or future cannot find a solution only in the temporal present, and that it needs the metaphysical backing of the idea of eternity, specifically that which is “out of time” in Deleuze (who traces it back to his source, Henri Bergson’s *Matter and Memory*, 1896), and the Nietzschean eternal return in Bohrer. However, both theories end in a non-temporality that would be unacceptable today, because the reduction to the present, Jameson argues, is a reduction to something more material than eternity: “It seems clear enough that when you have nothing left but your temporal present, it also follows that you have nothing left but your own body. The reduction to the present can thus also be formulated in terms of a reduction to the body as a present of time” (“End” 712).

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<sup>5</sup> In posthumous interviews Deleuze mentions that he abandoned the notion of ideal schizophrenia after the tragedies of drug culture in the 1970s, replacing it with the collective ideals of nomadic horde and guerrilla band. However, Jameson dismisses this theory as relevant only if anarchism is considered as a form of reduction to the present (“End” 711).

While Jameson's theories of the reduction to the present and its corporeality inform this thesis' argument, his methodologies and conclusions are mostly political, and thus out of the scope of the present research on immediacy in the arts. In particular, his theory that the reduction of the perception of time to the present is a tendency never fully realized, because humans can never attain the immediacy of mind and body of animals, is not relevant here. Immediacy in this dissertation is characterized by quick action, which is not a tendency towards the complete immediacy of mind and body, but rather an attempt to fill for a moment an emotionally and ideologically empty space. In this vacuum characters cannot locate any clear coordinates or ultimate purposes by which to orient their lives, and thus can only live in the present moment, with no demarcated categories of past and future.

This vacuum is a precondition for the immediacy visible in various cultural outputs in contemporary Japanese literature and popular culture (anime and manga) analysed in this thesis. Analogous to Hartog's argument, the prevalence of the "omni-present present" in these works has become prominent in the wake of groundbreaking events that shattered people's perceptions of orders of time and ideologies. The early to mid- 90s provide such context for the emergence of the vacuum. 1995 in particular emerges as a watershed year in the discourse on Japan, with numerous epochal events and changes that shifted the perception of reality and time from stability and hope to one of instability and fear for the future. These range from economic changes that progressively led to widespread precariat and non-regular employment (Hayamizu 46–47; Osawa, Kim, and Kingston) to natural and man-made disasters, especially the Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake and the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo underground (Blaker). As for cultural outputs, cultural critic Uno Tsunehiro also argues that the shift in themes in Japanese popular creativity between 1995 to the late 00s correlates to the end of the economic bubble and sudden devastating events (such as the sarin gas attacks), which spread a sense of

anxiety and distrust among the Japanese towards social models that no longer provided stability:

What is the ‘world filled with forgeries, where the symbolic world has fallen and the loss of a firm sense of reality is lost’? It is the ‘world after 1995’ that I mentioned before. The ‘symbolic world’ here should be understood as society, history and the state. With incidents such as the underground sarin gas attack that felt ‘totally like a manga’, a firm sense of reality was lost. The feeling that ‘the world is strange’ weakened the young’s faith in social self-realization, and in exchange a psychologism seeking acceptance for the self-image (character) setting became widespread. (*Zero Nendai* 29)

In this vacuum, characters exist in a never-ending present against an obscure and threatening future, similar to the one Hartog describes (196). The present they experience is a constant dimension that appears not clearly demarcated from notions of the past, of memory and tradition, and of the future, but where it is also impossible to have a purpose in life, at any level, or to find satisfaction in social structures such as families. Individuals cannot find gratification in their roles, and thus concentrate only on their proximate realities they can immediately perceive. The same applies to the throwaway society around them that does not appreciate people in their human complexities, but values them only insofar as they can provide immediate usage.

A similar situation is described in the non-fiction of the main author in the literary section of this thesis, Takahashi Genichirō (b. 1951). In a newspaper article, Takahashi writes that in the economic recession, even young graduates of high-ranking universities are disillusioned regarding their prospects of entering the job market because of the exploitation that awaits them. He quotes the emblematic graduation speech given recently by a colleague of his, a Meiji Gakuin professor, who explains to graduating students: “I cannot congratulate you on your graduation, because in the society you are about to enter you are going to find many people who only think of you as *convenient, disposable pawns* [*koma*]. You will suffer, and struggle, won’t you? Therefore, my intention has been to teach you the wisdom to survive

in such an environment” (“Watashitachi” 189).<sup>6</sup> The extract here suggests that contemporary Japan roboticizes its youth: they are not assessed as individuals, but as pawns valued only for the immediate utility they provide within the workforce. This attitude of immediacy, which neglects the complexity of the individual and his/her particular career trajectory, considers the workers as mere *instruments* to fulfil the corporate system’s immediate professional requirements.

The distress the graduates in the speech will encounter is represented also by the fact that the long-standing social model in Japan, whereby the individual establishes a single-track career path by entering fiercely competitive top-ranking high schools and universities, and then attaining highly-paid jobs (Hendry et al. 78–81, 85, 152–155; Rohlen 129, 209), has weakened as a guarantee of prosperity and stability.<sup>7</sup> The graduation speech in the article emphasizes that scepticism is shared both by the young students and by a retiring member of the society they are entering. It is ironic that at this most hopeful and congratulatory of events the speaker can only deliver a message of foreboding. The ideal of succeeding in the corporate establishment is thus disavowed even before the students have embarked on their professional lives.

Immediacy emerges in the vacuum through quick repetitive action that does not achieve significant developments but is reiterated in a constant present. This instant action, however sudden, does not constitute Bohrer’s moment of aesthetic epiphany, a literary

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<sup>6</sup> Emphasis mine. The name of the professor does not appear in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Studies on employment crisis have highlighted that the model based on occupations converging towards cities is no longer sustainable both economically and demographically (Hendry et al. 85–86; Masuda). On the employment crisis of the last decades see also: (Hayamizu 46–47; Osawa, Kim, and Kingston; Takenobu and Ōuchi). Further evidence can be found in the phenomenon of “school refusal” (Hendry et al. 81–82; Shimizu), one of which causes is a rebellion towards the unsatisfying school system at all levels. Consequences of youth’s refusal to engage with contemporary society are shut-ins (*hikikomori*) who do not leave their houses, or even “freeters”, i.e. people hopping from one job to the other. The latter phenomenon may have been caused by the instability of the job market in the post-bubble recession, but also by a personal refusal to fulfil social expectations of adulthood, namely family and career (Cook). Such trends are visible both among men and women, with more and more women postponing marriage by staying at home and using their income for personal shopping. They are often thus labeled “parasite singles” (Hendry et al. 164–165; Yamada).

emancipation from instances of a presumed continuity with what is before and after; rather, immediacy is characterized by violent action performed in the absence of reflection and thought.<sup>8</sup> In literary works that manifest immediacy, characters refrain from thinking critically about their world, and instead prefer to indulge in the safety of the local reality they immediately recognize and perceive. They privilege what is of immediate concern to the stability of their everyday cycles, rather than concentrating on deeper existential issues such as political representation, or how a society that seems so unpredictable actually functions. This can affect the modes of knowledge too, with people focusing on preset categories they can immediately refer to, instead of enquiring first-hand into complex matters, such as mourning the victims of the Triple Disaster in 2011, a prominent theme in Takahashi's novel *Koi suru genpatsu* (The Nuclear Plant in Love, 2011). This aspect of immediacy is as evident in Takahashi's stories as it is in the manga *Shingeki no kyojin* (Attack on Titan, 2009-), where the characters prefer to live in the makeshift stability of a walled society rather than venture outside and explore the mysteries that lie beyond.

This attitude comes to mind when reading an article written by Takahashi himself, in which he argues that issues of national concern such as the depopulation of the countryside due to excessive urbanization are distant for the majority of Japanese citizens, who suspend critical thought (*shikō teishi*). Outlining this problem, Takahashi laments that while initiatives to promote local economies and attract young people back to the countryside are taking place nationwide, to the general population the problem still appears distant. Focused only on their immediate and present concerns, people feel alienated from general issues that seem too remote from their everyday lives. He writes: “Did we really think about the significance of

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<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, among other differences, in Bohrer suddenness in its various forms and stages is an aesthetic moment characterizing authors between the nineteenth and twentieth century, so it appears not strictly related to postmodern forms of emphasis on the present (Bohrer vii).

creating nuclear energy, or about the ageing or decreasing population? Although we noticed vaguely that they represented problems, didn't we just 'not think' how they would be related to our future, captivated as we were by our daily lives? Should that be true, then perhaps we too are responsible for the 'Banality of Evil'" ("Kangaenai" 167). In the last line Takahashi refers to Hannah Arendt's description of Nazi enforcer Adolf Eichmann's trial.<sup>9</sup> As Eichmann avowed that he did not give much thought to what his actions meant because he was only following orders, Arendt identifies his main crime, or sin, as *not* discussing the orders and *suspending* his critical thought. Both in the article and, more importantly, in the cultural products by Takahashi and others, people often dismiss critical thought and enquiry as unfruitful activities, and instead concentrate on what guarantees their immediate survival, in the localized environments they know so well.

Importantly, action predicated on immediacy is often a response to corporeal stimuli. Suspending critical thought as they struggle to determine their identity and purpose in an obscure society, characters focus on the immediate gratification of stimuli, be it through physical violence, against others and/or themselves, and extreme sexual practices. By doing so, many characters seek ways to fill the numbness, the despair or the helplessness they feel towards an obscure reality where they cannot find their place, and where clear future options seem foreclosed. The attainment of this gratification, all the more enjoyable because it is immediate, is a repetitive process. As it provides neither a stable solution out of never-ending immediacy nor a satisfying life purpose in the long run, characters indulge in corporeal stimuli repeatedly to experience a series of moments and to feel alive, even if only momentarily. A prime example of this is the novel *Konsento* (Outlet, 2000) by Taguchi Randy, where the protagonist Yuki, struggling to make sense of her brother's sudden death, feels disconnected

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<sup>9</sup> *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, first published in 1963.

from the world and engages repeatedly in casual sexual intercourse simply to satisfy her stimuli to feel alive in the moment.

The characters seeking the immediate benefits of violent stimuli appear to live in what sociologist Ōsawa Masachi has termed the contemporary “age of impossibility” (*fukanōsei no jidai*).<sup>10</sup> In the 2008 book by the same name, he argues that in this age, starting in 1995 (the year of the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake and the Tokyo underground sarin gas attack), it is impossible for people in Japanese society to have shared ideologies or ideals; as such, there are no grounds on which to distinguish good from bad.<sup>11</sup> Amidst this uncertainty, people across ages and genders in this age escape *into* reality:

An escape towards ‘reality’ is distinctive of the contemporary age. However, ‘reality’ in this case is not ordinary reality. It is something realistic beyond reality, a reality within reality, a reality that makes you think ‘now this is truly reality!’ That is to say, a phenomenon is visible in various instances that I want to describe as an escape into a reality at times extremely violent, at times pleasant. A most basic example is the trend of self-harm, seen in wrist-cutting. We can say that the direct pain occurring on one’s own body is a simplified version that, feeling more real than any reality, makes reality what it is. The Armageddon and terrorism, religious or nationalistic fanaticisms directed at warlike extreme violence are another kind of escape into reality. (*Fukanōsei* 4)

Without strong ideologies to show what prosperity or “meaning” in life are, the characters experiencing immediacy live in an age of impossibility where they use brutal experiences as

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<sup>10</sup> Ōsawa builds his theory on sociologist Mita Munetsuke’s periodization of postwar Japan. In the early 1990s Mita subdivided it into three ages based on people’s relation to reality: 1) the “age of ideals” (*risō no jidai*), 2) the “age of dreams” (*yume no jidai*) and 3) the “age of fictions” (*kyokō no jidai*). The first age (1945-1960) corresponds to the preliminary phase of high economic growth, when people strived to realize ideals and had a firm sense of reality. The age of dreams (60s to mid-70s) was characterized by the fulfilment of the dreams of (material) happiness made possible by growing affluence. The latter age of fictions (late 70s-present), is an era in which individuals find comfort in fabricated reality as represented by films, photographs, computers, or even amusement parks such as Tokyo Disneyland. They create hyper-reality spaces that function with their own rules, and to the exclusion of the outside world. As a consequence of this attitude, social issues are treated as single phenomena that have their own unique dynamics, and have no traits in common (or possible explanations) with other contemporary issues. See: Mita, Chapter 3.

<sup>11</sup> See also: Ōsawa, “2013.”

outlets to feel immediately what is real beyond all doubt, and yet are required to repeat these practices over and over, in endless cycles of repeated present moments.<sup>12</sup>

A possible solution to escape this cycle of immediacy is found in inter-personal connections and community. Community is intended here as the reconstruction of ties with other human beings based on the critical understanding of sharing the same human condition, made of needs, joys and sorrows. It is close to what Takahashi advocates in an interview on *Koi suru genpatsu*: “The most valuable thing is to start confronting [others] again, and tie relationships again” (“Supesharu” 21). In this sense, among the multiple Japanese terms that may be translated with “community” (for example *komyuniti*, *kyōdō shakai*, *chiiki shakai*), the one that seems most befitting is *kyōdōtai* insofar as it defines a “group that, as seen evidently in families, is united within an environment of intimate feelings, or through deep connecting emotions” (Imamura 50).<sup>13</sup>

This need to re-connect is motivated by the excessive emphasis on the immediate, entailing loneliness and disconnections from others. In a society where individuals concentrate on their proximate spheres endlessly, indulging in violent stimuli for immediate gratification, it is difficult to construct a common discourse of ideologies and emotions that is uniting beyond the repetitiveness of presentism. It is often the case that numerous individual immediacies clash with each other for instant satisfaction, without actually understanding others. That is why in many works characters may find a way out of immediacy through rebuilding inter-personal connections, based on understanding others and recognizing a common purpose that is not necessarily determined by a shared geographical location but by emotional recognition. At various levels and magnitudes, characters manifest a longing for

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<sup>12</sup> Strong ideologies here refer to concrete ideas of how a society should be, and of one’s own role in it.

<sup>13</sup> This definition is also informed by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies’ theorization of *Gemeinschaft* (community) seen in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Community and Society, 1887).

lasting connections that would help them understand and value their identity outside of the immediate repetitive roles and stimuli, and inside a community embracing the depth of their humanity and critical thinking. However, while this community is not always achieved in all narratives, it remains as a tantalizing possibility in the background, highlighting that a failure to recognize others and confront critically with them cannot bring about an escape from the repetitive cycles of immediacy.

The hypothesis of immediacy is motivated by an enquiry into new forms of literary and cultural products in contemporary Japan, namely after the historical break of 1989. The reflections on new forms of cultural products are a response to critical remarks by eminent literary critics on the decline of Japanese literature after the late 80s. In *The Concept of "Literature" in Japan* (2006), Suzuki Sadami notes that after the 80s the expression "the end of literature" (*bungaku no shūen*) was widespread within literary circles as an acknowledgment of the growth in prestige of audio-visual media, exponents of popular culture, to the detriment of the value of printed books, and therefore of pure literature: "'Literature,'" writes Suzuki, "has grown so weak that it seems hardly more than a traditional custom, one that, unlike the old clocks and calendars, just happens to have survived"(2). In light of this, according to Suzuki, it has now become crucial to reflect on what literature actually means. Thus, the right question to ask is what literature can do and what it has been unable to do (ibid. 6). On a similar note, in the essay collection *History and Repetition* (2012), Karatani Kōjin theorizes the end of the modern novel after the historical rupture of the demise of the Soviet Union and the death of the Shōwa Emperor: "When a novel appears in which it is difficult to distinguish that novel from the consciousness of it, from the consciousness of the act of writing that novel, it already amounts to a prophesy of the end of the novel as a genre" (153). By interpreting these comments as provocative, contending that a form of literature has died,

this study has enquired into how literature has changed and how it has developed new forms of expression after the mid-90s. The theme of immediacy is one of the possible answers as to the new ways in which cultural outputs after the historical break have portrayed the spirit of their age, embedded in the cultural contexts in which they were produced. In doing so, this study analyses and highlights authors and products that have not usually attracted extensive academic interest, but which nevertheless offer valuable insight into understanding the current Japanese panorama in literature and popular culture.

This dissertation, therefore, does not claim to be a totalizing study of immediacy in the arts. It focuses on a specific set of literary texts by Takahashi Genichirō (b. 1951), Taguchi Randy (b. 1959) and Hirano Keiichirō (b. 1975); it also focuses on two anime and one manga series, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Psycho-Pass* and *Shingeki no kyojin*, as these works portray key aspects of immediacy, and delineate possible escapes from it.

## **1.2 *Ima deshō* and personal development**

Immediacy's instant, repetitive action is reflected in personal development strategies (*jiko keihatsu*). Enjoying renewed success in Japan, these publications offer advice on how to improve one's professional or emotional skills in order to attain success in life. They encourage users to act in the moment and to make small, immediate changes in their lives to improve their everyday conditions. The foremost example of this is the popular slogan *ima deshō* (now is the time!), a catchphrase first used in a TV commercial by Tōshin prep school teacher Hayashi Osamu in 2009. The imperative to act on the moment, but with quick actions within one's personal dimension, could well serve as a banner to encapsulate immediacy in this study.

In 2009 Hayashi achieved nationwide popularity when he acted in a TV commercial where he taught a contemporary literature summer course for second-year students of Tokyo University. Here, Hayashi remarked that knowledge of kanji is fundamental to understand contemporary literature, yet very few students concentrate on the subject. To motivate his students, he created his now-famous slogan “[kanji no benkyō wa] itsu yaru ka? Ima deshō” (when shall we [study kanji]? Now is the time!). This episode marked Hayashi’s debut in the public eye. He became a media personality, appearing regularly in shows and lectures throughout the country and adapting his motto to diverse situations. He also started a blog and authored a book, both bearing *ima deshō* in their respective titles. As a testimony to the slogan’s steady popularity, in 2013 it was awarded the yearly Great Prize for Neologisms and Popular Phrases (*Shingo ryūkōgo taishō*) and the Golden Prize of the Great Prize for Internet Popular Phrases (*Netto ryūkōgo taishō*).

*Ima deshō* is relevant because it manifests an urge to produce a minute change *now*. This famous attitude in Japan does not advocate structural or social change, but encourages minute changes in one’s proximate environment. The emphasis for the change is on one’s present, not on society as a whole. This catchphrase turned ideology was widely popular in Japanese society, and appealed to the feeling that one needs to change oneself, because society will not change. Hayashi’s 2012 book is a manifesto of this philosophy. The goal is to offer 45 techniques to “remodel” oneself (*jibun kaizō jutsu*), as the subtitle reads. He provides readers with simple advice with which to change their life, for example changing one’s attitude by greeting others respectfully regardless of their social status (13).<sup>14</sup> Exemplified by *ima deshō*,

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<sup>14</sup> The concept of small daily changes producing benefits in the long run is also akin to the psychological category of “delayed gratification.” Researched by American psychologist Walter Mischel in the late 60s and early 70s, delayed gratification focuses on the capacity to delay the temptation of an immediate reward for a more satisfying and enduring one at a later stage (Carducci). A growing body of literature on the subject associates the ability to delay gratification with mechanisms of self-regulation, patience and willpower, and its foreseeable positive outcomes with professional and personal success, and even with health improvements. In recent years,

*jiko keihatsu* literature is linked with immediacy because it advocates self-observation in search of one's own inadequacies, and proposes immediate changes. The change might even amount to simply shifting chopsticks from the usual right hand to the left (Kamiōoka), but it is fundamental that the change be done now.

While personal development books stress the benefits of individual actions, they also reveal the perception of a vacuum, where serious improvements and grand-scale change are impossible. Therefore, as the future seems foreclosed, people tend to focus on immediacy. This emerges also from cultural critic Azuma Hiroki's view on these publications. In an article he explains that *jiko keihatsu*'s commercial success shows that Japanese society is incapable of improving collectively. The books are popular because neither society nor the future appear optimistic. The Japanese perceive that the economy is in a state of recession, and that this will not change in the near future. As effective improvement is not envisioned, *jiko keihatsu* literature thrives in an age where everything is disposable, where even books need to be quickly readable, and need to have catchy titles that will not be easily forgotten. Azuma laments a national culture that once flourished but is now decaying, because it is neglecting its old values of dedication to study and knowledge. He underscores that the importance of study and critical reasoning on challenging texts (he cites philosophical texts in the article) needs to be rediscovered and passed on to younger generations to salvage Japan's unique creativity,

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delayed gratification has played a significant role in the studies of psychologists such as Martin Seligman, who has studied the pursuit of long-term delayed gratification as a means to achieve lasting happiness (Seligman), or as a key factor in improving academic performance in adolescents (Duckworth and Seligman). In this sense Hayashi's original slogan may suggest that postponing immediate gratification and studying kanji well will lead to admission into a prestigious university. However, these investigations are outside the scope of this study, which considers *ima deshō* relevant for its sheer emphasis on repeated action in the moment. Hayashi's earlier example of immediately revising the attitude in greeting everyone in the same respectful manner may be motivated by a final reward of success, but it also reveals the necessity to perform a sudden change because what one has in front of oneself is not satisfactory. As the literary sources suggest, characters have control only over their immediately proximate environment because a life change in broader terms is now rarely envisioned.

which used to produce imaginative stories that thrilled international audiences ever since the Meiji era and roughly until the 1970/80s (Azuma, “Hamaru?”).<sup>15</sup>

### 1.3 Literature and the Internet

From the mid-90s technological progress, especially the Internet diffusion, has influenced methods of communication at various levels, from the circulation and consumption of information to literary expression. Never before the two decades in question had technology had such a pivotal role in shaping the themes and expression of literary artists. This section therefore investigates the aspects in which the immediacy of the Internet made its way into literature.

Much like Jameson’s argument on the spatialization of time, the Internet creates a flat dimension where all information can converge and have the same value because they are not filtered nor censored. This also entails the issue of the authenticity of information, as shown in Yūki Shirō’s *Intānetto no shikaku* (The Internet’s Blind Spot, 1996), a crime novel about a con artist who exploits the Internet and commits fraud throughout the world. It generated a considerable degree of controversy following its publication because it enquired into security issues arising from the diffusion of the Internet. Another example is the novel *Tokyo nanmin satsujin netto* (The Tokyo Refugees Murder Network), by Murakami Masahiko. The novel begins with a mummified corpse found in the backyard of a dry-cleaning shop that is discovered after a post appears on an online message board. The local authorities find out that the cleaner’s entire family has disappeared, while the investigation is narrated through Internet posts and conjectures. Murakami’s novel features an experimental narrative mode for the time,

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<sup>15</sup> As for philosophical texts, here Azuma does not mention specific ones: he limits himself to describing them as books in the humanities such as those belonging to “philosophy of the thought” (*shisō tetsugaku*), that are not popular reads but still promote introspection and the investigation of human behaviour.

where the main voice contributing to the reconstruction of the case is that of a free, faceless, Internet community, in which all comments and suggestions are posted, shaped by the numerous individual opinions, prejudices and, possibly, lies. Against the background of the investigation, the novel questions how the truth is shaped by a myriad of different individual voices, and what should be believed. *Tokyo nanmin satsujin netto* was published in 2000, when the Internet was gradually becoming less of a novelty, yet the story problematizes the new authority and functions the Internet was seizing as a means of communication. The immediacy of the new technology, conveying a message that anybody can access instantly, signifies a critical increase in the number, scope and timing at which news can travel. However, such richness also presents the question of authenticity. If virtually everyone has the possibility to post a message in the safety of an anonymous message board, then he also automatically has no restraint or obligation regarding the validity of the content. In the immediacy of the Internet all news, lies and truth alike, have the same value. Murakami Masahiko's novel is a relevant example of how the Internet has entered common imagination, and of its dual nature of a fast carrier of news and of an unrestricted, potentially dangerous pool of information. An increase in quantity does not always mean an increase in quality.

On the other hand, the presentist space occupied by different levels of media and information may also have the positive effect of offering new avenues for artistic expression. In the early years of the Internet, this was especially true for Murakami Ryū, one of the first Japanese authors to experiment with the new technology. In June 1997 he launched, in collaboration with composer Sakamoto Ryūichi and young, promising programmers and designers, a website called “tokyo DECADENCE.”<sup>16</sup> The website was a multimedia showcase

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that “Tokyo Decadence” was also the international title for the movie *Topāzu* (1992). Directed by Murakami himself and with music by Sakamoto, the movie is based on the short-story collection of the same name, published in 1988.

for Murakami's work, featuring previously published novels such as *Topāzu* (1988), *Rabu & Poppu* (Love and Pop, 1996) and his first narrative project serialized on the Internet, *The Mask Club*, later published in hard copy in 2001. Tokyo DECADENCE did not contain the usual entries found in other websites such as the profile and chronology of the author or links; instead, it focused only on content by Murakami. The site constituted a platform for multimedia experimentation, mixing images with text in Japanese and English, videos and music.<sup>17</sup> The immediacy of the Internet allows for simultaneity of information, and the possibility to feature different types of content in an immediately accessible format. Tokyo DECADENCE is a prime example of the immediate coexistence for artistic forms allowed by the Internet, eliminating the hurdles of the physical release of contents.

A flattened virtual present can abolish the physical distance between authors and audiences, who can interact sharing the same space. In the Internet, readers can comment directly on the authors' works without intermediaries, in a peer-to-peer kind of communication. This immediate exchange has become a fundamental part of the Internet's influence on literature and culture. It was crucial for shaping the literary career of Taguchi Randy. A so-called "OL" (office lady) at an advertisement agency, in 1996 Taguchi Randy (real name Keiko) found a suitable outlet for her writing aspirations in the form of essays published online. Often based on her personal experiences, as are many of her later works (her father was a violent alcoholic, her mother overwhelmed with rearing children and her brother, a *hikikomori*, died young), her essays deal with the meaning of life and death, love and identity. Her explorations are based on the acknowledgement of a dysfunctional society, and have

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<sup>17</sup> In the words of contemporary literature professor Enomoto Masaki, Tokyo DECADENCE was a bold experiment in multimedia and interactive fiction that by mixing words, images and music surpassed the existing adult and literary sites and provided a new space for artistic expression (150–151).

enjoyed a high degree of popularity, with over 70,000 weekly readers. This positive response led her to publish her first novel *Konsento* in June 2000.

Taguchi's presence on the Internet is strong. She regularly updates her blog with diary entries and news of the latest events in which she has taken part. She is also present on social networks such as Twitter. This network infrastructure, also used by Takahashi and Hirano, contributes to building the persona of the author. The author is not only a name behind a literary product, but becomes a concrete, almost palpable Internet presence that shares the same presentist space as the readers, and draws nearer to them by writing about everyday life. While this proximity might be used for feedback on his/her literature, it is also an integral part of the writer's figure in the media. As the authors use the Internet to share their thoughts, they create an immediate presence that is relatable to readers who tend to see them as accessible people with similar likes and dislikes. They are not identities expressed only in what they write, but are concrete beings thrown into the flux of life like everyone else. The Internet has had a leveling function, in the sense that writers and readers now have the same means of communication at their disposal.

#### **1.4 1995: a liminal year**

The literary and popular culture sources portraying immediacy analysed in the following chapters were published or broadcast between 1995 and 2011 (with the exception of *Psycho-Pass*, which aired in 2012). These years delineate a time frame between major social and economic changes, the social traumas of the former year and those related to the Great East Japan Earthquake and the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Of course, other sources dealing

with immediacy have appeared outside of this frame.<sup>18</sup> Bearing this self-conscious limitation in mind, this dissertation offers an interdisciplinary study on a distinctive multi-faceted trope surfacing strongly in the contemporary age as discussed above, demarcated by two points in time characterized by changes, man-made and natural disasters, and social traumas that might have contributed to shattering people's perceptions of orders of time and of a stable reality. These years serve as a socio-historical context for cultural products describing an emphasis on the immediate.

The precondition for immediacy is an ideological vacuum. Characters live in an unstable society where it is hard to have a firm idea of meaning or prosperity. The vacuum underlies the emphasis on the present, in the absence of thought on important national and social issues.<sup>19</sup> When investigating what events may have contributed to shaping this perception, 1995 emerges often as a watershed year in the discourse on Japanese (but also international) society (Blaker; Campbell; Hayamizu). Numerous events and changes took place in 1995 that strengthened people's sense of instability in a world that, they felt, could be destroyed at any time. As Taguchi remarks in an interview, the employment crisis that shaped the perception of loneliness and individual malaise in society that she portrays in her literature was influenced by significant developments in the job market in 1995 ("Personal Interview").

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<sup>18</sup> Authors and literary movements have dealt with certain aspects of immediacy as outlined here before the contemporary age. A prime example is the *Taiyōzoku* (sun tribe) youth movement in the 1950 and 1960s. Inaugurated by Ishihara Shintarō's novel *Taiyō no kisetsu* (Season of the Sun, 1955), it indicates representations of disenfranchised youth in the postwar who, disillusioned with contemporary politics, engaged in extreme practices of sex and violence, seeing them as immediate stimuli to react to the loneliness and lack of satisfactory ideologies in their lives. The youth's refuge into violence out of dissatisfaction with ideologies and lack of representation is also a recurring theme in the fiction of Mishima Yukio, Abe Kōbō and Ōe Kenzaburō. For example, in Ōe's short story *Sevuntin* (Seventeen, 1961) a boy turning seventeen feels disenfranchised from Japanese society after the failure of the wartime nationalistic ideal, and finds an outlet for his internal struggles in the Imperial Way Faction, an extreme right political group that favours violent repressions of opposition. Detailed comparisons between these sources and those in contemporary immediacy are outside the scope of the present research, which focuses on the occurrence of a specific form of immediacy emerging in the points outlined in the introduction. These comparisons, however, constitute interesting topics for further work and explanation.

<sup>19</sup> Such reduced scope of people's attention only to their local reality is also discussed in a number of Takahashi's articles ("Erabu"; "Tsumetai").

Furthermore, significant advancements in technology, especially the Internet, in this year made it increasingly possible to reach sources of information and communicative exchange instantly, strengthening the sense of immediacy provided by accessing this virtual world of new connections. For these reasons, this section presents various events occurring in 1995 that contributed to shaping the perception of the vacuum visible in narratives of immediacy.

According to sociologist Nakanishi Shintarō 1995 impressed on the Japanese the notion that “society won’t go on as it has been until now” (Hayamizu 3–4), referring mainly to two events that caused turmoil in Japanese society and exacerbated its sense of instability. The first is the great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake of January 17<sup>th</sup>, which caused 6,434 deaths in the southeastern area of Hyōgo Prefecture; the second is the sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway perpetrated by the cult organization Aum shinrikyō on March 20<sup>th</sup>, during rush hour shortly after 8 am. The attack resulted in 13 deaths and over 6,000 wounded. When Japanese citizens learned of the gas attack through the morning news, they perceived the indiscriminate nature of the terrorist assault as a shock. The feeling of facing something completely out of the ordinary was even stronger, as the memory of the previous natural disaster was obviously still fresh (ibid. 189). The two tragic events, sudden and catastrophic, for many signified the unpredictability of the world. The sarin gas attack planned by a religious group worshipping a vague divine entity symbolized the instability of life in society at the time. The organization’s epochal attacks constituted a watershed event that gave rise to multi-faceted cultural narratives, divided into dominant narratives brought forward by authoritative intellectuals, but also in dialogical products challenging such orthodox theories (Ushiyama and Baert).

Other factors of destabilization are visible on the economic front. Although the Japanese economy started its descent in 1995, as the bubble economy of the late 80s had already begun its steady decline since 1991 with the heavy fall of land prices, it was in 1995

that a state of long-term recession was officially acknowledged. That year's edition of the "White Paper of Economy" (*keizai hakusho*), the annual report issued by the Cabinet Office on domestic economic analysis, after the early 90s' keywords of "expansion" and "adjustment" (*chōsei*), bore the subtitle: "For the Resurrection of Japanese Economy's dynamism" (*nihon keizai no dainamizumu no fukkatsu wo mezashite*). It was now official that Japan was entering a period of long recession.

Another striking factor is rising unemployment. 1995 marked a significant increase in the overall unemployment rates. From the 2.5% of 1993 and 2.9% of the previous year, the percentage surpassed the 3% barrier increasing up to 3.2%, and has been growing steadily, reaching a peak of over 5% in the first half of the 00s, and again 5.1% in 2010 (Hayamizu 46). However, it was in 1995 that, after the figures of previous years, it became evident that the influence of the long-term recession was affecting the job market deeply. The youth born in the years between 1971 and '74, the so-called "dankai junia" or "second-generation baby boomers" were graduating from university and entering the job market in these years. They encountered a market where the concepts of "lifetime employment" (*shūshin koyō*) and "seniority by length of service" (*nenkō joretsu*), the foundations of the Japanese corporate employment system, were crumbling under the hardships of the economy, and more and more companies adopted new hiring policies privileging rewards based on results rather than on fixed employment. The old model of graduating from college and entering a company could not be guaranteed anymore.

To face the new situation, in May the Japan Federation of Employers' Associations (*Nikkei ren*) proposed a deregulation of the old hiring models of lifetime employment and seniority retribution in favour of new Japanese management policies, publishing a report titled "Japanese-style Business Management in a New Era" (Shin jidai no "nihonteki keiei"). The

new model proposed the division of workers into three categories: 1) “chōki chikuseki nōryoku katsudōgata” (regular worker employed on a long-term basis with in-house training), made of executive candidates; 2) “kōdo senmon nōryokugata” (highly-skilled worker hired on a fixed-term basis), and 3) “koyō jūnangata” (flexibly employed non-regular worker hired on a fixed-term basis). Companies were advised to hire a combination of the three categories: furthermore, only workers in the first category should have a long-term employment, while the others could have flexible contracts. Because of such deregulation, the 1995 report is often considered to have paved the way for the increase of non-regular employment (*hiseiki koyō*) over the years (Hayamizu 46–47; Osawa, Kim, and Kingston 323). The growing discrepancy in number and wage between regular workers (*sei shain*), hired directly by the company, expected to work full-time on various assignments, and enjoying strong job security, and non-regular ones (*hisei shain*), usually hired through agencies or outsourcing firms, with clearly defined work assignments and without stable job security apart from a fixed-term contract, is a pressing issue. The employment crisis, virtually sanctioned by the 1995 report, saw the number of underpaid non-regular workers reach 5.9 million in only ten years (1995-2005), to the detriment of a regular employees’ decrease of 4.5 million (Takenobu and Ōuchi). Furthermore, between 2001 and 2010 regular workers percentages decreased from 72.8 to 66.3, while those of non-regular workers increased from 27.2 to 33.7 (Osawa, Kim, and Kingston 314). As currently more than 90% of non-regular workers reportedly have an annual income below three million Yen, with one single woman out of three between 20 and 64 years of age living under the poverty line (Takenobu and Ōuchi), it is evident that this is a crucial issue. As the debate first surfaced in the mid 00s discussing non-regular hiring policies and “disguised dispatch” practices (*gisō haken*), again the 1995 *Nikkeiren* report was often indicated as the main cause for the economic deregulation (Hayamizu 46).

As for culture, 1995 was a moment in Japanese history when citizens were particularly attracted to occult pseudoscientific matters that accounted for supernatural explanations of the world. Surprisingly, the interest in occult matters did not wane even after the homicidal attack by Aum shinrikyō, which recruited proselytes with prophecies of the coming Armageddon (Hayamizu 133). Instead, people who felt at a loss in society continued to be drawn to cultural products delving into mystical matters showing an obscure reality, such as the TV animation series *Shin seiki Evangerion* (Neon Genesis Evangelion). First aired in late 1995, the series is particularly relevant as an excellent example of a new kind (in the mid-90s) of animated narrative showing young protagonists in physical and emotional conflict against a society with no transparent ethics and purposes, and which considers them only for their immediate usefulness.

1995 was also the year in which technology made significant strides towards entering public awareness, laying the groundwork for its current ubiquity. Created in its primitive form by the US Ministry of Defense in 1969 under the name of “Arpanet”, a system to join computers worldwide on a network, the Internet reached public usage in the early 90s, increasing the number of its users in 1993 with the introduction of the client software Mosaic. However, in 1995 the exponential growth in sales of personal computers with modems (18 million households, a 64% increase from 1994 was registered in the US) helped significantly the increase of private Web navigation in the following years.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, famous giants of e-commerce such as Amazon.com or eBay first established their presence online or grew massively like the Netscape Navigator browser in this year, which has been defined as the year “the Web started changing lives” (Copilevitz).

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<sup>20</sup> Figures are taken from: Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press. “Technology in the American Household: Americans going online ... Explosive Growth, Uncertain Destinations.” Washington, DC: TMCPP Oct. 16 1995. 10.

Though with numbers inferior to the US (16.3% households with personal computers in 1995, with 3.3% using Internet yearly in 1996), Japan began to acknowledge the new possibilities offered by Internet technology for public and private life.<sup>21</sup> For example, the former head of NHK Shima Keiji foresaw that the Internet would revolutionize the media eventually, wiping away newspapers, broadcasting stations and advertisement companies (Hayamizu 19). Additionally, the word “Internet” entered the top ten for the Great Prize of Popular Phrases (Fukagawa). The spread of the Internet was favoured by the increasing diffusion of personal computers in Japan, which in 1994 had outsold household appliances for the first time in history, and in 1995 broke another record with 5 million PC units being shipped. Japan and the world had entered an age where technology was exponentially increasing its relevance in the daily life of the citizens.

### **1.5 Selection of works and methodology**

This dissertation discusses portrayals and reactions to immediacy in literary fiction by Takahashi Genichirō, Taguchi Randy and Hirano Keiichirō, in the anime series *Shin seiki Evangerion*, *Psycho-Pass* and in the manga *Shingeki no kyojin*. This selection was made acknowledging the potential issues raised by choosing to analyze works in popular culture alongside literature. Adding manga and anime to the investigation enriches the scope of the research, yet also poses the problem of leaving other media out such as film or light novels which might present valuable manifestations of immediacy. However, within this self-imposed limitation, this thesis illustrates the trope of immediacy in works across different media, therefore showing that immediacy is not limited to literature, but is a cultural trope manifested also through different modes of representation aimed at different audiences.

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<sup>21</sup> Hayamizu 16.

Taking into account the inherent differences of the various media such as form, audience, and distinctions of high and low cultural products, the main criterion for selecting the works in literature and popular culture was the overarching theme of narrative joining them. All works share portrayals of a vacuum where characters live in a never-ending present and react to it violently in the absence of critical thought, in response to violent stimuli and, possibly, long for inter-personal ties and community, which they may or may not achieve in the end. All works are representative of their own fields and genres, and have had wide resonance with their respective consumers. The anime and manga have all enjoyed high popularity worldwide, have generated spin-off products, and are considered staples in their genre and media. Takahashi, Hirano and Taguchi are exponents of the so-called *junbungaku* (pure literature), as is attested also by the numerous prizes they have won awarded by the literary circles. For this reason, they were chosen to illustrate a response to the initial question about the end of “pure literature.” Furthermore, they were selected to provide variety in terms of age groups and gender in the analysis.

One challenge in discussing the fiction of these contemporary authors is mediating the authorial figure and their literature. With the abundance of information and data in the technologized present age, the three writers maintain an active presence in the media alongside their literature. They are highly visible on the Internet, where they write articles and blogs complementary to their published writings, and have accounts on social networks, where they exchange views with the readers and receive feedback. They have written commentaries and discussed their literature in interviews, and have also shared their political views (especially Takahashi). Their life experiences also surface in their literature: Takahashi often inserts episodes from his life in his fiction, elaborating them playfully, and Taguchi’s experience as an OL and the sudden death of her brother inform her first novel *Konsento*. Confronted with

this vast amount of parallel information, the issue at hand is what methodological stance to take when approaching the literary texts.

Regarding the debate between the figure of the author and the text, the poststructuralist intellectual Roland Barthes proposed an influential theory in his essay “The Death of the Author”, published first in English in 1967, then in French in 1968.<sup>22</sup> Here, Barthes argues against the widespread critical approach considering the author (and/or his hypostases such as society, history, psyche, liberty) as the ultimate power imparting a single univocal meaning to the writing. He maintains that the modern capitalistic market promotes a commodification of the “author, work and reader-critic relationship” where the author places an unambiguous meaning on the work; the reader consumes it and then moves to another work. Therefore, the author becomes the only source for explaining a text, as though it were the product of a single voice, thus strictly limiting the possibilities of interpretation. In opposition to this, Barthes argues that a text does not originate from a unified authorial consciousness, but is a plurality of voices, of other words, other utterances and other texts. Therefore, to assign an author to a text is to “impose a limit to that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (“The Death” 147). Then, the author must “die” as the univocal source for interpretation, and give way to the supremacy of the text and the variety of writings that blend and clash within.<sup>23</sup>

Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. (Ibid. 148)

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<sup>22</sup> The essay first appeared as “The Death of the Author” in the American literary magazine *Aspen*. However, it was not until Barthes republished it in France with the title “La mort de l’auteur” in *Mantéïa V* that it received wide critical attention.

<sup>23</sup> Barthes claims that the disappearance of the authorial subject occurs the moment writing arises. This formalist insistence on eliminating any external influence from the text (history, world, society) thus appears to contradict his earlier historicity (Burke 14–15).

In a later essay, Barthes specifies that the author is not to be removed completely, but that he might come back to the text, though not as a privileged paternal unit but as a “guest”, inscribed into the literature as one character (“From Work” 161). Similarly, this dissertation does not consider the authors and their public views as privileged sources for interpretation, but rather as important contexts for the texts (which include anime and manga). Extra-textual sources such as the authors’ biographical information, non-fiction, statements and political commentaries are a number of the numerous possible contexts used alongside the texts to illuminate a plurality of interpretations.

In this approach, the dissertation moves beyond the aforementioned author/text opposition, and adopts a middle stance in line with more recent theories on mediating between intertextual analysis and the consideration of the “biographical imperative” that authors’ personas and life facts are indispensable for a comprehensive understanding of the works. This approach is informed by methodologies advocated by literary scholars Stephen Dodd and Hoyt Long. In the *The Youth of Things: Life and Death in the Age of Kajii Motojirō* (2014), Dodd writes that Kajii’s illness and concerns over mortality cannot be separated from his fictional writings that mediate his state of being (2–3). Long’s reflection in his research on spatial relations in the works of poet and author Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933), sheds further light on the issue. While Long distances himself from poststructuralist notions of authorial exclusion, but also from romantic ones of a supreme author whose “biography commands [the work’s] writing with transparent immediacy” (Chartier 28), he acknowledges the role of authorship and biography in making texts worthy of circulation. Here, the “author-function” is to be understood and pursued as “a means to retrace connections between authors and works, between authorial positions and contexts of production, in ways that work back to a sense of ‘historical, cultural, political,’ and I would add *spatial*, ‘embeddedness’ on the part of

speaking subjects” (Long 7). In line with this debate, this thesis adopts a middle ground “return of the author” stance, in which the extra-textual data on the authors’ lives are not considered as keys for interpretation but as sources alongside the texts useful to illustrate the connections showing the speaking subjects’ embeddedness in their cultural social, historical and cultural contexts.

The approach outlined above also applies to popular culture, where any authorial information is used alongside the cultural products. Manga and anime are studied for their representationality, that is, for the worldview they convey. As noted by Asian Studies professor Mark MacWilliams, whilst manga and anime are generally considered entertainment products providing formulaic fantasies of escapes, the imagined worlds they portray can also offer space for social, political and existential reflection. By doing so, rather than offer utopian escapes, they motivate active changes in the real world (MacWilliams 10-11). Therefore, this dissertation approaches manga and anime as multi-layered sources offering multiple readings, but it also considers media-specific features such as visual representations and techniques necessary to actualize analytical readings.<sup>24</sup>

## 1.6 Outline of chapters

Chapter 2 illustrates the relevance of immediacy against relevant theories in contemporary debates on literature, popular culture and the arts: Azuma Hiroki’s database theory, the *sekai-kei* and *survive-kei* theories, indicating respectively narratives where the scope of action is localized to personal stories, and narratives where characters internalize the vacuum and understand the need for constant action. The section that follows investigates Uno Tsunehiro’s theory of Little People (small beings all bringing forward their personal values in a vacuum

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<sup>24</sup> For more on this see: Berndt, “Considering”; “Intercultural.”

where an overarching ideology lacks). Lastly, the chapter presents two theories positing a flattening of culture to an endless present: Murakami Takashi's "Superflat", which advocates a form of artistic production where high and low art coexist on the same panel of immediate consumption, and Kumashiro Tōru's "rejuvenation depression", postulating that in contemporary Japan expectations about age have been flattened to a sense of perpetual youth. Chapter 2 informs the overall argument by illustrating how selected aspects of immediacy surface in contemporary cultural discourses, which also prove relevant for the specific textual analyses in the following chapters.

Chapter 3 analyses immediacy in three works of fiction by Takahashi Genichirō, the main author in this study. After giving an outline of his variegated life and major publications, which account for his exceptional visibility alongside his literature, the first section investigates the novel *Godira*, the first in chronological order. Originally serialized in 1996, it is a postmodern patchwork of different chapters showing a confused reality in which it is difficult to locate meaning. The characters live in constant present where they can survive only by continuing their repetitive actions in the absence of critical thought about how the world functions. As traditional categories of meaning in life or a shared morality have collapsed, the only thing that exists and guarantees survival is the immediacy of acting in an interminable present confined to the localized reality of one's personal activity.

A similar collapse of traditional temporal boundaries is visible in the long novel *Nihon bungaku seisuishi* (History of the Rise and Fall of Japanese Literature, 2001). Various illustrious exponents of modern Japanese literature are the main characters in the seemingly disconnected chapters dense with anachronisms. Writers such as Natsume Sōseki, Tayama Katai or Ishikawa Takuboku struggle to produce literature while engaging in present-day pastimes such as Tamagotchi electronic toys, *enjo kōsai* (the phenomenon of schoolgirls

dating older men for financial benefits) or becoming porn movie directors. The setting is a synchronic temporal dimension, a never-ending present where past and present coexist. By portraying this bizarre temporal dimension, mixing history with playful anachronisms, the novel illustrates the need to rethink literary categories and to investigate the relevance of history and memory in this age of immediacy.

*Kimi ga yo wa chiyo ni yachiyo ni* (May Your Reign Continue for a Thousand, Eight Thousand Generations, 2002. Henceforth *KGY*) is a collection of stories portraying characters who can neither make sense of, nor escape their predetermined roles (worker, husband, father). Consequently, words and concepts like love, sex and happiness become meaningless, and institutions like marriage are passively accepted as inevitable. The collection is a manifestation of the current ideological vacuum in which characters find it impossible to make sense of their lives. In order to feel alive, they perform rushed actions to respond to violent stimuli that constitute their whole essence. Suspending critical thought, they live solely for the immediacy of action.

Chapter 4 continues the analysis on literature with three novels by Takahashi, Taguchi and Hirano. The overall theme is immediacy's relationship with stimuli. They portray instances where sensorial experiences may also lead to critical thinking. The mind and the body are not mutually exclusive, allowing characters to achieve a deeper understanding of themselves and others through corporeal stimulation, especially sexual intercourse. In the first two novels, this may be a way to feel oneself vis-à-vis others, thus rethinking inter-personal connections and build a community escaping immediacy. In the last one, while embracing sexual stimulation does lead the characters to deeper individual awareness, since they do not confront others critically, they cannot exit the cycles of immediacy.

*Koi suru genpatsu* (2011), together with being one of the earliest literary responses to 3/11, is also one of Takahashi's most controversial novels. Within the loose framework of a film crew shooting a porn charity movie after 3/11, the novel challenges the modes of knowing and mourning in contemporary Japan. By provocatively inserting pornographic elements within the setting of post-3/11 literature, it encourages critical thinking and first-hand experience, in a contemporary society where even the relationship with human loss and mourning after a tragedy is standardized for immediate uncritical reference.

In Taguchi's debut novel *Konsento* (2000) the protagonist Yuki finds her reclusive brother dead in his apartment. The shocking discovery compels her to reflect on life and death, and the reasons that may have led her brother to end his life. This process lays bare her loneliness as well as her frantic pursuit of sexual stimulation. She does so as she longs for real inter-personal connections; she ultimately achieves this by radically rethinking her personal and corporeal identity, and her relationships with others. Corporeal stimuli are also central to Hirano's *Kao no nai ratai tachi* (Nudes Without Faces, 2006), where continuous violent stimuli feed a perverse sexual relationship between a middle school teacher and a civil servant. Their sexual exhibitionism, enhanced by the possibilities of immediate access to communities online, is their only means to interact and thus oppose the presentist monotony of their lives. The Internet's immediacy in the access, production and consumption of information enables people to create numerous parallel identities. Their identity is reduced to a single facet that, while true, is valid only in the localized reality of the porn website. As the two characters do not confront others critically, they cannot escape immediacy in their real life.

Chapter 5 focuses on representations of immediacy in popular culture. The three works discussed portray fantasies of immediacy set in the future, or in an unspecified past. In the anime and manga immediacy, isolation, and the absence of thought feature prominently, as

characters eventually bring forward ways to escape the cycle of immediacy by forging inter-personal connections. This applies especially to the two anime, whereas the manga also highlights the immediacy of violence and stimuli. The anime *Shin seiki Evangelion* (1995-1996, henceforth *Evangelion*) is set in a post-apocalyptic future where unidentified alien creatures appear to destroy the planet. The only resistance available to mankind is to employ androids that only certain special children, one of whom is the protagonist Shinji, can pilot. Unable to make sense of his identity in this obscure society, Shinji indulges in the immediacy of his mental isolation, seeking refuge from the world in solipsistic fantasies of self-hatred. Only through profound self-inspection is he able to unmask his malaise and escape the isolation of immediacy by asserting his identity in the face of the community of people around him.

The anime *Psycho-Pass* (2012-2013) is set in a futuristic Japan where computers scan people and assign them professions according to their abilities. As even the propensity to commit crimes is determined pre-emptively by technology, every aspect of life is classified and addressed. This system causes the future Japanese to submit themselves to the immediacy offered by this omniscient system, which promises them stability at the expense of their critical thought. However, the main characters challenge the unchanging present embodied by the system with their critical reactions: while two of them are destructive and cannot bring about real change, the last solution advocates building a community of people who think and strive for a better world outside of immediacy.

The manga series *Shingeki no kyojin* (2009-) is set in an unspecified time period in the past, where giant creatures known as Titans have decimated the human population, which has taken refuge inside three massive walls. The walls are a barrier between the immediacy and absence of thought of a seemingly quiet life inside them, and the critical enquiry into the

outside world, where soldiers venture to kill the Titans and unravel their mysteries. Immediacy emerges from the presentist sense of danger too: the soldiers cannot oppose decisive offensive strategies against the powerful enemies and can only wage battles for their own survival in presentist cycles where the last day of humanity is replayed endlessly. Finally, the stimulation of violence plays a crucial role. When soldiers kill the Titans, they respond to violent stimuli that are magnified by the hatred towards the enemies that have caused so much tragedy. The carefully drawn panels of violent action graphically render this process of immediate gratification and catharsis from violent action.

Chapter 6 is a space to draw the conclusions. After summarizing the final observations made in each previous chapter, it discusses how the study of immediacy contributes to the broader field of modern Japanese literary studies, as well as of popular culture. Further, it presents related issues that were considered in the study but that could not be included in the dissertation due to word limit. Finally, the chapter considers possible avenues for future research.

## Chapter 2

### Immediacy and contemporary culture

This chapter explores theories in contemporary culture related to immediacy. Ranging from shifts in media consumption to theories in fine arts and to psychological trends in contemporary youth, the theories show the relevance of aspects of immediacy across various levels of the current debate on contemporary Japanese culture. Azuma's database theory postulates that in the present age audiences do not consume popular culture for the grand ideologies they can find in the products; instead, they concentrate simply on recurring elements that are combined in each product. In the ideological vacuum, cultural products appeal because they elaborate superficial elements that the users appreciate for their immediate familiarity. A reduction in scope to the immediately familiar, local environment emerges also from the *sekai-kei* (world system) trend in popular culture, describing those products that reduce grand-scale apocalyptic narratives of the end of the world to the localized dimension of personal stories.

The immediacy of action in the vacuum shares numerous points of contact with Uno Tsunehiro's theory of *savaiv-kei* (survival system, henceforth *survive-kei*) that Uno sees as distinctive of manga and anime after the year 2000. Uno argues that products in this era have somehow internalized the vacuum, and therefore focus on constant immediate action, as the protagonists are aware that they need to act perpetually in order to survive.

Aspects of the ideological vacuum and immediacy emerge from another later theory by Uno, arguing that in the contemporary age, where social ideals have disappeared, cultural outputs respond by portraying myriads of "Little People", characters that struggle for their

own personal values. This reduction of scope is related to immediacy because it shows the prevalence of narratives where characters (particularly heroes) only focus on their proximate reality, without engaging in thinking about lofty ideals: instead, they act repetitively to maintain their present circumstances, in an endless presentist cycle.

Immediacy, especially as informed by presentism, is prominent in two studies on contemporary aesthetics. First, Murakami Takashi's artistic idea of "Superflat" shows a convergence of different cultural levels on the same artistic space, thus eliminating any demarcations between high and low cultures. Traditional artistic canons disappear to coalesce into an all-encompassing present time of art. In the second study, psychiatrist Kumashiro Tōru posits that in contemporary Japan the sense of time and ageing has flattened and stretched almost limitlessly, as people try to rejuvenate themselves in order to postpone old age indefinitely, and thus constantly live in the present of their youth.

The theories in this chapter shed further light on the presence of elements of immediacy in cultural discourse and advance the overall argument by providing valuable theories to apply to the textual analyses in the chapters that follow.

### **2.1 Narrative consumption and the database theory**

Critic Azuma Hiroki's renowned and influential "database theory" posits that contemporary popular culture works are skilful mixtures of recurring elements derived from a database of tropes and characters familiar to the audience, who then experience the occurrences of each element as they consume them. His theory is relevant as it illustrates audiences' behaviour in the ideological vacuum where, instead of consuming products for the grand messages and ideals they convey, audiences content themselves with combinations of elements they recognize immediately (localized realities).

In *Dōbutsuka suru posutomodan* (Otaku: Japan's Database Animals, 2001), Azuma traces shifts in the perception of cultural products in the mid- to late 90s that have resulted in the contemporary trend in immediate cultural consumption. He does this by focusing on consumption trends of the so-called *otaku* (a general term for individuals with obsessive interests in comics, anime, video games, technology, science fiction and the like).<sup>25</sup> According to Azuma, although *otaku* are usually referred to as representatives of a subculture, they nonetheless constitute a significant portion of the consumer market in Japan and therefore shed valuable insight on the shifts in society's appreciation and demand for cultural products.

Azuma argues that in the decade between the late-80s and the mid- to late-90s a shift occurred from “narrative consumption” (*monogatari shōhi*) to “database consumption” (*dētabēsu shōhi*). The former was first introduced by the social critic and anthropologist Ōtsuka Eiji in his 1989 book *Monogatari shōhiron* (Theory of Narrative Consumption). The categories theorized here are relevant to understanding Azuma's argument. Ōtsuka's theory is based on the relationship between derivative works (*niji sōsaku*, indicating the reworking, especially in sexualized versions, of manga, anime and video games in derivative publications such as *dōjinshi*, “fan publications”), and “simulacra.” Theorized by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard between the mid 70s and early 80s, the simulacra theory postulates that in postmodern society the differences between original products and copies will become less discernible, yielding to a sort of middle form, the simulacrum, that is neither original nor

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<sup>25</sup> The term *otaku* first appeared in the 70s to indicate the supporters of a new subculture wave beginning in the 70s. However, the term as it is used commonly now (referring to a subculture groups), was first employed by Nakamori Akio in 1983. In the late 80s, *otaku* took on a negative connotation, in that it was associated with the serial abductions and murders of little girls perpetrated by the “*otaku* murderer” Miyazaki Tsutomu. After this event, the word became associated with antisocial and perverse behaviours and personalities. In an introduction in the magazine *Shūkan Yomiuri* 10 (1989), Nakamori describes them as individuals that are “bad at communicating, a skill proper of human nature, and therefore prone to isolating themselves in their own world.” Such belief appears to be widely held even nowadays (Azuma, *Dōbutsuka* 176).

copy.<sup>26</sup> It follows then that consumers (mainly, but not exclusively, *otaku*,) who do not distinguish between original and derivative products actually make their choice precisely at a simulacrum level, where copies and originals no longer exist (Azuma, *Dōbutsuka* 41).<sup>27</sup>

In this context where simulacra are dominant, Ōtsuka explains that cultural products are not consumed *per se*, but exist as fragments showing a “grand narrative” (*ōkina monogatari*) or order (*chitsujo*) existing in the background.<sup>28</sup> Sales of derivative products are effectively driven by the consumers’ belief that purchasing them will bring them closer to a grand narrative. Ōtsuka sees a new tendency in consumeristic society exactly in this shared sensitivity that does not consume a single drama or object, but the system itself that necessarily exists in the backdrop. The system (the grand narrative), however, cannot be sold in its entirety, therefore only parts of it are consumed. Ōtsuka terms this situation “narrative consumption” (Ōtsuka 13–14, 17–18).

Ōtsuka also posits the existence of “small narratives” (*chiisana monogatari*) at the opposite end of the spectrum: “However, a product presupposing such ‘narrative consumption’ has an extremely dangerous side to it. In other words, after consumers have consumed a large number of ‘small narratives’, if they are able to latch onto the ‘grand narrative’ (the entire programme), they then become capable of creating ‘small narratives’ freely with their own hands” (ibid. 18-19). Small narratives indicate here narrative elements circumscribed within certain works, such as characters or plot twists. Conversely, grand narratives are indeed the backbone of small narratives, but as they exist primarily in the form of narrative settings and

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<sup>26</sup> For more on Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra see (*L’échange; Simulacres*), published in 1976 and 1985, respectively.

<sup>27</sup> The reality of the simulacra is not only present from the consumers’ point of view. There are various instances of authors themselves oscillating indistinctly between the planes of original and derivative works. For example, Takeuchi Naoko, author of the *Sailor Moon* manga, is known to have exhibited often at fan products’ conventions. Moreover, even Gainax, the studio responsible for *Evangelion*, has produced numerous parodistic iterations of its original anime.

<sup>28</sup> *Ōkina monogatari* is translated as “grand narrative” in the English translation of Azuma’s book by Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono (Azuma, *Otaku*). The same applies for *chiisana monogatari* (small narrative).

worldview, they are unable to come to the foreground. Although *otaku* – and mass consumers in general – want to consume sections of grand narratives, the setting and worldview cannot be experienced as a whole: as a result, small narratives, namely fragments of the system, are consumed as products (Azuma, *Dōbutsuka* 50).

In his 2001 book, Azuma argues that Ōtsuka’s narrative consumption model, while sufficient to delineate a modern era in which grand narratives were still functional as the deeper background to smaller narratives, no longer captures the situation adequately in the

The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The image was sourced at: Azuma, *Dōbutsuka* 51.

postmodern/contemporary age, where users consume single elements that are immediately familiar to them. In the preceding modern era, Azuma writes, the world could be schematized through the so-called “tree model”, which graphically depicts a superficial (*hyōsō*) world comprised of small narratives. That world is in turn regulated by a deep layer (*shinsō*), corresponding to the grand narrative (Figure 1).<sup>29</sup> However, this tree model has been replaced by the database model:

A simple example [of the database model] would be the Internet. There is no core there. Namely, no hidden grand narrative regulating all webpages exists. [...] If anything, on the one hand, the Internet is the accumulation of codified information; on the

other hand, it consists of individual webpages built in response to the users’ readings [...]. This two-layered structure greatly differs from the modern era’s tree model in that the agency determining the appearance emerging on the surface (the webpages seen by single users) is not in a deep layer but on the surface, meaning that it does not reside in the hidden information itself, but on the side of the users reading them. In the modern era’s tree-type world the surface was determined by the deep layer, but in the postmodern database-type world the surface is not determined solely by the deep layer, but by manifest

Figure 1 The modern tree model and the postmodern database model

<sup>29</sup> Azuma, *Dōbutsuka* 51.

expressions as different as the numerous moments in which the works are read.  
(*Dōbutsuka* 52–53)

The database consumption model offers insights into contemporary products' consumption based on immediacy, namely the combination of elements immediately known by audiences, but with the absence of critical enquiry into ideals or form of superstructures (the grand narratives). The database model, according to Azuma, has come to the fore with the decline of such grand narratives, a context akin to the ideological vacuum, a precondition for immediacy. This decline is distinctive of the contemporary postmodern age. Azuma argues that up until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the world was still following the tree model, in that grand narratives in the form of ideologies were sought after, produced, and passed on. One example might be the leftist student movements following political grand narratives. However, the social and political upheaval of the 60s ushered in an age which, from the 70s onwards, gave rise to postmodern culture wherein grand narratives were no longer produced nor required. Those educated in the previous era found themselves caught between a world that was already being defined through a database, but which was still characterized by the now obsolete tree model. This contradiction induced the production of fabricated (*netsuzō*) grand narratives, such as the surge of interest in the US towards new science and mysticism in the 70s, or the first generation of *otaku* in Japan. Against this background, the shift to a database system ushered in the decline of the necessity of fabrications. The generations born and raised in the postmodern age consume products with the database in mind; in other words, they do not require an all-encompassing superstructure (ibid. 56-57).

Following the decline of interest in grand narratives, consumers of popular culture in the last two decades appreciate instead the immediacy of recurring elements. For example, the *otaku* of the 90s grew less interested in the original outputs (manga or anime), and privileged

instead the consumption of single elements, or fragments, in the form of action figures and illustrations. This special kind of consumption is called *chara moe* (*lit.* character fascination).<sup>30</sup> An instance of this can be found in the comparison between two popular anime: *Mobile Suit Gundam* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. Both portraying youngsters caught in a war, they are two banners of the anime booms of their respective ages:

These two products were consumed and supported by two completely different attitudes towards narrative. [...] Most *Gundam* fans channel their passion into the close inspections and full realization of one *Gundam* world. It means that the enthusiasm towards a grand fictional narrative is still upheld. However, I believe that the fans of *Evangelion*, which appeared in the mid-90s, a particularly young generation (third generation), did not quite direct their interest toward the *Evangelion* world as a whole. Rather, from early on they concentrated their interest on characters' design and configuration, as objects of excessive derivative readings and *chara moe*. In other words, in that instance a grand narrative, or fiction, like the *Gundam* world was no longer the object of desire, not even as a fantasy. *Gundam* fans are known for being unusually fussy about consistency in the "Universal Century" chronology and the mechanics' reality. In opposition to that, most *Evangelion* fans needed the various settings only in order to feel empathy towards the protagonists' setting, draw erotic illustrations of the heroine[s] and build action figures of the giant robots: they showed obsessive interest to that extent, yet they rarely immersed themselves in the work's world any deeper. (Azuma, *Dōbutsuka* 59–60)

Azuma's database theory illustrates aspects of immediacy in contemporary media theory. The demise of grand narratives in the postmodern age, from the mid-90s is akin to the ideological vacuum because it defines an age where consumers (of popular culture here, but the reasoning may be extended to other products such as literature) do not believe in the existence of grand narratives, ideologies or superstructures that they may seek in cultural products. In this vacuum, users consume cultural products without enquiring into grand narratives, but enjoy them as skilful combinations of elements that are familiar to them. In other words, in the database model they do not consume products as a whole, but only fragments of them. This

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<sup>30</sup> The expression roughly translates to "character fascination", where *moe* is *otaku* jargon referring to fascinating cute characters, usually female, appearing in manga and anime.

discourse informs the investigation on immediacy because it echoes the attitude of characters who suspend their critical thought for ideals in the vacuum, and who focus on the reality that is immediately recognizable to them. Alongside immediacy in the arts, Azuma highlights a contemporary trend in which, within the demise of grand narratives that may provide meaning both at the fictional and ideological level, consumers direct their interest towards the immediate satisfaction of small narratives. In media consumption too, an ideological vacuum is a precondition for a general focus on proximate realities.

## 2.2 Sekai-kei and survive-kei

The theories of *sekai-kei* and *survive-kei*, developed in relation to Japanese cultural products from the mid-90s onwards, are important in describing points of contact with immediacy. Both deal with works set in an ideological vacuum. Against the decline of grand narratives, both trends describe the reduction of stories to the characters' immediately perceptible, local realities: in particular *sekai-kei* products reduce superstructures to individual stories, whereas *survive-kei* characterizes outputs where reiterated individual action is central.

The *sekai-kei* was first used by critics in the early 00s to describe products in popular culture, literature and other arts from the mid-90s to the *zero nendai*. It refers to the reduction of grand narratives to familiar one-to-one relationships involving the proximate surroundings of the main characters, the only dimension that matters. Art and media critic Kurose Yōhei defines the *sekai-kei* clearly in an article:

*Sekai-kei* generally indicates a narrative form that directly connects the small personal relationship of the protagonist (I) and his love interest (you) to big issues such as the 'world's dangers' and the 'end of this world' without inserting any description of middle terms [chūkankō] such as society or the state, a middle ground so to say. (108)

Lacking a middle ground, the nature of the *sekai-kei* narrative structure became an object of debate among Japanese intellectuals.<sup>31</sup> Literary critic Maeda Rui (pseudonym for a literary critic group run by Waseda professor Ichikawa Makoto) wrote that the particular structure is a result of the “choice not to portray any economic or historical issues that should exist as structure. In other words, [it is a] choice obeying the arbitrary ‘interest’ of the writer” (253). However, a large number of critics did not concentrate their arguments on the rightfulness of the *sekai-kei* narrative. For example, the writer and critic Kasai Kiyoshi defined Maeda’s critique essentialist, and countered that *sekai-kei* products are the “expression, necessary to this age, of the disorder [*shicchō*] and incompleteness of the will structuring the social sphere” (*Tantei* 57–58). The second position illustrates that the lack of engagement with the middle ground, or grand narrative, is rather an expression of the spirit of the age, rather than the whim of a single author.<sup>32</sup>

One example of *sekai-kei* is the 2005 anime series *Air*.<sup>33</sup> The protagonist Kunisaki Yukito sets out on his journey as an itinerant artist to save “the girl crying in the sky”, a promise he made to his dying mother. He then encounters the heroine Kamio Misuzu and becomes involved in her personal story. Her story, however, is also related to Yukito’s mission, because she is affected by a mysterious illness, linked to her other self, the girl in the sky, who is constantly plagued by sad dreams. As the content of her dreams gradually goes back in time, in the end both Misuzu and her other self die. The mystery of the dreams is revealed in the second chapter, called “SUMMER.” Set a thousand years before the first chapter “DREAM”, SUMMER is the story of Ryūya and the winged female of a noble species Kanna, known as “Yokuto”, who is a huge repository of memories with the purpose of passing them on to her

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<sup>31</sup> It is a middle ground which used to be necessarily naturalistic (Kurose 108).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. also: Kurose 108.

<sup>33</sup> Kurose mentions that attributing *Air* to the genre might not encounter general agreement, yet he asserts that the series expresses the essence of *sekai-kei* creativity in animation (116).

offspring. It becomes clear that Misuzu's suffering and subsequent death are caused by the fact that the girl has inherited the painful memories of Kanna, who is killed by the imperial court. The tragic fate of Yukito and Misuzu was predetermined by the tragic end of Kanna/Yokuto, and there is no possibility of resolution: Misuzu's sad dreams can only go back in time to their origin one thousand years earlier. With its central personal relationship set as a lens for a plot with far-reaching threads, *Air* is emblematic of the *sekai-kei* narrative: "Here, 'Yokuto's tragedy' that occurred one thousand years earlier is the 'end of this world'; the relationship between Yukito and Misuzu, who wound up inheriting [Yokuto's tragedy], is arranged as a 'you and me' [relationship]. This is clearly the basic *sekai-kei* narrative structure (Kurose 117).

The reduction to local realities in the *sekai-kei* discourse is not limited to popular culture. In *Nihon. Gendai. Bijutsu.* (Japanese. Contemporary. Art., 1998), art critic Sawaragi Noi argues that postwar Japan does not have a legitimate art history because the 1955 system, which upheld postwar democracy, isolated Japan from the rest of world history, thus turning the country into an ahistorical place. As art and its counter-movements are embedded in history, how can they exist in an ahistorical Japan? Sawaragi's enquiry of the roots of tradition echoes in principle studies such as Karatani Kōjin's *Nihon kindai bungaku no kigen* (Origins of Modern Japanese Literature, 1980), yet the art critic's focus is on the narratives (*monogatari*). He sets out to use the writing style (*buntai*) of postwar art critics not to escape the "postwar critical space, but to unravel the conditions that make the postwar the postwar self-referentially while adopting a specifically art critical stance" (*Nihon* 26).

Sawaragi's approach is *sekai-kei*-esque because in order to trace postwar art history's ahistoricity he focuses on local narratives of other emblematic critics, which are located within their self-referential dimension of art criticism. More importantly, it also entails immediacy insofar as the personal styles become local to him, immediately familiar, serving as a single

present used to retrace the past. As a result, Sawaragi concludes that the origin of Japan's transformation into an ahistorical "bad place" (*warui bashō*) lies in the war images' distorted representations of the Asian Pacific War. The images, symbolizing the war, are a repressed trauma that needs to be addressed directly, otherwise postwar art will never possess a history, and it will end up trapped in a sterile cycle of repetition and oblivion.<sup>34</sup>

The cycle of repetition and oblivion is a sign of presentism, and is not limited to art history. It manifests the immediacy of a perpetual present, where different events are juxtaposed together to create small local narratives. In the 2002 volume *'Bakushinchi' no geijutsu* (The Art of Ground Zero), Sawaragi juxtaposes the images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki's mushroom clouds to those of the World Trade Center in flames on 9/11, and comments:

Why are we engraving somewhere in our brain the 'end of the world' and the 'remains and ruins of fire' so strongly, although in truth we have never seen or experienced them? I don't understand it clearly. However, one thing I can say is that postwar Japanese, to varying degrees, have experienced the 'end of the world' and the 'remains and ruins of fire' over and over through television and films, and subculture such as manga and anime: Tokyo destroyed by the great monster 'Godzilla', awakened from his primeval slumber by radioactivity; *Space Battleship Yamato* trying to save the earth which has been turned into a death star by radioactivity; the imperial capital turned into a mountain of debris by the psychic wars depicted in *Akira*; the children in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, who are compelled to suicidal mission by the 'student mobilization' in order to stand up to the unidentified 'angels'... The examples are practically countless: within that thin 'subcultural creativity' lacking a perspective, over and over we have made Tokyo and Japan into ruins, and also fought atrocious hand-to-hand battles with the protagonists trying to survive them. (388)

While playing a prominent role for *sekai-kei* narratives, *Evangelion* also contains the seeds of criticism by Uno Tsunehiro, who theorizes a change in creativity in *zero nendai* works. This change from *sekai-kei* to *survive-kei* and the so-called "decisionism" (*ketsudan shugi*) touch on immediacy because they highlight the internalization of the vacuum, where characters

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<sup>34</sup> Kurose 112.

acknowledge that without strong ideals the world is a constant battle for survival, and the consequent emphasis on reiterated immediate action.

Uno's theory is primarily a reaction to *sekai-kei*. He argues that critics espousing the *sekai-kei* interpretation, especially Azuma, failed to recognize a shift in creativity from the late 90s and early *zero nendai* because they were still under the influence of the trends expressed in *Evangelion*. The *sekai-kei* discourse, defined by Uno as "post-*Evangelion* syndrome", in the early 00s still relied too heavily on the *hikikomori* tendency of the protagonist(s) in the anime series. In robot anime prior to *Evangelion*, piloting a *mecha* meant self-realization vis-à-vis society, usually embodied by a scientist father.<sup>35</sup> However, the protagonist Ikari Shinji flees from his imposed duty and progressively shuts himself in. He no longer seeks self-realization in the eyes of society, but yearns for someone who can accept him unconditionally. Thus, *Evangelion* symbolizes the *hikikomori* trend of products after 1995 and onwards. Since it is impossible to find meaning in an obscure world, characters avoid any critical confrontation and seek refuge in isolation: "*Neon Genesis Evangelion* portrays the hopelessness that, in such an opaque world where nobody explains what is right, if you get involved with others and try to do something, you are inevitably going to fail, hurt someone and even hurt yourself" (Uno, *Zero Nendai* 16). By interpreting popular culture products in the *zero nendai* through this trend and classifying them as *sekai-kei*, Azuma and other critics influenced by him did not realize that this category had been surpassed. Uno writes:

The feeling that 'the world is strange' weakened the young's faith in social self-realization, and in exchange psychologism seeking acceptance for the self-image (character setting) became widespread. The very reflection of such 'feeling' was called 'sekai-kei', which connected the 'inner self' and the 'world' directly, without a middle ground such as 'society' and 'history' that couldn't be trusted anymore. [...] That was indeed a 'new creativity' [*atarashii sōzōryoku*], no doubt about it, however ten years ago. This world understanding

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<sup>35</sup> The term *mecha*, deriving from *mekanizumu*, *mekanikaru* in Japanese, indicates large armoured robots, usually controlled by a pilot stationed inside, appearing in manga and animation.

by Azuma is not keeping up at all with the world after 2001 – with the world after the synchronized terrorist attacks in the US and the structural reforms of the Koizumi Junichirō administration. (*Zero nendai* 29)

The new creativity advocated by Uno emphasizes immediate action predicated on the realization and acceptance of a vacuum where grand narratives are no longer possible. In the face of an opaque society, characters do not escape into their inner selves, but instead act and seek confrontation with others because, though painful, they need to do so to survive. Uno calls this trend focused on action for survival *survive-kei*, with at its base the sense of survival (*savaiv kan*) that took the place of the *hikikomori* trend at the turn of the millennium. Uno writes that against the background of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the new disparities in society, the youth began to generally realize that if they shut themselves off, they would inevitably be harmed by events out of their control: isolation would lead to annihilation. Therefore, the only way to avoid extinction was to embrace the conflict of living in a community and take instant action (“Ushinawareta” 93–94).

A major difference between *survive-kei* and the discourse on immediacy lies precisely in action based on community. While in immediacy action is carried out in the absence of critical thought, generating isolation as characters only concentrate on their immediate local reality, in the *survive-kei* characters act to escape from isolation, thus embracing confrontation with a community, even though acting entails hurting others. However, Uno’s argument is relevant because it still highlights the need for constant action aimed at survival. Characters need to take action: not a well-structured one that will help them explain and reconcile with society, but rushed, even repetitive action that enables them to survive another day.

A prime example of this notion is the novel *Batoru rowaiaru* (Battle Royale, 1999) by Takami Kōshun. A high school class is suddenly kidnapped by order of the authoritarian Japanese government, now calling itself “Republic of Greater East Asia.” They are brought to

a deserted island and forced to kill each other until only one remains alive. The theme central to the plot is that if the individual loses himself in an identity crisis where he no longer understands who he is or what he needs to do, like Shinji, then he is bound to be killed in the hardship of the present world. The novel ushered in a new awareness among the young audiences in the *zero nendai* that inaction would lead to extinction. *Batoru rowaiaru* encountered great success, with a film version directed by Fukasaku Kinji released in 2000, and a manga version, with art by Taguchi Masayuki, serialized from 2000 to 2005.<sup>36</sup>

The *survive-kei* originates from a coexistence, with others and society, which is inevitable for the individual. The murderous competition on the island exemplifies the struggle that is present at all levels in contemporary life, be it in the workplace or in the family. Facing this struggle, the characters in *zero nendai* products discard the *hikikomori* inaction and embrace the fight for survival. The impulse for immediate action is motivated by the will to survive with one's own strength. The sense of survival at the core of the *survive-kei* originates from the spirit of "decisionism" (*ketsudan shugi*), which largely characterizes the early and mid-00 years (Uno, "Ushinawareta" 94). Decisionism, Uno writes, presupposes the impenetrability of the world, and does not take the powerlessness it entails as a hindrance or as an outlet for isolation, but rather accepts and overcomes it. It indicates the individuals' realization of the world as a battlefield, and their agency to first think by themselves and take action for their personal values. In the chaos of contemporary life, the *zero nendai* decisionist chooses what to believe, which might even turn out to be groundless, but is as good a value as any to survive (*Zero nendai* 94).

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<sup>36</sup> A spin-off manga, with art by Ōnishi Mioko and Oguma Yōhei, and focusing on the six girls barricading in the lighthouse seen in the main story arc, was published in 2011 under the title *Batoru rowaiaru. Tenshi tachi no kokkyō* (Battle royale: Angels' Border).

Decisionism is connected with immediacy because it acknowledges the need for quick action. It is not a passive stance, but an active choice to act on the moment repeatedly, born out of acceptance of the existence of the ideological vacuum. It is a decision to embrace the *ima deshō* impulse and take agency. Emblematic of this paradigm is the manga *Death Note*. The protagonist Yagami Light represents the decisional power of the *zero nendai* because he wants to react to the presentism of the unchanging contemporary age, always acting until he achieves his aims. Light is bored with how the same everyday cycle keeps repeating in an unsatisfactory way: “Every day the same thing over and over. This world is rotten” (Ōba and Obata, *Death Note* 1:5). He encounters the possibility for reaction when he finds the magical Death Note. The notebook is in truth an instrument that belongs to the *shinigami* (gods of death) who, from their heavenly realm, observe and select humans to kill instantly, thus prolonging their own life by the amount of time subtracted from their victims’ original life span. The *shinigami* Ryuk, bored like Light with the endless cycle of identical days, decided to have fun by letting a human have his notebook. When Light first tries the incredible power of the Death Note, he experiences a moral dilemma on the righteousness of its usage, which he then overcomes in the spirit of decisionism accepting the world’s competitive nature:

I...I killed two people. I...killed....two people...What should I do? Th...this dreadful notebook....No. Wasn't the first one a man nobody would care about if he died? But what about the second one? He sure wasn't so evil to deserve the death penalty! No...Isn't this what I always thought? The world is rotten. Rotten people should die. I...I can do it with this notebook...The only problem is my force of will...Only after two people I'm feeling like this [Light is scared in his bed]...But of course, we're talking about human life...Can't be taken lightly. Will I resist? Should I give up?.....No, no. I can't give up...Even if I have to sacrifice my soul and my life. Someone has to do it! Things can't go on like this. Even if I gave this notebook to someone else, would he be able to do it? No one's as great as that.....That's right...I can do it...no...Only I can do it. I'll do it! I'm going to change the world with the Death Note. (1:42-45)

Light's new justice derives from his dissatisfaction at the contemporary world, where good people are at the mercy of petty criminals, and highly dangerous mass-murderers are on the loose, or even kept in prisons without being executed. His purpose is to create a perfect society purified of all evil, where he will rise as the god deciding matters of life and death. If, as Ōsawa Masachi has put it, Japan is living in an age of impossibility, where it is not clear what is good or wrong for the country, then Light's own set of values stands a fair chance to become the new rule. The condition is obviously that he win the world's competition by eliminating the adversaries he encounters in his path. As long as he does so, he will gain wider and wider consensus, and his set of beliefs will determine what is right. Here, immediacy is played out in Light's mindset which internalizes the world as a conflict zone and is constantly ready for immediate action.<sup>37</sup>

*Survive-kei* and decisionism are not only distinctive of popular culture, but are visible also in *junbungaku*. One prime example is the Akutagawa prize-winning novel *Keritai senaka* (The Back I Want to Kick, 2003) by Wataya Risa (real name Yamada Risa). While the novel is mentioned by Uno as an example of struggle for survival and action in a circumscribed environment, it also contains aspects of immediacy for the descriptions of violence in response to stimuli.

*Keritai senaka* is set in the localized environment of a classroom, where students compete for popularity. The protagonist Hasegawa Hatsumi (Hatsu) is a first-year high school student who dislikes her classmates, isolating herself from them. She approaches a fellow outsider, her classmate Ninagawa Satoshi, by telling him that she once met his idol, the young celebrity Orichan. Satoshi, craving for information on Orichan, gradually becomes interested in Hatsu. The two of them then start to spend time together at his house. There, Hatsu finds the

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<sup>37</sup> Except for the first time he uses the Death Note's lethal power, Light has almost no hesitation in acting to achieve his purpose.

picture of a naked woman whose face has been replaced by that of Orichan: on the spur of the moment, she kicks Satoshi in the back. As their relationship continues, Hatsu however does not feel she is in love with Satoshi. She feels an emotion apparently stronger than love, the violent stimulation to kick and hurt him.

In Wataya's novel decisionism informs the immediacy of action and stimulation. The acknowledgement of the vacuum and of society as a battlefield instils in the characters the impulse to act and participate in the fray to guarantee their survival. The competition to survive socially is played out in the localized environments of, first, the classroom and, then, between the two young students. However, Hatsu's involvement with Satoshi does not develop into a canonical love story: it drags on as a relationship that is not clearly defined. There is no clear purpose in her being with him if not to guarantee her social survival and to find solace in responding to the stimuli of harming him. Arguably, behind the stimuli for immediate violence here is an attempt to instil brutal physical sensations into a society where the young feel emotionally numb because in the ideological vacuum they are incapable of understanding their role in society. Against this backdrop, Hatsu's sudden urge to kick may be seen as a way to channel an indefinite emotion into physical pain and thus feel alive, although it ultimately constitutes mere momentary satisfaction.

The two theories in this section inform the main argument because they are parallel hypotheses detecting aspects of immediacy in contemporary cultural outputs. First, both trends presuppose the ideological vacuum: *sekai-kei* creativity identifies the vacuum as the absence of metanarratives and channels critical issues such as death and the end of the world into the small, localized sphere of personal relationships. By doing so, it is akin to immediacy insofar as the characters concentrate on their local realities, which defy any attempt at grand narratives. On the other hand, *survive-kei* assimilates the vacuum as a conflicted society that

does not provide clear coordinates, or defined ethics. However, rather than escaping from this society, characters take immediate action in order to avoid extinction. Although in Uno's theory action does not take place in the absence of critical thought, it is still immediate and repetitive, because it must fill the vacuum over and over, lest the conflict afoot in the world overwhelm the characters. Although different in purpose, action in *survive-kei* highlights a contemporary urge to exist in the moment (that may be a response to stimuli) aimed at survival, because in the vacuum every moment may well be the last.

### **2.3 The age of Little People and augmented reality**

Uno's theory of Little People offers valuable insights into contemporary narratives in popular culture, literature and other media, that describe characters focusing on their local realities (small narratives) in the absence of critical confrontation with metanarratives (grand narratives) or superstructures that are no longer available in the vacuum, or are not sought after. Postulating the proliferation of a myriad of small narratives in the absence of grand ones, this theory touches on immediacy by highlighting the prevalence of local realities against the characters' engagement in critical thought. Moreover, Uno's final argument about augmented reality theorizes that derivative works expand the present creative dimension in a similar way to the spatialization of contemporary culture posited by Jameson.

The proliferation of small narratives (Little People) is distinctive of the contemporary age from the mid-90s. In *Ritoru Pīpuru no jidai* (The Age of Little People, 2011), Uno develops this reflection based on creative representations of individuals and their perception of the world in the aftermath of 3/11. In previous generations, Uno writes, when major exceptional events occurred that might disrupt the peace and prosperity of everyday life (for example, the threat of the atomic war and the Cold War) Japanese creativity was famous for

devising powerful representations of the end of consumeristic society. Examples of this include the worldwide popular *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* by Miyazaki Hayao (*Kaze no tani no Naushika*; manga 1982-1984, animated film released in 1984), Buronson and Hara Tetsuo's manga series *Fist of the North Star* (*Hokuto no ken*, 1983-1988) set in post-atomic, post-apocalyptic worlds, or even Aum shinrikyō's attack, which compromised the citizens' sense of stability. However, the same did not happen after 3/11. Imaginative narratives of the world's end very rarely appeared, and if they did they did not function as metaphors suggesting the end of a peaceful yet mundane daily life. In 1995 events such as the sarin gas attack and the Hanshin-Awaji earthquake imbued the general population with the notion that the everyday cycle of life may end at any time. However, Uno writes, the force of these ideas weakened in the years that followed, and had completely eroded by the 2011 with Fukushima and the Great East Japan Earthquake. The situation has changed because Japanese society after 3/11 is no longer experiencing a clear-cut demarcation between what is ordinary and extraordinary (*nichijōsei* and *hinichijōsei*) (*Ritoru* 5–6).

Uno describes this contemporary instability of life coexisting with an indefinite threat by drawing parallels with fiction by Murakami Haruki. In the short story “Super-Frog Saves Tokyo” (*kaeru-kun, Tōkyō wo sukuu*), included in the collection titled *after the quake* (*Kami no kodomotachi wa mina odoru*, 2000), written in response to the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, the mysterious creature Worm (Mimizu-kun) seems to embody the mixed reality of present-day Japan. Sleeping beneath Kabuki-chō in Shinjuku, Worm reportedly has the power of causing an earthquake whenever it becomes angry. However, nothing specific is known about Worm, neither its appearance, nor exactly how it causes earthquakes. The mysterious monster represents an unsettling presence lurking in contemporary society that possesses the power to annihilate the world, but which cannot be defined clearly. Therefore,

people cannot understand, let alone control it (*Ritoru* 6). The indefinite threat posed by Worm mirrors that represented by Fukushima's nuclear reactors:

I think that in current Japanese society the creativity to grasp a being such as Worm is in short supply. A thing that, whilst being a big, incredibly big creature capable of shaking our very world, does not exist 'outside' the world, but 'inside' it. And thus a thing that doesn't have a personality, doesn't tell a story, and that can't be understood. I think that having exposed such a being is bewildering the people of this country. (ibid. 7-8)

The nuclear threat here is one example of the grand narratives that cannot be identified by contemporary creativity because they constantly change. This condition is analogous to the vacuum in immediacy, where characters do not perceive the existence of an overarching ideological structure by which they can find meaning and models for prosperity. Borrowing the term from George Orwell's novel *1984* (published in 1949), Uno writes that in the present age "Big Brother" has died, referring to a grand personified structure that until modern times used to provide citizens a grand narrative (history) by which they could establish their identity. As a consequence, the narratives of the individual as opposed to a recognized system no longer function, because the external system cannot be identified clearly. Based on such observations, Uno defines the current age as the "age of Little People" (*Ritoru Pīpuru no jidai*), both a reference to Orwell's Big Brother and to the tiny mysterious beings appearing in Murakami Haruki's series of novels *IQ84*.

Little People are beings created by the system surrounding us. They are by no means huge beings outside of us. If anything, they are beings united with our living space, invisible, constantly propagated and remade by our very lives. A simple structure, such as that of multiple little things confronting one grand one, doesn't exist anymore in the world. Rather, through countless little beings interlocking infinitely, the chain shapes the system in the form of an invisible environment. (*Ritoru* 20)<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Book 1 and 2 of *IQ84* were published in 2009, whereas Book 3 appeared one year later.

The proliferation of Little People signifies an inversion from a vertical power structure of a grand narrative (Big Brother) defining ideologies (or models against which to develop new ones) projected from above, to a horizontal structure of countless beings converging and putting forward their values and representations that are now all equivalent. In the age of the vacuum the question for creativity is “not to take distance from a large thing and dissect it, but how to respond, approach, or use the little things that are disseminated” (ibidem). The Little People’s formulation is relevant to the discourse on immediacy because it posits the existence of infinite small narratives within the circumscribed scope of the characters’ localized circumstances. These narratives all have the same value, because in the vacuum there is no place left now for Big Brother, as suggested in chapter 18, Book 1 of *IQ84*, titled “No longer any place for a Big Brother” (*mou biggu burazā no dete kuru maku wa nai*) (Murakami, *IQ84; IQ84 Book 1*).

With the progressive decay of grand narratives (systems, ideologies), exacerbated since the mid-90s, the scope of people’s horizons in life has been shrinking. Without social or political models against which to find representation (or against which to protest), the characters find acknowledgement of their existence in the small dimension of their proximate reality. This is evident in Uno’s investigation of popular culture, especially of heroes in *tokusatsu* (live-action films and shows making vast use of special effects) films and TV series. This analysis is relevant to show how contemporary narratives portray the reduction of ideologies through the emphasis on the immediacy of local realities.

One prime example is the evolution of the TV superhero Kamen Rider through various iterations across 40 years. In the first homonymous series (1971-1973), the young scientist Hongō Takeru transforms into the titular character to fight the evil organization Shocker, responsible for giving him his powers in the first place in the attempt to turn him into a cyborg

soldier. Following this pattern, the early *Kamen Rider* series still presented heroes with a defined sense of purpose, a sense of a grand narrative. It is in much later versions, those in the *zero nendai* and after, that the conflict is no longer portrayed in opposition to a form of recognized evil, but becomes an internal competition to protect the heroes' proximate surroundings, stressing the necessity to survive in the here and now. This is prominent in *Kamen raidā W/daburu* (*Kamen Rider Double*, 2009-2010. Henceforth *Kamen Rider W*). Here, the two main characters Hidari Shōtarō and the mysterious Philip fight an evil organization by using the morphing belt "W driver" and merging into one Kamen Rider W. What is striking here is that the two no longer fight for an ideal of world justice, but rather to protect their local reality, represented by the fictional town of Fūto. This local community is a circumscribed dimension, because the ideal of protection is anchored to a proximate dimension, and does not take into account the world outside of it. The example of Fūto is relevant because while representing a shifting trend within the world of *Kamen Rider*, it also represents the ultimate reduction of contemporary superheroes' ideals to localized realities:

The problematic of describing justice/evil in the age of Little People is the expiration of the publicness upheld by the criteria determined by the Big Brother. The fact that your definition of justice/evil and mine don't coincide is already a given assumption. [...] [*Kamen Rider W*] limits the world to the local community called Fūto, and by representing it as a theme park where one justice is sustained it re-staged the hero 'protecting world peace.' That is, so to speak, a degeneration to a 'small justice.' [...] *Kamen Rider W*, not portraying any city whatsoever outside of Fūto, half-consciously removes the biggest problem sweeping through the age of Little People. (Uno, *Ritoru* 349-351)

One final point in Uno's theory, the description of "augmented reality" (*kakuchō genjitsu*), is germane to the spatialization of contemporary culture advocated by Jameson. Instead of being related to the acquisition of space to the detriment of time, in this case Uno postulates a flattening of creative space that, rather than demarcating products clearly, constantly expands on them. Augmented reality indicates a tendency to emphasize an immediate, local experience

instead of reconstructing a grand narrative. Uno cites the example of the Internet; with its sensational diffusion in Japan since 1995, the Internet was expected to usher in an age where the citizens used their new capacity as originators of messages to establish a thriving civil society. However, it mostly became a platform emphasizing the sense of belonging to esoteric anonymous communities such as the popular bulletin board “2 Channeru” (2 Channel).<sup>39</sup> However, according to Uno, the other side of the coin is that Internet-focused communities also provide their users with spaces to share their personal creations, derivative products made with the tools immediately available to them. Community sites such as the famous personal video sharing web platform “Niko Niko dōga” (Smiley videos) or “pixiv.net” grant direct access to a wider public without intermediaries, allowing the circulation of personal re-elaborations of common elements, such as illustrations of characters detached from the original products in which they appeared. The proliferation of derivative products, supported by localized interests, contains the seeds of a new distinctive Japanese/Asian creativity that, rather than trying to hypothesize a grand narrative, finds its identification in the focus on localized realities, shaped and expanded by local communities.<sup>40</sup> In this sense, contemporary cultural products expand their proximate reality:

In this age of Little People, human creativity does not function as something that should draw us into ‘somewhere that is not here’, but as something that, by diving into ‘here, now’ thoroughly, reinterprets it and goes on to expand it. [...] [Fiction] manifests itself by digging deep inside ‘here, now’ – this reality’s living space, and by multiplying it. Thus, fiction is not requested and produced so that people in the present age get hold of ‘another world’ (‘somewhere that is not here’), where (grand) narratives in which the state and history give meaning to individual life are at work, but precisely so that people may start

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<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the technological advancements in hardware and software for instant communication have wound up focusing on the act of communicating itself, namely emphasizing sending messages to receive an immediate reply, regardless of the content (Uno, *Ritoru* 360). Underlying this tendency is what sociologist Kitada Akihiro has termed *tsunagari no shakaisei* (the sociability of connections), indicating a type of communication spread especially among the youth and deeply influenced by the Internet and the diffusion of mobile phones which focus on preserving the circle of communication for the sake of being connected to someone, and to the detriment of the quality and content of the messages (Kitada, *Kōkoku; Warau*).

<sup>40</sup> This is also the case of Fūto in *Kamen Rider W*.

‘small’ narratives from the ‘real world’ (‘here, now’). [...] The former fiction (in the age of the Big Brother) is of a virtual reality (VR) kind, whereas the latter fiction (in the age of Little People) is operating as an augmented reality (AR). (ibid. 414-415)

Similar to *survive-kei*, Uno’s theory of Little People is useful to advance the discourse in immediacy on the reduction of scope in contemporary narratives in the absence of grand, metanarratives (the vacuum), while offering a valuable category for literary analysis. While in the previous section the resulting emphasis was on immediate action in a conflicted world, here it is a spatial one, identifying an emphasis on the characters’ proximate reality. Against the demise of the Big Brother, the myriads of equal Little People do not seek to recuperate grand narratives, but find satisfaction in their local dimensions. Alongside this spatial reduction in emotional and physical space, the category of augmented reality also offers insights into the spatialization of contemporary culture. Born out of the localization of culture, augmented reality identifies a space of creative elaboration that may expand endlessly, blurring the boundaries between authorial and derivative products, similar to the present emphasis on space submerging categories of time in Jameson.

#### **2.4 The flattening of art and of age consciousness**

Both in immediacy and in the presentism informing it, the contemporary perception of time has been flattened, with a never-ending present extending to cover discrete notions of past and future. This section describes two contemporary theories advocating a degree of flattening in Japanese culture: the first one is the aesthetic notion of “Superflat”, theorized by Japanese artist Murakami Takashi; the second is the notion of a temporal loop, a flattening of the perception of ageing in the general population. Although they do not deal strictly with

literature but with popular culture, introducing them is valuable to illuminate how a relevant aspect of immediacy has been treated in a wider cultural discourse on Japan.

A world-renowned artist, Murakami Takashi is a painter and sculptor, but also works in fashion, merchandising and animation. He is known for having translated Japanese *otaku* creativity into art on an international scale. In 2000 he published his Superflat (*supāfuratto*) theory in the catalogue for the homonymous group exhibition he curated for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Since then, Superflat has become a keyword associated generally with Japanese postwar culture. Briefly put, Superflat refers to the blurring of high and low culture, which repackages elements of low culture (from the *otaku* subculture such as manga and anime) and exhibits them as high art, for example anime characters with bright colours presented on flat polished surfaces. The opposite is also true, as Murakami is known for adapting his creations presented as high art into products of merchandising (low art) at affordable prices. In Murakami's art the boundaries between what is considered high and low art are demolished to create a space where these two merge and coexist without differences, thus creating a pool of elements that can be reworked to produce new art. In this sense, the similarities with Azuma's database concept are evident. Superflat art is created through accessing a boundless database of elements, all present in a culture that is flattened, that has no internal hierarchies and centres on the present moment, because it creates new elements re-elaborating what is at hand. Its immediacy consists precisely of that.

For Murakami, Superflat has originated from the particular state of isolation of Japanese art that, unlike in the West, is not based on notions of highest level of quality and resources put into creations. In Japan art does not have this kind of context, as this "highest level" is neither acknowledged, nor pursued. Murakami states that "art is definitely not something Japanese" (Azuma and Kurose 81–82). Also, the incompatibility of Japanese

creations with the Western environment would lead to uneven confrontations of products. For those reasons, art cannot take root in Japan. Murakami realized that Japan does not have a pyramid-like cultural structure like the West, and that without this difference between high and low in society, it does not require art as a common language among the different layers (ibid. 87). Immediacy is evident in Japanese art's absence of critical confrontation between internal layers, and with other countries' art: as a consequence, in Japan art finds itself in a state of isolation, focusing only on its local reality. This condition has worsened from the mid-90s, when the import culture started to decline in Japan as a form of cultural vanguard, as also noted by Azuma interviewing Murakami (ibid. 90).

While this isolation from external artistic influences has prevented contemporary Japanese art from change in the Western sense, it is exactly this localization, preserving its unique environment, that generated Superflat aesthetics. Superflat was born out of the distinctive Japanese background in which there are no artistic hierarchies, and artistic creations coexist on the same level plane. Similar to notions of time in presentism, by removing definite categories Superflat art exists on an elongated plane of a constant present dimension, where different elements coexist and are recombined to create products that do away with hierarchies (as the present submerges notions of past and future in presentism).

While Superflat advocates a flattening in the canons of art, another relevant theory postulates a conflation of clear-cut categories into a flattened perception of time, specifically concerned with ageing. In the book *'Wakazukuri utsu' shakai* (The Society of 'Rejuvenation Depression', 2014), psychiatrist Kumashiro Tōru argues that the social and cultural environment in contemporary Japan has extended the perceived duration of the phase of youth, so that the population's perception of ageing has become dysfunctional, or is even negated. Immediacy is implied here because when the sense of growing old is negated, or at least

weakened, the perception of time passing itself ceases to be relevant, and is flattened within a perpetual present that, as in presentism, does not clearly envision its future ending (the coming of old age).

Kumashiro writes that present-day Japan is teeming with products that target rejuvenation, such as cosmetics, or commercials aiming to convince customers that they are young, and that they can do anything at any age, which can be included under the “shōgai geneki” (never retire) banner. Also, the protagonists in cultural products such as anime and manga, films and TV drama, are mainly young men and women of premarital age. Although older generations represent the majority of viewers, characters to whom they can relate in terms of age are actually in the minority. The result is that the perception of ageing has changed, because the focus of what is associated with being old is shifting forward (*Wakazukuri* 8). In a survey carried out by the Japanese Cabinet Office for the year 2014, 6000 people over 60 years of age across the country were asked which age they associated with being elderly. The results show that while the majority still answered “more than 70 years” with 29.1% against 48.3% in 1999, there was a significant portion of people (27.9%) answering “more than 75 years”, as opposed to only 14.7% who gave the same answer in 1999.<sup>41</sup> It is evident that the general perception of being elderly in Japan is steadily shifting towards later ages.

As the state of being youthful is extended almost indefinitely as in presentism, it follows then that the gap with actually being elderly is widening, since the perception of ageing in present-day Japanese society has become less gradual, and more of a clear-cut boundary between youth and old age: “We are made aware,” writes Kumashiro, “that when we

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<sup>41</sup> The data was taken from “Heisei 26nendo. Kōreisha no nichijō seikatsu ni kansuru ishiki chōsa kekka” (Results of the survey on the daily life awareness of the elderly. Year 26 Heisei). Cabinet Office, Government of Japan: <http://www8.cao.go.jp/kourei/ishiki/h26/sougou/zentai/pdf/s2-8.pdf>. Page 164. Accessed on 26 July 2016.

resolve to end puberty, which has now become long, or when we think of approaching our sixtieth birthday, it is surprisingly difficult to change our lifestyle up to now and move to one suitable to a senior person” (*Wakazukuri* 9). Therefore, people risk finding themselves in a confused state in which they do not know what corresponds to being old. They do not know how to age properly, so to speak. For Kumashiro, that is the eponymous depression of the contemporary loop of perpetual youth. Based on observations gathered in his work, Kumashiro writes that he has witnessed numerous cases in which this has triggered mental disorders in patients. These are cases of what he has named “rejuvenation depression” (*wakazukuri utsu*).

One relevant clinical example is the case of Ms. C, 43 at the time of writing.<sup>42</sup> Managing both work at a print company and raising her two children, but still having a dense social life and hobbies, C was well reputed in her workplace as a “self-realized woman.” However, that lifestyle was not altogether wholesome for her. She acknowledged that since she went to a concert in a spare moment from work she started suffering from insomnia, and that her capacity to concentrate diminished. She also grew more intolerant with her children. Thinking that she had to get back on track, C nonetheless kept working hard, to the point that she started to neglect eating and refrained from social engagement. After approximately six months she visited the psychosomatic department, was diagnosed with depression, and prescribed a treatment of rest and medicines. The therapy was effective: after two months C’s symptoms had improved significantly. However, she was still not satisfied, because she could not maintain her previous lifestyle filled with non-stop professional and social commitments. As the psychiatrist remarked that it was hard to keep up such a busy schedule at forty, she showed reluctance to admit physical decay caused by age by saying that she wanted to “work

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<sup>42</sup> The examples in the book are montages of the recurrent traits found in the psychiatrist’s activity, with the names of the patients omitted for the sake of privacy.

hard at the same pace she had when she was young” (*Wakazukuri* 12). Continuing with cognitive behavioural therapy sessions C’s strict beliefs on youth were mitigated to the point that, after a year, she adopted a lifestyle suited to her biological age and without relapsing into depression (ibid. 11-12). Aside from the positive final resolution, C’s case is emblematic of a shared sentiment in contemporary Japanese society that youth should be extended indefinitely.

This rejuvenation depression, the presentist sentiment of an elongated present of youth not envisioning a future change, permeates contemporary popular culture too. It is evident in the changes in worldview shown in manga, wherein the last two decades narratives where characters maintain present conditions rejecting development have replaced the postwar narratives of maturation. This is particularly evident in *shōnen* manga.<sup>43</sup> In the late 60s the baseball manga *Kyojin no hoshi* (The Star of the Giants, 1966-1971), the boxing manga *Ashita no Jō* (Tomorrow’s Joe, 1967-1973), and the volleyball *shōjo* manga *Atakku No.1* (Attack No.1, 1968-1970) were very popular.<sup>44</sup> These manga focused on portraying young athletes who trained hard and made harsh sacrifices to achieve success in their respective disciplines. While perhaps not palatable to the tastes of contemporary readers, the ordeals the characters experienced were appreciated by the audience at the time of Japan’s economic growth, with the underlying assumption that one could not be a child forever and that one needed to work hard to mature in life. However, in the decades that followed, aspects of hard work and sacrifice as necessary conditions to becoming fully-fledged men and women were progressively toned down. While in popular *shōnen* manga of the 80s such as *Seinto Seiya* (Knights of the Zodiac, 1986-1990) the characters still risked their lives repeatedly in harsh training, what differs from the sports manga of the previous era is that “such effort and

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<sup>43</sup> *Shōnen* manga are generally aimed at an adolescent male audience, whereas *shōjo* are geared towards a female readership of the same age.

<sup>44</sup> They belong to the *spokon* genre, which takes its name from the abbreviation of “supōtsu konjō mono” (works on tenacity in sport).

tenacity were not drawn as a process to mature into adults, and to rise in society, but as a process for boys to achieve victory as boys, and for the development of friendship among friends” (Kumashiro, *Wakazukuri* 80). What is more, “the shift from the ‘stories where the protagonist grows from a boy into an adult’ to ‘stories where boys mature while still being boys’ reaches its apex with the great success of *Dragonball*’s first story arc, where [the protagonist] goes on his adventure in the deformed body [of a child]” (ibidem).

The role of effort (*doryoku*) as a means to change one’s conditions drastically becomes progressively less apparent from the late 90s onwards. In popular manga such as *Death Note*, the detective manga *Meitantei Konan* (Case Closed, 1990-) effort is indeed present, yet it is tellingly subordinated to the characters’ pre-existing abilities. Yagami Light and the detective Conan Edogawa work hard in their own right, but they only do that based on their cunning and power allowing them to succeed in their quests. Effort now is not the key to success, but it can only take place insofar as the characters have certain skills and wits that make hard work worthwhile. In this sense, effort is not a game-changer, but merely an additional ability that may be added if certain conditions are met. Going back to the sports manga parallel, Kumashiro writes that while in the popular basketball story *Slam Dunk* (1990-1996) the balance between ability and effort is still maintained, the importance of ability over effort is evident in the recent tennis hit *Beibī suteppu* (Baby Steps, 2007-). Here, the protagonist Maruo Eiichirō makes efforts in sports only because he has the skill to maximize them efficiently. His hard work only functions on top of his certainty that it will lead to concrete results. It is not a practice carried out to complement, or even replace, skills. It has become a skill in its own right. That is a crucial difference with the old *spokon* manga showing tenacity in sports, and reflects the shift in taste of contemporary audiences: “It seems that even though young adults and boys in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are attracted to stories of happiness achieved through ability and

wits, they are expressing a ‘lack of confidence’ towards stories where happiness is obtained thanks to mere effort” (“Kyojin” 21). The weakening of sheer effort as a means to change one’s predicament in these narratives shows a difficulty in envisioning structural change in a future that appears foreclosed in presentism, covered by an endless present to which the characters can only react repeatedly with what they have at hand.

This chapter brings together several theories in contemporary Japanese cultural outputs that touch upon various aspects of immediacy. They provide insightful reflections to expand the present debate. They show different aspects of media consumption, characters’ focus, art and age consciousness that have shifted from the mid-90s onwards, in most cases predicated on an ideological vacuum, described as the demise of grand narratives or metanarratives. In this situation, whether on the part of consumers, as in Azuma, or of characters in cultural products, the focus has shifted to a form of presentism, where an expanded form of the present with its local familiar realities has become the only relevant dimension. In the database theory, this manifests itself in audiences interested in familiar elements that are recombined skilfully in cultural products, rather than in the grand narratives in the background. In *sekai-kei*, the decay of grand narratives and superstructures is a precondition for the reduction of said narratives to the circumscribed scope of small personal stories. As a reaction to that, Uno’s *survive-kei* and decisionism identify a post-*sekai-kei* creativity that acknowledges the ideological vacuum, and considers the world as a struggle for survival, where characters need to take instant action to guarantee their survival in seemingly endless cycles. The localization of action is prominent also in Uno’s theory of Little People, postulating that in the absence of a Big Brother contemporary creativity focuses on narratives where characters act to maintain their local realities and community.

The reduction of scope to the presentist dimension entails also a flattening of culture, a horizontal spatialization in Jameson's terms, that subsumes clear-cut categories: this happens at the level of original and derivative products, as in the expanded creative space in Uno's augmented reality; the endless present realm of art in Murakami Takashi's Superflat, typical of Japanese artistic insularity, conflates notions of high and low culture in a common artistic dimension; finally, a flattening can happen also in terms of age consciousness, as Kumashiro's rejuvenation depression shows, describing a general social environment where citizens tend to prolong an idea of youth indefinitely, often with dysfunctional consequences. With their differences and similarities, these theories all enrich the hypothesis on contemporary immediacy, highlighting relevant aspects and categories useful to bear in mind and apply in the textual analyses that follow.

## Chapter 3

### Immediacy in literature: Takahashi Genichirō

An academic and author, Takahashi Genichirō has published prolifically works ranging from novels to essays, from translations from English to Internet posts and to manuals to train aspiring writers since his debut in 1981. He has also appeared in interviews in literary and non-literary magazines and radio shows. Takahashi is a strong presence in the current Japanese literary scene, both as an author himself, but also as an intellectual reflecting openly on the contemporary state of Japanese literature, and on the social value of nation. In his multifarious production immediacy comes often to the fore as a general focus at the core of numerous issues in the contemporary life and society portrayed.

Takahashi Genichirō was born on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1951 in Onomichi, Hiroshima prefecture, as the eldest son of Takahashi Tetsurō, head of the family-owned iron foundry, and his wife Setsuko. Interested in the expressive power of words and writing from an early age, in 1967 he wrote, directed and acted in a parody of Alfred Jarry's modernist play *Ubu roi* (King Ubu, 1896), often considered a precursor to the theatre of the absurd. While in high school, he also founded a non-partisan political group (*mutō-ha*), taking part in several demonstrations. At 18 he entered the Faculty of Economics at Yokohama National University: however, his university days were turbulent, with most of his classes cancelled due to the turmoil caused by the university dispute of 1968-1969. Takahashi continued his political activism, participating in city demonstrations as part of the radical student movement. In November of the same year he was arrested for possession of dangerous weapon. Until the beginning of the following year, he was sent back and forth between prison and the Tokyo Juvenile Classification Office in

Nerima, and eventually to family court. In February 1970 he was prosecuted and taken into custody at the Tokyo Detention House until August. While in prison, he started suffering from severe aphasia, which made it impossible for him to write.

From 1972, Takahashi did manual labour for ten years, working in a construction company, a foundry, and also in a chemical plant. In 1977, due to the expiration of the maximum period of attendance, he was officially withdrawn from Yokohama National University. In 1979 he started writing again. As part of his rehabilitation from aphasia, he used to write the simple sentence “I like this glass” over and over every day. In 1980 his first novel, titled *Subarashii nihon no shōsetsu* (A Wonderful Japanese Novel), was one of three works shortlisted for the Gunzō Prize for New Writers. In 1981 he started working relentlessly on an old plot and notes. The final novel, titled *Sayōnara, gyangu tachi* (Sayonara, Gangsters), is an experimental piece of postmodern writing: chapters of one sentence occupy one page, onomatopoeic sounds in English are alternated with Japanese, and a two-page manga is inserted in-between.<sup>45</sup> *Sayōnara, gyangu tachi* won the Gunzō prize for “Outstanding Work” (*yūshūsaku*): Takahashi had officially made his debut as a writer, and could quit his job at the construction site to dedicate himself to the craft full time.

Takahashi’s literary production is vast, and ranges across multiple genres. Usually considered an exponent of Japanese postmodernism, he often plays with language, decontextualizing famous writers and personalities of the past and inserting them into contemporary contexts; his works are also known for their graphic descriptions of sexual intercourse. Together with the fiction analysed here, other notable works include: *Gōsutobasutāzu shōsetsu bōken* (Ghostbusters Adventure Novel, 1997), where Butch Cassidy

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<sup>45</sup> The novel was published in 1982. An English translation by Michael Emmerich was published by Vertical in 2004, with the title *Sayonara, Gangsters*. It is the only full-length novel by Takahashi hitherto published in the English language.

and the Sundance Kid embark on a trip across the US in search of a mysterious ghost and *A.da.ru.to* (Adult, 1999), which describes the making of a porn movie. Working on *A.da.ru.to*, Takahashi conducted fieldwork by visiting a porn movie set, and even directed a film. In *Miyazawa Kenji gurētesuto hittsu* (Miyazawa Kenji Greatest Hits, 2005), he reworked 24 children's stories by the titular author (1896-1933), adding elements of contemporary Japanese society such as *enjō kōsai*. The short story collection *Sayonara Kurisutofā Robin* (Goodbye Christopher Robin, 2012) included stories written immediately before and after 3/11. The collection won the 48<sup>th</sup> Tanizaki Junichirō Prize in the same year.

Alongside his fictional works, Takahashi has written texts for photo books such as *Oyogu hito* (Swimming Man, 1984) with photos by Kurigami Kazumi, translated literature from English such as the 1983 short story “In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried” by Amy Hempel (translation published in 1986), and translated picture books, for example *Pit Ahoi!* by Swiss children author Marcus Pfister. In his non-fiction, he has often reflected on the essence and expressive power of language, and whether language is necessary for literature; examples include the *Nippon no shōsetsu* trilogy (volumes published in 2007, 2011 and 2014), and also the essay *Hijōji no kotoba* (Words in Emergency, 2012), penned in response to the triple disaster of 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2011. Furthermore, always open to discussing political matters in contemporary Japan, he explores how Japan may recover its democratic health in the current problematic situation in *Shizumu nihon wo aisemasuka?* (Can You Love a Sinking Japan?, 2010), followed by *Don don shizumu nihon wo soledemo aisemasuka?* (Can You Still Love a Steadily Sinking Japan?, 2012), both co-authored with the intellectual Uchida Tatsuru. On the same note, in September 2015 his two-day political conversation with the leaders of the

SEALDs student organization on the possibilities of freedom and democracy in Japan were published in the volume *Minshushugi tte nanda* (Tell Me What Democracy Looks Like).<sup>46</sup>

This chapter explores how different aspects of immediacy emerge from two novels and a short-story collection in Takahashi's *oeuvre*. All three works portray the isolation and loneliness in the vacuum. Unable to make sense of their place vis-à-vis a wider community, the characters find solace in acting in the moment and in their local reality. In the novel *Godira* this is achieved through repetitive daily activities, while in the short stories in *KGY* violent responses to stimuli are prominent. Quick and repetitive actions are carried out in the general absence of critical thought, as characters resort to taking action precisely because attempts to enquire into the superstructure of their world are futile.

The actions of the characters take place in a state of presentism, in a world in which the endless cycle of the present submerges the preservation of past memory and forecloses visions of a future, whether benign or malign. This is evident especially in the frequent anachronisms of the second novel *Nihon bungaku seisuishi*, where Meiji literary history is rewritten playfully with present-day elements, thus creating an undefined temporal dimension stressing the contemporary relevance of literary and existential issues.

The three products show in different ways that re-establishing inter-personal connections leads to an escape from the endless cycles of the present. *Godira* shows that a collective critical effort may break the isolation of local realities. Similarly, *KGY* highlights the importance of community by portraying the isolation entailed by indulging in the immediacy of stimulation. Lastly, *Nihon bungaku seisuishi* envisions an escape from immediacy and the

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<sup>46</sup> The Student Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALD) was a Japanese student organization protesting against the Abe government in 2015-16, especially against the security-related bills (*anpo*) concerning the overseas deployment of the Self-defense forces. Its members took an active part in the demonstration surrounding the Diet building on 30<sup>th</sup> August. SEALDs gained great popularity, extending its presence across different media and across the country.

vacuum by emphasizing the value of memory, of not forgetting, which is vital to re-establish common categories that emerge here as existential as much as literary.

### 3.1 *Godira*

Although published by Shinchōsha in 2001, due to its serialization in the magazine *Nami* in 1996 *Godira* is the earliest fictional work by Takahashi in this study.<sup>47</sup> Beginning with a dedication to “All the poets in this world who are in anguish (e.g. Fujii Sadakazu)”, *Godira* is a collection of short stories, all set in the enclosed dimension of the Shakujii neighbourhood in Nerima, Tokyo, where Takahashi himself used to live with his family. The stories have little connection with each other, except for recurring characters, ordinary people engaging in daily activities. The various events are of a postmodern taste, mixing everyday urban reality with the appearance of aliens, or talking toys, none of which appear to upset the population. The titular character is seldom mentioned, and even less is known about it. It appears to be a sort of fabled creature holding the key to the mysteries of the world: for this reason its name, “*Godira*”, is a slightly different spelling of “*Gojira*” (Godzilla), the famous atomic monster first appeared in the in the 1954 Tōhō film.

In *Godira* immediacy emerges primarily from the extremely localized environment of a neighbourhood and the presentism in which the characters live. In the vacuum where they are unable to make sense of how the world functions, characters exist in an endless present where they can survive only by performing repetitive activities. For similar reasons, other characters indulge in repeated actions as a response to the stimuli of violence, sex and pornography in order to survive the emptiness of a world they cannot comprehend. All these actions are performed in the absence of critical thought: the characters do not usually think

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<sup>47</sup> The *tankōbon* version is a substantially revised and extended version of the stories originally published in *Nami*.

about the meaning of their roles or of life itself, because they know it would be pointless: thus, they prefer to act quickly and repeatedly. In the end, whilst one character does exert critical thought, it becomes clear that the effort of only one person is not enough. To escape immediacy effectively, a community is necessary.

The physically enclosed setting of *Shakujii* mirrors the mentally circumscribed reality where all the action takes place. Since characters live in a world whose underpinnings (its secrets, as they are called here) are hard to understand, they only care about their local reality. Therefore, they cling to the immediacy of the actions directed at their proximate world, both in terms of space and thought. No matter how ordinary the actions may be, they guarantee the characters' survival in their secluded world.

The story "O-sōji suru hito" (The Cleaning Man) is emblematic of this. A policeman obeys his impulse for immediate action to fill the vacuum. In the beginning, he is hit by a sudden epiphany, suggesting that there is a mystery hidden in the district, and that Godira holds the key to it. However, that is as far as the revelation goes. Critical thought is undermined because, on the one hand, it is impossible and, on the other, because it would not bring the man valuable knowledge: "After that he didn't clearly understand. He had an insight. He grasped the core of something. However, the core was all he could understand. Understanding only the core is actually the same as hardly understanding at all. At that point, the policeman decided to leave the insight" (*Godira* 22). Here, the core of things amounts to the surface, as only a comprehensive view of things equals drawing near to the truth. However, the policeman dismisses this option as impossible, and is instead drawn to the necessity for impulsive action.

The action here is the compulsive violence of shooting that is not motivated by a cogent suspicion or the detection of a real danger, but by the frantic search to have someone to

shoot at, whatever the reason. His victim is a man cleaning the streets of Shakuji. While the man is simply doing his job, that does not prevent the policeman to regard him as an outlet for his violent urges: “I immediately feel the urge to shoot. When I was at the police box in Akihabara, a drunkard kept pestering people, so I fired twelve shots into his feet, and when I was on duty at the box in Yotsuya 3-chome, again I put twelve bullets into the legs of a pram parked without permission” (ibid. 25).

As his colleague forces him to realize that the cleaning man has not done anything suspicious, the policeman has no choice but to refrain from violence. However, although reason and common sense seemingly clash with the immediacy of action, the latter again comes strongly to the fore as soon as an insight of truth forms in the mind of the policeman. He is struck by a feeling that the world is about to end, or that possibly it already has, and he again turns his attention to the cleaning man. Though aware that in the vacuum it is impossible to reconstruct a complete meaning, he still attempts to find one, as exemplified by the perception of the end of the world. However, since this perception is fragmented, and thus insufficient, it needs to be countered by immediate action to fill the void. That is why, thwarted by the common sense of the passive colleague, the policeman waits in ambush for the cleaning man to give him an excuse to shoot him. While looking at him from afar, he says to himself: “Yeah, I got it. Now please hurry and commit rape or something. Otherwise I can’t shoot you!” (ibid. 27). While the policeman may be waiting for a concrete motive, his focus is still on the immediacy of action, no matter the cause. The need for a crime is only an external factor imposed on him by the environment.

Another manifestation of immediacy is the monotony of repetition. In a state of presentism there are no clear notions of past and the future, therefore the characters act in an expanse of repetitive present moments. If the policeman represents the need for quick

immediate action, then his supposed target, the cleaning man finds comfort in the immediate satisfaction of repetition, the only means he has to survive the vacuum. The man has been cleaning the streets all his life. Once he also cleaned the road before the Imperial villa in Hayama. Now that he works in Shakujii nothing has changed in his life: he keeps cleaning the streets, and then moves to another street when he is done, without looking back:

Many years had passed [from when he was in Hayama]. The man had been cleaning, as usual. He didn't look back over the past. That is, he would never look back over the places he had cleaned. That's because... because, because fallen leaves and chewing gums and empty cans fall again where he had just cleaned. If he went back each time and cleaned from the original place, he would never be able to get out of the same neighbourhood. (Ibid. 28-29)

The man, named after the real poet Fujii Sadakazu, keeps himself busy with a repetitive activity, and only moves forward without retrospect. While he also does this to avoid cleaning the same spots, he does not look back to avoid any confrontation with the past in the first place, a past which that is indefinite in presentism. For him, it is only viable to move forward, and thus find solace in the local reality of his job which, if it seems repetitive on the one hand, on the other it gives him an anchor to survive through escaping from confrontation with a past that, overwhelmed by the omni-present present, is impossible to reconstruct.

The immediacy of repetition as embodied by the cleaning man bears several points of contact with the concepts of difference and repetition as theorized by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. In *Difference and Repetition* (*Différence et répétition*, 1968), Deleuze outlines his philosophy of time around three inter-dependent time syntheses. The first sees time as a circular dimension made of cyclical repetitions of the same. Examples are the rising sun, the changing of seasons, or even the recurrent elements of tragedy. The subject thus experiences these repetition of instants as habits which, contracting cyclically one into another, constitute the present not as a single instant or an object, but as a living dimension (Deleuze 70-79;

Hughes 105-106). The second synthesis builds on Immanuel Kant's rejection of time as circular and his theorization of it as a straight line imposed on sensory experience, as described in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kritik der reinen Vernunft, 1781). Following the first synthesis, if time is not circular, but instead a succession of events rather than the cyclical passing of present moments, then it loses its contractile range. There is a "finitude of contraction" that limits the extent of the apprehension of the subject, who can no longer experience habit, which now becomes powerless as nothing returns. In this context Deleuze invokes the second synthesis, that of memory (Hughes 110). Since habit no longer has value, then memory must process the past to make sense of it: it is the active synthesis of what was previously present. It relates to a pure *a priori* past that exists in itself only at the time of the operation of memory (Deleuze 81). However, according to Deleuze, both these syntheses subordinate repetition, relegating it to a secondary process vis-à-vis time. For this reason, he proposes a third model of time, where repetition is the form of time. To do so, he uses Nietzsche's concept of eternal return. However, Deleuze often points out that this return is not to be intended as a cyclical repetition of the same, of unchanging habit, as this would lead to an incomplete definition of repetition. Instead, what returns here is difference. While in the first model habit returns as the same, and in the second memory is required in order to create identity and thus find meaning in the past, the eternal return is the repetition of that which differs from itself or, in Nietzschean terms, of those beings whose being is becoming: "Repetition is no more than permanence of the One than the resemblance of the many. The subject of the eternal return is not the same but the different, not the similar but the dissimilar, not the one but the many, not necessity but chance" (ibid. 126). At this point, the knowing subject/ego takes on a new shape from the previous ones. Joe Hughes' explanation here serves also as a summary of the three syntheses:

There is only an 'ego', and this ego is capable of only one action: it contemplates. Being a passive ego, it can only contemplate what is given to it. At first this is simply matter itself. Contemplation is then an apprehension, and the ego is called an imagination. Having apprehended matter, the ego has now before it something other than matter. It now contemplates its previous apprehensions. The ego is then called a memory. In the third synthesis the ego has two things before it: apprehension and reproduction, imagination and memory. The third synthesis will therefore bring these other two faculties into one contemplation, and insofar as it is the unity of the faculties, the ego has become the faculty of Thought. (110)

Bearing these reflections in mind, how does the repetition of the cleaning man in Takahashi's story relate to Deleuzian theories? The cleaning work is repetitive: its recurrent habitual circle of cleaning and then moving to another place suggests a circular nature of time, typical of presentism. However, the man does not want to look back over his past cleaning sites for fear of becoming entrapped in an infinite cycle. For this reason, the man is escaping an unchanging habit, but at the same time he refuses to confront the past, although he occasionally contemplates it as a past memory image. It is not active apprehension, but passive contemplation. Finally, the repetition of his work entails the return of the different, insofar as he consciously changes location each time. However, his repetition does not seem to entail becoming, or the return of the ever-different in the sense of maturation or development. The man does not exercise thought as a contemplation and final synthesis of time. He does not question his reality. Even after having the unusual encounter with a talking stuffed toy, he does not bother to enquire into why he is there and what its existence means:

The man thought for a while. The stuffed toy can talk. Let's accept that. It can happen, right? The world is large. It said he's read my poems? Everything was shrouded in mystery. The world was full of mysteries. Something was strange. The man tried to think what. Perhaps, if the man had had the attitude to think about something thoroughly at that time, he might have come near that mystery. But he wasn't that kind of man. He whispered: 'Oh, well.' He went back to cleaning. (*Godira* 32)

Critical thought on the meaning of the world is in activity that is never pursued to the end here. Like the policeman above, Fujii Sadakazu has a brief intuition that thought might lead to something fundamental, but he refrains from it, as that action would entail too much trouble. He suspends critical thought and prefers to find satisfaction in the repetition of work in his proximate reality. By doing so, he collocates himself in the presentism of a perpetual living present.

By rejecting critical thought for the immediacy of action, the characters refrain from the difference-engendering creative power of thought as described by Deleuze. In chapter three of *Difference and Repetition* the philosopher deals with the question of the image of thought. Analysing previous philosophical theories of the image of thought, Deleuze enumerates eight features such as the Descartes' good nature of thought.<sup>48</sup> However, according to Deleuze, all these images imply an *a priori* nature of thought, a meaning and a logic, and thus do not realize the fundamental function of difference and repetition: “[Traditional images] crush thought under an image which is that of the Same and the Similar in representation, but profoundly betrays what it means to think and alienates the two powers of difference and repetition, of philosophical commencement and recommencement” (Deleuze 167). To achieve a reformulation of a new image of thought, Deleuze evokes Nietzsche, arguing that the traditional images of the good nature of thought entail morality, “since Morality alone is capable of persuading us that thought has a good nature and the thinker a good will, and that only the good can ground the supposed affinity between thought and the True” (ibid. 132). Therefore, this kind of thought appears to be subordinate to practical forces, political and moral. In opposition to this thought in the service of power, Deleuze proposes a reflection on a purely philosophical notion of thought, free from power relations. As opposed

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<sup>48</sup> In the *Discourse on the Method* (Discours de la méthode, 1637) Descartes explains that men equally possess a good sense enabling them to discern truth from fiction.

to a good-natured thought, he postulates thought as an encounter. In the world encounters are forced upon the subject, who is made to think. In doing so, the subject inevitably realizes the impotence of thought itself, and subsequently the creative necessity of thought to counter the violence of these encounters. Conversely, as also mentioned by Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals* (Zur Genealogie der Moral, 1887), the traditional image of thought has emerged precisely to repress said violence. Therefore, the philosophical image pursued by Deleuze must operate at two levels. It must both oppose the traditional moral image and understand thought as an act of self-engendering creation: “The problem is not to direct or methodically apply a thought which pre-exists in principle and nature, but to bring into being that which does not yet exist (there is no other work, all the rest is arbitrary, mere decoration). To think is to create – there is no other creation – but to create is first of all to engender ‘thinking’ in thought” (Deleuze 147). The type of thought expressed here is a dangerous one, in that it does not suppress but faces the violence of creating against the encounters. However, by discarding the traditional image, this kind of image-less thought is at the same time the only one able to approach difference in itself and complex, creative repetition. Only by creating can it be free from the difference of the same and embrace recasting of difference, without being embroiled in reminiscence. This thought which is “born in thought, the act of thinking which is neither given by innateness nor presupposed by reminiscence but engendered in its genitility, is a thought without image” (ibid. 167).

In Takahashi’s story the creative nature of thought is indeed acknowledged, as seen in the hypothesis of the cleaning man approaching the truth of things, but then it is not enacted through an active choice. The cleaning man rejects the dangerous power of creation as an excessive effort, and chooses to revel in the comfortable immediacy of repetition which, although not a complete habit, still does not engender critical thought. With the vacuum in the

background, the subject chooses immediacy, suffocating any doubts in the well-known repetition of a familiar presentist everyday routine.

In other stories in *Godira* characters suspend initial attempts at critical, creative thought, and indulge in the immediacy of acting repeatedly in response to strong stimuli. Such is the case of the story “Nihon no poruno” (Japan’s Porn). The protagonist is a man named Suzuki Ichirō, whose ordinariness is made evident from the start, where an ironic undertone compares him to his more successful homonym, the famous baseball player: “The Mariners’ Suzuki Ichirō’s annual income was 600 million yen, but this Suzuki Ichirō’s income, in the last twenty years, had never gone over 2,500,000 yen” (*Godira* 40). This Ichirō is obsessed with sex, and consumes great quantities of pornographic materials, whose graphic descriptions are interspersed with the narration of his tale. His life has always been characterized by immediate need to respond to sexual stimuli. During his university years, he was widely known as an eccentric person because he would suddenly raise his voice and leave the classroom to go to the toilet and masturbate, regardless of whether it was during a class, an exam or admission ceremony. This repeated absenteeism cost him his degree, and consequently the chance to fulfil his dream of becoming a teacher in a girls’ school where he would have been surrounded by beautiful girls sexually longing for him. As a result, he ended up changing numerous jobs, where he would always be laid off because of his compulsory habit to disappear off to the toilet to masturbate. For him, then, the immediate stimulus of sexual drive is the principle guiding his life.

Similar to the policeman above, Ichirō lives in the urge for instant repeated action aimed at covering the vacuum created by the lack of confrontation with any other structural issue about the world. As the policeman needed any pretext to fire his gun, be it seeing Saddam Hussein or Kim Jong-il in the crowd, Ichirō lives by perpetually needing to quench

his desire of women. He is so desperate that he starts to doubt his pick-up techniques taken from books and novels. He goes to speak to the author Takahashi himself, living in Shakujii, who, however, is not able to help him and refers him to other authors such as Murakami Haruki and Ryū, allegedly more expert on the subject (49-52). Back at home, after masturbating again, Ichirō starts thinking about the women with whom he has had intercourse in his life. Then, something unusual happens. The man starts considering thinking critically about his situation:

The phone rang. The man picked up the receiver. Again, it was the usual woman's voice. 'You can get drunk, but you're going to end up with a weird one, for sure,' she said with an incredibly sexy voice. 'Thank you for your advice.' The man hung up the phone, and opened a pornographic book. It's kinda strange, the man thought. Something around me is moving forward. The man lifted his gaze from the porn book, and tried to think about it. It was the first time in his long life that the man had ever taken his eyes off an opened porn book. However, sadly the man had no idea what he should think about. Or rather, until that point he had never attempted to think about anything. He went back to his pornographic book. (54-55)

Like the policeman and the cleaning man, Ichirō notices that there might be something beyond his routine, an attempt at critical thinking, but then decides to turn his gaze elsewhere and find solace in the repetitive cycles of action responding to immediate stimuli. For him, not trained to think critically, the evident mysteries of the world are less interesting, and then less threatening, than the immediate and tangible satisfaction of pornography: "For an instant, something sparked in the man's mind. So, who was that woman? What does she want with me, anyway? However, that was the matter of a moment. The man had something more interesting. It was how Hirotaka [the male in the porn book] was going to unbutton Sanae's dress. The man turned the page. Hirotaka was about to turn his hands on the fourth button" (56). The closing of the story is emblematic: the minute descriptions of foreplay and the romantic intercourse come to the foreground to represent how strong and vivid Ichirō's stimuli are and,

at the same time, how forcefully they relegate the activity of creative thinking, sketched for a brief instant, into the lifeless background of the vacuum.

Suspension of critical thought prevents the individual, more or less deliberately, from focusing the gaze on the deeper nature of matters in life, while being concentrated on acting in his local reality, as in the case of the sexual gratification of pornography for Ichirō. This prospective limited to one's proximate surroundings and concerns is one issue that is frequently present in Takahashi's fiction as affecting the minds of contemporary Japanese. This is true also for his non-fiction. For example, in a 2012 article titled "Tsumetai sekai de boku tachi wa mogaiteiru" (We Are Struggling in a Cold World), he encourages people to try and see matters from a wider perspective, instead of the usual circumscribed one: "This time, I would like to look at things from a lot 'farther away' than usual. That's because I feel that we have become only capable of seeing what is close to us" (59).

To suggest a new wider perspective, in the article Takahashi brings up the study on the Buddhist monk Shinran (1173-1263) by Yoshimoto Takaaki, titled *Yoshimoto Takaaki ga kataru Shinran* (Shinran Told by Yoshimoto Takaaki, 2012). Yoshimoto chooses to evoke Shinran mainly because of the age in which he lived, plagued by famine and numerous natural disasters, in a way not dissimilar from Japan in the aftermath of 3/11. However, what interests Yoshimoto, and Takahashi, is that Shinran criticized the mutually exclusive tendency of considering the various issues, incidents and social phenomena of the time by considering them either as "urgent problems" (*kinkyū no kadai*) or "eternal problems" (*eien no kadai*). Shinran, Yoshimoto writes, proposed an amalgam of the two, as often matters are made of the two sets of problems. To explain the point, Yoshimoto makes the contemporary example of anti-smoking movements: thinking that one should quit because there is a high probability that smoking causes cancer means considering the urgent problem; on the other hand, this

exclusive attitude would not solve the “eternal problem” of the human mental condition of enjoying things that we know are bad for the health. Shinran was capable of finding eternal problems in what seemed an urgent problem and, conversely, to identify an urgent problem in those things deemed to be eternal problems. That, for Takahashi, relates to the essence of ascertaining reality. Thinking and looking from afar, without being too wrapped up in the immediacy of proximate reality, it is possible to identify the bigger picture: “It is not [a matter of] either-or. If we throw away either of the two, we lose reality” (“Tsumetai” 60). To sacrifice one of the perspectives means to lose the complexity of reality. The characters’ focus on immediacy prevents them from trying to understand the deeper structure of the matters.

Although immediacy manifests itself as action in the absence of thought, there are very rare instances in which characters reflect briefly on the mysteries of the world. These isolated moments of enlightenment show a world in constant flux, one that is hard to understand and fix in a determinate form. This representation of the vacuum motivates the characters to care only about their proximate reality. A prime example of this is the episode with the members of a secret organization that has been operating for long with the purpose of spreading evil among the general population. Although their long activity should enable them to have a more definite notion of the world (consisting of Shakuji), their observations present a view not too dissimilar from the single inhabitants. One henchman of the organization, who calls himself the “president of evil” (*aku no sōsai*), sees his boss turn first into Yoda from the Star Wars saga, but speaking with the voice of the model Kanda Uno, then into a spotted seal and finally, responding to his employee’s request, into the features of the musician Moritaka Chisato. The boss is obviously a shape-shifter: yet, in the surreal postmodern world of Shakuji, the employee does not question this fact too much, and just shrugs it off:

My boss is amorphous. To put it simply, he does not have a fixed form. Well, I can’t say anything for certain on that matter either. Although, we’ve been

together for long. There are even some people who, rather than not having a shape, don't exist to begin with. Well, I don't really care about it anyway. Yet, I wonder how he can do normal things, like when he's taking a leak." (80)

The shape-shifting boss embodies a reality that is changing every time, and which is impossible to comprehend, nor represent in a definite form. Also, the fact that he can adapt to any shape in the mind of his employee, who does not think too much about his boss' true nature, shows that one's proximate reality can often be shaped by the subject's mind to adapt to his immediate needs of comfort, without challenging his critical thought.

The nature of the boss is an example of presentism, showing that reality is made of a series of equivalent present moments, each unrelated to the previous one. Although this cycle has been operating for millennia does not provide a definite notion of a past time that informs the present reality: "How many years have you been doing this job?" the boss said. 'Well, about 4000 years? Maybe about 5000 years. Boss, I've been doing this for too long that I don't remember well.' 'Every time, I only say 'Evil!'. It's always been like that for tens of thousands of years. Yet, you can't remember even that. I don't believe you're working seriously at all.'" (82). The millennia of work have actually amounted to nothing more than the repetition of the same activity for the president, of the same job over and over. It is presentism, the repetition of the habit that the subject chooses not to let become difference in the Deleuzian sense. Notions of the past or accumulated experience are not relevant here, as the living present is the only dimension that counts, and where all actions take place.

In the realm of immediacy where characters focus on action within the cycles of presentism, there is indeed an episode where a character exerts critical thought and understands the mysteries of the world. The final chapter, aptly titled "Godira", offers room for considerations on an escape from immediacy and into community. The protagonist Kenichi, who quit his job as a policeman and now works as a construction worker, realizes the dire

conditions of the workplace, where some colleagues might be laid off by the boss who is constantly lamenting the high costs of keeping so many workers who are idling most of the time. Kenichi is aware of the repetitive nature of these complaints: it is the circular time of presentism. However, the rupture in this circular tissue happens when Kenichi distances himself from accepting the repetition of a localized perpetual present, and starts thinking about his condition, thus reaching enlightenment:

I looked at my watch. It was still 12:20 That meant that this situation would continue for another 40 minutes. I tried to think. About many things. About the future. About life. What is life? Eating and working? Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't. Anyway, what I did understand was that this situation would be continuing for many years to come. How many years? How many tens of years? I was getting dizzy. I was reaching unconsciously for my hip. It wasn't there. The gun. Yes. I wasn't a policeman anymore. Suddenly, it dawned on me. I understood. Everything. What? The secret of the world. What! It was that? (188)

The moment of revelation, mocked and deemed not useful in other stories, is now fully embraced by the ex-policeman. His newly found epiphany makes him aware of the nature of the world's repetitiveness, and of the supremacy of localized reality. This knowledge puts him at odds with everyone else he encounters, who are all still caught up in the loop of immediacy. It is telling that as he rides the bus home he sees that all other passengers are oblivious to his comments, all staring forward vacantly like living corpses. However, although others, including his partner, do not believe him, the man smiles and is confident in his existential discovery, namely that nothing really exists. Or rather, things exist only insofar as he experiences them. As he explains to an incredulous psychiatrist to whom he was referred when his partner left: “In the world, only the places in my sight do exist. The places and events appearing on things like newspapers, TV or advertisement leaflets, they're all fabrications! You get it, right? Nothing exists. It's a complete emptiness. It's less than a vacuum.” (205).

The immediacy of local realities is supreme, whereas the places left outside of Kenichi's perception vanish instantly. However, there is one thing existing outside of his local reality:

There's a basement, there's something in there. He is... how should I say, kind of like a town hall registrar with a slight disability. And, as for what he's doing in that basement, he's watching me the whole time. [To the psychiatrist] Do you understand? The guy controls the world expanding and erasing it, and circulating a lot of false information. Therefore, to be precise, the only things truly existing in the world are me, the basement and that guy living in the basement.' (206)

As it is time to confront the guy in the basement, Kenichi opens the door to the waiting room, and checks that everything is as he remembered, with the bespectacled receptionist looking at him. Then, as he is about to head back to the examination room, he suddenly turns around and opens the emergency door. With this unexpected turn of events, the creature in the basement did not have time to set up the waiting room again. Therefore, within the spatial paradox, the fabricated world around Kenichi starts to crumble like cards and dissolve, swallowed into the ground. Immediately afterwards the man finds himself standing in the basement, at last. Now, Godira is finally revealed, with his dinosaur-like appearance made of a big tail and sharply pointy teeth.

However, the final confrontation after unmasking immediacy cannot lead to a complete escape from presentism and localized realities. The creature is angry at Kenichi for destroying his work and especially for having done so without any thought about what he is going to do next in a world that does not exist anymore, not even as a fabrication. Faced with the realization that his proximate reality has disappeared, Kenichi asks Godira for one last favour: to restore only his Shakujii Park. After granting him his wish, Godira asks: “‘Why did you want me to restore only Shakujii Park?’ ‘For some reason, since it's something I like.’ ‘Just that?’ ‘Yeah. [...] What should I do from now on?’ ‘The hell I know! If you're done, leave at once! Don't come back ever again! So, bye-bye!’” (211).

This resolution hints that even one critical effort is not sufficient to escape the cycles of immediacy fully. Left in the isolation of a single revelation, the individual reverts back to the immediacy and familiarity of small local narratives. Although Kenichi exercises critical thought fully, and unmask the loop of the immediacy of the living present, in the final confrontation he is not able to live with the knowledge of the true structure of the world. Therefore, even for him, the enlightened one, there is no other way to survive than clinging onto a small portion of local reality. That is why he asks the monster to restore only his neighbourhood: what he likes, knows and sees everyday as a habit. There is comfort for him in the immediacy of the localized reality of Shakujii Park. While in the beginning of *Godira* the policeman rejects the epiphany of thinking because it would only give him a fragment of the truth, in the end he embraces it, but still cannot find a definitive solution in it. This is because the knowledge granted by critical thinking does expose the vacuum of the current world for one person, but is not sufficient to confront the ensuing nothingness. It highlights the necessity for an even greater collective effort. If the world is made of different parallel local realities for others, as it is for Kenichi, then a joined effort to think critically about building inter-personal connections would mean an escape out of immediacy. Perhaps people then would be able to reconstruct a new world from the ashes of *Godira*'s fallen fabrications. To break out of the loop of immediacy, an act of radical creation is necessary. This can only be achieved by creating a new sense of community in this presentist age.<sup>49</sup>

However, such effort demands a great change that most people do not want to make.

Like them, in the end Kenichi too decides to privilege his proximate dimension over the rest of

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<sup>49</sup> The urgency of recreating communities from zero is highlighted tellingly by Takahashi also in his non-fiction. Citing works dealing with the need to change the meaning of words in politics to reflect a new reality (Sōda; T. Yoshida), Takahashi summarizes that if the core of movements such as populism is to restrict people's intellectual creativity and freedom by attaching ready-made labels (that of "minorities"), "what we need now, even more than to criticize that, is to create a new cooperation, to create a new meaning of 'people.' [...] We can only create everything from scratch: words, 'families' and politics. There is no other future" (Takahashi, "Bokutachi" 81, 83).

the world, and enjoy its immediate familiarity. Before asking Godira for his wish, he did not know what to do. Now, he is more confident, assured of the existence of the portion of world he knows well. He can go back to his world now. He needs nothing else: “I opened the door. The sun had come out. It was daytime. Where was I? I didn’t know. Yet, at least, Shakujii Park existed in this world. That thought uplifted my heart. I checked the inside of my pocket. There were 300 yen in coins. No, there were only 300 yen. I started to walk. First of all, I needed a canned beer” (211).

### **3.2 The history of the rise and fall of Japanese literature**

Serialized in *Gunzō* from May 1997 to November 2000, and then published as a volume in May 2001, the Itō Sei prize-winning *Nihon bungaku seisuishi* (henceforth *NBS*) is one of Takahashi’s longest novels. Though it features recurring characters, it does not follow a uniform plot. It is a collection of episodes set in the same world, which are either auto-conclusive or spread over multiple chapters. However, there is a common theme: The novel portrays illustrious exponents of modern Japanese literary history, specifically of the Meiji era (for example Natsume Sōseki and Mori Ōgai), dealing with existential issues which generally can be traced back to their artistic struggles to reconcile life and literature, and on how to portray life in literature faithfully. In this respect, the debate around the birth and essence of Naturalism is particularly important throughout the novel, starting with the story of the final days of illness of Hasegawa Tatsunosuke (Futabatei Shimei).

*NBS* is a piece of postmodern historical meta-fiction that combines historical accuracy, negotiating prior literary histories, and evident playful anachronisms through frequently modernizing the language and behaviour of historical figures, and inserting them into present-day contexts. In doing so, the novel portrays an indefinite temporal dimension of

presentism, where discrete notions of the past and future coalesce into the elongated panel of a perpetual living present. Thus, when Meiji writers lament that literature is in a state of isolation due to the excessive focus on localized realities removed from a shared tradition, it refers to the contemporary one too. For these reasons *NBS* advocates a rethinking of literary categories, providing a new literary compendium to counter immediacy. To do this, memory is a crucial issue to envision a community and escape the cycles of presentism. Although memory is often lost in a forgetful world, and spoken words may be misunderstood, the novel ultimately emphasizes the importance to remember, firmly aware of what has happened before, so that people may position themselves in a communal thread.

From the beginning, *NBS* emerges as a historically accurate fiction, relying on extensive research on the author's part, as highlighted by critics (Kawamura 282). It is in fact based on the Meiji and Taishō literary history *Nihon bundanshi* (History of the Japanese Literary World, 1953-1973) written mainly by the writer and critic Itō Sei and completed after his death by his friend, the critic Senuma Shigeki. Itō's history contextualizes authors by adding a lively background of human drama to their stories, showing their personal relations, friendships and influences, in order to fully portray their development as artists. An analogous approach is at work in *NBS*, including life contexts and the personal stories of the writers. However, a large degree of fictionalization and modernization in the language is present. For example, on the debate on Japanese Naturalism, with authors striving to find an authentic new form of Japanese literature, Tayama Katai expresses his literary struggle while lamenting the exploitation of his art by fellow writers Shimazaki Tōson and Kunikida Doppo:

My pain is my precursors' pain. No, that's a mistake. It's the pain of failing to become a precursor. I'm super unlucky. I, before anyone else, set my eyes on Futabatei Shimei. I foresaw that precisely Futabatei held the key to contemporary Japanese literature. No mistake there. When Futabatei made *Unrequited Love* [Katakoi] into a volume after eight years, I was the one going around and advertising that 'This is contemporary literature. It has to be this!' I

lent *Unrequited Love* to Kunikida in November, Meiji 29, and based on that the guy published *Musashino* and established Naturalism in January, Meiji 31. I shouldn't be saying this, but he became famous having read my *Unrequited Love*. It hurt me badly. But it was ok. There's still time. It's Meiji 36. On New Year I lent Merezhkovsky's *Tolstoy and Dostoevsky* to Shimazaki. Then, in November I lent him an English translation of *Crime and Punishment*. Shit, Shimazaki, instead of spending all your money on women, buy some books, you idiot. Anyway, the two books I lent influenced Shimazaki heavily. When I went to Komoro [where Shimazaki was living] in the evening, he dared say to me, as if crazy with fever: 'Tayama, it is confession, confession! Novels need the truth.' [...] Confession and truth supported by Naturalism, that's the way to go, from now on. [...] Let's dominate the literary scene after the death of [Ozaki] Kōyō, let's annihilate the guys from other generations, let's play our cards well and do sweet business, it's going to be easy-peasy because no one else has read as many books as us; most writers are stupid so if we praise them they're going to be happy and become our allies, that's good, isn't it? Because the literary circle is soft.' We'd sworn like that, shit! Shimazaki, you bastard, you slipped out. You couldn't have written *The Broken Commandment* without my books, could you? Both Kunikida and Shimazaki have become famous thanks to me! (*NBS* 217–218)

The anachronistic colloquial expressions used in Tayama's reminiscence perform a double function. On the one hand, the characterization of complex literary issues as stories of envy among friends, and the use of direct, often derogatory, colloquial language, help to tone down the serious nature of such debates. The playfulness describing the debate on the I-novel and Naturalism in terms of a plan by Shimazaki and Tayama to subvert the stupid literary community has the effect of modernizing the issue and making it stand out as urgent for the characters themselves and, possibly, more relatable for readers of fiction. On the other hand, by placing a *junbungaku* debate on the level of a story of jealousy between friends, informed by their living environment, the novel extracts the characters (and their issues) from the past temporal dimension of the Meiji era, and reframes them in a more contemporary context. One aspect of immediacy in *NBS* lies exactly in the presentism connecting the past Meiji era and contemporary Japan, creating an indefinite order of time where the past is not clearly demarcated from the present, and both coexist on the same elongated plane of an omni-present

present. Tayama and Shimazaki speaking in colloquial modern Japanese, together with swear words, both demystify the serious literary matter, and at the same time insert the characters into an indefinite present dimension, where the dialogues and events may take place at any moment, regardless of the actual times in which the characters lived. This effect is all the more evident when clearly anachronistic references are added to the tales of Meiji writers. An example is when Mori Ōgai worries about his literature, still written in a less colloquial style than the successful novel *Nogiku no haka* (The Tomb of the Wild Chrysanthemum, 1906) by Itō Sachio:

That's what's popular now. Now it's on sale in convenience stores too. *The Tomb of the Wild Chrysanthemum's* reprint edition. I was so jealous that I was about to drool. I found that it was on display next to 'Dr. Copa's [an architect-writer born in 1947] feng shui book. What about my books? They're not even in bookstores, let alone in convenience stores. Why isn't 'Maihime' there? Isn't that indeed a Japanese classic, a must-read if there ever was one? Also, *The Improvisatore* [novel by H. C. Andersen, translated by Mori Ōgai] and the like. Once I tried to talk it over with the publisher. 'What about a special edition of 'Maihime'?' 'Sensei, an old thing like that doesn't sell. Rather, people can't read it.' 'They can't read it? It's Japanese! Japanese. It's far easier to read than Komuro Tetsuya's [present-day musician] lyrics, isn't it?' (449)

Together with Komuro Tetsuya and Dr. Copa, throughout *NBS* there are countless examples of anachronistic popular cultural elements: Natsume Sōseki even pesters Mori Ōgai with questions about Tamagotchi toys, and Tayama Katai becomes a porn film director. These intrusions of modernity, which undoubtedly have an ironic effect, surprise the characters at first, but are soon metabolized as normal in the texture of the presentist time frame of the novel. *NBS* shifts continuously through the present and the past Meiji era, creating an indefinite temporal dimension of a perpetual present. Thus, the problems of Mori Ōgai envying the success of Itō or Dr. Copa become the same as those of any other contemporary writer. Also, his issues with the reception of his literary language vs popular song lyrics are

relatable to any reader. Although coated in Meiji literary history, the writer's struggle on what to write and how is very much an urgent one.

Answering, or better analysing, this issue, *NBS* provides new categories of literature. As shown in the above examples, these new categories emerge powerfully because, rather than being a mere retelling of the history of modern Japanese literature, they are a combination of Meiji history and contemporary references that create a completely different context for the characters, who act in an expanded present dimension comprised of localized realities. Thus, the debate on Naturalism, and the search for literary expression and truth of Meiji writers, are decontextualized from their traditional categories and are reframed in a new context closer to contemporary perception.

Through this combination of historical facts with contemporary elements and fictionalization, *NBS* is a new compendium of Meiji literary history, and at the same time a piece of historical fiction in the postmodern sense. Linda Hutcheon, a major scholar of the relation between postmodernism and intertextual theory and practice, writes that postmodernism is contradictory and double-coded, because “it works within the very systems it attempts to subvert” (*Poetics* 4). Postmodern fiction does this through parody, “the perfect postmodern form for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies. It also forces a reconsideration of the ideal of origin or originality that is compatible with other postmodern interrogations of liberal humanist assumptions” (ibid. 11). Therefore, according to Hutcheon and other critics, postmodern parody works with various contemporary and historical forms. It is a juxtaposition of different styles and codes aimed at representing and disturbing the prevalence of the established forms it parodies in the first place (Allen 189-190). Thus, by using different codes and referencing to an established canon of literary histories, *NBS* is a postmodern fiction that parodies history and challenges it by reworking it playfully.

History as an idea and practice is relevant to understand the questioning of other forms and codes of expression in historical metafiction. Hutcheon argues that fictions such as *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie (1981) show that no historical narrative of events can transparently represent such events, because all historical narratives depend on available modes of narrative and knowledge. Even historical events are available to the historian through what Hutcheon calls, following Genette, “paratexts”, indicating an array of prior subjective texts (accounts, newspaper articles and the like), with which the author negotiates to produce a new narrative. In this respect, historiography and postmodern historiographic fiction do not differ:

If the past is only known today through its textualized traces (which, like all texts, are always open to interpretation), then the writing of both history and historiographic metafiction becomes a form of complex intertextual cross-referencing that operates within (and does not deny) its unavoidably discursive content. [...] This is writing that raises basic questions about the possibilities and limits of meaning in the representation of the past. (*Politics* 81)

Thus, in order to produce a new text, the author must be aware that writing a historically-oriented narrative entails the problems of dealing with intertextual relations of what has already been written. Therefore, he/she should distance himself and ironize on the narration in order to be taken seriously, as suggested by the Italian academic and novelist Umberto Eco vis-à-vis writing his historical novel *The Name of the Rose* (*Il nome della rosa*, 1980) (Eco 67–68).

In this sense, *NBS* can be understood as a work of postmodern historiographic metafiction. Although the irony is more manifest than in Eco’s novel, emerging in the narration of events together with the framework of the past, Takahashi’s novel shows awareness of organizing its narrative in the negotiation with prior literary histories (Itō Sei’s,

for one) and contemporary popular culture and fiction. With its playful approach it shifts through these different modes and establishes a new document.

However, unlike *The Name of the Rose*, the temporal dimension in *NBS* is not a reconstructed past but that of presentism, oscillating between the Meiji era and the present one, without (evident) discrepancies in the narrative. One example is the story “Harajuku no taikan” (Serious Illness at Harajuku), where the narrator, speaking as Takahashi himself, relates his story of his own actual hospitalization in Harajuku for a gastric ulcer in 1998, adding, however, that he shared a room with none other than Natsume Sōseki.<sup>50</sup> The chapters alternate accounts of Sōseki’s reflections after his own illness, caused possibly also by the severe stress of writing novels, and the present of 1998, while Takahashi was writing *NBS*. These two time frames share the same space in the chapters, as Takahashi is indeed intimidated by the great Sōseki, and yet acknowledges his tangible presence there as a possibility in this presentism:

Sensei was standing by the bed like a ghost, I hurried to take off my headphones, Woah! You scared me, sensei, you’re terrifying me, Sorry, Mr. Takahashi, somehow I was up because I couldn’t get to sleep, as sensei said so, he lightly sat on my bed. Even if you think that a man who has a chance to talk in person to the great Natsume Sōseki in the middle of the night on a day at the end of Autumn in 1998 is a lucky one, it’s still intimidating, isn’t it? (356)<sup>51</sup>

Immediacy is central to the novel’s sense of purpose. The reflections on literature show that Japan is too focused on its proximate reality, thus in a state of isolation from confrontation and tradition that prevents it to develop artistically. Therefore, in its presentism combining past issues with present ones, *NBS* is also a critique of the contemporary Japanese literary scene, to

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<sup>50</sup> The reference to Sōseki is spelled out already in the title of the chapters. In June 1910, while writing *The Gate* (Mon), Sōseki was hospitalized for a gastric ulcer (the same illness as Takahashi). In August of the same year, after relocating to Shuzenji, Izu peninsula, for therapy, he suffered from a gastrointestinal disorder, vomiting more than 800g of blood. This life-threatening malady became referred to as “Shuzenji no taikan” (serious illness at Shuzenji).

<sup>51</sup> Since in the original the passage is all written as a stream of consciousness, with sentences only interrupted by commas, I preserved the same punctuation in the translation. The only exception is the sentence starting with “even”, where I inserted a period for ease of understanding where the Japanese has a comma, and then starts a new paragraph.

which it offers a lively new historical compendium. The narrator/Takahashi voices this dissatisfaction towards the end of the novel: “Reading the writings of authors who lived more than hundred years ago, incredibly I don’t feel any discomfort. I was expecting that. If anything, I feel an even greater discomfort towards products written in this age. However, maybe that’s inevitable” (463). More importantly, the confrontation with present-day Japan is evident throughout *NBS*. In a conversation with the poet Ishikawa Takuboku and Sōseki, Hasegawa (Futabatei Shimei) discusses his writings and the shortcomings of Japanese literature: “I don’t have a standpoint [...]. At the beginning I was only imitating. I was imitating Russian and French authors. Yet, I realized there’s no point in doing that. Everybody uses words like ‘person’ or ‘life’, but Japanese people now can’t possibly write transcending life as Japanese. You can’t help determining things through trends and books. We should start from our real perception. There’s no other way” (502). However, this authorial perception should be on a different level from that of other people:

I know that I need to stand above the Japanese, and the Japanese language. However, I can’t bring myself to understand that. The people of this country are terrible radicals. They have no philosophy. Or perhaps, they just don’t think investigating things thoroughly. This is my real perception. Everything passes lightly by their eyes. They immediately forget even what happened yesterday. Do people like these even need novels? I’m questioning that. I’m not sure there are any literary men in Japan. But we can be sure there aren’t any readers, right? (Ibidem)

Although these words come from a Meiji author, in presentism they apply to the current scene too. The contemporary Japanese too are caught in the net of immediacy where they are isolated, only focusing on their proximate reality, on their immediate passions. As these short-lived interests are not motivated by critical thought and confrontation, and are soon forgotten. As authors do not have a philosophy that takes into account literary history,

developing its novelty, their products are bound to be consumed quickly, and forgotten just as quickly.

Facing this lack of coordinates in contemporary Japanese literature, *NBS* reframes literary problems in a presentist dimension, advocating the need to rethink literary categories taking into account history and confrontation with other traditions. Otherwise, the literary scene will remain stagnant and superficial, focusing only on its proximity, as shown in Tayama Katai's criticism of the opaqueness of literary circles, obsessed with style rather than considering substance:

Since we use the word *bundan* [literary circle], those who don't know it mistakenly assume that it has loads of richly talented and knowledgeable authors. Isn't the *bundan* [the place] where a bunch of people who can't get a proper job, who can't do anything apart from writing book critiques, who are only capable of putting words in line, who are socially awkward, liars, who are loose with women with their rotten personalities, gather in a corner of society and live huddled together shoulder to shoulder? (235-236)

To escape this isolation of immediacy, of quick consumption and forgetfulness, the novel highlights the need to rebuild a literary history, thus reaffirming the value of a community based on shared memory. Predicated on immediacy's focus on proximate reality, literature finds its scope reduced to tackling current trends, soon to be forgotten. *NBS* recalls its playful history in order to try and present new historical coordinates for contemporary writing. It is an attempt at restating what Takahashi has called in his non-fiction a "map of literary history" (*bungakushi no chizu*), which is lacking in contemporary Japanese novels whose narratives are isolated, composed without the background of a shared literary tradition (*Chō 'shōsetsu' 57–60*).<sup>52</sup> This map is a creation for the current age, in that it hearkens back to a literary history constructed upon facts and reflections of past authors. However, it is mixed with anachronisms

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<sup>52</sup> It is relevant, however to point out that in this manual for aspiring writers Takahashi does not describe this condition negatively. He states it as a fact, as a sign that times have changed, and manifests his interest in observing what novelties this literature will bring about (*Chō "shōsetsu" 56-57*).

responding to the current state of presentism. By remembering this history one can take part in a tradition that is acknowledged and shared by others. By confronting him/herself with a common past, an author may well rework it playfully, as happens in *NBS*, but he/she would still be doing so acknowledging the existence of a community exceeding the isolation of proximate realities. In the end, to escape immediacy *NBS* restates the importance of community, manifested here in remembering words that are passed on through generations. That is because, though in immediacy words are soon forgotten, in truth they do survive those who uttered them. This is what the narrator/Takahashi means when, at the end of the novel, standing by the open door he looks at his infant child sleeping in the baby bed, musing:

The fact that I wouldn't be alive in this world when this child reached my age now somehow was a great joy for me. [...] These words came up in my mind. 'My first memory is a door closing slowly. A man is standing against the backlight. I can't see his expression. Come to think about it, that was certainly my late father.' I closed my eyes. Then, I could hear them faintly, the cries of one hundred billion people who have fallen beyond the waterfall basin. If I listen carefully, the cries of my future self are certainly there in the mix too. (*NBS* 658)

The antidote to escape immediacy is to (re)position oneself in a community by remembering the words of predecessors, and to reflect on them in one's own distinctive way, so that one may truly utter his/her own. Like the narrator's son, future readers may misunderstand past words, but they will nonetheless be aware of them, and will engage in a cultural community based on knowledge, exchange and understanding. This is the awareness of memory, of what dies and of what stays behind. This is *NBS*'s escape from immediacy: the acknowledgement of the passing of time, and that of the individual right to remember as part of a cultural community.

### 3.3 May your reign continue for a thousand, eight thousand generations

The short-story collection *Kimi ga yo wa chiyo ni yachiyo ni (KGY)* was first published in 2002. Its title is an obvious reference to the lyrics of the Japanese national anthem *Kimi ga yo*, which can be translated as “May your reign continue for a thousand, eight thousand generations.” The anthem, based on a *waka* poem written in the Heian period, was first used with its current melody in 1880 as a song used by the Japanese National Army to address the emperor. It was the official anthem of the Empire of Japan until 1945, after which it was no longer lawfully sanctioned, but remained the *de facto* anthem until 1999, when the Act on National Flag and Anthem (*Kokki oyobi kokka ni kansuru hōritsu*) law again recognized it as official.

This ironical reference to the greatness of Japan suggests that the book is generally addressed to the Japanese population. In the commentary to the paperback edition, written by Takahashi himself, the writer explains that he had had a concrete plan and title for this book for a long time before publication: “The content that was to be put into question had been decided early on. It was to write about the people who must live in this country called Japan here and now. Having decided only that in my mind, I began writing this novel” (“Kono shōsetsu” 280). *KGY* emerges indeed as a collection of different stories that explore contradictions and conflicts in common life in everyday Japan.

The characters in *KGY* live in an ideological vacuum, where they cannot make sense of their social roles (family, work). Given the ordinary life setting, *KGY* is an evolution of *Godira* because it shows more in detail the reasoning on the absurdity of everyday roles and communication, and the distance between real and idealized life. The characters refrain from critical thought, deeming it useless, and survive by accepting social conventions (also linguistic ones) and finding solace in carrying out repetitive actions to survive in their local

realities. Stimulation plays an important role, as many characters act repeatedly in response to violent stimuli, constantly aiming to experience the most extreme sensations to survive the moment without thinking critically about the vacuum. However, in the end the obsessive procurement of individual stimuli creates irreparable conflict in social living, leading to miscommunication and isolation. This conflict may also have extreme repercussions, portrayed with playfulness often resulting in the grotesque. However, at the core the characters here secretly long for community, acting to relate to others, although all their individual actions remain isolated, and thus end up in failure. The book raises this awareness to the reader too through stimulation. The violence and extreme sexual practices in *KGY* serve as stimuli for the reader, eliciting in the audience violent sensations, but also an awareness of immediacy and of the need to rethink communication and inter-personal relations to counter it.

The emphasis on now and on localized reality is a means to survive in the vacuum, whose absurdities and conventions become clear as characters begin to reflect on them. This happens in various ways, for example through the extenuating repetition of words which, eventually, reveal their hollow nature of simple labels designed so that people relate to them for immediately understandable meaning. It is a meaning that, however, does not have any solid superstructure behind it. Words encapsulate a localized portion of reality that is proximate to the speaker but not totally relatable for others. Far from attempting communication based on mutual understanding, these words constitute stimuli by which characters can repeatedly survive discrete moments in the vacuum.

Such is the case with the story “Papa I love you” (sic). The protagonist, a husband and father of a girl of seven, is obsessed with his role in the family, precisely because he cannot make sense of it. Therefore, ever since his daughter was born, he has been obsessed with the word “incest”: “When the doctor handed him the newly-born daughter, the man unconsciously

looked at her genital area. It wasn't on purpose. Somehow he had had a bad feeling. Therefore, he had thought of looking away. However, his gaze betrayed him. There was a slit. Something like a vertical line. At that moment, the word 'incest' sprang in his mind. He was the one most surprised by it" (*KGY* 33). The man's obsession with incest is central. He has never seriously thought about carrying it out (although he is indeed aware of his daughter's beautiful growing body), but still he struggles constantly to make sense of this word looming over him. He tries to escape from this conflict by thinking that it is just a word, however unable to liberate himself from it: "The man decided to think about something else. About other things that he would have scruples about uttering or writing. That way, he wasn't worried that the word 'incest' would come up. Yet, when was it better to think? That was hard. Because that word always came as a surprise attack" (*ibid.* 45). The word "incest" is a sudden stimulus. It attacks the man with immediate impulses that he cannot combat. However, it does so without being really connected to any factual meaning. The fact that the man is not seriously considering committing incest shows that there is a discrepancy between the meaning associated with the word and the man's reality. The word does not represent any real signification, but still creates a conflict within the man because of its connotation of immoral sexual intercourse. The word haunts the man, but more importantly it shows an uncontrolled stimulus of immediacy, which attacks and disappears with no permanent trace on his mind because it is born in the absence of critical thought.

The story problematizes the nature and usage of words that, based only on the speaker's local reality without critical thought about reception, do not achieve mutual understanding and communication. "Incest" here is a label clashing with the man's perception of reality. A similar contrast occurs when the man deliberately talks to his daughter using obscene words and language that is not considered suitable for her age. As they are watching

television, she tells him that she would like to sing and dance like the talent artists on TV, because she thinks it is fun. He then counters her by saying: “‘Actually, they’re not having fun at all.’ ‘Really?’ ‘Yeah. You know, when the show is over and they go back to the hotel, those girls get a call from the boss. Then, when they go to the boss’ room, the boss orders them to get naked. Then, the boss licks the girls’ privates with his tongue, makes them lick his willy, and at times he sticks his willy into their bottom hole” (47). The language exposes the absurdity of communication and confutes the assumption that words are conventions mutually intelligible to both interlocutors. The man is using the above language not primarily to be understood, but mostly for himself, to express his immediate perception, regardless of the consequences. Words here are labels to ornate one’s localized experience of his reality. They are tools to shape a localized reality that is only accessible to the speaker. When his wife reprimands him by saying that he should just express the normal things usually on his mind, he muses that there are no such things: “She’s saying odd things. The man thought so. That was because the words the man had spoken were nothing more than a fragment of the world of images where one small part of what he usually thought, one very small part of the world created by his imagination which, once it had been sterilized and the poison had been taken out, had been definitely whitewashed as a result” (50). Words are personal, expurgated versions of the world imagined by the utterer. They are employed for his immediate usefulness. For him, then, they respond to the stimulation to cover the vacuum created by the impossibility to adequately represent the superstructure of the world. Therefore, what is possible is to try and fill the gap momentarily through satisfying the personal need for expressing one’s proximate reality in the moment.

Stimulation is central to the story, as shown through action and words. His relationship with them orders his life. Due to lack of communication, he is at odds with his family, with his

wife not recognizing him anymore. Furthermore, in immediacy the procurement of stimuli is a repetitive activity pursued in the absence of thought. While he stays in this predicament, the man cannot escape the cycle through stimulation: he can only move from one stimulus to the other. In the final act of the story, while on a walk with his daughter, the word springs again in the man's mind: he feels a burning sensation welling up inside him, and realizes he needs to fight and defeat it. Suddenly, they are approached by a man in sunglasses, who blindfolds them and drives in a limousine to a building, with a big room furnished with several sofas. On two of them a drunk writer dressed in a kimono, and another giggling man in pajamas, are seated. While the drunken man stutters something, then falls asleep, the pajamas man tells the protagonist he has a problem he needs help with. It is a problem that the others do not even see as such, let alone understand it. The man realizes he has the same problem, but when the pajamas man tells him there is no cure, he suddenly has a revelation, and asks his interlocutor:

‘You have sex too?’ ‘Of course!’ ‘What I mean is when you put your penis inside a woman's thing and move it up and down’ ‘Yeah, that's why I'm telling you I do it.’ The man gave a cry again. He had a feeling he had understood something. It was only a feeling. Wasn't it better that way? And the man had realized one more thing. Since he came here, he hadn't thought about the word ‘incest’ even once. Although he hadn't even imagined anything else! (54-55)

Likely, the same problem affecting the pajama-clad man was that they were both trapped in the discrepancy between the word and the reality (un)attached to it. Only the protagonist is able to overcome this painful contrast, however simply by finding another stimulus, thus without escaping immediacy. This is because his actions are not predicated on critical thought, but rather on its suspension in favour of abandoning himself to the pleasure of sexual intercourse. Therefore, the resolution of the conflict does not occur through a reconciliation with the meaning of words and their relationship with reality, nor through reaching a point of mutual agreement (with his wife and daughter) on conveying the same portion of reality

through verbal communication. He overcomes the threat of the word by submitting his thinking to the immediate satisfaction offered by the basic stimulus of sex: in the never-ending cycles of the present, he has fought one stimulus with a stronger one.

Finding refuge in action in response to corporeal sexual stimuli to avoid critical confrontation is a recurrent theme in *KGY*, but its description is nowhere as central as in the contiguous stories “Chenji” (Change) 1 and 2. Here, the subordination of critical thought to incessant action to satisfy extreme sexual gratification is the only way for characters to survive in the presentist vacuum. This is evident from the beginning. The protagonist, a disillusioned writer, is thinking about illustrious predecessors who were not successful in their lifetime, specifically Van Gogh or Ishikawa Takuboku. However, since he cannot think of a third example, he spends one whole day in the process. This action shows that any kind of serious thought, although an ironically trivial one here, is fruitless in the end. It is better to compensate it with a meaningless activity just to fill the void. As the man confesses to himself: “I can’t just think the whole time. In my experience, it only lasts for three months. Therefore, when I get fed up with thinking, I go to my desk, spread a sheet of paper and halfheartedly pretend to write something” (173-174). This meaningless writing is for him just a stimulus for the immediate benefit of buying time, thus prolonging his current state avoiding any kind of critical thinking. While he is writing, he thinks: “This will hold for six months. Six months. Now stop, that’s enough. Enough of thinking about Van Gogh and Ishikawa Takuboku, of drawing their portraits, of having sex with [the co-worker] Arisa. Then, I have to find another woman at a bar or a party” (174). The man needs to keep himself constantly occupied with stimuli that give him immediate satisfaction and that, if amassed, guarantee him a certain length of thought-free wellbeing. The “change” in the title refers to this need to constantly procure new pastimes and react to stimuli to avoid critical confrontation.

This predicament is brought to the extreme in the major change that occurs at the end of the first chapter. The exploration of corporeal stimuli is too strong an urge, and it overwhelms any half-hearted attempt at thinking and rationalization. One morning the man wakes up dazed; he finds that he has mutated into the female body of Arisa. After the initial bewilderment of the sudden inexplicable change, the man decides to make the most of the sexual possibilities his new voluptuous body offers him, and decides to go to a bar. His attempt at rationalizing his predicament is postponed, if not set aside completely, for the exploration of immediate sexual pleasure. His urge is so strong that he even feels attracted to his new body, almost as if he were looking at another attractive woman: “I looked at the mirror behind the [bar’s] owner. I was sitting. The breasts in the one-piece dress looked about to burst open. The exposed legs were white, and purple panties were visible at the end. What the hell! I was inadvertently clicking my tongue. I was lusting after myself, wasn’t I?” (182-183). The overwhelming power of sexual stimulation is augmented by the perspective of the gaze. Although the man is looking at his new body, he is relishing the voyeuristic pleasure offered by an external object of desire, and the material satisfaction of literally possessing it. By thinking that is not his body, the man only concentrates on the corporeal sexual stimulation provided by the situation, which literally embodies it. Were he not gazing, and thinking instead that it was his own body, he probably would have seen things differently, possibly worrying about the strange mutation (which has occurred nonetheless). Thus, the sexual stimulation is so strong that it obscures any thought about the strangeness of the situation. Even as he entertains himself with a writer at the bar, any doubts about what he himself is doing there, in a woman’s body with a man, are subordinated to the exploration of novelty, of immediate satisfaction in the mysterious situation.

Yet, the utmost prevalence of immediate satisfaction over critical thinking reaches its peak when the protagonist wakes up naked in a hotel room. Not remembering what happened, he performs a quick initial inspection of this body, only to find that he is in the body of a man again. However, it is not his original body, but instead the one of the writer, who is actually sleeping on the bed beside him, in Arisa's body. The man's attempt to make sense of this new strange situation, as usual, does not last long, and is instead overwhelmed by the urge to explore new stimulating avenues: "I felt like my mind was getting more and more entangled. There was no way I could understand even if I thought any more. I must use my time for more useful things" (185). The profitable thing is of course to indulge into the new sexual experience provided by situation at hand: he then binds his hands and gags him with a towel. He can now experience the new sensation of sexual satisfaction, devised in the spur of the moment: "I penetrated him at one stretch. It felt good. It felt tight as I'd never savoured before. I felt like my eyes were dazzled. Not bad. I thought. It is exactly because things like this exist that it is worth to be alive" (186). The man's whole existence is not determined by achievements or critical understandings of his place in the world, or what it means: on the contrary, it coincides with acting to satisfy sexual stimuli.

The tone of the second chapter is similar. While the man occasionally attempts to think about his inexplicable metamorphosis and about the complexity of human beings, enquiring whether his identity is his consciousness, which would then be preserved, or if it also necessarily includes physical appearance, these reflections do not occupy his mind for long, as they do not lead to any useful conclusion. Therefore, he abandons any thoughts on the matter to concentrate on sexual exploration. He is then kidnapped by two men, a fat and a small one, who take him to a mysterious building full of attractive men and women, one of whom professes to be his wife. The two henchmen, who happen to work for a publishing company,

sequestered him mistaking him for the writer, and ask him to write a novel. The man envisions a new height of sexual exploration, that of “raging sex” (*dotō no sekkusu*). Based on his experience, he describes that people will now exchange bodies with one another after sex, so that they can explore new sensations with different bodies each time. This will produce the definitive sexual experience, for which people’s craving will spread like a virus. Bodies will become interchangeable vessels for sexual pleasure: “Bodies will only mean something to latch on to momentarily! The distinction between men and women will become a matter of convenience! Do you understand? ‘Myself’ is not going to mean anything!” (202).

This vision is particularly relevant because, though based on the man’s personal experience, it applies to a wider world that lives in the immediacy of acting only to respond to the never-ending sexual stimulation that comes at the cost of their capacity to think critically. In a situation where even a supposed intellectual such as the protagonist fails to confront critically with the world, and instead pursues the ultimate sexual experience, it is consequent that the rest of the population will follow suit and sacrifice individuality (symbolized here by the bodies) for the immediate pleasure of constant change. Bodies are debased as the unique repositories of people’s minds and personalities: they are now mere exchangeable sex toys. The satisfaction of sexual stimuli undermines the complexity of human beings with their own distinctive bodies. This is epitomized in the story’s conclusion: though the man is supposed to write the novel, a creative process, instead he focuses on the voluptuous curves of his wife’s body, visible under the dress. Aroused, he seizes her. To the astonished wife he explains that he needs to “reclaim his wild side.” He then orders the woman to kneel and perform oral sex: “It felt good. That was exactly what I wanted to do. So I thought. I wasn’t thinking of what would come after. It had been super until now. Surely, it was going to be all right from now on too” (206). As the man is having oral sex, he looks at the dog in the room, and notices the

animal's erection in watching him and his wife. His current satisfaction has not finished, and yet he is already devising another sexual game involving the dog. In the endless cycle of action for stimulation, the man sees only opportunities to gain extreme sexual pleasure. Not only human bodies have become interchangeable tools for sex, as is the woman, but animals too.

In “Change” and “Papa I love you”, the characters choose immediate stimuli and reduce complex concepts to consumable commodities (bodies), to avoid critical confrontation with immediacy, and the peril they entail of laying bare the absurdity of the vacuum. In their vicissitudes, they are thus able to cope by suspending critical thought and acting in their localized reality, in response to violent stimuli. This attitude only entails individual survival. It is not a communal activity, because its immediacy refers solely to the characters' proximate reality. Therefore, as seen in the language in “Papa I love you”, immediacy causes isolation from communities.

This theme is central in “Mother Father Brother Sister” (sic, henceforth MFBS), where the pursuit of immediate stimuli brings about the dissolution of a family. It is the story of the Takahashis, a family made up of the father Tetsurō, the mother Setsuko, and the children Hiroko and Kenichi.<sup>53</sup> The story is narrated by Kenichi, who died previously from bullying. Not exactly a ghost, Kenichi still lingers in the house, considering himself part of the family. However, since he is also something else, in a position between worlds, he can relate secret events about the family which reveal its real predicament. The family members share a story of incest. When alive, Kenichi used to have sex with his sister. He had been peeping at her naked body, stealing her underwear and masturbating on it. He had also touched her while she was asleep and, realizing she was not averse to it, they engaged in sexual intercourse. Not only

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<sup>53</sup> It is noteworthy that, although the story is purely fictional, Tetsurō and Setsuko were the real names of Takahashi Genichirō's parents.

that, the father also committed incest with his daughter, following the same process as Kenichi (and even described in the same words). Finally, the mother had an extra-marital affair with a Waseda student who was tutoring Kenichi. Thus, when each family member is only seeking to satisfy his/her stimuli, the community crumbles. In the late son's words: "The family was completely disrupted. As a result, I died haunted by the 'deadly disease'... I think" (61).

The general urge for satisfying individual stimuli is not only related to the incest, but is also at play in miscommunication. The scene of the family gathering, traditionally symbolic of familial unity, shows the isolation of all members, too focused on their proximate realities without considering others. The gathering is simply an occasion where the members can ventilate their urges, so that they may satisfy their stimuli, without any critical thought. A prime example is when the father Tetsurō starts to talk to the others about the origin of *Kimi ga yo*, the Japanese national anthem. In Kenichi's words: "No particular reaction from Setsuko or Hiroko. Whenever Tetsurō said something, there was never any particular message embedded within. I think that, maybe, the man Tetsurō has never thought seriously about anything. Perhaps for him it is fun just to let it out of his mouth and say it, or so. If so, he's just like a baby. Although he himself doesn't think so" (61). The father's words are empty because they are not the product of serious thought, and are not received by any intent listener. Again, miscommunication occurs because the speakers are not interested in conveying mutually comprehensible meaning, just focusing on their proximate reality. This painful discrepancy between the immediate, partial significance of words and the actual concepts they should represent is characteristic of the life in the contemporary world emerging from MFBS as well as other stories such as "Papa I love you."

However, through dying Kenichi manages to escape this cycle of immediacy. When life is terminated, the familial conflict ceases to exist. Kenichi thus rejoices in his new

freedom from having to cope with the sterile labels of his previous life. In his new perspective as a dead observer, he can see clearly that his family does not fit into any of the usual familial categories, because everyone is only interested in the fulfilment of their immediate urges:

Suddenly, Hiroko interrupts [the parents' conversation]. 'I can hear Kenichi's voice! He's telling me to change the TV channel. He says he wants to watch *This is Weird, Japanese People!*' Hiroko, damn you, you just want to watch it yourself! Something warm is welling up inside my chest. **Happy family get-together. Familial happiness.** I didn't realize that when I was alive. Dying, I finally realized it. I held back my impulse to let out a cry. Yes... I'm glad I died... (80)<sup>54</sup>

Kenichi has managed to escape the fetters of immediacy. However, he did not do so thanks to critical thought, or by rebuilding the severed inter-personal connections in the family. There is no community here, only an individual escape through abstraction.

While the characters seen so far act in the absence of thought, there is one story where one person exerts critical reflection to lay bare the nature of the immediacy of those around him who pursue constant stimuli. However, his actions do not achieve a sense of community, and remain a destructive performance of madness in the face of the absurdities of the vacuum. Similar to Kenichi, it is another extreme human condition that enables Tanaka, the protagonist of the story "Kichiku" (Brutal Man), to see through the immediacy of existence. A homeless man seeking a job, Tanaka eventually finds an occupation at a body modification company aiming to start up a website to promote their US-inspired business in Japan. The unusual company proposes body enhancements such as tongue splitting and tongue lengthening (the boss has a forked tongue; the assistant Marian has one that reaches down to her jaw) to enhance bodily functions and open up new avenues for corporeal stimuli and somewhat animalistic sexual experiences. According to the boss, their enterprise is going to thrive because it caters to the natural urge of people to try always something new and seek the

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<sup>54</sup> Emphasis in the original.

ultimate stimulus. Tanaka is shocked at what is before him, especially when another collaborator, Ken, enters the room and shows his personal modification: a split penis, apparently aimed at giving a man double the pleasure of sexual intercourse. Horrified, Tanaka starts to think the people of the company are insane and, producing a knife from his bag, cuts the others' appendages and stabs them to death. Tanaka feels his madness is redemptive and righteous. He has learned how to see the real nature of people, comprehending his mission: to eliminate brutal people that are happy doing horrible things just for the sake of pursuing the utmost immediacy of ever stronger stimuli. As he reassures himself he is doing the right thing, he also discloses his past:

If people like these exist, the world will go crazy. They're trying to make a mess of the world. It's like the doctor said. The doctor said it's not my fault. Yes, the psychiatrist in charge at the prison. [...] That time something had happened to you, the doctor said. It was because a thin veil was hanging. It was not your fault, he said. Yes. I really think so too. Otherwise, there was no way I could cut mum, dad and brother's throats. That wasn't me. That wasn't me, it was the act of some brutal man I didn't know. (275-276)

The veil metaphor is recurrent in *KGY* to signify a sort of screen numbing characters' emotions and impairing their perception of reality.<sup>55</sup> It symbolizes the vacuum where characters cannot make sense of their life, and thus seek acute stimuli to feel alive. However, Tanaka has gone beyond the veil, tearing it apart. He has thought about the nature of the people in the company, and deemed their search of immediacy insane. For him, homicidal madness is the tool to escape the repetitive cycle of stimuli. As Kenichi in *MFBS* escapes from the absurdities of immediacy through death, Tanaka does so by eliminating those who lay bare the nature of said immediacy. While destructive and isolating, madness is as liberating as death.

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. the short story "Mama told me" (*KGY* 20).

Madness as a means for liberation from the senselessness of life harkens back to a similar trope in Italian writer Luigi Pirandello's *oeuvre*, particularly in the play *Henry IV* (Enrico IV, 1921). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, an unnamed Italian nobleman falls from his horse while impersonating the Emperor Henry IV of Germany at a masquerade pageant. Hitting his head, the man settles into the delusion of actually being the historical figure who lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. His entourage and relatives then stage a castle scenography in his residence and hire actors to help him revel in his folly. However, after twelve years of this life, unknown to the others Henry regains his memory and comes out of his delusion, yet he decides to persist in the appearance of it, playing with people from the advantaged position of the king. Eight additional years after his reawakening he is visited by a doctor and old acquaintances with the goal of curing him. Presented with unsettling images of his past, Henry is furious to the point of revealing his travesty, and ends up killing a man. Now, to protect himself from prosecution, he will forever persist in his false delusion.

Henry chooses madness because it allows him to honestly unmask the absurdity of the world and not take part in it. In act 3 he declares: "I am cured, signori, because I know perfectly that I play the madman, and I do it here, quietly. Your trouble is that you live in your madness in great agitation, without understanding it or recognizing it"(863).<sup>56</sup> His madness is liberating for him because it enables him "to see with a mind that disintegrates conventional structures because it constructs with an unconventional logic. [...] To be mad is to penetrate the inescapable relativity of all structures and values, to live with a heightened awareness of the arbitrariness of what is real and true" (Caputi 96).

In both Pirandello's play and "Kichiku", madness corresponds to a break in the veil of existence. It is a necessary means to take a different stand from the absurdities of

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<sup>56</sup> English translation by Anthony Caputi (Caputi 96).

contemporary life, and at the same time to re-establish the value of intelligence in acknowledging the falsehood of others' farces to find a meaning that is ultimately absent. In *Henry IV* reason is masked as madness to reach a critical abstraction contemplating the hiatus between the conventional pretence of meaning in life and the actual absence of it (Luperini 124). However, in Takahashi's text Tanaka is free from the anguish of the modern man to realize the meaninglessness of life. It is a postmodern text in that it treats the absence of sense with playfulness. Tanaka is not defeated by the fruitless search for meaning. In the story, and possibly throughout *KGY*, the absence of meaning is a given premise in the vacuum. Tanaka's madness is triggered by his disgust because people live for stimuli within this context. Unlike Henry, madness does not allow him to take an external stance to reach a critical abstraction, but instead forces him to operate right at its heart to unmask and execute it, literally.

In *KGY*'s world of immediacy only individual action and stimulation guarantee survival, because in the vacuum characters do not find a sense of community based on mutual communication, comprehension, or even ideologies with which citizens may identify. The story "Kimi ga yo wa chiyo ni yachiyo ni" exemplifies this well, portraying a taxi driver witnessing the postmodern fight to the death of famous political and religious figures such as Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, Gandhi and even Jesus Christ. This fight was organized by the current God (the former one had a neurosis and vanished), to find a final resolution to the conflict of ideologies. All of them are weak and do not hold in the vacuum, so the only way to see which one may prevail is a *battle royale*. Similar to other settings in *KGY*, sheer survival is preponderant. However, as predictable, all exponents die, together with the ideologies they represent. In the world of the vacuum and immediacy, no ideology appears to be valid. Only localized realities survive. That is why, when the taxi driver reaches God after the battle, he

only cares about being paid for the fare, so that he may continue his job, surviving in his proximate dimension.

However, although the stories show the supremacy of immediacy and localized realities over critical thought, creating isolation, there is a longing for community and shared ideals at the core of *KGY*. Although the characters are at odds with social structures, and cannot engage in real, two-way communication, underlying their failures is an attempt to connect with others, be it with a family member or with a sexual partner. However, the stories exemplify that in the vacuum, in a society of immediacy, individual efforts not predicated on deep critical reflection are bound to fail, trapped in the cycle of immediacy. That is why, as with the madman Tanaka, individual action, though born out of critical thought, is not enough to bring about a collective change out of immediacy, and ends up being only destructive. Yet, thought unsuccessful, these characters living in Japan still seek human connections, or an ideology that may account for their existence. This feeling is visible, if looking closely beneath all the layers of immediacy, as shown in the ending of “Kimi ga yo wa chiyo ni yachiyo ni”. After the ideological mayhem, Hal the taxi driver takes on a new customer and, reflecting on what happened, starts to hum the Japanese national anthem. The customer, who has never heard of Jesus Christ nor Hitler, has a feeling he has somehow heard the song, but cannot remember exactly where or when. In the end, where all ideologies crumble in the vacuum, and only immediacy survives, the characters still long for a faint notion of a Japanese ideal, symbolized by the anthem, though distant and irrecuperable it may feel.

On another level, the narratives in *KGY* elicit this awareness in the reader. The emphasis on violent stimulation in the absence of thought, expressed through numerous graphic descriptions, functions as a source of fleeting stimulation for readers too. As suggested in a review of the work, the often disgusting scenes, for example when a group of children

watches a porn video of two women making each other vomit, are also meant to stimulate the readership strongly, and thus make them reflect about what life is in contemporary Japan (Nagae 286-287). By showing the extreme disconnection of the characters in a world of immediacy through shock factors, the book advocates in the readership the need to counter this situation, and possibly establish inter-personal connections, based on critical reflection and communication with others, that would help them escape the vacuum and immediacy.

The textual analyses in this chapter show how the hypothesis of immediacy emerges concretely in Takahashi's literature. Across the two novels and a short-story collection, characters live in an ideological vacuum, where they struggle to make sense of their life and their work, and thus can only concentrate on their local realities, and the present dimension. Especially in *Godira* and the second novel, characters live in presentism, where they do not have clear notions of past and future, and thus experience an endless present dimension, where they face similar situations cyclically. Presentism is particularly prominent in *NBS*, where Meiji writers share the same space and trends with contemporary people, thus underlining the relevance of their literary struggles to the contemporary situation. In these predicaments, the characters suspend their critical thought to concentrate on quick action to survive. While different in nature, action on one's proximate reality is fundamental in all the literary works: in *Godira* it is repetitive, in *NBS* it is writing that does not confront itself with other traditions, and in *KGY* it is violent action predicated on fierce stimulation.

Through their differences, the narratives show characters reveling in the isolation of immediacy, in the absence of critical thought. Whether it is in the secluded environment of a Tokyo neighbourhood, in writing literature without confrontation with literary history, or in a life predicated only on extreme sexual gratification, Takahashi's literature here portrays isolated characters who, concentrated only on immediacy, fail to confront themselves with

others critically. Although some of them may think critically, all individual efforts without inter-personal connections and understanding are bound to fail. Yet, what these failures show is that there is a way out of immediacy if critical thought and action were linked with re-establishing a community based on shared ideals, memories and tradition, as seen in *NBS*. Playing across different times, literary and existential issues, graphic representations of sex and violence, Takahashi's literature shows Japanese people that, no matter their shortcomings, secretly long for community to escape immediacy. Their problem is that, in the presentist world of immediacy, they do not know (or perhaps do not want to know) how to relate to others, as that would require the effort of critical confrontation outside of the comfort of their localized realities.

## Chapter 4

### **Immediacy in literature: Takahashi, Taguchi and Hirano**

This chapter advances the analysis on immediacy in literature with three novels by Takahashi, Taguchi and Hirano, respectively. All set in present-day Japan, they portray a world of presentism, with characters acting in repetitive daily routines in the absence of thought, feeling disconnected from society. In the first novel, *Koi suru genpatsu*, the disconnection is mainly depicted in the divide between societal categories of mourning and death, which are based on superficial knowledge of localized realities, and the deep human truth they should convey. In the other two novels, the main characters feel isolated from a society where they feel out of place, or which does not provide them with satisfactory human ties.

In all three novels, the immediate actions carried out to survive the ideological vacuum revolve around sexual stimulation. However, together with responding to urges for immediate carnal gratification, born in the absence of thought, sexual stimuli also acquire a deeper meaning as means to find corporeal connections with others, and to reach better awareness of the self. The novels do not portray mind and body as mutually exclusive categories as in a Cartesian dualism. Rather, sensorial experiences may lead to critical thinking and identity-assertion, as in the mass sex scene carefully described in Takahashi's novel, or in the sexual rituals in Taguchi. In the first two novels by Takahashi and Taguchi, action which embraces sexual stimuli is vital to rebuild inter-personal connections, and to position the self within a community possessing its own history, thus escaping immediacy. Hirano's novel, on the other hand, shows that while embodying sexual desires by releasing porn videos on the Internet provides a sense of community within the websites, it cannot provide an escape from

immediacy as it is not based on critical confrontation with others. Therefore, when based only on the simple satisfaction of one-sided stimuli, a lasting sense of community cannot be achieved, and characters cannot move outside of the cycles of immediacy.

#### **4.1 The nuclear plant in love**

The 2011 novel *Koi suru genpatsu* articulates immediacy against the aftermath of 3/11, especially the Fukushima disaster and the debate on nuclear energy in Japan. With its satirical approach, the novel challenges conventions in addressing 3/11, and the superficiality of the concepts of mourning and reconstruction, by positioning them against a world centred on immediacy. Immediacy emerges from the outset in the sense of urgency throughout, of the necessity to act (to write) to respond to an emergency. It is manifest in the state of presentism where society treats phenomena such as 3/11 as localized and isolated crises, which may appear cyclically and which should be quickly dismissed as such, removed from memory and from the awareness of shared histories. This approach fails to acknowledge that 3/11 is a reminder of a long-standing situation, where people suspended their critical thought to focus on their proximate realities, thus not really considering all the human suffering, the deaths, and the meaning of mourning vis-à-vis such destructive event.

Controversially, the novel uses sex and pornography to debunk these superficial aspects of society and to advocate the importance of basic human activities as modes of first-hand knowledge. Thus, provided that it is not simply to satisfy one-sided urges, acting to respond to corporeal stimuli may also lead to finding connections with others, and to understand all the complexity and implications of human life and death. Sex and human contact are the keys to rebuild inter-personal relationships based on mutual understanding, thus allowing people to feel part of a community, not only with those in their proximity, but

also in relation with the dead, the past and the future. Re-establishing physical and emotional connections offers an antidote to immediacy.

*Koi suru genpatsu* is perhaps Takahashi's most famous novel, and it constitutes one of the first literary responses to the Triple Disaster (it first appeared in *Gunzō* in November 2011). The novel is perhaps best known for its sexual content and provocative approach to the disaster. To describe the plot of Takahashi's novels is no easy task, and *Koi suru genpatsu* proves most difficult, but suffice it to say that it is the story of Ishikawa, a man who is collecting funds for a charity project for the victims of the Fukushima catastrophe. His project involves a charity porn film production, aptly titled *Koi suru genpatsu*. Ishikawa embarks on this project, thinking how to produce an adult-video with a nuclear plant at its stage, and with different versions where 3/11 and 9/11 overlap and famous personalities such as Osama Bin-Laden, Vladimir Putin and even former Japanese Prime Minister Kan Naoto appear in controversial contexts.

The novel uses satire and ridicule to challenge conventions in contemporary Japan, especially vis-à-vis the nuclear problem and restoration.<sup>57</sup> The parodic force of the novel is evident from the cover, in bright yellow, displaying slogans such as “Stay crazy” (sic) or “A story of love, adventure and the soul of men fighting to make a charity porn movie for the great earthquake.” From the outset, the novel is a manifest exercise in defying expectations of the seriousness of the nuclear issue, and also in debunking the stereotypes associated with dealing with said questions. The dedication page reads “Dedicated to all the dead... it is all too easy to say this.” Although the issue of the dead plays an important role in the novel, as is

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<sup>57</sup> Also highlighted in: Gebhardt, “Japanese” 240.

explained later on, the pompous oversimplification of the issue when dealing with disasters is mocked.<sup>58</sup> The destabilizing effect of the disclaimer on page 7 is even stronger:

Needless to say, this **story is completely fictional**. Even if, in one part, it were similar to reality, that would be an utter **coincidence**. If you thought that what is written here, even a tiniest bit, could happen in reality, that's **because you're crazy**. There's no way such an **insane world** could exist. Go to a psychiatric clinic, at once! Now! That's the only piece of advice I can give you. See you later."<sup>59</sup>

With a humorous effect, the disclaimer mocks the seriousness anticipated by a work dealing with the nuclear disaster. However, at a second reading, the seemingly lighter tone has the opposite effect: while denying connections with real events, the writing vehemently draws the attention to the fact that the novel has more manifest political and social undertones than the playful cover and introduction would suggest.

This debunking, satirical approach gains more force and significance if viewed against the immediacy that operates both on the urgency of writing and the population's suspension of critical thought on important issues to accept definitions for immediate reference that undermine human complexity, especially vis-à-vis a society-shattering event such as the Fukushima catastrophe.

The first reading of immediacy makes the parodic aspect more evident because it highlights the sense of urgency pervading the book. It is the urgency, on the part of the author, to act, or better to react, to a unique event right now. In an interview, Takahashi himself expressed the urge to write that he felt at the time of the disaster. Usually, novels are written with careful preparation and planning, but there are times of urgency, when the writer feels compelled to act in the moment:

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<sup>58</sup> In the book this sentence appears to be taken from an online collection of famous sentences. However, notwithstanding the origin, its relevance in the novel is the same.

<sup>59</sup> Emphasis in the original.

That is what Lévi-Strauss calls ‘bricolage’, using what is available at hand. [...] There are novels written in times in emergency. They differ from usual novels. If we largely divide expressive functions there are two, those where you construct novels according to your artistic standard, and those you write because, facing a crisis, you have to say something. [...] On the brink of a crisis, there’s no time to construct, so you pick up what you think you could use from what’s fallen down. (Takahashi and Sasaki 222)

Takahashi here refers to fiction such as Kawakami Hiromi’s *Kamisama 2011* (God 2011), where the author reworked a short story published originally in 1993, setting it in an area contaminated by radiation from the Fukushima reactors. For Takahashi, Kawakami felt the same impulse to write and respond to the emergency with what she had: “Apparently, Kawakami brought the story forward to herself. Nobody told her to, she just wrote, without even knowing the effects it was going to have. This is the instinctive action of a writer. Reading Kawakami’s story I was deeply impressed: to write everything is the instinct of an author” (ibidem).

In extreme times, it is the nature of the writer to think and write immediately. While not a complete absence of thought, as argued in previous chapters, for Takahashi here careful planning and structuring are subordinated to the immediacy of writing which, if left to linger for years, would not have the same power or meaning. This is why it is relevant to bear this sense of immediacy in mind when analysing *Koi suru genpatsu*. Thus, it is possible to sift through the lack of a defined plot and explain the intrusion of a post-disaster literature section in the third quarter of the novel. According to certain critics, this thoroughly un-introduced section does not add anything to the book as a whole (Ōki 119), yet in the above sense it acquires new significance as an essential part of the response that the author felt he needed in this dire situation.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> In a conversation with fellow writer Ikezawa Natsuki, Takahashi reveals that with *Koi suru genpatsu* the urge to write was so strong that he wrote the novel in only 40 days. He maintains that it is a book dictated mainly by

The middle-aged Ishikawa too realizes the need to address something in Japan *right now*. This means to escape immediacy's reduction of the world to localized realities and familiar concepts in the absence of thought, and to begin drawing connections among various phenomena and the people behind them. This is symbolized by the shockwave that catches Ishikawa and his collaborators in the middle of a production meeting. The earthquake shatters their shelves, causing porn videos to fall to the ground. However, the studio president makes Ishikawa aware that this is not the effect of a single wave. It is but another manifestation of a change that has been going on from long before: “[The earth] it's still shaking’ I said. ‘It's always been shaking’ the president said. ‘For decades.’ ‘Really! I hadn't realized!’ ‘That's because you're thick’ the president said” (*Koi* 94). Realizing that the shockwave is not an isolated event, but part of the broader state of things, is a reminder that something must be done now to change. All the videos lying on the floor are diverse lives, different stories and voices making up a multi-layered world, but which are not taken into account in the main narrative in today's world. The realization that it has been shaking for years is a call for awareness of a change that has caused Japan to be caught in a cultural slumber, where the peculiarities of each human life are generally not considered for the sake of the simple standardization of history and society. Looking at the videos scattered on the floor makes Ishikawa think of all the genitalia represented in the porn movies:

Shelf after shelf fell to the ground, and extraordinary amounts of videos stacked inside were scattered all over the room. I thought about all the **countless dicks and pussies** appearing in the videos. **The lid to the cauldron of hell. Someone inside my head** said. In a loud voice. ‘Let's continue the project meeting’ the president said. First, we set out to tidy up the videos. Then, it started to shake again violently. But I wasn't scared. Because, you see, **it had always been shaking, for decades.** (94-95)<sup>61</sup>

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the age, a good 70% of it, with but a minor contribution by the author (Ikezawa and Takahashi 261). The novel is primarily a response motivated by the impulse of immediacy required from such an event in the present time.

<sup>61</sup> Emphasis in the original.

While mentioning genital organs and porn is both shocking and humorous, it also signals a new method to debunk the general slumber of society and to re-evaluate the meaning of contemporary life. In this moment of emergency, the old ways do not work anymore. This need was felt also by the author himself, as revealed in an article:

It goes without saying, but since 3/11 both 'reading' and 'writing' like before has become difficult. I can't find interesting the things that were, or should have been, interesting before. I can't write what I used to write easily before. On the other hand, things that I had ignored before now slip into my feelings. Or, even if I mean to write in the usual manner, my way of writing has changed. I think this is my problem, but at the same time a problem of the world we're living in too. ("2011 nen" 148)

The new way of writing here involves sex and pornography and, alongside the humorous effect the topics impart, they also serve to re-evaluate aspects of society. By representing explicit themes not usually associated with serious issues such as politics, nuclear energy and death, the novel shifts the attention to re-examining sex, the most basic of human actions, which is ultimately at the core of human relations. One critic has noted that although the book is filled with licentious and obscene language, it does not stimulate sexual drive (Ōki 118). Pornography and sex in the novel are not simply graphic stimuli, but rather shift the focus to basic human interactions. They emphasize empathy towards others and a consideration of their joys and sorrows. These activities suggest that there are other ways to look at human matters, different from the ones officially proposed and metabolized. In a review of the novel, psychiatrist and literary critic Saitō Tamaki has underscored that sex serves here as a liberation from the fetters of simplistic concepts, so common in the aftermath of 3/11:

Regarding the earthquake and nuclear plant, we are already in the process of being caught in the imperative of 'the one righteousness.' Eros is what can potently detoxify such imperative. I am not sure whether it was the author's design, but because of this pattern, I read the book twice. I thought that the loud laughter of when I first opened it turned into a voiceless lament the second time. For sure, we have long been waiting for a 'hope' presented in this form. (Saitō)

The hope in *Koi suru genpatsu* is that voices, experiences and stories that are usually taken for granted resurface in people's awareness. The novel describes characters living in a contemporary society fashioned by immediacy, which sacrifices its capacity to think critically about the specificity of human lives and suffering (in the aftermath of 3/11), and constantly uses ready-made slogans that refer only to proximate realities that cannot account for all the human layers behind them, and which can easily be manipulated by power structures.

People in the society inhabited by Ishikawa live in a state of presentism where they treat events such as 3/11 as separate phenomena that present themselves cyclically, but which have no connections between them, and thus do not constitute a common history. The episode of the ground shaking is telling: presentism isolates the shockwaves as a manifestation of a single event, a new earthquake, that will be addressed and recognized by institutions and the population as a single phenomenon disconnected from analogous manifestations in the past.<sup>62</sup> Instead, the boss, and then Ishikawa, realize that the ground has always been shaking. Therefore, apart from the specific damage and victims of the catastrophe, the shockwaves bring to the surface the alarming reality that the situation has been ongoing for years, connecting various earth-shattering events worldwide in a collective experience.

In the novel, if one listens carefully, 3/11 brings to light the vacuum behind the disconnection of immediacy, in a contemporary world where the complexity of human beings and their relations are undermined for immediate disposability not requiring critical thought. People are living in a presentist series of disconnected "nows". However, it is evident that this vacuum of true personal relations is not exclusive to Japan. There is a scene in which world leaders meet and reveal that they are incapable of sincere human relationships, and that they

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<sup>62</sup> Mita Munetsuke describes a similar attitude of treating events as single phenomena, disconnected from other contemporary ones, as a distinctive feature of the age of fictions, characterizing the late 70s up to the present (Mita Chapter 3).

can only have sex with life-sized dolls. The novel's setting, as well as its urgency to take action speaks also to the global village after 9/11. It is also telling that Takahashi actually began writing the novel in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City. The project, titled *meikingu obu dōji tahatsu tero* (Making of Terrorist Attacks), had several similarities with its final form, including the charity porn film setting, but was abandoned midway, only to resurface as *Koi suru genpatsu* in 2011. The author has revealed that one of the reasons he abandoned the novel was that, although there were numerous common problems between Japan and the world, he still could not write freely when the watershed catastrophe was not close to him personally. With 3/11 now the problem was at home, so he could write about it freely and with irony (Takahashi and Sasaki 218-219).

Therefore, in this world people do not think critically about important issues, such as nuclear energy or other human suffering. They are too focused on their own survival, on reacting to stimulation in their proximate reality. This reality emerges graphically through the images of sexual abuse. When the crew is shooting a sex scene at a radiation shelter in the Fukushima outskirts, the experienced actress Yoshiko explains to her niece that social dynamics functions around the procurement of immediate personal gain and satisfaction. In a scene reminiscent of "Papa I love you" in *KGY*, the adult uses obscene language with an underage girl to make a point on the immediacy regulating human actions. Life is a never-ending presentist cycle where people act repeatedly to sexual stimuli. Therefore, to survive, the niece should respond to men's sexual drives through satisfying her stimuli too.

This is Yoshiko's advice to the niece Saori:

'Then what should I do?' 'It's obvious, isn't it? You suck his penis.' 'I can't do that! Mom's gonna be angry!' 'So, would you rather they stuck it in your vagina and anus? Worst-case scenario, you could die of massive bleeding.' 'I...don't want to die...but I don't want to suck penis either.' 'Now, that's why you're a cotton candy. You're spoiled. You're always thinking crazy things, like someone's always going to help you. You think that there's a prince

somewhere, who's going to come to you when you're in a desperate situation. You'd better remember. Those are all lies. Those things happen only in TV or Disney movies, in Japanese textbooks or bestselling novels. It's impossible. Everybody's busy with themselves, and even if they hear a cry somewhere, they pretend not to hear it.' (4)

Good people do not seem to have room to exist. As people focus on their proximate realities, in the absence of thought, even important concepts such as the vehement sloganeering for a swift reconstruction in Japan reveal a scarce substance behind them. In the aftermath of 3/11, official organizations and mass media promoted optimistic messages of national unity and a speedy recovery, leaving insufficient time for the appreciation of the scale of human damage, and to mourn the victims. The journalist and psychiatrist Kayama Rika has termed this tendency “reconstruction nationalism” (*fukkō nashonarizumu*) (Kayama 2-9), describing that it leaves behind those who, because of their present misery, cannot take in part in the mass enthusiasm of a united Japan, well directed in its steady recovery (Gebhardt, “Japanese” 241). This simplifying tendency does come to mind when in the novel Ishikawa remembers the politician Doi Takako and his aunt, saying that “they are both dead, but they were really good people. **Good people like those in Yoshimoto Banana’s novels**” (193).<sup>63</sup> This is a parodic reference to the fiction of a fellow writer, full of simplistically good-hearted people and, more importantly, to her comments expressing excessive faith in the government and Japanese engineers (Gebhardt, “Japanese” 242, 245). In *Koi suru genpatsu* the platitudes are only a phantom of real human understanding. Common rhetoric, from official organs and the population, about faith in the government and the reconstruction of a united country, are aspects of immediacy: they function as superficial labels designed for quick reference and

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<sup>63</sup> Emphasis in the original. Furthermore in 2011, at the time of writing, Doi Takako was still alive. Probably, Ishikawa thinks she is dead because, after her retirement, she had become far from the public eye, and thus her work was forgotten.

disposal, caused by a suspension of critical thought that cannot possibly account for the great amount of human suffering in a catastrophe such as 3/11.

The novel deploys sex and pornography against this immediacy of forgetfulness and oversimplification in the absence of critical thought. It brings to the fore pornography as charity, challenging standardized concepts of what is appropriate for mourning, of what is *kinshin* (considerate). Thus, by shooting a porn film for the victims, Ishikawa and his crew use something that is *fukinshin* (inconsiderate) to honour something serious, and show that there is an aspect of the catastrophe that is not included in what is usually considered *kinshin*. As the literary scholar Kimura Saeko has noted, the *fukinshin* porn video opposes the obligation that there is only one appropriate way to mourn and only one idea of righteousness (196).

That is why the supposedly *fukinshin* sexuality constitutes a means to bring attention to what remains hidden in the presentism and immediacy of contemporary society. By using sexual images in the *kinshin* Japanese post-disaster context, the novel shows that there are many issues and many ways of thinking in the face of the disaster that remain unearthed, because people do not think about them or, even if they do, they do not live in a system and a community where such freedom of expression is upheld. Immediacy, shown through advocating swift reconstruction and constantly moving forward without dwelling on the past, leaves no room for people to consider other ways of mourning. To express such sentiments would be as frowned upon as talking about genitals in public. As Yoshiko continues instructing her niece Saori about the harshness of the world, penises and vaginas again become the symbols for human truth that becomes buried under the contemporary suspension of thought:

‘It’s not only me. I think I know them [genitals], but most people don’t. Men and women alike. They know that they have a vagina, a penis, but as for the other things, they don’t know anything.’ **‘Why don’t most people know about them? They’re adults.’** ‘That’s because **they’re doing their best not to think**

**about them.** Or rather, because although they're thinking about them, they pretend they aren't. [...] First, it is because they're ashamed of talking about it. However, that's not the main reason. The real reason is because **they can't see them.** 'What?' 'Silly girl! [...] Vaginas and penises! Have you ever seen them on TV? Were they in the newspaper or in a magazine? In a folded leaflet? Have you seen them in a textbook? Can you buy them in convenience stores? Not at all. **Everybody has a penis or a vagina, but they keep them hidden, so they're not visible.** [...] Because they'd be in trouble if people could talk about the truth.' (*Koi* 159-160)<sup>64</sup>

In immediacy people are focused on their proximate reality. This impairs communication, because they cannot express the truth of their feelings (as they cannot talk about their genital organs), but it also impairs their critical capacity to experience things for themselves, thus moving beyond their local realities. To counter this, Yoshiko proposes her revolutionary plan to subvert the general repressive education, based on immediacy and suspension of thought. Her programme of education will have small children sit in circles around touching the genitals of adult men and women engaging in sex before them, and will also involve taking pupils to see people dying in hospitals, and having them listen to homeless or depressed people (*ibid.* 163-170).

Though extreme, Yoshiko's provocative educational plan highlights the mental and emotional isolation with which people live in the novel's setting, and the necessity for a community based on mutual understanding. With immediacy permeating various aspects of life, words and concepts, whether by citizens or official organs, amount to labels describing a portion of reality for immediate reference, which are soon forgotten. Suspending critical thought in order to focus on their proximate realities, people grow out of touch with the suffering and complexity of others. That is why it becomes necessary to radicalize human relationships with the vehement insertion of sex. Through this basic act people can empathize with one another and start building a new sense of community.

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<sup>64</sup> Emphasis in the original.

The final mass sex scene in Ishikawa's film becomes a manifesto for people to slow down and exit the immediacy of localized realities, building a community. However, here sex does not refer to a separation of the mind and body, with people suspending critical thought to indulge in responses to corporeal stimuli, but is a way to reach a better awareness of oneself and others, thus leading to critical thought. Rather than simply a means to satisfy an urge (as is the case in *KGY*), carnal stimuli and sex serve as conduits for other human experiences; they enable the rebuilding inter-personal connections outside of the proximate reality of immediacy. All different kinds of men and women, hetero and homosexuals, converge for a final act of love where the main commandment is to feel and connect slowly, in contrast to a contemporary world focused on immediacy, that does not provide the chance to value the specificity of other humans. On 11 September 2011 huge groups of people gather at a special location in front of Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.<sup>65</sup> In this postmodern pastiche of presentism, dead and living people, even celebrities of the past such as Kurosawa Akira, Walt Disney and Pier Paolo Pasolini all participate. They all arrive by bus, irrespective of their social status (it is "porn film-like democracy", he comments on page 250). They are divided into groups by the director who guides them in their preparation for group sex that does not "satisfy one's lust...but is built in common with all the other couples around" (253). Through a huge megaphone Ishikawa announces: "**today...only today...you should devote your dicks and pussies...to others**" (ibidem).<sup>66</sup> He then realizes that next to him Michael Jackson, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Ozaki Yutaka and other deceased singers are singing *We Are the World*. He feels that the dead singing the lyrics of fraternal love is even more striking, and realizes that "**sometimes, I almost forget this is a porn movie... Isn't it a normal charity?**"

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<sup>65</sup> Although Ishikawa explains that this date was chosen because August would have been too warm for outside sex, the reference to 9/11 is evident.

<sup>66</sup> Emphasis in the original.

(256).<sup>67</sup> With this realization, the novel suggests again that if one contrasts the isolating immediacy and considers others in all their facets, then uncritical categories of appropriateness lose credibility in the face of first-hand contacts with communities of other people. As the director orchestrates the mass intercourse, sharing each other's pain and joy through the body becomes a new way to build true relationships with fellow humans: **“Look...stare...suck...touch...bite...rub the cheeks...smell...raise your nails...do all of that...in total reciprocity...without anyone standing above the others...without anyone trying to take leadership”** (258).<sup>68</sup> In the world of immediacy, individuals try to push their individualism on others for their personal survival, concerned only with their local sphere, oblivious to the pain of others. That is why Ishikawa stresses the importance of equality in the act of mass sex. Here, direct sensorial experience leads to critical thinking. Only through touching others and being touched, seeing and being seen in return, is it possible to regain the basic value of human contact, and achieve true community based on inter-personal connections, in opposition to the frantic pace of immediacy comprised of a presentist series of instants. This is the final guidance given by the director in closing the pornographic scene, written all in bold:

**Slowly...opposing the trend of the age...more slowly...then you will eventually get to the point where you can't go any further...good...stay like that for a moment...still penetrating but without moving but...hug your partner firmly...you will feel like two bodies have actually become one...even so maybe you will feel the existence of someone other than you beyond the thin skin...Besides...why do we close our eyes when we are having sex?...Women generally have their eyes closed...Actually, maybe they're opening their eyes slightly...but is it because they're afraid?...Perhaps we are frightened...scared...of seeing...of seeing our real selves... that people will find out that we're not thinking about others...but today you aren't scared one bit...then let's open our eyes...even though they've been closed until now...let's open our eyes right**

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<sup>67</sup> Emphasis in the original.

<sup>68</sup> Emphasis in the original.

**now that our desire is running free...let's see our partners...then let's start moving...slowly...more slowly... (263)**

The final sex scene includes two relevant aspects in the analysis of immediacy: the value of action and the relationship with the dead caused by the catastrophe. The physical connections in the scene express the need to act and know for oneself advocated by different characters throughout the novel, from Ishikawa to Yoshiko. Given that the book is permeated by a sense of urgency to act now, the sex scene then emphasizes the importance to react to immediacy, taking action as soon as possible. However, it is not a rash unstructured action, a simple response to immediate stimuli. Action is deeply intertwined with critical thinking. It is the careful consideration that in a society where individuals refrain from thinking about important issues such as nuclear power and its consequences because they only focus (and are made to) on their survival in their proximate surroundings, something must be done to rebuild lost connections.

This urgency to act is related to immediacy as described in the beginning of the section, regarding the author's impulse to react instantly to 3/11. However, a similar comment is found in the body of the novel itself. Towards the end, a non-fictional section titled "A Theory of Disaster Literature" (*shinsai bungakuron*) is inserted abruptly without any introduction. A different narrator *watashi* (in opposition to *ore* indicating Ishikawa) analyses various works of fiction he considers part of disaster literature. Although it has been suggested that even without this anomalous section the novel would have been the same (Ōki 119), the "theory" usefully highlights the connection between thinking and acting. At the very beginning, *watashi* reveals that a famous writer, whose name is not disclosed, once replied in an interview that he had been waiting for that day [3/11] all along. This controversial statement was not published as part of the interview, perhaps because it would have been considered inappropriate.

However, the man's actions of actually travelling to disaster-affected areas to help reconstruction show that what comes forth in times of emergencies is the need to act, even in ways that do not befit common definitions of appropriateness: "Most of that man's undertakings were related to the 'commemoration' [of the victims]. Nonetheless, when people gave priority to 'mourning', he chose something different as a priority" (*Koi* 201). The man acted as a result of careful thinking and preparation, which made him realize that critical thinking must be accompanied by action too, otherwise it does not affect inter-personal connections.

Therefore, "that day" (*ano hi*) is for him the time where he could put into practice his thinking, where the urgency for changing things became evident. It is because acting, whether visiting affected areas, or even shooting a porn film, is the true way to show compassion and understanding for the disaster, rather than hiding the absence of thought behind labels:

Facing the reality of the earthquake, the man who said 'I have been waiting for this day all along' left these words before 'mourning.' Well, to be precise, by taking his body to the affected areas and devoting it (taking action) to 'mourning' and 'reconstruction', his soul, without moving one bit from the desk, decided (thought) to say he had been waiting for 'that day.' For that man, to 'think' and to 'act' were equal. Or, conversely, to 'think' was to 'act' with a slightly different meaning. Most people have forgotten about this. (203)

For the man, who might well be Takahashi himself, "that day" (a phrasing found often in Japanese narratives on 3/11) is the day where Japan was dramatically exposed, where the incongruities of its society came to the fore, together with the countless victims: "By the way, what was 'that day'? It's the day the things hidden in this country were laid bare" (*ibidem*). A significant part of the things concealed refers to immediacy. It is the fact that the Japanese are isolated now, feeling disconnected from others because they live focusing on their localized realities. People do not think critically about important issues, and even if they do, they do not express it in front of others. This creates a never-ending loop of presentism, comprised of

repeated present moments without any larger connection to others or to the past. Therefore, the man had been waiting for the poignant moment when the Japanese would have to face this catastrophe that would confront them with the necessity of taking structured action and regaining a consciousness of others. In this respect, Kimura Saeko has noted that speaking up too is a form of action. Therefore, the novel itself is a product of thought, acting and speaking. Also, the contrast between the humorous writing of the porn shooting scenes and the more serious tone of the literary theory section make the latter stand out even more, emphasizing the urgency to take action and speak now (Kimura 202).

Thoughtful action, then, is a way to curtail the loop of isolation.<sup>69</sup> To cut this yoke also means to find a wider connection outside of the repetition of presentism. This connection should not only be with notions of the past, but also with a shared awareness of the future: not only realizing the present dead, but also those of the future. As seen previously in the mass sex scene, where the dead participate with the living, the presence of the dead is a prominent aspect in the novel, even more so in the post-disaster literature section. Here, studying Kawakami Hiromi's *Kamisama 2011*, the narrator writes that in the new setting of the story all living children have disappeared. However, there is a scene where a family with children appears behind two men clad in anti-radiation suits. Since only the two men are real, the family must belong to the world of fantasy. The narrator believes the children are speaking to the readers, and wonders about their identity:

If the children are ghosts, i.e. dead, when and where did they die? Did they die on 'that day'? Maybe so. Because many children died. Or, if, as politicians and scholars say, the events occurred on 'that day' had no 'direct influence' on people's lives, then perhaps they are the dead of a distant future. [...] I read those 'children' as the 'future dead.' I thought those are the 'children' killed in the distant future by what 'that day' brought on, or 'children' that can never be born. [...] This story 'commemorates' **children who have not been born yet.**

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<sup>69</sup> Kimura also suggests that this command is strengthened by the narrator mentioning ties with the terrorist attacks on 9/11, therefore indicating that the endless loop has been continuing worldwide for years (Kimura 201).

The children who have not been born yet are important members of our community too. Then, by observing the ‘mourning’ of the unborn children, this story is declaring its involvement with the future of this community (including both me and you). (*Koi* 210-212)<sup>70</sup>

These children, the future dead, are an important factor that has to be internalized in any attempt at real mourning. This realization shows that ‘that day’ did not finish on 3/11 but will continue with its repercussions for the days to come: it is the necessary consequence of living in age where numerous deaths can result through man-made disasters such as the nuclear plant meltdown. Therefore, the very act of mourning here takes on a much wider scale than the limited one offered as a slogan in the world of immediacy. As a conscious process in the Freudian sense, in *Koi suru genpatsu* as in *Kamisama 2011* mourning means to counter immediacy and escape presentism by establishing a connection with the specific victims that 3/11 entails: those in the past, present, and future.

Acknowledging the deaths of the future also means embracing death as a possibility intrinsic to life. In immediacy death is something that is separated from the category of life, it is shunned as the negation of it. The absence of thought and presentism, disconnecting life from past and future, distances people from the concept of death as something coexisting in daily cycles. In opposition to this, *watashi* remembers the case of his great-grandmother. After working in the fields until 80, and then sewing at home until she was 90, in her final years she became senile, frequently uttering unintelligible things. When she died, the relatives who had been with her in the senile years were prepared for her death, and did not cry. That is because the great-grandmother had died after doing all she had to do, dying slowly and gradually: “The people in the house had lived long with a dead person. That was obvious. For those people ‘death’ and ‘age’ were not ‘impurities.’ With time, we have to see ‘death’ and ‘age’ as

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<sup>70</sup> Emphasis in the original.

‘impurities,’ Probably, ‘illnesses’, ‘disabilities’ and ‘poverty’ too. ‘Impurities’ must be purified. In other words, they must be kept away from our sight” (227). Unlike the time of the great-grandmother, in the contemporary age immediacy separates life and death from one another. The suspension of thought is a voluntary act which causes people to see existence as comprised of separate moments, failing to see the constant exchange between life and death. To understand these connections would mean to exit the uncritical isolation of one’s proximate reality, thus countering immediacy.

The post-disaster literary section demonstrates that immediacy and the absence of critical thought stigmatize death as an impurity, because realizing that death it is a part of life would mean acknowledging the potential for destruction that is not only part of human existence, but also the responsibility of the living. The relevance of this cycle of responsibility in life and death is shown clearly in *watashi*’s analysis of Miyazaki Hayao’s manga *Kaze no tani no Naushika*. The story is set in a post-apocalyptic earth 1,000 years after the “Seven Days of Fire”, a global war that eradicated cities and the heavily industrialized civilization. The poisonous substances released in the conflict gradually polluted most of the earth and seas, creating a massive forest with its own poisonous ecosystem, called the “Sea of Pollution” (*fukai*), which is steadily encroaching on the open world. Nausicaä, princess of the small kingdom of the Valley of the Wind, learns there is a way to purify the polluted sea: determined to find it, at the end of her journey she speaks with the human race from 1,000 years before in a crypt.<sup>71</sup> Here, the princess discovers two appalling truths: first, the sea of pollution was created by that previous human race to purify the world; second, Nausicaä and the others were modified to live in a polluted land. Therefore, in order for the pollution to be purified, and a

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<sup>71</sup> The manga was also turned into an anime film, released in 1984 and lasting 116 minutes. The narrator of *Koi suru genpatsu*, however, claims that this final scene he is commenting on only appears in a never-released complete anime version of the story, allegedly lasting eight hours. Aside from the implausibility of this occurrence, *watashi* is simply quoting from one of the final scenes in the manga, volume 7, which contains far more story material than the officially released anime.

clean world regenerated, the whole present human race has to be exterminated. *Watashi* notes that Nausicaä represents the dead of the future, caused by the men from 1,000 years earlier, who admit their own folly in causing meaningless deaths (Miyazaki 7:195). In her dialogue with the men of the past, she comes to embody the voices of the dead. He notes: “The ‘human race from 1,000 years before’, trying to make excuses to the dead of 1,000 years later, is us. Why do the words of the ‘human race from 1,000 years before’ sound empty? In truth, that is because there are no words the ‘human race from 1,000 years before’ can say to the future dead they are going to kill. The author [Miyazaki] knows this very well” (*Koi* 217). The men living long before Nausicaä’s time are like “us”, the people living in the contemporary world of Takahashi’s novel, because both have created a system generating death, now and in the future, and both see death as a moment intrinsically different from life. They see death as an immediate change that means the opposite of any existence, a moment to start anew regardless of what was before. However, by doing so they deny the responsibility that comes with being aware that death is not so dissimilar from life, and that it is actually an invaluable part of everyday existence. Nausicaä criticizes the humans of the past because with their absolute purification plan they negate death. They cannot change and realize that in reality she and all other humans in her world have been living with death all along: “We have lived together with the sea of corruption. Extinction has already become part of our lives” (Miyazaki 7:198, 201).

The dialogue stresses that although the suspension of thought in immediacy denies it, death is inevitable while living in a polluted and destructive world. It must not be exorcized, but acknowledged to re-evaluate the importance of life, especially vis-à-vis all those who died, and will die because of this world. The narrator comments finally that “to the ‘human race from 1,000 years before’ who continued to spread death, Nausicaä argues that death should not be despised and that they should live together with the dead. That is because they are so

foolish that they cannot understand the meaning of their being alive without living together with the dead” (*Koi* 218). Since people and institutions in *Koi suru genpatsu* do not think critically, separating all parts of their lives in simplistic categories for immediate reference, they do not understand that life and death coexist with them, in the present and the future. Therefore, they needed a wake-up call, a disastrous event like the Fukushima disaster to think really about emergencies, to confront the dead alongside them and, hopefully, take action for change. Thus, the post-disaster literature theory surrounding the porn film shooting comes full circle, because the day people face all the deaths and learn to live with them is the day the writer at the beginning had been waiting for all along. It is a day they can think and face the emergency head on, thus acting to break the yoke of immediacy. It is an action they should not postpone any longer.

In conclusion, like the unknown writer who went to the disaster-affected areas, *Koi suru genpatsu* is a statement to take action against immediacy, which undermines the importance of human connections and of direct experience exceeding one’s proximate reality. Sex fulfils both these functions here, as a means to connect with others and appreciate all their peculiarities, joys and sorrows. Like the literary examples in the post-disaster section, it is born out of critical consideration that human life and death are part of the same cycle, and that people are part of the same human community, informed by the past and the future it may also be foreclosing with nuclear destruction. If people realize this, they may enact true commemoration which, far from being an uncritical standardized practice that will give way to empty slogans of reconstruction and national unity, means instead to embrace the connections with others, both dead and alive. It is a deeply personal activity that values the roots of human contact. If done with these intentions, even shooting a porn film would suffice.

#### 4.2 Taguchi Randy

This section enlightens and diversifies the portrayal of immediacy in literature by showing its occurrence in the novel *Konsento* (Outlet) by novelist and essayist Taguchi Randy. Taguchi Randy, whose real name is Taguchi Keiko, was born on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1959 in Tokyo. After finishing high school, she spent several years as a freeter, without a fixed job, taking part in underground cultural productions (short films, plays) and working as a nightclub hostess. However, interested in writing from a young age, at 23 she entered a one-year programme in an editors' school, attending classes such as magazine editing and research. After that, through a connection with one of the professors at the school, she started working at an advertising agency. Her first interview after becoming a regular employee was with poet Itō Hiromi. After a decade in the business, at 35 she quit her job to dedicate herself to writing, which her teachers had encouraged her to do. First, she became popular for her non-fiction. In the mid-90s her popularity as an essayist was growing steadily, thanks to her publications on a mail magazine, reaching up to one million subscribers. In 1996 she also released a travel diary titled *Wasurenai yo! Vetonamu* (I won't Forget You! Vietnam), relating her one-month trip to the Asian country. Around the same time, while looking after her infant child, she wrote a ten-page short story for a monthly writing competition hosted by the magazine *Hato yo!*, winning at the second attempt. She was 37. Two years later, she wrote her first long novel *Konsento*, published in 2000, marking her debut as a novelist.

Taguchi is a prolific author, whose production ranges from novels to short stories to essays, following the general theme of characters coming to terms with life, death, pain, love and happiness in the contemporary world. *Konsento* inaugurated a trilogy, followed by *Antenna* (2000) and *Mozaiku* (Mosaic, 2001), that portrays young women trying to find a way to connect in a disconnected society, experimenting ties with others and the spiritual world

through sex and occult practices. Similar themes are found in the short story collection *Middonaito Kōru* (Midnight Call, 2000), where various women living in the city are looking for their path in life. As for literary recognition, both *Konsento* and *Mozaiku* became finalists for the Naoki Prize in 2000 and 2001, respectively. *Konsento* and *Antenna* were also turned into films, released in 2001 and 2004. Furthermore, in 2001 the book *Dekireba mukatsukazu ni ikitai* (If Possible, I'd Like to Live Without Getting Angry) won the first ever Fujin kōron literary award for works with women as subject. In 2004 the story collection *Fujisan* became again a finalist for the Naoki Prize.

Similar to Takahashi Genichirō, Taguchi has addressed relevant social and political issues both in her fiction and essays. Starting from her essays about her trip to Vietnam, she has written often about her thoughts and experiences on life in areas affected by war or nuclear disasters. One example is the non-fictional collection *Yorube naki jidai no kibō – hito wa shinu no ni naze ikiru ka* (Hope in a Hopeless Age: Who Do People Live if they Have to Die?, 2006), which includes the essay “Hope in a Nuclear Age” (*Kaku no jidai no kibō*), recounting her observations in her trip to the Belarusian village of Budische, downwind from Chernobyl. A more recent example is the novel *Zōn ni te* (In the Zone, 2013), where the writer Hatori Yōko visits a restricted area in Fukushima where the vegetation has now outgrown the smell of the death caused by the radiations. This “zone” she repeatedly visits comes to represent an undefined area between life and death, which could possibly constitute a new foothold to grasp the ambiguity of the current age, and rethink the meaning of life and death (Yuki, “Adoration” 93-94).

In Taguchi's first novel *Konsento*, the relationship between stimuli and immediacy is central. The protagonist, the young woman Asakura Yuki, lives in Tokyo focusing only on her local reality, like everybody else. Feeling disconnected from others and suspending critical

thought, she repeatedly engages in violent sexual intercourse with numerous men to survive, even momentarily, the vacuum and presentism of the world. Together with sex, another important sensorial stimulus is the pungent odour of decay that defines her relationship with her dead brother. However, as in *Koi suru genpatsu* sexual and corporeal stimuli may also lead to critical thinking: through profound sensorial experiences and shamanistic practices, Yuki can find a deeper connection with a world outside of her proximate reality, a spiritual community encompassing all living beings. Finally, she can also establish a connection with her dead brother, with whom she recreates a common history, therefore surpassing presentism by re-assessing their past.

Yuki's development starts as she enquires into the reasons for her older brother's mysterious death. Her introvert brother, Taka, had gone missing for two months to live, it now turns out, as a *hikikomori* (shut-in) in an apartment, where he finally let himself die. As he had no connections to the outside world, the corpse is discovered only after it had already started to decompose. This shocking event propels Yuki, who had been living quite separately from her family, to re-evaluate her relationship to her brother, and especially what his death means to her life.

Action in response to corporeal stimuli is central in *Konsento*, and illustrates the sense of immediacy pervading Yuki's world too. There are numerous descriptions of strong, sudden sensations that seem to provide a hint of connection enabling to survive in the emotional isolation of the vacuum, even if momentarily. The protagonist is defined through these violent stimuli usually pertaining to the sensorial dimension. One early example is the sudden stimulation she feels in the pungent odour of her brother's rotten body. When seeing the corpse in the casket at the funeral, she feels a strange attraction to this stimulus. It is this sensorial urge that defines her relationship with the brother, as she tells the undertaker:

I strangely feel intimacy with my brother's decomposition smell. Now, I've become used to this ugly smell. When I smell this odour, I can feel that my brother still exists. If this smell vanished, I'd certainly forget about my brother immediately. I'm always like that. I only think about myself. My brother often told me I'm arrogant. Therefore, I wonder if, by rotting like this, my brother isn't showing off to everybody, saying 'I'm here! I did exist.' I have this feeling. I feel he's saying 'I did exist and was alive, do you get it?' (*Konsento* 36-37).

Not feeling connections with others, because she cannot exit her localized reality, Yuki can only feel the existence of her brother from the stimulus of the pungent odour. Her mourning of Taka here is not rendered through affection or careful memory, but through an immediate sensation. It is what affects Yuki's sense of smell violently that makes her aware of him.

Together, with the smell of decay, sexual stimuli play a central role in *Konsento*. Initially, they represent a means to find personal gratification in the absence of critical thought, aimed at surviving her isolation momentarily. There is a vacuum of human connections around Yuki, as she focuses only on her proximate reality, both professionally and emotionally: absorbed in her work as a writer for a financial magazine, she is out of touch with her family, and does not emotionally connect with others, basing her relationships with different men only on sexual intercourse. To fill this void of loneliness, sexual drive and intercourse become powerful tools for immediate gratification, as happens in the relationship with her co-worker Kimura. Although he clearly has feelings for her, their relationship mostly consists of her regarding their sexual intercourse as a means to satisfy her urge to feel her body to the utmost. Thus, after waking up from a vision of her brother, when she sees Kimura on her doorstep she cannot repress a massive sexual drive:

As he entered the room, holding me he embraced me, and suddenly kissed me inserting his tongue in. [...] As he hugged me telling me to pull myself together, a clasp somewhere inside my head burst loose, and I became crazy with desire. It was uncontrollable desire. I pushed Kimura down and forcefully fastened my teeth on his tongue. Pushing my tongue in forcibly, I ran it over his gums (144).

The scene is followed by a detailed graphic description of sexual intercourse: “I concentrated wholeheartedly on the tip of his minutely twitching penis. Going from his penis to his anus, I let my tongue crawl to Kimura’s crotch. Kimura too began to fondle my genitals with his tongue. He licked my perineum. The feeling of his tongue rose through my backbone, erupting at the top of my head. It felt irresistibly good” (145). Minute sexual descriptions, recurrent throughout, convey the importance of stimuli for Yuki. Through those, she manages to survive for a little longer the inexplicability of her life, where she can neither make sense of her brother’s death, nor of the relevance it has for her relationship with him. Through the violent stimuli, and the immediate satisfaction of sex, she is able to feel a kind of connection in her lonely world. It is not, however, a connection to Kimura, as their bodies are separate entities, but to her own body which is activated through stimulation. At the same time, these careful descriptions are a powerful tool to express the force of the stimuli to the reader too. Through these almost voyeuristic observations of Yuki’s pursuit of sexual stimuli, the reader may also experience a sort of kinship.

The immediacy of stimuli defines also one of the most important relationships in the novel, Yuki’s relationship with Professor Kunisada. As Yuki struggles to understand her brother’s mysterious death, she starts counseling sessions with her old University mentor in psychology, who was also her former lover during her student days. Their relationship was characterized by violent sadomasochistic sexual intercourse. However, as soon as that feeling of adventure wore out, Yuki felt no more pleasure in being with him. Yuki asks for Kunisada’s help again and this triggers similar sensations. As their sessions continue, Yuki manages to confront her feelings to her brother in a sincere way, and it also becomes clear that she has chosen to see her old professor not only for his expertise, but mainly because of the stimulation he can provide. She needs to be desired by him, to be the object of his craving for

sexual gratification. Their relationship is based on rekindling sexual stimulation in each session, otherwise it will end. That is why Yuki is at a loss when she experiences the one time the professor does not respond to the immediacy of sexual stimuli:

Like a TV show host, with a businesslike smile Kunisada showed me to the door. Slightly hurt by that behaviour, I bowed and left the room. Then I was dubious as to why I felt hurt at being treated in a professional manner. And yet, when I came here I wasn't supposed to feel even one bit of attachment to this man... I was shocked. I'm already dependent on Kunisada. It's scary. That's why human relationships are dangerous. (85)

The immediacy of sexual stimulation defines all of Yuki's sentimental relations in the absence of critical thinking: she does not aim to find lasting connections, understanding herself and the partner. Yuki blames this condition on her first breakup with Kunisada, ten years before, when he tried to possess her also emotionally by appealing to the memory of a past love tragically lost in an accident: "Since then, I can't love men at all. No matter who I sleep with, no matter how much I feel in the sex, when I'm alone after the action, I feel a little depressed. Yes. The future and the past are really similar. If you don't change this moment, right now, only a future shaped alike can come" (224-225). Although it is debatable whether Kunisada's projection of his past love on Yuki is the real cause for the protagonist's behaviour with men, what is relevant is that her relational world is dominated by presentism and immediacy. She is incapable of developing a relationship based on the accumulation of experience, memory, affection and, ultimately, understanding of others. Her love life calls to mind the "raging sex" envisioned by the protagonist turned author in Takahashi's story "Chenji 2." Similar to the people having sex changing their bodies to achieve the ultimate sexual experience, Yuki too sees love relations only in terms of the immediate stimulation they can provide to her.

In *Konsento*, however, stimuli also take on a different function, uniting the mind and the body to achieve critical thinking. If, similar to Takahashi's *KGY*, stimuli serve initially for

the procurement of immediate satisfaction, which makes the protagonist feel alive, later in *Konsento* stimuli become a means to connect with others. Similar to the final mass sex scene in *Koi suru genpatsu*, where men and women, living and dead, converge to experience each other thoroughly by direct contact and appreciation of others, eventually stimuli (mainly sex, but not only) for Yuki defy hierarchies of pleasure and become vessels to experience the feelings and sufferings of other people to whom she did not feel any connection before, thus achieving a sense of community outside of the isolation of immediacy.

In this way external stimuli, such as the sex with Kunisada, evolve into another kind of stimuli that promote critical thinking and awareness. A prime example of this is the change in the smell of the brother. The rotting smell of the corpse attracts Yuki to him, before any other memory of affection: it is the force of the stimulus that pervades her awareness of the brother. However, it is not a fleeting sensation that disappears after contact, like the sexual intercourses that leave Yuki alone after they are consumed. The smell of decay is something that the woman cannot escape: it remains to haunt her even after the funeral, as it is unexpectedly triggered in her when encountering certain people, for example Kimura. She smells the pungent odour of death in him, which enables her to sense that he is indeed sick. This smell of death comes to play an important role in the story, and also exemplifies the double function stimuli can have in *Konsento*. The smell of death is a corporeal stimulus that defines Yuki's relationship with the brother because, at the beginning, it is all that he represents for her. However, as she grows aware it is a part of her, it becomes also a connection with the brother, a sort of portal between his and her dimension. It is a shared sensation, a stimulus they have in common and which eventually enables her to feel kinship with him. By sharing this stimulus, she can relate to his world better, something she did not do while he was alive. Through the odour she can also remember him. Outside of the repetition of presentism, she can recreate a

notion of their common past, namely the memories they did not (want to) share in life, because they were emotionally separated. Although the smell is born out of an immediate sensation not rooted in understanding, eventually it becomes the gateway for connection and memory, a way to defy presentism and the disconnection of immediacy. By doing so, not only can Yuki learn more of Taka, but she can also define her own identity. Moreover, it is exactly this close relationship with the dead brother that generates the empathy distinctive of literature, according to religion scholar Kamata Tōji. By engaging in a dialogue with the dead brother, Yuki lets him enter her, through the smell, and thus manages to purify him, giving him repose (Kamata and Taguchi 47).

The rotting smell as a stimulus has the ultimate function of providing a connection, even to oneself, establishing one's identity vis-à-vis the different. This relationship between death, impurities and establishing identity is reminiscent of British anthropologist Mary Douglas' theory on dirt, and Bulgarian-French psychoanalyst and literary critic Julia Kristeva's study on abjection. In *Purity and Danger* (1966), Douglas enquires into the meaning of dirt, pollution and rituals of purification in different societies and religions. In her theory dirt, including disease and death, refers to what is out of place, and the various practices of dirt-avoidance and purification in society have the purpose of affirming order on what is outside of it, thus re-instating boundaries: "Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system over an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created" (4). Influenced by Douglas' work, in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Un essai sur l'abjection, 1980), Kristeva uses abjection to describe human reactions (horror, disgust) to the threat of a breakdown of meaning, of the distinction

between subject and object, the self and the other. It is a primal repression, preceding the subject's establishing its relation to an object: "Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (10). Abjection is particularly related to death because it is a response to the rejection of death's materiality. When a person sees a human corpse, especially one of a friend or of a family member, he/she experiences the trauma of seeing his/her life made real. In it, the individual sees what he/she has discarded in order to live, and thus is able to assert identity over what is different. The repulsive aspects of a corpse serve to re-establish the boundaries between the dead and the living: "These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being" (Kristeva 3). Therefore, though reacting with disgust and fear, human beings are repetitively drawn to the abject because it serves to re-establish boundaries, between the individual and the other, between life and death, through confrontation with the tangible other. That is why Kristeva associates it with *jouissance* (enjoyment): "One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it. Violently and painfully" (9). In *Konsento*, the palpable reality of the dead brother, and the stimuli of the rotting smell function similarly to dirt and the abject in Douglas and Kristeva. Like dirt, they are transgressions to an idea of order (life) that therefore must be purified to re-establish one's existence; at the same time, the smell is the abject that creates disgust, but which also draws Yuki repeatedly to it as a stimulus, a tangible sign of death enabling her to re-define her condition of being alive. Like in *Koi suru genpatsu*, incorporating the dead's tangible memory and presence into everyday life is crucial to re-establish one's identity as a living being.

Together with reaffirming one's life, the pungent stimuli of death offer also a doorway to another world outside of the immediacy of proximate realities. It is an invisible spiritual

dimension that connects sensitive individuals.<sup>72</sup> By realizing the connections offered by the stimuli of death and sex, Yuki becomes aware of her potential for sensing and channeling these connections. She becomes the titular *konsento* (power outlet), in that by receiving stimuli (the plug), she is able to tap into the invisible world. She is a receptacle of connections that are born of immediate stimuli but which, if embraced, can lead to critical thinking and a wider consciousness of the world.

In the novel the process of building inter-personal connections through tapping into a wider spiritual world is associated with shamanism. As Yuki's friend Ritsuko explains, "shamans are the hole carved in the wall. And that hole is connected to an invisible world. So, those who visit the shamans put their plug in the outlet. By doing so, they can connect with the divine world" (*Konsento* 194). Yuki has a special sensitivity because she is capable of receiving external energy (stimuli) and turn it into living energy to connect with a wider world. According to Ritsuko, this is the function of a shaman: "An outlet is necessary to use electricity, right? In other words, it's a tool for the supply of energy. In the case of shamans too, people who have depleted their life energy come to them and receive energy. In the past there were many of such suppliers of vital energy in the communities. Man shall not live by bread alone. Without vitality, he's going to die" (*ibidem*). Therefore, being a shaman here is a way to build a sense of community.

Yuki can establish community in a spiritual world connecting various individuals, thus exiting the localized realm of immediacy. She is able to connect with other voices, such as that

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<sup>72</sup> This dimension is redolent of to the invisible world of self-inspection that Taguchi mentions in commenting on her literature. In an essay she writes that this invisible world of fiction is made of images that can speak of the real world. This invisible realm is an inner dimension where literature can operate to turn the visible world into the invisible one, and rearrange it in different ways. When she herself lost her brother in real life, she could not accept it, and turned to literature, to the invisible world, for a narrative she could accept ("Bungaku" 22–23). For her, this inner world is a realm of deep self-confrontation. Thus, people are able to find their own answers, in contrast with the outside world of reality, where they simply stick to superficial knowledge and try to impose their opinion on others, out of self-defense to preserve their own convictions rather than understanding others (*ibid.* 28).

of her brother. By doing so, she can finally accept Taka's death. She understands that he was like her in principle, a sensitive receptacle, but he was never fully understood because they never connected in life: they were too focused on protecting the immediacy of their comfort zone of disconnection. In the end, her brother could not survive by filtering all the outside stimuli. Unable to channel them, he pulled the plug from the outlet of his life. In the final confrontation, Yuki rebuilds the memory of the brother, and takes in that this reconstruction allowed her to find her connection and purpose:

Though we were brothers with the same capacities, we put all our efforts to protect our egos. That's why we couldn't blend. Such a pity. We lived scared all along. Hating our naivety. Despising the world's arrogance. Simply to avoid being violated by the outside stimuli, we always lived still in our shells. That was because if we even let the guard down a little, those terribly strong vibrations called human emotions would have interfered. They'd have penetrated and violated us. They'd have taken over our egos. You were misunderstood a lot. It was hard for you to live. But now it's over. Because of you, I achieved a new awareness. I was able to cast off my old shell. Thank you. (330-331)

Embracing stimuli without fear of connecting with others enables Yuki to get out of her proximate reality and travel the realm between visible and invisible world. Thus, in such indistinct dimension of life and death, she is one with the totality of nature (*daishizen*) and can feel connected to something greater than her ego.<sup>73</sup> In the end, Yuki accepts her shamanistic role, and starts to work as an awakener, liberating potential vessels like her through sexual performance. Ultimately, as in Takahashi's *Koi suru genpatsu*, real connections are found through mutually opening up to the corporeal stimulation of sex and death. The *kinshin* of total comprehension away from immediacy is gained thanks to the *fukinshin* of physical pleasure.

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<sup>73</sup> This ambiguous zone, defying the immediacy of being encapsulated in a reductive description for common usage, is a trope recurring in later fiction by Taguchi too, for example in the eponymous zone in Fukushima visited by a writer in the novel *Zōn ni te* (2013). This natural locus, where life and death coexist, can represent a new foothold to find new connections in a society where immediacy has pushed them down in people's consciousness.

### 4.3 Hirano Keiichirō

Rising to the literary spotlight at a young age, Hirano Keiichirō is one of the foremost exponents of contemporary Japanese pure literature. Experimenting with various themes and modes of writing, Hirano is also an author attentive to technological advancements and how they influence human relations. In particular, novels such as *Kekkai* (Collapse, 2008) explore how the Internet brings to the fore the darkness in people's hearts that used to be concealed in previous ages (Hirano and Numano 90). This theme is central, especially in its relation with immediacy, in the short novel *Kao no nai ratai tachi* (Nudes Without Faces). After a brief biographical introduction to the author, this section analyses the trope of immediacy in this novel, published in 2006, two years before *Kekkai*.

Hirano was born on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1975 in Gamagoori, Aichi Prefecture. As his father died when he was still an infant, from 2 to 18 years of age he was raised in his maternal home in Kita Kyūshū, Fukuoka Prefecture. Interested in reading and writing from a relatively young age, he wrote his first eighty-page piece while in high school, and continued this activity also while attending the law faculty at Kyoto University, together with parallel hobbies such as a light music club and a part-time job at a bar. While still in university, in 1998 he submitted his first novel *Nisshoku* (Eclipse), which had taken him a year to complete (six months for research, six months for the writing up), to the magazine *Shinchō*. Set in 15<sup>th</sup>-century France, it is the story of a theologian struggling with faith and having a mystic experience. It is written in a carefully elaborate language reminiscent of Meiji literature, replete with archaisms and classical kanji not immediately accessible to the average Japanese reader. Before submitting the manuscript, Hirano sent a 16-page letter addressed to the magazine editors explaining the reasons behind his writing. Arousing the interest of the editors, he met them in Kyoto and showed them the work, which was eventually published in the August issue of *Shinchō* in a

single instalment. *Nisshoku* received high praise from the literary circle, and Hirano was immediately hailed as a child prodigy, reminiscent of Mishima Yukio. As a confirmation of that, one year later his debut novel won him the 120<sup>th</sup> Akutagawa literary prize. One member of the selection committee, the writer and politician Ishihara Shintarō commended that the book's display of knowledge and archaic style were necessary modes for resurrecting contemporary literature" (Hirano and Numano 89). Adding to the sensational occurrence of the award, at the time Hirano was the youngest winner ever at only 23 years old. He was later surpassed in 2003 by the joint winners Kanehara Hitomi and Wataya Risa, who were respectively 20 and 19 years old at the time of the award.

In 1999 he also published his second novel *Ichigetsu monogatari* (Tales of the First Moon), the title obviously reminiscent of Ueda Akinari's *Ugetsu monogatari* (Tales of Moonlight and Rain, 1776). Here, a young Meiji poet seeks an escape from depression in a mountain temple. There, he experiences visions between the real and a dream world, trying to reconcile his love for a woman. Written in an archaic style, *Ichigetsu monogatari* is akin to the previous *Nisshoku* also in themes. In an interview, Hirano has explained that both novels enquire into the question of individuality and identity in times of crisis of previous values. In this sense, both Europe at the end of the middle ages and the Meiji era resemble Japan in the late 90s, after the economic bubble burst (the time of Hirano's writing), because they are all times where society felt at a standstill, when the values and beliefs held until that moment felt no longer valid as the world was changing radically (Hirano, "Personal Interview"). In 2002, he published his third novel *Sōsō* (Farewell to the Departed) set in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, and having the composer Frédéric Chopin, the painter Eugène Delacroix and novelist George Sand as the main characters. Together with the two previous novels, *Sōsō* makes up the so-called

“romantic trilogy”, marking the first phase in Hirano’s production, characterized by stylistic classicism and elaborateness.

Conventionally speaking, the publication of the short-story collection *Takasegawa* (harkening back to Mori Ōgai’s *Takasebune*, 1916) in 2003 marks a change in his literary production, inaugurating a second phase where he focused on shorter fiction on contemporary themes such as family and modernization, and written in contemporary Japanese. In many of these stories, the author also experiments with visual effects, playing with words to stimulate the reader visually together with content. One example is the story “Onna no heya” (A Woman’s Room), included in 2007’s *Anata ga, inakatta, anata* (You, Weren’t there, You), where words are arranged to form a picture.

In 2004 Hirano was appointed cultural envoy by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. Based in France, he gave lectures all over Europe. Back in Japan, alongside his work on essays, he returned to the long novel form, publishing *Kekkai* in 2008. This murder mystery, together with the science fiction novel *Dōn* (Dawn, 2009), *Katachi dake no ai* (Artificial Love, 2010) and *Kūhaku wo mitashinasai* (Fill the Void, 2012) constitutes his third phase. Referring often to how technology shapes human life, these novels show that there are different sides coexisting in their protagonists. This trope has been theorized by Hirano as “dividualism” (*bunjin shugi*), and is also the subject of a non-fictional publication titled *Watashi to wa nani ka: ‘kojin’ kara ‘bunjin’ he* (What Am I? From ‘Individual’ to ‘Dividual’, 2012). The books published in this phase too received critical acclaim, with *Kekkai* and *Dōn* winning the Education, Science and Technology Ministers’ Art Encouragement Prize for New Writers and the Deux Magots Bunkamura Prize respectively, both in 2009. In 2014, Hirano was appointed “Chevalier de l’ordre des arts et de lettres” by the French Ministry of Culture.

Although this periodization is used, as always, more as a convention than a distinct differentiation in an author's *oeuvre*, Hirano himself acknowledges that while his main interests have stayed the same, such as individuality, identity and the issue of free will in a system-based society, the ways he looks at them has evolved, like phases in classical music, about which he is very passionate too (Hirano, "Personal Interview"). Currently, he has entered what could be described as a fourth phase, where his enquiry into identity often is played out in the form of love stories, such as his latest published novel *Machine no owari ni* (At the End of the Matinee, 2016), which won the Watanabe Junichi literary Prize in 2017. Together with his literary activity, Hirano is also the author of numerous literary essays and reviews. He is also an active public figure, regularly posting messages on his Twitter account on a variety of topics, from music reviews to political statements. He has often made comments opposing the Abe government, especially regarding the Anpo treaty, and also took part in the public demonstration in front of the National Diet on 30<sup>th</sup> August 2015.

In *Kao no nai ratai tachi*, the ways in which immediacy brought about by the Internet influences people's personalities is the fulcrum of the story. The creation of Internet avatars enables the two main characters, Kimiko and Mitsuru, to become celebrities for their sex videos, thus existing only in a localized reality that does not account for their whole personality as human beings. They find an outlet to survive in the vacuum, as they live in a presentism where they experience cycles of an unchanging real world where they do not fit. Therefore, they find satisfaction only in acting to respond to sexual stimuli, performing extreme sexual acts that are released as videos on the web. Only through these actions can they give voice to their inner instincts of exhibitionism, which the vacuum of existence in the real world cannot accommodate.

The immediacy of stimuli enables the characters to survive. Although their avatars do not account for their whole personality, because they refer to a localized reality embodying only one fragment of them, still the repetitive action for stimulation leads to the realization of a true part of their identity. Also, by interacting with viewers that appreciate their performances, the two characters can find a sense of community on the Internet that would be impossible to find in real life. However, since this community is based on the immediacy of stimulation, not leading to critical confrontation with others, it cannot be integrated into the real world: therefore, when the two dimensions merge in a public incident, Kimiko and Mitsuru become social outcasts. While the Internet community allows them to survive and experience gratification, it is neither a lasting way out of immediacy, nor does it build a solid community, because it is valid only in its presentist dimension that thrives insofar as new videos are uploaded regularly. Finally, the emphasis on sexual stimulation and voyeurism stimulates readers too. The detailed descriptions of violent sexual acts also refer to readers' need for stimuli to fight the emotional numbness of the contemporary world, thus possibly providing a temporary healing to present-day vacuum and immediacy.

*Kao no nai ratai tachi* develops with an external narrator relating in chronological order the events that led to a public incident six months before, involving two Internet erotic celebrities known until then only as "Mikkī and Micchī." Although the details of the incident are revealed later, from the first chapter, where the narrator describes fragments of a DVD he has come across in his research, it appears to be related to the two characters having sex in public: in fact, the DVD labeled "Osaka Castle", similar to numerous other videos circulated on the Internet, is an amateur porn video shot by Micchī, showing him and the woman known as Mikkī having sex in a shaded area of the landmark. After that, the narrator introduces the two characters, and everything that led to the final incident. The narration is conducted from

an omniscient external point of view. This almost godlike perspective has been indicated by critics as a sign of the author exerting total control over his characters and events, inserting his comments (Takai, Gengetsu, and Tanaka 337). However, when describing the two protagonists, the narrator does acknowledge that their real names are his own invention for conventional purposes, and that actually they might be written with different kanji (*Kao* 11). This fact insinuates the doubt that everything the narrator is telling is a fact only in his personal relation of the event, and not absolute truth. This kind of narration, ironically entailing the questioning of its authenticity, recalls the information exchange on the Internet, where everything is immediately publishable and accessible without filters, therefore hardly foolproof or thoroughly verifiable.

Mikkī is Yoshida Kimiko, a middle-school teacher at the time of the incident. Micchī, Katahara Mitsuru, is a civil servant who had a troubled experience in school, connected with bullying and episodes of violence on his part, thus making him resent his former institution. Both are incapable of finding satisfaction in ordinary sentimental sexual relationships because they are seeking stimulating experiences. They meet for the first time when Kimiko ventures out of curiosity into an online dating site, which Mitsuru had been using for a long time. Then, after they start having sexual encounters, Kimiko finds out that Mitsuru has been circulating on the Internet pictures and videos of her taken during their extreme sexual performances. These faceless images of her nudity, which refer to the novel's title, make their duo a web sensation known simply as "Mikkī and Micchī." Upon this revelation, Kimiko tries to break away from the relationship, but in vain, as he forces her to one last open-air performance during the day at the old school he resents so much. However, the final show does not go as planned. When a teacher sees them, Micchī stabs him with a knife, while Mikkī is crying,

petrified. After the police arrests them, and their identities and deeds are broadcast publicly, their lives will never be the same.

The immediacy of the Internet plays a pivotal role in the creation and experience of identity in the characters' proximate reality. By easily creating avatars on online platforms, message boards, chats and the like, people can create multiple identities that function only in localized portions of reality. These side identities are opaque, because they are hidden behind avatars concealing real names and appearances. Thus, avatars can embody one trait of people's personality, which is brought to the extreme, for example when Micchī uses one to post pornographic pictures on a website. However, this avatar does not provide a full account of one's character: it is an embodiment of one side that is then consumed immediately, without filters, by the enclosed community where it exists and is valid. In the selected Internet context of the porn websites where the two exhibitionists thrive, users access their identities immediately, consume them, and forget them immediately. In this realm, people are known by others only insofar as their Internet identities are exposed, namely through the fragments present in particular contexts. That is why even though Mikkī is Kimiko in real life, the two do not correspond to the same person. They perform different social roles, and embody different characteristics at different degrees: "Those who knew 'Mikkī' didn't know 'Yoshida Kimiko.' Those who knew 'Yoshida Kimiko' didn't know 'Mikkī.' Perhaps among them there were some who knew both of them, but even in that case the two people didn't coincide" (*Kao* 12). The Internet makes it possible, and easy, for Kimiko to create Mikkī, who becomes another entity that feeds from her, but also has a life of her own. The separation between the two is also rendered graphically in the novel, as both names are always written under quotation marks.

Within this mechanism, Micchī and Mikkī exist because they give their real-world counterparts an outlet to act in response to the sexual stimuli they need to survive in the sentimental dissatisfaction of their lives. The immediacy offered by the Internet to give life to a side of one's personality responds to the desire for immediate sexual stimuli felt by both Kimiko and Mitsuru. Before meeting Mitsuru, Kimiko is described as a woman who, as she comes to terms with her changing body when entering womanhood, finds pleasure not so much in sharing such experiences with her friends, as in the thought of the uniqueness of her menstruation: “‘Yoshida Kimiko’ did plainly feel a girly, dreamy emotion towards friendship, but although she was ambiguous [about it], she wasn't entirely insensitive to the privileged thrill of being different from the others. To her that hadn't drawn others' attention about anything it was an unexpected, altogether unknown experience” (36). For her, unable to fit in her classroom, the pain of the menstruation becomes a way to stand out. She starts to be enthralled by the painful experience, whose repetition comes to regulate her life, divided by menstrual cycles. While she is living for this stimulus, she also longs for another potential one given by the menstrual pain, the engrossing promise of future carnal pain:

The other kind of pain [...], went more and more distant, towards a one-time future. For some time, she had come to associate it naturally with the idea of the pain in her first sexual intercourse. That unexperienced pain that would come again soon, just once, amplified manifold, frightened her often, combined with an exceedingly reasonable moral taboo. The graphic expression of the hymen being ‘torn’, ‘rent’ made the violence of the action stand out. Whilst scared, on the other hand she felt all of that was rather indifferent to her, so now she counted on those unlimited postponed possibilities, and also believed in them. (36-37)

The immediacy of corporeal stimulation is the only source of gratification for Kimiko, even as she grows up. She lives in presentism, where she survives an unchanging everyday in an emotional numbness, without significant developments. To survive this cycle, she indulges in

the stimulation of occasional pleasurable experiences This is why she also sets up an Internet connection at home and comes across the dating site.

Mitsuru is a similar case. His relationships with women are not based on sharing or understanding, but in the stimulation given by extreme situations. He bases his relations on fun, in the absence of critical thought. He cannot find pleasure unless he teases his partners, stimulating them with vibrators and abusing them verbally while filming them on tape, as he does also with Kimiko. Therefore, Mitsuru and Kimiko form their bond because their lives are already defined by their actions to respond to the violent sexual isolated stimuli they constantly seek. The immediacy of the stimuli finds an ideal outlet in the immediacy the Internet provides for the creation and consumption of new identities that embody this craving. Thus, Mikkī and Micchī are born and can thrive.

The Internet enables them to express this side of their identity in the localized reality of the porn website, because in real life Kimiko and Mitsuru live in a state of presentism where future satisfactions are foreclosed. It is only the immediacy of pleasurable experiences that can make them survive the vacuum for a moment. As is said of Kimiko: “Within such everyday [life], she was caught in the feeling that she was somehow stagnating. There was nothing she must do in preparation for a few years later, for the future. [...] She was beginning to feel too much discomfort in positioning herself in society. If she couldn’t entrust that to the future, she must devise something now in the present. [...] There was only leisure” (77). So, when the man and the woman access the Internet, they are transformed into something else in the localized reality of the website: they become entities that live in an online world where stimuli are always present, so that they can act in response. They feel alive only in the immediate procurement and consumption of sexual stimuli, where they do not have to deal with the other sides of life in the real world, such as work. Since social norms do not account for who they

really are, they find a satisfying identity in the stimuli of the liberating exposure of their sexual escapades. This is especially true for Mikkī, who finds refuge in this new identity where she is shielded from the shame she would have felt for her graphic actions in the real world: “She entrusted her self escaped there [from the shame feeling of the real world] to a different person named ‘Mikkī.’ [...] The proper name ‘Mikkī’ differentiated her as she had escaped from herself, and in that sense it was protecting her” (110).

Although Mikkī and Micchī are but fragments of their identity created in the immediacy of a localized reality, they are nonetheless true, and entail a critical awareness of themselves. As in the two previous novels, embracing violent sexual stimulation enables the two performers to make the mind coincide with the body, thus reaching a better awareness of themselves, though not in relation to a wide community, but in the localized reality of a porn website. They are the true immediate embodiment of the characters’ coincidence with their sexual stimuli (the leisure required by Kimiko) that the vacuum of contemporary society cannot grant. Therefore, within the context of a dissatisfying real world, immediacy for action becomes inevitable to survive. While this immediacy is given shape through an Internet avatar, it makes it nonetheless a truthful manifestation of the characters’ personality.

Through this, *Kao no nai ratai tachi* foreshadows the splitting of identities that is prominent in later novels by Hirano such as *Dōn*, and is articulated as “dividualism” (*bunjin shugi*) in a 2012 essay.<sup>74</sup> Dividualism argues that each person in contemporary society comprises of different facets, different traits of his/her personality. For example, one trait stands out when one person is dealing with someone, a lover, whereas the same trait might be hidden when he is dealing with someone else. Therefore, all these sides coexisting within one person are aspects that make him a “dividual” (*bunjin*), meaning that his identity can be split

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<sup>74</sup> Hirano, *Watashi*.

in different sides. The idea of *bunjin* is of course a reaction to contemporary society's perception of individuals (*kojin*) as defined by a comprehensive integrated personality that cannot be divided into different ones (Hirano and Numano 91). Hirano has explained that although the Japanese know they have multiple sides within them, this phenomenon is usually seen negatively as a manifestation of the difference between exterior and hidden behaviours. However, individualism is not a negative connotation, but rather a realization of the different facets within each person. Furthermore, although these individualistic sides were invisible before, the Internet with its transparency and quick access to all kinds of information has made them surface (Hirano, "Personal Interview"). The Internet ignites this mechanism in *Kao no nai ratai tachi*. Its immediate nature, enabling users to create new identities in selected contexts, births Mikkī and Micchī. Only the Internet can provide the environment where the two can exist as manifestations of Kimiko's Mitsuru's multi-faceted identities. Although the avatars take on a life of their own, and might even survive their real-life counterparts (*Kao* 125), they are nonetheless true parts of two living (in)dividuals.

What is more, Mikkī and Micchī are not only true identities: they also give meaning and importance to Kimiko and Mitsuru. In the vacuum of their lives, the immediacy of action for stimuli embodied by these two faceless avatars fills the emotional void for numerous repeated instants. Immediacy here works both ways: that of the pleasure felt by the two in their performance, her in exposing her lustful body, and him in relishing the sensation of owning her, but also in the extreme sexual gratification on the part of the viewers in the web's localized reality. Moreover, the fact that Mikkī appears with her face cut out from the pictures stresses the stimulation provoked by her body alone, without giving viewers the hindrance of taking into account her face too, a sort of reminder of her complex identity as a person living in the real world. As Mikkī, she is pure, immediate stimulation. And all followers on the web

lust after her for that, because they do not need any kind of critical thinking about her identity in that context. Further, it is her superiority over other avatars in exactly embodying the stimuli that gratifies her. The immediacy of stimuli, not her job nor any other relation in the real world, makes her feel important and critically aware of herself:

The naked bodies [on the website], separated from the faces through a mosaic, protected from that interference, appeared just as such. It wasn't simply to conceal identities: the deleted face thus made the body stand out, and supplied that very figure as a new face to the viewers. Thus, even comparing it with any of those, she felt that the extremely racy fleshiness of her body was not something that would by any means lose in comparison, and instead felt very proud of it. (*Kao* 145)

This pride felt in the immediacy of the Internet works only insofar as it applies to the avatars' proximate reality. Mikkī is shielded as long as its existence is not associated with that of Kimiko. That is because immediacy and the Internet, while bringing together individuals who struggle with inter-personal encounters, still operates in localized realities in isolation from the whole. That is why when the comfort of immediacy and real life merge, irreparable conflict arises. When the incident is made public and Mikkī and Micchī are associated with their counterparts Yoshida Kimiko and Katahara Mitsuru, the game of immediacy comes to a halt.<sup>75</sup> When the media expose the real identities of the two performers, they are not allowed to go back to their former places in society. Although, unlike Mitsuru who is on trial for his armed assault against the teacher, Kimiko is only taken to account for the lesser criminal accusations of public indecency and trespassing, her career as a teacher is over. Now that all her details and pictures are public, she is labeled as the "large-breasted lewd female teacher" (*kyonyū inran jokyōshi*). The incident has yanked Mikkī back to that world of shame from which she was protecting Kimiko in the first place. In the end the individualistic side where Mitsuru and

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<sup>75</sup> The incident is probably a parody reminiscent of a real-life case, the Osaka school massacre (*Fuzoku Ikedashō jiken*), where a former janitor entered the elite Ikeda Elementary School armed with a kitchen knife and stabbed numerous children, resulting in eight dead and fifteen wounded (Takai, Gengetsu, and Tanaka 341).

Kimiko could find gratification in the immediacy of stimuli and a localized reality cannot bridge their isolation in the real world, without a community based on critical confrontation with others.

In conclusion, in *Kao no nai ratai tachi* the immediacy of the Internet's localized realities, where people can create new identities to express sides of their personality, is vital to survive in presentism. In pornographic websites the two find an ideal outlet for their craving for sexual violence, and also the gratification of being successful in their localized reality, where viewers are aroused by them. This gratifying immediacy of stimuli is also operated by the novel itself. With its many detailed sexual descriptions, and the voyeuristic nature of Mikkī and Micchī's shenanigans, the book provides numerous stimuli to the reader too. Not only that, since the incident is hinted at from the beginning, the reader may also be enticed to read until the end to know the truth about it. The novel may provide its audience a fleeting leisurely release from the emotional vacuum of their current lives, serving as the immediate source of healing (*iyashi*) that many, according to Hirano, now seek in literature to keep their balance ("Personal Interview").

This chapter deepens the analysis on immediacy through three novels that shed further light on the importance of stimuli. Despite the apparent differences in the novels, the characters in the three novels live in presentist worlds where life seems to amount to repetitive cycles of the present, without clear notions of past and future developments. In this society, where people concentrate on their proximate realities in the absence of critical thought, it is difficult to draw connections with past events informing the present and future (*Koi suru genpatsu*), and with other human beings, both living and dead. Therefore, the characters tend to focus only on what concerns them directly, acting to respond to strong stimuli to find instant gratification and survival in the isolation of immediacy.

However, different from the one-sided physical urges suppressing thought for physical pleasure seen in *KGY*, the corporeal stimuli in this chapter may also lead to varying degrees of critical thought. As the mind and body are not mutually exclusive, sensorial experiences provide better awareness of oneself: this creates a community outside of immediacy in the first two novels. In *Koi suru genpatsu* it is action responding to sexual stimulation that, when not aimed at satisfying a fleeting urge, is capable of making a genuine connection with one's partner, thus building a new community based on mutual understanding, outside the immediacy of proximate realities. In Taguchi's *Konsento*, the violent stimuli of the rotten smell of the brother's corpse and of sexual intercourse, if carefully embraced, become a gateway to deeper inter-personal connections. Through the smell, she is eventually able to rebuild her memory of her brother, and thus to understand his life and suffering, as she understands hers in relation to him. Thus, remembering him she can reassert their common history, outside of presentism. At the same time, through sexual intercourse, she becomes a vessel for human connections, opening other spiritually-sensitive people like her to the understanding that they are all part of a community.

On the other hand, in *Kao no ratai tachi* Mikkī and Micchī achieve a better critical awareness of themselves through responding to sexual stimulation, yet they cannot escape the cycle of immediacy and presentism of their lives in the real world. While the sensorial experiences enable them to express one fragment of their true selves in an individualistic perspective, and give them a temporary sense of community in the localized reality of the website, they still do not provide a wider awareness of their relationships with others. As in the raging sex in Takahashi's "Chenji 2" the bodies here are vessels for immediate extreme sexual pleasure that do not entail careful understanding of the partners. As liberating and empowering as these extreme sensations might be, when stimuli are pursued simply for their

immediate gratification, it is always a one-sided activity that cannot account for one's place vis-à-vis a community in the real world. Therefore, through showing Mitsuru and Kimiko's social failure, the novel still suggests that embracing corporeal stimuli without critical comprehension of oneself and others cannot entail a lasting sense of community, and thus an escape from immediacy.

## Chapter 5

### Immediacy in popular culture

This chapter explores the trope of immediacy in Japanese animation and manga. It focuses on how the theme is played out distinctively in the stories, characters, worldview and visual representations in each respective series, investigating how they contribute to the present argument on immediacy. All products discussed have enjoyed a high degree of success worldwide and have been adapted into various media, ranging from manga versions of original anime and vice versa, video games and novelizations expanding on the worlds and untold histories sketched in the works, to countless derivative products such as *dōjinshi* (fan publications). The commercial success of these cultural productions is evidence of their popularity among the contemporary public. In this chapter, all series are analysed in the medium in which they originally appeared.

Although they may differ in sub-genres (post-apocalyptic fiction, robot anime, crime thrillers), immediacy features prominently in all anime and manga. Unlike the previous literary works which, with the exception of *Nihon bungaku seisuishi*, portrayed immediacy generally within present-day Japanese society, the anime and manga here address it through representations of crises of the orders of time and society imagined in alternative realities.

Across more than a decade these products, successful staples in their fields and genres, portray in their distinctive ways the crisis of individual identity vis-à-vis society, which ends up in the characters generally resorting to the comfort of acts of uncritical immediacy. The representations of society change from that of an obscure entity with unclear standards and morals in the oldest work, *Evangelion*, to one of a well-ordered system instructing citizens on

their roles in a seemingly peaceful environment in *Psycho-Pass* and *Shingeki no kyōjin*. Nevertheless, each work consistently portrays a fundamental conflict between the exertion of critical thought to challenge the world's system, and its refusal and consequent refuge into uncritical immediacy, which may be portrayed as a solipsistic mental isolation, or the contentment with preset social and professional roles. This aspect of immediacy also manifests itself in relation to throwaway societies instrumentalizing their members, considering them only for their immediate usefulness and nothing more. A similar approach is also visible in the relationship with information and knowledge, which is usually imparted from above in the form of clear-cut categories (of good and evil, of right and wrong) meant for immediate reference, which do not allow room for critical thinking and discussion on the part of citizens.

In pivotal scenes in each of the works the characters suspend critical thought and instead engage in sudden, violent action, often employing giant robots or monsters as medium. This immediate action functions as instant gratification for the characters, making them feel alive in environments where independent and critical self-assertion are either impossible to actualize, or are disavowed by prevailing systems or organizations. This trope emerges perhaps more strongly in popular culture given the visual nature of the media; combined with textual narration, the use of images in animation and manga offers more direct ways to represent violence than literature. Anime and manga therefore engage their respective audiences in ways that differ from readers of the fiction of Takahashi, Taguchi and Hirano.

Another major point is the relationship between immediacy and community. Suspension of thought, gratification through immediate action and the repetitiveness of preset roles in a never-ending present create isolation from the other members of society. In an environment where everyone focuses on maintaining the status quo in their proximate sphere there is no room for critical confrontation with others, or the government, resulting in people's

isolation from one another. Against this backdrop, all three products portray instances in which the main characters exert critical thought and position themselves vis-à-vis a new community, a community whose foundations are rebuilt anew from the very disruption caused by immediacy. They achieve this recognition of belonging in different ways, and the concepts of community they envision are concomitantly different. However, what links all popular products is the representation of critical thought which is ultimately aimed at the reconstitution of a community born out of the re-consideration of one's identity in relation to others, rather than in the isolation of the immediate.

### **5.1 Neon Genesis Evangelion**

The robot anime series *Evangelion* (1995-1996) has already surfaced in this study numerous times, both for the cultural impact it had within the many changes in Japanese society in the watershed year 1995, and because of its relation to cultural theories of *sekai-kei* and *survive-kei*. The present section explores in greater detail the multifarious ways in which immediacy emerges within the anime.

*Evangelion* is often considered a turning point in robot anime, breaking away from dominant narratives of the genre where the intentions of enemies and organizations are clearly identified (visible, for instance, in the various Mobile Suit Gundam series): *Evangelion* portrays instead young pilots struggling to find meaning in their duties, having to fight in an inexplicable world ripe with obscure symbolism. Motoko Tanaka writes that it is a prime example of postmodern apocalyptic fiction. Somewhat parallel to Mita and Ōsawa's periodization, previous apocalyptic fiction from the 70s to the 80s pursued ideals of shared grand narratives of justice, good or evil, whereas fictions from the mid-80s recreated these quests for ideals in enclosed fictional spaces. *Evangelion* however deconstructs notions of

moral and social ethics: also, the sense of community as the foundation of society is very weak (Tanaka 115). By portraying an obscure world where society does not give characters clear notions and purposes by which they may orient their lives, the anime resonated widely with its main viewership, youth dealing with the challenges of puberty (Nishimura; Yamaguchi; Yokota).

Immediacy is staged initially in the protagonist's identification with action as a pilot. By suspending critical thought as a futile effort in a society providing no clear moral compass, Shinji chooses to conform to his assigned role as a pilot, in order to be recognized by his father, an eminent member of a society that values its members only for their immediate usefulness. Eventually, as this unstable mechanism of identification does not satisfy him, he isolates himself into the localized, secluded realm of his repetitive fantasies of self-hatred, because he is not capable of being accepted by others in any other capacity other than his role as an Eva pilot. He carried out his duty for fear of being isolated from others, but this loneliness only plunges him (and his fellow pilots with similar struggles) further into an abyss of mental instability and physical decline. Rebuilding connections with others, and recognizing himself as a member of a community are crucial steps for his psychological maturation. Ultimately, the series portrays an escape from this isolation and the tyranny of the immediate through self-inspection and the rebuilding of communal relationships starting from the personal perception of the self. The protagonist's escape from immediacy towards community is achieved through his assertion of his individual identity in relation to others.

*Evangelion* opens in 2015 in a post-apocalyptic future (at the time of airing). In 2000 a global cataclysm called "Second Impact" destroyed Antarctica almost completely, causing the death of half the human population. The impact caused massive transformations worldwide, changing the Earth's axial tilt, modifying climate radically (now the world experiences a

perpetual summer), and leading to political and economic unrest, and the nuclear destruction of Tokyo. Officially, the catastrophe was attributed to the fall of a meteorite, but it later surfaces that it was caused by experimentation with Adam, the first of the Angels (*shito*), mysterious extraterrestrial monsters who regularly attack humanity in the anime's present. The series' main setting is Tokyo-3 (*daisan shin Tokyo*), a militarized civilian city that was originally intended to be the new capital (it is set in the Hakone area), but which now hosts the mysterious organization Seele and the paramilitary Nerv, both of which are conducting research on Second Impact.<sup>76</sup>

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Figure 2 Asuka, Shinji and Rei, with the Eva 01

Fourteen-year-old Ikari Shinji is summoned suddenly by his father Gendō, commander of Nerv. He arrives in Tokyo-3 as the city is under attack by Angels. As conventional weapons cannot penetrate the monsters' defensive barrier, the AT (Absolute Terror) force field, Nerv has intervened by deploying biomechanical *mecha* (large armoured robots) called "Evangelions", or "Evas." As Shinji arrives when the third Angel attacks, Gendō commands him to pilot the Eva Unit 01 and fight. Unable to make sense of this abrupt call to arms, Shinji is hesitant at

<sup>76</sup> As can be inferred, the translation for the Japanese name of the city would rather be "New Tokyo-3", or "Neo" as in the Italian translation. However, in this dissertation the names in the official English adaptation are used.

first, but then agrees and defeats the Angel. He is then joined in the battles by two fourteen-year-old girls, the mysterious and seemingly emotionless Ayanami Rei and the feisty Sōryū Asuka Langley, pilots of the Eva 00 and 02, respectively (Figure 2).

The first sixteen episodes of *Evangelion* focus on the battles of the pilots defeating the Angels, different in shape but united by the purpose of attacking mankind one after the other. From this point of view, the series does satisfy the expectations of sleek robot designs and quality action scenes usually associated with anime in the genre. From episode sixteen onwards, however, the series shifts drastically to portray psychological themes, exploring the mental instability of the pilots, especially Shinji. Struggling to make sense of their duties as pilots, the children seek refuge in interiority and isolation. It adds to this sense of alienation that the taciturn Rei, for whom Shinji has feelings, is revealed to be a clone of Shinji's dead mother created by Gendō. It is this attention to the psychological turmoil of the characters that distinguishes *Evangelion* from previous robot anime, or even anime in general. As Susan Napier has noted:

What makes *Evangelion* truly groundbreaking are the psychic struggles in which the characters engage. These battles are both wide-ranging and emotionally draining. They are also presented with surprising analytical sophistication as the characters try to come to grips with their own inner turmoil, their problematic relations with each other, and finally, their relation to more remote forms of Otherness—the gigantic machines that are the EVAs and with which they must synchronize, and the enigmatic Angels who present a riddle that is increasingly depicted in what seems to be a Christian or perhaps Gnostic notion of apocalypse. (425)<sup>77</sup>

It is a difficult and reductive task to summarize the entire storyline of *Evangelion*, as many subplots hinted at remain obscure and are open to ongoing discussions. There is no decisive

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<sup>77</sup> *Evangelion* self-consciously offers numerous psychoanalytical readings. Especially in the final two episodes, the anime overtly toys with Freudian references and concepts. Examples are the therapy setting with Shinji trying to understand something about himself, the phallic and vaginal symbols in the representations of Angels, the symbolism of his mother replicated into his friend, and Shinji's union with his mother's body every time he pilots the Eva (the robot was created merging it with the body and mind of Shinji's mother). However, while applying Freudian and Lacanian theories would highlight further important points, psychoanalytical implications are outside the focus of the main theme of immediacy in this study.

battle between humanity and the Angels, nor are the reasons behind the Angels' attacks ever explained. Provocatively, the series abruptly steers away from these enigmas, with the stunning conclusion of the two final episodes, 25 and 26, that follow Shinji's psyche through various alternate realities, showing his final reconciliation with his world. This story, however, only takes place in his mind. The series ends without revealing what actually happened.

Immediacy emerges strongly in the suspension of critical thinking for immediate action, in an obscure world where it is not possible both for Shinji and his colleagues to understand what Seele and Nerv are actually planning. Since it is impossible to know what the enemies are, or even to fully comprehend the nature of the Evas, Shinji's initial attempts at investigation are futile. To think about the foundations of this society, which seemingly amounts to Nerv and Seele, and his place in it, is useless. Apart from the two organizations, there is no trace of grand narratives, nor are stances on deep existential issues obvious. As noted by Tanaka, "society is insignificant in the story, and moral standards and social ethics are increasingly unimportant. Questions of what constitutes good and evil, purity and impurity, and the difference between life and death are not presented in the story" (115). Living in an obscure world with an obscure symbolism, borrowing elements from the Kabbalah as well as from Norse mythology, the children do not have psychological room to think critically about their identity, nor do the superimposed power structures offer any assistance or clues. This also explains why Shinji increasingly disengages from his duties as a pilot and escapes into his interiority, avoiding critical confrontation with others.

In the absence of critical thought, and in the struggle to define identity, the immediacy of action becomes the only way to survive the moment. Borrowing Uno's terms, in this vacuum the characters are Little People that react by fighting for their personal values. The children's battles, especially in the first part of the anime, are a reaction to the threat

immediately facing them, rather than a premeditated action upholding an ideal of justice. Not knowing why he was summoned, or even of his father's involvement in the military operations, Shinji can only react in the moment by entering the Eva 01 and fighting the threat at hand. However, he does not pilot it because he believes he is part of a grand narrative of unbending justice, but rather to find a sense of identity, as a pilot, albeit only temporarily. That is why, after a period in which he refrained from being a pilot, Shinji then returns to the headquarters and asks to be reinstated. Thus he affirms his identity: "I am, I am, Ikari Shinji, the pilot of the Eva 01" (Anno Ep. 9).

This aspect of immediacy is related to recognition from others. While Shinji identifies himself in the repeated action of fighting in the Eva 01, this affirmation also holds true for his father and Nerv. Commander Gendō values him only for his immediate utility in battle. Nerv needs Shinji because only he has the skills to pilot the robot (only certain children are able to synchronize psychically with Evas) and Rei, piloting the 00, is injured. If Shinji cannot immediately serve their purpose, then Gendō has no need for him as a son. This is evident in their first dialogue when Shinji arrives at Nerv headquarters, and Gendō explains his reasons for summoning him. The setting emphasizes the disparity between their two roles, with the Commander speaking from his high position in a control room, isolated with a screen, and Shinji listening from below while facing the massive head of the Eva 01 under maintenance (Figure 3):

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*Figure 3*

Shinji: Father, why did you send for me?

Gendō: You know why.

Shinji: So you're telling me to get in this thing and fight with that thing?

Gendō: Correct.

Shinji: I don't want to. Why this now? I thought you didn't want me!

Gendō: I only called you because I have a use for you.

Shinji: Why me?

Gendō: Because there is no one else who can.

Shinji: No I can't. I've never seen nor heard of anything like this before.

There's no way I can do it.

Gendō: You will be instructed.

Shinji: I...can't do it. There's no way I can pilot that thing!

Gendō: If you're going to pilot it do it now! If not, then leave! (Anno Ep. 1)

Faced with this sudden challenge from a father he has not seen in three years, Shinji is at a loss. However, in the end he decides to pilot the robot. He embraces the immediacy of the action, as well as that of the recognition from his father who only sees the side of him that is useful. For this reason, Shinji decides to face the enemy before him: "I mustn't run away, I mustn't run away, I mustn't run away, I mustn't run away, I mustn't run away! I'll do it...I'll pilot it" (ibidem). The Eva 01 provides an outlet for Shinji's need to silence his identity crisis and critical thinking, and offers him a role to play to find recognition from his estranged father. In the vacuum, the giant humanoid robot functions as a vessel for two sides of immediacy. As Tanaka has also highlighted, there are no strong ideals here, just the exploitation of the pilot

role: “Shinji reluctantly agrees to pilot an Eva, but he does so in order to feel worthy of existing and to gain his father’s recognition, not to save the world or the injured Rei. He continues to pilot the Eva since he has nowhere else to go. [...] He cannot find meaning in his life except in his special status as an Eva pilot” (116).

However, while Shinji and the other children pilot the Evas to feel needed in a society (Nerv) that only considers insofar as they fulfil their immediate necessities, eventually they can longer find meaning or gratification in the immediacy of the action. They cannot come to terms with their identity in a world that does not provide them with opportunities for critical confrontation. Towards the end of the series they refrain from action, escaping in their interiority. This interiority, however, is hardly a site of critical confrontation, but rather a localized space where the pilots live out the solipsistic fantasies in the absence of critical thought. As seen in previous fiction, to enter this sphere of personal immediacy is a profoundly lonely activity. Thus, Shinji relegates himself gradually into his own monad, while Rei cannot find her identity with the realization that she is just one of many clones of Ikari Yui, Shinji’s dead mother and creator of the Eva 01. The other pilot Asuka struggles instead with her childhood trauma of finding her unloving mother hanged in front of her, which caused her to grow up always craving for acceptance. Unable to build an awareness of herself now, she cannot find solace in the immediacy of piloting the Eva 02, as she feels unworthy of the task after failing in combat, the only thing for which humanity needed her. So, she allows herself to waste away, disappearing over the course of several days.

The immediacy of action is then progressively abandoned for the immediacy of stagnating in solipsistic emotional isolation. The generally disorienting vacuum of the worldview surrounding the pilots, with its arcane symbolism, underlies the *hikikomori*-like reclusion into which they escape. It is a world where no moral references or ideals are given,

and where it is difficult for young individuals to find their place. In this sense, the characters are haunted beings who occupy fantasy worlds not rooted in reality. Thus, *Evangelion* portrays what Jeffery Sconce describes as a postmodern fantasy of fragmentation:

Where there were once whole human subjects, there are now only fragmented and decentered subjectivities, metaphors of ‘simulation’ and ‘schizophrenia.’ [...] In postmodernism’s fascination with the evacuation of the referent and an ungrounded play of signification and surface, we can see another vision of beings who, like ghosts and psychotics, are no longer anchored in reality but instead wander through a hallucinatory world where the material real is forever lost. (18)

This hallucinatory state of palliative immediacy of taking refuge into one’s own haunted psyche is caused both by the children’s nature, but also by the presentist surrounding world (Nerv/Seele) where ideals do not surface, and which does not encourage the children’s confrontation with their superiors. In this haunted form of presentism, the children cannot find notions of shared past or memories that would inform their identities. Instead they live in a repetitive present where they need to face the Angels’ threats endlessly. Any idea of future developments in the war is foreclosed.

This world is no repository of fixed identity and memory. Napier has compared it with the decadence of early twentieth-century Tokyo as highlighted in Seiji Lippit’s *Topographies of Japanese Modernism*:

Even though the anime [*Evangelion* and *Serial Experiments Lain*] we are examining are set in a future that seems to have lost all traces of Japanese tradition, they are both works that privilege memory—both its loss and its stubborn ability to remain important in a fluctuating world. But in both *Lain* and *Evangelion* memory itself ultimately becomes uncertain, a force to be manipulated and even, perhaps, abused (Napier 423).

This reference-less atmosphere is also achieved through a peculiar visual style, where space, shapes and color contrast each other to create a sense of disorientation (ibid. 424). One

example of this is the representation of the tenth Angel, Sahaquiel. Its soft, changing shape defies expectations of the typical mechanical enemies expected in robot anime (Figure 4).

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*Figure 4 Nerv's Major Katsuragi Misato (centre) monitors Sahaquiel*

These disorientating visual representations, set in an obscure world, resemble the dreamlike images signifying a loss of shared memory in Lippit's argument. Describing Kobayashi Hideo's essay on the lost home, he remarks that modern Tokyo in the 1920-30s did not offer cultural identification for a shared tradition. With shifting boundaries, and the writer's unease in experiencing modernity, it could not function any more as a source of cultural identification: "The dreamlike quality of city space frames the loss of the shared memories that help define a national community, as well as their substitution by phantasmal mass-mediated images" (Lippit 5). The shifting images of the Angels and the Evas, together with obscure organizations representing society, impede the pilots' identification with a well-defined cultural repository: like Tokyo in modernism, Tokyo-3 is a phantasmal space that does not offer a space of shared memories.

A major shift in the relationship with immediacy takes place in the final two episodes, 25 and 26, that illustrate a process of self-reflection and escape from immediacy. The two episodes are a radical change from the previous ones, abandoning the battle scenes and any

attempt to resolve the conflict with Angels, and staging instead a vision of Shinji's psyche enquiring into the very nature of reality.<sup>78</sup>

The impact of psychological conflict is emphasized visually from the very beginning of episode 25, titled "The End of the World" (*owaru sekai*).<sup>79</sup> Away from colourful battles and sophisticated technology, writings on black and white screens flash throughout the episodes, spelling out the questions that are posed during Shinji's interrogation. Shinji appears seated alone on a chair in an empty and muted theatrical background. The numerous written questions appear incessantly as they egg Shinji on while Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" plays in the background. The first thing that appears is "Reason to exist [*sonzai riyū*]. Raison d'être." Then, following questions such as "What do you fear?" even visually convey the urgency of such themes, revealing that now these are the most pressing issues regardless of everything else that is happening outside. This effect is also achieved through the use of still images accompanying the narration. In his analysis of the unusually frequent employment of still images throughout this anime series, William Routt has noted that, by freezing the action, they hold the viewers' attention, effectively shifting the focus away from the engrossing action of the fight scenes and towards psychological issues. In regards to the particularly frequent use of this "freezing the action" technique in episodes 25 and 26, he remarks that "the series continually uses stills of Shinji and his surroundings to direct attention to his state of mind and to his memories, constantly reminding viewers that what is going on inside his head warrants our attention—and in this way predicting its own psychological denouement" (41).

The interrogation lays bare the immediacy of action in which Shinji located his identity as a pilot. Shinji actively chose not to think critically about his role; he simply piloted the Eva

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<sup>78</sup> This conclusion has generated a debate among fans as to whether or not it is a satisfying ending; as a consequence, a theatrical version of the anime was released in 1997 which included a different ending.

<sup>79</sup> Even in the Japanese version, all *Evangelion* episodes have a primary title in Japanese and another one in English. Episode 25's one is "Do you love me?"

in order to feel needed: “Why do you pilot the Eva? ‘Because everybody tells me to. [...] Isn’t that for everybody’s good?” (Anno Ep. 25). Then, Asuka appears in his mind and accuses him pointing her finger: “The very fact that you think you’re doing your best for others, that’s a comfortable way of living. In the end, you’re lonely, Shinji...That’s just dependence. Aren’t you just wishing to be needed by others? Aren’t you just waiting for others to bring you happiness? A fake happiness!” (ibidem). The sense of being needed is an immediate stimulus that, while not truly gratifying him, still gives him something to seek while desperate for survival. That is why he feels he cannot be separated from the Eva, which has become his localized reality where he feels accepted. He thinks acting as an Eva pilot gives him the recognition from others (a stimulus on which he is dependent), that the world will never grant him as an individual. The Eva is a projection of himself. This is also emphasized graphically because the Evas resemble giant human beings, rather than completely mechanical robots as in other anime of the genre such as *Majingā Z* (*Mazinger Z*, 1972-1974) or the first Gundam series (1979-1980). This link with human instincts and Angel DNA is rendered even more graphically when the Eva 01 breaks the mechanical restraints and acts out of control in episodes 16 and 19 (Figure 5).

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Figure 5 The anthropomorphous Eva 01 in berserk mode

In this self-interrogation, Shinji reveals that this attitude of immediacy is intimately connected with loneliness, specifically the fear of being alone. Shinji despises himself because he is incapable of relating with others as a peer, fearing that he will not be accepted. He feels that if he does not provide an immediately usable version of himself as an Eva pilot, the others will abandon him. So, he is not piloting the Eva for the greater good, but rather to uphold a reductive, localized version of himself that others may accept and use. He does it for himself. It is he who needs the Eva, not mankind. Without the Eva, he has no chance of surviving, as shown in an introspective dialogue with other characters, against still images of deserted landscapes, a railroad crossing, a basket left alone at a sandpit and an apartment full of moving boxes:

Ritsuko [Akagi, Nerv's head scientist]: Quietly obeying and accepting what others tell him, isn't that how [Shinji] gets on in life?

Shinji: Yes. If I don't do that, I'm going to be left alone again. [...]  
(Whispering) Nobody accepts me!

Screen: You're just convincing yourself of that.

Shinji: That's why I have to pilot the Eva.

Screen: You're just deluding yourself that you're worthless to begin with.

Shinji: (Shouting) I've got to do it!

Screen: It's not true.

Shinji: [...] No. I'm worthless. I've got nothing to be proud of. [...] By piloting the Eva, I can be me. Before piloting the Eva, I had nothing. [...] I have nothing. Nothing at all.

Screen: What makes your life worth something?

Shinji: Nothing.

Screen: So...

Shinji: I hate myself. (Ep. 26)

Such fear and self-hatred do not only affect Shinji, although he is the main subject of the psychological analysis: Asuka and Rei also struggle to ascertain their own identities and find refuge in their own worlds of immediacy. Like Shinji, they cannot find acceptance in others because they fear they will not be understood, and therefore they find solace in the immediate familiarity of their roles, hoping to be considered useful by Nerv. However, this loneliness

confines them progressively into isolation, even to the point of physical and mental decay. Traumatized by her mother's rejection, Asuka constantly craves for approval and praise from others, associating it with her role as a pilot. However, this image of herself is not satisfying, because it is based on an immediate instrumentality that is not sustainable. For this reason, when Asuka fails to pilot the Eva 02, she feels she has no purpose left, and lets herself waste away. While alone in the robot's cockpit she deprecates herself: "Nobody needs me. Nobody needs me. Nobody needs a pilot who can't control the Eva" (Ep. 25). Similarly, Ayanami Rei identifies her life purpose in the use she can have for her creator, Ikari Gendō. She has lived for the immediate gratification of being useful to him, as a pilot and for the activation of the mysterious Instrumentality Project, planned by Nerv and Seele. That is all that mattered to her, so she was happy to die after Gendō had no use for her. However, she realizes that this immediacy cannot account for her identity as a person: this one-sidedness of her cannot be reason enough to live. So she is afraid now for what comes next. The immediate identification with Gendō's purpose has left her alone: "I existed because he has use for me. But it's over. He's not going to need me. He will abandon me. I should have wished for that day, but now I'm scared" (ibidem).

Shinji and his fellow Nerv members depend on the immediate recognition and acceptance provided by their roles as pilots. If they lose them, they feel they are worthless, making people want to abandon them. It is a never-ending presentist cycle, going back and forth between the self-identification with the object of immediate convenience (the Eva), and escape into the immediate gratification of the self-contained isolation, thinking that nobody understands.

To find a way out of this never-ending cycle of immediacy *Evangelion* shows the need to rebuild equal connections with others, not based on exploitation practices. Only by

recognizing themselves first and then in relation to others, can the characters finally achieve a stable sense of community outside of immediacy. In a slow process of self-analysis and maturation, Shinji reaches this by realizing first that the reality of loneliness and self-hatred is simply one possible reality, not the ultimate truth. In the end of episode 25, all the members of Nerv tell Shinji that he made a small enclosed world for himself, where he could protect his weak mind and heart from the fear of confronting others. To emphasize that this world is only one possibility, the setting changes to a theatre stage, with the camera showing lighting and plans, as if to say that the characters are simply playing one role among many. Shinji's perception of isolation, and his consequent escape into its immediacy, is only one possibility that he chose for himself to suspend critical confrontation and indulge in his fantasy; it is by no means absolute. Therefore, he needs to forge another reality based on a different perception that begins from inside of him. With another drastic change in animation style, episode 26 shows a hand-sketched Shinji floating against a white page. This basic scenery, so different from the action-packed scenes of previous episodes, emphasizes that Shinji's reality begins from an empty space onto which he can create/project whatever he chooses. Black lines appear and illustrate a land on which he can stand. This setting calls to mind the final confrontation in *Godira*, where Kenichi realizes that reality is simply created around him from scratch for his immediate perception and use. However, while in Takahashi's novel this discovery is accompanied by the loneliness of critical thinking, and that in the end all Kenichi can do to survive is to live in makeshift reality, for Shinji the creation of reality can be a moment of liberation. By freely recreating the environment around him, changing his perception of the world, he can find another identity different from the one characterized by suspension of thought and refuge into the immediacy of personal isolation.

However, a reality with just himself is not enough to reframe his identity out of immediacy. For the final step he needs to connect to others, recognize them and position himself in relation to his community. Although it is in the boy's capacity to decide what constitutes his reality, simply leaving it as a white sheet with a single black line would still mean being stuck in immediacy, in an empty world where he can only perceive himself and his proximate reality. This would resemble the lonely world of *Godira*. That is why he needs to include others in the picture: he needs to go outside of his immediate sphere and face others to really see his identity:

Rei: There's only you here. [...] You cannot know your own shape without the existence of beings other than yourself. [...]

Misato: You know your own shape by seeing the shapes of others.

Asuka: By looking at the barrier between you and other people, you visualize your own shape.

Rei: You cannot see yourself unless there are other people.

Shinji: I can exist because there are other people around. If I'm alone, I'll be alone no matter where I go. [...]

Misato: By recognizing the differences between you and others, you're shaping yourself.

An escape from immediacy can be achieved through community, by organically rebuilding ties with others. *Evangelion* suggests that this can be done in many different realities. After the above scene, the setting changes abruptly, showing a totally different, self-assured Shinji who is woken up by a healthy-looking Asuka, telling him they are going to be late for school. As the two rush out of the house, the camera shows a warm family picture, with Gendō now placidly reading a newspaper while his wife Yui makes breakfast. On the way to school, in a scene typical in high-school comedy anime, Shinji bumps into Rei, who is now a high-spirited transfer student, and peeks at her underwear. While also serving as comic relief from the previous atmosphere of profound self-inspection, this vignette suggests that there can be multiple realities where the same characters behave differently. The scene also shows that no

matter how much reality changes, the truth of human relationships remains the same. Whether Rei, Asuka and Shinji go to school together, or whether they pilot the Evas, the truth of their identities always begins from their interpersonal relationships. Since there are potentially as many realities as there are people, there might be an Ikari Shinji who chooses not to pilot the Eva. The truth outside of immediacy lies in how you perceive yourself among others, and not in uncritical isolation from them.

Therefore, once back in the theatre stage Shinji understands that people can be isolated in their proximate realities. However, by thinking critically he finds the motivation to try and understand a wider reality through confrontation with others. Shinji used to live in the immediacy of the localized reality of his self-harming fantasy, so he thought his longing for connections and community could not be answered. Therefore, he thought that without the robot he would be worthless. However, if he thinks about himself and those around him, he can recreate the reality he wants, and position himself in a wider world. As an instrumental version of *Zankokuna tenshi no tēze* (Cruel Angel's Thesis), the series main theme, plays in the background foreshadowing a moment of triumphal liberation, Shinji takes his first step towards critical maturation: "I hate myself. [Together with Rei and Asuka] But maybe I can learn to love myself. Maybe it's ok for me to be here. That's right. I'm just me. I am me, I want to be me. I want to be here! It's ok for me to be here!" Shinji has begun his journey away from the past immediacy. He becomes aware of himself and, by doing so, of others. Outside of the previous dimension of relations based on immediate gain and disposal, and the stimuli of action, he has reconciled himself with his world. In the final scene, the glass wall of the stage breaks, and the boy finds himself surrounded by the other characters, his father and mother included, congratulating him for his maturation.

It is noteworthy that the series' controversial conclusion has fostered critical debate as to whether it constitutes real maturation. According to Kasai Kiyoshi, *Evangelion* does not portray a modern narrative of maturation, because it does not follow Freudian Oedipal theory. Instead of rebelling against his father, and thus acquiring a woman of his own and becoming independent, Shinji is forced by Gendō to achieve physical and spiritual union with his dead mother by entering the Eva 01, which had been merged with the soul and body of its creator Ikari Yui. Therefore, when Shinji synchronizes with it, he is uniting with his mother. Further, Kasai sees the Instrumentality Project, conflating all beings into a complete all-encompassing one, as an imaginary hypertrophy of non-separation of mother and child. According to him, *Evangelion* does not portray a modern society where a child matures by symbolically killing his father and becoming his social equal ("Sekaikei" 21-28). Further, Susan Napier argues that the representations of the floating Shinji on an empty page and the high-school drama setting are obvious references to the role of the animator, who can create a world out of emptiness. The medium's intrinsic play with unreality offers other interpretations to *Evangelion's* ending:

The highlighting of the animation's essential unreality can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, [...] we can see it as underlining the explicit message that every human has the potential to create his or her own world. On the other hand, given the generally dark portrayal of the human psyche in the series up to this point, it is also possible to suggest that *Evangelion's* final apocalyptic vision is an ironic one: even when we think we can control the reality around us, we are actually at its mercy, cartoon characters in the hands of the fates or the animators. The happy ending that we see is one ending but, as the series makes clear, it is only one of many possible endings. (429-430)

However, these readings are somewhat reductive, as they overlook the significance of the final reconciliation scene. While it is true that *Evangelion* plays with symbols of union with the maternal body through the Eva 01, Kasai's reduction of Shinji's possibilities of maturation to Oedipal theory does not take into account his self-reflection outlined in the final episodes. Through the voyage into his psyche, and the questioning of his motivations, Shinji is able to

mature and reassert his identity in relation to his community, including both his father and mother. In particular, the final scene where his family and friends applaud him underscores the relevance of community, not only the relationship with the mother, in the process of maturation. Similarly, although the series suggests there may be many possible realities, Napier's interpretation does not consider that the final reconciliation with community is a constant for any process of maturation, notwithstanding the countless contexts the animators might draw around Shinji. Regardless of what shape the reality around him takes, Shinji can always find himself, his identity, through critical confrontation with others, without fleeing into the immediacy of the Eva or of his own psyche. To escape the trap of immediacy it is necessary to rebuild connections with others, and to forge a new community. As in Takahashi's *Koi suru genpatsu*, awareness of oneself is achieved through mutual recognition with others. Hence, whether flying on a white page, bumping into Ayanami on the way to school, or piloting the Eva in a merciless world, his community will always applaud Shinji if he thinks critically about himself and his world.

### **5.2 Psycho-Pass**

Unlike *Evangelion*, in the futuristic crime anime series *Psycho-Pass* (2012-2013) immediacy is not manifested as a reaction to a society that lacks ethics or morals, but rather to a highly structured society giving precise instructions with regards to people's identity and way of life. In a highly-technologized future Japan, people's lives are determined by a superimposed system, called "Sibyl", a sort of Orwellian Big Brother, that guarantees safety and stability in exchange for its control and the *de facto* isolation of Japan.

In the early 22<sup>nd</sup> century life in Japan is regulated by the omnipresent Sibyl System, a government-managed powerful network of psychometric scans that measure the minds,

personalities and inclinations of all citizens, thus determining the most appropriate job and position for them in society. This assessment is referred to as “Psycho-Pass.” Guided by the system’s directives to secure a stable and safe society, Japan has become a self-sufficient country thanks to machines producing genetically modified corn called “hyper-oats” and a new energy form called “metan dehydrate” in the countryside, causing most people to live cramped in towns, while the general population has decreased to 1/10 of what it was in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Japan now being an autarchy, relations with foreign countries are practically non-existent, as defense drones are deployed along Japanese borders. However, the most prominent change is that by measuring Psycho-Passes, Sibyl System can also calculate the probability of an individual committing a crime, using the Crime Coefficient. When this coefficient exceeds a certain numeric level, police forces can apprehend, or even kill the would-be criminal. These teams are comprised of enforcers, selected from individuals with innately high crime coefficients, and by inspectors who also have the function of overseeing them, and stopping them should the need arise. Both teams are equipped with special handguns called “Dominators”, which are connected to the Sibyl System, and activate only when facing latent criminals.

Immediacy emerges primarily in the ways the system organizes people’s lives. In an autarchic society which decides everything for them, citizens sacrifice their critical enquiries into their life purpose and beliefs, and settle for the immediate solace of the proximate reality of their preset roles, both professional and personal. They live in a presentism where only the present where they repeatedly perform their roles counts: the system does not allow citizens to envision future possibilities of change, nor to have notions of a shared past and memory, as it has banned the study of history altogether. Used to these conditions, people generally do not question the system or its values for the sake of their peace of mind, and for the purported

happiness and safety guaranteed by a system that provides them with all the answers they require. This affects also their enquiries into the meaning of justice. Through Dominators and Psycho-Passes the system provides unbending categories of right and wrong: the police forces are not supposed to question anomalies or defects in this superstructure, following their own beliefs, but should follow these guidance of immediate reference, suppressing any doubts. As such, people suspend critical thought for the sake of safety.

Within this powerful order which commodifies individuals into following uncritically the immediacy of their assigned roles, three characters question the flaws and dangers of this unifying system, and present different solutions to escape the isolation of immediacy. The criminal Makishima is a system anomaly trying to instigate others who challenge Sibyl and commit crimes freely; he represents rebellion and destruction. His arch-enemy, the enforcer Kōgami, opposes the suspension of thought advocated by Sibyl by following his own sense of justice, but then cannot change the system in his personal war, and thus needs to disappear with Makishima; finally, after these two destructive approaches unable to bring about a change in society, inspector Tsunemori Akane represents the necessary outside, the synthesis of the two that tries to operate a change from within society, believing in building a community of people who strive for a free world. Similar to *Evangelion*, retrieving connections and rebuilding a community is a solid way to exit immediacy.

The analysis in this section is based on the anime's first season (22 episodes), written by Urobuchi Gen, Fukami Makoto and Takaha Aya, and animated by Production I.G. The story opens in a 2112 Tokyo (exactly one hundred years from the actual date of the anime broadcast), with the first mission of Tsunemori Akane as an inspector of Unit 1 of the Public Safety Bureau's Criminal Investigation Division. On her first assignment she shoots to restrain the enforcer Kōgami Shinya, under her supervision, because she deems he was threatening an

apprehended criminal's life. Although she is ashamed for this result, Kōgami is grateful for her action, which prevented a possible murder. Their relationship develops throughout the series, and they draw closer professionally and emotionally, although never maturing into a romantic bond. During their investigations, they come across the crimes of the main antagonist Makishima Shōgo. Makishima is a system anomaly, a criminally asymptomatic (*menzai taishitsu*) individual who always had a low crime coefficient, regardless of his actions. A mastermind determined to destroy the perfect Japan created by Sibyl System, Makishima instigates others to commit carefully planned crimes to destabilize society. Kōgami has also a personal grudge against Makishima, because he was behind a crime years before that caused the death of Kōgami's colleague, when he was still an inspector. Unable to face the sudden surge of extreme stress, Kōgami's crime coefficient had skyrocketed, causing him to be demoted to enforcer.

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*Figure 6 Official art showing Makishima, Kōgami and Akane. The characters' models were designed by manga artist Amano Akira*

Causing riots to divert the police's attention, Makishima manages to enter the Health and Welfare's Ministry Tower, where Sibyl System is located. There, he learns the truth: Sibyl is an electronic system fed by the brains of similarly asymptomatic individuals. When he is

offered to join, Makishima refuses and escapes. His next plan is to bring the whole self-sustaining economy down by uploading a virus into the system. Since Sibyl has ordered Akane to capture Makishima alive (he is too valuable for them), Kōgami leaves his team planning to kill the bioterrorist. In the end, once they have tracked him down, despite Akane's efforts Kōgami kills Makishima and disappears.

The ruling Sibyl System is based on the immediate instrumentality of individuals. In order to bring happiness, Sibyl System follows the principle of “the right man for the right job” (*tekizai tekisho*), scanning each individual and determining what he/she is fit for and what he/she should do. Therefore, akin to socialism, by not promoting competition and assuring full employment for everybody, the system purportedly provides the safest and most stable society possible.<sup>80</sup> However, for the sake of this ideal of happiness, this system dehumanizes citizens, seeing them only as numbers. For Sibyl's “cymatic scans” [sic], people are not complex and unpredictable beings: the system simply analyses them for their immediately usable, and computable skills, and puts them in the right place, from which they are not likely to escape. It is a closed society that does not permit anomalies (though only officially). Its secluded nature is also emphasized visually, with Tokyo clearly surrounded by water and thus isolated from the rest of the world, under a constantly dark sky (Figure 7).<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> This setting is strongly redolent of Aldous Huxley's famous dystopian novel *Brave New World* (1932), imagining a futuristic London where citizens are engineered through artificial wombs and indoctrinated from childhood to fit into predetermined classes based on their intelligence and skills. Through these methods, society aims at upholding a peaceful and happy society. Together with *Brave New World*, *Psycho-Pass* intentionally draws on numerous renowned science fiction dystopias, such as the already mentioned *1984* by Orwell and *Minority Report* (1956) by Philip K. Dick. The constant play with references includes also intellectuals such as Ulrich Beck and Michel Foucault, as will be seen later.

<sup>81</sup> This visual rendering of the “submerged” city without a blue sky, suggesting loneliness, was introduced by director Shiotani Nayoshi. Also, his decision to portray light filtered by the rotating fans is an homage to the 1982 film *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott), based on Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Fujitsu, “Psycho-Pass” 72).

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*Figure 7*

In the predetermination of this society, the Japanese have no room for important career or personal choices (Sibyl System also coordinates love relationships and marriages), so they can only focus on the local reality of the roles and jobs assigned by the system. They live in a presentism where only performing their everyday roles matter, as any possibility of future changes is not envisioned. Therefore, the only dimension that counts is the localized reality of their present, of their pre-assigned roles. While the localization of action imposed by society is present also in *Evangelion*, there is a striking difference. In the robot anime Nerv represents a portion of an obscure society in an obscure world, whose real motives are unknown. In *Psycho-Pass* these standards are very much explicit. Although the real purposes and identity of Sibyl System are kept secret, it still functions as a Big Brother, as a metanarrative that instructs the citizens as to what they should do to secure happiness. The perspective is overturned: it is exactly the forceful manifestation of moral and social rules that leave the citizens to find meaning only in the familiar immediacy of their preset roles.

Another consequence of this society is that in its comfortable embrace citizens tend to become uncritical and conveniently stop thinking about whether it is really safe and right to live there. They choose to submit their free will and capacity to think critically to the immediate benefit of stability, so that they do not need to make an effort, because the system tells them what is best. Even if some of them had doubts about the real benefits of this type of

regulation, in the end they privilege the stability of the system. This is what Kōgami refers to when, citing German sociologist Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society (Risikogesellschaft, 1986)*, he states that Japan now cannot escape its dependence from something convenient, and yet dangerous:

Kōgami: A safe and perfect society is just an illusion. The society we live in now is still a dangerous society.

Tsunemori Akane (henceforth Akane): Dangerous?

Kōgami: It's a society depending on things that are convenient, but also dangerous. Our government made us take risks. But the risks were dispersed and distributed so cleverly that no one was able to notice it. No, they did notice, but pretended that they hadn't. Everyone might have been looking the other way. Precisely because there was danger, they had to act as if there wasn't, in order to keep their sanity.

Akane: Were the citizens of this city that clever, including me?

Kōgami: [...] I think humans are clever. They can unconsciously try to avoid their responsibilities. (Motohiro and Shiotani Ep. 17)

Sibyl does not only create presentism in that it forecloses future possibilities, but also because its official policies prevent citizens even from confronting themselves with a shared notion of past and history. Universities, seen as repositories of knowledge that might instigate critical thought, have been abolished in favour of a school system comprised of six years of primary school and four years of both middle and high schools. Even more striking, deeming it useless and against common sense, Sibyl has suppressed the teaching of history at all levels. Purged historical records now can only be accessed through digital databases. As history is the repository of a people's knowledge and collective memory which inform the present, this policy creates presentism by discouraging any form of communal thought that might question the validity and benefits of Sibyl System.

Japan in 2112 is a country where critical confrontation with the validity of the standards imposed by Sibyl is at a minimum. This applies to crimes and investigations, which are at the core of the series' main story. The system developed by Sibyl, measuring the crime

coefficient of latent criminals, is reminiscent of the one used in Philip K. Dick's short story "The Minority Report" (1956), where three clairvoyant mutants foresee crimes and feed information to the Precrime Division that apprehends criminals before they commit the deeds. In principle both systems function on the premise that there is no debate about the nature of crime, nor on the legitimacy of arresting someone before the crime is even perpetrated. They consider crime as an inevitable ending, given the premises. In the case of Sibyl System, to maintain a peaceful society law enforcers submit their critical capacities to the Dominators. Dominators are emanations of Sibyl: by measuring crime coefficients, and activating only when the readings confirm the presence of a latent criminal, they substitute completely the police forces' ability to discern crime and act accordingly. Both inspectors and enforcers are not supposed to think about how to act, but simply to rely on the immediacy of the Dominators' functions ordering them. Ironically, the very brains that form Sibyl System in reality belong to those irregular criminals that elude the cymatic scans. Criminals who do not fit into the system actually form its core and cooperate for the eradication of crime itself. Of course, this truth is not divulged publicly, as it would obviously destabilize a system that prospers in being perfect in the minds of its subjects that live by the immediacy of clear-cut categories such as crime itself. In the words of Urobuchi Gen, *Psycho-Pass*'s main author, in this world "indirect thought control is all over. [...] I created everything as a 'world where peace is kept by not making people think'" (Urobuchi and Kusaka 67).

Against this well-ordered society, the three main characters Makishima Shōgo, Kōgami Shinya and Tsunemori Akane represent different reactions to Sibyl System and suspension of thought. They question Sibyl, situating themselves in different ways in relation to the general immediacy dictated by Big Brother. It is relevant to examine their cases closely

to see how in fact citizens can or cannot live in this world when they apply critical thinking and unmask immediacy.

Makishima is an anomaly born outside of the system. From this liminal perspective, he feels he is living according to his own free will, without indulging in the safe haven of the immediacy of preset lives and conditions with which all other Japanese have to deal. Makishima is a critical thinker whose first priority is to bring about the destruction of the system. In this sense, he is akin to the anthropological figure of the trickster, visible in numerous mythological, folkloristic and religious traditions. The trickster is a “magical violator of taboos”, a figure with a high degree of intelligence that plays tricks with malice to destabilize the system of which he is a liminal figure (Grinnell 257; Makarius). Makishima despises others who simply obey Sibyl’s orders, lulled by the comfortable immediate benefits it offers:

Makishima: By analysing an organism’s force field read by a cymatic scan, they [the system] figure out how a person’s mind works...The intelligence of science finally uncovered the secret of souls, and this society changed drastically.... But people’s wills are not a part of that assessment. I wonder what sort of criteria you use to separate good from evil.

Akane: What on earth...

Makishima: I want to see the radiance of people’s souls. I want to check if it really is precious. However, when men simply base their lives around Sibyl’s oracle, without ever questioning their own will, do they really have any value? (Motohiro and Shiotani Ep. 11)

This dialogue takes place the first time the police track down Makishima. Akane confronts him in the sewers where he is holding her friend Funahara Yuki hostage. It is evident that Makishima lives for the stimuli provided by bursts of anti-Sibyl violence, what he calls the “radiance of people’s souls” (*hito no tamashii no kagayaki*). By instigating violence, his ego is gratified instantly with the pleasure of witnessing extreme manifestations of free will that challenge the categories of right and wrong purported by Sibyl for immediate reference.

Although he is a critical thinker who questions the system, he cannot completely escape immediacy, as he still craves the stimuli of testing people to the limit of their will, as he does in the scene below with Akane. She is incredulous because her Dominator keeps reading a low crime coefficient even when Makishima threatens to kill Yuki, so he challenges her to kill him with a rifle before he ends her friend's life. In this moment, he is reacting to a double stimulation: on the one hand, he sees Akane struggling whether she should obey the Dominator, and not apprehend Makishima, or whether she should follow her instincts and stop the criminal; on the other, he feels the pleasure of killing Yuki and getting away with it, thus confirming his truth and Sibyl's falsehood (Figure 8):

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*Figure 8 Akane's Dominator is still locked, reading a crime coefficient of 0, although Makishima is holding a knife to Yuki's throat*

Makishima: My Psycho-Pass has always been pure white. It never got clouded, not even once. All sorts of vital reactions in my body must be affirming me, judging that my actions are those of a good and sound man. [...] You can't measure my sins. If there is someone who can judge me, it'd be only those...who choose to become murderers of their own free will. [...]

Akane: (picking up the rifle, shaking) Let Yuki go now! Or...

Makishima: Or I'll be killed, by your murderous intent. That'd be a grand ending in its own way. Now, you feel the weight of life on your index finger, don't you? As long as you're Sibyl's puppet, you can never experience that. That's the weight of decision and [free] will. [...] Now, aim with the intention to kill. (ibidem)

Ultimately, Akane cannot force herself to disobey the system and kill Makishima; as a result, her friend dies horribly before her very eyes. Although he is doing it for his immediate,

repetitive gratification in a world that does not give him any other form of satisfaction, Makishima remains a critical thinker who encourages critical questions about people's free will. By testing Akane, he casts moral doubts about the essence of justice, whether it should follow one's own judgement, or whether it should adhere uncritically to an ideal imparted from above.

However, although Makishima aims to destroy the system, his opposition may originate also from a lack of community, although it is in the immediacy of Sibyl. As a system anomaly, from his childhood he experienced isolation because he did not conform to the normal society of people with pre-assigned roles. Unable to be part of Sibyl, he decided to destroy it. This realization surfaces when Kōgami seeks advice from Professor Saiga, a former clinical psychology Professor who retreated to the mountains when the Sibyl System dismantled universities:

Saiga: What is certain is that there was a severe turning point in his [Makishima's] life. The moment he realized he was an idiosyncrasy. ... That his body could control his Psycho-Pass at will. Some may think it's a 'privilege', right? But Makishima was different. What he felt was... probably... alienation. In this society, isn't to not appear in Sibyl System's eyes, in a way, the same as not being counted as a human?

Kōgami: 'A child not taken into the group'... I see. Surprisingly, maybe that's Makishima's origin. (Ep. 19)

It is relevant to bear the above in mind when reading Makishima's statements that in this world inter-personal connections do not matter anymore as a foundation of individual identity, because "in a world where everybody is surveilled by the system, and lives by the system's norms, a circle of people is worthless. Everybody is just domesticated to his own personal peace of mind, in his small prison cell" (Ep. 21). Makishima is referring to Michel Foucault's theory of the "Panopticon", a centralized structure of constant surveillance, usually a prison, where the ever-visible inmate, under the gaze of the authorities, inscribes himself in its

relation of power, adapting to a new form of discipline from above.<sup>82</sup> The criminal mastermind's words lend themselves to a double reading: on the one hand, he is denouncing the isolation of the present system, where all convince themselves they are happy in the comfort of not thinking of anything except their immediate personal satisfaction. On the other hand, Makishima might be resenting the world for not giving him a sense of belonging. Even though it is a system based on immediacy, and which discourages/prohibits critical thinking, being a part of the system entails connections with others in the same situation. These connections are not the same kind of inter-personal connections and community visible in *Evangelion*, because in this case they do not stem from critical confrontation outside of immediacy. However, not being a part of the Sibyl System, prevented Makishima from feeling kinship with anyone, thus possibly provoking his homicidal intent.

To understand Kōgami's character it is important to examine how he appears vis-à-vis his antagonist Makishima. At first glance, the enforcer Kōgami Shinya is the antithesis of what the villain is fighting for. This is suggested also by the characters' visual representations. While Makishima has long white hair, and is usually dressed in white or pale colours, suggesting an almost ethereal aura of someone who does not engage emotionally in the world around him, Kōgami is always dressed in black, with jet-black spiky hair. Rarely smiling, and frequently displaying expressions of anger or sadness, the enforcer shows that, regardless of his intentions, he is very much caught up in emotions (Figure 9).

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<sup>82</sup> Foucault expressed his theory of the Panopticon, building on the concept by Jeremy Bentham, in the book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (*Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison*, 1975).

The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The image was sourced at: Motohiro and Shiotani Ep. 16.

*Figure 9 Makishima and Kōgami engaging in a fight in episode 16*

However, Kōgami and Makishima are not dissimilar when it concerns their exertion of thought in relation to the system's immediacy of directives. Both characters question the system and exert free will: where Makishima attempts to destroy the system from outside, Kōgami resists the system from within, still pursuing his own sense of justice without submitting his freedom of thought to the Dominators. As demonstrated by the previous dialogue with his colleague Akane, Kōgami is perfectly aware of the danger posed by an allegedly perfect society, where people turned a blind eye to its associated risks of dehumanization. After the incident that caused his demotion from elite inspector to enforcer three years earlier, he lost hope in his profession. However, by meeting Akane and realizing her strong beliefs in the duty represented by the police, he is reminded of the ideal of justice associated with it. Even so, his view of justice clashes with Sibyl's standard, that prevents him to arrest Makishima. At this point, he rejects the unbending notion of good embodied by the Dominator, and leaves the Department of Public Safety to embark on a rogue mission to enforce what he believes is right. Here, the relationship with Makishima comes full circle because, by chasing someone who is not a criminal according to Sibyl, Kōgami is strongly expressing his own free will, thereby producing that 'radiance of the soul' that Makishima

seeks, as noted by Fujitsu (“Psycho-Pass” 75-76). His worst enemy is eventually his greatest triumph.

Although Kōgami and Makishima present two ways of opposing the laws of a system that provides its citizens with the comfort of familiar localized realities in the absence of thought, their methods are based on individual actions with homicidal purposes. They do not involve rebuilding ties with a community that would transform the system from within: it is either total destruction or following one’s personal justice to eliminate a destructive factor, knowing that this will prevent return to society. Hence, both Makishima and Kōgami must necessarily disappear, because without community they cannot cause a structural change outside of immediacy.

To rebuild inter-personal connections another approach is necessary, one that can operate from the inside yet still maintaining awareness of the dangers posed by the system. That is the case of inspector Tsunemori Akane. While Makishima and Kōgami embody two sides of the same coin, Akane manages to keep away from their destructive conflict and finds another way to react to Sibyl System and its immediacy. As Fujitsu remarks, by instigating crime Makishima aims to recreate another form of submission and control over individuals, one that is akin to the system he wants to destroy in the first place. Akane opposes this view and pursues Makishima, but she disapproves of Kōgami’s maverick abandonment of the system to kill. Akane remains close to both characters, but maintains a separate critical stance opposing their excesses. She is not absorbed into Sibyl, because she critiques it, but at the same time she is not completely removed from it, because that would prevent her from monitoring it (“Gaibu” 69).

Given her in-between stance, Inspector Tsunemori can bring about the structural change required to connect people and to envision a community outside of immediacy. Akane

is aware of the immediacy replacing critical thought in present-day Japan, and she too questions the Sibyl System. However, she does not resort to violence like Makishima, nor does she abandon the system altogether like Kōgami. Instead, she chooses to locate her own voice from within the system. Without attempting to destroy it, she believes in community over the immediacy of preset decisions. She is confident that with her personal endeavor to change she will be able to rebuild a community that thinks and upholds ideals that will eventually bring about an end to the rule of Sibyl: “The law doesn’t protect people. People protect the law! The law is built on the hopes of all those who hated evil and sought a righteous way of living. [...] People have prayed for a better world throughout time...To make those prayers still meaningful, we have to try our best to protect it to the very end” (Ep. 22). Akane chooses to bet on people’s capacity to think and be brave to achieve the ideals of a free society that opposes Sibyl’s dehumanizing immediacy.

At the base of the system, Akane believes, there are people, and eventually their thoughts will replace Sibyl, as emerges from her final confrontation with the central database. The system is disappointed that she was not able to apprehend Makishima alive. However, Sibyl concedes that though it misjudged her practical abilities, her immaculate Psycho-Pass and her clear judgments make her an ideal subject. Therefore, they will continue to monitor her to appease her inner ideological conflict, thus gaining valuable data to shape the future model citizen:

Sibyl: Continuing to observe and analyse your movements will provide us with valuable hints on how to build a methodology to appease the citizens in the future and have them adapt.

Akane: You think it’ll go so smoothly?

Sibyl: As long as you don’t show any signs of jeopardizing our secret, your life and your freedom of action will be guaranteed. We expect your cooperation. If you obey your desire for self-preservation, there should be only one choice for you.

Akane: Yeah, I don’t want to die in vain, and it’s also true that current society can’t hold without Sibyl.

Sibyl: We feel we can confide in your judgment based on your respect for the law.

Akane: Do you know the most demeaning thing you can do to the law you should respect? That's creating and applying a law that is unworthy of protection. You shouldn't underestimate humans. We're always aiming for a better society. Some day, someone is going to come to turn off the power in this room. We will find a new path for sure. Sibyl System, you guys have no future! (Ep. 22)

Similar to Takahashi's *Koi suru genpatsu*, *Psycho-Pass* stresses the importance of re-evaluating human life, its beliefs and experiences, to create a new community escaping the isolation of immediacy and the emphasis on localized realities. This transformation, however, does not seek to destroy the system; rather it aims to change it collectively from within. If successful, the Sibyl System will cease to exist, not through violent physical destruction, or because all criminals will have been eradicated, but rather because people from inside the system have decided to climb the stairs of the tower and shut it down as it is no longer fit for the purpose of creating a happy society.

### **5.3 Attack on Titan**

Set in an unspecified European-looking pre-industrial revolution era, the ongoing manga series *Shingeki no kyōjin* (Attack on Titan), by Isayama Hajime, depicts mankind's struggle for survival against mysterious human-like creatures, named Titans. Varying in size, and displaying little or no intelligence, Titans are interested only in devouring humans. They are very strong and extremely hard to kill: even if mutilated, their body parts regenerate over time, so the only way to terminate them is to make a precise cut (one metre in height and ten centimetres in width) on their nape, regardless of their size.

Immediacy is manifested through the dichotomy between a secluded walled society kept in a numbing safety, where people only focus on their proximate sphere, and the horrors

of an unknown outer world populated by the Titans, where only few humans dare to venture.<sup>83</sup> Living inside the walls means surrendering critical thought on what lies beyond, and accepting the comfortable immediacy of the lifestyles imparted by the monarchy for an idea of a peaceful life. The survey corps are an exception to this norm: this military squad, including the main characters as members, ventures regularly into the unknown world to fight and to learn more about the mysterious enemies, the Titans, at the cost of countless human losses. In doing so, they represent freedom of thought and a countermodel to immediacy. As a confirmation of this, they also oppose the secretive tendencies of the government to withhold secrets and promote immediacy, and work in concert with the citizens to establish a new community of people seeking truth beyond their quiet life.

However, immediacy emerges from the presentism of the constant desperation the humans experience when facing the strong merciless Titans. Against these seemingly unbeatable enemies, soldiers live solely in the moment of every battle, knowing that each moment might be their last; they exist in a never-ending present that repeats cyclically and does not seem to bring any development. One possible way to escape this harrowing presentism of danger and despair is to connect one's imminent death with the ones of those fallen before, thus envisioning a community and historical continuity in a general purpose that soldiers might entrust to those fighting and dying after them. Against this background, immediacy surfaces in the stimuli of violence. As with presentism, the visual representations in the manga emphasize the singular moments in battles, which also serve as immediate stimuli for characters and readers who can release the tension accumulated and possibly locate a form of catharsis.

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<sup>83</sup> Although the English "Attack on Titan" appears on the cover of the first Japanese manga volume, and is therefore the officially recognized translation, "The Attacking Giant" seems more faithful to the Japanese, and also fits better with a later plot point.

One final observation, based on recent developments in the story, shows another perspective on the conflict between men and Titans, suggesting that the categories of good and evil presented throughout the manga might be simply categories of immediate reference, that might turn to be otherwise if deep critical thought alters people's perspectives.

To develop these arguments further, it is necessary first to describe briefly the world and events from which they emerge, as from the 23 volumes published so far. *Shingeki no kyojin* locates itself between the *shōnen* and *seinen* manga meta-genres (usually intended for a male audience between 10 and 18), with elements of horror and post-apocalyptic fiction. The narrative structure focuses mostly on the main characters' experiences, so the truth about the mysterious world is experienced when they win against the Titans and those behind them (Ursini 2). A century before the main events, the survivors of the Titans' attacks found refuge inside three giant concentric walls, called "Wall Maria" (outermost), "Wall Rose" and "Wall Sina" (innermost). This walled structure also reflects the economic and political hierarchies of the community, with the king and the noblemen living in the innermost wall, and common people and peasants residing in the cities within Wall Maria (Figure 10). Retiring to an enclosed portion of land, and limiting their area of action, humans managed to live in peace without a single attack for a hundred years. Having lived in relative prosperity for a century, the men and soldiers inside the walls have now grown accustomed to safety and do not think a Titan attack could be possible. Still, they do not care about the world outside the massive, 50-metre high walls. The garrison corps (*chūton heidan*), military forces stationed in cities, spend more time drinking and feasting than in preparing for defensive operations. Only the survey corps (*chōsa heidan*), the military squads trained in anti-Titan combat, venture outside to reclaim the Titan-infested territories, however suffering severe human losses, and very little gain.



Figure 10 An overhead view of the land inhabited by humans within the three walls (2:36-37). *Shingeki no Kyojin* (c) Hajime Isayama / Kodansha Ltd.

The story opens with a sudden attack by the Titans, with the 60-metre tall colossal Titan (*chō ōgata kyojin*) appearing abruptly at the gates of the Shiganshina District, Wall Maria, and smashing a piece of the wall open. With Titans storming inside, including the formidable armoured Titan (*yoroi no kyojin*), and the military forces caught unawares, the town is ravaged, forcing the few survivors to abandon Wall Maria and retreat into Rose, thus yielding the bigger third of their territory to the enemy. Among the survivors are the main characters, the step-siblings Eren Yeager and Mikasa Ackermann, and their friend Armin Arlert. During the attack, Eren's mother Carla is eaten by a Titan before his eyes. The shock and anger at his helplessness fuel the ten-year-old's hatred, and instill in him the resolution to grow stronger and wipe all Titans from the face of the earth.

Five years later, Eren and his friends have graduated from the 104<sup>th</sup> regiment. Since the ten cadets with the best overall scores are entitled to choose freely to which corps to be assigned, the majority of them usually wants to join the military police (*kenpeidan*), the corps

appointed as the royal guard in the safety of the innermost wall, and therefore the ones less likely to encounter Titans. However, Eren and his friends are determined to join the survey corps and fight Titans. During a Titan attack, Eren discovers that he possesses the power to transform into one of them, and uses his new strength to help humans (Figure 11). As the story continues with numerous plot twists and as many desperate fights with Titans, the main characters and the survey corps discover the secrets of their world. They learn that Eren is not the only human who can transform into a Titan. His fellow trainees Annie Leonhart, Reiner Braun and Bertolt Hoover all possess the same power: specifically, Annie is able to transform into the female Titan (*megata no kyojin*), and the latter two are actually the armoured and colossal Titans who attacked Eren's town at the beginning. The three of them belong to the "warriors" (*senshi*) group, ruled by commander Zeke, who can turn into a sentient powerful beast Titan (*kemono no kyojin*). The warriors, originating from a distant country, hate the monarchy and the society within the walls, aiming to destroy it.



Figure 11 Titan/Eren (right) defeats a Titan and saves Mikasa (2:106-107). *Shingeki no Kyojin* (c) Hajime Isayama / Kodansha Ltd.

One striking aspect of immediacy emerges from the separation between the seclusion of the world within the walls and the one beyond. The isolation within the walls guarantees a well-ordered society and a safe life to its citizens, who can live in the immediacy of focusing on the localized realities of their everyday cycles, without thinking critically about the world

outside. This separation of inside and outside also harkens back to the dichotomy between *ingards* and *utangards* in Norse culture (Ursini 3; Yamazaki). *Ingards* (inside) indicated the inner space, usually fenced by walls, where the laws of a community were respected, as opposed to the savage and lawless *utangards*.

Except for the survey corps, the villagers and soldiers inside the walls traded their freedom of thought for an idea of safety and stability, much like the future Japanese in *Psycho-Pass*. Even after the sudden destruction of Shiganshina, the mentality of the general population and of the town military remains unaltered. After Wall Maria's tragedy, the population retreats to living in relative peace within Wall Rose. Again, as the memory of the massacre fades, people forget the sense of imminent threat, indulging in the immediacy of their everyday cycles. In fact, five years later even among the recruits there is a feeling of careless bliss:

Female cadet: Nothing's happened in five years. It's not going to be the same atmosphere as a few years ago.

Male cadet: In these five years the wall has become a lot stronger.

Female cadet: Maybe the colossal Titan won't come anymore.

Eren: Stop sounding like a wuss! (1:121)

The localized space of immediacy was created from a superior authority to deliberately keep people in the ignorance of their simple lives. The protagonists discover that the king erased memories from their subjects and created an alternative reality to avoid confrontation with the past, and make them believe they were living in a perfect society of peace. The current king Rod Reiss explains that the first king who created the wall society wished for a world ruled by Titans, because he believed that would entail peace. Therefore, it is not for normal people, even members of the Reiss family, to inquire into what is best (Isayama, *Shingeki* 16:150-151). They simply need to concentrate on their proximate reality, in the absence of thought.

The citizens' lack of critical enquiry into the truth signifies their isolation from the rulers in Wall Sina. The distance between the central political structures and the underrepresented general population is a recurrent theme also in *Psycho-Pass*, representing the divide between central machinations and the citizens who do not have the means to enquire critically into them, or simply do not want to bother, to preserve immediacy. In *Shingeki no kyojin*, this distance of political representation is portrayed even at the military level. Although the survey corps are supposed to provide advancements in the war against Titans, many consider them just as tax parasites stealing their hard-earned money for their expensive anti-Titan gear and their crusades, which end up in misery and massacre more often than not. The corps' reputation among colleagues is not different. On the other hand, the military police, although made of elite cadets, is the one farthest from action. Almost all members of the military police have never even seen a Titan in their life. Similar to the king to whom they live the closest in Wall Sina, contrary to expectations, their function is not to represent and protect the citizens, but rather to find contentment in the safety of their proximate reality. As Annie explains, it is in human nature to privilege one's local reality and safety, rather than common good or knowledge: "In this world, the greater your aptitude to deal with the Titans, the farther you're able to get away from them. [...] What is the point of such a farce? [...] Human nature. How's that for an explanation?" (Isayama, *Shingeki* 4:136).

In contrast to this attitude, Eren is a critical thinker that ventures in the *utangards*, trying to defeat the Titans and see what is beyond the walls. Even from a young age, Eren has been sceptical about the nature of the wall: it is a protection, but it also functions as a cage. He is prepared to exit his comfort zone: for him, to live within the walls is for livestock that only care about their lives, without thinking about the peril of the Titans or about all the soldiers who died in battle (1:24, 41). That is because, for him, the nature of people is to be free and

not confined by walls (4:12-29). Therefore, Eren bears the seeds to create a new community of people doing outside of comfortable immediacy: it is a community based on confrontation with the outside world, and on the pursuit of knowledge. Eren's freedom of thought stands out amongst his fellows, who are emotionally numb about their life purpose, and therefore only focus on acting to preserve their proximate realities.<sup>84</sup>

Challenging the immediacy of proximate realities is necessary to achieve a new community. Eren's superiors, and gradually the colleagues in the survey corps embrace this attitude to bridge the distance between free thinkers and the walled society. They realize that they cannot be the only ones pursuing knowledge outside the walls, and that they need to rebuild connections with the other citizens to achieve a new society based on members with equal knowledge. Under commander Erwin Smith, who has always been interested in finding the truth about history, the survey corps carry out a coup d'état against the phoney king Fritz and the shadow monarchy of the Reiss family. However, they cannot be successful on their own. It is only by convincing merchants, journalists, and other soldiers of the garrison and military police to work together for their own sense of justice, in order to really protect their dear ones, that the government is overthrown. As the survey squad leader Hange Zoe explains:

Captain Levi: What means did you use?

Hange: We didn't change it [...]. The choices that each of them made changed this world. (15:137-138)

Presentism is crucial in the sense of constant danger pervading the encounters with the Titans. The characters live in an endless present where they could die at the hands of the Titans at any moment. Danger is dreaded constantly, not as a sentiment that wells up before an important

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<sup>84</sup> Saitō Tamaki has noted that Eren's fellow soldier Christa Lenz is envious of him because she does not possess any desires of her own. According to him, this fact resonates well with the manga's young audience, because now youth are thought to possess no desires other than acceptance and recognition, also through social networks. Therefore, when they do not achieve this recognition, as Christa who is simply an emarginated illegitimate child of the royal family, they end up in despair. Eren, however, is enviable because he can channel this despair into a propelling force for fighting (Saitō and Hashimoto 64).

fight, but as a sort of stimulus (not gratifying at all) lurking under the skin. The soldiers live in the presentism of peril where battles may arise endlessly, but where even an unlikely victory would not entail any advancement in the war. That is because most fights do not have strategic value, but amount to reiterated resistance to Titan attacks. This omni-present present allows only the survival of the moment, which might be negated the successive instant and renewed again in a never-ending cycle. This sense of utter, constant terror is emphasized graphically by Isayama, whose drawing style has often been described as bad (*e ga heta*). The trembling lines suggest instability. Also, similar to Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893), the odd balance of the eyes and mouths of the Titans, the emphasis on their teeth, underscore terror and utter powerlessness (D. Yoshida 47) (Figure 12).



Figure 12 Eren sees his mother eaten mercilessly (1:77). *Shingeki no Kyojin* (c) Hajime Isayama / Kodansha Ltd.

There is eventually a sense of development in the battles, especially when the survey corps fight against the warriors Reiner, Bertolt and Annie. However, even in decisive battles the

sense of urgency is paramount. In many occasions, seemingly fundamental battles conclude with little knowledge gained and the more powerful Titans still undefeated. In the aftermath, the sense of defeat is linked with the despair of having lost so many friends.

The corps live in a presentism where the fights are often charged with the heavy meaning of *now* being the moment in which the fate of mankind is at stake. In a world where every fight could mean death for many, soldiers live in an everlasting present, where they experience the presentism of every moment as the final one, where every instant is the worst for mankind, with no other value than that of surviving for another moment (Figure 13).



Figure 12. In two different occasions, (9:23; 12:107), the survey corps' chiefs restate that now is the moment where everything is at stake. *Shingeki no Kyojin* (c) Hajime Isayama / Kodansha Ltd.

One solution to break free of presentist cycles is to find a connection with other soldiers as members of the same community of lives. As the survey corps need to repeat infinite series of single last moments that end up in innumerable human deaths, there would seem to be no purpose in fighting. However, they can escape the vicious circle of presentism through finding

meaning and difference in repetition in a Deleuzian sense, and thus envisioning a sense of community encompassing all corps. The soldiers need to think critically that they are all part of a community of soldiers who have given their life to the common ideal of leading mankind to knowledge and the final victory. They are not isolated individuals living in presentism, but part of a historical continuity: as those before entrusted their lives to them with their sacrifice, so will they entrust their lives' purpose to future soldiers too. As Commander Erwin Smith says leading a desperate charge against the beast Titan, to gain time for Captain Levi to strike it from behind:

Survey corps soldier: (Crying) Are we going to die now?

Erwin: Yes

Soldier: Since we're going to die anyway, you're telling us to fight and die in the end?

Erwin: Yes.

Soldier: Well, since we're going to die anyway, there's no meaning in the way we die, or if we die disobeying orders, right?

Erwin: Totally right. [...] So doesn't life have any meaning? Wasn't there any meaning in the fact that we were born? Is it the same for our fallen fellow soldiers? Did those soldiers have no meaning too? No, it's not like that! We give meaning to those soldiers! We that live can remember those brave dead! Those sad dead! Dying here, we will entrust meaning to those living next! That is the only way to fight against this cruel world! (Leading the mounted charge)  
Rage, soldiers! Shout, soldiers! Soldiers! Fight! (20:88-95)

Remembering the dead thus calls to mind the dead ratifying the living in Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva, and applied in Taguchi's *Konsento*, as well as in *Koi suru genpatsu*. However, in an apparently reverse perspective, Erwin Smith reminds his soldiers that it is the living that give a sense to death, because everyone is going to die eventually. By envisioning this sense of kinship, it is possible to counter the cycle of immediacy, made of single presentist moments where countless soldiers might die with no concrete benefit, thus amounting to nothing more than immediately expendable cannon fodder.

Another important aspect of immediacy is violence. Against the backdrop of the battles with the Titans, the sheer violence of every single blow acquires great importance. In the atmosphere of constant danger, violence responds to a stimulus that meets the reader's expectation for something terrible that may happen at any moment. The techniques of the manga medium enable *Shingeki no kyojin* to present panels with gruesome images that appear as a sudden shock, a stimulus to the reader who has been expecting a cruel image. One prime example of this is the two-page spread of the 104<sup>th</sup> regiment's trainees who imagine being eaten by Titans in one of their first sorties. As they mull over the peril, what could be just expressed in dialogue comes instead as a sudden blow to the reader, a strong stimulus fueling the sense of terror with its immediate impact (Figure 13).



Figure 13 (5:126-127). *Shingeki no Kyojin* (c) Hajime Isayama / Kodansha Ltd.

A similar process is visible in the violence against the Titans, which serves as an immediate emotional catharsis. The fear and danger they instill as implacable death machines fills the characters, Eren first, with a profound lust for killing. The nearer the chance to kill Titans, the

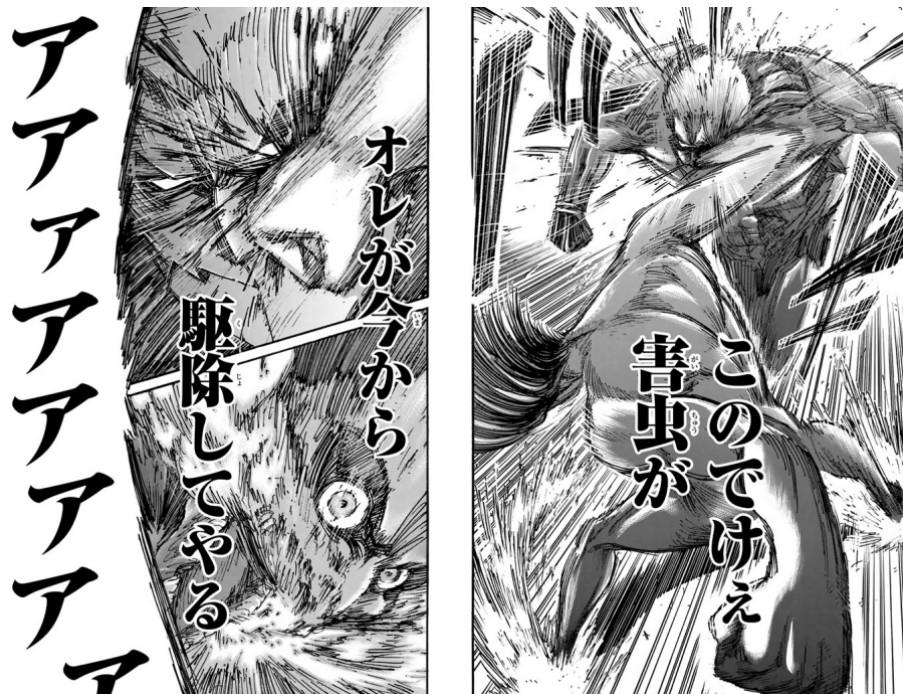
stronger the stimulus and the cathartic release, all the more so because of the emotional charge they motivate. A prime example is when Eren transforms into a Titan to fight Reiner Braun, the armoured Titan who attacked his village and killed so many of his friends. The emotional charge of hatred and rage is augmented greatly by the realization that Reiner and Bertolt had deceived their fellow soldiers all along, pretending to be their friends. It becomes a powerful, immediate stimulus to act on the moment (Figure 14).



*Figure 14 Eren (left) rises incited by his anger to kill Reiner (right). The hot smoke exhaling from his mouth and the indefinite lines of his face convey a sense of unstable rage (11:42-43). Shingeki no Kyojin (c) Hajime Isayama / Kodansha Ltd.*

Each blow provides Eren with an immediate alleviation of his anger. Further, the drawings emphasize the importance of each moment, portraying the action in slow motion (Figure 15). Thus, the stimulus of violence affects the reader too who, following what is portrayed visually, can empathize with the characters who fight the Titans and feel their anger welled up in the previous atmosphere of despair.

The gruesome death of each Titan serves as an immediate emotional catharsis for the characters, even if it is but for a brief moment. It serves them as a means to find an immediate solace against the despair and rage of mankind's general powerlessness facing terrible monsters. That is why the power to become a Titan himself enables Eren to find a safe space, where he can finally give body to his desires of immediate satisfaction in violence. Moreover, Saitō Tamaki has noted that, similar to the well in Murakami Haruki's fiction, the transformation into a Titan here functions as a space for dissociation from trauma and stress (Saitō and Hashimoto 59).



*Figure 15 The impact of Eren's punch is drawn in detail and in large panels, emphasizing both its physical and emotional power. The scenes make each moment count as an immediate emotional release and gratification (catharsis) (11:44-45). Shingeki no Kyojin (c) Hajime Isayama / Kodansha Ltd.*

As a final point, it is relevant to illustrate that categories of good and evil, of friends and enemies, shift from being uncritically accepted by the population, as instructed by the royal government, to being more ambiguous in later parts of the story. The official narrative of the Titans as the enemy that drove humanity inside the seclusion of the walls is unmasked, as it

becomes clear that the system prevented the citizens to realize that Titans are in fact humans. Therefore, similar to *Psycho-Pass*, it becomes evident that the initial oppositions of Makishima vs. Kōgami, crime vs. Sibyl System, were in fact tools for causing suspension of critical thought, impeding critical confrontation with the fact that the other should be seen as part of a similar community. The Titans that used to be the immediate nemesis surface not only as human beings, but also as weapons used in the war between Marley and Eldia, the two warring countries beyond the sea from which the Titans and the walled refugees originated. Although soldiers need to fight Titans for survival, they learn that their enemies are actually men themselves, victims in their own right of the power struggles between two armies.

The same applies to the conflict between the citizens of the two factions of Eldia and Marley. As the story progresses, it shows that categories of guilt and innocence are not immediately definable as they seem, but are instead matters depending on perspectives. For most of the story the focus is on Eren and his world threatened by Titans; later it comes to light that there exist entire countries beyond the sea. The group of the Eldian warriors (Reiner, Bertolt, Annie), led by Zeke, come from there and aim to retrieve the Founding Titan's power that Eren's father managed to hide inside his son. So, for Eren and his fellows they are the enemy, together with the normal mindless Titans, called "Pure Titans" (*muku no kyōjin*). This is the main perspective by which good and evil are determined: it is the evil Marley nation that chastised the Eldians and sent Titans to haunt the survivors on the island containing the walls. The concept is immediately relatable for what is shown on the pages. However, later in the story the manga shows scenes from the perspective of those left on Marley. The Eldians on Marley are discriminated and made to live in ghettos. They nurture hatred towards their kinsmen on Paradis island who left them behind, and hope that they can be of use to Marley to atone for their sins perpetrated when Eldia used to rule over Marley. For example, Reiner's

mother, who had her son chosen to inherit the armoured Titan's power and chase islanders, wishes that all those on Paradis were annihilated:

Those on the island are demons. Demons that turned the world into hell, and built their paradise on heaps of corpses. But we are different. [...] We don't know when those on the island will trample the world and attack with their powerful Titans. We Eldians must be the ones to stop it. Because when we accomplish that we will first be recognized as good people by the world. (23:167-168)

How the plot thread between Marley, Eldia and Paradis will be played out in the rest of the manga from now on remains to be seen, but what stands out here is that Eldians have their own values of justice, of good and evil, opposed to those of Eren and his fellow soldiers. Therefore, the story suggests that there is a whole grey zone, an ambiguous area of human depth that surpasses one-sided, uncritical categories for immediate reference. Going beyond immediacy, it is possible to see that there are many sides to any story.

In conclusion, the fantasies in this chapter articulate a sense of immediacy akin to the literary forms in new ways. The characters live in presentist worlds where they act in endless present dimensions foreclosing possible future developments, and where no sense of a shared history makes them feel part of a community. As a result, they tend to act focusing on their proximate realities in the suspension of thought: in *Evangelion*, Shinji refuses to think and takes refuge in a solipsistic idea of self-hatred, whereas in *Psycho-Pass* the future Japanese find comfort in the proximate reality of their preset roles; in *Shingeki no kyojin*, the immediate safety provided by the giant walls and the monarchy prevent the citizens from wanting to venture outside. Across the three works, a shift is visible in terms of how immediacy emerges vis-à-vis society. In *Evangelion* Shinji's auto-isolation is a reaction motivated by a society with obscure standards, which also causes him to long for immediate recognition in the absence of grand narratives. Possibly, this sentiment is also a manifestation of the popular

creativity of the mid-90s, portraying stories set in opaque realities. On the other hand, in the two later products that appeared more than a decade after Gainax's anime, suspension of thought does not lead to an escape into the immediacy of one's interior proximate reality, but to contentment with roles that the benevolent, all-controlling system assigns to citizens in the promise of safety and happiness. Therefore, the similar contrasts surface in seemingly opposing environments, from immediacy in the absence of existential guidelines, to immediacy where grand narratives do exist, but still impair critical judgement of ambiguous areas escaping the restrictive directives of dominant systems.

Especially in the first two anime series the relationship between the isolation of immediacy and longing for community is paramount. In *Evangelion* Shinji and the other pilots escape into their isolationistic fantasies hating themselves because they think nobody can understand them unless they prove immediately useful; in *Psycho-Pass*, critical thinkers questioning Sibyl System are isolated, with the prime examples of the criminal Makishima and the enforcer Kōgami, who needs to cut his ties from society to operate out of the system following his beliefs. However, in both anime such isolation cannot bring about an escape from immediacy, either at the individual or social level. Therefore, rebuilding inter-personal connections is necessary to achieve a new sense of community, and thus assert one's identity in relation to it, in the case of Shinji, or to dismantle Sibyl as a group joined by people with the common intent of improving society in *Psycho-Pass*. A sense of community is indeed present in *Shingeki no kyojin* too, but it is not played out in stark contrast against social isolation. Community is intended as a human *locus* in which to share knowledge and find a meaning in fighting, originated by the exercises in critical thinking of the survey corps.

Finally, through the peculiarity of the manga medium, *Shingeki no kyojin* introduces the relationship between violence and catharsis in immediacy. In the presentist setting of

constant danger, the emotional charge associated with the Titan enemies makes them targets to satisfy the immediate stimulation of violence, emphasized graphically through minute descriptions of each strike. Therefore, fulfilling this violence provides not only survival in a never-ending present, as is the case of sex in Takahashi's short stories, but also an emotional catharsis, a purging of the hatred and anger accumulated against the enemies of humanity.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusions

The purpose of this dissertation has been to illustrate the trope of immediacy, analysing its relevance in contemporary Japanese literature and popular culture. Chapter 2 highlighted aspects of immediacy in contemporary Japanese cultural discourse, providing useful categories for textual analyses. Common to these theories is an ideological vacuum from the mid-90s as a precondition for immediacy, frequently characterized by the demise of grand narratives, metanarratives or superstructures. In this scenario, narratives are also characterized by a form of what Hartog refers to as presentism, where one's proximate reality in an expanded present is the only dimension that counts. Azuma Hiroki's database theory suggests that this is evident in the way audiences consume popular culture products, interested only in combinations of superficial familiar traits, rather than seeking grand narratives to understand and explain their environment. Shifting from audiences to primary sources, the reduction of action to the immediacy of localized realities is prominent in *sekai-kei* products, where grand narratives such as the end of the world are subsumed in personal stories (small narratives). Action is central in Uno's theory of *survive-kei* and decisionism describing narratives where characters need to act constantly on the moment to survive. In his later theory of Little People, Uno postulates that in the demise of grand narratives characters act in endless cycles to maintain their local realities. Regarding reductions of scope, the final two theories illustrate a cultural flattening or spatialization, following Fredric Jameson's argument that in the contemporary age omnipresent space has flattened time to the immediate living present. Murakami Takashi's Superflat aesthetics indicates an expansion of the artistic horizon, where

high and low culture coexist in the same space. Similarly, Kumashiro Tōru's theory of rejuvenation depression posits a flattening of age perception of youth in Japanese society, where individuals seem to live in an endless youth, postponing ageing indefinitely.

Chapter 3 advanced the hypothesis of immediacy with textual analyses of fiction by Takahashi Genichirō. In the two novels and short-story collection, characters live in an ideological vacuum where, struggling to find grand narratives to represent their world, they only concentrate on the small narratives of their proximate realities. The sense of presentism is most prominent in *Godira*, where characters live in an endless present not informed by notions of past and future, and in *Nihon bungaku seisuishi*, where Meiji writers are inserted in contemporary contexts, creating an indefinite temporal dimension that merges past and present. To survive in these cycles of the present, the characters in all works constantly take action in their local realities, in the absence of thought: in *Godira* action generally entails repetitive work; in *Nihon bungaku seisuishi* it refers to writing focused only on itself, in isolation from critical confrontation; in *Kimi ga yo wa chiyo ni yachiyo ni* action is predicated on violent stimulation. In all of these contexts, the characters are isolated, focusing only on what affects their local reality in the absence of thought. Despite a few isolated attempts at critical thinking, when their efforts are only enacted on the level of the individual, without real confrontation with others, the characters cannot build lasting inter-personal connections; they thus fail to achieve a sense of community that would enable them to break the never-ending cycles of immediacy. However, their failures at building connections ultimately show that characters do long for community, but cannot achieve it on their own without establishing shared ideals and memories.

Continuing the exploration of immediacy in literature, Chapter 4 deepened the analysis on immediacy and the role of stimuli in particular. Characters act in response to corporeal

stimuli to survive in the presentism of their lives, which seem to amount to endless present dimensions without clear notions of the past and/or of future developments. Therefore, the characters focus only on surviving in their proximate realities, in a state of isolation where they do not find connections with past events informing their present, nor with other human beings, living or dead. However, different from the physical stimuli seen in Chapter 3 that do not usually entail critical thought, in the novels by Takahashi, Taguchi and Hirano stimuli may also represent a doorway to critical thought, as they are not merely means to satisfy one-sided urges. Far from a Cartesian dualism of mind and body, sensorial experiences may also be a form of direct knowledge, allowing a deep appreciation of one's own identity as well as the identities of others, in relation to the community at large. In *Koi suru genpatsu* embracing sexual stimuli emphasizes the need to re-evaluate basic human interactions and empathize with others outside of one's proximate reality. It enables characters to rebuild inter-personal connections and achieve a sense of community based on mutual understanding. In Taguchi's *Konsento*, when the protagonist reacts to the violent stimulus of the smell of her brother's corpse, she is able to reconstruct their common history and assert her identity vis-à-vis his; this allows her to escape from the limitations of presentism. At the same time, as a shaman she embraces sexual intercourse as a gateway to a wider spiritual world, where she can recognize herself and others like her as part of the same natural community, away from the isolation of the immediacy of individual proximate realities. Finally, Hirano's *Kao no nai ratai tachi* stresses the importance of inter-personal connections as a means to escape immediacy and presentism by portraying the consequences of the failure to do so. The two characters reach a better critical awareness of themselves by responding to violent sexual stimulation and expressing this trait of their personality. However, as this awareness is only actualized within the localized reality of a porn website, without critical confrontation and appreciation of

themselves vis-à-vis others, this practice cannot guarantee a real community outside of immediacy.

Shifting the focus from literature, the final Chapter 5 described immediacy in popular anime and manga portraying alternate realities from present-day Japan. Across two anime and one manga series, the characters find comfort in action which occurs within their proximate realities, in the absence of thought. In *Evangelion* Shinji seeks refuge in the familiar realities of his interiority, thus escaping confrontation with an obscure society; conversely, in *Psycho-Pass* and *Shingeki no kyojin* the characters survive by unquestioningly obeying their roles assigned by totalitarian secluded societies which offer the promise of security and stability. However, as these scenarios generate constant isolation, as individuals only concentrate on localized realities, the three series show the relevance of critical thinking leading to community as a way to escape the cycles of immediacy. This is particularly relevant in the two anime: re-evaluating oneself and establishing his identity through critical confrontation with others allows Shinji to reconcile himself with his community; in *Psycho-Pass* establishing a community of people aiming to improve society together may lead to dismantling the system which promotes immediacy. Another major point in this chapter is the importance of violent stimuli in *Shingeki no kyojin*. Living in the state of presentism where they cyclically encounter the constant threat of death, killing the Titans offers soldiers a powerful means to achieve emotional catharsis.

In conclusion, what unites the different analyses is the crucial role of connections in immediacy. The cultural outputs portray characters living in the isolation of their proximate realities, where they act in the absence of thought to fill the void of their existence. However, despite their actions that might suggest the contrary, the individuals in the narratives still long for human connections. The literature and popular culture portraying immediacy always

oscillate between scenes of connection and disconnection, of isolation and attempts at community-building. In this respect, they are akin to the social media that, while offering the promise of connecting with others, are ultimately premised on the sheer frequency of messages, rather than actual communication and understanding with others.

The constant tension between connection and disconnection invests the readership too, showing a need for community. The works elicit opposing responses from readers, immersing them in portrayals of isolation, and of longing for human connections. These scenes convey an *aporia*, a doubt or suspension of judgment suggesting that society, as in the sources, has reached an emotional impasse, a point of disconnection where it is necessary to rethink human interactions and build new inter-personal bonds to create new communities, thus escaping the vacuum of immediacy. The depictions of strong stimulations, ranging from carefully described sexual intercourse, as in Taguchi or Hirano, to rejection and disgust in instances of extreme violence and brutal sex, as in fiction by Takahashi, perform a similar function of providing stimuli to try and connect with others.

Responding to the initial research question of enquiring into new forms of literature and popular culture, this dissertation has illustrated the distinctive trait of immediacy and its relationship with connections and disconnections. Since the provocative remarks by critics were related to the supposed death of pure literature, as a response this study selected literary exponents of the so-called *junbungaku*. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, intellectuals have debated on the distinction between a form of pure, serious literature, and a more commercial “mass literature” (*taishū bungaku*), focused on entertaining rather than engaging with social commitment. *Junbungaku* is connected with the interests of the *bundan* (literary guild) and the prizes associated with it (for example the Akutagawa Prize), whereas works in mass or entertainment literature seem to have their own equivalent in the Naoki

Prize.<sup>85</sup> While it was outside the scope of this research to enquire into the validity, or necessity, of such distinction, the literary analyses did show how immediacy contributes to pure literature by highlighting how it represents “serious” and social issues in the perception of orders of time, compulsive action and in the isolation in contemporary society, thus illustrating new narrative ways in which pure literature has changed from the end of the 80s.

Furthermore, immediacy contributes to the general fields of Japanese literary and cultural studies by shedding new light on portrayals of sudden violence and extreme sexual practices. Immediacy can enrich the study of such instances by adding the reflection on contemporary rifts in time, and the consequent emphasis on the present and the immediate, predicated on an ideological vacuum. For example, the discussion of immediacy and presentism would impact on the analysis of works by Murakami Ryū where repeated instances of violence are prominent, such as *Piasshingu* (Piercing, 1994). Here, a man is haunted by homicidal fantasies of killing his infant child with an ice pick. He tries to find an outlet for his urges in planning to kill a prostitute, who in turn manifests suicidal instincts. The hypothesis of immediacy would reframe the analysis of violence within the emphasis on direct sensations and action in response to stimuli, thereby illustrating how the characters’ violent urges are manifestations of the supremacy of the immediate and its localized realities as the only dimension in which they can act and feel alive.

In popular culture, one example would be the manga series *Koroshiya I* by Yamamoto Hideo (Ichi the Killer, 1998-2001), famous for its extensive graphic depictions of violence and sex. Considering these works also through the lens of immediacy would add another layer of interpretation, and possibly highlight connections with other related works. This study also contributed to the academic fields by bringing to analytical attention numerous works of

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<sup>85</sup> For a summary and discussion on the debate between pure and mass literature in Japan see: Strecher.

fiction and popular culture that have not been researched widely, thus broadening the scope of the current research on the current Japanese artistic panorama.

A number of relevant issues surfaced in the course of the study but could not be included in the final dissertation due to the word limit. It is the case of other sources in Taguchi and Hirano's literature, such as the short stories in *Middonaito Kōru* and in *Tōmeina meikyū* (*An Invisible Labyrinth*, 2014) respectively, relevant for their depictions of stimuli. Another issue is the comparison between the contemporary manifestations of immediacy and similar instances in the literature of previous eras, such as the representations of violence within a dissatisfying society in the *Taiyōzoku* youth movement, or in literature by Ōe Kenzaburō or Mishima Yukio. Also, the emphasis on stimulation and sensorial experiences in immediacy opens interesting possibilities for confrontation with the *Shinkankakuha* (new sensationalist school), the prewar literary group led by Yokomitsu Riichi and Kawabata Yasunari that focused on exploring new sensations in literature.

For future research, it will be relevant to continue this intellectual endeavour by extending the investigation to other authors and works, for example Abe Kazushige and his fiction where technology plays a fundamental role in shaping human relation, as is the case in the novel *Nipponia Nippon* (2001). Furthermore, it will be valuable to consider how the trope of immediacy has changed, if it has, outside the temporal parameters of this study, to understand whether the constant tension between connecting and disconnection has indeed found resolution into a stable form of community outside of immediacy, or whether this conflict has evolved into other forms. Whichever the case, if there is one future immediacy cannot foreclose, it is that of artistic expression.

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