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From futuristic center to lifeless periphery: Tokyo in three dystopian narratives from post-Fukushima Japan

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Abstract Reflections on the collective traumas that have shaped Japan's more recent history (primarily the triple disaster of Fukushima) have ignited a new boom in dystopian productions that have achieved an unprecedented success. These narratives explore themes that deal with the erosion of the ecosystem in which humans live – but also of the human body itself. However, it is not only human beings who play a part in some of these dystopias: the city of Tokyo also plays a key role within them. The purpose of this paper is to explore this peculiar role of Tokyo in three selected case studies: namely, *Adou* (2021-) by Amano Jaku, *Soundtrack* (2003) by Furukawa Hideo, and *The Emissary* (2013) by Tawada Yōko. Destroyed and rebuilt in multiple media productions over the last seventy years and at the center of psychedelic futuristic visions, Tokyo becomes either a swarming center of human life or an abandoned wasteland, an urban skeleton that stands as a reminder of the impending or preceding catastrophe, forcing the reader to think about the actual future of our urban spaces – and whether it will include us humans or not.

Keywords dystopia; Tokyo; city in literature; spatialization; cityscape

1. Introduction

For a couple of centuries now, the urban space has been one of the most used settings for stories that, across several genres, wish to explore the human condition and how it has been shaped by modernity. The city and its often fragmented, chaotic space are a privileged tool for observing and representing the inner dilemmas and reasoning of characters – from open and clear streets to dark and dangerous alleys.

Ever-changing and evolving along with the human protagonist, the city becomes a mirror held up to reflect on the individual as well as on the society, a material text that can be read and interpreted in different ways. Tokyo, among others, is one of the most represented and explored cities in literature and mainstream media – a metropolis that has gained more and more popularity

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even outside its country since the end of the Second World War, becoming instantly recognizable also to Euro-American audiences. Often subjected to an exoticizing and orientalist gaze, Tokyo has been one of the most popular settings for both Japanese and non-Japanese science fiction and dystopian narratives since the 1950s, becoming maybe the 'most fictionally destroyed' city in the world.

The aim of this paper is to observe how Tokyo has been represented in selected dystopian works published in Japan after the beginning of the new millennium – from a sprawling metropolis, a futuristic center teeming with life, to an empty and lifeless periphery. To do so, I will consider the city as a relevant or even main character, appearing metonymically in the narrative through the crowd, as inspired by Lehan's *The city in literature: an intellectual and cultural history* (1998: 8). After a brief introduction on the new relevance of dystopias in recent years and the increase in popularity of the genre, the second section of this article will delve into the chosen research approach, focusing in particular on the concept of *spatialization* (De Fina 2009; Doloughan 2015) and on the urban space as a dystopian space, both as center and as periphery, drawing on the studies of Tulumello (2015) and Ladiana (2017). Lastly, the paper will then focus on Tokyo and on its particular history before presenting three case studies: *Adou* (*Adou*, 2021-), a manga still in serialization by Amano Jaku, *Soundtrack* (*Saundotorakku*, 2003), a novel by Furukawa Hideo, and lastly *The Emissary* (*Kentōshi*, 2013), a novel by Tawada Yōko.

2. The return of dystopia

Dystopias are a specific genre of speculative fiction that imagine a world worse than the one the author and intended reader live in. A world that, while being objectively worse, has its roots in issues and problems that are already part of the society that the work has been aimed to, serving therefore as a 'warning' or an 'alert'. According to Gregory Claeys, dystopia "describes negative pasts and places we reject as deeply inhuman and oppressive, and projects negative futures we do not want but may get anyway" (2017: 498); precisely because of their nature, they thus offer a privileged insight into the anxieties and fears of contemporary society.

Literary dystopia in all its different media iterations has a precise task (Claeys 2017: 501): educating and warning the audience about issues and conflicts that are already happening in the present, inspiring readers to act,

raising awareness about the consequences of human activity on the planet, and imagining possible futures that encourage a more sustainable way of living.

In recent years, the genre has experienced unprecedented popularity, moving from niche to mainstream media and generating a widespread public engagement at a global level. For the first time, dystopian imageries have crossed the boundaries of the genre, targeting a wider, more generic audience; dystopian and speculative fiction is no longer for hardcore sci-fi fans only, but aims at reaching a public that is as wide as possible.

There might be several reasons behind this increased and almost unexpected popularity, among which the ever-decreasing gap between the time of the catastrophe imagined in the text and the time of the actual lived experience of authors and readers seems to play a prominent role. If earlier and more 'traditional' dystopias imagined a worse future a century or more after the time in which they were written, today's fictional apocalypses often imagine "human society as it could be in a near future or in an alternative present, providing that some of its features (for instance, mass surveillance, digital technologies, or overpopulation) are increased" (Malvestio 2022: 28). The catastrophe is no longer a warning for the generations to come but becomes a condition that is already present and that humans have to deal with.

Another recent development for dystopian imageries is their crossing not only of genre boundaries, but also of national borders. Even if the most renowned dystopian works come from the Anglo-American tradition, in recent years dystopian texts have been popularized all over the world and productions from those cultural areas that are usually considered as 'periphery' have in some cases entered the global mainstream market. Specifically in the case of Japan, the traumatic experience of the triple disaster of Fukushima in 2011 triggered novel considerations about the role of literature as testimony in the public and in the intellectual sphere, as well as new reflections on the precarity of the balance between the human species and the surrounding environment. These ideas made way not only for what is usually considered "post-Fukushima literature" in general, but also for a new influx of dystopian works of fiction across different media: literary prose, poetry, but also manga, anime, cinema, and television series.

However, this recent increase in popularity should not be interpreted as a lack of a precedent tradition – works of speculative fiction, whether utopian or dystopian, have been produced in Japan since the genre was introduced in the country through translations of European and American sources (Moichi 1999: 90-91). Furthermore, the rising of anxieties tied to the contamination, mutation,

disintegration of the body in Japan is also linked to two traumatic historical events: the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that forever marked the country's collective memory. These fears, therefore, have been present in Japanese culture since the end of World War II, and have 'only' been exacerbated by the 2011 Tōhoku triple disaster first, and by the COVID-19 pandemic more recently, along with new anxieties about environmental collapse and climate change.

Due to their nature and to the characteristics of the genre as a whole, dystopian narratives reflect what humans fear the most in a specific time frame and cultural context – they hold a mirror in front of us that shows a terrible future that "we do not want but may get anyway", to quote Claeys (2017) again. Therefore, dystopias are a powerful instrument that makes it possible to analyze and rethink societies by offering us an insight on our collective fears, forcing us to question the position of the human in our planet and ecosystems – including the urban space.

3. Moving through the city: 'space', '*spatialization*', and the dystopian urban space

As Richard Lehan addresses in the introductory chapters of *The city in literature: an intellectual and cultural history*, the (modern) city has been an imposing presence throughout the last three centuries of cultural history (1998: 3). Not only a vibrant backdrop on which actions and characters can be projected, the metropolis becomes also an independent, living entity that can either welcome or swallow the unassuming protagonist.

The way that characters move in the narrated space of the city has been studied thoroughly, but in recent years the focus has shifted from temporality and causality to a re-examination of "the potentials of space and place in helping to constitute narrative domains" (Doloughan 2015: 1). This shift, according to Anna De Fina, is also due to a reconfiguration of the concept of space brought on by globalization; displacement, deterritorialization, and the redefinition of power relationship between 'centres' and 'peripheries' have made necessary in narrative analysis a rethinking of seemingly granted or universal concept such as 'space' and 'place' (2009: 109).

De Fina, in particular, proposes the notion of *spatialization* as a key process through which "space is invested with social meaning" (2009: 126) by individuals, groups and institutions. While her research focuses on spoken

utterances and retelling of past experiences, Fiona Doloughan extends this idea to literature, and to the construction of space in written, literary texts:

> [...] the places in which the characters are located and the spaces that they traverse carry meanings, meanings constructed by reference to particular social and political geographies as well as in relation to the identities of the characters. (Doloughan 2015: 2)

Space, therefore, is used by authors to encode "certain models of the story world" (De Fina 2009: 113), creating a literary landscape that is not only *passed through*, but that has a certain degree of agency in itself, influencing the life and livelihood of the characters of the narrative. It is then on the readers to decode the meanings carried by spaces and places and understand the movements traced within the plot.

In the dystopian texts presented in this contribution, the urban space of the city plays a significant role. At times envisioned as a futuristic metropolis in full bloom or at the brink of collapse, at times imagined as an inhospitable wasteland that serves as a memento and testimony to what once was, the city in speculative fiction provides more than a setting. It encodes precious information that lets the reader infer what happened to make the fictional world a different (and worse) iteration of the one they live in – even when it is not explicitly stated. In the selected texts, in particular, the urban space can be considered a manifestation of the corruption, contamination, and erosion of the human body – one of the many themes that these narratives deal with.

In analysing the dystopian space of the city, this paper borrows some key concepts from the field of Urban Studies, in particular from the works by Daniela Ladiana and Simone Tulumello. These scholars, among many others, have reflected on how the configuration and re-configuration of the city in recent years has given birth to new, 'dystopian' landscapes in the real urban spaces of cities around the world. The metropolis becomes then a "space of fear" (Tulumello 2015) structured around flows of capital, goods, people, information – "objects of competitiveness and productivity" (Ladiana 2017: 619). Fear of crime, violence, and invasion from an ever-shifting 'other' have permanently reshaped the contemporary urban landscape into a sort of hyper-guarded fortification (Ladiana 2017: 622), resulting in a conscious delineation of limits and borders that draw an alternative map of the city, excluding precise areas and categories of citizens.

Architecture can become, then, a means to enact discriminatory practices and to express power – a vehicle of social exclusion. This happens, according to Tulumello (2015), through three precise architectural and urban elements:

1. the *enclosure*: "secluded spatial forms" (259) that are either the result of voluntary seclusion or forced exclusion of certain demographics: rich and affluent gated communities on one hand, ghettos, camps, and slums on the other.
2. the *post-public space*: a space that is built to mimic the appearance of public space but is free of the perceived dangers of it through means of surveillance, fortification, and gentrification – limiting at the same time "active practices of citizenship" that lay outside consumerism (260).
3. the *barrier*: a calculated interruption of an urban infrastructure that limits the availability of interconnections between specific "nodes" of the city, successfully limiting the movements to and from certain neighbourhoods inside the city (260).

All these elements, together with the progressive disappearance of public space and of its civic role, merge to create what we can call "urban dystopias" (Ladiana 2017).

These studies deal with real urban spaces and analyse trends that have been shaping the contemporary world. It is therefore interesting to observe how these changes in the structure of the city are represented and reimagined in dystopian texts. After all, as stated before, dystopia stems from inequalities and issues that are already inherent in the society we live in, using the narrative devices of abstraction and extremization to bring them to our attention and spark a reflection in the reader.

Of course, the city and its representations have been observed from several different perspectives. The approach chosen for this article is to look at the urban space through the *crowd* – a living, vibrant, ebbing embodiment of the city – following Lehan's (1998) approach:

> The city often presents itself metonymically, embodied by the crowd. We look through the crowd […] to the city. […] Each crowd offers a way of reading the city. […] From Defoe to Pynchon, the ways of reading the city offer clues to ways of reading the text, urban and literary theory complementing each other. (Lehan 1998: 8-9)

Starting from this theoretical and interdisciplinary foundation and the taxonomy it provided, this paper aims to examine how one city in particular has been represented in recent dystopian narratives: Tokyo, the capital of Japan. While a thorough analysis of its history and characteristics would be beyond the scope of this paper, the next paragraph will provide a brief and certainly not exhaustive overview of the historical contingencies and literary significance of one of the most studied and imagined cities in the world.

4. Built, destroyed, re-built, destroyed again: Tokyo and its countless iterations

In his book *Imaginary Athens: urban space and memory in Berlin, Tokyo, and Seoul*, Chun Jin-sung defines Tokyo as a "discursive formation of sorts" (2021: 173) – a city characterised by a complicated stratification: of buildings and cement over waterways, of memories, historical events, ideas and literary retellings. A city that in its perpetual change and in its being outside of "ready-made urban narratives" (Waley 2013: 331) has fascinated writers and scholars alike, becoming a material representation of hope, nostalgia, fear, a canvas on which "its story can be rewritten any number of times" (Mansfield 2016: 194).

Tokyo, formerly known as Edo, has been the economic and cultural center of Japan for centuries, and its consecration as the actual capital of the country at the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912) only strengthened its role as a centripetal core, "where discourses on Japanese national identity and history are generated and interact" (Thornbury & Schulz 2018: VII). The changes in the domestic politics of the country, the opening of the borders, and the consequent encounter with Europe and America (and their colonial endeavours) pushed Japan toward a forced modernization and a re-construction of Edo, both materially and ideally, into an imperial capital befitting of that name:

> Having suddenly transformed into the imperial capital where the emperor resides, Tokyo had to be rebuilt into a space that would visually convey Japan's new state ideology. […] To impart a modernized impression to foreigners and convince them to revise unequal treaties, the Meiji government decided it was necessary to change the capital's landscape and took the lead in launching renovation projects. (Chun 2021: 172-3)

This grandiose project was to be achieved not by simply modernizing Edo into a new version of itself, but through the reinvention of the urban space into what

would then become Tokyo, a "newly historicized space" (Chun 2021: 173) that would impress a modern, efficient, and radically different image upon the city. From its origin, then, Tokyo has been a city of re-building, re-construction, re-imagination, both as a physical landscape and as a concept, an idea of what the capital city should look like to meet the expectations of foreign visitors. At its core, there lies a fragmented and ambiguous identity (Chun 2021: 174), thorn between its feudal and yet already very urbanized past and Euro-American modernity.

However, throughout its history, Tokyo's urban space was re-built and re-imagined not only as a way to reinvent its image and significance both at a national and international level. The city has been destroyed multiple times, either by natural or man-made disasters, and every time it has been rebuilt into a new iteration of itself – assimilating this constant change and impermanence of buildings and landmarks. Throughout the several calamities that struck the city, of which the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 and the WWII air strikes are the most widely known, several symbols of national history and identity, such as the Imperial Palace and the Meiji Shrine, were destroyed and then rebuilt again. As Barbara Thornbury and Evelyn Schulz concisely write in the introduction to their volume *Tokyo: memory, imagination, and the city* (2018),

> Twice massively destroyed (by earthquake and war) and rebuilt during the twentieth century— and, for decades now, willingly tearing down and rebuilding in the name of progress— Tokyo today is a place where objects of recollection are perhaps fewer and harder to recognize than those of other major cities. (Thornbury & Schulz 2018: VIII)

Hence, it is no coincidence that in several popular media published during the postwar period Tokyo appears, once again, as a destroyed city – by another natural disaster, war, or a non-human entity that attacks the city. The image of the capital burned to the ground in the days after the bombings comes back over and over again, haunting the memory of those who fled into the countryside and came back to "the charred remains of a hecatomb" (Mansfield 2016: 134). It superimposes itself over the new buildings, train tracks, infrastructures that began to rapidly appear during the economic boom – leaving a lingering fear in its wake. Among the cultural productions that re-elaborate these urban anxieties we find some of the 'new classics' of Japanese dystopia and Sci-Fi: *Gojira* (1954, directed by Ishirō Honda) and all its sequels and spin-offs, the SF novel *Nihon chinbotsu* (1973) by Komatsu Sakyō, and the manga (and then animated movie) *Akira* (1985) by Katsuhiro Ōtomo.

Thus, Tokyo becomes "a canvas on which to project larger issues of capitalist excess, national belonging, and personal identity" (Pendleton 2018: 48), but also an entity that becomes alive and sentient through its people – the crowd, "ebbing and flooding, great waves of people washing around the buildings, rushing through the channels, and pouring back out again" (Waley 2009: IV).

The next paragraph will present three different cultural productions written after the turn of the millennium that feature Tokyo as more than just a setting. I argue that in all these texts the city is more than a simple background on which the characters are projected; instead, it is a character in its own right – appearing metonymically through the crowd (or its absence) and playing a distinct role in defining the dystopian imaginary that these texts draw from. Furthermore, I will also analyse how these dystopias experiment with the concept of Tokyo as a "center", either by exaggerating the magnetic and centripetal power of the metropolis up to the brink of collapse or by reversing it completely, transforming one of the biggest cities in the world in a desert, lifeless wasteland.

5. From centre to periphery: three case studies

The texts presented in this section will follow a symbolic route through different ways of reimagining Tokyo in a dystopian setting, moving from a lively and vibrant urban centre to an abandoned and lifeless periphery. In all three works, the city is a dominant presence even when not directly referenced, looming over the characters and their disjointed lives.

5.1 Tokyo alive, vibrant, contaminated: *Adou* (2021-) by Amano Jaku

The first cultural production selected is *Adou* (original title 亜童, *adou*), a serialized manga by Amano Jaku, published since 2020 in *Gekkan Young Magazine* and then collected in volumes by Kōdansha. The plot revolves around the titular *adou*: orphaned, often terminally ill children that have been selected as test subjects for human and plant cells fusion. These secret experiments are carried out to create new 'biological weapons' – a genetically modified 'seed' is implanted in the body, and the subjects' DNA is rewritten and fused to that of the chosen plant. The result is an incredibly powerful and at the same time deeply hybrid body, that can mutate and partially transform into a plant on command.

This process does not grant a successful result: in some children the fusion does not happen, and they are (literally) discarded. Others become violent and uncontrollable – the plant takes over, and eventually erodes and consumes not only their bodies but also their humanity, as happens to Rin, a secondary character: "Even if it can take care of the wounds, the plant is already part of her and can no longer be taken away"[1] (Amano 2021: 56, cfr. fig. 1), and "Perhaps one day ... the plant will devour her whole body" (58-59).

Figure 1: *Adou* vol. 3, p.56. © 2021 Amano Jaku, Kōdansha

Adous are not considered 'humans' by the government: there are no records of them at the registry office, nor are there any other documents that can prove their existence and role in society. Thus, they do not exist as 'people,' but only as experiments, as test subjects to be eliminated when no longer useful or out of control.

The manga is set in a futuristic Tokyo in a future not too far from our present – technology has evolved, but (apart from the DNA fusion process) not in unimaginable ways for the average citizen: impossibly tall skyscrapers loom over the city centre, while self-driving vehicles work as bars and clubs on the move, and every person has their own portable devices that are both a phone and a tool for identification and payment. However, Amano leaves no space for illusions: impoverished neighbourhoods – recognizable by narrow streets and crowded one-story buildings – are not too far from the glamorous and shiny entertainment district, marking a clear separation between the rich and the poor and creating "spaces of urban exclusion" (as mentioned in paragraph 3).

The city has changed radically, not only in architecture but also in population: twenty-five years before the beginning of the story a new immigration law was approved, letting in an increasing number of foreign

[1] All translations into English in this paper, unless specified, are by the author.

nationals and creating a melting-pot of cultures and languages – a striking contrast with the idealized but nonetheless popular contemporary image of Japan as a monoethnic society.

The crowd in *Adou* is therefore a multi-cultural, buzzing, and agitated entity, only seconds away from revolting. From the first pages, the reader moves through an overcrowded marketplace following the erratic movements of the main character: Eight, a young *adou* who escaped confinement and finds himself wandering through Tokyo for the first time in his life (cfr. Amano 2020: 7-10). Through his eyes, the crowd is both fascinating – with its endless movement of different people, clothing, languages – and fearsome, an untamed beast or hive-mind of sort that threatens to swallow the boy whole.

Figure 2: Following Eight. *Adou* vol. 1, p.8. © 2020 Amano Jaku, Kōdansha

Figures 3 and 4: Lost in the crowd. *Adou* vol. 1, p. 7 and 10.
© 2020 Amano Jaku, Kōdansha

Tokyo, coming alive through its crowd, becomes a reflection of the hybrid figures at the centre of the manga: both complex creatures, made up of different 'souls' living in a single, contaminated body, the city and the *adous* are symbols of a hybridization caused by an external cause – which is the core theme around which the story of Eight and his friends revolves. While they are chased by the army and government as outlaws, this evident link between *adous* and the urban space also functions as a legitimization of some kind. Even if they are not perceived as humans but as an undefined 'other' that transcends species boundary, they can always claim their place in the contaminated, vibrant, and dangerous Tokyo portrayed in the manga.

5.2 On the brink of collapse: *Tokyo in Soundtrack* (2003) by Furukawa Hideo

The second text presented as a case study is *Soundtrack* (2003, original title サウンドトラック, *Saundotorakku*), by Fukushima-born author Furukawa Hideo. The novel – long enough to be divided into two volumes in the original edition – brings the reader in a world temporally close to ours but transformed by the catastrophic effects of climate change. The story follows the two main characters, Touta and Hitsujiko, from their childhood, spent on an apparently

deserted island after a shipwreck, to their adolescence and return to an overheated, polluted, almost claustrophobic Tokyo.

While the novel explores several different themes, from the struggle between youth and adulthood to the power and meaning of dance and music, the dystopian and ecocritical elements remain relevant even twenty years after its initial release in Japan. For the purpose of this paper, one section in particular will be analysed – a chapter simply titled "0", in the second half of the novel, where the reader finds out what happened to Tokyo and what triggered the catastrophic changes that would bring it to the edge of total collapse. Interestingly, the year when it all begins in the novel is 2009, but many events and situations might feel familiar to readers after the height of the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and 2021 – if not prophetic, as the author himself has stated in an interview with *Japan Forward* (Furukawa 2022).

In the first passages, Tokyo is already enveloped in a suffocating, murderous heat ("殺人的な熱波", Furukawa 2003: 355), and the natural flow of seasons has been irrevocably disrupted – summer 2009 starts on March 21st in the city:

> 二〇〇九年三月二十一日、東京の夏が始まる。その夏は例年の猛暑とはちがって、東京の秩序のすべてを一瞬に、終わらせる。
> 殺人的な熱波がたけだけしい勢いをふるって、文字どうりの殺人劇をもたらす。
> [中略] 局地的な集中豪雨は都心に頻発していた。互換にじかに攻撃を加える、不快な暑さが已まず生じた。 (Furukawa, 2003: 355)
>
> *On March 21st, 2009, summer started in Tokyo. The heat was unprecedented and brought any idea of 'normal climate' to an end. A murderous heatwave enveloped the city with the strength and violence of a genuine tragedy.*
> *[…] Heavy rains continuously hit the city, making it stuffy and unlivable.*

Due to the relentless heat, electricity and air conditioning systems become essential, both for humans and for the correct functioning of machines in factories and hospitals – but the additional heat generated by air conditioning makes the situation worse, and soon enough the temperature on the ground of Tokyo, mostly covered in tar and cement, reaches the astonishing temperature of 60°C (356). To prevent explosions, citizens start leaving their cars turned on and with cold air at full power even when not in use, adding more and more sources of heat to the already struggling city environment. At the beginning of 'the end', therefore, the crowd appears in the text through the heat trails left by

every single person by using their cars, their air conditioners, their electrical equipment, all now needed for survival:

> そのために自動車は東京の都市部に対して二十四時間の排熱をつづけた。コンジーによる建物の排熱があり、不法移民を含める二千万都民の、人間の排熱もあった。生きて活動すれば人間は当然、熱を発する。(Furukawa 2003: 356)
>
> *So, cars radiated heat in the whole of the urban area of Tokyo at all hours. Then there was the heat coming from the buildings, and finally the heat coming from the twenty million people (including illegal immigrants) that lived in the city, and that by simply going on with their daily life generated more and more warmth.*

By moving around through the boiling streets, the citizens of Tokyo transform into an ebbing wave, a never stopping tide that parallels the 'heatwave' engulfing the city and bringing it on the verge of collapse.

However visible or invisible ("可視" or "不可視" in the original, 357), the changes in the climate are evident, and they bring forth even more dire consequences. Tokyo becomes a 'heat island' – palms start growing in the streets, while tropical mosquitoes arrive through aircrafts landing at Narita airport and invade the urban space, now hot and humid enough to ensure their survival. The swarms of insects and their potential danger are not noticed in time, and outbreaks of malaria, dengue, and other illnesses severely impact the population, triggering extreme responses from both the government and the citizens, including a plan for introducing bio-engineered, virus-resistant mosquitoes in the environment:

> バイオ昆虫に対する不満は、ほとんど漏れて来なかった。生態系に及ぼされるはずの未知の影響は、すでに東京の生態系が未知の怪物化(モンスター)を遂げているためにか、はなから無視された。(Furukawa 2003: 359)
>
> *There was almost no dissent on the use of bio-mosquitoes. The possible and yet unknown side effects on the natural world were ignored, maybe because Tokyo's environment had already transformed in an unfamiliar monster.*

Thus, Tokyo becomes alive, a sentient being that threatens its citizen's survival by becoming a more welcoming home for other species – dethroning humans from their position of superiority over the environment and nature. This

monstrous metropolis takes shape a couple of scenes ahead, where a crowd of people infected with malaria or other deadly tropical diseases escape from hospitals and medical institutions to protest for their human rights in the last days of their life ("残り数日の命だからこそ人権を", 401). Marching through the streets of Tokyo, the crowd of patients represents the full transformation of the city from the beating heart at the core of the country, lively and beaming with activity, to this sick and infected version of itself, overwhelmed by non-human entities and contaminated – still a "center", but on the verge of full collapse.

5.3 A periphery of ruins: Tokyo in *The Emissary* (2014) by Tawada Yōko

The third and last case study is the 2014 novel *The Emissary* (original title 献灯使 *Kentōshi*, translated into English in the same year by Margaret Mitsutani), by Tawada Yōko, written in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster and based on a previous short story, *The Island of Eternal Life* (不死の島 *Fushi no shima*, 2012). In this novel, Japan has been struck by a catastrophic event that remains unnamed throughout the text, but that is hinted to be another nuclear disaster, with 'radiation' and 'mutation' becoming taboo words in this post-apocalyptic society. The response from the government to the emergency is to isolate the country by closing down the borders and by forbidding both keeping in contact with other countries and using foreign words and language in everyday speech. Tawada consciously and clearly hints back to the *sakoku*, the period of forced isolation of Japan that lasted almost three hundred years until the late 1800s, going as far as imagining the old name of the capital, Edo, making a comeback – almost like a common (maybe unconscious) wish to go back to a pre-modern society.

The story is told from the point of view of the two main characters: Yoshirō, a man over a hundred years old, and Mumei, his frail but incredibly smart great-grandson. As a consequence of the catastrophe that struck the country, in fact, old people seem to have lost their ability to die, while children are born already sick and experience a continuous worsening in their health throughout their whole life, leaving to the elderly most physical labour. This inversion of roles makes it so that old people, who are responsible for causing these extreme living conditions, are forced to take care of their descendants and watch over them as their body keeps deteriorating right in front of their eyes and they become too weak to live.

In this fragile world, the soil and the air are polluted and contaminated, and life in what once was the metropolis of Tokyo is no longer possible. All the neighbourhoods and cities have been abandoned, and lie now as empty skeletons of what once was:

> It had been years since he had been to Shinjuku — what was it like now? Billboards, far too gaudy to be overlooking ruins; traffic lights changing regularly from red to green on streets without a single car; automatic doors opening and closing for nonexistent employees, reacting, perhaps, to big branches on the trees that lined the streets, bending down in the wind. In banquet halls, the smell of cigarettes smoked long ago froze in the silver silence; at table after table in the pubs on each floor of multitenant buildings customers called absence caroused, drinking and eating their fill for a flat fee; with no one to borrow money the interest demanded by loan sharks rusted in its tracks; without buyers, mounds of bargain underwear grew damp and fetid; mold formed on handbags displayed in show windows now flooded with rainwater, and rats took leisurely naps inside high-heeled shoes. From sidewalk cracks stalks of shepherd's purse grew straight up, six feet high. Now that human beings had disappeared from this urban center, the cherry trees that had once stood demurely beside sidewalks, slender as brooms, had grown thicker around the trunk, their branches spreading boldly out in all four directions, their luxuriant green afros swaying gently back and forth in the breeze. (Tawada 2014a: 25-26, trans. Margaret Mitsutani)

Tokyo, no longer a liveable environment for humans, becomes inhabited by all sorts of non-human entities: rats and mould that take possess of human clothing and accessories, cherry trees that are now allowed to stand tall and grow, but also the ghosts of a society that has disappeared – the frozen smoke of cigarettes, the absence of customers. Nature takes back its space inch by inch, and humans relearn to live far away from the crowds and the electrical lights.

The city, once a point of arrival, a destination, a goal to accomplish, has lost its status as the 'center' and is now nothing more than a periphery, a place to leave as soon as possible if one is able to. Once again, Tawada plays with a role reversal: Tokyo, considered the economic core of Japan in real life, becomes a sterile and unprofitable land in fiction, while the countryside of Okinawa, Hokkaidō, and Tōhoku become the new economic and cultural centers of the country, producing fruits and vegetables, and becoming richer and richer. In this dystopian, post-apocalyptic world, the metropolis literally takes on the role of periphery, surrendering its status to real-life ones.

Those who choose to remain in Tokyo – mostly the elderly – continue their struggle against all odds and against an environment that gets progressively more poisonous and threatens to shut them inside their homes, but they are ultimately destined to watch as everything slowly deteriorates, unable to do anything or even just die. Tokyo becomes a wasteland, its once prized real estate now is a burden or even a death sentence for its owners, since prolonged exposure to the pollution that pervades the streets, the soil, the air, and the water can cause "multiple health hazards":

> Yoshiro had to admit it: what he had taught his grandson had been all wrong. He remembered telling the boy, "You can't go wrong with real estate. Get yourself some land in a prime location in the middle of Tokyo and you're fixed for life — its value will never go down," but now that all of Tokyo's twenty-three wards, including prime locations, were designated an "exposure to multiple health hazards from prolonged habitation" area, neither its houses nor its land had any monetary value. […] Yoshiro's wife Marika wasn't the only one to abandon the house and land she had inherited in central Tokyo because she couldn't find a buyer. (Tawada 2014a: 40, trans. Margaret Mitsutani)

At the same time, the idea of the metropolis, of its possibilities, and of the memories attached to it never leaves Yoshirō, who vividly remembers his former life and cannot accept its definite end. This fondness and regret for Tokyo, while reminding us of its now lost prestige and importance, also highlights its downfall, along with all the ideas of future, progress, and technology associated with it – so much that Yoshirō would rather disappear than let go of his past:

> […] just saying "Tokyo" aloud still excited him somehow, bringing back an enthusiasm for the city he couldn't let go of, making the thought of Tokyo disappearing altogether so unbearable he thought he'd just as soon vanish along with it. (Tawada 2014a: 49-50, trans. Margaret Mitsutani)

However, not all hope is lost – the ones who will keep the idea of Tokyo close to their heart and will work for its reconstruction are also the same people who physically cannot die, and that will keep the city alive in their memories. After all, as Tawada herself said in the *Journal of Jours Tremblants*, a collection of short essays written in the days right after the earthquake that caused the nuclear incident at Fukushima, "a city is not the sum of all its houses, a city exists in our heads. That's what makes it possible to rebuild it" (Tawada 2012: 96).

6. Conclusions

This contribution explored how the representation of Tokyo in different dystopian texts published in Japan after the turn of the millennium shifts alternatively between a futuristic center and a lifeless periphery. Furthermore, in all the texts presented as case studies the role of the city is not simply that of a background over which the protagonists move, but also that of a character in its own right. The analysis was approached through the concept of *spatialization* (De Fina 2009; Doloughan 2015) and a close reading of the texts that aimed at observing how the crowd moves through the fictional, dystopian urban space of Tokyo, inspired by Lehan's (1998) view of the crowd as a metonymic representation of the city.

After a short introduction on dystopian narratives and their recently increased popularity, the paper delved first into the theoretical background that informed this approach, and then moved on to drawing a non-exhaustive outline of Tokyo's recent history and its significance and representation in popular media during the postwar period. Specifically, the paragraph focused on the cycle of destruction, reconstruction and change that characterized the metropolis and that is "integral to the narratives of Tokyo in works of the imagination" (Thornbury & Schulz 2018: XIII).

Lastly, three case studies were presented: the manga *Adou* (2020-) by Amano Jaku, and the novels *Soundtrack* (2003, Furukawa Hideo) and *The Emissary* (2014, Tawada Yōko). In the texts, Tokyo is ever present – a sentient, living creature that keeps changing, responding to the struggles that its citizens face in their dystopian world by adapting its cityscape. Yet, the three iterations of the city in the manga and novels imagine a fictional Tokyo that is different every single time, and that can be placed on a continuum ranging from center to periphery: from *Adou*'s bustling and vibrant futuristic city to *The Emissary*'s abandoned ruins, with *Soundtrack*'s overheated and overpopulated metropolis falling in between – still at the center, but on the brink of collapse.

Through these representations of Tokyo in a more or less distant future, the reader is forced to reflect on the ties that the urban space of the city has with its human and inhuman habitants – and on how fragile the balance of the cityscape as an ecosystem is. By extremizing one or more issues that exist in the real-life version of the city, such as pollution, heat, humidity, or a wide gap between the living conditions and opportunities of lower and upper classes, these fictional Tokyos become not only a dystopian backdrop that sets the rhythm of the story, but also a call to action directed to the readers – which is, again, the main task of

dystopian narratives. Finally, if current-day Tokyo makes us "think about what it means to live in cities now" and "question our preconceptions about modernity and about urban life" (Waley 2013: 331), re-imagining Tokyo either as a centre or as a periphery forces us to think about the actual future of our urban spaces – and whether it will include humans or not.

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