

Catastrophilia: A case study of the eco-apocalyptic *Japan Sinks*' mediascape

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Abstract The global entertainment world has recently seen an increase in post-apocalyptic products, clearly reflecting a public demand for catastrophe-related narratives. This 'catastrophilia' finds a relevant example in the dystopian works by Komatsu Sakyō, one of Japan's most celebrated science fiction authors, beginning with the first novel *Nihon chinbotsu* (1973). Having become a transmedia product thanks to film, manga, and anime adaptations, the story portrays a fictional version of "The Big One" able to sink the entire Japanese archipelago in an unknown future. What is the reason behind such success? By adopting an interdisciplinary perspective intertwining psychological, philosophical and media studies, this paper examines the popularity achieved by *Japan Sinks* and its mediascape to unveil the addiction to the apocalyptic narratives that goes beyond the ecotopic purpose of re-establishing a symbiotic contact between humans and the environment. Instead, it results from a pathological desire for violence and death and an atavistic tendency for morbid curiosity.

Keywords eco-apocalypse; dystopian narrative; catastrophilia; morbid curiosity

1. Introduction

Contemporaneity is characterized by a 'rarefaction of the present': an atmosphere of uncertainty and instability dominated by non-linear, non-binary but fluid and ever-changing values, trends and identities. The Covid-19 pandemic worsened the instability of this precarious time by fomenting a distrust of others and the disruption of social bonds. From a broader perspective, collective sociophobia has also led to fractured selves and identity distress.

This unsteady time has played a pivotal role in various artistic representations. The global entertainment world has been increasingly fascinated by dystopian and post-apocalyptic scenarios, reflecting public concerns for climate change and the anthropogenic causes of environmental

disruption, from nuclear annihilation to widespread diseases. Hence, the dystopian paradigm has turned into a narratological stratagem to denounce and investigate the reasons beyond the sociological crisis of the present and its multiple features.

This research investigates the reasons behind the incredible media success of the dystopian genre, with a particular exploration of the terms of its inter- and trans-mediality. As a case study, the study explores the novel by Komatsu Sakyō's, *Japan Sinks*, and its 'mediascape' as conceived by Appadurai (1990: 9). The term highlights a vital aspect of globalization in the entertainment industry, consisting in adaptations and the remaking and transpositions into a multimedia franchise that involves literature, comics and graphic novels, movies, animation and theatrical representations.¹

The original title, *Nihon chinbotsu* 『日本沈没』, sometimes read as *Nippon chinbotsu*, is an example of this sort, first published in 1973 by Komatsu Sakyō and then subject to mediations and transpositions up to the present day. The original story of *Japan Sinks* portrays a typical topos of the genre: a fictional version of "The Big One" which causes the slow sinking of the entire Japanese archipelago in an unknown, dystopian future. This apocalyptic event sets in motion the quest for survival by the protagonists. The first novel describes the struggles of scientists and politicians, portraying post-war Japan dealing with the effects of the 1964 Tōkyō Olympics and the 1973 Oil Crisis. By setting up the collapse of the Japanese country in a global dimension, the author reflects on Japanese identity and its encounter with the foreigner, questioning the socio-political perspectives of domesticity versus internationality, centrality versus periphery, diaspora and social fragmentation. Its predicting quality is prescient in the depiction of socio-political responses to great disaster to the point of constituting a model for other SCI-FI productions. The narrative advances a meaning-making reflection on the present day by

¹ Some of these theatrical spectacles were performed abroad: West Germany (in 1974), Brazil, the United States, Canada, France, Sweden, Spain (in 1975), Finland (in 1976), and Portugal (in 1981). See "Submersion of Japan" in Wikizilla, https://wikizilla.org/wiki/Submersion_of_Japan, (last access on 5/1/2024). Although the source could not be traced back due to a lack of archive, the same site reports that even the official newspaper of the Italian Communist Party, *L'Unità*, featured a mention of the "Submersion of Japan" (title in English) in the issue of 1975, page 7: "La prospettiva di un Giappone sommerso dall'oceano infuriato è descritta con ampiezza di mezzi in un nuovo film di fantascienza giapponese, intitolato, nella versione inglese, *Submersion of Japan*."

postulating and representing futable post-apocalyptic scenarios (Posadas 2023: 115).

This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach through which it attempts to explain the multifactorial etiology beyond human ‘catastrophilia’ and the demand for the ‘delightful horror’ (Burke 2015 [1756]: 139) that denotes the present day. After a theoretical framework of a philosophical nature, the study explores various psychological theories which validate the human need for catastrophe-related productions. The analysis focuses on the so-called ‘morbid curiosity’, a psychological hypothesis that postulates neurological reasons beyond catastrophe-addicted behaviours. In doing so, the attention is turned to the artistic representability of disasters, which mainly relies on a dystopian paradigm: CLI-FI (climate fiction) related to ecotopian (or eco-dystopian) and eco-apocalyptic narratives, as well as post-apocalyptic discourse concerned with hegemonic political power such as totalitarianism. The reception study approach is relevant in understanding how the quest for the transmediality of dystopian works responds to the demand for the ‘delightful horror’. The final aim is to demonstrate how ‘catastrophilia’, in the form of the psychopathological manifestation of ‘morbid curiosity’, plays a leading role in the success of the dystopia-related mediascape, revealing the symptom of insecurity and social disruption of the contemporary era.

2. A Philosophical Framework for ‘Catastrophilia’

By the term ‘catastrophilia’, Dieter Roelstraete postulated

the voyeuristic (or, in the technical jargon of psychoanalysis, scopophilic) impulse, clearly given in the human animal, to marvel at and thus, consciously or not, to aestheticise the spectacle (whatever man-made or not) of human suffering. (Roelstraete 2007: 8)

The concept, now part of the urban dictionary, echoes the philosophical inquiry on the sublime associated with astonishment when confronted with the overwhelming imagery of natural disasters, war scenarios or catastrophic hazards. The idea belongs to the field of aesthetics and refers to the quality of magnificence - whether physical, intellectual, spiritual, or artistic – of an object, its greatness considered beyond all possibility of measurement or imitation. The term first appeared in a rhetorical treatise by Longinus (1st century? [2013]), an ancient Greek literary critic. European scholars then implemented it to debate the concept of beauty.

Among others, German philosopher Immanuel Kant also reflected on the topic by observing the difference between *das Erhabene* (the sublime), and *das Schöne* (the beauty; 1764 [1996]: 80-81). In facing extraordinary forces of nature or man-made catastrophes, human beings perceive concurrent feelings of attraction and repulsion, which cannot be described as pleasure but as wonder and alarm. The ‘mathematical sublime’ by Kant defined the aesthetic evaluation of its grandiosity. The consciousness of human limitations and insufficiency in the face of certain events and the sadness associated with feeling powerless determines a sense of amazement and awe (Menegoni 2015: 89). Conversely, the term ‘dynamically sublime’ translates what Kant referred to *das Macht*. This power dynamically enables the perception of awe and reverence (Menegoni 2015: 94).

Around the same time, the British philosopher Edmund Burke likewise meditated on the topic, publishing one of the most influential works on the theme, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756). According to the author, a source of the sublime is a terrible object or something that operates analogously to terror. This feeling should not be addressed as pleasure but as delight or, to borrow Burke’s words, ‘delightful horror’. The feeling emerges from the desire for self-preservation and is extremely strong and ever-present in humans. According to Burke, its highest level is astonishment, while its direct subordinates are awe, reverence and respect (Burke 2015 [1756]: 139). The ‘delightful horror’, which fascinates and simultaneously terrorizes the observer, has to do with survival, as the feeling of astonishment remains unaltered as long as the sublime object is not close enough to represent an actual threat to the individual. The danger must be tangible but distant; it must never become a physical wound. It is not a near-death experience but rather the feeling of the proximity to death.²

According to Burke, sublimity is intrinsically connected to the terrible uncertainty of the things described (2015 [1756]). The present time is fertile ground for the perception of sublimity, especially considering the insecurity and uncertainty that permeates everyday life. Thus, the need for catastrophe-related discourse in the entertainment field, through which the audience can fulfill the need for terrific imagery without being touched by a material tragedy.

² A near-death experience overwhelms the victim with a terror of dying, often resulting in the symptomatic spectrum of PTSD. On the contrary, sublimity is performed by perceiving the proximity of death while being sure of one’s safety.

Representing catastrophe through literature, movies, and artworks equals a safe lens the individual can wear at their convenience.

Therefore, the concept of the sublime, specifically the ‘delightful horror’ described by Burke, identifies the roots behind an interest, not necessarily morbid or obsessive, in cataclysms and tragedies. This philosophical approach also underlines how this tendency, common to all humankind, is intrinsically linked to survival. However, it emphasises its negative aspects: being powerless, fragile, and defenceless in the face of overwhelming events. If at the basis of this attraction for catastrophe – hence the term ‘catastrophilia’ – there is a natural feeling of awe and admiration, in the psychological field these emotions are reframed as a curiosity for the unknown, the driving force behind the preservation of the species.

The following paragraphs explore the atavistic character of ‘catastrophilia’ from a psychological perspective, introducing the concept of ‘morbid curiosity’ and its relevance in the success of post-apocalyptic productions. The case study of *Japan Sinks* is then presented to offer examples of how ‘morbid curiosity’ effectively works among spectatorship.

3. ‘Morbid Curiosity’ and Audience Participatory Agency

‘Morbid curiosity’ may be defined as a “psychological attraction for entertainment violence” (Cox & Levine 2020: 43). Although it may appear as a mere syncretic version of perversion, voyeurism, fetishism, masochism, and sadism, ‘morbid curiosity’ involves temporary substitutive satisfactions through the return of the repressed object.³ This gratification is often referred to by the term ‘hedonic’ in media psychology, and it describes the pleasurable experiences media offers the audience (Evans 2020: 89). Generally speaking, ‘morbid curiosity’ is not considered to be against moral decency because it serves psychological functioning and well-being. Indeed, according to a cognitive perspective, the demand for catastrophe-related imagery resides in the need to learn how to respond correctly, overshadowing the entertaining quality of the apocalyptic description, however visually stimulating.

Since ‘morbid curiosity’ advocates for voluntary exposition to violence, it may be linked to ‘apocaholism’, a concept derived from Gary Alexander’s

³ According to Freud, “it denotes the process by which certain thoughts or memories are expelled from consciousness and confined to the unconscious”. See *Encyclopedia of Psychoanalysis*, <https://nosubject.com/Repression> (last access on 27/7/2023).

article entitled *Apocaholics Anonymous*, where the American writer reflects on how the interest towards gruesome images, horrific news, and frightful situations contributes to a pessimistic vision of life (Justin 2010).⁴

The recent massive use of social media to denounce criminal acts or give real-time accounts of natural disasters, environmental catastrophes, and war situations has raised public awareness of concrete social activism initiatives.⁵ At the same time, however, it has caused massive media exposure to violent, terrifying, sometimes exaggeratedly explicit images. The absence of filters and sweetened or properly selected content as in the case of the old communication systems, radio and television *in primis*, has generated two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, overexposure to such information has done nothing but exponentially increase the audience's curiosity, tickling its hunger for horror-related media products even more. This desire, as shown by the psychoclinical studies commented on here, subtends the need for self-preservation: the more one increases one's cognitive baggage in relation to danger and threat, the more one has strategies for dealing with it. On the other hand, such massive exposure has caused a kind of emotional dulling, an apparent state of numbness that goes by the name of 'disaster fatigue', hereon explored.

Recent neuroscientific studies on brain functioning have proven 'morbid curiosity' as a conflict state. The object of interest of 'morbid curiosity' is not the outcome (death) but rather the pathway to it. Hence, it can be defined as a multi-factored construct; at its core there is sensation seeking (Scrivner 2021: 2). People are moved by the need to collect information, an atavistic gesture nurtured by the instinct for survival. Notwithstanding, the nature of that information remains obscure for individuals until they acknowledge it (Oosterwijk et al. 2020: 2). Exposure to aberrant images would thus not result from a masochistic pursuit of human suffering and pain. On the contrary, it would be an attempt to domesticate synapses to problem-solving skills capable of coping with disaster impacts resiliently.

What is at stake here is the so-called 'reward circuitry' provoked by novel, rare, not normative or challenging information for the individual: the curiosity they arouse triggers the subject and becomes a source of pleasure even though it may jeopardize the individual's safety (Oosterwijk et al. 2020: 2). It is not

⁴ For the record, another source attributes the paternity of the term to the biologist Peter Kareiva. See UCLA (n.d.).

⁵ 'Participatory journalism' stresses a particular aspect of citizen active participation in reporting news stories. See Bowman & Willis (2003).

merely the dopamine effect resulting from a roller coaster ride; both reward circuitry and curiosity are at the foundations of human survival. Brain regions associated with reward involve an appraisal process, its psychological functioning including 'liking' and 'wanting'. Simultaneously, curiosity provides information to improve decision-making practices. Oosterwijk and colleagues have proven that neuronal brain connections gain more information in the negative choice condition than in the positive one, which is reflected in a stronger activation of reward circuitry (2020: 6). The demonstration that engaging in negative stimuli supports extrinsic incentives is proof that 'morbid curiosity' is not merely a gruesome addiction, but rather, an ontological need that guarantees human survival by resolving uncertainty.

The subjectivity of personality traits represents a variable in the trend for 'morbid curiosity.' For this reason, in 1986, Zuckerman and Litle developed the Curiosity About Morbid Events (CAME) scale to evaluate an individual's need for novel stimulation and arousal. Literature has demonstrated a positive relationship between personality traits and sensation seeking, mainly curiosity for aversive stimuli with an uncertain outcome. A state of vigilance or anxiety represents an adaptive mechanism to preserve the organism's homeostasis. Notwithstanding, over-anxious individuals or those within a constant state of hyperarousal and fragile emotional sensitivity risk exacerbating this character trait through repeated exposure to violent media content.

Data also demonstrates there is a difference between the negative social category involving harm in a social context (which illustrates a higher level of semantic or narrative complexity) and the negative physical category disclosing graphical portrayals of dead bodies (Oosterwijk 2017: 2). The findings thus reveal a link between negative stimuli and avoidance motivation (Oosterwijk 2017: 9). The exposition to violent imagery and the tendency to show 'morbid curiosity' functions as a *memento mori* which offers psychological and social benefits in terms of gaining resilient, adaptive skills: "the exploration of negative social information helps an individual to acquire and encode important knowledge about the social environment" (Oosterwijk 2017: 11).

In the past decades, mourning rituals were frequent, and people were familiarized with death in daily life. 'Morbid curiosity' thus supplied the need for mass grief. It is not indicative of deviancy but an adaptive trait with an educational purpose since threat can also enhance the propagation of information (Scrivner 2021: 2). The more dangerous the impending phenomenon, the more curious people become to gather information and avoid the adverse outcomes.

Nevertheless, recent times have witnessed the reverse side of the coin. In the past few decades, the market has become so saturated with post-apocalyptic imagery to raise doubts regarding the efficacy of those entertaining products in inspiring activism and civic agency. If the products are created to raise awareness by sensitizing public opinion, overproduction risks trivializing and banalizing their purpose. In this regard, Marinelli talks about the “depletion of transmedia logic” (2022: 35). Thus, according to some critics, the widespread eco-anxiety has been suffocated by the overabundance of information on the topic; its spectacularization has resonated as a repeated alarm and has lost effectiveness. Accordingly, Cox and Levine argued that this catastrophe-addicted tendency makes one lose sight of the remarkable repercussions of anthropogenic interventions in life. Apart from the cognitive interest in the representation of catastrophe and the entertainment it induces, what results may be a sense of disaster ennui generated by a lack of concern about disaster’s aftermath and recovery (2020: 46). This ‘disaster fatigue’ echoes the psychopathological label of ‘compassion fatigue’ which is addressed to the emotional commitment required to the therapist (or to other support personnel) and that can assume a dysphoric character, with behavioural and symptomatic fluctuations (De Pieri 2021: 28-29). In other words, ‘disaster fatigue’ manifests in the emotional saturation of the individual overwhelmed by disaster-related news or products. Again, although the Anthropocene demands collective responsibility, the pervasiveness of apocalypse-related discourse would lead to the individuals’ desensitization on the topic.

Controversy aside, practice shows that the spectatorship feels involved in the narrative, providing ground to express often incommunicable emotions. In this sense, audience engagement is performed in the twofold aspects defined by Evans (2020: 35). On the one hand, the receptive attitude finds its fulfilment in catastrophe-related works; while, on the other, an interactive behaviour which claims bottom-up agency, especially concerning climate change and the implementation of nuclear energy. ‘Morbid curiosity’ would thus serve as a cathartic, expiatory act. Raising public awareness towards sensitive issues through abreaction may lead to the individual and social agency in the public sphere through individualized, small-scale actions with a therapeutic character (Hammond & Ortega-Breton 2016: 110).

Moreover, general definitions of engagement neglect the circulation of fan-related productions inspired by the original work. Fan fiction, video making, and sharing content (ideas, commentary, webisodes) on social media concur to term the ‘peritextual engagement’ (Evans 2020: 54), a phenomenon by which

stakeholders exploit popularity indexes to wisely target marketing policies. This trend reveals another aspect of transmedia potential: the so-called ‘prosuming skills’ (Toffler, as qtd. by Scolari 2019: 326), a concept that simultaneously addresses pro-ductivity and con-suming attitudes. The adjective ‘prosuming’ acknowledges a new tendency in artistic production: the co-working of authors and users based on creative engagement on individual and collective levels, which gives birth to a form of imaginative reification.

The case study of *Japan Sinks*’ mediascape presented here, well performed the ‘morbid curiosity’ trait expressed by public engagement in demand for the revival of the original story by Komatsu Sakyō with a transmedia perspective.

4. The eco-apocalyptic mediascape of *Japan Sinks*

Malvestio defines eco-dystopia as a genre that “merges the catastrophic imagery of the post-apocalyptic tradition and the consequential mode of dystopia” (2022: 26). Subsequently, this study adopts the term ‘eco-apocalypse’ to refer to the *Japan Sinks*’ mediascape. The predictive speculation of dystopia is implicit, while the term emphasizes not only the natural disaster dimension of the original novel but also the breakdown of the civic institutions it portrays, along with the social repercussions exploited in the overturn of family configurations.

This paragraph aims to explore the *Japan Sinks*’ mediascape to highlight how this dystopian SCI-FI product's inter- and trans-media nature resulted from the demand from an explicit audience, in turn, tickled by the psychological construct of ‘morbid curiosity’. The focus will, therefore, be on the reception dynamics of *Japan Sinks*’ Franchising⁶ rather than the analogies and differences that transposition, reworking, and adaptation invariably entail.

The description of contemporaneity as a ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman 2000) was particularly tailored for Japan during the 1990s and 2000s when postmodern society started to show signs of alienated subjectivities. The lifestyle suddenly changed, now characterized by a fast-paced, agitated, restless routine; it became what Paul Virilio and Edward O’Neill termed ‘social dromoscopy’ in the urbanistic field (1998).

The subgenre of the *sekai-kei* 世界系 (world-type), which became popular during those decades, sublimated social malaise by focusing on the omission of

⁶ Bill Tsutsui provided a detailed list of *Japan Sinks*’ media, available at <https://www.nctasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/List-of-versions-of-Nihon-Chinbotsu.pdf> (last access on 22/01/2024).

social mediation between individuals and an apocalyptic event on a large-scale (Hack 2020: 202). Japanese SCI-FI has been highly prolific in this sense, embodying in a transmedia production what Susan Sontag called “the imagination of disaster” (Sontag 1965) and reframing the changing of Japanese national identity through the allegorical function of the genre. In particular, the re-evaluation of the interdependent relationship between human beings and the environment promoted by the eco-apocalyptic novels assumes new connotations by the radioactivity contamination of Japanese soil after the double bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as well as the more recent nuclear accident at the Fukushima nuclear power plant. In this sense, eco-apocalyptic production in Japan acquires new importance as a redefinition of self-identity in the ecosystem’s mechanism (Drake 2012: 41). Indeed, according to Goto-Jones, SCI-FI in Japan represents the heritage of the Second World War, performing the apocalyptic nature of its defeat and the hypotheses of the country’s post-war trajectory of resurgence (Goto-Jones 2008: 15).

After the Tōhoku triple disaster in 2011, Komatsu was invited to spend some words on the tragedy, later published as the preface of volume *3.11 no mirai. Nihon SF sōzōryoku* 『3.11の未来。日本のSF創造力』 (Future of 3.11. Imaginative Japanese SF, 2011). The author described himself as “a citizen of an atomic-bombed country, a young boy of the left-party against the atomic army who later became a SF writer” (2011: 2). Komatsu reflected on the 3.11 catastrophe by describing the exceptionality of the event as “unimaginable” (*sōzō dekinakatta*; Komatsu 2011: 2).

Eventually, during the Seventies, long before the success of the *sekai-kei*, Japan was the first to promote the ‘media-mix’ ecology, a way to disseminate artworks by intertwining different media, thus approaching different audience targets (Steinberg 2020: 159). Fidelity and loyalty of the Japanese fandom shaped the Japanese entertainment market to the extent that Collins labelled the phenomenon ‘transmediaphilia’ (Hills 2019: 290).

Japan Sinks is an example of this sort. This science fiction novel was published in two volumes for the first time in 1973 by Komatsu Sakyō 小松左京, pseudonym of Komatsu Minoru (1931-2011). The author has long been considered one of the masters of Japanese SCI-FI together with Abe Kōbō and part of this success can undoubtedly be attributed to the popularity of *Japan Sinks*. Its genesis, under a different title - *Nihon metsubō* 『日本滅亡』 (literally: *Japan downfall*) dates back to the 1964 Tōkyō Olympics as an emblem of recovery in post-war Japan that inspired its serialised publication and, nine years later, its final version. The reception of the work has been very positive by

the audience. The first novel gained the 27th Mystery Writers of Japan Award and the Seiun Award for a Japanese novel-length work selling about 4.7 million copies (The Asahi Shinbun 2020). Apart from the diatribe that saw the award contested because the work is more akin to the SCI-FI genre than the mystery one, the motivation behind this prestigious award concerned the intellectual novelty of *Japan Sinks*, as reflected in some of the comments of the judging panel:

Japan Sinks (by Komatsu Sakyō) has become such a bestseller that it seems strange to be commenting on it now, but an ambitious work on such a large scale will rarely come out. - Tsunoda Kikuo

Komatsu Sakyō's *Japan Sinks* is a wonderful work of art that depicts a world that no one else could have created. - Ikushima Jirō.⁷

Despite the difficulty in finding the first impressions of the public in the 1970s, on the Bookmeter platform,⁸ the readership shares enthusiastic comments about the scientific accuracy of the text, even though this slows down the reading and the subsequent unfolding of the events.

Since its first publication, *Japan Sinks* has inspired adaptations and transpositions into movies, anime and manga, including some remarkable remaking. Its popularity is so widespread that it has also inspired other productions with similar themes, including the famous anime series *Tōkyō Magunichūdo Hachitenzero* 『東京マグニチュード 8.0』 (*Tokyo Magnitude 8.0*, 2009) by Tachibana Masaki.

Although the sequel, written four-handedly with Kōshū Tani and entitled simply *Nihon chinbotsu dainibu* 『日本沈没第二部』 (*Japan Sinks Part Two*), did not obtain the same public acclaim, its release in 2006 is relevant since it questions the dynamics between authorship and readership, revealing the quality of a global intergenerational phenomenon. In this regard, Tanaka observed that while *Japan Sinks Part Two* discloses what happened to Japan after the catastrophe described in the first volume, its unpopularity could reside not in the long period between the two publications, nor in the dubious plot that sees the nation rebuilt on artificial islands. Instead, the reason behind its apparent flop may lie in the collapse of the bubble economy and the resulting

⁷ For the original statements, see <http://www.mystery.or.jp/prize/detail/10271> (last access on 3/01/2024).

⁸ For the original statements, see <https://bookmeter.com/books/575781> (last access on 3/01/2024).

experience of social fragmentation to which the readership had been exposed during those years (Tanaka 2014: 165). Tanaka's hypothesis is interesting because it suggests not only a physiological decline in interest that generally characterizes sequels compared to the original version but also because it represents a true example of what was previously termed 'disaster fatigue.' The stress and anxiety caused by the change in Japan's favourable economic condition from both domestic and international perspectives could have resulted in a decline in audiences no longer interested in the portrayal of a national crisis since it was already taking place, albeit not geological but economic. At the same time, the publication, decades later, of a sequel to *Japan Sinks* is evidence of an interest not limited to the generation coeval with the author but that involved the next generations through a hereditary handover. The failure of *Japan Sinks Part Two* is thus only apparent; in reality it underlies the strong appeal of the work and the excellent marketing campaign able to induce audience loyalty regardless of the readership's age.

According to Napoli, loyalty is one of the main features of public engagement in the transmedia culture, along with attentiveness, appreciation, emotion, recall and attitude (Evans 2020: 5).⁹ Indeed, the publication of *Japan Sinks Part Two*, as well as the multimedia transpositions of the original version, suggest the strong attachment the fandom has nurtured to the story over the decades. Ide Kazuko reflects that a series of volcanic eruptions and earthquakes that hit Japan in 1973 also contributed to the high sales of the novel and to transform the first film adaptation into a box-office hit (Kazuko 2006: 1). Eventually, the first cinematic transposition (translated as *Submersion of Japan* or *Tidal Wave* in English) by film director Moritani Shiro was the highest-grossing film in Japan in 1973 and 1974 and recorded a distribution revenue of over 2.80 billion yen (COMICSMART INC. 2020). The attendance in Japan was estimated at 6.5 million spectators (Schilling 2006). The second live-action film by director Higuchi Shinji became a hit with 5.34 billion yen in revenue at the box office in 2006 (COMICSMART INC. 2020).

In 2013, exactly 40 years after the first publication by Komatsu, the Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst in Wien presented the exhibition *Nippon chinbotsu Japan Sinks. A manga*, introducing *Japan Sinks* as "a mass phenomenon of contemporary culture". The 15-volume manga series

⁹ Evans stressed a significant distinction between 'affect', as an immediate emotional reaction, therefore doomed to disappear, and 'affection', conceived as a long-term relationship between spectatorships and artworks (2020: 85).

by Ishiki Tokihiko (2006), at the core of the exhibition, combined both the original novel and the visual effect of the 2006 movie by director Higuchi, resulting in a product that was not only transmedial but also intertextual. The public opinion shared on the Mecacomic.jp platform gives the idea of a highly topical work (*riaru time sugite*) and, therefore, terrifying (*kowai*).¹⁰

Furthermore, the participatory culture of the audience also played a crucial role in the marketing policy. This can be seen in the fans' approval manifested in fandom through meetings, book clubs,¹¹ and fanmade revivals that have significantly increased the dissemination and success of *Japan Sinks*' mediascape over the years, transcending Japanese borders to establish itself globally. A recent example is the animation series *Japan Sinks 2020*, a Netflix production that represents in all respects a transmedia storytelling work that has allowed Komatsu to land on global telescreens.

As concerns the 'morbid curiosity' related to *Japan Sinks*' mediascape, the success of its franchising and the favourable reaction of the public for all these years constitutes proof of the widespread 'catastrophilia' towards Komatsu's production which has engaged not only the Japanese audience but also global consumers. The reception of literary and film products responds to different market rules and shows a variance in audience reactions directly determined by the medium. Thriller and suspense elicit audience interest, but in disaster films, in particular, the visual representation of protagonists' psychological burden assuages anxiety, satisfying the spectators' 'morbid curiosity' (Cox & Levine 2020: 45). *Japan Sinks*' transpositions into movies by film directors Moritani (1973) and Higuchi (2006) deal with widespread destruction, which visually appeases the catastrophe-addicted public. The 'morbid curiosity' manifests in the 'cinematic unpleasure' of *Japan Sinks*'s mediascape, in other words "the frustration of the pleasure drive, but also the mobilization of a range of 'negative' emotions on the spectator's part, among them discomfort, embarrassment, anger and guilt" (Wheatley 2009: 78).

Conversely, the anime adaptation *Japan Sinks 2020* (Science SARU-Netflix production) also portrays invisible implications of the catastrophe, such as radioactivity contamination, clearly responding to the 11th March triple disaster. Unlike the original novel, *Japan Sinks 2020* is set shortly after the 2020

¹⁰ For the original statements, see <https://mechacomic.jp/books/88856/reviews?sort=helpful> (last access on 3/01/2024).

¹¹ For example, see <https://www.uk.emb-japan.go.jp/JAPANUKEvent/event/2023/202306/12-JS-BookClub-JapanSinks.html> (last access on 28/07/2023).

Tōkyō Olympics, featuring a young female athlete among the protagonists. According to Yaochong Yang, this choice of the chief director, Yuasa Masaaki, broadcasts an alternative narrative compared to government propaganda based on the reconstruction of the disaster areas after March 11. In particular, the critic considered the depiction of the Japanese - neither calm nor relaxed - as a counter-narrative of the mainstream broadcasting news of March 2011 which presented the Japanese people as extremely self-controlled and composed, thus problematizing Japan's total recovery from 3.11 (Yang 2021: 110). As proof, in the introductory section of *Japan Sinks 2020* Official Site, a large quotation in bold captures the readership's attention: "What does Japan mean now?" (*Ima Nihon to wa*) confirming the resolution of the producers to revamp *Japan Sinks*' original story in the light of post-3.11. Incredibly, Yuasa justified the deviation from the original plot with the close familiarization of the audience with the big catastrophe, thus implying the constant exposition of spectatorship to dystopia-related artworks: "After we experienced the 2011 earthquake, the fear is real [...] so I thought I should portray how people think and live in a world where Japan has sunk, instead of taking an omniscient view" (Ohara 2020). The 2020 anime series has the merit to provoke the public's opinion on various issues: multiculturalism and xenophobia (especially towards mixed families) versus Japanese nationalism; the role of misinformation versus disaster preparedness in facing cataclysm; the plague of thievery, sexual assaults and violence which occur with the disruption of institutional security; radiophobia; and the character of spirituality versus sectarian religious proselytism while coping with psychological trauma.

Some of the public comments shared on the Reddit.com platform help to understand which aspects of this latest media transposition tickled the viewers' tension towards the 'delightful horror':

I thoroughly enjoyed it, it was a good representation of human resilience and how love can foster hope [by Kawaii-nani].

I loved it too. It hit an emotional nerve with me that not many shows do. I felt like a Japanese Nationalist watching this [by SkyNightZ].

I also felt like a Japanese Nationalist, and I'm not even Japanese. [...] I do think it's amazing! I binge watched the entire series. [...] If anything, the show felt like it portrayed very realistically what happens when part of the world is hit by devastating catastrophes and that was very scary and overwhelming to watch, but at the same time it feels so important [by insecuredane].

I loved it, absolutely fantastic. I'm kinda disappointed some people are saying it was bad because they felt rushed or the deaths didn't feel important enough. That's what made it so much more sad, the deaths are meaningless and yet they had to keep moving on otherwise they could die too. I definitely received a few arrows to the feels [by tjsh52].¹²

While *Japan Sinks 2020* seems to have adequately responded to the need for concrete examples of resilience and adaptability in the face of an epochal catastrophe befalling Japan, the sense of empathy it stimulates may generate, in extreme cases, a revival of Japanese nationalism. It is unsurprising considering that in dealing with the triple catastrophe of 11 March, political slogans calling for national unity strongly encouraged a sense of cohesion in Japanese society. Notwithstanding, while overly explicit or gruesome scenes respond to the need for spectacularization, they also fail in rendering human losses 'meaningless'. It is no coincidence that the Common Sense Media site discourages the viewing of anime to children:

It's good but I believe that this show is appropriate for 13+ because it does have too much sexual stuff violence etc.. But it can easily traumatize a child or a teen emotionally [by Adeday].¹³

Indeed, *Japan Sinks 2020* anime magnifies the scenes of violent and often unnecessary death, while protagonists remain almost imperturbable in mourning family and close friends, only to disclose true feelings in the final episodes.

For these reasons, a forum discussion on Reddit.com entitled *Japan Sinks: 2020, the biggest disappointment of the year*, reveals the hostile product reception in terms of the emotionlessness of the characters, annoying and dense shocking scenes, and awkward dialogues. This may suggest that the director's main intention was to create a sensationalist product to entertain the masses rather than maintain the sense of realism that characterised the original work.¹⁴

¹² For example, see https://www.reddit.com/r/anime/comments/hon1tk/japan_sinks_2020_discussion/ (last access on 4/01/2024). No information on the user's profile specifies the nationality of the commentator, which would have been interesting to investigate.

¹³ For the original statements, see <https://www.common sense media.org/tv-reviews/japan-sinks-2020> (last access 4/01/2024).

¹⁴ For the original statements, see https://www.reddit.com/r/anime/comments/hog18m/japan_sinks_2020_the_biggest_disappointment_of/ (last access on 4/01/2024).

The exacerbation of drama results in the desensitization of the spectators: audiences focus on the cruelty dimension rather than on the pathos and empathy, which bereavement usually implies (Moronato 2020).

In 2021, Netflix collaborated again with TBS for a ten-episode drama series entitled *Nihon chinbotsu: kibō no hito* 『日本沈没—希望のひと』 (*Japan Sinks: People of Hope*) featuring the actor Oguri Shun. Although freely arranged in a modern key, it was favourably received by the audience and ranked 76% favourably among Google users. This TV show has been considered the fourth-best proposal for Japanese film production on Netflix in May 2023 (Egan 2023), thus attesting that the escalation of *Japan Sinks*' mediascape is far from coming to a halt. In this sense, the proposed case study embodies the definition of 'transmedia storytelling' as conceived by Jenkins: a strategy to integrate a myriad of texts into a narrative no longer limited to a single medium (Jenkins 2006: 95). The drama also had the merit of intriguing the younger generation about the original work: it was captivating enough to solicit the reading of the novel. On the Bookmeter platform,¹⁵ many users commented that they have decided to read *Japan Sinks* following the success of the TV screen adaptation, frequently labelling it as a *panikku shōsetsu* 「パニック小説」 (literally, 'panic novel'). The term denotes novels focusing on climate change, pandemics, and accidental catastrophes that turn everyday life into a crisis (*nichijō kara hinichijō* 日常から"非"日常).¹⁶ Although this broad definition does not necessarily determine the emergence of a new sub-genre within the broader umbrella term of SCI-FI, detecting this new trend is crucial as it sheds light on the interests of the public: amateur sites such as Tree-novel¹⁷ or Book Off Online Koramu¹⁸ suggest lists of the best *panikku shōsetsu* to interested users, among which *Japan Sinks* is always present. On the Filmmarks platform, among the most frequent comments, besides the unparalleled acting talent of the first actor, is the intense realism that made the adaptation perhaps

¹⁵ For the original statements, see <https://bookmeter.com/books/575781> (last access on 3/01/2024).

¹⁶ For the original description, see <https://www.netoff.co.jp/tag/?tagid=14461> (last access on 22/01/2024).

¹⁷ For example, see <https://tree-novel.com/works/episode/522b45a303ba23df57fef6ea2545f265.html> (last access on 22/01/2024).

¹⁸ For example, see <http://pro.bookoffonline.co.jp/hon-deai/syousetsu-theme/20190208-panic-osusume.html> (last access on 22/01/2024).

less entertaining but more truthful.¹⁹ This is in line with the original version of the novel, which was appreciated precisely for its detailed use of scientific elements to contribute to the realism of the story and, therefore, reveals the director's specific interest in maintaining the original appeal of *Japan Sinks*. In this sense, it seems that Netflix's *Japan Sinks* has succeeded in giving relevance to the scientific interest that characterised Komatsu Sakyō's original novel, even though the idea that Japan could sink because of such a devastating earthquake is as absurd as it is impossible.

5. Conclusion

Indeed, disaster-related topics found in Japan's broad artistic representation since 18.5% of earthquakes in the world occur in this quake-prone nation (Martin 2019). According to the Governmental Report issued in 2013, there is a 70% chance of a magnitude seven earthquake striking the Tōkyō area in the next 30 years, killing almost 23,000 people and causing damage of up to 95 trillion yen (Chūou bōsai kaigi 2013). Japanese people have thus been defined as '*hinan shakai*' 避難社会 (evacuation society; Akihito 2020) regarding the constant climate of insecurity and precariousness that obliges residents to be ready at all times in case of evacuation. In its multifaceted sub-genres of eco-apocalypse, dystopia, ecotopian fiction, just to name a few, science fiction predicts futurity with a focus on human behaviour. As Harvey observed,

[t]he dominance of science fiction and fantasy genres in the realm of transmedia storytelling can be attributed to a number of reasons. While arguably these genres attract the kinds of audiences interested in seeking out new material, these genres come with "in-built" solutions to the fuzziness that can arise when storyworlds spread across multiple media forms. Such solutions are not necessarily open to more mimetic, realistic genres. The supremacy of fantastical genres might also be attributable to the merchandising power of these kinds of storyworlds [...], but also to the kinds of world-building involved in constructing such storyworlds, and the concomitant pleasures such world-building offers fan bases (2019: 163).

The catastrophe-related production offers social commentary for the contemporary era, enabling disaster preparedness skills and resilient problem-

¹⁹ For the original statements, see <https://filmarks.com/animes/1280/1707> (last access on 4/01/2024).

solving expertise, which solicits a sublime fascination with psychological suffering, especially when coping with environmental destruction (Hammond & Ortega-Breton 2016: 112).

The case study of *Japan Sinks*' mediascape has proven that Japan, as the "earthquake capital of the world" (Martin 2021), is fertile ground not only for speculative fiction experimentations but also for implementing a broader perspective of media entertainment, engaging authorship and readership in the artistic production simultaneously. In this sense, the mediascape of *Japan Sinks* is an excellent example of transmediality, conceived as an immersive and paratextual space that mimics real life (Freeman & Gambarato 2019: 8-9). Future scenarios can only see an intensification of the co-participation - the 'prosuming skills' identified by Toffler - of spectatorship in artistic production, as the massive interference of social media and artificial intelligence into everyday domestic reality shows no sign of slowdown.

The results of transmedia studies are effective in understanding the dynamics of the mediascape by underlining the culture-specific characteristic of media consumption. In this sense, 'catastrophilia' is an emerging trend that media circulation captures and rearranges in symbols and codes that impose multiple visions of reality (Bertotto 2019). This study strengthens how 'morbid curiosity' cannot be limited to Thanatos, the Freudian *Todestrieb* (death drive), since its enticement is stimulated by an atavistic need to learn how to cope with the harmful environment to survive. It is always a matter of representability: in the case of eco-apocalyptic works, although catastrophe plays the leading role, the description of the restoration of the status quo is at stake and often goes hand in hand with the reconstruction of self- and collective identity (Kakoudaki 2002: 113). In other words, spectatorship is not looking for the disaster itself but for the resiliency implied in the recovery process, which turns out to be an efficacious metaphor for facing everyday troubles. In this regard, 'catastrophilia' may contribute to engaging individuals in the participatory culture, prompting collective agency in dealing with social issues like anthropogenic involvement in disasters:

Fictional disaster narratives, including much of Komatsu's own writing, can therefore be understood as one part of this broader media ecology whose function is the premeditation of affect via the visual spectacle. (Posadas 2023: 116)²⁰

'Morbid curiosity' and transmediality are the results of the insecure, ever-changing reality that global society is experiencing nowadays. The boundaries

²⁰ Leonzi proposed the alternative term 'transmedial ecosystem' (2022:11).

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