

# Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan

*A Transdisciplinary Perspective*

*Edited by*

*Katarzyna J. Cwiertka and Ewa Machotka*

Amsterdam University Press

Cover illustration: ???

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Typesetting: Crius Group, Hulshout

Amsterdam University Press English-language titles are distributed in the US and Canada by the University of Chicago Press.

ISBN 978 94 6298 063 1

e-ISBN 978 90 4853 002 1 (pdf)

DOI 10.5117/9789462980631

NUR 630



Creative Commons License CC BY NC ND (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0>)

© All authors / Amsterdam University Press B.V., Amsterdam 2017

Some rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, any part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise).

# The Metamorphosis of Excess

'Rubbish Houses' and the Imagined Trajectory of Things in Post-Bubble Japan

*Fabio Gygi*

## Abstract

This chapter looks at the ways in which the 'rubbish house' (*gomi yashiki*) emerged in Japan as a socially recognized phenomenon in the years after the collapse of the bubble economy. Rather than understanding it as a local variation of hoarding, the aim is to locate the *gomi yashiki* as a phenomenon related to consumption at the intersection of two distinct regimes of value: the bubble years of overconsumption in the 1980s and the years of economic stagnation in the 1990s. The rubbish house can be conceptualized as a place of stagnation, from where things can always return. Uncomfortably straddling the gap between discourses on wastefulness (*mottainai*) and self-enhancing consumerism, it becomes a manifestation of the ambiguity of value itself.

**Keywords:** 'rubbish houses' (*gomi yashiki*), hoarding, circulation of goods, consumption, rubbish disposal, recycling

## Introduction

What happens to things that are consumed? 'To consume' is derived from the Latin *consumere*, meaning 'altogether' (*con-*) 'taking up' (*sumere*). In Japanese, the word *shōhi* is created by combining the Chinese character for 'cancelling, erasing' (*kesu*) with the character for 'to spend/squander' (*tsuiyasu*). In other words, consumption is a disappearing act – except that it is not. The ideal object of consumption is that which uses itself up in the process of being consumed. Food and drink are close to this ideal of disappearing by being transformed into something else (sustenance, energy, merriment), but even they come in packages that remain behind, an accursed share. The problem is exacerbated when considering so-called consumer durables. These are also consumed, but this process extends far beyond the human lifespan and, more importantly, far beyond the cultural and social utility of a commodity. Their time is out of joint with

the faster-moving development of new and improved goods. The challenge every consumer society faces, then, is to render absent that which has been consumed but remains as material excess.

This essay examines what happens when excess refuses to disappear, when the imaginary trajectory of things that leads from production to consumption to waste is interrupted and redirected. More specifically, it looks at a phenomenon called *gomi yashiki* (rubbish houses), whose prominence in the Japanese mass media overlaps in significant ways with the onset of what is now referred to as the 'post-bubble' period. It is my contention that the trope of the rubbish house crystallizes anxieties about consumption, ownership, and the value of things at a point in time where value itself has become unstable.

The notion that things acquire meaning and value not just from the way they are produced, but also from the way they are exchanged and consumed, is one of anthropology's key contributions to the study of material culture (Mauss 1990 [1925]). In a critique of Marx's notion of the commodity, Appadurai (1986) points out that being a commodity is something that happens to a thing (rather than being an essential property of it, as Marx has it when defining commodities as 'congealed labour'). Objects are in motion, they move along trajectories and can be alienated as commodities or appropriated as personal possessions as they mediate social relationships through a range of networks. It is more difficult, however, to understand waste and refuse in these terms. If commodities are said to have social lives, can we also say that they die, or is this taking the evocative metaphor of biography (Kopytoff 1986) too far? Is 'being rubbish' just another reversible state or condition a thing can find itself in, and is the movement of a commodity therefore 'reversible and nonlinear, without beginning or end [...] as the metaphor of a circuit implies' (R. Foster 2006: 289)? Or do we need to conceive of a non-reversible process of transformation by destruction, a one-way trajectory so to speak? Kopytoff's example of the hut of the Suku of Zaire seems to suggest that dissolution is a kind of death (1986: 67), while recent geographical scholarship emphasizes waste as a commodity in ongoing processes of recycling and transformation (Moore 2012; Herod et al. 2013). Either way, the trajectory of things is both an empirical fact – in that material objects move in time and space – and a product of the imagination through which things are made meaningful in different cultural contexts (Appadurai 1990).

The empirical and the imaginary do not always fit together seamlessly. I shall argue that what renders objects dynamic, transformative, and sometimes unpredictable, is the fact that meaning and matter – usually

thought of as two aspects of the same entity – can be out of joint, creating friction and agency that goes beyond the model of discrete stages. This is not only a question of materiality (Gregson and Crang 2010) but also one of temporality, for different dimensions of meanings may survive radical material transformations and vice versa: materiality can outlive meaning and utility. In other words, the imagined and the empirical trajectory of things can contradict and destabilize our notion of thinghood and render objects uncanny.

The trope of the *gomi yashiki* brings the material and the imaginary into uncomfortable proximity; it connects what is normally thought of as separate categories: possessions, waste, individuals, institutions, and the promise and nightmare of consumption. It uneasily straddles the pursuit of the new in the late 1980s with the emerging concern with recycling and reuse in the early 1990s. It becomes a salient metaphor, precisely at the moment when we ask: 'Where do things go?' This essay aims to trace these connections, from the emergence of the *gomi yashiki* as a media phenomenon to the shifts in consumption and understandings of value that it embodies to the ways it is represented in literature.

### **Attack of the rubbish aunt!**

On 11 November 1993, the women's weekly *Josei Seibun* published an unsigned article called 'The woman who takes home other people's rubbish: She strikes again this morning!' The three-page article had a second headline reading: 'A crisis that puts pressure on the Owada family!?' The Owadas referred to in the article are the parents of crown princess Masako, who is married to the successor to the Chrysanthemum throne, crown prince Naruhito. The article starts as follows:

*Morning at the corner of a high-class residential area in the A ward of Tokyo. Salarymen, Office Ladies and students hurry to the closest private railway station. Amongst them are also those who carry plastic bags to the rubbish collection site along the street. Picking their way through these people are of course the housewives who come out briskly to throw away their rubbish. This familiar morning view one can see everywhere is contradicted by one elderly woman. Wearing a green cardigan, a grey skirt and white sneakers in the style of an 'active auntie', she appears at this street corner too this morning. This older lady, upon arriving at the rubbish collection site, opens the thrown-away rubbish bags and peers inside. Then she takes something*

*out and puts it into another rubbish bag. This she does for approximately 10 minutes. As soon as she grabs the two rubbish bags that seem to contain what she has chosen, she carries them home with surprising speed [italics in original].*<sup>1</sup>

As this is the first report that frames a concern with the accumulation of domestic refuse, which subsequently served as a template for many others, it bears examining more closely. The article starts out with an evocation of the quotidian that defines urban and suburban landscapes in Japan: streams of people and things moving at a prescribed time on prescribed trajectories in the same direction. Subverting this flow is the figure of the elderly woman who reverses and redirects the current of certain things towards her house. This contrast is further developed by the description of her decrepit, old house overflowing with rubbish that stands amidst the middle- and upper-class residential mansions, dramatically building up to the vicinity of members of the imperial family. The relatives of the imperial family are mentioned to add a scandalous dimension to the woman's actions and to situate the article more comfortably in a magazine whose main staple is celebrity gossip, fashion, and scandal. But it is not only the proximity of these two worlds that is threatening. The article goes on to describe a very concrete fear: that the woman would extend her range of scavenging and eventually reach the rubbish of the Owada house. Although this is not elaborated on further, the sense of unease is palpable. As in many examples of sympathetic witchcraft in anthropological literature, there is something deeply disturbing about such a material connection between two different social worlds, a connection, furthermore, through which the lower world could create a direct association with, and thus some kind of control over, the higher world, against its will. What is ambiguous here is the ownership of discarded things and to what degree they still belong to persons, or persons to them. In short: how material objects mediate knowledge and relationships of, to, and with persons.

Inspired by the article in *Josei Seibun*, the underground manga artist Nemoto Takashi (1994) wrote an article titled 'Gomi no daibutsu no maki' (Rubbish Buddha) for his idiosyncratic column 'Nemoto Takashi no jinsei kaidoku hatoba' (Nemoto Takashi's life detox wharf) in the magazine *Takarajima*. He starts with the same premise – the vicinity of the Owada family home – and the column follows a similar pattern: first a description

1 'Tanin no gomi-mochikaeri-obasan kesa mo shutsudō', *Josei Seibun*, 11 November 1993, p. 5. All translations from Japanese in this chapter have been carried out by the author.

of what is visible, then a recounting of interviews with some neighbours, and finally the life story of the woman who is friendlier to him and his colleague (who works as a carer for the elderly) than to the press reporters and television people who apparently pestered her for interviews in September 1993. Their broadcast allegedly led to an increase of stuff because people from other places would come to dump their own rubbish secretly at night. The article was decorated with drawings in Nemoto's brutalist style. On the whole, it was sympathetic to the woman portrayed.

Whereas these early reports used a vocabulary playing either on military metaphors (*yōsai*, 'rubbish fortress' or *shiro*, 'rubbish castle'), or, more ironically, on luxury (*goten*, 'rubbish palace'), the notion of the rubbish house became the standard form of reference around 2000. The notion of fortress or castle was usually invoked when describing the forbidding exterior of the houses, where only a small path leads to the entrance buttressed with towers of rubbish. Windows through which one could only dimly make out a wall of things on the inside reinforced the impression of impenetrability associated with military installations. The other popular term, 'rubbish palace', plays on the fact that most of these houses were freestanding buildings on privately owned ground, often with a sizeable garden. This in itself denotes privilege and luxury, which in this case is counter-caricatured by the abundance of rubbish in evidence.

These articles started a small boom in the reporting of similar phenomena, the pinnacle of which was reached in 1999/2000. Television coverage followed a similar pattern: once established as a phenomenon by the name of *gomi yashiki*, reports on *gomi yashiki* became part of the popular wideshow, an infotainment news genre that contains the less 'heavy' miscellanea. Such reports occurred several times a week during my first fieldwork period in 2006 and 2007. Added to the wideshow were formats closer to reality TV, where *geinōjin*, Japanese celebrities, would help clean up a rubbish house and interact with its inhabitants. Significantly, the standardization of use of the term *gomi yashiki* also replaced the original link to a person (*gomi obasan*, 'rubbish aunt'), with a topos, a house full of rubbish.

The origin of the *gomi yashiki* in the yellow press and on 'human interest' television programmes has furthermore given the word an informal slant, and during my fieldwork there was no official denomination, either in the world of social services or in the language of the local authorities. Officials working for or with the local authorities were careful to distance themselves from the word *gomi yashiki* and often referred to it indirectly using formulations such as 'what is known in the mass media as *gomi yashiki*'.

## Gomi yashiki as the uncanny

The term *gomi yashiki* also alludes to another, related semantic field: its closeness to the *obake yashiki*, the haunted house, is certainly not coincidental, as many neighbours I interviewed described *gomi yashiki* as *fushigi* (strange, otherworldly) or *bukimi* (uncanny). Sometimes, it is even implied that the cause of the accumulation of rubbish is supernatural. The neighbour interviewed in Nemoto's column mentioned above alludes to the possibility that the person living in the *gomi yashiki* is possessed; several informants living nearby cases of *gomi yashiki* during my fieldwork mentioned that maybe the inhabitants had turned into *yōkai* (spectres). Another article in the weekly *Shūkan Taishū* calls the inhabitants *kijinhenjin*, which, while not directly supernatural, translates as 'strange eccentrics'.<sup>2</sup>

The use of the term *fushigi* denotes something that is 'inexplicable, incredible, magical, miraculous' (Figal 1999: 223), something 'which cannot be grasped by thought' (M.D. Foster 2008: 17). It is widely used with reference to ghostly appearances, but broader than 'the supernatural'. Although Foster's work deals with specific Japanese monster culture, his understanding of the *fushigi* applies equally well to the description of the *gomi yashiki*:

The transcendence of the everyday is critical here: rather than the supernatural, perhaps a more appropriate, though awkward, coinage would be supernormal. Whether manifest as an unexplainable experience or the appearance of a monster, a breach occurs in the predictable everyday fabric of life: something happens that is beyond normal – and therefore worth remarking upon (M.D. Foster 2008: 16).

This is precisely the rhetorical structure of most of the articles about *gomi yashiki*. In the midst of quotidian familiarity (everyday morning rubbish disposal) something that is deeply disturbing disrupts the taken-for-granted tranquility: this is, of course, Freud's definition of the uncanny, one of the possible ways to translate the term *fushigi*. In Freudian terms (2003 [1919]: 150), the experience of the uncanny is triggered by one of two things: either a blurring of the lines between reality and fantasy (although it would make more sense to say the blurring of lines between two different realities, as the blurring makes it difficult to tell which is real and which is fantasy); or through the return of that which has been repressed. Even if we do not accept all the premises of psychoanalysis, I argue that Freud's argument

2 'Gomi yashiki no shujin dono', *Shūkan Taishū*, 6 September 2000, pp. 45-6.

can be transposed from the psychic to the material: it is the matter that has been made absent through disposal that returns in its material excess. If the disposal of waste can be equated with the psychic act of forgetting/repressing, then the gomi yashiki is uncanny, because in it, the objects and things that are so familiar that they are no longer noticed return as strange and disturbing reminders. The blurring of the clear lines between realities and categories of things (such as personal possession/waste) appears as uncanny here because it implies reversibility: things that have become rubbish can return, suggesting a crossing of the boundary between life and death (even if it is 'only' things). The trope of the gomi yashiki is also uncanny because the otherworldly erupts in the home, the most familiar place usually associated with safety and shelter.

The gomi yashiki thus puts the spectator in a schizoid position: just as we note the familiarity of the objects that make up the accumulation, we conceive of the accumulation as somehow monstrous, and this contradiction is extended to whoever inhabits the gomi yashiki. The elderly woman who is interviewed by Nemoto keeps on eating food leftovers directly from the rubbish bags (which makes the journalist question her sanity in spite of her otherwise lucid answers). In Taguchi's short story 'Jamira', the possibly monstrous nature of the inhabitant is invoked by likening the gomi yashiki to a 'nest of aliens' (2004, discussed below), referring to Ridley Scott's film franchise of the same name. Entering a gomi yashiki is like entering a parallel world that has been created from the debris of the familiar, but is teeming with 'alien' life: cockroaches, rats, flies, and other insects. Similarly, the 'master' (*aruji*) of this other reality is someone deeply familiar (*obachan*) and yet someone who has changed (*bakeru* – to change means turning into something ghostly) into something quite different. In the distorting mirror of the gomi yashiki, the consumer and owner of things appears as monstrous. Or, as John Scanlan puts it in his book *On Garbage*, 'ultimately we are our leftovers [...], garbage – far from being spent or used-up – presents an alternative version of "reality"' (Scanlan 2005: 142-3).

This alternative reality uncomfortably straddles the critical discourse on the throw-away society of the late 1980s and the early rhetoric of recycling of the early 1990s. Can the gomi yashiki be interpreted as resistance against the rampant materialism (*butsuyoku*) of society? Is it best understood as an attempt to recycle (something that those I interviewed often mentioned they want to do)? Or is it part of the nascent environmental movement that later formed around the notion of *mottainai* ('What a waste', a phrase that my informants frequently used to keep me from throwing away their things)? It is interesting to note that almost all of the articles end with a

question, leaving the reader to make up their own minds. I am proposing that, in order to understand the salience of the *gomi yashiki*, we need to look at the transition from the last years of the bubble economy to the onset of the 'lost decade'. The remainder of this chapter discusses this shift in relation to three fields: consumption and time, recycling and waste disposal, and the more broader question of value.

### Consuming the bubble

If he had gone and cheated on me, that would not be an especially big deal. But when I heard about the girl I ended up furious. 'She was amazing. In a suede skirt. The blouse was from Roberta, right?' Note: *In a suede skirt. The blouse was from Roberta, right?* From the description of her attire you can guess that she is a sensual girl (Tanaka 1980: 184).

The heyday of the bubble economy, from 1984 to 1989, is univocally represented and remembered as a period of exuberant consumption and decadence, when fashionable urbanites ate sushi topped with real gold foil (Miura 2014: 114); consumers consistently chose the more expensive version of a functionally equivalent product (Tobin 1992: 21); and it was not unusual for a middle-class couple to change their entire furniture every second year (Clammer 1997: 80). While the economic realities for a large part of the population were very different from this image of excess, the conspicuous consumption of the 1980s was the result of a shift of patterns from family-centred consumption to the indulgence of more personal desires that started to emerge after the oil shock of 1973. In the period of high growth after the war, companies could cater to the population as a whole and marketing was focused on the idea that consumption was a means of achieving happiness. One's own career and status were mirrored in being able to afford the 'one rank up' product (which assumes a fairly fixed value hierarchy both in terms of people and things). The baby boomer generation in Japan was the driving force behind mass consumption, and the standardization of the life course that Emiko Ochiai (1997) calls the 1955 system was also responsible for the notion of the homogeneous consumer with clear-cut desires and wants. The change that occurred in the 1970s is both historic and demographic: the oil crisis revealed the unsustainable and vacuous nature of high-growth ideology, while at the same time the offspring of the baby boomers, sometimes called the *shinjinrui* (new breed), were more interested in consumption as a means of self-expression (Havens 1994: 151-7). Tanaka Yasuo's catalogue

novel *Nan to naku kurisutaru* (Somehow crystal) – serialized in 1979 and published in 1980 – represented a new sensibility towards differentiation: the somewhat thin plot of the novel is supported by a massive apparatus of annotations on all the brand name goods that appear in the main text, with sometimes ironic comments as to their relative ranking. While the novel can be read as wry commentary on how it is impossible to express oneself with one's possessions (that others could always also acquire), the marketing gurus of the 1980s jumped on to the idea of 'differentiation'. Fujioka Wakao (1987) proclaimed the end of the mass in *Sayonara, taishū*, while Seibu marketing master Itoi Shigesato coined the now famous slogan '*Hoshii mono ga, hoshii wa*' ('I want something to want', the particle 'wa' at the end marking it as female speech). Miura, himself a sociology student-turned-marketing expert, calls this the 'age of amorphous desire' (2014: 101).

The advance of consumerism in Japan created its own ideology and its own attendant critique, much of it heavily influenced by French postmodern thinkers<sup>3</sup> like Jean Baudrillard and sociologists like Bourdieu.<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu's observations on consumption practices and distinction in France did not come as a surprise to the marketing experts who formed most of the audience of these writings. Many marketing experts came from the discipline of sociology and there is a large, grey zone between academic writing on consumer society and the prediction of social trends with catchy phrases and neologisms ('new breed', 'micro masses', and 'searching for the self' (*jibun sagashi*) all emerge from this murky twilight). Some of these are then turned into analytical terms by sociologists, sometimes without realizing their origin as marketing speech (everyone who claims there is a 'boom' happening in Japan is very likely to be unwittingly jumping on a marketing bandwagon). Baudrillard's darker pronouncements on overconsumption<sup>5</sup>

3 It is important not to overemphasize culture in the explanation of these complex historical developments: 'Hyper-consumption in contemporary Japanese cities is not a product of "post-modernism" so much as the logical outcome of thirty years of policies which have put economics (the economics of the individual as well as the economics of the nation) first and have promoted a pervasive depoliticization' (Clammer 1997: 54).

4 Baudrillard's work was translated into Japanese before Bourdieu's (although Bourdieu was an examiner on his dissertation) and his particular style of critique, with clever neologisms and snappy, slogan-like epigrams, ironically struck a chord with those interested in promoting consumption as a ludic, self-referential activity. Bourdieu's work, on the other hand, while dealing with consumption and stratification in a much more empirical way, was more problematic because of its emphasis on power differentials (Ogino 2013).

5 In a list of new experiences that the uneasy individual seeks out to create a sense of excitement in a consumer society, Baudrillard (1998: 80) mentions 'Christmas in the Canaries, eel in whiskey, the Prado, LSD', and, somewhat enigmatically, 'Japanese-style love-making'.

were recast in a much brighter light in the writings of Yamazaki Hirokazu, for example in his publication *Yawarakai kojinsuugi no tanjō* (The birth of soft individualism), which emphasizes consumption as a process-oriented activity in which the enjoyment is extending the moment of ‘using up’ (1987: 205). ‘Soft selves’ as ‘consuming selves’ are self-created by consumer choice (in contrast to ‘producing selves’ (1987: 197)), through which they can tame capitalism. In a similar vein, Tobin (1992: 20) notes the difference between the pessimistic diagnoses of the consumer society in the West where ‘the middle class hungrily appropriates the cultural capital and style of the old elite’ in a desperate attempt to paint over the meaninglessness of their existence, while in Japan ‘consumption often has the feeling of adolescent exuberance’ (Ibid.), a kind of capitalist carnivalesque.

One of the reasons Baudrillard’s writings fell on fertile ground in Japan is that he was preoccupied with the symbolic dimension of consumption and its relation to social status, something that has a long, premodern tradition in Japan (especially in status-conscious locales such as Kyoto<sup>6</sup>):

[Y]ou never consume the object in itself (in its use-value); you are always manipulating objects (in the broadest sense) as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status (Baudrillard 1998: 61).

Compare this to what the later chairman of the Parco group, Masuda Tsuji, told his staff in the mid-1980s:

What is consumption (*shōhi*) anyway? Look at the Chinese characters we use to write it. Kesu, ‘erase’. Tsuiyasu ‘use up’. But our consumers aren’t actually erasing or using up anything, right? Buying fashion at Parco, buying interior goods at Parco, that’s not the same as buying radishes at the supermarket. They are not just ‘consuming’, right? They are ‘creating’, *sō*. They’re consuming to create their own lifestyles. That’s why I say this isn’t *shōhi*; it’s *sōhi* (creative spending)’ (quoted in Miura 2014: 51-2).

Both quotes refer to the process of consumption, but the difference lies in the spin that is put on the result: while Baudrillard’s more negative

6 Baudrillard visited Kyoto for the first time in 1973 and returned several times. It was also in Japan in 1981 that he was given a camera, inspiring him to become a photographer (Zurbrugg 1998: 32).

evaluation of consumption suggests that consumer choice merely leads to conformity in the service of upward mobility, the same phenomenon in marketing speech is turned into an affirmation of (lifestyle) choice, and, therefore, of individual freedom. The two quotes also share the same blind spot: they both allude to the fact that things are not really used up in the process of consumption, but by focusing exclusively on the symbolic possibilities of commodities, they are oblivious to the material implications of this claim. Interestingly, recycling figures in Baudrillard only as cultural recycling, the reviving of retro trends on which consumer culture depends in the face of limited variation. Waste, on the other hand, is dismissed as a mere moral pseudo-problem:

The consumer society needs its objects in order to be. More precisely, it needs to destroy them. [...] It is in destruction that [consumption] acquires its meaning. [...] Only in destruction are objects there in excess and only then, in their disappearance, do they attest to wealth (Baudrillard 1998: 47).

Clearly inspired by Bataille's problematic interpretation of the potlatch, Baudrillard offers both a critique and an exaltation of consumer society by describing it in terms of sacrificial logic: by destroying wealth through consumption, society transforms goods into meaning and social status. While the sacrificial metaphor is useful to conceptualize signification, it reaches its limits when we turn our attention to the materiality of the objects. Again, the implicit assumption is that the transformation of goods into status also somehow liquidates the material nature of things.

Rather than an oversight, then, it is the very absence of the material dimension that underpins consumer society and makes it possible in the first place. The system of consumption/waste only works through material connections that have to remain hidden for them to function. Such a notion of consumption as sacrificial economy is prefigured in the way that Heian-period offerings (*sonaemono*) were floated on the Kamo River as tributes to the deities, but later picked out of the waters to be consumed by the 'underclasses' downriver in Fushimi. The link to the deity is created by making absent the offerings (the deities have consumed them); at the same time, the social and geographic structure of the Heian period emerges as a result of a material connection between consumption and waste. In essence, the system only works if the connection between the two parts (upstream imperial court and downstream underclasses) is obfuscated.

### The exaltedness of the new

One of the hallmarks of consumerism is an appreciation of the new for newness's sake. In the same way the epithet 'new and improved' became a shorthand for progress in American post-war consumer culture, in Japan 'newly available' (*shin hatsubai*) and 'newly appearing' (*shin tōjō*) are staples of publicity, suggesting that the fact of newness of the product itself is part of its essence and allure. As Miura (2014: 206) puts it: 'One of the iron rules of consumer society for many years has been to persuade customers that the things they already own are boring and obsolete in order to get them to buy something new.'

In a Japanese context this modern valuation of the new is underpinned nicely by two cultural factors: an association of the new with purity and absence of pollution (Clammer 1997: 80), and the seasonal nature of consumption (Daniels 2009a). The former is usually not formulated as traditional concern with pollution,<sup>7</sup> but more vaguely as disgust: when talking with informants who had lived through the height of the bubble economy they would often muse about the abundance of the new in those halcyon days. Mentioning second-hand goods would usually provoke a retrospective shudder: 'It simply was not done in those days. We would have considered it to be disgusting (*kimochi warui*),' one housewife told me. When probed as to the nature of the disgust, the answers were evasive, but pointing towards unknown others: while wearing and using hand-me-downs from relatives was common practice even before the 1990s, possessions of strangers were considered to be a source of a vague sense of pollution, veiled in a language of disgust.

Only the new provided a sense of purity, because those unknown others who had made and packaged it were removed from the imaginary trajectory. Commodities just magically appeared and were greeted with the opposite of disgust, or, as Baudrillard describes it: 'The period of newness is, in a sense, the sublime period of the object and may, in certain cases, attain the intensity, if not the quality, of the emotion of love' (Baudrillard 1998: 113).

If, as Baudrillard stresses, it is the symbolic value that defines the commodity, what is used up in the process of consumption? Social differentiation is a fairly stable social system into which consumption practices are transformed and in which symbolic value endures beyond the death of the thing. What actually is consumed and used up in the process, then, is newness itself: in other words, a temporal quality of the object (a quality

7 See Kirby 2011: 102-32 for an analysis of modern notions of purity and pollution.

the object loses as traces of use appear in the material). To own something that is the height of fashion means to partake in the elusive present. As Yamazaki has correctly diagnosed, bubble era consumption was a temporal process, in which the new was always superior to the old, yet to finally own the object of desire would also extinguish that desire. At the same time, established brands like Louis Vuitton were successful in the context of a relentless pursuit of the new, precisely because their brand stability satisfied a yearning for permanence.

Needless to say, this form of accelerated consumption of branded commodities led to an enormous increase of waste, as the 'life span' of consumer objects was decoupled from the object's durability and functionality:

Objects are also discarded much more rapidly in Japan than probably anywhere else. Perfectly functional but simply out-of-date equipment, fashions or furnishings will be replaced rapidly by those who can afford to do so; possession of the very latest enhances cultural capital like almost nothing else. Variety or originality is not the point: newness is (Clammer 1997: 24).

The novelty itself was being consumed, and the material remainder (often in mint condition) was barely more than rubbish to be thrown out. The imaginary trajectory of commodities was still a one-way system: something was produced and advertised, desired, bought, consumed, then discarded promiscuously with little ado for the next thing:

A certain day each month is 'heavy rubbish day' when unwanted large objects can be put out on the sidewalk for collection by the municipal rubbish collectors or by private contractors. The most astonishing variety and volume of things are discarded – furniture, TVs, bicycles, golf-clubs, all kinds of electrical appliances and just about everything else that a modern household might possess. Students and poorer people often furnish their dwellings with cast-offs of this kind, which is not a bad idea since the objects are often in almost mint condition. It is not uncommon for middle- and upper-middle-class households to change their furniture, appliances, curtains, even cutlery, every few years (Ibid.: 79-80).

As Clammer shows, there was some degree of reuse of discarded things during the 1980s, but in the collective imagery this did not play any role. It was the absence of the old and obsolete that created the present moment and one's own relevance as individual qua consumer. Brand objects were

coveted possessions and, contrary to the many practices of redistribution and sharing that apply to gift economies (Rupp 2003), they were conceived of as singular things that had a singular relationship to the self.

## Rendering absent

*The rubbish problem emerges when the circulation of matter is obstructed and acyclic materials are used in people's lives. Matter is indestructible, if it does not circulate it will accumulate in nature and have a negative influence on human beings* (Kumamoto 1995: 12).

In order to keep the consumption of new things going, enormous amounts of no longer new things must be made absent. As the material substrate remains after the newness has been consumed, to render absent was a question of removing the no longer desired objects from the gaze of those who once possessed them: namely, by sending them to the periphery of the city to be incinerated and then dumped in Tokyo Bay.

The large-scale rebuilding of Tokyo in the post-war era and the rapid expansion of the markets transformed Japan into the world's leading manufacturer of electronic consumer goods and led to an unprecedented rise in living standards. The amount of waste produced by mass consumption was accommodated by using the rubbish to retrieve land from Tokyo Bay. Yumenoshima, the 'island of dreams', became the main destination of Tokyo's waste in 1957.<sup>8</sup> The annually increasing amounts led to a conflicted relationship between the residents of Kōtō ward (to which it belonged) and the affluent Western suburbs of Tokyo (whence much of the rubbish originated) – so much so that the mayor of Tokyo, Minobe Tatsukichi, declared a 'rubbish war' in 1971. The construction of incineration plants in each Tokyo ward was suggested to alleviate the burden placed on wards closer to Tokyo Bay, which comprised artificial landmasses, but local resistance in Suginami ward led to further exacerbation of the conflict. Both in 1972 and in 1973, local politicians and residents blocked rubbish trucks from Suginami ward from delivering their rubbish and sent them back. Only when the incineration plant in Suginami became active in 1983 did the tensions ease.

8 Yumenoshima originally was created from dredged sand and was reclaimed to accommodate a new airport for Tokyo. The war, however, interrupted the building process and after the war the island was designated to become the 'Hawaii of Tokyo', hence the name 'Island of Dreams' (Kawajiri 2013).

Tokyo in the 1980s was booming: fashion and trends came and went with increased speed, while circles of consumption were intense and short. A new lifestyle, felt to be modern and cosmopolitan, took hold among white-collar workers. Recycling was virtually unheard of when the bubble finally burst at the beginning of the 1990s. The perception of the life span of things changed rather dramatically in the first few years of the 1990s. The Tokyo stock market reached its peak on 31 December 1989, and began its downward spiral in January 1990 (Sand 2006: 104). The subsequent recession led to a slow transformation in the regime of value. While newness was still the main ingredient that made things attractive to customers, a whole secondary economy of 'recycle shops' and '100-yen shops' took hold and transformed many urban neighbourhoods in a way convenience stores had done in the post-war era. Recycling and the use of second-hand goods became standard practice.

As early as 1990 the word *junkangata shakai* (circulation-type society) was being used in Japan to indicate a society in which resources were recycled and things were used multiple times (Sakata 2005: 41). This was a clear break from the linear path that the trajectory of things was imagined to have during the bubble economy. The circular imagination of a society that recycled its refuse posed its own problems, however: for example, how to bring the abject stage from which things can be resurrected into view without also suggesting dirt and pollution? Howell (2013) describes the linguistic and discursive manoeuvres undertaken in the Edo period to rebrand human waste as fertilizer. Recycling must undergo a similar process in order to become socially acceptable. A process of melting down and re-forming the material, during which the matter undergoes purification by fire, is the way that recycling is promoted (with the obvious drawback that such a process consumes enormous amounts of energy, throwing serious doubts on its sustainability).

### Secondhandedness and *mottainai*

Another, more eco-friendly way of recycling is through flea markets or bazaars, organized by schools and volunteer organizations, where things can be given away, swapped, or bought and sold at low prices. Although some flea markets such as the Tōji temple market in Kyoto pre-date the Edo period, there have been two waves of new flea markets: one following the oil shock in the 1970s and a larger one after the bubble burst in the early 1990s. These provide the observer with a scale on which to measure the degree to

which the reuse of items first becomes acceptable and then mainstream. This can in part be attributed to economic necessity, in part to a discourse of environmentalism that gains traction, but also to a re-evaluation of what is valuable and what is not.

Inge Daniels describes how at a bazaar in Kyoto all objects have a note from the previous owner attached to them, asking of the future owner to take care of the object by using it – in her case, a toaster that has not been used before (2009b: 396). This neatly illustrates how secondhandedness requires and opens up a social imaginary: where do things go once they were (or were not) used and disposed of (or given away)? Who are the others that receive them and what kind of relationship do such transactions entail? Daniels concludes that such instances show a Japanese sense of duty towards objects, but as her investigation focuses only on the ethnographic present, she does not take into account the massive shift in consumption practices of which such occurrences are a symptom. While a sensibility towards others mediated through objects may well be an enduring aspect of Japanese culture, the ways secondhandedness became normalized has a distinct millennial imprint that is connected to a rediscovery of cultural values in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Disposal only becomes a moral act once the trajectory of the object is imagined as including various others, from concrete persons to a generalized Other such as the environment or nature. This, in turn, changes the dynamics with which value, the core concept in making decisions about disposal, is understood.

Taking a more historical approach, Eiko Maruko Siniawer (2014: 166) describes how the notion of wastefulness (*mottainai*) acquires a new saliency as the economy stagnates:

While ‘mottainai’ had certainly made appearances in previous postwar decades, the values and emotions that it evoked were spelled out and discussed more explicitly, deliberately and visibly in millennial Japan than they had before. ‘Mottainai’ was said to capture not just the act of wasting, but principles and feelings associated with the consciousness of wastefulness, such as regret and shame for the loss of things, appreciation and respect for things as well as for those who made them, and empathy and compassion.

The notion of *mottainai* enables the shift from values (as embodied in objects) towards value as a moral category (Miller 2008). As a moral imperative, wastefulness regulates everyday consumption and how the flow of things is redirected towards others; as a rediscovered cultural value, it becomes part

of a marketable Japanese identity that distinguishes Japan from the rest of the world (then prime minister Koizumi was keen to promote Mottainai as an international movement under Japanese leadership).

'Mottainai' was also the main term my informants who lived in gomi yashiki used to explain to me why they did not want to get rid of the accumulated stuff. In a psychologically informed context this may appear as attachment and sentimentality. When considering it from the point of view of an ethics of disposal however, it looks more like a refusal to make value judgements, as in a quickly changing economic environment such judgements seem increasingly arbitrary. Furthermore, it can be read as a refusal to engage with the real and imagined Others that disposal would entail. It is no surprise, then, that in an alienated, urban landscape, these others can appear as threatening. To illustrate this, the last part of this chapter provides a close reading of one of the first literary representations of the gomi yashiki.

### 'A complicated emotion': Taguchi's 'Jamira'

In 2004, the novelist Randy Taguchi published a collection of short stories under the title of *Fujisan*. The short stories vary widely in content, but they all refer to the sacred mountain in some way. 'Jamira' is set in a town in Shizuoka Prefecture over which Mount Fuji towers. In fact, the mountain is such a dominating presence that the narrator, a young man who works for the local authority after having dropped out of a remunerative but boring job at an investment bank, feels constantly observed by it. He was told as a child that Mount Fuji would see if he did something naughty and since then felt the watchful, all-penetrating eye of this looming 'observer' (Taguchi 2004: 142) on his back, even when it was shrouded in clouds. This narrator is sent by the local authority to investigate complaints about a gomi yashiki and to persuade the old woman living within to let them help her clean up the mess. Although everyone feels sorry for him for doing such a 'dirty' job after the prospect of having a high-flying career, the narrator is secretly glad to be dealing with such an interesting phenomenon. His task is to establish contact with the woman (whose family name is Kimura), but his attempts show no results initially. He calls her Jamira after a film monster (*kaijū*) in a TV series he watched as a child. His predecessor at the 'environment branch' of the local authority warns him that she is a *yōkai*, a kind of spectre. When he goes to have a preliminary look at her house, he is indeed reminded of the nest of the extraterrestrial life forms in the film *Alien*. Jamira is like

nothing he has ever seen: she seems barely human to him and yet fills him with a sense of awe. After the encounter with Jamira he has a dream:

In the back garden of my parents' house there is an open hole and I throw all kinds of things away into it. The hated chicken meat balls, the forgotten textbook of a classmate I hid to annoy him, an almost blank answer paper, the baby rabbit from the breeding shack that died when I stroked it, the library book I borrowed and failed to give back, all the inconvenient things that reflect badly on me, I stealthily dispose of them by throwing them into that hole. Peeping into the hole, I see that it is pitch black and apparently bottomless. When shouting 'Oi!' no echo comes back. I am reassured; I throw all kinds of things into the hole and feel relieved. The wank magazines that I secretly ordered by internet retail, the manga books that I stole, the woman who hated me although it was she who had an unpleasant body smell, the homeroom teacher with protruding nose hair. The hole swallows everything and is silent.

I think 'Where actually do the thrown away things go?' Well, never mind. Somewhere at the end of the world there might be a rubbish dumping ground. While wondering where this may be, it suddenly hits me. The rubbish house. I get it. The hole is connected to the rubbish house. All the things I have been throwing away are buried in that house (Taguchi 2004: 156).

The local authority, over which his father has considerable sway, passes a law that allows 'measures of beautification' to be taken and the environment branch enlists the services of a female clinical psychologist. The narrator, however, is not convinced, and when they start to bring Jamira a packed lunch every day to establish contact and the old woman starts to open up, he is secretly disappointed that she gives up her 'otherness' to human contact on such simple conditions as the provision of food. Jamira eventually gives in and moves to a home for the elderly for a few days while the local authority and neighbourhood volunteers make a concentrated effort to clean up the rubbish house. At first it seems as if more stuff is just erupting from the earth and the amount will not diminish in spite of the constant toing and froing of heavy rubbish disposal trucks. As the clean-up proceeds, everyone's astonishment at the amount of rubbish wanes and is replaced by something else:

But this rubbish was made up from what had formerly been their own possessions. From the mountain of rubbish emerged a large number of things that elicited cries of 'oh this was our son's bicycle' or 'ah, this was

our charcoal brazier'. The things they had believed they had thrown away came suddenly back and the neighbours felt a complicated emotion. Among them there were also those who picked the things up and took them back home again (Taguchi 2004: 202).

When the neighbours break out in shouts of relief at the end of their toil and the last of the rubbish vans leaves, Jamira suddenly appears. The chatter dies down. In the sinking sun she is only a silhouette. Her expression is indiscernible. Slowly, without looking at anyone, she walks past them, towards Mount Fuji, aglow in the evening sun, leaving everything behind her. In my interpretation, I wish to concentrate on the ways in which trajectories of things are imagined in this complex, multi-layered narrative.

The narrator is concerned with where things go once one has gotten rid of them. He is interested in the future of waste, so to speak. The act of throwing away is an act of disappearance: it can happen to humans as well as to things. It is the appearance of the hole in the backyard in his dream that makes him realize how this world works: only by making everything unpleasant disappear, one's own sins as well as the inconvenience and burden of others, can one live unobstructedly in the present. Everything seems meaningless to him because no action of ridding has any consequences. If something (human or object) has outlived its purpose as momentary distraction, it can simply be thrown away. The price he pays for the ease of a life with no memories is the possibility of being haunted by that which he throws away. This is why the unknown trajectory of objects and humans thrown into the hole bothers him: although the hole seems bottomless, matter must go somewhere. It either accumulates in a cul-de-sac or goes somewhere else, as in the dream, where everything that is thrown away appears again in the *gomi yashiki*. Jamira is only their temporary keeper, for those unpleasant things are bound to return. The hole is an exit that makes things disappear and the question as to where it leads is mirrored in the narrator's obsession with anal sex:

Only in the beginning do I have normal sex; what I am really interested in is the asshole. The other hole disgusts me. Would you thrust your penis into a hole if you do not know where it leads? [...] The mouth and the anus are connected. Whenever I think of that I feel relieved. Entrance and Exit. Where there is an entrance, there is always an exit (Taguchi 2004: 165).

It is not anal sex that appears 'dirty' to him, in spite of the bodily waste that passes through the same orifice; it is evacuated from the body and

disappears in a different kind of hole. When having anal sex he reverses this flow: in his imagination his penis re-emerges through the mouth of the woman and she is reduced to being meat on a skewer (*kushi*). The vagina, on the other hand, is seen as a one-way system: what gets in there reaches a place where things stagnate, and stagnation breeds monsters. Jamira becomes monstrous because she interrupts and redirects the flow of waste to end in her house: it is this stagnation of others' things put in her care that gives her power as a sort of gatekeeper. In the *gomi yashiki*, the two images of flows overlap: one connected further in an endless passing on of refuse, the other leading to an end point where things accumulate. The narrator feels safe as long as he throws everything unpleasant into the bottomless hole, because he imagines those things and persons to be passed on endlessly. Only when he dreams that everything leads to the *gomi yashiki* is he concerned with the possibility of their return, a haunting that would make everything present which he had so callously made absent. This possibility of haunting becomes very real to the neighbours when they clean up the *gomi yashiki* and many things surface that they had thrown away and trusted to be made absent eternally. The 'complicated emotion' they feel is both a shock of recognition and presumably a sense of shame. What they wanted to get rid of becomes publicly visible and shows them to have neglected their duty towards the things once in their care. In a sense, they are looking at the material trace of their own, albeit 'alternative', history.

## Conclusion

This chapter attempted to situate the trope of the *gomi yashiki*, its definition, and its rise to media notoriety in a particular time and place. While it may very well be that it is 'just' a Japanese formulation of what in the United States is increasingly medicalized as hoarding (Frost and Steketee 2011), the discourses surrounding the *gomi yashiki* are highly specific. At the core of the discourse is the ambiguity of what is and what is not waste, and how arbitrary these decisions often are. In spite of the name 'rubbish house', the *gomi yashiki* complicates the category of rubbish and shows that things are made into rubbish and can return from this state. Like Appadurai's commodity state of an object, an object's rubbish state is not stable or terminal either. It brings to the fore the fact that matter does not die, but neither is there a smooth, circular flow of recycling. Instead, there are complicated eddies, currents, flows and counterflows, and stagnating pools where time becomes tangible and solid. This becomes

especially troubling when this instability in the meaning of matter erupts in domestic space and renders the home uncanny. Like the haunted house, with which it shares a linguistic similarity in Japanese, the rubbish house haunts both the throw-away society's imagination of a one-way system and the more environmentally conscious notion of a smooth circle of recycling and reuse.

## Works cited

- Appadurai, Arjun (1986). 'Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. by Arjun Appadurai, pp. 3-63. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (1990). 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', *Theory, Culture & Society* 7: 295-310.
- Baudrillard, Jean (1998). *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. by Chris Turner. London: SAGE Publications.
- Clammer, John (1997). *Contemporary Urban Japan: A Sociology of Consumption*. Oxford, UK/Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Daniels, Inge (2009a). 'Seasonal and Commercial Rhythms of Domestic Consumption: A Japanese Case Study', in *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*, ed. by Elizabeth Shove, Frank Trentmann and Richard Wilk, pp. 171-87. Oxford/New York: Berg Publishers.
- (2009b). 'The "Social Death" of Unused Gifts: Surplus and Value in Contemporary Japan', *Journal of Material Culture* 14: 385-408.
- Figal, Gerald (1999). *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Foster, Michael Dylan (2008). *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai*, 1st ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Foster, Robert (2006). 'Tracking Globalization: Commodities and Value in Motion', in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. by Chris Tilley, Webb Keane, Susanne Kuechler, Mike Rowlands and Patricia Spyer, pp. 285-302. London: SAGE Publications.
- Freud, Sigmund (2003). *The Uncanny*. Penguin UK. [First published in 1919.]
- Frost, Randy and Gail Steketee (2011). *Stuff: Compulsive Hoarding and the Meaning of Things*. Boston, MA: Mariner Books.
- Fujioka Wakao (1987). *Sayonara, taishū: Kansei jidai o dō yomu ka?* Kyoto: PHP Kenkyūsho.
- Gregson, Nicky and Mike Crang (2010). 'Materiality and Waste: Inorganic Vitality in a Networked World', *Environment and Planning A* 42: 1026-32.

- Havens, Thomas (1994). *Architects of Affluence: The Tsutsumi Family and the Seibu Enterprises in Twentieth-Century Japan*, 1st ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Herod, Andrew, Graham Pickren, Al Rainnie, and Susan McGrath-Champ (2013). 'Waste, Commodity Fetishism and the Ongoingness of Economic Life', *Area* 45: 376-82.
- Howell, David, L. (2013). 'Fecal Matters: Prolegomenon to a History of Shit in Japan', in *Japan at Nature's Edge: The Environmental Context of a Global Power*, ed. by Ian J. Miller, Julia Adney Thomas and Brett L. Walker, pp. 137-51. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Kawajiri Sadamu (2013). 'Tōkyō – Yumenoshima, namae no yurai wa kaisuiyokujō, kūkō mo', *Keizai Shinbun* (15 November).
- Kirby, Peter Wynn (2011). *Troubled Natures: Waste, Environment, Japan*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Kopytoff, Igor (1986). 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. by Arjun Appadurai, pp. 64-91. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kumamoto Kazuki (1995). *Gomi mondai e no shiten: Haikibutsu to risaikuru no hōseido to keizaigaku*. Tokyo: San'ichishobō.
- Mauss, Marcel (1990). *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. London: Norton. [First published in 1925.]
- Miller, Daniel (2008). 'The Uses of Value', *Geoforum* 39(3) (May): 1122-32.
- Miura, Atsushi (2014). *The Rise of Sharing: Fourth-Stage Consumer Society in Japan*, trans. by Dana Lewis. Tokyo: LTCB Library Trust/International House of Japan.
- Moore, Sarah A. (2012). 'Garbage Matters: Concepts in New Geographies of Waste', *Progress in Human Geography* (March): 1-20.
- Nemoto, Takashi (1994). 'Nemoto Takashi no jinsei kaidoku hatoba: Gomi no Daibutsu no maki', *Takarajima* (September): 36-7.
- Ochiai, Emiko (1997). *The Japanese Family System in Transition: A Sociological Analysis of Family Change in Postwar Japan*. Tokyo: LTCB International Library Foundation.
- Ogino, Masahiro (2013). 'Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and Thereafter', in *Japanese Social Theory: From Individualization to Globalization in Japan Today*, ed. by Anthony Elliott, Masataka Katagiri and Atsushi Sawai, pp. 94-110. London: Routledge.
- Rupp, Katherine (2003). *Gift-Giving in Japan: Cash, Connections, Cosmologies*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Sakata Yūsuke (2005). *Gomi no kankyō keizaigaku*. Kyoto: Kōbō shobō.
- Sand, Jordan (2006). 'The Ambivalence of the New Breed: Nostalgic Consumerism in 1980s and 1990s Japan', in *The Ambivalent Consumer: Questioning Consumption*

- in East Asia and the West*, ed. by Sheldon Garon and Patricia L. Maclachlan, pp. 85-108. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Scanlan, John (2004). *On Garbage*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Siniawer, Eiko Maruko (2014). "Affluence of the Heart": Wastefulness and the Search for Meaning in Millennial Japan', *Journal of Asian Studies* 73: 165-86.
- Taguchi Randy (2006). *Fujisan*. Tokyo: Bungei shunjū.
- Tanaka Yasuo (1985). *Nan to naku kurisutaru*. Tokyo: Shinchōsha.
- Tobin, Joseph J. (1992). *Re-Made in Japan: Everyday Life and Consumer Taste in a Changing Society*. New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press.
- Yamazaki Masakazu (1987). *Yawarakai kojishugi no tanjō: Shōhishakai no bigaku*. Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha.
- Zurbrugg, Nicholas (1998). 'The Ecstasy of Photography', in *Jean Baudrillard: Art and Artefact*, ed. by Nicholas Zurbrugg, pp. 32-42. London: Sage Publications UK.