Crisis of Time! The Tyranny of the Immediate and Community in Two Literary Works by Takahashi Gen'ichirô

Japanese Studies

Filippo Cervelli

SOAS University of London

Email: f.cervelli023@gmail.com

Abstract

In his fiction, Takahashi Gen'ichirô often portrays crises of contemporary life where characters do not identify with shared ideologies or communities, resorting to repetitive actions to survive in their empty daily existences. This article argues that a central factor for such crises is a shattering of perceptions of orders of time, predicated on problematics linked to the lingering postwar Japanese context, and leading to an overextended present as the only dimension that matters. Characters can only focus on acting in their proximate realities, without critically confronting themselves with others or with wider issues in society. Often, this type of compulsive action is in response to sudden violent stimuli, also of a sexual nature. Ultimately, a possible way out of the never-ending cycles of the present is to reconstitute a community based on mutual understanding. The article examines these occurrences of the dominating immediate and community in the salient examples of the novel *Godira* and the stories in *Kimi ga yo wa chiyo ni yachiyo ni*. Through this analysis, the article shows the relevance of the theme in Takahashi's fiction and how it contributes to the broader field of Japanese literary studies, especially vis-à-vis the discourse on post-Fukushima productions.

Introduction

Takahashi Gen'ichirô (b. 1951) is a prolific author, his production ranging from novels to essays, from radio programs to writing manuals. In his fiction, he often portrays characters experiencing crises in their contemporary lives, where they struggle to coexist with their daily jobs, or to recognize themselves within structures such as family or society. This study argues that these forms of crisis pertain to the individual's protracted malaise in everyday life. It illustrates this point by focusing on two narrative works, the novel *Godira* (2001) and the short-story collection *Kimi ga yo wa chiyo ni yachiyo ni* (May Your Reign Continue for a Thousand, Eight Thousand Generations, 2002; henceforth, *KGY*), where this kind of crisis is salient. Both instances show consequences of a postwar situation which impedes Japan's coming to terms with its own history, and where issues recur unresolved. While the linguistic experimentation in Takahashi's earlier fiction of the 1980s is also a reaction to a repressive discursive condition, especially in the wake of the student protests of the late 1960s and thereafter (in which Takahashi himself participated), in the later works under scrutiny the intellectual and emotional constraints underpinned by Japan's lingering uncertainty are signified through a temporal isolation, a contemporary malaise where perceptions of orders of time have been shattered, and whereby the characters live in an overextended present that is not informed by the past as a repository of collective memory, nor does it envision a future seen as progress. Moments resemble one another, and individuals, incapable of finding a shared ideology or grand narrative (in Lyotard's terms) by which to orient their lives, are incapable of structured action conducive to long-lasting change. Caught in this predicament, they concentrate on their small, localized realities, acting repeatedly, often in response to

corporeal stimuli. By indulging in practices providing tangible gratifications to violent and sexual urges, they obtain a fleeting sense of being alive in an ideological vacuum. In a sort of Cartesian mind-body separation, repeated action privileges the physical, and is generally performed in the absence of critical thought; characters do not enquire into the structure of the world and society, nor do they consider other concerns outside their own. This creates an isolation where multiple personal spheres of individual gratifications clash in a seemingly endless cycle.

In the protracted postwar condition of ideological uncertainty, people only focus on the immediate, sharing only a repetitive present. However, they may still find a way out of immediacy through rebuilding a sense of community on the basis of mutual understanding and the identification of a common purpose determined by emotional recognition. Community entails reconstructing ties with other beings sharing the critical comprehension that everybody is part of the same human condition with its different needs, joys and sorrows. It is akin to Takahashi's (2012: 21) own statement when interviewed on *Koi suru genpatsu* (The Nuclear Plant in Love, 2011), his controversial novel on the aftermath of 11 March 2011: 'The most valuable thing is to start confronting [others] again, and tie relationships again'.[1] If one had to locate a Japanese equivalent among the possibilities of translating 'community' (for example *komyuniti*, *kyôdô shakai*, *chiiki shakai*), the most befitting is *kyôdôtai*, as it defines a 'group that, as seen evidently in families, is united within an environment of intimate feelings, or through deep connecting emotions' (Imamura, Mishima, & Kawasaki, 2008: 50).[2]

At different levels, characters long for lasting connections predicated on critical thinking. This is what Takahashi proposes to possibly salvage contemporary Japan, burdened by the incapacity to come to terms with itself. While community is not necessarily achieved in the two works, the communal sense does linger in the background as a tantalizing

possibility, highlighting that a failure to recognize others and forge new human ties based on mutual understanding prevents the Japanese to build a change in the oppressive present.

Community performs multiple essential functions. First, it contributes to differentiating Takahashi's emphasis on the present from similar previous instances in literature. While narratives portraying a horizon limited to the immediate present are neither new nor unique to Japan –James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) is one of the most famous examples –, the emphasis on action against the demise of shared ideologies recalls occurrences in Japanese postwar literature. One prime example is the *Taiyôzoku* (sun tribe) youth movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Helmed by Ishihara Shintarô's novel *Taiyô no kisetsu* (Season of the Sun, 1955), the movement promoted representations of disenfranchised youth who, disappointed at contemporaneous postwar politics, reacted to the ideological loneliness in their lives by indulging in extreme sexual and violent practices. Similarly, Ôe Kenzaburô also portrayed juvenile refuge into violence against the lack of ideological representation. In his short story *Sevuntîn* (Seventeen, 1961) a young boy struggling for identification after the failure of wartime nationalistic ideals finds an outlet in the Imperial Way Faction, a group of extreme right enacting violent repressions of the opposition. While in the aforementioned instances the characters act in the present, they do so mainly in response to a failure or insufficiency of ideologies, whereas in Takahashi's fiction the absence of metanarratives is already internalized. Further, although especially in Ôe's story the boy identifies himself with a group, this sense of belonging is not achieved through mutual understanding of others, as highlighted in Takahashi, but is still dependent on the satisfaction of violent stimuli.

Second, together with the emphasis on the present, community permits to expand the analysis on Takahashi's fiction, particularly by recontextualizing his narratives featuring recurrent violence and sudden action against the framework of the instability of perceived

orders of time. Third, it helps illuminate the relationship between body, thinking and interpersonal ties in later works by Takahashi such as *Koi suru genpatsu*, appeared in the aftermath of the triple disaster of 11 March 2011. By bringing together these three points, the article contributes to the broader field of literary studies by expanding the understanding of individual and collective crises articulated at the level of everyday existence.

Postwar shadows

In delineating the possible causes of the contemporary sense of an overextended present it is essential to contextualize it within Takahashi's understanding of and reactions to the postwar Japanese context.[3] Broadly, it is a context of limited comprehension and expression emanating from his literature in various ways. Yamada (2011) notes that, in early fiction such as the novels *Sayônara, gyangu tachi* (Sayonara, Gangsters, 1982) and *Jon Renon tai kaseijin* (John Lennon vs The Martians, 1985), Takahashi's dissident activism of his participation in the student protests of the late 60s (and his ten-month-long incarceration in 1970), takes the shape of a literary rebellion to 'renew political and literary sign systems as a means of resisting the limitations imposed by the state, the media, and even literary criticism' (2011: 2). While in the later *Godira* and *KGY* the rebellion against such discursive spaces leaves the floor to the supremacy of the present, the author's resistance against language and expression conforming to one unequivocal truth is paramount. The books portray a world where words are signs conveying an individual portion of reality which is not based on a commonly shared context, therefore preventing mutual understanding and communication. There is no progress, but a divisive repeated present. Underlying this incommunicability, where the characters cannot find a common identity, is the persisting shadow of postwar Japan's inability to find a collective understanding to break free of an intellectual and emotional impasse, which cannot but repeat itself with no long-lasting solution.

There is no shortage of debates theorizing the permanence of extended postwar phases in Japan, for example the consideration of the so-called 'long postwar', whereby the *après-guerre* seemed to go on and on at least until the end of the Shôwa era in 1989, as if to signify a clear break from the wartime past, and a new beginning under the helm of democracy (Gluck, 1990: 4). Also, in *Nihon .Gendai. Bijutsu* (Japanese. Contemporary. Art., 1998) art critic Sawaragi Noi argues that postwar Japan is removed from world history, due to the proliferation of distorted images of the Asian Pacific War. The failure to address the real trauma repressed by such images has turned Japan into an ahistorical 'bad place' (*warui basho*) which does not permit a legitimate art history, but instead limits any such attempt to repeatedly pinpointing separate narratives of emblematic critics, located within their self-referential dimension.

However, alongside these theories on Japan's incapability to construct a comprehensive historical narrative, Takahashi's understanding of the postwar psychological stalemate resonates in particular with critic Katô Norihiro's arguments on a defeated Japan. In *Haisengoron* (Since Defeat, 1997) and in subsequent clarifications to it, Katô debates that Japan has not overcome its postwar defeatist predicament, and is therefore incapable of decisively apologizing for its war responsibility (despite politicians' statements): it is affected by a schizophrenic, split personality that prevents the construction of a valid 'subject of apology' (1997: 102-103). This personality refers to Japan's uncertain political identity since the Pacific War, torn between defenders of the constitution as the most radical of its kind, and those advocating a revision of article 9 to enable Japan to be a normal nation capable of using military force when necessary (1997: 49-50). Caught in this Jekyll and Hyde dichotomy (in Katô's own comparison) and unable to understand its war experience, which becomes only designated as a 'bad war', Japan cannot apologize convincingly for episodes such as the Nanjing massacre. To heal from this schizophrenia of recurring and unresolvable conflicts,

Japan should first mourn its own war dead, including both war victims and soldiers who died on the battlefield:

> The postwar Japanese (including me born after the war), 'mourning' the war dead is not at all a ritual-like process. To put it bluntly, I am referring to how each postwar Japanese is able to confront those war dead, how they are thinking about the dead. In French, it would be *considérer* (or *envisager*) *des morts de la guerre*. These words have the sense of thinking [*kangaeru*], respecting [*omonjiru*], or confronting [*mukiau*]. (Katô, 2010a: 13)

Whilst Takahashi's fiction engages particularly with a similar notion of 'comprehensive mourning' which, for example in the case of the triple disaster of 11 March 2011, should be extended to all present and future victims, including the children that will never be born due to the radiations in the Fukushima area (2011: 210-212), more broadly his literature runs parallel to Katô's arguments insofar as it portrays a schizophrenic society that fails to consider, and think about, critical issues from a comprehensive perspective. To oppose this trend would require 'critical thinking', namely reflecting on issues recognizing wider implications beyond one's own immediate concerns or satisfaction (or even partisan interests). It is akin to what Takahashi, inspired by Hannah Arendt's reflection on Nazi enforcer Adolf Eichmann, laments as lacking in contemporary society:

> Listening to Eichmann's trial, Arendt concluded that his crimes lay in 'not thinking'. Though he knew he was committing a massacre, he didn't want to think anything more of it, because that was his job. […] As for us, were we really thinking about the meaning of nuclear plants, or about the ageing population, or about the population decline? While slightly aware of the

possible issues with them, didn't we 'not think' about the future they would

bring, blinded as we were by our daily lives? (2015b: 167)

The failure to think critically results in a predicament where characters do not find common values based on recognitions of shared experiences and historical memory; thus, they cannot move forward in accordance with them, like postwar Japan is unable to apologize effectively and reunite its split identity.

With no solution envisioned, the same issues return again and again in several of Takahashi's works from the late 1990s and onwards where the above postwar shadow looms over a Japan that has 'sunk', unable to find a common ideology or identity. This is evident in Takahashi's choice of references. *Nihon bungaku seisuishi* (The History of the Rise and Fall of Japanese Literature, 2001), for example, recontextualizes modern Japanese literary history by displacing illustrious literary authors from the Meiji into contemporary settings, highlighting existential problems common to both eras, and advocating the necessity to rethink literary categories and re-establish a comprehensive historical memory that, again, seems to be lost in the isolating contemporary society.

These connections to a conflicting Japanese identity are overt even in the titles of the two works analyzed principally here. *Godira* evidently tweaks the orthography of the famous monster Gojira in Honda Ishirô's 1954 film by the same name. Again, it useful to cite Katô (2010b), who observes that the monster, rising from the waves, symbolizes the Pacific War victims who were not fully acknowledged or mourned and who, unable to go to heaven, must return to their place of origin (Japan) over and over as revenants (even in subsequent films in the franchise). Further, the fact that Gojira attacks Tokyo almost following the path of the American bombers in the city's raids, but then stops before attacking the Imperial Palace, signifies in Katô's view the pain of Japan's war dead in realizing that the revered emperor

that had dispatched them to war is no longer there to protect them as a symbol (154-155).

Alongside this interpretation, it is possible to see Takahashi's monster Godira, who supposedly holds the keys to the mysteries of the world, as a lingering symbol of Japan's loss. If Honda's monster symbolizes Japan grieving for a lost identity, Takahashi's legendary creature, who nobody has ever seen, reminds of a vague repository of Japanese identity that, however, is now irrecuperable. Similarly, the second book's title *Kimi ga yo wa chiyo ni yachiyo ni*, consisting of the first lines of the Japanese national anthem wishing for the imperial reign to continue forever, refers to a sense of common understanding of Japan, again symbolized by the emperor, which under the persistent postwar shadow seems to have become but a series of meaningless words.

Overcome by the present

This sinking of Japan in the late 1990s and onwards is taken for granted by the characters in Takahashi's works under scrutiny. The divisive postwar context of a lack of collective understanding, or sense of history, that returns to haunt people, much like Gojira attacking Tokyo, is taken to extremes in his fictional worlds where satisfying immediate needs repeatedly overwhelms any attempt of critical consideration of issues not pertaining to one's individual sphere.

In its sheer emphasis on the present, Takahashi's fiction bears some resonance with other contemporary theories, in and outside of Japan. In *Regimes of Historicity* (Régimes d'historicité, first published in 2003), French historian François Hartog argues that the current age is shaped by a sense of short-terminism, or 'presentism' (coined in contrast to futurism), where time is experienced as a never-ending present, and where only the immediate counts. Now, politics and the economy exist in their own time, blocked in a cycle of repetition where single moments resemble each other:

Political leaders are required to 'rescue' the euro, for instance–or the whole financial system, for that matter–every month or so, or at least to declare they are doing so. And this raises an even more fundamental problem: our old representative democracies are beginning to realize that they don't really know how to adapt their methods and rhythms of decision making to this tyranny of the immediate without sacrificing precisely what made them democratic in the first place. (2015: xiv)

According to Hartog, this condition has emerged also as a consequence of perceptions of rifts in time and questioning of its orders that began earlier in the twentieth century, for example the 1968 anti-capitalist protests signifying a loss of faith in time as progress, and in a future overturning the present. Such perceptions intensified dramatically in the aftermath of ground-breaking events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the collapse of the communist ideal and the rise of fundamentalist movements that have shattered suddenly and irreversibly people's relations of time.[4] It has now become difficult to demarcate past, present and future effectively. The result is an expansion of the present, which now functions like the *tota simul* advocated by St. Augustine, and by Plotinus before him, to define eternity: 'Nothing passes away but the whole is simultaneously present' (Hartog, 2015: 203). The past and the future conflate into an 'omnipresent present', becoming indistinguishable from one another.

Fredric Jameson has also notably theorized the supremacy of the present time. He (2016: 13) maintains that in late capitalism space has become omnipresent, effacing other orders of time: 'Today all politics is about real estate. Postmodern politics is essentially a matter of land grabs, on a local as well as a global scale'. Thus overcome by space, time has been reduced to the present moment. Actions are valid only in the instant they occur: '[Time] is to be found in the new flash crowds enabled by cell phones and texting: the new mass demonstrations of Seattle and of Eastern Europe, of Tahrir Square and of Wisconsin and of

Occupy. […] They are no longer the politics of duration, but the politics of the instant, of the present' (ibidem).

The physicality of the immediate submerges notions of past and future. Thus, in contrast to the ever-expanding space of the present, the sense of history is lost, and the historical past cannot be retrieved nor can the future be imagined (ibid: 13). For Jameson (2003: 712), this reduction to the present is deeply intertwined with corporeality: 'It seems clear enough that when you have nothing left but your temporal present, it also follows that you have nothing left but your own body. The reduction to the present can thus also be formulated in terms of a reduction to the body as a present of time'.

Takahashi's fiction has points of contact with the above 'omnipresence' of the present in emphasizing a reduction of the living dimension to the present and underscoring the relevance of immediate action. However, Jameson maintains that the shrinkage of perceived time to the present is a tendency never fully realized, because humans can never attain the immediacy of mind and body of animals; conversely, this study does not consider a tendency towards the complete immediacy of mind and body, but rather analyzes quick action as an attempt to fill for a moment an emotionally and ideologically empty space.

Moreover, considering that in Hartog's view presentism arose in the aftermath of ground-breaking events in the late 1980s, it is worthwhile to consider that comparable experiences in contemporary Japan may be found between 1990s and the early 2010s, demarcated by epochal events and changes that shifted the general perception of reality and time from stability and hope to one of instability and fear for the future. Such events range from the growing economic recession that led to widespread precariat and non-regular employment, to natural and man-made disasters such as the Great Hanshin Earthquake, the cult organization Aum Shinrikyô's sarin gas attack on the Tokyo underground in 1995 and, at the other end of the spectrum, the Triple Disaster of 11 March 2011.

Among the various cultural theories arisen in Japan around the epochal turmoil of 1995, sociologist Miyadai Shinji's 'endless everyday' (*owari naki nichijô*) shares similarities with Takahashi's immediate action. Miyadai (1995) maintains that in a post-Aum Japan people, especially the youth, can no longer hope to identify social models or ideologies by which to organize their life or assert their identity. Therefore, they can survive this ideologically impermanent world by indulging repetitively, practically endlessly, in activities that gratify them, without necessarily trying to find any special meaning therein. One example is *enjo kôsai* (dating with compensation), describing the practice of young women dating older men for financial benefits. However, in a later collective publication Miyadai (2007) modified his position stressing how individuals acting in such everyday still need to find a trace of meaning, a value onto which to latch in an ideologically shifting society, thus substantially different from Takahashi's repeated actions, which are usually performed in the absence of thought and in response to stimuli. Further, the writer's representation of a dominating present, despite the similarities with Miyadai and others' debates shown in this section, is fundamentally rooted in his understanding of the Japanese postwar context.

Godira

Godira is a collection of short stories set in the Shakujii neighborhood in Nerima, Tokyo, where Takahashi himself used to live with his family. The stories are not connected except for the recurring characters, ordinary people engaging in their daily lives. The postmodern setting mixes everyday urban reality with the appearance of aliens, or of talking toys, none of whom upset the population. The romanization 'Godira', appearing on the cover of the book, is used throughout this analysis.

The Shakujii neighborhood is as enclosed physically as the reality where all the action takes place is circumscribed mentally. In a postwar ideological vacuum where shared identity

or values (or the world's secrets, as they are called here) are inscrutable, the characters only care about their local reality. They cling to the immediacy of the actions directed at survival in their proximate world, both in terms of space and thought. The chapter 'O-sôji suru hito' ('The Cleaning Man') is a prime example of this. A policeman feels the constant urge for immediate action. He has a sudden epiphany, suggesting that there is a mystery hidden in the district, and that Godira holds the key to it. However, he chooses not to pursue that revelation further. Critical thought is discarded because, on the one hand, it is impossible and, on the other, because it would not amount to any valuable knowledge: 'He grasped the core of something. However, the core was all he could understand. Understanding only the core is actually the same as hardly understanding at all' (Takahashi, 2001: 22). Since the core of things amounts to the surface, only a comprehensive view means drawing near to the truth. However, this option is impossible for the policeman, who obeys the necessity for impulsive action.

The compulsive violence of shooting is not supported by a cogent suspicion or the detection of a real danger, but by the obsessive search to find a target. His victim is a man cleaning the streets of Shakujii. While the man is simply doing his job, the policeman still considers him as an outlet for his violent urges: 'I immediately feel the urge to shoot. When I was at the police box in Akihabara, a drunkard kept pestering people, so I fired twelve shots into his feet, and when I was on duty at the box in Yotsuya 3-chome, again I put twelve bullets into the legs of a pram parked without permission' (ibid: 25). The policeman has to refrain from firing, as his colleagues make him realize that the man is not suspicious. However, the urge for action again comes strongly to the fore as soon as an insight of truth forms in the officer's mind. He is struck by a feeling that the world is about to end, and he again turns his attention to his original target. That is because, parallel to Katô's argument on the opposing views on the constitution, the seemingly critical perception of the end is

fragmented, and thus insufficient: therefore, it needs to be countered by another extreme position, namely immediate action to fill the void. The policeman waits in ambush for the cleaning man to give him an excuse to shoot. He says to himself: 'Yeah, I got it. Now please hurry and commit rape or something. Otherwise I can't shoot you!' (ibid: 27). While he may be waiting for a concrete reason, he focuses primarily on action. The need for a crime is only an external factor imposed on him by the environment.

The cleaning man represents another manifestation of the repetitiveness of a present devoid of critical reflections. John Treat (2018: 280) writes that Takahashi is the Japanese novelist most interested in the 'temporality of the past *and* the future, which is not to be confused with believing there actually is one'. The cleaning man corroborates this observation by showing that the past and the future are inconsequential, as he finds solace in the satisfaction of repetition, the only means he has to survive the vacuum. He has been cleaning the streets all his life. Now that he works in Shakujii nothing has changed from when he was cleaning the roads before the Imperial Villa in Hayama; he cleans one street, then moves to another, without looking back:

> Many years had passed [from when he was in Hayama]. The man had been cleaning, as usual. He didn't look back over the past. That is, he would never look back over the places he had cleaned. That's because… because, because fallen leaves and chewing gums and empty cans fall again where he had just cleaned. If he went back each time and cleaned from the original place, he would never be able to get out of the same neighborhood. (Takahashi, 2001: 21–29)

The man engages in a repetitive activity giving him solace in his localized professional reality. While he also does this to avoid cleaning the same spots, he refrains from confronting a past that here, overburdened by the present, is impossible to reconstruct. The cleaning man

symbolizes the Japanese postwar context in which upholding one's own everyday reality is done at the expense of a wide critical confrontation with a collective past that would allow the country to assess its history fully and shape its future. In his repetition, he is negating any possibility of learning from practice, thus also denying the return of difference in the Deleuzian sense. In *Difference and Repetition* (Différence et répétition, 1968), the philosopher Gilles Deleuze proposes a temporal model where repetition is the form of time. Building on Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of eternal return, he indicates that this return is not to be intended as a cyclical repetition of the same, but of that which differs from itself or, in Nietzschean terms, of the beings whose being is becoming: 'Repetition is no more than permanence of the One than the resemblance of the many. The subject of the eternal return is not the same but the different, not the similar but the dissimilar, not the one but the many, not necessity but chance' (1994: 126). The cleaning man does follow a circular structure of time, shown in the recurrent habitual cycle of cleaning and changing locations. Yet, his refusal to critically confront the past does not involve becoming, nor the return of the ever-different as development. By not questioning his reality he forecloses any possibility for a critical development enabling him to see a purpose or even an understanding of the world around him.

This is evident when, even after an unusual encounter with a talking stuffed toy, he does not wonder about why it is there. He suspends critical thought, denying what Deleuze (1994: 147) called the creative and difference-producing power of thought that 'engender[s] "thinking" in thought' (1994: 147), and chooses satisfaction in the repetition of work in his proximate reality. Thus, he continues to exist in a perpetual living present:

> The man thought for a while. The stuffed toy can talk. Let's accept that. It can
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> happen, right? The world is large. It said he's read my poems? Everything was
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> shrouded in mystery. The world was full of mysteries. Something was strange.

The man tried to think what. Perhaps, if the man had had the attitude to think about something thoroughly at that time, he might have come near that mystery. But he wasn't that kind of man. He whispered: 'Oh, well'. He went back to cleaning. (Takahashi, 2001: 32)

The reference to poetry here is crucial. The cleaning man is named after the real poet (and scholar of classical literature) Fujii Sadakazu, whose work 'in its mixture of worlds, past and present, poetry and prose, lyricism and critical statement, […] is an attempt to "deconstruct" the past, bringing out elements of Japan's culture and literature which have been historically marginalized' (Selland, 1993: 201). Together with authors such as Hirata Toshiko and Matsuura Hisaki, Fujii is one of those poets that emerged in the 1970s and 80s postwar context, negotiating the student protests' opposite promotions of individuality and collective values, and who, as Suzuki Shiroyasu (1993: 17) writes, have produced verses asserting the importance of an individual voice 'in the face of an overwhelming mass-media flood of homogenized "expression" in which individual difference of voice and experience is as much as possible erased […] to create a psychological and spiritual desert'. Running parallel to Takahashi's own fiction to an extent, Fujii's poetic work engages with a postwar flattening, a commodification of critical thought stifling comprehensive confrontation with all possible means of expression. In *Godira*, the fact that the toy is an admirer of his poetry should make Fujii reflect that there is in fact a possibility for the development of other critical voices, but this awareness is shunned by the poet himself, who shrugs the toy's comments off, even feeling slightly envious. The cleaning man here is embodying the very postwar psychological desert to which his real-life poetry reacts.

The scene is important also because it exemplifies Takahashi's ironic stance. Fujii's disavowal of critical enquiry, both regarding creative poetry and the fact that the toy read it,

is treated with playfulness – as is Fujii's own insertion in the story. This ironic perspective, which largely pervades both *Godira* and *KGY*, and is visible in other works such as *Nihon bungaku seisuishi*, signifies a narrative engagement with Japan's postwar schizophrenia that is not overtly characterized by deprecation for a lamentable state of things, but by a playful reaction inquiring into the creative possibilities vis-à-vis the limitations of the detached present. However, Takahashi's irony, tinged with postmodernist playfulness, does not stem from detached observation, but from a participation in looking from different perspectives at a general situation that includes him too, both specifically, for example in his appearance as a character in the cleaning man's chapter, and, more broadly, in his engagement with writing on Japan which, as he has stated in a conversation, being his home country allows him to take a liberating ironic approach even when dealing with serious matters such as 3/11 (Takahashi & Sasaki, 2012: 218-219).

Throughout *Godira*'s ironic narration, the characters do not ponder the deeper nature of matters in life and remain concentrated on acting vis-à-vis their proximate realities and concerns. This may be to fill the void with repetition, or in response to stimuli for violence, as with the policeman, or for sexual gratification, for example with the protagonist of the chapter 'Nihon no poruno' (Japanese Porn), a man who is only keen to repeatedly assuage his sexual drive through masturbation or the consumption of pornographic material.

However, while the endless present shuns critical confrontation, the book still offers a glimpse of community as a possible solution to the impasse in the final episode, where one character does exert critical thought. The chapter, aptly titled 'Godira', sees the protagonist Ken'ichi, who quit his job as a policeman and now works as a construction worker, realize the dire conditions of the workplace, where the boss, always lamenting the high costs of keeping so many idle workers, might lay them off at any time. Ken'ichi knows that such complaints are repetitive: it is the circular nature of this presentist-like time. However, the

circle is broken when the man refrains from accepting the repetition of his proximate present, and reaches enlightenment by enquiring critically into his condition:

> I looked at my watch. It was still 12:20. That meant that this situation would continue for another 40 minutes. I tried to think. About many things. About the future. About life. What is life? Eating and working? Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't. Anyway, what I did understand was that this situation would be continuing for many years to come. How many years? How many tens of years? I was getting dizzy. I was reaching unconsciously for my hip. It wasn't there. The gun. Yes. I wasn't a policeman anymore. Suddenly, it dawned on me. I understood. Everything. What? The secret of the world. What! It was that? (Takahashi, 2001: 188)

The epiphany discloses the nature of the world's repetitiveness, and of the supremacy of localized realities. The new knowledge isolates Ken'ichi, because everyone else he encounters is still wrapped in the loop of the present. This includes readers too, who are denied access to the ex-policeman's revelation. Takahashi here dialogues with readers by inscribing them (and likely himself too) in the detached, divisive present undermining common critical efforts, and where mutual comprehension is not achieved. By ostentatiously denying readers a comprehensive understanding of its character's mind, *Godira* itself becomes a metafictional vehicle of its own worldview in the relationship with its audience.

The fact that Ken'ichi's vision is restricted to his perception underscores its inaccessibility to others. He realizes that things exist only insofar as he experiences them, whereas the places left outside of his localized reality disappear instantly, with one notable exception:

There's a basement, there's something in there. He is… how should I say, kind

of like a town hall registrar with a slight disability. And, as for what he's doing

in that basement, he's watching me the whole time. […] The guy controls the

world by expanding and erasing it, and circulating a lot of false information.

Therefore, to be precise, the only things truly existing in the world are me, the

basement and that guy living in the basement. (ibid: 206)

With a trick, Ken'ichi manages to destroy Godira's fabrications and reach the basement.

Now, the monster is finally revealed: a dinosaur-like creature with a big tail and sharply

pointy teeth.

Although coming from critical thinking, the final confrontation cannot lead to a

complete escape from the emphasis on proximate realities. The creature is angry at Ken'ichi

for destroying his work, especially because he did it without thinking about the consequences

of living in a world that does not exist anymore, not even as a fabrication. Having at last

realized that his localized reality has disappeared, Ken'ichi asks Godira for one last favor: to

have only his Shakujii Park restored. After granting him his wish, Godira asks: ' "Why did

you want me to restore only Shakujii Park?" "For some reason, since it's something I like".

"Just that?" "Yeah. […] What should I do from now on?" "The hell I know! If you're done,

leave at once! Don't come back ever again! So, bye-bye!" ' (ibid: 211).

This resolution illustrates that one critical effort is not sufficient to escape the cycles

of the present, thus underscoring the need to build a collective sense of community. Isolated

in the loneliness of a single revelation, Ken'ichi cannot find any way to survive other than

clinging on to a small portion of a localized reality. That is why he asks the monster to restore

only his neighborhood, exactly what he knows and sees everyday as a habit. For him,

Shakujii Park represents the comfort of the repetition of the familiar. While in the novel's

beginning the policeman rejects the critical epiphany because it would only grant him a fragment of the truth, in the end he accepts it, but is still unable to find a definitive solution in it. While the knowledge given by critical thinking lays bare the vacuum of the world for only one person, it is not sufficient to confront the ensuing nothingness. Instead, it manifests the necessity for an even greater collective effort. If Ken'ichi's case applies to others, and the world consists of different parallel localized realities, then only a joint effort to think critically about building interpersonal connections would lead to an escape out of the never-ending present. [5] With this possibility, the book engages with finding a way out of postwar Japan's predicament. If, like Gojira, Takahashi's monster also symbolizes Japan's pain for its unreconciled identity, then citizens would need to promote the radical change of forging a new critical community, where epiphanies are shared, in order to face the monster again, vanquish it and, hopefully, reconstruct a new world from the ashes of its fallen fabrications: a world where Godira does not need to appear over and over.

Kimi ga yo wa chiyo ni yachiyo ni

In the commentary to the paperback edition of this 2002 short-story collection Takahashi (2005b: 280) explains that he wanted to 'write about the people who must live in this country called Japan here and now'. This connection to Japan's contemporary state is evident from the title which, referring to the opening lyrics of the national anthem wishing for the emperor's eternal reign, shows the country's predicament under its postwar shadow, where notions of a common understanding or shared human bonds, that once may have been embodied by the emperor (for better or worse), can no longer be found anywhere. At the same time, the reference to a grandiose national symbol ironically refers to Japan's supposed greatness which, in the absurd representations of the conflicts in contemporary everyday life, is brought down to its knees.

In *KGY*'s Japan, characters cannot identify with nor understand their social roles (family, work). Similar to *Godira*, the characters deem critical thought useless, and survive by carrying out repetitive actions in their localized realities. These actions are often performed in response to violent stimuli; extreme sensations offer a tangible handhold to survive the moment without thinking critically about the vacuum. As a result, the incessant cycle of gratification of individual stimuli, a sign of failed critical confrontation with others underpinned by a shared psychological and emotional context, causes irreparable conflict in social living and manifests itself as pervasive miscommunication where words are spoken only for individual satisfaction, losing any possibility for mutual intelligibility.

In portraying these conflicts and divisions, *KGY*'s experimentation goes one step (or several) beyond *Godira*, portraying the extreme repercussions of the detached present with a playfulness often resulting in grotesque and absurd settings. For example, miscommunication is shown here through the exhausting repetition of words which become hollow labels. In the story 'Papa I love you' (sic) the protagonist, a husband and father of a girl of seven, is haunted by the fact that he cannot make sense of his familial role. This is epitomized by his obsession with the word 'incest': 'When the doctor handed him the newly-born daughter, the man unconsciously looked at her genital area. It wasn't on purpose. Somehow, he had had a bad feeling. Therefore, he had thought of looking away. However, his gaze betrayed him. There was a slit. Something like a vertical line. At that moment, the word "incest" sprang in his mind' (Takahashi, 2005a: 33). Though he is aware of his daughter's beautiful growing body, he has never seriously thought about committing incest, and yet he struggles constantly to understand this haunting thought. He is unable to escape the conflict: 'The man decided to think about something else. About other things that he would have scruples about uttering or writing. That way, he wasn't worried that the word "incest" would come up. Yet, when was it better to think? That was hard. Because that word always came as a surprise attack' (ibid:

45). The word is a stimulus that, while attacking the man with sudden impulses, is never actually connected to any factual meaning. The man's 'innocence' about incest shows a discrepancy between the meaning associated with the word and his reality. Even without any real signification, 'incest' still creates a conflict within the man due to its connotation of immoral sexual intercourse. It is an uncontrolled stimulus of a life that only amounts to the present, which repeatedly attacks and disappears, leaving no solid trace on his mind because it is born in the absence of critical thought. Nothing changes in the long run, but only the reality of repetitive haunting stays, similar to the revenant unresolved conflicts in postwar Japan.

The story brings to the extreme the problem of the failure of mutual understanding by questioning the nature and usage of words that, based only on the speaker's proximate reality without considering issues of reception, do not achieve mutually intelligible communication.[6] 'Incest' is a label conflicting with the individual perception of reality. A comparable clash happens when the father deliberately uses inappropriate language with his young daughter. When she tells him that she would like to sing and dance like the talent artists on TV, he replies: ' "Actually, they're not having fun at all". "Really?" "Yeah. You know, when the show is over and they go back to the hotel, those girls get a call from the boss. Then, when they go to the boss' room, the boss orders them to get naked. Then, the boss licks the girls' privates with his tongue, makes them lick his willy, and at times he sticks his willy into their bottom hole" ' (ibid: 47). The language, not without irony, both unmasks the absurdity of this communication and destroys the assumption that words have an appropriate context where they can be intelligible to all interlocutors. The father does not talk to be understood, but to give a shape to his localized perception of reality, oblivious to the consequences. This epitomizes the divisive climate broadly portrayed both by *KGY* and *Godira*, where the failure to confront critically and comprehensively with others, a sign of the lingering postwar

condition, prevents words from achieving long-lasting communicative effects, like the failed apologies described by Katô. Emblematically, as with Ken'ichi's epiphany, the father's words remain largely 'private', shaping a secluded reality only accessible to the speaker. This is evident when his wife protests that he should just express the normal things usually on his mind: 'She's saying odd things. The man thought so. That was because the words the man had spoken were nothing more than a fragment of the world of images where one small part of what he usually thought, one very small part of the world created by his imagination which, once it had been sterilized and the poison had been taken out, had been definitely whitewashed as a result' (ibid: 50). Words do not reach others: they merely respond to the stimulus to fill the vacuum created by the impossibility, and the futility, to adequately represent meaning. They equate to acting superficially on the moment to cover the gap momentarily through satisfying the individual need for expressing one's proximate reality.

Without real communication, the man is alienated within his family, and is only able to cope by moving from one stimulus to another. In the final act, 'incest' appears again in his mind: he feels a burning sensation welling up inside him, and realizes he needs to fight and defeat it. Suddenly, he and his daughter are kidnapped by a man with sunglasses. They are taken to a room and confronted by a drunk writer dressed in a kimono and a giggling man in pajamas. The latter tells the father he needs help with a problem that nobody else understands, for which there is no cure. The father has an epiphany that he shares the same problem and asks:

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

'incest' even once. Although he hadn't even imagined anything else! (ibid: 54–

55)

The shared problem likely refers to being trapped in the discrepancy between the word and

the reality (un)attached to it. Only the protagonist overcomes this dolorous contrast, although

by finding another stimulus, and another, in a perpetual repetition. If there is indeed a

resolution, it does not occur via a reconciliation between the meaning of words and their

relationship with reality, nor through communication with the family based on reciprocal

understanding. The danger of 'incest' is averted by submitting critical thinking to the

immediate satisfaction offered by the basic sexual stimulation: in the never-ending cycles of

the present, the man has simply fought one stimulus with a more powerful one.

Takahashi's playful experimentation of the creative possibilities of action in the

detached present in response to constant gratification, often sexual, is exemplified most

strikingly and graphically in the contiguous stories 'Chenji' (Change) 1 and 2, where a man

suddenly finds his body swapped with that of his female co-worker. The absurdity of the

situation never concedes room for critical reflection, as it is immediately seen as another way

to satisfy sexual stimuli again and again. That is why ultimately the man envisions the

practice of 'raging sex' (*dotô no sekkusu*): like him, people will exchange bodies with one

another, men and women, so that they can explore new sexual heights each time. This will

produce the definitive sexual experience, with people's cravings spreading virally. Bodies

will become just 'something to latch on to momentarily! The distinction between men and

women will become a matter of convenience!' (ibid: 202). Although the interchange between

bodies may suggest a reciprocal exploration of others, a means to attain a degree of

intersubjectivity, it is intrinsically not so here. Pornography in *KGY*, as in *Godira*, remains

anchored to the satisfaction of immediate stimuli. The bodies may change, but the characters

do not fathom a subjectivity outside of their own. This correlates to what Yasar (2009: 237) writes about the author's male-oriented pornography: 'Takahashi's utopian project of intersubjectivity, the mutual comprehensibility of self and other, seems to be intensely grounded in homosociality, if not necessarily in patriarchy per se'. In 'Chenji' and in 'Papa I Love You', no other individual pleasure is considered apart from the individual's own immediate gratification, let alone comparing it with that of women as subjects.[7]

In *KGY*'s endless present characters avoid critical confrontation with life and their fellow humans, acting in response to their immediate individual concerns. This attitude only entails individual survival. That is why, when certain characters manage to escape the cycles of this never-ending present and of the absurdities of life, they do so either through homicidal madness ('Kichiku', Brutal Man) or through death, as in 'Mother Father Brother Sister'. However, as in *Godira*'s ending, these solutions never amount to a structured escape, because they are solitary activities that do not entail communal action and change at a wider level.

However, *KGY* also hints at the possibility of building something in contrast to the dominating present that may encompass community, as exemplified in the story 'Kimi ga yo wa chiyo ni yachiyo ni'. Here, a taxi driver named Hal witnesses the fight to the death of famous political and religious figures such as Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, Gandhi and even Jesus Christ. As it often happens in Takahashi's works, personalities from the past appear in the present, without it being surprising.[8] The former God had a neurosis and vanished, so the current one organized a *battle royale* to see which ideology would prevail, as all others proved weak in the vacuum. Similar to other stories in *KGY*, the struggle for individual survival is crucial. However, as is predictable in this world where common ideologies do not exist, all fighters and their ideas die. Only localized realities survive. Tellingly, when the driver approaches God after the mayhem, all he cares about is being paid for his trip; despite

the defeat of grand narratives, he just needs what pertains to upholding the individual familiar reality of his job.

However, although the story shows the isolation created by the supremacy of the immediate and of personal survival over critical thought, in the background there is still a longing for community and shared ideals. This feeling is visible in the ending when, after taking a new customer, Hal reflects on the slaughter and starts humming the Japanese national anthem. Although the passenger does not know Jesus Christ or Hitler, he thinks he has somehow heard the song before. This shows that ultimately, even if under the lingering shadow of postwar divisions, where all ideologies crumble and only the immediate survives, people still long for a faint notion of a Japanese ideal, of a narrative that may join them all, as symbolized by the anthem and its reference to the emperor's reign as a repository of a perceived shared identity. Though distant and possibly irrecuperable, there is still hope for personal ties that may last. On the one hand, *Kimi ga yo* may well be a title that parodies the impossible struggle of the common Japanese in an omnipresent present; on the other, it is the echo of the longing for a community to counter the isolation.

Such awareness is elicited in the reader too. Emphasized through graphic descriptions, the force of immediate stimuli in the absence of thought affects the audience too. As a reviewer suggests, disgusting scenes like the one where a group of children watches a porn video where two women make each other vomit are also intended as a strong simulation instigating the readership to reflect on life in contemporary Japan (Nagae, 2002: 286–287). By using shock factors to highlight the extreme disconnection in this world of the present, the book proposes change through establishing ties and communication with others.

Conclusion: ties to a future

Godira and *KGY* reveal mentally and physically secluded worlds where characters perpetuate repetitive activities in a seemingly everlasting present. This situation is affected by the vision of an underlying postwar context of a split Japan unable to comprehend its crucial issues fully, thus condemned to relive these same contrasts repeatedly without effective solutions. In his literature, Takahashi exacerbates this predicament through a crisis of perceptions of orders of time, where individuals, deprived of principles guiding their existences, survive without critically enquiring into the meaning of their lives, performing repetitive actions to uphold their localized realities.

As regards temporal settings, scholars such as Treat (2018) and Yasar (2018) have highlighted how the writer, particularly in reference to *Nihon bungaku seisuishi*, makes the past, symbolized by great men, emerge into the present, creating a dimension where both coalesce. While to some extent this is true also for *Godira*, (where Meiji writer Mori Ôgai appears in Shakujii), and *KGY* (the battle of historical figures), here it contributes to representing an indefinite present dimension where only the immediate counts. Moreover, Treat (2018: 291) writes that with such existential setting in *Seisuishi*, Takahashi signifies a disappearance of the future:

> [Takahashi] thinks about the future and its slow cancellation in a process that began some time ago. […] Time in *Seisuishi* loops back onto itself, short-circuiting future-time. 'Future' here refers not solely to the direction of time, but instead to the loss of the expectation of progress in postbubble, post-Fukushima Japan. Really new things simply do not happen anymore.

However, though the disappearance of a future seen as progress is mostly internalized in the worlds of *Godira* and *KGY*, still the possibility of rebuilding a community with fellow beings is a tantalizing possibility to find a handhold to imagine a future outside of the crises of the

present. A re-establishment of communal ties can motivate a definite change outside of the monotony of repetition, burdened by postwar Japan's unresolvedness and disconnections. While in the end community is not achieved, still its relevance is expressed by the failure of single critical efforts that remain sterile.

The relationship between community and this detached present provides an important analytical lens to recontextualize the reading of other works in Takahashi's vast *oeuvre* such as *'Aku' to tatakau* (Fighting with 'Evil', 2010), where children are repeatedly required to act in incomprehensible situations to understand the suffering of a little girl, and thus save the world. At the same time, this combination may be applied to later works by other authors, as it essentially foreshadows the emphasis on the rediscovery of personal bonds with others, a fundamental trait in the discourse on literature after 11 March 2011 and its relationship with *kizuna* (bonds).[9] That is because in Takahashi's fictional world the past and the future may well be indiscernible, but in the end humanity's best chance at survival remains to bet on its neighbors.

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[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from non-English sources are the author's own.

[2] This definition is also informed by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies's theorization of *Gemeinschaft* (community) seen in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Community and Society, 1887).

[3] An exhaustive discussion of Takahashi's articulation of postwar Japan, let alone a general history of these debates from other sources too, is a broad topic whose careful analysis would exceed the focus of this article. Therefore, discussion is circumscribed to sources directly relevant for the present literary analysis.

[4] See also: (Gauchet, 2002; Pomian, 1999).

[5] The urgency of recreating communities from zero is highlighted tellingly by Takahashi also in his non-fiction. Citing works dealing with the need to change the meaning of words in politics to reflect a new reality, Takahashi (2015a: 81, 83) summarizes that if the core of movements such as populism is to restrict people's intellectual creativity and freedom by attaching ready-made labels (that of 'minorities'), 'What we need now, even more than

to criticize that, is to create a new cooperation, to create a new meaning of "people". […] We can only create everything from scratch: words, "families" and politics. There is no other future'.

[6] The question of words' failure to communicate is a recurrent one in Takahashi's *oeuvre*. For example, as Treat (2018: 300–301) describes, the short-story collection *Dôbutsuki* (Animal Chronicle, 2015) portrays a future where humans have surrendered speech to animals.

[7] That said, in the later *Koi suru genpatsu* pornography and eros will indeed be described as a way to interact fully and explore the pleasure of other human beings, be they men or women, dead or alive.

[8] Other notable examples are *Nihon bungaku seisuishi* and *Kannô shôsetsuka* (A Voluptuous Novelist, 2002).

[9] See for example: (Tokita, 2015).

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