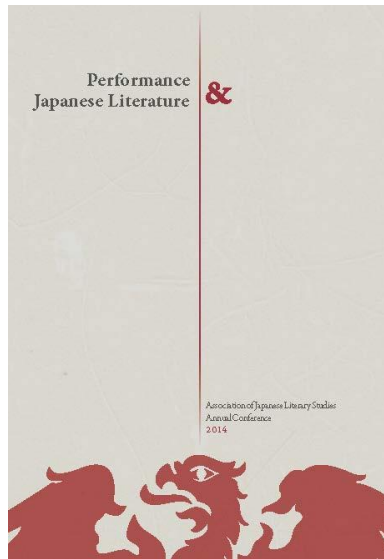


“Cities in the Clouds: Theatrical Perspectives on
Tension Between Rebirth and Return in the Post-
3/11 Utopic Imaginary”

Justine Wiesinger 

*Proceedings of the Association for Japanese
Literary Studies* 15 (2014): 153–160.



PAJLS 15:

Performance and Japanese Literature.

Ed. Michael Bourdaghs, Hoyt Long, and Reginald Jackson

Cities in the Clouds: Theatrical Perspectives on Tension between Rebirth and Return in the Post-3/11 Utopian Imaginary

Justine Wiesinger
Yale University

The intellectual and artistic response to the unprecedented triple disaster that began in March, 2011 in northeastern Japan was not slow. The speed with which new plays directly or obliquely addressing the calamities were produced allowed the dramatic texts to enter directly into the post-disaster discourse variously conducted on television, in print media and across social media platforms. On the stage, the emotions and preconceptions of Japanese people in the post-disaster moment were, as in life, not cleanly separated from ostensibly objective problem-solving strategies. Among those Japanese post-disaster plays that I saw in 2011 and 2012, some documented the horror of the catastrophes themselves, but more were focused on the dreadful question that arose in the aftermath: *what ought we to do from here?* As much as the disasters represented tragedy, for many thinkers they also represented opportunity; not only a call to action, but also a chance to re-imagine Japanese society and infrastructure from a conceptually “clean” slate.

Destruction offers the choice between rebuilding with the goal of replicating what has been lost, or building something new from the ground up. Looking first at the latter option, existing social, political, and economic models have been frequently questioned in the wake of disasters, especially on the stage.¹ The examples I will discuss today all come from little theater, which in many ways was best equipped to respond quickly and directly to the disasters. These plays were enacted in small, intimate spaces (Ikebukuro’s Theater Green and Nakano’s The Pocket Theater) by semi-professional and student groups with limited budgets. Independent of major external fundraising considerations, these groups were able to quickly create and stage simple performances that responded not only to the disasters but also to nearly up-to-the-minute political realities in Japan and the world, intertwining social and environmental concerns with ongoing events such as the Occupy Wall Street movement.

In Setoyama Misaki’s *Yubi (Finger)*², a play in which a man and woman mime picking over the disaster’s wreckage in search of salvageable goods on an empty stage, the couple’s arguments over the moral uncertainties of their current occupation call into question the ethics of ownership, appropriation, and the

¹ For one example, see Akita Ujaku’s *Gaikotsu no Buchō*, a leftist excoriation of the colonial racism that led to the massacre of Koreans following the 1923 Great Kantō Earthquake. Akita Ujaku, “*Gaikotsu no Buchō*,” *Engeki Shinchō* (April, 1924): 28-49.

² *Yubi*, written and directed by Setoyama Misaki. The Pocket Theater, Nakano, Tokyo, November 27-December 2, 2011.

objectification of the dead in a capitalist society. In Nishio Kaori's *Onesho-numa no owaranai atatakasa ni tsuite* (*Regarding the Unending Warmth of Bedwetting Bog*)³, a group of women flee the city and their former jobs, creating their own independent community in a remote bog, remaining aloof from corporate and urban society despite knowing that the land they have settled oozes poison. The contamination is made visible to the audience in the form of an overflowing bucket of yellow paint that continuously drips and dribbles symbolic poison down into a kiddie pool center stage throughout the performance. In these plays, the social order is also restructured, as women largely become ascendant. The woman in *Yubi* questions her male partner's right to dictate her morals, and in the end draws her own moral code (inevitably also a code of economic ethics) which the man consents to obey. Though her brand of compassionate profiteerism, acknowledging a certain personhood belonging to the dead (through the act of warming the corpse's hand rather than enacting violence upon the body to extract her profit) while still freely profiting through the appropriation of the property of the dead, may be hypocritical, it is presented as the first time that she has contravened the commands of her man or questioned the ethical status quo under which they have been operating, which declares the dead to be objects upon which any act may be acceptably committed by the living in the name of survival. In *Onesho-numa*, the women exclude all men from permanent membership in their society, except for one, whom they dominate, dressing him in women's clothing and assigning him the domestic responsibilities of their settlement. These are examples of what we might call the model of "rebirth," at one end of the post-disaster utopic spectrum: old values and systems are questioned, and new societies are imagined, following new or rearranged moral and social orders. Utopic in their realizations or not, these imaginary societies are conceptualized as discontinuous with the present one. A break is required, and the new orders are, if not superior to the old, distinctly different, positing a future that (at least ideally) will not mirror the past.

However, an equally powerful regressive force is also in play both in these scripts and in society at large. In the aftermath of the disasters, a large vocabulary of similar, yet variously nuanced, words relating to recovery has been deployed: *fukkatsu*: a revitalization, *fukkyū*: a reversion to a past state, *fukkō*: a restoration, *saisei*: a rebirth, and so on. As pointed out by Senō Kenichirō in *Chūō-kōron*⁴, *fukkyū* in the sense of "polishing existing models" is not the only possibility for recovery after disaster. "Rebirth" and "return," though often spoken of in the same breath, pull in temporally opposite directions. Earlier, I gave some examples of moments in the post-disaster plays that reach toward the "rebirth" ideal by implicitly or explicitly rejecting features of the status quo, substituting conceptions of society that at least appear new or different.

³ *Onesho-numa no owaranai atatakasa ni tsuite*, written and directed by Nishio Kaori. Theater Green, Ikebukuro, Tokyo. October 19-24, 2011

⁴ Senō Kenichirō. "Shinsai fukkō ni wa hatten shikō de nozome." *Chūō-kōron* (May, 2011): 70-77.

The “return” ideal, on the other hand, is a conservative desire to revert to the moment before destruction, wiping out memory of the disasters in an effort to overcome the events themselves.

On stage, however, characters did not seek to rebuild edifices (thereby physically reproducing the past and glossing over the rupture of disaster), but rather to regress to a safe social and/or emotional space (in order to enact the same process psychologically). In *Onesho-numa*, the adult women living in a poisonous landscape behave like children rather than adults, shirking the overwhelming responsibilities of work, childcare, and attention to the environment, at one point (for example) cavorting, childlike, to a chanted nonsense verse while ignoring the crises being experienced by the settlement’s two children. They seem not even to entertain the possibility that the children who “mysteriously” appear may have been produced from their own bodies, nor do they acknowledge the seeping environmental poisons as a problem that must be confronted, but gradually succumb to their environment instead. The play gives us evidence that these women once functioned “normally” in adult urban society⁵, so it is evident that rather than ignorance or innocence, what we are seeing is deliberate or pathological regression⁶, perhaps triggered by the insurmountable environmental dangers surrounding the women in their new home. Lacking the ability to combat the poison in their environment themselves, as well as being disconnected from any form of government or larger social body that could intervene, the women can only cope with the problem through mechanisms of psychological self-defense, resulting in a preference for a return to a comfortable past.

It is worth emphasizing that forward- and backward-looking tendencies generally appear side-by-side in post-disaster theater. On stage, the distinction between forward- and backward-looking reactions is not always as clear as one would suppose. These plays reveal complex worlds of political and psychological instability, oscillating between progressive and reactionary ideals in quest of utopia. Characters in these and other post-disaster plays alternately or simultaneously call for re-evaluations of national values and practices, seeking change and new beginnings, while also attempting to erase the scars of disaster and social calamity by reverting to childlike states or attempting to return the nation to its pre-disaster condition. The ideals of both ends of the spectrum exert power over those in the post-disaster moment who attempt to imagine

⁵ The women recount that they have held jobs, had romantic/sexual relationships, and so on, however unhappy those circumstances may have been.

⁶ I wish to employ this term unbound from strict psychoanalytical definitions to mean a movement backward in time or development, although this would seem to imply a teleological norm for individual and social development. I do not wish to claim that people or societies must necessarily undergo a linear progression toward some ideal that is being subverted, but rather that, for good or for ill, a conscious or unconscious attempt at the repetition of some past state is taking place, which is not congruent with the libidinal emphasis of Freud’s concept of regression.

a better future. Indeed, even recovery plans have presented both tendencies at once in states of co-presence or flux. However, as we shall see, the lure of both ends of the utopic spectrum tends to become less visible when concealed in the texts of ostensibly practical solutions for recovery, though planners operate under the same mechanisms of defense and desire that drive their theatrical counterparts.

Besides the ideals of utopia built on novelty and on the reversion to the moment before disaster, there is a third, less visible option: neither rebuilding former structures (social or physical) as they were in the moment before disaster nor inventing new structures, but harking further back to the (real or imagined) past. Just as the women in *Onesho-numa* attempt to seek solace from overwhelming problems by moving backwards into adolescence and childhood, in Matsueda Yoshinori's *Nihon no owari* (*The End of Japan*)⁷, a politician attains popularity (aided, significantly, by a little girl), when he proposes a plan that will turn back the clock on modernity. In order to solve Japan's social ills, he proposes that the nation be subdivided once more into its pre-modern administrative domains (*han*), chopping the nation up into theoretically independent units that would supposedly ameliorate social and economic problems by making people more interdependent on a local level.⁸ By using a middle-school student as his spokesperson, the politician is able to imbue his vision with a less conservative image, leveraging the girl's youth to project the past onto the future in a seemingly viable manner. Of course, the plan depends upon a relatively rosy conception of the Tokugawa past as having been less troubled than the present. It is in moments of upheaval—this November, 2011 play having appeared in just such a moment—when nostalgia is at its most appealing. The politician offers no specific evidence that his plan would be effective, nor even that society functioned appreciably better when divided into *han* than it does now; the proposal's appeal rests largely on the fact that it would allow people to turn their backs on recent physical, social and economic disasters by returning to a time when such events supposedly did not occur.

⁷ *Nihon no owari*, written and directed by Matsueda Yoshinori. The Pocket Theater, Nakano, Tokyo, November 27-December 2, 2011.

⁸ None of the three plays discussed within this paper explicitly mentions the 3.11 disasters (although the program notes for *Onesho-numa* make reference to them, as do the program notes for *Yubi*. The website for the Minamoza group which performed *Yubi* further specifies that the play is set on "March 12." (<http://minamoza.com/history.html>, last modified 2012)). The links with the disaster are more obvious in *Yubi* and *Onesho-numa*, but I contend that *Nihon no owari* is involved in the same processes found in the other two works, (especially given its resonance with reconstruction plans as discussed below). *Owari* mentions current events like the Occupy movement, but the 3.11 disasters are conspicuous in their absence from the frenetic social and political discourse. Still, the references to current events situate *Owari* in the post-disaster timeframe, and indeed the disaster's absence from political discussion may accurately reflect the lack of helpful response on the part of politicians following the disaster, and the silences elected or imposed regarding questions of responsibility, silence not necessarily being reflective of disinterest. It is my view that the social anxieties and utopic zeal in this play are impelled by the recent disasters. *Owari* was presented directly after the post-apocalyptic scene presented in *Yubi*, on the same program.

Although Matsueda spoke in a post-performance talk of intending to portray his politician as a “*tadashii Hittorā*,” or “correct Hitler,” the reactionary proposal does not ring *tadashii* (especially in the sense of “upright” or “righteous,” as shall be elaborated below) at all, offering only a chance to deny present suffering by pursuing an imaginary past, and ignoring the national in favor of the local.

On the stage, the problems of uncritical regression and reversion are evident: the women of *Onesho-numa* regain the carefree exemptions from social responsibility that they enjoyed in childhood, but refusing to face up to environmental problems and the care owed to other members of their society (especially children, who represent the future of the settlement) eventually dooms them to sink to their deaths in a poisonous morass. The politician in *Nihon no owari* produces a plan for Japan that demands the nation’s very dismantling, its eponymous end, in the pursuit of the sort of nostalgic naïveté that might be embraced by middle-school students, based on the sole belief that the past must have been preferable to the present simply because the problems do not appear to have been the same. When recovery plans are proffered on the “nonfictional,” written page, however, the gaps in such thinking not being visibly embodied by human beings whose biases and character flaws are evident to us, progressive “rebirth” vocabulary can mask a proposal’s conservative blind spots even more efficiently than a middle-school spokes-girl gives a sense of future to a reactionary politician’s master plan.

These post-disaster plays offer us a lens which we can use to view post-disaster reconstruction or restructuring plans with additional critical distance. As an example, I will discuss my reading of the *Reconstruction Plan Beta: Cloud City*⁹ vision put forward by Fujimura Ryūji¹⁰ and the Tōyō University Fujimura Ryūji Laboratory, which for me took on an entirely new character when read in light of Matsueda’s *Nihon no owari*.

Fujimura’s plan proposes a new organization of urban space based on the trendy concept of “cloud” computing. In addition to planning the construction of new, “twenty-four hour” cities economically and physically focused around data centers, the plan goes on to suggest “risk hedging at the national level,” necessitating the division of Japan into “self-sustainable economic

⁹ Fujimura Ryūji. “Fukkō keikaku beta: kumo no toshi/Reconstruction Plan Beta: The Cloud City.” *Shisō Chizu Beta 2* (Fall, 2011): 38-50.

¹⁰ Tōyō University lector Fujimura is not necessarily Tokyo’s leading architect, but besides being published in Azuma Hirōki’s journal *Shisō Chizu Beta* and running his own *Roundabout Journal*, Fujimura has also co-authored a book on the subject of post-3.11 social and architectural restructuring. He was noted in the press for backing the controversial plan to preserve the Fukushima Dai-Ichi reactor site as a tourist site/museum, along with Azuma and others. I examine his proposal here not because it is the most likely plan to be put into action in the next few years, but as a case study of certain resonances I find in supposedly fact-based, practical post-disaster recovery planning with the reaction to the disasters as enacted on the stage. Fujimura Ryūji and Miura Atsushi. *3.11-go no Kenchiku to Shakai Desain*. Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2011.; Yutaka Shiokura, “Locals divided over ‘disaster museum’ proposal for Fukushima plant.” *Asahi Shinbun*, March 29, 2013. Accessed February 13, 2014, <http://ajw.asahi.com/article/0311disaster/recovery/AJ201303290008>.

zones” centered on eight supposedly “safe” inland locations.¹¹ Though not requiring the three hundred units proposed by Matsueda’s politician, Fujimura’s plan does envision a decentralized society as the automatic site of “bottom-up *machizukuri*,” placing much of the responsibility for solving economic and organizational ills on what is imagined to be the endemic volunteerist spirit of locally-organized society.¹² The Fujimura plan does not cite its reasons for positing that citizens will necessarily be more active and willing to take on administrative duties in an economically-decentralized Japan than they are in a centralized nation, but recalling *Nihon no owari*’s similar rhetoric¹³ suggests that the ideal vision of the pre- or early-modern *machi* lies at the heart of the assumption. Early-modern *machi* society may have been more economically self-sustaining on the local level than contemporary society is, with our increased reliance on national and global supply chains, but the concomitant image of a necessarily cooperative, volunteerist, more socially-conscious society issuing from de-coupling an administrative/economic unit from the center, or the larger nation, is unsupported and at least partially based on nostalgic idealization.

Furthering the idealization of citizens as conceptualized by Fujimura’s plan is a process of dehumanization: people are likened to data and the proposal is made to rationalize them accordingly. Not only does the plan seek to neutralize the inefficiencies of a “tree-based” model by locally concentrating physical gathering places and industry as data is centralized on “cloud” servers, but the proposal also suggests that decentralizing resources and multiplying centers of industry will insulate the nation from the effects of future disasters. While this sounds wise, the danger in reducing people and resources to data is the callousness it might promote. A bad sector in a hard drive can be quarantined so that the rest of the system can go on to function as usual, the sort of efficiency that this plan seeks to emulate on a national scale. While it seems rational to spare the nation from the logistical interruptions caused by regional disasters, the national necessity to repair these interruptions in order to minimize disruptions across the country incentivizes widespread aid for rebuilding in the damaged area(s). Local self-sufficiency appears to be desirable, but the lack of dependence on national networks might weaken both the incentive and the infrastructure available for sending aid to disaster areas. Cloud caches of websites allow broken servers to be worked around in order to ensure the smooth transfer of data, keeping users from ever knowing that service has been interrupted, but this model is not necessarily the ideal for a human system, where redundancy fail-safes still cannot account for individual lives. The fictional 300-*han* proposal shares a similar weakness: while local communities *might* be strengthened, there is no reason to believe that this spirit would extend to the nation as a whole,

¹¹ Fujimura, *Cloud City*, 44.

¹² *Ibid.*, 50

¹³ Especially pages 21-23 in the printed script.

where long-distance networks of interdependency might conversely be broken down. Within the proposed system, there are any number of scenarios in which one or a few regions would become weakened and it would be undesirable or impossible for the nation's other zones to aid them. Individual human lives are scaled out of the top-down models which favor geographical units that can mask catastrophic disaster in one area by leaving others relatively untouched. This compartmentalization of disaster stymies the national-scale progressive instincts awakened in the post-disaster moment, fortifying the status quo against disruption by nature or accident (for the majority, and the majority only).

Turning back to the theater, we can see that while *Onesho-numa* and *Nihon no owari* have few explicit links, it is possible to read *Onesho-numa* as the failed test-case of the proposals made by the fictional politician Nishimura (and the real-life architect Fujimura). The women in *Onesho-numa* have formed their own nostalgia-fantasy *machi* of the kind longed for by Nishimura and Fujimura: their society appears to be largely independent and although they are occasionally visited by an itinerant merchant named Marcos, they have little to no contact with metropolitan economy or infrastructure. Of course, the constant dripping of poisonous slime undermines the imagination of their eco-friendly matriarchal cooperative village as idyllic, and the behavior of the citizens of this locally-focused community is even more troubling. Instead of “bottom-up *machizukuri*,” responsibilities lapse as the women are unwilling or unable to fulfill their duties as local citizens, to the point that environmental dangers are allowed to persist unchecked, and almost everyone in the community dies. It is important to note that, in this decentralized community, the lack of responsibility structures applies especially to the national government. The women did not bring the poison to their land, but there is no central society to which they can turn to address the problem. The lack of government interference in the women's lives may allow them some freedoms, but it also keeps the national government conveniently invisible when questions of responsibility for the environment and its effect on citizens are raised. The problems in *Onesho-numa* are much larger than the community of six or seven living there, but the invisibility/absence of social structures beyond the local community makes redress impossible. In this case, it is not only the people of other regions who are permitted to ignore local environmental catastrophes; the government itself is absolved of responsibility.

My argument is not that plans seeking to hedge national risk by strengthening the local, or even those which look to the past for inspiration, are necessarily wrong or lacking in utility. Rather, I argue that post-disaster drama illuminates the psychological tensions at play in the aftermath of catastrophe, in some cases revealing the emotional background of supposedly rational/scientific planning. If the Cloud City “risk-hedging” plan is flawed, we can see in it the allure of idealized pre-modern local community, papered over by futuristic computing terminology that considers people as well as resources as analogous to data. Moreover, that reduction of people to data demonstrates the

pitfalls inherent in progressivism proposed for the sake of novelty. What I have called “forward-looking” perspectives are no less plagued by preconceptions and fantasy (and no less likely to count people as expendable) than are those which seek to revert to an idealized “historical” social organization. In either case, it behooves us to continue to read the scientific and the administrative against the literary, remembering that real-life politicians, scientists and architects are as prone to the charm of regressive escapism based on fine-sounding analogy and buzzword-peppered futuristic utopia-hunting as are their dramatized counterparts.