Apocalyptic Imagination: Sekaikei Fiction in Contemporary Japan

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/02/01/apocalyptic-imagination-sekaikei-fiction-in-contemporary-japan/

MOTOKO TANAKA, FEB 1 2013

Benedict Anderson calls the concept of a communal space in which ideologies are supported and social norms are defined "imagined communities," that is, virtual communal spaces in which individuals can meet others and which exceed the limitations of existing village communities; Anderson explains that cultural imaginations create such communal space. Grand narratives such as ideologies and cultural/political movements have been shared by various types of imagined communities.[1] Until the 1980s, people communicated in a modern communal space supported by modern ideologies that forced each member to share the reality created by grand narratives or worldviews. However, once the premise of grand narratives was no longer trusted since the 1980s due to the end of the Cold War and postmodernization, it became increasingly difficult to communicate by relying on consensus in these imagined communities. In the case of contemporary Japan, the two apocalyptic incidents of 1995, the Kobe Earthquake[2] and the Subway Sarin Incident[3], decisively made Japanese society as an imagined community insecure and unreliable.

Critic and playwright Betsuyaku Minoru refers to this communal space as the middle ground, and claims that its role in fiction has changed. Whereas the distance that one can touch/feel is the foreground, the distance that refers to something very far away, such as the world/universe or transcendence, is the background. It can be argued that the role of the middle ground, which mediates between the foreground and the background, weakened in the late 1980s as Japan got further postmodernized, and people started to connect issues in the foreground with issues in the background, bypassing the middle field.[4] Philosopher and critic Azuma Hiroki explains this phenomenon of the loss of communal space where one can meet others outside of limited communities as the weakening of the Symbolic in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms. He comments that Japanese youth tend to focus on their families and love relationships and on apocalyptic catastrophe in the world or universe, but rarely on society or the wider community outside their close relationships. According to Lacan, a close relationship belongs to the world of the Imaginary, and a far-off and abstract issue such as the end of the world belongs to the world of the Real. The world which mediates the Imaginary and the Real is the Symbolic, and it is usually represented as larger communities, societies and nation-states. Azuma claims that the imaginations of the younger generation combine "the Imaginary" directly with "the Real."[5] In fact, the weakening of the Symbolic or the middle ground brings the birth of a new apocalyptic imagination called "*sekaikei*" in Japan after 1995.

Sekaikei, roughly meaning "the motif of the crisis of the world," is a neologism referring to subcultural works of animation, manga, games and light novels[6] on the combined theme of apocalyptic crisis and school romance.[7] Works in the *sekaikei* genre increased after the boom of the animation *Neon Genesis Evangelion*,[8] and *sekaikei* continued to be one of the main motifs in Japanese subculture in the 2000s. Many see in these *sekaikei* works the unmistakable influence of *Evangelion*, so the *sekaikei* phenomenon is also referred to as the Post-Evangelion Syndrome. Representative *sekaikei* works according to this definition include the animation *Hoshi no koe* (The Voices of a Distant Star; 2002) by Shinkai Makoto (b. 1973);[9] the manga *Saishū heiki kanojo* (Saikano: The Last Love Song on This Little Planet; 2000-2001) by Takahashi Shin (b. 1967);[10] and the light novel *Iriya no sora, UFO no natsu* (Iriya's Sky, Summer of the UFOs; 2001-2003) by Akiyama Mizuhito (b. 1971).[11]

In a narrow sense, *sekaikei* works deal with situations in which the foreground (love between the always male protagonist and the heroine) is directly connected to the background (apocalyptic crisis and the end of the world)

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without the mediation of the middle ground, such as communities and societies. The apocalyptic crises depicted are usually wars with the potential to end the world or even the universe, and the actions and crises of the protagonist and the heroine are synchronized with this fate. Society, nations, states, or international institutions are largely absent or even non-existent.[12] Not only the middle ground, but also Otherness are largely absent from *sekaikei* fiction; heroines in the narratives often play the role of mother to the protagonists; and the love of the empowered heroines for the adolescent male protagonists is often depicted as unconditional. Secondary characters are mirrors or shadows of the protagonist, whom they never seriously confront. Also, the reasons for the apocalyptic crisis are rarely explained at all in *sekaikei* stories, and there are almost no detailed explanations of wars. Characters in the narratives do not know what is righteous or evil, for moral norms cannot be structured without the presence of or reference to the Symbolic.

Why has *sekaikei* fiction become so popular among young males in the early 2000s? One explanation is that the attraction of *sekaikei* works is related to the phenomenon of acute social withdrawal known as *hikikomori* that began to be recognized as a serious social problem in Japan in the late 1990s. *Hikikomori* (literally pulling away, used to describe both the phenomenon and its sufferers) refers to the phenomenon of individuals choosing to completely withdraw from social life, often seeking extreme isolation and confinement. The dominant nexus of *hikikomori* centers on the transformation from carefree youth to the responsibilities and expectations of adult life. When psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki conducted a major study on the phenomenon in 1998 he estimated the number of *hikikomori* at around one million,[13] but by 2005 the number had grown to 1.6 million, sixty to eighty percent of them male. The most recent study of *hikikomori*, the first nation-wide study by the government, estimates the number of *hikikomori* at around 700,000, with an additional 1.55 million so-called semi-*hikikomori*.[14]

Another social problem, the worsening employment situation for youth since the burst of the asset price bubble, is also related to the *sekaikei* worldview. Between the late 1990s and 2005, downsizing and unemployment increased and the number of people seeking jobs exceeded the demand for employees. This situation led to an increase in the number of young freeters and NEETs. Freeter is a Japanese term for people between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four who lack full-time employment or are unemployed, excluding homemakers and students; they may also be described as "permanent part-timers." These young people do not start a career after high school or university but instead usually live with their parents as so-called "parasite singles," and work at low-skilled and low-paid jobs. The low income they earn makes it difficult for freeters to start their own families, and their lack of qualifications makes it difficult for them to get full-time jobs later in their lives. It is estimated that the number of freeters in 2005 was around two million. It is true that some young people willingly chose more flexible work-styles, including part-time and freelance options. But this was mainly because the government at that time period could not offer concrete policies to alleviate the unemployment and underemployment of youth.[15] NEET was originally a United Kingdom government acronym for people currently "Not in Education, Employment or Training." In Japan, the classification comprises people aged between fifteen and thirty-four who are unemployed, unmarried, not enrolled in school or engaged in housework, and not seeking work or the technical training needed for work. It is estimated that there were about 847,000 NEETs in 2006. The increase in NEETs means that there are large numbers of non-*hikikomori* who are not willing to work or prepare for independence.[16]

The *hikikomori* phenomenon and the increase of freeters and NEETs show that it is difficult for Japanese youth, especially males, to accept their social role as adults; they cannot attain proper social status as mature members of society. Young males may feel overwhelmed by contemporary postmodern Japanese society, or be unable to fulfill their expected social roles as they have not yet formulated the sense of personal *honne* and *tatemae*—"true self" and "public façade" —necessary to cope with the paradoxes of adulthood. These analyses can be applied to the increase in freeters and NEETs; these youth are supported by their parents, and do not have a firm intention to become independent and mature. These complicated factors led Japanese youth in the mid-1990s to withdraw from social relationships and from establishing mature identities as members of society.

According to Lacan, children mature as they learn that they are not omnipotent: in other words, one becomes gradually mature as one accepts one's lack of power and experiences resignation and loss.[17] *Sekaikei* works circumvent this process of becoming, and seem instead to affirm withdrawal and refusal of maturity. In this regard, it is natural that *sekaikei* began to appear in conjunction with the *hikikomori* phenomenon and the rise of freeters and

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NEETs in late 1990s Japan. *Sekaikei* works satisfy the desire of omnipotence by allowing their protagonists to indirectly control the world through their empowered girlfriends and negate the experiences of resignation, refusal and loss.

Thus, it is unsurprising that apocalyptic imagination of contemporary Japanese male youth comes to include no meaningful social interaction or Otherness. Accordingly, most stories with apocalyptic themes do not describe the world after the crises have passed, for they do not deal with change through growth. Without meaningful inter-subjective relationships and confrontations there can be no substantial communities and societies sustained. Japanese *sekaikei* apocalypse has thus paradoxically established itself as apocalypse without Otherness, change and maturity; it seems headed for endless, changeless post-apocalypse.

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[1] Benedict Anderson, *Sōzō no kyōdōtai* (Imagined Communities), trans. Shiraishi Saya and Shiraishi Takashi (Tokyo: NTT shuppan, 1997), 18-28.

[2] The Great Hanshin Earthquake (the Kobe Earthquake as it is more commonly known outside Japan) occurred on January 17 in the southern part of Hyōgo Prefecture. Over six thousand people died and nearly 44,000 were injured. Old houses made of wood collapsed, and infrastructure such as highways, railways, electrical systems, gas and water supplies, and the telephone network were widely and severely damaged. More than 300,000 people were left homeless. This was Japan's worst natural disaster since the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, causing some ten trillion yen in damage, equivalent to 2.5% of Japan's GDP at the time.

[3] The sarin nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway (known in Japan as the Subway Sarin Incident) is an act of domestic terrorism perpetrated by members of Aum Shinrikyō on March 20. The police initially said that the attack was an attempt by the cult to hasten the apocalypse, while during the subsequent trial of those responsible the prosecution said that it was intended to bring down the government and install Matsumoto as the emperor of Japan. In five coordinated attacks during the morning rush hour, members of Aum released sarin gas on several lines of the Tokyo Metro. At least a dozen people died on that day and in the ensuing days, while over five thousand were treated at hospitals, including some fifty with severe to critical injuries and nearly a thousand who suffered temporary vision problems. This was and remains the most serious attack to occur on Japanese soil since World War II.

[4] Betsuyaku Minoru, "Chūkei no sōshitsu" (The Loss of the Middle Ground), in *Uma ni notta tange sazen* (Tokyo: Libroport, 1986), 10-13.

[5] Azuma Hiroki, "Yūbinteki fuantachi" (Postal Anxieties), in *Yūbinteki fuantachi#* (Tokyo: Asahi shinbunsha, 2002), 61-64.

[6] *Raito noberu* (light novel) is a genre of novels born in contemporary Japanese subculture. They are entertainment novels primarily targeting teenagers and young adults, usually published as *bunkobon*, and often illustrated by popular manga artists. In recent years, light novel stories have been popular choices for adaptation into manga, anime, and live-action films.

[7] *Sekai* in the word *sekaikei* is usually written in katakana. Translator Jonathan E. Abel and Kōno Shion explain the term *sekaikei* as "the kind of plot in anime and video games in which the small group of characters act as if their thoughts and actions can affect the fate of the entire world." See Azuma, *Otaku*, 124.

[8] TV series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, directed by Anno Hideaki and produced by GAINAX (Tokyo: TV Asahi, October 4, 1995-March 27, 1996).

[9] *Hoshi no koe – The Voices of a Distant Star* (2002), dir. Shinkai Makoto (DVD, Comics Wave, 2006).*Voices of a*

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Distant Star was highly acclaimed because it was written, directed and produced entirely by one individual on his Macintosh computer. This animation won The Award for Image Design in the Entertainment Category in the Digital Contents Grand Prix, and The Highest Award of Public Offering Category at the 2002 Tokyo International Animation Fair 21.

[10] Takahashi Shin, *Saishū heiki kanojo* (Saikano: The Last Love Song on This Little Planet), 7 vols. (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 2000-2001). Manga version was serialized in Shōgakukan's *Big Comic Spirits* magazine. Later, the manga story turned into the TV animation in 2002, original video animation in 2005, and the live-action film in 2006.

[11] Akiyama Mizuhito, *Iriya no sora, UFO no natsu* (Iriya's Sky, Summer of the UFOs), 4 vols. (Tokyo, Media Works: 2001-2003). Later, it turned into original video animation in 2005, two video games for the Nintendo DS in 2007, and a manga series in the teen boys' magazine *Dengeki Maō* in 2007.

[12] Kasai Kiyoshi, Introduction in *Shakai wa sonzai shinai: sekaikei bunkaron* (There is No Society: the Theory of *Sekaikei* Culture), ed. by Genkai shōsetsu kenkyūjo (Tokyo: Nan'undō, 2009), 5-6.

[13] Saitō Tamaki, *Shakaiteki hikikomori* (Social Withdrawal) (Tokyo: PHP, 1998), 3-8.

[14] "Seven hundred thousand *hikikomori*," *Yomiuri shinbun*, 24 July, 2010.

[15]Charles Hugh Smith, "Japan's Economic Stagnation is Creating a Nation of lost Youths," *Daily Finance* (June 8, 2010). http://www.dailyfinance.com/story/careers/japans-economic-stagnation-is-creating-a-nation-of-lost-youths/19580780/.

[16] Genda Yūji, "Jobless Youths and the NEET Problem in Japan," *Social Science Japan Journal* 10, 1 (2007): 23-40.

[17] Saitō, *Shakaiteki hikikomori*, 206-207.

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