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Eco-Intermediality and the Artful Recluse's Hut: Mizuki Shigeru's Manga *Hōjōki*

Abstract: This article proposes *eco-intermediality* as a cross-fertilization between what has been the hitherto predominantly thematic orientation of ecocriticism and the more form-oriented concerns of intermediality studies. To explore the transformative potential of this eco-intermedial conceptual framework, I focus on the 2013 manga adaptation of *Hōjōki* by the Japanese visual artist Mizuki Shigeru. *Hōjōki* (1212) is a medieval essay written by the Japanese poet-monk Kamo no Chōmei and bearing witness to a string of environmental disasters that overtook Kyoto at around the end of the twelfth century. The combination of a poignant environmental theme with a long history of translations and adaptations makes this work particularly amenable to an eco-intermedial approach. My main argument is that the post-Fukushima adaptation by Mizuki is a game-changer in such history, inasmuch as the artist brings his unique environmental imaginary and the distinctive formal affordances of manga to bear on Chōmei's text, so as to convey the sense of a world where objects and phenomena are endowed with agency and thus outside full human control. The ultimate aim of the present article is to highlight the far-reaching ecological implications of the intermedial textures that Mizuki creates in his manga *Hōjōki* to express an environmental imaginary hinged on material agency and empathy.

Keywords: adaptation; eco-intermediality; hermits; impermanence; intermediality; manga; Mizuki Shigeru; *vōkai*.

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1. The artful recluse's hut and its eco-intermedial ramifications

When we are lost in darkness and see a distant glimmer of light, who does not dream of a thatched cottage or, to go more deeply still into legend, of a hermit's hut?

A hermit's hut. What a subject for an engraving! Indeed real images are engravings, for it is the imagination that engraves them on our memories... The hermit's hut is an engraving that would suffer from any

exaggeration or picturesqueness. Its truth must derive from the intensity of its essence, which is the essence of the verb “to inhabit.” The hut immediately becomes centralized solitude, for in the land of legend, there exists no adjoining hut... And there radiates about this centralized solitude a universe of meditation and prayer, a universe outside the universe. The hut can receive none of the riches “of this world.” It possesses the felicity of intense poverty; indeed, it is one of the glories of poverty; as destitution increases it gives us access to absolute refuge. (Bachelard 31-32)

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 became a pandemic in the early months of 2020, stories of recluses and their huts began surfacing in the media with some frequency. *National Geographic*, for example, published a photo essay on Mauro Morandi, a man who has lived alone on Italy’s Budelli Island for the past 31 years (Khan). The essay visually and verbally foregrounds Morandi’s meager existence and full immersion in the pristine landscape of the island, thus evincing a temperament that values spiritual freedom over material possessions. Artfully framing his views of the natural landscape is Morandi’s ramshackle house. In addition to other creative pursuits such as sculpture and writing, he is an avid photographer of the Budelli landscape and often posts his images on social media. In 2017 he published a photo book, titled *8: un’isola*, that opens with the statement: “Vivo in una casa molto piccola, ma le mie finestre si affacciano sul grande mondo / I live in a very small house but the windows overlook the big world” (8).

Mauro Morandi’s story is a felicitous contemporary distillation of what makes the artful recluse’s hut so affectively and visually appealing across media “when we are lost in darkness,” as happens in times of environmental disaster and public health crisis. Such disasters and crises entail a sense of impermanence, a sense of the spurious security offered by the social order and its structures – and the hermit’s hut is the frame through which we at once perceive this impermanent world and find refuge from it. More to the point, Morandi’s story, as well as the stories of the other artful recluses that I will be discussing, are a primer for the idea of *eco-intermediality* that I wish to explore in this essay. Eco-intermediality as I envisage it here is a transformative cross-fertilization between what has been the hitherto predominantly *thematic* orientation of ecocriticism and the more *form*-oriented concerns of intermediality studies.

In disaster-prone Japan, where I have lived for over a decade now, there is an enduring and endearing story of an artful recluse’s hut that periodically re-emerges from its medieval mists to speak to coeval crises: *Hōjōki* (方丈記, often rendered as Notes from a Ten-Foot-Square Hut), by poet-monk Kamo no Chōmei (1155-1216). The work, written in 1212, constitutes a first-hand account of a succession of environmental disasters that Chōmei himself witnessed unfold in the Heian capital (today’s Kyōto) around the end of the twelfth century: an outbreak of plague, a huge fire, a devastating typhoon, a severe famine, and a massive earthquake. This was the late part of the Heian period (794-1185) in Japan, a time

of great social and political strife marked by the decay of aristocratic society and the uprising of the warrior's class, which led to protracted battles between warrior houses. Chōmei lived to tell this tale of destruction and upheaval. Even though he himself had been a part of the inner circle of power in the grand capital, he left privilege and self-advancement behind to opt for a secluded life. Hence his reportage-style account of the disasters is followed by a more personal though equally powerful narrative of the misfortunes that cause him to move into increasingly smaller houses and, finally, in an act of renunciation, to become a Buddhist monk and retire to a mountain hermitage to the southeast of the nearly destroyed capital. There, he seeks tranquility in a mindful existence in his tiny hut immersed in the natural landscape.

The combination of the environmental dimension described above with a fairly long history of literary translations and adaptations makes *Hōjōki* particularly amenable to an eco-intermedial approach. Such history began with Natsume Sōseki's abridged translation in 1892 and Minakata Kumagusu and F. V. Dickins's first full translation into English in 1905. Ever since, numerous others have been released: from Basil Bunting's modernist poetic condensation, *Chomei at Toyama* (1932), based on an Italian prose translation by M. Muccioli, to successive renditions by Japanologists such as Donald Keene and A. L. Sadler in the second half of the twentieth century as well as numerous contemporary versions, including the first one by a female translator, Meredith McKinney, in 2013 – and this is just to mention translations into English. The latest one, a poetic rendition by Matthew Stavros, was published in April 2020 and acknowledges the outbreak of COVID-19 as a key motivator: "My hope is that the book's message will help readers maintain perspective even at an extraordinarily challenging time and to remember that, like Chōmei himself writes, 'the flow of the river never ceases.' This too shall pass" (n.p.).

Indeed, the various translators of *Hōjōki* have adapted the work and its suggestive nuances to their own cultures and times, or distilled from them meanings of more global, planetary reach stressing commonalities of human experience in its relation to nature, particularly in troubled times of crisis and change. Before Stavros, a 1996 poetic version by Moriguchi and Jenkins, titled *Hojoki: Visions of a Torn World*, was dedicated to "the people of South Hyogo" who suffered the devastating Great Hanshin earthquake in 1995. Yet, it is a post-Fukushima manga adaptation of *Hōjōki* (2013) by the well-known Japanese visual artist Mizuki Shigeru (1922-2016), that is truly a game changer in terms of the eco-intermedial approach that I propose to explore here. Before turning my attention to Mizuki's work and its contexts, let me clarify further this eco-intermedial conceptual framework.

One of the key points of entry into eco-intermedial cross-fertilizations is the concept of form. As previously suggested, form has been rather neglected by ecocritics, perhaps because it is less amenable to the focus on transcultural flows that now dominates the field. A notable exception is Ursula K. Heise's recent work. For example, in "Plasmatic Nature:

Environmentalism and Animated Film” (2014), Heise acknowledges that most ecocritical studies construe the relationship between animation and environmentalism as a matter of thematic content, and thereby approach animated film much as they do other works of fiction in film or literature. As a consequence, “many of the formal characteristics that distinguish animation from other kinds of film, let alone fiction in other media, get lost in the process.” She proposes instead “to focus on some of the aesthetic strategies that are particularly distinctive of animation” (303). Here, too, I will focus on some of the distinctive aesthetic strategies of manga – henceforth understood as a Japan-based and Japan-derived graphic narrative – deployed by Mizuki Shigeru in his *Hōjōki*. These strategies, combined with Mizuki’s unique environmental imaginary, convey a sense of objects and phenomena endowed with agency, refusing in this way to treat either natural or human-made environments as mere inert things fully available to human control. Rather, there is an insistence that these environments are alive and populated by all manner of *uncontrollable* nonhuman agents. The far-reaching ecological implications of the intermedial textures that Mizuki creates to express his environmental imaginary is what I ultimately wish to pursue in the present study.

In order to fully understand manga *Hōjōki* in this light, it is important to begin with a brief cultural-historical excursus on Chōmei’s *Hōjōki*. The excursus will also help me establish some preliminary bridges between ecocriticism and intermedia theory. Caroline Levine’s reframing of the relationship between form and content comes to my aid here:

Literature is not made of the material world it describes or invokes but of language, which lays claim to its own forms – syntactical, narrative, rhythmic, rhetorical – the spoken word, the printed page. And indeed, each of these forms and materials lays claim to its own affordances – its own range of capabilities. Every literary form thus generates its own separate logic. (7)

Most importantly for my point, Levine adds that such organizing principles, being abstract, “are iterable – portable. They can be picked and moved to next contexts” (10). And few fields have provided, indeed, more insights into these exchanges than intermediality, with its attention to cultural and medial contexts from systematic and historical perspectives, in its generous encouragement of interdisciplinary research and its concomitant spirit of democratic openness to “all kinds of cultural configurations, be they performances, products of popular culture or the new media” (Rippl 6).

When it comes to cross-pollinations between visual and verbal structures that engage with eco-intermedial concerns during times of crisis and change, few traditions are more compelling than that of the East Asian artful recluse or hermit. Its birthplace was China, where reclusion (*yin*) as a disengagement from worldly gain and a retreat to remote places in search for a non-materialistic, virtuous life amidst nature was “a concept of such great

antiquity and value that its ideals were retrospectively attached to the country's earliest legends" (Sturman and Tai 8).

These recluses were not just artistic- and literary-minded individuals who temporarily chose to eschew wealth and fame in the pursuit of a solitary path. In his book *Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits* (1993), American writer and translator Bill Porter, who had himself spent some years as a hermit in Taiwan and in the late 1980s went to China in search of the remnants of the hermit tradition, eloquently describes them as follows:

Hermits have remained the most esteemed of persons, because hermits are sages. They can see that to which others are blind and hear that to which others are deaf. When emperors, kings, clan chiefs, leaders of early Chinese culture needed to get in touch with natural forces, the gods outside the city wall and inside the human heart, they turned to hermits. Hermits could talk to heaven. They knew its signs, they spoke its language. Hermits were shamans and diviners, herbalists and doctors, adepts of the occult and the manifest. (352)

Despite their retreat from worldly affairs, many of these hermits made efforts to express their disengagement visually and verbally through various media, leaving behind scroll paintings, poems and essays that form a distinctive brand of art. Peter Sturman astutely formulated the apparent conundrum of an ideal of reclusion that was not truly reclusive, because it was "a calling out for individuals of sympathetic mind... Reclusion was primarily conceived as a broadly shared discourse that invited commentary within a like-minded community" ("The Art of Reclusion" 15).

It is thus small wonder that the visual and verbal intermedial structures through which these artful recluses conceived their place in a dynamically changing world ramified throughout East Asia, accreting diverse local sensibilities and traditions of thought, and thereby metamorphosing into other forms of art with their own distinctive eco-aesthetic concerns. Japan's artful recluses are a good case in point. As cultural geographer Augustin Berque points out, ancient poetic continuities between China and Japan were the vector for other-than-literary paradigms; such paradigms channelled a common sensibility pertaining to the relationship with nature and, in particular, to the image of the hermit's ideal habitat embodied in his hut (136).

The tradition of the artful recluse reached its zenith between the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries in Japan, "an epoch dominated by the problems, texts and symbols of Buddhism" (LaFleur 11), but also one characterised by the terminal collapse of the ancient social and political structure, as I previously pointed out. William LaFleur remarks that many people "were deeply absorbed in a debate as to whether the entire world had just entered a necessarily evil era called *mappō*, the final epoch of the current Buddhist cycle" (LaFleur 3). Mezaki Tokue even argues that "for the first time in their history the Japanese became possessed by a deep pessimism" (159).

Yet, by drawing a distinct line between themselves and the profane world, the artful recluses of medieval Japan – among whom Saigyō (1118-1190) and Kamo no Chōmei figure prominently – constructed an alternate world apart from that of *mappō*. And by creating works brimming with vitality and self-confidence in their artful views of life and nature, they established spiritual freedom and thus transcended the crisis of the age, Mezaki observes (178-179). In a crucial way, theirs was an escape that ultimately led to reengagement.

In common with a significant part of the literature of the age, Chōmei's *Hōjōki* responds to and expresses the then ubiquitous Buddhist teaching that nothing exists outside the law of impermanence or evanescence (*anicca*) – *mujō* in Japanese – through the topos of the hermit's hut.¹ LaFleur argues that this emphasis on the *mujō* of dwellings and habitations suggests not only impermanence as a temporal category but also instability as a spatial one. The appearance of this spatial connotation, he elaborates,

coincides with a change in the scope and character of *mujō* in nature as well. It is no longer limited to the more or less predictable sequence of the seasons; through earthquake, flood, and fire, impermanence/instability takes a totally unpredictable route. (61)

As *mujō* eventually came to apply to everything, it too pervades the key sections of *Hōjōki*. Let me cite LaFleur again:

First, the *mujō* to which Chōmei calls attention clearly extends beyond nature's seasonal rhythm and the private lives of individuals. *Mujō* was by this point in history seen in the natural calamities and in society as a whole... Second, Chōmei's focus on what happens to man's habitations seems especially important; he singles out man's dwellings for special consideration – 'not of long duration: so in the world are man and his dwellings.' The habitation becomes not merely another instance among many where *mujō* is demonstrated but a context of particular importance, a precise mediator between the large context, the world as a whole, and the small one, the individual. All are shot through and through with *mujō*; it pervades all. (63)

Thus there is a strongly didactic component at work in *Hōjōki*, as Chōmei presses home the point that one ought to abandon all positions and constructions intended against *mujō*, so as to live a kind of existence that is fully in harmony with the law of impermanence/instability. The *hōjō* – Chōmei's ten-foot-square hut – articulates "the truth that any world in which we find ourselves is bound to collapse and come apart" (LaFleur 79). Charles Shirō Inouye compellingly summarises Chōmei's injunction: "if we understood the world for what it really is, we would flee its complications and live simpler lives, ones that do not center themselves on possessions and foolish attachments" (45).

More problematic, though, is the equally strong component of cultural essentialism at work in some of these scholarly articulations of *mujo* as an at once “unique historical fact of the period of transition to medieval Japan,” and a concept that “transcended historical boundaries to become a philosophical undercurrent of the Japanese people” (Mezaki 180). Mezaki enumerates all the *quintessentially* Japanese arts as “elements of the culture born of the lives of the aesthete-recluses” – ranging from *waka* (the general name for native short poems, also known as *tanka*) to linked poetry (*renga* and *haikai*) and including as well as the arts of tea (*sado*), flower arrangement (*kado*), *nō*, arts such as painting and landscape architecture, and the very lives of the “I-novelists” in modern times (179-180).

Manga is not listed here. However, considering the genre's prominent role in the visual expression of *mujo* in modern Japan and, in particular, the centrality given to the concept in Mizuki Shigeru's adaptation of *Hōjōki*, it could well be. An introduction to Mizuki's creative world and his specific motivations to engage in a manga adaptation of Chōmei's work in 2013 is thus in order.

2. From Kitarō to Chōmei: The eco-intermedial significance of Mizuki Shigeru's *yōkai*-inspired manga

We dwell in constant loss and continual creation. If we depend on form to make change meaningful, we now know that the shape of change, expressed as form, also changes with time... Each of us contributes to this reality that none of us fully controls nor understands. If there is a lesson here, it might be this: that as we struggle to find a place for ourselves in relationship to whatever we accept as form, we ought to calm our striving by keeping our hearts empty enough to allow something else to enter in. “Form is emptiness and emptiness is form.”

To grasp the mutable, formal space called Japan is to begin to see our own particular cultural moment, and to be resigned to all we did not choose – earthquakes, seasons, theft, heartbreak, the character of parents, the personalities of children. Ours is a cicada-shell world. Our earth is fragile and ever-changing. Our life on this planet is brief. In the face of dying, we live. (Inouye 223)

In 2012, the publisher Shōgakukan invited Mizuki Shigeru to create a manga version of *Hōjōki* for their running series of didactic manga adaptations of Japanese literary classics, *Manga kōten bungaku*, aimed at a young readership of students. The key motivation behind the publisher's invitation appears to have been Mizuki's keen interest in Chōmei's classic, which he had first read in his youth just before being conscripted into the Imperial Army to fight in World War II, as he acknowledges in a promotional interview he gave to Shōgakukan's magazine *Sarai* in 2013 (“Watashi to Hōjōki” 118). As an artist whose work had always channeled other times and other places into the present, his starting point was

likely Chōmei's proposition:

The best way to understand the world today,
Is to hold it up to the mirror of the past.
(*Hōjōki: A Hermit's Hut as Metaphor* 17)

And as an artist whose work had always questioned the limits of the human and the possibilities of modern society, Mizuki could not but be drawn to Chōmei's portrayal of a character who radically leaves behind human society in search of an alternative world of renewed innocence and hope.

Yet, in the same interview to *Sarai* Mizuki adds a rather problematic layer. When he elaborates on his first acquaintance with *Hōjōki*, as a young soldier about to go to war, he stresses his feeling of "resignation" (*teinen*) in the face of imminent death – a mood that, he felt, chimed with Chōmei's (118). Apropos of resignation, Inouye astutely remarks that Chōmei's withdrawal from the impermanent world of *mappō* was not a decision "to live deliberately," as Henry David Thoreau would have it, "but as a resignation to the lack of choices" (43) such a world actually offered. Inouye reads in Chōmei's brazenly general statements about resignation and impermanence in *Hōjōki* "a critique of the power structures of his day" (44). However, by evoking resignation, *mujō* and nothingness in the light of his experience of World War II, Mizuki summons a controversial ideological dimension that has long haunted Japanese aesthetics. Yuriko Saito calls it "the aestheticization of transience" and reminds us how in Japanese history it has been utilized "to maintain the status quo of a societal condition or to promote a certain political agenda" (190). Saito refers in particular to the way in which this attitude towards aestheticizing such a quality "was promoted and utilized by the military government during World War II to justify its war effort and mobilize citizens toward nationalistic goals" (193).

Inevitably, the aestheticization of impermanence re-emerged in the wake of the triple disaster of March 2011 (henceforth referred to as 3/11) – a massive earthquake followed by a tsunami and a nuclear meltdown in Fukushima – that shook Japan and brought about significant challenges to the artistic world.² Critical approaches to manga that privilege form (the aesthetic and media-specific properties of this subgenre of graphic narrative) have been at a crossroads ever since. Post-3/11 pressures on art and its discourses to engage more with societal and environmental issues have met with little resistance in English-language comics discourse, which has long exhibited a strong transcultural inclination and prioritized topical approaches. In Japan, by contrast, because "manga attracts interest less as container of ideology but rather as a form... in a highly contextualized manner" (Berndt 66), engagement with those issues has been more scattered. By "highly contextualized manner," manga theorist Jaqueline Berndt means an attention to publication formats, generic frameworks, horizons of expectation, and modes of reception according to literacy, which tend to

segment (or perhaps segregate) societal topics and privilege “certain taste communities over broader society-wide communication” in Japan. Hence the impression of an “eclipsing” of societal topics, which Berndt sees instead “as their emergence as generic conventions” (75). Skilled readers of manga, she contends, focus more on “characters’ tangible emotional states and relations rather than on ideological interpretations” (77).

All these things converge to form what Berndt calls “the mangaesque (what is assumed manga proper, or typically manga),” an iridescent concept that should nevertheless caution us against “the indiscriminate application of traditional analytical tools and the alleged universality of comics aesthetics” (78). Rather, we should open our minds to the sociocritical potential of “manga advocates’ emphasis on sharing instead of distinction, on empathy and self-confirmation instead of critical questioning, on affective rather than political engagement, on codification and conventionalization instead of modern realism and authenticity” (79). No less importantly, the angle of vision proposed by Berndt envisions as well a different role for researchers of manga. Rather than “excavating hidden ideological layers for educational purposes,” they are compelled to act “as mediators, providing opportunities for exchange across generations, genders, and generic tastes into which the industry has been segregating so far” (78).

While these postcritical idea(l)s are praiseworthy in many respects, they should not blind us to the potentially problematic ideological undercurrents at work in Mizuki’s complex take on *mujō* in his manga adaptation. Reverting to Charles Shirō Inouye’s seminal study on evanescence and form in Japanese culture, he suggests that all too often the simultaneous experience of these qualities in art has been insularly and nationalistically predicated on being “quintessentially Japanese” – on being “shared by all similarly formed people... who have learned to read the space of Japan in the same way” (10).

With these ideas in mind, let me now turn to the eco-intermedial significance of manga *Hōjōki*. Intermediality is indeed a fitting trope to describe Mizuki’s creative endeavours. Few artists of his generation moved with such agility among so many different media: from *kamishibai* (a form of Japanese street theatre and storytelling, highly popular before the advent of television), manga, television, films, and books, to video games and interactive computer technologies. Folklorist Michael Dylan Foster likens the artist’s adeptness within contemporary media to the morphing qualities of the concept at the centre of his life and oeuvre: *yōkai* (“The Otherworlds” 24). The word means “creatures, presences, or phenomena that could be described as mysterious or eerie” (Komatsu 12) and its visual representation has a long, complex history. While it is not part of this essay’s scope to explore such history, it should be mentioned that the postwar period in which Mizuki entered the cultural arena as an artist is a landmark in this regard. This is because the rapid emergence of new media of communication led to the appearance of *yōkai* in new genres that reached a wider range of audiences in a shorter time (Papp 119). Mizuki adroitly rode this wave and

his distinctive *yōkai* characters quickly became part of the popular imagination of children and adults in Japan. Prominent among his creations – and paradigmatic in its dynamic mix of media, ranging from manga to animation – is *Gegege no Kitarō*, which focuses on the adventures of a young *yōkai* called Kitarō and his cohort of *yōkai* friends and foes. Interestingly, several episodes of the extensive Kitarō animation series aired between the 1960s and the 1990s focused on issues such as pollution and promoted *yōkai* “as symbols of environmental problems caused by urban encroachment” (Papp 119).

Actually, there are two main routes connecting *yōkai* to environmental issues. One relates to the very origins and philosophical framework surrounding the concept. According to cultural anthropologist and eminent *yōkai* specialist Komatsu Kazuhiko, Taoist ideas underpin the philosophy behind *yōkai*.³ These ideas entered the Japanese court in the Heian period from China, and crystallized in practices of fortune-telling, divination, astrology and, later on, religious beliefs, to form a system of esoteric cosmology that came to be known as *Onmyō-dō*. At its root is the idea of *ki*, an ever-flowing, ever-changing energy that animates every aspect of the universe and takes shape in physical or verbal forms, as well as in intangible and invisible entities. As in Taoist philosophy, the consummate symbol of *Onmyō-dō* is the two-polarity image of *yin* and *yang*. In contradistinction to value systems hinged on the belief that there are distinctly good and evil entities, in this system the two polarities, representing though opposite faces of the same entity, should not be assigned any such moral values; depending on its energy status, the same entity can have two faces.

In Japan’s Shinto mythology, all supernatural beings have a positive and a negative aspect, meaning there are no absolutely peaceful *kami* (gods) nor absolutely angry *kami*. Festivals and ceremonies are aimed at compelling the celebrated *kami* to retain its positive side, as neglected *ki* around their abode might mutate. And once the *kami* takes the shape of *yōkai*, it becomes uncontrollable, holding the danger of bringing misfortune to the people residing in its vicinity. In Chōmei’s time, this kind of metamorphosis accounted for the multiple environmental disasters that he poignantly narrates in *Hōjōki*. Mizuki’s manga draws on such imaginary to spectacular effect, as will be discussed in the next section.

Art historian Zilia Papp adds some further considerations that will be relevant to Mizuki’s reworking of *Hōjōki*, so it is worth citing her at length:

Yōkai appear on the border between the worlds of *kami* and human, of this world (*gense*) and the other world (*takai*), such as on bridges, at crossroads, at the edge of the water or in the forest glade. They appear when night turns into day or day turns into night, at dusk or dawn. *Yōkai* are either mutations from humans, animals, plants or utensils, or a mutation from a *kami*...

Yōkai is the moment of change in turning from one category to the other, representing the anxiety and fear associated with the uneasiness of change from known to unknown, from certainty to uncertainty... *Yōkai*, in summary, are the form

given to change and the anxiety, uncertainty, fear and awe associated with it. They give shape to the anxieties associated with historical and social change as well. (12)

The second route connecting *yōkai* to environmental issues relates, precisely, to another major period of uncertainty in Japan. The nation's rapid postwar industrialization and urbanization caused widespread environmental destruction, which in turn caused *yōkai* as signifiers to shift to new and unprecedented roles. As Foster demonstrates, a sense of loss and lost innocence led to a longing for rural communities and ways of life that had been abandoned in Japan's reckless drive to industrialization. Such longings also translated into a revival of interest in folklore and folkways, as well as in weird and mysterious phenomena (*Pandemonium and Parade* 163-164). The *yōkai* becomes, in Papp's words:

A mascot that stands for an idealized, nostalgic rural past and a shared national and communal identity. By extension, it also becomes a symbol of pristine nature and an idyllic rural way of life that is progressively disappearing in the postwar period. (119)

It was this increasing presence of *yōkai* in Japan's postwar cultural imaginary that allowed for Mizuki's emergence as an enormously popular artist that capitalized on their historical lineage and nostalgic energy to convey a message with far-reaching ecological implications. He not only invested *yōkai* with a fictional life as characters in his narratives but also carefully cultivated a personal mystique of someone with authentic roots in the *yōkai*-haunted countryside and even a sort of *yōkai*-human himself (Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade* 165; Foster, "The Otherworlds" 24). And this could not but further inspire and contribute to such presence in the ensuing decades – including in post-Fukushima Japan, when Mizuki brought his approach to *yōkai* to bear on Kamo no Chōmei's *Hōjōki*.

3. Form, empathy, and *yōkai* in post-Fukushima Japan: Mizuki Shigeru's manga *Hōjōki*

You have to believe that *yōkai* and *kami do* exist.

It is just that they are rather elusive because their forms are difficult to discover, difficult to feel. (Mizuki, "Me ni mienai" 66)

To be sure, Mizuki Shigeru is not the first translator-adaptor to have brought a strong personal and environmental commitment to *Hōjōki*. Most notably, at the beginning of the twentieth century Minakata Kumagusu had already left such a mark on his translation of the text. Inferring such commitment, however, requires a considerable reliance on the paratexts surrounding the translation as well as on the translator's biography.⁴ By contrast, the

affordances of the manga form allow Mizuki to develop a unique rapport with the narrator-protagonist and his world from the very outset, without requiring from readers an over-reliance on external information. Let me begin with the visual design of the front cover in which a cross-legged, barefoot Chōmei levitates at the centre, contentedly playing his lute in old age (see Figure 1). The contours of the figure are softened by a white halo, which merges into the equally white frame containing the title on the upper left corner. Indeed, every element in the cover suggests a blurring of boundaries, including the juxtaposition of a white-and-blue design suggesting foamy wavelets on a flowing river in the upper frame with a striped pattern in earth tones suggesting the domesticity of woven cloth in the lower half of the frame, behind Chōmei's figure.

Anyone who is familiar with Mizuki's previous work will immediately recognize the striking resemblance between the aging Chōmei in the cover and "Mizuki-san," a comical-looking, bespectacled character who self-referentially appears in his manga with some frequency, representing the illustrator himself. But even those who do not establish this connection in the cover will be compelled to do so through the graphic arrangement of the first panels of the story, in which the alignment of the verbal and visual elements suggests the morphing of a flowing river landscape – providing the background to the famous first lines of *Hōjōki* and signaling its central symbol of *mujō*, impermanence – into a scene of writing. A subsequent panel introduces Chōmei penning the work in his hut; the graphic arrangement of the panel suggests a morphing of the figure into Mizuki-san (see Figure 2).⁵ An element that also stands out in these first panels is the image of decaying leaves fluttering in the wind. The image will recur throughout the book as another key visual motif of *mujō*, leading us to drift along with them and to enjoy the temporary joys of pattern and texture, while also working as a reminder that everything and everyone is subjected to the law of impermanence. All these elements converge and lead to a splash page where we see Mizuki-san emerging from the woods and walking towards Chōmei's hut, amidst fluttering leaves (see Figure 3).

This first succession of panels configures thus a sort of prologue, establishing the frame narrative – the encounter between Chōmei and Mizuki – a thereby also the key theme: the need to memorialize environmental disasters in artistic form, so that their teachings are properly internalized in the present in view of a more sustainable future. However, while the information verbally provided in the speech balloons no doubt aids the didactics of the message, it is the way it is crucially combined with over-the-shoulder images alternating

Figure 1. From *Hōjōki* (2013), by Mizuki Shigeru. ©MIZUKI Productions and Shōgakukan.

Figure 2. From *Hōjōki* (2013), by Mizuki Shigeru. ©MIZUKI Productions and Shōgakukan.

Figure 3. From *Hōjōki* (2013), by Mizuki Shigeru. ©MIZUKI Productions and Shōgakukan.

between Chōmei and Mizuki-san that makes us both empathize with the uniqueness of their perspectives *and* infer ecological connections between their plights (see Figure 4).

Once such perspectives and connections are established, Mizuki sets the scene for history to enter the narrative – and he does so through the device of time travel, visualized in a rather clichéd manner in one final panel showing a moving spiral through which the proverbial

Figure 4. From *Hōjōki* (2013), by Mizuki Shigeru. ©MIZUKI Productions and Shōgakukan.

leaves swirl and disappear into time's hole (see Figure 4). In the sections that follow, we are taken through the various stages of Chōmei's life, from childhood to middle age, and learn of the tumultuous historical events and environmental disasters that beset it.

Yet, these events and disasters are not presented as conventionally embedded narratives that provide a mere background to Chōmei's numerous trials and tribulations and that ultimately serve to justify his existential choice. Rather, such narratives give graphic and affective shape to the animate forces and currents of power that charge the world inhabited by humans – forces and currents that they ignore and neglect at their own peril. We are, of course, in *yōkai* territory here.

Even though Chōmei never explores the intervention of supernatural forces in the disasters that beleague the human world in *Hōjōki*, there is a clear sense throughout the narrative that the agency of the physical world constantly defeats any human attempts to impose a sense of order on it. Mizuki remains faithful to this sense of the source text, particularly in his drawing of the densely populated urban spaces and the way the human characters move through them in the panels. Comics theorist Thierry Groensteen sees

anthropocentrism as a key characteristic of the narrative scheme of traditional comics and defines it thus:

The narrative drawing privileges the character, the agent of the action; it successively accedes to each character the level of *protagonist*, in the etymological sense of “he who plays the primary role.” Moreover, the format of the panel appears calculated to be married to the body of the character represented in the frame, as if the panel constituted its natural habitat, its vital space, delimiting the space of its immediate behavior. (*The System of Comics* 161-162)

In Mizuki's manga, by contrast, as the disasters rage on one after the other the form of the panels often conveys an impression of incongruity with the askew bodies of the characters that struggle inside them. This incongruity is further reinforced by the use of onomatopoeic sound effects, whose striking graphic forms often bleed diagonally across several panels, as though to signify the untamable material agency of the nonhuman phenomena at work (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. From *Hōjōki* (2013), by Mizuki Shigeru. ©MIZUKI Productions and Shōgakukan.

Another characteristic feature of Mizuki's graphic style that runs counter to the abovementioned anthropocentrism is the striking contrast it tends to create between the detailed, realistic depiction of landscapes and weather phenomena on the one hand, and the human characters drawn in quirky, cartoonish shapes and often devoid of distinctive facial features such as eyes, noses and mouths, on the other hand. John Berger once pointed out that in a drawing "the artist gives more time to what he or she considers important. A face is likely to contain more time than the sky above it. Time in a drawing accrues according to human value" (Berger and Mohr, Chapter II). In Mizuki's *Hōjōki*, time accrues according to a different set of values.

Reverting to *yōkai*, their doorway into manga *Hōjōki* is the story of Emperor Sutoku, which in Chōmei's source text deserves no more than a laconic reference:

I heard talk of a similar famine,
In the era of Chōshō.
During the reign on Emperor Sutoku.
But I know nothing of that time.
All I know is that the famine on this occasion,
Was the worst I've seen before and since.

(*Hōjōki: A Hermit's Hut as Metaphor* 27)

Sutoku, whose reign spanned the years from 1123 to 1142, is the most politically unsettling *yōkai* that has ever haunted Japan, alongside Sugawara no Michizane and Taira no Masakado. In the aftermath of one of the bloodiest dynastic struggles that beset the latter part of the Heian period, Sutoku was forced into abdication and exile. He became a monk and devoted himself to the copying of holy manuscripts, which he sent to Kyoto, only to be snubbed as the imperial court feared he might be attempting to curse them. The subsequent events surrounding the figure are the stuff of legends and folk tales. It was widely believed that Sutoku's death in a distant location, tarred with opprobrium and without the requisite Buddhist funerary rites, might have been causing a spate of calamities in the capital. Cameron Hurst describes the prevailing mood and its implications most succinctly:

As in the case of all unsettled political situations in traditional Japan, the chronicles record an unusual number of natural calamities and portents for the period: fires, comets, pestilence, and the like. The physical violence that had come to characterize life in the capital continued unabated. (207)

Significantly, Sutoku has continued to haunt modern Japan at times of momentous change or calamity. In 1868, as the Meiji period began, Emperor Meiji ordered the construction of Shiramine-gu in Kyoto to enshrine Sutoku as a *kami*. The goal was to placate the deceased Emperor's vengeful spirit and thereby to ensure that the new political and

social order of Japan proceeded on its swift path to modernization without the subversive intervention of *yōkai*.

No doubt aware of this politically subversive dimension, Mizuki depicts the events surrounding Sutoku's intervention in the late-Heian disasters with obvious gusto and painstaking graphic detail. This includes an episode in which Sutoku bites his own tongue and uses the blood to write his manuscripts, soaking them with his hatred for the court, which once again rejects the offering (26-27). The figure is depicted as a fearsome force of nature, with untamed long hair, sitting atop boulders at the edge of precipices, surrounded by raging seas and lightning bolts (see Figure 6) – an iconography that is strongly reminiscent of the Sutoku woodblock prints of Utagawa Kuniyoshi and his disciple Utagawa Yoshitsuya in the Tokugawa period (1603-1868).

Figure 6. From *Hōjōki* (2013), by Mizuki Shigeru. ©MIZUKI Productions and Shōgakukan.

But Mizuki chooses to embed here yet another significant narrative that is not part of Chōmei's source text: the poet-monk Saigyō's pilgrimage to the Shiramine mausoleum of the disgraced Sutoku in the remote Sanuki Province (today's Kagawa Prefecture), in 1168. As mentioned before, Saigyō, alongside Kamo no Chōmei, is one of the most eminent and revered artful recluses of the Heian period. He had been an unwaveringly loyal subject and close associate of Sutoku, and his pilgrimage aimed to pay his respects and to appease the deceased Emperor's vengeful, restless spirit. Mizuki's literary source here is most likely the short story "Shiramine," from the renowned collection *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (Ugetsu monogatari, 1776) by Ueda Akinari. These tales are among the most celebrated examples in

Japan of the literature of the strange and the marvellous, comprising mostly ghost stories that feature encounters between humans and supernatural entities. “Shiramine,” the first story in the collection, is widely regarded as its gold standard. Mizuki illustrates the story in five graphically dense pages packed with drama (30-34). The narrative closes with Sutoku vanishing into a *yōkai*-like luminous white shape, not before ominously leaving in the air the threat that unspeakable catastrophes will ensue (33-34). The section that follow proves him right, depicting a cascade of environmental disasters and wars wreaking pandemonium and destruction in the grand capital. The depiction of these events will occupy the central section of manga *Hōjōki*, in a proportion that is fairly similar to the space it receives in the source text.

What could have led Mizuki to embed and expand thus on the Sutoku *yōkai* narrative, giving it such a pivotal role in his adaptation? To understand the potential eco-intermedial significance of this narrative, two central points need to be remembered. One is the complex relationship between the concepts of *yōkai* and *mujiō*. Once again, Charles Shirō Inouye comes to my aid with his insights on monstrosity as a form of resistance to the regime of rationalized space and its systems of visibility that came to define Japan’s path to modernization. *Yōkai* had a key role to play here, he argues. As changing, uncontrollable beings existing anciently, *yōkai* “came to be of great interest precisely because their metamorphic aspect did not square with a gradually strengthening emphasis on fixed realities” (99) – an emphasis brought about by the steady advent of a multiplicity of scientific discourses and regimes of visibility hinged on realism. For the pictocentric Japanese artist, Inouye adds, *yōkai* accounted for “the ill-fitting bits and pieces of modern life that did not easily conform to this rational or otherwise ideal view of the world” (100). He concludes that, under the pressure of “a dramatic disciplining of the visual field and an increasingly one-dimensional understanding of evanescence... Japan’s famous monsters came to all but disappear for a season” (100). For reasons explained in the previous section, in the postwar decades a panoply of monsters reemerged in the shape of *yōkai* – and Mizuki Shigeru became a key player in this revival. His manga *Hōjōki* represents a more recent, though no less significant, surge in post-Fukushima Japan, reminding us that *yōkai* can be politically subversive agents of *mujiō* in times of acute crisis, even if their message is far from unambiguous.

The second point we need to bear in mind is that *yōkai* reflect a generally animistic worldview – the idea that all things are animated by a life force of some kind – meaning that “there are many kinds of persons in this world, only some of whom are human” (Asma 287). In Mizuki’s approach, even though *yōkai* are infused with independent agency, they are eminently *affective* phenomena requiring from us a certain sensitivity to the world of the invisible, so that we can perceive them and endow them with visible form. Mizuki suggests as much in his essay significantly titled “Me ni mienai mono o miru” (Seeing things that the eyes cannot see), which I have chosen as a fitting epigraph for the present section. Let me cite

the passage in full:

As something that tries to take form, [*yōkai*] hint by knocking on the brain of the artist or the sculptor (in other words, this is the thing we call inspiration). We often hear, “*Yōkai* and *kami* are created by humans,” but the funny thing is that the instant you believe this, the *yōkai* or the *kami* will stop knocking on your brain.

You have to believe that *yōkai* and *kami* do exist.

It is just that they are rather elusive because their forms are difficult to discover, difficult to feel. (66; translation by Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade* 170; emphasis in the original)

Michael Dylan Foster sees *empathy* as a keyword here. In his words, *yōkai* are “artifacts of an energetic expression of empathy – the discovery of intention and subjectivity in the events of the outside world, a projection of our own abilities to think and act onto something else” (*The Book of Yōkai* 86). In manga *Hōjōki*, Mizuki assigns agency to the unfolding disasters in the form of a recognisable *yōkai* and thus counteracts the human sense of impotence and meaninglessness that stems from a confrontation with such disasters, as well as tests our powers of empathy – thereby also encouraging us to see things afresh and to conceive the potential for change. Foster:

In the philosophical study of logic, the “law of the excluded middle” suggests that for any proposition there are only two possible choices: *true or not true*. The middle is excluded. But, of course, the interstitial space-time in which *yōkai* thrive is this excluded middle – wherein lies the possibility of a third, previously unimagined, choice. This excluded middle is a zone of uncertainty not because of the negative value associated with uncertainty but because of its potential. Certainty can delimit vision and hinder change. (*The Book of Yōkai* 89-90)

It is this whole philosophy that underlies Mizuki's take on *Hōjōki* and compels him to reinterpret the work's import for post-Fukushima Japan. As happened in Chōmei's time, the triple 2011 disaster of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown is a reminder not only that the natural environment is beyond the control of humans but also that humans have created monsters over which they have no control. In this scheme of things, *yōkai* are no longer mere escapist dreams of fantasy and light-hearted entertainment subtly tinged with cultural essentialism, but transformative metaphors that compel us to think through the unknown and to consider the daunting challenges ahead.

In the very final section of Mizuki's *Hōjōki*, Chōmei lies down in his hut and questions the integrity of his commitment to the Buddhist ideal of *mujō* (207-210). As an artful recluse, might he have become excessively attached to the pleasures of a simple life dedicated to art amidst nature, thus hindering his own enlightenment? The source text ends here. The manga version continues though, as Mizuki-san pensively visits the abode of the now long

dead Chōmei and, on his way through the woods, reminisces on the impact that reading *Hōjōki* had on him as a young soldier on the eve of going to war (212). If an acute sense of impermanence and of disengagement from the world were to be expected from those on the way to their deaths, he ponders, in this century permeated by disasters such sense no longer holds. As he proffers this, Mizuki-san looms at the centre of the frame, staring piercingly at the readers from behind his horn-rimmed glasses, with his mouth ajar and smoky puffs of breath coming out of his nostrils, signaling intense emotion. In the panel underneath, the Chinese character for “the end” (*kan*, meaning complete), softened by a surrounding white halo, is conjured from a thicket (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. From *Hōjōki* (2013), by Mizuki Shigeru. ©MIZUKI Productions and Shōgakukan.

Hence the takeaway of manga *Hōjōki* is not one of closure and completion. On the contrary, as the human world contends with what appears to be insurmountable environmental loss in the twenty-first century, the ever-changing alternative world of Mizuki’s *yōkai* offers a transformative metaphor for ecologically re-imagining the unknown across media. I have argued that *eco-intermediality* is a fitting name for this project of

ecological re-imagination through form. More poetically, Michael Dylan Foster phrases it as “the possibility of transforming amorphous hopes into solid futures” (*The Book of Yōkai* 244). Yet, as Foster also warns, the ways these futures turn out to be “is the responsibility not of the *yōkai* but of the humans who do the transforming” (244).

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End Notes

1. *Anicca* is a Pali term and refers to the idea that “both the phenomenal world and our perceptions of it are constantly changing” (Inouye 31). It is one of the three marks of existence in classical Buddhism, alongside *dukkha* (suffering) and *anatta* (no-self). Of the three qualities, *annica* is foundational. *Annica* heals *dukkha*, because suffering arises from desiring things that people perceive as immutable and thus falsely real. An understanding of *annica* also leads to *anatta*. The truth of the latter is that we are part of this world and therefore we are also changeable and conditional – no identity is stable. According to Charles Shirō Inouye, theories of knowledge influenced by classical Buddhism “viewed the nature of the self, and its relationship to the world, in ways that do not necessarily lock the self into opposition with nature.” Crucially, some interpretations of these three marks of existence “led to asceticism, monasticism, or what we may call a mystical retreat into nature that flowed from an acceptance of the mutability of all things” (32).
2. Discourses around impermanence appeared with regularity in the Japanese media as the triple disaster unfolded in the spring of 2011. See for example Sakurai Joji's “Season of special poignancy: Earthquakes, cherry blossoms traditional reminders of mortality.”
3. Komatsu first proposed these ideas in a series of lectures, titled “Yōkai Bunkaron” (Cultural Theory of Yōkai), that he gave at Kyushu University in 2006. The contents are usefully translated and summarized in Papp 8-10.
4. For an in-depth discussion of these issues in relation to translations of *Hōjōki*, see my forthcoming article “Frictions of the Environmental Imaginary in Translation.”
5. It should be noted that manga pages and their respective panels are read from the right to the left.

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