

## Remembering the Future: Sion Sono's Science Fiction Films

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### *Abstract*

This article focuses on two science fiction films by the Japanese film auteur Sion Sono: *The Land of Hope* (2012) and *The Whispering Star* (2015). The aim of the article is to analyse the two films as a critique of the aftermath to the 3/11 disaster in Fukushima in 2011; highlighting the potentially disastrous ecological effects that the meltdown of nuclear power plants can have on the future for humanity and life on earth. The analytical framework is based on the film philosophical concepts *belief in images* and *time*, the film studies concept *slow cinema* and the science fiction concept *counter-futurism*. The analysis of the films clarifies how time and duration is used to problematise a future without an actual future in relation to a nuclear disaster. One conclusion is that Sono's entries in the genre can be regarded as a contemporary phase of the Japanese 'imagination of disaster', adding new counter-futurist critical ideas to the cross-section of film-philosophy and science fiction film.

Keywords: Sion Sono; 3/11 disaster; Japanese science fiction; counter-futurism; slow cinema

In this article I will analyse two very different science fiction films by the Japanese film auteur Sion Sono (1961–): the nuclear disaster family melodrama *The Land of Hope* (2012) and the low-key experimental space- travel drama *The Whispering Star* (2015). Sono's entries in the science fiction genre, as I will show, entails both a reimagining of nuclear disasters and a renewal of science fiction film in Japan.<sup>1</sup> The way the films are aesthetically structured also motivates including them in the ongoing critical dialogue on the use of film as philosophically motivated sources of knowledge to think with, to develop new ideas, and to create new concepts for understanding and impacting life (Colebrook 2001; Deleuze 1986; 1989). The film philosophical discourse and

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<sup>1</sup> At least two more of Sono's films could be categorised as science fiction: *Themis/Himizu* (2011) and *Tokyo tribe* (2014). The reason for not including them in this article is because they depart from the focus of this article both thematically and stylistically.

extrapolations of science fiction have a potential to be creatively connected more often than is the case today. This is particularly relevant in relation to science fiction from a global perspective, opening for a cultural variation of different epistemologies and aesthetic expressions.

Science fiction film produced outside anglophone film cultures have started to gain widespread attention from other than specialists and devoted fan groups.<sup>2</sup> But there is one film culture that for a long time has been acknowledged as being in the forefront of making inventive and original science fiction film, namely the Japanese. This has been the case since at least the prehistoric monster *Godzilla* (Ishirô Honda, 1954) was awakened by American nuclear bomb tests from its resting place at the bottom of the sea and made a spectacular entrance on the big screen, unleashing its destructive power on Tokyo—for the first time but definitely not the last.

Other ground-breaking films that have dazzled audiences in Western as well as Japanese cinemas are the Anime classics *Akira* (Katsuhiro Ôtomo, 1988), and *Ghost in the shell* (Mamoru Oshii, 1995). These films were immensely popular and created a renewed international interest in Japanese popular culture, not least amongst Western youth and some slightly older film scholars (Ryfle and Godzisewski 2017: 84). Avantgarde films as Shinji Tsukamoto's bizarre and experimental tales of robot-man hybrids, *Tetsuo* (1989) and *Tetsuo 2: Body Hammer* (1992) inspired by a character from *Akira*, did not necessarily attract large audiences, but have been very influential for the development of science fiction film criticism and contemporary ideas about cyberpunk and post-humanism (Brown 2010).

This article is divided into two parts, one theoretical and one analytical. I will briefly introduce Sion Sono and his work and then continue by contextualising the historical background to his science fiction films. The analysis will be supported by a cross-disciplinary theoretical framework with concepts drawn from film-philosophy (*belief in moving images already seen/screened and time*), film studies (*slow cinema*) and sociology (*slow violence*). These theoretical concepts will support the analysis of the films as specifically Japanese *counter-futurist*

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, Wong, Westfahl and Chen 2005; Paz 2008; Alessio & Langer 2010; Langer 2011; Smith 2012; Banerjee 2014; Fritzsche 2014.

documents, questioning the prospect of a future for humanity with the looming threat of nuclear disasters.

#### *Aesthetics of Violence and Subversion*

Sion Sono has primarily been regarded as a maverick film director with an inventive personal style. He has remained on the fringes of Japanese film culture making violent and extravagant generic crossovers, challenging established notions of film narration and style by breaking filmic conventions and testing the viewer's taste. Since the feature film debut in the 1980s Sono has directed more than 40 feature films, short films, documentaries and television series. In addition to filmmaking he writes poetry, paints and creates performance art in public spaces and art installations.

Sono has criticised traditional Japanese conventions and ritualistic behaviour both in his films and in other artistic expressions. Commenting on his outsider position in Japanese film culture he expresses doubt in adhering to 'common sense' (Ogata and Akimoto 2016: 338). In an interview in the documentary *The Sion Sono* (Arata Oshima, 2016) he states that Japanese audiences in general are hesitant towards artists they regard as unorthodox and unconventional. Sono highlights that there is an anxiety in Japan about showing proper respect for Japanese traditional culture: 'I think formality is overrated in Japan.' He speculates that by positioning himself in the role as the 'enfant terrible' of Japanese film, he has missed out on opportunities and alienated funding bodies.

It took indeed a long time for Sono to make a name for himself in Japan and he is generally neglected by film scholars and is barely mentioned in contemporary Japanese film history. But his romanticised self-image of being an outsider has become problematic to uphold in relation to the positive attention he has received at international film festivals. He has for example been awarded a number of prizes at art cinema festivals (Ogata and Akimoto 2016: 339), and the international attention has opened doors to the Japanese market as well.

In Sono's eclectic oeuvre it is possible to detect a number of recurring motifs, revolving mostly around youth rebellion, outsiders, sex and violence and a questioning of traditional cultural values. The motif of a generational gap in many of his films is never as drastic as in his international breakthrough *Suicide Club* (2001). The opening sequence depicts an utterly surprising collective suicide, visualised with buckets of

blood and gore. Fifty-four smiling and singing young girls dressed in school uniforms jump in front of a subway train at Shinjuku station in Tokyo. The smiles on their faces show that they know something, while their parental generation is completely left in the dark. Other young people follow the girls' lead and commit suicide *en masse* without leaving a clue to their actions for their bewildered parents (Jacobsson 2009). In Sono's films, youth is connected to agency and a potential to establish resistance towards stagnated ideas in a stalemate culture.

Lately Sono has expanded his circle of motifs and turned his attention to the 3/11 disaster, which took place on 11 March, 2011, starting with an earthquake, followed by a tsunami and ending with a meltdown of three reactors at Fukushima nuclear power plant. This thematic shift has also changed the tone and style of the filmic expression. The stylistic renewal in his science fiction films seems at a first sight to have taken the form of an homage to the Japanese film auteurs Yasujiro Ozu and Akira Kurosawa and a more conventional style of filmmaking. But a closer look will reveal that there is more at stake than admiration and nostalgia. The disrespect for Japanese traditions and filmic conventions is by no means absent; it has simply taken another less conspicuous form with a specific aim of projecting an idea about the future.

#### *Imagining a Future without a Future*

The natural disasters of 3/11 (the earth quake and the tsunami) resulted in more than 18 000 casualties. The nuclear fallout from the reactor meltdown forced approximately 160 000 people to leave their homes and relocate. The fact that this combination of disasters was both natural and man-made/technological has had an even greater impact on the cultural imaginary in Japan. Fukushima is located in a remote area far from the political power centre in Tokyo, but despite taking place in the periphery, the disaster was regarded as a trauma for the whole nation and was treated as such in public and political discourse. But it soon became common sense in Japanese political discourse to euphemistically describe the disaster as solely a natural disaster (Dinitto 2014: 342). Fear, anger and general distrust in the government's handling of the catastrophe and the abandonment of the homeless and poverty-stricken victims have created a clear divide between the people and the political

power. For the people in the region the disaster was clearly man-made and technological.

The experience of 3/11 has resulted in different ways to handle the trauma. Tessa Morris-Suzuki observes that a major strand of the emotional and intellectual response to the catastrophic 3/11 events can be characterised as a form of 'disaster-utopianism' (2017: 175). According to Morris-Suzuki there have been several occasions in Japanese history where catastrophes have been followed by an upsurge of disaster-utopianism and a unified striving for 'world renewal' (2017:178). 'World renewal' processes have often started as popular rebellions criticising governmental preparations and their handling of different forms of disasters. In the aftermath of 3/11 two strands of utopianism have been established that move in different ideological directions: 1) an anti-nuclear movement focusing on the rebuilding of small-scale communities, and 2) a resurgent nationalistic vision of a family-oriented traditional Japan (Morris-Suzuki 2017: 187).

Documentary film makers from all over the world approached the disaster right from the start and it has continued to attract many documentarists (Iwata-Weickgenannt 2017: 110). Fiction film makers have been more reluctant to treat the topic most likely because it is considered a societal taboo as long as the memory of the experience is still vivid for the affected people (Kiejziewicz 2017: 118). It is even rarer that fiction films have expressed critical perspectives (Iwata-Weickgenannt 2017: 110). Fiction filmmakers have generally approached the 3/11 disaster by including melodramatically framed expressions of mourning and loss as central motifs in their stories (Wada-Marcinano 2019).

Sion Sono's films stand out since they are explicitly critical and take the grieving experience a step further. Instead of exploring ways to overcome mourning, Sono focuses on making sense of the constantly looming threat of death and extinction caused by radiation. In his science fiction films death is the result of man-made nuclear technology and the fact that all security systems failed to withstand the natural disasters. His films show that the experience of a loss of historical agency has created an imbalance in the perception and thinking of human existence tending towards a dystopic imaginary devoid of any form of modernist progress, where the threat of extinction is omni-present and the idea of a future has lost its meaning.

In Japanese film culture death has always been an important motif. From a Zen Buddhist perspective (with deep historical roots) death is connected to an idea of circularity where both life and death is transient, liquid and without distinct boundaries—in what could be described as a ‘gradualism’ of interconnected forms of existence, rather than a clear and visible line between embodied life and spiritual death (LaFleur 1992). In several films by Yasujiro Ozu and Akira Kurosawa this culturally specific way of understanding life and death has been visualised with an aesthetic sensibility characterised by a ‘sweet sadness’ (‘mono no aware’) of life’s transience (Richie 1996). This aesthetics was epitomized in Kurosawa’s *To Live* (1954), where in the light of being afflicted with terminal cancer the insignificant bureaucrat Watanabe manages to push forward the plans to build a playground in his district of Tokyo through the bureaucratic system—as a final act before his passing. The use of terminal cancer can be regarded as a response to the fear of the atomic bomb and the effect of nuclear radiation in the 1950s.

In both *To Live* and the aforementioned *Godzilla* death can be interpreted as a productive force generating new life—as an expression of ‘disaster-utopianism’ death paves the way for a new generation. In Sion Sono’s 3/11-science fiction the imagery and the themes have been inspired by Kurosawa and Ozu, but the artistic conventions of the sweet sadness of life’s transience is problematised and put to an ultimate test in the light of the post-nuclear meltdown existence.

#### *A Counter-Futurist Imagination of Disaster*

In her seminal article ‘Panic Sites’ (1993) Susan Napier analyses three Japanese science fiction films made in different historical eras. She discusses the films as commentaries on the Japanese cultural imaginary; an imaginary that is processing historical disasters and national traumas. The discussion of science fiction and disaster has been an important part of (Western) science fiction critique, most notably captured by Susan Sontag as an ‘imagination of disaster’ (1985). Since the Japanese science fiction film genre is, according to Napier, even more firmly connected to different forms of disasters, Japanese films paint an even bleaker and more dystopic picture of the future than many other film cultures and Napier concludes that ‘Japanese science fiction parallels the modernization of Japan but celebrations of this modernization are notably lacking’ (1993: 329).

In her analysis, Napier highlights the tension between modernisation and technological development and man-made or natural threats of destruction in *Godzilla*, *Tidal Wave* (Moritani Shirô, 1973) and *Akira*. She connects the films to three historical turning points in Japanese twentieth century history: 1) The aftermath of the second world war and the literal as well as cultural fallout of the atomic bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki; 2) the loss of the traditional Japanese society and its cultural values and an eroding national identity during the rapid financial and technological development, and the global success of the Japanese industry in the 1960s and 1970s; 3) the progress of individualisation, social alienation and the destructive aspects of youth and underground culture in the shade of an expanding economy about to burst in the late 1980s. These three film depictions of violent destructions of Tokyo and eventually the whole country form a pattern in Japanese film history of dystopic fiction questioning modernity.

Sono's science fiction films can arguably be regarded as the next phase of the historical trajectory that Napier has developed in her article: a twenty-first century phase informed not only by the declining economy, social alienation and the social precarity of a generation for whom searching for secure positions is an 'exercise in futility' (Allison 2013: 356), Japan's diminishing role as global political power, but also by a country deeply concerned by the natural disasters in the form of earthquakes and a devastating tsunami, and as a result of these disasters the meltdown of reactors at the nuclear power plant in Fukushima. Sono's 3/11 films, *The Land of Hope* and *The Whispering Star*, contribute with a new and even more dystopic understanding of the future in this next phase of Japanese science fiction disaster film despite departing from the generic convention of graphically visualising the disaster.

Sono's dystopic imagination can be characterised as a thinking about a future where the Future with a capital F is no longer an option and only remnants and memories of society are left. We are here dealing with an aesthetic form that could be discussed in the terms of *counter-futurism*—an aesthetic strand of science fiction problematising speculations and ideas about the future from critical-political perspectives, questioning established notions about political common sense and taken for granted

power hierarchies.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to, for example, Afrofuturism, counter-futurism is not a critique of the representation of specific identities or a striving for reclaiming an ethnically infused history, perspective or epistemology.<sup>4</sup> Counter-futurism captures instead a wide array of radical critique (ecological, epistemological, Marxist and intercultural) that focuses on the deprivation of prospects of human life as a continuing force of existence.

A common denominator of counter-futurist science fiction is a focus on the concept of time, often depicted in the form of audio-visual variations of a retro-nostalgic imagery. In the case of Sono's science fiction the counter-futurism manifests itself as a radical re-thinking of the prospect of an actual future for humanity—and the progress of time that has lost its validity in light of nuclear disasters.

#### *A 'Belief' in Cinematic Images*

The contemporary phase of Japanese science fiction as it is articulated in this article can be characterised as depictions saturated with nostalgic memory-images from specific parts of film history. As film and media philosopher D. N. Rodowick argues, moving images have for more than a century constituted 'the occasion and the conceptual framework for thinking through some of our most fundamental human dilemmas, both ethical and ontological, about questions of meaning and experience, of fantasy and belief, and of our knowledge of the world and of other minds' (2017: 2).

Memories of cinematic representations linger on in a collective media-memory, establishing a platform for thinking *with* film and using film as sources of knowledge. Rodowick describes this film-philosophical way of thinking as a 'belief' in images previously seen/screened (Rodowick 2017: 27). In contemporary film-philosophy cinema is still today discussed as an analogue medium and film as rolls of celluloid, regardless if this no longer is the case. In general, film analysis is informed by an analogue understanding of film. Concepts used by contemporary researchers presuppose a historical 'belief' in images seen, rather than adhering to a complete rethinking of film

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<sup>3</sup> For an extended discussion of futurism and counter-futurism see Jussi Parikka (2018).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of Afro-Futurism, see Yaszek (2006).

analysis in line with what the process of digitalization of 'film' entails (Rodowick 2007; 2017). The belief in film as analogue sources of knowledge demands a perception of time as 'bergsonian duration' (Deleuze 1989; Rodowick 1997), whereas digital 'virtuality' requires a different approach still to be fully developed.

Since moving images remain 'continually in flux' between analogue actuality and digital virtuality, a new and updated theoretical understanding of film is needed (Rodowick 2017: xi). Rodowick formulates four imminent philosophical questions of what philosophy wants from (moving) images today: 1) critical attention to the conceptual reciprocity between thought-in-images and thought-about-images; 2) to renew itself conceptually through deep engagement with novel forms of aesthetic experience; 3) the projection of new ideas, concepts, and criteria not yet precisely formulated by philosophy; and to sum up 4) a new critical passion for art.

The aesthetic juxtaposition of now and then also highlights the necessity to think further on the 'belief in images seen' and provide input to the scholarly cross-section of film philosophy and the study of science fiction film. The 'belief in images seen' is a common denominator in *The Land of Hope* and *The Whispering Star*—both films activate and re-use motifs and aesthetics from Japanese film history with the purpose of questioning the possibility of 'world renewal' of the world as we know it. This intertextual connection can be understood as both dystopic and nostalgic at the same time. The playful disrespect for common sense and cultural conventions opens for a counter-futurist thinking of both the future and of the concept of time. Analysing Sono's science fiction films is a rewarding way to begin answering the philosophical questions identified by Rodowick.

#### *Slow Science Fiction Film*

A central aspect of the counter-futurist aesthetics in Sono's science fiction is a tangible slowness permeating the films from start to end; a slowness that activates the spectators' consciousness of the concept of time. By applying a style reminiscent of Ozu in *The Land of Hope*, with long takes and contemplative sequences focusing on everyday family relations and gatherings over generations, Sono connects to a contemporary international strand of filmmaking that has recently been discussed in terms of *slow cinema* (de Luca and Barradas Jorge 2016).

*The Whispering Star* pushes the concept of slow film even further, to the brink of being stylistically provocative, and almost boring to watch—in this case clearly more inspired by Andrei Tarkovsky's two Russian science fiction classics, *Solaris* (1972) and *Stalker* (1979), than Ozu's family melodramas.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of slow cinema captures a type of auteurist film that has circulated on the art cinema festival circuit since the early 2000s and have gained widespread attention from notable film critics. Slow cinema films are distinguished by being extremely slow paced and containing frequent *temps morts* sequences. Slow cinema has been regarded as artworks promoting philosophically informed contemplation and appreciation of artistic photography, framing and composition. The films are often regarded as a reaction to the dominance of fast paced and action-packed commercial cinema and easily digestible audio-visual pieces of profitable entertainment for consumption on contemporary international markets. But there are also critics and researchers that have described this type of film as intellectually empty and as 'self-conscious, complacent artworks made-to-order for cultural elitists' (Çağlayan 2018: 3).

It is only the concept slow cinema that is new: the style of filmmaking has roots far back in film history to different aesthetic traditions in different parts of the world. Looking back at film history provides as mentioned above important keys to unpacking the 'belief' in images, and the counter-futurism at play in Sono's films. Sono's oeuvre is simultaneously culturally specific and cosmopolitan, impure and intercultural, artsy and trashy and his science fiction films are balancing and integrating different filmic traditions—thereby demanding a cross-cultural film-historical awareness and sensibility in the analysis of his films.

Slow cinema is not only expressed in style and form. As Tiago De Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge point out, Ozu's films are slow also in relation to their content. In *Tokyo Story* (Yasujiro Ozu, 1959), which can be regarded as a source of inspiration for *The Land of Hope*, the story focuses on an elderly couple and a majority of sequences depict the slow

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<sup>5</sup> The last time I watched *Solaris* was a couple of years ago in the home of my colleague Åke Bergvall. I remember vividly how in the company of other colleagues I was nodding off in Bergvall's sofa to this very long and slow-paced film.

bodily movement of the old couple performing mundane chores and spending a lot of time in stillness and sitting down (De Luca and Jorge 2016: 6). The repetitive patterns of slow physical movement and the focus on everyday tasks create an experience of slowness in addition to the use of long takes and slow-paced editing. Slow cinema can be described as an integral part of Japanese film history, primarily connected to the work of famous auteurs (Ozu, Kurosawa and Mizoguchi) during the 1930s–1960s. Contemporary Japanese slow cinema can to a high degree be regarded as an homage to the classical era.

Turning our attention to Western Europe the inspiration for contemporary slow cinema is mainly traceable to the modernist and experimental art cinema produced in the 1960s. European art cinema directors developed many of the stylistic devices that slow cinema is re-using today. The experimentation of slow aspects of 'film language' in post-World War II Europe was performed in relation to the rebuilding of societies, an economic boom and with a critical lens directed towards a nascent bourgeois ennui.<sup>6</sup> The general raise in living standard provided time and opportunity for reflections on the 'human condition'.

According to Emre Çağlayan, these European film traditions function 'as a prelude to our own cultural anxiety about temporality today' (2018: 11). Çağlayan analyses contemporary slow cinema with the support of the concepts nostalgia, absurdism and boredom (2018: 17), and he states that an important aspect of slow cinema is an appreciation of the analogue materiality of so called 'proper' film making processes (2018: 8). All three analytical concepts will be helpful in the analysis of Sono's portrayals of a futureless future, connecting the traditions of Japanese classicism and European modernism. The missing link between these two traditions and Sono's science fiction films is the generic cross-over between popular science fiction and auteurist art cinema that had its heyday in Western film cultures in the 1970s. Besides the already mentioned films by Tarkovsky important sources of inspiration are *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, USA 1968) and *Silent Running* (Douglas Trumbull, USA 1972).

Sono brings all these traditions together in his re-imagination of science fiction film, but he takes the philosophical discussion in a new

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<sup>6</sup> See for example, Balint Kovacs (2007).

direction by connecting the aesthetic slowness to a conceptualisation of Death as omnipresent and invisible—as a slow form of deadly violence. The idea of ‘slow violence’ has recently been introduced from an environmentalist humanities perspective. Rob Nixon includes in ‘slow violence’ climate change, toxic drift and deforestation as examples of a violence that lacks a clearly identifiable intention behind the violent acts. Nixon clarifies that slow violence ‘occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’, and this violence is ‘playing out across a range of temporal scales’ (2011: 2).

In sum, the following analysis of Sono’s science fiction films will focus on discussing them as representatives of the next phase of Japanese disaster imagination. I will highlight how the films are using a nostalgic inspiration from different aesthetic traditions and the idea of a ‘belief’ in images to problematize the prospect of a future. In the analysis particular attention will be devoted to the counter-futurist critical perspective, visualised as slow cinema activating an awareness of the concept of time.

#### *No Hope in The Land of Hope*

*The Land of Hope* has been highlighted by scholars and critics as one of the first fiction films that critically treated 3/11. The film has been praised for its understated representation of the catastrophe and the focus on the effects on everyday life for ordinary people. It has also been noted that the film is a radical break with the graphic aesthetics of violence so prominent in Sono’s earlier productions, and that the style of the film is clearly inspired by Ozu (Domenach 2015; Iwata-Weickgenannt 2016; Kiejziewicz 2017; Yee and Chu 2018). There is no graphic violence visible in the film: when violence occurs it always takes place either outside of the frame or is mediated via technological devices. The explosion of the nuclear reactors is, for example, implicated by a power outage, and in one sequence a reactor explosion is visible on the news on a small television in a living room.

A number of sequences depict mundane, slow and pensive conversations between characters sitting down on tatami mats. Long takes dominate the structure of the film and the camera makes no sudden movements. At a first glance this is a traditional Japanese family melodrama, but there is radical counter-futurist critique embedded in this traditional style. The ‘no future’ is depicted in the form of an updated

version of a traditional cultural-historical Japanese type of suicide—Shinju.

The fictional setting of *The Land of Hope* is Nagashima, a part of Japan apparently situated in a coastal location similar to Fukushima. Nagashima is a wordplay on the two cities Nagasaki and Hiroshima that were hit by Atomic bombs at the end of the second world war, and of course Fukushima which is used as a reference point to the film and is mentioned by characters in the film several times. In the film Nagashima is ironically introduced with a road sign: 'Welcome to the home of the famous nuclear power plant'. The story is centred around the Onos, a family of farmers: Yasuhiko (Isao Natsuyagi) and Cheiko (Naoko Ohtani), their son Yoichi (Jun Murakami) and daughter in law Izumi (Megumi Kagurazaka). Together they run a farm with dairy cattle and vegetable crop. They live a comfortable life in a calm and serene rural landscape when disaster strikes in the prefecture in the form of an earthquake, a tsunami and a meltdown at the local nuclear power plant.

The morning after the earthquake workers dressed in protective equipment appear and divide the Onos courtyard in half and put up a borderline separating the safety zone from the danger zone. The workers do not respond to any questions and no clear information is given to the people in the village. The Onos' neighbours, the Suzukis, are informed that they have to leave immediately since their house is on the wrong side of the safety barrier. Mr. Ono realises that there probably has been a meltdown at the power plant and he forces his son and daughter-in-law to leave the farm not to risk their health and future. He hands Izumi a stack of anti-nuclear books and an old Geiger counter as a farewell gift.<sup>7</sup>

Mr. Ono has no intention of leaving his home since his wife Cheiko is afflicted with dementia. She is drifting further and further away from lucidity—experiencing a continuing regression and reliving fragments of her youth and childhood. Ono is determined not to move Cheiko from the place where she has lived all her life and remove her sense of security. In the courtyard there are trees planted by his father and grandfather and in front of the house is the tree that they planted together

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<sup>7</sup> The books that Izumi is handed are real titles critical of the nuclear power industry published after Fukushima. By using these titles Sono, as Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt has clarified, provides a nuanced critique of the lack of information about the risks of living in close vicinity of nuclear power plants before 3/11 (2017: 115).

on their wedding day in the midst of a blossoming flowerbed. The trees are their family heirloom and represent their connection to the place.

When Yoichi and Izumi have settled in a new town Izumi reads all the anti-nuclear books and starts questioning televised propaganda that downplays the risks with radiation. In one tv show housewives are invited to give evidence on how they stopped worrying about radiation and wearing protective masks, so other people would not feel uncomfortable being around them. The tv host's advice is not to make a fuss about radiation since it is interfering with people's everyday life. The host talks to the camera and comforts the audience by appealing to traditional social conventions: 'In times like this we shouldn't be hysterical about radiation. I don't think it's appropriate. Now I'll get opinions from some housewives in the studio. And relax to it. That's what Japan needs. Da da dum. Let's eat, produce and buy!'

Izumi seems to be the only one in the new town that will not let go of her fear of radiation. Her worry becomes more intense when she soon thereafter becomes pregnant with their first child; she puts duct tape on the door and window frames and protective plastic in the whole apartment. Izumi starts wearing full body protective gear and the family becomes the village laughing stock. Reluctantly Yoichi adapts to Izumi's thinking and gradually accepts to be regarded as a fool by people in the street and at work. Diagnosed with 'radiophobia' by her gynaecologist and ridiculed by other pregnant women, the couple finally decides to move further away from the nuclear plant to be on the safe side.

Yasuhiko and Cheiko are told by government officials that they eventually will have to leave their home and they are ordered to put down their livestock. Finally, they receive an eviction notice. At the end of the film Yasuhiko says goodbye to Yoichi and Izumi with a final piece of advice that they should rely on their own judgement about how to handle the threat of radiation. Yasuhiko shoots his cows and thereafter commits suicide, after having shot his beloved Cheiko, in the flower bed under their wedding tree.

#### *Radiation-Shinju*

Shinju (double love suicide) is a traditional Japanese way of ending one's life that has often been used as a motif in different art forms. Historically Shinju was performed in kabuki and bunraku theatre, as a way for lovers to be together when their love was forbidden by social

conventions in a strictly hierarchical society. Romantic love was often regarded as a threat to the rationale of the social structure balancing marriages as economic transactions and in social hierarchies. To overcome social restrictions and unite in sensual communion, dying together was the only option (Lifton, Shuichi and Reich 1979: 281). With their ankles ritually tied together the lovers would remain united in the afterlife. This highly romanticised form of suicide has been a common trope in historical Japanese film genres.

But Shinju has also been used as a motif in popular science fiction disaster film. In *Tidal Wave*, one of the films that Napier analyses in her article a scientist refuses to be rescued, 'stating that he prefers to commit a "love suicide" (*shinju*) with Japan' (Napier 1993: 334). In this film the object of the strong romantic love is thus Japan and the only way to stay attached to Japan is to go down with the island when it disappears under water.

In *The Land of Hope*, Cheicko has started to drift apart from Yasuhiko long before the nuclear disaster took place. From the circular Buddhist conceptualisation of life and death her dementia can be interpreted as the first step on the way of entering death. Dementia could also be discussed in terms of a slow process of dying, emphasized by the film's slow aesthetics. By performing Shinju the old couple may be seen to overcome the brain disease that has started to drive them apart and stay together on the other side. But in this film, there is more than romantic love at stake. It is precisely here in the death scene that the traditional Japanese aesthetics collapses and opens up for a radical counter-futurist critique. The reason for the Shinju is to escape the radiation permeating everything, destroying all life. To reunite on the other side is the only option; only death is left.

The death scene is a final act of tenderness. Cheicko is taking care of the flowers and Yasuhiko asks his wife if she wishes to be together forever and she replies 'of course' He hugs and kisses her under their wedding tree and says: 'You want to die?' 'Are we going to die?', Cheicko asks him. 'Yes', Yasuhiko nodding. 'Ok, if we can die together', Cheicko replies. We only hear the gun shots and the final image in the scene shows how the wedding tree bursts into fire. When their connection to the land and their ancestors burns there is no sweet sadness, only destruction. The circle of life and death is broken.

*Hysterical Radiophobia or a Vision of No Future?*

The final sequence of the film follows upon the death of the Onos. Yoichi and Izumi are on the move to find a new place to live and stop to rest at a beautiful beach. They meet a young mother with a small child. Izumi looks happy and feels free from the looming threat of radiation. The two young women presumably talk about children, while Yoichi rests leaning towards an old log of tree. At first this sequence is in line with the traditional gender pattern clearly visible in the film. Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt criticises *The Land of Hope* from a gender perspective in her thorough close analysis, and she concludes that despite criticising the handling of the disaster on many levels the film ends up projecting an ‘affirmation of traditional gender roles’ and connecting motherhood with nurturing (2017: 124). She highlights the scene where Yoichi discusses Izumi’s growing fear with her gynaecologist and is informed that she is afflicted by ‘radiophobia’. The medical condition is described as happening to women and taking the form of a (hysterical) overreaction and inability to process sensitive information rationally.

From the counter-futurist perspective proposed in this article it may be added that the traditional melodramatic form is building up to the Shinju sequence where everything collapses. The film critiques the cultural mix of tradition and modernity that characterises Japan—a society with no way of handling the 3/11 disaster and consequently unable to provide a future for its people. This interpretation is supported by the final sequence. When Izumi is talking to the other woman the Geiger counter in Yoichi’s bag starts signalling. Izumi’s fear of radiation turns out to have been well founded—the war against the invisible enemy that kills everyone with slow violence is a reality. The imagery in this sequence bears a striking resemblance with the crime melodrama *Fireworks* (Japan 1997) by Takeshi Kitano, which was a radical break with his earlier style of high intensity graphically violent crime films in a similar way as *The Land of Hope* for Sono. The ending of *Fireworks* takes place on a beach (strongly resembling that of *The Land of Hope*) and depicts how a middle-aged man and his wife who is terminally ill in cancer perform a modernised variant of Shinju, while the camera pans towards the horizon where the sky meets the sea—a visualisation of the circle of life and death. Suddenly a shot is heard and the camera captures a young girl on the beach playing with a kite; she represents the future generation (Jacobsson 2009). Comparing *The Land of Hope* with

*Fireworks* clarifies that both films update and modernise Shinju, and how the nuanced play with traditional aesthetics is the key to the radical counter-futurist ideas Sono presents.

The broken circle is further emphasized in a subplot where the Suzukis' son and his girlfriend visit the wasteland of the forbidden zone to see with their own eyes the devastating effects of the natural and technological disasters. Amongst the debris in the destroyed housing areas they encounter two children looking for a Beatles record. They laugh at the children's old-fashioned taste in music: 'They like Beatles. That's retro'. Suddenly the children disappear and are nowhere to be found. The children could be interpreted as ghosts haunting the disaster area, but also as ancestors who have been ripped from the perpetual circuit of life and death, searching for a way of connecting again. But in the radiation-infused Nagashima the future has expired and the ancestors will disappear forever.

#### *The Unbearable Whispering of The Whispering Star*

In *The Whispering Star* a nuclear disaster has already happened before the story takes place. What is still left of humanity is scattered all over the solar system. The story revolves around a female looking android<sup>8</sup> on a freight vessel (in the form of a traditional Japanese house) that travels through space delivering packages to apathetic humans. The android (later in the film it is revealed that it is called Yoko Suzuki ID 722) is presumably all that is left of Japan. The viewer is informed in an intertitle that humanity is an endangered species, that there are more androids than humans left, and that 'mankind is nothing but a flicker of a flame'.

During the android's travels it performs everyday house-hold chores on the spaceship, dressed in an apron and equipped with a duster. It does this over and over again and pauses only to listen to voice recordings on a reel-to-reel tape recorder, or to argue with the ship's computer that constantly is on the verge of malfunctioning. The inside of the space ship bears a striking resemblance to a tiny old-fashioned apartment with a

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<sup>8</sup> See Bergvall (2012) for a discussion of the importance of the allegorical use of the female android in *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, Germany 1927). An interesting topic to follow up in science fiction studies would be to analyse the female android from a cross-cultural perspective.

kitchenette. The camera focuses on specific details inside the space vessel, meticulously documenting everything the android does: opening the water tap; dusting the strip lighting in the ceiling; opening a cupboard.

The android makes regular stops to visit planets and handing out the cardboard packages she is responsible for delivering. The common denominator between the places she visits is that they resemble abandoned post-disaster areas with deserted villages, ruins overgrown with weed and debris spread out over the landscape. Yoko walks around for a while in the different places and eventually finds the recipients, they sign for the delivery and the android leaves the planet. Little or no dialogue takes place during the deliveries. The pattern is repeated and little or no change takes place during the film.

The only thing that initially makes the viewer aware of the fact that the main character is an android is that there is nowhere to sleep on the spaceship. The few remaining humans in the film are behaving, expressing themselves and communicating in a somnambulist manner making it quite hard to differentiate between androids and humans—in comparison with *The Land of Hope* where the film ends with a rupture in the circle of life, the humans in *The Whispering Star* are dead men walking—or a curiosity reminiscent of a distant past. This is further emphasized by the fact that the humans order packages to be delivered by hand when they—as Yoko says in passing—easily could have received them by teleportation. The break in the circle of death and life has already happened and the humans are becoming more adapted to a humanoid lifestyle and the boundary between human and machine is becoming more and more irrelevant.

The lack of human life as we know it is implemented in the style and form of the film. *The Whispering Star* is exceptionally slow and filmed almost entirely in black and white. It is testing the spectators' patience with the use of sound. The characters are whispering, there is almost no ambient sound and the little sound there is stands out by being annoying, repetitive and monotone. Examples are a moth moving around inside in the ceiling light and an empty soda can that is initially stuck under the cowboy boot of a human Yoko meets on a planet while he walks slowly for minutes of filmic duration and then under one of Yoko's feet, making a metallic clicking sound with her every step. The film's soundscape adds to the understanding of the artificiality of this new post-nuclear

disaster world. The sounds in the film do not disturb the android, but they most certainly have an effect on the spectator.

To connect the film to the nuclear disaster in Fukushima, Sono used the evacuated disaster area as location for the shooting of the film. Actors were recruited from the area and were people he had previously met while performing interviews in preparation for *The Land of Hope*. It is quite obvious how the film is echoing the depiction of a number of young women in Ozu's family melodramas. At the same time the images evoke memories of the early space travel science fiction films of the 1950s. The experimental style of *The Whispering Star* is distinctly self-reflexive and, in comparison with *The Land of Hope*, also presents an array of retro-nostalgic images reminding spectators of the 1960s modernist avant-garde and the slow philosophically inclined science fiction of the 1970s. The contrast between the different inspirational sources establishes a more complex understanding of a 'belief' in images and in terms of Rodowick's questions *The Whispering Star* opens for a different analytical perspective than *The Land of Hope*. The critical perspective in *The Land of Hope* is nuanced and demands knowledge about both film history and culture specific aesthetics, whereas *The Whispering Star* constantly demands the spectators' attention leaving little room for misunderstanding. The challenge is rather to have the stamina to endure the slowness and the use of sound.

#### *Time and Time Again*

The narration in *The Whispering Star* revolves around a number of precise time notifications provided by intertitles. The precision of these notifications does not serve to make any sense of duration and instead gradually creates an absurd experience of time for time's sake. The attention to detail also connects the film's argumentation about time as developed for and by humans. For example, the juxtaposition and the stark contrasts of the traditional exterior of a Japanese house equipped with a jet engine travelling through space and a 'wan rūmu manshon' ('one-room mansion', a small functional apartment of approximately 110 sq. feet for one person) with an android dressed as a traditional young unmarried woman, collapse the timeline into an unspecific 'sometimes always'.

The attention to detail in the imagery slows down the experience of an already meditative style of film making. Adding to the attention to the

concept of time already activated by the experimental style, a number of intertitles with precise notifications of time and date is inserted, for example: Monday. Tuesday. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday Sunday. One year later. 5:23 pm. 7 seconds. These time notifications provide no sense of coherence, but rather instigate a feeling of absurdity and pinpoint that time as linear duration has lost all meaning in this film. The only thing in the film reminding spectators of a human conceptualisation of time is that the android has to change its batteries regularly. When the power is running low on her AA batteries she opens a lid in the side of her belly and changes six batteries.

The sequences when Yoko is listening to tape recordings further enhance the spectator's experience of being disconnected from a time line and an experience of duration. It is initially unclear who has made the recordings and it seems like Yoko is finding the tapes for the first time and is genuinely surprised and interested in the content—and in the old-fashioned technology. But gradually it becomes clear that she has made the recordings herself to document her journey for the company she works for and for her upcoming replacement. The recordings provide information about her travels, that she has 82 more packages to deliver, and that she will be a couple of years late with her mission. At the beginning of the film the android is easily mistaken for a human being but she is gradually stripped of her humanity. She does her different chores because she is programmed to do them.

But there is one part of the film that creates ambivalence regarding the boundaries between humanity and artificiality. Yoko suddenly breaks her routine behaviour by being interested in the content of the boxes that she is delivering. She shakes the boxes and finally opens them one by one. She finds a photo negative with four images of a child in one box, water colours and a paintbrush in another box, a stuffed butterfly in yet another box, and then a pencil, a fishing lure, a paper cup and a photo of a sleeping child. Unmoved by the objects Yoko continues on her travels. The human trait of curiosity does not lead to any change in the android but rather pinpoints the distinction between humanity and artificiality.

#### *Delivering Memories*

When the material content of the boxes is revealed the artefacts seem random, underwhelming and insignificant. But the material artefacts are carriers of memories. The people Yoko meets have waited for years to

receive the small material pieces. The waiting for mail and the small trinkets are the only things they have left in their post-disaster existence. The android cannot connect emotionally to memories. The humans can do nothing but connect to memories, so the waiting keeps them alive.

In one sequence, the style of the film is altered and a little piece of 'reality' enters the frame. This happens when Yoko is looking for a client in an abandoned house. There is no address on the package. She looks out of a window frame (a thinly veiled metaphor for the cinema experience) into an overgrown landscape and the film shifts from black and white to colour. Sono is reminding the spectators that they are now looking straight into the forbidden zone of Fukushima, at the same time as they are watching this experimental science fiction film. The waiting that keeps the humans alive in *The Whispering Star* is here reproduced as the waiting for the radiation to disappear from Fukushima—a time frame which clarifies that *time, duration* and *humanity* are in fact nothing but a 'flicker of a flame'.

Yoko arrives at a beach (the coast line of Fukushima) with a delivery to a very old lady who works as a cigarette vendor. Her cigarette stand has started to break down on the beach. A large grandfather clock is sticking up in the sand. Yoko asks the woman if she has waited for long, she answers: No.

In the final sequence, Yoko arrives at a long hallway with transparent paper walls to deliver a package. She walks along the hallway and on both sides human silhouettes are displayed on the walls as puppet figures interacting, playing and socialising. This final sequence deconstructs the belief in images with this shadow play depicting human life before the disaster, a past life that is lost forever.

#### *Concluding Discussion*

Sono's science fiction films present a thorough critique of the 3/11 disasters and the threat of extinction from radiation, as a form of slow violence. From a film-philosophical perspective the thinking developed by these films is pinpointing the disastrous experience of existing without a Future. The definitive rupture in the circle of life and death in *The Land of Hope* and the negation of linear time in *The Whispering Star* clarify the importance for humanity to have an open-ended *finitude* to look forward to, to value life in response to, and to make sense of its existence (Hägglund 2019).

Death works—as Zygmunt Bauman (1992) has proposed—as a ‘necessary condition for the formation of human cultures’ (Jacobsson 2009). An omnipresent death without nuance and ambivalence erases the foundation of the meaning of life. This is what has happened in *The Whispering Star*. The somnambulist humans have lost their purpose due to radiation. They are no longer living their lives as social beings in communities, they are only co-existing in a decaying post-disaster landscape. An open-ended finitude does not determine, but provides a sense of belonging and opens for some necessary thinking on the conditions of existence. Knowing that we will die but not how, when and why also motivates our care for our living conditions, not least from an ecological perspective. Sion Sono’s counter-futurist critique, supported by the aesthetics of slow cinema and disrespect for the restraints of traditional values and aesthetics, guides the audience in evaluating their own ‘belief in images’ in relation to the potential devastating effects that nuclear disasters may have on the environment, and on the conditions for upholding any form of biological life.

The next phase of Japanese science fiction, here represented by these films, depicts the definitive breakdown of the safety nets of modernity, closing all doors for the sentiments of ‘disaster-utopianism’. The meltdown of the reactors eradicates the ambivalence balancing life and death. In *The Land of Hope* even the most stern wish to uphold normality gives way when Yoichi hears the Geiger counter on the beach far away from the forbidden zone.

In *The Whispering Star* the only thing keeping people alive are the nostalgic memories delivered by the android. In *The Land of Hope* and *The Whispering Star* looking back and using film history is at the centre of the films, signalling a counter-futurist awareness. But these films are not a eulogy that directs a nostalgic eye backwards to better times; rather they problematise a future that is both timeless and without a Future as we understand the concept.

In light of the counter-futurist critique in Sono’s films as it is discussed in this article, the films can be regarded as a response to the questions posed by Rodowick about what philosophy wants from moving images. The films provide a conceptual reciprocity between thought-in-images and thought-about-images in relation to the concepts of death and disaster by re-using and updating traditional aesthetics and thereby creating a new type of Japanese science fiction. The slowness of the

films' aesthetics and narration creates a disruption of the experience of duration and emphasises that it is fruitless to turn to a nostalgic belief in images to find answers about a future without a Future—new ideas and new ways of thinking about the future have to be invented. A poignant visualisation of this problem is found in *The Land of Hope* when the boundary is constructed between the forbidden zone and the rest of Japan, separating the Ono's and the Suzuki's. This is an exercise in absurd vanity, constructing a useless material and porous border to 'stop' an invisible enemy from slowly killing everyone and everything.

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