Convenience and virtuality: Making sense of emergency in Japan

Grant Otsuki

University of Toronto

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According to Gins and Arakawa, "the human condition is a crisis condition if ever there was one [although] few individuals and societies act with the dispatch a state of emergency requires." (Gins and Arakawa 2002, xvi) The primary emergency to which they refer here is the emergency of biological death. Gins and Arakawa worked towards their goal of avoiding death and 'reversing destiny' by experimenting with architectural designs that might produce a sense of emergency which may lead to the reconfiguration of human bodies. In the weeks surrounding the March 11th earthquake, their architecture became a site for coping with another emergency, the nuclear disaster at Fukushima.

In this paper, I explore how the residents of the Reversible Destiny Lofts, a building created by Arakawa and Gins, imagined and experienced this emergency. I pay special attention to how the notion of 'convenience' ('benri') was mobilized in this context. Though convenience has not been a major focus in studies of Japan, it has been discussed in relation to changes in sociality in the post-industrial economy and the ubiquity of 'kombini', or convenience stores (Bestor 2004, 163-165; Whitelaw 2008), and mobile technologies (Kato 2005). In this paper, I approach convenience as a value that my informants used to orient and make sense of their lives in the Lofts and a society that they saw as increasingly dominated by virtual experiences and informatisation – by what Castells has called "real virtuality" (2000) or Hayles "a regime of computation" (Hayles 2006;Hayles 2005). I then discuss an episode from later in my fieldwork, in which the themes of convenience, virtuality, and emergency come together to illustrate the contradictory relationship between them, and their expression in a form which confirms my informants' anxieties. I hope to offer a way to think about how the value is entangled with bodies and history in the context of a nuclear emergency.

Built in a quiet residential area of Tokyo in 2005, the most noticeable feature of the Lofts from the outside is the bright, multi-colored paint scheme. Inside, it is the floor which commands immediate attention. Large parts of it are covered in rough bumps that create hilly landscapes in the central areas of each apartment. Staff would explain to visitors that the Lofts were built to be the opposite of the 'barrier-free' universal design philosophy that had become ubiquitous in Japan.

Kiriko and Tomoya, who lived in the unit above me, told me that they had disposed of many pieces of furniture when they moved in, because there was very little space where things could safely be placed, especially in earthquake-prone Japan. One concession in the design of the Lofts to convenience was a flat space adjacent to the spherical room in each apartment for accommodating a full-sized refrigerator, although many of the residents chose to make do with smaller fridges that fit within the central kitchen space.

Convenience had been a feature of my conversations with Kiriko during my time at the Lofts. Kiriko explained their decision to live there in spite of the inconvenience by

making reference to the convenience of life outside the Lofts. "Things are so convenient, that everything is inconvenient." She explained this statement to me in this way:

> Think of a beautiful moon in the night sky. We may never have had a moment when we wonder what the moon is. We're told that it's the moon when we're small. Before we know it, we take it as obvious that it's a moon. We don't wonder why it comes out at night, or why it turns into a fragment of itself. We never doubt that we know the answer. For children born today, things are becoming even more obvious. They will be given answers instantly. Is this really what we want?

"The ability to search [online] over the ability to wonder?" I asked. "That's what I mean: that convenience is inconvenient. Take this room. There's nothing convenient about it, but it's a wonder to live here."

This ambivalent relationship with convenience, mediated through concerns about the cultural and personal effects of instantly available information, was echoed by Shogo, another resident, who lamented the easy substitution of virtual for actual presence among the young children in his art classes. He said, "[For them], it's dangerous and inconvenient. Some of them think that if they see a place on a big screen in 3-D, they don't need to go themselves. But if they went, there would be smells and flavours and warmth." This was why he implored visitors on the tours of the Lofts that he conducted to put down their phones and digital cameras: "because we spend too much time understanding the world as information rather than experiencing it with our bodies."

"Convenience" is in part generational. Kiriko and Shogo looked upon those who had grown up with a mobile phone in one hand and a laptop clutched in the other with some apprehension, pointing to common discourses linking information technology and social decline in Japanese society[1]. But the generationality of convenience has another aspect, which ties it to Japanese postwar history.

Convenience was a way of comprehending the most recent nuclear emergency in terms of the last one, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In an e-mail Kiriko sent me several weeks after the Fukushima disaster had begun and after I had returned to Canada, she repeated her words – "Things are so convenient that everything is inconvenient". She wrote, "How much convenience do people want? We have more than enough." She continued, "'Convenience' equals electricity consumption, which demands a stable, nuclear supply. Because of this, we are so busy processing information that we have no time to contemplate what lies before our eyes, calmly, quietly, and respectfully." Now, from within a state of unfolding emergency, she reiterated the link between information and convenience.

This time, she added, "The Japanese are a forgetful people. That's why we allowed the nuclear power plants." Kiriko's sentiment was echoed in a speech given in Spain by the novelist Haruki Murakami several months later. Speaking about how the push for economic prosperity overcame Japan's post-war commitment to peace and against nuclear weapons, Murakami said, "The so-called "reality" that has been proclaimed by those who promote

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1   See, for example, *Ikirutte nanyaroka?* (Ishiguro and Washida 2011, 14-15) (co-authored by the inventor of the android mentioned below), which compares the current generation of students to "broiler chickens", "happy living in cages doing only the tasks given to them."

nuclear power however, isn't reality at all. It is nothing more than superficial "convenience", which their flawed logic confused with reality itself." (Murakami 2011) Behind their words hung the memory of Hiroshima.

What made this link so salient for Kiriko and the others was that they could experience the bombing and the war mainly as information, but they also knew it as something that resisted representation. Kiriko and Tomoya were both "hibakusha nisei" – second generation survivors of the atomic bombing at Hiroshima. Her father, she told me, was twenty years old when he witnessed the effects of the bombing, though he rarely ever spoke to her about it. She guessed that he did not speak, because he wanted to resist remembering what she called the "images of hell." What she had been able to gather from school and others around her, was that it was the smell that was the most horrifying part of the aftermath, something which she could only imagine.

Silence and passivity in the face of tragedy is an aspect of the "victim's history" of wartime Japan that dominates Japanese cultural discourse about the war (Napier 2000). John Treat, quotes a survivor of Hiroshima who recalls, ""Oh, look, there's another enemy plane coming" just as the Enola Gay passed directly overhead; then, remembering what happened seconds later, he states, "Thereafter there were no more words."" (Treat 1995, 27) On the night Kiriko spoke about her father, Shogo and other residents of the same generation told similar stories about their parents and their silence about the war which persisted even as they appeared to remember fear and trauma with their bodies. Tomoya then turned to me and said, "The war can't be abstracted. The Japanese still haven't recovered from the war."[2]

I returned to Japan later that year to continue my fieldwork, this time in the western half of the country. Just before the anniversary of the earthquake, I attended a performance of a play entitled "Sayonara". It was the first time it had been performed in Japanese since the disaster. It is a short play involving three actors, two human and one artificial, modeled on a young woman. The robot used in the play was originally developed to be as human-like in appearance as possible, with the goal of creating an optimal means of communication for conveying the feeling of human presence across the internet.

The play depicts a conversation between a dying young woman, and a robot tasked with providing her with comfort in her final days. They discuss poems that the robot recites to her about facing the end of life. The woman dies and the stage lights go down, as the robot reads the final lines: "And yet, when my thoughts drift to the comings and goings of the waves, I know that one day I will return to my true home."

For this performance, the playwright added a coda scene. When the lights go back up, the daughter's corpse is gone. A courier appears, who begins verifying that the robot is operating correctly. He then informs her of her new task: to sit facing the sea on a beach near Fukushima Daiichi, and recite poems for the dead in a place where humans can no longer go. She accepts her assignment, and is carried away to be shipped.

The audience was left imagining a young woman alone on an abandoned beach, mourning on humanity's behalf. It is a powerful image and was an expression of the playwright's desire to show technology redeeming itself by working to comfort those whom

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2   Although I do not explore it further here, origin stories about Arakawa told to visitors to the Lofts suggest links between Arakawa's focus on the body and his wartime experiences. (See also Arakawa and Gins 1994)

it had endangered, and was powerless to protect. At the same time, as a device for making actual human presence unnecessary and inconvenient, the robot, as both actor and character, embodies the very value of convenience, and a normalization of virtualization which, for Kiriko and the others, are the antithesis of living in the Reversible Destiny Lofts.

The architecture and the android are steeped in a nuclear story of Japan after the bomb, a story of successive atomic emergencies. In this story, convenience indexes not just what kinds of lives we have and want to live, but what kinds of bodies would be adequate for those lives and what worlds might best fit those bodies. It is a way of thinking about what we must do with ourselves to live through this emergency, and the next, not just as a question of who can speak and how, but how some body can remain present in those states of emergency.

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