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# **“SHE LUSTED AFTER BUILDINGS, AND THEY LUSTED AFTER HER”: OBJECTOPHILIA AND COMMODITY ANIMISM IN JUNJI ITO’S “WOODEN SPIRIT” AND “FUTON”**

Leonie Rowland

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## **A Series of Shocks**

Neoliberal Japan is often discussed in Gothic terms.<sup>1</sup> In *Japan and the Cosmopolitan Gothic* (2013), Michael J. Blouin refers to customary paradigms of the country “as a monstrosity, as sheer excess, as unbridled capitalism run amok” (104). Likewise, in *A New Companion to the Gothic* (2012), Charles Shirō Inouye argues that “Japanese culture is profoundly Gothic,” suggesting that the Gothic inhabits day-to-day life in twenty-first century Japan (444). Accordingly, this paper views the social ramifications of Japanese capitalism in a Gothic framework, focusing specifically on the symbolic animation of inanimate objects, which are treated as substitutes for human connection in Junji Ito’s manga short stories “Wooden Spirit” and “Futon” (2014). In doing so, it demonstrates, first, that horror in these texts is generated by the departure from conservative narratives surrounding wealth and gender, combined with the implication that transgression from social norms is only acceptable if it is carried out within the capitalist system; second, that both texts privilege object obsession over human connection, framing the fetishisation of private property as a source of personal loneliness and cultural destruction; and third, that Japan being “profoundly Gothic” in the twenty-first century can be attributed at least in part to the transgressive human–object relations proffered by Japanese capitalism (Inouye 444).<sup>2</sup>

The connection between “mass destruction” and capitalism that Christopher Sharett identifies in *Japanese Horror Cinema* (2005) as a defining feature of Japanese Horror marks a point of return to the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which led to the reimagining of the Japanese home, family, and community in a neoliberal framework (xii). Despite the fact that Japan was already a budding capitalist nation, economic reforms implemented during the postwar years of Allied occupation (1945-1952) are best understood in terms of Naomi Klein’s disaster capitalism, which she outlines in *The Shock Doctrine* (2007).<sup>3</sup> For Klein, this brand of capitalism occurs when disasters – in this case, the concurrent bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which led to Japan’s unconditional surrender – are viewed as “exciting market opportunities” (6). Consequently, socioeconomic reforms are implemented in societies that, in better health, would have resisted them. Klein argues that disasters such as Hiroshima and Nagasaki put

the entire population into a state of collective shock. The falling bombs, the bursts of terror, the pounding winds serve to soften up whole societies [...] Like the terrorised prisoner who gives up the names of comrades and renounces his faith, shocked societies often give up things they would otherwise fiercely protect (17).

Despite the fact that the term was coined decades after Hiroshima, John Dower's description of occupied Japan echoes Klein's definition of disaster capitalism. In *Cultures of War* (2011), he argues that America's "political and civic virtues helped make it possible to move decisively during the brief window of a few years *when defeated Japan itself was in flux and most receptive to radical change*" (338, emphasis mine). Dower's language resists moral judgement – he uses "in flux" and "receptive" where Klein uses "shocked" and "coercion" – but the overwhelming consensus is that Japan was a passive partner in the creation of its postwar foundations (Dower 338; Klein 17). Thus, since Japan's emergence into the global marketplace meant restructuring around Western economic models – first in 1868 at the dawn of the Meiji era, then during the Allied occupation – the capitalist system is coded as a tool of de-Nipponisation, often harnessed by the Japanese themselves as a means of competing with Western powers. As such, the texts in question do not necessarily assert that Japan is unique in the pervasiveness of its capitalist system, but rather that the manner of its implementation and continued manifestation have perverted traditional Japanese values, leading to an eruption of transgressive human-object relations in fact and fiction alike.

The loneliness epidemic that Japan has been facing since the 1980s is a direct result of capitalist reforms. In *Japan's Old Men are the World's Loneliest* (2018), psychologist Junko Okamoto calls Japan the "loneliness superpower," using language associated with the nation's economic ambitions ("superpower") to emphasise the duality of its much-coveted world influence (cited in Lewis, n.p.). Loneliness, Okamoto implies, not only results from Japan's economic power but surpasses it in the global consciousness. The word *kodokushi*, or lonely death, was first used at the height of Japan's economic success in the 1980s to describe people who were dying alone and remaining undiscovered for long periods of time. The word *karōshi*, or death by overwork, was also used at this time to describe individuals, usually successful businessmen, who dropped dead without any prior signs of illness. Both terms are evidence of the breakdown of traditional social bonds (such as family and marriage, which are explicitly or implicitly absent in both scenarios) and are indicative of a nationwide environment where people cannot form interpersonal relations because they are devoted to corporate culture. In this way, capitalism makes people lonely and then uses their loneliness to sell them the illusion of companionship through cunningly Shintoesque marketing techniques.

In *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (2006), Anne Allison argues that the value placed on personal acquisition in Japan is a result of wide-spread social disconnect. This drives people to seek companionship in commodities, compensating for inadequate interpersonal relations by purchasing goods that have been encoded with personalities. Typically,

these goods include anything from anthropomorphic products like Tamagotchis or Pokémon, to games consoles and virtual partners, to brands that one associates with oneself. Such strategies are particularly prevalent in Japan because of their roots in animism, which Roger J. Davies in *Japanese Culture: The Religious and Philosophical Foundations* (2016) describes as the “attribution of conscious life to nature or natural objects, and a belief in the existence of innumerable spirits which are thought to inhabit sacred places and which are intimately involved in human affairs” (40). Whereas animism is usually associated with reverence for the natural world, the allocation of “conscious life” to commodities relocates the “sacred places” of Shinto to supermarkets and shopping malls (40). Allison calls this “commodity animism,” suggesting that contemporary Japanese commercial culture inhabits a pseudo-spiritual realm where objects are endowed with personalities (86). It is the ownership of these ‘living’ things that allows people to exist without contact with others, making personal acquisition a priority insofar as it is a comfort. This is evident in “Wooden Spirit,” when a woman is sexually fulfilled by her house instead of her husband, suggesting that the ownership of private property is a greater source of intimacy than marriage. The same can be said for “Futon,” when an adulterer turns to his bed rather than his spouse to protect him from evil spirits that have inhabited his flat. This kind of animism is less about reverence for the natural world and more about ownership of the commercial objects that have overrun it. However, these products also offer a carefully constructed alternative to a lifetime of loneliness, reinforcing conservative narratives by locating the solution to problems caused by the capitalist system within the system itself.

Accordingly, in *The System of Objects* (1968), Jean Baudrillard argues that human relationships have become relationships of consumption because they are experienced indirectly through commodities. He uses the purchase of wedding rings, through which the idea of marriage is consumed, as an example. In “Wooden Spirit,” the building facilitates Manami’s objectophilia and is thus consumed as the idea of sexual union. Likewise, in “Futon,” Tomio’s bedding becomes an expression of his absent mother and alienated partner, allowing him to consume the illusion of safety by concealing himself in its comforting embrace. The commodification of human faculties is, in Baudrillard’s words, the formal logic of the commodity as analysed by Karl Marx “in its most extreme expression,” demonstrating that his reading of commodity in *The System of Objects* is essentially Marxist (216). As such, it complements my readings of the relationship between late capitalist consumerism and Japanese religious culture (the marriage of which creates commodity animism). However, for Baudrillard, it cannot “be said that objects are an automatic substitute for the relationship that is lacking, that they serve to fill a void: on the contrary, they *describe* this void” (221, original emphasis). Whereas objects in these stories certainly describe the void between people, they are also anthropomorphised as direct substitutes for lacking human relations. In “Wooden Spirit,” this substitution is effective, since Manami’s seduction animates the house, and they achieve sexual union. In “Futon,” it is not, and the futon is revealed as a mere descriptor of the void left by the destruction of Tomio’s maternal and marital ties. In both cases, commodity animism ultimately offers the women in question a better life to the one they were previously living. However, it also reinstates conservative narratives that frame neoliberalism as a moral force, designed to protect those who adopt it as an ideology. This protection is, of course, illusory, and one oppression (in this case, patriarchal figures) is traded for another (dependence on commercially available objects).

As such, horror in these texts is derived from the assertion that liberation from gendered social constraints can only take place within the capitalist system.

### Fetishising the Domestic Space

Junji Ito is arguably the most successful contemporary horror *mangaka* in Japan and certainly the most well-known in the West. His cannon ranges from *Uzumaki*, a three-volume epic about a town overtaken by spirals; to *Tomie*, which ran from 1987-2000 and follows a beautiful girl who is periodically dismembered and reborn; to *Junji Ito's Cat Diary: Yon & Mu*, a semi-biographical account of his cats. In 2019, Ito received the Eisner Award for his adaptation of Mary Shelley's Gothic masterpiece, *Frankenstein* (1818), and has written numerous short stories that have influenced (and are influenced by) the Japanese Gothic and J-Horror traditions, as well as their Western counterparts. "Futon" and "Wooden Spirit" (also known as "Blanket" and "Haunted Wood Mansion") open his 2014 collection *Fragments of Horror* (or *Shard of Evil*), which was originally serialised in *Nemuki+* magazine in 2013. The primary consumers of his work are young women (*josei*), but he is read widely across demographics, and his 2019 adaptation of Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human* was targeted specifically at middle-aged men, signalling an intentional expansion of his audience. In this sense, his work is consumed in a similar way to commodity animism, which is targeted overtly at young girls (through products such as Sanrio's Hello Kitty and Bandai's Tamagotchi) but consumed in its various forms across Japan and the globalised world. Thus, the animation of commodities that occurs in "Wooden Spirit" and "Futon" is of particular concern to readers of Ito's work.

Accordingly, in "Wooden Spirit," Manami, a woman claiming to be an architecture student, destroys her marriage when she turns to her home rather than her husband for sexual gratification. She enters the house as a lodger and is accepted by a father and his daughter, Megumi, with varying reluctance, under the promise that she will complete their household tasks in exchange for a room. She eventually marries into the family but refuses to leave the house to go on her honeymoon, preferring to rub her naked body against the walls. After gratifying her object sexuality, Manami turns to wood and becomes a part of the building, which responds to her advances by transforming into a monstrous creature. The father and Megumi flee in horror, concluding that "[s]he was a pervert... she lusted after buildings, and they lusted after her" (40). Manami's objectophilia leaves her family lonely and displaced, demonstrating that the privileging of material possessions over human connection creates interpersonal disconnect.

The lust-worthy building is a symbol of the family's inherited wealth and personal histories since it was owned by their ancestral line. Manami's seduction and consequent destruction of the property leaves Megumi and her father without a home, dislocating them geographically. It also creates the conditions of existential "uncertainty, of rumbling instability" that, in *Precarious Japan* (2013), Allison argues have led many Japanese people to feel "that they don't belong (anywhere)" in neoliberal times (13, 8). Megumi describes the property in animistic terms, stressing the emotional importance it holds for her and her father, who share "joy, sadness, everything with this house" (12). The building functions as an addition to their immediate family as well as a signifier of their

ancestors, suggesting that the adoration they feel towards it is a passion for private property, which is valued for its connection to their family line. This demonstrates the way in which possessions can act as substitutes for absent relationships, since the house is transformed into a vessel for human passions that were once, but can no longer be, directed towards other humans. As such, it enacts Baudrillard's argument that:

our everyday objects are in fact objects of a passion – the passion for private property, emotional investment in which is every bit as intense as the 'human' passions. Indeed, the everyday passion for private property is often stronger than all the others, and sometimes even reigns supreme, all other passions being absent (91).

The intensity of passion sparked by the house in both Manami and the family is enhanced by its status as a "registered national tangible cultural property," a title reserved for works of art and architecture that embody the legacy of the Japanese people, making it a site of cultural importance (12). Thus, the familial and cultural legacies it embodies are commodified and made available to the public through guided tours, repurposing them as products that can be consumed by entering the house – and in the family's case, by owning it. This exposes the depthlessness of the house as a historical artefact on a personal and cultural level: it is no longer the private space Megumi and her father grew up in, so its authenticity as their family home is lost. Likewise, its status as a cultural relic only extends to its surface appearance because it has been upset by modern additions such as a television and electric lighting, which are anachronistic to the building's time of construction in 1854. This "flattening" of history into its surface aesthetic is attributed by Fredric Jameson, in *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), to the "depthlessness" of postmodernism, which empties historical objects of their original significance (9). He writes: "we are witnessing the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms" (9). For Jameson, the postmodern subject is content to consume the past through surfaces, such as the preserved exterior of a building, regardless of the historical accuracy and depth of meaning that lies behind them. This can be seen in "Wooden Spirit," since the building is reinstated as a modern household (rather than a relic of the Ansei period) and a tourist destination (rather than a private home), resulting in the "waning" of its authenticity (10). Manami's objectophilia, which ruptures this surface aesthetic when the house transforms into a monster, exposes the superficiality of the family's ties to their ancestors and the past more generally, both of which are corrupted by her unwillingness to preserve the illusions of historical, cultural, and emotional significance that are signified by the building's pristine exterior. The desires of an individual are here prioritised above the wellbeing of the family because Manami views the building in terms of the wealth accumulated by its cultural significance, demonstrating the way in which culture is fetishised by the neoliberal consumer. The commodification of culture, Ito asserts, is responsible for its destruction.

It is, of course, the building's surface aesthetic that originally draws Manami to it. For

Baudrillard, the commodification of this kind of building, which is only accessible to the public through advertising and allocated visiting hours, triggers sublime awe in those who cannot afford to own it. He composes a list of “houses beyond compare,” which are photographed in magazines and consumed by the public as “dream creations without any commercial significance” because they are financially unavailable (18). Megumi’s “noble wooden building” could sit quite comfortably among them. Baudrillard writes of “old eighteenth-century mansions, miraculously well-equipped villas, Italian gardens heated by infra-red rays and populated by Etruscan statuettes – in short, the world of the unique, leaving the reader no alternative [...] but contemplation without hope” (18). Initially, Manami embodies this “contemplation without hope,” which is tied to questions of financial prosperity and social class, when she is told she must join a tour group in order to enter the house (18). Megumi, on the other hand, represents “the world of the unique,” of flourishing private property and cultural heritage, and in doing so, she is processed by Manami as an *alternative* to hopeless longing (18). In contrast, Manami embodies a general public who lust constantly after what they cannot afford. The fetishisation of high-priced items such as the building is, according to Allison, “one of the most visible, if superficial, markers” of neoliberal Japan, facilitating nationwide fantasies of personal ownership and national prosperity (*Millennial Monsters* 67). This desire for inaccessible affluence shares connotations of imagination and unreality with Baudrillard’s “dream creations,” suggesting that freedom to buy is only available to the economically elite (18). Here, as in Allison’s observation that “Japan is becoming a place where hope has become a privilege of the socioeconomically secure,” hope itself is acquired through financial wellbeing, making it into a kind of commodity (*Precarious* 34). It is determined by the subject’s freedom to buy and therefore finds its antithesis in the inaccessible wealth of others.

Consequently, the story hinges on a tension between the public and private spheres, where ‘private’ connotes prosperity and ‘public’ connotes relative financial lack. The separation between the home and the wider world is established in Japan from a young age as *uchi* (inside, clean) and *soto* (outside, dirty). The former is fetishised and the latter is embodied by Manami, who imposes herself onto the private lives of Megumi and her father in order to seduce the building. She is associated with the outside (*soto*) because of her financial precarity and lack of blood ties to the family, both of which alienate her from the culturally significant building. However, although Manami enters the building as a guest, she quickly transforms it into a domestic space that depends on her, since her promise to take care of Megumi and her father in exchange for a room implies that she is allowed to treat the house as her own. Of course, if Manami must live in the house before she can domesticate it, it follows that she must marry its owner before she can seduce his property. Her sexual inclinations are tied up in questions of marriage rights, which entitle her to the building and retransform the space from public back to private. Her role as the father’s cook, cleaner and, eventually, his wife, upholds normative gender dynamics since the private sphere is owned by a man and run by a woman, meaning that Manami rules over the domestic space but is ultimately powerless because she has no financial stake in the property. Thus, despite her induction into the private sphere, she remains an outsider in her own home, bound by the implication that women can only express themselves economically and erotically with the help of men. It is not until she joins with the building in sexual union that her husband’s dominion over his home, and therefore over

her, ceases to exist. In this way, Ito frames commodity animism as an escape from the tyranny of oppressive gender roles. Manami may be a slave to materialism, it asserts, but at least she is not a slave to domesticity.

Consequently, Manami's desire to acquire the house is sexually coded in the "chills" she gets from looking at the ceiling, the "masculine strength" she attributes to its joists and her observation that the woodwork is "very sexy" (16). Megumi later complains about Manami sexualising her home, maintaining that her new stepmother is "weird" because she goes "around to other people's houses [...] talking about how sexy they are" (19). Megumi finds the word 'sexy' uncomfortable, but this is less because Manami is speaking to a building and more because she is speaking to a building that does not belong to her. So, Megumi's response to Manami anthropomorphising the woodwork further suggests that marriage, which would make the house hers by proxy, is necessary to the fulfilment of her fetish, echoing Baudrillard's insistence that "the purchase itself, simple approbation, is transformed into a manoeuvre, a scenario, a complicated dance which endows a purely practical transaction with all the traits of amorous dalliance: advances, rivalry, obscenity, flirtation, prostitution – even irony" (188). Manami's powers of persuasion take the place of a regular purchase, marking a return to a pre-capitalist system where a service (in this case, cooking and cleaning) is exchanged for an object (a room in the house) without money as a mediator. Once Manami is no longer required to pay for the room, she is liberated from hopeless contemplation and initiated into a world where dream creations are at her fingertips. The source of eroticism, then, is the possession of private property without financial exchange, which facilitates the pretence of wealth – even though this is at the expense of her newly forged human ties. Again, normative gender dynamics are unsettled by Manami's objectophilia, since her marriage is a temporary, albeit necessary, measure. However, the story is conservative in the sense that Manami's sexual and financial liberation is achieved through the competitiveness and individualism that characterises neoliberal thought. Thus, commodity animism frees her from the constraints of wealth and gender, but, like progressing in a competitive work environment, she triumphs at the expense of others.

So, Manami's marriage is emptied of the usual connotations of love and longevity, retaining significance only in the access she gains to her husband's property. Here again is a postmodern depthlessness, this time of emotional bonds that dissolve beyond the image of a marriage presented in the couple's wedding photo. Manami's lack of love for her husband is clear when she refuses to leave the building to go on her honeymoon, offering "I love being in this house" as her only explanation (23). Here, the word 'love' is reserved for an object rather than the man she has just married, simultaneously revealing the emptiness of her relationship and the extremity of her objectophilia. However, as Manami's attraction to the house increases, her husband's attachment to it weakens. He becomes "pretty down" after Manami chooses the house over their honeymoon and wonders, "is it really that wonderful?" suggesting that his home, which he must compete with for his wife's affection, is no longer his "pride and joy" (24). This demonstrates the ultimate failure of the house to preserve personal and cultural heritage since its "wonder" is lost without any changes to its exterior. The historical coding remains intact, but the father's grief empties it of the emotional resonance it once held. Since the building also "lusted after [Manami]," it is as if it must abandon him to pursue her (40). Both his wife and his home have chosen each other, leaving him lonely and financially destitute. Thus, the severing of his ties with Manami and the house also coincides with



the severing of ties with the past, especially because the building is “annull[ed]” of its status as a national treasure due to its “lost” value (40). The disorientation this causes is evident when Megumi calls her stepmother “that woman,” dropping her name in a show of disownment (40). Her father also oxymoronically states “our house isn’t ours anymore,” signalling a confusion of ownership in his use of a possessive pronoun (*our*) that is immediately undercut (*isn’t ours*) (40). In this way, the loss of the past causes a loss of orientation in the present, suggesting that the family’s identity is tied inextricably to their material possessions. Since it is this demographic that commodity animism targets, Manami turns them into the ideal consumers.

The Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs attributes the creation of tangible cultural properties to Japan’s wealth of artefacts that are “endangered due to lifestyle changes” and “societal changes,” where *change* refers to the modernisation and Westernisation of historically significant spaces, many of which “have been rapidly disappearing” (n.p.). Manami, with her materialist ambition, embodies the change in lifestyle (or acceleration of capitalism) that drives people to value personal acquisition above all else, including the preservation of history. She has symbolically replaced traditional Japanese culture with modern consumer culture, exposing the former as an empty relic of a time that cannot exist in conjunction with the present. As such, Ito presents the fetishisation of private property as a source of personal loneliness and cultural destruction, not least of all because Manami’s success hinges on her romantic and sexual attraction to a cultural heritage site, which is preferable to a human.

### Object Dependency

In “Futon,” Tomio, a man who retreats under a futon because he believes his apartment is filled with dark nature spirits, also chooses an object over a person, but this time it is to keep him safe rather than gratify him sexually. He lives in a single room with Madoka, the woman he eloped with, and depends on her for food, money, and care. However, Tomio’s attachment to the futon alienates Madoka since he associates it, rather than her, with his continued wellbeing. Madoka cannot see the spirits and believes her partner is going mad. Eventually, Tomio confesses to infidelity with a witch, whom he invited into their flat. This coincides with an overworked Madoka finally witnessing the spirits. She flees from the building and returns a month later to find Tomio still under the futon, coated in a blanket of hallucinogenic mould. The connotations, here, are that Tomio feels a greater kinship with his futon than his partner. However, the futon punishes rather than protects him, binding him to the site of his infidelity in an attempt to reinstate lost family values.

In *No Logo* (2000), Naomi Klein argues that brands “conjure a feeling” of safety and familiarity to encourage the public to buy their products, suggesting that Tomio’s object dependency can be attributed to the illusion that objects take care of their owners (6-7). For Klein, this illusion is achieved by using “imagery to equate products with positive cultural or social experiences,” reinforcing social norms in order to make the buyer feel like a functioning member of society (29). However, the absurdity of Tomio’s faith in the futon is clear from his belief that it will shield him from the spirits, even though it can neither conceal his body (which forms a mound in the middle of the

bed) nor secure him against anything capable of entering the flat. The fact that Tomio identifies the futon as the safest place in the apartment suggests that the carefully constructed feelings of safety and familiarity identified by Klein do not stop at purchase. They are internalised by the consumer so that products associated with comfort are expected to perform emotional duties that surpass their functional role. Baudrillard's observation that "[i]f all advertising were abolished, individuals would feel frustrated [...] by the feeling that they were no longer somehow 'being taken care of'" also suggests somewhat ironically that the 'safety' embodied by brands is necessary to psychological wellbeing, even though the 'care' they project is illusory and, in Tomio's case, harmful (189-190). His inability to see beyond his perception of the futon-as-protector and comprehend Madoka's role in his survival is evident when he encourages her to "hurry and hide" with him, suggesting that they will both be safe in bed-bound withdrawal (4). When Madoka works to keep Tomio alive, she accidentally perpetuates the illusion that the futon is his saviour, since he implicitly attributes her efforts to the object. This further isolates Madoka from her thankless partner because he is blind to the sacrifices she makes for him. Thus, Ito suggests that the familiarity conjured by brands is a malign force, designed to threaten the values it claims to uphold in order to ensure the consumer, who senses their lifestyle under threat, will continue to buy into its promise of safety.

Tomio's retreat into the futon infantilises him whilst forcing Madoka into the public world, overturning conservative gender roles. Since the futon is affiliated with the home, it takes on a traditionally female role. Likewise, since Madoka is forced to go outside and work, she takes on a traditionally masculine role. However, the futon is an incapable parent, and Madoka is pushed to her "mental and physical limits" in her attempts to sustain Tomio financially, feed him, and remove his waste (5). Consequently, the home is framed as a site of continuous labour, forcing Madoka to take on work associated with both gender roles. The emasculating effect this has on Tomio is symbolised by the image of him peering out of the futon, which recurs throughout the story: only his right eye is visible as he cowers under the covers like a child, the rest of his face covered by a floral duvet. In *Japanese Horror Cinema* (2005), Jay McRoy associates the image of a gazing female eye, which appears famously in *Ju-On* (2003) and *Ringu* (2000), with vaginal imagery. The panels showing Tomio peering out of the futon are framed similarly, with the duvet standing in for the usual curtains of hair. Such associations serve to symbolically castrate him in a similar way to the father in "Wooden Spirit," who cannot defend his home, secure a future for his daughter, or maintain either of his marriages. However, the father is emasculated because of his wife's infidelity, whereas Tomio is emasculated because of his own transgressions. When he uses the word "summoned" to explain how "a witch" ended up in his bed, he displaces his infidelity onto the supernatural, shrouding it in mystical language to divorce it from reality (9). The line, "I confess! I was the one who summoned her here!" accepts ownership of the situation, while also suggesting that this ownership is circumstantial, subject to the knowledge that the woman he slept with is a supernatural entity who could have influenced him at any turn (9). Likewise, Tomio's claim that the witch "did all of this" implies a lack of agency and disregard for the consequences of his actions (8). His infidelity is positioned in contrast with Madoka's unwavering devotion, demonstrating that, spirits aside, he is responsible for rupturing their relationship. In the panel where the confession takes place, Tomio's eye is positioned behind branded bottles, which appear uncanny against the carnival of dark nature spirits taking place above

them. In the background, Madoka stares in their direction. Since Madoka bought the drinks with the money she earned to sustain her partner, the empty bottles emphasise her nourishing role in contrast with the destruction and devastation that hangs above them, which Tomio is responsible for. Her glance, intentionally or not, bypasses him and rests on them in contemplation of her efforts. It is a moment of revelation, not only that her partner has slept with another woman but that her attempts to save him, and their relationship by proxy, have failed. This ultimately amounts to the fact that she cannot assume the role of both man and mother, suggesting that the only way to combat her exhaustion is to reinstate the conservative gender dynamics Tomio has perverted. Thus, the nuclear family, in which men and women successfully carry out their allocated roles, is presented as an alternative to a life of continuous labour.

Tomio's self-imposed confinement echoes the *hikikomori* phenomenon that gained media coverage in Japan during the Lost Decade of the 1990s, when the country was suffering from the collapse of its asset price bubble.<sup>4</sup> *Hikikomori* translates as 'social withdrawal,' and according to Tamaki Saitō's psychological study *Adolescence Without End* (1998), "the term refers to the act of retreating from society and avoiding contact with all people other than one's own family" (18). It is linked to feelings of loneliness and disconnect because it treats the home as an isolated space that functions most prominently as a barrier to the outside world. There are an estimated one million *hikikomori* cases in Japan today, many of which are attributed to feelings of shame that arise from perceived failure to meet the demands of capitalism. These demands include pressure to achieve in school and work environments, which Kaori Okano and Motonori Tsuchiya (1999) credit to the precarious and pressurised job market characteristic of the post-bubble economy. Whereas Tomio, whose maladies stem from infidelity, cannot be viewed as a universal symbol for *hikikomori*, Ito's depiction of social withdrawal is significant in its engagement with commodity animism. Saitō (1998) notes that *hikikomori* are largely middle-class because most working class shut-ins are eventually forced to leave the home to work – but the couple's one room apartment, combined with the fact that Madoka has to "work all day" in a factory to care for Tomio, situates them as a working class household (Ito 5). Thus, the futon's association with safety fuels Tomio's belief that danger is located in the outside world rather than in his precarious financial situation, forcing Madoka to bear their financial burden alone. In other words, the couple's inability to cope with the pressures of everyday life is treated as a personal, rather than a systemic, issue, and Tomio's reliance on the futon as a solution perpetuates this illusion.

The ultimate depiction of the futon as a damaging force comes when Tomio, still tucked inside, is found engulfed by a "spongy" blanket of hallucinogenic mould (10). Here, Ito invokes the fantastic, theorised by David Roas as "a conflict between (our idea of) the real and the impossible," to suggest that the futon may have been causing Tomio's visions in the first place (3). Since their apartment is so small, the mould could presumably have affected Madoka too, explaining their shared perception. According to Roas, "the fantastic will always depend, by means of contrast, on what we consider as real," and its presence here exposes the empty promises of protection upheld by capitalism, which "manufactures" our conception of reality (5, 12).<sup>5</sup> For example, as Alejandro Rossi notes, "[w]e count on the existence of the outside world when we sit in a chair, when we lay

down on a mattress, when we drink a glass of water," but these things are commodified and filtered through the capitalist system, which becomes synonymous with existence itself (34). Thus, for Ito, the real (capitalism as protector) and the impossible (capitalism as perpetrator) are two sides of the same system: rather than one reality infiltrating another, the shadow side of consumerism (in which objects turn on their owners) intrudes on the "[w]ish-fulfillments" and the "animation of inanimate objects" that Sigmund Freud associates with "fairy-stories" and are, incidentally, defining features of commodity animism (249). Since Roas equates "impossible objects" with the fantastic, reality under capitalism is not entirely at odds with the supernatural but rather *with the supernatural as a malicious force* (4). The irony, of course, is that the object Tomio chooses as his protector is the thing causing him harm.

This serves to implicate Tomio and the futon in the destruction of their domestic space. Just as Manami becomes a part of the woodwork in "Wooden Spirit," the image of Tomio consumed by the mould binds his body and his bedding, transforming them into one monstrous being. They are an anti-advertisement, an exposure of the empty promises made by retailers such as Belle Maison, a Japanese company selling heated table-bed hybrids called *kotatsu*, who have made their name internationally as a brand that "lets you stay in bed FOREVER" (n.p.). Here, hyperbole is used as a transparent sales technique since few people would actually attempt to stay in bed forever. However, the statement acts in service of both consumer (who would rather stay in bed than go to work) and capitalism (which requires the consumer to buy the bed *and also* go to work, not least of all to facilitate the purchase). Since it is impossible to please both parties, the product is imbued with false promises that lull the buyer, who never truly expects to achieve bed-bound bliss, into believing their desires are understood by society. The "obviously fake" reciprocity that occurs is explained by Baudrillard as follows: "what adapts to you is an imaginary agency [here, the promise of a lifetime in bed], whereas you are asked in exchange to adapt to an agency that is distinctly real [a society that runs off the exchange of capital, which requires a lifetime of work and therefore undermines the initial promise]" (191). The reality of eternity in bed, Ito suggests, is laced with financial precarity and loneliness, which affects Tomio and Madoka alike. At the story's close, Madoka, like the father in "Wooden Spirit," has lost her home (from which she retreats), her partner (who cheated on her), and her family (who are absent in the wake of her decision to elope). Likewise, Tomio has alienated himself from everything except his futon, which punishes him on Madoka's behalf, forcing him to relive the destruction of his marriage through the host of spirits cackling above him. Both characters are made lonely by Tomio's transgression and subsequent object obsession, but if "Wooden Spirit" concludes that the rejection of normative gender roles and destruction of the home is the only way to escape domestic horror, then "Futon" suggests that upholding the nuclear family is the only defence against the physical and financial demands of capitalism.

### A New Kind of Home

In both stories, objects assert themselves as the protectors of women who have been wronged by their social roles, while also presenting consumerism as the sole solution to their problems, causing isolation and loneliness. Without material possessions, the texts decry, the characters in question

would be doomed to a life of disappointment, frustration, and powerlessness, usually facilitated by oppressive domestic space. This demonstrates that commodity animism is inherently exploitative because it capitalises on “lives at once obsessed with and then left unfulfilled by food, human connection, home” (Allison, *Precarious* 2). However, it also gestures to the fact that, exploitative or not, personal fulfilment is often inextricable from personal acquisition. The self, in other words, is made up of objects in the same way that objects are imbued with a sense of self. Considering that the characters discussed always become a part of the objects they have fetishised, the prevalence of commodity animism in these texts, and in contemporary Japanese society more generally, suggests that the market dictates not only what it means to be alive but what it means to be human.

It is necessary, then, to redress the way people relate to their possessions. Allison argues that:

family, in the postwar buildup of corporate capitalism, became not only the seat of hard work and high performance, but it also fed consumption as the site of a new kind of home: a privatized, domestic space filled with consumer electronics – washing machines, electric fans, and a family car parked outside (*Precarious* 22).

Here, owning the latest products (despite having to pay for them) is a reward for adhering to cultural expectations of the nuclear family. In the texts discussed, objects are either used to actively enforce this dream (in the case of “Futon”) or to deviate from it all together (in the case of “Wooden Spirit”). This is indicative of commodity animism’s ability to adapt to the needs of the consumer, abandoning the connection-based values it claims to uphold at a moment’s notice in order to generate capital. So, on the one hand, the Gothic in these texts reaffirms the belief that capitalism is looking after people by supplying material solutions to their loneliness. On the other hand, it implies that these so-called solutions are themselves Gothic entities, born of a system that is at once excessive in its inescapable cycle of labour and consumption, and deficient in its attention to humanity’s emotional needs. In the face of this contradiction, commodity animism cunningly suggests that the real problem is people – their lack of care for each other, their adherence to regressive social structures, and their insatiable desire to consume.

## NOTES

1. Broadly, neoliberalism describes social systems that deregulate markets and make cuts to public spending in order to boost the private sector. This is achieved, according to David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), through “government decentralization, deregulation, privatization and *laissez-faire* measures that allow for a free and competitive international trade” (2).
2. Here, ‘transgressive’ describes human-object relations that are considered illegal, immoral, or outside of social norms.

3. The occupation was spearheaded by the United States and led by Douglas MacArthur. It is the only time Japan has been occupied by a foreign country and involved comprehensive reforms in the economic, social, and political spheres.

4. Japan's bubble economy lasted from 1986-1991 and was caused by the substantial inflation of real estate and stock market prices. The 'Lost Decade' (which actually refers to the period between 1991-2010) was the period of economic stagnation that followed. According to Allison, the collapse of the asset bubble transformed Japan "from a society with a vast (and materially secure) middle class to one that is now [...] downstreaming, bipolarized, and riddled by class difference" (*Precarious* 5).

5. Although Roas does not use the word *manufacture* in direct relation to capitalism, it is revealing of a socio-economic context in which the capitalist system infiltrates our collective reality at the level of linguistic expression.

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**BIONOTE**

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