

Ghost in the Shell: An After-Thought on Pierre Huygue's *Human Mask*

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The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it.
Thinking perhaps begins there.¹

Jacques Derrida

In the opening sequence of *Human Mask* (2014) by Pierre Huyghe, the eye-level camera (a drone?) moves slowly and smoothly, with occasional fast-forward effects, in an abandoned village and captures the remains of ruined houses and buildings one by one.

With no sign of human presence, the ghostly structures—surrounded by empty streets, parking lots, and dysfunctional electricity poles—suggest that time there no longer unfolds through anthropocentric actions or narratives. As the camera proceeds midair into the depths of the deserted town, one hears in the background a now-useless evacuation order, coming out of a loudspeaker, reverberating in (and vanishing into) the void. The whole screen is pervaded by an eerie machinic time of unpredictable cinematic movements; in fact, the sudden shifts in camera speed intensify the inhuman precision of the surgical dissection of reality. The combination of this “post-apocalyptic” scene and the “robotic” cinematography of the opening sequence creates a strange sci-fi atmosphere and suspends the viewer’s ability to differentiate fiction and reality.

Various visual signs in the sequence, such as the style of the destroyed buildings and the letters on the billboards, suggest that the film was produced in the aftermath of the triple disasters—the earthquake, the tsunami, and the Fukushima nuclear powerplant crisis—that hit the entire Tōhoku region of Japan on March 11, 2011. As a result of these incidents, hundreds of thousands of people had to evacuate their homes to avoid possible exposure to high-level radiation; although evacuees from areas at a distance from the powerplant are now slowly returning to their hometowns (there are, of course, evacuees from the same areas who have decided not to return for various reasons), many towns

and villages around the powerplant still remain abandoned and will remain so for decades to come because of their exposure to radiation.

The visual reference to the Fukushima incident in *Human Mask*, is, however, minimal. Nothing in the film clearly explains the cause of the post-apocalyptic landscape in the opening sequence or offers any notion of what is to come. For the entire length of the film, which is about nineteen minutes long, the camera stays inside an abandoned house after the opening sequence and follows the aimless movements or non-movements of a monkey—a Japanese macaque—wearing a girl-faced-mask with long hair, somewhat reminiscent of (but not exactly the same as) a Noh mask, passing uneventful time in solitude. There is no drama, no action (except for the futile repetition of erratic movements), and no scenery change. The film thus unfolds as a sort of Beckettian quasi-documentary of anti-climactic confinement and waiting. But waiting for what? We don't know. This waiting, if this is waiting at all, seems to be completely cut off from an outside world whose shifting conditions can only be surmised by changing lights (or radiation?) behind the window, an emergency-warning broadcast that reverberates over abandoned houses and streets, and drops of (contaminated) rain hitting the roof of the house. No allusion to *Godot*.² This apparent contextual vacuity or indeterminateness leaves the film open to a range of comparative analyses and, indeed, invites the viewer to drift into the space of an uncertain but fertile connectivity.

Following this evocative lure (that could well be a trap), in this essay, I have decided to let myself drift into the space of *Human Mask* from multiple entrance points that are not necessarily commensurable with each other. Therefore, in this essay, thematic, structural, or historical-contextual perspectives intermingle and cacophonously resonate with each other. The approach taken here is intentionally centrifugal but not centripetal; the discussion extends in multiple directions in the hope of weaving an exemplary web of interpretive threads whose configuration remains temporary and open for further consideration. The purpose of doing so is not to fold those threads back into the center to solidify a concentric architecture of meaning, but rather to identify other nodal points to broaden the network of interpretive possibilities.

Planet of the Apes

Given the theme of implied interchangeability or overlapping identity between humans and apes, for example, the classic cinematic precedent *Planet of the Apes* (1968) immediately comes to mind as a comparative piece for *Human Mask* as the earlier movie's plot also takes place in the posthuman (i.e., post nuclear-war) world.³ That this posthuman world famously turns out to be the earth at the end of the film makes it even more appealing for comparison, not to mention the fact that Huygue often uses earlier cinematic productions as a referential basis for his work.⁴

To adopt the perspective of the *Planet of the Apes*, the girl-masked monkey of Huygue's film can be seen as a time traveler from the "future" examining what it *was*

like to be a human left alone in an abandoned house at the last moment that civilization perished. The plot of the 1968 movie takes place in the year 3978, and humans are dispossessed of the ability to speak and enslaved by the apes. For the apes, the existence of intelligent humans is unthinkable or at best a myth because they have long since completely vanished from the face of the earth, leaving behind only a scant collection of archeological traces. In the movie, then, somewhat like the story of Schlieman's discovery of Troy, Cornelius, the ape archeologist, and his wife, Zira, with the help of the human captive, Taylor, find remnants of the long-lost human civilization, which appears to have been technologically quite advanced. But how did this sophisticated civilization disappear so thoroughly? A total nuclear war—the result of the very technology that strengthened human civilization—is the answer that the famous last scene of the movie insinuates.

The world that the “future” monkey arrives at must therefore be the first stage of a post-nuclear era in which there are ruins of the lost world but no remaining trace of actual humans. Human presence is reduced to its empty shell, namely, a mask that needs to be *animated* by being worn by the monkey, somewhat like in Noh plays in which expressionless masks are brought to life by being worn by actors. But similar to characters in Noh plays who often turn out to be possessed by some supernatural being, be it a ghost or a spirit, the animated mask does not simply signify humanity. A sense of uncanny (in)humanity is present in both *Planet of the Apes* and *Human Mask*, but perhaps more disturbing in Huygue's video piece; this is precisely because the mask is worn by a monkey whose behavioral pattern is mimetically close enough to a human's to evoke a sense of familial kinship but, at the same time, decisively different to suggest an irreducible gap from humanity, a gap that cannot be explained away by the all-too-human concept of spirit or ghost.

This evocation of the ambiguous similar-but-different relationship between the human and the monkey brings us back to the material reality of Huygue's piece. For unlike the earlier classic film, in which the roles of the ape and the human are diametrically reversed in terms of the distribution of language, knowledge, and technology, *Human Mask* remains stubbornly resistant or indifferent to that kind of theatrical inversion. This is primarily because it is the “real” monkey who plays the role of the human character in Huygue's piece.

In other words, the perfect substitution of apes for humans in the earlier movie is made possible because it is after all *human* actors with linguistic ability who play both roles; the reversal is accomplished on the plane of language. This reversal remains incomplete, if not utterly impossible, in *Human Mask* in which the speechless actor-the-monkey plays the role of a young girl. But does she remain silent because she lacks the ability to speak? Or is she deprived of “others” to communicate with? The silence makes us aware of the mundane fact that a monkey cannot speak human language; but, at the same time, we are negatively reminded of countless examples in cinematic or literary tradition in which animals are given the ability to talk like humans with the

technique of the “voice-over.” For example, the movie by Paolo Pasolini, *The Hawks and the Sparrows* (1966), which left a deep impression on Huygue, featured speaking birds in an unforgettable way.⁵

What complicates the matter is that the monkey who stars in *Human Mask* was in fact recruited by Huygue from a local restaurant where the monkey works as a “waitress.” Her given name there is Fuku-chan, and her ability to socialize with customers can be viewed in various YouTube footage. The monkey is therefore not representative of the typically imagined monkey in “nature.” The ready-made opposition between the human and the ape is not applicable here. The monkey was already working within a constructed “human” milieu and thus denatured or cultured, at least in terms of her behavioral patterns, into an “almost human” subject, to borrow language from the cultural theorist Donna Haraway.⁶ The monkey, in fact, reenacts her performance as a waitress in the film by going to the refrigerator to get a hand towel for an absent customer. That she is also wearing what looks like a simplified sailor suit—the type often seen as a school uniform in Japan—in addition to the mask is symbolic of her “almost human” status.

Cold War

The concept of the “almost human” that Haraway introduces in her seminal *Primate Visions* gives us an interpretive lens that curiously complicates the allegorical reading of *Human Mask*.⁷ That is, the present-future relationship and the post-nuclear imagination discussed above through the lens of *Planet of the Apes* can be folded back onto the past historical context of the Fukushima incident. The starting point of this detour is the privileged position that primatology continued to occupy within the ideological orbit of the Cold War. This is what the media-studies theorist Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky says:

Occupying the border zones between psychiatry and zoology, psychology and physical anthropology, behavioral science and the natural sciences, primatology was influenced by the cold war and placed in the service of exploring outer space, but it also stood at the center of desires for a better world and harmony with nature.⁸

In short, monkeys in the laboratory were studied as a human mirror to prepare them for better futures, including space trips and gender studies. The story of Ham the Astrochimp, the chimpanzee who was launched into space in 1961, is the most well-known case in terms of a scientific connection to the Cold War (Ham was selected out of 40 candidates after various examinations).

Although their contexts of training between the poles of the up-to-date-technological and down-to-earth mundane are worlds apart, Ham and Fuku-chan were both extensively disciplined in highly artificial environments to substitute for humans. Furthermore, like Ham, who was confined alone in a space ship to experience a trip with unpredictable accidents, Fuku-chan (albeit fictionally) is left alone by humans as

a surrogate subject in an abandoned house that can metaphorically be understood as an experiment of how the last “semi-human” reacts in the deserted laboratory-in (as)-ruins.

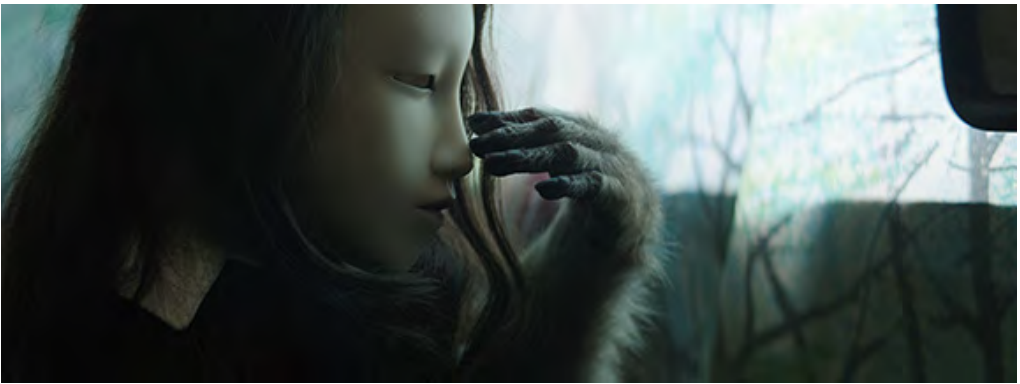
The dialectical correspondence, as it were, between the two monkeys does not stop there; for what looms behind the Fukushima incident is nothing but the history of the Cold War. In the first place, the postwar development of nuclear energy in Japan was deeply intertwined with its politico-economical alliance with the United States (more on this later). The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, which was damaged heavily by the tsunami on March 11, 2011, causing radiation leaks, was in fact one of the earliest nuclear plants in Japan that began its commercial operations in 1971 using reactors built by the American company General Electric. And, needless to say, nuclear science and space technology together formed the front lines of the Cold War. Apes and monkeys were always placed at the very front of that line as “mock” subjects. Like Ham, who was sent to outer space as a “test” pilot, Fuku-chan can be seen as a “test” survivor wearing a human mask, who examines what it is like to live alone under the influence of the invisible rain of radiation. In fact, in the wake of the Fukushima situation after the nuclear leak, it is difficult for us to see the beautiful soft light that comes through the obscured windows or to hear the drops of rain hitting the roof of the abandoned house without feeling the omnipresent menace of radiation.

Beuys and Huygue

The “almost human” status of Fuku-chan in *Human Mask* and its deconstructing effect on the normally clear boundary between human and animal, or nature and culture is consistent with other works by Huygue in which animals—an overarching term that pulls multiple species into its orbit—play an important role in creating similar categorical confusion and open the ontological boundaries of the “work” itself to its surrounding environment. Insects, plants, and other beings in nature all contribute to produce the same effects; for example, Huygue’s ambitious *Untilled* at dOCUMENTA 13 (2017) consisted of myriad elements, both natural and manmade, including a female greyhound named Human, bees, ants, a variety of plants, and other manmade objects such as sculpture and stone slabs dispersed in an ambiguously defined corner of Karlssue Park in Kassel. In earlier works such as *La Toison d’or* (1993) and *Stream Side Day Follies* (2003), conversely, humans wearing animal masks played significant roles. I do not have enough space here to discuss in detail these other works, which have much more complex and open-to-environment structures in comparison to *Human Mask*. It suffices here to reiterate that animals are recurrent “actors” in Huygue’s works and often play significant roles in his projects, especially in their deconstructive roles against the conceptual stability of what we call “humanity.” Yet, even in comparison to these other works that involve complex elements and structural layers, the degree to which the theme of animal-human overlay is featured exclusively in *Human Mask* is exceptional. The method in this work, as we have already confirmed, is minimal; it is as if by concentrating solely on the minimal



Pierre Huyghe, *Untitled (Human Mask)*, 2014. Film, color, sound, 19 min. © Pierre Huyghe. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Hauser & Wirth, London; Esther Schipper, Berlin; and Anna Lena Films, Paris.



Pierre Huyghe, *Untitled (Human Mask)*, 2014. Film, color, sound, 19 min. © Pierre Huyghe. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Hauser & Wirth, London; Esther Schipper, Berlin; and Anna Lena Films, Paris.



Planet of the Apes, 1968. Dir: Franklin J. Schaffner.



Pierre Huyghe, *Untilled (Living entities and inanimate things, made and not made)*, 2011-12. Dimensions and duration variable. © Pierre Huyghe. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin. Commissioned and produced by dOCUMENTA (13) with the support of Colección CIAC AC, Mexico; Fondation Louis Vuitton pour la création, Paris; Ishikawa Collection, Okayama, Japan.



A frame from the documentary film by Helmut Wietz, documenting Joseph Beuys, *I like America and America Likes Me*, a three-day performance at the René Block Gallery, SoHo, New York, 23-25 May 1974. B&W film, 35min. © Helmut Wietz, Common Film Produktion GmbH, Berlin. Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Pierre Huyghe, *Untilled (Living entities and inanimate things, made and not made)*, 2011-12. Dimensions and duration variable. © Pierre Huyghe. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Esther Schipper, Berlin. Commissioned and produced by dOCUMENTA (13) with the support of Colección CIAC AC, Mexico; Fondation Louis Vuitton pour la création, Paris; Ishikawa Collection, Okayama, Japan.

image-monad, diverse ecological as well as historical issues can be correlated via its refractive capacities.

With regard to the self-imposed minimality of *Human Mask*, I cannot resist comparing it with yet another work, this time an art historical precedent, to delineate heretofore unexplored issues. The object of comparison is Joseph Beuys' renowned performance piece, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, which took place in New York in 1974. In May of that year, Beuys traveled to New York from Germany to lock himself up with a wild coyote in the René Block Gallery in SoHo. Wrapped up in a felt blanket, his signature material, Beuys spent eight hours a day alone with the coyote for three consecutive days in the gallery and tried to establish some communicative bond with the animal. Before and after the performance, he used an ambulance to transport himself to and from JFK airport, with his entire body wrapped in several layers of felt and placed on a medical stretcher, in order not to communicate with "America." He, in other words, intentionally chose the coyote, a species associated with the Wild West, to solely represent America. In many ways, a comparison with this historical performance by Beuys allows us to delineate and explore the complex network of questions that Huygue's *Human Mask* opens up against and beyond the conceptual framework of this earlier work.

While keeping in mind the essential differences of the media of each—one is originally a performance piece (although we now have no choice but to watch it on film) while the other is conceived as a video piece—I would like to begin this comparison with their similarities. To start with the obvious, both use the situation of confinement to address the ontological question of "humanity" and the fluctuating contours of its forms of subjectivity. Both, in other words, are designed to force the viewer to reimagine the boundary or lack thereof between the human and the nonhuman; Beuys puts himself in a dialogical situation with the coyote, and Huygue overlays the image of a girl with the "almost human" monkey. What connects their deconstructive attitudes toward the concept of the human is their thread of ecological awareness (albeit with subtle differences), of human overconfidence about industrial and technological development bringing the world to the threshold of disastrous downfall. The use of confinement or enclosure as a frame for their work corresponds to this critical awareness and embodies their alienation or self-exile from the damning human world outside of it.

In comparison to Beuys' work, however, the title of which makes an explicit jab at industrialized America in favor of a wild, uncontaminated America, Huygue's work seems more ambiguous and is not as outspoken in its critique of anthropocentrism. Yet, the abandoned townscape that appears at the beginning of the film and its relationship to the remaining scenes, in which the protagonist spends time alone in confinement, insinuates a profound sense of helplessness in the post-apocalyptic or post-human world. Perhaps the situation is already beyond critical intervention or restitution, as it is an overwhelming sense of silent doom, rather than the hope of preventing further downfall

that seems to pervade the entire work. Deprived of anyone to communicate with and left utterly helpless, Fuku-chan, with the impending possibility of exposure to invisible radiation, barely survives the post-catastrophic shelter-house. The complete absence of a clear reference to Fukushima in the film is quite effective in delocalizing this image of survival, making it a global allegory.

To extend the scope of our inquiry of Huygue's work to the photographic in general, this dark house, or *camera obscura*, within which the camera is confined seems to operate as a self-referential double of the photographic or cinematic frame; but this frame is fragile and porous to the light-as-radiation that permeates the world's visibility through and through. This is where we are reminded of the work of many photographers after the 3.11 incident such as Takeda Shimpei, Arai Takashi, and Kawada Kikuji, who have also tried to evoke the light-radiation conflation by foregrounding or accentuating the physical-chemical process of photographic exposure-development in their respective work.⁹ In other words, light, in their photographs as well as in Huygue's video piece, is no longer treated as a neutral medium for transparent visibility. It is rather a profoundly ambivalent agent whose presence is necessary in maintaining our ability to perceive and navigate the world, but also functions as a constant reminder of the omnipresent radiation across borders of any kind. The frame-as-confinement/shelter therefore does not delineate a zone of safety; it always fluctuates with an ingrained sense of "waiting" for the unknowable catastrophe to come.

To return to the comparison between Beuys and Huygue, the method of confinement works quite differently in their works in that it is used as a way to actively refuse the outside world in the work of the former, but is used as a space of passive withdrawal in the work of the latter. This also corresponds to their contrasting attitudes toward the human subject as agency; that is, while Beuys firmly believes in the sovereignty of his autonomous self both as an agent of rejection and also as a representative of humanity to confront nature or American wilderness, Huygue emphasizes profound doubt about such autonomy of human agency and the conventional opposition of culture versus nature. This significant difference can be confirmed in that Beuys employs a I-You mirror structure for his performance while Huygue leaves the composite subject alone without any partner to communicate with (only the camera and its operator).

In Huygue, as we have already seen, humanity (culture) and animality (nature) are not contrasted as opposing entities but differentially layered onto each other to unsettle the imaginary boundary between them. Huygue's choice of a monkey is in fact already a clear indication that he wants to draw our attention to the deconstructive, perhaps jagged, continuity of primate subjects that invalidates any attempt at defining the essence of humanity as categorically different from our family species. In addition, it is here important to notice that Huygue chooses the mask of a young girl—a doubly marginalized figure in the human world by virtue of being both female and young—to be worn by our protagonist (although Fuku-chan wore the girl's mask when engaged in

her quotidian labor, it is ultimately the artist's decision to keep the girl mask for Fuku-chan); and the girl as a narratological character already has a long history of being used as a medium to communicate with the non-human world (*Alice in Wonderland*, needless to say, is one notable example in that regard). In *Human Mask*, thus, the overlaying of the "almost-non-human" character of a girl and the "almost-human" character of a monkey further intensifies the uncertainty of the boundary between the human and the non-human; but, on the other hand, a mask being a mask, an artificial "shell," as it were, the viewers are also constantly reminded of the subtle but irreducible gap between the wearer and the worn. That gap or fissure is, to put this another way, a differential void that simultaneously connects and disconnects—or conditions and undermines—the two ontological categories on its either side, and as such seems to harbor a ghostly being in its fold whose presence can only be felt and is eerily material but never perceived.

Ghostly Silence

We need to remember here that the boundary between the human and non-human should not be imagined as a clear dividing line. It should rather be imagined as a space of (dis)connection where multiple boundaries can be drawn and redrawn depending on the perspective from which we observe them. The mask, in other words, is a perfect signifier where the provisional status of those boundaries gets foregrounded. In this regard, there is no doubt that Huygue was aware of the connection to the theatrical tradition of Noh judging from the stylistic features of the mask used; the combination of flat white make-up paint all over its surface and the rather expressionless facial features resembles similar Noh masks, which are supposed to function as projective or dialogical screens by virtue of their very expressionlessness, to allow for the audience's various emotional responses. Ever shifting angles and/or the changing conditions of light, combined with the movements of an actor, contribute to their deeply affective function. Moreover, what is important for us here is that, in the Noh tradition, as mentioned in passing earlier, this neutrality of the mask functions as a medium to usher in the voice of the deceased or no-longer human. The mask in the Noh theater, thus, also performs a similar task of mediating the living and the dead, if not the human and the non-human.

We also, however, need to be aware that a crucial difference exists between the Noh theater and *Human Mask* in terms of the mask's semiosis. For, in the former, although the mask makes itself available for the return of the deceased by virtue of its radical neutrality, its connection to the dramaturgical signified—be it love, resentment, or rage—is ultimately stable (albeit with some affective variations); this is because the mask's meaning is highly controlled by the pre-existing script of the play. In contrast, in the latter, that stable link between the signifier (mask) and the signified (emotion) is resolutely broken. The ghost who is supposed to return through the mask is no longer a known posthumous being but replaced by an amorphous *post-human ghostly*, as it were, whose ontological obscurity resonates with or is embodied by the dim light and

equivocal noises (of winds and rains etc.) surrounding and pervading the house in the film. The alternating shots of restless movement and the apathetic inaction of Fuku-chan amplifies this frustrating unknowability of what is to come/return; an uncertain return that is actually not really a “return,” as it lacks the very subject of return. Deprived of the voice to return and also any companion to talk to, the speechless mask seems to function more abstractly as an allegory of the whole situation marked by a profound sense of existential melancholy derived from the dual loss of past and future: the already-occurred tragedy and the radical uncertainty of the post-Fukushima situation. By extension, perhaps, we can connect this sense of melancholic enclosure with the experience of Hiroshima-Nagasaki, Three Mile Island, or Chernobyl, for it is precisely the compulsive return of the nuclear crisis that thoroughly erodes our desire to find an exit and has left us (and other beings) powerless and speechless.

Thus, to reiterate, unlike Beuys’ performance, the enemy to fight or an original “nature” with which to communicate cannot be found in *Human Mask* because a clear oppositional or innocent stance can no longer be taken; the figure of the sovereign artist who stands outside the corrupt system has been replaced by a speechless composite “subject” stripped of its agentic power to critique the system from an outside position or to (re)invoke the voice of the past or future; “she” is wholly confined to the expanse of a melancholic present produced by none other than humans in their unending pursuit of energy-efficient modernity. The only foreseeable “future” that can follow on this temporality of compulsive repetition seems to be a total catastrophe that will inevitably end up severely damaging our conventional understanding of a temporal axis so that any discussion of the “future” becomes almost senseless.

Modernity and Nuclear Power

It is perhaps necessary here to recall that the complicit entanglement of postwar modernity and nuclear energy is, for obvious reasons, most acutely and complexly manifested in the history of postwar Japan. As many historians such as John Dower and Ran Zwigenberg have pointed out, the collective memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has been subjected to a process of symbolic neutralization by the Japanese government in tandem with the United States, especially in the years of the American occupation (1945-52), which removed it from the terrain of genealogical-historical reflection to transform it into an emblem of universal mourning and an abstract pledge for future peace, which repeats itself in the ever-suspended present.¹⁰

Roughly speaking, this “sublimatory” transformation occurred along two axes: the first is an over-emphasis on a peaceful utopian future to avoid a critical-genealogical hence more difficult reflection, for both Japan and the United States, on the complex historical contexts that led to the tragic outcome; and the second is the discursive condensation around survivors’ emotional first-hand accounts of their experiences that began to emerge after the 1950s. In regard to this second axis, although there is no doubt that the

courageous testimonies of survivors are incredibly valuable for the following generations and for humanity as a whole, it is not wrong to assume that they also had some effect on abstracting and/or sentimentalizing nuclear discourse away from uncompromising historical investigation.

With these discursive tendencies, as I already mentioned in the section on the Cold War, the Japanese government was able to widely promote the “peaceful use” of nuclear energy, again in collaboration with the United States, in the postwar context. Moreover, with an ironic twist of imagination, its “peaceful use” was often welcomed by the general public as if it were an expression of atonement or compensation for the immeasurable tragedy that struck Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In fact, the utopian idealism that was deeply ingrained in this abstract discourse of peace (sometimes the “cleanness” of the nuclear energy was emphasized in addition to its peacefulness), which had already emerged in the years of the American occupation, can be understood better if seen as overdetermined by the wish for imaginary atonement.¹¹ Indeed, the postwar Japanese policy to expand the use of nuclear energy has been, at least partially, sugar-coated and accelerated by this promoted desire for recompense; the bad use of the nuke, both in the past and the future, can be overwritten by the good (economically promising) use of it, says this wishful voice. Even recurrent nuclear incidents since the 1950s such as the Lucky Dragon No. 5 (1954) or Tokai Village (1999)—or Three Mile Island (1979) and Chernobyl (1986) to include those from abroad—could not unsettle the field of such discursive construction.

To return to our subject, it is the renewed realization of this long complicit relationship between economic prosperity (or top-down modernization of the nation) and nuclear energy mediated by the sublimatory notion of peace, that left most Japanese speechless, including the local residents who had to evacuate their homes, when the Fukushima incident happened immediately after the earthquake in 2011. There is no outside position, in other words, from which the Japanese can critique the Fukushima incident like Beuys did back in the 1970s; for most Japanese are already implicated in the process that finally reached a liminal point in which the inner contradictions of “reactionary modernity” itself can no longer be brushed aside. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that a catastrophe was already quietly happening not only in Japan but also throughout the world in the Cold War context beneath the surface, and the position that Beuys took in the 1970s was one that was merely illusory or hysterical and refused to face (but was unconsciously aware) of the reactionary side of modernity that is so integral to its program.

The complete absence of voice and the profound sense of melancholy in *Human Mask* that I mentioned earlier, I would argue, echoes this sense of impasse or irreparability of the situation typically symbolized by nuclear contamination whose effects easily exceed the limit of our perceptive faculty (all we can do is “echo” what has been said to us just like Echo in Greek mythology). The recognition that we ourselves are implicated

in creating this destiny and that we are powerless to remedy the situation adds more weight to the pervading sense of melancholy. Fuku-chan's spatial isolation in *Human Mask*, then, can also be seen as an allegory of temporal incarceration in the recursive present, severed from the voices of both past and future.

But the story does not end there. This complete absence of voice also seems to have the curious effect of opening viewers' sensors to a wide range of other aural or tactile sensations that are evoked, for instance, through various close-up shots throughout the film; it is as if we are asked to shift our perceptive gear toward the obscure layers or different rhythms and temporalities of being that cannot be captured by the frame of all-too-human vision or narrativization. Not only winds or rains, but also a cat, a roach, or the quiet humming of a refrigerator...they all contribute to opening us to the inability to sense those invisible ontological dimensions. The recursive present, therefore, may not be the complete standstill of existence per se, and rather than an apocalyptic conclusion, perhaps it is the sense of a profound melancholy that can be transvalued as the path to those different dimensions. The key for that transvaluation, however tenuous, can be found, I would argue, in the final scene of the film where the viewer is confronted head-on by Fuku-chan's gaze.

Gaze

In the final seconds of *Human Mask*, the entire screen is filled with a close-up of Fuku-chan's eyes moving anxiously behind the two empty holes of the white mask. This is in fact the only scene in the entire film in which the viewer directly confronts her gaze. The piece ends rather abruptly with the after-image of this gaze still lingering in the viewer's mind, disrupting the third-party position that the viewer is able to maintain throughout the film thanks to the "transparent" presence of the camera. Furthermore, the fact that the mask covers most of the face and that the mask itself is reduced to a white surface in the close-up shot seems to uproot (or liberate) the gaze from any namable subject such as "girl" or "monkey." What we see there in the dark holes is only the uncertain movement of pupils (not even the eyes!), deprived of meaning-conveying function and reduced to the most "naked" state of the gaze. Although I say "her gaze" above, what captures the viewer is actually the uncanny impersonality of the gaze. This impersonal gaze has the effect of exposing the viewer to her/his inability to know (what/who exactly is looking at us and are we looking at?) and as such seems to haunt us into the abyss of ontological and ethical uncertainty within a melancholic confinement. This gaze, while refusing to be contained in the semantics of the human as in Sartre's or Lacan's theory, invites us into a vertiginous reflection about what constitutes the boundaries—perhaps multiple and overlapping—between human and non-human beings.

Instead of performing the role of surrogate humans, the gaze, in other words, looks at us from some ambiguous or indeterminate outside that unsettles the very opposition between the inside (subject) and the outside (the other). It seems to perform two

contradicting tasks from this obscure position: one existential, the other transcendental. For, on the one hand, it arrests or freezes the viewer as an object much like the Sartrean or Lacanian gaze does; but on the other hand, this existential arrest refuses to be understood as an effect of the intersubjective duel of human gazes (Sartre) or the subjugation to the symbolic order of the linguistic system (Lacan). It rather draws us into an abysmal space beyond the order of the human where we are compelled to re-examine the conditions and limitations of our anthropocentric system of representation-as-subjugation. And it is this sense of the beyond-human or the transcendence of the impersonal gaze that brings our attention to the onto-ecological dimensions of and around our existence, including the invisible effect of radiation, which have remained outside our consciousness for a long time.

Metaphorically speaking, what appears to illuminate this ecological aspect more than anything else in the film are the images and sounds of water, including the recurrence of falling rain, drops from a faucet, and water that seeps over various objects, all of which insistently suggest the durational presence of the material “world” that envelopes us but never makes itself available for an easy conceptual capture. The torrential rain toward the end of the film, with the resounding echoes that it produces off the surface of visible as well as invisible objects in the frame, makes us aware of both the micro and macro-scale workings of this beyond-human process. The random clamor of the rain is, in other words, reminiscent of the quantum motion that underlies all existence, crossing the border of the organic and non-organic that demands we prepare for the start of thinking anew. And in this new thinking, anthropocentric imagination may dissolve like “tears in rain,” but may also be opened to a radical reconfiguration of an ever-shifting ontological co-existence that will never be complete in and of itself¹².

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 29.
2. This mode of “waiting” is somewhat reminiscent of the state of animals in zoos. As John Berger discusses in his essay “Why Look at Animals” (1977), animals in zoos have become “utterly dependent upon their keepers” while their interests “ha[ve] been replaced by a passive waiting for a series of arbitrary outside interventions.” See Filipa Ramos, ed., *Documents of Contemporary Art: Animals* (London

- and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery and the MIT Press, 2016), 68.
3. Although the original novel by Pierre Boulle (1963) was not ostensibly about the nuclear crisis of the 1960s, the first film adaptation by Rod Serling in 1968, especially the famous ending scene, was widely recognized as a symbolic reference to the nuclear apocalypse.
4. To name a few examples, Huygue’s *Remake* (1994-95) is an attempt to “remake” Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954) and his *Third Memory* (2000) is a complex reconstruction of an

- actual bank robbery (1972) interlaced with a variety of mediated images that include scenes from Sidney Lumet’s movie *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975).
5. On Huyghe’s relationship to Pasolini’s films, see the following interview: George Baker, “An Interview with Pierre Huyghe,” *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 95.
6. In this regard, it is important to note here that primatological findings in recent decades have already confirmed that apes quite flexibly adapt to their living environment and develop different behavioral patterns

in response to it. The “culture” of the apes in captivity (in human world) and that of the ones in nature are therefore proven to be very different. See the following interview for more detailed explanations: “‘One Could Describe Us as Chimpanzee Ethnographers’: Christophe Boesch in Conversation with Cord Riechelmann,” in *Ape Culture*, eds. Anselm Franke and Hila Peleg (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2015) (published in association with an exhibition of the same title held at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in 2015), 55-59.

7.
Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 2.

8.
Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, “Where

the Hell Is the Exit to This Field: On the Continued Relevance of Donna Haraway’s History of Primatological Knowledge,” in *Ape Culture* (see n. 5), 26, see note 5.

9.
For their work, see the catalogue of the following exhibition: *In the Wake: Japanese Photographers Respond to 3/11* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2015).

10.
See Ran Zwigenberg, *Hiroshima: The Origins of Global Memory Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) for a detailed account of how this process of symbolic neutralization happened in the years immediately after the war (especially Chapter 1). See also John Dower, “The Bombed: Hiroshima and Nagasaki in

Japanese Memory,” in Michael J. Hogan, ed., *Hiroshima in History and Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 116-42.

11.
Of course, this discourse of peace was endorsed and accelerated by the famous speech known as Peace Declaration by Hamai Shinzō, the mayor of Hiroshima, at the second memorial ceremony on August 6, 1947.

12.
“Tears in rain” is, of course, a reference to the famous final scene of the first *Blade Runner* (1982) in which, interestingly enough, rain also plays a significant role in pointing to the dimension beyond the limit of human imagination and memory.