

Per Israelson

The Vortex of the Weird: Systemic Feedback and Environmental Individuation in the Media Ecology of Ito Junji's Horror Comics

This paper briefly discusses a handful of comics by Ito Junji¹ in relation to the genre of cosmic horror and the literary work of H. P. Lovecraft. My claim is that these comics — while they are perfectly accessible individually, and can be read, at least to some degree, as isolated works of art — also comprise a collective; a network of interconnected media objects organized in the form of a media ecology. I will argue that Ito's comics establish an environmental aesthetics, an ambient aesthetics, where the infrastructure of the medium becomes world-generating, that is, ontogenetic. Rather than focusing on a certain meaningful aspect of the narrative, the medium itself becomes the locus of narrative meaning. Background becomes foreground, and the environment itself becomes the systemic organization of a meaningful structure: a move that philosopher Timothy Morton has called ecomimesis (Morton, 2007, 31). But while Ito's comics perform this move when engaging an actual reader, they also relate this experience to the media system of horror comics. Reading the comic book is also engaging in as well as being engaged by the genre and media system of cosmic horror. Understanding Ito Junji's comics as media-ecological objects thus not only shows how the reader is already an integral part of the comic book medium, it also indicates a new way of conceptualizing the relation between individual work and genre.

In literary studies, Tzvetan Todorov has claimed that genres “are precisely those relay-points by which the work assumes a relation with the universe of literature” (Todorov, 1970, 8). And Mikhail Bakhtin argues, in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, that genres are radically dyna-

¹ The romanization of Japanese words follows the English translated editions here; however, the Japanese name order (surname preceding first name) is applied.

mic systems, engaging in what he conceptualizes as diachronic dialogicity. Bakhtin maintains:

A genre is always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously. Genre is reborn and renewed at every new stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre. This constitutes the life of the genre. [...] A genre lives in the present, but always *remembers* its past, its beginning. Genre is a representative of creative memory in the process of literary development. (Bakhtin, 1984, 106)

By looking briefly at how some of Ito's comics engage with the work of H. P. Lovecraft and the genre of cosmic horror, I will in the following suggest that we take Bakhtin at his word here, that is, that we understand him literally: the horror genre is a parasitic organism; it is a hybrid organism, part material, part immaterial, part memory technology, part living memory. And it is precisely the incessant movement between these incommensurable parts that generates the paradoxical and liminal state that is at the heart of horror. This, I will argue, is the vortex of the weird.

The threat of a horror story is not so much posed by what it means, but rather by what it *does* to the reader. Taking part in a horror story is to be challenged as a unitary and autonomous subject. To this extent, horror narrates the intrusion of the strange and monstrous into the mundane, forcing a reconfiguration of reality. Thus, the limits of consensus reality are put to the test. This is basically philosopher Noël Carroll's definition of art-horror (1990, 34). But I would argue that this cognitive test, this ontological reconfiguration, is not only staged within the narrated storyworld, or performed as an act of interpretation; it is also performed materially. The horror story always stresses that the narrative medium in which it unfolds functions as an ecosystem, where every meaningful notion of reality emerges through ecological feedback, a feedback that also includes, and partly controls, the reader. In this sense, the medium is already part of the reader's sensual and cognitive apparatus: the reader of a horror comic is already haunted by the magazine, so to speak.

Using systems theory and neocybernetic theories of information, and especially the theory of autopoiesis, it is possible to describe how the horror genre operates as a living technological organism that adapts to, but also adapts, its environment. This entails a radical shift in literary theory, away from meaning-oriented hermeneutics to an ecocriticism focused on material and environmental agency.

According to the theory of autopoiesis, living organisms are operationally closed and relate to the environment in which they are enmeshed as an observing system, by structural coupling. However, the environment – and an external, objectively existing world – does not pre-exist an observing system, but rather, observation comes about following a set of interactive processes that are determined by the organization of the system. Thus, the theory of autopoiesis stresses perception as an act of creation. But while the perceptual apparatus is organized in relation to an environment, this relation is altogether internal to the observing system and determined by that system's own organization (Hayles, 1999, 136). It would then seem that the organization of living systems determines the environment, while at the same time being open to feedback from that very same environment. By creating their environments, organisms – that is, humans and animals, as well as technical objects and media – are created by the environments in which they are enmeshed.

The causality of autopoiesis might appear paradoxical, and from the perspective of a traditional humanist logic concerned with stable truth-values, it is. However, as Bruce Clarke, Professor of Literature and Science at Texas Tech University, notes in his book *Neocybernetics and Narrative*, neocybernetic theories function by a posthumanist logic in which this paradox becomes productive. From a neocybernetic point of view, form and matter, as well as subject and object, and system and environment are not oppositional concepts. Instead, the binary logic that marks a system is here an effect of the operational closure by which a system distinguishes itself from an environment. But this distinction is always temporal and subject to feedback from the environmental medium. Clarke writes:

The environmental medium is not antithetical to the concept of systemic form, but rather, the contingent horizon within which such forms manifest their possibilities. Whereas the classical form-matter binary presented a static ontological polarity, the systemic form-medium binary is not ontological but operational, emergent, self-referential. The form-medium distinction loops back upon itself to include what it excludes. (Clarke, 2014, 74)

Operating as an ecosystem, a genre is reconfigured by every new object which is added to it, in effect retroactively rewriting its own causality. In this sense, Ito Junji's comic books emerge from the genre of cosmic horror and the work of H. P. Lovecraft, while at the same time reconfiguring it.

Lovecraft upholds a central position within the media franchises as well as the collaborative fandom networks that, following media scholar Henry Jenkins, constitute convergence culture. There are numerous adaptations of Lovecraft's work, in all kinds of media: radio, podcasts and films, as well as literature and comic books. But also games, such as the very influential *Call of Cthulhu* role-playing game from 1981, and the *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* video game from 2005, reflect this position. There seems to be no place on this earth where the tentacles of the Old ones cannot reach. To some degree, this vast network of transmedia narratives, engaging in participatory platforms, is a continuation of the cultural and material environment in which Lovecraft's stories first emerged, that is, the pulp magazines and amateur fandom publications of the 1920s, the most influential perhaps being the magazine *Weird Tales*. This environment is characterized by a collaborative creativity in which writers and editors participated and used each other's work: an ecosystem of creative feedback where fans and readers become publishers and writers, affecting the system and being affected by the system.

It could be argued accordingly that the genre of cosmic horror, from the very beginning, so to speak, clearly functions as a media ecology in which a complex system generates, and is at the same time generated by, the environment. This feedback is what makes it possible for the genre, as a worldbuilding system, to remain the same while simultaneously always becoming new. To paraphrase cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter, genre is a strange loop. I will now sketch Ito's engagement in one such loop.

In contrast to many other comics artists and writers – such as Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore, Richard Corben, and recently also Peter Bergting, Emelie Östergren and David Thollin in Sweden – Ito Junji has, at least to my knowledge, never adapted a story by Lovecraft. Even so, the presence of Lovecraft in Ito's work is palpable. Recurrent themes and the general milieu have an often strikingly Lovecraftian quality in his stories. In an interview with the online publication *78 Magazine*, Ito points to Lovecraft as a direct influence, saying: "The different stages of the spiral (in *Uzumaki*) were definitely inspired by the mysterious novels by H. P. Lovecraft. His expressionism with regard to atmosphere greatly inspires my creative impulse." (Winsby, 2006, no page).

Though spirals and vortices are abound in Lovecraft's work – he was for some time obsessed with images of the spiral nebula in the early decades of the 20th century, as well as with the spiral philosophy of Lucretius – I am here more interested in the spiral as a figure for the

recur- sive feedback loops between system and environment.² Thus, even works by Ito that are not explicitly related to Lovecraft can be understood as configured from the environment – or the atmosphere as Ito says – of a Lovecraftian media ecology, in a sense pertaining to one vast and distributed technological organism.

Ito's short story "Thing that drifted ashore" (Jp. *Hyōchakubutsu*, 1995/2010) elaborates on a familiar and much-loved Lovecraftian theme, namely that of the unknown beneath the sea, where, as we know, the high priest Cthulhu sleeps, dead but dreaming, and from which many of the hybrid monsters spawned by the great Old ones emerge. The premise of the story is simple. An unidentified sea creature has beached (Figure 1).

² Literary scholar Sean Moreland discussed the relation between the spirals in Lovecraft's work and the spirals in Ito's comic art in a paper that he presented at the *International Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts* in 2018. Moreland's paper, "Further down the Spiral: Lovecraftian C(ha)o(s)mic Horror in Ito's *Uzumaki*", with publication forthcoming, discusses the spiral theme and motif in both Lovecraft and Ito, and has influenced the present argument significantly. The spiral movement in Michel Serres' philosophy that Moreland discusses has clear affinities with the ecological and neo-cybernetic argument of my paper.

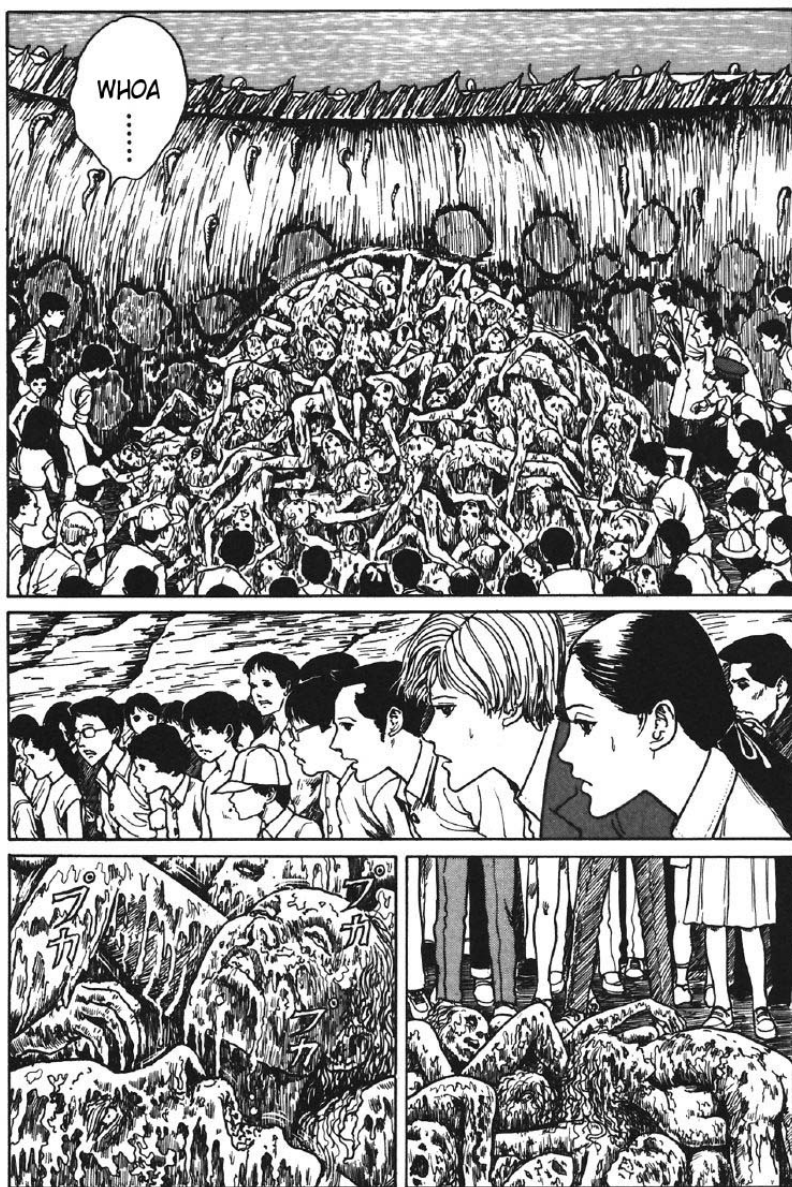


22

Figure 1: "Thing that drifted ashore" (2010), 22.

It is enormous, some thirty meters in length, and clearly not a whale, more reminiscent of a giant sea serpent, with a strangely grotesque head. People come gathering to look – scientists, reporters, the military, the general public. A young man and a young woman feel particularly – and somehow inexplicably, almost supernaturally – drawn to the strange sea monster, against their own wishes. The young man has nurtured a lifelong fear of the sea, ever since a traumatic visit to an aquarium at an early age. The woman, too, fears the ocean, after losing her fiancé in a shipwreck some seven years earlier. They both share the same, recurrent nightmare of floating “like an embryo,” as the woman puts it, underneath the sea, somehow entangled amongst other unseen people, protected from the horrors of the deep by a semi-transparent membrane. In fact, as it turns out, the belly of the sea creature is also semi-transparent, and inside there appears to be scores of dead people entangled with each other. However, as the creature is cut open, and the bodies pour out, it soon becomes apparent, of course, that they are in fact alive, though severely emaciated and transmogrified (Figure 2).

漂着物



37

Figure 2: "Thing that drifted ashore" (2010), 37.

The drowned fiancé is among the grotesque mass of creeping bodies. As the story concludes, it is suggested that these unfortunate people have somehow been adapted to the metabolism of the sea creature, and thus evolved into a kind of parasite, feeding off its immense body. Here a monstrous collective is suggested; a collective that not only comprises the actual bodies devoured by the creature, but also the memories and dreams of the two young protagonists, thus overthrowing the temporality of the narration. The body and the psyche are not a closed system, but an open ecosystem, porous and distributed in a feedback loop with the environment.

These transgressions of borders between subject and object, system and environment, inside and outside, before and after, are not only thematized, but also performed in a subtle play with perspective and focalization, in which the perceptual apparatus of the reader is distributed within the medium. By making the environment of the medium part of the narrative, a kind of metalepsis is performed, in which the embodied position of the reader is imbued with narrative agency. As opposed to a traditional narrative metalepsis, where transgression between levels of narration shifts the positions between narrator and character within the structure of the narrative, this environmental metalepsis indicates a post-humanist subjectivity in which the work of art is an open system, and where there is no position that is truly outside.

An even stronger emphasis on the uncanny and weird effects of this metaleptic transgression between different ontological realms can be found in the short story “The Enigma of Amigara Fault” (Jp. *Amigara dansō no kai*, 2002/2015). Following an earthquake, a massive fault has been opened in the Amigara Mountain in H prefecture, somewhere in Japan. Strangely, the fault exposed by the earthquake is covered in thousands of human-shaped holes. As with the sea creature, this weird natural phenomenon has drawn the attention of media, scientists and government officials, as well as the general public, and a large group of onlookers have amassed. The origins and purposes of these apparently ancient holes are debated, until a man, claiming one of the holes to be his, undresses and steps into it, disappearing completely into the mountain (Figure 3).



Figure 3: “The Enigma of Amigara Fault” (2015).

The story then follows two young people, a man and a woman, struggling with their own fears and desires of entering the mountain. Dream narratives are interspersed with the narration; dreams of a possible distant antediluvian past explaining the existence and nightmares of being caught in the hole and crushed by the mountain. These proleptic and analeptic episodes generate a broken and dispersed network of temporal trajectories whose configuration – conceptualized by comics scholar Thierry Groensteen (2007) as “braiding” – hinges on the corporeal and sensorial immersion of the reader. Thus, the claustrophobic confinement within the mountain depicted in the proleptic nightmare of the male protagonist is enhanced and materially performed by a metalepsis, in which the reader, by a play of perspectives, is positioned within the space of the narrative, focusing the eye as well as the act of seeing.



Figure 4: "The Enigma of Amigara Fault" (2015).

This spiraling movement between different points of view, which draws the reader into the medium, is further intensified in the culmination of the story, where the male protagonist is drawn into his hole in the fault (Figure 4). Here the sensorial apparatus as well as the agency of the individual is distributed, within the medium as well as within the narrated storyworld. This posthumanist subjectivity, where the infrastructure of the medium becomes part of the body and the sensorium, is finally taken to its extreme in the concluding page (Figure 5).

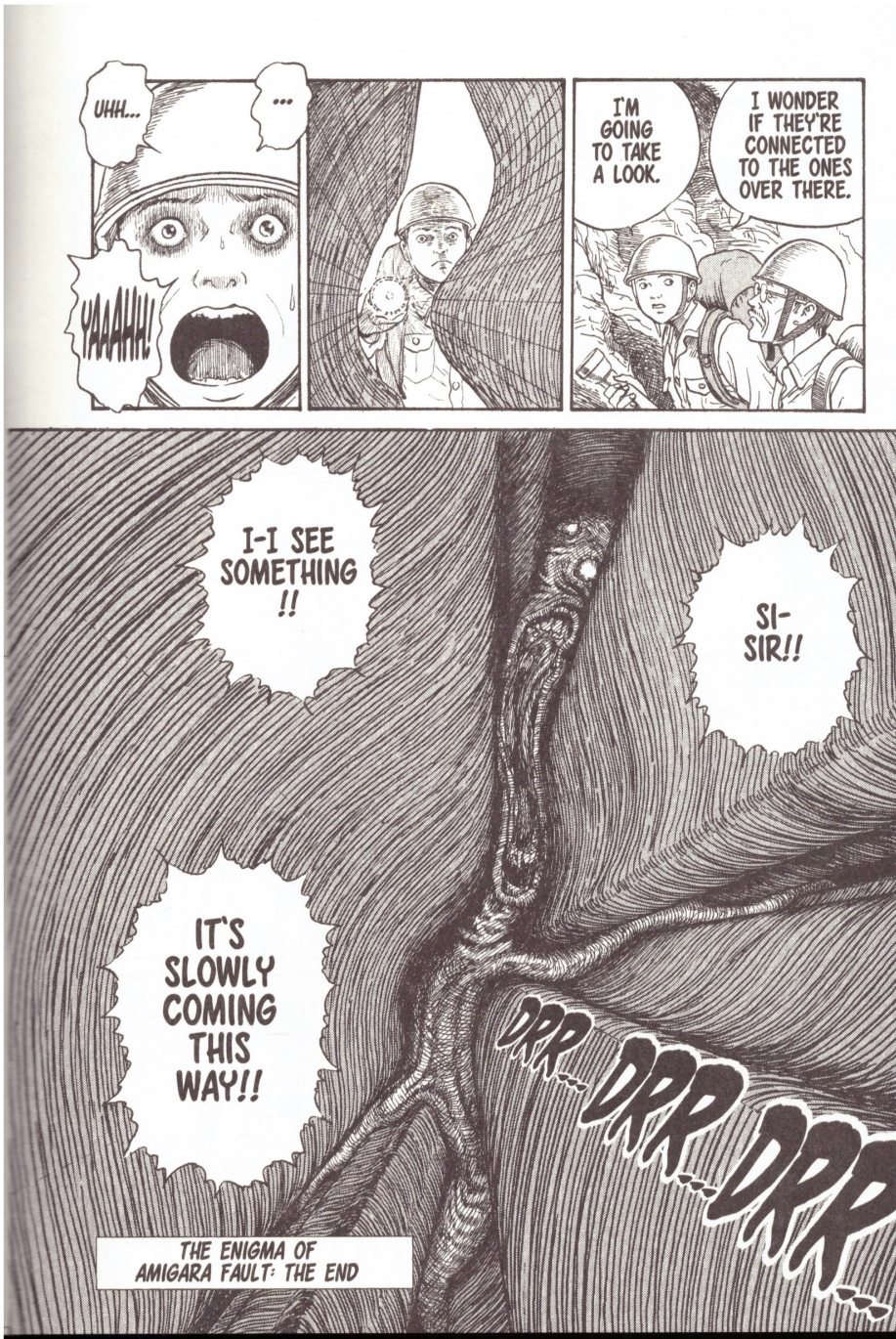


Figure 5: "The Enigma of Amigara Fault" (2015).

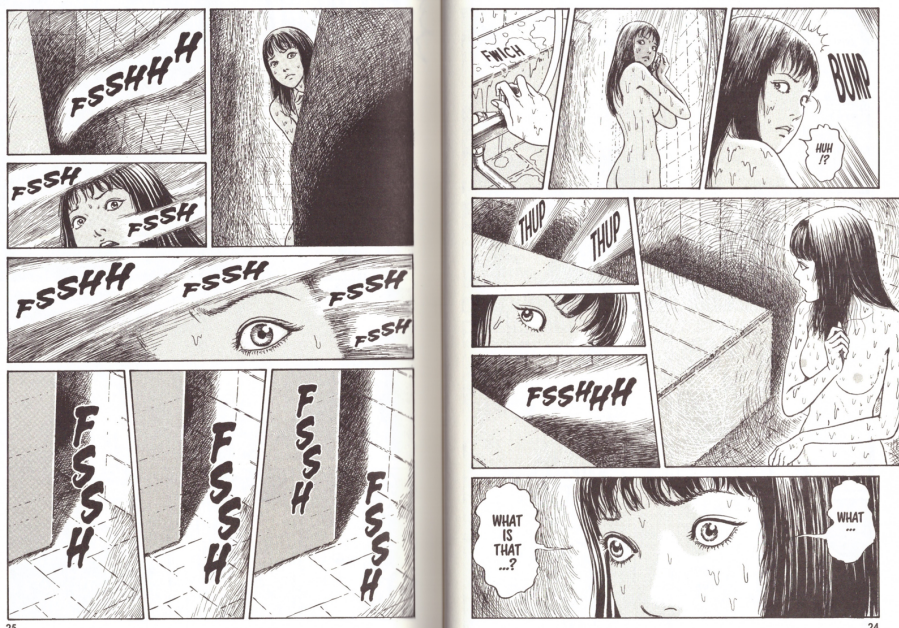


Figure 7: Gyo: *The Death-Stench Creeps* (2015), 24–25.

The story follows a young couple, Kaori and Tadashi, on holiday in Okinawa, where they first encounter the smell. Here we can truly talk about an invading atmosphere. This environmental agency is translated into the comic's double-page spread in an elaborated play with points of view and narrative positions (Figure 7). In this spread Kaori is trying, in vain, to wash away the stench while the bathroom is permeated by what appears to be a synesthetic conflation of smell, movement and sound. Synesthesia is strongly played upon throughout the whole series, further establishing the senses as a distributed, posthumanist sensorium.

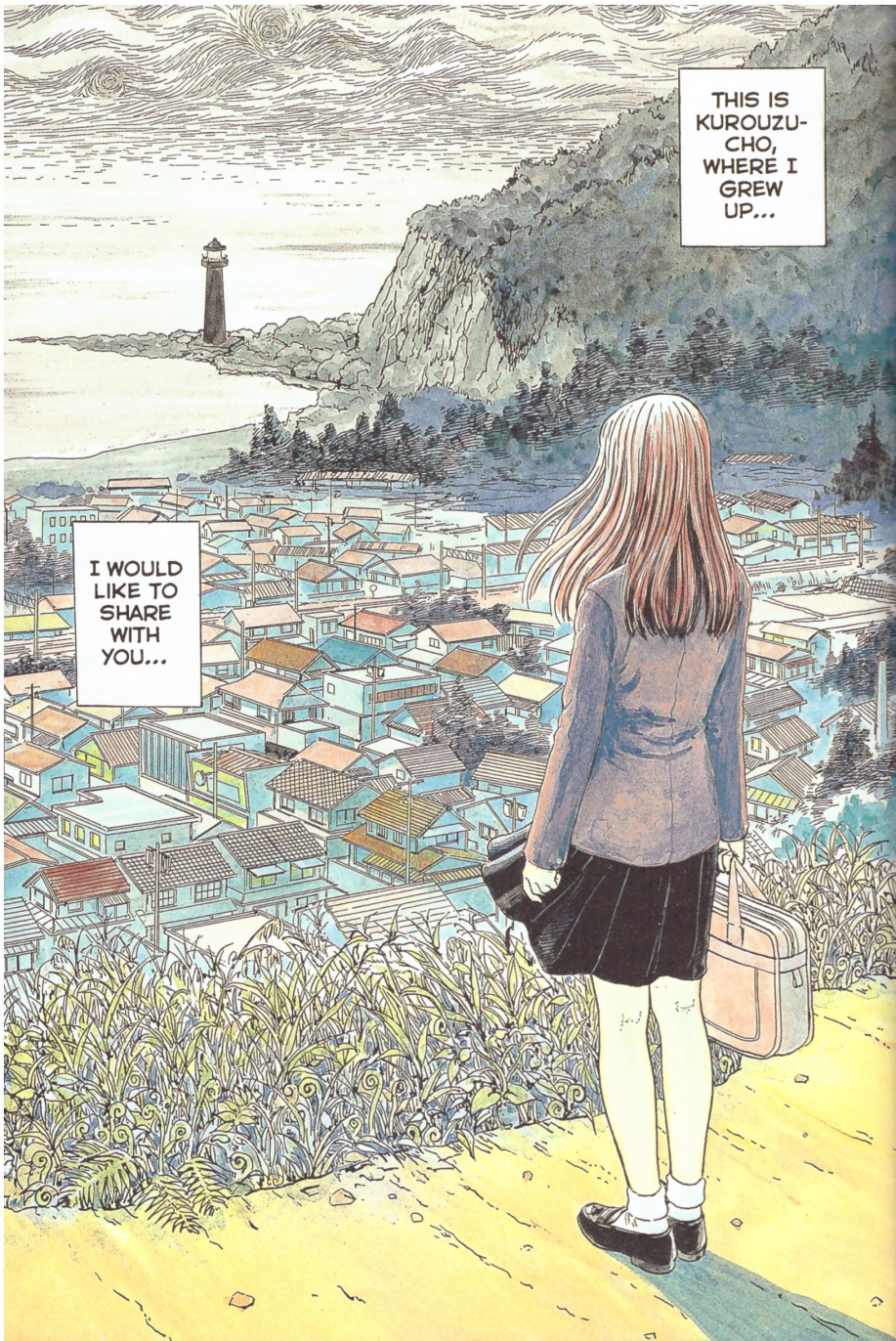


Figure 9: *Uzumaki: Spiral into Horror* (2013).

The work by Ito that most explicitly relates vortices and spirals to an environmental and posthumanist agency and aesthetics is, of course, *Uzumaki* (Jp. for vortex); a work of such a grand scale it can only be glimpsed as a fragmentary conclusion to this paper. While *Uzumaki* ostensibly focuses on the experiences of a young high school couple – Kirie and Shuichi – its real protagonist is in a sense Kurouzu-cho, a small Japanese coastal town. The story opens with Kirie looking out over her town from the surrounding mountains. The scene evokes Caspar David Friedrich’s classical painting *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818). But while Friedrich’s painting establishes the autonomous vision of Western liberal modernity, of the colonial modern subject disinterested in the scenery and approaching it from a distance, it becomes evident, merely by turning the page, that Ito’s version of the sublime is far from romantic.



Figure 10: *Uzumaki: Spiral into Horror* (2013).

Instead of a stable vantage point we find once again a wandering and fragmented perspective, forcing the reader to engage and be engaged by the

medium (Figure 10).³ The perspectival twist around the body of Kirie indicates a spiraling movement, and the reader is soon informed, by Kirie's friend Shuichi, that the town is obsessed with spirals. Foremost among those obsessed is Shuichi's father, who is at the center of the first of the twenty loosely connected episodes which comprise the lengthy narrative of *Uzumaki*. If this obsession seems to be of a rather manic kind – Shuichi's father is transfixed by garden snails and circular patterns in pottery, as well as by the swirls of soup bowls and bath tubs – it is nevertheless an obsession within the realms of psychological realism. Initially.

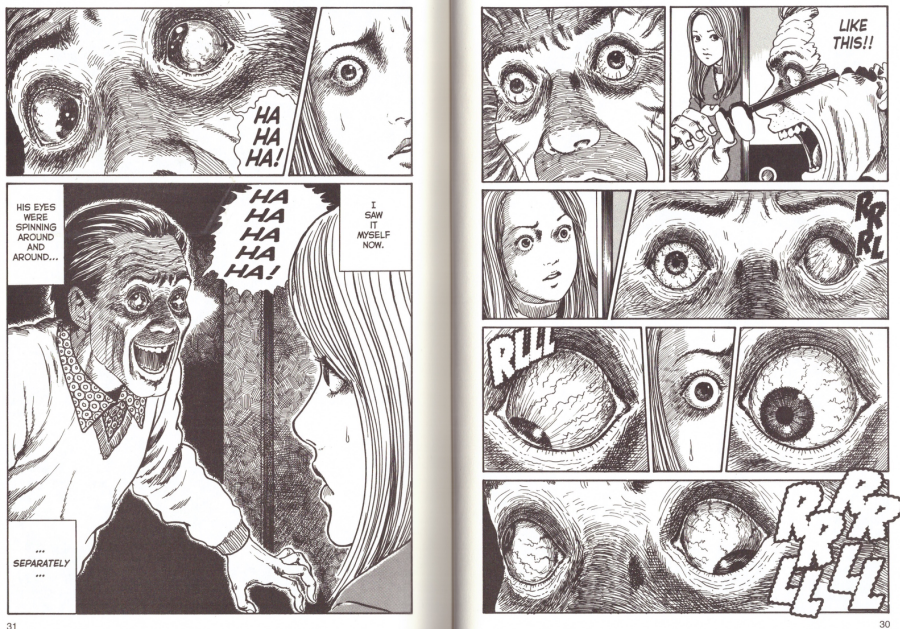


Figure 11: *Uzumaki: Spiral into Horror* (2013), 30–31.

Soon, however, obsession becomes possession (Figure 11). The supernatural and grotesque rotation of the eyes here would seem to be an allusion to the famous head-spinning scene from the *Exorcist*, while at the same time further stressing sensation and the distributed sensorium of the comic book medium.

³ Moreland presented this reading of the opening scene as a postmodernist comment on Friedrich's romantic-modern aesthetics in the above-mentioned conference paper.

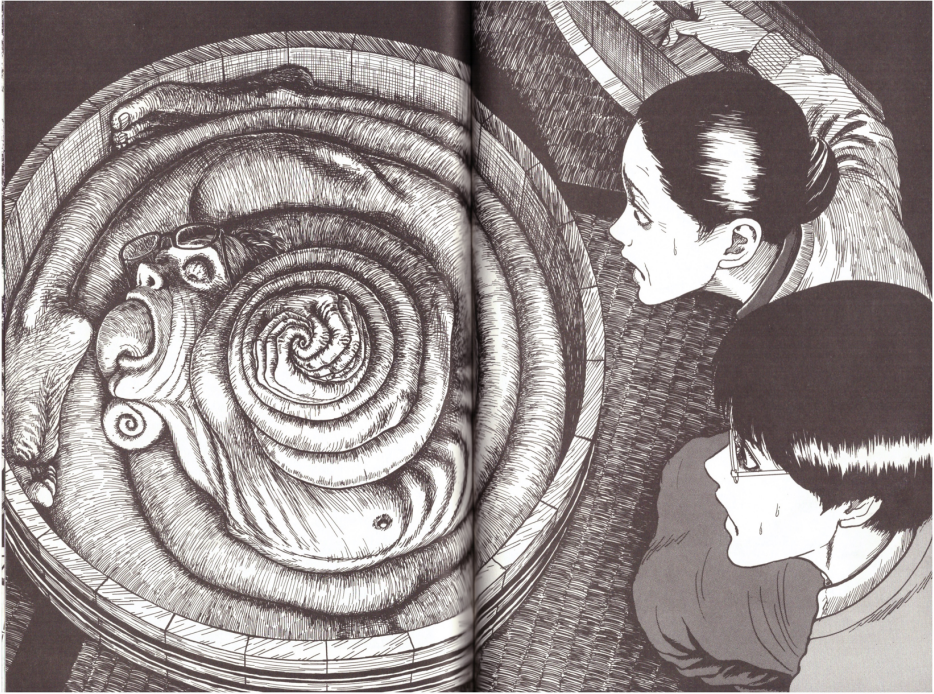


Figure 12: *Uzumaki: Spiral into Horror* (2013).

In the conclusion of the episode, Shuichi's father is discovered, after a short and unexplained absence, coiled like a spring, in a large bathtub (Figure 12), his body grotesquely and unexplainably broken.

The narrative of *Uzumaki* unfolds episodically, each chapter structurally and thematically linked, but without direct causal and temporal progression. Each episode focuses on a new intrusion of spirals into the mundane, precipitating supernatural transformations. Thus, the episode "Medusa" narrates, not without a certain amount of humorous action, the spiraling of Kirie's hair, which takes on a life of its own. And in the episode "The Snail," Kirie's classmate Katamaya – "the ultimate slowpoke" who only comes to school on rainy days – is transformed into a snail. In one of the more grotesque episodes of the series, "The Umbilical Cord," the placenta and umbilical cords of vampirical and supernaturally aware babies grow back and spread like a new species of fleshy mushrooms, disseminating the spiral obsession as food produce.

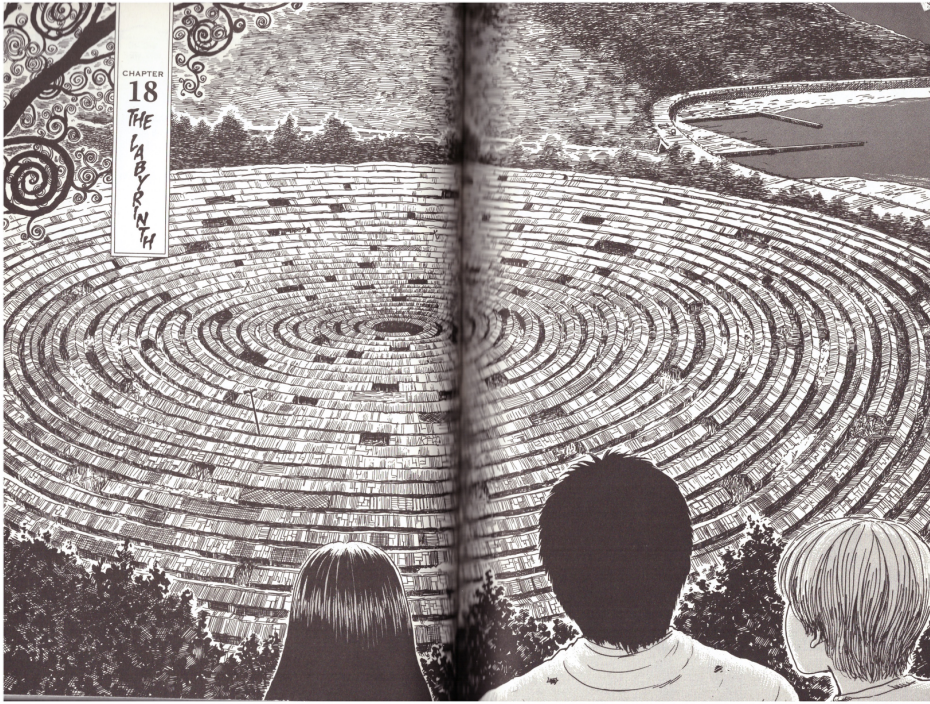


Figure 13: *Uzumaki: Spiral into Horror* (2013).

Eventually spirals take over the whole town, rearranging the infrastructure and buildings into a spiraling labyrinth. At the center of the labyrinth, a staircase takes Kirie and Shuichi into a different plane of existence, an underworld of truly Lovecraftian proportions, where the famous non-Euclidean and cyclopean geometries of his horror stories abound. Here the comic's double-page spread takes on a material ambiguity, where the vortices of the spirals are at the same time towering structures extending outwards and maelstrom-like holes descending into the deep. The direction of spirals here clearly hinges on the position of an embodied reader.

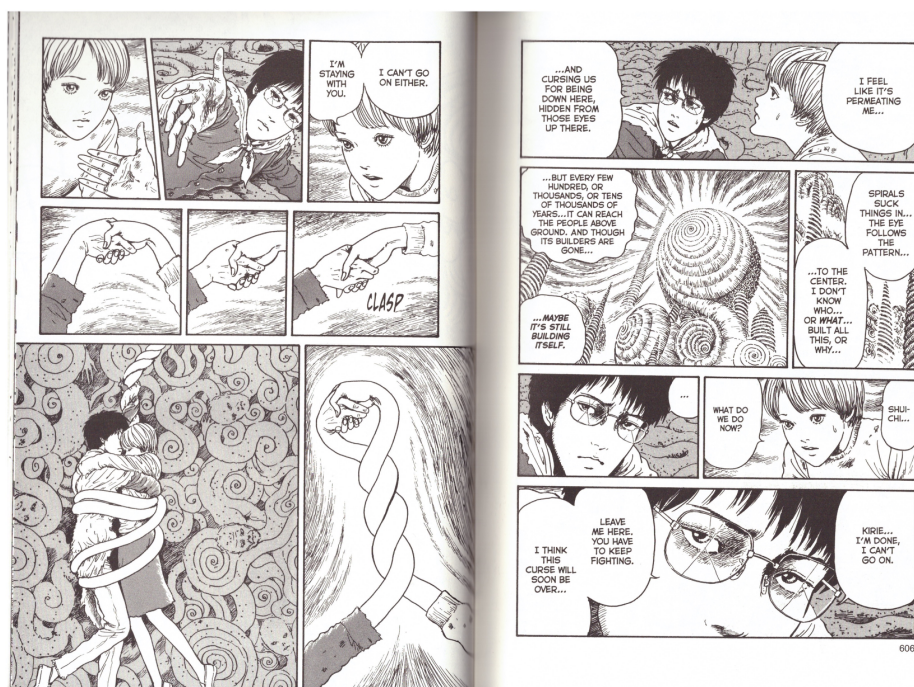


Figure 14: *Uzumaki: Spiral into Horror* (2013), 606–607.

In this underworld, Kirie and Shuichi are transformed into one collective being, entangled and distributed, in a scene that from the perspective of anthropocentric liberal humanism comes forth as monstrous and horrific, but that from the perspective of a posthumanist, and dare I say, spiral logic, reads as a rather touching comment on the lover's fate in the Inferno of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, alluding to the episode of Paolo and Francesca, doomed to be forever swirling around each other, near but never to touch.

In the final, and “lost,” chapter of *Uzumaki*, which was not part of the original series as it ran in the magazine *Big Comic Spirits* (1998–1999), the spirals come to subsume all of creation, as the discovery of a new spiral galaxy intrudes on the world. Here spirals signal full-blown apocalypse. But then again, one must remember that the temporality of the vortex is not progressive, rather it is recursive. It will always spiral back again. The apocalypse is as much revelation as it is annihilation. Each chapter in *Uzumaki* presents a new version of the world, a version that is not so much a logical consequence of the previous, but a retroactive reconfiguration of causality. Every new episode emerges from and concurrently rewrites the

previous. In a similar matter, it could be argued that the different comic book titles that I have talked about here, so clearly evincing a number of general similarities – a young couple as protagonists, a weird natural phenomenon forcing a reassessment of reality, infrastructural agency, and so on – also are feedback loops spiraling back into each other, individual systems of meaning and effect emerging from and at the same time generating their environment; the atmosphere of Lovecraft's horror mythology.

Reconfiguring Lovecraft's mythology by continuously reconfiguring his own narrative, not only between different titles, but also within each individual title, Ito presents narration as an open ecosystem. Accordingly, Alan Moore's Lovecraftian adaptation *Providence* (2017), where the final scene depicts the outer god Azathoth as a vortex in the sky, emerges from and reconfigures Ito's stages of the spiral (Figure 15). But so does Paul La Farge's *The Night Ocean* (2017); a metafictional, postmodernist novel where the continuous transgression of narrative voices and levels delineates individuality as environmental feedback (Figure 16).



Figure 15: Alan Moore & Jacen Burrows, *Providence Act 3* (2017).

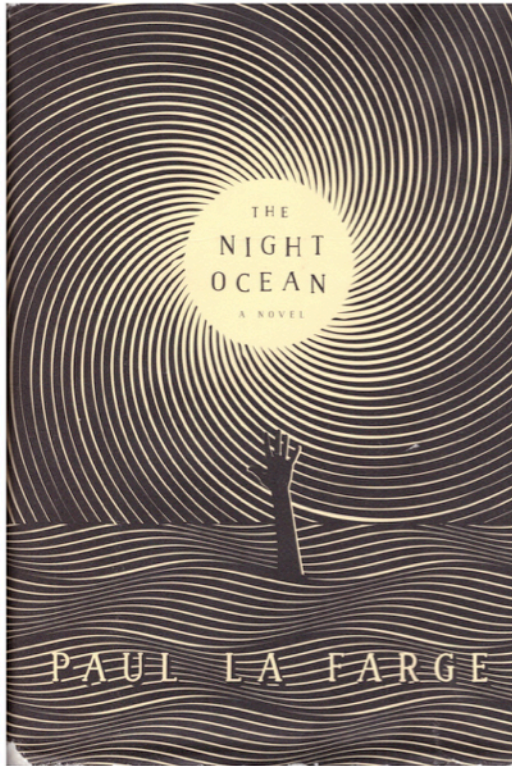


Figure 16: Paul La Farge, *The Night Ocean* (2017).

Thus, every reconfiguration closes on a system, but there is always a remainder, a lingering trace that provokes a new structural coupling and a new organizational structure. This new structure, coming after the previous, will nevertheless function as the first and original structure. Accordingly, every genre is always new, at every moment in which a system is coupled to an environment, while it is also always old and original. This is perhaps how genre remembers, as a distributed sensorium, a feedback loop between system and environment, and perhaps, this is how we as readers partake in the individual work and in the universe of literature, creating while being created by the environment into which we are drawn. A vortex of the weird.

Institutional affiliation: Stockholm University, Department of Culture and Aesthetics

References

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1999 (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Carroll, Noël. 1990. *The Philosophy of Horror*. New York: Routledge.
- Clarke, Bruce. 2014. *Neocybernetics and Narrative*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. 1999. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ito, Junji. 2010. "Thing that drifted ashore."
<http://monsterbrains.blogspot.com/2010/12/junji-ito-thing-that-drifted-ashore.html> (last access November 14, 2018).
- Ito, Junji. 2013. *Uzumaki: Spiral into horror* (deluxe edition), trans. Yuji Oniki. San Francisco: Viz Media.
- Ito, Junji. 2015. *Gyo: the Death-Stench Creeps* (2-in-1 deluxe edition), trans. Yuji Oniki. San Francisco: Viz Media.
- La Farge Paul. 2017. *The Night Ocean*. New York: Penguin.
- Moore, Alan, and Jacen Burrows. 2017. *Providence, Act 3*. Urbana, Ill.: Avatar Press.
- Morton, Timothy. 2007. *Ecology without nature: rethinking environmental aesthetics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 1975. *The Fantastic: a structural approach to a literary genre*, trans. Richard Howard. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Winsby, Mira Bai. 2006. "Into the spiral: A Conversation with Japanese Horror Maestro Junji Ito." *78 Magazine* 3(1).
<http://www.78magazine.com/issues/03-01/arts/junji.shtml> (last access November 14, 2018).