

Endless Dreams of Cro-Magnon or a Perpetual Feast?

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Throughout human history, we have faced countless crises of varying nature. But the biggest impending crisis of all is the possibility of extinction of the human race. Professor Mitsuru Haga shares his musings on the trajectory of humanity and offers insights on how we may navigate future crises based on Japan's unique experiences. In this uncertain and lonely future of humankind, art provides the space for contemplating on what it means to be human.

Le monde and l'homme

“Le monde a commencé sans l'homme et il s'achèvera sans lui,” states French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in his seminal 1955 work *Tristes Tropiques*. Translated, it means “the world has commenced without humans and it shall end without them”. The first half of this asseveration is a fact. When Earth was formed around 4,600 million years ago, we were not yet there. Based on this data, this great scholar concludes that we shall be extinct long before the termination of our planet. This would be the greatest crisis of all Hominina families. In fact, it should be an epigrammatic slogan of the United Nations.

However, I can never be such a pessimistic magnate like Lévi-Strauss. Humble as I might be, I feel obliged to try everything to avoid such a catastrophic future and prove that this great mind was wrong after all. To this don-quixotic resistance, all hands on deck to battle stations! (It is also interesting that the French scholar did not consider at all that the world might end with the Last Judgement as Christians have predicted.)

Continuous “replacements” or crises: the normal situation for 6 million years

Six million years ago, the Hominina family tree branched from genealogical trees that later became chimpanzees and bonobos; this is our “birthday.” Since then, our genealogical tree grew well and flourished with branches, just like a real woody plant. In other words, plurally different humans coexisted at the same time and there have been numerous “replacements” where older humans were substituted by newer ones. This is nothing but the greatest tragedy for the concerned extinct older humans.

Because if this has been the normal situation for 6 million years, then why not us homo sapiens, too? Isn't it safe and obvious to deduce that we too shall be replaced by a newer human? Extinction will be the greatest of our crises. We should engrave in our minds that we are only living this prosperity with our annihilation in view.

Lonesome homo sapiens: “Travellin’ All Alone” since 40,000 years ago

What is even more dreadful is that unlike the six-million-year long period where different humans coexisted, we are now lonesome cowboys

and cowgirls “travellin’ all alone” just as Billie Holiday sings. We are no longer accompanied by coexisting humans as was the case for so long. Therefore, if we, homo sapiens, become extinct, and if there is no one to pass the baton on, it would be the end of all Hominina families. The whole responsibility for disproving Lévi-Strauss’ proposition rests solely upon our shoulders.

“The last” replacement from Neanderthal to Cro-Magnon: culture to adapt to climate change

Given that mission to avoid a catastrophic crisis, it is of great importance to know what happened in “the last”, for now, replacement. Why did Neanderthals cease to exist and on the other hand we survived? From the massacre of the former by the latter to the possible annihilation of the former by a disastrous illness caused by a viral infection, these theories have no cogent evidence.

According to the studies by Professor Takeru Akazawa and his group, Cro-Magnon, i.e., Homo sapiens in the European region, had more capacity to adapt to climate and environmental changes. “Tool boxes” or “tool kits” are sets of tools for specialised activities such as hunting, fishing, collecting plants, or sewing. The “tool box” of the Neanderthal continued to be quite monotonous and did not change essentially for 170,000 years. It consisted of only stone tools for simple work with no effective hunting tool.

On the other hand, the “tool box” of Cro-Magnon had gone through rapid (almost every 10,000 years) change led by technological innovations, upgrading from Aurignacian to Gravettian

and Solutrean, Magdalenian types. These tools were made from a range of materials, not only stone but also bone and antler. Cro-Magnon upgraded various hunting tools and they even invented working tools, i.e., tools to make tools. Technological innovation to adapt to drastic climate changes was the reason we survived. Culture was the key to survive climate changes and the reason for the difference between the two; one is extinct and the other flourished.

Agriculture as environmental engineering: and therefore environmental burden and cause of crises

Then, is it safe to say that technological innovation is always a good strategy? The most innovative technology by humans of all time is agriculture. This is the human practice of cultivating plants and livestock that gradually started around 11,000 years ago in different parts of the globe independently. In other words, it is a human deed to load the natural environment so that Mother Nature should yield benefits for humans. By means of agriculture, we made nature subservient to us, and it enabled the human population to grow. However, this is exactly the reason why once we indulge ourselves in agriculture, we can never renounce it. If we stop agriculture, most of us should die from starvation. For the sake of nature, if we execute 100% non-chemical organic agriculture, according to some studies, harvest will be reduced to one-fifth of the present state. This means that we have to let die or kill four humans

out of five. This population pressure prevents us from stopping this human deed of contaminating nature. If “Anthropocene” is defined as an epoch dating from the commencement of significant human impact on earth’s geology and ecosystem, it started with agriculture. A Japanese agronomist Professor Yōichirō Satō goes as far as describing agriculture as a “forbidden fruit”—once we have bitten it, we can never go back.

The same goes for nuclear power technology and plants. We know that it contaminates nature, but we can’t stop it. Similarly, the Tokyo Olympic Games were postponed until 2021 because of the unexpected coronavirus pandemic situation which also cannot be controlled by modern science. It is again agriculture that triggered the tragedy. If we define cultural heritage as products of human activity, the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus is surely one of them. The virus is also a global cultural heritage; a product of our historical, cultural and social activities.

In the distant past, among people whose lifestyles were based on hunting and gathering, the constituent numbers of each human group were very small and the groups were scattered in open savannahs. Once the majority of these small groups became immune, contagious viruses had no place else to go; thus, neither endemics nor epidemics could occur.

But when agricultural culture began, people started to live and work closer together. This should be the time when epidemics of influenza occurred for the first time in human history.

And ever since the ancient Sumerian city-civilisation of southern Mesopotamia rose, where the “Three Cs (closed spaces, crowded places, close-contact settings)” were formed, the 2020 pandemic was the inevitable outcome.

Somebody has said that now BC means “Before Corona”. Then AD would be “After Disaster”. What will “AD” look like?

Fukushima power plant meltdown in 2011: zenith of technological failures

Ever since the first flintknapper chipped the first stone to create the first stone tool in the Lower Palaeolithic Age, we have kept advancing technologically. Of course, one of the most advanced state-of-the-art technologies is the nuclear power plant. Fukushima thus reminds us that technology is a double-edged sword.

Based on the technologies, starting with stone-tool-making technology which was followed by various newer ones, humans created the civilised world outside and above the natural world. Thus, we deprived the Creator (i.e. nature), of the right and the ways to evolve. How arrogant we are!

The legendary king Gilgamesh of the ancient Mesopotamia epic destroyed the guardian of the Cedar Forest, Humbaba, and continued the adventure seeking eternal life. But a barmaid of Babylon admonished this rioting hero by saying “Gilgamesh, where are you roaming? You will never find the eternal life that you seek. [...] Savor your food, make each of your days a delight. Bathe and anoint yourself, wear bright clothes that are sparkling clean. Let music and dancing fill your house. Love the child who holds you by the hand, give your wife pleasure in your embrace. That is the best way for a man to live.” (Yajima 1998).

We too, the descendants of the successful Cro-Magnon, should listen to the barmaid. We should be conscious of how insolent and audacious we have been, and we must come out of the endless dreams of Cro-Magnon. And also let us be reminded that *in vino veritas* (translated: In wine, there is truth) and therefore let's go to a bar to *libiamo, ne' lieti calici!* (translated: Let us drink, happy chalices!)

“Unintentional monument” as a sign to think about ourselves

Art historian Alois Riegl in 1903 published a book, *Der moderne Denkmalkultus. Sein Wesen und seine Entstehung* (*The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin*), in which he characterised monuments by their commemorative value. By doing so, he expanded the concept of monument; including not just the conventional positive *gewollte Denkmal* (translated: intentional monument), but also every other negative *ungewollte Denkmal* (translated: unintentional monument).

The latter type of monument has historical value which arises from the particular, individual event or moment in the course of human history, and the perception of this moment is left to this interpreter's subjective preference. In Riegl's concept, there is another third class of monuments characterised by their age-value, or *Alterswert*, which requires no scientific or art historical knowledge to appreciate the monument.

Thus “monument” sublimates from the state of “instrument that serves only those in power” to a higher state of “shared heritage of all humankind.” The German term “*das Denkmal*”

is composed of two parts—*das mal*, meaning stain, sign, or indication, and *denken*, meaning to think, consider, meditate. It is rather *ungewollte Denkmal* than *gewollte Denkmal* that is precious and that contributes to us humans as “sign to think” about ourselves and about our future. This is because it is not just the moveable remains of disasters, but especially the memorial ruins of disasters with positional information that are important examples of the *ungewollte Denkmal* of the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami.

Japan as frontrunner of finding answers for a unique set of newly emerging issues

Professor Hiroshi Komiyama evaluates and advocates “Japan as an advanced country in problems (課題先進国日本)” in his book with the same title published in 2007. He expounds on Japan no longer being a country that is trying to catch up with and absorb advanced civilisations such as the Chinese (from ancient times for centuries) and the West (since 1868 when the Meiji period started), but rather a “frontrunner” of finding answers for a unique set of emerging issues that few other countries are facing, like environmental problems, declining birth rates, depopulation, population ageing, and energy supply problems.

These include natural disasters and radiation hazards, the most recent catastrophic ones being the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami, and the melt-down of the tsunami-hit Fukushima nuclear power plant. The Japanese regret and reflect deeply on our failures, and therefore, we struggle and fight back. We

willingly share these hard-won achievements with the world.

For example, Japanese scholars have published a detailed paper in an international academic journal about handling methods for cultural heritage that is contaminated by radioactivity, which is the first such case in the world (Sano and Yamamoto 2015). Some of the lessons are;

- Since radioactive iodine in the air has a half-life of eight days, people should not approach the radioactive contaminated zone for at least eight days, preferably three half-lives, or 24 days.
- Because radioactive caesium ends up in the soil, one should study and analyse the currents of the air, rain and geographical features of the land. Mapping the contamination status and following this with an official announcement by the government are needed.
- Storage walls should be thicker than 20 cm. Air-conditioners should be stopped, so that contaminated air does not circulate.
- Archives, libraries, and museums are good refuge shelters.
- Geiger-Mueller counters are needed. Cultural properties with more than 1,300 counts per minute should be left behind.
- Workers (preferably male) should be in their 50s or older.

After the incident of Chernobyl, it seems that there are no reports about radioactive contamination of cultural properties. But mentioned above are the specific measures to rebuild confidence and a sense of pride and belonging of the local community and so as to prevent further destruction of cultural heritage.

In ancient times, kings and emperors trumpeted their glories by means of *gewollte Denkmal*. In the modern world, we should share our problems. Please learn from our hard-learnt *ungewollte* lessons.

Art as visual philosophy: a Japanese painting that depicts perpetuation

Art has no power when earth trembles and devastating waves attack. After those desperate moments, if one is still alive, those functions of *Nachtwächterstaat* also known as night-watchman state (i.e. police and military), become essential, followed by the fruits of science and technology (i.e. bulldozers and trucks for salvage). To know what happened and to evaluate the situation, subjects such as seismology, geoscience, and oceanology are required. Then to relieve and rebuild the local communities, jurisprudence, politics, and economics come into play.

And art? Is it “summer fires and winter fans (夏炉冬扇)”, or in a word, useless? In a sense, yes. Because art has no power that could overturn the physical order of the nature. It could only ratify it as such; stone is stronger than wood, and stone is stronger than water. Ratification of the physical order of nature had been the human way of recognising of the world before the religious mind was aroused in us.

Gradually, primitive religious cognition emerged. That is to view the world in a way to sense something that transcends the physical order, for example to consider that wood is stronger than stone because the former has life force, or that water is stronger

than stone because rushing streams can move and even pierce the latter. These lofty sensing and affections standing aloof from the physical order of the nature is the primitive religion.

This encouraged an attitude to transcend spatial and temporal order of nature and caused an interest to the effect that the visual sense and tactile sense have over sensitivity, thus creating art that has no practicability nor usefulness. It does not possess utilitarian value. But art transcends physical order of nature, and thus, salvages souls and helps rebuild the pride of the people. A famous private investigator Philip Marlowe in the hardboiled fiction created by Raymond Chandler said in *Playback*, “If I wasn’t hard, I wouldn’t be alive. If I couldn’t ever be gentle, I wouldn’t deserve to be alive”. We struggle to stay alive, but without gentle souls and honourable pride we do not deserve to be alive.

When art is a visual philosophy, a visualisation of how we recognise the world, what would be the principal aim and philosophy of lives on earth? Which piece of art would express this philosophy best?

It is perpetuation. And, I would say, that one particular art piece would be a 17th century Tokugawa period painting, *Family enjoying the evening cool* (紙本淡彩納涼図 / 夕顔棚納涼図) by Kusumi Morikage (Figure 1) which depicts “a peasant family lounging under a calabash-vine arbour, basking in the twilight atmosphere of a cloud-draped moon at the close of a sweltering Indian summer day. [...] The artist, by consciously using diluted ink to suggest the twilight hour, has poignantly captured a harmonious moment of family life.” (National Treasures & Important Cultural Properties of National Institutes for Cultural Heritage n.d.)

The family does not live in a luxurious palace but in a humble hut. They are not surrounded by treasures but enjoy the evening cool after a quick bath and appreciate the moon. Nothing here, even the moon, is abiding, but therefore, the world presented here is sustainable. They are contented and fed by a perpetual feast. What is depicted here is a humble Japanese take on “Savor your food, make each of your days a delight. Bathe and anoint yourself, wear bright clothes that are sparkling clean. Let music and dancing fill your house. Love the child who holds you by the hand, give your wife pleasure in your embrace. That is the best way for a man to live” as the Babylonian barmaid said to Gilgamesh.

If we show this painting to Claude Lévi-Strauss or to the whole *l’homme* of the modern world, what would the latter part of the epigram or the future of *le monde* be? Hoping for the best, let us work together for a perpetual human future. □



Figure 1. Kusumi Morikage, *Family enjoying the evening cool* (紙本淡彩納涼図 / 夕顔棚納涼図), Tokugawa period / 17th century, one two-fold screen, light colour on paper, 149.1x165.0 cm. National Treasure, Collection of Tokyo National Museum. (Image retrieved from Tokyo National Museum Digital Research Archives: <https://webarchives.tnm.jp>, accessed 2011-9-15)

About the Author



Professor Mitsuru Haga is a Professor of Tohoku University, Japan, and his fields of specialty are Ancient Greek and Roman, Ancient Central Eurasian Archaeology, as well as Higher Education Theory. Following the path of Alexander the Great, he has excavated a Greek-Kushan City in Uzbekistan and has been studying the transmission of iconography of Greek mythology towards the East, in which Buddhism played an important role. His present positions also include Vice-Chairperson, Memory of the World Committee for Asia and the Pacific Bureau, UNESCO and Vice-Chair/Bureau member, Japanese National Committee for UNESCO Memory of the World.

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