

Working Worlds in Neoliberal Japan: Precarity, Imagination, and the “Other-World” Trope

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This article explores images of work in postmillennial Japanese media culture, not for their representation of actual labor conditions but for their capacity to stimulate concepts of social belonging within neoliberalism. Though I examine of a variety of texts, my central object will be the trope of *isekai* 異世界, or “other-world,” a staple of anime, manga, and light novels that depicts a character’s transportation to a fantastical realm.¹ In contemporary usage the term *isekai* usually refers to a highly conventionalized subgenre of fantasy fiction, which I discuss in the latter part of the article. However, the speculative experience of the “other-world” trope appears in many other forms throughout the fictional ecology of anime and related media. We may distill from these multifarious *isekai* a particular imaginative situation: a newcomer’s subjective encounter with a strange world that builds toward a total picture of its environment. I hope to extract from

this fantasy a mediated process of “social imagination,” conceived as the “elementary capacity of evoking images” through which a society is instituted and transformed within the minds of those who live in it (Ricoeur 1986: 3; Castoriadis 1987: 127). This framework means to challenge the long-standing representationalist tendency within literary and cultural criticism, which assumes that the political work of fictional texts is to instructively represent real-world structures of oppression and resistance. I focus here on the application of Western precarity studies to Japan’s experience of socio-economic neoliberalization. Although such studies have broken new ground in documenting growing public consciousness of economic insecurity and social atomization, they tend to limit themselves to judgments of whether fictional texts reify or criticize neoliberal hegemony in Japan, based on an assumption that their representations of work are direct correlates of those activities in the actual world. Through this lens anime, manga, and indeed most popular media in Japan can offer only mild critiques, individualistic coping mechanisms, escapism, or at worst valorizations of neoliberal ideology. Attention to mediated processes of imagination shifts focus from the assumed reality behind a fiction to the productive value of fabulation itself in the struggle against the self-evidence of “neoliberal reason,” whose atomizing logic still dominates social landscapes both in and out of Japan (see Brown 2015).

My focus on fiction as a collective imaginative process aims for a multifaceted account of mediated sociality. Media images of social activities or relationships are simultaneously experiential and symbolic, simultaneously affective and discursive. Even the most didactic portrayal of a given social condition must first model a resonant experience of a world in which it occurs. Conversely, a seemingly escapist fantasy entails the modeling of a virtual, possible, or desired condition through recognizable feelings and perceptions. Overemphasis on critical and representational dimensions neglects the role of “integrative” imaginative responses to social problems. Whereas critical responses follow what autonomist theorist Maurizio Lazarato (2004) calls the “logic of contradiction, the political representation of an injustice,” integrative responses engage with dislocations like precarity by fabricating alternative experiences where crises are solved, limitations are

overcome, or wounds are healed. They contain oppositional productivity when their visions of the world “articulate new possibilities for living” (Lazarato 2004) beyond the alienating conditions that produce them, and when they affectively bind social images to concepts conducive to cooperative life.

My perhaps surprising reliance throughout the article on the autonomist school of Marxist thought (which advocates a “refusal of work”; see Weeks 2011) stems from autonomism’s ability to identify social promise within the seemingly inescapable conditions of advanced capitalism. However corrupted they may be, the productive social actions colloquially called “work” give visible form to individual and collective life, integrating human rhythms into larger scales of subjective relations that in turn help to perceive the ambiguous whole of society. Potential for popular rejection of neoliberal reason lies in moments when social imagination can utilize affectively charged images of work to give form to a virtual social without reproducing alienating conditions. Critical cultural studies should also attempt to track down these “specters of the common,” as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009: 153) have described the concepts of shared existence buried under capitalism’s relentless privatization of the social. In such efforts, flights of fancy can often outpace critical realism. This potentiality will orient my investigation into the mediated responses to postmillennial Japan’s specific experience of precarity, in particular the *isekai* trope. I highlight fictions that model experiences in an “other-world” via images of characters integrated through work into a visible social whole, satisfying a need to revitalize collective being against the breakdown of postwar social structures amid Japan’s neoliberal turn in the late 1990s and early aughts. The social potential of anime and manga’s *isekai* lies in their very detachment from realistic social representation. Investment in fictional universes gives them the freedom to play with the affective dimensions of social images, thereby generating autonomous visions that can escape the neoliberal traps of nostalgia, narcissism, and cynicism. The uses of the “other-world” trope, I argue, point us toward a raw process of imagistic and affective cognition that is nonetheless capable of producing concepts amenable to exodus from neoliberal reason.

Imaginative Complication: Precarity, Nostalgia, Exodus

In Anglophone contexts the term *precarity* is widely used to evoke the interacting socioeconomic and psychological effects of neoliberalism (Millar 2017: 2). It describes both the insecure conditions of post-Fordist capitalism (Neilson and Rossiter 2008) and the abstract sensations of vulnerability that they engender (Ettlinger 2007). Precarity is one of the semiconscious structures described by Lauren Berlant (2011: 18) as “post-Fordist affect,” or “the sensorium making its way through a postindustrial present.” Scholarship in English, exemplified by Anne Allison’s (2013) *Precarious Japan* and the essays in *Visions of Precarity in Japanese Popular Culture and Literature* (Iwata-Weickgenannt and Rosenbaum 2015), has deployed the concept to capture contemporary Japan’s experiences of job shortages, labor casualization, and seemingly endless natural and social crises in the decades following its economic decline in the early 1990s. Despite their inestimable successes, these studies’ preoccupying search for representations of a new class consciousness in Japanese culture leaves them with a narrow field of textual responses to precarious conditions. Allison’s ethnological work documents the country’s shift from postwar stability to postmillennial precarity, describing the breakdown of “a sense of the future” into an eternally anxious present. Life in precarious Japan begets an atomized and cynical “politics of survival” that erases the ability to imagine “living harmoniously with others” (Allison 2013: 83–84). Allison’s focus on the affective dimensions of socialization cogently diagnoses the ills of postmillennial Japan, and she rightly points to encouraging trends like antipoverty campaigns and cultures of volunteerism. In the realm of culture, however, she tends to downplay fiction as a productive force, dealing mostly with autobiographical works that serve as transparent documents of Japan’s dissolving social fabric (see esp. Allison 2013: 71–76, 108–12). Japan’s unique fictional media and related popular cultures are merely “commodified care” allowing temporary relief from neoliberal atomization while ultimately perpetuating its causes (99).

The essays in *Visions of Precarity in Japanese Literature and Culture* offer a variety of innovative textual readings, yet the contributions on popular fiction focus similarly on critical representations of precarious conditions. In

Roman Rosenbaum's (2015) analysis of the manga *Welcome to the NHK*, the reclusive *hikikomori* ひきこもり (shut-in) main character and his tribulations are posed as allegories of real-life youth employment problems. Maria Grajdian's (2015: 127) sophisticated elaboration of precarious subjectivity within Shinkai Makoto's cinematic anime still grounds analysis on Shinkai's "realistic, though mournful tableau of Japanese society nowadays" and ultimately concludes that Shinkai offers "no general solution." Christopher Perkins's narrative ideological analysis of the live-action television series *Part-Timer, Buy a House* (*Furītā, ie o kau*; Kōno and Jōno 2010) particularly exhibits the representationalist ethos. Perkins criticizes *Part-Timer*'s depiction of "freeters" フリーター (part-timers, or unaffiliated part-time or temporary laborers) for promoting a "new spirit of capitalism" that valorizes precarious labor as self-discovery and self-fulfillment. He argues that *Part-Timer* fails viewers by not enabling "critique of the structure of the social, political and economic processes they are embedded in" (Perkins 2015: 65). This disappointment in the object of study seems inescapable. Very few works of popular culture offer the kind of systemic mapping Perkins seeks. If critically exposing extant power relations is the only productive political role for fiction, then all that remains for popular culture studies of Japan or elsewhere is to further delineate how deeply immersed our pleasures are in the networks of late capitalism.

An opportunity emerges when we understand work images like those in *Part-Timer* as iterations of social imagination—that is, not as complete and purposeful representations of an objective condition but as flashes of coherence within the collective process of apprehending the totality of social life. Social imagination proceeds through tensions between a homeostatic drive toward coherent horizons and a transformative drive toward potential innovation (Castoriadis 1987: 127–31). In media-saturated societies, social imagination takes on a manifestly visual character as media images enact the collective negotiation of these drives into visible, experienceable forms (Orgad 2012: 47–49). Media images are sites of instantiation in a differential process by which an imagined social landscape is "both formed and forming, displaying both stability and creativity" (Lennon: 2015: 78).² A work image's organizational value therefore extends beyond the depicted action, giving "shape to the formless and duration to the transient" (Bauman 2000: 136–37). Relations between working subjects and assumed social totalities

help to constitute what Charles Taylor (2004: 23) calls the “social imaginary”: the shared background of “normative notions and images” undergirding social organization. Depictions of work in popular culture thus function not just as representations of actual labor relations but also as visual nodes binding together a virtual experience of the social world, acting as lynchpins for cohesive fantasies of imagined community. This certainly applies to postwar Japan, where work and its structures were continuously articulated as quasi-natural essences of national identity. While the ideological functions of figures like the male “salaryman” and the female “office lady” are obvious, they are more than simple obfuscations. Rather than comprising a single hegemonic reality, mediated work images feed into more or less captured imaginative processes, cleaving to normative “instituted” forms while also “instituting” incremental deviations (Castoriadis 1987: 131–32).

Japan’s swift and severe neoliberal turn—stagnation in the recessionary 1990s, casualization at the turn of the millennium—precipitated a crisis of its normative social imaginary. The postwar absence of strong welfare programs or independent unions meant that there were neither buffers to ease the transition nor institutional platforms from which to criticize it (Watanabe 2007: 327–28). Anxieties over changing economic structures therefore tended to enter public consciousness through sociocultural channels, mapping labor issues onto an image of the threatened nation as a whole. In particular, rising levels of nonstandard labor were problematized through the discourse of *wakamonoron* 若者論 (youth theory), which explains social change in terms of shifts in youth psychology (see Toivonen and Imoto 2012). Its now-famous categories of problematic youth—*hikikomori*, freeters, and NEETs (non-job seekers)—and their perceived rejection of adulthood were often cast as the primary destabilizing agents of theretofore stable social relations. Consequently, fantasies of social reintegration with the youth worker at the center became a salient conceit in popular narratives.

As iterations of social imagination, imaginative integrations have their own pitfalls, most commonly nostalgia. Invoking Lauren Berlant’s notion of “cruel optimism,” Allison’s (2013: 68–71) case studies show individuals compulsively striving for postwar images of prosperity and social belonging—a uniform school-career path, lifelong employment, home ownership, patriarchal family structure, and family-based welfare—even as the economic

means to realize them have all but disappeared. For Berlant (2011: 24–27) and Allison, cruel optimism is one of the definitive psychosocial modes of late capitalism, where honest pursuit of an outmoded sense of a “good life” becomes a self-destructive compulsion. While the drive to restabilize imagined horizons is not inherently reactionary, postmillennial Japanese fantasies tend to compulsively align themselves to the configurations of the postwar family-corporate system, exhibiting the same cruel optimism documented by Allison. This impulse is often visible in the topical nature of live-action television *dorama* ドラマ (serials). Gabriella Lukács (2010) explains how certain *dorama* genres in the post-Bubble era worked to renegotiate the national community along lines of affective consumption and individualistic work ethics. While presenting ostensibly contemporary portrayals of characters participating in a current social trend, *dorama* often remain audiovisually invested in stable postwar horizons.

Part-Timer, Buy a House (Kōno and Jōhō 2010), the series criticized by Perkins, is a clear example. It tells the story of Seiji, an indolent middle-class dropout who enters the part-time job market in order to buy a new house for his depressive mother. Seiji becomes a day laborer at a construction company, where he learns the value of pride in one’s work from his salt-of-the-earth coworkers before eventually being offered full salaried employment. While Perkins (2015: 74) notes that “some elements” of the postwar consensus remain in *Part-Timer*’s depiction of working life, I would go further and argue that the entire series is built to return working life to an older economic horizon. Perkins identifies how the nuclear family with the angelic mother at the center grounds the series’s supposedly contemporary depictions of changing conditions. The “normativity hangover” seen in the depiction of the family structure also permeates the depictions of work (Berlant 2011: 176–79). Played by pop idol Ninomiya Kazunari, Seiji—who at various points throughout the series occupies every “bad youth” category from *wakamonoron*—acts as a flexible marker of destabilization that we view from the macroscopic position of the imagined totality endangered by his presence. His vacillations and his final recuperation into full-time employment aim to smooth the instability back into the postwar imaginary. *Part-Timer* is less of a failed critical depiction of new labor conditions but the cruel integration of an outdated horizon.



Figure 1 The road scene in *Part-Timer, Buy a House*, 2010.

Part-Timer's reinstitution flows through multiple layers of work images and extends to the entire national imaginary. A key scene shows the work crew riding in a truck bed and looking back on the site where they have been building a road (fig. 1). Listening to the veteran workers extol the road's permanence and their satisfaction at making a lasting contribution to society, Seiji contemplates his own work ethic. While Perkins's (2015: 75–76) diagnosis of the scene as an elaboration of the series's neoliberal values engages with its discursive aspects, we should notice the older vision of social cohesion generated through its audiovisual techniques. The shot from the truck bed matches our line of sight to the workers' view of the road glowing in the morning light, making us share in their gaze onto the work that connects them spatially and temporally to the rest of the country. While the workers' conversation conceivably connotes a neoliberal work ideology, on these imagistic levels the scene seems unaware that the neoliberal economy even exists. The road, meant to imbue their work with holistic meaning and provide "a key to the future" (75–76), is an example of the redundant construction projects scarring the Japanese landscape with endless reapplications of developmentalist policies. Precarious work, which in *Part-Timer*'s 2010 was already characterized by a digital and service "cultural capitalism," is here brought back into the fold of spatially conceived development and national unification (Sugimoto 2010). With Seiji's return to full-time employment at the series's end, the image of work is returned to its "proper" place. *Part-Timer* and similar *dorama* fall victim to a kind of perceptual repetition that

traps the process of reimagining collectivity in the neoliberal context. These visions of renewed socioeconomic relations both inherit and produce the cognitive inability of postmillennial Japanese society to unfix itself from the stable hierarchies of the postwar era.

It is true that most reimaginings of work in popular media serve to accommodate subjects to the new socioeconomic demands of capital, as Lukács and Perkins insist. However, a lasting insight of autonomist thought is that social production continuously precedes and exceeds its subsumption into capitalist incentives; its human energies, therefore, are only externally and tentatively organized by capital (see Lazzarato 1996: 143; Hardt and Negri 2009: 137–42). This, I suggest, includes the mediated process of social imagination. We should not dismiss media fantasies as uncritical escape, nor positive representations of working life as ideological capitulation. While entangled in compulsions like cruel optimism or the cynical “politics of survival,” social images contain the imaginative seeds of new collectivity buried in late capitalism’s empire of the private. The ever-radical Hardt and Negri (2009: 164–65) even acknowledge that “the family, the corporation, and the nation do engage and mobilize the common, even if in corrupted form, and thereby provide important resources for the exodus of the multitude.” The political work of contemporary fiction should include its potential to simulate collectivity beyond both neoliberal atomism and attachment to past social systems. This is the power of fantastical “other-worlds” like anime and manga *isekai*.

Anime, manga, and other Japanese media related to the so-called otaku subculture are productive precisely in their lack of investment in real conditions. Ōtsuka Eiji (2003: 186–90) has explained that the production of fictional worlds and situations constitutes primary organizational forces in otaku fictions, often eclipsing narrative altogether. Differentiating them from allegorical genres like science fiction, Azuma Hiroki (2007: 64) theorizes that these fictions participate in a shared “environment of imagination” (*sōzōryoku no kankyō* 想像力の環境) defined by genres of feeling enacted through mutually referential networks of tropes. Attaching fictional world-building to subjective vision, their audiovisual techniques fabricate affect-oriented virtual experiences within an environment of transmedia images. The *isekai* conceit is an exemplary product of this environment. Inheriting

elements from role-playing games and fantasy fiction, the classical *isekai* enacts a fantasy of self-reinvention: an unremarkable protagonist is mysteriously transported to a magical world and finds herself/himself imbued with supernatural abilities and embroiled in a grandiose conflict. The well-trod tropes of the fantasy world form an intense background for the adolescent characters as they make choices and attempt to understand their new place. The *isekai* conceit can be seen as a microcosm for the otaku environment of imagination itself, a hyperreal “other-world” of nonreferential horizons to reorient and magnify the feelings of social life. This informs my expansion of the term beyond the standard genre conventions; *isekai* is a method of resituating experience through shared techniques of imagination. I contend that this kind of imaginative pleasure, too easily dismissed as escapism, is a potent source of social thinking. Whereas *dorama* like *Part-Timer*, *Buy a House* are produced and consumed with ultimate reference to the imagined community of Japan, these fictions aim for the fan’s immersion in the imaginative environment as a self-sufficient horizon.³ While limiting certain kinds of critical representation, they enable a wide range of imaginative integrations. Critical and integrative modes are not mutually exclusive, as will we see in the next section. However, the latter need not follow from the former to qualify as an engagement with neoliberalism. Indeed, imaginative integration as an independent mode of social thinking can avoid the impasses met by critical representations.

Transformative potential resides in the moments when constructive play within an imaginative environment freely assembles “real” social images such as those of work. Amano Kozue’s (2002, 2003–8) *ARIA* manga series offers a particularly pure example of how the fanciful constructivity of anime and manga can isolate the wholesome feelings of working life from out of their real-world institutional contexts.⁴ In a representative scene, apprentice gondolier Mizunashi Akari pilots her gondola through canals on the outskirts of Neo Venezia, a fantasy Venice located on a terraformed future Mars. Akari is a newcomer to this world, an immigrant from “Man-Home,” or Earth. *ARIA* is not strictly in the *isekai* genre, since Akari simply immigrates there, although her flight is whimsically depicted as a magical descent. It nonetheless draws on an *isekai*-style subject-world relation organized through scenes of work. The reader discovers this new world



Figure 2 Akari navigates a waterway in the ARIA manga series. ©KOZUE AMANO/MAG Garden 2002.

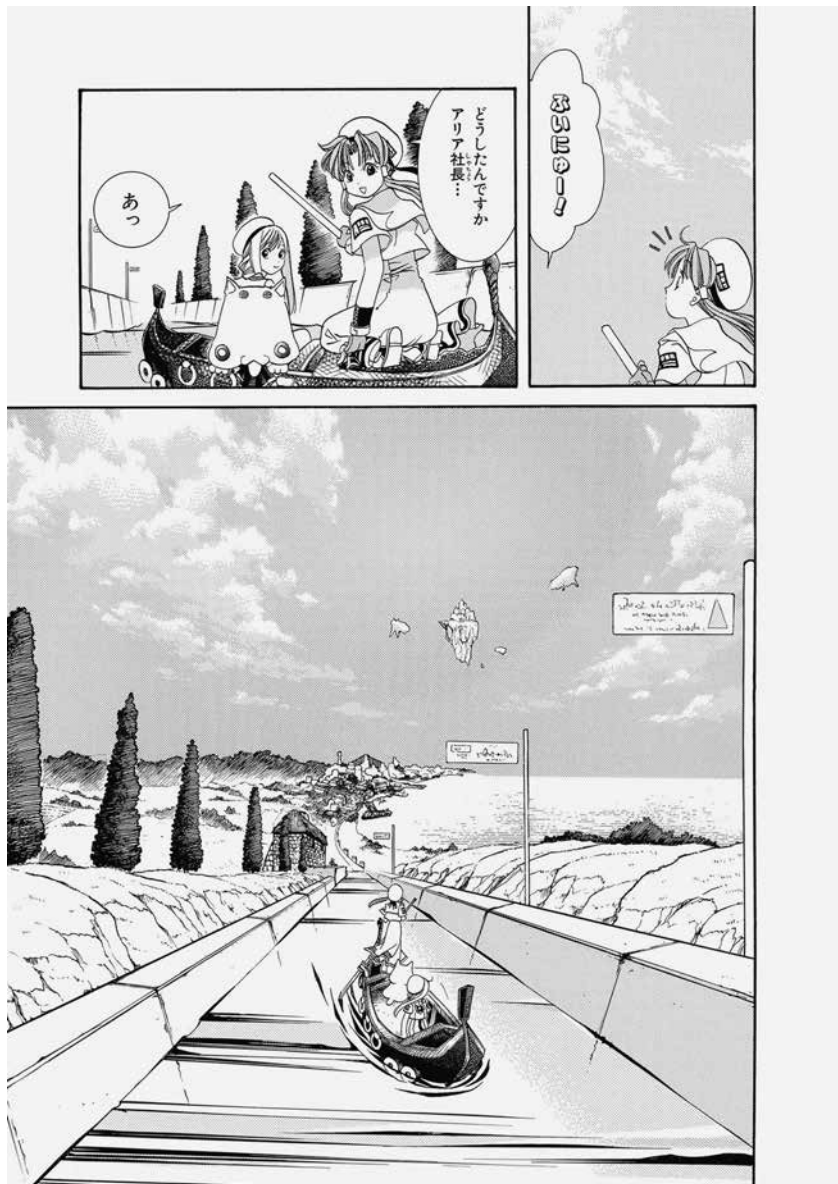


Figure 3 Holistic belonging in the ARIA manga series. ©KOZUE AMANO/MAG Garden 2002.

alongside Akari; its interrelating structures are manifested through her daily experiences. In this scene, manga panels bring the reader in close to Akari's facial expressions and bodily movements, shifting through moments of concentration and satisfaction as she navigates a difficult waterway for the first time (fig. 2). Successions of intimate scenes are interspersed with views of the hybrid landscape; the picturesque foreignness (to Japanese readers) of the European-inspired countryside lies beneath the futuristic marvels of interstellar ships and islands floating in the sky (fig. 3). The different textual pleasures build moments of work into a comforting sensation of social belonging, with its subject integrated into a manifestly visible social totality. *ARIA* began serialization in early in the first decade of the 2000s, a period that marked Japan's entrance into precarious life via the structural violence of the Koizumi government's neoliberal reforms and their accompanying *jikōsekin* 自己責任 (self-responsibility) logic of risk privatization and victim blaming (Hook and Takeda 2007). This was also the period when the social effects of the mass casualization of labor brought on by deregulation began to manifest themselves (Miyamoto 2011). *ARIA*'s effacement of these conditions for an innocent celebration of working life might seem equivalent to the integrative fantasy we saw in *Part-Timer*. Indeed, they are trying to produce the same thing: a holistic reintegration of individual work into the social totality. But unlike *Part-Timer*, *ARIA*'s totality is assembled within the pleasurable flux of a fantasized "other-world."

ARIA is uniquely productive in its radical mixture of genres of otaku fiction. Most importantly, it synthesizes the *isekai*'s spatial unfolding with the temporal rhythms of another subgenre called *nichijō-kei* 日常系 (everyday style). *Nichijō-kei* eschews narrative development almost completely, focusing instead on the daily lives of a group of characters. Readers/viewers simply experience being together with the characters in a vicarious pattern of life. In the scene above, *ARIA* combines the intimacy produced by the intense focus on the character in *nichijō-kei* with the sense of wonder and discovery in the *isekai*. Akari muses at one point that she feels she has "discovered" the rhythms of Neo Venezia. Her individual rhythms through the streets and canals flow into those of the city; manga paneling enables the juxtaposition of scenes, perspectives, and emotional registers frozen in motion, generating the intimate pleasure of the character's lifeworld, while



Figure 4 A panorama of Neo Venezia in *ARIA*. ©KOZUE AMANO/MAG Garden 2005.

images of characters superimposed on spectacular backgrounds stimulates an identification of the individual with larger scales of belonging (fig. 4). Through her work she discovers her new home's natural and human environment while bonding with other characters whose different occupations allow the hybrid city to function. *ARIA*'s visual rhythms produce a distilled experience of social being where work effortlessly gives form and duration to life, weaving individual and collective rhythms into an integrated whole.

Akari's journey from Earth to Neo Venezia is an imagined recovery of a lost holism, but not the nostalgic totality assumed by *Part-Timer*'s vision of belonging. The cityscapes of Neo Venezia, with the reconstructed Saint Mark's Square standing under manmade floating islands, are visible expressions of *ARIA*'s ludic drive to synthesize an authentic social experience by reassembling past and future, native and foreign. Akari meanders through spaces reminiscent of old Japan, European history and folklore, futuristic industrial structures, and nonreferential pockets of cat-filled dream-spaces.



Figure 5 Work dissolves into care in *ARIA*. ©KOZUE AMANO/MAG Garden 2003.

ARIA thus constructs an amalgam of experiences to satisfy the emotional needs denied by Japan's increasingly atomized society without relying on the reality configurations plaguing its national imaginary. Most fruitful is the way *ARIA*'s narrative slowness gives labor a subsidiary role within social experience. Its leisurely pace unyokes Akari's work from a profit motive and ties it to the movement of the season, her moods, and the needs of those around her. She switches between working, discovery, and bonding depending on whom she meets and where she finds herself, abruptly deciding that exploring a new district or attending to a friend counts as job training. In one evocative scene, she and her partner restructure their gondola route so that they can convince a stoic rival trainee to open up to them (fig. 5). The scene's climax dissolves markers of competition and affiliation within a swirl of natural beauty, surrounding the characters in their moment of mutual recognition as equal subjects sharing the same world.

The contrast between neoliberalism's frenzied blend of work and life

and Akari's self-managed pace mirrors another crux identified by the autonomists: that the difference between exploitative affective labor and autonomous social production rests on who or what governs the rhythms of work and life (see Berardi 2009: 68–69). Underlying Akari's control of her rhythms is the unstated fact that she owns her own labor. The Aria Company to which she belongs operates as a small self-managing enterprise, with an alien cat “president” serving only a symbolic role. This ingenuous erasure opens up the free play of social imagination to enact a textual form of what autonomists call *exodus*: a removal from the capitalist context of that which is empathetic, cooperative, and collective in social production (see Virno 1996a, 1996b). Writing after the financial crash of 2008, Franco Berardi (2009: 213) speculates on the means by which “social tasks that can no longer be conceived as a part of the economy. . . once again become forms of life.” He foresees that “in the days to come, politics and therapy will be one and the same. . . . Our task will be the creation of social zones of human resistance. . . . Capitalism will not disappear from the global landscape, but it will lose its pervasive, paradigmatic role. . . . It will become one possible form of social organization” (220). Berardi is imagining his own integration here. The “therapy” of caring for others constitutes the central task of the new world. Simple human actions create new zones that expand outward to form the hybrid composition of the socioeconomic world as a visible totality. *ARIA* envisions a similar world, where work as profitable labor occupies a smaller portion of social life alongside “extra-economic networks” of mutual support. In her contemporary application of autonomist thought, Kathi Weeks (2011: 229–31) encourages the development of “postwork imaginaries” wherein social production is conceived outside of wage-labor relations. *ARIA*'s world produces one of the closer approximations of a postwork imaginary that Japan's popular culture is capable of giving.

ARIA demonstrates the multiple pathways of mediated social imagination in times of socioeconomic change. Imagining its solution to the work-based crisis of the social imaginary on an intuitive-affective level, it produces an integrative fantasy that maps onto the search for a postcapitalist common without the realist impetus for social critique. Without politicizing values of interdependence and control over work rhythms, it emotionally binds the reader to them by modeling a subjective experiential world, making us

feel their necessity in imagining the social and thus providing a potential referent for what Weeks (2011: 175–77) calls a “utopian demand.” However, *ARIA* is an early product of Japanese neoliberalism; its imaginative exodus will become more difficult to achieve after precarity becomes a preoccupying experience in Japan’s national imaginary. Once established as a normative image, precarity tends to infect any depiction of social being, creating an unfavorable environment for the imagination of non-nostalgic collectivity.

Precarious Impasses and the Mediated Social

In Kurosawa Kiyoshi’s (2008) film *Tokyo Sonata*, the recently downsized manager Ryūhei comes to inhabit a very different Tokyo than he had previously known. Cast out from the clean and bustling office of his old job, he wanders through trash-strewn alleys, waits in labyrinthine lines along grimy stairways to apply for temporary jobs, and eats charity lunches in weedy lots. Ryūhei’s change in labor status precipitates an environmental transformation of his experience. He nonetheless refuses to accept his new situation and compulsively repeats his old rhythms. Hiding his dismissal from his family, he makes a daily show of putting on a suit and leaving for a nonexistent office while trying with increasing franticness to maintain paternal authority over his sons. As Ritu Vij (2015: 180) elaborates, *Tokyo Sonata*’s spatial elaboration of Ryūhei’s “pathological desire for security” and the damage it does to his family sensualizes the knowledge that the old society is gone. Postmillennial Japan has become a more savage world in which the subject cannot survive without its own transformation. The film’s depiction of economic instability marks a moment in late 2000 to 2010 when precarity was forming into a salient structure within the national imaginary.

As neoliberalization progressed under the Koizumi government, *waka-monoron*-inspired youth-bashing gave way to structural concepts such as the *fuan shakai* 不安社会 (insecure society; see Genda 2005) and *kakusa shakai* 格差社会 (unequal society; see Yamada 2004). Widely viewed media events helped shape a macroscopic vision of national precarity. The NHK documentary *Working Poor* (Kamada 2006) and the high-profile New Year’s Temp Village, organized to care for downsized contract workers following the global financial crash in 2008, both helped to “make poverty visible” to

the nation (Yuasa 2012: 93). Of darker significance was the infamous Akihabara Massacre of June 8, 2008, when a twenty-five-year-old temp laborer killed or wounded seventeen people in Tokyo's Akihabara district. The deepening crisis of work was often processed through images of destabilizing transference, wherein a previously stable subject, youth or otherwise, is posed as the victim of a sudden dislocation to a precarious lifeworld. Invoked in a wide variety of media, the image reflected how shifting economic relations had disrupted cultural patterns organized around guaranteed employment and uniform career paths, forcing people to radically alter their life scripts. In the *Working Poor* documentary, for example, painful montages of photos from interviewees' earlier lives mark them as victims of unexpected falls into theretofore unthinkable poverty. Especially for young adults, institutional networks of support meant to guide individuals through public education into occupation-based "social locations" no longer functioned (Brinton 2011). In his widely read *Society of Unequal Hope* (*Kibō kakusa shakai*), sociologist Yamada Masahiro (2004: 121–22) attempts to capture the strangeness of the conditions in which young Japanese found themselves via an image of "prismatic refraction" (*purizumu henkutsu* プリズム偏屈). The entrance into adult life, Yamada imagines, entails a deflection through strange economic pathways into unknown social locations. *Tokyo Sonata* also relies on the refraction image, in that Ryūhei's dismissal throws him into a new and inhospitable environment of locations and activities. As we will see, anime and related fictions in the 2010s will literalize the image via the fantastic trope of the *isekai*.

While *Tokyo Sonata* presents an unsparing critique of the new Japan, other media fictions served a process of accommodation, providing simulations of how to work and survive in the new liquidized society. In addition to the *dorama* described by Lukács, some pop-art films during the period focused on the freeter as the source of an energetic new worldview. Unfettered by the strictures that come with a stable social location, the young part-timer in these fictions embarks on a journey that unfolds the totality of Japanese society in a novel and invigorating way. Tanada Yuki's (2008) *One-Million Yen Girl* (*Hyakuman-en to nigamushi onna*) is interestingly similar to *ARIA* in the way it meticulously weaves a holistic subject-world relation from stylized images of the protagonist's peculiar work rhythms. Her career prospects destroyed by



Figure 6 Suzuko placed in a new location in *One-Million-Yen Girl*, 2008.

a criminal conviction, young freeter Suzuko moves around Japan, working a temporary job at each place until she earns 1 million yen, at which point she departs for another location. Elegant camerawork actualizes Suzuko's experience inside a lush cycle of work and movement. Travel scenes show her on solitary bus rides through flows of landscape as voice-over narration provides philosophical pathos. The camera then establishes her picturesquely in the new setting, after which she moves into her new temporary rhythm of work and life (fig. 6). Yet Suzuko's freedom parasites the same expired unity as *Part-Timer*, *Buy a House*. Her rhythms gain their sense of beauty and belonging by assembling established Japanese filmic archetypes—idyllic rural towns, lovable locals, conventionalized coming-of-age scenes—as eternal harbors for the casualized worker. In the end, her liberty to discover newness simply unveils once more the fantasy of an unchanged Japan. *Tokyo Sonata* does not fare much better. It invests its energy in critique and is manifestly successful in destroying the cruel optimism embodied by its main character. But precisely because of this investment it must end with the “impasse” that comes after the worldview's destruction (Berlant 2011: 221–22). While Vij (2015: 183) sees potential in Ryūhei's ultimate acceptance of his situation, in terms of the wider social landscape the final scene at his son's piano recital

enacts an acquiescence. For Ryūhei's worldview, the solution is to carry on, albeit without illusions, and trust in the next generation. This imaginative impasse is a key component of what Mark Fisher (2009: 20–21) describes as “capitalist realism,” a “reflexive impotence” that reproduces the neoliberal horizon through the very act of properly recognizing it. Widely imposed social precarity creates a predicament for social imagination. Rejection of its atomism in search of holism risks the traps of stagnant nostalgia and cruel optimism. Rejection of its insecurity in search of agency risks devolving into narcissistic individualism or defeated fatalism. The lack of solutions should be seen not as shortcomings of individual works but as evidence of neoliberalism's dissolution of the social.

Since the 2010s “*isekai*” has come to refer almost exclusively to the huge output of fictions featuring a male gamer, usually marked as a *hikikomori* or other social outcast, who finds himself transported to a world resembling that of an online role-playing game. Born out of fantasy tropes' subsumption into online gaming culture, their standardized narratives enact a self-reinvention fantasy in which the socially awkward youth enters a world where knowledge of games becomes the key to survival in it. Like many anime genres, they feed teenage male heterosexuality, with the male lead surrounded by attractive female characters. Since the subgenre emanates from anime-oriented *raito noberu* ライトノベル (light novels), anime versions replicate in voice-overs and comedic timing the novels' characteristic *bocchi* ぼっち (loner) narrative voice, where plot events are ironically commented on by the cynical yet vulnerable main character/narrator. The resulting complex of anxiety and desire is well calibrated to dramatize the experiences of nonelite youth facing the countless microcompetitions that have come to characterize adult life after the normalization of nonstandard labor. Consequently, many works in the subgenre critically map the image of precarious transference onto the trope of the *isekai*, figuring the casualized workforce as an entry into an unknown world.

The fantasy realms of these “precarious *isekai*” bear visible marks of a flexible economy—want ads, contracts, work scarcity, and homelessness. More importantly, their narratives pose the *isekai* adventurer as a marginal worker forced into risky labor for uncertain economic gain. A sequence from *Grimgar: Ash and Illusions* (*Hai to Gensō no Gurimgaru*; Nakamura 2015), for



Figure 7 The dangerous work of new arrivals to the *isekai* in *Grimgar*, 2015.

example, shows the protagonists, a group of new arrivals to the *isekai*, attempting to kill a goblin as part of their work (fig. 7). The fight scene is simultaneously intense and pitiful; gravity-conscious animation captures the desperation in their frantic unskilled movements. After the gory killing scene, the episode returns from commercial to a close-up of the small sum earned from the job, followed by the party disbanding for the day after exchanging a tired “again tomorrow.” The sequence condenses the party’s repeated actions on the margins of survival, organized by the pivotal symbol of exchange. *Konosuba: God’s Blessing on this Wonderful World!* (*Kono subarashī sekai ni shukufuki o!*; Kanasaki 2016–17) depicts the humorous misadventures of a *hikikomori* named Kazuma. Reincarnated in a gamelike *isekai*, Kazuma is forced to accept humiliating and dangerous quests with his similarly pathetic comrades. *Konosuba* imagines alienation in the precarious world through absurdist humor and schizophrenic rhythmic fluctuations. In the first episode, for example, Kazuma’s first foray into the *isekai* job market moves through a montage of work rhythms framed as fulfilling and meaningful but that the viewer easily recognizes as the hand-to-mouth life of a precarious laborer (fig. 8). The montage romanticizes the minutest movements—



Figure 8 Day labor in *Konosuba*, 2016.

a stream of drunken vomit takes the form of a rainbow—before ending with Kazuma awakening on his bed of straw in a squalid stable to scream, “This is wrong!” The romantic image of a holistic social place appears as a kind of erroneous brain state, belied by harsh realities and constituting an object of ridicule. *Grimgar* and *Konosuba* thus resemble *Tokyo Sonata* in eviscerating cruel optimism and providing a critical imaginative mapping of neoliberal life as unsafe, absurd, and harmful.

As in *Tokyo Sonata*, however, the investment in criticality means that even the transformative realm of the *isekai* becomes a platform to enact capitalist realism. By writing neoliberal conditions into the physical structure of the world and alienated distance into the subjective worldview, precarious *isekai* fall prey to the atomized individualism so amenable to neoliberal hegemony. As a relatively serious sample of the subgenre, *Grimgar* manifests its alienation in moments of elegiac meditation, with traumatized characters framed against impressionist backgrounds of vaguely European towns blending into the surrounding landscape (fig. 9). The violence of their socioeconomic condition is inextricable from the beauty of the environment, which feeds the story’s themes of finding a livelihood and companionship in a harsh world.



Figure 9 The impressionistic landscape in *Grimgar*, 2015.

While a touch of the common is present in the way that the new arrivals survive by depending on each other, their makeshift family simply replicates privatized modes of care. We cannot see, as we can in *ARIA*, any traces of what Weeks (2011: 176) calls the utopian demand for “a more substantial transformation of the present configuration of social relations.” *Konosuba*’s protagonists comically repeat cycles of boom and bust as the money gained from completing quests is inevitably lost, forcing them back to the “quest board” to survey the unattractive options (fig. 10). In addition, the focus on neoliberal alienation sometimes causes the subgenre’s orientation toward heterosexual male desire to slide into outright sexism. *Rising of the Shield Hero* (*Tate yūsha no nariagari*; Abo 2019), for instance, begins with the protagonist’s ostracization from the *isekai* society due to a false rape charge. It exemplifies the gender envy of destabilized male workers that Ueno Chizuko (2013: 25) argues has reinforced Japanese neoliberalism’s divisive regimes of production and domination. These precarious *isekai* fictions bypass cruel optimism only to remain trapped in the cynicism generated by their very critical topicality, thereby negating the *isekai*’s transformative power as a constructible world.



Figure 10 Kazuma and his companions look for jobs in *Konosuba*, 2016.

Log Horizon (*Rogu horaizon*; Ishihira 2013–15), one of the earlier examples of precarious *isekai* fiction and arguably one of the most innovative, makes better use of the precarious *isekai* as a space to imagine a reintegrated world within conditions of neoliberal atomism. The story follows Shiroe, one of thirty thousand Japanese gamers who suddenly find themselves in the world of the fantasy role-playing game *Elder Tale*, inheriting the appearance and powers of the characters they play in the game. *Log Horizon's* *isekai* is manifestly neoliberal. Not only are the competitive impetuses of gaming—leveling, bonuses, player-killing, and so on—physicalized in this *isekai* as economic activities, every building and plot of ground “is an object for sale.” While they are effectively immortal, the absence of any visible purpose beyond the transactions of daily life breeds anomie among the stranded players. Like the actual precarious Japan, the adventurers’ labor is dislocated from meaningful social locations and incapable of structuring a visualization of the whole. Some players numbly perform quests to pay for daily expenses, while others descend into robbing, kidnapping, or forcing younger players into sweatshop-style labor.



Figure 11 The strategic view of gamer imagination in *Log Horizon*, 2013.

In developing this critical representation *Log Horizon* remains faithful to its environment of imagination, systematically unfolding the *isekai* as a game world and adhering closely to the images and processes of role-playing games. It also makes pivotal use of what we might call a “gamer imagination.” Building on Azuma’s theories, Selen Çalik Bedir (2020) uses works like *Grimgar* to describe how “gamelikeness” and its features of repeatable and looping narratives have come to function as base referents for a wide variety of fiction. In visual forms, the obvious visual cues of game perspective, where the field of vision is augmented with data menus (fig. 11), mark out and stimulate an instrumentalist worldview that seeks to strategically systemize one’s field of action. Multiple scenes show Shiroe cataloging and testing *isekai* phenomena using the augmented reality display. Such an orientation can easily legitimize what Paulo Virno (1996a: 13) calls “sentiments of disenchantment”—the opportunism, fear, and cynicism engendered by post-Fordist processes. Indeed, as Kazuma’s eventual successes in *Konosuba* exemplify, many texts in the subgenre effectively utilize game references as tutorials for competitive neoliberal thinking. However, as Virno theorizes, these negative emotions are

simply the capitalist distortion of a cognitive “degree zero”: our intuition that in postindustrial society “our relation to the world tends to articulate itself through possibilities . . . instead of according to linear and univocal directions” (23). Properly reoriented, this degree zero can stimulate a drive toward common production instead of neoliberal atomization. *Log Horizon*’s gamer imagination perceives a split between the pleasures and goals given by the game system and those specific to the agency of the individual gamer, who may manipulate the rules of the system to achieve a desired effect. The result is a subjective orientation in which the totality reveals itself as an *artificial* system, comprehensible and malleable to human effort.

The systemic rules of *Log Horizon*’s *isekai* are defined by logics of self-interest and competition that most adventurers simply accept, thereby devolving into either the liquid malaise of precarious subjectivity or savage forms of exploitation. Shiroe instead manipulates these parameters in the service of a plan to institute a cooperative society among the dissolute players. Initially a typical alienated *bocchi*, Shiroe slowly develops a sense of agency by “creating a place for others,” as he puts it. *Log Horizon*’s achievement is to enact his drive toward a new collective through multiple imaginative techniques: the gratifications of experiential viscosity, the strategic mapping of space, and the critical correlation with actual socioeconomic conditions. As Shiroe’s game imagination learns to influence the *isekai*’s laws and other players’ behavior, he regularly encounters panoramic moments of the fantastic landscape, including the titular “log horizon” he and his companions discover (fig. 12). Like in *ARIA*, these moments of shared pathos stimulate both emotional identification with the totality and intimacy with those sharing in it, providing a kind of affective guide for Shiroe as he proceeds to visualize the plan that will become “his work”: the collectivizing labor that slowly positions his own existence within a widening network of cooperation. While still somewhat limited, in *Log Horizon* the female characters’ roles in the coalition leads to more detailed depictions of their skills and motivations. It is not that *Log Horizon* is more consciously progressive than other *isekai* texts; rather, it opens onto recognitions of others’ agencies and identities simply by striving toward its new collective. The story arc culminates with Shiroe’s coalition manipulating the self-interested leaders of major guilds into forming into a roundtable government that will protect



Figure 12 Affective experience of expansive vision in *Log Horizon*, 2013.

weaker players and the *isekai*'s native population against exploitation. Neoliberal reason reduces the social world to economic parameters operating outside of human intention. In resisting the self-evidence of these parameters, the coalition's move to institute order touches, consciously or not, on the will to autonomy and the recovery of "bare democracy" (Brown 2015: 201).

Through alternating textures of strategy and affect, *Log Horizon* produces an imaginative integration that neither clings to the assumed collectivity of the postwar era nor embraces neoliberal cynicism nor contents itself with a personal journey through an immobile totality. Its promiscuous deployment of mediated visualities forces collective social being into view from out of the opacity of the precarious environment. Unlike *ARIA*'s innocent imagining of a leisurely and liberated lifeworld, *Log Horizon* internalizes precarious conditions and the difficulty of visualizing the social within them. Whereas *ARIA* weaves its totality organically from the subject's simple work rhythms, *Log Horizon* begins from the strategic necessity of first visualizing the existing totality in its inadequacy, then the means by which a new totality might be instituted. The work of reorienting the totality situates the subject in that very process. Shiroe's revolution is therefore

interesting less as an analogue of a particular utopian demand than as a methodology for social imagination in media-saturated societies. Its game-based *isekai* fantasizes a world in which media imaging techniques can be mapped onto the social world, generating models of action and communication that can question an existing order while also producing a new one. It therefore suggests to the ranks of alienated gamers that their reclusive play in fact contains the very cognitive faculties that might allow them not only to survive in the world but to change it.

Social Imagination and Cultural Criticism

Precarious social conditions certainly exist, as do the exploitative structures that generate them. These must be identified and criticized. But it is also important to consider what desires or visions are catalyzed when precarity interacts with ideal images of society and the mediated imaginative processes that produce them. Japan's case draws attention to the fact that the spread of socioeconomic precarity necessitates fundamental reformulations of the concept of the social itself. Its particular investment in the image of work rendered the neoliberal turn into a crisis of its entire social imaginary. The *isekai* trope enables an imaginative response to this experience, forming a base environment in which to reposition individual work against a desired whole. Like the vast majority of imaginative practices in the world, these fictions of "other-worlds" operate through desires—physical, emotional, social—producing pleasures within the confines they have been given. But their social visions produce more than they intend to. *ARIA*'s free-flowing rhythms of work, care, discovery, and leisure experientially conceive the possibility of an economic world organized according to the postwork values of slow life, while *Log Horizon*'s mediated visualities of strategy and empathy provide hints toward the self-institution of society (Castoriadis 1987: 125). The social imagination in these fictions implicitly understands the imagined community as a terrain in question, malleable to the motions of fabulation. Their cognitive work through other-worlds offers an example of imaginative activity responding productively to socioeconomic change and quietly questioning the inevitability of the neoliberalized world.

Of course, the question of politicization remains. Constructions like

the *isekai* are raw forms of social cognition; the transformative potential of their imagined worlds is likely sensed rather than understood within most people's viewing experiences. But this is where criticism comes in. Rather than ignoring or condemning ostensibly escapist media forms, literary and cultural criticism should strive to uncover, explicate, and nurture the productive speculations within them. What fails as critical representation may succeed as imaginative integration. As the liquid processes of global capitalism continue to erode the old edifices of social belonging and the basic possibility of the social becomes a fundamental question for the future, it seems ever more pressing to gain a reflexive understanding of these raw modes of imagining collectivity and set them in dialogue with critical projects aimed at resisting imposed precarity and the inequalities that cause it. Deeply embedded as their current forms may be within the monetary flows of communicative capitalism, media fictions constitute an informative and emotional source of the common, and therefore must be seen as indicators of the continued potential for a human social existence, either within capitalism or beyond it.

Notes

- 1 All English translations of Japanese text are my own.
- 2 Paul Ricoeur (1986: 265–66) calls these two functions “ideology” and “utopia”; Cornelius Castoriadis (1987: 108) calls them the “instituted society” and “instituting society.” For a comparison of this view of imagination and the Lacanian conception of the imaginary, see Lennon 2015: 53–55.
- 3 For a concise English explanation of this kind of fictional realism, see Steinberg 2014.
- 4 Amano's manga series began serialization in 2002 within a minor imprint under the title *AQUA*. In 2003, the series switched to a new imprint and began using the title *ARIA*, under which it continued for most of its serialization and gained its large-scale popularity.

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