Article:
Coates, J. (2025) Hamaguchi Ryūsuke's Evil Does Not Exist as degrowth parable. positions: asia critique, 34 (1). 12157504. ISSN: 1067-9847

https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-12157504

Hamaguchi Ryūsuke's *Evil Does Not Exist* as Degrowth Parable

Hamaguchi Ryūsuke's *Evil Does Not Exist* (*Aku wa sonzai shinai*, 2023) is perhaps the most enigmatic film of the director's career to date. Reviewers, journalists, and interviewers wrestle with the film's confounding ending, which leaves audiences asking "What did I just see?" (Jacobson 2024: 18). Nonetheless, the film has made an impact both at home and overseas, winning prizes at film festivals from London to Kerala. It is clear that *Evil Does Not Exist* is saying something important, but what? Hamaguchi's signature refusal of easy political readings of his work necessitates new approaches to understanding this elusive film. This article proposes reading *Evil Does Not Exist* as a parable, which can provoke thoughtful consideration of ethical and moral issues through "an aesthetic form of indirection" (Mayward 2020: 285). By reading Hamaguchi's film alongside the work of philosopher Saitō Kōhei, I employ the form of the parable itself as a research method by placing two texts alongside one another, each informing our reading of the other. Saitō's popular manifesto in support of degrowth, and the academic work underpinning it, offers a way into Hamaguchi's film, while also demonstrating how cinema can engage and persuade audiences as an indirect yet evocative mode of communicating complex problems.

At first glance, the film's provocative title may seem to offer a statement about its meaning, but Hamaguchi prefers to frame the choice as more subtle provocation:

> Simply put, while I was doing field research for the script, these words just came out of me as I was looking at the natural landscape and thinking about nature. I think that's something other people can probably relate to — when you look out

> at nature, this idea that evil does not exist. But that doesn't mean that this is the message of the film in its entirety at all. (Hamaguchi quoted in Brzeski 2024)

When the film was first shown at the 80th Venice International Film Festival in September 2023, "Evil Does Exist" (*il male esiste*) appeared in blue letters against a black background in the title frame before "Not" (*non*) arrived in red lettering a second later, reversing the initial meaning. This suggests that both claims, and at the same time neither, are true to the world of the film. Yet every critical review of *Evil Does Not Exist* and interview with Hamaguchi attempts to search for evidence within the film and the director's world view that demonstrates the existence, or otherwise, of evil (Koyanagi 2024). This article proposes an alternate mode of understanding what the film tells us about human-nature relationships by reading *Evil Does Not Exist* as a parable, a simple story used to explore a moral or ethical problem. Hamaguchi's simple story resonates with contemporary environmental concerns, such as debates about ethical modes of using and sharing natural resources, often framed in reference to the concept of the "commons." Reestablishing an idea of the commons in contemporary Japan is core to Saitō's popular case for a transition to degrowth-friendly ways of living. By paying close attention to how the natural environment and relationships between humans and nature are depicted, this article offers a mode of understanding *Evil Does Not Exist* as an audio-visual staging of a contemporary moral problem that invites extended mediation on an urgent issue with no easy answers – how to live in the Anthropocene.

Parable as Method

Media historian Brian R. Jacobson characterizes *Evil Does Not Exist* as "a familiar environmental parable… a perceptual and ethical training exercise, executed through film

form and designed to deliver a message about the generational effects of environment-shaping actions" (2024: 18). Yet the cryptic ending appears to resist Jacobson's description of a film "designed to deliver a message." *Evil Does Not Exist* seems to evoke rather than deliver its meanings, suggesting that this is a different kind of film parable than the didactic mode most commonly recognized. Recent scholarship on film and theology has been working with a broader range of definitions of the parable form, from the didactic to the illustrative, indicative, or revelatory. These distinctions are often not clearly observed in film analysis, as theologian and film scholar Joel Mayward argues (2020: 284). Originating from the Greek *parabolē*, "parable" combines *para*, meaning "alongside" and *bolē*, "a throw." Mayward notes that while "a *parabolē* is a throw or a projectile that comes at or from the side… the word '*parabolē*' suggests indirect speech, eliciting the sense of being 'blindsided' or 'sucker punched,' a subversive and surprising rhetorical attack that successfully penetrates emotional and logical defenses" (2020: 285). Perplexed viewers leaving screenings of *Evil Does Not Exist* may have felt "blindsided" by the confusing ending, which arrives like a "sucker punch" in its suddenness. Mayward's definition of a parable as "aesthetic form of indirection" (2020: 285) therefore seems a more useful mode through which to read the film.

While we might be more accustomed to thinking of parable as a didactic mode of communication, the indirect nature of parable is key to how the form itself operates, as early modern parable scholar C. H. Dodd described: "At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought" (1935: 16). The very lack of clarity that troubles the ending of *Evil Does Not Exist* creates exactly this "doubt" that leads the viewer into "active thought," puzzling over the narrative events and their meanings long after leaving the cinema. In this way, the film could provoke even viewers sceptical of didactic ecological narratives into sustained consideration

of the human-nature relationship in our Anthropocene age. The vivid impression made by Hamaguchi's strange and sudden ending is in part due to the director's careful world-building which creates a detailed and believable environment for the characters. "This is the paradox of the parabolic structure: it begins in a realistic ordinary circumstance that the audience recognizes as the 'real world,' only to upend the audience's expectations through an affective crisis and subsequent coda, prompting reactions that are more of a lingering 'hmm...' than a sudden 'aha!' (Mayward 2020: 291). This structure extends the viewer's imaginative capacities, as the "collusion of the ordinary with the extraordinary elicits a crisis of response," generating new possibilities and new ways of seeing (Mayward 2020: 292).

Hamaguchi seeks to use new ways of seeing to foster new ways of thinking employing a diverse range of perspectives and points of view throughout *Evil Does Not Exist*. Shots that appear to show "how a machine sees, or perhaps how nature sees" prompt the viewer to see the story from polyvalent perspectives (Hamaguchi quoted in Robinson 2024). "I think that the fact that we, the audience, can acquire a different way of looking, perhaps, can lead the audience into understanding the rest of the film in a deeper level" (Hamaguchi quoted in Robinson 2024). Reading *Evil Does Not Exist* as a revelatory parable, which evokes a problem rather than communicating a didactic message, reveals how techniques such as the use of polyvalent perspectives enlist the viewer as an active participant in meaning-making, interrogating the film to puzzle out its messages, ideas, and suggestions.

William J. Brown and Terry R. Lindvall translate *parabolē* as "to throw beside," understanding the parable as "a form of teaching using comparison" employed to "provoke thought" (2019: 242). Hamaguchi also invokes this comparative mode, suggesting that, "watching this particular film against this title is probably an interesting experience together" (Hamaguchi quoted in Robinson 2024). Borrowing the method of "throwing beside" or "experiencing together," I place a close reading of Hamaguchi's film alongside a short

account of popular contemporary discourses on ecological issues in Japan today in order to evoke a more generative understanding of the film through comparison. This approach engages the parable form itself as research method.

Japan today is the locus of intensive discourses on ecological crises and futures, prompted in part by the visible ecological impacts of the triple disaster of 11 March 2011, which included earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown and subsequent atmospheric pollution disasters, and by increasingly observable climate change affecting temperatures and weather patterns. One of the most prominent voices in this environmental discourse is philosopher Saitō Kōhei, author of the bestselling *Hitoshinsei no 'Shihonron'* (*Capital in the Anthropocene*, 2020), which formed the basis of the scholarly English-language book *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (2022) and the popular non-fiction bestseller *Slow Down: How Degrowth Communism Can Save the Earth* (2024). Saitō calls for a "slow down" in everyday life and consumer activity as a means of addressing the climate crisis and the social inequalities that it exacerbates. Reading Hamaguchi's film alongside such popular public discourse offers a mode of exploring "how the interpretive movement from film-world to life-world might occur as the parable's formal and formative aspects intentionally provoke the audience (whatever the context) into reimagined moral praxis" (Mayward 2023: 194).

Saitō's popular books call for a "reimagined moral praxis" in his efforts to persuade readers of the value of slowing down and embracing degrowth, for the planet and for society. His manifestoes have captured the imagination of readers across Japan and beyond, selling over 500,000 copies. Saitō's work attends to the impact of late capitalist pursuit of growth on the environment, from the ecological damage of pollution and deforestation to the increasing inequalities caused by division of areas and peoples into a prioritized center and a sacrificed periphery. Reading Hamaguchi's film "thrown beside" this contemporary discourse shows

how film can persuade using subtle evocations where a manifesto employs strident rhetoric, and appealing through affect where non-fiction prose appeals through logic. We might therefore think of Hamaguchi's film as a version of Saitō's theory in cinematic parable form. While Saitō proposes degrowth as a means of combatting the damage wrought by humans, imagining such a radical change is a challenge. The famous adage, "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" identifies precisely this problem (Jameson 2016: 3). Arguing for Hamaguchi's film as a means of exploring such alternative environments, I propose that cinema can offer a mode of imagining alternate ways of living of the kind that scholars of the Anthropocene have called for (Haraway et. al 2016: 554).

Hamaguchi in the Anthropocene: Human-Nature Ambivalence

Evil Does Not Exist presents a small number of human characters, many of whom are taciturn or almost entirely silent. By contrast, the surrounding environment is emphasized in the visual design, soundscape, and plot to the extent that water, trees, and deer become equal in importance and consequence to the human characters. The film opens with a series of vignettes depicting life in a rural community, seen through the eyes of nine year old Hana (Nishikawa Ryō) and her father Takumi (Omika Hitoshi), but also from the apparent vantage points of animals and even plants. The ten minute opening sequence pans along the tree-lined skyscape, sharing the perspective of the forest floor. When Takumi uncovers wild wasabi, we see a close-up shot of his face as though from the perspective of the wasabi plant. Hana looks at a deer, and her view is matched by a reverse shot of equal duration showing Hana as if seen from the deer's perspective. This fosters the "slightly different way of perceiving" that Hamaguchi uses to develop "a different way of thinking" (Hamaguchi quoted in Robinson 2024), in that seeing the world from the perspective of a plant or animal invites the viewer to consider the needs of the environment. The repeated visual motif also emphasizes the active

role of the plants and animals in the local eco-system, demonstrating that as much as humans act on their environment, the surrounding wildlife also acts on the human characters.

Hamaguchi is often associated with slow cinema (Leu 2024), in part because many of his most famous works have long running times and slow-paced action. While the simple plot moves at a pace that would not qualify *Evil Does Not Exist* as slow cinema, long takes and silent ethnographic-style scenes which capture Takumi and Hana's daily routines evoke something of the mood of slow cinema to communicate a sense of the characters' lives as similarly slow, or slowed-down, in the manner of Saitō's manifesto. Rehearsal practices and imagery associated with Ozu Yasujirō's classical cinema are also apparent in Hamaguchi's work (Mankowski 2021), and these similarities may offer clues to decode his depiction of the natural world. Director and critic Yoshida Kijū interpreted Ozu's many shots of vases and chairs as images that return the gaze of the viewer, inviting them to participate in the "imaginative possibility" that "constitutes the pleasure of watching motion pictures" (Yoshida 2003: 84-85).[1] This "imaginative possibility" echoes the generative function of parable, which deploys uncertainty to provoke active thought. The constant problem-solving involved in decoding Hamaguchi's ever-changing viewpoints keeps the viewer engaged in an active relationship with the film and its problematics, and sets up a sense of agency on the part of the plants and animals which foreshadows their final violent encounter with the human characters. Hamaguchi's habit of showing empty rooms before or after human characters have occupied them also evokes Ozu's commitment to inviting viewers to speculate on the relationships between characters using shots of unoccupied *ryokan* inn rooms or middle class living spaces. For example, a shot of Takumi's cabin which precedes a meeting of local villagers there establishes a cozy atmosphere that suggests a sense of trust among friends,

[1] I would like to thank Julia Alekseyeva for this suggestion.

while a later scene showing a shabby unoccupied office space communicates an ad-hoc chaos that is reflected in the workers' attitudes towards engaging with the villagers.

Like a revelatory parable which uses a simple plot and abstracted characterizations to explore a complex problem, the narrative development of *Evil Does Not Exist* is extraordinarily economic. Early scenes show Takumi gathering water for a local *udon* noodle shop, establishing the central role of water in the plot, and glimpses of deer portend the catastrophic ending. Even a casual conversation about tree types between Takumi and Hana as he carries her home from school foreshadows the sharp thorn on which a visitor will later injure herself. While the central conflict of the plot appears to arise between the nature-loving villagers and the careless visiting workers, Ishibashi Eiko's soundscape and Hamaguchi's editing make it clear that ambivalence has existed between the villagers and their natural environment since before the beginning of the film. The swelling score accompanying the opening long shot of the tree canopy is abruptly broken off mid-phrase, matching a sharp cut to a medium-close up of Hana. This silence is violently shattered by the sound of Takumi's chainsaw, followed by an image of the handyman slicing and chopping wood. These sounds disrupt the majesty of Ishibashi's composition and the opening images of peaceful woodland, and suggest that the humans, villagers and visitors alike, are aggressive disruptors in the natural environment.

Further disruption arrives from Tokyo in the form of talent management company Playmode, which sends workers Takahashi (Kosaka Ryūji) and Mayuzumi (Shibutani Ayaka) to present the villagers with plans for a "glamping" ("glamorous camping") site for overworked city dwellers. As the villagers quickly note, the site proposal situates an inadequately-sized septic tank upstream on the river that provides water for the area. The importance of the river is emphasized in the naming of the area, Mizubiki (水, the kanji for water, is combined with 挽, to grind or saw) and in the testimonials of villagers at the

presentation meeting, such as the *udon* shop owner who moved to the area for the special properties of the water.

Caught between the skepticism of the villagers and the entrenched position of their employer, Takahashi and Mayuzumi drive back and forth between Tokyo and Mizubiki. Then disaster strikes. Hana, whom Takumi often forgets to collect from school, has tired of waiting for her father and wandered into the woods on her own. A search reveals her injured body. It is not clear what has happened, or whether she is alive or dead. A series of shots showing Hana in proximity to an injured deer may be flashbacks - perhaps, like earlier shots which seem to show the viewpoints of plants and animals, this sequence presents images of factual events as though from the perspective of the surrounding trees. Alternatively, the scene may visualize Takumi's attempts to imagine what has happened to his daughter as he surmises that she has been gored by a wild deer. Amid this confusion, Takumi turns on Takahashi and wrestles him to the ground. As Takumi runs into the dusk carrying Hana, Takahashi struggles to his feet, then collapses. When the screen fades to black, it is unclear which of the humans or animals have survived the violent end of the simple narrative.

From Slowed-Down Cinema to *Slow Down*: Water as Common Concern

This sudden and shocking ending can be read as a kind of retaliation from the threatened natural world against the humans who pose that threat. However, Hamaguchi resists this explanation, pointing out that as "humans are a part of nature" it is very difficult to create a clear divide between the two (Hamaguchi quoted in Robinson 2024). Instead, the director suggests that we look to the prior events in the narrative: "When this kind of ending happens, I feel it causes the audience to reflect back on what they experienced before that, to rethink what they just watched, and to reflect upon whether their worldview of what they just saw was correct. That effect to me is a very interesting way to experience a film, and can result in

a lot of interpretations" (Hamaguchi quoted in Robinson 2024). Taking Hamaguchi's call to reflect on our viewing experience seriously, the slowed atmosphere of the film itself suggests how we could respond.

Evil Does Not Exist features an "aesthetic slowness" common to Hamaguchi's previous works (Quaranta 2024: 38), created by frequent use of silence, dead-time, fixed shots, stillness or slowness in the poses and movements of characters, and slow-paced verbal exchanges. This slowness seems to reflect the villagers' lives; many characters discuss their choice to settle in the village as part of a larger project of slowing down, and plot points such as Takumi's carelessness with time emphasize that the villagers live at a leisurely pace. Chiara Quaranta argues for understanding such slowness as "a radical call to take care of the freedom stemming from a finite, groundless life, to responsibly assume the burden of existentially encountering another person, and to intimately understand that to live is difficult" (2024: 41). In its slowness, *Evil Does Not Exist* could similarly be read as a call not only to care for the environment, but also to acknowledge the burden and difficulty of assuming that position of care.

Though environmental themes run consistently through the simple plot, Hamaguchi told a packed press conference at the Venice Film Festival premiere that he did not have any particular interest in environmental issues when beginning filmmaking (Tatsuta 2024). Collaborating with Ishibashi Eiko, composer of *Drive My Car*'s original soundtrack, Hamaguchi instead sought an escape from the pressure to follow up that award-winning film with another popular hit. The director had agreed to develop a dialogue-free short film to accompany the performance of an original piece of music by Ishibashi, but inspired by the environment of her rural hometown, Hamaguchi also developed this visual accompaniment

(*Gift*, 2023)[2] into a feature length film loosely based on a story told by a local resident (Tatsuta 2024). The research process used to establish backstories for characters and locations brought the potential of nature management as allegory for human relations to Hamaguchi's attention.

> During the research process, I was introduced to a local nature expert who is a friend of Ishibashi san… They said something similar [to the Mizubiki villagers]. Water is something that must be handled responsibly [*Mizu to iu no wa, jibun-tachi ga sekinin o motte atsukawanakute wa ikenai mono*]. It is not something that people living upstream can use as they please, but rather people upstream have a responsibility. That's really true, and I was impressed by it. (Hamaguchi quoted in Tatsuta 2024)

While the villagers are depicted as responsible users of the Mizubiki river, treating the water as a shared resource in accordance with the concept of the commons, this does not occur to the visiting workers representing Playmode talent company. Representatives Takahashi and Mayuzumi show the villagers a slick video explaining "glamping", but the flaws in Playmode's plan quickly become apparent. The company's lack of local knowledge is visually established in the opening shot of this long meeting scene, which lingers on the exterior of the village hall. While the hall is clearly marked "Mizubiki town, Harazawa Public Hall" (*Mizubiki chō Harazawa kōminkan*), Playmode refers to the area simply as Harazawa, indicating both a lack of knowledge of the region, and the crucial ignorance of the importance of water (*mizu*). The village chief (Tamura Taijirō) sums up the ensuing

[2] The title of this companion film evokes the Convivialist argument for reframing our relationship with the natural world as a "gift relationship" in which "one takes from lakes, mountains, forests, farm animals, and wild animals, and one also gives something back to them" (Adloff 2024: 254).

discussion by explaining the core condition of village life: those upstream must remain considerate of the fact that their actions impact those downstream. Hamaguchi's use of the river as allegory for the responsibility that those living upstream bear towards those living downstream echoes a central metaphor in public discourses on the current ecological crisis and adapting to degrowth lifestyles (Saitō 2020). In reading *Evil Does Not Exist* as a cinematic parable, I am not arguing that Hamaguchi was directly inspired by these researchers and public intellectuals. Rather, by paying attention to the context in which the film was created, that is, the current moment in which how to manage shared resources, responsibility, and the ecological crises of the Anthropocene are being discussed as part of the popularization of the concept of degrowth, I suggest that we can learn something more about this enigmatic film's meaning through provocative comparison.

Degrowth in Public Discourse

Degrowth is broadly defined as "a process of political and social transformation that reduces a society's throughput while improving the quality of life" (Kallis, Kostakis, Lange, Muraca, Paulson, & Schmelzer 2018: 291). Since its popularization in the early 2010s in activist and economist circles, discussion of degrowth has spread to mainstream media, exacerbated by public interest in new systems, ideologies and futures in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. We could interpret the slowed and simplified lifestyles of the villagers of Mizubiki as an example of degrowth in practice. Yet Hamaguchi does not simply endorse this way of life, but explores the conflicts that arise when this slowed form of living meets the faster pace of contemporary capitalism, allegorized by Playmode. The reminder that the environment poses as much of a threat to the villagers as the villagers do to the environment further resists any simple reading of the villagers' lifestyle as superior. In this way, the cinematic parable form offers an evocative mode of engaging with the concept of degrowth that contrasts with pro-

degrowth activism in its nuanced exploration of the realities of degrowth living and its challenges.

The foundations of degrowth began with the French movement known as *décroissance*, inspired by the work of economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (1971) and social philosopher André Gorz (1972). Their growth-critical arguments were amplified after the 2008 global financial crisis by prominent economists such as Serge Latouche (2009) and by ecological, industrial, and feminist economists (Martínez-Alier, Unai, Franck-Dominique & Zaccai 2010; Demaria, Schneider, Sekulova & Martinez-Alier 2013; Spash 2020). Variations on degrowth have been known as steady-state economics (Daly 1973), post-growth (Jackson 2009; Paech 2018), and a-growth (van den Bergh 2011). Even before 2008, Japan was identified as a potential leader in the transition to degrowth in the wake of the economic "bubble burst" in 1991 (Karabell 2016). It is therefore no surprise that today degrowth is a popular discussion topic among the general public in Japan, as well as across many scholarly disciplines.

Film scholar Hideaki Fujiki reads contemporary documentary cinema through the lens of degrowth, observing that Saitō tends to equate the idea of degrowth with the concept of the commons (Fujiki 2025: 22). Fujiki notes that Saitō's vision of the commons is a means of designating energy and care resources as public goods, and managing them democratically, but that this "planetary scale" goal is not often reflected in the local modes in which ecological issues are approached by contemporary documentary cinema (2025: 21-22). Analyzing documentaries that foreground "social relations, collective activities, mutual aid, and democratic decision-making" as depictions of the commons, Fujiki argues that such cinematic depictions diverge from pro-degrowth arguments in that they often do not "perfectly fit either extreme of the binary opposition between capitalism and anti-capitalism or between growth and degrowth" (2025: 22). *Evil Does Not Exist* shares some formal

qualities with documentary film in the research processes which provided a basis for the script, and in the ethnographically-informed depictions of characters' everyday activities. Hamaguchi's story about "social relations, collective activities… and democratic decision-making" in Mizubiki can similarly be understood as a narrative about the commons, symbolized by the shared river.

Water as Commons: Managing Shared Resources

Saitō describes the commons as "forms of wealth that should be managed and shared by every member of society" (2024: 89). When the commons are appropriately managed, Saitō argues, degrowth will not feel like privation, but abundance. This argument borrows from the idea of "social common capital" developed by Uzawa Hirofumi, who argues that water, shelter, healthcare, electricity and education are common goods which benefit all, and should be treated responsibly in order to maximize positive outcomes for society (2008). Saitō's key point of difference lies in his argument that the commons should be managed by a system in which all citizens have a voice, rather than as shared capital administrated in a top-down manner. His recurring material example of this political idea is water and its management:

> water is abundant and is something that everyone desires and needs. In such a situation, water should be free. It would thus become an ideal form of public wealth. Yet these days, water has, by whatever means necessary, been rendered scarce, commodified, and assigned a price. (Saitō 2024: 156)

Shared ownership ensures responsible management because it protects a resource from overuse by a single owner (Saitō 2024: 116). For example, in Mizubiki Takumi and the *udon* shop owner negotiate how much water he will take from the stream each day on her behalf.

Playmode's proposed septic tank, on the other hand, not only monopolizes an area of the shared river for the exclusive use of the company's customers, but also represents a form of overuse in its limited capacity, which will lead to the equivalent of five campers' wastewater being released into the river each day. In these scenes, the villagers appear to treat the water sources in Mizubiki as "commons", something that everyone desires and needs, and use this common good responsibly and sparingly to safeguard the resource for others. By contrast, the Playmode workers approach the river as something that they can fence off for their own use, demonstrating the practice of "enclosure" which Saitō notes has historically challenged the idea and functioning of the commons.

Saitō's vision of management of the commons as democratic practice is also evident in the villagers' mode of discourse about how to use the river water. In the village hall meeting, residents gather together, pass a microphone around, and nod and cheer to support speakers' points, creating a lively communal atmosphere that suggests democratic decision-making. By contrast, a subsequent debrief by video call with Playmode's remote consultant and aggressive boss strikes a more hierarchical tone. The consultant joins the call from his car, while the Playmode employees squeeze into a tiny beige and grey office with coats hanging on walls and doorframes. The atmosphere is rushed and careless, in contrast to the considered environment of the village hall in which participants took their time to formulate their thoughts. Takumi closed the village hall meeting by expressing willingness to collaborate: "If the plan is good, we'll support it." Yet both the consultant and the Playmode boss emphasize urgency over compromise, citing the company's receipt of time-limited government subsidies, the perceived need to corner the glamping market by developing the first site, and the cost of Mayuzumi and Takahashi's wages. The slow time of Mizubiki is disrupted by this transition to the hurried discussion among Playmode employees squeezed into small spaces marked by signs of imminent departure such as coats and car interiors.

Hamaguchi evokes Playmode's constricted financial position by enclosing Mayuzumi and Takahashi within a second frame provided by the video calling platform. The viewer is positioned as though we are the other party on the video call, looking into the Playmode office through the small digital window. Enclosing the characters in this way underlines that their project itself is one of enclosure, capturing common resources and privatizing them for profit. At the same time, the image also evokes the employees' frustration at being trapped in their jobs, and in the wider late capitalist economy. The banality of the Playmode office with its damp coats and tiresome boss creates a sense that Takahashi and Mayuzumi's work is an abstracted allegory of the common working conditions of late capitalism.[3] Situating the viewer as a participant in the video call implicates us in this same environment, suggesting that all who participate in the capitalist economy share some blame for the diminished conditions of the Anthropocene.

By contrast, Mizubiki is depicted as an area where common resources are shared and villagers remain aware of the impacts of "upstream" actions on those living "downstream" (Jacobson 2024). The setting brings to life Saitō's depiction of commonly managed land which people use "as needed to support themselves, gathering fruit, firewood, mushrooms and the like, as well as using these areas for fishing and hunting game birds" (Saitō 2024: 151). Yet Hamaguchi's visualization of this commons is not utopic, as demonstrated by the inference that Hana's injury has been precipitated by disruption caused by local deer hunters. The closing images of Hana in proximity to an injured deer resonate with an earlier scene in which deer hunters were heard shooting above the village. The implication that Hana may have been harmed by an injured deer sharply upends any sense of the villagers living in harmony with nature.

[3] I would like to thank Wayne Wong for this suggestion.

Instead, frequent references to water pollution and downstream impacts suggest that there is no perfect era of human-nature relations to which we can return – while the Anthropocene is the result of particularly egregious extractive practices, humans have tried to manage and control the natural world for much longer (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000; Zalasiewicz et al. 2015). As Takumi counsels, living with nature is a question of balance, and "If you overdo it, you upset the balance" (*yarisugitara, baransu wa koware,* literally "If you do too much, the balance breaks"). Attempts to manage nature in modern Japan have historically veered towards breaking this balance, and yet the inclination to try to manage nature remains, apparent in such real life examples as the glamping site proposal which Hamaguchi researched when developing the script for *Evil Does Not Exist.*

Managing Nature, Managing People: Historical Echoes in Mizubiki

While ecomodernists propose inventing and developing our way out of the climate crisis, Saitō is among the many scholars who take issue with the pervasive idea that "humanity's survival will be enabled by nature's *management*" (2024: 133). Playmode, which several characters point out is actually a talent management company, is allegorical of the ecomodernist position in its effort to generate growth from a green-seeming initiative. Such green-washing has historical antecedents in the development and management of nature in Japan, ever since state-led nature management initiatives centered around "*chisui* (regulation of water) became central to the science, technology, and philosophy of Edo Japan" (McCormack 2007: 444). The human-nature relationships in Mizubiki allegorize a series of historical attitudes to nature management from early modern to contemporary Japan.

While the Edo period cyclical design of water management in which rainwater collected in forests and rice fields and then in holding areas dedicated to retaining flood water seems attuned to the workings and needs of the environment, this system was not necessarily

predicated on the balance that Takumi advocates, but instead prioritized water management over humans (or at least humans of a certain class). As trees were maintained to absorb and hold back excess water, forests were protected by the "uncompromising rule of *ki ippon, kubi hitotsu* (chop one tree, forfeit one head)" (McCormack 2007: 445). The injury or death of Hana as a consequence of disruption to the environment and its inhabitants recall this historical breaking of the balance between the needs of humans and the needs of the environment when one is sacrificed for the other.

Such efforts to protect natural ecosystems from humans later gave way to a focus on *seibi* or "fixing" the environment. Takumi's role as a handyman echoes historical approaches to nature as something that can be mended through human intervention. In modern Japan, interventions tended to take the form of deforestation as rural areas were sacrificed to enable fast construction in the cities (Tsing 2017: 186), dam building technologies imported from Europe (McCormack 2007: 447), and the bureaucratization of water management in the first Meiji River Law of 1896 and the "coherence of river systems" that characterized the 1930s (Kada 2006: 44-45). Takumi is repeatedly shown chopping wood and hammering, allegorizing the role of construction in human intervention in the natural environment after World War II, which included river infrastructure (Kuwahara 1992).

At the same time, Japan is often associated with a particular love of nature (Stolz 2018: 243; Waley 2000: 209), echoed in the driving premise of Playmode's plan – that spending time in nature will have beneficial affect for overworked city dwellers. That a presumed affection for nature would cause disruption to the environment of the kind allegorized by the Playmode's polluting septic tank also has historical echoes: landscape architect Yamamichi Shōzō observed that affection for water could "interfere with rivers and cause considerable dislocation" when extended to construction interventions like the building of water parks (1992: 28 quoted in Waley 2000: 210). In *Evil Does Not Exist*, an assumed

affection for nature on the part of glamping clientele causes interference with the village river, while respect for the water and inhabitants downstream curtails the villagers from polluting or overusing the shared resource. Though love of nature may be a characteristic long associated with Japanese attitudes, respect for nature appears to be missing in the historical discourses around its management and control.

Gavin McCormack argues that, "The prevalent philosophical assumption in Japan for over a century has been that nature subjected to control, *seibi*, is preferable to nature in the raw," tracing this assumption to "the insecurity of life in an archipelago subject to typhoon, earthquake, and volcano" which led to the privileging of "regulation and control of nature rather than in adaptation to it" (2007: 455). Yet disaster is not limited to natural causes, as a large body of scholarship on water poisoning and pollution in Japan demonstrates (Sasaki-Uemura 2002: 98). As early as the Edo period, opposition groups were formed by farmers to protest about "bad water" (*akusui*) which leeched from mines and damaged crops (Stolz 2014). The villagers' organizing to protest Playmode's top-down approach to planning echoes this long history of citizen protest movements that take water and its management as central issue.

At the same time, McCormack's observation about the "insecurity of life" in an archipelago prone to both natural and man-made ecological disasters resonates with the unpredictable suddenness of the violent ending. Insecurities around the impossibility of predicting environmental events and outcomes challenge the desire or inclination to attempt to manage nature, both in Hamaguchi's parable and across historical developments in ecological discourse in Japan. While the concept of the commons prizes nature as shared resource, acknowledgement of the power of nature is often missing in this mode of understanding human-nature relations. The sudden violence at the end of Hamaguchi's narrative reasserts this unpredictable power, and reminds the viewers that human-nature

relationships are not confined to management, but also involve interdependent power relations. As the discourse of "bad water" gave way to more technical discussion of pollution (*osen*) in the Meiji period, Tanaka Shōzō, sometimes called Japan's "first conservationist," developed his theory of the "real powers of land and water" (*chi no ikioi, mizu no ikioi*) to conceptualize the interdependence of humans and nature (Stolz 2014). Tanaka understood the power of nature as something external to humanity, and yet entwined with humans and their practices through a series of "flows" or "material exchanges" (Stolz 2014). While good "flow" (*nagare*) was mutually beneficial, bad flow or "poison" (*doku*) would result in a "second, toxic nature" leading to "accumulation of death instead of life" (Stolz 2014). This way of understanding nature, as both potentially beneficial and potentially threatening, is evoked in Hamaguchi's cinematic parable. Tanaka's warning is reflected in the ending of *Evil Does Not Exist*, which suddenly metastasizes into an accumulation of injury and death.

The Real Powers of Land and Water: Human-Nature Interaction as Unpredictable

Takumi's reaction to Hana's accident at first seems unpredictable. Why attack Takahashi, who has followed him to help search for Hana? The Playmode employees' earlier queries about the role of the deer in the local environment resonate through this final scene. As Takahashi and Mayuzumi try to understand what kind of threat the deer could pose to the glamping site, they question Takumi about their behavior, and in particular their interaction with humans. Do the deer ever attack? No, Takumi replies, except in rare cases. When a deer is "gut-shot" (*hanya*, literally "half-arrow"), meaning fatally injured but not yet dead, it may attack to protect its young. The foreshadowing prevalent throughout the film piles up in these final scenes to confront the viewer with what we have sensed all along – that "upstream" actions have slowly been accumulating to force a deadly confrontation between humans and

nature, and then, as a "downstream" consequence, among the humans themselves. An early shot in the search party sequence shows a villager calling for Hana as he walks along a stretch of river, not the pretty winding stream where Takumi collects water, but a sharp concrete-edged section of managed water, rushing down uniform steps which have been built into the bed to force its flow. Had Hana fallen into this section of water, injury would have been almost certain. The sharp edges and rapid flow suggest danger, and the clearly man-made nature of the bank indicates that humans have created this threat.

Takumi's unpredictable reaction to Hana's accident is contextualized by the preceding images of nature as threatening, which create the sense that some kind of disaster is in fact the predicable consequence of the accumulation of divergent threats to both the natural world and the villagers' way of life. Robert Stolz points out the recurrence of discourses of unpredictability in public debates about water in Japan, increasing since the triple disaster of March 2011 (Stolz 2018: 245). Discourses of water, and nature more broadly, as unpredictable developed awkwardly in conflict with the idea that the special relationship to nature enjoyed by Japanese people should render nature predictable (Stolz 2018: 243). The idea of a special Japanese relationship to nature sets certain expectations that are undermined by natural disasters. Stolz argues that while the triple disaster was discussed by media outlets and authorities as "completely 'unprecedented,'" "unheard of," and "'beyond expectations' (*sōteigai*)" "such a repetition compulsion of constantly going beyond expectations suggests a problem with the expectations themselves" (Stolz 2018: 245).

Stolz's point echoes in Hamaguchi's own reflections on his co-directed documentary series about the triple disaster:

> The everyday of Japan before 2011 seemed to be limitless. There was no difference between yesterday and tomorrow. The cycle would go on and on.

> That's how everybody felt about the reality they lived in. When the tragedy occurred, something had stopped and we knew that the experience would reshape us (Hamaguchi quoted in Mankowski 2021).

Japan before the triple disaster is characterized by a sense of limitlessness that looks a lot like growth-ism, and by a "cycle" similar to the "overdoing it" that Takumi warns against in *Evil Does Not Exist*. The "problem with the expectations themselves" that Stolz discerns in shocked reactions to apparently "unpredictable" occurrences do not appear to have been addressed more than a decade after the triple disaster. Instead, *Evil Does Not Exist* exposes problematic expectations on all sides; Playmode's expectation that it can commandeer a section of river for overuse without consequence, the villagers' expectation that they can live alongside wild animals without injury, and Takahashi's expectation that Takumi will refrain from violence even when Hana is threatened. Underpinning such problematic expectations is an arrangement that Saitō terms center-periphery, wherein the center thrives by pushing bad outcomes onto the periphery, endlessly deferring the consequences of seeking growth at all costs.

Center versus Periphery, City versus Village, Human versus Animal

Saitō identifies a "plunder-and-cost transfer" at work in late capitalism, drawing from Immanuel Wallerstein's understanding of capitalism as reliant on a structure in which "core" and "periphery" are opposed, with the wealthy nations of the core exploiting the labor and resources of the periphery for their own gain. "The economic growth of the core has necessitated the plundering of natural resources from the periphery, while at the same time shifting the costs underlying this growth onto the periphery as well" (Saitō 2024: 12). In Japan, we can see this pattern in the distribution of wealth, labor, and resources which came

to be known as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, under which the colonized peripheries of Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria were put to work in the service of mainland Japan, and also within the archipelago itself, where Hokkaido and other peripheries were treated in an extractive manner as resources for the metropolis. In Mizubiki, the anxious echoes of Japan's colonial expansion resonate through Takumi's admission that even the villagers are relatively recent settlers, having moved to the area in the early postwar era when the government encouraged people to settle in rural regions. His identification of himself as a "child of settlers" using the word "*kaitaku*" (to settle or colonize) suggests that the villagers may have been settler colonizers similar to those in Hokkaido and other regions, implicitly connecting the settlement of Mizubiki with the plunder of peripheral areas during Japan's aggressive expansion.

Neoliberal advanced capitalist areas today often find both core and periphery in one country, or even in a single city. The March 2011 triple disaster offers a recent example, in which the Fukushima area of Japan was treated as a sacrificial peripheral area supplying power to the capital, much as internal colonies such as Hokkaido have been used to provide the capital with food, natural resources, soldiers, and energy at different historical moments.[4] As wealth and poverty become ever more polarized, the core is exemplified by salaried city-dwelling employees with disposable incomes for glamping breaks, and the periphery by exploited and precarious uncontracted workers and small farmers. Ignacio Adriasola traces this shift to the "Japanese capitalism debate" (*Nihon shihonshugi ronsō*) of the 1930s, which recognized "the economy's division into 'traditional' agricultural and 'modern' industrial sectors" with steady wage increases and lifetime employment afforded the latter, and low paid and temporary work in the former (2015: 207). Mizubiki can be read as an allegory of such a rural periphery in the debate about campsite wastewater. The consultant's demand that

[4] I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

Mizubiki "take the hit" of polluted water in order to maximize Playmode's profits recalls Japan's historical "sacrifice zones" which were expected to live with polluted water, earth, and air due to corporate poisoning (Stolz 2018: 246).

The hopeless shrug with which the Playmode employees meet the villagers' objections to this proposed sacrifice reflects Hamaguchi's own characterization of the attitudes of city dwellers: "I think living in a city is about putting our trash outside and forcing it into the peripheries… We live as if that can't be helped, and yet we do it knowing there must be an end to this sometime" (Hamaguchi quoted in Denney 2023). Confronting the "end" that will come "sometime" requires an honest assessment of the situation, which is made impossible by corporate and government denial. A rhetorical "can't be helped" attitude suffuses negotiations around the treatment of Mizubiki and its villagers as periphery. When a self-contained campsite reservoir and septic tank is proposed as a solution to the downstream impacts of the campsite waste, the remote consultant advises instead that Playmode accede to the villagers' request for a 24 hour caretaker as a substitute for making concessions on the septic tank. The appointment of the caretaker is further compromised when Takumi is approached but declines. Mayuzumi suggests that he act as an advisor instead, inferring a senior position, only to be undercut by Takahashi, who excitedly proposes that he quit Playmode and serve as caretaker, with Takumi as his personal aide. This repositions Takumi as an assistant to Takahashi, despite the fact that it is Takahashi who is unqualified for the position. By play-acting as a caretaker after one day of chopping wood and collecting water, Takahashi remains in "play mode," recalling the *furusato tsukuri* movement, which we could think of as the "play mode" of agrarian life in modern Japan (Robertson 1991). The supposed concession to the villagers' request that was hiring a responsible and qualified caretaker has now become a means of rehabilitating an unqualified

city worker suffering from burnout, mirroring the aim of the glamping initiative itself and prioritizing the needs of the core (city) over the periphery (village).

The peripherization of Mizubiki transforms the lush scenery into a "landscape as a visualization of anxiety" (Adriasola 2015: 222). Hamaguchi's color scheme codes the environment as potentially threatening by using cold blue tones for the landscape, in contrast to the warm oranges and reds of the humans' interior spaces.[5] From the opening title, blue is associated with danger, as the statement "Evil Does Exist" appears in blue lettering, before "Not" arrives in red. The association of blue and cold with nature recalls Hamaguchi's first impressions on visiting Ishibashi's rural home:

> I looked out and it was a wintry natural landscape. There were barely any people around. It was minus 10 degrees Celsius out there, which means that people, if they stayed out there for too many hours, could freeze. And so in some ways it presented a kind of danger that existed, but of course there's no evil intention there. (Hamaguchi quoted in Reed 2024)

Warm orange light, interiors, and clothing in human spaces contrasts with the cold blue danger outside, and red is similarly associated with the "Not" evil of the title. Yet Takahashi, arguably the most intentionally evil of all the characters, wears a red-orange coat that seems to telegraph a warning, and Mayuzumi spills her red blood on the snow. Hana and Takumi are clothed in blue, suggesting their affinity with nature, but occupy the warm-toned interior spaces of human habitations, indicating that they are divided in their allegiances between the natural environment and the world of the human. This nuanced use of color coding suggests that neither humans nor the natural environment can be easily understood as simply evil,

[5] Thanks to Wayne Wong for this suggestion.

simply dangerous, or simply innocent. Nature, without intention, is both potentially dangerous and innocent, while the humans, who act intentionally, can be both vulnerable and destructive.

Conclusion: Sacrificing the Periphery is Sacrificing Ourselves

> Once the periphery is exhausted, things can no longer function the way they have up till now. (Saitō 2024: 16)

Following the revelatory parable format, the "sucker-punch" of Hamaguchi's story arrives when Takumi responds to Hana's injury with a sudden attack on Takahashi. Hamaguchi characterizes this response as "acting out of desperation" like the gut-shot deer who turn violent when confronted with no alternative means of protecting themselves and their young (Hamaguchi quoted in Robinson 2024). In this way, the victims of downstream consequences spread beyond the shaky boundaries of core and periphery to encompass the deer, Hana, Takumi, and Takahashi. Reading *Evil Does Not Exist* as a degrowth parable which uses a simple story to illustrate moral and ethical problems demonstrates how film parables can explore complex ideological, ecological, and social issues such as those addressed by degrowth discourses with a greater degree of nuance than is possible in the manifesto format or activist provocation.

Cinema offers a mode of audio-visual exploration of contemporary moral problems such as the alienation of humans from our natural environment in the Anthropocene, using the parable form to generate polyvalent meanings. While Hamaguchi's film may not be an explicit argument for degrowth transition, or even an ecological protest in the mode of earlier eco-critical filmmakers and documentarians, it offers something more subtle in its evocation

of the impact of human actions on the environment and the downstream consequences of those actions, predictable and unpredictable. The puzzling ending recruits viewers to attempt to solve the mysteries of the narrative, ensuring that consideration and debate about human responsibility in the Anthropocene continues beyond the film theatre. Reading *Evil Does Not Exist* as a cinematic parable suggests that it doesn't matter whether evil exists or not. In the too-late moment of the Anthropocene, assigning blame matters less than rethinking our relationship with nature and how we live in the world.

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