29 Beyond 2020

Post-Olympic pessimism in Japanese cinema

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“Ever since Tokyo has been selected to host the Olympics, Japan floats five centimeters above the ground.” This short message opposes Japan’s euphoria towards the upcoming 2020 Olympics with mocking irony. It was written by filmmaker Sono Shion, the enfant terrible of contemporary Japanese cinema, and shown in his 2015 “Love & Peace” exhibition.

In his Amazon Prime mini-series *Tokyo Vampire Hotel* (2017), Sono’s criticism is blatant. Set in 2021, the Tokyo Olympics did not lead to the hoped-for economic growth and Prime Minister Yamada now promises recovery for Japan, suggesting to distribute microchips to all citizens. In the second episode, in a homeless settlement in Tokyo, a stained signboard appears behind trash bags: “Tokyo 2020: Only 3 days until the opening” (Figure 29.1). Sono puts Olympic euphoria, literally, on the trash pile.

In similar fashion, Kishi Yoshiyuki’s boxing drama *Ah, Wilderness* (2017) envisions a hopeless post-Olympic Tokyo. Also taking place in 2021, crime and suicide rates are rapidly increasing. The film starts with a student in debt killing himself with explosives in the middle of Shinjuku. The government reacts with a new policy allowing citizens to pay back student loans by working in healthcare or for the Self-Defense Forces.

Shiraishi Kazuya’s *A Gambler’s Odyssey 2020* (2019), however, is set directly in 2020. In this reinterpretation of the bestselling novel-series *Mahjong hōrōki* (1969–72), a gambler travels from the ruins of postwar Tokyo 1945 to the year 2020. Encountering stained posters of the Olympics, he is puzzled as the only Olympics he can recall are the cancelled games of 1940. It turns out a new World War devastated Tokyo again and as a result the 2020 Games are cancelled. Implying a possible cancellation of the 2020 Olympic Games was enough to anger government officials. On January 31, 2019, the director and his lead actor Saitoh Takumi were summoned to the House of Representatives for an advance screening, resulting in an unheard-of prohibition of press screenings before the official release.

In stark contrast to the governmental Olympic vision, cinema can present a counter-narrative, addressing the problems of a declining economy, increasing crime and suicide rates, the beginnings of a totalitarian society, and a possible new global war. Cinema brings Japan back to the ground.

Figure 29.1 Sono Shion: *Tokyo Vampire Hotel*, 2017, ep. 2.

Source: © Amazon Prime Video (screenshot).