

A chimeric being from Kyushu, Japan

Amabie's revival during Covid-19

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This article explores how the resurgence of a forgotten chimeric figure from the Japanese history of disasters and epidemics, the prophesizing *yōkai* Amabie, intersects with some central ecological and political discourses in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially those associated with culinary practices, human rights and relations with other historical epidemics. This uncanny *yōkai* from southern Japan in the pre-modern Edo period addresses contemporary lives as they are caught in a suspension of our usual temporal and spatial dimensions.

Emerging from the seas of history

Amabie (アマビエ) is a Japanese female *yōkai* (妖怪)¹ who originates from the Kyushu region. She is described as a female chimeric creature whose body is an assemblage of human, fish and bird characteristics, with three fish tails/legs and flowing dark hair. She reminds us of Western representations of a mermaid, except her whole body is covered in scales and can be portrayed as having (or not having) arms. She has a human face, but with bird-like eyes and a beak. According to local lore and historical

records, Amabie appeared only once – emerging from the sea and illuminated by a halo – to a local officer in the Higo area, Kumamoto prefecture, in 1846. Like other prophesizing *yōkai*, she left behind a message: ‘Good harvest will continue for six years from the current year; if an epidemic ever spreads, draw a picture of me and show it to everyone’ (Fig. 2). She did not appear again, and remained in that sense an ‘outsider’ (see Komatsu 1987 for an analysis of spirits as mythical outsiders).

Unlike the riverine *kappa* (河童)² – another water *yōkai* – Amabie does not seem to have a mischievous character. The term *yōkai* has been used to define ‘all things beyond the realm of explanation ... an umbrella signifier for things we generally translate with terms such as *monster*, *spirit*, *goblin*, *demon*, *phantom*, *specter*, *fantastic being*, *lower-order deity*, or *unexplainable occurrence*’ (Foster 2015: 19; original emphasis). The dual message that Amabie left behind (of abundance and disaster), echoes the ambiguity that characterizes other human-fish creatures called *ningyo* (人魚),³ mermaids and mermen, whose appearance might be associated with prosperous events but also ominous catastrophes – whether that be because they warn about or actually call upon them (Foster 2015: 154-155; see Hayward 2018: 61 for the connection between *ningyo* and tsunamis in the southern islands of Japan). *Ningyo* bodies are preserved in temples and were believed to prevent disasters (Chaiklin 2010: 247). A golden Amabie pattern features on a single sheet seal stamp (*kami goshojin*, 紙御朱印) issued by Irugi Shrine (Tokyo) on 10 May, to pray for an early end to the new coronavirus pandemic (Fig. 3).

Historical records from the 13th century onwards describe mermaids being associated with ominous events (Chaiklin 2010: 243). Fishermen in the Edo period (1603-1868) were rumoured to produce mummified ‘mermaids’ (allegedly adding animal parts, papier mâché and other objects to a large fish) and some were traded with Dutch sailors (Foster 2015: 155-156; Hayward 2018: 53-54; see Viscardi et al. 2014 for an analysis of CT scans and X-rays of several specimens).⁴ The story of a fisherman capturing a mermaid made it into records of encounters between the Dutch and Japanese in Nagasaki Bay, Kyushu, in the 1820s, predating Amabie’s appearance in 1846.

He then gave out that he had caught the creature alive in his net, but that it had died shortly after being taken out of the water ... The exhibition of the sea-monster to Japanese curiosity paid well; but yet more productive was the assertion that the half human fish, having spoken during the few minutes it existed out of its native element, had predicted a certain number of years of wonderful fertility, and a fatal epidemic, the only remedy for which would be, possession of the marine prophet’s likeness. The sale of these pictured mermaids was immense. (Busk 1841: 261)

A recent Twitter post mentions a ‘possible’ Amabie mummy in a Dutch museum,⁵ adding to the list of oriental mermaid remains in European collections (see Viscardi et al. 2014). The presence of these manufactured mermaids has been seen as representing ‘a question of East-West interactions’ (Chaiklin 2010: 242).

During the Edo period, the printing of scrolls to be hung for protection or as a mechanism to limit the impact of calamities such as earthquakes was widespread. In 1855, woodblock prints with catfish (*namazu-e*) were produced following the Edo earthquake (Smits 2009). The 1858 cholera epidemic saw the use of images affixed to houses for protection (Gramlich-Oka 2009).⁶ Similar prints were

Fig. 1. Amabie. Ink and watercolour on paper by Claudia Merli, May 2020.

Fig. 2. An Amabie image taken from a kawara-ban (broadsheet) newspaper of the Edo era. Kyoto University Library.



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Fig. 3. The text reads: 'prayer at Irugi Shrine, 10 May, 2nd year Reiwa [2020] for an early termination of the new coronavirus infectious disease'. Amabie goshuin (seal stamp) of Irugi Shrine.

Fig. 4. Measles print (hashika-e), 1862, Edo-Tokyo Museum, Sumida, Tokyo, Japan.

Fig. 5. A sweet in the shape of Amabie.

Fig. 6. Amabie sweet in Sugamo Jizo Dori shopping street.

Fig. 7. Amabie wind chimes, Satake Shotengai in Taito Ward.

1. In several recent news articles Amabie is described as a 'beast', or a 'monster' or as a 'little figure'. The kanji *kai* (怪) is associated with both terms that would translate as 'monster' *yōkai* and 'strange beast' *kaijū* (怪獣) but should not be reduced to either (Foster 2015: 22-23).

2. A *yōkai* whose body is a combination of parts from a frog, a tortoise and a bird, with claws. Its human-shaped body is partly covered in scales. The *kappa* is also associated with medical knowledge, specifically bone-setting and reattaching severed limbs (Foster 2015: 161-162).

3. The two kanji mean human being (人) and fish (魚).

4. Chaiklin, however, contends that the taxidermy techniques and specialist knowledge required were not available to fishermen at the time (2010: 254).

5. <https://twitter.com/kz1300kawasaki/status/1268416412374061056> (last accessed 6 June 2020).

6. In May 2020, another beaky *yōkai* rose to the pandemic stage, recovered from the collections of a Japanese museum: a two-headed bicoloured bird called *yogen no tori* (予言のとり), a prophecy bird, that protected an area of central Japan from a cholera epidemic in 1858 (which had started in Nagasaki, Kyushu) (*The Japan Times* 2020; see Gramlich-Oka 2009 for an analysis of this epidemic).

7. <https://twitter.com/shigeokahide/status/1233551711890837504>.

8. Kumamon TV 2020. *Pray for People and Peace 2020/Kumataro* くま太郎 (くまモン PPA). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbc6-sTaEH8>.

9. The concept of the 'invisible mask' has been analysed in relation to *kampo* medicine and pharmaceuticals in Japan during the Covid-19 epidemic (Hofer 2020). During the Manchurian pneumonic plague epidemic of 1910-1911, people stamped facial covers with temple seals (Lynteris 2018: 448).

10. <https://twitter.com/banditrabbit8/status/1266883515238379523>, 31 May 2020 (last accessed 6 June 2020).

also used to ward off the measles outbreak of 1862 (one of the recurring epidemics that swept across Japan in intervals of a dozen years or more), depicting the *hashika* demon overpowered by Lord Wheat and a group of people. The prints were called *hashika-e* (麻疹絵), measles prints (Smits 2009: 14) (Fig. 4).

Smallpox received similar iconographic expressions, with *hōsō-e* (放送絵) smallpox prints (Rotermund & Tyler 2001). Martha Chaiklin mentions that in 1816, woodblocks of *ningyo* were available in Edo to counter a severe measles epidemic, and could either be affixed on house pillars or worn on the body as protection (2010: 248). *Yōkai* have developed, inspired and been represented in contemporary Japanese popular culture where they have appeared in modified forms as anime and in manga series as part of highly commercialized enterprises (Foster 2015: 78-79). *Ningyo* and mermaids have also been circulated on the Internet to promote tourism in several Japanese localities (Hayward 2018: 61).

In following Amabie's new-found mediatic life, I take inspiration from an 'ontographic engagement' that deals with spiritual alterities without assuming that these do not exist, and which compares different worlds showing intersecting webs of relations and causation (Jensen et al. 2016). Some of the tropes that emerge relate to the construction of remoteness (both spatial and temporal), the interconnectedness of our worlds and the experience of uncanny objects (the coronavirus and Amabie) which are conceived as located beyond our grasp.

Timeline and historical enmeshments

Embarking on a tour of South East Asia, the cruise ship the Diamond Princess left Yokohama harbour on 20 January 2020, visiting several countries in the region before returning to southern Japan at the beginning of February, where it was quarantined in Okinawa for one day due to suspected Covid-19 cases on board, before anchoring off Yokohama port on 3 February, where it eventually docked and remained quarantined. Global audiences followed the operations, health controls and tracking of infections among the international and Japanese passengers, who were mostly confined to their cabins. News broadcasts beamed updates about onboard conditions and the passenger menu, which the chef and kitchen crew tried to keep as varied and healthy as possible.

International and local news reported regularly on mounting criticism of the way the Japanese authorities were handling the crisis, hinting at human rights violations over the prevention of passengers from leaving the ship. Critiques also addressed the unsatisfactory measures taken to cordon off the red areas on board (where cases of Covid-19 were ascertained) from the green areas, facilitating the spread of contagion on the cruise liner. By the end of February, of the 2,666 passengers (1,281 Japanese nationals) and 1,045 crew members, 705 had been found to be infected. On 1 March, all passengers had disembarked.

Between the end of February and the first week of March, first appearing on the Twitter account of Japanese manga artist Shigeoka Hide,⁷ and later becoming a global phenomenon on social media (see Alt 2020 for an extended cultural comment), a drawing of Amabie connected the present global Covid-19 pandemic to Japan's history of epidemics. The Japanese people brought Amabie's story back to life: artists, painters and soon others started to create drawings and distribute them as benevolent, well-wishing, protective images – or as Alt wrote (2020) 'a character for solace'. Multiple representations and commercial products such as sweets (*amabie wagashi*, アマビエ和菓子) (Figs 5 & 6), keychains, effigies and manga, took Japan and the global social media by storm (Fig. 7).



Fig. 8. Poster from Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's Covid-19 campaign.

Fig. 9. Sōsai Ryōko, active 1860-1868. Japan, Ise-shō (1862). Various workers affected by measles punish a god of measles, a doctor and pharmacy keeper as the latter two try to protect the god from the workers.

Fig. 10. Medico della Peste. Traditional Venetian carnival masks, including the plague or beak doctor's mask, in the window of the Ca' del Sol mask shop in the Sestiere di Castello, Venice.

Fig. 11. Mask worn by a plague doctor at the end of the 18th century.

Amabie went 'viral' after 6 March, when the Kyoto University Library posted on Twitter the original news-sheet from an Edo-period broadsheet containing the original drawing of the creature (also reported in *Kyodo News* 2020). Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) enlisted Amabie as a symbol of the Covid-19 campaign (see also Johnston 2020) to raise awareness among young people about the risk of asymptomatic transmission (Fig. 8), as stated on the first line of the slogan: 'Because I can spread it without knowing' (tweet on the MHLW's official account, 9 April 2020). The same importance given to personal responsibility and self-reliance in controlling the spread of infection was already present in some of the *hashika-e* of the Edo period: 'The intervention of physicians or deities was not necessarily a requirement, or even beneficial at all, for conquering measles' (Smits 2009: 16) (Fig. 9).

As later during the Meiji Era, these measures were considered to appeal to the individual's sense of responsibility and did not correspond with what we would nowadays call 'community or public health' (Johnston 1995: 178-180). Other woodblock prints portrayed doctors instructing the population to act to prevent the disease by implementing diet and lifestyle changes (Smits 2009: 17). In the Edo period, mass media played an important role in 'the production and popularity' of *yōkai* culture (Foster 2008: 204). Not surprisingly then, keeping with the historical presence of *yōkai* in contemporary Japanese society (and their revival as manga), social media became a suitable platform for the global circulation of Amabie images during the Covid-19 pandemic. Twitter pages carrying the hashtags #amabie, #amabiechallenge (in Japanese, #アマビエ and #アマビエチャレンジ) started circulating shortly after the original image was published by the Kyoto University Library. People around the world soon rose to the challenge, circulating Amabie's image to acquaintances and friends as a form of protection against the new coronavirus infection.

I drew an Amabie myself (Fig. 1) between April and May and posted it on my Facebook page, with a specific dedication to my friends in Japan, but I eventually sent it via individual messages to other friends who would be, if not exactly protected by seeing it, perhaps reminded of my affection. There is something about this action of drawing and distributing Amabie that reminds me of the art of hyperobjects discussed by Morton (2013b), of making visible the presence of another invisible hyperobject that surrounds us, in this case the virus itself. The art of the time of hyperobjects explores: 'The uncanniness of beings/ The uniqueness of beings/ The irony of relationships between beings/ The ironic secondariness of the intermeshing between beings' (Morton 2013b: 44).

Northern Kumamoto prefecture, the original site of Amabie's epiphany, drove a specific Covid-19 campaign in which the popular regional mascot Kumamon (a chubby black bear with red, round cheeks) dressed up as Amabie and even featured in a 'collaboration' with the *yōkai* – a joint venture one might say, to educate on protective and hygiene measures (Kumamoto Tamana 2020). Apart from merchandise items for the campaign, a dance video was also made to encourage hand washing (#WashHands), in which Kumamon appears before the camera dressed up as Amabie, together with four young dancers, wearing shiny, long, blue wigs, donning scaly skirts or belts, and pink conical beaks mounted on white surgical face masks (Kumamon TV 2020).⁸

Among her different forms, Amabie was also embroidered or printed on reusable face masks in Japan, available for purchase from several Internet outlets, adding an invisible spiritual protection to the physical barrier afforded by the fabric.⁹ Some drawings of Amabie wearing a protective face cover are visible on social media, reinforcing



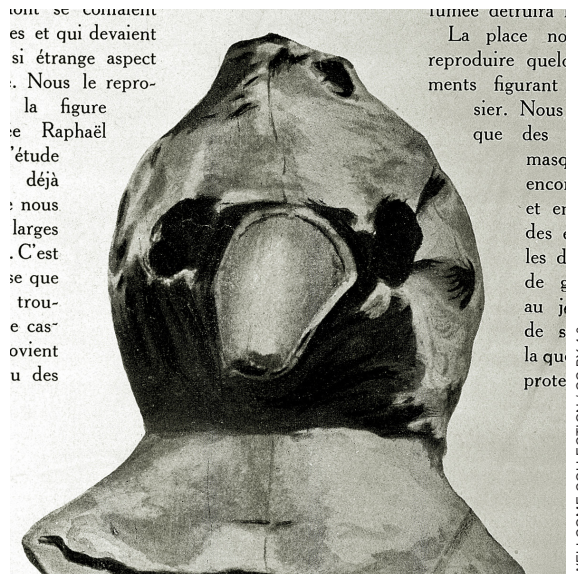
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Fig. 12. *Amabie and plague doctor. Ink on paper by Diana Moll, July 2020.*

Figs 13 & 14. *Scarecrows modelled on Amabie.*

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the message of protection offered, but also her response to the individual's 'civic responsibility' to wear one (cf. Wilkinson 2020 on issues of mask use and production), or a much earlier and ubiquitous one concerning health rituals of protection in Japan (Burgess & Horii 2012). Crossing the borders of Japan to become a global icon of protection (rather than just a mascot, as Alt 2020 and Johnston 2020 suggest), Amabie features in the work of California-based artist Diana Moll, who posted a series of daily ink drawings on Twitter under the moniker Bandit Rabbit; here Amabie is portrayed donning a long, pointed, dark mask with jutting, round goggle cut-ins.

The mask itself closely and rather explicitly resembles the iconic masks worn by plague doctors in Italy and France during the epidemics of the 17th and 18th century, which completely covered the face and/or head and had a frontal part shaped like a long beak (Ruisinger 2020). When I asked Diana about the association between the two, she reminisced how since she was a teenager she had been interested in the figure of the plague doctor and also, coincidentally, Japanese arts. At the suggestion of a friend, Diana made a drawing of Amabie and the plague doctor together. When one of her media followers asked her why they were portrayed together, she replied 'they are business associates and share the same mask maker'. Apart from wearing a beaky mask, the plague doctor is also a mask in the sense of a costume (as in Venice carnival's *Medico della Peste* mask, Fig. 10), and Amabie costumes also started being used in Japan (as in the Kumamon hygiene promotion dance).

The beak – and sometimes also the ears – of the plague doctor's mask were filled with garlic or fragrant substances like rue to 'clean' and purify the air before inhaling it, according to the miasmatic theory of disease considered valid at the time (Lynteris 2018: 449; Ruisinger 2020: 242-243). However, the plague doctor's iconic appearance was not so much an actual medical practice prevalent in wider Europe at the time, but a mediatic phenomenon of representation, circulated in print (Ruisinger 2020: 248) – rather like the circulation of *yōkai* images of Amabie in Edo's Japan. Both can be considered to be at the centre of their respective 'visual culture[s] of the plague' (Lynteris 2018: 451).

The beaked doctors looked like monsters or 'ghosts', wrapped in a waxy body cover with gloved hands, such that most of their human form was concealed (Fig. 11). Coronavirus is seen as a monster that needs to be opposed by another monster – as in the 1858 cholera epidemic in Japan when the fox, considered 'the culprit', could only be fought by another beast, the wolf of Mitsumine Shrine (Gramlich-Oka 2009: 51). In threatening to imperil our very existence as a species (Lynteris 2018: 452), the virus also acts as an hyperobject (Morton 2013a), since it has already cast the global population into a state of temporal and spatial suspension whose 'scale is [or rather was] beyond human imagination' (Bradley 2019: 168).

German print pages in the 18th century generally portray the beaked doctors as originating from and belonging to southern Europe – the plague always belongs to other realities where medical facilities are deemed inferior or less sophisticated (Ruisinger 2020: 248). Instead of approaching our contemporary world as interconnected in a web of *en* (ties and relations), the beginning of the pandemic witnessed a reproduction of an exclusionary trope of remoteness and exoticism. During an interview I gave for Uppsala University's special forum on Covid-19 at the end of March, I pointed out that during the current pandemic, in several affected contexts, the assumption that Covid-19 was a 'remote risk' – one which concerned other countries, other regions – was repeatedly made, until, in each context, it inevitably became a home epidemic (Hulth 2020). It seemed to me that the circulation of news and



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images of the 'pandemic-elsewhere' was an accepted fact, whereas the very real risk of the spread of the virus across borders was refuted and pushed beyond the inhabited world, like a spectre to be exorcized.

Three political epilogues

Rather than considering Amabie as just a cute, endearing mascot of the Covid-19 pandemic, I suggest looking at this Edo-period prophesizing mermaid *yōkai* as an agent of efficacy in a global ecology comprising emerging 'complex webs of *innen*' – networks of relations and causality (Jensen et al. 2016: 163-164). As a hybrid figure, Amabie's body reminds one of another liminal creature that has been closely associated with the coronavirus pandemic: the pangolin – a mammal with a scaly body, and a long beak-like face; an anomalous animal that is a remarkable 'matter out of place' (Douglas [1966] 2003: 36-41). The four-legged mammal's association with the contemporary 'plague' we live in is not a benign one: its consumption as a Wuhan delicacy (but in a 'dirty' wet market environment) was initially blamed (together with the consumption of bats) for the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (cf. Lynteris 2016 and 2019 for representations of Chinese wet markets and animals as villains). Considered the height of gastronomic exclusiveness and a source of *materia medica* in the Orient and on the African continent, where its scales and meat are used to ward off evil as well as to treat various diseases, the pangolin and other wild meats are nowadays removed from their ecological context to become items of marketized forms of outsourcing and consumption (Volpato et al. 2020).

Scaly mermaids were historically put to medicinal use, both in Western and Eastern worlds. In Japanese folklore, eating the flesh of *ningyo* could bring about an uncomfortable immortality, and mermaid water called *ningyosui* was sold as a medicine in Edo; the medicinal properties of *ningyo* seemed to be derived from encounters with the West, specifically Dutch sources, and date back to the 18th century (Chaiklin 2010: 247-248). In the contemporary commercial production of Amabie *wagashi* sweets, the confectionary becomes more than simply merchandise – an actualization of, in fact, eating mermaids. Like some Japanese *yōkai*, the hybrid pangolin appears to embody ambiguous properties, being associated with prosperity (indexed by the wealth required to acquire its meat/body), warning of/warding off evil or diseases (in its spiritual and medicinal capacity), but also as a herald of ominous 'plagues' (like the appearance of a beaked doctor on the scene).

Japan has already given space to a broad *yōkai* revival, during the post-war period of rapid modernization and urban development, when the *yōkai* embodied a sense of nostalgia for the rural past, as in the artistic work of Shigeru Mizuki's manga series (Foster 2008: 165). *Yōkai* have also been co-opted in disaster education for children; for example, after the 2011 Tohoku earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis, *yōkai* were used as social devices to transmit disaster risk information (Takada & Kondo 2019; see also Alt 2020). Amabie has become an effective messenger of public health awareness as well as a call to recover our relationship with the environment, marked by spiritual, if not supernatural, encounters with nature – when fishermen and local officials could seize swimming or prophesizing mermaids, be warned of impending calamities and maintain a form of communication with an ecology yet to be disrupted.

As Japan stood still and to a great extent became house-bound, Amabie was fished out from the seas of history to travel across societies. In fact, the same could be said of Amabie as was said of the manufactured mermaids of Edo times – that 'it didn't matter if Japanese mermaids weren't

real; enough people wanted them to be real in Japan and the West that there was an ongoing demand to see them. The manufactured fakes were a physical manifestation of this desire' (Chaiklin 2010: 260). Globally, many now would want Amabie to be real and defeat the Covid-19 pandemic. This year, the 23rd Scarecrow Competition in Tokyo was specifically dedicated to Amabie, and several effigies of the beaky mermaid lined Fukagawa Museum Street from 1 to 23 September (See front cover & Figs 13 & 14).

In a tweet posted on 31 May by artist Diana Moll, Amabie is dragged into the realm of politics and human rights, and is portrayed crying, standing beneath clouds encircling the face of George Floyd,¹⁰ one of the most recent victims of racist violence in the USA, who on 25 May, was killed by asphyxiation in Minneapolis by a policeman using an excessive technique for restraint. During two interviews arranged remotely, I asked Moll why she created this drawing. She answered that she could not avoid reflecting on the event, and that she had pondered for quite some time before going ahead with the drawing, since she did not want to appropriate the image incorrectly.

Moll painted Amabie and George Floyd together because 'you cannot separate the politics, the political climate, the environment, from health'. And neither could the Japanese mermaids of history, as they were messengers and witnesses – not only to natural and health calamities, but also to political murders (specifically in the 13th century, when they were associated with the murders of two shōguns and political unrest) (Chaiklin 2010: 243).

Conclusions

Diana Moll, the artist who started posting on Twitter, has drawn explicit connections between Amabie and the beaked plague doctor (Fig. 12), who appear together in her work, surrounded by emblems of skulls in the clouds, accompanied by oneiric animals (turtle deer) and grinning black dogs, making their way amid miasmatic clouds and bush fires. Global ecological degradation and the desolation of social and economic inequalities brought to the fore by the pandemic find their way into international news, scientific and media commentaries, as well as political action.

The Kyushu region has historically been the gateway to Japan and the hub of its relations with the rest of the world, including the exchange of medical knowledge between Dutch and Japanese doctors. A cute *yōkai* originating in Kumamoto prefecture has become a pandemic spiritual icon that has travelled well beyond the region's boundaries, following the same path as the mummified mermaids, becoming an element of exchange, connecting Western and Eastern worlds in the context of the current pandemic. Rediscovering Amabie and the plague doctor has allowed some individuals and communities to make past pandemics *present* (Lynteris 2020). Resorting to a prophesizing *yōkai* fits a popular paradigm that also characterizes public health and global health preparedness and their messages as forms of pandemic prophesizing (Caduff 2015: 5-7, 71-72).

Like the mermaids who appeared in Japan at a time when 'the natural order was far from distinct' (Chaiklin 2010: 260), Amabie has come to the surface again in an epoch when the order of nature has been so heavily affected by humans to become also indistinct. This is the world where a coronavirus has been able to emerge in Wuhan 'out of nowhere', as a spectre to haunt and bring the whole world back to self-confinement measures that hark back to pre-modern times. Amid all these crossed boundaries, the prophesizing *yōkai* Amabie from pre-modern Japan has become the superembodiment of a misplaced human condition, of negated bodies, neglected realities, suffocated identities, which all remain suspended – neither fish nor human, neither fish nor fowl. ●