

Special Feature

The Age of Allegory¹

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The Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 did not take place. Although what is called Tokyo 2020 is scheduled to start on 23 July 2021 with an opening ceremony held at the New National Olympic Stadium, it is obviously not Tokyo 2020. From its inception, the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 was already a simulacrum or a fantasy of reenacting the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. The COVID-19 pandemic has further transformed this simulacrum into a simulacrum of itself. Even Otomo Katsuhiro could not have predicted such a bizarre turn of events. In fact, a series of public scandals and costly debacles have already made this Olympics “special.” The government and those who have a substantial financial stake in Tokyo 2020 have tried hard to present it as a mega-event full of symbolic meanings that will boost the national economy and have positive social impact. Yet it has produced many unintended consequences betraying their expectations. These negative consequences can be regarded as the culmination of Japan’s lost 30 years which started in the early 1990s with the collapse of the so-called bubble economy. They reveal the Japanese society’s systemic inability to face up to facts as they are, analyze them objectively, and pursue the best possible course of action to solve problems or improve the given situation. The Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 as a non-event has given an opportunity for many Japanese to see the fundamental problems lying at the core of the system under which they live.

On October 1, 1964, the Shinkansen bullet train—which was also dubbed as the “super-express of our dreams” —started service between Tokyo and Shin Osaka just nine days before the opening of the Tokyo Olympics. On October 16, 2020, *Demon Slayer the Movie: Mugen Train* (『劇場版 鬼滅の刃 無限列車編』) was released throughout Japan. While the Mugen train’s passengers fall into sleep and dream of their innermost fantasies of happiness and euphoria when their tickets get punched by the conductor, the spectators of *Demon Slayer the Movie*, after handing admission tickets to a ticket-taker, were led into the world of a film-dream. The Mugen train (無限列車), whose final destination is infinite (=mugen) darkness, is also a train of dream and fantasy (=mugen or 夢幻) or a

phantom train (let's remember that Tanjiro appears as a racoon dog or tanuki in Inosuke's dream). The entire course of events leading up to Tokyo 2020 in 2021 has cruelly exposed that the Olympics is nothing more than a mass of fantasies comparable to the delusional dreams of passengers on the Mugen train. However, these passengers do not care whether their blissful experience is real or illusory. They just want to escape from a painful truth plaguing their soul. Then, what kinds of dreams did the spectators experience while watching *Demon Slayer the Movie* in the midst of the pandemic?

Demon Slayer the Movie consists of two segments of unequal length. The first—and longer—part shows Tanjiro's and other demon slayers' attempt to protect two hundred passengers on the Mugen train from the demon Enmu (魍魎). Although this part ends with a spectacular train crash, they succeed in preventing mass slaughter (i.e., the pandemic) by defeating Enmu. However, what initially appears as a climactic end of the film turns out to be a beginning of the second part, which is focused on a titanic battle between the Flame Hashira Rengoku Kyojuro and Akaza, the third strongest demon under Kibutsuji Muzan. Moving with lightning speed, they fight like two martial arts warriors. Akaza repeatedly urges Kyojuro to become a demon to gain eternal life. As a demon, Kyojuro could forever keep training himself to approach perfection by competing with Akaza. Kyojuro unyieldingly refuses Akaza's solicitation by emphasizing, among other things, the preciousness of finite life. The color association in the scene presents Akaza as a blue character and Kyojuro as a red one. The choice here is between demon and human, infinity and transience, and also the blue pill and the red pill, i.e., between a comforting world of illusion and an inhospitable world of reality. Yet there is a grain of doubt about what appears to be the indubitable difference between illusion and reality. For one of the meanings of "aka" in the name "Akaza" is "red," and this makes both the status of demon and the nature of illusion ambiguous.

Are we choosing the blue pill or the red pill? Are we in the position to make this choice? Do we know what the blue pill or the red pill is for us in the first place? *Demon Slayer the Movie* does not necessarily ask any of these questions directly. However, situated in the context of the global pandemic and the ongoing drama—either tragedy or farce—of the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020, this blockbuster movie cannot but bear additional layers of meanings.

The following special section on *Demon Slayer* is based on the online international webinar "Suspensions of Concentration: *Kimetsu no yaiba* and Blockbuster in the Year of the Global Pandemic," which was held on March 19 and 20, 2021. The webinar was generously supported by Waseda University's grant for international research collaboration, Waseda Brussels Office, and the Graduate School of International Culture and

Communication Studies (GSICCS). I would like to thank all participants, but especially the Brussels Office director Jean-Louis Moortgat for his unwavering support, Akiko Sugawa-Shimada, Seio Nakajima, Rayna Denison, Julien Bouvard, Lukas R.A. Wilde, and Marie Pruvost-Delaspre for their contributions to the success of the webinar. But most important of all, none of this has been possible without the help of my colleague Bryan Hartzheim. I thank him for his continuous support and dedication to GSICCS.

Endnote

- 1 This essay was written on June 25, 2021.