

Commentary

Digital Catfish and Technological Ritual: Experimental Rites through Earthquake Early Warning in Japan, by Lee Kangwon

“Here Fishy Fishy!”

Robert Oppenheim*

In this playful article, Lee Kangwon invites us to follow “catfish” through Japanese social seismology. Edo-period popular belief that the activity of catfish could reveal when earthquakes might occur gave rise to Japanese scientific attempts to test and operationalize this proposition. Experiments tested the hypothesis that observation of the behavior of catfish in laboratory aquariums might predict seismic activity in the following days. Far more lasting and successful than those attempts has been the catfish as icon of earthquake foreknowledge, in the form of Yurerun, the mascot of the Japanese Earthquake Early Warning System, and the personal digital devices—the “digital catfish” of Lee’s title—through which Japanese citizens potentially receive some seconds’ notice of earthquakes to occur. Ultimately, then, Lee’s sojourn through and with catfish is an investigation of the condition of “life surrounded by devices” that in turn mediate human attunement to the environment.

In what sense is anthropology prepared to go fishing with Lee, and in what sense is it not? Lee is at pains in his article to disavow any version of the anthropological culture concept that is purely idealist, solely oriented

* Professor, University of Texas at Austin.

toward human collectives, or imagined in terms of some authenticity of the humanly scaled. In his telling, such understandings of culture license a casting of technology as culture's antithesis or other, a force of alienation from what is properly human. Pace Heidegger, traditional anthropology, and much else besides, Lee thus suggests that any notion of culture that cannot make equal room for human relations with electronic gadgets hooked into a vast seismological network, right alongside the interiority of Edo ethnozoology, is not worth having. While "culture," perhaps, is not the most common critical target, the tune that Lee is whistling here (with a Busby Berkeley chorus of catfish behind him) shares notes with critiques of exclusively-social social sciences and exclusively-humanist humanities mounted by actor-network theory (ANT), post-ANT, feminist technoscience, and other developments principally deriving from science, technology, and society (STS) scholarship (most famously Latour 2007, whom he cites). Lee takes his place alongside those who, instead, call for the study of forms of life arising from the association of humans and non-humans and the assemblage of their agencies. At the same time, however, Lee recasts several "classical" anthropological concepts for the purpose of considering digital catfish in discussions, for instance, of "experimental rites," "technototemism," and "technological ritual." With the last, which is the most developed in the article, Lee points to the "order politics" in which digital catfish are entangled. The devices, their zoomorphism, and the Earthquake Early Warning network to which they are linked all collaborate to make or restore order concerning the seismic, just as religious ritual—and arguably the original catfish-earthquake association—did earlier in Japanese history. Where Lee also invokes more recent anthropology, as well as post-ANT attention to "cosmopolitics" and related ideas, is in his insistence that this order is not merely a matter of assembled agencies and extended selves but also of affective management and projections of the collective good.

Tracing such arrangement(s)—with an important dual sense of the process of arranging and the result of that process—gives the article its empirical substance. Notably, Lee delves into the temporalities of different orders of earthquake prognosis. Against the backdrop of a broadly acknowledged "trade-off between speed and accuracy," Lee notes the diminished status of both earthquake "prediction," a matter of seeing decades into the future, and earthquake "foresight," which promised three to four days' advance notice, due to their various failures to provide adequate warning of Japanese seismic events since the 1990s. In their place

there is now earthquake “forecast,” the world that digital catfish inhabit, in which signals are sent to inform the public mere seconds before tremors begin. As Lee discusses, however, the order of forecast also involves the tuning of responsibility, liability, and public affect. Foresight’s false positives had caused multi-day evacuations of cities with significant economic consequences, to the disrepute of scientists who provided the warnings; forecasting redistributes responsibility for false alarms and renders them relatively inconsequential at the same time. Meanwhile, those who create forecast order also worry deeply about producing the proper emotional response in those who hear the voice of digital catfish, in motivating them to self-protective action but not to panic. In this, the very cuteness of the catfish iconography and the cultural intimacy of the association of catfish and earthquakes plays some role in affective domestication. It is well worth swimming along with Lee’s rich study.

References

- Latour, Bruno. 2007. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.