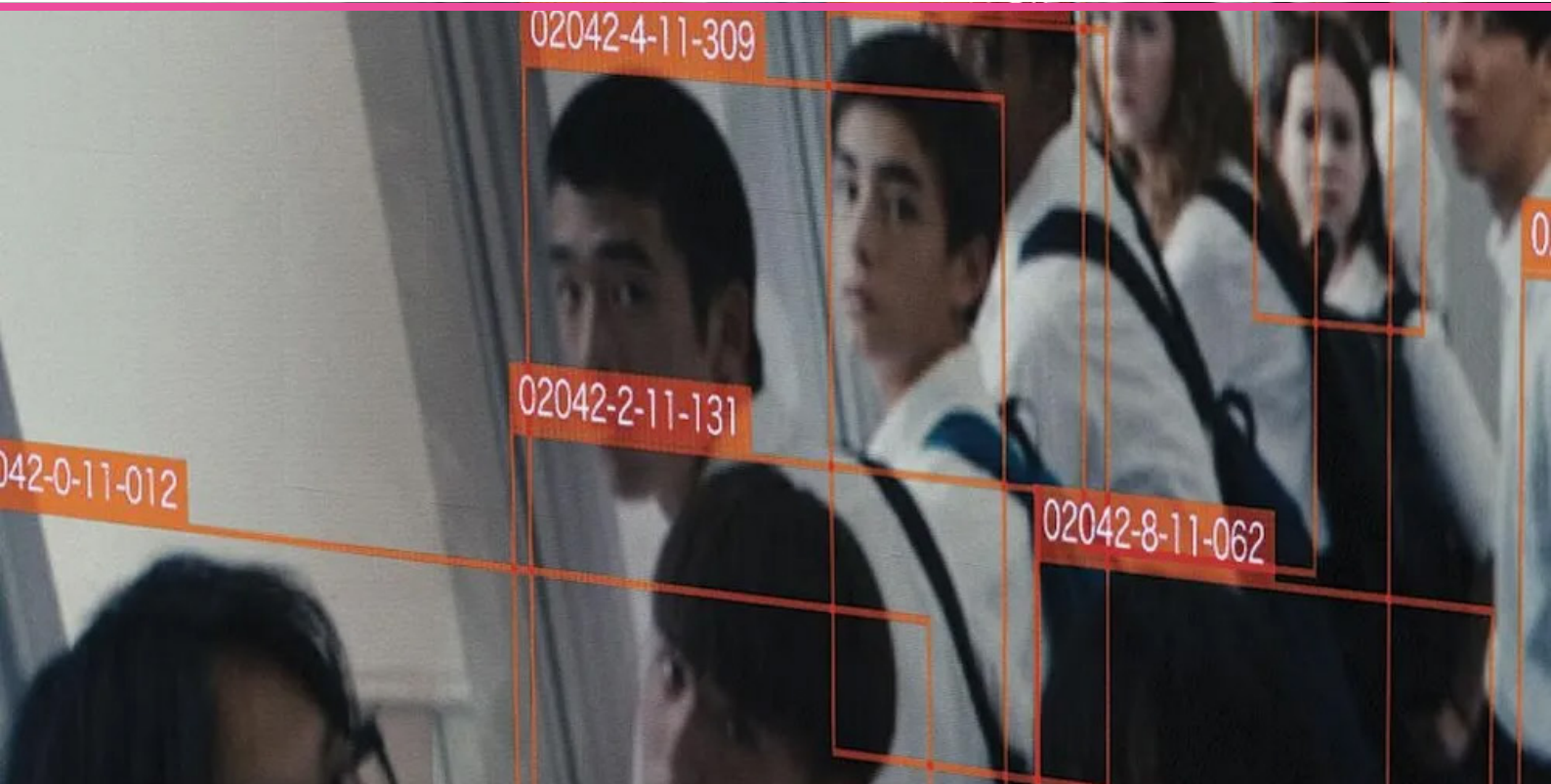




This issue of *The Japan Society Review* highlights the breadth and nuance of Japanese cultural narratives, from speculative fiction and independent film to historical biography and contemporary art. Covering literature, cinema, and more, the September issue offers a diverse and engaging set of reviews that reflect both enduring traditions and fresh creative perspectives.

We begin with *Splendours of Japan: Highlights from the Bodleian Library*, a beautifully curated volume that brings together rare manuscripts, prints, and artefacts from one of the world's most prestigious libraries. This review explores how the book illuminates Japan's literary and artistic heritage through the lens of Western collecting and scholarship.

In biography, *A Man of Resolve: Richard Henry Brunton* by Geoff Goolnik presents the life and legacy of the Scottish engineer who played a pivotal role in Japan's Meiji-era modernisation. Goolnik's account offers a compelling portrait of cross-cultural exchange and the enduring impact of Brunton's work on Japan's infrastructure and development.

Literary fiction is represented by *Eclipse* by Hirano Keiichiro, a philosophical and emotionally resonant novel that delves into questions of identity, memory, and moral ambiguity. In contrast, *Harlequin Butterfly* by EnJoe Toh challenges readers with its genre-defying blend of science fiction, surrealism, and metafiction, offering a cerebral and imaginative reading experience.

In film, *Happyend*, directed by Neo Sora, is a striking debut set in a dystopian near-future Tokyo, where AI surveillance and authoritarian control loom large and a group of friends navigate adolescence and rebellion in a society increasingly hostile to individuality.

Finally, we feature Shibuya Sho: *Falling from the Sky*, an exhibition that presents the haunting and ethereal works of the contemporary artist. Through evocative imagery and abstract forms, Shibuya's art invites reflection on fragility, transformation, and the unseen forces that shape our world.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

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Mayumi Donovan, Lucy Farley, Laurence Green, Conor Hodges, Sanae Inagaki and Graham J. Ironside.

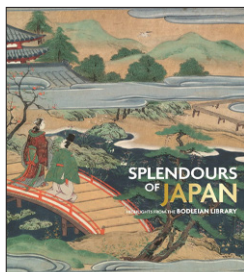
Image: Still from *Happyend* directed by Neo Sora (2024)

Splendours of Japan: Highlights from the Bodleian Library

Various contributors

Bodleian Library Publishing (2025)
ISBN-13: 978-1851245901

Review by Sanae Inagaki



Splendours of Japan offers a multifaceted introduction to the culture of Japanese books. Drawing on rare materials from the Bodleian Library's collection at the University of Oxford, the book explores the history of Japanese printed works from a variety of perspectives, including print technology, materials, binding, calligraphic styles, and publishing systems. Through these lenses, the reader gains insight into different aspects of Japanese culture as reflected through books.

This is neither a dry academic catalogue nor an overly simplified guide for beginners. Instead, it strikes a thoughtful balance between the two, opening up new perspectives for the reader. For me, this book offered me an opportunity to reconsider the historical and cultural contexts of Japanese books and publishing from angles I had previously overlooked.

One of the first chapters that captured my attention was chapter four by Marinita Stiglitz, 'The Japanese Book: Paper, Colour and Lustre'. This section highlights the materials and techniques essential to the physical creation of books, such as washi paper, pigments, and surface treatment. The chapter focuses on how Japanese books were physically constructed, framed through the triad of "paper, colour, lustre". The selection of paper, the use of colourants, and the finishing techniques each reflect the accumulated skill and knowledge of the craftspeople involved. These details are presented in a clear and accessible manner.

While books are often seen primarily as vessels for reading, storing, or transmitting information, this chapter reminds us that they are also crafted objects. Long before they are read, books are made – and in the process of their making, culture is already embedded. This shift in perspective is woven throughout the book.

Chapter five by Katja Triplett, 'Typography and Jesuit Mission Prints', focuses on the activities of the Jesuit mission in Japan and the role printed materials played in their work. The chapter sheds light on how printing served as a tool of religious, linguistic, and cultural exchange – a topic explored through specific examples and careful documentation.

Particularly intriguing is the discussion of multilingual books. Missionary texts often used both black and red ink to

distinguish different sections of the page, with each colour having a specific functional role. Some texts combined Romanised Japanese with Portuguese, revealing how the missionaries prioritised vernacular communication.

These choices suggest that the missionaries aimed not simply to impose European knowledge, but to speak directly to Japanese audiences in their own language. Through this practice of printing, we see evidence of cultural negotiation and adaptation—something this chapter conveys through concrete examples.

Chapter six by Laura Moretti, 'Commercial Publications in Tokugawa and Meiji Japan', presents the development of commercial publishing in Japan from the Edo period (1603–1868) into the Meiji era (1868–1912). It traces the evolution of the publishing network from its roots in 17th-century Kyoto to its expansion into Edo and Osaka in the 18th century. This movement is shown to have facilitated the circulation of knowledge and the integration of publishing into daily life.

One particularly interesting example is the account of Tsuruya Kiemon, a prominent Edo-period publisher. His work on publications such as Hachiman Taro Ichidaiki is analysed in relation to woodblock printing techniques and narrative structure, demonstrating the close connection between the practical aspects of publishing and the content itself.

Works by artists such as Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858) also circulated widely within this commercial framework, becoming familiar cultural objects for a broad urban readership. Reading this chapter, I was reminded how deeply publishing practices were embedded in the rhythms of everyday life in Edo Japan.

Overall, this book offers a wide-ranging view of Japanese cultural history through the medium of books. Its clarity and balance make it accessible to non-specialists while still offering valuable insight for those with prior knowledge.

I was especially drawn to the case studies in Chapters five and six. The records of intercultural contact through printed matter, and the growth of a commercial publishing industry, both reveal how books functioned as more than just containers for knowledge.

The book also includes chapters that explore how seasonal aesthetics – such as those found in waka poetry – were conveyed through book design, further demonstrating the richness of its subject matter. It is a valuable read not only for those interested in publishing and book history, but also for anyone looking to gain a fresh perspective on Japanese culture. §

A Man of Resolve: Richard Henry Brunton

by Geoff Goolnik

Troubador Publishing Ltd (2025)

ISBN-13: 978-18051448850

Review by Graham J. Ironside



On completion of a reading this biography, one cannot escape from concluding that Richard Henry Brunton (1841-1901) was indeed a man of a resolution displayed across a veritable panorama of settings and contexts – many of which were less than welcoming.

The author traces the many strands of a professional life led by a little publicised 19th century civil engineer spanning a humble beginning in north-east Scotland to Ireland via Japan. Justifiably remembered in some quarters for his Japanese lighthouse developments, Dr Geoff Goolnik's book concludes with accounts of Brunton's later life engaged in the emerging mineral-oil enterprises of Central Scotland and associated workers' educational and social movements locally. His broad career concluded with engagement in theatrical and domestic architecture and decoration. The writing of memoirs and histories drawn from his experience occupied him latterly.

Although the headline appeal of the book may lie in its examination of Brunton's outstanding Japanese civil engineering practices with over half of its content so located, much rich material remains to be mined elsewhere by the social scientist. Explorations of inter-governmental and inter-departmental relationships, formal and otherwise, help illuminate many trade and diplomatic exchanges of the time.

In human resource management fields too, Brunton's record stands up to close scrutiny even by modern standards. He was central in the progress of meaningful staff training procedures, regularising their application across a dramatically broad setting. He seemed to move with equal facility across fields of international politics, mercantile exchanges, professional management and social interactions whilst retaining his personal drive and highly individual style as a national Chief Engineer but still an imported foreign expert.

His works' input extended widely beyond lighthouse construction to encompass the planning and construction of streets, and a heavy duty iron bridge, drainage schemes, reservoirs, water supply and public lighting, much of which centred in Yokohama. Even the emergence of the settlement's new public park was to bear the mark of Brunton. Further still, harbour planning was to figure in his already bulging portfolio. Early telegraph services owe

much his involvement and support as, of course, does the modest initial appearance of the railway.

Brunton returned to Britain in 1876 eventually to secure managerial employment in Bathgate, Scotland, a centre of paraffin-oil production – a chemical not unconnected with his former life. Given his history of engagement in workers' education and personal development, it is not surprising that he soon became involved in local workers' institutes and clubs and successfully sought to extend their horizons. This move was not unexpected and provided public exposure to a range of topics on modern technology and current issues.

With the local decline of the mineral-oil industry, Brunton looked for new challenges.

Now followed a period of scientific writing and membership of professional associations as well as his entry into the world of commercial plasterwork in its various guises. The 1890's proved difficult but he successfully morphed into a talented theatre architect of highest standing in Ireland.

Personal and professional reminiscences were penned in a limited range towards the end of his life in April 1901.

The author has signposted an accessible, well-referenced and extensively-illustrated path leading towards the quite unique life of a less publicised 19th century colonial industrialist. The route lies through areas of architecture, commerce, politics, public works, diplomacy and culture before successive backdrops of feudal Japan, Victorian public works, Lowland Scottish industry's labour relations and commercial architecture and decoration.

Academic sources mentioned are impeccable with immediate references quoted at the bottom of relevant pages, extensive appendices and well-captured illustrations. The text prose is welcoming to the general reader whilst informative to the scholar whether historian or social researcher. The author has clearly achieved a fine balance between his study of a former Japanese bureaucratic context and an uncomplicated biography beyond mere deference to the appeal of a modern Japonism.

As told, Brunton's story is both entertaining and scholarly. The man was ambitious and clearly driven as he navigated the currents of modernism and traditionalism in widely differing settings. At point blank range, he was instrumental in the opening up of Japan and in its absorption of Western technology and practice in a unique blend of practical engineering and interpersonal relationships.

The reader is exposed to a multi perspective in reading the book as both a telling biography of personal resolution as well as an insightful window to developmental studies.

The final chapter successfully closes the piece in a deeply meaningful appraisal of a life lived to its measure and beyond. The author suggests its significance lies in the surmounting of a unique range of challenges raised in that

time. These are not necessarily grounded in that period but can be transposed easily and surely recognisable today. More than an agent of change, Brunton may be portrayed as

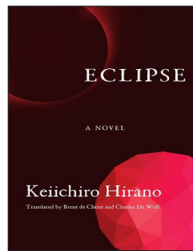
a genuine professional in his avowed belief in competence and skill in all undertakings but still displaying a touching humanity. [S](#)

Eclipse

by Hirano Keiichiro
translated by Brent de Chene and
Charles De Wolf

Columbia University Press (2024)
ISBN-13: 978-1782275909

Review by Laurence Green



On the cusp of the Renaissance, a young Dominican friar leaves Paris for Florence, chasing the wisdom of ancient, pre-Christian manuscripts. But his path takes an unexpected turn when he meets a mysterious alchemist in a remote village - an encounter that draws him into a perilous and morally perplexing search for enlightenment. As their fates entwine, catastrophe descends: weird disasters ravage the village, climaxing in a total solar eclipse that alters everything.

Hirano Keiichiro burst onto the literary scene in 1998 with *Eclipse* like a revelation. Written while he was still an undergraduate, it won the coveted Akutagawa Prize and stunned readers with its brilliance. Part historical odyssey, part philosophical meditation, *Eclipse* immerses readers in the mysticism of medieval Europe while asking probing questions that still haunt us today: the collapse of rigid worldviews, the struggle between light and darkness, the yearning for transcendence.

For English readers coming to *Eclipse* from one of Hirano's other works in translation - *A Man*, or *At the End of the Matinee* - be warned, despite its slim length, *Eclipse* is another entity entirely. Whereas Hirano's later novels have invariably targeted a sleek, coolly intellectual but resolutely mainstream seam (*At the End of the Matinee* was even turned into a blockbuster film), *Eclipse* is an exercise in pure, undiluted literary fiction - an Akutagawa winner in the very paragon of its potential form; the sheer love of language and its capacity to craft not just narrative and setting, but a singularity of feeling that is staggering at times, especially when we consider how young Hirano was when he wrote this short novel.

On the face of it, *Eclipse*'s historical setting and plot are simple - comparisons to Umberto Eco's classic *The Name of the Rose* are apt - but if this was just a vaguely religious-themed, slow-paced tale of a journey from one place to another, there would be little to mark it out. What positively sings from every page of *Eclipse* though is the sense of assured style - a bizarre, and often unsettling quaintness in word choice and syntax that makes the novel feel like it was

written hundreds of years ago. You don't just read about a world of the late 15th century, you feel it - this sepia toned visage of rural backwaters that deftly manages to never descend into old-timey caricature. Instead, this world, for all its strangeness, is resolutely real - and all the scarier for it.

And that's something we have to mention - this book is not for the faint hearted. From the very first page, wrapped up in the archaic language and postulations of antique philosophy and religious dogma, there is a sense of malaise to this world that builds and builds with palpable tension, tightening and tightening until we reach a dramatic reveal roughly midway through the book. In the tradition of great horror-thriller movies like *Don't Look Now*, we feel something is deeply, deeply *wrong* with the village that forms the novel's core setting, without ever being able to put our finger on precisely why. To say more would be to spoil a great denouement, but suffice to say, once revealed, we realise we are absolutely no longer in the world of the known any longer, and what follows only furthers the descent into a world that shocks and astounds us. The final climax is a masterpiece of dramatic tension, but also shirks nothing in terms of graphic visuality - the sensuality, violence and sheer explosiveness of Hirano's prose here match any X-rated movie, and those on the queasy side are advised to tread carefully.

The translators, who have rendered Hirano's text with masterful depth and verbosity - a task in itself given how many obscure references to medieval lore and alchemy there are - also contribute an insightful introduction to the book too. This raises a thorny question; whether to actually read it before the novel or not. The advantage in doing so is that it clarifies and contextualises a lot of Hirano's creative decisions for phrasing the novel in the way he does - I was left wondering whether to have gone into its strangeness 'cold', so to speak, would have simply been too much. And yet, to read the intro does to some extent spoil what is to follow, and my feeling was that this accompaniment would have perhaps served better as an afterword. Whichever option the reader chooses, the analysis offered in this section is crucial in understanding the literary quality of the text, as well as simplifying to some degree what can at times be its more complex and obtuse qualities.

The introductory section makes note of how at the time of its release, *Eclipse* saw Hirano hailed as a kind of second coming of Mishima Yukio, and it is certainly true that in its astounding visual and sensual qualities, there

is something of the same spirit there. There is a filmic ambience throughout that helps lend much needed power to the book's slower sections, as well as punctuating its climaxes with an even stronger intensity of feeling. *Eclipse* is a novel that, in the best of sense, rewards the patient reader who may struggle through the early passages, where it is more unclear where things are going in terms of our young protagonist's journey to the mysterious village - a point at

which the pace finally begins to quicken. What is evidently clear though, by the time you reach the end, is that this is a work of the most profound literary texture - leaving mental images stamped in the reader's mind that will last a lifetime. The aftertaste is bitter, unsavoury even at times - this is not a 'pretty' novel in any shape or form - but there is a dark beauty to it all the same. S

Harlequin Butterfly

by EnJoe Toh
translated by David Boyd

Pushkin Press (2024)
ISBN-13: 978-1782279778

Review by Conor Hodges



Enigmatic baby-food entrepreneur turned publisher of hyper-specific books A. A. Abrams spends his life predominantly in transit, flying to and fro in economy class waving around a net that catches ideas. Flights are the perfect place, Abrams explains, to capitalise on our idle mid-flight thoughts that, with nowhere else to go, fly around like imaginary butterflies ripe for the catching. But why can Abrams, himself a version of another businesswoman-philanthropist also called A. A. Abrams, see these imaginary butterflies, and where did he get the net? And what does A. A. stand for? All roads, as it turns out, lead to Vladimir Nabokov.

In just over 100 pages, EnJoe Toh's Akutagawa Prize-winning *Harlequin Butterfly* takes us on a Möbius strip-shaped journey about language, creation, writing and imagination. Characters read prohibitively titled works such as *Untold Tales for Those with Three Arms* and all search for one another in a futile doom loop towards the end of the beginning.

For those acquainted with EnJoe's previous work, *Self-Reference ENGINE*, *Harlequin Butterfly*'s deceptively sparse plot that collapses and spirals in on itself will be familiar territory. But for those that aren't, it can be tempting to chalk everything up to a Lynchian fever dream where getting lost is the whole point, and attempting an understanding is futile. Indeed, when it was announced as the winner of the Akutagawa Prize in 2012, this was a common criticism, and it was met by some in Japan with confusion as to how something so unintelligible could win such a mainstream literary prize.

Upon finishing my first reading, I sympathised completely with this view, feeling at a loss and unable to weave together the disparate threads that had seemingly been left unconnected. Had I not been writing this review,

I probably would have left it there. However, on my second reading, armed with a slightly better understanding of the plot of this book and – crucially – that of an entirely different novel altogether, *Harlequin Butterfly* unlocked itself for me, showing me the way out of the woods and rendering almost all of my notes from the first time around essentially useless. Much like in Nabokov's *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, two books that clearly influenced EnJoe, I was able to follow the breadcrumbs that had been waiting for me the entire time.

The novel ostensibly revolves around A. A. Abrams's search for the elusive polyglot author Tomoyuki Tomoyuki, who writes a prodigious amount of material in the language of whatever country he stays in, leaving behind reams and reams of pages in hotel rooms. Tomoyuki Tomoyuki appears to collect all material around him – adverts, kitchen cupboards, labels – and eventually synthesises them into a unified voice. After Abrams's death before the "beginning" (a word I use tentatively) of our novel, agents working for her Abrams Institute endlessly continue her search for the author, submitting seemingly completely unrelated reports for remuneration and attempting to find Tomoyuki Tomoyuki by travelling and writing copiously, essentially invoking him through mimicry. EnJoe's untraceable author and Abrams's fixation on the creator rather than the creation is a striking symbol of readers' desires to unearth the author hidden underneath layers of characters and metaphor in their work, even if it was never their intention to be found.

This strange cat-and-mouse between the characters is complicated, however, by the frequent change of perspectives. Our first "I", a person sitting next to A. A. Abrams on the plane while he explains his imaginary-butterfly catching, is revealed to be a character in a piece by Tomoyuki Tomoyuki, translated by our second "I", an agent for the Abrams Institute. Our third "I" Tomoyuki Tomoyuki himself, at once a weaver of textiles, a writer and a female butterfly that lays its egg into the mind of another version of himself that hatches into an idea for the piece that is eventually translated by the agent, is potentially the source of everything we read, the secret that everyone is trying to work towards, the beginning and the end of the endless loop.

But what explains the plot's central conceit, that Tomoyuki Tomoyuki is able to acquire languages at superhuman speeds? Perhaps, EnJoe seems to suggest, that art and creation are the gateway. As Tomoyuki Tomoyuki himself offers, writing is 'a pivot. A set phrase. A sequence of words to get you from here to there. This one takes the form of a door'. Perhaps all Tomoyuki Tomoyuki is doing is traversing the world through the portals opened by his own creative voice.

There is a strong Borgesian motif here. The writer who forgets everything he writes as soon as he's written it but can immediately replicate languages upon hearing them immediately recalled the unfortunate man in Borges's *Fictions* who remembers every memory perfectly, and every instance of remembering the memory creates a new memory for him to remember, and so on. Labyrinths also abound in the novel: the Moroccan city of Fez, where we first get a glimpse into Tomoyuki Tomoyuki's process as an author, is described as 'a maze to disappear in' in a beautiful description that may act as a cipher for understanding the book as a whole.

The most important influence on EnJoe and the catalyst for everything that happens in *Harlequin Butterfly* is the looming presence of Vladimir Nabokov, both in his fictional form as an old time-bending, chess-playing lepidopterist in the novel and as a very real writer in our world. His greatest influence on the story comes from his final novel, *Invitation to a Beheading*, and the fictional harlequin butterfly – the Latin binomial of which is *Arlequinus Arlequinus*, from which Abrams gets his name – that Nabokov drew for his wife Vera at the front of her copy of the book.

Taking the form of a "fictional autobiography", *Look at the Harlequins!* is narrated by a fictional version of Nabokov, Vadim Vadimovic, another double-named protagonist. Each character is an embodiment of one of his other novels, and the result is an incredibly self-referential work that draws upon the Nabokov mythos and, despite ostensibly being about the author's life, enhances his mystery. *Harlequin Butterfly*, both in name and subject matter, is a direct response to this work, and Nabokov's powerful influence

on the novel is reflected by his character's ability to rewrite the beginning and claim the discovery of the imaginary butterflies as his own.

With Nabokov and Borges as strong influences, it is only natural that EnJoe chooses to fixate so heavily on language in this novel. While Borges wrote almost exclusively in Spanish, he famously remarked in an interview with William F. Buckley that he found English a 'far finer language' than Spanish because of its blend of Germanic and Latin words and the fact that 'you can do almost anything with verbs and prepositions'. Nabokov, too, began the task of writing in English after emigrating to the US, eventually mastering it and producing some of the most acclaimed works of the twentieth century. Tomoyuki Tomoyuki's ability, then, may be understood as an expression of the universality of human communication. He even says as much, remarking that 'people say the same things all over the world'. Adding an extra metatextual layer to this is reading the novel through David Boyd's excellent translation, only further highlighting the universal value that stories told through language can have.

While reading *Harlequin Butterfly*, I often thought of a line from Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature*:

I have tried to teach you to read books for the sake of their form, their visions, their art. I have tried to teach you to feel a shiver of artistic satisfaction, to share not the emotions of the people in the book but the emotions of its author – the joys and difficulties of creation.

I can feel EnJoe's brain working in the margins of the novel, and the sheer creative power it took to produce this intricate, confusing, strange little puzzle of a story. As Tomoyuki Tomoyuki says, 'The chain of creation goes on and on. Its form is constantly changing, cycling through the stages of transformation, setting new life in motion'. EnJoe has certainly made clear his ability to create and transform conventional narrative with this novel, and I am excited to read whatever works of his find their way to being translated into English. [S](#)

Happyend

Directed by Neo Sora (2024)

In cinemas across the UK from 19 September 2025

Review by Mayumi Donovan

From the start, you're pulled into a near-future Tokyo – disorienting red lights leave you unsure of where you are. *Happyend* is a dystopian drama that touches on issues

we're facing today – politics, society – all seen through the eyes of a group of high school friends somewhere in Tokyo. At its heart is the complex relationship between Yuta (Kurihara Hayao) and Kou (Hidaka Yukito), which reflects the film's deeper themes of friendship and the tough choices of growing up. It asks a powerful question: do you follow society's rules just to fit in?

We follow five friends trying to sneak into an illegal club. After getting stopped at the door, Yuta – an eager DJ

wannabe – and Kou slip inside. They lose themselves in the pounding music, but the fun doesn't last long. The club gets raided by police. While everyone else runs, Yuta stays behind, immersed in the music. That moment really shows how important music is to him.

From the start, it's clear these five don't follow the rules. They just want to have fun together. After a prank involving Yuta and Kou, the school cracks down with a new surveillance system. Breaking rules adds "points" – a cold way to keep control. Visually, the surveillance points system gives the film its most dystopian feel. The principal (Sano Shiro) is strict, almost military, and only makes things worse as tensions rise.

Despite the serious themes, the film balances it with dry humour. Especially Ata-chan (Hayashi Yuta) brings light-hearted moments with his jokey actions in intense situations.

At NYFF, director Neo Sora said the film was inspired by the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, which caused huge fires in Tokyo. That feeling of a looming disaster quietly runs through the story. There's also a subtle thread about Japan's darker past – colonialism, immigration control – not front and centre, but always there in the background.

The soundtrack by Lia Ouyang Rusli stands out. It reminded me of the emotional depth in Sakamoto Ryuichi's work – he's Sora's father. The music is gentle, nostalgic, and feels like it was guided by Sora himself. He also directed *Opus*, Sakamoto's final work, where the camera lingers on the piano and Sakamoto's performance in a meditative way. That same sensitivity flows through *Happyend*.

I also really liked the cinematography. It creates a city that feels both unfamiliar and familiar at the same time. There's a sharp contrast between the muted cityscape and school, and Kou's house – a Korean restaurant – which bursts with colour and life, giving it a "lived-in" energy. The earthquake's impact shows in clever ways: a shaking screen, objects falling off shelves. Sometimes the sound gets eerily quiet, adding to the tension.



A big reason the film works so well is the casting. The friends' chemistry feels real and believable. Yuta and Kou give strong, layered performances — you see both their softer and angrier sides. Sano Shiro nails the role of the principal. As always, he's brilliant playing the villain.

Happyend drops you into a future Tokyo, but somehow it feels nostalgic. Watching it took me back to my high school days – when I was a bit rebellious, pushing back against the rules. The film connected me to that part of myself, even though it's set in the future.

The most impactful moment comes toward the end – the final frozen shot is powerful. It leaves you wondering: what now? It lingers, full of unspoken meaning and tension. [S](#)

Exhibition - Shibuya Sho: Falling from the Sky

at Unit Gallery, London
(20 August – 18 September 2025)

Review by Lucy Farley

Every day, Shibuya Sho rises and looks out of his apartment window onto a Brooklyn dawn, photographing the sky overhead for reference. Later, he will purchase a copy of *The New York Times* from the stand downstairs and paint the morning sky across the front page. This became part of

the artist's daily routine during lockdown, and a selection of the accumulated results of the practice was exhibited at Unit Gallery, Hanover Square. It seems that Shibuya's art is rarely discussed without reference to the strict regime behind its production – I am reminded of Hokusai's well-known practice of painting a daily talismanic *shishi* (Chinese lion), the fame of the routine far outstripping that of any individual work. The collection of Shibuya's work presented at Unit Gallery was a striking sequence of broadsheet pages, the main columns of text redacted neatly and entirely by

squared-off swatches of colours that are vivid against the pulp grey of the paper.

Each sheet, effectively time-stamped by the date on the masthead, offers a window onto any given morning in New York. Just as no two days are the same, the selection spans a huge array of colours and moods: from gradients of deep indigo (Sunday, October 29, 2023) to a shock of molten red (Friday, February 23, 2024) to a delicate dove-grey haze (Thursday, November 9, 2023). But the paintings included in *Falling from the Sky* all have one thing in common: it is raining. Shibuya has rendered raindrops in a highly realistic *trompe l'oeil* effect, sometimes as fat spheres that seem to tremble upon the surface of the acrylic paint, sometimes as a crazed delta of wind-blown track marks. These works are beautiful. And it is the beauty of the mundane which the artist seeks to capture: the tranquil sanctuary offered by nature, which is all too often overlooked amongst the noise of everyday existence.

In an interview with *It's Nice That* magazine earlier this year, Shibuya talked about the inspiration behind this series. He began to paint over *The New York Times*, he said, 'almost as if to erase the news with nature, and that kept me sane'. Since then, Shibuya's work seems to have shifted into a more meditative mode, and then again into a more overtly political one – his most recent works are still in the same '*The New York Times*' format, but directly cite news stories: a huge, cartoonish broken heart titled 'BIG, BEAUTIFUL BREAKUP' on the day *The Times* reported the split between Trump and Elon Musk; or blackened scraps against a pale gauzy blue titled 'EVACUATION TO ?' in reference to the evacuation leaflets dropped by Israeli forces on Gaza. In contrast, this more introverted series takes as its focus the gossamer streaks of a spring shower across a pane of glass, the darkening threat of a sky in an imminent storm. It does, albeit obliquely, still meditate upon the connection between the natural world and the unfolding of global news. In the introductory video played in the gallery's foyer, the artist reminds us that elsewhere, the sky is not so gentle:

'It's not rain that falls, but bombs. Where I see beauty, others see smoke [...] These paintings are reminders of what peace looks like. And how fragile it is'.

As I walked around the space, peering onto one New York morning after another, I was struck by the relationship between the brief, five-line weather forecasts left unredacted on the paper along with the rest of the masthead and that familiar, unchanging Gothic typeface. These forecasts are always different, but naturally use repeated terminology: 'drizzle', for example, appears on multiple days, yet the corresponding paintings are diverse: gentle stripes of dusky lilacs and greens on Friday, December 29, 2023 ('Some drizzle in the morning'), or bright peach bloom set against a dense crackle of steely blue on Monday, March 4, 2024 ('Morning drizzle'). It serves to demonstrate the limitations of the strictly curtailed forecast in contrast to the complexity of lived experience, 'shifting and sliding', to use the artist's words, like the patterns of rain on glass.

Falling from the Sky was also preoccupied with questions of time, and of control. Artistic production is constant – Shibuya produces a work every morning, rain or shine, but as inclusion in this exhibition was dependent on the condition of rain, curatorial coherence is decided by the elements themselves. In this respect, absences took on meaning too – though this was only a small selection of what must be hundreds of 'rainy day' paintings produced (in the video, Shibuya tells us that statistically in New York it rains about 121 days a year), I began to wonder whether the spans of time without a representative painting indicated periods without rain – 'sunny intervals' in the exhibition's scope. The order in which the paintings were hung posed further questions: in an exhibition which otherwise followed a strictly chronological timeline, the decision to reverse this order on one large wall was striking.

This exhibition was an excellent introduction to Shibuya's work, and offered a tranquil meditation on the importance of fleeting moments of beauty against an ever-shifting backdrop of bad news. §

