

A Japanese Science Fiction Story: Unno Jūza's *The Secret of the Cosmic Dust*

Till Weingärtner (transl.)

Introduction

Unno Jūza 海野十三 (1897-1949), often called the “founding father of Japanese Science Fiction”¹, was born in Tokushima in 1897 as Sano Shōichi.² In the mid-1920s his acquaintance with Yokomizo Seishi 横溝正史 (1902-1981), one of Japan’s most well-known authors of mystery novels, led to the publication of his debut story in the magazine *Shinseinen* 新青年, which was at that time edited by Yokomizo. Unno’s own background as a graduate in Electrical Engineering from Waseda University is reflected in his early masterwork, the scientific detective story *Denkiburō no Kaishi Jiken* 電気風呂の怪死事件 [*The Case of the Mysterious Death in the Electric Bath*] from 1928. His early work was often aimed at younger readers and was influenced by foreign mystery stories such as Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes series. Throughout the 1930s Unno’s work took on more and more elements from science fiction and can be seen to reflect the political state of Japan, its militaristic expansion into East Asia and the prospect of war with the United States. Military conflict with Martians, for example, becomes a reoccurring motif in his stories, as also seen in the story presented below. As a science fiction writer, Unno was drafted into the Ministry of the Navy to contribute to the ministry’s propaganda efforts. The short story introduced here, entitled *Aru uchūjin no jiken* ある宇宙塵の秘密³ in the original, can be read as a prime example of Unno’s work written in this context. Japan’s defeat in the war came as a big shock to Unno. This is seen most vividly in his diaries, posthumously published under the title *Unno Jūza Haisen Nikki* 海野十三敗戦日記 [*Unno Jūza's War Defeat Diary*].⁴ Between 1945 and his death in 1949, Unno continued writing science fiction, but now with a focus on future utopias. Some of Unno’s stories have been translated into English and published by J.D. Wisgo, most recently in the collection *Fast Forward Japan: Stories by the Founding Father of Japanese Science Fiction*.⁵

¹ J.D. Wisgo, “About the Author”, in Unno Jūza, *Fast Forward Japan: Stories by the Founding Father of Japanese Science Fiction*. Translated by J.D. Wisgo. (Portland, Orgeon: Arigatai Books, 2021), 162.

² Also see the overview of his life and work in the online *SFE: The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*: https://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/unno_juza (last access 26 December 2021)

³ Unno Jūza, “Aru uchūjin no himitsu” in *Jūhachi-ji no ongaku burō* (Tokyo: Hayakawa Shobō, 1976), 149-160.

⁴ *Unno Jūza Haisen Nikki* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1971)

⁵ Unno Jūza, *Fast Forward Japan: Stories by the Founding Father of Japanese Science Fiction*.

Unno Jūza: The Secret of the Cosmic Dust

It was almost midnight when I locked the door to the television laboratory. My steps crunched loudly on the gravel path leading to the back gate. I started to tremble.

“Just go home early for once and have a celebratory drink. Now you are a professor! This way the dead professor may find peace ...”

I remembered the friendly words of my colleagues from earlier that day. I didn't care much for drinking, but I had a feeling that I really should have left earlier. Without understanding the reason, a shiver ran down my spine. My heart felt heavy. I had the vague feeling that a ghost might appear out of the dark. Was this a sign of angina pectoris, caused by my lack of exercise? No, I knew the real reason for it was my uneasiness at my promotion to professor. Professor Shibuya had lost his life three years ago, which had left the professorship in the television laboratory vacant. His death had made it possible for someone as young as me to become a professor, and this had left me with overwhelming guilt.

I would not have felt that way if Professor Shibuya, who I had almost worshipped, had died a normal death. However, his was such a curious end, the like of which had never happened before. He had disappeared, believed to be cosmic dust in the sky. Counting the number of people who had turned into cosmic dust, there was only one: Professor Shibuya.

“Going home now, are we?” the guard at the back gate asked. I gave him a silent nod and passed beside him through the gate.

“Oh yes, it was a cold night like this when the professor left earth ...”

Memories of that night's events came flooding back.

Back then, Professor Shibuya had just completed his revolutionary invention of a flying television device. “Just look at this outstanding performance! It can receive visual images from distances of up to a billion kilometres!”, he had said excitedly, admiring his invention. If only I had understood what idea lay behind those ‘billion kilometres’, perhaps I could have prevented what happened. But ignorant as I was, I had done nothing.

At that time the rocket known as the *Red Devil*, built by the Schmidt Company, had just arrived in Tokyo from Germany and had been assembled in our laboratory. The following May, Mars would be as its closest to Earth. Dr Schmidt had planned a trip to Mars, bringing his rocket with him to Tokyo, due to Tokyo being best placed for such an endeavour. A building for the rocket launch was erected on the roof of the institute. The construction was finished, and essential experiments completed, giving the scientists from abroad the opportunity to unwind after Christmas and prepare for the new year. It was during that period that the fateful incident occurred. At midnight, on a cold December night not dissimilar to this one, a sudden flash of lightning that hit the roof of the institute causing the *Red Devil* to lift off into the sky with an ear-splitting roar.

Terrified people from the neighbourhood rushed out to see what was happening, but as they gathered in front of the institute it was over already. The German rocket had already reached the stratosphere and left just a dim beam of light in its wake.

I heard about the disaster at my lodgings and naturally rushed to the institute right away, although there was nothing I could do. It was totally unclear at this point why the rocket had launched. Some of us speculated that a gas explosion might have been the reason. I expected Professor Shibuya to be able to explain and have a plan of action ready on my arrival, but he did not show his face at all that night. I would only see him again the following morning.

I still had no suspicious when I unlocked the door to the institute the next morning, as always, at half past eight. I immediately took off my coat, slipped on the white lab coat and read the notes on the blackboard wall. As it was normally me who was the first in the laboratory, it had become common for Professor Shibuya to write down tasks for me to fulfil the day before.

ON ARRIVAL, TELEVISION NO2 START! IMAGE RECIEVER FREQUENCY NEAR 70.000 SELECTION, MODULATION! CATHODE LINE: CHECK COOLING!

The instruction surprised me. Attempting to receive an image without an opposite site didn't make sense. Without understanding the professor's intentions, the plan seemed strange. I went over to the instruments, but Television Device No1 which had been there the day before was gone, leaving an empty spot behind, reminding me of a gap between someone's teeth.

"The professor must have taken the device to initiate an image transfer. So typical, leaving like that without specifying the exact starting times!" I muttered to myself.

Still clueless, I had not drawn the connection between the events of the previous night and the instructions on the board. As ordered, I positioned myself in front of the image receiver and switched it on. The cathode line started to glow. As I wrapped my hand around the control and started to search in the area of 70,000 kC an unusually strong reaction occurred. After precise tuning, stripes came into focus on the screen. As the synchronisation took hold, a fixed image gradually appeared in the upper part of the screen. It was the shape of an odd-looking human being. On his face he was wearing something resembling a respiratory mask, from which three pipes dangled down like elephants' trunks. Those pipes were connected to the valve of a high-pressure vessel. Behind the figure were measuring displays, their white needles twitching left and right in front of black scales. What a strange room! What a bizarre human being!

"Uruki! What time do you make it?"

The voice which came through the receiver's speakers was, to my surprise, the voice of the professor.

"It is eight hours, 42 minutes and 31 seconds."

"Alright, a time lag of seven seconds. This means we are up to speed, at 50,000 km/h."

50,000 km/h! Finally, hearing these words from the professor, I grasped the connection to the events of last night. The professor was inside the rocket! That was it! Why had I not realised it earlier?

"Oh, so you hadn't realised yet?" the professor asked, a big smile on his face. "I feel sorry for the Schmidt Company, but I had no choice. I could not let this opportunity pass by. I am

going to send a television broadcast of my Mars expedition, so do inform the countries of the world about my plans. Given the current circumstances it will take seven or eight months until I reach Mars. I want everyone to see it. I must not miss out on this opportunity. Please consider what you can do to contribute, so my sacrifice won't be in vain."

I didn't have the courage to criticise the professor for his daredevil plan. He had been waiting for his chance and had built the set of portable devices. Then he had tricked Dr Schmidt and taken off into space. He did not expect to come back to earth in one piece, but his scientific passion had carried him away on this foolhardy mission.

It was with shock that the world learned of his plans. Almost as one, leading journalists jumped on planes with scientists from their own countries hoping to conduct an interview with the professor in his rocket as soon as possible, using receiver no. 2 which was now in my custody. At lightning-speed foreign scientists began to construct identical television receivers and requested permission to broadcast images of the Mars expedition to their respective nations. There seemed to be general agreement that there was still time to finish their preparations if they worked quickly, as the estimated arrival on Mars was still seven to eight months away.

And indeed, after four months the image receivers were put into service in every country around the world. The eyes of the world were now on Professor Shibuya as he steered the rocket.

But as space is not as exciting as Ginza Avenue, it was only natural that little by little people began to feel bored by the monotonous reports from the *Red Devil*.

Exactly five months had passed when an incident occurred, sending shockwaves across the world. Due to a malfunction, the *Red Devil* now hovered helplessly in space. According to Professor Shibuya, he had been unable to identify the cause of the rockets sudden halt. Astronomers and physicists from around the world were fascinated by this riddle, and soon after, the Dutch physicist Dr Saal was able to solve it before everybody else.

"We have succeeded in solving the puzzle of the *Red Devil's* interim stop", he explained in front of the image receiver. "The *Red Devil* entered the intercept point of universal gravitation. As long as its considerable mass is not reduced, the current situation will continue indefinitely."

The world was in shock. Trapped at the intercept point of universal gravitation? How was something like this possible? It was like a trap set on the boundary of the uninhibited realms. Once trapped, escape seemed, at least for the moment, impossible. I witnessed over the next few days the face of my venerated professor showing more and more signs of stress.

"Uruki!" the professor addressed me suddenly one morning. "I have decided to attempt one last thing. I have come up with a plan, but I will have to leave my place in front of the transmission device ..."

What was the professor planning? I could not even start to imagine. Soon, his contorted face disappeared from the screen. At first, I did not think much of it, but then something remarkable occurred.

“Special Report! The *Red Devil* has slowly started to accelerate again! Hurrah! Hurrah! But why is Professor Shibuya nowhere to be seen? We have tried to establish contact but have not received any response!” reported JOAK,⁶ the development baffling the entire world.

Yes, the rocket had slowly started to gain speed. But the pilot, who was on everybody’s mind, did not reappear on the screens.

I received a call from abroad. “It is Dr Saal.”

“Professor Shibuya’s extreme sacrifice has put the rocket back in motion. I assume he is not onboard anymore. He must have abandoned the rocket. The more the distance between him and the rocket increases, the more the balance of the gravitational forces which affect the rocket is broken. That’s why it has started to move again. He has made the decision to sacrifice his life for the benefit of the entire human race and to set the rocket and transmission in motion again. The images, that we are going to see, were paid for with the professor’s life and are therefore unimaginably valuable.”

The pilotless rocket travelled ever closer to Mars, relying now only on its gyrocompass. It appeared like a ghost from an old fairy tale. But in reality, it was a ghost ship for our own times. The famous Canal Belt could clearly be recognised. People all around the world forgot to sleep and eat and came together in front of Professor Shibuya’s image receivers to witness this unprecedented spectacle. It would not be long before we would see the Martians, something we had desired for so long.

But then, to the surprise of everyone, the following happened: just as a film in the cinema might be abruptly broken by a rip of the cellophane, the image on the screens suddenly disappeared. In the same moment the radio waves which had been transmitting non-stop ceased. Why now, with only a few hundred kilometres to the surface of Mars? This remains a mystery, as does the question of what happened to Professor Shibuya.

I looked up at the clear sky glittering with cold stars and took a deep breath.

Today, I have my own theory about what happened. The Martians could have discovered and captured the *Red Devil* before its arrival on Mars. We had always assumed that the Martians were behind us Earthlings, as we sent a rocket in their direction first. And if you consider that they have the abilities to bring down a rocket, a rocket flying hundreds of kilometres above the surface of Mars, you might also suspect that they are as scientifically advanced as we were on Earth in 1950 or thereabouts.

It is my goal to perfect the development of the television devices as quickly as possible. I am currently working on a device with the promising ability to show an object the size of just one centimetre on the surface of Mars from a height of 10,000 kilometres. Far out of reach of the Martians. From this height it will be possible for mankind to spy on the Martians without fear of the device being destroyed.

In any case, the attempted visit from the *Red Devil* marked the beginning of the struggle between the Earth and Mars. Now it is our top priority to spy on the Martians and prepare for

⁶ JOAK: Callsign of the Tokyo Broadcasting Station, now known as NHK.

war in space should the need arise. My main goal, however, is to find out the truth about the whereabouts of my revered professor and teacher, who most likely ended up as cosmic dust.

I continued to walk through the endless green of the tree-lined paths. Stars were twinkling between the gaps of the dark leaves, and I took a deep breath. They reminded me of the gentle eyes of my professor, urging me to be ready for my own self-sacrifice.