

Science fiction provides us with more than a glimpse of futurist visions, it allows us to probe questions of cultural history, politics and socio-economic change in societies. Chris Goto-Jones reveals his fascination for this sub-culture and Japan's long and mutating relations with 'weird-science'.

# From science fictional Japan to Japanese science fiction

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The term 'science fiction' is of relatively recent origin, apparently coined by the genre-legend Hugo Gernsback in an editorial to his new magazine, *Science Wonder Stories*, in 1929. Nine years later the magazine changed its name to *Astounding Science-Fiction*, and thus the name entered history. However, throughout the 1920s and 1930s there were a plethora of competing terms: pseudo-scientific, weird-science, and Gernsback's own early favourite 'scientifiction.'

Fiction that would eventually become labelled as 'science fiction' (or 'sci-fi') had been in existence for at least a century before. Convention dictates that the first piece of sci-fi was Mary Shelley's gothic masterpiece, *Frankenstein* (1818), although the reasons for this origination are far from uncontested. For some, it is enough to say that *Frankenstein* is the earliest text that still exists within what Damien Broderick (*Reading by Starlight*, 1995) has called the 'megatext' of modern sci-fi (that is, within the set of stories that define literacy in the genre). For others, the issue is not conventional but thematic: sci-fi is about technology and mechanisation, necessarily a product of modernity and of the industrial revolution. Accordingly, the 19th century works of Shelley, HG Wells and Jules Verne should be read along side Nietzsche's proclamations about the death of god, Max Weber's account of the 'iron cage' of modern bureaucratic machinery and Martin Heidegger's stand against the self-alienation of Being in the face of the imperialism of technology.

## Science fictional Japan:

In other words, sci-fi is the literature of the hopes and anxieties of industrial modernity, and it should come as no surprise that other industrial societies have produced their own 'weird-science.' Indeed, Japan's relationship with sci-fi began in its so-called 'age of machines' (*kikai jidai*) in the early 20th century with the work of writers such as Mizushima Niou and Yumeno Kyūsaku, who were writing contemporaneously with social critics and philosophers struggling with the problematics of modernity and its overcoming (*kindai no chōkoku*). Already in the late 1920s, Japanese writers (and scientists) were envisioning robots or *jinzō ningen* (artificial people), and stories about them (including some claims to have invented them) appeared in popular science magazines in the 1920s and 1930s; at this time, such stories would have been labelled as *kūsō kagaku* (imaginary science). It was not until the post-war period that the English terms 'SF' or 'sci-fi' entered popular usage.

Historians of Europe as well as Japan will be quick to notice that this period corresponds approximately to what Eric Hobsbawm has called the *Age of Empire* (1989), in which the so-called Great Pow-

ers established and consolidated imperial rule across the globe. It is interesting to reflect that one of the other central, thematic concerns of sci-fi is often considered to be the encounter with difference, and occasionally with either the mystification or the demonisation of difference. In other words, sci-fi can be read as a thread in the weaves of colonialism and orientalism. Indeed, in recent years much of the most sophisticated work on sci-fi has come from the standpoint of post-colonialism. From this perspective, we see the beginnings of the creation of a science fictional Japan, as well as the coincident birth of science fiction in Japan.

The engagement of Western sci-fi with the East Asian 'other' in the first half of the 20th century (and then again during the years around the Vietnam War) is clearly informed by a kind of reactionary and anxious frontier-spirit. Classic comic-strips such as Philip Francis Nowlan's *Buck Rogers in 25th Century* (the first US sci-fi comic strip, starting on 7 January 1929) and Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* (beginning 7 January 1934) show America being overrun by the Red Mongols, and pit the all-American hero (Flash Gordon is quarterback of the New York Jets) against an evil (Chinese) Emperor Ming the Merciless of planet Mongo. However, perhaps the most remarkable of these pre-war texts is the *Sixth Column* (1949) by Robert Heinlein, which was originally serialised in *Astounding Science-Fiction* in January, February and March of 1941 (nine months before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor). Heinlein



Gojira (1954) movie frame.

specific race. In many ways, Heinlein's novel is an intriguing window into American fears about Japan's imperial expansion and its proposed Co-Prosperity Sphere.

As one of the most influential voices in American sci-fi, Heinlein's portrayal of the 'PanAsiatism' has been extremely controversial, variously condemned and praised for its engagement with the volatile race-politics of the time. On the one hand, critics have accused Heinlein himself of buying into American chauvinism and anti-Japanese propaganda during the early 1940s. On the other hand, Heinlein and others have argued that his purpose was anti-racist, and that his text was an attack on Japanese and US racism at the time. Whatever the actual force of this book, the historical interest of *Sixth Column* vastly outweighs its literary quality, which even Heinlein himself lamented.

These sci-fi classics from the early 20th century illustrate very well the ways in which science fiction was a symbolic genre or a metaphorical discourse from its inception. Heinlein's transparency in his depiction of the Japanese as *Japanese*, rather than as aliens from another galaxy with suspiciously Japanese or Chinese sounding names, was actually rather unusual. The tendency in sci-fi is to re-figure the encounter with the 'other' in terms of the encounter with the literally alien. Of course, the question of race politics within sci-fi has attracted a wide critical literature. In the post-war period, Samuel R. Delany would become a leading figure in this field, using his own science fiction (and sci-fi criticism) to explore and challenge questions of identity and difference, of exploration and conquest, of autonomy and assimilation. His 1967 Nebula Award winning novel, *The Einstein Connection*, has become a classic of its kind.

In the post-war period, however, it gradually became clear that the representation of Japan in science fiction did not have to orbit around *negative* racial stereotypes. No longer a military threat, Japan began to recapture some of the romantic mystery that it had once enjoyed in European eyes, such as in the work of Jonathan Swift (*Gulliver's Travels*, 1826), whose archetypal explorer, Gulliver, famously travelled to the mystical land of Japan with a special letter of introduction from the king of Luggnagg, with whom Japan was apparently allied in the 18th century! By the time of the New Wave movement of the 1970s, Asia was already an explicit source of inspiration for the mystical futurities of the West, and 1980s cyberpunk placed the technologically thriving, contemporary Japan into the

fictive futures of Europe and the US. In other words, whilst the fictions had slipped from negative to positive, Japan remained science fictional.

## Science fictional Japan in the post-war world:

In the years immediately following the end of the Second World War, anxiety about the emerging Cold War was clear in the so-called 'Golden Age of Science Fiction.' In 1949, George Orwell's masterpiece *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published, in which the fictional nation of Eastasia is identified as one of the three superpowers of the dystopian future. In general the 1950s and 1960s are marked by intense political activism and by scepticism about the ability of technology to solve all problems, and this agenda is played out in the sci-fi of the time.

Central to these problematics was the horror of wartime technology, culminating in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. A common theme in Anglo-American sci-fi became anxiety over a loss of humanity and the potential collapse of civilisation triggered by the pursuit of technological advancement. Three of the most acclaimed sci-fi novels of all time, Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* (1951), Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), and Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), all appeared in this period. As we will see, the a-bombs also played a central role in the development of sci-fi in post-war Japan, albeit in a radically different way; the classic monster film, *Gojira* (1954) by Honda Ishirō, will become emblematic.

By the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s, however, there was a real turning of the tide. The so-called 'New Wave' of sci-fi shifted the attention of authors and readers away from the technology-driven glories (and anxieties) of 'outer-space' and towards the complex, human concerns of 'inner-space.' During this period there was a real focus on challenging social and cultural taboos, on radical political stances, and on heightened literary quality. Leading lights in the UK and the US were Michael Moorcock, Brian Aldiss, Roger Zelazny, and of course Samuel R. Delany (although some of these figures rejected the label).

One of the intriguing aspects of the New Wave was the way in which it re-appropriated and re-signified Asia; like many of the other cultural movements of the time, the New Wave was fascinated by spiritual aspects of Asian culture, such as Zen (DT Suzuki established his Zen Centre in California during the 1960s), Indian mysticism (just as the Beatles travelled to India in 1968), and the freshly politicised nature of Tibetan Buddhism. Indeed, Kingsley Amis famously condemned the New Wave for its fixation on stylistic innovation and for its persistent recourse to (what he called) Oriental religions and spirituality. Zelazny's *Lord of Light* (1967) might be indicative.



Image used to promote Nippon 2007.

One of the truly literary moments in this period was Nobel laureate Hermann Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel*, which was first published in 1943 in a Germanic context of intoxication with the 'mystic East.' In 1969, it was finally translated into English as *The Glass Bead Game*, a novel that posits the development of a new form of game as the pinnacle of human civilisation, requiring consummate intellectual and spiritual development, which is identified strongly with East Asian traditions. Indeed, Hesse's other novels also enjoyed a revival in the 1960s (after his death in 1962) largely because of their resonance with the counter-cultural, spiritual movements of the time: *Siddhartha* (1922), *Steppenwolf* (1927), *Journey to the East* (1932).

This sci-fi re-figuring of Asia as a spiritual alternative to the technologically angst-ridden West was a common feature of many of the novels of the period, not to mention an already familiar orientalist trope in European literature. Indeed, it bled over into the sci-fi boom of the late 1970s and 1980s that followed the release of *Star Wars* in 1977. For many critics (as well as for George Lucas himself), many aspects of the *Star Wars* galaxy, specifically the mystical 'Jedi Way,' were derived from Taoist and Zen philosophies (sometimes presented with the admixture of Zoroastrianism); the fabled 'force' reconstituted *qi* or *ki*; Yoda's famously garbled English has been seen as a thinly veiled representation of Japanese-English.

Whilst the *Star Wars* phenomenon abandoned the high-brow pretensions of the New Wave in favour of sci-fi's more popularist roots, it retained a certain nostalgic romanticism about representations of Asia as the home of a spiritual (and often more 'human') alternative to coldly technologised and alienated societies in the West. Interestingly, the next major movement in science fiction affected a re-technologising of this mythical spirituality, often via the imaginary of Japanese technological advances.

The 'cyberpunk' movement of the 1980s, led by writers such as William Gibson, Bruce Sterling and the editor Gardner Dozois, witnesses the creation of 'cyberspace' as a futurity in which consciousness, spirituality and digital technology coalesce. In the context of the digital revolution and the rapid emergence of the Japanese bubble economy, visions of the future began to take on a distinctly East Asia visage, with Ridley Scott's sci-fi masterpiece, *Blade Runner* (1982), setting an early standard. Shortly afterwards, Gibson's acclaimed *Neuromancer* (1984) contained some powerful Japanese imagery, and portrayed the future as tinged with 'Japaneseness': the microchip that makes everything possible has the name Hosaka; the best computing power comes in the form of the Ono-Sendai Cyberspace 7; and key characters (such as the cybernetically enhanced and genetically engineered super-ninja, Hideo) have obvious Japanese origins. By the time of Gibson's *Idoru* (1996), which is explicitly set in a version of Japan that is simultaneously represented as a futurity (for the West) and as a slightly fantastical vision of present-day Japan, cyberpunk's love affair with Japan was already profound. This was techno-orientalism or Japanophilia: Japan was no longer merely science fictional, Japan had become the future itself.

### Science fiction in Japan:

Given this context, it was not without a measure of intentional ambiguity and perhaps irony that *Nippon 2007*, the first World

Science Fiction Convention (Worldcon) to be held in Asia (but the 65<sup>th</sup> Worldcon), chose as its slogan: *Nippon – SF no kuni* (Japan – The Land of Science Fiction).

Worldcon began in New York in 1939. As its name suggests, the convention's ambitions were international from its inception. If we can assume that sci-fi was a genre concerned with the future at that time (and this is not a universal assumption, as we have seen), and particularly with a post-national, space-faring vision of humanity, then any lingering sense of national parochialism seems both quaint and ridiculous. Given the nature of the genre, Worldcon should have paid more attention to the 'World' than the World Series... Nonetheless, the dominance of the US and the apparently inalienable centrality of the English language has characterised the history of Worldcon (and especially the prestigious Hugo Awards that are presented at the convention each year).

Of course, it is not merely coincidental that the first Worldcon to be held in Asia comes at the peak of European and American interest in science fictional Japan. However, it is also the case that Japanese science fiction is beginning to play a highly visible role in Euro-American popular culture: the anime and manga explosion of the 1990s and 2000s has made Japan a global force in science fiction, and Japanese video games (often with sci-fi themes) dominate the international market. The influence of Japan and Japanese sci-fi on the US is now unequivocal, leading Tatsumi Takayuki to claim that we are all 'Japanoids' today (*Japanoido sengen*, 1993), whether we know it or not: Ridley Scott freely confesses the influence of Japanese media on his classic *Blade Runner*; the Wakochoiki brothers are open about the importance of anime in their *Matrix trilogy* (and even produced an anime interlude, the *Animatrix*, 2003); and



Akira (1988).

recently Leonardo DiCaprio announced that he would produce a movie version of the classic animanga *Akira*. Not only that, but anime has broken through into the mainstream of Western popular culture: science fiction directors such as Oshii Mamoru (*Ghost in the Shell*, 1995) and Ōtomo Katsuhiro (*Akira*, 1988) are now iconic figures in their own right.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Worldcon has finally had to recognise that Japan is not merely science fictional, but also a real-world context for a specific tradition of science fiction. That said, many *gaijin* (alien) participants at *Nippon 2007* were surprised to learn about the depth and richness of Japanese science fiction, which has developed in dynamic interaction with Western sci-fi, even if that development has gone almost completely unnoticed in the English language literature of sci-fi criticism. *Nippon 2007* coincided with the 46<sup>th</sup> Japan Science Fiction Convention (the first JSFC was in Tokyo, 1962) – the annual event at which the prestigious



Advertisement for Ghost in the Shell (1995).

Seiun Prizes (the Japanese equivalent of the Hugo Awards) have been awarded since 1970.

One of the intriguing things about the JSFC is its sense of the world. Whilst it makes no claims to being a 'Worldcon,' its history shows a much greater openness to (and awareness of) sci-fi from overseas. Indeed, unlike the Hugo Awards, there is a special Seiun Prize for the best translated novel, which has been won by such genre-greats as Frank Herbert, Robert Delazny, and David Brin. Conversely, the great Japanese sci-fi writers are almost unheard of in Europe and the US, despite the fact that many of them engage directly with the themes and questions raised by European and American authors, providing interestingly inflected, alternative visions. To the extent that the 'world' is aware of Japanese sci-fi, it appears to locate the genre in the media of anime, manga and video games, neglecting the novels and short stories that comprise the backbone of the sci-fi 'megatext' in the West. In other words, the field of science fiction demonstrates international language politics in microcosm.

Some of the more literary classics of Japanese science fiction have been translated into English. The towering figure of Komatsu Sakyō (who has won the Seiun four times) might be known to English readers as the author of *Nihon chimbotsu* (1973, translated as *Japan Sinks*, 1995), which sold over four million copies in Japan; as guest of honour, Komatsu also won the Seiun at *Nippon 2007* for the eagerly anticipated sequel *Nihon chimbotsu II* (2007). Readers may also be familiar with the work of Abe Kōbō, whose mainstream novels have made something of an impact in translation, and whose experimental sci-fi novel *Daiyon kampo-ki* (1958, translated as *Inter Ice-Age 4*, 1970) appeared in English in time for the New Wave. However, other accomplished writers will be lesser known: the unparalleled master of the 'short short', Hoshi Shin'ichi is virtually unknown; even the incomparable Tatsui Yasutaka, famed in Japan as the recipient of both the Tanizaki Prize and the Kawabata Prize for literature (1987 and 1989), who has won back-to-back Seiun Prizes (1975 and 1976), has only recently come to the attention of the international public, partially because he wrote the novel (1993) on which Satoshi Kon's acclaimed anime, *Paprika* (2007), was based. In recent years, science fiction in Japan has reached new levels of maturity and acclaim; non-genre, literary writers such as the Nobel laureate Oe Kenzaburō and the phenomenally successful Murakami Haruki have been experimenting with elements of science fiction and fantasy in speculative ways.

In fact, sci-fi in post-nuclear Japan looks very different from its counterparts in the West, which Japanese authors were hun-

grily reading in translation. Rather than observing the characteristic 'frontiersmanship' that is often present in Anglo-American genre novels, Tatsumi Takayuki (*Full Metal Apache*, 2006) suggests that we can see a spirit of 'creative masochism' (*sōzōteki higayaku seishin*) in Japanese sci-fi, characterised by the anxiety of writers like Komatsu and Abe Kōbō about the ideological heritage of the Second World War and the twin, reinforcing psychological damage caused by defeat and by the apocalyptic nature of that defeat. For these writers, sci-fi possesses a special mission and purpose in post-war Japanese society, since it necessarily contains within it hypotheses for the future development of Japan and visions of 'tomorrow' that allowed the 'New Japan' of the post-1945 era to continuously challenge and re-conceptualise its post-war trajectory. Given the events of the Pacific War, this self-reflective and self-critical task seemed especially urgent in the 1960s, but it also continues as a central theme in Japanese science fiction throughout the subsequent generations of writers; it has witnessed something of a renaissance in the 1990s following the end of the Cold War and Japanese society's concomitant quest for national identity.

In contrast to the 1950s and 60s in the West, the 1970s and early 1980s might be seen as the 'golden age' of Japanese science fiction, during which time a new generation of writers could refer back to classics of home-grown sci-fi (as well as to imported and translated texts), especially after the nuclear monstrosity of *Gojira* and the publication of Komatsu's *Japan Sinks* in 1973. For the first time, young Japanese writers could identify *Japanese* heroes of sci-fi, alongside the big names of Cordwainer Smith and Samuel Delany who were emerging against the background of the Vietnam war. Indeed, the 1970s and 80s were periods of incredible richness in Japanese sci-fi, at least partly because writers absorbed all of the previous SF traditions from the West simultaneously at that time, rather than diachronically, resulting in unusual patterns, motifs and themes that were creatively 'Japanese.'

Unlike his Anglo-American compatriots, Komatsu's sci-fi was characterised not by the claustrophobic paranoia of the Cold War but rather by the grand tectonic movements of history (and the earth's tectonic plates!), which seemed to persist in imperilling Japan. Indeed, the role of historical singularities (such as the apocalypse itself) in Japanese science fiction cannot be understated, and many of the most influential writers to emerge during the 'golden era' seemed to orientate their work around them. One such figure, who would later break through to world acclaim with the anime *Akira* (1988), after the manga of the same name (1982-86), was Ōtomo

Katsuhiro for his manga *Dōmu* (1980-2, 1983). By the early 1980s Japanese sci-fi was rapidly becoming a hermetic and cultural world of its own, both in touch with Anglo-American currents and self-reflectively independent of them.

One of the most exciting and interesting aspects of Japanese sci-fi is, of course, the way in which its own megatext is explicitly open to a range of additional media. We have already mentioned anime and manga, and the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a string of impressive, conceptual works by the likes of Shirow Masamune and Oshii Mamoru, and then Anno Hideaki's remarkable and revolutionary, *Shinseiki Ebuangerion* (1995-96). As was already the case in the 1920s, Japanese sci-fi shows a predilection for exploring the technological limits of the human via robots, cybernetics and 'mecha.' A persistently controversial issue in sci-fi (and Japanese cyborg sci-fi in particular) concerns the gender politics of the interactions between female figures and technological change.

However, it is also noteworthy that the Seiun Prize is sensitive to the demands and potentials of different media as expressive forms. It is notable, for example, that the 2001 Seiun Prize for Best Media was not awarded to a feature film or an anime but to a video game – the characteristically 'Japanese' Playstation title *Gunparade March*, which (like many of the most popular games in Japan) was never even released in Europe or the US. The game was later made into a manga by Sanadura Hiroyuki and an anime series by Sakurabi Katsushi, both of which have been licenced for translation into English.

This openness to varied media as the vehicles for science fiction is symptomatic of a wider embrace of what has been called 'convergence culture' – the increasing tendency for cultural franchises to employ multiple media to relate a core narrative, around which the various media 'converge.' Although the *Matrix* series is often cited as a classic example of convergence in the West, it is in Japan that we see the most highly developed, persistent and pervasive examples. Perhaps the most famous and successful sci-fi example is the sprawling and epic *Final Fantasy* series, which incorporates dozens of video games, manga, anime, novels, and various other 'character goods.' But *Final Fantasy* is not unique in its convergent nature – it is not uncommon for Japanese sci-fi stories to unravel in multiple media. In other words, sci-fi is an unusual expressive form and a socio-economic phenomenon in Japan.

In sum, it seems that science fiction provides an interesting lens on questions of cultural history and the political unconscious in various societies; it expresses political critique and futurist visions of reform; and it manifests important currents in socio-economic change as well as transnational cultural flows. As the 'land of science fiction,' Japan is a fascinating case.

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Asiascape.net would like to thank MEARC, Toshiba, the NWO and IIAS for supporting its projects in this field.