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SCIENCE FICTION



Mechademia : Second Arc

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• • • Introduction

In the Age of Transnational Science Fiction

TAKAYUKI TATSUMI

We used to know what Science Fiction meant. With Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne, and H. G. Wells as the literary grandparents in the nineteenth century; Hugo Gernsback, a Luxembourgish-American engineer, invented science fiction as a literary genre with his edited magazine *The Amazing Stories* published in 1926, in the heyday of the Jazz Age. While the early science fiction writers were obsessed with future prediction, it was the distinguished editor John W. Campbell who brought up Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, and Theodore Sturgeon from the 1930s through the 1940s to expand the sociological possibilities of the genre. Hence, the golden age of science fiction that coincided with Pax Americana in postwar years. However, it is ironic that the space race of the Cold War age, as climaxed by Apollo 11's moon landing in July 1969, did not seduce these writers to pursue the dream of "outer space." The New Wave Movement in the 1960s as represented by J. G. Ballard, Brian Aldiss, Harlan Ellison, Philip K. Dick, Samuel Delany, and Stanislaw Lem started to explore not outer space but "inner space," by making use of Freudian psychoanalysis, Levi-Strauss's structuralist anthropology, and Bretonian surrealist poetics. These New Wave writers came to prefer the term "Speculative Fiction," coined by Heinlein to the term "Science Fiction" in the Gernsbackian sense.

The 1970s saw the rise of feminist speculative fictionists such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, and James Tiptree Jr., aka Alice Sheldon, who all found "gender space" as a new frontier. And the 1980s saw the Cyberpunk Movement as championed by William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, John Shirley, Lewis Shiner, Rudy Rucker, and Pat Cadigan whose works, coinciding with the development of internet technology, cultivated what Gibson called "cyberspace" and had a tremendous impact on not only American Literature but also World Literature from the 1980s through the 2020s. This is the reason why *PMLA* (*Publications of the Modern Language Association*), the most significant journal of World Literature in the United States, once featured the special topic "Science Fiction and Literary Studies: The Next Millennium" in its May 2004

issue with noted science fiction scholar-critics Marleen Barr and Carl Freedman as the guest editors.

However, the science fiction we used to know came to be gradually metamorphosed into something else in the wake of cyberpunkish techno-orientalism coinciding with the discourses of “Japan as No. 1,” “Pax Japonica,” and “Cool Japan” in the past four decades. As *fin de siècle* Western literature enjoyed the taste of Japonisme around the year of 1900, the late twentieth century saw the rise of the “Asian,” and especially “Japanesque” mode in science fiction, empowering Japanese science fiction as such and transgressing the generic boundaries between prose, manga, anime, and gaming. For the cutting edge of this trans-generic deconstruction, please read Alexandre Paquet’s splendid article on videogame narratology “Automata Collective,” included in the present issue.

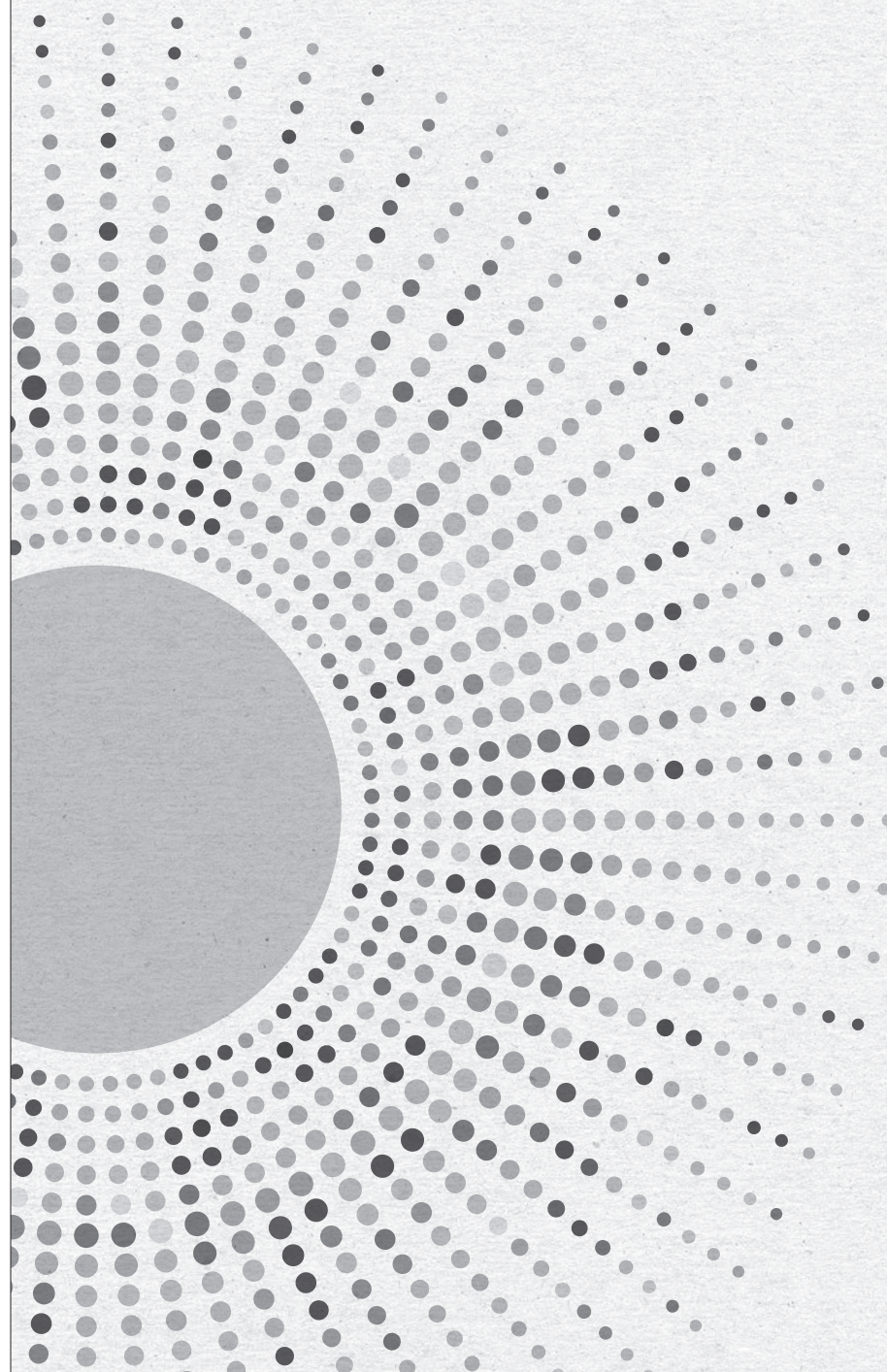
Historically speaking, the literary subgenre of Japanese science fiction started with the inauguration of the first commercial monthly of science fiction in Japan, *Hayakawa’s SF Magazine* in December 1959, with Fukushima Masami (1929–1976) as the original editor-in-chief. Of course, as the origin of Euro-American science fiction could be traced back to the nineteenth century, the ancestors of Japanese science fiction could be rediscovered in the Meiji Era (1868–1912), as Denis Taillandier precisely explained in his article “Literary Science Fiction in Japan: The Story of a Secret Infiltration” included here. However, it is true that as *Amazing Stories* powerfully created the market of this new literary subgenre, *Hayakawa’s SF Magazine* skillfully pioneered the science fiction market in Japan that would have otherwise collapsed immediately.

Since then Japanese science fiction produced a number of talented writers ranging from the first-generation writers such as Hoshi Shin’ichi (1926–1997), Komatsu Sakyō (1931–2011), Tsutsui Yasutaka (1934–), Toyoda Aritsune (1938–), Hirai Kazumasa (1938–2015), Mitsuse Ryu (1928–1999), Mayumura Taku (1934–2019), Aramaki Yoshio (1933–), and Yamano Koichi (1939–2017); the second-generation writers such as Tanaka Koji (1941–), Yamada Masaki (1950–), Hori Akira (1944–), Kajio Shinji (1947–), Kawamata Chiaki (1947–), Yokota Junya (1945–2019); the third-generation writers such as Arai Motoko (1960–), Yumemakura Baku (1951–), Tani Koshu (1951–), Noah Azusa (1954–), Kambayashi Chohei (1953–), Ohara Mariko (1959–); down to the contemporary writers such as Tobi Hirotaka (1960–), Hayashi Joji (1962–), Suga Hiroe (1963–), Ueda Sayuri (1964–), Itoh Keikaku aka Project Itoh (1974–2009), Enjoe Toe (1972–), Hase Satoshi (1974–), Ogawa Issui (1975–), Fujii Taiyo (1970–), Miyauchi Yusuke (1979–), to name a few.

Back in the 1960s, when the first generation writers wanted to gain the Japanese voice of the genre, they were ambitious enough to transgress the literary boundary set by mainstream writers and establish science fiction as part of world literature, as you could easily see in Komatsu’s legendary science fiction manifesto “Dear Ivan Efremov: On a Critique of Socialist Science Fiction Theory” (originally published in the November 1963 issue of *Hayakawa’s SF Magazine*) whose English translation is available for the first time in this issue. Deeply influenced by western science fiction, they published not only hardcore science fiction, but also avant-garde speculative fiction blueprinted by Abe Kobo (1924–1993), the precursor of Japanese science fiction and a perennial candidate for Nobel Prize in Literature whom both Komatsu and Enjoe admired very much. Japanese science fiction, from the beginning of the genre, has long been speculative. Therefore, from 1969 to 1970, in the first science fiction fanzine in Japan *UCHUJIN* (Cosmic dust, inaugurated in 1957), edited by Shibano Takumi (1926–2010), Aramaki Yoshio engaged in a heated debate with the young talent Yamano Koichi, the writer-editor of the first commercial speculative fiction quarterly *NW-SF* (1970–82), who actually shared much of the same radical New Wave-oriented perspective as Aramaki, but who could not help but attack the existing Japanese science fiction writers as naive imitators of their Anglo-American colleagues in his radical critique “Japanese SF: Its Originality and Possibility” published in the June 1969 issue of *Hayakawa’s SF Magazine* and reprinted in the March 1994 issue of *Science Fiction Studies* in North America (trans. Kazuko Behrens, Darko Suvin, and Takayuki Tatsumi). Against Yamano’s critique of Japanese science fiction, Aramaki defended the originality of the first-generation writers, especially Komatsu Sakyō, whose profound speculation, Aramaki says, could well compare not only with the Western existentialists, as represented by Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, but also with the philosophy of Suzuki Daisetsu, aka D. T. Suzuki, an internationally known philosopher of Buddhism. Thus, from today’s perspective, this Yamano versus Aramaki controversy, which ended up with Aramaki’s professional debut in 1970 with his science fiction manifesto “The Fiction of *Kunst*: A Re-reading of Heinlein” (originally published in the June 1970 issue of *Hayakawa’s SF Magazine*) reprinted in this issue and a highly Nietzschean and Ballardian speculative fiction entitled “The Great Noon” (published in the August 1970 issue of *Hayakawa’s SF Magazine*), should be redefined as the first attempt to theorize Japanese speculative fiction. For more detail, read Baryon Tensor Posadas’s brilliant article printed here, “Hidden Histories, Traveling Time: Science Fiction Translation as Cognitive

PART TWO

Critique



••• Robot Theater (*Robotto engeki*) in Japan

Staging Science Fiction Futures

JENNIFER ROBERTSON

Robot Revue

In February 1932, at the height of the first wave of robot-mania in Japan, the all-female Takarazuka Revue performed *Robotto no tawamure* (The robot's playful joke), a musical comedy by playwright Takehara Mitsuzō.¹ Set inside an American department store, the musical spoofs the popular trend of staging robot shows to attract shoppers. The *mise-en-scène* consists of an upstairs and a downstairs room. A lifelike, male-gendered humanoid robot clothed in a belted pants suit, Mary Jane shoes, and a soft bowler-type hat, stands in the center of the upstairs room (Figure 1). Downstairs, the props include a bookshelf lined with encyclopedias and various reference books, and a scientific switchboard with levers operated by a technician that activate the robot's body and mouth. The robot's voice is provided by an announcer downstairs projecting through a telephone receiver connected to the humanoid in the room above. As explained by an onstage chorus:

When the handle is pulled, the robot moves/
Pressing, pressing the pedal, switching it on/
Dance, dance the robot dances/
This is said to be a marvel of science/
But how far will this advance?—so ominous.²

Three female customers who had received an invitation to meet the humanoid at first doubt its ability to perform “exactly like a human being” as advertised. What follows is an excerpt of their interaction: a sexist gag based on the homonymic Romanized English and German words “history” (*hisutorii*) and “Hysterie” (*hisuterii*).

Customer #2: Um, Robot-san, it says in the invitation that you are a walking encyclopedia, so, I want to ask you something about history [hisutorii].

Robot: Ah yes, I know that well. It's something that affects women—it's really a problem isn't it?

Customer #2: That's hisuterii [Hysterie]! I'm asking about hisutorii [history]!

Robot: Oh, so you're asking about rekishi [history]! Please, ask me Anything! I know about everything since the beginning of time!

Customer #2: Oh my, Robot-san, you are full of confidence, aren't you? In that case, I'll ask you [pauses to think] . . . do you know what sparked Luther's Protestant Reformation?

Robot: Of course! I know all about that!³

Downstairs, the announcer passes a note to an assistant directing him to quickly retrieve the book on the history of Christianity. In the meantime, the robot makes small talk with the customers until the book is delivered, whereupon the robot begins to recite a truncated history of the Protestant Reformation. When the humanoid concludes, the three women applaud, and Customer #1 exclaims, "My, your delivery was so smooth it was as though you were reading from a book! At this rate, flesh-and-blood humans are surely doomed!"⁴

The hisuterii/hisutorii wordplay was a clever nod—sure to elicit giggles—to the extensive coverage in "[f]amily and household magazines, midwifery and obstetrics-gynecology journals, and women's, popular medical, and general-interest magazines" published in the 1930s and early 1940s, of sexual practices and associated anxieties, such as hysteria, frigidity, and infertility.⁵ Robot fiction was a growing subfield within the emerging genre of science fiction and robots were frequent subjects of cartoons and fine art media alike from the mid 1920s onward. Fritz Lang's (1890–1976) revolutionary silent film *Metropolis* (1927), featuring the evil Robot Maria, debuted in Tokyo in 1929 to enthusiastic audiences.⁶ Daily newspapers began to regularly publish articles about robots, such as "Robotto, kikai ningen" (Robot, machine human), a two-part series in May and July 1931, in the national daily *Tōkyō Nichinichi Shinbun* penned by psychologist Matsumoto Matatarō (1865–1943) on how in the future, humans will depend on robots.⁷

The same newspaper, a national daily, also ran an advertisement for a futuristic "panorama exhibition" of "Tokyo in the year 1990" (*1990nen no Tōkyō*). The event was held at the Matsuzakaya Department Store in Ueno (November 1–19, 1931). In addition to a moving and talking robot, the public was intro-



Figure 1. The robot in the Takarazuka Revue's *Robotto no tawamure* (1932) performed by Nakoso Nahoko (active 1922–35), top center. Photograph by author from *Takarazuka Shōjo Kagekidan kyakuhonshū* (Takarazuka Girls Revue playscript collection), no. 134 (February 1932).

duced to new technologies, such as television, airplanes, aerial photographs of Tokyo, rockets, and weapons. The advertisement featured a mechanical humanoid robot with a diving-bell shaped head, big round eyes, and a muscular torso with gears and a clock, operating a ship's wheel-like device. Starburst lines around the robot's body make it appear shiny and electrified.⁸ By 1932, robots were a staple image in advertisements from food additives, skin cream, radios, matches, insecticide, and tobacco,⁹ suggesting the proximity of science fiction fantasies to real world commodities.

As noted, Takarazuka's robot play capitalized on the popularity of the robot exhibitions staged in department stores and other public venues in Japan, Europe and the United States, a practice that continues today. The most obvious direct inspiration for the robot character in the Revue's play was the debut in Japan of the life-size mannequin-like German robot *Remarque* at the "Tokyo in the year 1990" exhibition of 1930. Actually, two *Remarques* had

arrived from Dusseldorf; one was sent on to the Tokyo Asahi Newspaper office and the other to the Osaka Asahi Newspaper office. The German humanoid robot, named after novelist Erich Maria Remarque, resembled a middle-aged man in a military uniform. Its hands and neck moved, it could roll its eyes, and it conversed through a wireless receiver through which a human operator provided its voice. Although the humanoid was advertised as speaking German-accented Japanese, a native Japanese speaker was charged with enabling Remarque to converse with the public. Remarque drew a huge crowd at Tokyo's Hibiya Kōkaidō (Public Hall) for a fundraising event on behalf of impoverished citizens.¹⁰

R.U.R. in Japan

Remarque may have inspired the storyline of Takarazuka's comic revue, but the casting of a human actor to play the part of the robot was most likely modeled after the critically acclaimed play, *R.U.R.*, performed in Tokyo in 1924. Published by Czech litterateur Karel Čapek (1890–1938) in 1921, *R.U.R.* (*Rossumovi Univerzální Roboti* [*Rossum's Universal Robots*]), was translated into Japanese in 1923 and staged the following year. Čapek's play introduced the newly coined word "robot," after the Slavic word *robota* meaning "serf labor," and *robotto* quickly became a ubiquitous buzzword in Japan. Before *robotto*, the words *jinzō ningen* (human-made human) and *kikai ningen* (machine or mechanical human) were used to name manufactured humanlike beings.

A science fiction melodrama with comical passages, the action in *R.U.R.* takes place on an island in 2000,¹¹ where anatomically realistic artificial humans are mass-produced in Rossum's factory from protoplasmic batter and sold all over the world as tireless workers. The company responds to customer demands for robots that conform to gendered occupations. Thus, female robots are manufactured to serve as "waitresses, shop-girls, secretaries,"¹² and male robots to perform manual labor. To make a long story short, new-model robots are provided with emotions and, now are able to experience anger at their exploitation by humans as slave-labor, revolt *en masse*. They kill all but one human, Alquist, a traditional artisan employed by Rossum's. Since the formula for the batter has been destroyed, the artisan is unable to repair or reproduce robots in the factory. Instead, in the closing act, he encourages an emotionally enhanced humanoid couple he calls Adam and Eve to go into the world as husband and wife. Somehow, it is inferred, they will repopulate their kind.

R.U.R. was performed in Tokyo in 1924 under the title *Jinzō ningen* directed by the leftist dramaturg Hijikata Yoshi (1898–1959). Hijikata, whose aristocratic upbringing belied his socialist politics, cofounded with theater director/playwright/actor Osanai Kaoru (1881–1928), the high-tech Tsukiji Shōgekijō (Tsukiji Little Theatre) in 1924; the name referred to both the actual theater and the troupe. *R.U.R.* was among the first plays staged there. Both men were instrumental in founding the *shingeki* (new theater) movement through which Euro-American plays were adapted for Japanese audiences. The Takarazuka Revue was also established in 1913 as a "new theater" in opposition to the "antique" (*koten*) Kabuki theater, and several Revue actors gravitated to other *shingeki* troupes following their retirement from Takarazuka. Founder Kobayashi Ichizō (1873–1957), the Hankyū railroad and department store tycoon, impresario, and two-time cabinet minister, embraced the revue form and Western music as a break with the past and as performing arts that captured a modern zeitgeist.¹³

Hijikata provided the funds for the construction of the Gothic-Romanesque building. The exterior and interior were uniformly dark gray to symbolize the serious business of the avant-garde theater, and care was taken to ensure that all 499 seats offered an unimpaired view of the stage.¹⁴ The dramatic lighting used in *R.U.R.* was made possible by the *Kuppelhorizont* (cyclo-rama), a German innovation that enabled unprecedented special effects and direct and indirect lighting variations. As noted in a review published in the *Tōkyō Asahi Shinbun*, the "striking contrasts of yellow and black amplified the expressionist aesthetic of Čapek's robot drama."¹⁵

The *Kuppelhorizont* formed an arc enclosing the back portion of the stage and curved into a dome at the top. The vertical sides could be made of canvas, but the most efficient examples were rigid with a plaster covering. By all accounts the Tsukiji Shōgekijō's *Kuppelhorizont* was magnificent and its various and ingenious effects astounded the audiences.¹⁶

The *Kuppelhorizont* was instrumental in providing the special effects that, together with stage sets and props, created the futuristic ambience of *R.U.R.* that foregrounded the science fiction themes of the social and psychological consequences of global robotization. The key point here is that cinema is not the only medium where special effects can create and sustain science fiction content, although until very recently, the theater has been underacknowledged as such.¹⁷ Important to note, in conjunction, is that although the future