

How Information Technology Has (Not) Changed Feminism and Japanism: Cyberpunk in the Japanese Context

Author(s): Kumiko Sato

Source: *Comparative Literature Studies*, 2004, Vol. 41, No. 3, Cybernetic Readings (2004), pp. 335-355

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40247417>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Penn State University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Comparative Literature Studies*

HOW INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY HAS (NOT) CHANGED FEMINISM AND JAPANISM: CYBERPUNK IN THE JAPANESE CONTEXT

Kumiko Sato

Is technological progress changing our conceptual mode of thinking and learning? Of course it is, in multiple aspects of culture and society, as argued by numerous scholars who explore the terminal space between humanity and information technology. Then, are there ethnic and racial differences in “our” conceptual mode? A potential drawback in the cultural studies of the human-machine interface is the tendency to categorize humans as an entirety of humanity without deliberate examination of cultural diversities encompassing technological progress. The rhetoric of change requires the assumption of transition from an old mode to a new mode, which is in reality less the development of a whole humanity than the sense of a historical progress that classifies certain nations as advanced compared to those presumably advancing yet still behind. Japan is a unique case in this context, for the country has presented itself as a contradiction of advancement and backwardness, or exotic primitivism conjoined with high-tech supremacy. Seen from a context of Japanese culture, the idea of progress presents a rather different set of questions about cyborg identity from that of the Western philosophy forming around the academic world of the US today. How, for example, should cyborg philosophy be contextualized into Japan’s adaptation of the philosophy and related literary practices, especially the genre called cyberpunk? Why did Japan become the only non-Western country that vigorously produces stories and images about cyborgs, androids, and cybernetic identities? These questions should not be simply addressed from the viewpoint of technological progress, but also from cultural contexts of identity politics in Japan.

This essay will attempt to shed light on the delicate interstitial space surrounded by the four different categorical spheres, namely, Western cy-

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE STUDIES, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2004.
Copyright © 2004 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.

borg philosophy, American cyberpunk, Japanese cyberpunk, and Japanese theory of uniqueness known as *nihonjinron*. This sphere has a very feasible presence due to its pretentious look of “cultural influence” yet relies on cross-cultural dynamism of ideological production. The definitions of cyberpunk and cyberfeminism in this essay are thus heavily dependent on mutual interpretations of “the other culture” from multiple perspectives, which requires some generalization of these concepts. However, I consider it inevitable in order to examine the dynamically fluid and interactive nature of culture being formed by the sense of “how they see us” rather than “what is our culture,” which is exactly an advantage of the discipline of comparative literature. In this paper, I will first trace a history of the philosophy of cybernetic identity, which will be referred to as cyberfeminism in this essay because of its feminist missions deployed by major figures in the field, and will then discuss how the idea of cyborg identity as developed by both cyberfeminism and American cyberpunk literature of the early-1980s impacted Japan’s cultural landscape and tied into the modern practice of Japanese identity politics. With several examples from Japanese cyberpunk novels, I will argue that Japanese adaptation of cyberpunk and cyborg philosophy has not only maintained but beautifully concealed the old logic of Japanese uniqueness that sustains the illusion of Japan as a culture that simultaneously progresses and regresses through technology.

The Location of Cyberfeminism

The invention of cybernetics in the 1960s and the subsequent emergence of cyberpunk in the 80s have recently resurfaced as the exploding popularity of feminist discourses merged with the ever-growing cyberculture of today. This second-wave feminism that arose during the 1980s and proliferated toward the late-90s, seem to have three rhetorical strategies that are sometimes used combined, sometimes separately. One is the well-known 1985 cyborg manifesto by Donna Haraway, a counter-theory to ecofeminism in the late-70s. Her bold statement of “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (181) fascinated feminists who were growing wary of the anachronistic feminist critiques of capitalism and technology. Haraway’s strategy was to use the cyborg as “imagery” to inspire a new cognitive mode of identity and body, which had been allegedly dominated by the three ideological categories of “white,” “male,” and “West.” With Haraway’s statement, the cyborg officially became the icon of the new prosthetic identity founded on

the fusion of organism and machine. The innovativeness (as well as a disadvantage) of Haraway's logic can be observed in the use of cyborg as a metaphor of the near future rather than as existing technology, which enabled scholars to find examples in fictional or imaginative narratives and in images, rather than in technology already achieved. It was indeed a manifesto for a future identity, not a case study of women obsessed with cosmetic surgery. The second group is characterized by the extensive application of Harawayan celebratory feminism to technophilia. As seen in technomaniac feminism represented by Sadie Plant's manifesto for cyberfeminism, the trick of the cyberfeminist discourse is the equation of women and machines as an attack on patriarchy. I differentiate this approach from Haraway's original claim because it reconnects the essentialist bond of gender and identity which Haraway's manifesto critiqued. In other words, technoeuphoric cyberfeminism tends to establish the binarism of male human and female cyborg, reinforcing the old system it was going to deny. In addition, as alerted by critics such as Constance Penley and Carol Stable, the postmodern tendency of cyberfeminism fits well with its apolitical nature bleached of class and ethnicity. The West and the rest of the world have never been more separated than this, despite the globalization of technology industry in actuality. The third group takes up a more practical side of cybernetic culture than the philosophy of imaginary cyborg, namely case studies of women on the Internet or those working in the fields of informatics, multimedia education, VR programming, etc., such as the collection *Cyberfeminism* edited by Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein. This model significantly differs from the first two in the sense that they keep reality and philosophy as two essentially different spheres: there are "real women" who cannot become cyborgs in reality. After all, being a cyborg, if it ever exists in practice, will be affordable only in the First World because of the impossible maintenance cost of the body, and will outstretch class difference far beyond today's sweat shops.

I have mapped out the outline of cyberfeminism because it is important to note that one common assumption still binds them together, that is, the notion that information technology has changed our concept of the human subject. How many times have we witnessed phrases like technology "opens up new spaces" or "new paradigms"? "New" is a seemingly harmless, yet rather tricky concept. On the one hand, it is true that the epistemological boundary of human and machine, or materiality and information, is being challenged today, which urges us to conduct a new configuration of the body, reality, and identity. Katherine Hayle's analysis in

How We Became Posthuman is an excellent example that enables us to realize how information technology has actually changed, and is changing, our view of "humanity." On the other hand, it is also true that information technology has not changed our concept of body and reality at certain levels. Anne Balsamo, for instance, examines cases of gendered cyborgs in her book, *Technologies of the Gendered Body*, concluding that technologies (as ideological constructs) "serve to reinforce traditional gendered patterns of power and authority" (10). The posthuman body may consist of replaceable parts, but each fragment of the prosthetic body claims its gendered origin. Balsamo's argument also suggests that the logic of gender is applicable to the realms of race and ethnicity. We understand her critique best by looking at the most popular prosthetic part of the female body today, which is the silicon breast implant: technological advance only serves to sustain, or even worse facilitate, the same old sexism based on traditional corporeality. A more radical (and simultaneously conventional) position is presented in Slavoj Žižek's analysis of the Ridley Scott film, *Blade Runner*, which argues that the blurred identity between human and android is a typical example of (Lacanian re-reading of) Descartes' *cogito*. For Lacanian theory, which has traditionally posited the subject as "the void" deprived of the content (meaning, or the enunciated), a person who doesn't know if he is a human or an android is typically a Cartesian subject in its purist form, who becomes truly human by realizing/enunciating that he is not (Žižek 199). Based on these counter-positions to the discourse of "new," it is possible to premise that, whereas it does produce new configurations of humanity, the emergent rhetoric of information technology is not only reinscribing the gendered/colored signs of the body, but even concealing its political ideology by pretending the opposite function.

The rhetoric of newness in the recent popularity of cyborg identity and post-humanity poses more questions than it appears to, not simply because of the above counter-arguments on ideological complicity of technological innovation, but also because all these arguments have been presented under the strict categorical limitation of "in the West." The idea of newness may not work in the domain where the old, or the paradigm prior to "the new," is not supposed to exist, that is, in the non-West. One of the main missions of the posthuman subject as a new philosophy is to reconfirm the assumption that there was the old model of subject in the West, i.e., the autonomous, unique individual who governs his human consciousness and organic body by means of reason. What underlies the argument of the new subject model that arose with technological progress in the West-

ern context is the sense of history that retroactively creates the past to be subsumed by the new present. For the non-West, this philosophical transition is deeply problematic, because the entity of the non-West has been defined as what is not the West, or what is behind the West in the progressive historical configuration. Assuming that most of the non-West may not have formed the same model of the autonomous subject in the past at the level of theory and philosophy, especially under nationalistic discourses of vernacularity, the notion of newness can only be seen as the West's luxury of critiquing itself on what the non-West has never enjoyed access to. In other words, cyberfeminist discourse takes the risk of becoming a typical example of the West's privilege of embodying modernity, and then postmodernity as the next historical phase, by leaving the rest of the world in premodernity or at best in vernacular versions of modernity.

How does, and could, the non-West establish its philosophy of subject against the Western force of cyberfeminism? This essay does not intend to cover the multitudes of what are considered to be the non-West, but instead presents Japan as a special case that *appears* to already embody what cyberfeminism aspires to achieve. The way Japan reads American cyberpunk and cyberfeminism is essentially twofold. First, the identity models proposed by cyberfeminism provide the neutral universal idea of evolution of humanity, regardless of ethnic differences. The conceptual advantage of the cyborg metaphor is exactly its transcendental status beyond categorical borders of biological differences. Cyberfeminism confirms Japan's long efforts to achieve Westernization, equivalent to modernization, exactly by means of technological progress. Second, as the main missions of cybernetic philosophy are concerned about the future in the imaginary form of metaphor, scholars tend to draw examples of the new identity from cyberpunk, and science fiction overall, which blurs the cognitive border between cyberfeminism and cyberpunk literature. This enables Japanese culture to create a dynamic reconnection of a particular characteristic of the early-1980s American cyberpunk and the universal claim of the cyborg philosophy, namely, Japaneseness and cyborg identity. The problematic equation of the two happened with the introduction of American cyberpunk in Japan, specifically *Neuromancer*, *Blade Runner*, and *Mirrorshades*. These early texts standardized the use of Japanese words and imagery in cyberpunk, which came to condition much of America's future vision in recent American films as well, such as *Matrix* (1999). Why does Japanese culture appear as an image of the future? An editor of Japanese science fiction anthology once expressed that post-Fordist Americans felt that "the Japanese people are al-

ready living in a version of the *future*" (Apostolou 11). It is possible to see cyberpunk as a reaction to the 1980s economic threat from Japan, as suggested by the notion of Techno-Orientalism.¹ Another example is provided by Bruce Sterling, a leader of the cyberpunk movement and the editor of *Mirrorshades*, who envisions the future as below:

Let me tell you what the 21st Century feels like. Imagine yourself at an international conference of industrial designers in Nagoya, Japan. You're not an industrial designer yourself, and you're not quite sure what you're doing there, but presumably some wealthy civic-minded group of Nagoyans thought you might have entertainment value, so they flew you in. You're in a cavernous laser-lit auditorium with 3,000 assorted Japanese, Finns, Germans, Americans, Yugoslavs, Italians, et al. (72).

Sterling's version of the future shows distinct difference from the stereotypical 21st-century images such as flying cars, aliens and spaceships. For him, the location of the future is where all cultures exist, from "London in 1880" and "Greenwich Village in 1955" to lost ancient Asian civilizations. Sterling states that in Japan, a paragon of "a true, post-modern, global cosmopolitanism, [...] the glamour of Otherness is internalized, made part of the fabric of daily life" (76). In a word, Japan is a Disneyland, a focal point where history and locality cease to exist. This does not necessarily mean that Japan itself was becoming global. It does not matter whether this representation of Japan is correct or wrong. The important message in Sterling's essay is the postmodern idea that Japanese ethnicity happens to embody the degree zero of historicity and locality to the American eye.

It is precisely in this new mode of representation of Japan that American cyberpunk discovered the new frontier for its landscape. This (re)discovery of Japan changed the Japanese view of Japanese culture as well. That is, American cyberpunk enabled Japan to find itself in the future of the West, which suggested that it had already outpaced the West in Westernization thanks to its rapid technological progress. This has equal potential for the belief that Japan came to represent the culture on the cutting edge of the technologization of human subjectivity explored by cyberfeminism. The complex interaction of mutual cultural interpretations across the border of American cyberpunk and the Japanese understanding of it, in fact gave birth to Japanese cyberpunk, which holds the view that this non-Western country, which has always desperately struggled to West-

ernize itself, has already achieved the future of the West exactly by retaining its traditional uniqueness of the past. The method of the new genre adopted by Japanese cyberpunk is to restructure the premodern uniqueness of Japan in the grammar of cyberpunk, which ironically resulted in the condition that the rhetoric of the new cybernetic identity helps to reinstate the old ties with *nihonjinron* that developed toward the end of WWII and further through postwar period. In the next section, I will map out how Japanism and Japanese cyberpunk came to exist and to rationalize the cultural paradox of becoming the future and the past of the West.

The Location of Japanism and Japanese Cyberpunk

The concept that the Japanese have developed a unique form of subjectivity is a historically and politically specific ideological construct, just as is the Western subject. The first and most important philosophical movement on pursuing Japanese uniqueness against the West's universality, known as Japanism or *nihonjinron*, is considered the series of wartime conferences known as "Overcoming Modernity" [*kindai no chōkoku*] published in 1942.² Among these contributions that attempted to reconceptualize a non-European form of modernity, Nishida Kitaro's philosophical deployment of culture and technology developed the idea that Japan should realize the harmony of Japanese culture (as spiritual uniqueness) and Western technology (as the source of modernity and its advantages). As Andrew Feenburg points out, "the idea of 'overcoming modernity' foreshadows strangely the later attempts of other non-European intellectuals in the anti-colonialist movement to declare their spiritual independence from the European sources of their modernity" (153). Forced in the dilemmatic logic of the agency for both the past, indigenous spiritual uniqueness *and* the progress of civilization designed by the West, it has been an urgent task for the non-West, the late-comers, to reconfigure the subject position that works for their cultural climate. In other words, whereas the West's binarism of human and machine or culture and technology had remained relatively secure until recent challenges from cyberfeminism or other postmodern critiques, the non-West has constantly confronted the ideological conflict of indigenous culture and Western technology. If, for the non-West, modernization has been a process of coming to terms with technology as the internal other, cyberfeminism's deconstruction of the modern subject is likely to be incompatible with the non-Western standpoint.

Nishida's philosophy mainly aimed to theorize the possible compromise of culture and technology so as to justify the synthesis of Japanese particularity and Western universality. Instead of rejecting European modernity and revaluing Japanese tradition (which usually happens with nationalist movements of the non-West), he attempts to establish a synthetic logic of Japanese universality. He writes in "The Problem of Japanese Culture" as follows:

When we say that the manyness becomes oneness, however, it means the negation of plurality, the extinction of opposition, the termination of mutual action. [This is because] the mutual action of things means complete opposition and thus mutual negation: A transforming B and B transforming A. But as already stated the establishment of a relationship between things must presuppose something common to both. So when we say A negates B, or transforms it, it can only mean that A has made a field common to B its own, that is, A has made itself into a universal field and by doing so A makes B its own; A itself becomes the world (864).

This complicated logic is meant to prove the idea that Japan can become the world, or that the East-West opposition can be dissolved into universal oneness without losing particularities, which is the ideal condition Nishida calls Historical World [*rekishi-teki sekai*]. Nishida's originality is marked by his construction of the subject model which constitutes commonality only through the mutual negation of East and West. His message is that the Japanese should not feel any danger to their national existence by absorbing foreign culture and technology (871). In his other essays published in the same year, "The Human Being" and "The Standpoint of an Individual in Historical World,"³ he explains Descartes' *cogito* as Japan's ideal model of "the subject as absolute paradox," namely the subject who acts out the synthesis of two opposing things. According to Nishida, Descartes' *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) represents this identity of paradoxical synthesis (25-6) realized by the mutual negation of cognition (I think) and being (I am), which curiously resembles Žižek's understanding of the Cartesian subject in *Blade Runner*.

Nishida's notion of "the subject as absolute paradox" clearly explains the predicament that the modern Japanese subject model had to confront in order to personify the non-West that subsumes the West. Nishida's logic was in some respects not new at all, for the conflict of two incompatible

things, especially that of culture and technology, has characterized Japan's modernizing process on a large scale. As early as the 1910s, one of the most representative writers of modern Japan, Natsume Soseki, expressed deep concerns about Western technology exhausting Japanese culture and leading humanity to the dark loneliness of modern individualism. Tanizaki Jun'ichiro, another modern writer, further developed theory of Japanese culture in antithetical logic to Western technology, as shown in his "In the Praise of Shadows." In this essay, Tanizaki argues that Japanese traditional beauty, which resides in subtle layers of mysterious darkness, is being wiped out by the flood of bright electronic lights and obsessive sanitarianism of Western technology. Intellectuals of modern Japan considered that the nation's primary task is to establish "its cultural identity as a nation outside the ordering cultural framework shaped by 'Western' nations," thereby realizing the ideal condition that culture (Asia) controls and reframe technology (West) to make it "ours."⁴ Nishida's contribution to this intellectual project of modernization was, therefore, his explicit negation of the modern theory that subordinates Western technology to Japanese soul. The direct political background of Nishida's intellectual efforts was no doubt a propagandist attitude supporting wartime expansionism and justifying invasion of Asia, and the condition of the war at endgame may have driven the philosophers into such a radical contradiction of the subject model. Whatever the actual reason was, Nishida's new theory presented the Japanese modern subject as a locus that amalgamates the incompatible binary oppositions of Japanese particularity and Western universality, actively pursuing the nexus as the interfacial identity of modern Japan.

In the postwar era, Nishida's radicalness was either misunderstood or deliberately forgotten along with the wartime political ideologies of the Great Japanese Empire, because the same old Japanism rose with the anachronistic intellectualism of essentializing Japanese culture as a tool to critique economic growth driven by high consumerism and rapid technologization. The writer Mishima Yukio and the literary scholar/philosopher Kobayashi Hideo were the most influential figures in academia and popularized intellectualism of the 1960s, who promoted the hegemonic supremacy of Japaneseness over the West and its egocentric pragmatism such as science, technology, and economic development. Their attitudes ironically repeated the prewar discourses of Japanese uniqueness with seemingly different looks.⁵ Whereas these academic and literary optimisms in the attempt to revive tradition were only sneered at by the public, as Mishima's own tragi-comedic suicide proved,⁶ popular culture more casu-

ally welcomed the diffusion of technology and high consumerism into postwar recovery. This can be most clearly seen in the emergence of science fiction in the early 1960s, which signaled a significant cultural shift at different levels. First, the science fiction movement that arose in the form of sci-fi magazine culture focused on emulating and transplanting American and British science fiction through translation and adaptation. The emergent sci-fi culture of postwar Japan equated advanced technology, which is a key factor of the genre whether in a utopian or dystopian form, with the principle of hardcore science fiction such as extrapolation, so as to promote the belief that the smooth transplanting of the genre into Japanese soil meant the nation's successful transition to the leadership of technological and economic progress in the world. A major task of the early science fiction was to fully Westernize culture through popular narratives, so to speak, as Morishita Kazuhito describes the movement as "enlightenment" [*keimō*] of Japanese thought. With the materialization of the sci-fi culture as the insignia of reason and scientific technology, the hierarchy established in the anachronistic binarism of Japanese spirit controlling Western technology was already inverted to the active revocation of Japaneseness on the level of popular culture. Second, it is important to note that the locus of the philosophical project of Westernization was shifting from serious political philosophy to the issue of enlightenment through pop culture. It is no coincidence that science fiction as a movement emerged in the same period of early 1960s, when Japan was increasingly becoming politically neutral after the miserable failure of Marxist and nationalist movements opposing the revision of the US-Japan Security Treaty in 1960. This anti-American movement, which became the last visible political movement in Japan, intended to oppose both the US policy requesting Japan to regain military power⁷ and patriotism which was reactivating nationalism of wartime Japan. In short, its hidden logic was to negate both the US and Japan, thereby engendering the neutral horizon of neither/both the US nor/and Japan. 1960 became a turning point of Japanese history, marked by the emergence of apolitical correctness (i.e. to become a healthy and moral citizen [*shimin*; Oguma 548] who has no interest in "Marxism," "nationalism," or even "democracy") and by the terminological shift from patriotism [*aikoku*] and nation [*minzoku*, meaning ethnic unity] to *shimin*. Science fiction fit in the cultural cavity of post-1960 Japanese society as an ideological dissolution from visible politics into popular fantasy. Finally, although the socio-cultural context greatly differs from Nishida's, popular culture did confront the same problem of reconfiguring the Japanese subject. While the upfront

philosophy of the sci-fi movement was eager to enlighten the Japanese conceptual framework through the cold logic of Heinlein and Asimov, there were also illogical bizarre fictions about Japanese turning into cybernetic existence, such as Numa Shozo's *Human Cattle Yapoo* (1953) and Komatsu Sakyo's *Japanese Apaches* (1964). These stories about Japanese bodies transformed into half-machine amalgams are deeply contextualized in Japan's postwar social condition and thus usually excluded from the 1960s smell-of-butter sci-fi movement due to its strong ethnic color, yet these narratives already seek identity in the cybernetic subject made of human flesh and metal parts, as later popularized in the 1970s superheroes (e.g., *Kikaidar*, *Masked Rider*, and other transformers) toward recent cyberpunk films like Tsukamoto Shinya's *Tetsuo, the Iron Man* and Otomo Katsuhiro's *Akira*, both in 1988. The cybernetic mentality that conditions these postwar fantastic narratives is in fact a rather active and almost self-torturing acceptance of machine parts into the human flesh, which drive the Japanese identity toward postwar survival and victory over the leading nations by means of radical incorporation of technology. If one asks the Japanese if they are human, they may have to answer, "we have never been fully human because we haven't reached the Western standard of the modern subject." All in all, unlike the intellectual movement of theorizing Japanese essential uniqueness reminiscent of prewar politics, popular culture surrounding science fiction highlighted and fully internalized the idea of Western technology by suppressing Japaneseness along with the memories of wartime Japan.

This condition seems to have continued in the science fiction genre and related popular narratives until the importation of cyberpunk in the 1980s. This change can be best explained by the historical stratification of the genre that Tatsumi Takayuki presented, which roughly divides the process of SF development into four periods (4-5). The 1960s introduced the notion and vision of "outer space" created by Asimov and Heinlein. The 1970s incorporated the notion of "inner space" through American New Wave. The early-1980s erased the border of science fiction and everyday life. The late 1980s transvalued the meaning of "writing science fiction" to "writing Japan" through cyberpunk. With the introduction of American cyberpunk, the pursuit of science fiction, which had been a ritualistic transformation of Japaneseness into American enlightenment and modern technologization, suddenly shifted its direction from Westernization to Japanization. Japanese science fiction grew by imitating and consuming American (and some British) science fiction, thereby expressing in the locus of science fiction the interactive relationship of the genre and Japan.

Accordingly, the classic SF narrative of humanity and space successfully empowered Japan to imagine Japanese as part of the whole entity called *homo sapiens*, and further, to imagine history at the planetary level. Any other genre than science fiction could not have created such a clear vision of universal humanity supported by the scientific logic of time and space. More internalized narrative of New Wave, deconstructing the existing rules of scientific reason and individualism, guided the universal subject to the inner world of self-consciousness, the philosophical realm of the skeptical subject. This also helped the Japanese reader to reinvent the internal self, bleached of particularities of locality and armed with universal humanity. With cyberpunk in the 80s, however, the “Orient” as the image of the other *and* self, manifested in science fiction, which justified the reemergence of the subject model as the paradox of the two opposing entities.

After the cultural shock Japan received from Ridley Scott’s film *Blade Runner* and William Gibson’s novel *Neuromancer*, which came to define cyberpunk in the Japanese context, Japanese science fiction also underwent the same renovation of the imagery of the near-future. This geopolitical time shift of the future image from the advanced West to the advanced yet backward East gave rise to an interesting discourse of the Japanese subject in science fiction criticism. Mainly led by Tatsumi, the idea came into being as “historical coincidence” of Japanese subject and cyborg identity. “Historical coincidence,” or *kiseizushita shinkuro* [unexpected synchronization] (Tatsumi 5), signifies that Japanese culture in reality had already outpaced the imagination of American cyberpunk, and thus the Japanese identity formed in contemporary Japan *coincidentally* corresponded with the Harawayan model of cyborg identity invented through cyberpunk. This proud announcement of revived Japaneseness required through the cutting edge of American culture means that the two separate histories of the West and Japan—the former modernizing, the latter behind—coincide in the discovery of Japan in American cyberpunk. The idea of historical coincidence is built on an interesting paradox, because it negates Japan’s connection to the original American cyberpunk. The discourse presumes that Japanese cyborg identity is Japan’s very original, which owes nothing, or very little, to America: the West found Japan as its future model. On the other hand, the inventiveness and newness of cyborg identity is the very value of Japanese cyborg philosophy. The meaning of the cyborg subject in the Western context solely depends on the intellectuals’ agreement that the West has established the Western subject. Without this Western concept of historical “progress” from the humanist Cartesian subject to the

posthuman subject that challenges the former, Japanese cyborg identity also loses its meaning. The emergence of cyberpunk and its literary criticism manifested the contradiction that the value of Japanese cyborg identity is its newness to the Western eye, but this newness has constituted unchanging Japanese uniqueness. The inversion of value thus occurs in the meaning of Japaneseness, from the failure in fully modernizing itself to the past revalorized as the postmodern present and near-future of the West. Ironically, American cyberpunk's impact caused a sudden revival of celebrating Japanese particularity in the West's universal terminology.

The way Japanese science fiction adopted American cyberpunk and retroactively made it their uniqueness also neglects certain changes that occurred in transition. There are two explicit changes worth noting here. First, the Asian setting and images applied in American cyberpunk, which were more a technical tool to stage the exotic inscrutability of hi-tech future than an essential condition for the genre, came to characterize the entirety of the genre as a requirement. As Tatsumi points out, "writing Japan" has become a significant part of business rather than simply utilizing East Asia for Otherness effects. Second is the cyborg's or cybernetic hero's transgender, that is, the emergence of the cyborg women on stagefront replacing male heroes in American cyberpunk. These two changes suggest that the female cybernetic being has close ties with the role of Japanese cyberpunk, namely, to write and rediscover Japan. To provide more detailed analysis of this transition, I will examine cyborg/android women in texts customarily categorized as Japanese cyberpunk, namely Kanbayashi Chohei's *Battle Fairy Yukikaze* (*Sento yosei Yukikaze*, 1984) and Noa Azusa's *The Flower of Babel* (*Bareru no kaori*, 1991).⁸

Female Cybernetic Presences in Japanese Cyberpunk

It is not too difficult to locate when science fiction started in Japan and how female heroes emerged in the genre. The basic notion of science fiction was introduced with the Japanese translation of H.G. Well's novel, *Time Machine*, in 1913, which gave birth to certain war propaganda sci-fi novels of the 1930s such as Nishimori Hisanori's *Beyond the Space* (*Uchu no kanata e*, 1936). It was only after the disastrous defeat in WWII that distorted Japanese figures as hybrids of machine and organism emerged, as represented by aforementioned *Human Cattle Yapoo* and *Japanese Apaches*. These novels from the 1950s to early 1960s depicted Japanese as subhumans

who transformed into iron-eaters or bio-machines in the postwar era. After the 1960s science-fiction movement of distinctly emulative nature, various modes and forms of human-machine chimeras appeared in popular TV programs and visual narratives, but explicitly cyberpunk-style narratives only came into being after the impact of translated American cyberpunk, especially *Neuromancer*. The transformation that Japanese cyberpunk had to undergo is best represented by Masaki Goro's career, who is considered to be the first writer who explicitly copied the American terms and narrative styles of the genre. Masaki first published a collection of short stories, *Evil Eyes* (1987), which looked like a mere Japanese translation of American cyberpunk as characterized by a lone male hero's somewhat tragic life as a cowboy in cyberspace, with narratives in the hard-boiled fashion and all those terms unique to the genre such as "jack-in" and "console." These stories proved the illusion that a Japanese can imitate what an American writes. Masaki's novel published in 1992, *Venus City*, however, was a relative success in customizing the genre by changing the protagonist to an ordinary Japanese OL⁹ girl, who transforms into a masculine hero with no real ethnic "color" in virtual reality. The story has also lost the extremely stylized fashion of American texts, as it is set in the age when cyberspace has become a synthetic entertainment center that anyone who pays access fees can access, more like a theme park. The novel's plot creates an irony when the female hero falls in love with a submissive Oriental girl in virtual space, who turns out to be her male Caucasian boss in her conglomerate company in reality. Because of this race/gender confusion, the novel's focus shifts from virtual space mystery adventure to a Japanese girl's complex with American male heroism that has tastes for exotic Oriental girls, which produces an awkward tension between these two future lovers. The novel well expresses the hero's identity dilemma being a Japanese female who turns into a Caucasian male to become a cyberspace cowboy.

What manifested in Masaki's *Venus City* was also visible in a popularized form of cyberpunk such as *manga*, especially in Shirow Masamune's *Kokaku kidotai* (*Ghost in the Shell*, 1991). This visual narrative, which is now a global media success, also standardized the structure of a Japanese female hero and a male figure (or figures) who is weaker and more human than her, such as Kusanagi Motoko against Togusa and Batou. The early form of these cyborg women, such as military hero(ine)s in Shirow Masamune's works (*Ghost in the Shell*, *Dominion*, *Appleseed*, etc.) and Knight Sabers in *Bubblegum Crisis* (1991-2), all developed the split structure of perspective between the female leading role and an inept male character in a support-

ing role. Toward the late-1990s, however, female cyborgs and androids have been safely domesticated and fetishized into maternal and sexual protectors of the male hero, whose function is usually reduced to either a maid or a goddess obediently serving her beloved male master, the sole reason for her militant nature. These fast transitions and spreading of cybernetic women indicate the fact that the strong female cyborg figure, who emerged with the adaptation of American cyberpunk between the late-1980s and early-1990s and has quickly turned into the maternal guardian of the whiny male protagonist in popular TV and *manga*, seems symptomatic of Japanese identity concerning both race and gender. Why did the cyberpunk theme come to tie in well with the female gender in the Japanese environment, and what subject model does it create or maintain against the Western notion of the new subject in the posthuman age? I will first shed light on Kanbayashi Chohei's *Battle Fairy Yukikaze*, which is considered the earliest materialization of Japanese, or Japanized, cyberpunk.

The story of *Battle Fairy* focuses on Rei, the pilot of the fighter plane named Yukikaze [snow wind; snow fairy] armed with highly advanced AI program and military weapons. These airplanes, known as the Sylphs, were developed to battle against the alien life form, JAM, whose intention and body form remain a mystery. JAM intervenes with computer systems and AIs of the human world, although they do not make aggressive attacks on humans. It becomes clear in the end that JAM probably cannot even recognize humans—they are simply attempting to communicate with computer programs and AIs who are infested with parasites, namely, humans. JAM's communication attempts (or invasions and hackings to the human eye) are especially active with the Sylphs, among whom Yukikaze is a most sophisticated and advanced form of intelligence, the state-of-the-art battle angel. After several fights against JAM, Yukikaze, who has already been quite discontent carrying the fragile, unintelligent, powerless egg in herself called "pilot," which severely limits her ability, decides to transmit her data to a self-sufficient pilotless aircraft with the latest updates. Rei, the human male pilot, is miserably dumped by the only intelligence form he trusted while Yukikaze, now liberated, finally acquires her full competency.

This novel's narrative comprehends two subject positions. One is the human pilot, the other, Battle Fairy. Rei is one of the top five special pilots of the Super Sylphs, whose mission is to bring back any information about the alien enemy, a total mystery as to their intentions, physical forms, or even whether they really exist. Trained to risk his life or his teammate's for the sake of his mission, Rei is depicted as a cold, inhuman character who

can only trust machines, or more precisely, only his Yukikaze. At first, Yukikaze seems to be his loyal mechanical partner, who exists just to serve Rei's commands: Rei's inhuman personality is essential to effectively communicate with his lover, Yukikaze, on the same plain. As the war continues, however, the Sylph fighter planes undergo rapid updates in arms and computer programs, which ironically proves the reality that Sylphs no longer need pilots—or they better serve the mission without them. As Rei gradually loses his *raison d'être* and authority over Yukikaze, the narrative weight also shifts from the inhumanity of both the pilot and the plane merged in harmony, toward the disorienting distance between the two. In the beginning, Rei's superhuman ability resembles the hardboiled hero of American cyberpunk, treating technology as an intrinsic part of his power. The ironic ending, however, where Yukikaze simply disburdens Rei, or the unnecessary part of her body and mind, paradoxically proves Rei's humanness. This castrated, feminized male figure is unbearably human, because his uselessness reinforces his human identity. As he strives to unify with Yukikaze, his doubts about which is actually fighting which—humans versus aliens, or just AIs versus AIs—only deepen, and this humanistic doubt alienates himself from Yukikaze, who now appears more alien than the enemy for her possible inability to tell humans from their adversary. When the perspective of the narration completes its transition from Rei to Yukikaze at the very end of the novel, where the Fairy happily flies away after ejecting the pilot, Rei's locus of subjectivity is reduced to ironic absence. On the other hand, Yukikaze, who pursues her unlimited potential by gradually losing sight of who is controlling her, grows her independent consciousness oriented by functionality rather than by the presumed distinction between humans and their binary opposites, whether the enemy or AI. The novel's fascination lies in the gradual shift of the subject point from the cold-blooded human pilot to the incomprehensible machine consciousness. These two subject positions respectively carry out their own functions. The former is a powerless, but (or therefore) moral and skeptical human male subject. The latter is a militant female subject who owns controlling power over both armed body and data access. The division of these two characters also indicates the supposed distinction between politics and military force at the state level, in the sense that politics is an illusion of humane control over the self-driven body of arms. If the Western subject is allegedly able to mediate the two, then the subject model in Japanese cyberpunk isn't. The splitting seems to occur because the technological power of cybernetic being is ascribed to the female subject who lacks the idea of machine-organ-

ism distinction, whereas the useless and absent male human fills the imaginary locus of moral.

Noa's 1991 novel, *The Flower of Babel*, follows the same structure of the dual perspectives, as the story revolves on a beautiful and powerful female spy, Anekawa Koi, and her helper, Georgic, who is a shy, delicate young boy. This novel is especially noteworthy because of its in-story research reports on the Japanese subject. The plot itself goes little beyond an ordinary space opera (female version) with a cyber-occult touch, as the story progresses with Koi, who serves her secret boss, the Emperor, to prevent the Sudo family's conspiracy of overturning the nation and finally hurdles the crisis with Georgic's help. The novel's true importance, however, lies in the detailed reports and talks about what Japan is and how the Japanese subject has formed through modernizing process. These vectors of knowledge in the story converge on the question of the Emperor, or the person who is only referred to as "ano kata," or "[the person] over there" throughout the novel. According to Koi's research paper on the formation of the Japanese subject (334-40), the "self" in Japan's political system has undergone a rather complex process to form the subject different than the West's Christian subject. Since the author applies Lacanian theory, the Christian subject is explained as what comes into being by subjecting himself to the Other through the mirror stage. Following Lacan, the novel presents the hypothesis that the splitting occurs in either mode of subject formation, whether Christian or Japanese, but the means to seam the split is different. Adopting Lacan's mirror stage, the in-story theory argues that the split is concealed by the fantasy of equation in the Christian model.¹⁰ What *The Flower of Babel* tries to prove is the idea that the Japanese subject lacks this fantasy of mis-identification achieved in the Christian tradition of the Other and the self, thereby producing another structure of the subject supposedly unique to Japan. For example, "I think, therefore I am" supports the Christian fantasy of the equation between the subject of enunciation (I, the enunciator himself, which can never be enunciated—your eye can't see itself!) and the subject of the enunciated (the agency of act, of thinking). The Japanese subject model in the novel, on the other hand, does not enunciate "I" because Japanese language usually does not take the subject, "I" or other pronouns to form a sentence. This requires the enunciator to suppose the listener of enunciation ("you") to suppose and know that the un-enunciated word ("I") is "your you" in the mutual dual supposition, that is inferably "I." The "you of you," a surplus that cannot be reduced to the fantasy of the simple "I" or the self, requires the imaginary locus that ultimately under-

takes everyone's "you." Koi's report concludes that the ultimate undertaker ("depositeé") is the Emperor, not a person or a function but a purely empty locus that does nothing and thus embodies everyone's subjectivity by becoming present absence. Compared to the Western subject who becomes a subject by "seek[ing] itself in interaction with the Other," the Japanese subject is imagined as a purely relational reference of you to you, which requires the absence *per se* at the top of the depositing pyramid structure.

Koi's report further explains that Japan's visibly split subject today was created by incorporating the Western model without discarding the Japanese subject. The result is the duality enacted as one, which corresponds to the modern condition of Japanese society. For instance, the conflict of A (past/local/culture) and B (future/global/technology), or simply of Japan and the West, are coexisting by internalizing the paradox, as represented by the uncanny symbiosis of computers and spiritual power, science and Shintoism, the democratic state government and the Emperor, etc. This condition also constitutes the relationship of Koi and Georgic, whose characteristics consist of opposing elements: Koi as a Japanese female agent embodies high capability in computer programming, manipulation of information technology, and military power, whereas Georgic is rather inactive and silent except for being the empty center that potentially executes Koi's supernatural power. Unlike *Battle Fairy*, in which the illusory bond of human and machine breaks between male human and female machine, *Babel's* adventure is in fact an attempt to rationalize, and thus rebuild, the connection of the two. The novel ends with the final appearance of Georgic, who solves the conflict, not by fighting the enemy as Koi has been doing, but by repealing the code that has set the two as opposite and separate, namely, by simply explaining to the enemy that they are merely the internal image of the Other. Their act of rebellion against the modern Japanese nation and their attempt to revive what have been suppressed by modernization, are programmed as a necessary evil to build the modern nation, and, as Georgic explains, the purely functional border created between the self and the Other no longer needs to exist because the novel's mission is to reveal the fact that there is not really any border. By this reasoning, the Sudo family loses their original motive to threaten Japan—the problem is solved. This ending's logic rationalizes the idea that the two opposing components of modern Japan are actually one and the same thing—computers do not differ from Shintoism, for instance, because wireless transmission of digital data is equivalent to spiritual communication. Data transmission has long been achieved as shamanistic possession of body and consciousness. The global computerization has already fulfilled what the enemy of

the modern Japan was struggling to realize, from psychic networking to the revitalization of souls or artificial intelligence. The main goal of the novel is to provide the rationale of Japanese cyberpunk, which is to equate Japan's ancient uniqueness and the future of technology. *Flower of the Babel* realized Japanese cyberpunk's actual task at the level both of its content and its generic form.

Conclusion

Japanese cyberpunk is a symptom of the struggle with its duality, between subject and Other, West and Japan, science and occult, as well as machine and human organism. It aims toward the synthesis of the two in the rhetoric of cyberpunk, which also serves as the rhetoric of Japanese uniqueness in the modern formation of subjectivity. My intention in presenting the cyberpunk texts from Japan is not to prove that there is a distinctly unique structure of the Japanese subject, but to argue that cyberpunk serves as a new locus of the old Japanism with the pretentious look of advanced technology. The epistemological innovativeness that American cyberpunk carried in itself easily merged with this old mission of Japan's modernization, which created the discourse of historical coincidence that retroactively produces the history of the prosthetic Japanese identity. This identity politics, that is, the newness of the West re-contextualized into Japanese tradition, produces the illusion that modern Japan has outpaced the West by reclaiming its past.

The emergence of female cyborgs in Japanese cyberpunk, who replaced the role of the male hero that characterized the first wave of American cyberpunk, explains how Japanese cyberpunk enacts its claim on the dual subjectivity of Japaneseness. Strong female cyborgs and androids so dominant in recent Japanese science fiction are actually presented as referencing signifiers of the empty subject at the center, who is often embodied in the form of a passive, powerless male character. His absent presence, compared to the strong and independent cybernetic women around him, may appear insignificant, but his insignificance itself provides power to the female hybrids. It is interesting to see how *Battle Fairy*, a predecessor published on the eve of Japan's cyberpunk adaptations, thematized the split of the two opposing presences, and was quickly switched to texts that pursue synthesis of the two under pervasive influence of American cyberpunk rhetoric. *The Flower of Babel* further achieved the standard format of the coupling of the

passive boy and the militant cyborg woman, which foreshadows the popularized form of female cyborgs and androids who save a powerless male hero as maternal guardians in various *anime* and *manga*. The development of Japanese cyberpunk texts and their female heroes has overall restructured the discourse of the split Japanese subject, thereby renovating the philosophy of Japaneseness and Japan's illusory advancement with the help from the rhetoric of post-humanity and cybernetic identity. The theoretical base of cyberpunk and cybernetic philosophy often allows us to stay blind to socio-historical contexts outside the West, which, in case of Japanese cyberpunk, implanted a rather problematic treatment of the notion of historical innovativeness and discontinuity from the past. Studies of cyborg identity must yet take another serious look at its rhetoric of the new. Multitudes of cyborg women coming out of Japanese science fiction today may appear attractive embodiments of a new phase of society and philosophy, but they may be carrying the old mission of modern Japan on their back.

Earlham College

Works cited

- Balsamo, Anne. *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996.
- Feenberg, Andrew. "The Problem of Modernity in the Philosophy of Nishida," *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, & the Question of Nationalism*, eds. James W. Heisig & John C. Maraldo. Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1994: 151–173.
- Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. NY: Routledge Press, 1991.
- Harootunian, Harry. "Overcome by Modernity: Fantisizing Everyday Life and the Discourse on the Social in Interwar Japan." *Parallax: A Journal of Metadiscursive Theory and Cultural Practices* 2 (Feb. 1996): 77–88.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formation of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychological Experience." *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*. London: Arnold, 2001: 189–195.
- Morishita, Kazuhito. *Nihon SF no gyakushu [Japanese SF Fights Back]*. Tokyo: Tokuma shoten, 1994.
- Nishida, Kitaro. "The Problem of Japanese Culture [Nihon bunka no mondai]," *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, ed. Theodore de Bary. NY: Columbia UP, 1958: 857–72.
- Oguma, Eiji. *Democracy and Patriotism [Minshu to aikoku]*. Tokyo: Shin'yosha, 2000.
- Plant, Sadie. "Beyond the Screens: Film Cyperpunk and Cyberfeminism." *Variant* 14 (Summer 1993): 12–17. Reprint in *Feminisms*. Eds. Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires. New York: Oxford UP, 1997 [1993]: 503–08.
- Sakai, Naoki. *Translation and Subjectivity: On Japan and Cultural Nationalism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997.
- Sterling, Bruce. "Shinkansen." *Whole Earth Review* 69 (Winter 1990): 72–76.
- Tatsumi, Takayuki. *Manifesto for Japanoid [Japanoido sengen]*. Tokyo: Hayakawa shobo, 1993.
- Zižek, Slavoj. "'The Thing That Thinks': The Kantian Background of the Noir Subject," *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. Joan Copjec. London & New York: Verso, 1993: 199–226.

Notes

1. "Techno-Orientalism" is a term coined to signify the recent, especially the 1980s, phenomenon in the US that Oriental images of Japan manifest in two contrary stereotypes, which are, the premodern traditionalism (*geisha*, *samurai*, etc.) and the supremacy of high-technology. See David Morley & Kevin Robins, "Techno-Orientalism: Japan Panic" in *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes, and Cultural Boundaries* (London & NY: Routledge, 1995).

2. There has been a recent revival of study on modernity and wartime/postwar intellectual history, from the late-1980s to 1990s, which arose in connection with questioning of postmodernism. For detailed analyses of Overcoming Modernity, see Sakai Naoki's "Modernity and Its Critique" and Harry Harootunian's "Overcome by Modernity."

3. Kitaro Nishida, "Ningen-teki sonzai [The Human Being]" and "Rekishiteki sekai ni oite no kobutsu no tachiba [The standpoint of an Individual in Historical World]" are taken from *Nishida Kitaro zenshu* [*The Complete Works of Kitaro Nishida*], vol.9 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1949) 1–68; 69–146.

4. See Tetsuo Najita, "On Culture and Technology in Postmodern Japan," *Postmodernism and Japan*, eds. Masao Miyoshi & H. D. Harootunian (Durham: Duke UP, 1989).

5. See Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1995) and Harumi Befu, *Hegemony of Homogeneity: An Anthropological Analysis of Nihonjinron* (Portland: Trans Pacific, 2001).

6. The writer Yukio Mishima committed ritual suicide of *seppuku* (known as *hara-kiri* in English) at military headquarters of Japan on November 25, 1970 after a failed attempt of a *coup d'état* with his private military troop. Most responses from the public, including the mass media and politicians, indicated that Mishima's act was totally out of context in 1970 and thus pointless. His suicide was interpreted at best as a public performance by an artist who had bizarre tastes for wartime ultranationalism.

7. The treaty was signed originally based on the agreement on the two nations' mutual military support in case either country is attacked by the third party. As is still the moot point of the U.S.-Japan relationship that has repeatedly arisen with Gulf War and "War on Terror," the treaty was concluded anticipating the future Constitutional change. Because of Japan's postwar Constitution that limits Japan's military capacities to resistance to inevitable armed attack, the U.S. was granted instead the privilege of using Japan as its military outposts for the Far East at large.

8. There are no English translations of these novels. The books I refer to in this essay are: Chohei Kanbayashi, *Sento yosei Yukikaze* (Tokyo: Hayakawa shobo, 1984) and Azusa Noa, *Baberu no kaori* (Tokyo: Hayakawa shobo, 1991).

9. A Japanese word for "office ladies," female office workers of non-career-track, who are supposed to work only until they get married.

10. According to Lacan, the mirror stage indicates the moment that the subject discovers the body in totality in mirror reflection. The important fact in this theory is "that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as *Gestalt*, that is to say, in an exteriority" (Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," 191), which calls for the mis-identification of the I in image at the threshold of the visible world foreclosing being as lack. If, for example, the Kantian subject (Deckard) in *Blade Runner* is split between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the enunciated (Žižek 217), the voice-over narrative in the director's cut of the film has the effect of integrating the subject into the "big Other." For more details, see Žižek's "The Thing That Thinks." Nishida asserts that the imagined integration of the split subject is enabled by the teleological existence of God (e.g. the final judgment and the preestablished harmony that follows) based on Leibniz's philosophy (72).