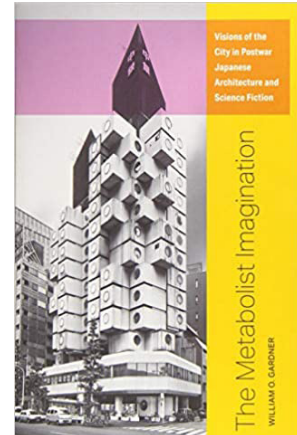


The Metabolist Imagination: Visions of the City in Postwar Japanese Architecture and Science Fiction, by William O. Gardner



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An argument could be made that the idea of Japan holds an outsized position within the formation of the megatext that constitutes the science-fictional imagination. This goes back to the beginnings of the genre, with Japan's rise as an imperial power at the turn of the twentieth century prompting the popularization of yellow peril and future war narratives that served as one of the precursor genres to science fiction, which later sees a revival in the techno-orientalisms of cyberpunk in the 1980s as Japan came to be perceived as an economic rival to the United States. Yet despite this prominence, only a handful of scholarly monographs on Japanese science fiction in the English language—Takayuki Tatsumi's *Full Metal Apache* (2006), Steven T. Brown's *Tokyo Cyberpunk* (2010), Motoko Tanaka's *Apocalypse in Contemporary Japanese Science Fiction* (2014), to name a few—have been published to date.

William O. Gardner's *The Metabolist Imagination* is a very welcome and much needed addition to this short list, not only providing sustained discussions of historically noteworthy works of Japanese science fiction that have not seen much attention in English language scholarship, but, more importantly, also offering a multilayered scaffolding for articulating the historical and critical significance of these texts. At the center of Gardner's discussions is the project of reconstructing the intertextual linkages between avant-garde architecture and the genre of science fiction. Taking the example of the cross-pollination of ideas between the Metabolist movement in postwar Japanese architecture and the postwar development of Japanese science fiction as his point of departure, *The Metabolist Imagination* presents a compelling case that their respective engagements with questions of futurity—first under the historical condition of postwar reconstruction in the aftermath of the Second World War, then followed by the subsequent neoliberal turn—call attention to how both of these sites of imaginative work perform their own respective practices of cognitive estrangement.

Gardner explains that a central tenet of the Metabolist group of young architects—which includes figures who have since become well known in their own right, such as Isozaki Arata, Tange Kenzō, Kurokawa Kishō, and others—was a project of an open utopianism in urban design. As articulated in their manifesto *Metabolism 1960: Proposals for New Urbanism*, they believed that architecture is better understood not as the design of fixed permanent structures, but as a process that remains flexible to future growth and potential transformation. Drawing inspiration from both the Japanese historical legacy wherein cities were frequently destroyed and rebuilt in the aftermath of fires and earthquakes and from the modular designs emerging out of the developments in space exploration, avant-garde architects in Japan imagined such projects as massive megastructures that enclosed whole cities akin to space habitats, or buildings constructed out of capsules like cellular structures that could be organically expanded or reconfigured as needed.

In Gardner's argument, it is this emphasis on a temporal dimension to architecture that serves as the basis for its interface with science fiction, writing that "the work of the Metabolist group of architects investigated here includes a significant narrative dimension" that invites reading them in conjunction with their contemporaries in science fiction (2). In other words, the works of the Metabolist architects did not simply parallel those of science fiction authors, but were in themselves cognitively estranging projects in dialogue with other writings conventionally classified as science fiction. For Gardner, this collaboration culminates in the 1970 Osaka World Expo, which featured—placed in the same space—the imagination of the future city expressed especially in the capsule architecture that was prominently featured throughout the various exhibits and the visions of the future by science fiction authors like Komatsu Sakyō and Tezuka Osamu (both of whom participated in the event). As Gardner notes, not only did the World Expo shape the trajectory of Japanese science fiction since as later cyberpunk narratives responded to the techno-utopian visions it presented, its media coverage outside of Japan arguably also prefigured the techno-orientalist image that would come to be ascribed to Japan in the 1980s. As such, an argument can be made that the 1970 Osaka World Expo also played a role in the subsequent development of Anglophone science fiction, in effect opening up a space to consider the stakes of Gardner's discussion beyond the confines of Japan.

Although *The Metabolist Imagination* does not quite fully explore these transnational ramifications, there is something to be said for its recognition of this possibility. In part, this is because even as the field of Science Fiction Studies can be criticized for its relative neglect of Japan shaped by its Eurocentric (if not even Anglocentric) historical legacy, on the flipside, the treatment of science fiction within the field of Japan Studies often exhibits a tendency towards what Hajime Nakatani has called a "Japanological neurosis," wherein something like "Japanese science fiction" is treated as a singular coherent entity and subjected primarily to a hermeneutics of national allegory (Nakatani 528). In the end, if there is one strength in particular to Gardner's discussion, it is precisely its deft avoidance of this trap that Nakatani identifies, opening new lines of intellectual inquiry. Indeed, in putting into active conversation the discourses of architecture and science

fiction, *The Metabolist Imagination* offers an effective demonstration of Istvan Csicsery-Ronay's contention that science fiction is not merely a "genre of aesthetic entertainment" but has become "a form of discourse that directly engages contemporary language and culture, and that has, in this moment, a generic interest in the intersections of technology, scientific theory, and social practice" (Csicsery-Ronay 4). In doing so, it provides a blueprint for articulating science fiction as something that is no mere object of cultural hermeneutics, but is itself a mode of critical practice of intellectual inquiry.

Works Cited

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