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My Own Private Tokyo

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I'm back to Tokyo tonight to refresh my sense of place, check out the post-Bubble city, professionally resharpen that handy Japanese edge. If

you believe, as I do, that all cultural change is essentially technology-driven, you pay attention to Japan. There are reasons for that, and they run deep.

Dining late, in a plastic-draped gypsy noodle stall in Shinjuku, the classic cliché better-than-*Blade Runner* Tokyo street set, I scope my neighbor's phone as he checks his text messages. Wafer-thin, Kandy Kolor pearlescent white, complexly curvilinear, totally ephemeral looking, its screen seethes with a miniature version of Shinjuku's neon light show. He's got the rosary-like anticancer charm attached; most people here do, believing it deflects microwaves, grounding them away from the brain. It looks great, in terms of a novelist's need for props, but it may not actually be that next-generation in terms of what I'm used to back home.

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Tokyo has been my handiest prop shop for as long as I've been writing: sheer eye candy. You can see more chronological strata of futuristic design in a Tokyo streetscape than anywhere else in the world. Like successive layers of Tomorrowlands, older ones showing through when the newer ones start to peel.

-- The world's second-richest economy, after a decade of stagflation, still looks like the world's richest place, but the global lead lines of money and hustle have invisibly realigned. It feels to me as though all that crazy momentum has finally arrived. --

So the pearlescent phone with the cancer thingy gets drafted straight into props, but what about Japan itself? The Bubble's gone, successive economic plans sputter and wobble to the same halt, one political scandal follows another ... Is that the future?

Yes. Part of it, and not necessarily ours, but definitely yes. The Japanese love "futuristic" things precisely because they've been living in the future for such a very long time now. History, that other form of speculative fiction, explains why.

The Japanese, you see, have been repeatedly drop-kicked, ever further down the timeline, by serial national traumata of quite unthinkable weirdness, by 150 years of deep, almost constant, change. The 20th century, for Japan, was like a ride on a rocket sled, with successive bundles of fuel igniting spontaneously, one after another.

They have had one strange ride, the Japanese, and we tend to forget that.

In 1854, with Commodore Perry's second landing, gunboat diplomacy ended 200 years of self-imposed isolation, a deliberate stretching out of the feudal dreamtime. The Japanese knew that America, not to be denied, had come knocking with the future in its hip pocket. This was the quintessential cargo-cult moment for Japan: the arrival of alien tech.

The people who ran Japan - the emperor, the lords and ladies of his court, the nobles, and the very wealthy - were entranced. It must have seemed as though these visitors emerged from some rip in the fabric of reality. Imagine the Roswell Incident as a trade mission, a successful one; imagine us buying all the Gray technology we could afford, no reverse

engineering required. This was a cargo cult where the cargo actually did what it claimed to do.

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They must all have gone briefly but thoroughly mad, then pulled it together somehow and plunged on. The Industrial Revolution came whole, in kit form: steamships, railroads, telegraphy, factories, Western medicine, the division of labor – not to mention a mechanized military and the political will to use it. Then those Americans returned to whack Asia's first industrial society with the light of a thousand suns – twice, and very hard – and thus the War ended.

At which point the aliens arrived in force, this time with briefcases and plans, bent on a cultural retrofit from the scorched earth up. Certain central aspects of the feudal-industrial core were left intact, while other areas of the nation's political and business culture were heavily grafted with American tissue, resulting in hybrid forms ...

Here in my Akasaka hotel, I can't sleep. I get dressed and walk to Roppongi, through a not-unpleasantly humid night in the shadows of an exhaust-stained multilevel expressway that feels like the oldest thing in town.

Roppongi is an interzone, the land of gaijin bars, always up late. I'm waiting at a pedestrian crossing when I see her. She's probably

Australian, young and quite serviceably beautiful. She wears very expensive, very sheer black undergarments, and little else, save for some black outer layer – equally sheer, skintight, and microshort – and some gold and diamonds to give potential clients the right idea. She steps past me, into four lanes of traffic, conversing on her phone in urgent Japanese. Traffic halts obediently for this triumphantly jaywalking gaijin in her black suede spikes. I watch her make the opposite curb, the brain-cancer deflector on her slender little phone swaying in counterpoint to her hips. When the light changes, I cross, and watch her high-five a bouncer who looks like Oddjob in a Paul Smith suit, his skinny lip beard razored with micrometer precision. There's a flash of white as their palms meet. Folded paper. Junkie origami.

This ghost of the Bubble, this reminder of Tokyo from when it was the lodestar for every hustler on the face of the planet, strolls on and then ducks into a doorway near the Sugar Heel Bondage Bar. I last came here right on the cusp of that era, just before the downturn, when her kind were legion. She's old-school, this girl: fin de siècle Tokyo decadence. A nostalgia piece.

The Bubble, I think, walking back to the hotel with a box of sushi from a high-end liquor store and a bottle of Bikkle, that was their next-to-last kick. That transplanted postwar American industrial tissue took awhile, and in the '80s it finally did the trick, but the economic jet fuel couldn't be sustained.

The world's second-richest economy, after nearly a decade of stagflation (the century's final kick), still looks like the world's richest place, but energies have shifted, global lea lines of money and hustle have invisibly realigned, yet it feels to me as though all that crazy momentum has finally arrived. Somewhere. Here. Under the expressway Andrei Tarkovsky used for a sci-fi set when he shot *Solaris*.

Next day, I run into fellow Vancouverite Douglas Coupland in the Shibuya branch of Tokyu Hands, an eight-floor DIY emporium where doing it yourself includes things like serious diamond cutting. He introduces me to Michael Stipe. Coupland is as jet-lagged as I am, but Stipe indicates that he's actually club-lagged, having stayed up till 2 in the morning the night before. And how does he like Tokyo? "It rocks," says Stipe.

Later, having headed for Harajuku and Kiddy Land, another eight floors – these devoted to toys that definitely aren't us – I find myself distracted outside Harajuku Station by a bevy of teenage manga nurses, rocker girls kitted out in knee-high black platform boots, black jodhpurs, black Lara Croft tops, and open, carefully starched lab coats, stethoscopes around their necks.

The look clearly isn't happening without a stethoscope.

They're doing the Harajuku hang – smoking cigarettes, talking on their little phones, and being seen. I circle them for a while, hoping one will have a colostomy bag or a Texas catheter worked into her outfit, but the look, like most looks here or anywhere, is rigidly delineated. They all have the same black lipstick, worn away to pink at the center.

I think about the nurses on my way back to the hotel. Something about dreams, about the interface between the private and the consensual. You can do that here, in Tokyo: be a teenage girl on the street in a bondage-nurse outfit. You can dream in public. And the reason you can do it is that this is one of the safest cities in the world, and a special zone, Harajuku,

has already been set aside for you. That was true during the Bubble, and remains true today, in the face of drugs and slackers and a notable local increase in globalization. The Japanese, in the course of being booted down the timeline, have learned to keep it together in ways that we're only just starting to imagine. They don't really worry, not the way we do. The manga nurses don't threaten anything; there's a place for them, and for whatever replaces them.

I spend my last night in Shinjuku with Coupland and a friend. It's hard to beat, these nameless neon streets swarming with every known form of electronic advertising, under a misting rain that softens the commercials playing on façade screens of quite surreal width and clarity. The Japanese know this about television: Make it big enough and anything looks cool.

Those French Situationists, going on about the Society of the Spectacle, they didn't have a clue. This is it, right here, and I love it. Shinjuku at night is one of the most deliriously beautiful places in the world, and somehow the silliest of all beautiful places – and the combination is sheer delight.

And tonight, watching the Japanese do what they do here, amid all this electric kitsch, all this randomly overlapped media, this chaotically stable neon storm of marketing hoopla, I've got my answer: Japan is still the future, and if the vertigo is gone, it really only means that they've made it out the far end of that tunnel of prematurely accelerated change. Here, in the first city to have this firmly and this comfortably arrived in this new century – the most truly contemporary city on earth – the center is holding.

In a world of technologically driven exponential change, the Japanese have an acquired edge: They know how to live with it. Nobody legislates that kind of change into being, it just comes, and keeps coming, and the Japanese have been experiencing it for more than a hundred years.

I see them poised here tonight, hanging out, life going on, in the glow of these very big televisions. Postgraduates at all of this.

Home at last, in the 21st century.

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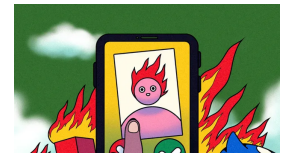
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