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BOOK REVIEW

***Samurai with Telephones: Anachronism in Japanese Literature* by Christopher Smith.**

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024. 242 pages

Christopher Smith's *Samurai with Telephones: Anachronism in Japanese Literature* is a stimulating and ambitious study that brings long overdue attention to the ways anachronism structures Japanese literary and cultural expression. Expanding from his 2017 dissertation titled *Now Long Ago: Anachronism in Edo and Contemporary Japanese Literature* defended at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Smith proposes a theoretical framework that distinguishes between “dialogic” anachronisms, which preserve the difference between past and present, and “monologic” ones, which collapse temporal distance by rewriting the past in the image of the present. This framework, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), Julia Kristeva (b. 1941), and postmodern theory, is then tested across an eclectic archive that stretches from literature to contemporary manga and anime, and Edo-period (1600–1868) genres like *kibyōshi* (comic books) and *kabuki* theater plays, including Ōgai Mori's (1862–1922) *Abe Ichizoku* (*The Abe Clan*, 1913), Sampei Shirato's (1932–2021) *Kamui-den* (*The Legend of Kamui*, 1964–1971), and Osamu Tezuka's (1928–1989) *Hi-no Tori* (*Phoenix*, original run 1954–1955).

Smith opens with the premise that anachronisms are not simply errors or comic flourishes, but fundamental strategies of cultural narration. In doing so, he challenges a long tradition of treating anachronism as accidental or secondary. His theoretical distinction is simple yet powerful: monologic anachronism rewrites the past to support the present, while dialogic anachronism places past and present side by side, allowing them to illuminate one another without collapsing into synthesis. This distinction

provides a fresh vocabulary for thinking about how texts negotiate temporal layers and is flexible enough to be applied across very different periods and genres.

Importantly, Smith situates Japanese literature and popular culture within broader conversations about temporality. His discussion of Shakespearean anachronisms in the introduction, for example, reminds readers that Japan is not unique in its temporal play but participates in a wider, perhaps global, literary practice. At the same time, he insists on the specificity of Japanese contexts, particularly the Edo period's lively print and theater culture, where audiences were historically attuned to the humorous and critical possibilities of temporal slippage.

The book's archive is admirably wide-ranging. Early chapters take up Ōgai's *Abe Ichizoku* and Shirato's *Kamui-den*, examining how anachronism intersects with modern ideologies of the individual or Marxist historiography. Later, Smith turns to Kenzaburō Ōe's (1935–2023) *Man'en Gannen-no Futtobōru* ('football in the first year of Man'en', 1967), which provides a particularly rich case because it contains both monologic and dialogic anachronisms, dramatizing the tension between rewriting and destabilizing history. Tezuka's *Hi-no Tori* receives especially compelling treatment. Smith shows how Tezuka's playful anachronisms – a twelfth-century samurai picking up a telephone, for instance – are not simply comic interludes but pointed critiques of official history and postwar national myth. Here the distinction between humorous gag and political intervention collapses, and Smith demonstrates how laughter can itself be a vehicle of critique. Equally valuable are the later chapters on Edo-period *kibyōshi* and *kabuki*, which highlight that anachronistic play was by no means confined to modernity. Works such as *Nise Murasaki Inaka Genji* ('a fake Murasaki's country Genji', 1829) or *Yoshitsune Sembon-zakura* (*Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees*, 1747) reveal a long-standing tradition of inserting present concerns into past settings. In showing Edo readers' awareness of such devices, Smith undercuts any assumption that early modern audiences consumed these works "naively." The effect is to emphasize continuity: anachronism has long served as a means of negotiating history in Japanese culture, whether in woodblock print or television anime.

Despite its many strengths, the study occasionally leaves the reader wishing for greater clarity or breadth. The sequencing of chapters is one such point. While the movement from Ōgai to Shirato, then to Tezuka, contemporary anime, and finally Edo texts, makes for a stimulating range, the connective logic is not always apparent. Are the texts chosen for their representative

force, their thematic parallels, or their theoretical utility? A clearer roadmap would help readers follow the argument across this diverse archive. Smith also draws heavily on English-language theoretical traditions. While this brings his work into dialogue with broader conversations in comparative literature and cultural theory, it results in relatively little engagement with Japanese-language scholarship on temporality, intertextuality, or literary historiography. Greater attention to Japanese methodologies could have strengthened the book's claims and placed them in richer conversation with existing Japanese debates that English-speaking readers rarely have a chance to encounter.

Conceptually, Smith frames anachronism most often as destabilization. While persuasive, this approach risks narrowing the trope's potential. Anachronism can also be generative: it can propose alternative histories, imagine parallel worlds, or open multiverse-like scenarios in which different versions of the past coexist. Smith gestures toward these possibilities but does not pursue them extensively. A broader theorization would have allowed his framework to capture not only the critical but also the constructive powers of anachronism.

Finally, questions of scope deserve attention. Although the title emphasizes "literature", much of the book is devoted to manga, anime, and theater. These are some of the most engaging sections, but they suggest a broader cultural rather than strictly literary project. Making this explicit – perhaps framing the book as a study of Japanese cultural narratives – would clarify its scope and avoid leaving readers uncertain about the boundaries of "literature" in Smith's account.

Smith's prose is accessible, but at times it leans into extended citation chains that can obscure his own interpretive voice. This tendency toward a somewhat conventional academic style occasionally slows the argument, giving more weight to the theorists he cites than to his own insights. Yet when Smith steps back from the scaffolding, his readings are sharp, his enthusiasm is palpable, and his voice is clear. The balance tilts toward caution, but the interpretive energy is always close at hand.

Overall, *Samurai with Telephones* makes a valuable contribution to Japanese literary and cultural studies by foregrounding anachronism as a central trope rather than a marginal error. Its theoretical distinction between dialogic and monologic anachronism offers a vocabulary that will be useful beyond Japanese studies, and its archive – spanning Ōgai and Ōe, Tezuka and Naruto, Edo *kibyōshi* and *kabuki* – is impressively broad. While the book could be strengthened by clearer organizational logic, deeper engagement with Japanese scholarship, and a more expansive account of anachronism's

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multiple functions, it succeeds in opening an important conversation. Rather than closing the field, Smith's study lays the groundwork for further research on temporality in Japanese literature and culture, inviting comparative exploration of how anachronism shapes narrative traditions across the globe.