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The Spectacle of Yellow Bodies and Disoriented Futures:
Deciphering Techno-Orientalist Manifestations of East Asia in Science Fiction

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Abstract

Western media and pop culture play an aggressive role in relaying problematic representations of racialized identities. Many regressive narratives of East Asia and their cultural identities continue to be encoded in varying mediums, particularly Western science fiction (SF) films. This thesis seeks to analyze the visual representation and narratives of East Asianness & Asiatic femininity used to illicit speculative technological futures in dystopic, Western SF films. This research will reference several key theoretical frameworks, such as Derrick Bell's critical race theory, Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality, Edward Said's critical concept of Orientalism, and Kevin Morley and David Robins' discursive phenomena of techno-Orientalism, in order to explore this topic of study. By performing a film analysis of three prominent sci-fi films from the 21st century, *Cloud Atlas* (2012), *Ex Machina* (2014), and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), a close textual analysis of various technical components of these films is conducted, in relation to three Western perceptions of East Asia and their cultural identities: East Asia as an evil empire, East Asians as machine-like, and East Asian women as objects. Thus, this research deciphers these visual encodings and techniques of techno-orientalism that conceivably establish a correlation between narrative, visual, and stylistic choices of Asian-inspired aesthetics that utilize Western cultural codes and signification and current, real-life regressive depictions of East Asian cultural identities they reinforce.

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I: Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER II: Literature Review.....	3
Geopolitics of Science Fiction & Cyberpunk.....	4
Defining “East Asianness” in relation to Techno-Orientalist tropes.....	7
High-tech Megacities in Urban Worldbuilding.....	8
Cyborgs.....	10
The Artificial Asian female as an ornament.....	13
CHAPTER III: Theoretical Frameworks.....	18
Critical Race Theory.....	18
Intersectionality.....	20
Orientalism.....	20
Techno-Orientalism.....	22
CHAPTER IV: Methodology.....	24
Film Analysis.....	24
Research Design.....	25
Sample & Sample Criteria.....	25
Procedure of Analysis.....	27
Ethical Implications & Limitations.....	27
CHAPTER V: Analysis.....	29
East Asia as an Evil Empire.....	30
East Asians as machine-like.....	37
East Asian women as objects.....	46
CHAPTER VI: Conclusion.....	56
Reference List.....	59
Filmography.....	68

List of Figures

<i>Figure 1:</i> Neo-Seoul skyline.....	32
<i>Figure 2:</i> Dark underbelly of Neo-Seoul.....	33
<i>Figure 3:</i> Kusanagi overlooking Japan's cityscape from atop a towering skyscraper.....	34
<i>Figure 4:</i> Kusanagi and Batou walking the streets of Japan.....	35
<i>Figure 5:</i> Kyoko lying on Nathan's bed.....	41
<i>Figure 6:</i> Kusanagi opening her eyes after she is transplanted into a mechanical body.....	44
<i>Figure 7:</i> Yoona-939 looking at Sonmi-451.....	49
<i>Figure 8:</i> Sonmi-451 looking at herself in the mirror after her escape.....	50
<i>Figure 9:</i> Kyoko unbuttoning her shirt in front of Smith.....	51
<i>Figure 10:</i> Kusanagi struggling to open the hatch of a machine tank.....	55

Introduction

Western science fiction (SF) films have long been a popular and powerful medium for exploring and presenting visions of imaginative futures and plausible contemplations of alternate temporalities. Speculative fiction provides an avenue to foresee, amplify, and address inevitable existential risks and cultural crises rooted in current sociopolitical anxieties that may come to define a technologized future. Modern cultural projections of SF's futures are replete with the vicissitudes of techno-Orientalism, presenting distorted depictions of East Asian culture, aesthetics, and identities that act as cultural signifiers of the foreign presence of an alien world. These regressive narratives of East Asia and their people are sophisticatedly encoded into Western SF, exemplifying ethnocentric and xenophobic messages, posing consequences to real-life understandings of East Asian cultural identities and their formation. This thesis is interested in the ways in which Western SF utilizes visual representation and narratives of East Asianness and Asiatic femininity to cinematically present a menacing and homogeneously threatening image of East Asia rooted in regressive stereotypes of the yellow body.

This study enters into the racialized genre of speculative fiction to problematize the West's construction of racial ontology displayed in Asian narrative spaces adopted and appropriated by Western cinema. Considering the social implications of techno-Orientalist applications of SF films on East Asian cultural identity formation, this research aims to explore the question: "How do contemporary filmic depictions of East Asians in Western SF films reflect Western perceptions of East Asia and their cultural identities?". To achieve this, this research study will adopt a postcolonial lens to conduct a film analysis of three widely renowned Neon-noir SF films released in the 21st century, *Cloud Atlas* (2012), *Ex Machina* (2014), and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017). These films will be examined in relation to theoretical orientations grounded in

Derrick Bell's critical race theory, Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality, Edward Said's critical concept of Orientalism, and Kevin Morley and David Robins' discursive phenomena of techno-Orientalism. In examining the East Asian subjects and cultural markers in the three films, this thesis reveals the ways SF exploits historically reinforced configurations of East Asia in its imagination of the future. Ultimately, this research was conducted in hopes that its findings contribute to a broader discussion of combating anti-Asian sentiments in Western media, in urge to move the SF genre towards a more inclusive direction.

Literature Review

A large body of literature exists within Western scholarship on their representations of East Asian cultural identities in various mediums of media. Its prevalence is even more significant in the entertainment industry, primarily in Western-produced science fiction (SF) and cyberpunk films. Recent research done in speculative fiction draws on critical concepts of notable scholars Edward Said (1979), David Morley & Kevin Robins (1995), and Anne Anlin Cheng (2018) to address the distorted perception of East Asia and their cultural identities in SF films. In particular, scholars seek to explore the discursive phenomena of techno-Orientalism and the extent to which its imagery pervades Western cinematic representations and cultural production of East Asian identities (T. Ueno, 1999; Roh et al., 2015). As the SF and cyberpunk film genre grows in popularity, there is a gradual increase in literature reflecting the geopolitical anxieties surrounding the genres' emergence, pointing to them as a site of prediction and reimagination for the state of historical warfare relations between the East and the West (Enteen, 2007; Myerson, 2020; Seed, 1999). Representations of East Asianness central to Asia's rapid technological advancements have also been explored within the cyberpunk film genre. This field of study confronts the interconnected relationship between race and technology that manifests in techno-Orientalist tropes often derived from East Asian-inspired hyper-technological aesthetics (Fan, 2016; Yamashita & San Pablo Burns, 2017; Otmazgin, 2011). Scholars also assert the importance of examining the gendered dimensions that have been lacking in existing techno-Orientalism literature, specifically in East Asian women's bodies as a subject of colonial fantasies of power (Zheng, 2016; Tian & Ommundsen, 2019; Lu, 2021; Tseng, 2019).

Burgeoning academic discussions on Western representations of East Asian cultural identities in SF films have paved the way to understanding the sociopolitical, and racial milieu

with which techno-Orientalism first emerged and where it is situated in contemporary culture today. This chapter will explore the technologized filmic elements that are employed in the SF and cyberpunk genre to perpetuate different techno-Orientalist tropes that construct an adversarial perception of East Asian cultural identities (Morley & Robins, 1995; Kuoch & Wang, 2018). This review will also draw upon Cheng's (2018) framework of Ornamentalism to discuss the inherently intersectional nature of techno-Orientalism in representations of East Asian femininity in relation to objecthood. To do so, this chapter will address both scholarly and non-academic sources of literature including opinion articles, film reviews, and analysis from popular culture blogs and websites that have contributed to the academic scholarship on techno-Orientalism in film (Kim, 2021; Hashimoto, 2021). The review of the aforementioned scholarship will be categorized into three themes of relevance: geopolitics of SF & cyberpunk, defining "East Asianness" in relation to techno-Orientalist Tropes, and the artificial Asian female as an ornament.

Geopolitics of Science Fiction & Cyberpunk

Contextualizing the emergence of the science-fiction genre and the cyberpunk sub-genre becomes integral when discussing the prevalence of the techno-Orientalism phenomenon employed in films. Research indicates that the rise of SF emerged in the West against the backdrop of Cold War geopolitics, which included residual xenophobic and anti-Japanese sentiments (Seed, 1999). During the height of hubris of political tensions between the United States of America (USA) and Japan in World War II, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked a historic change in how warfare relations were handled (Hendershot, 1999). The real-life appearance of nuclear warheads in Japan brought to life what was once only conceptualized in SF. Scholars suggest that anxieties related to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima

and Nagasaki in 1945 were drawn into SF as the site to reimagine the notions of idealism and nationalism that interplay with the imaginative outcomes of warfare (Seed, 1999; Jancovich, 2019). The atomic bomb deployed over Hiroshima and Nagasaki informs the rate with which technology was accelerating that reconceptualized the relationship between war and technology in relation to capitalist dominance and economic rule (Chin, 2019; Gray, 1994).

Early written works of SF played a significant role in conflating the boundaries between scientific fact and fiction (Gross, 2015). One important author was Herbert George (H. G.) Wells, a renowned novelist known for formulating fictional narratives based on scientific knowledge (James, 2012; Niederland, 1978). Scholars contend that Wells' novels were so revolutionary that his innovative imagination of speculative fiction was often deemed ahead of its time (Gearon, 2019). Wells foresaw the warfare relations between the USA and Japan during the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing in his novel, *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), where the bombing of cities and the development of mass destruction weapons were described in excruciating detail (Wells, 1933). Scholars argue that early works of SF prior to the Cold War have masterfully anticipated narratives that speculate around technology's inevitable progress and inadvertently influenced warfare outcomes (Gray, 1994; Berger, 1976). These narratives manifest themselves in SF through inter-galactical tensions, apocalyptic destruction of humanity, and a cry for peace in a war-torn world.

As SF literature and cinematic text flourish, several veins have branched out in derivation. One critical sub-genre is cyberpunk, which can be situated as an emerging site of racial ontology where academic dialogue can take place. Cyberpunk is defined as a cultural formation that shapes the ways in which the techno-digital landscape of contemporary life can be understood (McFarlane et al., 2019). The cyberpunk sub-genre is intrinsically haunted by the

“yellow peril” anxiety, a concept that originated in the late 19th century to describe the alleged threat East Asian people posed to Western civilization (Siu & Chun, 2020; Peters, 2021; Rajgopal, 2010; Jerng, 2017). Cyberpunk envisions a techno-dystopia tethered to the condemned remains of globalization: “multinational corporate domination, powerless and pliable masses, and environmental degradation” (Enteen, 2007, p. 262). While the sub-genre took shape in the 1980s (Gomel, 2018), the dystopian themes of cyberpunk draw comparable parallels to the emergence of its predecessor and can be traced back to the early authors of SF, like Wells and Jules Gabriel Verne. There is a dialectical tension between the technological utopia often constructed in SF and the uncontrolled dystopia of technological progress portrayed in cyberpunk (Radu, 2016; Renegar & Dionisopoulos, 2011). Scholars assert that contemporary manifestations of SF are better understood through the cyberpunk sub-genre than its preceding roots (McFarlane et al., 2019).

SF became the ideal medium through which the West reconfigured the historical formation of East Asian racialization. Aside from military conflict, SF explores the “apocalyptic sense of imperialist expansion to other worlds” (Yu, 2015, p. 9). The Western political thought of reformulating the perception of their Eastern rival is drawn into SF to curb fears related to yellow peril anxieties. Early works by pioneers of the SF and cyberpunk sub-genre, including Wells, Verne, and William Ford Gibson explored Western political explorations into futuristic alien worlds. These works speculate a near imaginative future of a doomed technologized world that is strangely familiar yet unrecognizable (Renegar & Dionisopoulos, 2011). The worlds constructed in cyberpunk bears a striking resemblance to the state of current realities and its fictional extrapolation of the inevitable cultural impact of the advancement of technology. The cyberpunk movement distinguishes itself from its origins by its central ties to plausible

trajectories of technological advancements and its near future speculation, as opposed to envisioning the state of the world centuries later (Renegar & Dionisopoulos, 2011). Scholars, journalists, and film critics alike agree that in its cinematic format, the cyberpunk sub-genre represents an extreme paranoia that manifests itself in xenophobic anxieties of a technologically controlled future that has inadvertently shaped the techno-Orientalist utilization of its aesthetic (Hashimoto, 2021; Roh et al., 2015).

Defining “East Asianness” in relation to Techno-Orientalist Tropes

The cyberpunk sub-genre owes its overwhelming success to its existence at the intersection of race and technology, exploiting both tenets at its expense. Compounded with the geopolitical conflict with which the cyberpunk sub-genre first emerged; Techno-Orientalism has become a method with which the ideological projection of those anxieties comes to manifest onscreen (Fan, 2016). In the midst of these pressures, the concept of techno-Orientalism allows “the West to preserve its identity in its imagination of the future” (T. Ueno, 1999, p. 95). The discursive phenomenon of techno-Orientalism investigates the Western world’s imagination of a technologized future using Asiatic aesthetics, bodies, and values to construct an Asianized West (Roh et al., 2015; Otmazgin, 2011). In particular, East Asian culture has become the primary site to articulate and construct techno-Orientalist tropes that continue to emulate caricaturized and stereotypical representations of East Asian identities (Roh et al., 2015; T. Ueno, 1999). Western-produced SF films deliberately commodifies East Asian culture by adopting the use of techno-Orientalism in their imagination of the near dystopian future. It is through the aforementioned geopolitical tensions between the West and the East that this phenomenon has come to be the primary force of actualizing speculative allegorical futures within the cyberpunk sub-genre.

Techno-Orientalism brings about a much more complex form of Othering that is engrossed in the racial significations of technology (Chun, 2009). Technological themes of advancement and progress are weaved into the cultural, historical, and geographical characteristics that are popularly associated with East Asia, manifesting in what this analysis will refer to as East Asianness. The phenomenon does so by fetishizing East Asianness as inherent characteristics representative of their cultures as a speculative technological Other studied by Western communications scholarship (Morley & Robins, 1995). The discursive practice of techno-Orientalism tokenizes East Asian culture in its reductive representations of their identities as technological commodities to the backdrop of Asian locations as futuristic imaginaries (Rogers, 2022). Research indicates that while certain elements of East Asian culture can be rendered present in SF films, the identities of those living in those locations are not necessarily visible (Paner, 2018; Roh et al., 2015). It becomes irresponsible to dissociate the correlation between connotations of technology and race; instead, viewing notions of race as representative of technology becomes essential when examining techno-Orientalism's framework of racialization (Chun, 2009). East Asianness in SF can be illustrated in dynamic Kung Fu fight sequences, flying automobiles, neon-lit cityscapes, technologically enhanced humans, and the casting of East Asian presenting or passing actors to play explicit Asiatic agents onscreen (Jerng, 2017). For the purposes of this research, this analysis will discuss and explore two of the most notable techno-Orientalist presentation of East Asianness in SF films: high-tech megacities in urban worldbuilding and cyborgs.

High-tech megacities in urban worldbuilding

East Asian-inspired futuristic cityscapes and infrastructure teeming with high technology are at the heart of numerous notable Western SF films. Urban worldbuilding in speculative

fiction is constructed based on real-life Western perceptions of dystopian societies, which are most closely characterized as East Asian (Rogers, 2022). Select Asian countries serve as Oriental backdrops that set the stage for the Western protagonist to be the primary driver of techno-Orientalist plots that develop in SF films. These dystopian megacities are often elaborately constructed through the careful, meticulous, and deliberate selection of techno-Asian elements most popularly associated with East Asian countries, cultures, and societies. Hollywood frequently portrays Asian cities as overdeveloped, crowded locations that suffer from the effects of overpopulation and late capitalism (Yu, 2008; Park, 2010). Techno-Orientalist perceptions and constructions of Asian cities in Hollywood unsurprisingly draw strikingly similar parallels to the techno-dystopic world envisioned by the cyberpunk sub-genre, as previously mentioned. Distinct East Asian motifs often decorate the background of these cities in the form of banners and signs written in Cantonese, often modeled from densely populated, neon-lit East Asian cities like Tokyo, Hong Kong, Korea, or Singapore (Roh et al., 2015; Rogers, 2022). Predictably, the imagined setting of the Asianized West is drawn from East Asian countries as vessels of technological innovation and Oriental exoticization (Said, 1979; Roh et al., 2015). In doing so, the West retains some semblance of control in regulating the West's perception of East Asia (Morley & Robins, 1995).

In the pursuit of constructing a fictional techno-dystopia, the West is unsurprisingly obsessed with imitating and borrowing certain elements of East Asian culture in their caricaturized impersonation of an Asianized West. In particular, that of techno-Japanese aesthetics. Morley & Robin's (1995) notion of techno-Orientalism references Japan as a speculative technological Other whose culture and civilization are closer to that of Martians than people on Earth. Scholars speculate that this very unfamiliarity with Japan might have given way

to the techno-Orientalist portrayal of Japan in the Western imagination (Ishihara, 1991; Morley & Robins, 1995). High-tech megacities in speculative fiction are often characterized by the use of Japonisme, which is defined as the cinematic personification of decorative Japanese aesthetic elements (Morley & Robins, 1995; Miyao, 2020). These can include the fetishization of stylized Japanese motifs like cherry blossoms, ninjas, samurais, and kimonos that often manifest in the background of these dystopian settings (Roh et al., 2015). Japonisme-generated urban world-building is thought to have been characterized by the West's pre-emptive declaration of superiority over East Asia. Despite Japan's rapidly growing technological supremacy, research indicates that the West believes to have earned the right to construct itself as they see fit due to its self-proclaimed role in "the creation of modern civilization" (Ishihara, 1991, p. 107). It is precisely at this critical juncture of technological decline that clearly illustrates the West's struggle in their unrelenting efforts to retain a technological future that is wholly and solely their own.

Cyborgs

The cyborg is a utopian figure that exists in hybridity as an organism that is part-human and part technology (Chun, 2009). As a creature that secures a foothold in both the world of imaginative fiction and material reality, cyborg characters are often portrayed as having the innate ability to merge their physical bodies and their human consciousness with technology (Haraway, 1990). While humans are the prototypes on which cyborgs are patterned after, these creatures are portrayed as machines whose agency seems to be far removed from the humanity their human parts should represent. The portrayal of East Asian bodies as cyborg characters, in particular, perpetuates the idea that East Asian identities are hyper-technological, inherently adversarial, and homogeneously threatening to the West (Roh et al., 2015). East Asian identities

are depicted as more willing or physically suited to accept cybernetic enhancements and are, therefore, manipulable, and disposable commodities. In an attempt to dehumanize the Asian body, the Othering of cyborgs or other technologically enhanced humans in speculative fiction reinforces the problematic stereotypes that remain central to the discourse surrounding East Asian representation; that East Asian bodies are expendable technology (Roh et al., 2015; Rogers, 2022). Techno-Orientalism's mechanisms of racialization manifest themselves in the cyborg trope by conflating the boundaries between race and technology (Allison, 2006; Haraway, 1990; Chun, 2009; Paner, 2018). As such, a striking resemblance can be drawn between the East Asian body and the cyborg, and it often becomes difficult to distinguish between their onscreen existence.

The specific existence of the East Asian cyborg highlights the manner in which technology and East Asian bodies have become increasingly intertwined not only onscreen but also throughout historical reality. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act, a federal law that "prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers (into the USA) for a period of ten years" (Lee, 2002, p. 36) was passed. During this time, a rhetoric about Chinese workers began to emerge, claiming that they are biologically built to work and are, therefore inherently mechanistic (Rhee, 2016). Chinese immigrants were thought to be incapable of assimilation and were biologically different from their Western counterparts (Loh, 2021; Calavita, 2000). The American Federation of Labor (1902) asserted that the Asian laboring body was believed to have inherently different needs than European workers, insisting that the former require intrinsically different demands and thus, did not deserve the same rights to safety, protection, or health (as cited in Roh et al., 2015). Chinese laborers were thought to be able to endure hardships that would destroy the average human (Roh et al., 2015). These assumptions were used to justify the legal framework

that permitted the exploitative labor conditions, discriminatory laws, and policies that presided over Chinese laborers which characterized Asian bodies as machine-like. As a result, while Chinese workers were valued for their labor, the distorted perception of Asian bodies bore witness to the flourishing of the yellow peril anxiety, an extreme form of xenophobia that posits China as an imminent and existential danger to the West (Siu & Chun, 2020; Peters, 2021; Rajgopal, 2010; Jerng, 2017). While the Chinese Exclusion Act was abolished in 1943, its effects still linger to this day, pervading Western cultural codes and significations in the fictional image of the cyborg (Rajgopal, 2010).

The universe of speculative fiction is intricately and inextricably entwined with the politics of historical reality. While labor standards may now be routinely regulated in the West, techno-Orientalist narratives of the Asian body as mechanical drones nevertheless prevail (Morley & Robins, 1995; Roh et al., 2015). Situating East Asian cultural identities as this image of the metaphorical cyborg is also supplemented particularly through the model minority myth, which is described as the celebration of the perceived collective socioeconomic success of Asian communities in the West in contrast to other racial groups (Kawai, 2005). The fictional cyborg body has become a product of Western imagery that embodies the complex yet seamlessly dichotomous relationship between the yellow peril ideology and the model minority myth (Okihiro, 1994). In tandem with techno-Orientalism, the juxtaposition of these two prevalent concepts has fueled the contorted portrayal readily disseminated through the cyborg's existence to describe East Asian cultural identities. As a result, technology in and of itself can no longer be thought of as a neutral conduit of fictional imagination and creativity. Instead, the multifaceted relationship behind the cinematic construction of the cyborg reframes the purpose of its existence onscreen. The narrative of futurity portrayed in Western SF films is enabled by the technological

labor of hyper advanced Asia. Ironically, the techno-Orientalist construction of cyborgs in Western speculative fiction represents East Asian cultural identities as the same technology that the West claims they are petrified of. As Asiatic agents onscreen, the cyborg is ushered into racial triangulation (Kim, 1999; Kawai, 2005). As the racial group most closely associated with the cyborg, East Asian identities are racially triangulated into a position below the superior White race but above their Black counterparts (Kawai, 2005). The cyborg's existence serves as a constant reminder that East Asians are intimidatingly brilliant but also inherently dangerous.

The artificial Asian female as an ornament

While techno-Orientalism problematizes the space wherein race and technology overlap, the concept is lacking in its considerations of the gendered dimensions of the artificial Asian woman in speculative fiction. The artificial Asian female exists at the intersection of race, technology, and gender under the subjugation of the techno-Orientalist's mechanisms of racialization. Research indicates that the western construction of East Asian women is informed by highly racialized characterization of East Asian femininity (Zheng, 2016; Tian & Ommundsen, 2019; Tseng, 2019; Tsang, 2020; Lu, 2021). As such, it is essential to address this gap by exploring the ways in which notions of East Asian femininity inform western perceptions of these women and permits the objectification of their personhood. As objects of male desire, the East Asian female body is often replicated onscreen based on these notions of ideal femininity in the form of the artificial Asian female. These representations of East Asian women in speculative fiction prevail under the governance of the male gaze, which feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey (1975) defines as the reductive representations of women onscreen that primarily constructs them through the male viewer's sexual desires. Embodied as a racialized and gendered being, the East Asian woman onscreen is often reduced to (if she does not already exist as)

aesthetic ornaments that serve as catalysts for the objectification of their personhood. Research asserts that the archetype of the artificial Asian female exists as a sexual object that primarily exists to delight the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975; Tseng, 2019).

Often described using highly racialized language, the ideal East Asian female physical body, according to non-Chinese men, is perceived as Asian women with a “slender body... petite figure... long-silky-black hair, tan skin, and tiny eyes” (Tsang, 2020, p. 925-926). These physical descriptors often accompany the articulation of Asiatic femininity as synonymous with subservience, innocence, docility, and naiveté. Personifying East Asian female physicality through these attributes unwittingly reveals the inherent associations the West has assigned to their bodies, and by extension, their personhood. This perception is largely influenced by colonial fantasies of power that rob East Asian women of their agency and living state of being (Tian & Ommundsen, 2019; Tsang, 2020). According to Western communication scholarship, East Asian femininity is often perceived as hypersexualized or suppressed (Tian & Ommundsen, 2019). When viewed this way, East Asian women are viewed as vacant vessels waiting to be replenished by Western men’s sexual desires and fantasies. In reducing their identities to sexual objects, the values of these women are often measured by the extent to which their sexualities are made palatable for male protagonists and presumably heterosexual male viewers (Mulvey, 1975). The physical and sexual identities of the women described in this way are only rendered visible by defining their femininity in relation to the men who envision them within and across the film screen.

As a result, the fetishization and objectification of East Asian women has resulted in disruptive consequences to various intimate sectors of real human life: sex, romance, and marriage (Zheng, 2016). It is through the prevalence of racial fetishes that these attitudes towards

East Asian women transcend the film screen and permeate into real-life understandings of their cultural identities. One such racial fetish is the yellow fever, which is defined as a form of widely accepted racial and sexual preference for Asian cultural identities in a romantic or sexual partner (Zheng, 2016). The normalization of the yellow fever fetish is used to justify the manner in which Western society has passively perpetuated the fetishization and exploitation of East Asian women with the least amount of resistance. In tandem with yellow fever fetish, notions of ideal East Asian femininity characterize East Asian women's sexuality as veiled in mystery (Tian & Ommundsen, 2019). The East Asian female body, therefore, becomes an object born out of exotic fantasy and a sexual experience to be yearned for and had. The yellow fever fetish supplements the western patriarchal gaze as it Others the East Asian woman in its exploitative cinematic portrayals (C. Ueno, 1997). The racialized Othering of the East Asian woman allows her recreation in SF as a visual manifestation of male subjugation, pleasure, and desire in the form of an exotic object.

It is at this point where Cheng's (2018) theory of Ornamentalism may lend an obliging hand to navigating the complex mechanisms that permit the objectification of Asiatic femininity. Ornamentalism is a conceptual lens that aims to redefine the existence of the Asian woman through a distinct human ontology at the convergence of personhood and objecthood (Cheng, 2018). The racialization of the Asian woman is identified through the ways in which her "personhood is conceived and suggested (legally, materially, and imaginatively) through ornamental gestures" (Cheng, 2018, p. 429). In its literal meaning, the word ornament is defined as a decorative artifact, an accessory item, or an inanimate object of inorganic matter. For the Asian woman who emerges in media through Western constructions of their femininity, it is suggested that her often nonexistent personhood is embodied through her existence as an object

that mirrors “the inhumanness of the human” (Cheng, 2018, p. 435). The Asian woman exists “*as and through* ornament (and is) caught in the haunting convergence between aesthetic value and material abuse” (Cheng, 2018, p. 419). The concept of ornaments, therefore, sustains the racialized figure of the Asian artificial female that paradoxically exists as a pseudo-living entity that vaguely resembles humans but is more akin to that of objects.

The East Asian woman rehearses her/its existence within the object/human continuum. The violent besmirchment of the racialized Asian woman is conceptualized through the lens of Ornamentalism, which assigns her/its proximity to objects as a precondition to her/its existence in the Western world. It is precisely her/its emergence as an object that designates her flesh as an ornament in her enduring form as an artificial Asian female (Cheng, 2018). In her analysis of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 2015 exhibition, *China: Through the Looking Glass*, Cheng (2018) draws attention to several lavish Euro-American haute couture fashion pieces designed by illustrious western designers, from Yves Saint Laurent to Tom Ford. What was found intricately scattered across the selection of these garments were ornamental stylization of Chinese aesthetics that designates “*China* (conflated throughout the show with Asia at large) equal (to) *ornament*” (Cheng, 2018, p. 425). In this sense, garments made of sequined silk, fashioned into kimonos, and decorated with porcelain shards represent the (yellow) flesh that Cheng has deemed synonymous with ornaments. This notion of flesh as interchangeable with ornament is at the core of the design for the East Asian woman blueprint. In positioning the East Asian woman strategically within the object/human spectrum, she/it exists as a repository for Asiatic femininity that can only be defined through the insidious materialization of her/its flesh as a racialized, ornamented body.

As East Asian women continue to be thoroughly duplicated through the opulence and sensuality that have become analogous with their objecthood, ideal notions of their femininity are bound in its inseparable ties to the postulation that “Asia is always ancient... feminine, available, and decadent” (Cheng, 2018, p. 425). As Cheng (2018) demonstrates how Asiatic femininity is consistently reproduced through material mediums such as fashion garments, she further points to the manner in which the yellow woman exists as a racialized conduit whose life is obstinately artificial. As such, racialized Western notions of ideal East Asian femininity further perpetuate her/its inorganic existence as an exotic, sexual commodity, and an aesthetic object. In fact, the yellow fever fetish uncannily supplements the mechanisms of the objecthood of the East Asian woman and her/its pseudo-living state of being. The persistent sexual desire and romantic longing to covet the yellow woman is neither an aesthetic nor a racial preference for her/its personhood but rather “a dream about the inorganic” (Cheng, 2018, p. 433). Compounded by the mechanisms of racial Othering of the East Asian woman, her/its materialization in yellow flesh as ornament affirms the culmination of her/its racialized existence as a human-like vessel that is intrinsically devoid of organic, human life (Lu, 2021).

Theoretical Frameworks

This study will examine the visual representations and narratives of East Asianness and Asiatic femininity used to exhibit speculative technological futures in dystopic, Western SF films. This chapter briefly discusses several key theoretical frameworks that are central to achieving the purpose of this research, such as critical race theory, intersectionality, Orientalism, and techno-Orientalism. The two former conceptual lenses will explore how race operates in relation to other axes of domination, including gender and technology, in the filmic storytelling of East Asian representation. Through the mechanisms of Edward Said's critical concept of Orientalism, and David Morley & Kevin Robins' related and more recent discursive phenomena of techno-Orientalism, this research will reveal the West's deliberate and relentless efforts of Othering East Asian cultural identities onscreen, gendered, and otherwise. The dichotomous relationship between the East and the West has historically interpreted and referenced Asia as a speculative technological Orient. The interplay of these frameworks will illustrate how racial Othering becomes a critical process by which perceptions of East Asian cultural identities are constructed and perceived in the West.

Critical Race Theory

Derrick Bell is often cited in communication scholarship as the founding father of critical race theory (CRT). His pioneering contributions to the development of the theory in its inception brought it to the forefront of legal discourse, which has paved the way for its cross-institutional and interdisciplinary application in communication studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Yosso, 2002; Crenshaw, 2011). While there is no single definition that can fully describe the comprehensive yet nuanced structures of CRT, scholars agree that it acts as a perspective that offers a coherent set of "beliefs about the significance of race/racism and how it operates in

contemporary western society” (Gillborn, 2006, p. 19). According to Delgado & Stefancic (2001), CRT offers a conceptual lens that examines issues of race within “a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group- and self-interest” (p. 3). The CRT framework seeks to confront the mechanisms of racism, sexism, and classism that are inherently ingrained in mass communication systems (Yosso, 2002). LeDuff (2017) points to the ways in which CRT can be used to “deconstruct narratives and imagery in local and national television news stories” (p. 66). Similarly, this research will utilize the mechanisms that LeDuff has established to apply the lenses of CRT in analyzing the techno-Orientalist visual, narrative, and stylistic choices of Asian-inspired aesthetics used to misrepresent East Asian identities in Western SF films.

CRT provides a valuable conceptual framework for interpreting the state of race relations in the West. As outlined by Parker & Lynn (2002), CRT can be characterized to illustrate three central tenets: “to present storytelling and narratives... to argue for the eradication of racial subjugation... (and) to draw important relationships between race and other axes of domination” (p. 10). These tenets become central to the previously discussed techno-Orientalist tropes and the embedded dichotomous relationship between the East and the West in the SF genre, which was thoroughly explored in the literature review. The construction of storytelling narratives of East Asian cultural identities in Western speculative fiction has always been polarized through various techno-Orientalist means, drawing upon preconceived beliefs about East Asian cultural identities. These narratives may inevitably form how film audiences may perceive these identities presented onscreen. The three tenets of CRT become especially important when examining the possible harmful consequences that may transcend the film screen into real and tangible reinforcements of how East Asian cultural identities are perceived in the real world (LeDuff, 2017).

Intersectionality

Pioneered by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, the concept of intersectionality was introduced as a theoretical framework that recognizes the interconnectedness of various social identities, including but not limited to race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexuality, and how they interact to shape a person's social experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). In its infancy, the intersectional framework emerged as a discursive lens to understand the unique form of marginalization Black women experienced in contrast to their male counterparts in various social situations (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw's rationale is especially valuable to this study as it provides a conceptual framework to address the lack of considerations of gender in discussions of race and technology in existing communication scholarship on techno-Orientalism. In the case of East Asian women, representations are largely shaped by the intersectional identities that embody their personhood, or as previously discussed in the literature review, the lack thereof. East Asian women's "intersectional identity as both women *and* of color" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244) permits their marginalization within two dimensions of oppression: racism and sexism. At the convergence of gender, race, and technology, the artificial Asian female becomes the primary subject that is emblematic of the intersectional nature of techno-Orientalism. Contextualizing the intersecting grounds of these social differences paves the way to understanding the patterns of oppression East Asian women undergo in their onscreen representations.

Orientalism

Orientalism is a term coined by Edward Said to describe the discursive ways in which the West imposes its superiority over the Orient (Said, 1979). The theory explores fictional and non-fictional Western representations of Middle Eastern cultures, arguing that Western scholarship is deliberate and unrelenting in its attempts to Othering the Orient by various imperialist means

(Said, 1979). This process of Othering becomes a critical factor in which perceptions of Middle Eastern cultural identities are constructed in the West. Said (1979) defines the Orient as “a European invention” where ethereal antiquity, “romance, exotic beings, haunting memories... landscapes, (and) remarkable experiences” (p. 1) come to manifest. In his work, Said explores the Orient/West dichotomy by exploring the existence of Arabs, whose identities are reproduced only through stereotypical representations that reinforce hegemonic ideas of Western domination (Said, 1979). The hegemonic distinction separating the Middle East as the Orient and the West as Occident further reinforces the Orient/West dichotomy established by Orientalism.

The Orient, which will be explored in this research, is the victim of colonialist and imperialist Othering of the Occident. Said (1979) emphasizes three conditions that an Orient/Occident relationship meets under the structures of Orientalism: (1) the Orient should not be thought of as just an idea or creation but instead a conscious, metaphysical construction bolstered by resilient consistency, (2) the recognition of the mechanisms of hegemonic power that are intricately woven into and cannot be divorced from the fabric of cultural, social, and historical ideas, and (3) the structure of Orientalism is built on a premise of falsity that is not rooted in facts. While these considerations are crucial when examining the Orient/Occident relationship, Said (1985) also brings into discussion the importance of considering “the subject doing the studying as well as the object or realm being studied” (Said, 1985, p. 128).

Following the logic of Saidian Orientalism, this research will reference East Asian countries, specifically China and Japan, and the identities that reside within these regions as the Orient, subject to hegemonic Western sovereignty. As previously explored in the literature review, the process of urban worldbuilding in speculative fiction utilizes Orientalist techniques of Japonisme that are innately engrained in the logic of Orientalism. The Asian stylization of

Western SF settings is only successful when it is consistently and cohesively applied to their onscreen characterization. In an attempt to construct an Asianized West, urban worldbuilding in speculative fiction draws from East Asian culture, the Orient, to help define themselves in relation to Asia. This process is made possible by the ways in which the Orientalist structures that govern the world of Western speculative fiction have historically dehumanized and exoticized East Asian cultural identities in order to define the West at their expense.

Techno-Orientalism

As extensively discussed in the literature review, Techno-Orientalism can broadly be interpreted as a derivation from the traditional Saidian Orientalism that encapsulates the idea of imagining East Asian culture and their identities as agents of an impending technologically controlled futuristic dystopia. Theorized by scholars David Morley & Kevin Robins (1995), techno-Orientalism violently imbues an innately interconnected relationship between Asia and technology. Much like the logic of Orientalism, the intrinsic association of technology to Asia serves to Other the Orient by perpetuating “the image of a culture that is cold, impersonal, and machine-like” (Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 169). Morley & Robins (1995) defined the term techno-Orientalism by referencing Japan as a speculative technological Orient, contending that the country has become a symbolic “figure of empty and dehumanised technological power... (representing) the alienated and dystopian image of capitalist progress” (p. 170). The reference to Japan, in this case, is not isolated but is somewhat representative of the phenomenon’s applicability to other Asian countries, including China, amongst others, as will be discussed in this research.

While techno-Orientalism does not necessarily depart from the binarism of Saidian Orientalism, the phenomenon instead adopts its logic to symmetrically vilify a collective Asia as

a threateningly futuristic technological force to further confirm the West's centrality (Roh et al., 2015). Techno-Orientalism endorses a colonialist yearning for Western domination by furthering a narrative that depicts a dystopian Asianized West where East Asian cultural identities enact the role of a technological villain to the West. The technological Othering of Asia as hyper-technified is successful, in part, due to the phenomenon's foundations in Saidian Orientalism. The hybridity of Orientalism previously established in the Orient/West dichotomy becomes central to the logic of techno-Orientalism as its systems only operate on the principle that Western culture is incapable of constituting "itself without excluding, devaluing and then hating the Other" (Morley & Robins. 1995, p. 170).

While techno-Orientalist techniques of Othering can be identified in various forms of media, its appearance in the genre of Western SF film, especially in cyberpunk, is arguably its most prominent iteration. The world of Western speculative fiction often draws inspiration from East Asian cultures in the form of futuristic cybernetic technologies characterized by social decay and dystopian futures. It can be said that the narrative, visual, and stylistic applications of East Asian-inspired aesthetics, as previously outlined in the literature review, is a deliberate process in which Western society continues to perpetuate harmful depictions of East Asian cultural identities. Techno-Orientalism becomes an integral framework in which this research is grounded. As a phenomenon that is deeply engrained into the SF genre, it becomes important to examine its logic in relation to the visual encodings and techniques applied to the selected films that will be analyzed in this thesis.

Methodology

Film Analysis

This study will analyze three prominent Western SF films from the most recent cinematic era, *Cloud Atlas* (2012), *Ex Machina* (2014), and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017). These films will serve as media texts containing compositional elements that can be subject to textual analysis. Film theorist Raymond Bellour (1975) asserts "that the film is a text, in the sense in which Barthes uses the word, is obvious enough" (p. 19). The critical examination of various components of these films will bring into perspective the stylistic and aesthetic techniques utilized to further techno-Orientalist applications of East Asian culture onscreen. Bellour posits that when "one studies a work, quotes a fragment of it, one has implicitly taken up a textual perspective" (p. 20) in the process. This film analysis will include the deconstruction of audiovisual elements, such as dialogue and motifs.

As a qualitative research method, the textual analysis of the selected films will explore the film's narrative, aesthetic, stylistic, and thematic elements. The identification of these elements will be argued and supported by direct quotations, timestamps, and screenshots of specific scenes that demonstrate the technological Othering of East Asian culture from each film. The analysis will also explore the editing techniques used to select and combine individual shots and cinematography, including camera placement, movement, and framing. In addition, an analysis of the mise-en-scène will be conducted, referring to the arrangement of the visual elements captured in front of the camera, such as set design, props, actors, costumes, and lighting (Long et al., n.d.). This study will examine the significance of these identified components in selected key scenes from each film to deconstruct the meanings that are consciously intended and enforced in relation to the representations of East Asian cultural identities (Ryan & Lenos, 2020).

As part of the film analysis, a narrative structure analysis will be conducted to examine the plot structure, story outline, and the sequence of events that may take place "that combine to create the direction that the storytelling takes" (Hansen et al., 1998, p. 143). It will also explore the ways in which Asian/Asiatic agents are developed in their onscreen characterization in relation to their storyline, or the lack thereof. In this sense, the narrative in films serves as a method of creating and evoking meanings onscreen. Meanings that are constructed, unconsciously and consciously, through various narrative and aesthetic necessities may also be inadvertently "connected to the social world in which they are made" (Ryan & Lenos, 2020, p. 6). Meanings in film can be extrapolated from the filmic techniques employed in integral sequences in the selected films (Ryan & Lenos, 2020). This film analysis will include a shot-by-shot analysis where the logic of techno-Orientalism may be in play. This may demonstrate how East Asian cultural identities, in their many iterations in SF films, have historically been technologically Othered in Western SF, partly due to the cultural fears manifested by geopolitical anxieties between the East and the West.

Research Design

Sample & Sample Criteria

This research study aims to analyze the application of techno-Orientalism in Western SF films used to perpetuate harmful representations of East Asian cultural identities as represented by the narrative and aesthetic stylization of these selected films. In order to answer the research question: "How do contemporary filmic depictions of East Asians in Western SF films reflect Western perceptions of East Asia and their cultural identities?" this study will analyze three widely acclaimed, cult classic SF films that were released in the 21st century, *Cloud Atlas* (2012), *Ex Machina* (2014), and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), all of which have been instrumental in

shaping the film genre's contemporary success. Nonprobability purposive sampling method was utilized in the selection of these three films, which is characterized as a process by which the media texts of interest have been "selected because they meet (the) criteria that have been predetermined by the researcher as relevant to addressing the research question" (Saumure & Given, 2008, p. 562). Due to the expansive nature of the study of techno-Orientalism in speculative fiction and time constraints, the small scope of this study will limit the sample size to three films.

Each of these films was chosen due to its massive popularity in the West, and commercial success, both factors that signaled the films' cultural significance within the SF genre. The three selected films were released within the last century and thus, will inform the contemporary state of race relations that are relevant to current Western perceptions of East Asian cultural identities. Amongst other SF films like *Blade Runner* (1982) and *The Matrix* (1999), which admittedly are cult classics within the genre, the three movies selected for this study have only been superficially referenced in popular and academic discussions of techno-Orientalism in speculative fiction yet fall into the same genealogy of films under its umbrella. These chosen films have been determined to have contained the most prominent techno-Orientalist sensibilities and imagery in contemporary productions of Western SF films. Personal viewership of these three films was also a critical factor in the selection process. Other factors include the determination that these three films fulfill the specific narrative characteristics of Asian-inspired elements in imagining a fictional Asianized West that is most pertinent to answering the research question at hand. These elements were thoroughly explored in the literature review, some of which manifest in the form of Asian-coded urban worldbuilding, cyborgs, and the artificial Asian female.

Procedure of Analysis

The close viewing of the three films was conducted on three separate occasions. The preliminary viewing of these films was performed without distractions or pauses, allowing for a fully immersive experience of each film. The next round of viewing paid close attention to any general observations regarding implicit and explicit portrayals of techno-Orientalist tropes of East Asian representation as extensively discussed in the literature review: Asian coded-urban world-building, cyborgs, and the artificial Asian female. These observations will inform three specific Western perceptions of East Asian culture that are reinforced, no matter how loosely, by the techno-Orientalist tropes as depicted in the films: (1) East Asia as an evil empire, (2) East Asians as machine-like, and (3) East Asian women as objects. Any key scenes that best exemplify these perceptions are noted, along with the timestamps and screenshots to accompany these observations. The last round of viewing revisits the scenes noted in the second round to closely examine the technical, thematic, aesthetic, narrative, and stylistic elements within the frame. This step will closely observe and record components of mise-en-scène and cinematography.

Ethical Implications & Limitations

Although Bellour (1975) argues that films can be subject to textual interpretation, he contends that film analysis as a method of critical examination will always remain incomplete. He argues that the pursuit of a film's materiality will inevitably produce a disproportionate translation of the intricate elements that make up the film. Films are comprised of various elements, such as literary, musical, pictorial, and theatrical texts, that cannot be adequately cited, "quoted... described or evoked" (Bellour, 1975, p. 22). Despite these limitations, film analysis remains the most appropriate research method to answer the question this study is asking. The

problematic representations of East Asian cultural identities are arguably the most pertinent in the entertainment industry. Western cinema plays a significant role in shaping public perception and identity formation. It becomes impetuous to disregard the impact of films on “the formation of... audience’s outlook, including their attitudes towards topical social issues” (Kubrak, 2020, p. 1) in the study of East Asian representation and race relations in communications scholarship.

In terms of the sampling method, Saumure & Given (2008) raises some concerns regarding the nonprobability purposive sampling technique due to limitations of data and findings transferability. However, because this research will primarily focus on East Asian representation specific to the film format, its extension to other racial/ethnic groups or media formats is not immediately necessary. Additionally, despite concerns over personal bias in the sample collection of this study, it is precisely the personal viewership and prior knowledge of these films from a recreational standpoint as a Southeast Asian woman of Chinese descent that informs my analysis.

As for ethical concerns regarding copyright infringement, all three films are distributed for public viewing in Canada. These films are available on the streaming service Amazon Prime Video. *Cloud Atlas* (2012) and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) were purchased to ensure ease of access and reference, while *Ex Machina* (2014) was available to stream on the platform. The use of films in this study also falls under the fair dealing statutory provision in section 29 of the Copyright Act of Canada, which states that the use of copyrighted material for “the purpose of research, private study, education... does not infringe copyright” (Government of Canada, 1985). Contents of these films will be used strictly for research purposes and have not been unlawfully reproduced or distributed throughout this study. A complete filmography will also be included to give credit to the rightful persons involved in creating these films.

Analysis

The world of Western speculative fiction nurtures the irreconcilability of the East and West. SF is intrinsically political, and its powerful ties to geopolitical conflict cannot be divorced from the stories it houses under its genre. This is demonstrated in the uncanny interconnected relationship between early works of SF and the state of military and warfare relations between the USA and Japan during the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The genre has become an avenue where the boundaries between imagination, prediction, and reality are heavily blurred (Gross, 2015; Enteen, 2007; Myerson, 2020; Seed, 1999). SF's roots in political conflict can be said to have inadvertently permitted the logic of techno-Orientalism to ingrain into the ways films from this genre allow the distorted depiction of racialized identities such as East Asians. It is not too far a reach to deduce that the Western stereotypes of East Asian cultural identities resulting from this genre are also inherently political. This film analysis enters into a complex space of racial ontology by examining how these geopolitical tensions between the East and the West are made apparent in films through techno-Orientalist portrayals of East Asian culture. This analysis will explore how these depictions are derived from and permitted by the lingering remnants of the geopolitical era from which the SF genre was born.

As previously outlined in the methodology, each section of this chapter will discursively examine the techno-Orientalist tropes, namely that of Asian coded-urban world-building, cyborgs, and the artificial Asian female, that are represented through stylistic, thematic, narrative, and aesthetic components of the three selected films: *Cloud Atlas* (2012), *Ex Machina* (2014), and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017). These tropes will be examined in relation to three prominent stereotypes and perceptions of East Asian cultural identities in the West. First, the culmination of the narrative and thematic elements of the films, including the condemned

remnants as a result of Asian globalization will be examined in relation to the perception of East Asia as an adversarial mercantile and economic threat to Western society and humanity. Then, the characterization and narrative structure of East Asian characters and cyborgs played by Asian actors will inform the perception of East Asian cultural identities as robotic, who are highly intelligent, machine-like, and expendable technology. Lastly, close attention will be paid to the East Asian women portrayed in these films by interrogating the multidimensional construction of her personhood, or the lack thereof. This will include the examination of the meanings her character conveys through her agency, attire, significance in the plot, and alignment to East Asian standards of ideal femininity.

East Asia as an evil empire

Drawing from a long history of geopolitical conflict between the West and Asia, the digitized futures imagined by Western SF films is an inescapably political manifestation of such anxieties. As thoroughly explored in the literature review, SF is a medium that has historically been utilized to reconfigure and reimagine sociopolitical relations and economic systems regarding astronomical, scientific, military, and technological progress (Hashimoto, 2021; Renegar & Dionisopoulos, 2011; McFarlane et al., 2019; Gross, 2015; Enteen, 2007; Myerson, 2020; Seed, 1999). What is unique to the allure of SF films is its construction of worlds that are vaguely familiar to contemporary society, with modified yet consumable representations of alternate temporalities. As the conflict between the US and East hovers over these disoriented worlds, it comes as no surprise, then, when the projections of these fears become visible onscreen. Urban worldbuilding in the three selected SF films is replete with techno-Orientalist imagery of East Asian-inspired iconography, architecture, and motifs, all of which are interwoven with the obfuscating obsession of technological progress marked by the unfamiliarity

of East Asia. These constructions of an Asianized techno-dystopic future situate East Asia as the main aggressor against the Western world, reflecting yellow peril anxieties about their economic and technological dominance.

SF's place setting is one of the main ways in which it posits East Asia as an adversarial threat to the West. This is illustrated in *Cloud Atlas* (2012), a film adaptation of David Mitchell's novel of the same name, published in 2004. The film consists of six interconnected stories that span from the late nineteenth century to the mid-2300s across different locations. Conveniently, only one of the six stories tells a tale about unchecked technological ruin taking place in East Asia, set in Neo-Seoul, a futuristic version of South Korea, in the year 2144. This plot follows the story of Sonmi-451, a genetically engineered fabricant Korean woman who works at a fast-food restaurant called Papa Song as a server. Neo-Seoul is captured in an extreme wide shot as a vast and vibrant metropolis of towering skyscrapers lit up with bright neon signs in Korean characters (Hangul) (see Figure 1). This glamorous and striking image of Neo-Seoul is contrasted by the threatening view of some buildings, referred to as Old-Seoul, submerged underwater due to rising sea levels (Tykwer et al., 2012, 01:02:35). The film depicts the perishing of Old-Seoul as a kind of reckoning for humanity's state of globalization and overconsumption in the wake of a technology-controlled dystopia epitomized by an Asian country. With the story prior to Sonmi-451's taking place in London the year the movie was released; the film situates the near future dystopia plagued by the devastating consequences of unchecked technological advancement as taking place in South Korea.

The placement of Sonmi-451's specific storyline of a techno-dystopic future in South Korea is an interesting narrative choice. It seems as though the film required for this particular plot to be placed in an Asian country to solidify its vision of a threatening, foreign Orient. The



Figure 1. Neo-Seoul skyline

film constructs the image of a dangerous Orient that is made consumable by exerting recognizable Otherness which is connotative of Western perceptions of East Asia. This Othering is accomplished by “establishing authority over the Other through knowledge of and access to the Other’s language, history, and culture... to define the colonized subject and determine its fate” (Lee, 1999, p. 114). The use of Japonisme illustrates visual cues of Otherness in another scene where the viewers witness the seedy underbelly of Neo-Seoul that embodies a bustling marketplace as the future of civilian life (see Figure 2). Signages in Korean characters are plastered across the heart of the densely packed marketplace overrun with rundown slums suffering from the detrimental effects of overpopulation. As the viewers encounter the Korean writing in this scene, they are made to comprehend Korea’s foreignness as a dangerous force that destroyed the familiarity of Western society and humanity displayed in the previous story set in 2012 London.

The resonance of yellow peril anxieties is only made distinctly clear in the juxtaposition of the technological ruin actualized in 2144 Neo-Seoul and the story that takes place after, set in post-apocalyptic Earth in 2321 Hawaiian Islands. The latter story takes place in a society where the remnants of technology are still present but do not utterly consume its world-system and



Figure 2. Dark underbelly of Neo-Seoul

instead exist in symbiosis with nature (Tykwer et al., 2012, 46:25). The story features a Western society that has rebuilt itself after a devastating calamity referred to as “The Fall” that annihilated the technologically controlled civilization personified in 2144 Neo-Seoul. With the guidance of familiar imagery of primitive life, this society is built in the image of a world overgrown with nature, surrounded by high mountains, steep cliffs, and dense rainforests. This projection of a cyclical temporality also comes with nostalgic notions of religion and faith that are tied to natural forces that sustain life, whose significance in society is reinforced through stories, legends, and myths passed down through generations. Unsurprisingly, it is Sonmi-451 who emerges in the role of a deity, carved in stone as a symbol of resistance and hope for the Prescient people of the Hawaiian Islands in 2321 (Tykwer et al., 2012, 01:48:05). Accompanied by consumable configurations of rural life, it is anticipatedly the strange and unfamiliar image of an East Asian woman who is venerated and revered precisely because Sonmi-451 is Othered into the role of an alien deity. The goddess of this newfound civilization constructed in the image of the Eastern Other only reinforces the Western Orientalizing of East Asia, thereby politically manifesting similar racialized anxieties of their relationship with hyper-advanced Asia.

Similarly, the cyberized society portrayed in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) resonates with yellow peril discourses about the societal collapse brought about by technological ruin, asserting that the future is inextricably tied to East Asian cultural influence. The film is a live-action adaptation of a Japanese manga and anime of the same name by Masamune Shirow. The story follows Kusanagi, a young Japanese woman whose brain was integrated inside a mechanical body made in the image of a white woman, in her quest to discover her true identity before she became Major Mira Killian. Kusanagi leads a team of operatives under the anti-terrorist bureau called Section 9 to fight against cybercrime in futuristic Japan. Set in 2029, the film depicts a future version of Japan that strangely resembles modern-day Tokyo but is simultaneously unrecognizably alien. The viewers are first introduced to the film's vision of this future society in an aerial shot taken from an elevated vantage point, capturing a highly urbanized city with a maze of interconnected elevated highways, sprawling city blocks, and an overabundance of digital screens and holograms decorating its skyscrapers (see Figure 3). Along with the familiar sight of these techno-Japanese aesthetics, the film utilizes Japonisme, drawing heavily from the digitization of Japan as a cultural space well suited to reimagine a new but recognizable world.

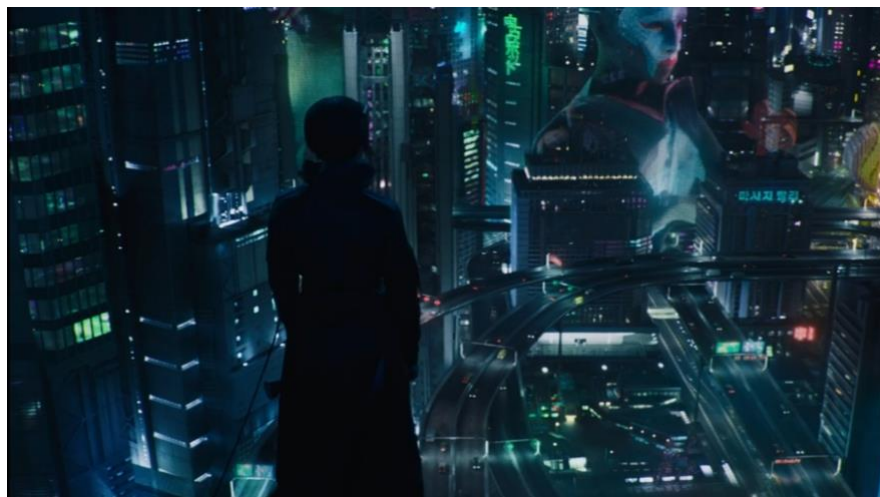


Figure 3. Kusanagi overlooking Japan's cityscape from atop a towering skyscraper

With distinctly similar Asian motifs and visual cues to the depiction of Neo-Seoul in *Cloud Atlas* (2012), *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) borrows from the foreignness that is connotative of East Asia's Otherness to construct its vision of 2029 Japan. Similar to the bustling marketplace in Neo-Seoul, the streets of 2029 Japan is accompanied by an assortment of East Asian writing, including Cantonese and Chinese characters (see Figure 4), in addition to the Korean and Japanese writing plastered onto the high-rise signs atop buildings (see Figure 3). These signages are Othering signifiers that construct a homogeneously threatening Asian country that is plagued with an uncontrolled dystopia of technological progress. To the viewers, the East Asian lettering on the screen serves as yet another signifier for meaning-making, thereby marking these signages that fill the background of the film as foreign, exotic, and Other. The identification of "the Oriental object functions to unsettle the perspective of the Western observer" (Yamamura, 2017, p. 93). The use of explicitly Asian visual cues is a tactic employed by Western thought to Orientalize the image of a dangerous Orient and make it consumable to the average Western viewer. The presence of Asia made recognizable by the logic of techno-Orientalism, looms over this cyberized world as a political manifestation of technological domination by the dangerous and menacing Orient.



Figure 4. Kusanagi and Batou walking the streets of Japan

In stark contrast to the technologically controlled civilization portrayed in 2144 Neo-Seoul and the cyberized society in 2029 Japan, *Ex Machina* (2014) imagines a critical juncture in the development of artificial intelligence, a future that feels like it is already here. The film tells the story of Caleb Smith, a coder who is recruited by his CEO Nathan Bateman, to be the human component of a Turing test to evaluate the consciousness of Ava, a humanoid robot he made in its final stages of development. Smith is brought to a highly restricted research facility located in a remote, isolated mansion in the middle of the mountains. The modernist architecture of the facility is reminiscent of the Japanese Zen design style and aesthetic. In place of obnoxious neon signages in East Asian writing often synonymous with SF urban worldbuilding, the mansion features modern architecture with clean, minimalistic lines made with functionality in mind. As the viewers follow Smith into this eerie, futuristic mansion, they witness the bleakness of the facility, which is only masked so well by the abundance of nature surrounding the building. With simplicity marking its interior design, the mansion's Zen-like architecture is deployed as symbolic cues of Otherness, thereby signifying a more subtle but just as insidious Othering as portrayed in traditional SF urban worldbuilding. Unlike the techno-dystopia characterized in the two previous films, *Ex Machina* (2014) makes its vision of the future of artificial intelligence a distorted reflection of current technological anxieties by grounding its narrative in a backdrop of consumable Japanese aesthetics.

It is through the marking of coherent cultural meanings that SF can successfully build a palpable political manifestation of an adversarial Asianized future. As demonstrated, the Orientalizing of Asian foreignness makes an appearance in each of the film's worlds, signifying strangeness and unfamiliarity using visual and symbolic cues of distinct East Asianness. SF's formulation of East Asia "rests on a fantasy that projects Euroamerican desires and dreads onto

the alien Other” (Marchetti, 1994, p. 2). Thus, the presence of East Asia onscreen uncannily aids in SF’s constructions of a believable re-imagination of sociopolitical systems but is also representative of the West’s estranged relationship with Asia. The Orientalizing of East Asian Otherness in SF can transcend the film screen and into real-life perceptions of East Asia, reflecting existing political relations between the West and Asia. For instance, many regressive narratives of China in the wake of Covid-19, in particular, follow in the footsteps of SF’s tendency to draw upon East Asia’s Otherness to encode xenophobic messages in Western news coverage of China. As such, the Western formulation of Otherness draws upon East Asian culture and aesthetics as dependable signifiers of difference to render East Asia a dangerous Other that threatens Western society and humanity.

East Asians as machine-like

The idea that East Asian identities are inherently geniuses and prodigies is a prevalent notion that has long persevered in Western society. From the workplace to the classroom, East Asian people are most often perceived as highly ambitious, hardworking, efficient, and competent employees and students whose educational achievements, academic proficiency, career success, and law-abiding behavior are central, if not definitive aspects of their identities. East Asian people are perceived as more academically, scientifically, and mathematically more intelligent than their Western counterparts (Kawai, 2005). These stereotypes are weaponized to figuratively and literally construct East Asian people as inherently robotic and machine-like. As portrayed in Western cinema and film, techno-Orientalist constructions of East Asian cultural identities in alignment with these stereotypes can bleed into the real-life Western perceptions of these identities on both a macro and micro scale. Common labels such as “nerds” and “workaholics” and descriptors of East Asian identities as competent but socially awkward,

unfeeling, cold, and anti-social are prescriptive of the West's reflecting beliefs on East Asian cultural identities (Zhang, 2010; Berdahl & Min, 2012; Silliker, 2012). The three Western SF films in this subsequent analysis reflect the continuous perpetuation of the idea that East Asian identities are the automatons of Western society, whose intelligence and machine-like characteristics warrant the dehumanization of their personhood into one-dimensional foreign figures who are undeserving of a fully developed, sophisticated, and multifaceted storytelling.

The Western perception of East Asians as robotic, unemotive workers is pivotal to one particular storyline in *Cloud Atlas* (2012). Sonmi-451 is introduced 25 minutes into the film, where she sits handcuffed to a chair across from an archivist, recalling the memories of her life prior to her conviction (Tykwer et al., 2012, 24:23). In her recollection, Sonmi-451 looks back at her life as a server at Papa Song, as a fabricant with limited sentience and agency. She recalls a time in her life when she accepted her fate without knowing the possibilities that existed for her and her kind outside the walls of the restaurant. Sonmi-451 leads each day with strict adherence to catechisms, which can be understood as rules for the fabricants, only two of which were mentioned in the film: the first stipulates that they must honor their consumers, and the third forbids them to question or imagine the consumers' world. These catechisms emphasize discipline and order, which have become synonymous with the machine-likeness of the East Asian women they govern. All catechisms are to be followed without questions while tending to customers pleasantly, no matter what abuse they are put through (Tykwer et al., 2012, 25:53). Catechisms represent the cultural differences that are made apparent between the work ethic of East Asians and Western workers (Park, 2010). The East Asian cyborgs in this film are guided by principles of loyalty, uniformity, and compliance, all attributes realized in the Western perception of East Asians as robots. As demonstrated in Sonmi-451's reluctance to answer

Yoona-939's question that violates the third catechism (Tykwer et al., 2012, 28:28), the passive obedience and adherence to the catechisms are further exemplified through their yellow skin and techno-Orientalist characterization of the East Asian cyborg. By equating this compliance with the limited, and at times totalizing, lack of free will the fabricants possess, their personhood is rendered nonexistent. As such, the racialized portrayal of the East Asian body in the film conflates the boundaries between race and technology (Allison, 2006; Haraway, 1990; Chun, 2009), thereby Othering them into mere machinery.

The same characterization that blurs the lines between the East Asian body and machinery can also be discerned in the promise made to the fabricants once their contract supposedly comes to an end. Initially, Sonmi-451 only knew of one future for workers like herself: exultation. The fabricants were told that at the end of their contract with Papa Song, they would be exulted and allowed to ascend and walk the streets of the consumers they serve (Tykwer et al., 2012, 26:37). Exultation was a promise of freedom and liberation from the chains of servitude that the fabricants have been bound to their entire lives. Thematically, the concept of freedom and self-actualization brought about by the promise of autonomy is a concept that the film incorporated to acknowledge the indisputable underlying themes of subjugation actualized in the array of East Asian cyborgs in the film. When Sonmi-451 learns what exultation truly means for fabricants like herself in the middle of the film, she realizes that workers like her were literally built to live and die in a never-ending cycle of servitude. Upon the end of their lifecycle, fabricants are recycled as a "cheap source of protein" and are packaged into food to feed future fabricants (Tykwer et al., 2012, 02:22:20). The Western perception of East Asians as robotic is materialized in 2144 Neo Seoul, in the form of fabricants who are treated as sub-human and emotionless beings, whose literal purpose in their lives are to serve their Seers (bosses) and the

patrons of Papa Song as machines of labor. Sonmi-451 and others like her exemplify the techno-Orientalist trope of the cyborg that perpetuates the Western perception of East Asian laboring bodies as robotic and thus, manipulable, disposable, and expendable technologies (Roh et al., 2015; Rogers, 2022).

The fabricants' characterization in *Cloud Atlas* (2012) is uncannily similar to the depiction of Kyoko in *Ex Machina* (2014). Kyoko is introduced 24 minutes into the film as a Japanese woman whose initial presence can be perceived as Nathan's live-in housekeeper who is in charge of various household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and as will be analyzed in more depth in the next section, sex. Kyoko's racialized body is portrayed as the quintessential techno-Orientalist trope of the silent, obedient, servile East Asian cyborg. She is perceived much closer to a robot even before the audience finds out that Kyoko is in fact a humanoid of Bateman's creation, just like Ava. Kyoko is portrayed using racial signifiers that tie her yellow skin to technology, thereby revealing the techno-Orientalist constructions of her racial identity as inherently robotic.

This portrayal is reinforced by the manner in which Ava is constructed to contrast her Asiatic counterpart. Unlike Ava, who demonstrates her proximity to humanness through her linguistic proficiency, intelligence, and whiteness, Kyoko's artificiality is amplified by her docility, obedience, and silence. Ava's warmth, curiosity, flirtatious nature, artistry, and kindness are signified in alignment with her whiteness. As demonstrated in her many interactions with Smith, Ava's humanness is believable not only because she is created in accordance with Caleb's preferences but also because she is a plausible manifestation of what the West perceives as humanity. In contrast to Ava, who in the image of a white woman can undoubtedly convince Smith of her human consciousness, Kyoko's silence and inability to express emotion through

facial expressions and tone of voice are hauntingly representative of her racial identity's interchangeability with the inorganic body. At times, the camera would capture Kyoko situated in the backdrop of both Bateman and Smith's interactions and then immediately transition into a close-up shot of her face, seemingly to make up for her muteness throughout the film. The camera lingers to capture any display of human reaction, but Kyoko is always captured as indifferent, cold, apathetic, and even soulless (see Figure 5). Even so, what accompanies Kyoko's silence is the lifeless expressions on her face, revealing her incapacity to feel, thereby portraying her as a synthetic human-like shell that is devoid of organic life.



Figure 5. Kyoko lying on Nathan's bed, presumably after they had sex

While it is implied that Kyoko gains some awareness of her subjugation throughout the film, it is curious to see that her integral role in Ava's escape at the end of the film comes as a surprise to Bateman (Garland, 2014, 1:31:13). After all, Kyoko is free to roam about the facility and is presumably afforded enough freedom within the mansion to come and go as she pleases. Underneath the clothes and the human-like skin, both Kyoko and Ava are created by the same person, whose brains are made of the same structured gel (Garland, 2014, 38:00). Their only differentiating factor is the ways in which they are racialized. In her East Asian figure, Kyoko is seen as harmless because her yellow skin indicates that she is loyal, compliant, and subservient.

The trust that Bateman bestows upon Kyoko but not on Ava can only be explained by the manner in which Kyoko's racial form is perpetually perceived as less human than Ava's whiteness. The capacity to cause harm and manipulate Smith as means of escape are facets of humanity only cautioned against in the case of Ava. Bateman does not perceive Kyoko as a threat to himself because he, unconsciously or otherwise, does not see any distinction between her racialized form and the inorganic humanoid robot he created. Kyoko's portrayal in the film reflects the techno-Orientalist construction of the East Asian body and how it is often depicted as indistinguishable from robots and thus, perpetuates the same perception in real-life.

A similar perceived lack of humanity within the East Asian body can be identified in Motoko Kusanagi's character in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), despite the racialized erasure in her portrayal. Unlike Sonmi-451 and Kyoko, who were portrayed as the Asian women they are meant to represent, Kusanagi is played by a white actress, Scarlett Johansson which represents an insidious whitewashing of the original Japanese protagonist altogether. While recognizing that the whitewashing of Asian characters remains a prevalent issue in Hollywood (Paner, 2018), it is not the focal point of this analysis; nevertheless, it cannot be ignored when discussing the racialized notions of perceived humanity. The film altered Kusanagi's story to remove the need for a female Japanese lead, situating her white mechanical body as a disguise for Kusanagi's Japanese "soul" to make her unrecognizable from her original form. While the plot is reconfigured, albeit inadequately, to accommodate this racial discrepancy, Kusanagi's whitewashed portrayal further perpetuates the idea that whiteness is the default and more superior to their Asiatic counterparts.

Johansson's portrayal of Kusanagi seemingly featured the actress with a noticeably paler than natural skin tone, inconspicuously altered eye shape, and Asian-inspired makeup. However,

it is important to note that Paramount Pictures have denied allegations of using CGI to alter Johansson's facial features to appear more Asian (Sampson, 2016). Regardless, it is difficult to ignore the dubiety surrounding Johansson's race in the film and whether the viewers can escape the whiteness denotative of Johansson and perceive Kusanagi's portrayal as ambiguously East Asian. Nevertheless, Kusanagi's Japanese form is caricaturized by Johansson's racial ambiguity, asserting that this distorted imitation is sufficient grounds for simulating a performance of East Asian identity. By immaterializing Kusanagi's true racial identity, she is reduced to a generic action hero archetype devoid of the cultural complexities that define her personhood, obliterating the East Asian woman in this equation. Therefore, Johansson's portrayal of Kusanagi complicates such an analysis of her racialized humanness precisely because her depiction raises questions as to how her racial ambiguity is meant to be perceived by the viewers.

What this case illustrates is the undeniable disembodiment of Kusanagi's racial identity that is made visible by the casting of Johansson, as will be examined in the following analysis of her perceived humanity. When the viewers are first introduced to Kusanagi, she is captured in an extreme close-up shot, panning out to her eyes opening, staring hollowly into the camera (see Figure 6). The emptiness in Kusanagi's stare is undeniable, signifying the literal abyss behind her human-like retina. This first scene introducing Kusanagi to the viewers already hints at a sense of artificiality in her psyche. After Kusanagi wakes up, her creator, Dr. Ouelet, expresses in awe of her new invention's human-like consciousness as she revels in her ability to "imagine...care... (and) intuit" (Sanders, 2017, 07:23). Despite being humanized throughout the film by her maker, Dr. Ouelet's boss, Cutter perpetually refers to Kusanagi as a weapon or asset that is devoid of humanity. Kusanagi's construction as inherently mechanistic is not simply characterized by her literal mechanical body, as would have been the case if the viewers perceived her as strictly

white. If Johansson's racial ambiguity is viewed as East Asian, Kusanagi suffers a more devastating fate of dehumanization that is connotative of her racialization. Kusanagi's machinic persona is constructed in strict accordance with the techno-Orientalist trope of the cyborg due to the inseparable ties the Asian laboring body has to robots. Her perceived East Asian body is posited as innately machine-like precisely because it makes coherent the lines conflating the boundaries between technology and human life. When viewed this way, Kusanagi's racialized form reveals the value attached to her hybridity, as it only amounts to her operational role as a major in Section 9, a sentient killing machine to be weaponized and wielded.



Figure 6. Kusanagi opening her eyes after she is transplanted into a mechanical body

For the East Asian man in this equation, we turn to Togusa from the same film. Togusa is one of three Japanese operatives in Section 9, which is curious for a story supposedly set in Japan. Most of Togusa's dialogue occurs in his first appearance, where he engages in a brief exchange with two other operatives, Ishikawa and Ladriya. In this scene, Ishikawa reveals to Togusa the cyber-enhanced mech liver he obtained, to which he replies in amusement, "You got enhanced so you can drink more?" (Sanders, 2017, 16:47). When urged by Ladriya to embrace cybernetic enhancements as commonplace in this futuristic society, Togusa calmly refused, "I'm

all human and happy, thanks” (Sanders, 2017, 16:55). As illustrated in this exchange, Togusa’s lack of cybernetic augmentation is conveyed as a point of pride, seemingly characterizing the natural state of his human racialized body as sufficient in a world rampant with cybernetic enhancements. It is curious to see the only Japanese person in the team be highlighted so early in the film as being reluctant to embrace the cyberization of society, especially when considering that this exchange was his most prominent role throughout the film. In revisiting the techno-Orientalist trope of the cyborg, Togusa’s portrayal in this sequence is an interesting depiction of the dehumanization of the East Asian body, positing that a natural East Asian body is equal to or if not more superior than their white, cyber-enhanced counterparts. This depiction is reminiscent of the prevalent rhetoric regarding Chinese laborers in the USA in the 1900s, who were thought to be biologically and intrinsically mechanistic. The technologization of the yellow body is made explicit in this scene because it has historically “been associated with mechanical, dehumanized labor” (Kurtz, 2017, p. 128). Togusa’s character is a continued rehearsal of the techno-Orientalist construction of the East Asian body as inherently machine-like. As such, Togusa’s reluctance to adhere to the augmentation of the human body is portrayed as a strength, which conflates his racialized characterization as an East Asian man with technology, exemplifying his proximity and likeness to robots even in his natural human form.

As illustrated in the three films, the Western perception of East Asians as robotic, machine-like, and devoid of humanity is readily perpetuated through various techno-Orientalist characterizations. In both their human and cyborg forms, these characters are portrayed through Orientalist stylization and enforce harmful and problematic perceptions about their identities. These filmic portrayals cannot be divorced from the world in which they are made and are therefore reflective of real-life Western perceptions of East Asian cultural identities. As

demonstrated in the narrative and arcs of the characters explored in this section, their filmic depiction only reinforces the existing stereotypes about the yellow body as perpetually technologized. These stereotypes are employed as “weapons of mass dehumanization targeted against” (Chu, 2015, p. 78) East Asians to brutalize their bodies into mere machinery. East Asians, regardless of gender, are portrayed as Other to Western perceptions of humanity and as a result are perceived as inherently and perpetually less human than their white counterparts.

East Asian women as objects

Immortalized by the lingering remnants of colonialism, East Asian women have long been viewed as exotic objects of sexual desire in the West. The hypersexualized image of a young, petite-figured, tiny-eyed East Asian woman dressed in skin-tight (often) anime-inspired costumes permeates Western media texts in its many enduring forms, including films, video games, and even pornographic material. Beyond that, East Asian women are understood by Western society as being inherently passive, innocent, submissive, and obedient – all of which are perceptions rooted in colonial fantasies of power and domination over the exotic, undeniably beautiful Eastern Other. The intersectional nature of techno-Orientalism is made apparent here as some of the stereotypes associated with East Asians discussed in the previous section are also relevant to the prevailing notion of these women as objects. These perceptions seep into real-life understandings of East Asian women as they continue to be normalized through various racial fetishes, such as yellow fever, which was thoroughly discussed in the literature review. The objectification of East Asian women persists in the Western imagination with harmful consequences for how these women are perceived and treated in real-life. It becomes imperative to examine how this notion continues to be perpetuated and simultaneously subverted in the three selected SF films.

In *Cloud Atlas* (2012), the objectification of Sonmi-451 and her fellow fabricants is made apparent by the ways in which their engineered physical appearance and sexuality are presented onscreen. All the fabricants are built in the image of conventionally attractive East Asian women, bearing a striking resemblance to each other: all with a bob haircut, slender body, petite figure, olive-skin-stone, and similar facial features, dressed up in the same short, tight-fitting uniform (Tykwer et al., 2012, 26:44). These women are created to express the Western image of Asiatic femininity and are denigrated into literal objects of visual and sexual pleasure, especially for the men in the film. With only physical traits that are designed to conform to Asiatic feminine ideals, these fabricants are portrayed as having no distinctive quality that makes them indistinguishable from the purpose for which they were created: to serve. Characterized by similar physical attributes and attire, these women's likeness to each other becomes a convenient portrayal of their lack of agency, thereby omitting any distinctive features of their personhood precisely because they are seen as having none. This lack of distinction between one fabricant and another informs their proximity to being seen as mere projections of male desire.

The Othering of the fabricants into objects of male visual and sexual pleasure is portrayed on various occasions throughout the film. In adherence to the first catechism, Sonmi-415 and her fellow servers were expected to serve their consumers with the utmost hospitality, all while enduring various forms of humiliation, degradation, and molestation. When a white male consumer violently grabbed Sonmi-415's derriere (Tykwer et al., 2012, 25:53), Sonmi-415 did not display discomfort and merely acknowledged the act. With barely any reaction from the other consumers around them, it was as if the violent act was normalized within and across the screen. The lack of reaction impels the viewers to dismiss the incident, making them complicit in Sonmi-415's abuse. This instance becomes representative of the perpetual mistreatment of these

women's racialized bodies. It was only when another fabricant, Yoona-939 punched a consumer who came up behind her and inappropriately sprayed her back with a bottle of mayonnaise (Tykwer et al., 2012, 30:17) that the other diners in the restaurant stared in shock. All the consumers turned to Yoona-939 as if she was the perpetrator of the crime even though she was simply defending herself (Tykwer et al., 2012, 30:25). Yet in 2144 Neo-Seoul, Yoona-939 is not afforded the agency or right to bodily autonomy, rendering her act of self-defense null and void. The viewers witness this abuse within the first 5 minutes of the two characters being introduced, eliciting a sense of rage over how these women are reduced to sexual objects by the male consumers they encounter daily.

The film's precarious depiction of Yoona-939's racialized objecthood is exemplified in another scene when Sonmi-415 comes across her clandestine rendezvous with Seer Rhee, their boss. It is implied that he had been waking Yoona-939 up in bewitching hours of the night in order to engage in sexual activity (Tykwer et al., 2012, 27:25). Upon her discovery, Yoona-939 gazes upon Sonmi-451 with an emotionless, lifeless expression on her face (see Figure 7), a look reminiscent of Kyoko's indifference in *Ex Machina* (2014) (see Figure 5). Here, the viewers attest to the sexual abuse to which Yoona-939's racialized body is subject. What is even more insidious about Yoona-939's fate is the fact that the character Seer Rhee is played by a white actor, Hugh Grant, who is featured in yellowface, a tactic of "exaggerate(ing) 'racial' features that have (been) designated 'Oriental,' such as 'slanted' eyes, overbite, and mustard-yellow skin color" (Lee, 1999, p. 2). This revelation is connotative of the power dynamic between the East Asian woman and the white man that is rooted in Western colonialism. Yoona-939's racialized body, therefore, becomes a site for exploitation, and she is treated as an exotic object and a sexual experience to be had.



Figure 7. Yoona-939 looking at Sonmi-451 when she discovered her sexual relationship with Seer Rhee

Keeping in mind the tight-fitting attire fabricants are made to wear under their subjugation, it is interesting to see similar clothing continue to be featured on Sonmi-415 even after she supposedly reclaims some semblance of consciousness. After Commander Hae-Joo Chang (notably played by Jim Sturgess, featured in yellowface) saves Sonmi-451 and ushers her into the world outside of Papa Song, she begins to gain more awareness of herself, eventually realizing her destiny and the role she is meant to play in the revolution to come. However, Sonmi-451's rapid procuring of intellect and depth of character development is not reflected in how she dresses after her escape. Despite being provided a closet full of new clothes (Tykwer et al., 2012, 01:03:22), Sonmi-451 is continuously dressed in short, provocative clothes. Sonmi-451 is captured dressed in a lacy short white dress, with a sheer kimono-like shawl patterned in light pink flowers, as she lays her head on Commander Chang's chest to feel his heartbeat in a rather sensual filmic sequence (Tykwer et al., 2012, 01:14:24). In another scene, Sonmi-451 is captured in a full shot from behind, dressed in a revealing, strapless, skin-tight black romper that barely covers her backside, staring at her reflection in the mirror (see Figure 8). Although a full shot in and of itself does not explicitly sexualize her body, it is curious to see her clothed so minimally despite her attained freedom. Conversely, it can be argued that this scene exemplifies Sonmi-

451's pursuit of reclaiming her sexuality by discovering her femininity through the revealing of her skin. Nevertheless, Sonmi-451's attire before and after her captivity subtly maintains the sexual allure of the Eastern Other as an exotic object who exists under the scrutiny of the omnipresent gaze of the men within the film.



Figure 8. Sonmi-451 looking at herself in the mirror after her escape, dressed in a short, tight black romper

East Asian women's skin, as demonstrated, is of unparalleled value when discussing the Western imagination of their objecthood. Much like Sonmi-451, Kyoko from *Ex Machina* (2014) suffers a similar fate of materialization of her racialized body. Most often seen unclothed or in exiguous coverage of her body, Kyoko's attire defines her personhood (or rather, objecthood) purely through her yellow skin. As Bateman's personal sex attendant, Kyoko's relevance to the plot is almost solely ornamental. Her existence in the film is defined as a literal tool for sexual pleasure, thereby embodying her racialized figure as already existing as an object. Kyoko's materiality is made even more apparent upon her first interaction with Smith, where he asks if she knows where Nathan is, which she presumably does not comprehend (Garland, 2014, 58:05). When Smith grabs her shoulders, Kyoko immediately unbuttons her dress thus suggesting the touch of a man signaled the immediate revealing of her skin (see Figure 9). The camera immediately tilts down from Kyoko's face to her chest, slowly capturing this act, and lingers just

long enough to entice the viewers to the uncovering of her skin. The cinematography of this scene aids Kyoko's construction as an object for sexual and visual pleasure as governed by the white, heterosexual male gaze. In this sequence, Kyoko is "depicted as (always) sexually available to the white hero" (Marchetti, 1994, p. 2). The significance of Kyoko's skin in this scene is reflective of her objecthood; not only does she exist as a sexual object within the film, but she is also captured and presented as an object of exotic desire to the viewers.



Figure 9. Kyoko unbuttoning her shirt in front of Smith

What is most pernicious about the significance of the yellow skin is not how it represents the East Asian women they constitute but how these women's emergence as objects literalizes their yellow skin to ornaments (Cheng, 2018). In one of the final arcs of the movie, the viewers see a hauntingly slow-paced sequence of Ava discovering several bodies of the robot models that came before her in Bateman's room that are all naked and conventionally attractive, in various stages of completion. Ava slowly opens each closet, revealing each model, but the camera barely glances at these bodies. It is only when Ava reveals the robot build of a visibly East Asian woman that the camera captures her in a medium-full shot, in her entirety (Garland, 2014, 1:34:40). Here, Ava removes the forearm from the build and inserts it onto her injured arm, after which the camera focuses in on a close-up shot of this unnamed woman's face (Garland, 2014,

01:35:45). Subsequently, Ava peels the skin off of the build piece by piece and places it onto herself, taking every part she needed as if to assert that the parts constituting the East Asian woman's racialized body was most befitting to fulfill Ava's needs of replicating feminine desirability. Throughout the film, whether through Kyoko or this unnamed woman, yellow skin is seen as interchangeable. The viewers attest to the injurious depiction of these racialized bodies that instantaneously perpetuate the idea that yellow flesh is synonymous with ornaments and thus, emerges and exists as objects.

Indeed, the materialization of East Asian women's bodies continues to be vigilantly preserved in contemporary SF films under the prevailing fantasy of Western imagination of sexual denigration and exotic desire. Beyond their ornamental yellow skin, East Asian women are objectified through the aestheticized portrayal of their bodies and the disembodiment of their racial identities. This is especially true in Kusanagi's portrayal in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), where the whitewashing of her character can be characterized as a distorted imitation of feminine East Asian desirability but cannot be representative of her objecthood. The symbolic annihilation of the East Asian woman, in this case, obscures the straightforward application of Cheng's (2018) conceptual lens of Ornamentalism in examining the racially ambiguous Kusanagi's objecthood. It is only through Johansson's racial ambiguity in the film that this analysis can dissect her existence through the racialized Othering of East Asian women.

Kusanagi is captured in ways that are revealing of her sexualization and objectification as both a white and East Asian woman, subject to the same patriarchal gaze. In one of the most iconic scenes recreated based on the anime, where Kusanagi stands atop a towering skyscraper, undressing her body don in a white, nude-like skin-tight suit (Sanders, 2017, 11:32). The camera captures her head to toe from a low-angle medium full shot, exposing every crevice of her body

hugged in the soft light illuminating from the neon signs around her. What draws the viewers' attention is not only her physical body but also Johansson's suspiciously Asian-like face, bringing an array of racial signifiers unique to Kusanagi's character design as her Asiatic counterpart. When viewed as a racially ambiguous East Asian woman, Kusanagi's body is explicitly eroticized, revealing the logic of techno-Orientalism that constructs her perceived portrayal. As the Orient, Kusanagi is both inferiorly feminized and exoticized. The ubiquitous nature of the figurative and symbolic power the West has over the East is made visible through Kusanagi's seemingly naked body, which would not have been revealed if she were straightforwardly perceived as a white woman. Manifested by the Western imagination of East Asian femininity, racially ambiguous Kusanagi is presented as an exotic fantasy and a sexual conduit for the Western patriarchal gaze and desire.

For the racially ambiguous Kusanagi, her perceived existence as an ornament is constructed when the film introduces the concept of consent in a cyberized society. Before every procedure that requires fundamental access to her cybernetic frame, Kusanagi is always asked for her consent to which she replies by verbally stating her name and the procedure she is authorizing to be performed, "My name is Major Mira Killian (Kusanagi), and I give my consent" (Sanders, 2017, 25:55). As a concept that generally applies to humans, Kusanagi's ability to consent is representative of her sentience, consciousness, and humanity. As such, the act of consenting compels the viewer to perceive Kusanagi's agency and control over her own person as familiar, thereby recognizing the organic life underneath her mechanical body. It is with the reinforcement of Kusanagi's bodily autonomy that the viewers are made to feel comfortable indulging in her sexualized and fetishized portrayal earlier in the film. Only later in the movie that Kusanagi's objecthood is uncannily solidified when Dr. Ouelet reveals that she

never actually needed Kusanagi's consent to perform any procedure on her body (Sanders, 2017, 01:11:39). After all, inanimate objects cannot give informed consent in the same way human beings do. This scene signals a shift for the viewers from the pleasure they were granted earlier by Kusanagi's show of consent. When gazed upon as an East Asian woman, Kusanagi is racially signified as a pseudo-living entity that exists at the convergence of artificial and organic life. By stripping away the human consciousness bound to the concept of consent, Kusanagi suffers the insidious materialization of the East Asian woman as constructed through Ornamentalism.

What draws the perceived East Asian Kusanagi apart from Yoona-939, Sonmi-451, and Kyoko is the subversion of this techno-Orientalist portrayal of the Oriental femininity she was initially presented with at the beginning of the film. During the last battle sequence, where Cutter deploys a machine tank to kill her, Kusanagi damages her body as she struggles to open the hatch of the tank (Sanders, 2017, 01:30: 48). The camera captures Kusanagi's muscular biceps ripping apart from a low-angle medium close up shot, and then immediately transitions into a high angle shot of her squatting down, with phallic muscles contracting, as she strains to pry open the latch of the tank (see Figure 10). The juxtaposition of the camera angles in this sequence elicits a shifting power dynamic that is symbolic of the destruction of her body. The low-angle shot asserts Kusanagi's dominance and power as she displays the strength in her muscular cyborg body, while the high-angle shot reveals the vulnerability of her body, literally being ripped to shreds. In stark contrast to the formerly elegant and exotic beauty her body was constructed under the ubiquitous Western patriarchal gaze, the racially ambiguous Kusanagi at the end of the film disavows such notions of femininity, as is portrayed in the contortion of her exposed body. This scene becomes emblematic of the destruction of the fetishizing gaze upon which Kusanagi is initially subject to, thereby subverting her objectification as a perceived racialized body.



Figure 10. Kusanagi struggling to open the hatch of a machine tank

While Kusanagi from *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) may not be the most suitable example of a racialized East Asian woman to demonstrate her existence through ornament, partly because of her controversial casting, her racial ambiguity in the film is still representative of a perceived East Asianness that is connotative of her objecthood. Ultimately, the racialized portrayal of all these women in the three films reflects an ongoing techno-Orientalist portrayal of East Asian women as objects, whether literalized through her yellow skin, narrative arc, or the ways in which she is presented under the scrutiny of the Western patriarchal gaze. The materialization of East Asian women is also made explicit by the manner in which the camera maneuvers to visibly aid in this construction. Despite some evidence of the subversion of their racialized objectification, these women are still overwhelmingly depicted as objects governed by the ever-present fetishizing gaze of the West. The critical analysis of these women's racialized objecthood asserts their continued relevance in Western SF films that are made explicit through the racial Othering of the East Asian woman. As such, these women's materialization as ornament and object in SF films perpetuates colonialist perceptions of their desirability, posing real threats to how they are perceived beyond the fictitious worlds in which they currently reside.

Conclusion

This thesis has discursively explored the relationship between three Western perceptions of East Asia and their cultural identities: East Asia as an evil empire, East Asians as machine-like, and East Asian women as objects. The analysis of *Cloud Atlas* (2012), *Ex Machina* (2014), and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) has illustrated how manifestations of techno-Orientalism continue to plague Western SF in their presentation of East Asia and the definition of their cultural identities. Western cultural imaginations of the East continue to be politically expressed through visual encodings governed by the omnipresent logic of techno-Orientalism, playing into present-day cultural fears manifested by yellow peril anxieties of Asia. The examination of East Asianness and Asiatic femininity in relation to prominent prescriptive stereotypes of East Asian cultural identities in the West is representative of the risks these depictions pose to real-life understandings of these identities. These findings inform the contemporary state of race relations that continue to surveil and Other East Asians in both fiction and reality.

The perception of East Asia as an emerging dominant technological force and adversarial threat to the West is constructed through the Orientalizing of East Asian foreignness. In each of the films analyzed, visual and symbolic cues of distinct East Asianness are used to signify coherent cultural meanings of strangeness associated with East Asia. Through the use of East Asian lettering onscreen and consumable Japanese aesthetics, the three films explicitly and implicitly draw upon East Asian culture and aesthetics in their futuristic vision of an Asianized West to project a future grounded in East Asia. This thesis has demonstrated how the logic of techno-Orientalism has permitted the SF genre to use these signifiers of difference to entrust the task of retaining humanity to the West, positioning them as the victim of an impending technologically controlled future epitomized by the threatening and menacing East Asia.

In terms of their cultural identities, the characterization of East Asian characters and cyborgs portrayed by Asian actors reveals the perception of their personhood as machine-like, expendable technology. Orientalist stylization is used to enforce the ontological nature of the East Asian subject, positing that they exist as technologized entities and thus, less human than their white counterparts. As demonstrated in the analysis, a number of characters from each film, including Sonmi-451, Kyoko, Kusanagi, and Togusa are Othered into the role of a techno-Orient, whose character in the films only reinforce existing historical stereotypes connotative of the machine-like, robotic nature of the yellow body. The examination of these characters' depictions asserts the ways in which East Asians' racialized bodies continue to be portrayed as devoid of organic life that is intricately tethered with technology, suggesting that the yellow body in itself can represent technology.

As for the East Asian woman in SF, the analysis exemplified how their portrayal depicts their existence as ornaments and objects for the sexual pleasure of the fetishizing Western patriarchal gaze. These women are constructed as conduits of visual enjoyment for the men within and across the film screen. The analysis of Sonmi-415, Kyoko, and Kusanagi's racialized bodies reveals the process of materialization these women undergo, made possible through the literalization of their yellow skin, attire, and narrative arc, aided by similar cinematography across all three films. East Asian women in the three films are constructed in adherence to East Asian standards of ideal femininity and perceived as lacking in agency, whose literal existence within the film is often defined solely when they are barely clothed. It is only in Kusanagi's portrayal in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) do the viewers witness some subversion of such notions of Oriental femininity and desirability. Despite this, this research established how East Asian

women continue to be racially Othered and characterized through techno-Orientalist means, perpetuating colonialist fantasies and longing for their exotic and alien allure.

This research study has successfully contextualized the emergence of techno-Orientalism in SF films that accounts for the preservation of the interdependent relationship between the East and the West beyond the scope of my proposed study. This study can potentially act as a fundamental groundwork for research in other relevant areas of study, such as political science, security studies, and philosophy studies, in understanding the dynamics and pervasion of techno-orientalist applications in other mediums of discourse. Allowing for a more expansive scope of study, perhaps the logic of techno-Orientalism can also be examined in news media coverages of China's counterintelligence and economic espionage efforts, bringing into discussion the risk the US government believes TikTok possess as a national security threat to American citizen's data privacy. Nevertheless, the findings from this research are a novel contribution to this relatively under-researched area of study in East Asian representations and race relations in communication scholarship.

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