A Familiar Otherness:
The Trope of Asia in Cyberpunk Movies since the 1980s

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Conceived broadly as a genre concerned with the possibilities and dangers of technology and their impact on human consciousness, cyberpunk has been characterized by gloomy visions of cultures on the brink of collapse. Having come into existence in the historical context of the onset of the electronic age and Asia's rapid economic rise, cyberpunk – notably in its cinematic form – has habitually drawn on Asian motifs to express anxieties about the future of high-tech mass societies. From the 1980s on, movies such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Brazil* (1985), the *Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003), *Cloud Atlas* (2012), and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) have employed Asian imagery to address technophobic fears of mind invasion, rapacious consumerism, environmental breakdown, and the erosion of individual rights. All of this has spawned a visual language that casts Asia as a symbol of the future, but at the same time tends to evoke Yellow-Peril notions of the eternally alien Other. And so despite the genre's ongoing reinterpretation of, and fascination with, the Asian trope – be it in the form of symbols, traditions, aesthetics, or actual characters as representatives of their culture – it has yet to escape inherited racial stereotypes.

Keywords: cyberpunk, cyberpunk cinema, orientalism, techno-orientalism, dystopian fiction, science fiction, Asiaphobia, *Blade Runner*, *Blade Runner 2049*, *Brazil*, the *Matrix* trilogy, *Cloud Atlas*

A prolific genre in literature and the visual arts, cyberpunk has been a major development in recent US culture. Its themes and aesthetics have resonated strongly in the pop-cultural imagination and brought forth many derivatives such as biopunk, steampunk, or dieselpunk. By now, its dystopian visions of hypercapitalism, de-individuation, and destructive technology have become a part of the current global zeitgeist. Especially contemporary anglophone literature and cinema dwell extensively on classic cyberpunk topics such as the threats posed by artificial intelligence and genetic engineering, as well as the juxtaposition of technological advancement versus social decline and loss of spirituality.

In spite or maybe because of this ubiquity, providing a clear-cut definition of cyberpunk is notoriously elusive, with various rivaling approaches being proposed in the literature (see Gözen 123-38). Sometimes the term is used to refer strictly to a short-lived literary movement of the 1980s, represented by a small group of writers who sought to revitalize the sci-fi genre by exploring the impact of the dawning digital age on human society. In contrast to classic science fiction, these authors anticipated that new technologies would not merely be utilized by humans, but would also cause profound metaphysical transformations of human nature itself, thus engendering post-human identities. William Gibson, whose 1984 novel *Neuromancer* is considered to be *the* seminal work of cyberpunk fiction, is widely credited with being the figurehead and main instigator of this literary mode.[1] However, at other times, the beginnings of the cyberpunk phenomenon are traced further back and placed within the broader context of the Gothic novel, in the tradition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), which explores questions of artificial life and the possibilities and limitations of science. Other classification strategies focus on characteristic plot elements, with the standard formula featuring the renegade hacker from the fringes of society taking on corporate power in cyberspace, typically by making use of a technologically augmented body. In other instances, the label of cyberpunk is used to denote an aesthetic category that eclectically mixes punk fashion, high-tech, and Gothic visual elements. Herein, the term is

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[1] Other prominent representatives of this group include Bruce Sterling, John Shirley, Rudy Rucker, Bruce Bethke, Neal Stephenson, and Pat Cadigan. Much of the work of these writers is rooted in the earlier New Wave movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and inspired by writers such as Philip K. Dick, Roger Zelazny, or Harlan Ellison. It is also influenced by the Japanese cyberpunk genre which was launched in 1982 by Katsuhiro Otomo's manga series *Akira*.

set forth under the priority of thematic content, namely as a subgenre of speculative fiction in which contemporary trends in culture, technology, and science are extrapolated into the near future to explore the promises and dangers of technology, and especially their effects on human consciousness.

While it is true for science fiction in general that it is rarely fully detached from reality, but contains at least some measure of reflection and commentary on existing societal conditions, this particularly applies to cyberpunk. With the explicit aspiration to take factually experienced reality as a starting point for glimpses into the future, the works of cyberpunk provide telling insights into the hopes and fears of the societal environment in which they are imagined. Thus, the standard cyberpunk themes – rampant consumerism, environmental collapse, mind control, and disintegrating individual and collective identities – constitute key issues that have been occupying Western mass societies since the late twentieth century. But while the "metaphors cyberpunk employed to explore our increasingly intimate relationship with technology [. . .] are as apt as ever," lately the genre seems to have been suffering from an aesthetic standstill. As a recent article in the *Guardian* has diagnosed, the "future has looked the same for almost four decades. [. . .] Hacking: check. Cybernetic enhancements: check. Street crime: check. Punk fashion: check. Urban sprawl: check" (Walker-Emig). And one may also add, "Asian backdrop: check."

Indeed, it has now become an almost taken-for-granted trope that the bleak cyberpunk forecasts of the near future should unfold in Asia or an Orientalized West.[2] To some extent, this can be attributed to purely historical circumstances. Since the genre was conceived at a time when Japan was the main economic driving force of the new computer age, setting cyberpunk narratives in Japan became a formulaic pattern inherited from the original cyberpunk authors, most notably Gibson. Like many North Americans in the 1980s, Gibson perceived Japan as the country where "tomorrow is happening today." As he once stated, "when I became known for a species of science fiction that journalists called cyberpunk, Japan was already, somehow, the de facto spiritual home of that influence, that particular flavor of popular culture." In short, "modern Japan simply was cyberpunk." The abundance of Japanese locales, motifs, and expressions in Gibson's work begot a sensibility that gave direction to subsequent oeuvres within that genre.

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[2] Herein, the term *Asia* is used mostly to refer to East Asia, which has traditionally drawn the main interest of the cyberpunk genre geographically, culturally, as well as with respect to race.

But this association of cyberpunk with Japan still does not explain why now, almost forty years since the inception of the movement and in a markedly changed geopolitical landscape, cyberpunk predictions of the future are still dominated by Asian themes and aesthetics. Especially given the fact that cyberpunk is an intrinsically global genre with global concerns as well as global stylistic influences, including film noir, hard-boiled detective fiction, and the drawing style of 1970s French sci-fi comics[3], it is remarkable how heavily it has been fixated on the trope of Asia. Although there have been attempts to break out of this convention – for example, Neill Blomkamp's 2009 surprise hit *District 9* ventured into African cyberpunk – the genre has been conspicuously slow to diversify. Indeed, the settings of the most recent cyberpunk-themed productions *Altered Carbon* (2018-) of or the video game *Cyberpunk 2077* (2019) look a lot like downtown Tokyo or Hong Kong and can be easily mistaken for scenes out of Ridley Scott's genre-pioneering *Blade Runner* (1982), the first movie to expand cyberpunk concepts into cinema.

This persisting affinity of cyberpunk to Asian imagery suggests that, within this particular genre, Asia has always been more than just the most plausible location for a high-tech future or a convenient setting for painting looming scenarios of sprawling megacities. Rather, this aesthetic fixation is also indicative of an undercurrent of more deep-seated conceptions of the racial Other that are rooted in a centuries-old notion of the Yellow Peril, i.e., an existential psycho-cultural Western fear of being conquered and enslaved by Oriental hordes.[4] I will show how depictions of Asia and Asians in Western cyberpunk have consistently served as a vehicle for articulating collective Western anxieties about race, which have come to be a defining feature of this genre.

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[3] One of the main contributors to the emerging cyberpunk aesthetics was the French comics anthology *Métal Hurlant* created by Jean Giraud, Philippe Druillet, Jean-Pierre Dionnet, and Bernard Farkas between 1974 and 1987. It was cited as a major influence by William Gibson, Ridley Scott, and Katsuhiro Otomo.

[4] The term was coined by French-Russian sociologist Jacques Novikow in his 1897 essay "Le Péril Jaune." However, the underlying racial anxieties are much older and can be traced all the way back to the Mongol invasions of Europe in the thirteenth century. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the concept was established as a topos in Western adventure literature and science fiction. Prominent examples include Dr. Fu Manchu, the archetype of the Asian villain created by British author Sax Rohmer in a series of novels launched in 1913; and Emperor Ming the Merciless of the popular space-opera comic *Flash Gordon*, conceived by Alex Raymond in 1934.

The representation of Asian cultures and people has been dynamic and static at the same time. It has been dynamic in the sense that it has been highly responsive to real-life political and economic developments, with the main attention shifting swiftly from Japan to China as the latter overtook the former as Asia's main economic powerhouse. Furthermore, the connotations attached to Asian signifiers went from being distinctly negative to neutral to positive synchronously with the tightening of economic ties to Asia and the West's perceived familiarity with Asian people and styles. And yet, despite these shifts, they remained static in that they sustained an undifferentiated, amorphous idea of "Asianness" in the form of a hybrid Orientalism that indiscriminately draws on various cultures, symbols, and historical periods of Asia and perpetuates the idea of Asia as an unchanging abstraction of Otherness. These ambivalent tendencies will be traced through four decades of cyberpunk movies, with specific emphasis on major productions such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Brazil* (1985), the *Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003), *Cloud Atlas* (2012), and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017).

Who Is Afraid of Nippon? – *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Brazil* (1985)

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) is considered *the* groundbreaking and formative work of cyberpunk cinema. It is set in 2019 Los Angeles, in the wake of an unspecified global catastrophe that has brought about an environmental cataclysm. People are encouraged to immigrate to off-world colonies which are built and maintained by bioengineered humanoids produced by the all-powerful Tyrell Corporation. The main character, Rick Deckard, played by Harrison Ford, is a cop who specializes in hunting down and killing these so-called replicants when they illegally escape to earth to pose as humans. Deckard falls in love with the replicant Rachel, and even starts suspecting that he himself may not be human. He is thus confronted with fundamental questions about the nature of identity and reality, and is forced to radically revise his notions of what makes a human being. The film is loosely based on Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, and since the book itself does not contain Asian themes, Scott's interpretation is a prime example of how cyberpunk movies have imposed their own layer of sociopolitical meaning by infusing the original narrative with the Asiaphobia of the 1980s.

The film was made at a time when the West was strongly preoccupied with fears of Asian political and economic hegemony. The

American involvement in Vietnam had only recently come to an end, and the Cold War fear of Communist China was giving way to rising alarm over developments in Japan. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Pacific siland state was undergoing a technological revolution in tandem with the onset of the new information age and the rising global demand for consumer electronics. Brands like Sony, Nintendo, and Yamaha were rapidly becoming household names in the West, and Japanese companies started investing heavily in the US, also purchasing high-profile companies and real estate, among them such landmarks as the Rockefeller Center, the Mobil Building, and Columbia Pictures. The American public was growing increasingly apprehensive of what it started to perceive as an "economic Pearl Harbor" (Harvey). This "Japanning of America" (Schweisberg) could also be strongly felt in popular culture as American teenagers discovered Japanese anime, and a vibrant martial-arts scene began to materialize.

All this fueled strong anxieties over reverse colonization and incited animosities that are commonly referred to as the "Japan-bashing" of the 1980s. Popular books such as Ezra F. Vogel's *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* (1979) warned of Japan outcompeting the US and taking over global market leadership. In the mainstream American press, Japanese business practices were even compared to World War II militarism. Thus, in a 1985 *New York Times* article, American Pulitzer Prize-winning author Theodore H. White drastically warned his countrymen:

> Today, 40 years after the end of World War II, the Japanese are on the move again in one of history's most brilliant commercial offensives, as they go about dismantling American industry. Whether they are still only smart, or have finally learned to be wiser than we, will be tested in the next 10 years. Only then will we know who finally won the war 50 years before.

The atmosphere of uneasiness and hostility conveyed by these words can also be perceived in *Blade Runner*, where "the fears of economic invasion and colonization that led to calls for a renewed American isolationism in the 1980s are expressed by figuring America itself as the battleground between Asian and American capital" (Yu 53). A futuristic Los Angeles is shown as an Orientalized space that is crowded with people of Asian appearance and plastered with Japanese and Chinese street signs and ads. Throughout the film, the strangeness of the urban landscape is further stressed by otherworldly music featuring Eastern-inspired vocal themes over electronic synthesizer tracks, thus

reinforcing the identification of Asia with the future.[5] In a recurring image of the dark cityscape, an enormous electronic billboard displays a Japanese woman in traditional garb and makeup. Later, a Coca-Cola ad flashes over the same billboard. In the background, a much smaller Pan Am logo can be seen. All this imagery suggests a merging of Asian and American corporate power, with the latter being ultimately subjugated to the former (see Yu 56).

Early on in the film, it becomes evident that Deckard, the white man, is foreign and marginalized in this environment. He is first shown attempting – unsuccessfully – to order in English, from a Japanese street vendor, the amount of sushi that he wants. Likewise, when in the course of his investigation he seeks to establish the origin of what he thinks might be a fish scale, his exchange with the Asian woman who specializes in analyzing such objects is conspicuously rudimentary: "Fish?" he simply asks by way of introduction as he hands her the item. As it turns out, the woman speaks fluent if heavily accented English. Nevertheless, Deckard continues to talk to her in single words like "Snake?" as if he were used to not being understood, negotiating his way through a strange land like an awkward tourist.

At the same time that whiteness is construed as a disadvantage in everyday dealings with the outside world, there is also a contrary vertical stratification of races. Street life is overwhelmingly Asian, but overhead, whiteness prevails: a mostly white police force patrols the city in flying cars; the white middle class lives in Aztec-/Mayan-styled buildings; and a white economic elite, epitomized by the Tyrell Corporation, remains isolated in high-rise pyramids with Victorian-inspired interiors and soft lighting that is in stark contrast to the neon glare of the gritty streets. In this context, it is also telling that, in this very Asian-influenced society, none of the replicants has Asian features. This absence further underscores the impression that the Caucasian body, although or precisely because it is increasingly under threat, remains the superior and most desirable commodity.

Scott explained in a 1982 interview that he based his vision of 2019 Los Angeles on an extrapolation of real-life trends in California, predicting that "the influence in L.A. will be very Spanish, with a big cross-influence of Oriental" (qtd in Kerman 17). Along the same lines,

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[5] The award-winning score was created by Greek composer Vangelis, one of the main pioneers of electronic music. Only a few years before *Blade Runner*, in 1979, he had released a critically acclaimed concept album entitled *China*, in which he employed Asian instruments and compositional styles that were then largely unknown to Western audiences.

production executive Katherine Haber remarked that the costumers working on *Blade Runner* were striving to "create the effect of a multinational, multi-racial society [. . .] We had tons of punks, Blacks, and Mexicans [. . .] a mélange of every part of society you could imagine" (qtd in Kerman 23). However, this is not the world we actually get to see in the finished movie. Although the city is depicted as culturally diverse – for example, Deckard's investigation also takes him into an Arab segment of the Los Angeles underground – the Asian element is clearly dominant. One may speculate that, despite Scott's expressly stated intentions to create a multicultural setting, the spirit of the time prevailed and found its way into the production. After all, the "Los Angeles of 2019 is not a simple extrapolation from current California demographic trends; instead, it is an imaginary postmodern site where futurist 'realism' has been replaced with oriental bodies and signifiers" (Yu 56). In general, *Blade Runner* portrays Asian and especially Japanese people and culture as the omnipresent and familiar, but at the same time profoundly separate and indecipherable Other. The film's imagined future is one of cultural mongrelization that, far from promising a harmonious amalgamation of cultures, will ultimately lead to Western civilization's being overwhelmed and displaced by pervasive Asian influences.

In sharp contrast to this vision, the future society imagined in Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) is conspicuously homogenous culturally as well as racially. Like *Blade Runner*, the film was initially a commercial failure, but subsequently became a cult classic. Although *Brazil*'s classification as cyberpunk may be debated – strictly speaking, it lacks the basic ingredient of high-tech – it is often subsumed under this label. It does also meet the criteria established above as it takes on staple cyberpunk topics such as a future run down by technocracy, the underdog rebel who uses his superior technical skills to fight authority, the question of psychological and moral integrity, and the impact of consumerism on human society. There are also numerous references to artificial bodies, and even a variation on the topic of cyberspace, only that instead of an electronic infrastructure there is an omnipresent network of tubes intruding on every space and aspect of everyday life.

Made only three years after *Blade Runner*, *Brazil* reveals very similar cultural fears. The story takes place "somewhere in the 20th century," in a country that strongly resembles England, which is anticipated to have become a consumer-driven totalitarian society relying on a mindless bureaucracy and dysfunctional, nonsensical technology that is at the same time futuristic and obsolete. The protagonist, Sam, played by

Jonathan Pryce, is a low-level government employee who lives a monotonous and dreary life. But in his dreams, he turns into a heroic winged knight who bravely rescues an unknown woman from distress. When Sam happens to encounter this same woman in real life, he discovers that she is wanted by the government as a terrorist. Sam falls in love with her, but is unable to save her from being apprehended and killed. He, too, is arrested and ultimately descends into insanity after being tortured by the government police.

Considering that the entire cast of *Brazil* is white, and that the referenced cultural materials belong almost exclusively to the Western realm, it is all the more striking that Sam's growing sense of impending calamity should take the shape of a giant Japanese samurai who haunts him in his nightmares. By contrast, Sam wears an armor that is clearly reminiscent of European knights. Like a psychological echo, Sam dreams of being locked in a fight with his monstrous Asian antagonist following frustrating encounters with a callous bureaucracy that threatens to destroy his life. And just like the totalitarian system that Sam feels crushed by, the formidable Asian warrior seems to be all-powerful, unpredictable, and invincible. Often, the Japanese Goliath is accompanied by a crowd of stooping, ragged-looking figures who all wear identical caricature-like *Budai* masks. Later, when Sam is imprisoned by the government, his torturer – who happens to be an old friend of his, but shows no sympathy or mercy – wears the very same grotesque mask as a kind of professional clothing. Hence, overdrawn Asian features are used here as a symbol for the despotic force of a totalitarian bureaucracy and its de-individualized, de-humanized cohorts.

Interestingly, when Sam finally manages to kill the samurai in a later dream sequence, he is surprised to look into his own face upon opening the visor of his Asian nemesis. This reflection suggests that Sam himself contributes to the system he so loathes; as an efficient government employee, he is literally part of the government body. In other words, he has become his own enemy by participating in the tyrannical machinery that is represented by the Asian body.

Unlike *Blade Runner*, *Brazil* uses Asian imagery not by way of providing commentary on concrete demographic changes, but as an allegorical abstraction. Therefore, the artistic choice to project the fears of totalitarian oppressive power onto stereotypical Asian figures seems all the more significant as a direct manifestation of the cultural atmosphere of the 1980s, with the film's imagery clearly seeking to tap into an almost taken-for-granted Western view of Asia as disturbingly threatening and unknowable. In this case, the fascination with the

mysterious power of the East takes the shape of a supernatural apparition of unknowable peril that ultimately stands for the degeneration of Western liberal values. The choice of a traditional Japanese warrior to illustrate this figurative threat is ascribable to the pronounced Japanophobia of the 1980s, which was stirred up by Japan's economic clout combined with its cultural difference.

Incorporating the Red Dragon – the *Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003)

Japan's strong economic growth came to an abrupt halt when the Japanese asset price bubble collapsed in late 1991. In what would later be termed the Lost Decade,[6] the country's economic fortune waned as China began outcompeting Japan politically and economically. Concomitantly, the anti-Japanese sentiment in Western popular media ebbed away and was rechanneled into animosity towards, and suspicion of, China. Particularly since the mid-1990s, Western anxieties over the acceleration of globalization processes became strongly connected to the discourse of China's rise. This time, the fear of the ascendancy of an Asian country was additionally incited by divergences in political ideology. Especially with the historic event of the economic hub of Hong Kong being returned by Britain to China in 1997, the specter of a communist country capturing the world market began looming large in the West. Countless variations on headlines such as "The Red Dragon Awakens" or "The Evil Breath of the Dragon"[7] filled the press, once again conjuring up centuries-old prejudices of the Yellow Peril.

But while China-bashing seamlessly replaced Japan-bashing, "Made in China" was also rapidly becoming a leitmotif in the everyday experience of Western consumers. Whatever collective concerns there may have been regarding a totalitarian state using cheap labor to advance its political interests, these concerns were overridden by the desire for affordable consumer goods. The West embraced Chinese products, and China's growing importance in the world, combined with its large population, even led to speculations that a Chinese dialect would soon become the new global lingua franca. Millions of Westerners took up learning

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[6] This term was originally used in Japan to refer to the period from 1991 to 2000, but has recently been applied to the entire time span from 1991 to 2010, which is known as the Lost Score or the Lost 20 Years.

[7] An article of this title, one of the more original variations on the ubiquitous image of the rising red dragon, was run by the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* in June 1998 (see Follath).

Mandarin or Cantonese as a way of remaining competitive in the new world market, while also seeking to get better acquainted with Chinese culture and traditions. These developments suggest that the economic and cultural influx feared in the case of Japan actually came to pass with China. Surprisingly, what had been so dreaded in theory turned out to be rather pleasurable in actuality, at least if judged by the unbroken Western appetite for Chinese-made consumer articles and the West's growing interest in Chinese stories. In 1998, Disney released *Mulan*, a Chinese myth of a woman warrior, and by 2000, the enormous success of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* demonstrated that perceptions of Asia by Western audiences had markedly changed.

Concurrently, in cyberpunk-themed movies of the 1990s, views of Asia were also undergoing a palpable transformation. At first, the image of the threatening alien began to fade in favor of a more neutral, purely visual cue for the future. Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days* and Robert Longo's *Johnny Mnemonic*, both released in 1995, are representative of this transitional phase. While they may not be cinematic masterpieces, they represent a caesura in the evolution of cyberpunk cinema as tokens of a more relaxed attitude towards Asia. *Strange Days* is set in Los Angeles in the final days of the last millennium. Seizing on the Y2K scare, the film shows the city in an apocalyptic chaos of crime, violence, and social degeneration. Visually, the movie is strongly inspired by the grunge aesthetics of the 1990s' punk rock scene, but it also features genre-typical Asian paraphernalia such as the ever-popular Chinese restaurant, or the cliché Japanese businessman who owns the very latest and best in entertainment technology. However, such motifs no longer stand out as political commentary, but seem more like a shorthand reference to the classic stylistic insignia of the cyberpunk tradition.

Similarly, in *Johnny Mnemonic*, the protagonist, played by Keanu Reeves, operates in a sphere populated by stereotypical Japanese characters such as inscrutable businessmen, members of crime syndicates, anime characters, and martial artists. But decidedly unlike Deckard in *Blade Runner*, Johnny Mnemonic is now familiar with, and very much in control of, this environment. At least subliminally, Asian culture is beginning to be construed as something that – while still alien and exotic – can be incorporated and mastered by the Western hero. There may still be a clear demarcation between the foreground of a white protagonist and the Asian background, but the angst over Asian difference becomes less acute as Asian characters begin to figure more prominently within the narrative. "Since approximately 1995, [. . .] one can see a distinct shift in cyberpunk cinema, not only visually, in the

sleeker, digital look of the films, but also ideologically, in its increased incorporation of non-white bodies and styles in the primary narratives and the foreground" (Park 92).

Only four years later, this blending was fully realized in the first installment of the *Matrix* trilogy, which represents the next milestone in cyberpunk cinema after *Blade Runner*. True to the stylistic conventions of the genre, the *Matrix* movies are studded with hallmark Asian references. For example, all three films memorably open with the "matrix digital rain," which is comprised of Latin letters, Arabic numerals, and half-width kana, a script used in the early days of Japanese computing. This code's typeface is also an homage to the Japanese cyberpunk classic *Ghost in the Shell*, where a very similar green screen is used.[8] But of course the most iconic moments of *The Matrix* – and arguably its strongest selling point – are the kung fu fighting scenes that imitate the style of Hong Kong action movies. Critiques such as Janet Maslin's enthusiastic 1999 review in the *New York Times* took particular note of this novel amalgamation:

> As supervised by [renowned Hong Kong martial arts choreographer and film director] Yuen Wo Ping, these airborne sequences bring Hong Kong action style home to audiences in a mainstream American adventure, with big prospects as a cult classic and with the future very much in mind.

Unmistakably, *The Matrix* ushered in a new era in the genre. As Chi Hyun Park has suggested, "the originality of *The Matrix* stemmed from its ability to combine Eastern and Western popular culture through visual idioms" (183). In other words, Asian background and Western foreground begin to blur. At the same time, the unease over Asian Otherness seems to all but disappear, and as the trilogy progresses, the implications of everything Asian grow increasingly favorable. *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions* strive to depict the last human enclave of Zion as a multiracial and multicultural society. But within this diversity, Asian characters and cultural elements are still assigned a prominent position. Whereas the first *Matrix* movie featured no leading Asian characters, the sequels do. Central positive figures such as Seraph, the Keymaker, or Captain Mifune are Asian. In addition, more often than not, the signifiers of the future are now imagined to be specifically Chinese. For example, Seraph, played by Taiwanese actor Collin Chou, appears in traditional-looking Chinese clothing, in a space that is

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[8] The manga *Ghost in the Shell* was published in 1989; its first anime version was released in 1995.

reminiscent of old-fashioned Chinese taverns, and speaks with a pronounced Chinese accent.[9] But most tellingly, the white hero Neo himself wears a coat that is in the style of a traditional Chinese tunic as it was popularized in the West by the legendary Cantonese Wing Chun master Ip Man, who taught Bruce Lee. Most importantly, in a battle fought mainly in digital cyberspace, it is not so much superior technological training, but rather the ancient Chinese art of kung fu, that is the weapon of choice and *the* central instrument in the fight to save humanity.

All this indicates an increasing familiarity and comfortableness of Western audiences with Asian people, objects, and styles. Even if one can safely assume that this acclimatization is also driven by purely economic interests to reach new markets in Asia and to appeal to the fast-growing Asian community in North America, the contrast to the mentality of the 1980s is still staggering. Little seems to be left of the cacophony of clashing Eastern and Western cultures depicted in *Blade Runner*, or of the unfettered enemy stereotypes of *Brazil*. Not dissociation, but amalgamation has become the new guiding principle. Yet this embracing and incorporating of Asian culture has not been unproblematic. As concerns about racial and cultural identities were becoming more pronounced, and the concept of cultural appropriation started figuring more prominently in public discourse, critics found it increasingly questionable that Asian signifiers were assumed and performed by white or non-Asian actors.

Between New Tendencies and Old Tropes – *Cloud Atlas* (2012) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)

One example for this development is the controversy surrounding *Cloud Atlas*, a production based on David Mitchell's 2004 novel of the same name. It is composed of six separate but interrelated stories that are set in different places and periods, spanning from the nineteenth to the twenty-seventh century. The central theme of the novel is the predatory aspect of human nature, with the storyline exploring the recurrence of racism, sexism, and colonialism in human history based on the concept of the transmigration of souls. In other words, each of the main actors performs various reincarnations of the same character, as the life paths

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[9] The fact that this role had previously been offered to Jet Li and Michelle Yeoh further confirms the assumption that having the role played by a star of Chinese cinema was a conscious choice on the part of the producers.

of a set of characters crisscross one another in different historical periods and constellations, in a cosmic cycle of injustice and atonement. Of the six narrative strands, two are set in the future, one in twenty-second-century Korea, the other in twenty-seventh-century Hawaii. In a familiar pattern, it is once again an Asian country that is chosen as the setting for the nearer future. The film predicts that in the twenty-second century the epicenter of hyper-technologization will have moved on from Japan and China to Korea. The narrative takes place in Neo Seoul, a megacity that has emerged in place of today's Seoul, which at that point has disappeared below sea level. The Korean peninsula has become a post-human totalitarian state in which corpocracy has completely replaced democracy.

The heroine of this narrative is the female replicant Sonmi-451, played by South Korean actress Doona Bae, who has been genomed for the sole purpose of working as a server in a global fast-food chain. In a society organized strictly according to corporate interests, it is no longer race, but the naturalness of conception that is the main basis for discrimination, with a clear separation between clones and so-called pure bloods. Sonmi's life is that of a slave; the mantra of her existence is "Honor thy customer." But she starts questioning her situation, and is eventually freed by members of the resistance. In the book, the resistance turns out to be sponsored by the state as an instrument for perpetuating the exploitative system, in a twist that is strongly reminiscent of George Orwell's *1984* (published in 1949). But the movie takes a more positive perspective. Here, the rebels are part of a genuine revolutionary movement fighting for the rights of clones. Their uprising is ultimately crushed by the government. But before being arrested and executed, Sonmi is able to broadcast a manifesto that reiterates spiritual humanist values in defiance of soulless materialism and exploitation. Later on, in the story set in twenty-seventh-century Hawaii, we learn that Sonmi is worshipped as a nebulous goddess. By then, humanity has reverted to a preindustrial stage of tribal communities dominated by superstitious beliefs.[10]

In *Cloud Atlas*, the depiction of Asia and Asians is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, it is an Asian protagonist in an unmistakably Asian visual setting who speaks for the whole of humanity. She personifies the

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[10] As Oliver Lindner has suggested, the choice of Hawaii as the setting for the final narrative is in itself significant in that it represents a literal as well as symbolic middle ground between Asia and the West: "Hawaii, which is situated between East Asia and the United States as the most powerful representative of the West, links the first and final narrative, the past and the future" (366).

universal struggle for human dignity and right to self-determination. The underlying message is once again that future Asia, this time represented by Korea, may be the most fertile breeding ground for an inhumane totalitarian order. But at the same time, it is suggested that it is exactly in the frictions and tensions of this order that a new and better system may be forged, and a better future may arise. All this can be interpreted as a positive take on the old trope of Asian difference.

On the other hand, the film keeps relying on a subtext of conventional Asian stereotypes. For example, in a globalized world, the clones are invariably Asian, a racial uniformity that implicitly appeals to the old Western notion of all Asians looking and acting alike. The motif of sameness is further layered in the film. When the clones solemnly march towards Elysium (where they believe they will be rewarded with a leisurely life after completing their time of service, but are in fact killed to be made into food for the new generation of clones), the camera sweeps over a crowd made up of identically styled Asian women, with some of the actors' faces being duplicated throughout the crowd. In another scene, Sonmi encounters her doppelgänger in a prostitute on the streets of Neo Seoul. This is an allusion to the stereotypical images of women as either goddesses or whores, but it also serves to reinforce the idea of interchangeability in a world where bodies have become mere commodities. Thus, Asian features are used here as a visual code for sameness and loss of individuality.

As mentioned earlier, *Cloud Atlas* specifically came under fire for casting white actors in "yellow-face makeup." In the movie, the concept of the transmigration of souls is expressed by the same actors wearing makeup that represents them as members of different races, with white actors being turned into Asian, Hispanic, or Black characters, and vice versa. Given that this kind of transformation occurred throughout the film in all directions and actually helped stress the arbitrariness of race and the fluidity of cultural identities, the controversy seems misplaced at least in this particular case, but maybe not so with other recent productions. For example, the 2017 Hollywood adaptation of the Japanese cult classic *Ghost in the Shell* met with criticism for featuring Scarlett Johansson in the main role. The obvious commercial reasons for casting a Hollywood star aside, one may indeed question why – in a film that otherwise remained very close to the style of the original anime and meticulously adopted its Japanese setting – the one salient "adjustment" was the race of the protagonist, Major, and of other leading roles such as Major's sidekick Batou and her main antagonist Kuze. The fact that the only two characters inhabiting a synthetic body,

namely Major and Kuze (Michael Pitt), are both given decidedly Caucasian features even though they are meant to operate in an Asian metropolis, uncomfortably harkens back to the all-white replicants in *Blade Runner*. Once more, the implication seems to be that, if only they had the option, Asian people would surely prefer being Caucasian. In this respect, *Ghost in the Shell* is symptomatic of cyberpunk's recycling of the Asian trope without critically reassessing and challenging it. As Paul Walker-Emig has observed, "[c]yberpunk's stasis leaves little room to map the emerging nationalisms, fascisms, political populisms and revitalised leftist movements seeking to challenge political and economic orthodoxy." This criticism also applies to cyberpunk's coding of race: because the genre keeps relying on Asia as the emblem of the futuristic and the unfamiliar, it is inevitably stuck with casting Asian cultures and peoples as the Other. In this way, Asian actors and cultural tokens remain mere props for the white lead.

Incidentally, this was one of the main criticisms directed at Denis Villeneuve's highly anticipated 2017 release *Blade Runner 2049*, which was attacked for lacking Asian lead characters despite recreating the Orientalized urban landscape of Scott's original. However, here I would like to offer a somewhat different perspective on this artistic choice within the greater context of the genre's history: although many fans of the 1982 movie were disappointed by the sequel and the film underperformed commercially, *Blade Runner 2049* made a great leap towards rejuvenating the stagnant genre by deepening and updating the themes of its predecessor. Set thirty years later, it tells the story of the replicant K, played by Ryan Gosling, who works as a blade runner for the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). In his private life, he tries to find some fulfillment with his holographic artificial-intelligence (AI) girlfriend Joi, a mass product made by the Wallace Corporation that has taken over from the Tyrell Corporation as the main supplier of humanoids. After K happens upon the remains of a female replicant who turns out to be Rachel (Deckard's love interest from the first film), it is established that she has died in childbirth. Because the discovery that replicants can reproduce threatens the social status quo, K is ordered to find and kill Rachel's child to suppress this politically explosive information. But in the course of his mission, he comes to believe that he himself may be the son of Rachel and Deckard. Like Deckard's, K's concept of self is fundamentally shaken, albeit in the reverse direction, as he has to come to terms with the notion that he may not be an android but a human being.

The film thus continues to address the timeless question of what makes us human by further elaborating on the relationship between biology and technology, between virtual and physical reality. At the same time, it moves away from the fascination with cyberspace and puts more emphasis on environmental issues, introducing new moods, topics, and imagery that are more representative of present-day concerns. For example, scenes at the remote protein farm, Deckard's hideout in the dustbowl version of Las Vegas, or the giant junkyard depict environments that are no longer associated with the corrosive forces of an Asia-centered hypercapitalism, but with global climate change.

Although the sequel thus breaks new thematic ground, it is also quasi obligated to provide a continuation of Scott's version not only with regard to its subject matter, but also visually. And so the Asian neon signs are still present, as are the chaotically teeming public settings. But the giant holographic ads now prominently feature a Russian ballerina, and the crowds on the streets look more racially diverse. Also, Los Angeles is no longer pictured as a futuristic babel of constant miscommunication. In a scene where a group of prostitutes approaches K on the street, one of them addresses the others in Finnish and is immediately understood. This is a display of a casual internationalism that has nothing more to do with the notion of an Asian invasion.

Granted, when viewed against the background of the original, the complete absence of Asian leading roles is conspicuous. After all, given the demography of three decades earlier, one would expect to find Asian people in all areas of public life, including science and the police force. But while the film may fail to directly challenge the racial stereotypes of its precursor, it does so indirectly by way of artistic omission: by conspicuously *not* having Asian actors figuring prominently in the plot, Villeneuve is starting to walk away from the trope of Asians as being inextricably linked to a dystopian future. Not that this is the most that can be done to face the complex issues of racism, colonialism, imperialism, and representation in Western cultural production. But it may be a first step toward escaping the fossilized formulas of race handed down from the 1980s.

In conclusion, the representation of Asia and Asians in Western cyberpunk movies remains highly ambivalent. On the one hand, a noticeable shift has occurred: after a peak of Yellow-Peril sentiments in the form of techno-orientalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the connotations of Asia have become more neutral, and eventually even distinctly positive. On the other hand, despite the subsiding of collective

fears over a "high-tech yellow threat," the dystopian forecasts of cyberpunk cinema keep relying on the trope of Asia as the arcane and profoundly separate Other. Thus, Asia keeps being construed – for better or for worse – as a dynamic symbol of the future, but at the same time as static, monolithic, and impenetrable.

As a symptom of this enduring sense of division, the interest in distinct Asian cultures has remained surprisingly underdeveloped, notwithstanding the allure that Asia always had for the cyberpunk genre. Even as Western attention has shifted to individual Asian countries in parallel to changes in the political power balance, Asia has remained an undifferentiated and unexplored conglomerate of Otherness to large parts of the Western cyberpunk audience. It therefore seems as if the cyberpunk imagination is not so much captured by any distinctive culture of a specific Asian country as it is by the abstract, wholesale idea of "Asianness," which is vague and normative at the same time. This is tantamount to a futurist Orientalism that habitually plays on well-established Western prejudices of Asian countries as human factories and of Asian people as a subaltern workforce of non-individuals – a quasi alien life form that has developed apart from Western ideals, but exactly for this reason may be much better adapted to survive the rough times to come.

There have been some efforts to shed this pattern, but the genre still has a long way to go in dismantling the racial paradigms that have become such an ingrained part of its visual and conceptual vocabulary. Whether cyberpunk will continue to give productive impulses for the critique and analysis of the dynamics of a global society will in large part depend on how successful it is in innovating its treatment of race.

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