Asian futures, without Asians
by Astria Suparak

I've prevented countless,
terrible futures.

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"If the war is the continuation of politics by other means, then media images are the continuation of war by other means. Immersed in the machinery, part of the special effect, no critical distance."
—*Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) by Trinh T. Minh-ha

What does it mean when so many white filmmakers envision futures inflected by Asian culture, but devoid of actual Asian people?

Innumerable sci-fi worldings show us non-Asians decked out in cheongsams, commanding in offices garnished with katanas, and retiring to homes decorated with Buddha heads and Shiva figurines. Speculative cityscapes are punctuated with prominent signage in Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, and Korean. American-made dystopias lean into current tropes yoking ethnicity to socioeconomic status, like the high-tech Japanese megalopolis, seedy Chinatown, or Indian slum. Despite all of these signifiers, the central characters are not Asian—if there are any Asians existing at all in these imagined worlds. Asian cultures are cleaved cleanly from their complex histories and rich meanings, decontextualized, mixed sloppily with signs of other Asian cultures, and used to undergird and embellish an environment for white protagonists to inhabit without its progenitors. This current of Orientalism fossilizes Asian cultures as ancient and static, in spite of the advanced timeline.

The majority of these movies and television shows were produced after US restrictions on Asian immigrants were eased in 1965, after the Vietnam War (or the American War, as it's known in Vietnam), and after and during the US's involvement in myriad conflicts in Southeast and West Asia. They are continuously churned out today. These fabrications replicate white Western anxieties about Asia, Asians, and Asian Americans, and reinforce well-trodden stereotypes shaped by American imperialism in Asian countries.

Without living and thriving Asians in these futures, without Asian voices in front of and behind the camera, we are left with several questions: Is this proclivity an extension of undue white confidence in mastering another culture's knowledge and skills, and the white privilege to strip it for parts? Are these texts prognosticating that Asian hairstyles, dress, food, technologies, architecture, arts, customs, languages, wisdom, beliefs, and philosophies will

become that quotidian or that deeply integrated into white culture? Or, if these are forecasts of a cultural melting pot or salad bowl, why are the leads and inhabitants almost entirely white? Sixty percent of the current global population is Asian. Are these films prophesying that this majority will be forcibly sterilized or crossbred until all traces of Asian physical features disappear? Or is this a manifestation of white people's fears of being colonized (physically or economically), enslaved, trafficked, reeducated, and bred (that is, being subject to what they have wrought on so many Brown and Black populations)? If yes, then this reveals another white fantasy: having the fortitude to not only fight off, but to *obliterate* their Asian colonizers, while inexplicably conserving the colonizer's aesthetic and lifestyle. These are predictions of Asian genocide, where the white victors choose to dress in the fashion of their supposed oppressors, retain rather than topple Asian religious effigies, and rehearse Asian artforms.

Following are excerpts from a typology of Asian futures without Asians, as visualized by white filmmakers over the last four decades.

"Asian" is a term that can, and has, included people whose ethnic origins are from East Asia, Southeast Asia, Pacific Islands, South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia (which overlaps with the Eurocentric terms "Middle East" and "Near East"). The subsequent examples reflect white Western sci-fi's fixation on East Asia and the genre's penchant for conflating various ethnic groups into a fungible Asianness.

Even in an Asian future we'll have to clip and anglicize our names.

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Note: [2] The character of Obi-Wan Kenobi (a.k.a. "Ben"), played by a white British actor in *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977), was based on a role performed by Toshirō Mifune in Akira Kurosawa's film *The Hidden Fortress* (1958). Mifune declined director George Lucas's offer of the Jedi Master role. Lucas apparently could not conceive of another Asian actor or character in his heavily populated story, even though he and his team drew again and again from Japanese culture, such as clothing design, hairstyles, armor, and fighting style (and in later films, from Bedouin, Chinese, Korean, and Mongolian traditions).

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Obi-Wan Kenobi. I wonder if he means old Ben Kenobi.

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Related tropes: Non-Asian characters with unexplained Asian names (one of the laziest efforts towards diversity, sometimes under the guise of "color-blind casting," oftentimes the result of whitewashing).

Chopsticks

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Asian recipes will be preserved centuries into the future, still prepared by anonymous Asians ossified in working-class positions, while non-East Asians evolve to use chopsticks.

Racist stereotypes fusing ethnicity and class status will be maintained: Noodles and rice are eaten by commoners in impoverished Chinatowns. Sushi is indulged by the wealthy.

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Note: [3] *Blade Runner* (1982). The griminess of science fiction's Chinatown-like neighborhoods is routinely exacerbated by staged rain and nighttime darkness.

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Related tropes: Traditional tea sets, typically Chinese, Japanese, or Turkish; street vendors with hanging food presented as weird, gross, and savage.

Kimonos, Kinda?

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Asian as a costume, a temporary skin, a vacation. An eccentricity, a means of self-discovery, and an indication of rank.

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Notes: [7] In *Demolition Man* (1993), Asian of any kind is employed to signify emasculated, neutered, passive, and pleasureless. The city's white leader exclusively dresses in kimono-like gowns; the police force, not trained for combat, is outfitted in mandarin collared uniforms; and extras wear robes and head coverings evocative of Japanese, Muslim, and Southwest Asian/ North African styles. The white male hero goes on a date in some bastardized version of a cheongsam, which results in unfulfilling and nonorgasmic (for him) sex. The other white male hero explains that the new society is "run by a bunch of robed sissies." All of the movie's main characters rail against this peaceful society of the future.

[20] Kamar-Taj is an invented Asian mystical arts monastery in *Doctor Strange* (2016), where an arrogant white American foreigner parachutes in to improve himself by extracting local wisdom. He quickly becomes the favorite pupil of his whitewashed mentor, despite being the least impressive in class. In short time, he's promoted to the position of Master and entrusted with the crucial responsibility of protecting the Earth.

Doctor Strange is a paragon of white exceptionalism, failing upward and over the entire school of sorcerers and mystics who've been in training much longer than him.

[22] In many sci-fi tales created by white people, race is a temporary skin to take on and off at will, divorced from cultural heritage and lived experience.

In *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) and *Altered Carbon* (season 1, 2018), we are told that Asian consciousness has been transferred into white bodies. We might get brief flashbacks of the characters when they used to be Asian, but it is the white actors and white faces that star in the films and TV shows, that have more screen time, that are given depth of character, that merit audience sympathy, that are allowed to love and be loved. The Asianness is just transitory; a curious backstory.

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Related tropes: Other traditional garments worn straight off the rack or altered (repeatedly in mini-dress form), especially the Chinese qipao

and tangzhuang, South Asian kurta and sari, Buddhist monastic robes, Muslim fashion such as niqab and burqa (seen fleetingly on background actors); headdresses (particularly turbans, rice paddy hats, kufi); hairstyles including chopsticks in hair (a foul apathy or inability to distinguish eating utensils from kanzashi), "Geisha" hair, odango hair.

Asian as setting, veneer, texture.

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Notes: [9] Chinese red paper lanterns are used by white directors and production designers to mark a zone of illicit and debaucherous activities, where thugs and sex workers ply their trade, where black market offerings are available for the right price with zero guarantees, and/or an area whose crowded residents are uniformly presented as impoverished, filthy, and expendable. These areas have names like "Paradise Alley" in *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (2017), "Rouge City" in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), and "The Colony" in *Total Recall* (2012)—dubbed "New Shanghai" in an earlier script.

[14] "Designating skin, designating texture" chirps the smart home device in *Cloud Atlas* (2012), which also sums up the movie in which prosthetics and makeup were applied in an attempt to alter the actors' races. No less than ten white actors were hired to play multiple roles and races each, but only one significant role was given to an Asian actor (Bae Doona). This huge disparity in hiring is in defiance of the movie's settings and their lengthy histories (and presents) with Asians, Moriori, and Pacific Islanders: Seoul, San Francisco, Hawaii, and other Pacific Islands.

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Related tropes: The "bazaar aesthetic" (termed by Monique Jones); paper parasols; river boats, floating markets; other Asian latticework such as Arabic and West Asian/North African mashrabiya, Indo-Islamic jaali.

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[IMITATING MARTIAL ARTS YELL]

8b

Entire knowledge bases and skill sets will be quickly absorbed—isolated from their deep histories and cultural specificity—through brain implants, downloads, or speed-reading. Martial arts will be instantaneously mastered without years of training, practice, or exertion.

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Notes: [8] The eponymous *Fifth Element* (1997) declared "the perfect being" (and predictably in the form of a white woman) learns all the martial arts by speed-reading the internet. She is only compelled to imitate the "martial arts yell."

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Related tropes: The brandishing and showcasing of various Asian weapons, primarily the Japanese katana, West Asian scimitar, Nepali khukuri, Filipino arnis sticks, shuriken (a.k.a. "ninja stars"), staff, and pole.

Background Buddhas

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Background Buddhas as simulacra of spirituality and easily obtainable enlightenment.

Ancient Asian artifacts will be cared for, regardless of whether actual Asians are.

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Notes: [7] Offices of evil masterminds frequently include medieval Asian armor and weapons as ornaments. In place of a weapon, the white archvillain in *Demolition Man* (1993) has a jade figurine of a reclining Buddha on his desk.
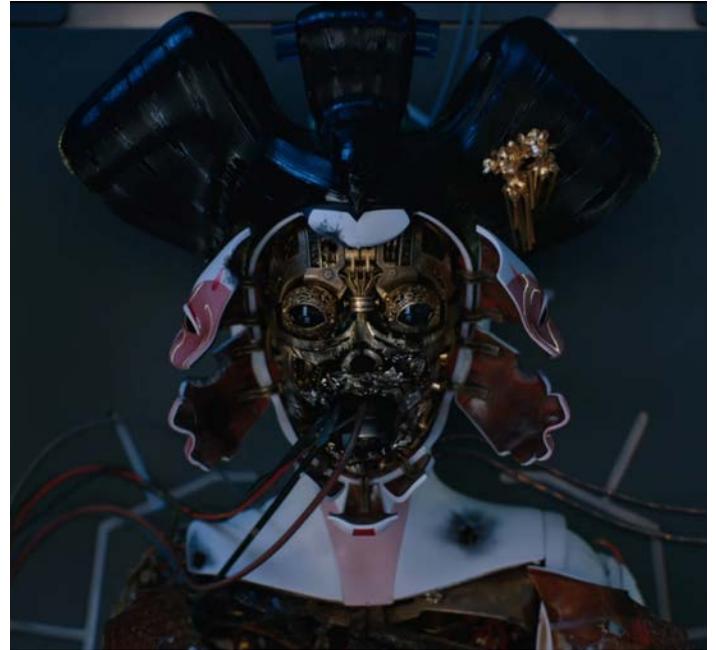
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Related tropes: Bonsai trees; dragons; koi fish; lotus flowers.

American-Made Geisha

The American-made geisha of white fantasies and fears: decorative, servile, and inscrutable on the outside, inhuman and foreign on the inside, never to be truly trusted.

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Notes: [18] This is an android named Kyoko, built to be a languageless Japanese servant in sexual slavery in *Ex Machina* (2014). Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno) and a second Asian woman robot named Jade (Gana Bayarsaikhan) are used like tools by the white female android Ava to escape from their male captor.

Kyoko is struck down by their jailor while protecting Ava. Instead of resuscitating her ally, Ava steps over Kyoko's body and then strips Jade for parts. Now corporeally complete and presentable to the public, Ava shuts the door on Jade. This is a perfect metaphor for white feminism.

[22] Three white people gaze upon the inert body of a geisha robot on an operating table in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017). The conversation: "She was a Hanka companion bot." "What was on her drives?" "Nothing. The data was destroyed as it was transmitted. No sign of what she was up to." [Camera zooms in between the robot's naked legs, looking squarely at her crotch.] "The hardware was vandalized." "They ripped her up!"

"They could have left traps in her. Mag pulses, viruses." "It's too dangerous."

The violent rape of a subhuman Asian body— no, a vessel—is implied. She is spoiled goods. She is a vagina dentata. And she is a fundamental threat to the sympathetic white characters.

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Related tropes: Crowds of Asian women acting in unison in the background, like school girls or groupies; Asian women sex workers, and the refusal to understand the difference between a sex worker and a geisha (formally trained entertainers in traditional arts such as music, dance, and conversation).

Giant Geisha Ads

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If you neglected to cast Asian people in your movie, don't worry—you can fix it later in CGI. Fill the screen with outsized, empty, muted Asians. In neon, hologram, video, projected, whatever.

If the default figure in the advertisements of your fantasy city is Asian, tell me again why your central characters, all their current and past love interests, all their friends, and the wealthy and powerful classes are decidedly *not* Asian? Surely your characters aren't rebelling against an Asian standard of beauty, as the script includes appraisals of the centered white bodies as "perfect," "beautiful," and rated as "10"s. Are they (you) adherents of racial purity and only choosing to interact with a white minority? Or is the charade of a diverse and multiracial future in these films as flimsy as the holograms?

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Notes: [9] In contrast to the voiceless Asian robots of the previous section, the white robots in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) are written as cloyingly sympathetic: David, the naïve boy

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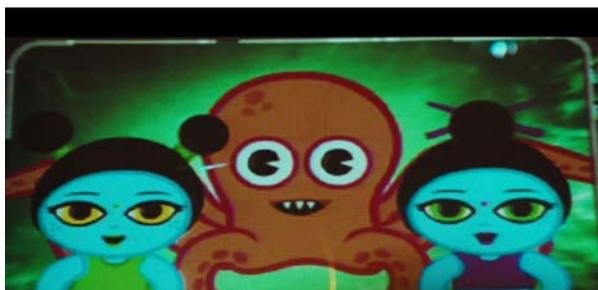
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who just wants to be loved; the charming gigolo who takes David under his wing; the nanny who comforts the boy regardless of her impending doom; and an assortment of fragile old men bots pleading for their lives. In this world, the universal child designed for all parents is a white boy. White robots can have more humanity than real humans, so many sci-fi stories tell us. But Asian robots as imagined by white filmmakers are usually not afforded that possibility.

[3] One of the most iconic scenes in cyberpunk and tech-noir is of an uncredited Alexis Rhee, a Korean American, playing a Japanese geisha in an advertisement in *Blade Runner* (1982). This film was made during Japan's economic boom and technological revolution of the 1980s, when America feared Japan would take its number one spot in the world economy.

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Related tropes: Blurry, background Asian actors who don't get speaking roles but are used to make the location look "diverse" or "Asian" or "future"; tropical island Asians to imply an "exotic" locale.

Guy eating rice.

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Filmography

1. *Flash Gordon: Perils From Planet Mongo* (1966). Edited down by King Features Syndicate from *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe* (1940). Directors: Ford Beebe, Ray Taylor. Based on the comic strip of the same name (1934) by Alex Raymond.
2. *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977). Director, writer: George Lucas.
3. *Blade Runner* (1982). Director: Ridley Scott. Based on the novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) by Philip K. Dick.
4. *Return of the Jedi* (1983). Director: Richard Marquand. Story by George Lucas.
5. *Brazil* (1985). Director, co-writer: Terry Gilliam.
6. *Total Recall* (1990). Director: Paul Verhoeven. Based on the short story "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale" (1966) by Philip K. Dick.
7. *Demolition Man* (1993). Director: Marco Brambilla.
8. *The Fifth Element* (1997). Director, writer: Luc Besson.
9. *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001). Director: Steven Spielberg. Based on the short story "Supertoys Last All Summer Long" (1969) by Brian Aldiss.
10. *Equilibrium* (2002). Director, writer: Kurt Wimmer.
11. *Minority Report* (2002). Director: Steven Spielberg. Based on the short story "The Minority Report" (1956) by Philip K. Dick.
12. *Serenity* (2005). Director, writer: Joss Whedon. Based on the TV series *Firefly* (2002) by Whedon.
13. *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007). Director: Russell Mulcahy. Based on the video game of the same name (1996) by Shinji Mikami, Tokuro Fujiwara.
14. *Cloud Atlas* (2012). Directors: Tom Tykwer, Lana Wachowski, Lilly Wachowski. Based on the novel of the same name (2004) by David Mitchell.
15. *Looper* (2012). Director, writer: Rian Johnson.
16. *Total Recall* (2012). Director: Len Wiseman. Based on the film of the same name (1990).
17. *Her* (2013). Director, writer: Spike Jonze.
18. *Ex Machina* (2014). Director, writer: Alex Garland.
19. *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014). Director: James Gunn. Based on Marvel comics of the same name (1969) by Andy Lanning, Dan Abnett.
20. *Doctor Strange* (2016). Director: Scott Derrickson. Based on the Marvel comics

character of the same name by Stan Lee, Steve Ditko.

21 *Blade Runner 2049* (2017). Director: Denis Villeneuve. Based on characters from the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) by Philip K. Dick.

22 *Ghost in the Shell* (2017). Director: Rupert Sanders. Based on the manga series *Mobile Armored Riot Police* (1989) by Shirow Masamune.

23 *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* (2017). Director: Luc Besson. Based on the comic book series *Valerian and Laureline* (1967) by Pierre Christin, Jean-Claude Mézières.

24 *Altered Carbon* (season 1, 2018). Creator: Laeta Kalogridis. Based on the novel of the same name (2002) by Richard K. Morgan.

25 *Mortal Engines* (2018). Director: Christian Rivers. Based on the novel of the same name (2001) by Philip Reeve.

26 *Alita: Battle Angel* (2019). Director: Robert Rodriguez. Based on the manga series *Gunnm* (1990) by Yukito Kishiro.

27 *Black Mirror* ("Striking Vipers" episode) (2019). Director: Owen Harris. Creator, writer: Charlie Brooker.