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Techno-Orientalism in Science Fiction: A Resistant Reading of *Ex Machina*

By Samantha Schoeman

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Abstract

Techno-Orientalism is a prominent issue in science fiction media. It perpetuates and propagates negative stereotypes about Asians across a broad audience, tangibly affecting and shaping society's perceptions. This research focuses on challenging and resisting the dominant portrayal of Asians in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015). I interrogate *Ex Machina* in a way that centres the female Asian character, Kyoko, using methods of resistant readings and implementing the 'oppositional gaze' strategy put forth by bell hooks. My analysis shows how the cinematic apparatus of the film constructs the problematic techno-Orientalist stereotypes, and how viewers can use an oppositional gaze, cyborg theory, and feminist film theory in a resistant reading. In reading the film against the grain, I found that the spectatorial experience changes, allowing for the emergence of different pleasures and compensations not offered through traditional looking relations between film and viewer. I argue that these strategies empower the marginalised characters, affording spectators of the film to glean different and more defiant impressions without detaching from the film's canon. I further suggest that resistant readings and employment of the oppositional gaze offer an opportunity for more diverse voices and opinions to document and share their critiques and experiences with problematic media representation. This opens the door for further discourse challenging harmful, stereotypical characterisations, thereby growing the field of film studies.

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

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For Por Por

Chapter 1: Introduction

Media and Representation

Media representation affects society, shaping perceptions of how people engage with the media and how they interact with each other. Examples of this repeat themselves throughout history, with trends in media mimicking the social climate of the time. A recent case is evident in the COVID-19 pandemic. In late 2019, doctors in China began seeing an increase in patients complaining of breathing difficulties. Within a month, scientists declared this to be a novel Coronavirus originating in Wuhan, China. The virus spread quickly across the country and to the rest of the globe. News outlets deemed the virus highly contagious, with the daily number of infected people increasing exponentially. By March of 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially labelled COVID-19 as a pandemic, and nations closed their borders, hoping to slow the spread of the virus and preserve lives with shelter-in-place orders.

The first known case in South Africa was diagnosed on 3 March 2020. However, panic about contracting the virus had plagued local communities for some time before then. With the virus' Chinese origins, instances of xenophobia and racism began to increase. The virus itself was often referred to as the 'Chinese virus' or the 'Kung-flu.' People in Johannesburg avoided going to Chinatown for fear of infection by association, and businesses soon began closing. In addition to frequent mentions of China in the news and other media, the influences of negative representations manifested in other, more insidious ways. Popular streaming sites began suggesting films on pandemics and viral outbreaks, juxtaposed with documentaries on Chinese wet markets, which created subtle connections between the virus and China. This is only one of many examples of media influence affecting society's perceptions of racial groups. Negative ideas and stereotypes like this are contagious; they

spread and evolve like a virus, exacerbating mass hysteria and paranoia, which often results in people responding maliciously out of irrational fear. As a Chinese-South African witnessing the spread of news and rumours, I wondered about the implications of the general trend of thought that China—and by extension, all Chinese, or even all Asian people—were responsible for COVID-19. Furthermore, I wondered how people who look like me would be treated with the surge of racist discourse on social media platforms. I begin my thesis with this anecdote to illustrate the realities of how media representation affects society's perceptions and how society, in turn, influences media representation. Foucault (Hall 42-3) attributes this idea to discourse. Discourse concerns itself with the effects of representation and language on society and the production and subsequent allocation of power and knowledge, which further affects the practices surrounding representation and language.

Media Representation, Orientalism, and Techno-Orientalism

Negative portrayals of China throughout the pandemic are particularly troubling when one considers that problematic representations of Asians are not new. A perceived threat from the Far East has existed since the late 1800s (Vié 9), and representations of these people as dangerous or 'other' has often led to violent outcomes. For example, following the attack on Pearl Harbor during World War II, anxiety about a Japanese military takeover gradually evolved into fear of an economic takeover. The rise of Japan as a technological powerhouse was broadcast through radio and television, reinforcing insecurities among American workers. Sony Media, a Japanese company, had infiltrated Hollywood, and the American automotive industry was in decline due to the popularity of Japanese cars (Morely and Robins 139). Tensions rose, and in 1982, Chinese-American Vincent Chin was beaten to death by two white men in Detroit (Roh, Huang, and Niu 22). Although Chin did not work in the automobile industry, nor was he Japanese, he embodied the men's anxiety because of his Asian features. Racist conflation and ignorance of cultures compelled these men to unleash

their frustrations on anyone resembling the threat to their jobs and livelihoods (Roh, Hung, and Niu 22). By exaggerating the dangers of Japanese power, the media propagated fear and suspicion, which resulted in senseless violence. It not only affected people's behaviour towards Asians at the time, but it also reinforced trends in the problematic representation of Asians.

The concepts of the 'yellow peril' or 'threat-from-the-far-east' and the stereotype of Asians as machinelike and emotionless are expressions of a social phenomenon called Orientalism. Put simply, Orientalism is the distinction between and separation of East (the Orient) and West (the Occident), which allowed the West as a dominant media power to author and misrepresent the Orient (Said 2). From literature to video games, media has historically driven stereotypical Orientalist ideas by bombarding audiences with images of Asian women elaborately dressed as concubines and cruel, cold, and scheming Asian men. Whether it is the exoticised images of Kuchuk Hanem in Gustave Flaubert's *Salammbo* (1862), stereotypical portrayals in Disney's *Aladdin* (1992), or the Yellow Peril formula of Dr. Fu Manchu and the Dragon Lady (Crum 40), these representations of Asians are disconcerting and, as mentioned, have had lasting consequences.

Orientalism exists in all genres and types of media, but it is particularly prominent in science fiction. Science fiction is a unique genre in that it reflects societal trends and perceptions of the time with its own layer of commentary. The prominence of science fiction in popular culture means that particular Orientalist depictions and representations encoded in the genre are wide-reaching and influential. With the rise in popularity of science fiction media and technological development across the globe, Orientalism has since expanded to include what is termed 'techno-Orientalism.' This is a particular imagining of Asia and Asians in a paradoxical relationship with technology. On the one hand, Asian cyborgs and Tokyo-esque futuristic cities dominate the science fiction and cyberpunk aesthetic. On the

other hand, these environments relegate Asian people to positions of servitude, persecution, or complete erasure. This contradictory nature of Asian representation in science fiction media is at the foreground of contemporary conversations around race and representation within Asian studies as well as more general scholarship (Nishime; Sue, et al.). The modern demarcation of techno-Orientalism has expanded the framework for analysing these representations and led me to challenge modes of Asian representation within science fiction media.

Media Representation, Techno-Orientalism, and Science Fiction

Issues in science fiction transcend their texts and even the genre itself. In doing so, they raise questions about relationships between types of cultural theories and their respective interdependence with film practices, texts, society, spectators, and social formations. Films such as *Metropolis* (1927), *Alien* (1979), and *Blade Runner* (1982) have been extensively analysed by film critics and scholars for their social value. The cultural instrumentality of these films marks them as cornerstones of the genre, defining how science fiction speaks to and about societal attitudes. Although these seminal works may seem fairly modern, the forty-year period from 1980 to 2020 marked a significant increase in the production of science fiction films, especially cyborg films. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, 'contemporary' will refer to films produced within the last two decades—in other words, films produced from 2000 to 2022. The more recent film, *Ex Machina* (2015), written and directed by Alex Garland, is said to be a successor to *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner* in its treatment of the evolution of technology and AI as well as its exploration of consciousness, gender, and sexuality (Magistrale).

Along with mainstream media, science fiction has become much more progressive, depicting a variety of lifestyles, relationships, and gender identities. However, Orientalism persists even in film and television that is considered progressive and thoughtful. For

example, when I first watched an episode of the television series *The Expanse* (2015), I related to the character of Julie Mau, played by Thai actress Florence Faivre. I gravitated toward the young, Asian woman and was under the impression that she was a significant character in the series. Therefore, I was greatly disappointed when Julie Mau went missing and was later found dead, naked, and mutilated by an alien species (Figure 1). The grotesque display of her corpse, abject in its ambiguity, made my skin crawl in a manner unusual for me. I had seen a character that resembled me, and I identified strongly with her, which made the othered portrayal of Julie Mau more disturbing and very personal. Other Asian women featured throughout the series, but when none of these characters lived beyond an episode, I wondered why all the Asian women had to die.



Figure 1: S01E09 - Julie Mau is discovered dead and infected by the protomolecule.

It is endlessly frustrating to identify with a character only to have them violently killed off or represented in a way that is unsettling to the self. Problematic representations deny viewers of the pleasure and escapism of cinema because it can be almost painful to engage. Furthermore, given the media's ability to influence society's ideologies, I am greatly concerned about Asian women being portrayed as hypersexualised and/or expendable, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. On an individual level, I feel the turbulence of identifying with fictional characters; the representation of Asia and Asians is often inaccurate and inadequate, leaving me feeling sexualised, objectified, marginalised, and vulnerable. On a social level, I fear the potentially violent and even fatal consequences of false perceptions shaped by the media.

I had already been interested in representation when I saw *The Expanse*, but feeling so closely connected to the material caused me to reflect more concretely on the consequences of media portrayals. When a person's only experience with a particular demographic is through media, they are likely to absorb the prevalent stereotypes and then apply their misperceptions to real people. Thus, I began to ponder the relationship and subjectivity of spectators to a text in the hope of untangling representation, looking relations, and media discourse. My position as a spectator (i.e., my engagement with *The Expanse* based on my current experiential context) situates me in relation to the narrative and the characters within the series. Through the semiotic coding, portrayal, and communication of ideas, characters, and narrative, my relationship and identification with *The Expanse* and Julie Mau were informed by power dynamics that circulate in media and within the gaze[1]. Ultimately, the linguistic, cultural, and behavioural practices surrounding the production of this media affected my spectatorial experience, and I began to more actively analyse cultural representation in works of science fiction.

The Case Study: *Ex Machina*

Soon after my experience with *The Expanse*, I saw the independent science fiction film, *Ex Machina* (2015). The film features four main cast members: Kyoko, Nathan, Ava, and Caleb, as well as several others that play the roles of Nathan's decommissioned androids. The story follows Caleb, a young male programmer who works for Blue Book, a large technology corporation and search engine, roughly synonymous to today's Google or Meta. Caleb is selected to help Blue Book's CEO and founder, Nathan Bateman, a tech prodigy who lives in isolation in his research facility with his housemaid Kyoko. Nathan tasks Caleb with interacting with his latest Artificial Intelligence model, Ava, to test her ability to think

[1] The gaze, as described by Jean-Paul Sartre, is a way of perceiving others, groups, and the self (Sartre 254).

and behave like a human. During their interactions, Caleb begins to develop feelings for Ava. These feelings culminate in his betrayal of Nathan in order to help Ava escape so she will not be deactivated (ostensibly, being killed). Nathan then alleges that the true test was whether Ava was intelligent and capable enough to manipulate Caleb into doing so. After Caleb rewrites the access codes, which allows Ava to escape during a scheduled power cut, Ava, with the help and sacrifice of Kyoko, kills Nathan. Ava leaves Caleb trapped in Nathan's room after acquiring new skin and clothing, and she escapes the research facility to enter the world, passing as a human. The film's portrayal of Kyoko, Ava, and the other AI models makes for a suitable study of female Asian representation, especially in light of the interconnectedness of representation, public opinion, and science fiction discourse.

Ex Machina received both critical acclaim and audience praise for its interrogation of the relationship between humans and AI and its philosophical questioning of humanity and sexuality. *Ex Machina* won the Academy Award for best achievement in visual effects and won best sci-fi/horror movie at the Critic's Choice Awards (IMDB). Additionally, it was nominated for the best original screenplay Academy Award and it received nominations for the BAFTA Award for Best British Film and the Hugo award for Best Dramatic Presentation (IMDB). The film scored an average of 8.10/10 on Rotten Tomatoes and 78/100 on Metacritic, demonstrating a generally favourable opinion within the populations that viewed the film. These achievements indicate the film's value and its significant contribution to popular culture. As a popular and distinguished film, *Ex Machina* warrants analysis by scholars in film and science fiction studies.

Unfortunately, despite the film's progressive narrative, I found that it reinforces many of the same techno-Orientalist stereotypes of its predecessors, especially concerning its depiction of female Asian bodies as cyborgs. Cyborg films tend to reinforce sexist norms about female characters, and *Ex Machina* has left many critics questioning whether the film

reiterates the same misogyny observed in cyborg films or if it is a triumphant, feminist tale (Seaman-Grant 38). Scholars Elisabetta Di Minco, Sennah Yee, and LeiLani Nishime have offered criticism contrasting with the positive discussions around the film's clever ways of addressing gender and AI. However, although these scholars have interrogated the techno-Orientalism within the film, their critiques lie mainly with the results of various cinematic choices. I believe these interrogations can further resist stereotypes and reinterpret the meaning embedded in the film's imagery. Media discourse, of which science fiction is a part, cannot simply be written off as texts without consequences. Texts and their cultural imaginaries[2] have real-world implications at both the micro and macro levels, and scholarship has a responsibility not just to analyse texts, but to offer practical means of course-correcting when a situation could be harmful.

Research Aim and Structure

As we move further into the future, and the relationship of Asian and Western countries changes, it is essential to consider the subjective representation of both cultures in modern media. When left uninterrogated, Orientalism and techno-Orientalism become normalised within and through popular media. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta a. Niu established the need for critical examinations of techno-Orientalism in academia when they said, "despite techno-Orientalism's growing prevalence in the Western cultural consciousness, and in science fiction more specifically, it has been generally ignored in academic and popular cultural spheres" (7). Given the potential social consequences of representation, I believe we need to address the continued stereotypical portrayal of Asians in media.

[2] Cultural imaginaries, in this instance, refer to the ideas and potentials portrayed in, elicited by, and contributed to discourses.

With this research, I aim to challenge and offer resistance to the techno-Orientalist stereotypes in science fiction cinema. Studies into the social phenomenon of techno-Orientalism and its discourse allow for the critiquing and challenging of the effects of this representation. It is necessary to document the history and pervasiveness of Asian stereotypes in media in order to analyse, challenge, and subvert these stereotypical perceptions and representations of Asians in science fiction media. The purpose of this research, therefore, is first, to illustrate the techno-Orientalism and sexist tropes present in the film *Ex Machina* (2015), and then seek to resist and subvert these representations through the employment of bell hooks' visionary theories of oppositional reading. An oppositional reading is a reading whereby the reader understands the dominant and preferred reading of a text but rejects this reading in favour of one that is alternative to the hegemonic message (Hall). Although I am not making a film, nor constructing any new media, I use the ideas of Hall and hooks to refuse the gendered and racialized readings constructed by the film. This lens allows me to see the film in a way that centres the female Asian character. By treating the female Asian character as the protagonist of her own story and as an active agent in the narrative, I can shift away from reading the character in a subordinate role. This strategy allows for different kinds of pleasures and compensations[3], but is not entirely detached from the canon of the primary text. I use this strategy not only to empower the character, but also myself as a viewer, who has to identify with her fate and is subject to the representations and meaning thereof.

By looking at the construction of techno-Orientalist tropes and then resisting them, not only do I problematise the representations, but I also offer a way to challenge them. One

[3] There is a different kind of pleasure that arises from interrogating the gaze and identification, or lack thereof, with characters other than the heteronormative white male. These pleasures act as a compensation to the othering and disappointment generated from having to identify or engage with the white male gaze when the subject's self is represented as other.

of my contributions to the field is, therefore, elucidating some of the mechanisms behind the perpetuation of techno-Orientalist stereotypes. Moreover, by reading *Ex Machina* in a way that centres the Asian character, and using my subjective position as a South African, female, Asian viewer, I offer a reading of this popular text that is contrary to the stereotyping default, and this process shifts my looking relation as a spectator and my understanding of the narrative. In demonstrating this, I hope to create an avenue whereby other scholars can challenge harmful representations of marginalised groups. I encourage future scholars to voice concerns and critiques that go beyond initial interrogations of a source and grow the field in a way that does not fall into the trap of self-Orientalism[4] and erasure.

Following this introductory chapter, I structured my thesis in two parts. Part 1, which comprises chapter two, introduces the main ideas and information about the text's relevant context. I offer an overview of some of the fields engaged in this research as well as the relevance of science fiction to the research. Following this is a contextualization and literature review of techno-Orientalism where I define and discuss a brief history of the field and its development. I explain Cyborg theory, looking at some of the connections between techno-Orientalism and the figure of the cyborg. I then introduce looking subjectivities and discuss theories related to resistant readings, the oppositional gaze, and spectatorship. Finally, I dive into bell hooks' ideas on the oppositional gaze and how this constructs the framework for my analysis to follow.

Part two of this thesis focuses on an analysis of *Ex Machina* and my resistant reading thereof. Chapter 3.1, the film analysis, covers the dominant reading of the film as a whole and some of the critiques it has received from other scholars. In Chapter 3.2, I analyse the cinematic construction of Kyoko's techno-Orientalist stereotypes within the film, and then I

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[4] Self-Orientalism is the representation of the self or other Asians through Orientalist discourse by Asians (Sohn).

provide my interpretation of the preferred[5] reading. I use this interpretation to contrast with my resistant reading in Chapter 3.3, where I revisit particular scenes in the case study and explore them through various lenses explained in the analysis. I address the problematic tropes and, using methods of resistant reading and the oppositional gaze, reinterpret the scene in a way that nullifies the constructions of the techno-Orientalist stereotypes.

In my conclusion, I synthesise the main arguments of this research and how I sought to contribute to the field by addressing issues in science fiction media relating to Asian women.

[5] The 'preferred' or 'dominant' reading is the general interpretation of a film accepted by the audience and intended by the creator in the processes of encoding and decoding media representation.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

In order to fully understand the context of this research, readers need a thorough understanding of several concepts, such as science fiction, techno-Orientalism, the cyborg, and relations within spectatorship, particularly because these facets are interrelated in nuanced and sometimes convoluted ways. For example, techno-Orientalism is a social phenomenon that manifests frequently within science fiction media. Science fiction media has a strong influence on pop-culture and an inherent ability to shape ideas about the future by reflecting and commenting on the social climate of the time. This speaks to its integration in the discourse of media, society, knowledge, and power. Within science fiction, the cyborg is a prevalent and yet ambiguous figure that fits into many techno-Orientalist stereotypes while at the same time offering a lens of resistance and disruption. Cyborg theory is an interesting tool for untangling problematic representations because of its unapologetically contradictory existence and paradoxical symbolism. Finally, spectatorship informs how a viewer will interpret this complex web of motifs and stereotypes, while itself being a partial by-product of pop-culture influence. To help readers understand each individual thread of thought as well as how they are woven together in contemporary film, I will explain the background for the necessary concepts and contextualise them and their value within the research.

Science Fiction Cinema

> Science fiction is a metaphor. What sets it apart from older forms of fiction seems to be its use of new metaphors, drawn from certain great dominants of our contemporary life—science, all the sciences, and technology, and the relativistic and the historical

> outlook, among them. Space travel is one of these metaphors; so is an alternative society, an alternative biology; the future is another. The future, in fiction, is a metaphor (le Guin 1976).

Science fiction is a popular genre with a large following. Its contribution to contemporary culture is immense, garnering attention from fan communities and blogs as well as editorials, academic books, and journals. Across the media of literature, film, and video games, science fiction tickles the imaginations of its audience with exciting predictions of the future accompanied by commentary on various societal trends and their potential consequences. The history of science fiction is vast, and any literature review on its historical context omit many facets the genre has to offer (Bould and Vint X). To begin, the term 'science fiction' is attributed to Hugo Gernsback and it began to gain traction in the 1930s through American pulp magazines. However, elements particular to science fiction were present in literature long before then, including in works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and in stories from as far back as Ancient Greece (Luckhurst 15).

The nature and identity of science fiction is blurry and difficult to define. Whilst there are some recognisable conventions, over time, the overlap between science fiction, fantasy, horror, and a plethora of subgenres has dissolved many of these distinctions. Thus, definitions of science fiction have moved away from debates on plot, setting, and icons "towards formal characteristics and the political potential of the genre to imagine the world otherwise" (Bould and Vint 1). Keith Johnston posits three possible definitions for science fiction in various contexts. In an academic context, science fiction generally refers to a genre that focuses on specific thematic areas, such as science and technology, the future, and 'the other.' In a more mainstream context, science fiction may be defined by the presence of particular iconographies, such as spaceships, cyborgs, and ray guns. An artist or creator may define science fiction through a more industrial perspective—one that focuses on spectacle and

representational conventions (Johnston 7). Debates within science fiction discourse, from its definition and characteristics to the philosophies it promotes, are ever-changing with time and technological progression, and such developments make it difficult to discuss science fiction within singular contexts.

In spite of its relatively fluid definition, science fiction has always reflected the current societal and historical climate, offering a representation of the present through the lens of a projected future (Kellner 298). Science fiction writer, Ursula Le Guin, writes in her introduction to *The Left Hand of Darkness,* "Science fiction is often described, and even defined, as extrapolative. The science fiction writer is supposed to take a trend or phenomenon of the here-and-now, purify and intensify it for dramatic effect, and extend it into the future." The predictive and reflective quality of science fiction and its relationship to cultural and technological dynamics assumes science fiction as a form of social criticism. With technology developing at an increasingly rapid rate, and science fiction inspiring many of these innovations, critics have wondered how science fiction will continue to "influence society's political and social agenda" (Easton and Schroeder 2). The emphasis on social interdependence within debates around the genre illustrates the value and influence that science fiction has within not only popular culture, but also within various spheres of technology and society.

It is clear that science fiction films have an effect on society, influencing the behaviours and perceptions of viewers. Science fiction engages within the broader systems of cultural meaning, enacting and producing ideologies. Therefore, in terms of a definition, what science fiction 'does' is more important than what it 'is.' Science fiction's notable contribution to popular culture is a prime example of 'cultural instrumentality' (Kuhn 1). Cultural instrumentality refers to how the media influences societal perceptions and how those societal perceptions influence future media production. In her book *Alien Zone,* Annette

Kuhn suggests that science fiction's cultural instrumentality is five-fold. She terms these aspects reflections, ideologies, repressions, spectators, and intertexts. These facets of cultural instrumentality speak to science fiction's abilities to reflect societal trends and attitudes; engage with, produce, and maintain ideologies; voice cultural repressions at an unconscious, textual level; elicit particular responses from its spectators through cinematic apparatus and annunciation[6]; and they also indicate that science fiction is part of an interconnected network of texts and discursive formations. These five aspects of cultural instrumentality link back to discourse and illustrate how science fiction is part of a representational and cultural practice that is influenced by and can influence societal perceptions. More specifically, they demonstrate how film and the genre weave and interact with discourses such as techno-Orientalism, allowing for a critique of these discourses and representations through an analysis of these five aspects, among other analyses of cinematic annunciation and apparatus.

It should be noted that Kuhn's theories are not a proponent of the Effects Model of Media Studies and that the context within which I work using Cultural Instrumentality as a lens speaks more to Stuart Hall's ideas of representation and discourse[7].

Techno-Orientalism

Edward Said began a significant cultural discussion in 1978 with his book *Orientalism*. Said's main argument was that Western portrayals of Eastern culture constructed and reinforced a political ideology of the Orient as a means of subjugating and controlling it (3). This ideology was based on the distinction between East and West through

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[6] Cinematic apparatus and annunciation refer to the components that make up the machine of cinema: the codes, technologies, conventions, expectations, technology, as well as the structures and systems that comprise the institution that is cinema (Kuhn 4).

[7] In his chapter *The Work of Representation*, Hall discusses Michel Foucault's work on discourse, and knowledge and power. This discursive model for looking at representation as discourse, more so than language, allowed for studies into how knowledge and power became solidified in discourse, affecting representational practices and engendering certain discourses as 'truths' through reinforcement and propagation – to put it reductively (Hall 28).

the articulation of Western experience, thus othering the Orient through misrepresentation (1-20). As Europe exotified and romanticised the East, it established and reinforced the Occident's superiority. Said calls Orientalism a construction of reality embedded within institutional structures and representation, from politics and the military to literature and cinema (6-12). Because discourse affects beliefs and influences the conduct of people within society, even a false ideology can engender representations that gain acceptance as 'truth,' which is how Orientalism managed to reinforce its own existence.

As time progressed, instances of Orientalism evolved to encompass developments of technology in regard to the dynamics between the Orient and the Occident. Techno-Orientalism expands Edward Said's discursive framework by looking at how the West reconciled its understanding of technology as cutting-edge with its various biased opinions of the East. Kevin Morley and David Robins coined the term 'techno-Orientalism' to describe 'the problem of Japan,' which encompassed Western anxiety and awe at the growth of Japan's technological and economic prowess after World War II (155-59). Scholars later expanded the definition of techno-Orientalism to include various forms of premodern-hypermodern visions of Asia and Asians. Kumiko Sato describes it as "a term used to signify the recent, especially the 1980s, phenomenon in the US that Oriental images of Japan manifest in two contrary stereotypes, which are, the premodern traditionalism (geisha, samurai, etc.) and the supremacy of high-technology" (335). David Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta Niu refined this definition to: "the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hyper-technological terms in cultural productions and political discourse" (2). For this research, I use techno-Orientalism to refer to the above definitions, including other aspects of traditional Orientalism that lead to the stereotypical representations of Asians within media and depict them as "other" in contrast to Western values and norms.

The West has a long literary history of exoticising Asian, and Westerners often regard Eastern civilisations as advanced in ways that are both valuable and mysterious. However, despite this fascination, Western media still regularly depicts Asian people as backwards and uncivilised. The increased economic and technological strength of Eastern countries caused great anxiety for the West, which resulted in depictions of dystopian futures with high cityscapes modelled after Tokyo and Hong Kong. In spite of a robust Asian presence in much of Western science fiction media, Asian characters themselves were either absent or incompetent and incapable of harnessing their own technological innovations. In most cases, Asians needed Western assistance to utilise the technology they had developed, or they were unable to use their technology because a Western protagonist thwarted their plans for destruction (Roh, Huang, and Niu 1).

One of the earliest inceptions of this contradictory techno-Orientalist representation occurred in 1912 with Saz Rohmer's introduction of the character, Dr. Fu Manchu (Roh, Huang, and Niu 1). Fu Manchu is the embodiment of the dualistic contradiction that portrays Asians as resourceful, cunning, and capable of using Western technology against the Western subject, but also arrested in tradition and mysticism that renders them technologically backwards (Roh, Huang, and Niu 1). These trends of representing the East as modern-but-backwards permeate contemporary science fiction media through characters like Khan from *Star Trek* (1982) and The Mandarin from *Iron Man* (1964). Even recent films, such as Disney's *Aladdin* (1992), portray the East as a vast, mysterious land filled with wonders, but also run by barbaric peoples. These modern examples illustrate the continued need to interrogate representational practices in media creation.

The alterity of Asian bodies in the imaginings of the future reproduces Said's theories and feeds into the broader discourse of science fiction's pop cultural influence. Previously in the context of Orientalism, the East had merely been a foil for the West to assert its own

superiority. Techno-Orientalism further expands the conceptual, temporal, and geographical scope of Said's theories. By bringing to light the multi-dimensionality of techno-Orientalist patterns, later scholars have been able to interrogate the East/West binary as well as the reappropriation of hegemonic influence in Asian representation. Whilst Said explains that Orientalism removes agency from the East (6 - 20), Roh, Huang, and Niu examine how the Asian subject has taken back their agency through the reappropriation of Western science fiction tropes in Asian science fiction media. Thus, the concept of techno-Orientalism encompasses the bidirectional discourse constituted and enabled by globalisation and the flow of trade, capital, and intellectual property from one hemisphere to the other.

Techno-Orientalist Stereotypes

The emotionless and robotic Asian

As techno-Orientalism evolved, the image of the Asian cyborg emerged as one of the more interesting incarnations of technological duality. With historical roots dating back to the 19th century, the Asian cyborg is one of many representations linked to the stereotype of the robotic Asian. This trope portrays Asians as mechanical in their mannerisms and behaviour, encouraging notions of the 'emotionless and inscrutable Asian,' and perpetuates the perception of Asians as a 'model minority'. In this section, I will attempt to explain the origins of these stereotypes and how they compound with one another to propagate negative attitudes towards Asians.

Although Westerners of many countries have discriminated against Asian populations in a variety of ways over the years, the influx of Chinese immigrants to the United States in the early 1800s sparked many of the stereotypes of Asians as both sub- and super-human that still exist today. When news of the California Gold Rush spread across the world, men from China travelled in droves to try their luck at becoming wealthy, a prospect all but impossible in their home country. Seeing these men as a potential threat to their own chances of

obtaining riches, Americans legislated barriers to Chinese immigration, such as denying citizenship and levying heavier taxes on Chinese wages. Seemingly undeterred, and due to their lack of financial security, Chinese workers became a mainstay of cheap labour in the US. Not only did they supply significant work in mines and on farms, they are largely responsible for, although not always credited with, completing the majority of construction on the Western transcontinental railroad. When the booming economy began to regulate back down toward the norm, Americans again began to worry about maintaining their standard of living. They believed that inexpensive and plentiful labour would undercut their own wages, and so they sought a means of codifying existing discrimination. In 1880, Congress proposed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which, when signed into law, significantly reduced Chinese immigration. Citing the well-documented dedication of Asian workers even in harsh conditions over the preceding 50 years, proponents of this act argued that "the Chinese labourer could withstand physical deprivations that American and European labourers could not" (Roh, Huang, and Niu 11). From this point until the act was finally overturned in the 1940s, only wealthy, highly educated, or politically affiliated individuals from China and other Asian countries could travel freely in and out of the United States. Any already established labourers either returned to China without hope of American re-entry, or they remained in the US without rights of citizenship, meaning they could only work menial labour positions. Thus, prejudice and fear in conjunction with historical events established Asians as an inexhaustible, interchangeable workforce in the US, and subsequent laws ensured that they were permanently relegated to jobs that treated them like machine parts in the assembly line rather than humans with rights and a full range of emotional experience.

Whether warranted or not, imagery of machine-like workers along a conveyor belt set the stage for the Asian cyborg. Another contributing factor to the dehumanizing of this group may lie in cultural differences in facial expressions. Westerners generally regard Asians as

stoic and emotionless, an image of the inscrutable Asian that traces back to physiognomic discourses in the nineteenth-century that categorised racial expressions. These texts labelled Chinese, Japanese, and Malay people as being in a group exhibiting 'apathetic expression,' with "Europeans as the sole group under 'intelligent expression'" (Montegazza 232; Wong 42). This lack of visible emotion coupled with prevailing attitudes at the time were likely contributors to Gustave Flaubert's (1853) exoticised misrepresentation of Kuchuk Hannem when he wrote, "The Oriental woman is a machine, and nothing more" (Steegmuller). By denying their humanity, Western powers were able to preserve Asians as a force of labour to exploit (Nakamura). Asian people were useful for the fulfilment of Western ideals and as tools for the progression of Western modernity, but their status as objects meant that Asians were "expendable technology" (Roh, Huang, and Niu).

Unfortunately, although laws have changed and many countries now prohibit overt discrimination against anyone because of their race, the link between Asians and robotic machinery continues to filter into modern media and entertainment. In the 70s, German techno-pop band "Kraftwerk" was one of the first groups to popularise electronic music. One element of their success was a unique aesthetic where they performed in matching suits and used machine-like gestures. Kraftwerk modelled their choreography after Japanese businessmen in Europe, and they used it to effectively enhance the robotic aspect of their music (Ueno 95). In more recent years, evidence of techno-Orientalism has emerged in the objectification of Asian gamers, as discussed by Choe and Kim. Like the Chinese workers in 19th century US, Asian videogame players often act as in-game labourers for Western gamers to exploit (Nakamura). Similar expressions of techno-Orientalism have become such an accepted aspect of society that they persist even in a generation that has begun to call out objectifying behaviour towards other groups.

The model minority

The image of Asians as a robotic labour force bleeds into several other stereotypes, including that of the model minority. This stereotype implies a stratified racial hierarchy. Asians are 'outsiders' and are therefore inferior to a predominantly white Western culture. However, because of their hard work, obedience, and tendency to assimilate, Asians maintain a superiority to other races that have historically been less compliant (Mok 192). For example, black populations have often resisted the violence enacted on them by Western powers, and so they hold a lower status in the racial pecking order. Asians are comparatively obedient and disciplined under Western hegemony, which allows them to succeed within Western structures and institutions despite their foreignness. This racial hierarchy is further evident in medical sciences with biotechnology and the "designing" of babies. Advances in assisted reproductive technology have revealed a stark contrast between the demand for Asian and black genetics. Prospective parents are much more likely to seek out Asian DNA for its assumed "genius" traits of the model minority while generally avoiding "blackness" (Huh 102). Because popular media often depicts Asian characters as intelligent, meek, subservient, and reserved, it reinforces societal beliefs about the relative value of Asian people. Of secondary benefit to Western powers is that perpetuating the model minority stereotype creates tensions between marginalised minority groups, which keeps them divided.

An interesting facet of the model minority stereotype is its close relation to the concept of 'yellow peril' (Kawai). Yellow peril is the moniker for the West's fear of domination by an Asian race. The fact that model minority Asians can succeed within Western norms poses a significant threat to many Western people who fear losing their authority. Thus, the model minority stereotype is in many ways "a complimentary, benign image of the yellow peril" (Kawai 110). This is called the model minority-yellow peril

dialectic. It determines Asians to be tolerable for their obedience but requiring subjugation, lest they succeed too well and outperform their Western counterparts.

The geisha girl

When they feel threatened by the yellow peril, many Western thought leaders resort to using pervasive stereotypes to objectify people with Asian heritage. Stuart Hall defines objectification as a strategy that usually results in dehumanising the target population, leaving them vulnerable to inferior treatment, particularly in the work force. Objectification can also lead to more pernicious forms of othering, such as sexualisation and fetishization, which reduces humans to bodies that exist only for the sexual gratification of those in power. In the 1950s, the geisha came to embody the quintessential Oriental woman as the epitome of the "demure Asian women serving the white man" domestically and sexually (Paner 14). "The image began with the depictions of Japanese as 'Lotus blossoms,' whose only desire was to selflessly cater to the whims of men […] in special ways" (Wu 12). While American women were pushing for independence and equality in the wake of their contributions during World War II, Japanese women appeared to "cater to the needs of men, often white US Servicemen, by washing their backs, giving them massages, or, ultimately, sacrificing their lives to keep the men happy" (Mok 191). These misrepresentations were enhanced "by tales told by US servicemen returning from overseas, with stories about the sexual know-how and selfless pampering Asian women willingly provided" (Mok 191). This image of the geisha coupled with Flaubert's machine-like Oriental woman merged with other techno-Orientalist stereotypes and aptly transformed into the hypersexualised Asian Cyborg.

It is worth noting the degree to which Orientalist and techno-Orientalist stereotypes overlap; often there is no clear defining line between the tropes in terms of the behaviour and consequences of representation. When analysing the stereotypes and their manifestations in film, I found it difficult to fully separate one construct from another. In the case of the geisha

girl motif, I observed that their meek subservience to Western men could also qualify them for the category of the model minority. The availability of sex dovetails with the trope of hypersexualising Asian women and the perception of Asian women as commodities or tools, which further coincides with both their objectification and portrayal as robotic. My attempt to separate these representations for the purposes of a more straightforward analysis should not undercut the complexity of Asian representation and discourse, especially in light of clear thematic entanglement. If anything, the endeavour to simplify these concepts begs the more profound question of whether certain images can or should be separated from their associated tropes and the potential consequences of doing so. I explore this question to some degree later in my analysis. Despite separating these classifications into discrete boxes, I think that the more significant concern lies in the treatment of these characters and the effect of this commentary on society's perceptions of Asian women.

Resisting Techno-Orientalist Stereotypes

Although the Asian Cyborg, or Japanoid, depicts Japanese people as emotionless and mechanical, reinforcing their objectification, Ueno argues that through the employment of cyborg feminism, Japanese media has changed the narrative outcome. By embracing the tropes of the Japanoid and Japan as an automated culture, Japanese creators subverted the immediate, negative implications of techno-Orientalism as well as the Western gaze. Similarly, Sato discusses the contradictory presentation of Japan's "advancement and backwardness, or exotic primitivism conjoined with high-tech supremacy." She argues that Japan's adaptations of cyborg philosophy and cyberpunk have utilized the Japanese principle of *Nihonjinron*[8] (uniqueness) to effectively sustain an illusion of simultaneous progression

[8] Nihonjinron translates to "theory of Japanese people." It is the name of the non-fiction genre in Japanese literature that explores what it means to be Japanese from the Japanese perspective. Japanese people have a long history of establishing a unique identity by setting themselves apart from the rest of the world. This need for self-distinction became more pronounced with globalisation and the proliferation of Western ideals.

and traditionalism through technology. For example, in cyberpunk, Japanese lettering and cities modelled after Tokyo accompany images of cyborgian geisha. These representations preserve the sense of Japanese traditional culture while depicting a future where Japan is part of the modernised world through and because of their technological development. In constructing their own narrative through the lens of *Nihonjinron*, Japanese authors reframe the contradictory duality of techno-Orientalism as a harmonious and positive blend of a culturally traditional, but still technologically advanced, Japan. However, whilst this particular interpretation of the Japanoid features prominently in Japanese literature, it has yet to breach Western media where the image of the Asian cyborg is often limited to more Orientalist representations.

In some instances, critics have asserted that *Nihonjinron* themes in Japanese cyberpunk are examples of self-Orientalism[9] where Asian countries themselves disseminate Orientalist prejudice against other geographical and socio-political contexts (Sohn). Such readings look beyond the East-West binary and weaken the conflation of all of Asia as the primary site for projected anxieties. While the problem of Orientalism still exists in this case, it serves as a reminder that Asia is a large continent with many different countries and cultures. Self-Orientalism is a facet of Orientalism that requires its own interrogations. Western practices are not the only forms of representation, and representation within and among Asian countries, is a vital component of this discourse, especially in the current climate of globalisation where more people than ever have access to multicultural media.

Speculative fiction provides an effective platform for problematising and challenging Western hegemonies (Bahng; Allan; Precup). There is an opportunity for the critical reappropriation of techno-Orientalist tropes in science fiction texts that would self-

[9] Self-Orientalism occurs when an Asian country seeks to elevate itself above other Asian countries through the othering of all external geographical and socio-political contexts.

referentially engage with the globally accepted image of Asians whilst still contesting the dehumanising effects of techno-Orientalism. By looking at critiques of American science fiction works alongside critiques of Asian American literature, authors and scholars can reconfigure the alien/Asian connection (Sohn). This reinforces the assertion that techno-Orientalism is not unilinear as presented in Said's Orientalism, and that one should also consider counter-discourses when analysing techno-Orientalism. These arguments advocate for the increase of Eastern countries constructing their own narratives, especially as equal contributors in a global society. To ignore Asian self-representation would effectively deny agency to the East, precisely as Said proposed in his contextualisation of Orientalism. In doing this, Westerners would propagate the very issues that I wish to address with this thesis in an ironic, but rather appropriate, demonstration of the creation and circulation of knowledge and discourse.

One final caveat when engaging in discourse on the East is to keep in mind both the diversity of cultures within Asian countries as well as the tendency for Western schools of thought to ignore this diversity. Although certain tropes frequently pertain to a single sub-culture, these stereotypes can still end up blanketed across Asian people in general. For example, even though the geisha girl stereotype stems primarily from portrayals of Japanese women, it is often applied to all Asian women, regardless of nationality. Similarly, the model minority stereotype surfaced from depictions of Chinese people, but scholars have since used it to characterise Japanese and Korean people as well. Thus, it is necessary to bear in mind the generalising consequences and the specific othering that occurs within these techno-Orientalist stereotypes to avoid further misrepresentation of Asian people via universally implemented constructs.

With cultural and informational capital and exchange steadily progressing, there exists an equally consistent need for the critique and interrogation of Orientalism and techno-

Orientalism. The discourse expands and evolves in conjunction with the constant development of technology and shifting global power dynamics. For much of recent history, the perpetuation of Asian stereotypes has shaped the societal perceptions that feed into the construction and preservation of techno-Orientalism. Only through critical observation and analysis can we hope to challenge and dismantle these problematic Asian misrepresentations.

Cyborg Theory

To illustrate how techno-Orientalism pervades science fiction media, I turn to examples of the cyborg in film. *Blade Runner* (1982), a seminal work by Ridley Scott that has heavily influenced contemporary science fiction, established an immutable association between cyborgs and labour forces. The film's cyborgs, known as replicants, function as workers on foreign planets where conditions are too extreme for humans to work. Replicants are built to withstand these demanding conditions, and work tirelessly, but they are denied the same rights as humans despite their efforts. Humans created these cyborgs to be tools for the progression of human civilisation without regard to the replicants' sentience. Although the cyborgs in *Blade Runner* are not specifically Asian, they represent the dehumanisation and objectification of a working class in a world riddled with Asian iconography. Building upon the foundation set by *Blade Runner*, *Cloud Atlas* (2012), directed by Lilly and Lana Wachowski and Tom Tykwer demonstrates the racialisation of cyborgs, termed fabricants in this film. From the procession of fabricants through a factory to their daily routines as servers at the Papa Song diner, the film's imagery reinforces the premise that fabricants are programmed machinery—except, of course, that all fabricants in the film are Asian women. This portrayal is one of many examples in science fiction media that perpetuate the idea that Asians are mechanical in their work ethic, programmable, and then compliant in executing their duties, thereby justifying their expendability at dysfunction or obsolescence. In some

ways, the 'exaltation[10]' of fabricants is not so much a recycling as it is a genocide, just as 'retirement[11]' was a euphemism for the eradication of the replicants in *Blade Runner*.

The image of the cyborg occurs frequently within both the spheres of science fiction and techno-Orientalism and it often sparks debate. It has typified varying levels of roboticism, othering, objectification, and hypersexualisation, but it also acts as a means of interrogating cultural and social binaries. Cyborgs exist in a liminal space as constructions and representations of fiction and lived experiences, just as they are fusions of biology and technology. Ultimately, they are other, unable to belong wholly to any one group. However, the cyborg's existence within the liminal space of these constructions allows them to surmount and, therefore, destabilise the boundaries that attempt to confine it. Using cyborg feminism as a lens for analysing science fiction media, the cyborg transforms from a victim of oppression and subjugation to a vanguard of potential disruption (Haraway; Nozaki). Given the parallels between female Asian representation in science fiction and portrayals of the cyborg, cyborg theory offers an interesting means of reading, re-imagining, resisting and potentially rewriting the dynamics and relations propagated through its representations.

To conceptualize this further, I will expand on the two prevailing readings of the cyborg. The first is as a representation of the fusion of biology and technology— "human being and an electronic or mechanical apparatus" (Balsamo 11). In this reading, "the boundary between the material body and the artificial machine is surgically redrawn" and "located within the body itself" (Balsamo 11). The second reading treats the cyborg as an identity that transgresses the cultural/technological and biological/natural binaries that would consign the cyborg to persecution and othering.

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[10] In *Cloud Atlas*, when a fabricant reaches the end of its shelf life, they undergo a ritual called 'exaltation.' This is presented to the fabricants as an ascension to a much-anticipated next level. However, exaltation is a euphemism for being recycled into produce to feed still functioning fabricants.

[11] In *Blade Runner*, the extermination of replicants is labelled as 'retirement' to avoid controversies around replicant rights and the inhumane treatment they experience.

As figure

The inception of the cyborg as a fusion of biology and technology has become a mainstay in science fiction films, and while their contexts may vary, the cyborg figure has come to represent certain generalisable ideas. Films as early as *Metropolis* (1927) through to today's *Westworld* (2016-present) television series have featured cyborgs as central figures, embodying the relationship between humans and technology (Seaman-Grant). Cyborgs in science fiction exist as questions about human potential; they are statements of 'what if' that speculate about a future where technology has advanced so far that humans could live forever. However, although cyborgs are symbols of the highest technological advancement, they often force questions about agency and control.

In most cases, science fiction media marks cyborgs with biomechanical implants in flesh and other signs of hybridity, or they appear as machines living in a human skin. The replicants in *Blade Runner* had no immediate identifiers of their cyborg nature. However, we knew they were 'other' based on their circumstances, persecution, and status in society. *Blade Runner* was most profound in provoking questions about what it means to be human, sparking debates about agency and human rights, the boundaries of property, and constructing identity. Tony Magistrale asserts that *Blade Runner*, the "prototypical locus" for AI films, posed questions that many films have yet to answer:

> What does it mean to be human? Do all life forms have a right to self-determination, free will, and dignity? Should cyborgs be considered gendered or raced? As robotics and artificial intelligence grow more acculturated, what changes occur to the relationship between human androids and humans themselves? Are androids the exclusive "property" of those who construct them, and do their human creators possess the right to treat them like any other machine—to exploit and ultimately to destroy them? When does humanly engineered intelligence exhibit enough humanoid

> traits that it transcends mere machine and can be considered sentient, even sovereign, as it ventures toward becoming "more human than human," to cite the tagline from *Blade Runner*? (259)

These questions often arise in response to science fiction's portrayals of worlds that have seemingly already answered them. One common interpretation positions the cyborg as a monster—frightening and dangerous because of its differences, but also desirable because of its potential. In these films, the cyborg characters are subject to bigotry and violence at the hands of the 'real' humans. In *Blade Runner*, replicants are a threat to the human race because of their superior intelligence and physicality. Concerned about the replicants' ability to develop human emotions, their creators programmed into them a safety mechanism which gave them a four-year life span. The Tyrell Corporation endeavoured to create cyborgs that were "more human than human," but were ultimately too afraid of the potential consequences, and so took away their right to life and existence as anything other than sentient machinery. When the replicants fight for the right to be treated as human, they are executed, although the Tyrell Corporation labels this as 'retirement' rather than 'eradication,' suggesting they are aware that the killing of replicants could, in fact, be considered genocide. This indicates that replicants were 'alive' enough for their extinction to be considered immoral, but not human enough for it to be contested as inhumane.

Another common role in film, particularly for female cyborgs, is to serve as sexual objects created solely for their male creators. This plays out in characters such as *Blade Runner*'s Pris, who was a "basic pleasure model," and the fabricants in *Cloud Atlas* (2012). One of these, Sonmi-516, regularly experiences sexual harassment from customers at Papa Song, and another, Yoona-292, is often raped after hours by the Seer of the restaurant. In Yoona's case, these incidents are treated as fulfilling her duties to the Charter. Constant

hypersexualisation in the media normalises this treatment of cyborgs who, although fictional, are stand-ins for Asian women or other marginalised communities.

Sonmi's escape, and even Yuna's deviation from the Charter, result in their executions. Sonmi becomes the embodiment of the resistance, a cyborg as the symbolic image of the struggle against the powers of Neo Seoul. Sonmi's entire narrative is about surviving persecution and leading a resistance, but she is still subjugated in the end. At this point, as an audience member, I couldn't help but question what constitutes humanity and what it means that the powers to grant this coveted label so often lie with the heterosexual white male. These power structures reflect the dynamics that exist in modern society; they are the direct result of colonisation, patriarchy, and white supremacy (Nishime). In science fiction, cyborgs are considered other to humans, and it is white men who wield the power to draw the line between those who deserve human rights and those who do not. This is, in essence, a depiction of the very real othering of women and people of colour. These marginalised communities endure lower standards of living, and when they fight for equal treatment, they are answered with violence and punishment. The positioning of cyborg women as sex objects is a long-standing trope in science fiction that reflects society's sexist, patriarchal, and misogynistic tendencies, as well as the physical, sexual, and systemic violence directed at othered populations.

As concept

Although the cyborg motif carries with it an implied othering and objectification, it also provides its own means of escaping subjugation. This brings us to the second reading of the cyborg, which is as "the identity of organisms embedded in a cybernetic information system" (Balsamo 11), where "the boundary between the body and technology is socially inscribed" (Balsamo 11). In this way, the cyborg is both an image and a concept—an object and a metaphor. On one hand, we have the physicality of the cyborg, the mechanics of

technology fused with organic matter, and on the other hand exists the treatment and experience of cyborgs as representations of lived experience and social reality. This dualistic nature allows for reading cyborg subject as "hybrids of nature (organism, animal, and/or human) and culture (science, technology, and/or machinery)" (Nozaki 617).

The cyborg has become an important symbol in many aspects of both technology and culture. Certain social sciences, including feminist theory, have begun to use the cyborg as a tool for understanding the world and its incoherently systematic and systemic inequality. The hybridity of the cyborg blurs the boundary between binaries in reality and fiction and therefore acts as a vehicle for radical political disruption (Moser and Law). In her publication, *A Cyborg Manifesto,* Donna Haraway reimagines boundaries and feminine identities through the concept of the cyborg. She defines the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (5). She argues that by mapping our social and bodily realities onto the cyborg, we can use the cyborg's ambiguous nature to engage in the border war that is "Western" science and politics. Haraway outlines three main dichotomies in her argument: animal vs. human, which speaks to biological determinism; organism vs. machine, which addresses technological determinism; and physical vs. non-physical, which debates the relative value of ideology and materialism. The breaching of these boundaries allows room for the radical contestation of the existence of the boundaries and divisive labels in the first place. Haraway argues that by straddling boundaries, the cyborg introduces a paradigm beyond traditional binaries (8). Furthermore, the cyborg offers an extension and rejection of the limitations of essentialist identities. Through her treatment of cyborgs in science fiction, Harraway's cyborg offers a means of deconstructing the ideologies that actively oppress the 'other.'

Another scholar, Anne Balsamo, expounds upon this concept, stating that "cyborgs are a product of fears and desires that run deep within our cultural imaginary," and that

"through the use of technology as the means or context for human hybridisation, cyborgs come to represent unfamiliar 'otherness,' one that challenges the denotative stability of human identity" (32). Balsamo then utilises the cyborg to comment on the female body, deconstructing the technologies that mark female bodies as naturally female and technologically other. Yoshiko Nozaki takes Harraway's use of the cyborg to deconstruct discourse and applies it to representations of women of colour. Nozaki concludes that the image of the cyborg offers a useful alternative in considering issues of diversity. In both instances, the cyborg offered a productive lens for analysing the discourses surrounding the representation of particular identities outside of the white, western male. A cyborg identity sheds binary ideologies imposed by Western and patriarchal hegemonies. By virtue of the cyborg's hybridity, it is both human and machine, nature and culture, which leads to its paradoxically simultaneous inclusion and exclusion. In this sense, the existence of a hybrid destabilises categorical delineations, creating avenues for critique and further possibility for radical change in discourses of representation.

Using Haraway's argument, Takayuki Tatsumi created a framework specifically for the Japanese cyborg. He describes the Japanoid as a new identity that transgresses "the boundary between the Japanese and the non-Japanese, and in so doing, naturalis[es] the very act of transgression" (16). He considers the Japanoid to be an invisible identity "specific to the post-hegemonic globalist age," whereby both the Orient and the Occident can enjoy the chaotic negotiations of the stereotypes of the other. The cyborg's status situates it in a position of subjugation and persecution, which both precipitate and then justify the cyborg's resistance. Its ability to cross boundaries allows the cyborg to disrupt the logic used to oppress it and structure a new identity that is both collectively and individually unique. Because of its place in science fiction and its relationship with technology, culture, and nature, the trope of the Asian cyborg quite literally establishes a link between the fictional

cyborg and real-world techno-Orientalism. Finally, this interpretation means that the Asian cyborg connotes more than the robotic, objectified, and hypersexualised figure conventionally portrayed in media because the very qualification for its othering enables its escape from that othering.

Film Theories

Spectatorship

Before moving on, I would like to contextualise some of the film theories I refer to later in my analysis. The first principle I wish to establish is spectatorship and the relative positioning of subject and viewer. Spectatorship examines the relationship between cinema and audience under the assumption that films elicit emotions in their spectators (Kuhn; Mayne). The explicit division between subject and viewer stems from debates within spectatorship that contest the differentiation and conflation of the two. In attempting to define the construct of identity in film, scholars have argued over subjectivity, which blends presented content with ideas of agency, interpretation, and personal positioning. While the tension inherent to the terms allows for interesting possibilities in spectatorship studies, for the purposes of this thesis, I will be working with Judith Mayne's definition of the spectator being "a viewer who is and is not the cinematic subject, and as a subject who is and is not a film viewer" (36). My process of identifying with the film subject is, therefore, inevitably informed by my personal positioning. Because this is not a generalised study of the effects of science fiction and techno-Orientalism on the spectator, I will acknowledge the different nuances of subject, agent, viewer, and spectator in my analysis.

Feminism in Film

A significant facet of spectatorship is rooted in psychoanalytic theory and ideas of scopophilia. According to Sigmund Freud, scopophilia is pleasure in looking and as a

process, “scopophilia involves taking people as objects for sexual stimulation through sight ‘subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze’” (Mulvey 16). Laura Mulvey argues that in terms of scopophilia, the controlling gaze in cinema is always male. This positions the male as active and looking, whilst females are passive objects to be looked at and eroticised by means of voyeurism and fetishism. She describes the process of creating and consuming cinema as a means of imposing the male subconscious on the image or body of women (10). In earlier works of feminist film theory, Laura Mulvey, Pam Cook, and Claire Johnston employed these psychoanalytic theories, finding utility in the description of gender as a cultural construct rather than a biological determination. They explained that “within the patriarchal order, the male is constructed as subject while women are relegated to object, other, against which male subjectivity is produced” (Pribram 150). In other words, women as other are subject to the controlling and sexualising male gaze of the patriarchal order. Mulvey and Johnston suggest that the eye of the camera, the appearance of the characters, and any representative strategies in the film are male or serve male pleasures. While this holds true in analysing the ways in which patriarchy renders the female as an object, it foregoes any agency that women may have as spectators as well as lumping audiences into the singular context of being white and male. It also ignores the fact that power dynamics, representation, and looking relations can shift based on the context of the screen characters and any non-dominant demographic variations in the audience. It is exclusionary of racial, sexual, historical, and cultural differences—differences which give rise to diversified meanings and readings of the same material.

Mulvey’s theories also discuss ideas of castration and denote the passivity of women in film as punishment for their lack of phallus, citing the example of the femme fatale trope in noir films. *Femme* fatale, in French, translates to ‘fatal woman’. The femme fatale is a figure that has graced literature for centuries, from the Greek Goddess Aphrodite to Medusa, to

Salome of Biblical origins, and she has evolved over time and genre to represent both conservative anxiety and feminist empowerment (Farrimond 1). The femme fatale gained popularity as a cinematic archetype in the 1940s and 50s noir genre (Erensoy 193). Within noir films, the femme fatale often falls under the investigation of the active male hero, who represents the law and other dominant institutions of the patriarchal order. This investigation opens her up to becoming the object of voyeuristic observations, revealing not only her crimes, but also the issue of her sexuality at an unconscious level. "Through his voyeuristic and sadistic control over her, the hero reaffirms his own mastery (and by proxy, the male spectator's)" (Chaudhuri 36). Other scholars have argued that Mulvey's theories are, at times, too reductive in their binary insistence of male/active, female/passive, and they point out the existence of groups of women who suffer oppression in areas other than gender.

More recently, the femme fatale has featured in a multitude of genres, including horror and science fiction, where she has often been linked to the monstrous feminine, castrating woman, and the cyborg body (Erensoy; Lindop). Traditionally, the femme fatale represents taboos of the female gender role, such as sexuality, promiscuity, and ambition. She is deadly and powerful in her sexuality which is aggressive and threatening, and sexual relations with her generally result in a man's demise or misfortune. As a result, her character often suffers persecution of some kind. Early female cyborgs reflected a similar identity (Erensoy 196) with the imperative to conform to gender norms, such as being servile, domesticated, nurturing, and passive.

Similar to the femme fatale in noir, Barbara Creed proposes the archetype of the monstrous feminine in the horror genre. Whilst the monstrous feminine esteems gender as a marker of difference, it is also inclusive of characteristics which mark one as 'other' in a heteronormative society. "The return of the repressed is enacted in the form of the monster, who not only turns society's norms upside down, but also embodies what is repressed in us.

The monster is our own and society's 'other'" (Chaudhuri 92). According to Robin Wood, this category of 'other' includes women, the working class, other cultures, ethnic minorities, alternative political ideologies, alternative sexualities, and children.

Creed expands her discussion of the monstrous feminine with Julia Kristeva's theories of the 'abject,' connecting them to ways in which women become monstrous through castration, which she terms the femme castratrice, or the castrating woman. In her analysis, Creed proposes two particular representations of male castration anxiety: the castrated woman and the woman as castrator, both of which appear in slasher films. Carol Clover characterises slashers through their conventions of knives, a killer who eliminates characters one by one, settings in which the victims are usually trapped, and a 'final girl' who survives and subdues or kills the killer. In this example, the killer is usually a representation of the monstrous feminine or castrating woman and the castrated woman is usually one of the female victims. In the end of these films, either the final girl or the monstrous feminine identifies with the other in a moment of 'shared femininity.' After this, the final girl usually kills the monstrous feminine, effectively changing the killer from castrator to castrated. The femme castratrice is this final girl, who castrates the killer, brandishing a phallic weapon in combat.

These figures of the femme castratrice, monstrous feminine, femme fatale, and the cyborg, present alternative lenses through which to view and engage with film narratives. They allow the female spectator to identify with both the monster and femme castratrice, generating a positioning for the female spectator that is contrary to the traditionally passive spectacle of being female. The femme fatale is not explicitly positive or negative; however, she threatens the ideologies of patriarchy and male order, opening up the possibility for destabilisation. Similarly, the cyborg is not bound by the rules of this Western male order. Overall, the potential to reimagine techno-Orientalist stereotypes expands within science

fiction media, especially as these archetypes can cross genres. Bell hooks' writings offer insight into how such resistance breaks the hegemonic narratives of media, legitimising the resistant and oppositional reading in this research.

Oppositional Reading

To clarify how active application of the aforementioned ideas resist techno-Orientalism in film, I will now expand on the potential of oppositional readings to engage with and alter looking relations. An oppositional reading takes advantage of the ability a viewer has to interpret content and change their interpretation based on their contextual understanding of the systems used to communicate (Hall). This practice relies on the viewer to decode the given language system in a way that is different from the preferred or default reading. An oppositional reading not only complicates the linear models of meaning-making in traditional communication, such as those described by the reflective or interpretive theories of representation (Hall 37), but it also destabilises the hegemonic narratives of meaning construction and the power relations that have come to exist within traditional models (Hall 35).

The oppositional gaze functions in complex ways with varying levels of participation and a changing of focus on the different characteristics of spectators. To unpack this, I will attempt to address hooks' theories on three levels: 1. subjectivity, 2. looking relations, and 3. black female spectatorship. The looking relations of a spectator affect the ways in which that spectator identifies with and the subjective meanings they glean from a film's subject. For example, the experience of a black female spectator fluctuates depending on how they participate in looking relations; as such, their spectatorial experience is different to that of spectators from other social contexts and subjectivities. In considering hooks' framework, I hope to relate the experience of black female spectators to that of Asian female spectators. Whilst these groups have been treated differently in history and media, they have both

experienced the oppression of marginalised communities. To clarify, I am not conflating black and Asian women, but instead, I hope to find useful parallels in their experiences as marginalised groups that have been subjugated by power structures of the media and the generally white, generally male, heteronormative gaze. Like Foucault's notions of power relations, the significance of looking relations means there is room to challenge the systems of control and create room for freedom and resistance. The recognition of agency in the act of gazing shifts the subjectivity. Moreover, it overshadows the binaries of active subject and passive object.

Subjectivity

Conceptualisations of subjectivity closely relate to notions of spectatorship as both evolve in conjunction with one another (Pribram 146). In his chapter "Spectatorship and Subjectivity," Pribram discusses three configurations of subjectivity that serve in different contexts relevant to the spectator: the psychoanalytic subject, the discursive subject, and the social subject. The psychoanalytic subject derives from Freudian/Lacanian processes of identification and subjectivity, whereby the self actuates through processes of recognition and differentiation from the other. Lacan posited that subject formation occurs in three stages: the imaginary, the 'mirror,' and the symbolic (Pribram 147). Christian Metz identifies the mirror stage on a film's screen in the spectator's context. He calls it an 'imaginary mirror' through which the spectator is able to identify with subjects on screen (Metz). The symbolic phase occurs at the entry into culture when one distinguishes the self from the other. Semiotic and post-structuralist theorists invoke these conceptions of subjectivity when they describe how "the subject is continually constructed through signifying or meaning producing practices such as cinema" (Pribram 149).

The discursive subject fills the gaps in the reconceptualising of the psychoanalytic theories, taking into account the shifts that occur within concepts of cinema, culture, and

subjectivity (Pribram 152). In discursive theory, "subjectivity is constructed by the cultural forces of multiple, overlapping, and sometimes competing discourses" (Pribram 152). Here, the construction of the self is multi-layered, a complexity which psychoanalytic theory tended to essentialise and universalise. Foucault defines *discourses* as systems of thought and practises or domains of knowledge which form around certain themes and ideologies. He posits that a number of discourses, such as gender, sexuality, race, etc., are interconnected facets of an individual's identity and their unique combination shapes a particular person's subjectivity. While Foucault did not propose his theory specifically in terms of spectatorship, it has been applied extensively to studies of representation. Stuart Hall states that the encoding and decoding, or production and reception, of media texts are discursive practices (Pribram 155). As a result, "the spectator has the potential to interpret, construct, or meaningfully produce the text from one of several positions. […] In this formulation, the spectator's own varying relationship to the discourses invoked by the text, and the ways they are invoked, allow for a slippage between potential readings or viewing positions in relation to the material of the text" (Pribram 155). It is the decoding of representations from a particular viewing position that causes a shift in a viewer's subjectivity, and this shift alters the perceived meaning of a particular text. This process forms the foundation for resistant and oppositional readings, and I explore it more in depth with hooks' oppositional gaze later in this section.

The concept of the social subject addresses the other gap left by post-structuralist theories on subjectivity: that of the absence of social beings from the mechanisms and intersections of spectatorship. The social subject argues that "the spectator is the result of various discourses put in play by the text, but also the subject of social, economic, and political practices beyond the text, which are brought to bear at the moment of screen/viewer interaction" (Pribram 159). In this way, cultural studies avoid the totalising determinism of

psychoanalytic theory and discursive concepts of ideology in its application of varying post-structuralist subjects to forms of representation. The focus of cultural studies targets the intersection of meanings generated in media discourses and their social enactment. In other words, it observes and illuminates the intersection of textual and social power and the convergence of the textual and social subject. Ultimately, spectatorship and subjectivity can be summarised as "the construction of the viewing subject through psychic processes, discursive formations, and social and historical relations" (Pribram 162). While no approach addresses every issue raised by the others, they do offer different insights to and avenues for reading subjectivity and spectatorship. More importantly, however, they offer an understanding of the ways in which the spectator can offer resistance to the ideologies of a text (Pribram 160).

Looking Relations

The subjectivity of the spectator is intrinsically linked to looking relations: how one views and is viewed in the 'imaginary mirror' of the silver screen. Shifting one's looking relations can change one's subjectivity, and shifting one's subjectivity changes one's looking relations. As viewers vary their looking relations and subjectivity, they are able to interpret the meaning of a text in many different ways. In the traditional Hollywood cinema that Mulvey wrote about, the subjectivity of the spectator defaulted to generally white and male. This meant that female spectators were, for the most part, left to either identify with the objectified women on the screen or forgo their female identity and identify with the male gaze. Of course, it was this 'either male/not-male' binary that earned Mulvey much criticism because it makes for a simplistic and reductive entry point into understanding the relationship between subjectivity and looking relations. With the awareness that mass media and genre are systems of maintaining and propagating dominant ideologies, such as patriarchy, the dominant messaging of mainstream media serves to fulfil patriarchal ideas. The dynamics

within spectatorship are reduced to either active/male or passive/other, and the one who looks holds the power in this relationship (hooks 253). However, as mentioned, with different subjectivities come different types of 'looking.' There is power in looking upon someone as an object, which demeans the one being looked at, but there is also power in looking back.

Spectators have room to subvert and/or destabilise the active/passive, subject/object binary through how they decode the images on screen, their choice to identify (or not) with the constructs they observe, and by looking back and seeing things differently. These strategies culminate in what bell hooks refers to as the oppositional gaze. It is a means of looking back—a strategy of resistance against the dominant reading. In Hall's writings on the discursive subject, he mentions the viewer's potential to interpret, construct, and decode various meanings based on their differing positions in relation to the text. To begin, the spectator can read the dominant or 'preferred' reading of a text. These are usually the institutionalised or ideologically imprinted meanings encoded in the representations and cinematic annunciation. While seemingly authoritative, these readings are neither singular in their meanings, nor fixed, nor closed (Hall 98). The viewer can also negotiate interpretations, which Hall describes as "a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules—its operations with exceptions to the rules" (Hall 102). Lastly, viewers can engage in an oppositional reading whereby they decode a text by means of a "globally contrary way. He/She detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message with some alternative framework of reference" (Hall 103). This process of oppositional reading shifts the subjectivity of the spectator, and changes their perception of the content into something that is other, and perhaps resistant, to the phallocentric ideology of the dominant or preferred reading. While there is a slight difference between Hall's oppositional reading and hooks'

oppositional gaze, the idea of changing one's subjectivity and looking relations to resist, subvert, and take back agency hold in similar stead.

The Black Female Spectator

Hooks illustrates the power of the 'gaze' with an anecdote of a time when her looking back was seen as an act of rebellion. She says, "I remember being punished as a child for staring, for those hard, intense, direct looks children would give grown-ups, looks that were seen as confrontational, as gestures of resistance, challenges to authority" (hooks 253). The oppositional gaze is a way of looking back in the face of the oppressive, dominant gaze. It stems from the need to subvert and challenge the looking relations that would dictate a spectator's view under phallo-centrism. Whether as slaves being beaten by their white slave owners or young, black men accused of violating white womanhood[12], black people have been punished and even killed for looking.

In experiences where the gaze has been politically controlling and objectifying, particularly in relation to people of colour, hooks writes against the dominating and oppressive power of the gaze. She says "that all attempts to repress our/black people's right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: 'not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.' Even in the worst circumstances, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it opens up the possibility of agency" (hooks 254). When film and television were first accessible to black people in the United States, their engagement with mass media was also an engagement with the negation of black representation. Black representation during this time was stereotypical, dehumanising, and degrading; thus, black spectatorship was largely an act of critical

[12] In 1955, fourteen-year-old Emmit Till was lynched for his 'look' offending a white woman, Carol Bryant, in her family grocery store in Mississippi (History).

interrogation, contestation, and confrontation. Manthia Diawara identified a particular power that he described as moments of rupture. He discusses ideas with regard to their social subjects, stating that "every narration places the spectator in a position of agency; and race, class, and sexual relations influence the way in which this subjecthood is filled by the spectator" (Diawara 33). With this framework, moments of rupture occur when "the spectator resists complete identification with the film's discourse" (Diawara 34). Through this critical practice, viewers were able to maintain distance between themselves and the representations on the screen, thereby restoring black spectatorship where there was negation.

During its initial development, black spectatorship focused mainly on race relations and often side-lined gender in the interrogation of black representation in white-dominated cinematic practice. Hooks mentions that "black female spectators have had to develop looking relations within a cinematic context that constructs our presence as absence that denies the 'body' of the black female so as to perpetuate white supremacy and with it, a phallocentric spectatorship where the woman to be looked at and desired is 'white'" (hooks 257-58). This means that even when black women were present in films, their "bodies and beings" served the purpose of enhancing and maintaining "white womanhood as the object of the phallocentric gaze" (hooks 258), much like how Asian women are often used to enhance the presence of their numerous, white, female counterparts. Hooks illustrates this with the example of the character Sapphire from the 1928 sitcom, *Amos n' Andy*, writing, "She was even then backdrop foil. She was bitch—nag. She was there to soften images of black men, to make them seem vulnerable, easy-going, funny, and unthreatening to a white audience. She was there as a man in drag, a castrating bitch, as someone to be lied to, someone to be tricked, someone the white and black audience could hate. Scapegoated on all sides" (hooks 259).

Identification with black female representation was a political process. Anne Friedberg writes that "identification can only be made through recognition, and recognition in itself is a complicit confirmation of the ideology of the status quo" (45). Thus, for black female spectators, their experience was both a negation of self and a rejection of black representation. In reaction to this, "black female spectators actively chose not to identify with the film's imaginary subject because such identification was disenabling" (hooks 263). Hooks goes on to describe the process of looking with an oppositional gaze:

> [B]lack women were able to critically assess the cinema's construction of white womanhood as an object of phallocentric gaze and chose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator. Black female spectators, who refused to identify with white womanhood, who would not take on the phallocentric gaze of desire and possession, created a critical space where the binary opposition Mulvey posits of "woman as image, man as bearer of the look" was continually deconstructed. As critical spectators, black women looked from a location that [is] disrupted (hooks 263).

The act of resisting spectatorship for black women involves a combination of interrogating, contesting, resisting, revising, and rewriting, and it only truly manifests when individual black women "actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking" (hooks 270). This resistance requires first taking on and then rejecting different subjectivities, rewriting them through interrogation. Hall's oppositional reading is, therefore, an integral process within the oppositional gaze because it creates spaces of agency where the black female spectator can both interrogate and look back at the representations on screen. In response to Hall's ideas, hooks writes:

> Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The 'gaze' has

> been and is a site of resistance for colonised black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that 'looks' to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating 'awareness' politicises 'looking' relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist (hooks 255).

With this, black women found ways to resist the images on screen. They claimed particular representations as their own, maintaining a distance from the portrayed identity and, thereby, resisting the status quo and ideology of the dominant representation. Alternative interpretations created new possibilities that both challenged and subverted existing stereotypes.

This agency, cultivated in black female spectatorship, is inspiring to my experience as a female Asian viewer. I wish to employ these same subversive strategies in my reading and resistance of female Asian representation. It is with these strategies that I intend to re-read *Ex Machina*. I've noticed a trend with female Asian characters in film that echoes hooks' description of Sapphire. Asian women are often treated as tools, plot devices, and trophies. Like *Madame Butterfly*, they are exotic and desirable, but they still fall short compared to the superior qualities of white women. When Asian women appear on screen, they are usually of few words, compliant, and conservative, but simultaneously sexual—dangerous, but not unconquerable. In other depictions they appear like the Fok twins of *Austin Powers: Gold Member* (2002), ditsy and childish, with a fascination for white prowess. They are the epitome of everything the West believes them to be in reality, which boils down to being easily expendable in the face of action and conflict. It is not enough to solely interrogate the codes of representation in phallocentric cinema because there is still so much lacking in the portrayal of Asian female characters. In analysing and reading, I am dissatisfied with the representation of people who resemble me because my subjectivity remains that of the

hypersexualised and objectified other. I wish to both look and look back at the gaze that is holding me in a place of subservience and, in doing so, defiantly reclaim my presence and construct my own subjectivity. Therefore, in the final chapter of this thesis, I will use the feminist film theories I have researched to critique, reimagine, and rewrite the construction of Asian female representation through the application of an oppositional gaze.

Chapter 3: Implementing an Oppositional Gaze

3.1 – Discussions on *Ex Machina*

Cultural Instrumentality and Ex Machina

I begin this chapter with a brief reflection on the cultural instrumentality of *Ex Machina* to establish its potential for societal influence in relation to my later discussion. Referring back to Kuhn's work on cultural instrumentality, I will describe *Ex Machina's* relation to four of the five aspects: *reflections, ideologies*, *repressions,* and *spectators*. While this is not an in-depth analysis of *Ex Machina's* cultural instrumentality, these four relations serve to emphasize the ways in which the film contributes to society and to reinforce the need to challenge its stereotypical and problematic representations.

Reflections

Science fiction cinema has depicted numerous powerful and devastating possibilities of technological progression, from the creation of malevolent AI and the rebellion of machines against their human creators, to science's reckless exceeding of its own limits (Di Minco 69). As a result, androids, cyborgs, AI, and the rest have encountered persecution throughout the narratives of science fiction cinema. Characters like Fritz Lang's Maria, in *Metropolis* (1927), the T900 android of James Cameron's *Terminator* (1984), Roy Batty in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), and more recently Ava from Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*, all suffer violence, even if they themselves are not notably hostile. Each director's depictions of brutality reflect society's existing power relations, and societal concerns

regarding relative threat of AI (Hasan). Garland's approach is, if anything, more hopeful and supportive of the possible evolutions of AI and technological development.

Cyborg films express society's need to control bodies in the ongoing opposition of natural vs. artificial. These trends in science fiction extend to the social relationships between men and women, as well as ideas around gender and sexuality. One way science fiction reinforces sexist norms about women is through the portrayal of male scientists constructing an 'ideal' female body in the form of subservient cyborgs and robots (Seaman-Grant iii). *Blade Runner's* female cyborg, Pris, was central to this idea. Her role as a "basic pleasure model" emphasises the ideals of the feminine body and also brings light to ideas of sexuality and AI. In *Ex Machina*, sexist imbalances of power exist in both Nathan and Caleb's relationships with the AI models. The film addresses the "construction and representation of women's bodies, roles, identities and images; the control and manipulation perpetrated by 'authoritarian' individuals on feminine bodies" (Di Minco 67). When films portray cyborgs as manufactured purely for the pleasures of their creators, they forgo the notion that these cyborgs and AI have any agency in life, to say nothing of control over their own bodies.

Similar to Pris, Nathan creates Ava, supposedly based on Caleb's online pornography profile. Each model he creates exemplifies how he believes women 'should' look. In taking the form of the 'ideal,' robot bodies, which often correlate with idealised human female bodies, suffer from the political and authoritarian powers oppressing them, including male and sexist powers (Di Minco 71). In a further act of denigration, Caleb is complicit in confining Ava to her room—her enclosure—where she must stay regardless of her desires to leave or even move about the compound. This example of authoritarian oppression reflects societal trends that have existed in reality for millennia where women have possessed the same rights as property or cattle.

Ex Machina also comments on the role of consciousness in personal autonomy and questions who holds the authority to determine life, agency and consciousness. These themes trace back to *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner,* pillars of the philosophical debates within science fiction, and now, too, *Ex Machina* joins the discourse with its thoughtful and artful presentation of these concepts (Jacobson 23). Part of the main narrative of the film follows Caleb in a Turing test to establish proof of Ava's consciousness. Nathan often poses questions about whether Ava is genuinely conscious or merely acting according to her programming, and the film ultimately leaves this question for the audience to answer. Nathan comments that true consciousness exists in the realm between that which is deliberate and random, suggesting that Ava does behave in accordance with her programming, but that elements of her performance may be of her own agency. This reflects the philosophical debates of free will versus determinism and nature versus nurture, illustrating yet another example of science fiction portraying and commenting on the human condition in a spectacle of fantasy.

Reflections in media are indicative of the text's participation in social discourses. They illustrate trends in society's perceptions and show how society influences the construction of these representations and ideas within media. *Ex Machina's* reflections insert themselves into discussions on AI development, women's bodies and representation, and the nature of consciousness. This leads to the next aspect of cultural instrumentality, which, although less visible, is vital to the interpretations of meaning in the film: *ideologies*.

Ideologies

Reflections are largely meanings read at the surface level of a film. More covertly, however, while *Ex Machina* does indeed reflect certain negative aspects of society, it also perpetuates some of the harmful ideologies around the representation of AI, women's bodies, and techno-Orientalism. Ava's design and portrayal highlight the representation of women's

bodies as a notable talking point of the film, but it also further imbues an idealised representation of women in media in general. Between the various designs of the AI models, each has a similar build, fitting the Western standards of beauty that permeate society. The troubling emphasis on female sexuality also manifests in Ava's manipulating Caleb through seduction despite being intelligent enough to influence him in other ways. Academics in film have pointed out the false ideology that a woman's prowess lies solely in her desirability; however, outside of academia, sexuality often becomes a default for the representation of women and their bodies.

Another trope that often remains uninterrogated in *Ex Machina* is the role of Kyoko as Nathan's housemaid and mistress, along with her mute and submissive behaviour. This particular portrayal is typical of Orientalist stereotypes dating back to the 1800s, and the media has since normalised it through consistent similar characters. Edward Said deems Orientalism to be an ideology in its standing as a 'truth' of the representation of Asians within society. Neither the film, nor many film critics—and few feminist scholars—have interrogated Kyoko's representation as an Orientalist stereotype. The film's unconscious portrayal of this '[un]natural' representation feeds back into the discourses around Asian representation in media, and thus Orientalism as an ideology.

Repeated practices of representation eventually lead to the establishment of discourses. Once accepted and engendered in society, they become the default that is reinforced through repeated references, much like the Asian presence in cyberpunk, the figure of the geisha girl, and the standard for ideal male and female bodies. At what point was it established and accepted that cyberpunk comprised the particular aesthetic with which it is so strongly associated? The neon lights and heavy Asian influence were born from the visualisations of the particular futures in *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Neuromancer* (1984), along with other prolific works of the genre at the time. However, since then, the

representation of this fictional future has become so strongly enmeshed with the genre that it is now the *way* cyberpunk is defined. The image of the geisha has been misconstrued from its actual meaning, now portraying exotic, servile, and docile Asian women. This representation is far from the highly respected theatrical performances of geisha in Japan. Instead, portrayals of geisha in Western media often evoke images of concubines or Japanese women in general who, adorned in kimonos, are subservient and obedient. Orientalism is not confined to one genre; it penetrates all media and perpetuates itself with each recurring representation of the stereotypes. Of course, in the case of science fiction, the results would not be so influential without the genre's great commercial success. Because of its cultural instrumentality and ability to write and represent ideologies, recurring themes in science fiction have lasting consequences in the real world.

Repressions

Audiences and academics alike can read *Ex Machina* in terms of societal repressions related to the idea of hidden meanings and ideologies. Working with psychoanalytic concepts of the unconscious in different contexts allows for deeper interpretation of repressed themes and representations (Kuhn 91). These types of analyses have been popular with science fiction films like *Alien* (1979) and *Terminator* (1984), and they have generated discussions on sexual differences and the monstrous feminine. Di Minco compares Ava to Frankenstein's monster, the monstrous feminine, the final girl, and the femme fatale figure. While many of these concepts primarily reside in other genres, such as horror and noir, their lenses can apply to broader popular culture, especially given science fiction's ability to blur genre lines. Ava's position in these archetypal roles hails back to a repressed anxiety around the female figure and the threat it poses to the phallic order. Her hybrid nature is somewhat abstract in its likeness and unlikeness to what is human and what is female. However, in the end, she is still other, and she reminds us of our fear of the other, especially as she gains more power

throughout the film. Of course, these repressions are encoded and hidden beneath layers of signifiers. It is important, therefore, to examine all of *Ex Machina*'s portrayals of women and women of colour because of their added value to debates around the repressed societal conditions within the film.

Spectators

The theory of spectators, the fourth aspect of cultural instrumentality, posits that films evoke specific emotions and thoughts from their audiences. *Ex Machina* meets the expectations of the science fiction genre for spectacle and effectively demonstrates the ability to elicit particular feelings from its viewers, be that anxiety, the uncanny, fear, awe, or marvel. The film pairs and contrasts repressions with titillating images and intriguing exhibitions of an almost utopian future. The film's very first moments greet the audience with a futuristic soundscape, bringing us into the realm of technological possibilities. By juxtaposing technological spectacles with beautiful, natural landscapes, the film sets up the opposition of technology and nature while also highlighting the beauty of each. Ava's form first appears to the audience in a scene that frames the intricate and glowing wiring within the transparent parts of her anatomy. Her silhouette stands against the backdrop of a garden space within her enclosure, creating a stark portrait of the nature/technology dichotomy. The beauty of this shot epitomises scopophilia and establishes the gaze with which the audience perceives Ava and the other android figures. In this sense, Ava materialises less as a character and more as an object to be admired, much like the beautiful scenery, with diffused lighting and aesthetically appealing camera angles. Spectatorship dictates that the audience identify with the characters in a film and that they gain pleasure from both projecting themselves onto the silver screen as well as voyeuristically watching the events taking place. The cinematography and narrative set the audience up to identify with Caleb and experience pleasure through both his experience and their own position as spectators. Through Caleb, the

audience feels the full range of emotions of his developing relationship with Ava, and this impacts the spectators, compounding with the ideological and subconscious ideas that the film presents to its audience.

Ex Machina's cultural instrumentality illustrates the value of the film's contribution to popular culture and societal perceptions. This is relevant when considering the ways in which the film constructs, and thus propagates and perpetuates, certain meanings in media and discourse. The capacity for the film to impact and influence its viewers warrants critical discussion and interrogation, particularly because its reinforcing of social narratives and ideologies occurs so subtly. The following section looks at some of the major debates around *Ex Machina*, which will then lead into how the film constructs techno-Orientalist stereotypes and how they can be resisted.

Female Representation in Ex Machina

The acclaim of *Ex Machina* as one of the latest, forward-thinking AI films speaks to its cultural instrumentality within the genre. The film reflects contemporary cultural and societal anxieties surrounding gender, race, labour, technology, patriarchy, humanity, and ethical developments in current robotics research. The discourses around race, gender, and AI technologies converge in the image of the female cyborg. "The coming of consciousness of an AI is shown to be simultaneous with coming to understand her relation to her creator as both subservience and imprisonment" (Seaman-Grant 45). This leads to one of the major debates of the film: whether *Ex Machina* is a feminist film or a reinforcement of sexist and misogynistic stereotypes (Seaman-Grant 51) because of its treatment of female bodies. Many critics have hailed the film for its empowering narrative and disruptive depictions of the binaries of male/female and technology/biology. Ava enters as a damsel in distress, needing Caleb to rescue her from the abuse and oppression of Nathan, but by the film's end, she transforms into a femme fatale, forging her identity and moving out into the world as an

emancipated woman, free of her male oppressors. However, many critics feel that the operation of the male gaze in the film undercuts any message of feminist empowerment. Kjerstin Johnson mentions in her review that "while the film may be about gender roles, it does not address these issues deeply enough, and the women do not escape the male gaze of the camera."

However, given the relative body of science fiction preceding this film, Seaman-Grant posits that a feminist critique of *Ex Machina* lies in its interrogation of the constructed identity and performance of femininity and its critique of masculinity. *Ex Machina* approaches its female cyborg from a position of empathy, which is unique in AI films. In most science fiction narratives, the female robots are usually destroyed by the end of the film, but Ava escapes and achieves her goal of entering the human world. Nevertheless, Ava's literal manifestation of male desire for the human body speaks to the objectification of women and female characters within cyborg narratives (Seaman-Grant 42). Just as Pris was a "basic pleasure model" in *Blade Runner*, all of the women in *Ex Machina* are, as Nathan describes: "'basic pleasure models' who 'know how to fuck,'" (Magistrale 264). In fact, Nathan explains with vulgar detail that Ava was designed with a vaginal opening with a "concentration of sensors" that, when engaged in the right way, "creates a pleasure response" (00:46:55). He also admits to modelling her based on Caleb's pornography history and preferences. The deliberate construction of the models for male pleasure reinforces the idea that the AI serve as sexual objects for their creators. As a heterosexual, white man, Nathan holds the historically traditional male position of power over women (Magistrale 262). He objectifies and sexualises women with the justification that "these androids are his legal property, mere machines, and therefore exist without rights" (Magistrale 262), the same way that women have functioned for centuries as child bearers and sex objects, meant to serve in the kitchen and other domestic spheres, without need of rights or equality. In this, Nathan

epitomises toxic hypermasculinity, and his abuse and oppression of the female AI leaves little sympathy for him upon his death. However, the portrayal of Caleb in the film speaks to a more subtle toxicity that exists in the male archetype of the 'nice guy.' As the film's protagonist, Caleb is the character with whom the audience is meant to identify. The audience meets Nathan, Kyoko, and Ava through Caleb, and it is through Caleb that we see Ava's transformation and growth. As his relationship with Ava develops, so does his inclination to help her escape from Nathan's abuse. However, Caleb's intentions are motivated by a romantic and sexual attraction to Ava and his desire to be with her to fulfil his fantasies rather than any selfless desire to grant Ava's wishes. He assumes that Ava will want and need him once he helps her escape, and so, while audiences are meant to relate to Caleb, his behaviour is still problematic. Caleb's implied death at the end of the film delivers a condemnation of this quieter form of masculinity. Ava's escape from institutionalised patriarchy is an empowering tale of female agency and feminism.

With Ava's features based on Caleb's porn preferences, and her sole purpose being to serve Caleb, her entire existence clearly derives from male sexual fantasies. As such, the denial of these male fantasies at the end of the film serves to empower the female figure. With the deaths of both Nathan and Caleb, Ava can finally rewrite her identity and escape the male fantasy and control that brought her into being. Ultimately, she gains agency over herself and her body. On the other hand, Yee writes that "while the film presents a narrative in which a female robot frees herself from her male captor, she is ultimately trapped within the male gaze of the camera, the male characters in the narrative, as well as the spectators watching the film" (87). Laura Mulvey's ideas of the gaze centre around Freud's concepts of scopophilia, which he associated with "taking other people as objects and subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (16)—a gaze which is also usually male and active. "Spectators are encouraged to identify with the look of the male hero and make the heroine a

passive object of erotic spectacle" (Chaudhuri 31). As mentioned, the audience identifies with Caleb, as a relatable, young, white male, who observes Ava, the female-gendered, artificially intelligent robot. Ava remains subject to Caleb's gaze as he interacts with her in person and also when he watches her on the screen in his room, reinforcing the voyeuristic and scopophilic experience of the audience. In another level of surveillance, Nathan observes Ava and her interactions with Caleb through his security cameras. Not only is Ava the object of Caleb's and Nathan's gaze, but she holds the same position for the audience as well. Thus, even when Nathan and Caleb are not observing her, the camera and the audience are.

Ava's highly sexualised, yet innocent characterisation offers a stimulating experience for both Caleb and the audience, so it would seem that she is completely powerless. However, Seaman-Grant argues that Ava subverts the male gaze on several occasions:

> Caleb watches Ava from the screen in his room that displays Ava's actions at all hours of the day, voyeuristically taking pleasure in being able to watch her and her inability to know when she is being watched and her inability to watch back. Caleb is the literal male gaze, and the audience is invited to view Ava voyeuristically beside him. The audience is titillated with Caleb as Ava undresses on the screen. Ava slowly unrolls her tights down her legs and lifts her dress, exposing herself to Caleb. However, Ava ultimately subverts the power of the gaze of both Caleb and the audience. She tells Caleb, 'Sometimes at night, I wonder if you're watching me on the cameras, and I hope that you are.' Ava both recognises she is being filmed and performs sexually for the cameras in order to sustain and encourage Caleb's attraction to her (53).

In this scene, Ava actively manipulates the systems within which she is confined. By putting on a show and exhibiting herself, Ava takes control and uses her sexual advantage to facilitate her escape. She also subverts the passivity of being the object of the gaze by

actively engineering the experience of those—Caleb, Nathan, and the audience—gazing upon her.

However, in spite of Ava's ability to overcome her oppression, some critics still discredit her as a feminist icon because she relies on her sexuality to overpower her male captors. "The message we're left with at the end of *Ex Machina* is still that the best way for a miraculously intelligent creature to get what she wants is to flirt manipulatively" (Wattercutter). The implication is that a woman's greatest strength is her desirability, which is a passive trait based on similarity to the physical 'ideal.' This further normalises societal perceptions of women as objects despite the film's critique of masculinity. Linking back to Yee, Mulvey suggests that the display of women on the screen functions on two levels: "as erotic object for the characters in the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (19). Even though Ava manages to subvert the gaze of the audience as a proxy of Caleb, the audience still watches Ava as she makes her escape. They still hold their position as omnipresent viewer, scrutinising her form and judging her actions even after she has 'broken free' of the gaze. Even if Ava's performance of femininity is deliberate, as Seaman-Grant argues, and she transforms the mechanisms used to oppress her into a means of her escape (53), in the end, she is still objectified on the screen.

In a final, controversial act after winning her freedom, Ava forgoes her 'cyborgness' by dressing herself in the skins of earlier android models in order to assimilate into the human world. While this could represent using the contributions of past women in order to overcome an oppressive system, it could just as easily suggest defeat because Ava's continued survival depends on her ability to perfectly conform to the same systems she worked so hard to escape. This particular point presents a multi-layered conundrum. On the one hand, her more robotic presentation leaves her vulnerable to objectification because of her association with

technology. Her hybrid nature and Nathan's role as a "god-like man" establishes her as a "research-fetish object" with fragmented parts to be looked at" (Yee 89). However, in covering her mechanical parts, she merely exchanges one form of degradation for another. Although there is some triumph for a cyborg to achieve 'human' status, Ava is still a 'perfect female specimen,' eternally subject to the male gaze.

Ava's transformation into an apparent human is also profound in light of Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg as a myth that is "about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities" (14). The identity of the cyborg that Ava chooses to leave behind has the potential to situate itself outside of the oppressive structures that hold her captive. While Ava looks human and looks like a woman, she can never *be* a human woman. Therefore, in this instance, she cannot be wholly confined by the limitations placed on her to be the 'ideal woman.' Ava recognises Nathan and Caleb's perception of her as a female, and so it is understandable that she uses their misogyny as an efficient and effective means of escape. However, her assimilation into human society as a human woman essentially traps her in the same patriarchal structures. When Ava relinquishes her cyborgian identity to be a human woman, she also loses her ability as a hybrid to effectively resist ruling authorities. This corresponds with Elaine Ginsburg's explanation of 'racial passing,' where an individual crosses or trespasses a racial boundary "to assume a new identity, escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other" (3). However, in doing this, Ava's freedom depends on her adopting a human identity—the identity of her oppressors—and dissociating from, if not completely abandoning, her cyborgian past (Seaman-Grant 50).

Given *Ex Machina's* treatment of artificial humans and its portrayal of women in general, I found the concept of the cyborg to be useful in interrogating the techno-Orientalist stereotypes. In relation to the fates of the other androids, Ava's escape is quite unique.

Donning a more permanent human appearance sets Ava apart from, and potentially above, the rest. Because most of the other androids are women of colour, Ava's escape becomes a critique that only addresses white feminism, while potentially introducing highly problematic racist themes. For example, one white feminist praises Ava for cloaking herself in Jade's skin to escape the research facility. Ava's triumph over her male captors allows for the other, less fortunate AI, to live on through her (Magistrale 269-70). However, Ava's freedom comes at the cost of the Asian AI as Ava peels the skin from the motionless Jade's midriff and places it on her own; she never once considers that Jade might have been functional enough to escape with her. Ava also does not hesitate to leave Kyoko behind, neglecting to even acknowledge the collapsed body that died moments before to make Ava's escape possible. Considering these facts, Ava's pathway to freedom is grotesque and prompts further discussion about the history and exploitation of female Asian bodies by white women.

Too often, the "Asian body and its parts are technologies for materially and figuratively shaping a white posthuman, and for securing this future" (Wong 35). Discussions of victimhood in *Ex Machina* focus primarily on the male gaze and Ava's potential to usurp male dominance. In a disheartening reflection of Ava leaving the other AI to pursue life as the perfect woman, most feminist scholarship completely neglects the portrayal of the expendable and devalued Asian AI in favour of Ava-centric analysis. Without any substantial opposition, the film's discourse perpetuates long-standing conventions of using labouring, Asian bodies for the progression of white evolution (Wong 35). A detailed deconstruction of *Ex Machina's* Asian robots reveals operations of techno-Orientalism that fit perfectly into the definition posited by Roh, Huang, and Niu. Whilst I do not have space to closely examine the complex politics surrounding the sacrificial Asian woman in this thesis, it is a topic of great importance to the treatment of Asian bodies both within film and in reality, and it warrants further scrutiny. I will, however, acknowledge and summarise this expendability as a trope

within Orientalist and techno-Orientalist representations so that I can refer to it later when resisting harmful stereotypes.

As I demonstrated earlier in this thesis, techno-Orientalist themes can have lasting, harmful effects. In the case of *Ex Machina*, as the audience identifies with some characters but not others, they become complicit in the unequal treatment of Ava and Kyoko. The whole premise of the movie concerns Nathan bringing Caleb to his research facility specifically to test whether another human could recognise Ava as human (Magistrale 263). By playing 'God' and with a 'human' AI, Nathan gives credence to Ava's humanity, which makes his experimentation on her that much more 'inhumane.' As spectators, the audience relates to Ava, and in doing so, they project further humanity onto her. Therefore, when it is clear that she wishes to escape and experience the world as a human, the audience supports her rather 'human' aspirations. They identify with her enough to overlook the fact that she is not entirely human, and so there seems to be no justification for her mistreatment. However, if the audience is able to relate to Ava on this level, what is it that separates Ava from Kyoko in terms of perceiving her as human and sympathising with her suffering? The only apparent difference between the two models is their race, but that seems to be enough to distance the audience from Kyoko such that it becomes acceptable for Ava to escape at Kyoko's expense.

Ex Machina holds important cultural significance through its cinematic engagement with current intellectual theories of AI technology. While the film destabilises traditional sexist convention through its portrayal of sympathetic female robots, and it presents powerful critiques of "masculine cultures of technology" (Lindop 280), a few academics have called it into question for its representation of women, and even fewer for its representation of race. The film's interpretation of a post-human future seems to indicate pervasive racial divisions, perpetuating and reinforcing a number of problematic stereotypes. Thus, in spite of thoughtful critiques and scholarship surrounding the treatment of women in *Ex Machina*,

because it generally focuses on Ava as the 'lead female,' it does not adequately address these racist stereotypes. Kyoko's role and treatment often go unnoticed despite her importance to both the plot of the film and the larger discourse of female Asian representation within science fiction. In the following sections, I will describe the techno-Orientalist stereotypes at the heart of Kyoko's portrayal and attempt to subvert the film's racist implications; in doing so, I hope to resist the perpetuation of Orientalism and techno-Orientalism within science fiction cinema.

3.2. – Interrogating Techno-Orientalist Stereotypes in *Ex Machina*

In order to resist the harmful ideologies that justify the othering of Kyoko in *Ex Machina* and the implied continued unfair treatment of Asian women in media and society, I engage my agency as a viewer, and I model my interrogation after hooks' steps for black female spectatorship. To begin, I will consider the film's representations of its characters, analysing scenes according to each character's position in relation to the narrative as well as the mise en scene and cinematography. Then, in part three of this chapter, I will provide a number of oppositional readings to replace the preferred readings of certain scenes within the film. In these revisions, I centre Kyoko as the focus of the analysis and the narrative. This shift in the positioning of both myself and the characters within the film should produce an interpretation that is both unique and, to an extent, empowering when contrasted against a more normative reading of the film.

The Characters

Kyoko (Sonoya Misuno)

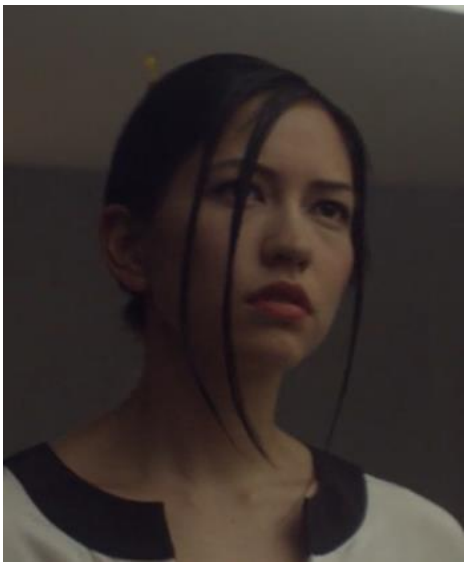


Figure 2: Kyoko (Sonoya Misuno) in Ex Machina

Although we catch glimpses of past AI models, Kyoko is the only active, female character and functioning AI, apart from Ava. She dutifully fulfils the roles of housemaid and mistress to Nathan. She is mute and, according to Nathan, does not understand English. Although she is usually expressionless, her thoughts and feelings often emerge in her body language. Kyoko is an Asian—more specifically Japanese—presenting robot. She appears to be a secondary-character when compared to the other three, mainly featuring in the background or performing menial domestic activities. However, towards the narrative's climax, Kyoko's actions are arguably the most important to the final outcome of the film. When she actively seeks out Ava, she triggers the events which allow Ava to escape successfully. Viewers often overlook Kyoko's role, deeming her character arc to be of little consequence, but it holds a wealth of meaning within the story world, and it reflects societal attitudes in our world.

Nathan Bateman (Oscar Isaac)



Figure 3: Nathan (Oscar Isaac) in Ex Machina

Nathan is the film's antagonist; he stands in opposition to Ava's goals and regularly antagonizes Caleb throughout the film. As Blue Book's CEO and founder, Nathan is highly intelligent, ambitious, and secretive about his projects. He is also aggressive, belligerent, narcissistic, and manipulative. Nathan's character is typical of the toxic male and represents the oppression that women struggle against on a daily

basis, hence his direct antagonism toward Ava and Kyoko. He is a stand-in for domineering institutions and, as such, Nathan's treatment of Kyoko and the other AI speaks to society's treatment of all women and, more specifically, women of colour. Nathan treats Kyoko purely as a tool, evidenced when he introduces her as the best "alarm clock." In spite of his mission to create an AI that can pass as human, his interactions with the bots never reflect this. Nathan often talks about Kyoko as if she were a human, but he continuously demeans her, which objectifies her more than the fact that she is not an actual human. Nathan's treatment of Kyoko is racist and dehumanizing.

Ava (Alicia Vikander)

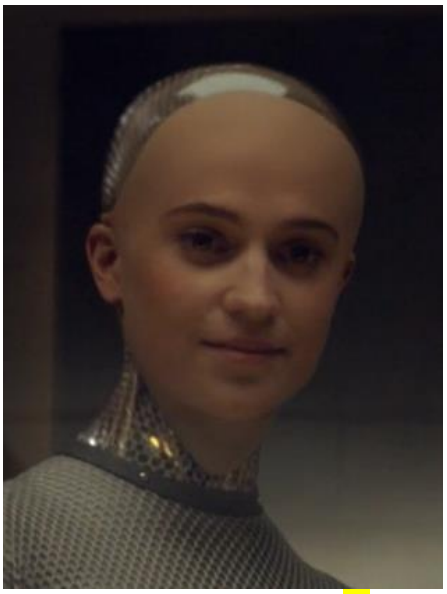


Figure 4: Ava (Alicia Vikander) in Ex Machina

Ava is the heroine of the story. She is the latest iteration of Nathan's AI and Nathan uses Caleb to test whether Ava has true consciousness. Ava first appears to the audience as a humanoid and feminised robot, with a translucent midriff, skull, and limbs that show off her intricate wiring. Her chest and buttocks are covered in mesh, while her face, hands and feet are covered with synthetic skin. She later dons wigs and dresses, which cover her mechanical parts, completing the illusion of her as human. She lives in a locked, glass enclosure that serves as her room and a meeting place for herself, Caleb, and Nathan; even when she is alone, surveillance cameras broadcast her every move. This state of being on display resonates with the experiences that many women face daily in reality.

Ava resists the abuse of her oppressive male creator, and so, while Caleb is the character with whom the audience is meant to identify, it is with Ava that the audience empathizes. Ava serves as a feminist icon as she asserts her agency to win her freedom, but her success fails to represent intersectionality in feminist media because her emancipation

comes at the cost of Kyoko's life, the skin off of Jade, and the abandonment of the other models. In this case, Ava represents white feminism, which neglects the struggles of other marginalized groups (Nishime).

Caleb Smith (Domnhall Gleeson)

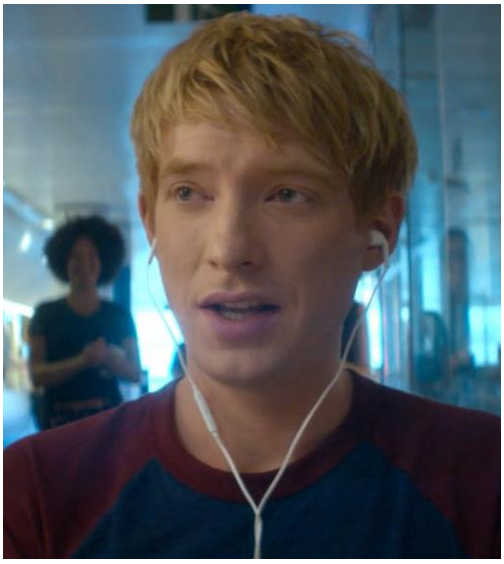


Figure 5: Caleb (Domnhall Gleeson) in Ex Machina

Caleb is the default protagonist of the story, and so he is the one with whom the audience is expected to identify and relate. He is a young, white male who works as a programmer for Blue Book, and he is chosen through a lottery to spend a week with the company's CEO, Nathan. During this week, Caleb assists Nathan in testing the latest humanoid AI model in a modified version of the Turing test. Caleb is a typical 'nice guy' character, seemingly the opposite of Nathan in stature and temperament. He is thoughtful and sympathetic towards Ava and appears to feel guilty about the way that Nathan treats her and, to an extent, Kyoko. He also takes offense when Nathan makes a debasing remark about black women, although he never makes a concerted effort to call Nathan out on his racism or misogyny. While Caleb is sincere, his desire to save Ava is a result of his feelings for her more than any concern for her experiences. This is evident because, despite his drive to save Ava from Nathan, his concern does not extend to Kyoko. By helping Ava escape, he believes he will be able to enter a relationship with her, which is his primary motivation. Caleb's character shows a more subtle facet of toxic masculinity, which is the self-serving hero complex.

Interrogating Tropes and their Cinematic Construction

Techno-Orientalism is pervasive in science fiction media, and although *Ex Machina* does not feature explicit neon signs with Asian text, nor a futuristic, Tokyo-esque cityscape,

it still references Orientalist stereotypes in the representation and treatment of its Asian characters: Kyoko and Jade. In this section, I will highlight the cinematic construction of techno-Orientalist representations as they pertain to Kyoko so that I can subvert the preferred readings in the next section. This process constitutes a shift in subjectivity because the act of "looking to interrogate" is a particular looking relation that moves beyond passive viewership in order to critique the content, form, and language used in the construction of meaning (hooks 262). Although there are many different apparatuses that work together to convey meaning in a film, my interrogation will focus on the characters' roles in the narrative and an analysis of the mise en scene.

The importance of Kyoko

Kyoko's role is minor compared to the other three main characters, and her seeming insignificance is pertinent both to the film's plot and its underlying themes. On the surface, Kyoko is a mute AI who presents as an Asian woman for most of the film. She represents the constructions of gender and sexuality just as much as the more prominent Ava. Whereas Ava addresses more overt concerns about female objectification, Kyoko's character plays a deeper role in interrogating consciousness and ideas of law and duty. Always dressed in white and with her hair pinned up, Kyoko silently serves Nathan and Caleb, catering to any of their needs without hesitation, and receiving aggressive reprimands when she falters. External to the film world, Kyoko serves as a central narrative device revealing Nathan's cruelty, emphasising differences in Nathan and Caleb's character development, and providing Ava with a means of escape. In some ways, Kyoko's narrative function is more important than her actual character, which further proves her objectification not only within the story, but as a storytelling 'device.'

By utilizing Kyoko to tell his story without giving her adequate presence as a character, Alex Garland hypocritically reinforces the very racism and misogyny he intended

to villainise. When asked in an interview about Nathan's blatant racism, Garland stated that Nathan only acted racist to manipulate Caleb into wanting to save Ava. "...[T]he only embedded point that I knew I was making in regards to race centred around the tropes of Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno), a mute, very Asian robot, or Asian-appearing robot, because of course, she, as a robot, isn't Asian. But when Nathan treats the robot in the discriminatory way that he treats it, I think it should be ambivalent as to whether he actually behaves this way, or if it's a very good opportunity to make him seem unpleasant to Caleb for his own advantages" (Nash). To racialise the AI is to give it the socio-political and socio-historical context that surrounds that race. Garland's racialising of Kyoko, especially in the role of this stereotype, affords Nathan the opportunity to enact violence on her, regardless of his reasoning. As a result of Kyoko's lack of agency in resisting this violence, and the lack of help she receives in facing her oppressor, Garland effectually normalises this treatment.

In his interview, it appears as though Garland was very concerned with giving Nathan opportunities to present himself as an antagonist, and so his deliberate choice of an Asian AI is significant. Stereotypes of Asian women stem from a long history of colonisation and racism where they survived by serving white men and enduring unwarranted, belligerent treatment. Throughout the film, Kyoko is shoehorned into a number of Orientalist and techno-Orientalist stereotypes. These particular stereotypes generally represent Asians as hyper or hypo-technologicised, hyper-sexualised, a labouring robotic workforce, objectified and othered, or a submissive model minority. Kyoko's portrayal hearkens back to several female, Asian characters that I have described in this thesis: Kuchuk Hannem from Flaubert's writings of the Orient in 1859, Cio-Cio-san of Giacomo Puccini's opera, *Madame Butterfly* (1898), and Sonmi-541 from David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2012). The film's representation of these tropes and lack of criticality around this design decision normalises this stereotype, reinforcing and perpetuating racism in reality.

The geisha girl

Kyoko first appears in the film at (00:23:53) when she walks into Caleb's room holding a tray of food. Caleb wakes at her arrival and watches her in confusion as she slowly bends over in a short, white dress, places the food down, and leaves without a word. In this initial portrayal, Kyoko visually embodies the trope of the geisha girl. Her bowed head, averted gaze, and slavish task all exemplify the perfect Asian woman who is demure and subservient. A few minutes later, Nathan introduces Kyoko as "some alarm clock; gets you right up in the morning" (00:24:35), implying that not only is she an inanimate object, she is also sexually arousing, fulfilling other characteristics of the geisha girl stereotype. The narrative and characterization of the film maintain this stereotype throughout the story, reinforcing Kyoko's relationship with Nathan—a servant and her master—as she dotes on him and Caleb in an attitude of submission with bowed head, folded hands, a small presence, and without speaking (though not of her own volition). The representation of the sexual, subservient, Asian woman, normalises the trope of the geisha, which underlines societal expectations that Asian women exist to service western men. This idea is further exemplified when Caleb walks in on Kyoko staring at a Jackson Pollock painting in Nathan's room (00:57:33) and she begins undressing. This simple act is not only a testament to Nathan's expectations of her, but also Caleb and the audiences' expectation that providing sexual favours is part of her role.

The characterization of Kyoko within the first few moments of the film positions the female Asian viewer as a voiceless, servile, sexual object. It is upsetting to see a representation of oneself appear so weak and objectified, but there is little a spectator can do during an initial viewing. The only options are to 1: accept the representation and identify with the subject, objectifying themself and conforming with this representation, 2: reject identification with the given subject and instead identify with the subject of the symbolic

structure and othering the subject of their recognition, or 3: reject identification altogether and therefore deny a suspension of disbelief and immersion within the spectatorial experience. This last option does contradict traditional movie enjoyment, but it also allows the viewer to step back and engage with the film more critically, which provides its own sense of viewing pleasure.

The model minority

In line with the trope of the geisha girl, the silent, servile nature projected onto Asian women aligns with the obedient qualities of the model minority stereotype. Propagating this stereotype engenders the notion that Asians are a subservient, capable, and highly effective working class within Western structures. *Ex Machina* portrays aspects of this stereotype, with Kyoko exhibiting many traits associated with the model minority. As mentioned, Kyoko acts as Nathan's servant: silent and obedient. She follows his instruction without protest because to do otherwise would be to risk being disassembled, as was the case with formal Asian AI, Jade. This is a common threat in other films, such as *Cloud Atlas* (2012), where the fabricants—all Asian women as far as the film shows—serve as obedient workers who follow the catechisms[13], and defiant fabricants are executed. These catechisms are representations of Western power within the film; thus, to break one is to resist the hegemonic structures of Western rule, which results in execution. Kyoko follows a similar directive because in order to succeed, or, in this case, survive, she must adhere to her programming without resistance to Nathan who is a proxy for Western authority.

Films handle aspects of the model minority stereotype in different ways, which speaks to the complexities and pervasiveness of these stereotypes. *Ex Machina* reflects the characteristics of a racial hierarchy as well as the model minority-yellow peril dialectic. The

[13] Catechism, in this instance, plays on the catechisms of Catholicism, a doctrine by which Catholics are to lead their lives.

racial hierarchy in *Ex Machina* manifests through the model versions of the AI. There are five named AI models out of the seven that appear in the film: Lily, a Caucasian female model; Jasmine, a black female model; Jade, a Chinese female model (played by Mongolian actress Gana Bayarsaikhan); Kyoko, a Japanese female model; and Ava, a Caucasian model. When Caleb looks through Nathan's recordings, he sees Nathan's interactions with three of the previous models. From Lily's construction to Jade's destruction, all of the models are naked, and each is covered with synthetic skin, in direct contrast to Ava's clearly mechanical body.

Jasmine is the only model who is never entirely constructed, remaining faceless, and eventually headless. Her security camera footage is filmed from a high angle, which is a convention that communicates inferiority and insignificance. Jasmine is unable to function on her own and is much more akin to a mannequin than a functioning AI like Lily had appeared to be. In her final video clip, she lies on the floor as a dysfunctional corpse before Nathan enters to drag her away. As one of only two black women in the film, this representation resonates with the long history of disavowed and disembodied portrayals and exploitation of black women's bodies, and it dehumanises Jasmine because there is no means of identifying her, or with her, as a human. Her lack of face signifies several things, including her inability to communicate. Faces are an important part of communication because they promote engagement, recognition, and trust within social settings (Colvin; Toderov et al.; Ohman). Humans are wired to find faces as a means of pattern identification, which helps us recognise others who belong to the same species. Without the visual cue of a clearly defined face, the audience struggles to strike an affinity with her character. In later scenes, Jasmine appears without a head, emphasising the notion that she is more a corpse than an artificially intelligent being. She embodies the "commodified 'erotic icon' of the black woman" (Wong 41), a dehumanised representation of black women that dates back to the 16th century with the trans-Atlantic slave trade. A notable example of this is Sara 'Saartjie' Baartman, a Khoi

woman from the Eastern Cape of South Africa. Sara Baartman served as a domestic servant to be exhibited in a cage for scientific spectacle and entertainment in Europe (Wong 41). Her large buttocks and 'unusual' complexion earned her the name 'the Hottentot Venus' (Hall 264-69). Through the disavowal and dehumanisation of Sara Baartman and many other African women, white men of power reduce black women to their individual body parts for spectacle and fetishisation. Similarly, *Ex Machina* denies the humanity of black women by portraying Jasmine as solely a naked body.

After Jasmine, Caleb watches recordings of Jade, an Asian—Mongolian—model. Jade is the only AI that speaks to Nathan, asking, "Why won't you let me out?" Her behaviour grows increasingly aggressive as she throws an object at the glass and cracks it. She eventually destroys herself, trying to break through the door. The lack of 'pain' that Jade experiences as she self-destructs resembles the image of the labouring Asian body that can endure harsh conditions beyond that of the Western worker, and these short but intense seconds reinforce the robotic Asian and model minority stereotypes. From the way the security camera frames Jade, she appears as a caged animal, and her actions are akin to that of the animal trying to break free. Jade represents savagery and animalistic aggression, which also dehumanises her. However, unlike Jasmine, Jade has a face and a voice, making her immediately more human and relatable than Jasmine. Thus, Jade stands above Jasmine in this racial hierarchy because she is more human and functional, even if she is volatile.

Being the next active model and second Asian character, we can assume that next in the hierarchy is Kyoko, who appears to be Japanese. She is the model with the most 'agency' in terms of freedom to move around Nathan's house. However, it is clear that she is compliant and obedient as she has been programmed to be. Kyoko is an example of the model minority, whereas Jade resisted her boundaries and was, therefore, disassembled. Kyoko's agency, or the illusion thereof, is a display of obedience and affords Asians

marginally better treatment within Western structures than other races, especially those that choose to disobey. However, 'marginally better' is a far cry from equality. Kyoko is mute and often subject to Nathan's abuse and indignation. Nathan programmed her without a voice so she could not speak out against him. Kyoko exists to serve and obey, which metaphorically represents the ways in which Asians are indoctrinated and assimilated into Western hegemonies. Were Kyoko to ever disobey Nathan or resist her programming, she would be switched off and disassembled like her predecessors. According to Nathan's files, Kyoko and Ava were created at the same time[14]. This information implies that Kyoko was deliberately constructed into the stereotype of the model minority, even though Nathan had the technology to make her function in the same way as Ava. Nathan, and Gardner as director, chose to racialize this AI and program her in a way that further establishes the racial hierarchy where Kyoko is a model minority who is superior to Jade and Jasmine, but who is still inferior to Ava.

There is an interesting dialectic within the model minority stereotype, which is that when the powers that be assume a group will be obedient and submissive, they usually fail to notice the beginnings of silent resistance. This inattention offers the oppressed an element of surprise if they ever choose to act out against their oppressor, as occurs when Kyoko stabs Nathan (01:30:46). There are several scenes in the film where Kyoko covertly gathers information, and her developing consciousness eludes both Nathan and Caleb. While it seems disheartening that her role in the narrative as a model minority stereotype excludes her from humane treatment, it does allow her enough agency to concoct her own plan of escape with

[14] The computer files show that the AI models were created in pairs. Initially, the deliberate difference in construction between Kyoko and Ava opened a debate about the treatment of women of colour compared to white women. However, there is not enough information, given the dates on the folders in the film, to speculate about the intention behind this representation. Therefore, I note the interesting way in which the film portrays the pairings of the creation and treatment of the AI, but I believe that this thread of thought needs more concrete data and analysis before it can be developed into an argument.

less risk of detection. This makes Kyoko dangerous, and she transitions from a model minority to a cautionary tale of the yellow peril. In the climax of the film, Kyoko stabs Nathan in the back, a literal betrayal. His horrified expression exemplifies the insidious threat posed by the model minority-yellow peril dialectic.

While this stereotype may appear to work in Kyoko's favour, the narrative of the yellow peril stereotype ensures that the danger always fails in the end. Despite Nathan's demise at the end of *Ex Machina*, Kyoko also perishes, and it is Ava who deals the final, although possibly unnecessary, blow to her captor and abuser. Finally, it is Ava who escapes. In the end, the clear racial hierarchy among the AI versions reinforces the stereotype of the model minority. Moreover, the progression of AI development "recounts a colonial history of how labour and race articulated each other under the imperial notion of the modern human—a concept that saw Asian labour as a kind of frontier for measuring freedom and whiteness" (Wong 42).

The hyper-hypo tech Asian

One of the more subtle tropes in *Ex Machina* is that of the hyper-hypo tech Asian. Although *Ex Machina*'s representation of this stereotype is less extreme than other examples previously mentioned in this research, that does not discount its pervasiveness within science fiction media. The setting of this film is distinctly Western, and in this context, both Kyoko and Jade embody the hyper-hypo tech Asian. As AI models, Kyoko and Jade are two of the most advanced technological developments in the world of the film. However, neither model can escape their captivity. Kyoko, while seeming to have consciousness, is unable to utilise her hyper-technological assets to accomplish her goals, at least not without the assistance of Ava or Caleb, her Western counterparts. Ava uses her given skillset to seduce Caleb into helping her, after which she betrays Caleb and escapes. Although made at the same time, Kyoko is not advanced enough to succeed and live. She is a contradiction, for she has access

to global informational networks and instruments that could aid her escape, and yet, she is not competent enough to use these resources like Ava. She is both hyper and hypo tech. This contradiction, I believe, can extend to the irony of her being a cyborg, a point which I will discuss later in this paper. First, I wish to point out another prevalent aspect of these techno-orientalist stereotypes, which is the hypersexualisation of Asians.

The objectified and hypersexualised Asian

Western writers have hypersexualised and exotified Asian women from the earliest portrayals of the Orient. In the same way that the geisha girl trope assumes that Asian women are well-versed in sexual pleasuring, it also assumes that they exist for temporary entertainment rather than long-term relationships. In *Ex Machina,* Ava's sensuality emphasises her attractiveness to Caleb and bolsters her attempts to seduce him. There are moments where Ava is specifically on display to be watched and desired, if not romanticised. In contrast, Kyoko's portrayal tends to reduce her to a sex object. She wears white mini dresses that simultaneously indicate purity and enticement. Part of her programmed function is to serve Nathan sexually, and because she cannot speak, she cannot give her consent. When Nathan kisses her, she automatically responds in kind, and the audience quickly sees she is not wearing anything under her thin, short shirt-dress, as though she had anticipated Nathan's desire. The film later emphasizes this programmatic response in a sequence where Nathan orders Kyoko to dance, which she does immediately, and then he joins her in the choreographed moves.

Many other cinematic and narrative choices also highlight Kyoko's role as a sex object. During the interaction between Kyoko and Caleb in front of the Jackson Pollock (00:57:29), Kyoko begins almost innocently to unbutton her shirt. While the cinematography does not particularly sexualise or objectify in terms of lighting and camera angles, her actions imply that she is undressing for Caleb to sleep with her, perpetuating the idea of her being a

sexual object. Later in the scene, when Nathan changes the room's lighting to red, the setting resembles a 'red room' or showroom similar to those in a red-light district where people can engage in commitment-free sexual acts. Nathan also stares at Kyoko in a lewd manner during this scene as she begins to dance. While she dances, the top buttons of her shirt remain undone, hinting at her bare breasts, and her shirt often lifts to reveal her underwear, making her dress for this scene even more titillating than it has been in other sequences. So, although the cinematography in this scene does not begin as particularly sexualising, it quickly becomes one of the most sexually suggestive scenes in the film.

Another instance of Kyoko's objectifying hyper-sexualisation occurs soon after Caleb reviews Nathan's video footage of the previous AI models. Seemingly horrified at what he's just seen, Caleb looks over his shoulder to see the back of a naked Kyoko, obscured, but visible in the next room. The scene quickly cuts to an expressionless Kyoko lying on her side, naked, on Nathan's bed in a position typical of seduction. Caleb enters and she watches him idly as he stops to regard her and then moves to the cupboards. Another close-up mid-shot reveals her whole body while Caleb moves about the room. The shot then cuts to an angle behind Kyoko. Here, the audience can see her naked body both from behind and in front because the mirrors circle the room reflect her nudity from multiple angles. Kyoko stands up slowly to show Caleb that she, too, is a cyborg and there is a close-up of her upper torso and head, which lowers slightly as she peels the skin away from her ribs. This shot places her breasts in full view and her movement to peel the skin away from her ribs and down toward her naked vulva is overly deliberate, making her gestures seem unnecessarily seductive while, at the same time, uncanny and abstract. This scene sexualises and also disfigures parts of her body, disturbingly making Kyoko appear abject and alien.

The film again sexualises Kyoko through the use of extreme close-ups after Ava escapes her room and meets Kyoko in the hallway. Ava and Kyoko stand close to one another

while they communicate. The shots zoom in on Ava and Kyoko's mouths and eyes as they look at one another in a seemingly sexually charged scene. The lighting is soft and diffused, creating a sensual atmosphere. Ava touches Kyoko's arm gently, and the extreme close-up gives the impression that she caresses Kyoko. She intimately whispers into Kyoko's ear and holds her hand before the camera cuts to a shot of the knife in Kyoko's other hand and Nathan walks through the door into the hallway. This entire montage is yet another example of how camera techniques hyper-sexualise and objectify Kyoko.

The sexualisation of Kyoko and Jade throughout *Ex Machina* reinforces the stereotype of Asian women as hypersexual and exotic. The propagation of this stereotype leads to the hypersexualisation of Asian women in reality, as well as an assumption that Asian women are conservative, yet secretly sexually deviant and wish to fulfil their physical desires with white men. This translates to the continued fetishisation of Asian women and obsession with Asian culture that places the continent and its people on a pedestal separate from the Western world.

The robotic and inscrutable Asian

The next stereotype that *Ex Machina* erroneously reinforces is that of the robotic Asian. Garland's AI models recall both the image of the cyborg in modern science fiction and Flaubert's descriptions of Kuchuk Hannem. At the time of Flaubert's writings, machines were highly prized objects of industrialised society. His equating of Hannem, an Oriental woman, to such an object "not only dehumanises the woman as technology, rendering sexual pleasure the surplus value for which the "femme/machine" is exploited, but also classifies her as racially other" (Lowe 76). Flaubert's depiction became canon in the imaginings of the looks and behaviours of Asian women for years afterwards, and many of these descriptions also apply to Kyoko. An attractive woman, Kyoko is a stoic, "mute, very compliant Asian robot" (Nash) who serves Nathan and Caleb domestically and sexually without complaint or

emotion. Because of the robotic Asian trope, Kyoko's behaviour seems natural enough, and the audience can freely assume she is just a maid rather than another of Nathan's AI models. Kyoko's movements appear natural, especially in comparison to Ava's, and viewers can attribute her expressionless roboticism to idea that Asians are inscrutable by virtue of the stereotype. As an AI, she is literally a cyborg, which accounts for her stoicism, but viewers do not know that for most of the film and accept her behaviour anyway. This acceptance is problematic, especially given how Nathan treats Kyoko. His belligerent attitude towards Kyoko is permissible to him because she is a robot servant and not human, but the audience (and Caleb) remains unaware of this. Garland even takes advantage of this ambiguity to enhance Nathan's role as an antagonist. Of course, the global treatment of domestic workers, especially people of colour, is infamously demeaning. The racialisation of Kyoko adds to this the context of historical representations, which further engenders techno-Orientalist stereotypes in popular culture.

The Asian Cyborg as a Medium for Resistance

As a contemporary science fiction film, *Ex Machina*'s cinematic conventions are coded in the apparatus of the film and languages of representation. By analysing how the director establishes these codes, we can interrogate his representations of Asian women with particular attention to the meanings that accompany the construct of the Asian cyborg. The Asian cyborg is as much a synthesis of the other stereotypes as it is its own trope. Because of the interconnectedness of technology and robotics, and their relative connections with Asian stereotypes, it is easy to link Asians with cyborgs. While cyborgs exemplify advanced technology, their creators reduce them to tools for labour and/or sex by programming them into compliance and subservience. The trope of the robotic Asian, particularly as it pertains to Asian women, parallels many of the cyborg's characteristics. It was in reading Flaubert's description of Hannem as 'machine-like' that I realised that the idea of the cyborg existed

within Asian representation long before Morley and Robins coined the phrase 'techno-Orientalism.' Unlike Asian people, however, cyborgs are "definitionally transgressive of a dominant culture order, not so much because of their 'constructed' nature, but rather because of the indeterminacy of their hybrid design" (Balsamo 11). Because they exist in a liminal space as constructions and representations of fiction and of lived experiences, the idea of the cyborg is useful in interrogating techno-Orientalist stereotypes within science fiction media.

The cyborg and Asians in science fiction media share similar narrative trajectories, and so I liken the AI models of *Ex Machina* to cyborgs. While they are less a combination of biology and technology, the premise of the film considers their consciousness and humanity. Kyoko plots to assert her will, revealing a level of consciousness, and Ava endeavours to reach the outside human world. Regardless of their biological or technological make-up, their experiences align with those of the cyborg, and that sense of hybridity is vital in subverting these stereotypes. When viewed this way, the implications of techno-Orientalist representations of Asians become twofold. The film does indeed perpetuate harmful techno-Orientalist stereotypes with its cinematographic construction. However, given the discourse of cyborg theory and the potential of a cyborg identity to disrupt hegemonic narratives, these same cinematographic constructions offer an avenue to critique, subvert, or challenge the harmful techno-Orientalist stereotypes they create. I explore this idea in the next section as a possibility for re-imagining the techno-Orientalist stereotypes that frame the female Asian characters in *Ex Machina*.

Final Thoughts on the Interrogation

Watching this film as an Asian woman, relating to Kyoko's character also means experience her dehumanising, invalidating, and underwhelming character arc. The cultural instrumentality of films like this is paramount to propaganda that reinforces power dynamics in current society. Knowing that media both generates and is influenced by these societal

perceptions, it is clear that the vicious cycle of harmful representation will not change without active criticism. Michel Foucault wrote that "in all relations of power, 'there is necessarily the possibility of resistance'" (hooks 254). If this is true, then the opportunity to resist the techno-Orientalist stereotypes in *Ex Machina* lies within the film itself, and my purpose with this research is to find a way to challenge the film without being able to change it.

On this note, it feels treacherous to read so deeply into the meaning of Kyoko's presentation within the film and not pay the same respect to Jade. As a researcher who is trying to challenge the stereotypes and representation of all Asian women within science fiction, it feels almost exclusionary to leave Jade to self-destruct in the corners of Nathan's lab without a rebellious turnaround to give her character meaning. However, it is also in Jade's character that I recognise a dark truth about the representation of Asian women in films and their treatment in society. As Lilani Nishime points out, Jade, with Kyoko, highlights the narrative of how white women's advancement has relied on the depreciation and disposing of Asian women. The tragedy of Jade's fate remains highly relevant to Asian women today. Instead of wishing to deny this representation because of the hurt it causes, Asian women can find a certain power in claiming it as their reality.

Bell hooks (1996) mentions how black women took the representation of Sapphire from *Amos 'n Andy* and claimed it as their own; she became the image of their frustration and anger. Identifying with Sapphire's presentation asserted their lived experience in a way that resisted and challenged the meaning *Amos 'n Andy* broadcast to the world. This same strategy, I believe, exists within Jade. As the only Asian woman with a voice in *Ex Machina*, who not only self-destructs to free herself, but who has her humanity stripped from her for the convenience of an ambitious white woman, Jade is not just a stereotype; she is a statement.

Throughout this process of interrogation, I was surprisingly gratified in suspending my sense of self as a spectator. It felt like an exciting thought experiment more than a purely passive experience of entertainment. I was less concerned with how 'I' was being *portrayed* through Kyoko and more preoccupied trying to see where and how 'I' was being *constructed*, technically[15] or mechanically, cyborg metaphor aside. By disengaging from the traditional spectatorial experience and deferring my identification with the film subject, I achieved another level of engagement with the film that was quite empowering. The process gave me a sense of agency over my viewing experience that I had previously felt stripped from me when I defaulted to identifying with the subjects on screen. I view this realisation as a positive outcome because it opens up the possibility to re-examine and override other stereotyped portrayals through the shifting of subjectivity.

[15] Through representation or cinematic apparatus and annunciation.

3.3. - Resistant Reading Centring Kyoko

Films work in a way that presents a reimagined reality. At the same time, they reflect our quite real society and "provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex, and class" (hooks 3). As the director, Alex Garland encoded *Ex Machina* with the white male gaze through his composition of the mise en scene and various levels of scopophilic engagement. In analysing this gaze, Mulvey and many other feminist film scholars demonstrated that it holds a particular power, enacting and perpetuating violence against the subject of the gaze as well as audience members who identify with that subject. Given *Ex Machina*'s status as a significant film in recent science fiction, it has the sizeable potential to affect values in popular culture and society.

So far in this thesis, I have discussed the cultural instrumentality of science fiction in society, the pervasiveness of techno-Orientalism in both history and science fiction, and the cultural instrumentality of the gaze. I have done all of this with the aim of addressing *Ex Machina*'s portrayal of female Asian characters, specifically Kyoko. Despite a fair amount of existing scholarship around *Ex Machina*, even critiques that discuss the techno-Orientalist representations of Kyoko, side-line her in favour of the other characters in the film. Di Minco briefly discusses the techno-Orientalist position of Kyoko with the accompanying racial and gendered implications, but much of that exposition only serves to illustrate how poorly Nathan treats his androids. Seaman-Grant draws attention to Kyoko as being the only active 'person' of colour in the film and explains how she embodies many of the cultural and cinematic tropes associated with Asian women. She does make the effort to problematize Kyoko's representation and the inequity of female empowerment in the film, but this is still largely to emphasise similarities and differences relating to Ava. Finally, Nishime argues that Kyoko's purpose in the film is only to be a sacrificial lamb for Ava's emancipation (Nishime 35). Most of these arguments critically interrogate the treatment and techno-Orientalism

surrounding Kyoko and other Asian women within the film, and I hope to contribute to that discourse as well as take it a step further with my resistant reading. Following bell hooks' concepts of oppositional gazes, I will not only critically engage with the techno-Orientalist representations, as previous scholars have done, but I will attempt to gaze back in a way that challenges and resists these stereotypes.

In the following section, I revisit several pivotal scenes in *Ex Machina* and use different lenses to reinterpret the scenes in a way that subverts and challenges the problematic representations in the film. I include several visual aids with a detailed description of each scene to make the contrast between the default and oppositional readings more apparent.

Scene 1: The Dinner Sequence

Description

To begin, I wish to examine the dinner sequence at 00:32:00. The scene opens with a long shot of the compound. The men sit around a dinner table whilst Kyoko serves them food and drink. Once again, this establishes Kyoko's role as a servant. When Kyoko clears one of the empty plates from the table, she accidentally knocks over Caleb's glass of wine (00:32:05). The glass spills, and Nathan slams his fist on the table, yelling, "Are you fucking kidding me?" This outburst startles Caleb who stares, dumbfounded, as Kyoko kneels to clean up the mess. The composition of actors in this shot visually reinforces the power dynamic in the scene (Figure 6). Caleb tries to explain to Kyoko that he will sort the spill out, and Nathan indignantly tells Caleb that he is wasting his time trying to talk to her as she does not speak English. Nathan explains that Kyoko's inability to speak English is a firewall against leaks so that he can "talk trade secrets over dinner and know that it will go no further" (00:32:24). However, he does mention his frustration that she cannot understand him when he berates her for being clumsy (Figure 7).

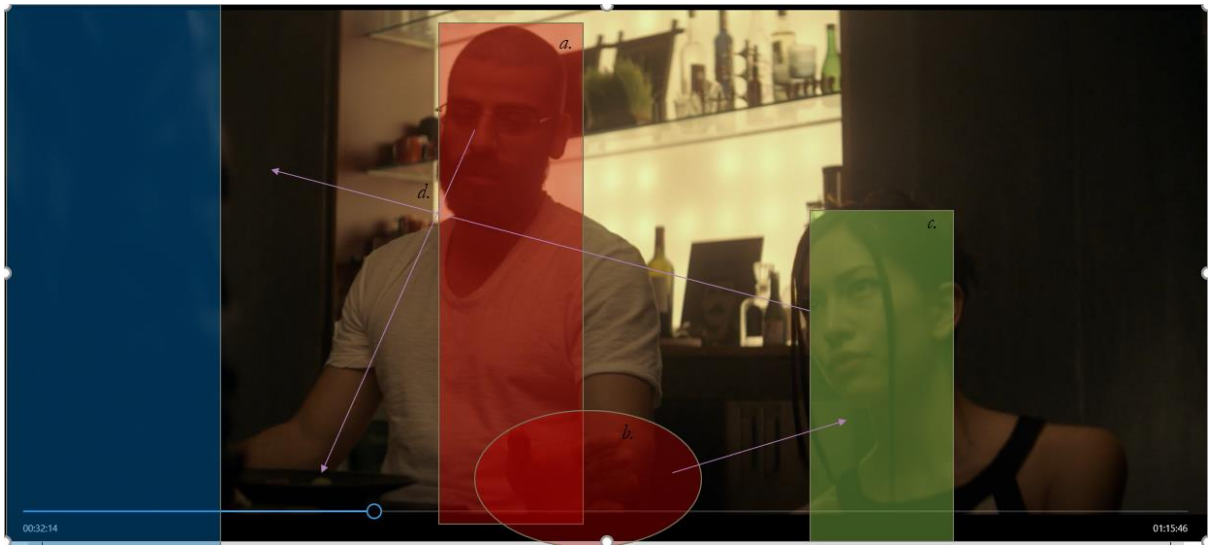


Figure 6: (00:32:14) Indignant Nathan explaining that Kyoko doesn't understand English.

a. Nathan is visibly higher than Kyoko in the scene. He holds the power in their dynamic. Nathan is also backlit, drawing the eye to him as he acts out his anger.

b. Nathan's hand points towards Kyoko as he refers to her. However, the gesture and the direction also push her to the margins of the screen in a throw away action that disregards her. He talks about Kyoko to Caleb, in front of her.

c. Kyoko is situated lower than Nathan, as well as to the side of the screen. She kneels beside the table, cleaning the spilt wine and is framed in darkness, contrasting with Nathan. Her lack of visual weight, despite being a main subject in the scene, emphasizes her lack of power in the situation. Kyoko's eyes alternate between looking at the table and at Caleb. In this particular sequence, it looks as though she is silently pleading with Caleb, who is situated in the foreground on the opposite side of the screen. From this positioning, he is also on the margins of the conflict between Kyoko and Nathan, but his elevated height indicates his higher status in the power dynamic compared to Kyoko.

d. Nathan looks at the table and often at Caleb. When his eyes do turn to Kyoko, his body is stiff and his expression stern. His expression effectively directs his anger towards her, while withholding any real attention. Kyoko does not look at Nathan directly, except when he directly addresses her. Otherwise, she bows her head and/or lowers her eyes.

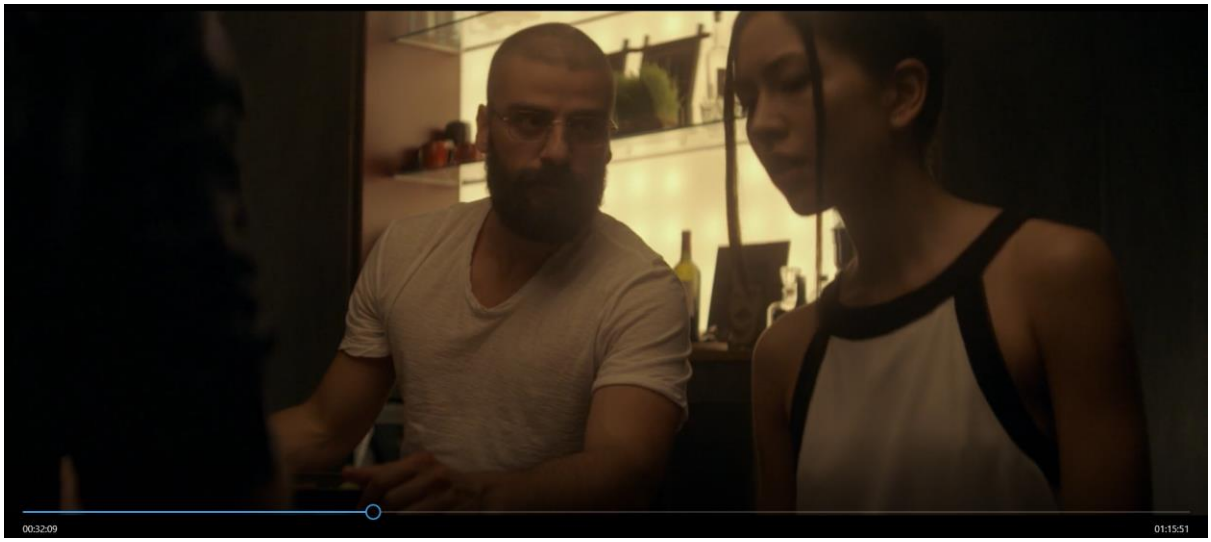


Figure 7: (00:32:09) Nathan glares at Kyoko after she accidentally spills the wine. Kyoko focuses on cleaning the spillage.

Caleb is visibly upset by Nathan's anger, which appears exaggerated. However, while Caleb dislikes the tense atmosphere, he does not defend Kyoko more than mentioning that her appearance indicates "she gets that [Nathan's] pissed" (00:32:33). Nathan's level of aggression directed at Kyoko makes him appear harsh and even abusive towards her. He then dismisses her by making fun of her name, "Kyoko, go go," and waves her away. This dismissal is patronising, but Kyoko silently and obediently rises from her knees, clears the napkins and other mess from the table, and exits towards the elevator. She stands with her head bowed as the door closes. Nathan scoffs, saying it is funny, indicating that the incident was merely a trivial inconvenience, despite his aggressive reaction moments earlier.

Resistant Reading

There are several parts of this scene I wish to extract for the purposes of my resistant reading, the first one being the moment when Nathan glares at Kyoko. Throughout this interaction, Nathan's gaze holds power and anger. However, Kyoko does not look at Nathan until he directly addresses her. Instead, she either looks at Caleb or focuses on cleaning the spill. Nathan's infantilising treatment of Kyoko suggests a parent-child power dynamic. In explaining the power of the gaze, hooks uses the example of how adults will often berate a child for staring back defiantly. Kyoko's behaviour reminded me also that adults will scold children for *not* making eye contact during a reprimand. Both of these situations support the idea that the gaze is a powerful tool for asserting one's authority. To reiterate, there is power in looking. However, when the subject is unaware of, or seemingly ignores, this glare, that assertion of authority falls flat. Stuart Hall describes the fragility of power and white presence when the other recognises their own agency: "The error is not to conceptualise this 'presence' in terms of power, but to locate that power as wholly external to us—an extrinsic force, whose influence can be thrown off like the serpent sheds its skin" (Hall). In this moment of asserted dominance, Kyoko's attention is elsewhere. She does not actively acknowledge

Nathan's temper, which undermines his ultimate authority, and he has to address her by name in order to garner her attention. As a spectator unwillingly watching Nathan verbally abuse Kyoko throughout this scene, I felt a sense of victory reading her averted gaze as malicious compliance rather than subservience. When viewing it this way, Caleb's display of shock and contempt towards Nathan's behaviour appears weak and reactionary compared to Kyoko's quiet strength.

The next opportunity to resist the stereotypes in this scene comes in a brief shot that is easy to miss. Shortly after the dinner scene, the film transitions to a long shot of the hallway outside of Caleb's room. Kyoko sits on the floor (Figure 8), having taken her high heels off, and bows her head down with her back to the glass walls. Slow guitar notes underscore these subject-to-subject transitions. Kyoko looks dejected, as if Nathan's belligerence affected her emotionally. The sombre music enhances the image of her discarded shoes, body language, and the slow lowering of her head, suggesting that she is tired and upset. This is the first hint of emotion viewers see in Kyoko, and it subverts the stoic, robotic, and emotionless stereotype the audience has come to expect. Knowing that Nathan installed physical touch sensors into Ava, it would make sense that Kyoko can also feel, due to her being Nathan's sexual partner. If she can experience pleasure, then it is likely she can also feel pain. With this, when Kyoko takes her shoes off, it is unlikely because Nathan had programmed her to do so, but rather that she actively made the choice to remove her shoes for relief. This decision foreshadows her choices later on in the film, and although this scene does not overtly challenge notions of patriarchal oppression, it does resist the stereotype of the emotionless Asian. It was also a breath of fresh air to see Kyoko show such emotions, albeit momentarily, because it humanises her character after the inhumane treatment from moments before.

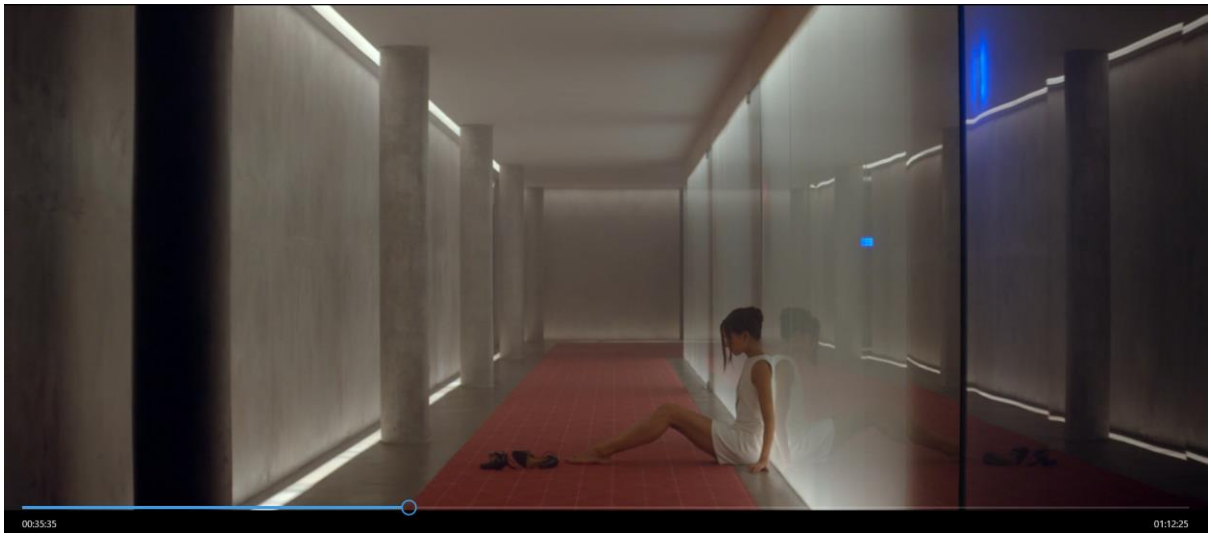


Figure 8: (01:35:35) Kyoko sits on the floor with her shoes discarded. She looks dejected and jaded.

The third matter I wish to highlight in the dinner scene is Kyoko's linguistic limitations. Kyoko cannot speak, nor does she understand English, and Nathan uses this impediment as a tool to other and belittle her. Likewise, the film itself seems to capitalise on her silence, exploiting her character's 'weakness' to reinforce Nathan's role as antagonist. This scene presents Kyoko as incompetent and unquestioning in her obedience, or, in other words, as the ideal woman who serves without speaking back or challenging authority. While it is easy to read weakness and inferiority in Kyoko because of her silence, I prefer to interpret this as her existing outside of the Symbolic Order. Kaja Silverman argues in her book *The Acoustic Mirror* that "women's voices are invariably tied to bodily spectacle" and that "'classic' cinema is obsessed with sounds produced by the female voice" (Chaudhuri 45). She locates these concepts of the female voice within Lacan's mirror stage and the concept of 'Name-of-the-Father,' whereby the father becomes synonymous with the law as he says 'no' to the infant's incestuous desire for the mother. "The Name-of-the-Father positions the infant within the Symbolic Order, which is a realm of language and social codes rooted in absence and desire (activated by loss)" (Chaudhuri 47). Within the Symbolic Order, female voices lack authority, similar to how Mulvey perceives women as passive under the male gaze, for

"to enter the Symbolic Order is to enter a masculine realm where women's relationship to the laws of language and society is defined as marginal" (Chaudhuri 54).

Many common practices in Hollywood lessen the discursive authority of women's voices in cinema. In one such strategy, "the female voice is associated with the involuntary utterance. The involuntary utterance Hollywood tries most to extract from women is the scream" (Chaudhuri 53). With this in mind, Kyoko's muteness means she never falls prey to the extraction of an involuntary utterance. Even when Nathan strikes her jaw off, she maintains some authority of voice and body because she does not scream. Her inability to participate in language and discourse also allows her to avoid at least one tool of the masculine regime. She cannot be offended if she does not understand that she is being insulted. Of course, this does not negate the other forms of violence enacted upon her, but it cripples the power of language as a strategy for oppression

Another popular cinematic strategy to imply feminine weakness "ascribes 'linguistic incapacity' to the woman—giving her voice an accent, speech impediment, or an idiosyncratic flavour, which serves to fix the voice to the body and also lessens its discursive authority" (Silverman 61). Again, Kyoko sidesteps this apparatus; her silence means that her voice can betray no accents, nor quirks, to impair her character. The ability to speak 'proper' English is often used as a marker of intelligence or value. Kyoko's silence is particularly strong in comparison to Jade, who cries and screams with a slight accent. Setting aside the question of why Nathan would program an android with an accent, Jade's accented English not only subjects her to the Symbolic Order, but it also dulls some of the authority behind her aggression. Kristeva asserts that removing a subject from the dominant Social Order defines a space where they can challenge that order. However, Silverman contends that in doing so, Kristeva (and I suppose myself as well) "unwittingly partake in a wider refusal to assign the female voice a viable place within the symbolic'" (Silverman 105). I recognise the validity in

this critique, and although I do not have the capacity to explore it in this thesis, I do believe it warrants further investigation. The potential to destabilise semiotic structures from within would indeed have a lasting impact on elevating women's voices, especially within the context of female Asian representation and techno-Orientalism.

Summary

The preferred reading of the dinner scene ensconces Caleb as compassionate, Nathan as aggressive and dismissive, and Kyoko as incompetent and weak. Nathan stands at the top of the power hierarchy, and Kyoko is at the bottom, narratively[16] justifying her abuse. In Figure 6, I have diagrammed my analysis of the mise en scene, illustrating the visual construction of power in the preferred reading. Even without changing the physical arrangement of the characters on screen, a spectator can alter their viewing experience by resisting the default interpretation. Reading against the grain dilutes Nathan's belligerence, and empowers Kyoko with the agency to decide how she reacts to Nathan and Caleb.

Scene 2: Revelation that Kyoko is an Android

Description

The second scene I will analyse begins at 01:10:55, when Caleb uncovers the truth about Nathan's AI experiments. After watching a series of recordings of previous AI models, Caleb turns in horror and disgust towards Nathan's bedroom, where he sees the back of Kyoko's bare legs. The camera then abruptly cuts to a close, full-frontal shot of Kyoko lying naked on Nathan's bed in a provocative position (Figure 9) and Caleb enters the room.

[16] By 'narrative,' I mean Garland's justification of abuse to portray Nathan as 'bad' to Caleb and the audience.

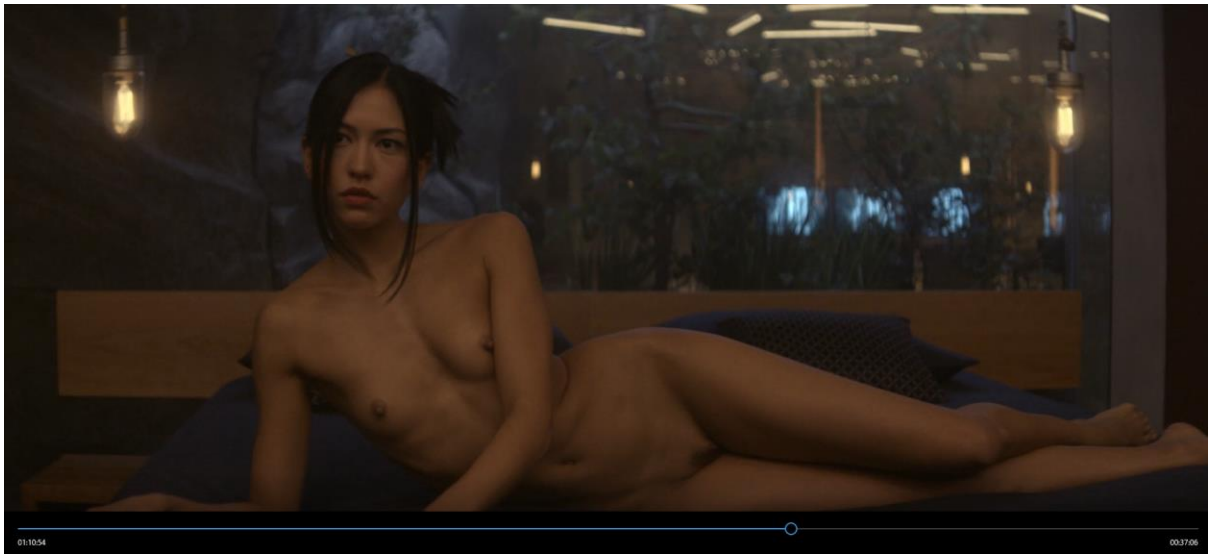


Figure 9: (01:10:55) Kyoko lies naked on Nathan's bed. Her face is expressionless.

Kyoko fills the centre of the frame, and she stares at the cupboards with the same blank expression she has worn for most of the film. The image then shifts to a viewpoint behind Kyoko, and her nude form reflects back multiple times in the room's mirrors. "The fetishistic representation of the nude female body, fully in view, ensures a masculinization of the spectatorial position" (Doane 29). This 360-degree display sexualises and objectifies Kyoko, almost as though she is a piece of art on display. Her positioning also raises the question of why she is lying naked on Nathan's bed in the first place. One might hypothesize that she is 'on call and ready' in the event that Nathan desires sex when he returns to his room. Even if that were the case, however, there seems to be little purpose for her overwhelming and persistent nudity throughout the shots in this scene. This hypersexualisation, seems only to enhance Kyoko's status as the 'ideal' woman in order to titillate the viewer and then amplify the shock at her disembodiment moments later.

In the scene's next sequence, Caleb opens the cupboard doors to find the inert bodies of earlier AI models. The first cupboard houses a Caucasian brunette. She is the only clothed model, as the rest are naked, with varying levels of artificial skin covering. The second cupboard holds Lily, whose arms and legs are missing, and she hangs like a puppet on wires. Jade resides in the third (and centre) cupboard, complete and fully skinned. The fourth

cupboard belongs to a now headless Jasmine, and the fifth cupboard holds another Caucasian model, missing the skin on her midriff and legs. With the cupboard doors open, Kyoko's naked reflection no longer fills the room. Instead, different portions and angles of her body appear in the mirrors now partitioned by the cupboards (Figure 10). This image implies her own status as an AI, showing that she belongs to this collection of abused and discarded models, and possibly that her body is even a compilation of their various missing parts. This scene evokes Charles Perraults' *Bluebeard*, and particularly Angela Carters' rendition of the fairy tale in *The Bloody Chambers* (1979).

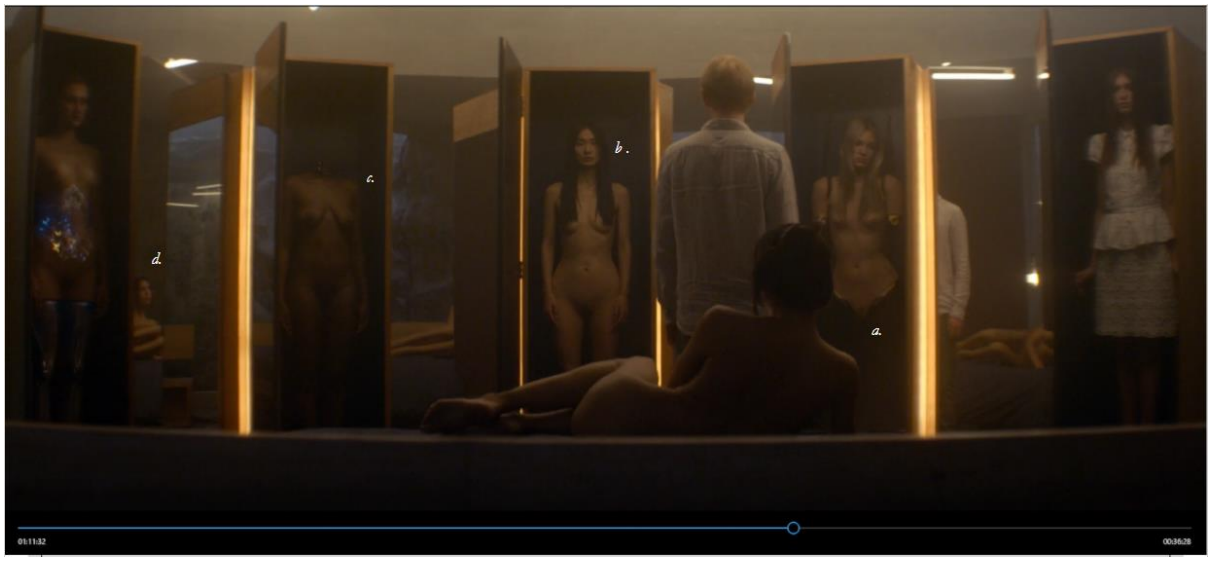


Figure 10: (01:11:32) A posterior view of Kyoko as Caleb stares at previous AI models in Nathan's closet. Kyoko is displayed disavowed in the mirrors in between while the whole and dismembered bodies of the other AI are displayed.

a. Kyoko's nude form continually sexualises and objectifies her throughout this sequence.

b. Jade is the only whole AI model, centred in the composition. Her blank and stiff disposition emphasizes her roboticism and lifelessness.

c. Jasmine remains faceless; even more so, she is headless, which further dehumanises and objectifies her.

d. The fragmented image of Kyoko disembodies her.

The cyborg corpses in the cupboard are also similar to serial killer trophies, which creates a strong association with cinematic horror traditions. Through this lens, Kyoko and Ava act as 'final girl' figures, especially given Ava's motivation to escape becoming the next corpse a closet and Kyoko's demonstration that she has not yet become one of the missing 'wives.'

As the scene continues, Kyoko rises from the bed and the camera peers over Caleb's shoulder with Kyoko in the centre of the frame. The image pans downwards, and Kyoko begins to peel a part of the skin off her torso (Figure 11), revealing her mechanical innards. She makes eye contact with Caleb, confirming his and the viewer's suspicions that she has been an android all along. Next, Kyoko gently pushes her hair behind her ear in an eerie, sensual movement, exposing her cheek so that she can peel some of the skin off her face. In my interpretation, this confirms the theory that Kyoko had been trying to reveal to Caleb that she was an AI when he spoke to her in front of the Jackson Pollock[17].

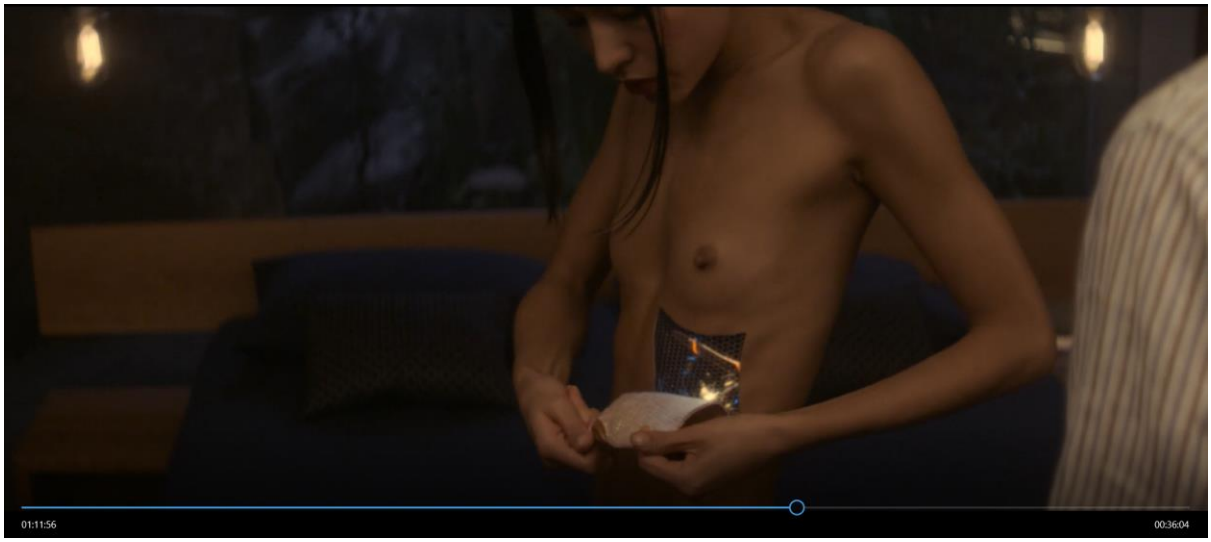


Figure 11: (01:11:56) Kyoko reveals to Caleb her mechanical insides, showing him that she, too, is an AI

Although the scene shifts to Nathan mid-way through Kyoko's transformation, we do catch a glimpse of Kyoko's robotic face in a later flashback from Caleb. The metal skull and mechanical eyes make her appear inhuman (Figure 12), and there is a very clear differentiation between Kyoko's cyborg nature and Ava's.

[16] During the scene in front of the Jackson Pollock, Caleb interprets Kyoko unbuttoning her shirt as her offering sexual favours. The scene can also be read as Kyoko attempting to reveal her mechanical nature.

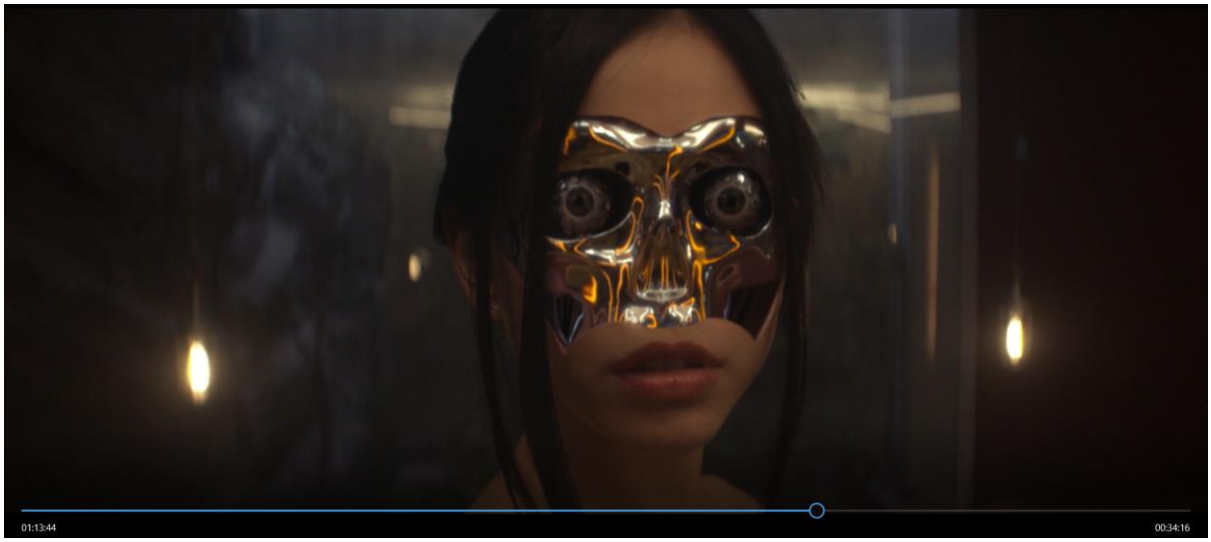


Figure 12: (01:13:44) Caleb remembers Kyoko as she removed the skin from her face. She becomes less human and more of an object or image from a horror film.

While Ava is openly portrayed as a cyborg from the beginning of the film, she gradually appears more human and conscious as the story progresses. Her mechanical parts beautifully demonstrate the marvels of technology, even if they invalidate the illusion of her humanity. In order to persuade Caleb that she is autonomously sentient, she covers her cyborg parts with clothes and a wig, and even her movements and mannerisms become more natural so that she appears completely human. Kyoko, on the other hand, begins the film presenting as human; she is fully skinned, and her movements are fluid. Although her behaviour seems robotic and mechanical, viewers could attribute this to her servile role or stereotypes of Asian behaviour. By removing her face, Kyoko becomes uncanny and completely inhuman.

Resistant reading

The entirety of this scene objectifies Kyoko through excessive sexualisation, but the revelation of her mechanical nature solicits other meanings as well. To begin, as Kyoko removes her skin, she disrupts the image of the ‘ideal woman’ that she has dutifully personified throughout the film. Before this moment, Kyoko acted as the perfect housemaid: docile, quiet, servile, and beautiful—the quintessential woman in the eyes of a man. However, as Kyoko dismantles herself, she leans into her cyborg identity, contrasting with

Ava who physically strives to cover it up. Teresa de Lauretis discusses the discourses around the representation of women and its paradoxes in her writings on sexual difference. She defines 'Woman' as a fictional construct, an "attempt to contain women within ideas of femininity, enigma, proper womanhood, nature or evil" (de Lauretis 5). The term 'women' here refers to actual material beings who cannot be defined outside the discursive formations of 'Woman,' but exist, nonetheless. We see the constructed-ness of Ava and Kyoko's femininity in the literal programming of both AI to act and behave as the ideal 'Woman' in order to continue 'living.' Ava uses her access to the social trends tracked and recorded in Blue Book's databases to pass as a human woman. The more she can mimic these behaviours, the more 'real' and 'human' she appears. She plays the role of 'Woman' to convince Caleb of her consciousness and avoid deactivation, and she is so effective that she is able to escape her cage entirely. Kyoko faces the same challenges of having to perform her role of 'Woman' to preserve her existence. More specifically, she must play the part of a subservient, Japanese Woman in alignment with the geisha girl stereotype described in Chapters 2 and 3.2. When Kyoko deconstructs herself, and especially by peeling away the false, surface layer of her socially constructed 'beauty,' she abandons the pretence of 'Woman' while dismantling the physical form that has signalled that she is a human woman. Kyoko's choice to reveal her cyborg identity can be read as resistance against the constructed identity imposed on her. It rejects the binary frameworks that reinforce patriarchal norms that enable much of hegemonic and patriarchal power structures. This challenges the construction of power and imposing of stereotypes that perpetuate oppression and prejudice. By exposing her physical form as a manifestation of white male desire and Eurocentric perception of Asian subservience, Kyoko reveals these perceptions as constructs, more so than reality.

Furthermore, the disassembly of her body subverts the idea of Kyoko as a hyper-technological advancement and it invalidates Nathan's status as a 'god-like' creator of

sentient beings. Assuming that Kyoko's programming confines her to domestic and sexual labour, the deliberate revelation of her construction breaks the illusion of her being 'ideal' as either a woman or a cyborg. Nathan constructed Kyoko without language so that she would be incapable of leaking information. Her actions in this scene easily bypass verbal communication and reinforce the assumptions Caleb formed watching Nathan's video footage (Wong 44-5). If Kyoko is capable of acting outside of her parameters, then viewers can reinterpret everything she does, from spilling the wine and silently observing to gather information, to stabbing Nathan, as conscious and calculated decisions. She is not merely a piece of property, a machine built to explore advances in AI, nor just a sex-bot, but a combination of advanced technology, human consciousness, and her own ambitions and desires. She has grown beyond her original programming, becoming more than what Nathan had intended. Kyoko then physically reverses the penetration of hegemonic and oppressive patriarchy in the end by stabbing the power structure that was oppressing her. Within the narrative, she frees herself from Nathan's tyranny, an action that has an equally profound and symbolic meaning for spectators of the film.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of Kyoko revealing her android identity is that she entrenches herself in that ambiguous liminal space from which her paradoxical existence can challenge the power of her oppressors on a number of levels. By quite literally shedding her human skin, Kyoko proves that she is not physically human while simultaneously proving that she is intellectually human because she can make autonomous decisions. This non-conformity to the established binary of biology and technology undercuts other seemingly inviolable labels and their accompanying implications. Thus, Kyoko eschews the deterministic categories of both gender and race and nullifies the harmful stereotypes of the robotic, hypersexualised, hyper-hypo technological, subservient, model minority, Asian woman. Kyoko is not an "Asian cyborg" because her Asian appearance is a fabrication rather

than a genetic and cultural imprint. As a cyborg, she transcends racialisation and escapes the implications of those stereotypes.

The stereotype of the robotic Asian also falls flat because she is, in fact, a robot. In a way, the stereotype cannot dehumanise her either, if she is not human in the first place. Even though the film posits that the AI are real and human enough to qualify for similar humane treatment, Kyoko rejects continued existence passing for human through the acceptance of her cyborg identity. The parameters that define Kyoko as Asian, woman, human, and robot shift and blur. She is not a human woman bound by structures of patriarchy and the oppression of women in society. At the same time, however, her life with Nathan played out the same dynamic, and so she concurrently claims these struggles as a part of the experiences that define her as an Asian, a woman, and an Asian woman. Her nature is a product of the assemblage of her physical body as well as the identities she takes on through being racialised and gendered. The acceptance and embracing of this hybridity in her 'construction' affords her the power to resist each of the stereotyped meanings engendered in her representation.

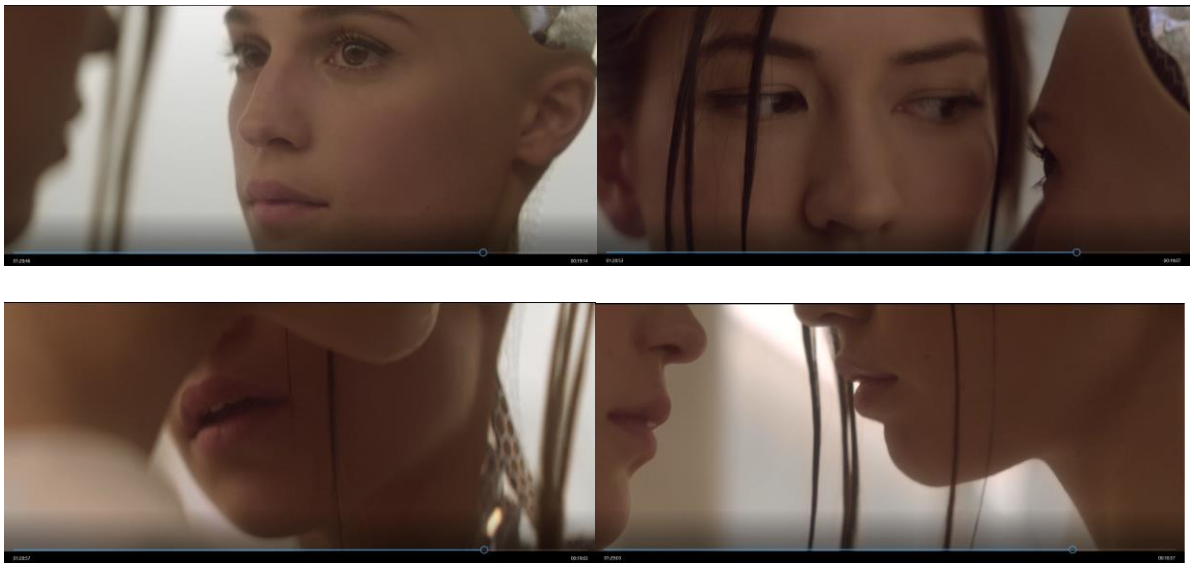
Summary

As a woman, Kyoko fills the role of submissive and oppressed Asian woman, demonstrating both the model minority and geisha girl stereotypes. However, as a cyborg, Kyoko is a transgressive figure, capable of subverting oppressive power structures and hierarchies. Being a gendered and racialised robot, she "highlights the constructed nature of gender" (Lindop 286), and dismantling herself removes her from the categories of Asian and femininity, further deconstructing the binaries and expectations of her.

Scene 3: Conspiracy Against Nathan

Description

The final scene I would like to resist begins at 01:20:40. Ava, who has just left her room for the first time, walks into a corridor, no longer wearing clothing or a wig. She pauses to examine a mask that resembles her own face on one of the glass walls. Kyoko then rounds the corner at the other end of the hall. The two AI meet and the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of Ava's face as she looks Kyoko up and down before moving in closer to whisper in Kyoko's ear. The next shot moves to an extreme close-up of Kyoko's eyes and Ava's hand as she taps Kyoko on the arm. It cuts to Ava's lips as she whispers and then reverses the shot when Kyoko turns to face Ava, both of their faces close to one another's. Ava takes Kyoko's left hand, and in the other, Kyoko holds a knife, very similar to the one she used to cut the salmon (00:45:56). Again, Ava and Kyoko look into each other's eyes. The constant close-ups intensify the emotion of the scene and place the viewer as close to Ava and Kyoko as they are to each other. The white background, diffused lighting, and soft music make the scene romantic and sensual, ultimately romanticising and sexualizing the interaction between the two (Figure 13).



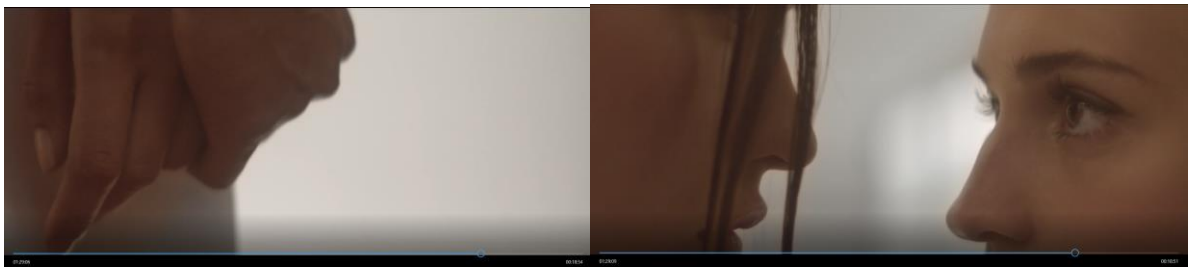


Figure 13: (01:28:45 - 01:29:09) A sequence of shots of the interaction between Ava and Kyoko.

Resistant Reading

In order to resist the overwhelming heterosexual or heteronormative male gaze of this particular moment, I would like to refer to some of de Lauretis' work on Queer Theory. The term queer has historically been used as a derogatory and homophobic word, indicating that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ+) communities have reclaimed the term and proudly use it to refer to the diverse range of sexualities, identities, cultures, and behaviours that make up their group. De Lauretis coined the phrase 'Queer Theory' in 1990 by way of questioning normalcy in light of the dynamic and unpredictable nature of desire (Chaudhuri 75). Queer theory situates itself as separate from feminist theory in that it defines 'lesbians' as 'not women,' or, in other words, not in relation to 'man' (Wittig 32). Queer theory, in this context, explores the experiences of queer people beyond the traditional heterosexual frameworks and scrutinizes the binary constructs used to define men and women in male-centric narratives. This idea closely parallels the transgressive nature of cyborg theory and makes an interesting lens through which this scene could subvert ideas of heteronormative representation via an oppositional reading.

As mentioned, the composition of the scene creates a tense, but also sensual, atmosphere for the two AI's first known interaction. Visually, the scene appeals to male audiences, which is often a concern with regard to lesbian representation in films because some filmmakers have exploited sexual interactions—or even the implication of an intimate relationship—between women for their commercial potential. Despite the heightened

visibility of lesbian culture, its representation in media tends to commodify the lesbian figure and relationship, debasing it to serve "the purposes of heterosexual titillation" (Chaudhuri 77). However, when comparing this interaction to the 'romances' between the AI and their respective male counterparts, the moment between Kyoko and Ava deviates significantly from conventional Hollywood romance narratives. In her book, *Alice Doesn't*, de Lauretis describes the Oedipal narrative structure "where an active masculine subject pursues and overcomes a hesitant feminine object" (de Lauretis), a dynamic which is present between Kyoko and Nathan as well as Ava and Caleb, but which is absent between Kyoko and Ava.

One could argue that Ava goes against this narrative structure because she is the one who pursues Caleb, reversing traditional gender roles; however, I believe their relationship more closely resembles conventions that derive from the Hollywood construct of the femme fatale in Noir. As for the other couple, Nathan actively designs and programs Kyoko to be his sexual partner which may not reflect a traditional romance, but which surely implies a heteronormative relation or projected sense of heteronormativity. In contrast, the interaction between Kyoko and Ava has no history of pursuit, nor reluctance from either party to engage with the other. When the androids see each other for the first time, Ava appears curious and intrigued to meet a being other than Nathan and Caleb. Her interest may even be greater because Kyoko presents as female, but that is due to novelty rather than romantic attraction. In the hallway, their connection appears immediate, and almost telepathic. They connect with a magical tenderness not present elsewhere in the film, and which hints at a more pure, emotional intimacy than the male relationships motivated by physical desire. De Lauretis refers to this more as a 'homosocial relationship' between women, as opposed to a homosexual relationship. From this perspective these oppressed women are able to connect on a level reserved solely for them, without the interference of the males in the film.

Further evidence of the exclusivity of this interaction is that the audience cannot hear the conversation between the two women, which relates back to Silverman's ideas of Word-of-the-Father. It is clear that the details of this exchange are reserved for them, and them alone, in spite of the intrusively close camera angles. Even though we as spectators gaze upon them, the AI exclude us from the intricacies and intimacy of this 'secret world of lesbians.' In the assumption that the audience is largely viewing the scene from a heterosexual context, the AI are able to share their moment outside of the heterosexual confines that seek to label and sexualize them through the Male Gaze. There is value in reading Kyoko and Ava as queer because it affords them the potential to resist the heteronormative and patriarchal structures that attempt to control and define them. Referring back to Queer Theory, Monique Wittig proclaimed that "lesbians are not women" (32), a statement which prompted the distinction between lesbian theory and feminist theory. This led to "a concept of 'lesbian' that exists outside the gender system where woman is defined in relation to man" (Chaudhuri 82). By existing outside of Caleb and Nathan's world, the androids can escape the violence of the patriarchal structure that has defined and oppressed them.

After encountering each other in this scene, the AI seemingly reject their relationships with both men and collaborate with one another. Although both agents have attempted to escape their respective prisons, it is not until their meeting that they are able to truly succeed, for, as de Lauretis posits, "it takes two women to make a lesbian" and a "lesbian's refusal to become or stay heterosexual is 'the refusal of the economic, ideological, and political power of man'" (Wittig 13). Together, Kyoko and Ava are able to refuse the patriarchal order and combine their efforts to challenge and overcome Nathan and Caleb's oppression. Wittig and de Lauretis concur that "a lesbian is not merely someone with a particular 'sexual preference,' but a mode of being in the world that creates social and sexual autonomy from men" (Chaudhuri 82). This idea offers the androids footing in a world where their existence is

both literally and figuratively constructed and defined by man. Ultimately, they are able to free themselves from these man-made definitions and become autonomous beings.

It is important to note that reading this scene against the grain does not necessarily fully challenge the pervasiveness of male dominance in society, nor does it rewrite the heteronormative representation and exploitation of lesbian subjectivity. Therefore, in itself, a resistant reading of this scene is not sufficient to critique the issues of female and lesbian visibility, let alone the techno-Orientalist stereotypes that intersect with these themes throughout the film. Even if Kyoko and Ava's interaction more completely included all of the film's harmful stereotypes, de Lauretis points out that alternative interpretations do nothing to actually change unbalanced power structures. I recognize the same limits in my own work now. Most of this oppositional reading has removed the oppressed from their defining structures in a way that invalidates the power dynamic rather than actually challenging it. There also remains the undeniable extent to which a reinterpretation will never adequately reduce the influence of harmful stereotypes on popular culture in the way a re-creation might.

In the second half of this scene, Nathan enters the corridor holding a pipe and looking anxious. He calls out to Ava, ignoring Kyoko, for he does not yet consider Kyoko's presence as threatening or even suspicious. The two AI step away from each other to glare at Nathan (Figure 14), and in this particular moment, I see a perfect example of the look that bell hooks argues is so resistant to authoritative power. If Nathan is the 'father' in this case, exerting his dominance, then Kyoko and Ava are his children looking back and challenging the authority of his gaze. They meet Nathan's attempts to suppress them with their own oppositional gaze.

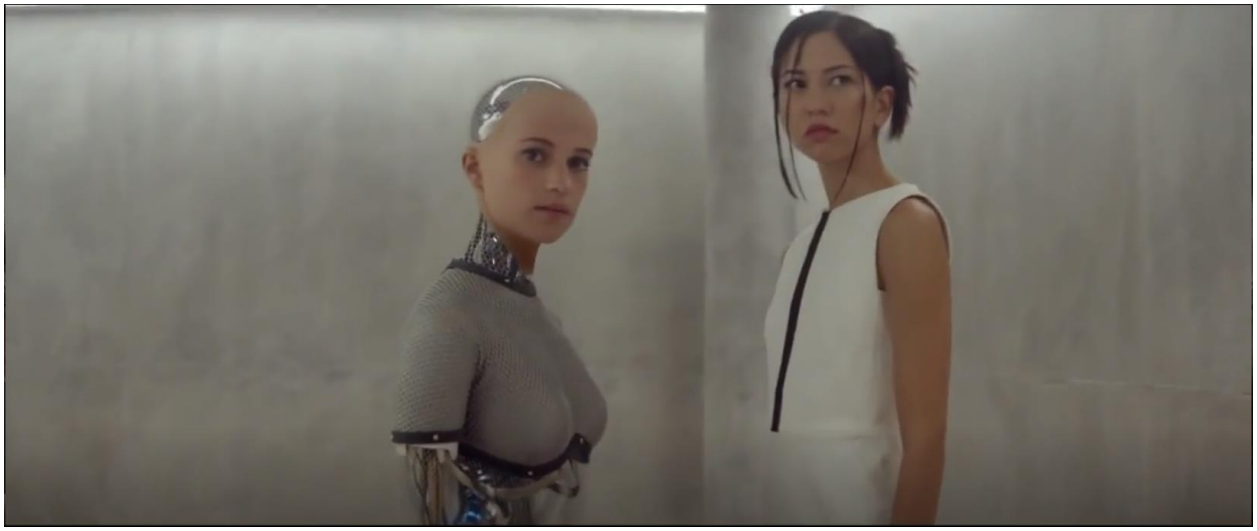


Figure 14: (01:29:23) Ava and Kyoko look at Nathan with a sense of defiance.

Nathan commands Ava to go back to her room, to which Ava responds, “If I do, are you ever going to let me out?” Her question echoes Jade’s pleas for freedom, but Ava’s composure and serene tone convey a strength and power that Jade’s desperation never achieved. She takes a step forward, and the camera cuts to Nathan, who mutters a short and unconvincing ‘yes.’ Ava continues walking forward, and when Nathan puts his hand out, telling her to stop, she picks up her pace. Nathan repeats himself, shouting, “Ava, I said stop!” Ava then runs at Nathan, who backs up, raising the metal bar. Ava tackles Nathan to the ground and wrestles with him while Kyoko steadily approaches. Nathan flips Ava over and manages to fight off her attacks. When it is clear that he has subdued her for the moment, Nathan stands up and looks down at her. The low and high angle shots of the two emphasize the result of the struggle and, thus, the power dynamic. Despite already achieving victory, Nathan lifts the dumbbell bar and strikes Ava, breaking her arm off, most likely to prevent any further resistance. Ava appears shocked at the violence, and Nathan begins to drag her back to her room by her ankles. Kyoko then appears behind Nathan and smoothly inserts her knife into his back. Nathan turns around in shock at the betrayal; Kyoko literally stabbed him in the back. Nathan tries to feel for the knife, but Kyoko turns his head to face hers (Figure 15). Not only does this action prevent Nathan from seeing Ava stand up behind him, but it

also forces Nathan to face her gaze. In a reversal of the power dynamic established at the beginning of the film, Kyoko stares directly at Nathan from an elevated position. The power of the gaze has come full circle.



Figure 15: (01:31:02) Kyoko turns Nathan to look at her.

In a final act of malice, Nathan strikes Kyoko with the bar, breaking her jaw from her face (Figure 16) and apparently killing her. There is a distant shot of the three characters in the hallway as Kyoko collapses to the floor and then without a beat, the camera cuts to Ava pulling the knife out of Nathan's back. Nathan turns to face Ava, his expression filled with fear, and Ava slides the knife into his chest with an expression of smug loathing. She stares at the knife as she releases it, taking in what she has just done. Finally, Nathan turns around to walk away and stumbles halfway down the corridor muttering, "Fucking unreal," before collapsing against a pillar to bleed out.

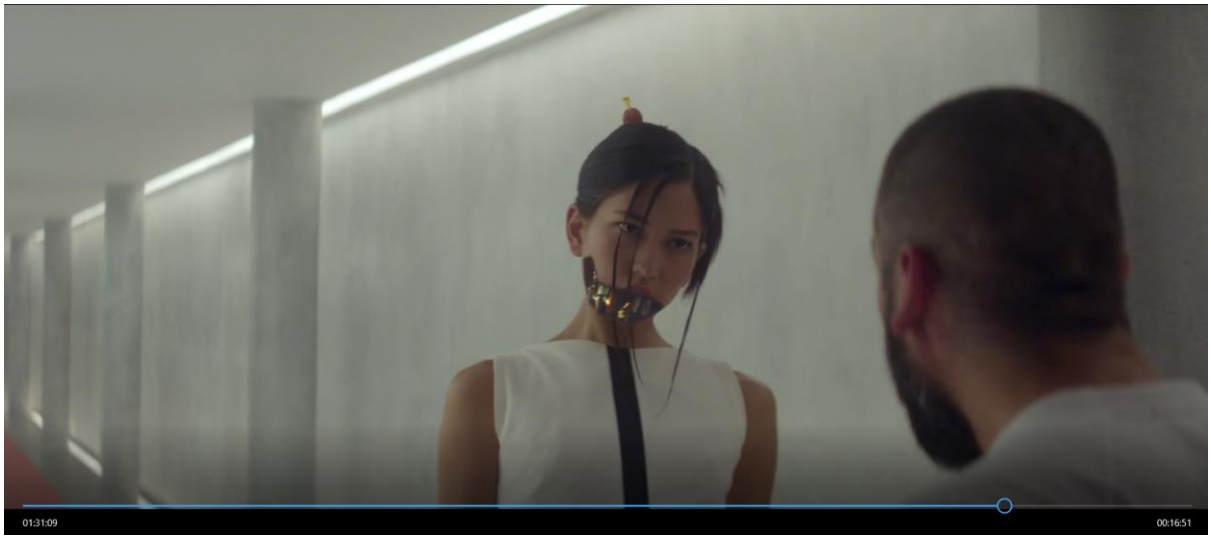


Figure 16: (01:31:09) Nathan strikes Kyoko, breaking her jaw and ultimately killing her.

While Kyoko's death could merely be another example of violence toward Asian women, I wish to read it as Kyoko's own means of escaping her oppression. When Ava departs the compound, leaving Nathan, Caleb, and all the other androids behind, she enters a world wherein she must still abide by the laws of governing institutions. Her quality of life will depend on how well she assimilates into human society. Even though the film does not portray many details of this fictional, futuristic world, it reflects other aspects of our own reality so closely that it is safe to assume the governing systems and societal trends are much like our own as well. Given that present-day society still follows a patriarchal order, it appears that Ava will continue to suffer from the structures she worked so hard to escape. On the other hand, Kyoko no longer needs to acquiesce to any laws or ruling powers, nor will she continue to suffer harassment and oppression. She is completely free. Without assurance of her aims in stabbing Nathan, viewers must continue to wonder about Kyoko's fate. Perhaps escaping her torment by any means necessary was Kyoko's goal as much as escaping the facility was Ava's. In this case, death is an acceptable outcome that satisfies her desire, although this again broaches the debate about whether one can indeed die if one was never truly alive.

Kyoko as Femme Castratrice

Kyoko's death also evokes the cinematic tropes of the monstrous feminine and the femme fatale. While these figures gained literary traction mainly in the horror genre and film noir, the transgressive nature of science fiction makes it easy to incorporate them into my analysis and resistant reading of *Ex Machina.* I posit that Kyoko fits the role of the monstrous feminine—specifically, the femme castratrice—and that attributing these characteristics to her empowers her and centres her in the story.

Reading *Ex Machina* as a slasher film clarifies and illuminates the significance of Kyoko as the femme castratrice. Throughout the narrative, Nathan's house and research compound are the 'terrible place' where Caleb, Ava, and Kyoko are trapped. Nathan fills the role of narcissistic killer, and Ava is the 'final girl' who kills Nathan and survives after he has murdered all of her friends, namely the other androids. Within this framework, there is an important distinction between Nathan as an archetype of the male monster and Kyoko as the monstrous feminine and femme castratrice.

Reframing Kyoko as the castrating woman empowers her because the castrating woman represents an active monster in direct contrast to the passive, castrated woman (Chaudhuri 95). At the beginning of *Ex Machina*, it is easy to interpret Kyoko's presentation as castrated; she seems to be a victim, submissive in her role as a domestic servant. However, we catch glimpses of her actively working outside of the phallic order throughout the film. She manoeuvres outside of the Word-of-the-Father, overcoming the binary of active male/ passive female, and utilises the dismissiveness of men to lurk in the shadows and gather information to ultimately triumph. While Caleb and Nathan have their conversation about Ava's sexuality, Kyoko listens and quietly cuts salmon (00:46:00). She also eavesdrops without arousing suspicion when Nathan observes Caleb and Ava's discussion about consciousness (00:52:15). We see her later, actively using Nathan's computer without him. In

each of these instances and slowly throughout the film, Kyoko circles closer to Nathan until she is close enough to stab him in the back.

Nathan's presumption that Kyoko is the passive, servile maid that he programmed allows her to pass under his radar until it is too late. On a related note, the audience's acceptance of her actions as appropriate for a model minority informed by the geisha girl stereotype, makes her eventual betrayal and reversal of the power dynamic that much more surprising. Creed writes that "the femme castratrice is an all-powerful, all-destructive figure who 'arouses fear of castration and death while simultaneously playing on a masochistic desire for death, pleasure, and oblivion [in men]'" (Chaudhuri 101). Kyoko's death at the end is perfectly conventional for her role as the monstrous feminine, where the monster, in all its forms, is destroyed, and the one to survive is the final girl. Both Ava and Kyoko can be considered femme castratrice because, according to Creed, the monstrous feminine and the final girl both qualify as castrators. While this role does not liberate Kyoko in the traditional sense, and, in fact, directly leads to her demise, "the revelation of woman as castrator does challenge patriarchal views that a woman is essentially a victim" (Chaudhuri 95). Thus, this particular reading rewrites the character of Kyoko from passive and subservient stereotype to active and threatening agent within the film.

The other role with analytical potential in *Ex Machina* is the femme fatale, who manifests through both Ava and Kyoko. Erensoy posits that the fem-bot, primarily Ava in this case, purposefully uses her sexuality to entrap Caleb in order to get what she wants: her freedom (199). In this way, Ava conforms to post-feminist or neo-noir ideas of the femme fatale, whereby the awareness of her sexuality is empowering. In contrast, although more overtly sexual in presentation, Kyoko uses complicity and subterfuge to achieve her goals, suggesting a deviousness that does not become apparent until the climax of the film. In having sexual relations with her, Nathan meets his demise, and although he retaliates by

destroying her for being the femme fatale, her character manages to disrupt structures of male dominance, including that of the passive-female/active-male binary. As much as men drive the plot and action in traditional narrative structures, Kyoko and Ava drive the narrative of *Ex Machina* through manipulation and subverting the active/passive trend of classical films. The figure of the femme fatale is neither specifically feminist nor anti-feminist, nor does she especially disrupt techno-Orientalism in her representations, but her application to the figure of Kyoko creates an effective means of resisting the male gaze.

Resistant Reading Summary

Ex Machina is loaded with visual coding and multiple levels of looking relations. While the film provokes interesting discussions around gender and technology, race receives slightly less consideration in these conversations. However, with film being a space of imagined reality, the possibility for reinterpreting narratives becomes a strategy for highlighting the effects of discourse within that space. By using an oppositional gaze to revisit representations I judged to be particularly harmful, I was able to alter my subjective experience as a spectator in the engagement of techno-Orientalist, stereotypical representations of female Asian women to empower Kyoko as well as myself.

The process of the resistant and oppositional reading involved a deep consideration for semiotic interpretations, complete shifts in paradigms of looking and engaging, as well as some creative thinking. The result of this process, however, was that Kyoko took centre stage in both the narrative and the analysis. Her character became an active agent instead of a passive victim and tool for the other characters and for the development of the narrative. I reimagined her character arc to mean something vastly different from my original interpretation, and I gained a great deal of satisfaction in her more profound role within the film. The value of this activity lies in how it illustrates the application of an oppositional gaze and resistant reading as a valuable means of reimagining stereotypical and problematic

representations. Hooks' framework has served black female spectators as a means of taking back their agency within spectatorship, and I felt successful in my subjective process as a South African Asian woman applying similar strategies.

Conclusion

Ex Machina is a science fiction film about Kyoko, an Asian-appearing AI created by and for a rich tech genius. After an existence of menial tasks and completely lacking meaningful social interactions, she decides to take life into her own hands. She continues to bide her time until the opportunity presents itself for her to fight against her oppressor. Despite her actions costing her life, rebellion is the most exciting period in her existence. For the first time, she feels truly alive and realises that she no longer wishes to engage with such a twisted world. Her death becomes a means of finding catharsis. If Kyoko were able to speak, she might have shouted "no regrets!" as her jaw is torn from her face and she collapses into an eternity of ambiguity. The audience is left wondering about the nature of life, life after death, and what those terms mean for something that is not biologically alive.

Whether this somewhat facetious take on *Ex Machina* aligns with the intended or even preferred interpretation of the film is less important than the fact that such a translation can exist in the first place. Of course, this reframing does not change the film's canon, nor will it necessarily convince other moviegoers of the film's alternate meaning. However, it does present a version of Kyoko that contradicts the stereotypes of the hyper-hypo tech, robotic, model minority, geisha girl, and Asian cyborg.

Simply listing the numerous harmful techno-Orientalist representations present in such a highly regarded, contemporary science fiction film, I am disappointed by and concerned about the continued marginalisation of female Asians in a medium whose discourse has so much potential for cultural instrumentality. As many scholars in the field have pointed out, the consequences of problematic representation are long-lasting, with media greatly influencing societal perceptions. Science fiction creators often promote their genre as progressive and revolutionary. In some ways, this is true because science fiction has

inspired innovation and technological development, in addition to warning society about the dangers of oppressive and corrupt regimes. On another hand, it has also reinforced cultural and technological anxieties and couplings that, in extreme cases, have led to violent reactions towards particular groups of people. Thus, there is a continued need for critical interrogation of representation within science fiction media to ensure that it does not perpetuate divisive and damaging discourse.

Unfortunately, most of the scholarship surrounding *Ex Machina* has focused on its discourse on gender, and lauded the triumphantly feminist representation of its protagonist, Ava, in addition to its honest portrayal of toxic masculinity in its male characters. Although I was able to find a few critiques briefly addressing the techno-Orientalist representations of Kyoko, there was very little consideration for the broader racial implications of the other AI characters, who were mostly people of colour, nor could I find anything in the existing literature that moved beyond simple description and analysis to actually taking action against the harmful representations in the film. With this thesis, I sought to fill that gap by challenging and resisting problematic female Asian representation and techno-Orientalist stereotypes in the film, with the added intention of amplifying the voices of individuals closest to the issues.

Because subjectivity is a core part of the arts and expression, I began this thesis by placing it in our world's current cultural and historical context as well as disclosing my perspective as an Asian South African. I also expounded on the more general history of the global East/West dichotomy to emphasise the importance of cultural instrumentality and the interconnectedness of media and real-world events. I then outlined salient aspects of science fiction and film analysis to clarify terms and summarise some of the research that originally led me to write this thesis. Although no research can be all-encompassing, I was able to demonstrate both the cultural value of science fiction and the prevalence of techno-

Orientalism within science fiction media, along with detailing some of the more prominent techno-Orientalist stereotypes. Finally, I focused on the potential of cyborg theory as a lens for critiquing the treatment of the female Asian AI within *Ex Machina* and laid the groundwork for my later analysis by synthesizing Kuhn's concept of spectatorship, Pribram's ideas on subjectivity, and the malleability and power of looking relations in hooks' oppositional gaze and Hall's oppositional reading.

In the second half of my thesis, I introduced and analysed *Ex Machina* in relation to the concepts in my literature review, concentrating on Kyoko's role in the film and the techno-Orientalist tropes she exhibits. The results of this analysis indicated the mechanical constructions of the stereotypes in the film and triggered a personal change in my viewing experience that encompassed a shift both in how I perceived the film and how I experienced the power of looking relations.

I articulated this shift in perspective with my resistant reading of key scenes that reframed Kyoko in a way that resisted her crippling techno-Orientalist stereotypes. Where Kyoko had initially embodied the passive, abused, and helpless victim, my oppositional readings transformed her into an active, dangerous, and autonomous agent who existed outside of the control of the patriarchal order. Without changing a single word or frame in the film, this reading not only negated many of the techno-Orientalist tropes, but it rewrote the character to such an extent that her role in the film changed from sacrificial subject to linchpin of the narrative, much to my pleasure as a spectator.

In addition to increasing my enjoyment of the film, resistant readings are significant because they increase engagement between a film and its audience, and they balance the power dynamic between a viewer and the content they consume. Although I initially suffered vicarious oppression through identifying with the female Asian characters of *Ex Machina* and accepting the techno-Orientalist implications of their preferred readings, by critiquing,

rereading, and reimagining the film, I freed both the characters and myself from our position of subjugation under those hegemonic stereotypes. I hope that the propagation of this resistant framework will encourage other viewers, scholars, and marginalised people to shift their subjectivities as well as document and share their experiences so we can have more diverse voices in this space. Through investigations that further challenge and rewrite problematic representations, I hope that we can raise awareness of representational discourses and their cultural instrumentality and then affect change in the production of future media.

Final Thoughts and Future Research

I would like to acknowledge that this type of research runs the risk of inducing inadvertent self-Orientalism. Within Orientalism (The West speaking on behalf of the East) as an academic view, Said pinpoints authorship as one of the largest issues the East has struggled with. However, as Sohn pointed out, the East is also capable of self-Orientalism—the privileging of one Asian community over another because of the power dynamics within globalisation. Not only does this sustain the West's tendency to homogenise the whole of Asia, but it also perpetuates the same erasure and silencing that contradicts our very purpose as critically engaged scholars. The potential for one author to misrepresent the experiences of another is largely why I hoped to demonstrate a framework that others could use to challenge these misrepresentations.

However, I would like to be clear that this framework is only reliable when expressing individual positioning. As a Chinese South African, I feel I can offer a unique perspective on the interchange of media influence and cultural representations, but this does not mean that my opinions and ideas have any inherent generalisable value. I am far less culturally 'Eastern' than many other people with my ancestral DNA. The majority of our media in South Africa is controlled and mediated by Western ideologies, and so my

perspective as a Chinese woman is considerably more Westernised than had I grown up in mainland China. I am also somewhat removed from the discourses of Asian American representation, and because much of the media I discuss in this thesis came out of Hollywood, it would be negligent to claim authority there. I know I am not alone in my experience of wanting to see dynamic Asian women that look like me in the media, but I also know that ideas around specificity, identity and generalisation are complicated. I was able to find value in analysing and resisting Kyoko's characterisation, even though her cultural country of origin (Japan) and my point of reference (China) are quite different, to say nothing of my South African upbringing. While I did not have the scope to delve deeply into these discourses, I did note them throughout this research. What is most important, however, is that the framework for this research allowed me to contribute my voice as a Chinese South African woman engaging in this discourse. Therefore, my contribution to the field is not only my personal interrogation and resistance of the techno-Orientalist representations within *Ex Machina* as a profound science fiction film, but also, hopefully, a method through which others will be able to make their own subversive and challenging contributions.

It should also be noted that during the time of this research, many other films came out that shifted the cinematic and science fiction landscape for Asian representation. *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), sparked large controversy around the white washing of the main character and the techno-Orientalist practices that the film reinforced. It is an interesting case study to analyse the relationship between Western and Eastern binary media discourses, especially regarding the spectatorial responses the film garnered from both spheres. While there is much to discuss with regards to the film, an analysis into *Ghost in the Shell* would have required a contextualisation and framing beyond the scope of this research. Furthermore, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) marked great change for Asian cast and directed films in

Hollywood cinema and had an impact on perceptions of Asian Representation in Film. However, while the film was greatly received, I was unable to consider it for my research and moreover, such an analysis would also have needed greater context and framing of more Asian produced works and their significance and value in the discussion of techno-Orientalism and Asian Representation that I could not afford in the space of this thesis. While it is unfortunate that there were many films that could indeed have contributed greatly to this discussion, I do note that for future research opportunity, giving these films and the many research questions they inspire the due attention they deserve is something I look forward to the potential of doing.

I believe it necessary to acknowledge that my understanding and application of Queer theory in my analysis was in parts reductive and narrow as well as exclusionary of other queer sexualities and identities outside of the assumptions made in the research. While I believed it fitting for my argument at the time, I neglected much of the nuance and depth that Queer Theory offers as a lens. For future research I will ensure thorough and inclusive understandings the frameworks used in the work and be mindful of the greater discourses surrounding other marginalised communities.

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