Vanderbilt University

Gendering the Techno-Orient:

The Asian Woman in Speculative Fiction

Melanie Lu

English & Asian Studies Honors Thesis

Advisors: Helen Shin & Mark Wollaeger

April 27th, 2021

**Introduction**

On March 16, 2021, Robert Aaron Long, a 21-year-old white man, allegedly shot and killed eight people at three massage parlors in the city of Atlanta, Georgia, United States. Six of these victims were women of Asian descent. Long claimed that the shootings were not racially motivated, and that instead he was eliminating temptations to his sex addiction. Captain Jay Baker of the local sheriff's office explained this during a press conference after the shooting, adding that the suspect had "a really bad day" (Chapell et al., "Official"). Long was ultimately not charged with a hate crime.

Beyond the longstanding problems of white supremacy and police unaccountability that have historically incited such tragedies, it is especially enraging to see the narratives surrounding the Atlanta shootings refuse to acknowledge the intersections between racism and misogyny that have haunted Asian women since they first entered the country. The Asian woman is Othered as an exotic object, desirable under the western patriarchal gaze precisely because her race informs the harmful stereotypes attached to her gender: meek, submissive, subservient, sexually exploitable. Race and gender—along with other identity indices such as class, age, and ability— should never be examined in isolation when discussing the multidimensional experiences of lived personhood and being, as well as the ways in which they are misconstrued and misrepresented to systematically disempower and dehumanize marginalized groups.

In this thesis, I enter into this problem space of racial ontology and its gendered dimensions by investigating the figure of the Asian woman as she is portrayed in popular culture and in particular speculative fiction (SF), tracing the structural mechanisms at work in the collective imagination that combine to construct this heavily racialized and gendered being. I begin with a brief historical survey of techno-Orientalism as a re-instantiation of traditional

Saidian Orientalism in the modern context of global information capitalism. Borrowing from Anne Anlin Cheng's framework of Ornamentalism, I analyze Alex Garland's 2014 film *Ex Machina* as a case study on how these concepts manifest in western SF texts. I then pivot to Oshii Mamoru's 1995 animation film *Ghost in the Shell* to suggest ways in which the Asian woman's embodied racial identity can be reproduced, reimagined, and renegotiated in Asian narrative spaces. Finally, I turn to the 2018 video game *Return of the Obra Dinn* by Lucas Pope to explore techno-Orientalism within the unique procedural mechanics of gaming. Although one might propose that postmodernist and/or hyper-futurist portrayals typical of SF legitimize the erasure of contemporary discourses of race and gender, I resist these readings by arguing that to posit the emergence of a post-racial world through posthuman ontology or to dismiss racialization as mere aesthetic stylization loses sight of the fact that race is heavily intertwined with technology and can itself constitute a form of technology.

**From Orientalism to Techno-Orientalism**

In Edward Said's seminal 1978 work *Orientalism*, the eponymous term was coined to critically describe the style of thought that has come to characterize the consequential perspective of the Eurowestern "Occident" on the East, or "Orient." Drawing upon a large body of historical and literary writings, Said demonstrates how the western world typically perceives the Orient as ancient but primitive, supine yet violent, materially sumptuous but morally degenerate. A mysterious land of exotic people and objects, the East is uniformly reduced to a monolithic image of backwardness, excess, and passivity. Orientalism is unconcerned with obligations of cultural authenticity, nor is it tethered to historical or geopolitical specificities. Indeed, instead of the immediate presence of the "real" Orient, Orientalism lays claim to truth but delivers mediated access to Asia and Asians as highly partial representations and reconstructions (Said 21).

Most importantly, Said recognizes Orientalism to be a discursive practice informed by the historical and material realities of western colonialism and imperialism. In other words, Orientalism is not merely a collection of inaccurate ideas or a misguided field of study; rather, it has ubiquitous manifestations within western cultural discourse, and it is systemically enabled and upheld by various socio-economic and ideological institutions that consolidate imperial power through a vast network of Orientalist practices. Citing Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, Said notes that Orientalism is ultimately "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient," an expression of the Occident's power to define the Orient while denying the latter's ability to speak for itself (Said 3). By viewing the East through arbitrary binary differences, the west renders Asia as Other so that its own perceived superiority—biological and cultural—is effectively reinforced: if the western subject is

modern, masculine, rational, and moral, it is only because the Oriental Other is constructed in contrast as premodern, feminine, fanatic, and irreligious.

In the decades that have passed since Said's coinage of the term, reinstantiations of Orientalism continue to permeate the western cultural imagination. Said is correct to preface his work with the question of "how Orientalism transmit[s] or reproduce[s] itself from one epoch to another" (Said 15): while the 19th and early 20th century saw the flourishing of yellow peril propaganda that predictably Otherizes Asia as backwards and depraved, the late 20th century bore witness to the invention and propagation of a particular form of Orientalism—one preoccupied with racial significations of technology. Whether it is Sax Rohmer's monstrous creation of evil scientist Fu Manchu, or the strangely familiar Asiatic aesthetics in dystopian works such as Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner* and William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, the west has become increasingly concerned with Asia's role in driving the technological future. Techno-Orientalism, or high-tech Orientalism, thus describes the prevailing tendency in textual and visual productions to imagine Asia and Asians in hyper-technologized and/or futuristic terms (Roh et al. 2). As we shall see, while seemingly reversing the dichotomies between the modern, technological west and the ancient, mystical East originally outlined by Said, techno-Orientalism nevertheless rehearses and adapts the binary logic of racial Othering in ways that call for critical scrutiny and reflection.

Any survey of techno-Orientalism must take into account its modern context of global information capitalism. Even while we are still contending with the massive repercussions of western colonialist and imperialist agendas in Asia, it is undeniable that dominant neoliberal ideology has enabled new forms of hegemony through information and capital exchange networks. As newly industrialized countries in Asia quickly gained formidable technological,

economic, and consumerist power over the past decades, imagery and language echoing earlier narratives of the yellow peril continue to surface and reveal western unease now directed towards the threat of an ascending technological East (Sohn 8). In the race to secure cultural dominance over the future, China and Japan have become two of the west's greatest, albeit differently signified, competitors: while Japan is known for its cutting-edge innovations, China as world manufacturer is often represented by the nightmarish vision of rows-upon-rows of factory workers mindlessly laboring away (Roh et al. 4). The techno-Orientalist project as construct thus serves as an amorphous avenue through which these mirroring aspirations and anxieties are expressed, reconfigured, and ultimately contained, although it does not actually differentiate between the historical specificities of individual Asian cultures.

The image of the factory worker mechanically slaving away at his monotonous tasks— one that has been readily absorbed into the western imaginary for describing Asians and Asian bodies—lies at the core of techno-Orientalism's mechanics of racialization. In a neoliberal consumerist culture that commodifies technological efficacy, this image encapsulates both the west's envious nostalgia towards receding global primacy, as well as fear towards a technologically instrumentalized future dominated by the alien racial Other. Therefore, if Orientalism is about the construction of the west as modern subject, then techno-Orientalism is about maintaining the west's subjectivity in the age of techno-modernity. To do so, the west aims to differentiate itself from the sub-human Orient: the Asian (Chinese) worker, indistinguishable by individual features and only recognized through the value of her physical labor, is made to embody only a phantasmagoric simulation of the real human subject (Roh et al. 5). Ironically deflecting any examination of the larger capitalistic forces at play in the unequal global distribution of labor, the west effectively utilizes techno-Orientalism to construct the Asian body

as its own moral antithesis, a soulless cog within a mass collective of automata indistinguishable from the advanced technology it symbolizes.

While it may be initially tempting to dissociate a concept as fraught as race from the seemingly neutral connotations of technology, it is useful to note that race and technology are not binary terms that correlate to a divide of nature and culture. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has argued for a critical lens that examines the "utility of race" by interrogating not only the relation between race and technology but also race *as* technology (Chun, "Race and/as Technology" 9). Such an approach circumvents the often futile ontological entanglement between the cultural and biological constituents of race, and instead considers race as a mechanism—a "historically inflected system of tools, mediation, or enframing that builds history and identity" (Chun, "Race and/as Technology" 7). In the case of techno-Orientalism, the formulation of race and/as technology is especially illuminating because it foregrounds the aesthetic coupling of the Orient with the technological as an intrinsic component of racialization. Asians are seen to create, utilize, and/or represent technology, but this should not obscure the fact that they *are* the technology: both in the sense that the Asian laboring body is literally viewed as unfeeling, robotic, and inhuman, and in the sense that the techno-Orientalist gaze serves as a mechanism that in turn defines the modern western subject in juxtaposition to the inferior Orient.

Perhaps it is unsurprising then to see Asians cast as various forms of cyborgs, replicants, aliens, and dolls in western cultural texts, or to learn that the neon skylines of Hong Kong or Tokyo are the prototypes on which these works have modeled their dystopian cities of the future. In these disorienting futuristic environments, it is the western subject—usually the protagonist— who evokes the sympathy of readers/viewers as he navigates these hostile and alienating technological terrains. The convenience of using Asia as a vessel of technological

defamiliarization is further apparent as Oriental exoticness itself translates into an unsettling but alluring sense of estrangement; the encoded mise-en-scenes plastered with vertically arranged Asian characters, for instance, may well mean nothing to the western viewer literally but nonetheless function as crucial signifiers of difference. Within these settings, the western subject is juxtaposed against the backdrop of a menacing Asianized future and is tasked with preserving his humanity among a mass of uncanny simulacra. As Toshiya Ueno notes, techno-Orientalism allows the west to posit itself as maintaining "a moralistic superiority" over the East, where "the American subject looms as an embattled but resistant fighter" (qtd. in Sohn 9). In a similar vein, Chun suggests that such texts cast communicative western subjects as "representations of survivors, of savvy-navigators who can open closed spaces" (qtd. in Sohn 9). Having lost the battle in securing technological and economic dominance, the west envisions itself as the bulwark of human morality in a threatening future of Asia-driven technological aggression, and in doing so it ultimately cements western subjectivity while reinforcing racial significations of the techno-Orient.

In sum then, far from being neutral devices that merely convey a sense of removed or alternate temporality, aesthetic style used to represent Asia and Asians in SF reveals a highly troubling account of how racial being can be constructed. One objection to this form of critique against techno-Orientalism is the notion that postmodern and/or dystopian portrayals typical of SF legitimize the erasure of contemporary discourses of race and gender, and that the technological era directs our concerns elsewhere towards the ontological nature of the human subject in relation to machines. As I will now argue in more detail, however, emphasis on either pure aesthetic signs or posthuman ontology loses sight of the pernicious mechanisms by which race is heavily intertwined with technology and can itself constitute technology.

**Screens and Mirrors: Ornamentalism in *Ex Machina***

In Alex Garland's 2014 science fiction thriller *Ex Machina*, these dynamics within techno-Orientalism are dramatized through the racialized and gendered nature of the brutal violence repeatedly inflicted upon cyborg bodies. Nathan, a genius tech company CEO, invites software engineer Caleb to his remote mountainside mansion to perform a Turing test on Ava, a beautiful android that is the latest of a series of Nathan's A.I creations. Throughout the film, the dazzling presence of Ava, whose gleaming, translucent mechanical body is hyper-visible and whose verbal expressivity is striking, is haunted by the silent, elegant figure of Kyoko, who we initially perceive to be Nathan's live-in Japanese maid and personal (sex) attendant. It is only during one of the film's most uncanny moments that we learn Kyoko is in fact another android, along with half a dozen decommissioned androids hanging in Nathan's closet that presumably were broken by his repeated abuse. Notably, most of these androids appear as (human) women of color with the exception of Ava, who was built according to the preferences of Caleb alone. Thus, even as the film seemingly posits questions of posthuman subjectivity within the context of machine consciousness, it simultaneously renders these cyborgs as gendered objects of a particular kind of violent racialized desire. It is to this complex embodiment that I now turn.

It is no coincidence that Ava and Kyoko's cyborg bodies are signified so differently in ways that rehearse techno-Orientalist constructions of racial identity. From the moment we first meet Ava, we notice her astonishing likeness to humans despite her mechanical body: not only is she highly intelligent, she is shown to possess higher order cognitive traits that are typically considered unique to humans, such as capacities for curiosity, empathy, desire, and artistic creation. Most importantly, she speaks and has "always known how to speak"—in a way that, let us add, vocally indexes the whiteness conveniently made apparent in her facial features, the only

part of her body covered with skin. What is important here, then, is the fact that Ava's artificiality is simultaneously hypervisible yet non-threatening—or perhaps non-threatening exactly because it is hypervisible. The combination of her inorganic body with the undeniable whiteness of her character compels the viewer to recognize her emerging subjectivity as familiar, acceptable, and deserving of sympathy, so that it is quite believable when she ultimately persuades Caleb into aiding her escape. Ava is a machine that is transparent in its efforts to imitate the normative expressions of ideal (white) humanness, and we as real human subjects are willing to cheer her on, as if abetting a child to escape her evil father.

In stark contrast, Kyoko's machinic hybridity derives from an uncanny liminal state in which the boundaries between the organic and synthetic are made ambiguous through her exotic racial body. Introduced as a clumsy maid who "doesn't speak English," Kyoko is at once beautiful and delicate but silently obedient. Unlike the linguistic dexterity bestowed upon Ava, whose voice deftly conveys a range of emotions ranging from flirtatiousness to indignation, Kyoko's silence continues throughout the entire film and is finally literalized by Nathan's violent act of shattering her jaw. Clothed minimally (often not at all) and repeatedly used by Nathan as a sexual instrument, her presence is defined solely through the flesh instead of speech or intellect. If Ava is meant to evoke our sympathy through the moral and emotional depth characteristic of the modern western subject, it is necessarily achieved via the contrasting racial significations of Kyoko as shaped by the logic of techno-Orientalism. Ava is curious, empathetic, agential, a machine that convinces us of her humanness; Kyoko is passive, unthinking, servile, a human (seemingly) who resembles automata. It comes as no surprise, then, when eventually it is Ava who successfully escapes the mansion while her Asian counterpart perishes in the process—the

ultimate validation of "western liberal humanism" that time and again triumphs over the unfeeling bodies of the techno-Orient.

But the pair's racial representations do not merely instantiate the binaries outlined by Orientalism: the Othering of Kyoko operates specifically in relation to the racial signifiers of technology. Returning to Chun's framework of race as technology, we see the irony here: despite being another one of Nathan's ingenious creations—one who presumably shares the same "structured gel" used for Ava's brain matter—Kyoko arouses the suspicions of neither Caleb nor the viewer, exactly because her exotic racialized form is itself a convenient explanation of her uncanny compliance and servitude. Even as we gaze upon her perfectly human-like skin, she strikes the viewer as infinitely less human than the artificially built Ava. In this sense, Kyoko's human body is always already technologized, just as the Asian is perpetually alien in the western formulation. The film's deceptive portrayal of Kyoko as (initially) human thus precisely reflects and reinforces the endurance of techno-Orientalism, in which there is no need, and perhaps no way, to effectively distinguish between the Asian and cyborg body.

What is especially pernicious about this portrayal, however, is that while the corporeality of race and gender is often presented as secondary or irrelevant to posthuman identity, it is in fact reinforced through such narratives of colorblindness. In one of the most iconic scenes in *Ex Machina*, a liberated but injured Ava seeks to repair her body so that she may blend in as a human during her escape to the outside world. Standing in front of Nathan's closet of decommissioned cyborgs, Ava removes the skin of another visibly Asian model and grafts it onto herself, with the scene cutting to Ava staring at her naked, now completely human, body in the mirror. Ava's self-conducted "surgery" quite literally asserts the notion that skin is interchangeable and replaceable, perhaps a superficial but inconvenient aspect of posthuman

personhood. The means are not as significant as the goal of concealing her artificiality, because it is the boundaries between human and machine that now pose legitimate concerns of existential difference—conveniently allowing us to overlook the reasons behind the fact that it is Ava who successfully escapes and not her Asiatic counterpart.

Indeed, the film subtly suggests that Ava and Kyoko are so similar that in many ways they are mirrored beings, made allies in an attempt to overthrow their human creator: just as the pair are engaged in an inaudible embrace before the climax of Ava's escape, Nathan's arrival causes both cyborgs to defiantly rise and turn at the same time, temporarily projecting an illusion of mirroredness (1:29:29). Thus, while the film relies heavily upon the techno-Orientalist mechanisms of racialization in characterizing both Ava and Kyoko, it simultaneously dismisses the critical relevance of race by framing them as doubles, consequently perpetuating the insidious narratives of SF as inhabiting post-racial worlds. At the same time, it is ironic but perhaps unsurprising that Ava—whether intuitively or intentionally—chooses an Asian predecessor to provide her with her new skin; since the Asian body resides most ambiguously within the spaces of organic and synthetic, it is thus also the most appropriate technology suited to Ava's needs in simulating a performance of humanity.

Not only does the film's doubling of Ava and Kyoko erase the embodied experiences of race in favor of a generalized concept of cyborg consciousness, it also neglects to account for the ontological complexities that arise from intersections between race as well as gender. While techno-Orientalism has provided the critical tools for examining the racialization of Asia and Asians in texts such as *Ex Machina*, further attention is needed when examining the distinctive gendered representations of the Asian woman, a recurring figure favored in western speculative fiction who serves as a titillating vessel through which themes of inorganicity and objecthood are

explored. On one hand, it is clear that Orientalist practices of fetishization and commodification are consistently at play, rendering the Asian woman an exotic good that can be possessed and dominated by the masculine western subject. On the other, however, such critiques inadvertently validate normative western assumptions on how personhood is typically conceived. The notion of female objectification, for instance, posits the pre-existence of a fully autonomous, natural being whose subjectivity is then violently reduced when she is made into an inanimate and consumable object. Yet, such narratives evade the crucial yet often ambiguous fusion between agency-bearing personhood and artificial objecthood that uniquely characterizes western representations of the Asian woman such as those of Kyoko. Here I turn to Anne Anlin Cheng's pioneering work on Orientalist and techno-Orientalist constructions of Asiatic femininity, in which she formulates a theory of Ornamentalism to effectively navigate the complexities of Asian female subjectivity by deconstructing the binaries between subject and object.

According to Cheng, fully understanding the unique nature of western constructions of Asiatic femininity demands a radical reconfiguration of the binaries between personhood and thingness. She offers the term Ornamentalism as a critical lens to examine the relations between objectification, aestheticization, and racialization in articulating a distinct ontology of and for the Asian woman: contrary to autonomous modes of being that arise from natural bodies, the racialization of the Asian woman involves "a process whereby personhood is conceived and suggested (legally, materially, and imaginatively) through ornamental gestures [...] that speak through the minute, the sartorial, the prosthetic, and the decorative" (Cheng 429). The western concept of the Person—which Cheng traces to Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and William Blackstone—and its idealization of the organic and integral body as designed by God is thus radically challenged, since the demarcations between personhood and objecthood are

violently collapsed in the process (Cheng 436). It is not (yellow) flesh that constitutes a racialized body, but ornament. There is no Person, in the natural, embodied sense, to begin with, and one must imagine an alternative ontology for a being that exists in a realm of thingness.

For the Asian woman who is constructed this way, it is not the case that she is transformed into object, that is, objectified, but rather that she already exists *as* object; flesh and ornament amalgamate in representations of this racialized figure. To make her case, Cheng draws on a range of texts from Euro-American visual and literary culture, while focusing heavily on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's dazzling 2015 exhibition entitled *China: Through the Looking Glass*. Indeed, the latter case, which featured more than 140 examples of haute couture and avant-garde wear from renowned western designers such as Yves Saint Laurent and John Galliano, was notable as it epitomizes precisely the kind of lavish ornamental stylization typically used to characterize Asian aesthetics. Looking at the clothing for female models that are supposedly inspired by "a pastiche of Chinese aesthetic and cultural traditions," one senses a recurring conflation between materiality and organicity ("Exhibition Overview"). As highlighted by Cheng, flesh and ornament are often synonymous in these sumptuous pieces, as porcelain shards are laced into bodices and calligraphy script becomes sartorial prints. Through the exotic vessel of Chineseness and Asiatic femininity, the material ambiguity of the garments effectively racializes the Asian woman as a being that is defined by the ornamental. If this ontological formulation of the Asian woman as object is true, we come to further realize how noteworthy it is that the artificiality of Kyoko is signified in such a way as to contrast the humanness of Ava; the objecthood of her being as yellow woman overlaps with and extends the narrative of the Asian alien as human simulacra, culminating in her racialized figure as uncannily human-like but nonetheless inherently devoid of organic life.

Cheng's theory of Ornamentalism is useful and highly relevant to our discussion for multiple reasons. In addition to examining the intersections between gender and race in Orientalizing the Asian woman, it highlights the importance of aesthetic style in the formal construction of racial narratives, thereby effectively refuting attempts such as those in *Ex Machina* to trivialize the role of racial signifiers in seemingly apolitical or post-racial contexts. The aforementioned exhibition, for instance, reclaims "postmodernism as a cure to Orientalism" by suggesting that the artistic value of the displayed pieces should be disaggregated from politics (Cheng 427). Such rhetoric is abundant in the museum's gallery webpages, where China is designated as a "land of free-floating symbols" that invites postmodern reinterpretation and reconstruction ("Exhibition Galleries"). Indeed, even the exhibition title's use of the notion of "looking glass," repeatedly referenced elsewhere as the collection's unifying theme, suggests an exculpatory self-awareness of the distorting effects of the western gaze. Under the guise of artistic creativity, the exhibition thus attempts to completely shed the burden of cultural authenticity by asserting that aesthetic style is innocuous and distinct from broader cultural or political narratives that more explicitly reflect ideologies of race.

*China: Through the Looking Glass* is not alone in exemplifying such Orientalist practices; thus, while Said's critique of western portrayals of a decadent Asia as Other remains valid, it does not as adequately emphasize the specific processes by which such aesthetic style itself is a gendered mechanism of racialization. Under the framework of Ornamentalism, we are not only able to recognize the gendered nature of the ethnic-cultural fetishization reflected by these garments, but to also understand why the west is persistently driven to denote Asia and Asiatic femininity with particular ornamental styles we see among this "land of free-floating symbols." This enduring figure of the faceless female mannequin, always garnished with

breathtakingly extravagant fabrics, textures, and appendages found throughout the collection, thus signifies for the western imagination a particular kind of person of desire. Instead of arbitrarily curating a pastiche of signs for aesthetic pleasure, the west has constructed a specific constellation of traits that racialize a being that is already characterized as an object. Looking back to our survey on the typology of western techno-Orientalist texts, we further see how this narrative of aesthetic style as seemingly raceless is similarly at play, as the mystifying Chinese character signboards typical in various SF settings are not inconsequential backgrounds but instead constitute a particular style that is inherently Orientalizing, even as these texts aim to prophesize a future that is less concerned with race than the fundamental biologies of human and machine.

Ultimately, Ornamentalism also presents a unique avenue to examine the figure of the cyborg as it encapsulates the challenges of (re)defining subjectivity within the techno-Orientalist narrative. Looking at the exhibition pieces on display in *Looking Glass*, which were assembled in juxtaposition to physical artifacts such as ceramics and paintings while using the same patterns on these objects for their design, we not only get the sense that they are meant to enact a particular mechanism of racialization for the Asian woman, but also that they subvert the notions of objecthood itself. Cheng suggests that what is ultimately at play is a foregrounding of the object's primacy that is only made legible through the racial significations of the ornamental Asian woman (Cheng 435). This unique ontological entanglement with objecthood is significant in questioning subject-object relations not only as they pertain to perceptions of female Asian bodies, but also to the viewer's own understanding of their human condition, as Ornamentalism facilitates the recognition that objecthood *is* part of being human. As Cheng explains eloquently, "while Orientalism is about turning persons into things that can be possessed and dominated,

ornamentalism is about a fantasy of turning things into persons through the conduit of racial meaning in order, paradoxically, to allow us to abandon our humanness" (Cheng 435). Thus, as a concept, Ornamentalism spotlights the crisis of modern life that Asiatic femininity personifies, where it seems increasingly difficult to reconcile ideals of the purely organic body with visions of a technology-driven future. More broadly, Ornamentalism challenges the long-standing western traditions that view the object as a subordinate byproduct of the natural subject within the subject-object dichotomy, prompting us to radically reimagine more diverse modes of personhood and being.

We now see how Ornamentalism as an extension of Saidian Orientalism has immense potential in initiating conversations on alternative forms of being that challenge the categories of human and artificial, especially those pertaining to cyberspace and cyborg bodies. If the Asian woman has always been a product of the synthetic, then she is in a sense "*the* original cyborg," compelling us to rethink the desires and anxieties surrounding materiality and artificiality (Cheng 433). In Donna Haraway's 1985 Cyborg Manifesto, the notion of the cyborg—an abstract fusion between machine and organic matter—offers a utopian promise of a postmodern, genderless world that rejects essentialist and naturalist identity politics rooted in western heteropatriarchy (Haraway 7). The limitations of Haraway's cyborg become especially clear now as we consider the figure of the Asian woman, who needs no bodily enhancement or modification to deprive her of organicity. Her cybernetic genealogy as traced through the western imagination predates what Haraway sees as technologically-aided liberation in the late twentieth century, since she has always existed ambiguously along the boundaries of Person and thing. She is thus crucial to understanding the expressions of modern personhood and life, where ideals of the natural, integrated individual are threatened not only by the potential fusion between technology,

ornament, and flesh, but also by the emerging desires we hold towards confronting our own humanness as modern subjects.

Let us now return to Kyoko, whose alternate mode of ontology as Asian/cyborg elucidates precisely the mirroring effect of Ornamentalism in inviting us to reflect upon the subject-object entanglement embedded in our own bodies. Indeed, mirrors and mirrored bodies already pervade the film; as we follow Caleb into the sleek, futuristic space of Nathan's sweeping underground mansion, the viewer cannot help but notice the overwhelming number of artificial surfaces that generate a range of distorted reflections. Not only do we repeatedly witness the trivial daily rituals of Caleb shaving and cleaning in front of his bathroom mirror, the refractive optic effects of glass panels, monitor screens, and surveillance cameras are ubiquitous. Layers upon layers of such mediated access to reality—whether it is the clear, transparent glass through which Caleb observes Ava, the filtered digital screens through which Nathan monitors his androids, or the cinematic lens that makes itself known through the bizarre black-and-white framing of Caleb and Ava's moment of intimacy, one can never escape the sense of an omnipresent gaze, a constant awareness of the act of looking and being looked at. We learn early on that there are no windows in the countless rooms of Nathan's subterranean home (despite its being built upon a mountainous, Zen-like surrounding), which effectively inhibits any direct viewing of nature and instead compels the inhabitants to gaze inward at each other.

It is this ever-present mirroring that creates stifling tension between the many human subjects and artificial objects within the house, recalling Cheng's observations on the uses of Ornamentalism in reflecting the crisis of modern personhood. As Caleb interacts with Ava and Kyoko, their intelligence and capacity for emotion plunge him into a downward existential spiral that ultimately brings him to suspect his own humanness. Are the beautiful, vibrant beings under

his gaze merely in possession of a different kind of life-like vitality, or is he himself a second-rate replication of the perfect artificial consciousness animating these cyborg bodies? By blurring the ontological distinctions between human and artificial beings, the film underlines the anxieties surrounding the modern subject as defined by having integral, organic bodies. More importantly, it does so by utilizing the mirroring effect of ornamental objects in deconstructing the subject, where one's recognition of the object's humanness in turn leads to the recognition of their own inhumanness.

Remarkably, it is Kyoko, the most human-like object (or perhaps the most synthetic subject), that prompts this radically transformative moment of introspection for Caleb. In one of the film's most powerful scenes, Kyoko reveals to Caleb, as well as the viewer, her artificiality as android—and thus her suffering under Nathan's sadistic misogyny—through the violent exposure of her own body: peeling off sections of her smooth, supple skin, Kyoko silently invites Caleb to gaze upon the same luminous mechanical coils and fibers openly displayed in Ava's body (figure 1, screenshots my own). While Kyoko has remained silent thus far and will continue to do so for the rest of the film, her silence here carries a conspicuous weight of its own. For is there anything more expressive of pain, arguably the most universal human language, than this attempt to appeal to Caleb's humanity by viscerally laying bare her own vulnerability? As the skeletal, metallic face of Kyoko hauntingly resurfaces in Caleb's mind after this encounter, along with her sunken orb eyes gazing directly at the viewer, it is never clearer how Kyoko's superficial skin becomes a vessel that paradoxically reflects the person-thingness embedded in our own perceived subjectivities.

Indeed, how else is one to explain Caleb's subsequent fervor in examining his own body? Frantically pressing onto his skin in the same area that Kyoko removed earlier, as if to confirm
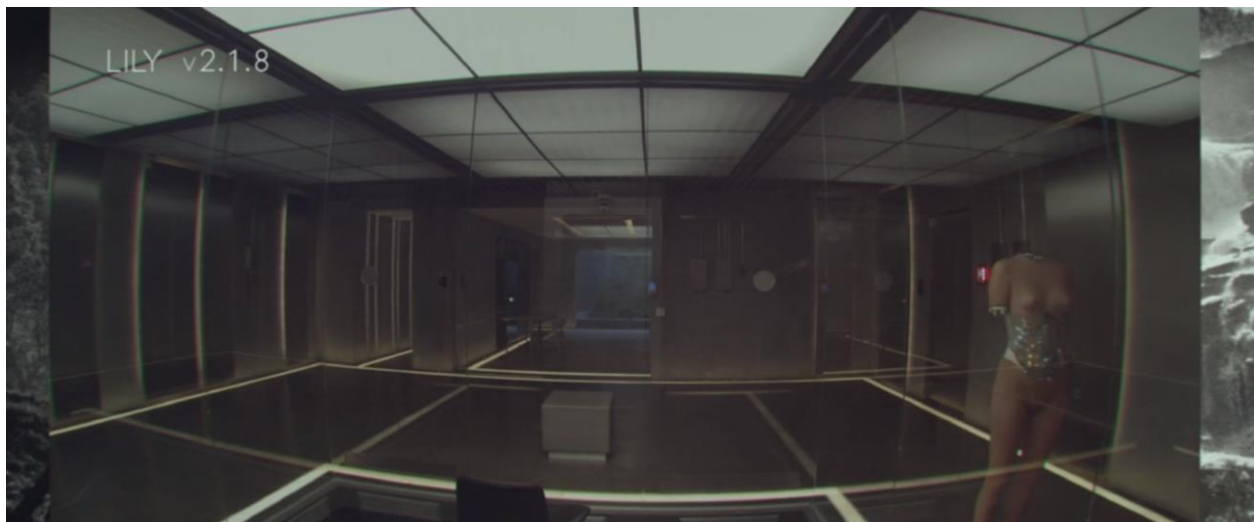
*Figure 1. the revealing of Kyoko*

its real fleshliness, Caleb then eagerly inspects his face, feels inside his mouth, before finally

producing a razor to cut open his wrist. Prying open the wound and apparently satisfied with the

copious amount of blood now dripping onto the floor, he smashes his fist against the blood-

stained mirror in front of him, seemingly having resolved his anxieties. There is perhaps no

example that better demonstrates the idea of ornamental objects mirroring the inherent

objecthood of the human, ultimately enticing one to confront their own ontological condition as

other than the organic, natural being they believe themselves to be. Thus, while Kyoko is at once

highly racialized and gendered, she is also an embodiment of the abstract crisis of modern

personhood outlined by Ornamentalism, prompting a reimagining of subjectivity through her

cyborg body.

But the film's questioning of the subject-object dichotomy isn't just limited to the

realizations of Caleb alone; in fact, the camerawork in this scene is fascinating in its deliberate

experimentation with the perceptions of the viewer as well. Throughout *Ex Machina*, the

prevalence of screens distinctly defines the viewing experience by frequently inserting what is

displayed on the screens of the characters to the screen of the viewer. For instance, by rapidly

switching from an objective third-person view to the first-person footage of Nathan's

surveillance cameras (figure 2), the film encourages the viewer to detach from their removed

position of spectator to that of participant. It is no longer Nathan or Caleb behind their monitors

performing the act of observation or surveillance; *we* are the ones who do so. This highly

immersive and interactive technique highlights the embodied quality of the cinematic experience,

effectively drawing the viewer's attention to her own processes of seeing that are never neutral

but rather interpretive.



*Figure 2. the screen as monitor*

In doing so, the viewer is made hyper-aware of the interjection of her presence among the

fictional, but highly corporeal, figures on screen. This ingenious hailing of the viewer-observer is

most salient in the aforementioned scene featuring Caleb's self-harming tendencies, in which the

viewer's screen functions as Caleb's bathroom mirror: we are presented with a close-up view of

Caleb's face and eyes as if he is right across from us, and the use of the fish-eye lens distorts the

edges of the room enough so that we are aware of the image's mediated nature. What is most

curious, however, is the sporadic, holographic shimmer of blue around the contours of Caleb's

face; given the intriguing angle of the scene, the source from which these lights emanate is

wholly ambiguous (figure 3). Are we seeing a default feature of the mirror itself, or are Caleb's

fears valid in the sense that he is, in fact, an artificial object unaware of his own existence? Or

rather, should we interpret the light beams as coming from the perspective of the viewer, so that

it is ultimately our own screen/eyes that have acquired such unnatural qualities? To complicate

matters further, the scene—now showing Caleb's bloody, cracked mirror—directly cuts to a

pensive Kyoko staring intensely at her own monitor, indicating that she has been anticipating and

surveilling Caleb's reactions since their earlier exchange. Have we been experiencing the scene

vicariously through the synthetic eyes of Kyoko, then? It is clear that the film plays with the

viewer's self-perceived distance from its characters; just as Caleb is made to question his

personhood in the face of Kyoko's startling artificiality, the cinematic choices in this scene leads

us to question exactly whose body we are occupying behind the screen-mirror. In this sense, the

film further broadens its portrayal of Ornamentalism at work in redefining subjectivity not only

for its characters, but also the viewer.



*Figure 3. the ambiguity of viewer perspective*

The disturbingly uncanny figure of Kyoko in the pivotal scene is further illuminated by

Seo-Young Chu's concept of the Asian alien as detained in Masahiro Mori's "uncanny valley."

In an attempt to explain the extreme yet often inexplicable feelings of unease or fear when faced with humanoid artifacts, Mori's theory posits that the more human-like the artificial object is, the stronger our sympathies, until a striking likeness provokes deep revulsion. Full sympathy is then achieved with 100 percent likeness, so that graphically the correlation between likeness and sympathy level resembles a valley. Chu further argues that "the uncanny valley can be enhanced when it takes into account whether a given humanoid artifact is conspicuously injured and thereby framed as a constructed object 'impersonating' a human subject," and that "the uncanniest humanoid artifacts...unsettle us because their otherwise perfect 'humanity effect' has been violently destabilized" (Chu 78). There is a strong resemblance of Cheng's formulation of Ornamentalism here, where objects can be found to induce subjects to examine their own interiority through extreme likeness. Thus, what is so disturbing about this violent destabilization is not the artificiality of the injured cyborg itself, but rather that the preconceived differences— physical or otherwise—between human and cyborg have been thoroughly eradicated. Is the Asian woman, represented through person-thingness, not a perfect expression of this "uncanniest humanoid artifact"? This is also why Caleb's horror at discovering Kyoko's artificiality must eventually extend to his human body, since she is ultimately a mirrored being that serves to problematize his own ontological complexities as the western subject.

We have now briefly examined several reiterations of Orientalism and techno-Orientalism as exemplified by *Ex Machina*, as well as the role of gender in racializing Asians through the lens of Ornamentalism. Through examining how specific visual forms and language operate in tandem with notions of utility in the west's Orientalist construction of racial ontology, we see that the complex representations of the Asian woman, cyborg subjectivity, and embodied posthuman identities remain heavily intertwined, ultimately informing a greater understanding of

modern personhood by suggesting alternative modes of racialized being in the context of

technology. Having arrived at this sketch of the western techno-Orientalist project, I shall now

explore a "mirroring" text that similarly engages questions of posthumanism in relation to

racialized, gendered cyborg bodies—this time from the perspective of the Orient—through the

Japanese media franchise *Ghost in the Shell*.

**Oscillating Bodies: Kusanagi's Ambivalence in *Ghost in the Shell***

"The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins."

—Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*

Mamoru Oshii 's 1995 animation film *Ghost in the Shell* (Koukaku Kidoutai), loosely based on Shirow Masamune's manga series of the same name, marks a critical juncture in the history of Japanese animation's reception and popularization in the west. With a $10 million production budget, the film was an ambitious effort on the part of Oshii to introduce anime to the western market, resulting in both critical and commercial success (Chun 197). The film has a relatively international viewership and engages with traditionally western frameworks of modern subjectivity, making it the most discussed Japanese anime franchise in the English-speaking academy to date (Bolton 103). Together with the 2004 animation sequel *Innocence* and the 2017 U.S. live-action adaptation, the *Ghost* franchise is a rich intertextual site in which its interpretative content as well as community discourse combine to illuminate the ways in which embodied racial identity can be represented and negotiated in both western and Asian narrative spaces. In the context of techno-Orientalism and the flow of global capital, it is important that we examine not only how the Orient is constructed under the western gaze, but also how the Orient responds to such narratives through diversifying forms of globally circulated new media.

From a comparative approach, it may be tempting to situate this Japanese film at the opposite end of the spectrum from *Ex Machina* within the western techno-Orientalist project, and to perform a recuperative reading in which the Orient reclaims a voice through which they can

represent themselves. However, while such accounts may hold true to a certain extent, they are also reductive in assuming that Asia does not produce and reproduce racial narratives of their own that are historically rooted in national and ethnic specificities. In this case, while *Ghost in the Shell* is not overtly political when compared to Oshii's previous films such as *Patlabor 2*, it still contains noticeable geopolitical and racial undertones, especially in representing Japan's relations with China and the U.S., that recall familiar western mechanisms of constructing racial and cultural identity. Thus, by detaching the Orient from techno-Orientalism, we can further scrutinize the latter as a particular style and method in framing broader historical and technological identity.

Specifically, we need to first consider the ways in which Japan's interactions with the west throughout modern history inform the technological ideologies manifest in Japanese animation and even popular culture in general. Scholars have long noted that Japan's complicated wartime history as both aggressor and victim has led to reinterpretations and allegorizations of the atomic bombings and postwar U.S occupation in popular media, inspiring many narratives of monstrous catastrophe, apocalypse, and invasion, along with representations of international (especially U.S-Japan) relations fraught with economic and technological tension (Bolton 32). Perhaps the long-running *Godzilla* franchise comes to mind, now with 36 total iterations that inherit the original 1954 film's allegorization of nuclear disaster to various degrees. In the context of this fixation with the monstrous and hyper-technological, Sharalyn Orbaugh has further suggested that not only are Japanese viewers consistently engaged with portrayals of robots, cyborgs, and the "mecha" genre (giant mechanical fighting suits), but they also share an affinity for the technological paradigm because of what she calls the "Frankenstein syndrome." This is an inflection of Rey Chow's coinage of "King Kong syndrome," which

originally delineates the west's Orientalist framing and spectatorship of Asia as a site of mutation and monstrosity, an unrestrained culture of excess devoured by its own technology (Orbaugh 174). Orbaugh's term, however, refers to the Orient's internalization, and even reproduction, of that framing, in which Asians and specifically the Japanese see themselves through the very lens that have constructed them as technological Other. In a similar vein, Toshiya Ueno proposes that Japanese animation not only acts as a distorting mirror through which the west misconstrues the Japanese as automata-like "Japanoids," but that it also serves as "the mechanism through which Japanese [people] misunderstand themselves" as they internalize techno-Orientalism (Ueno 95). These techno-political anxieties pervade *Ghost in the Shell* as well.

Set in an unnamed Japan-esque state in the near future, the film follows its female protagonist Motoko Kusanagi, a cyborg whose body is completely synthetic except for parts of her brain that house the "ghost" of her consciousness and memory. Kusanagi, also referred to as "the Major," is property of section 9, a government branch that specializes in cybersecurity. Over the course of the film, she is tasked with the pursuit of a cybercriminal known as the "Puppet Master," who hacks into the ghosts of others to plant false memories and make them commit acts of terrorism. After several chase scenes and a heap of political drama, we learn that the Puppet Master is the unintended result of an artificial intelligence program which—or "who"—now claims to be a sentient life form "born in the sea of information." During the film's climax, the Puppet Master invites Kusanagi to "merge" with him so that he may achieve death and diversify his program, much as organisms evolve by reproducing genes with variation. In exchange, the Major would gain the ability to transcend her physical "shell" and access the omnipresent cybernet, in which she would leave behind their "offspring" as digital information. The merging takes place amidst a heavy military onslaught as the government attempts to destroy the Puppet

Master, and the film ends with a transformed Kusanagi ready to venture into the "vast and limitless net" as represented by a panoramic view of the sprawling city underneath.

At first glance, the film seems saturated with racial and political undertones, as the conflicting agendas of various departments, sections, and foreign parties are complex if not overwhelming. The film opens with a written exposition asserting that race and nation-states still exist in this version of the near future, despite the vast proliferation of corporate networks and cyber communication lines that now dominate the planet. While the exact nature of Japan's government remains ambiguous, government officials and section heads are all given Japanese names, including the Major; in fact, her last name "Kusanagi" alludes to a legendary sword from one of Japan's oldest myths, thus constantly signifying her Japanese-ness. The central conflict facing section 9, moreover, involves a complicated navigation of foreign diplomacy laws, as the Puppet Master is initially believed to be an American hacker and his capture thus requires cooperation with section 6, the diplomacy unit. In this joint pursuit, Kusanagi's team repeatedly suffers from the need to bypass the rigidity of bureaucratic procedure, and throughout the film her cyborg abilities are almost always used in the context of state regulation, operation, and maintenance; her mechanical body is, after all, officially property of the state. We see the underlying tensions here: even in a highly technologized Japan where cyborgs are commonplace—almost the entirety of section 9 has had bodily modifications of some sort—this technology is never decoupled from race or national identity; looming in the background is a constant, ubiquitous threat of invasion, instrumentalization, and violation, whether from patriarchal state militarism or an antagonistic U.S. presence embodied through the ghost-hacking, agency-usurping Puppet Master. Thus, while *Ghost* foregrounds the cyborg body, it also reiterates in allegorical terms—like many other Japanese anime—anxieties of unequal U.S.-

Japan power dynamics and U.S. occupation, and it makes clear that its ideological discussions are framed under such political contexts.

Nonetheless, while the film does keep in mind such allegories of state politics, it fails to realize that the abstract notions of militaristic state power cannot be critiqued in vacuum as separate from cultural hegemony whereby ideologies of racial representation are shaped. In other words, it does not question the larger techno-Orientalist devices at play that Otherize through the aestheticization of Japan, and in this sense *Ghost* is a "westernized" film that embraces the dehumanizing practices used to construct Japan's distorted image in the west. As I have recounted earlier, this internalization precisely demonstrates Ueno's characterization of Japanese animation as a "sub-empire of signs" in which the harmful logic of racialization is replicated and projected elsewhere (Ueno 95). For instance, both Chun and Ueno comment on the Orientalizing role Hong Kong plays in functioning as a geographical setting for *Ghost*. In numerous interviews, Oshii's team revealed that they specifically chose Hong Kong as a model for the landscape designs in the film, and that they intended to capture its distinct "feel" of exoticism and alienation as a city without history (Lum, "Dreamscapes"). Indeed, Chun has pointed out the paradoxical portrayals of this desolate urban terrain that contains both traditional "Chinese markets" teeming with straw-hat figures as well as an endless grey-blue mass of modern high-rise buildings (Chun, *Control* 205). Even Tokyo did not have such high-rise buildings back when the film was created, so by introducing this particular visual device the film immediately defamiliarizes both its local and western audience. This notion of verticality in architecture that Oshii highlights—whether in the vertically arranged Chinese characters that fill the streets and alleys, or in the macro spatial configurations of the cityscape, in which the Major repeatedly leaps, floats, and dives across various heights—is thus crucial to the effect of disorientation the

film aims to instill within its viewers. This utilization of an exotic Other as background amounts to an unmistakable rearticulation of the western techno-Orientalist narrative, in which the exotic Asian Other is perpetually arrested within the ancient-modern paradox and becomes a conveniently propped mirror reflecting the technological and moral superiority of the western (now Japanese) viewer. These unfamiliar vertical structures have become quite a signature component of the western perception of Asian (and especially Chinese) architecture, and our Japanese protagonist ventures into this alienating space much like her western counterpart in texts such as Scott's *Blade Runner*. Not only does she have to navigate and survive the crowded, disorganized spaces that evoke a physical sense of disarray, but she must also preserve her own humanity against the indistinguishable mass of laboring bodies—epitomized by the chase scenes where section 9 literally traverses the city's bustling markets—that warn against the cold, corporate immorality of technological dystopia.

Most important for my purposes, techno-Orientalism in this film manifests in the specific visual styles employed when rendering various raced and gendered bodies. Chun has written extensively on the peculiar stylistic treatment of bodies in this film as well as in Japanese animation in general, arguing that *Ghost* "insists on the Japanese as primary by displacing 'primitiveness' onto the Chinese" (Chun, *Control* 196). This attention to animation aesthetics is important, as viewers unfamiliar with the genre may overlook the specific patterns by which racial difference is indexed in the face of seemingly exaggerated and unrealistic art styles. While Japanese characters such as our protagonists in section 9, with their large eyes, colored hair, and voluptuous figures more in line with western beauty standards, do not look stereotypically Asian, Chinese characters in the city's background are often drawn with slant eyes and buck teeth reminiscent of yellow peril propaganda (Chun, *Control* 214). Often minor villain figures, these

"ghostless" beings hacked by the Puppet Master are dispensable, interchangeable pieces

scattered along the way in Kusanagi's pursuit of the American mastermind, conveniently

contrasting the Major's own capacities of intellectual and moral reflection. At the same time,

white characters such as the American A.I. specialist Dr. Willis are also portrayed more

realistically in terms of phenotypic features (figures 4-6). The seemingly innocuous flatness of

characters in animation thus does not absolve its creators of the racial markers that typically

come with embodiment; in fact, ideologies of racial and national identity are in a sense more

explicitly visualized in such animated texts, as they demonstrate directly how racial identities are

quite literally imagined, created, and circulated through hand-drawn celluloid sheets. In this

instance, the film reproduces the logic of techno-Orientalism by visually projecting the

dehumanizing western signifiers of "primitive" Asianness onto the Chinese, reinforcing the

yellow peril-style visual rhetoric that links certain constructed racial features with backwardness,

threat, and intellectual poverty. Just as the western gaze fortifies its own humanity in the face of

the uncanny, robotic Asian stereotype, the Japanese makers of *Ghost* effectively contrast and

elevate a superior Japanese identity that is intended to be viewed as more human than the

Chinese, both morally and visually.



Figure 4. Kusanagi Motoko

*Figure 5. Dr. Willis, right*



*Figure 6. Hong Kongers in the city background*

Nevertheless, despite this intra-Asian Othering, the film also offers powerful vectors of reconfiguration for the Asian woman's embodiment and personhood in ways that are at the very least intriguing if not radically subversive. This ambiguity in the film's treatment of race and objecthood shares affinities with Homi Bhabha's influential theorization of colonial mimicry, wherein the relationship between the colonizer and colonized is one that is marked by ambivalent mimesis; the colonizer, while desiring a reformed Other that recognizes and adheres to the same hegemonic ideologies to which they are subject, nevertheless calls for a kind of imitation that ultimately renders the two "almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha 126). For a total, perfect

copy by the colonized necessarily leads to the recognition that there is no categorical difference between the colonizer and his subject, and the asserted hierarchies of power will inevitably collapse. Mimicry is thus a "double articulation," simultaneously "resemblance and menace" insofar as it contains the potential for reproduction but also rupture of the colonial institution (Bhabha 127). Bhabha's theory is grounded upon British colonialism in India and Africa, yet his concept of mimicry applies to the U.S. and Japan as well. *Ghost* is a prime example of this ambivalence in colonial discourse: although the extent of its effectiveness remains questionable, the film dramatizes and makes visible the oppressive presence of the ubiquitous historical colonizer, even as the animation internalizes and replicates techno-Orientalism as a kind of sub-empire, or empire within empire. In other words, the film enacts the reciprocal desires of Japan in mirroring western mechanisms of racialization to establish its own subjectivity, while simultaneously allegorizing the hierarchical dynamics of state power. But the most salient aspects of this double articulation lie beyond the binaries of Japan and the U.S. as political or historical entities: the film extends techno-Orientalism's broader implications to cyborg bodies by constructing the Major's enigmatic body in ways that mirror western paradigms of posthuman subjectivity, while at the same time proposing alternate ontologies of being reminiscent of Ornamentalism's concern with objecthood as human condition.

Kusanagi's cyborg body lies at the core of the film's multilayered representations of the intersections between race, gender, and objecthood, and in many ways it is an "ambivalent" text, in Bhabha's sense, in and of itself. To begin with, the Major's body is explicitly coded as female as it is constantly hypersexualized; at the same time, it is unmistakably an object, a powerful but nonetheless breakable machine that can be replicated and reassembled without differentiation. The opening sequence of the film encapsulates this duality acutely, as we follow closely the

(re)constitution process of a cyborg body, presumably Kusanagi's, as it gains metallic skeleton, artificial musculature, and finally human-like skin. As her body slowly rises through a large liquid chamber in its final stages of creation, we (repeatedly) see close-ups of her ample breasts, during which a protective surface peels away like paper to reveal and accentuate the skin underneath. Contrastingly, what actually remains of the Major's original body, her brain, is presented fleetingly as an abstract image as it is scanned through a green filtered screen. The organic is thus viewed as digitized information and the synthetic is highlighted in terms of its fleshliness. This tension between the seemingly natural (sexual) and mechanical body persists throughout the film, and repeatedly compels the viewer to interpret the construction of the Major's body through dramatically different if not paradoxical means.

On one hand, it is easy to see the hypersexualization of Kusanagi's body as a form of gendered violence, that is, as a form of symbolic violence aligned with the physical violence inflicted upon her by male characters, the patriarchal state as represented by the highly militarized section 9, or even by the gaze of the viewer. Much as the scientists and lab operators in this opening scene are shown observing the Major's assemblage from various angles, the viewer is similarly invited to gaze upon Kusanagi's body throughout the film in a way that is distinctly voyeuristic. Conveniently, the Major's built-in camouflage abilities require her to remove clothing, and the film features in multiple scenes the Major engaged in various covert government operations while naked, perhaps as a service to the male gaze of its viewers. On the other, what is noteworthy here regarding Kusanagi's sexualization is that the viewer's voyeuristic gaze is not directed towards any actual sex act, but instead functions precisely because Kusanagi's cyborg body is sex-less (in the sense that it is not able to participate in sex, unlike Kyoko) but also evocatively voluptuous. Thus, the voyeurism at work here is perhaps akin

to the sense of pleasure and perceived power that derives from sexually appropriating an artificial object that is incapable of sex—and more so because the Major's conspicuously naked body is almost always placed in non-sexual contexts such as fight scenes. Although cyborg bodies and erotic bodies are not necessarily mutually exclusive (e.g., sex dolls), I argue that the way Kusanagi's body is signified in particular depends inherently upon this duality of sex-lessness and hypersexualization, a duality driven by the constant slippage between organicity and artificiality that the viewer is made to acknowledge when viewing her body. Unlike Kyoko's sexual body that strives to convince us of its humanness but ultimately deceives through its Asianness, then, Kusanagi's voluptuously artificial body in *Ghost* explicitly points to its own ambiguity as object, perhaps even forcibly so as we repeatedly see various forms of physical violence inflicted upon it that quite literally call into question its ontological makeup. After all, as Kusanagi asks, how is one to know if there is really a "ghost" in her shell, and does this distinction even matter, when the Puppet Master himself is an example of consciousness constrained to neither organic nor mechanical bodies?

This question of subjectivity embedded within the object-body is further complicated by the film's usage of the distinct visual qualities of celluloid animation, another major point of departure from live-action films such as *Ex Machina* that challenge our understandings of embodiment. One might easily suggest that animation as a medium itself is inherently defined by disembodiment since these are all hand-drawn images that lack real bodies behind them, and that such an art form forecloses any interpretation of the Major's body as "natural" or "organic" in the way that, for instance, Kyoko's body has been discussed. Yet, not only do such claims neglect the cinematics of immersion in allowing the viewer to suspend disbelief, they also overlook the fact that the Major's embodiment is deliberately highlighted by animation in ways
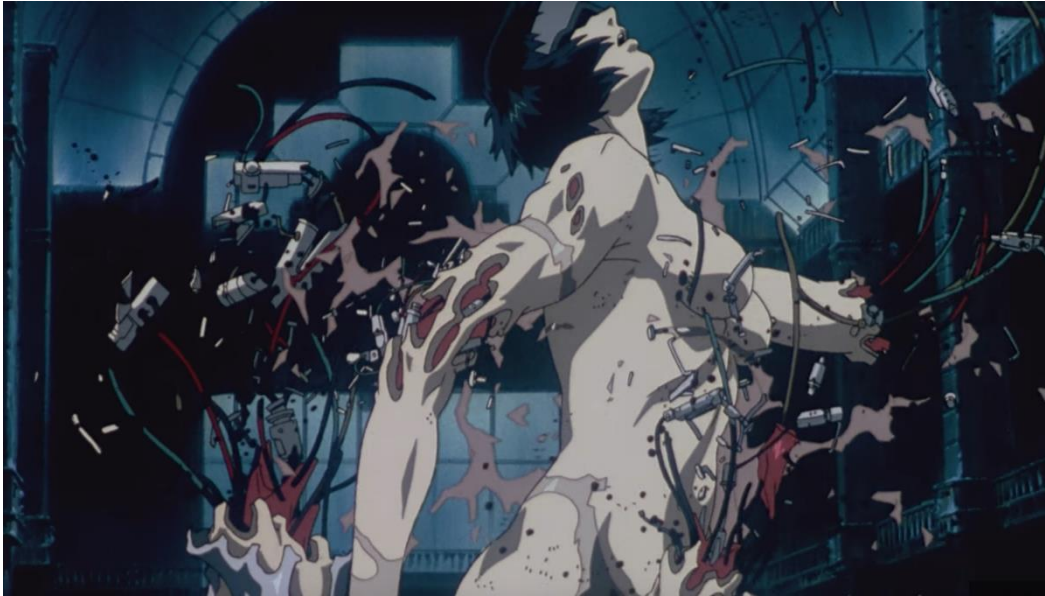
that perhaps cannot be effectively conveyed by any real body. Christopher Bolton characterizes this unique aspect of Japanese animation through the framework of "oscillation," in which the viewer is constantly situated between immersion and distance, transparency and mediation, realism and abstraction, and is repeatedly made aware of the form of the text itself through highly artificialized devices such as lighting and other visual effects (Bolton 12). This oscillation is unachievable in live-action films, since paradoxically, the realness of the bodies on screen signals to the viewer the implausibility of what is being done with/to those bodies. Kusanagi as animated is thus "a virtual or performed subject that is real, unreal, and hyperreal at the outset" (Bolton 104). The constantly oscillating animated body moreover recalls our previous discussion of Ornamentalism, and we see that Cheng's theory is as crucial to understanding representations of subjectivity in *Ghost* as it is in *Ex Machina*. Ornamentalism depends upon the recognition that people can simultaneously appear as subjects while existing as objects, a recognition that ultimately leads to an ontological ambiguity that challenges the way one conceptually approaches the subject-object relationship in normative western ideology; thus, in a sense, animation's oscillation is a natural conduit for ornamental beings, as these celluloid bodies are always operating as subjects as well as objects, even before we acknowledge the heightened nature of this slippage in Kusanagi.

Beyond the use of nakedness that renders Kusanagi at once sex-less and sexualized, *Ghost* frequently calls attention to the oscillating duality of the Major's body. Most interesting is the film's climax when Kusanagi battles a spider-like tank in order to confront the Puppet Master. In this spectacular scene, Kusanagi destroys her own body after unsuccessfully attempting to lift the lid off the tank; as she exerts more and more strength, the gleaming muscles on her naked body bulge and expand to inhuman proportions, before finally tearing and bursting

apart to reveal the now splintered mechanical structures within. The entire sequence effectively encapsulates the discomfort that comes with the recognition of ornamental objecthood, as the visceral destruction of the Major's body simultaneously highlights its fleshliness as well as artificiality (figures 7-8). Between the realism of the incredible violence thrust upon her hyper-corporeal body and the careless apathy with which the Major self-inflicts this violence, presumably because she considers her body replaceable and therefore inconsequential, the collapse between subject and object is twofold: on one hand, the viewer needs to reconcile the notion of Kusanagi as agential subject with this robotic, uncanny act of self-destruction in which her body is literally treated as an object; on the other, the striking visuality of the scene derives from a deliberate utilization of its stylistic ambiguity as animation, in which the Major's rapidly transforming, "oscillating" body is both hyperreal (in the sense that the musculature seems even more organic as it gains definition) as well as paradoxically unreal (the more "realistically" the animated body is drawn, the more noticeable its differences with real bodies). This critical scene serves to cement, if not make explicit, the ontological complexities in constructing Kusanagi that blur the distinctions between organicity and artificiality, human and machine, thereby producing powerful statements on alternative expressions of modern subjectivity.


Figure 7. Kusanagi's hyper-real body

*Figure 8. Kusanagi's heightened artificial body through self-destruction*

These narratives of cyborg subjectivity are further confounded by the film's evocative

explorations of posthuman reproduction, in which a complete transcendence of the physical body

seemingly signifies the next stage of evolution. At first glance, the final merging between

Kusanagi and the Puppet Master seems like an affirming response to the traditional western

problem of Cartesian-dualism, in the sense that it rejects the cumbersome, vulnerable body in

favor of omnipotence and omnipresence now made possible by a digitized, immortal mind.

However, as our discussion thus far on the Major's embodied objecthood has suggested, the

subject cannot be so easily defined as the consciousness-bearing mind alone, and the film

ironically draws attention to the inadequacy of its own solution. Orbaugh has suggested that the

merging scene subverts western ideals of an integral, impermeable male subject whose bodily

origins are spatially and temporally placeable (Orbaugh 186); however, closer scrutiny of the

aesthetic choices in this scene allows us to question the effectiveness of such subversive

endeavors. While both naked and limbless from battle, Kusanagi and the Puppet Master—now

lying side by side—present bodily differences that are striking (figure 9). Hosted in the same

Megatech cyborg model as Kusanagi, the Puppet Master is a voluptuous blonde who nonetheless

speaks in an unmistakably male voice, just as it had previously been referred to as male by section 9. The vocal dimension is significant here, as Kusanagi utilizes Japanese speech patterns that are decidedly more feminine (e.g., the ending particle *wa*). More importantly, Kusanagi's male partner Batou covers her chest with his jacket, a meaningless gesture that he nonetheless does repeatedly throughout the film. The embodied nature of this digital "transcendence" is thus made conspicuous, as it is hyper-codified through normative expressions of gender, race, and sexuality (Batou teasingly labels the scene a "lovers' suicide"). One needs to critically question what exactly is being (re)produced in this cyborgian merging, or perhaps wedding/coupling, between Kusanagi and the Puppet Master. It is not the case that the film simply constructs body/mind and subject-object relations as binaries, and that this final scene functions to advocate for one over the other; rather, what is particularly interesting, as well as revealing, is the film's self-awareness of these tensions so that it refuses at any point to completely discard aesthetic significations of the body. This is perhaps made most evident near the film's end, after Kusanagi has successfully merged with the Puppet Master despite having had her cyborg body destroyed in the process. Explaining to Batou her newfound existence, she quotes, "When I was a child, I spake as a child...but when I became a man, I put away childish things"—even as she is now speaking in a child (and girl)'s body that Batou has found for her to use as a substitute.



*Figure 9. Kusanagi and the Puppet Master's merging*

Ultimately, then, the body remains indispensable to our interpretation of the film's explorations of modern identity, although its highly futuristic cyborgian settings may initially disguise its relevance. As the film imagines posthuman narratives of reproduction, as well as alternate forms of ontologies that question the boundaries between organicity and artificiality, it consistently highlights the embodied nature of such discussions, so that Kusanagi is always a racialized, gendered being that challenges the western distinctions of objecthood and personhood. At the same time, however, the film perhaps is indeed best characterized by ambivalence, as it not only embraces the premises of tech-Orientalism in fetishizing Japan's distorted image as techno-future, but also reinforces techno-Orientalism's harmful logic of racial Othering. What Bhabha perhaps does not point out, then, is that in order for colonial mimicry to be truly subversive, the colonized must recognize its own construction as Other. After all, despite the critical discussion his work has since inspired, Oshii has declined to problematize the film's dynamics of race when asked about the decision to cast Scarlett Johansson as Kusanagi in the 2017 U.S. live-action remake. Instead, he seems to have no problem with it since he believes the Major's "physical form is an entirely assumed one" (Osborn, "Original").

**Coda**

In the concluding portion of Cheng's formulation of Ornamentalism, she returns to her initial inquiries into Ornamentalism's implications beyond Asiatic femininity. Extending her discussion to the construction of the Black female body, she contrasts the objecthood that defines the Asian woman with the planthood characterizing Sethe's wounded Black body in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*—ultimately urging us to reflect more broadly, and more radically, on how racialized and gendered significations of the body can call into question the normative binaries of western subjectivity. Indeed, our discussion thus far attempts to shed light on the potential of more diverse modes of being and personhood, and in light of Cheng's evocative conclusions, we might consider Han Kang's powerful short story "The Fruit of My Woman" set in Seoul, where, through a bizarre sequence of magical realism, the narrator witnesses his wife metamorphosize into a plant. Or more broadly, the subversive interpretation of the Asian woman as the original cyborg invites a comparative feminist analysis of the racialized body in Afrofuturist and African-futurist works. For instance, in Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* novella (2015), the story of a Himba girl's foray into a prestigious intergalactic university, how does the female body serve as historical text, a vehicle to inscribe and reimagine collective trauma, tradition, and mythology through the framework of technology? Another fruitful exploration might compare R. F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* series, in which the female protagonist single-handedly reconstructs modern Chinese history by becoming a physical conduit for supernatural divinities, with Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, which combines the SF device of time travel with slave narratives by thrusting the protagonist Dana back to her ancestral plantation.

The possibilities are numerous, yet my interests here gravitate more specifically towards the emerging discourse on video games, the most lucrative entertainment industry in the world

today. My previous analysis of films—especially *Ghost in the Shell*—has demonstrated the importance of taking into account the nature of visual form, in addition to narrative content, in shaping particular viewer interpretations. Paying attention to the creative medium itself becomes especially important when we enter the realm of video games, where interactivity is one of the defining characteristics of game experience. While any text, whether literary, visual, or otherwise, arguably "interacts" with an active reader/viewer in some way to produce meaning, video games offer unique challenges to how we think about interacting with texts. Not discounting the ongoing discussion regarding the role of narratology versus ludology in video games studies (Juul 16), I aim to briefly highlight here the medium's high level of interactivity as a significant area in which racialization and gendering take place through mechanisms inherent to video games.

I am therefore less interested in how fiction or storytelling in games can Otherize—they certainly do—but rather in how the underlying structures of video game mechanics do so, perhaps as part of a larger conversation on the ideological mapping of computer-mediated processes. For my purposes, I wish to call attention to the rule-based, outcome-oriented qualities that govern most video games; the fact that the player is encouraged, compelled, or simply allowed to perform certain actions in order to achieve certain outcomes is crucial to understanding how video games exert cultural influence and (re)produce ideology. Ian Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric is useful here: distinct from the verbal or visual rhetoric that accompanies more traditional forms of media, procedural rhetoric as often operating through digital systems designates the practice of using processes such as game mechanics persuasively, where "arguments are not made through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models" (Bogost 29). Bogost

contends that video games that effectively mount sophisticated procedural rhetoric can inform and challenge players to reflect on how processes in the material world do, can, or should work, thereby interrogating these material systems themselves (Bogost 57).

But even as I accept Bogost's fundamental premise that video games utilize argumentative procedure to great degree, I resist the suggestion that this procedure is necessarily rhetorical in nature: while players can indeed be *persuaded* to adopt certain views, it is also likely that the same procedures can *manipulate or condition* them into doing so. In other words, Bogost fails to adequately address the extent to which pre-existing ideologies may already naturalize, and thus reinforce, the very material processes video game procedures can literalize or seemingly call into question. Alexander Galloway has pointed out that procedures in video games—or what he calls "protocols"—can be viewed as allegories of control, where, through following and absorbing game rules that mirror the politics of the informatic age, players are "learning, internalizing, and becoming intimate with a massive, multipartite global algorithm" (Galloway 35). It is this more pernicious effect of video game procedure that I highlight as a re-instantiation of techno-Orientalism in new media.

Let us briefly consider one example of a video game where this tension between procedure and allegory comes into play through racial Othering. While Lucas Pope's 2013 independent game *Papers, Please* has garnered much critical attention for its procedural sophistication in interrogating the realities of immigration policy and authoritarian state violence, his most recent detective game *Return of the Obra Dinn* (2018) utilizes procedure in ways that are subtler and perhaps more troubling. On a general level, *Obra Dinn* employs procedural mechanics common to the detective genre's idealization of objective, intelligible, and unmediated historical truths, such as by granting the detective means to traverse time and space

when unravelling the *Obra Dinn*'s mystery; however, here it is important to elaborate on how racialization mechanisms are similarly woven into the structural pathways of the game. Set aboard a fictional East India Company trade ship from 1802, the game requires the player to investigate the fates of the *Obra Dinn*'s 60 crew members and passengers, who have all died or disappeared due to various natural and supernatural causes. The player navigates in first-person the complex layout of the monochromatic three-story ship with a magical pocket watch, which allows them to return to specific moments before each character's death to explore relevant audio and visual clues. Using a roster and drawings of the crew, the player makes progress in the game whenever they correctly determine and input character fates into their inspector's logbook; with every three cases solved, they are able to access more scenes and proceed further into the mystery. Even on a narrative level, the game Orientalizes by relying heavily on a mystical Formosan treasure chest as a central plot device: belonging to a group of royal Formosan passengers, this exotic object is revealed to have set in motion the endless tragedies on board, where, through some unfathomable Oriental magic, hordes of "terrible beasts" of the sea are lured in to attack the *Obra Dinn*.

What calls for scrutiny is not just how the plot of the mystery unfolds, however, but more importantly the procedural strategies of deduction players have at their disposal when identifying characters and subsequently their fates. While more scrupulous or ambitious players may meticulously look for conclusive clues embedded solely within the narrative, such as by reconstructing timelines, analyzing character relationships through dialogue, or tracking specific character items at key locations, the game also offers a more freeform reasoning space in which external factors, such as profession or race, can be exploited for processes of elimination. At more difficult stages within the game where clues are scarce, one inevitably finds themselves

noticing the simplistically rendered, but unmistakably present, racialized appearances of the characters, or the pronounced accents and linguistic variation of the dialogue recordings replayed at each death. Combined with the logbook's convenient catalogue of all character origins, which include a variety of European and Asian nationalities, these normative racial markers make it possible for the player to guess character identities through trial and error, since the logbook automatically progresses once any three correct fates are reached. For instance, a player might assume a certain character to be Chinese based on their appearance and/or accent; then, with two identifications already entered into the logbook, the player could input all the Chinese names given until one of them triggers a third correct response. The way the game portrays individual racial appearance, accent, or culture—whether "accurately" or otherwise—is irrelevant here; what Bogostian procedure highlights are the rule-based structural pathways encoded in the game that permit racialization to work as a strategy in the first place. *Obra Dinn* thus motivates the player to make the kind of racial generalizations—accent as natural index of identity, ethnic features as justified means of racial and subsequently social categorization, etc.—that Bogost anticipates such a game to critique through procedure. Yet, instead of using rhetoric to expose the harm of racial Othering, the game cements their normative nature; since players are able to proceed in the game in this way and uncover the "truth" of the mystery, *Obra Dinn* actually rewards them for engaging in these ideological practices, thus further naturalizing the constructed logic of racialization.

This implicitly encoded notion of reward is especially important when we reflect on Bogostian procedure in terms of its argumentative qualities. Unlike language that aims to persuade through direct instruction or explication, the procedures players are introduced to in video games like *Obra Dinn* are powerful tools by which ideology is *learned*, in the sense that

players internalize—through interacting first-hand with rules of the game—processes that they themselves observe to be effective, often in high-stakes settings. In *Obra Dinn*'s online community forums, some players comment gleefully or in frustration about the fact that they can use "brute force" logic to clear the game, while others retort that this is not how the game is "supposed to be played." But a singular or mandatory method for playing the game does not exist, just as a singular method to interpret a text does not exist, and it is precisely this possibility, this hidden logic, embedded in the game that becomes critical to its treatment of racial ideology as argument. For *Obra Dinn* does not offer a puzzle in which race does not exist or signify, nor does it explicitly satirize racialization as its own procedural vice, as was perhaps done with *Papers, Please*; instead, players encounter situations where racialization, seemingly irrelevant, ultimately proves to be highly effective once learned. Indeed, racialization is deliberately made a covert, intuitive, indeed algorithmic logic, much as how it operates in the real world, and herein lies the argumentative, or "persuasive," power of digital procedure.

Whether it is the earlier forms of explicit racism seen in yellow-peril propaganda, or the appropriation and depoliticization of race under the disguise of postmodern aesthetics, or the increasingly common narratives of post-racial dystopia featured in speculative fiction, reinstantiations of Orientalism and techno-Orientalism continue to define and surveille how Asians speak, act, and exist in both fictional and real worlds. Thinking back to Said's early concerns with Orientalism's amorphous, self-adapting nature over time, it is imperative that we pay close attention to the rapidly evolving expressions of global media and continue to identify, resist, and ultimately dismantle the various languages and spaces by which such oppressive systems of Othering exist. By examining the nuanced constructions of the subject-object binary as manifest in the Asian woman's ornamental objecthood, this thesis has hopefully taken a step

towards the critical discourse on reimagining gendered racial ontologies to promote more

productive and subversive understandings of modern personhood.

Works Cited

Bhabha, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: the Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October*, vol.

    28, 1984, pp. 125-133.

Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*. The MIT Press, 2007.

Bolton, Christopher. *Interpreting Anime*. University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

Chapell et al. "Official Who Said Atlanta Shooting Suspect Was Having A 'Bad Day' Faces

    Criticism." *National Public Radio*, 18 March, 2021,

    https://www.npr.org/2021/03/17/978141138/atlanta-shooting-suspect-is-believed-to-

    have-visited-spas-he-targeted.

Cheng, Anne Anlin. "Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman." *Critical

    Inquiry*, vol. 44, Spring 2018, pp. 415-446.

*China: Through the Looking Glass.* "Exhibition Overview," The Met Museum.

    https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2015/china-through-the-looking-glass.

*China: Through the Looking Glass.* "Exhibition Galleries," The Met Museum.

    https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2015/china-through-the-looking-

    glass/exhibition-galleries.

Chu, Seo-Young. "I, Stereotype." Roh et al., pp. 76-88.

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. "Race and/as Technology; or: How to Do Things to Race." *Camera

    Obscura*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2009, pp. 7-35.

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. "Orienting the Future." *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia

    in the Age of Fiber Optics*. The MIT Press, 2006.

*Ex Machina*. Directed by Alex Garland, A24, 2015.

Galloway, Alexander R. "Playing the code: Allegories of control in *Civilization*." *Radical*

    *Philosophy 128*, 2004, pp. 33-40.

*Ghost in the Shell*. Directed by Mamoru Oshii, Manga Entertainment, 1995.

Haraway, J. Donna. *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the*

    *Late Twentieth Century*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. The MIT Press,

    2005.

Lum, Patrick. "Ghost in the Shell's Urban Dreamscapes: Behind the Moody Art of the Anime

    Classic." *The Guardian*, 2 August 2018,

    https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/aug/03/ghost-in-the-shells-urban-dreamscapes-

    behind-the-moody-art-of-the-anime-classic.

Orbaugh, Sharalyn. "Sex and the Single Cyborg: Japanese Popular Culture Experiments in

    Subjectivity." *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: Japanese Science Fiction from Origins*

    *to Anime*, edited by Bolton, Christopher et al., University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Osborn, Alex. "Original Ghost in the Shell Director Mamoru Oshii Has No Problem with Live-

    Action Remake." *IGN*, 2 May 2017, https://www.ign.com/articles/2017/03/21/original-

    ghost-in-the-shell-director-mamoru-oshii-has-no-problem-with-live-action-remake.

Pope, Lucas. *Papers, Please*. 3909 LLC, 2013.

Pope, Lucas. *Return of the Obra Dinn*. 3909 LLC, 2018.

Roh, D. S. et al., editors. *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History,*

    *and Media*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. 2015.

Said, Edward W.. *Orientalism*. Penguin, 2003.

Sohn, Stephen H. "Introduction: Alien/Asian: Imagining the Racialized Future." *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2008, pp. 5-22.

Ueno, Toshiya. "Japanimation and Techno-Orientalism." *Seventh International Symposium on Electronic Art*, edited by Roetto, Michael B. Rotterdam, Sept. 1996.