

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Asian futures, without Asians: Scary look at science fiction

By Andrew Hamlin
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2014's "Ex Machina," written and directed by Alex Garland, won an Oscar and was widely considered one of the most dashing and deep science fiction films of its era.

But as artist, curator, and academic Astria Suparak points out, the two Asian androids in the film, Kyoko (played by Sonoya Mizuno) and Jade (Gana Bayarsaikhan), end up being sacrificed so the white android, Ava (Alicia Vikander), can survive. Ava even removes android skin and a whole arm, from Jade, to further her getaway—a primary example, says Suparak, of Caucasians exploiting Asian skin in science fiction (SF) films and TV.

Suparak's illustrated lecture, "Asian futures, without Asians," delivered via Zoom through the Jacob Lawrence Gallery on Nov. 30, arose from her scrutinizing roughly 400 science fiction films and TV shows. She decided to concentrate on the period from 1965 to the present, since 1965 marked the lifting of longstanding restrictions against Asian immigration, in the U.S.—paving the way, in other words, for the Asian percentages, and Asian American cultures, seen today.

The lecture, lasting roughly one hour, staked out what Suparak called a "taxonomy" of eight tropes visible through this intense look at her source material. She started with "Anglicized Names," the notion that any long name, hard to pronounce for Westerners, must be shortened. This includes Obi-Wan Kenobi being shortened to Ben Kenobi (she mentions in passing that

the famous Japanese action hero Toshiro Mifune was offered, but turned down, the part of Kenobi). Another prominent example comes in "The Fifth Element," where an Asian-inspired character, Leeloominaï Lekatariba Lamina-Tchaï Ekbat De Sebat, becomes, simply, Leeloo. (And is played by yet another white actor, Milla Jovovich. That leads to the conundrum of whether "colorblind" casting is in any way better than whitewashing.)

The second trope, "Chopsticks," demonstrated the frequent misuse of Asian food in SF. Sushi indicates wealth and power for those eating, and Chinese food seems always low-class, served up in rainy, grimy markets. "The Fifth Element" features a decidedly un-Thai salesman serving up "Thai food" from what signifies as a Chinese eatery.

Third came "Kimonos, kind of." Suparak explored the idea of Asian-ness as a costume one can put on for the screen, similar to the Asian-as-skin notion. Western bathrobes, she noted, trace their origin to the Japanese yukata, a kind of casual kimono. But bastardized versions of robes and kimonos can be found throughout science fiction, often worn by non-Asian actors and characters—notably the Ancient One from 2016's "Doctor Strange," portrayed by Tilda Swinton.

"Shōji screens" tracked the indiscriminate use of Japanese screens, plus different kinds of Asian arches, metalwork, and latticework. "Martial arts download" gave examples of incoherent approaches to martial arts, notably the notion that Leeloominaï Lekatariba Lamina-Tchaï Ekbat De Sebat, aka Leeloo, learns the entire history of hand-to-hand combat, through speed-reading.

"Background Buddhas" emphasized how non-Asian characters seem to obtain an "instant enlightenment," simply by surrounding themselves with Asian artifacts and signifiers. The "American-made geisha" turn out decorative, and servile, but deadly underneath, and their Asian-ness renders them ever-treacherous.

She concluded her trope list with "Giant geisha ads," pointing out how many films, including the original "Blade Runner," give the viewer Asian faces at a remove, plastered across video screens or rendered as holograms, but restricted to enticing, and selling, instead of fully-fleshed out characters.

In her "(finale)," Suparak ventured that this overarching vision of a future world with plenty of Asian-ness, but very few actual (and fewer actualized) Asians, reflected a faith on the part of white people, that they could absorb and control any culture, or set of cultures, they wished, and leave out any aspects they wished. In a follow-up dialogue, led by University of Washington professor Chandan C. Reddy,

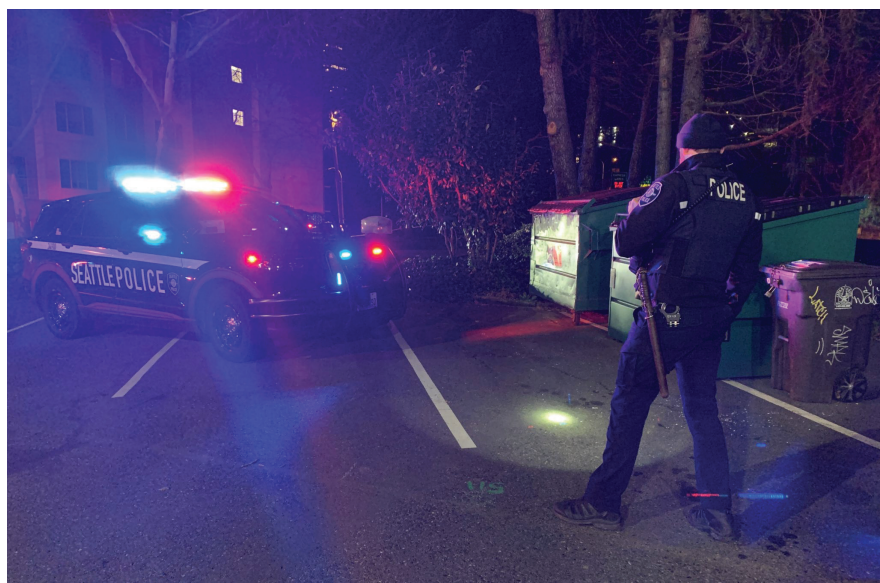
Suparak was asked about positive portrayals of Asian characters she found in contemporary visual SF. She listed the films "Space Sweepers," "Wandering Earth," and "Snowpiercer"—all films, not surprisingly, masterminded by Asians.

She also offered a word of advice to white makers of SF: Let Asian makers make important decisions, and support folks making work of their own culture, without trying to take over. ■

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BRIEFLY

Kobe Terrace shooting



Shooting scene near Kobe Terrace Park on Dec. 3

Detectives are investigating after a man was shot near Kobe Terrace park in the Chinatown-International District on the night of Dec. 3.

At 11:18 p.m., police responded to 6th Avenue South and South Washington

Street for reports of a shooting. Arriving officers found a man with a gunshot wound to the stomach and immediately began first aid. The 38-year-old victim was taken to Harborview Medical Center in stable condition. ■

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