

Movies, Asians, and Techno Orientalism

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Despite what most of us claim, humans learn the best not from reading, but from seeing.

That is, we are visual learners and in most circumstances, movies are our teachers.

In this speech, I'd like to address the problems in the matter of representation of Asians in Western cinema by explaining the concept and effects of techno orientalism in movies

Techno-orientalism is a phenomenon in which Asia and Asians are imagined in films as both hyper technological but intellectually primitive; smart, but not enough to beat the heroic West. This contradictory depiction of Asians as robotically advanced, but submissive, and villainous was nothing but a desperate attempt at reclaiming superiority to Westerners.

it may simply sound as if Asians are represented to be the perfect villain trope, but it goes much deeper than that. East Asian features are usually what is plastered on cyborgs and robots and killer machines in movies because that is literally how westerners perceive Asians to be- robotic inside and out; emotionless, empty and submissive to their masters.

When a dystopian future with extremely advanced technology pops up in movies, the Asian-ness of the scene is almost always over exaggerated -so much that in most circumstances the directors don't even bother to fact-check the very different cultures of East Asia and just cluster it all into one abomination of Japanese, Chinese and Hangul characters on billboards. Not only does this raise problems on the generalisation of east Asian cultures, but the depiction of the people also raises red flags

Women when playing cyborgs or robots, are always hyper-sexualised with their features and their roles in movies: they're either the sexy Asian servant, the sexy bodyguard, or the siren that lures men in with seduction. The way they move, the way they look, the way they speak -they are all the product of

a society that has had no problem with fetishizing their very existence -reducing their identity to be nothing but objects to be exploited. The role men play is no less degrading- either the merciless, evil, rich villain, or the rows and rows of highly educated, factory workers, slaving away on minimum wage and robot-like obedience.

This view of Asians as an expendable labor force can be traced back to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, where such things were claimed in court: Chinese laborers were built to withstand physical deprivations, but Americans weren't. Chinese people were intelligent, yes, but also obedient -again, something Americans were apparently not. The publication went further on to claim that, biologically, European descendants and the Chinese differed because the latter did not require safety or shelter or sustenance.

But why did westerners feel the need to put Asians in a bad light?

The answer is simple: people tend to do silly things when feeling threatened.

One of the first instances of techno-orientalism was the character Fu Manchu, created in 1912 portrayed as the archetype evil mastermind with slanted eyes, and an evil mustache. Fu Manchu represented the western ambivalences towards what lay in the East and that manifested strange contradictions to calm their nerves with thoughts like:

The Asians were smart but not smart enough to beat them.

Yes, Asians may have technology but they will surely use it for evil and so the West had to take over.

Asians could not be trusted, but they would make great workers.

Japan soon prospered and had the dubious honour as the original techno-orient in the 80s with the help of the cyberpunk movement so the West averted their eyes from China and focused their gaze on Japan. Japanese tech companies started popping up in every major American city so the west retaliated with Hollywood. The movie Blade Runner was created, with a dystopian city that looked a lot like modern Beijing, but it had a Japanese Geisha on their billboard. The Matrix did the same. Then the women in movies like Ex Machina, Metropolis, and Cloud Atlas were portrayed as robots; built to obey and abide and look beautifully Asian while doing so. Since the growth of both economies after the Second World War, the West

felt threatened by Asians and did the most cowardly thing possible to reclaim some of their superiority back.

However, as the world around us evolves, so do cinematic representations. When the first all-Asian movie since 1993; Crazy Rich Asian was released in 2018 the narrative of Asians in cinema shifted dramatically -showing the world that they were not the robots the West has been emphasizing to us for the past 200 years. When Parasite won the Oscars Asians were able to feel the pride and receive the recognition we deserved. When Shang-Chi came out as the first East Asian superhero on the big screen, new possibilities presented themselves to us. As society becomes more aware and sensitive to the way minorities are represented, we no longer have to feel dismissed. We can finally present ourselves in the spotlight we want and not the one forced upon us.