21st Century Orientals: The Displacement of Eastern Identities in Contemporary Hollywood Adaptation

Annie Wang
awang4@wellesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection

Recommended Citation
https://repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection/229
21st Century Orientals:
The Displacement of Eastern Identities in Contemporary Hollywood Adaptation

Annie Wang

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors in
Cinema & Media Studies

April 2014

© Annie Wang 2014
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... 3

Introduction: The Sun Never Sets on the Hollywood Empire ............................................ 4

Chapter One: Racial Allegories in *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* ....................... 10
  Persians in “Arab-Land” .......................................................................................... 13
  The Princess, The Sheik, and the Knifethrower: Stereotypes from “Arab-Land” 20
  Sir Ben Kingsley and the Sincere Oriental Villain .................................................. 28

Chapter Two: The Creation of Race Politics in *The Last Airbender* ............................... 31
  M. Night Shyamalan’s Celebratory Yellowface ....................................................... 33
  The Aesthetics of Racial Implication ....................................................................... 37
  “Imprisoned”: A Case Study in Filmic Disenfranchisement ..................................... 45

Chapter Three: Orientalism in the Era of the Post-Racial Body in *Cloud Atlas* ............ 50
  The Geography of *Cloud Atlas* .............................................................................. 54
  The Liberation of Neo-Seoul .................................................................................. 59
  Doona Bae, Zhou Xun, and the Question of the Authentic Body .............................. 65

Conclusion: 21st Century Hope for Hollywood? ............................................................... 73

Appendix ........................................................................................................................... 78

Works Cited ..................................................................................................................... 79

Filmography .................................................................................................................... 83
Acknowledgments

The process to this thesis’s completion has been a long and often arduous one, and I am so fortunate to have had the support and affirmation of so many throughout the past year. I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the contributions of the following individuals:

My thesis advisor, Professor Elena Creef, who has been my most ardent supporter and more than once brought me out of the dark recesses of cynicism to find redemption in some of the more difficult (read: frankly awful) material I worked with;

The other members of my thesis committee: Professors Winifred Wood and Maurizio Viano of the small but mighty Cinema & Media Studies Department for their indulgence, attentiveness, enthusiasm, and abiding love for 35mm, and Professor Anjali Prabhu, from whom I have learned so much about the great joys and tribulations of the academic writing process;

Emily Belanger for helping me format my citations and bibliography at the eleventh hour and LTS for being patient with my perpetually overdue books;

Kat Chen, Katie Clark, Vivian Dai, Amalina Dave, Callie Kovacs, Allison McDonough, Lauren Richmond, Brittany Saunders, and Liz Wright; each provided inspiration, insight, or information that made it into my thesis in some way, shape, or form and for that—and your unwavering friendship—I will be forever grateful.

Lastly, this work—as all others—is dedicated to my parents. Only time will tell if the world will ever know the extent to which their love, wisdom, and guidance have suffused every word I write and every step I take.
Introduction: The Sun Never Sets on the Hollywood Empire

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

- Joseph Campbell, The Man With A Thousand Faces

Our lives are not our own. From womb to tomb, we are bound to others. Past and present. And by each crime and every kindness, we birth our future.

- Sonmi~451, Cloud Atlas

This thesis bloomed out of a budding interest in the Hollywood system that conveniently converged with my increasing desire to understand the complex social politics that govern my own identity as a first-generation Asian American, all of which was spurred on by the increasing prevalence of modern methods of mass communication. In the age of the internet, every person who has access to a computer, smartphone, or tablet can become a culture critic and somewhere along the way I became swept up in the growing community of Asian American media critics, where I began to notice a peculiar pattern emerging. In 2012, Ang Lee won the Academy Award for Best Director for his work on Life of Pi, the feature-length adaptation of the critically-acclaimed novel of the same name, becoming the first Asian director to win the award, as well as the only director to have won Best Director twice during the twenty-first century.\(^1\) Among his many accolades is the recurring rhetoric that he is “transcendent” or “post-national” in genre, able to engage his audience on an international level.\(^2\) For example, much attention has been paid to the faithfulness with which he creates the atmosphere and aesthetic of 1970s America in The

\(^1\) Up until 2013, Lee was also the only non-white winner for Best Director. Alfonso Cuaron, the winner of Best Director in 2013 for Gravity, is the first Mexican-born director to win but his heritage is white-Hispanic.

Ice Storm (1997), and the commercial and critical success of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000) is considered to be a prime example of a film specific to a Chinese genre that has attained global audience appeal because of its postmodern awareness of and response to a global audience. In other words, such acclaim seems to insinuate that Ang Lee’s success as a non-western director is, at least, partly due to his ability to make films that appeal to a multi-national audience.

Compare this briefly with Memoirs of a Geisha (2005, dir. Rob Marshall), a film that—despite the persisting criticisms about cultural insensitivity in casting and melodramatic elements—also won multiple Academy Awards during the 2006 award season, most notably in Art Direction, Costume Design, and Cinematography. Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon and Memoirs of a Geisha feature pan-Asian casts despite taking place in specific countries where national and ethnic identity are key; both also take certain liberties with visual and aural aesthetic, engendering accusations of Orientalism to generate revenue at the cost of Asian and Asian American representation. Hollywood’s backdrop treatment of Asia as a setting has long been complex and remains problematic, still mired in stereotypes and signifiers of Asian-ness that have been prevalent since the late nineteenth century. The more exotic aspects of Asian culture that render it so fascinatingly “Other” to an American audience are also the aspects that are the most often exaggerated and reshaped to a fantasy landscape. As we move forward into the twenty-first century, Hollywood appears to be more racially progressive than ever but Orientalist stereotypes inherent in modern blockbusters reveal that we are still very much stuck in a brutally racialized and gendered present.

---


4 Japanese-American actress Shizuko Hoshi, who voiced the narration provided by the older Sayuri, matched her accent to Chinese actress Zhang Ziyi so that Saiyuri has a Chinese accent throughout.
Armed with this realization, I began to build a list of recent films that in my view represent many of the dominant attitudes towards Middle Eastern and Asian cultures held by Hollywood and, by extension, white Western society today. I include portrayals of the Middle East among my selected films as they make up the bulk of Edward Said’s examination of Orientalism, which Asians have inherited in twentieth and twenty-first-century American culture. I have chosen to examine three big-budget films adapted from a variety of popular source material; the fantasy-adventure genre is broad, but each of these films takes place in a time and place outside our own reality where existing racial constructs can and should be deconstructed. The sources succeed in doing so, but all three of their film adaptations fall short of such an expectation. Though all three films take place in real or Asian-inspired settings, indigenous actors are constantly displaced or absent altogether from the screen and/or production process while the material aspects of their cultures are brought to the forefront as it is convenient for the filmmakers, preventing these people from actively being able to define themselves in a space that belongs to them. This, in turn, prevents Hollywood from accurately reflecting America’s oft-described “melting pot” culture, calling into question how much America truly values racial and ethnic diversity.

The films discussed in the following chapters each act as a case study; each encapsulates a wide range of classic Orientalist themes in the fantasy-adventure genre, representing some of the prominent and consistent ways in which “benevolent racism” and “sincere fictions” have replaced the blatant caricatures of early film history. Benevolent racism consists of prejudices that are seen as benefiting an oppressed group but in actuality continue to support the oppression of said group. Sincere fictions are social, psychological, and historical constructs accepted by a majority population unwilling or unable to deal with alternative interpretations of events or
peoples different than themselves. In the case of Asian Americans, benevolent racism stems from traditional portrayals of the East as passive and helpless while sincere fictions allow Hollywood to continue creating media that portrays it as such.\(^5\)

Chapter One begins with an examination of *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2010, dir. Mike Newell), an action-adventure blockbuster based on the popular video game series (1989 – ongoing) that takes place in “Ancient” Persia and involves the quest for and struggle over a magical artifact that allows the bearer to control time. *Prince of Persia* creates a society where whiteness and anglo-heteronormativity are representative of physical and symbolic nobility, and where brown and black bodies contain the potential for positive change but are unable to achieve it without the white protagonist to act as a catalyst. Chapter Two continues with *The Last Airbender* (2010, dir. M. Night Shyamalan), a family-oriented martial arts adventure film based on the critically-acclaimed Nickelodeon animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2006-2008). *The Last Airbender* takes place in a fantasy world where different nations at war are represented by a variety of East Asian and Pacific Islander cultures combined with elemental powers. The film creates racial politics that reflect the beliefs of western society, constructing whiteness as a symbol of good and relegating Asians to the background, denying them agency in their own world. Finally, the most ambitious of these is *Cloud Atlas* (2012, dir. Lana and Andy Wachowski, Tom Twyker) a science-fiction film adapted from David Mitchell’s 2004 novel of the same name that uses reincarnation as its main narrative catalyst. Chapter Three examines the segments of *Cloud Atlas* that take place in Neo-Seoul, Korea, approximately one hundred years into a dystopic future earth ruled by corporate culture. Classic yellowface


performance shifts the focus of the narrative from an Asian woman to a white man playing Korean while fetishizing and commodifying the Asian woman’s body, emphasizing the centrality of the white heterosexual male in a film that claims to transcend time, space, and the confines of the physical body.

Ironically, the trending treatment of Asians in American film culture is characterized by their displacement or absence from the screen itself. Whether through the production or in the diegesis, Asians are curiously absent from the process of telling their own stories. In some films one mode dominates the other, but most often the two appear as forces working in tandem, giving audiences the approximate experience of a new culture while still maintaining western hegemonic power structures. However, this does not mean that Asian culture itself is absent from the screen. Out of the three films, only *The Last Airbender* claims a setting completely removed from our spatial and temporal reality but all films constantly reference real places, cultures, and/or practices, making their complete dissociation from reality impossible. Elements range from medium to medium—for example, analyzing how a film’s visual aesthetic is inspired by or departs from visual sources such as comic books or animated shows as opposed to the style and rhetoric of a literary source such as a novel.

The ever-increasing popularity of works adapted into film in current cinema is obvious: in our staunchly capitalist consumer culture, it is economically advantageous for the creators or owners of a franchise to extend interest over multiple media in an effort to reach and influence the widest audience, including feature films.6 Their profits prove that the idea of Asian culture appeals to American audiences as well as audiences abroad, but that such films succeed despite

---

the retention of western cultural norms—in effect, American and European film studios define what it means to be Asian for the rest of the world.
Chapter One: Racial Allegories in *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*

In 1978, Edward Said defined *Orientalism* as “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other.” Said asserts that Americans associate the Orient much more closely with the Far East while he focuses on Western Europe’s affixation with the Near East, but I would argue that the combination of recent current events and the subsequent media attention, adaptation, fictionalization, interpretation, and representation have placed the role of the Near East at the forefront of the American imagination.\(^7\)

Just as Americans became obsessed with appropriating Mesoamerican history, art, and architecture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a way to promote American exceptionalism and legitimize their own (at that point in time) lack of historical roots compared to those of their European ancestors, we might look at the insertion of traditional Western values into films taking place in the “Orient” as a response to such recent phenomena as increased globalization or the uneven shifts in acceptance of anti-racism, anti-homophobia, and anti-gender discrimination in society.\(^8\) Hollywood is in many ways a balm to the discomfort felt by the public as it becomes aware of and is forced to confront such a slow but profound social shift towards a more heterogeneous population. Fiction becomes a method of escapism; science fiction and fantasy films are particularly effective genres in which to either keep changing

---


8 For a comprehensive overview of the history of the boom of Mesoamerican archaeology and how it affected American architecture, religion, and popular thought, please refer to R. Tripp Evans’ text *Romancing the Maya: Mexican Antiquity in the American Imagination 1820-1915* (University of Austin Press, 2004).
paradigms at bay or critique current social oppressions by envisioning a world with different paradigms. Overlaying an unfamiliar setting or culture with the patriarchal, heteronormative, and white supremacist Hollywood conventions that audiences are already familiar with can remove such anxiety, making foreignness more palatable for the average viewer by turning the “Other” into something that is either pleasurable to consume or to see consumed as a way to maintain the status quo.

*Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2010), which is very loosely based off of the popular video game series, was intended to become Disney’s newest mega-franchise à la *Pirates of the Caribbean* and was designed to appeal to the Prince of Persia series’ main video game demography: male gamers aged 18-36.⁹ This is not particularly unusual as the fantasy-adventure genre in film in mainstream Hollywood is formulated to fit roughly the same demographic. The *Prince of Persia* series currently contains ten titles; the original game was a simple 2D sidescroller created by Jordan Mechner in 1989 and has since been expanded to several full-length 3D action-adventure games, not all of which are chronologically connected to the canon. The time period of the games is unclear, allowing the filmmakers to create a world that imagines an approximation of Ancient Persia based mostly on Orientalist tropes, including the treatment of women as objects or material possessions, and Northern African/Arab/Near-Eastern peoples as less civilized than their Western counterparts.

The titular Prince of Persia is unnamed in the games but in the film is called Dastan (Jake Gyllenhaal), the youngest son of King Sharaman (Ronald Pickup). Orphaned at a young age, Dastan was adopted into an extradiegetically multiracial royal family, which consists of his two

---


older legitimate-blood brothers Tus (Richard Coyle) and Garsiv (Toby Kebbell), and their uncle Nizam (Ben Kingsley), the king’s Vizier. The film follows Dastan as he pursues the Dagger of Time, a magical artifact that allows the bearer to rewind time, across the Persian Empire with his love interest Princess Tamina (Gemma Arterton) in order to make amends for the death of King Sharaman.

*Prince of Persia* faithfully fulfills Joseph Campbell’s concept of the *monomyth*, more commonly known as “The Hero’s Journey.” Campbell defines the monomyth as a formulaic pattern that mythic narratives from vastly different cultures have in common, including the stories of Prometheus, Jason, the Buddha, and Moses. In it, the hero “ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder [and returns] with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.” The hero of the fairy tale is also differentiated from the hero of the myth in that the mythic hero’s boon affects the whole of the society or world that he returns to, as opposed to personal victory or fulfillment. Fantasy-adventure titles in particular favor the journey of the mythic hero because it guarantees the growth of the protagonist from an underdog to a hero who embodies the film’s major moral message.

The monomyth is particularly important in examining *Prince of Persia* because Dastan is *the* definition of a mythic hero—through his individual exceptionalism he is beset on a quest that only he can complete, traveling to distant lands and initiating the literal regeneration of the entire world at the climax of the film. Throughout his journey, he meets many different peoples who either help or hinder him on his quest, but ultimately it is he alone who must face and defeat the ultimate evil. This popular (though by no means universal) structuralist formula, recycled in dozens of profitable Hollywood films a year, should for all intents and purposes be predictable and unoffensive, but the simple, straightforward nature of *Prince of Persia*’s narrative is

---

complicated by how it approaches issues of race and class in the casting of the characters and what race comes to symbolize in the course of the narrative.

**Persians in “Arab-land”**

With the exception of the Sudanese warrior Seso (Steve Toussaint) and, to an extent Sheik Amar (Alfred Molina in more exaggerated brownface), whiteness—specifically, western Eurocentric whiteness—is a trait that is shared amongst the film’s real and symbolic nobility. American cinema seems always to make a correlation between British accents and class status, a remnant from the golden age of Hollywood when American movie stars like Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn cultivated a distinctive “Mid-Atlantic English” dialect that favored a similar elocution.\(^\text{11}\) The act of whitewashing the main cast contributes to what media critics Kent A. Ono and Vincent Pham describe as allowing an audience “to imagine what aspects of performance align with an imagined Asianness, while simultaneously attempting to note aspects of the actors’ whiteness, thus practicing the skills of discriminating between what is Asian and what is white.”\(^\text{12}\) In more recent Hollywood history, overt racial masquerade is not as omnipresent as it once was and is seldom intentionally used as caricature.

Rather, canonically Asian characters have been forced to take a backseat to their more prominent white counterparts who eagerly wear the Orientalist costumes, speak the language (or, more commonly, adopt the accent), and practice the customs of a new exotic space without any apparent strangeness, striking a discord with the still-prevalent association with the physical appearance of Asians as indications of “Other”. What is especially evident in artworks produced

---


\(^\text{12}\) Kent Ono and Vincent Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media* (Boston: Polity, 2009), 47.
during the height of British and French imperialism, many of which depicted noted European figures or members of the bourgeoisie in Orientalist turbans and robes, lounging on sumptuous silks and being tended by their more humbly-dressed dark-skinned servants, is the logic that a westerner may practice any culture he desires—in essence, self-Orientalizing himself—without recrimination, but that when an Asian character seeks to practice his own culture it is seen as exotic and exclusionary.

While the characters of *Prince of Persia* are all of Near Eastern or African descent, most of the actors are well-known white-American or Anglo-British actors and are immediately recognizable as such despite often sporting impressive amounts of bronzer. Jake Gyllenhaal’s status as a highly profitable heteromasculine leading man was more than likely to have contributed significantly to the decision to cast him in the lead role despite his Swedish and English ancestry and with the exception of Sir Ben Kingsley, who we will return to at the end of the chapter, there were no actors of color cast in any of the primary roles. Furthermore, they speak, inexplicably, in British accents while the minor and background characters speak with more obviously Near Eastern-derived accents, “Occidentalizing,” as we may call it, the connection between nobility and whiteness. On a more economic note, the casting of ethnically accurate actors would also have lowered the film’s profits by alienating the Islamophobic populations in the U.S.

As Persia is now known as Iran, the film also effectively depoliticizes the landscape by making the demographic makeup less foreign to and more comfortable for American viewers. The conflation between the Persian, Ottoman, and other Near Eastern Empires creates a landscape that Jack Shaheen calls “Arab-land”; the stereotypical characterization of the geographic Near East that begins with “the desert, always the desert, a threatening place” that is
barren and hostile. The city of Alamut, Princess Tamina’s city, is named after a region of northwestern Iran that was settled in the eleventh century CE. To place this in historical context, the Abbasid Caliphate would have been experiencing a Persian renaissance after centuries of Arab-influenced rule, leading to the development of a strong Muslim civilization and major scientific and artistic developments. However, no such aspects of the blossoming civilization appear or are mentioned; instead, Persian culture is portrayed as being positively medieval in their priority on conquest and conflict-making, and religion is only mentioned in the context of the nameless “gods” that created the sacred sand that Tamina protects. Setting the film in an exotic and fantastic bygone era that has no connection to ongoing conflicts in the Middle East allows the audience to consume an Orientalized culture without thinking of the sociopolitical context in which it was created or the people it affects.

The question of casting in Prince of Persia presents an interesting axiom when it comes to ethnic characters, in that their actual race is inconsistent from film to film. To place this film into the greater context of how Arabs have been represented in recent film history, Ancient Persian characters have previously played main roles in Alexander (2004, dir. Oliver Stone) and 300 (2006, dir. Zak Snyder). A brief visual comparison of how Persians are portrayed in these films reveals that Hollywood is still strongly biased towards using racial contrast to show difference. In Alexander, the highly fictionalized biopic of Alexander the Great, the role of Darius III (336-330 BCE), is played by Israeli actor Raz Degan. 300, a fictional account of the Battle of Thermopylae based on the graphic novel by Frank Miller and Lynn Varley, casts Brazilian actor

---


14 Mechner’s original script (2005) set the film during the ninth century CE, but historically Alamut was not settled until the tenth century. Any mention of time period has been taken out of the final product.

Rodrigo Santoro as Xerxes I (519-465 BCE). Both Darius and Xerxes are antagonists and while Degn’s appearance is relatively faithful to depictions of soldiers in Persian reliefs found at Persepolis, the design of Santoro’s Xerxes (Figure 1.1) is an extreme example of what the Near East represents in the mind of the Orientalist.

Figure 1.1. Close-up of Xerxes, the Persian God-King. Santoro’s face was digitally altered for the film.

Xerxes is shown as a flamboyantly androgynous mélange of African and Near Eastern cultures in deliberate counterpoint to the literally Spartan masculinity of Leonidas (Gerard Butler) and his army of Greek soldiers, almost all of whom are played by British and Australian actors. After the initial establishing shot of Xerxes approaching, the first close-up reveals him to be emphatically hairless and heavily embellished with dark eyeliner, sharply groomed brows, and elaborate gold jewelry. His pupils have also been dilated and his eyes enlarged digitally, giving his face a strangely effeminate, exotic, and unearthly quality. When he speaks, his voice—incongruous with his effeminized face—is deep and sensuous as he tries to coax Leonidas into surrendering to his army in exchange for gold and glory. One facet of Said’s
critique of Orientalism emphasizes that the West holds the value of an Othered culture by their material goods—the physical body of Xerxes showcases this to an extreme. Standing a full head and shoulders above any normal human, Xerxes is a living statue drenched in black and gold, an oversized manifestation of the riches of the Near East and its feminine gendering in start visual counterpoint to the hypermasculinity of the West.

To date, Director Zac Snyder has adapted two popular graphic novels for the screen, including 300. Both films are unusually faithful to their source materials as many of the shots take their composition and mise-en-scène directly from their corresponding panels in the novels. The Darius of the graphic novels appears to be of vaguely African descent and his attire bears no resemblance to how the ancient Persians depicted themselves in their art and architecture. Instead, his titanic physicality is placed in juxtaposition to that of Leonidas. Xerxes is a God-King, a larger-than-life commander over a vast legion while the Spartans are only a small group of three-hundred men, which makes their symbolic victory—since technically there was no victor at the Battle of Thermopylae—that much more significant.

The attempt by Miller, Varley, and Snyder to present Xerxes as an impressive and malevolent godlike figure is instead a form of benevolent racism. At one point during their meeting, Xerxes approaches Leonidas from behind and places his gold-manicured hands on his shoulders, invading his personal space and speaking in a way that indicates he is not only threatening the physical defeat of Leonidas’ army, but the potential of sexual violation and/or humiliation as well, mimicking the invasion of the Persian Empire on Greek soil. The multiple extreme close-ups of Xerxes’ mouth—a shot in modern cinema usually reserved for seductive female characters—underscores this intent. The sexual ambiguity of a villain from the East is a

---

16 Said, Orientalism. 22.

17 The other film is Watchmen (2009), based off of the 1987 graphic novel.
long-time staple of Oriental Othering in film, appearing as early as the corrupt Warlord Chang in *Shanghai Express* (1932, dir. Josef von Sternberg), played by Swedish-American actor Warner Oland, whose actions can be interpreted as perverse towards not only the two female protagonists, but the male protagonist as well.¹⁸

It is unclear how much of Santoro’s skin was darkened for the role through make-up and how much was affected in the post-processing to achieve *300’s* highly distinctive and stylized aesthetic, but the significant difference between the depictions of Xerxes and *Prince of Persia*’s Dastan clearly comes down to the connection between their alignment and their race. The Battle at Thermopylae is mythologized in *300*, with Leonidas fulfilling the role of the epic hero in the monomyth, freeing his people from the threat of subjugation by the Orient and through his mortal sacrifice bringing everlasting glory to Greece. When Persians are represented as antagonists and/or based off of historical figures and conflicts, they are dark-skinned conglomerations of visual tropes that evoke Asian-ness and African-ness in interchangeable quantities, but when they are the fictional fantasy heroes, they can conveniently be portrayed as white, heterosexual, and unquestionably masculine, giving Europe claim to the legacy of ancient empires while still retaining their moral supremacy.

*Prince of Persia, 300*, and films like them fit neatly into the larger allegorical tradition of representing whiteness as good and darkness as evil or corrupt. The visual association of good and evil has such a long history and remains so deeply enmeshed in the fantasy-adventure genre that it cannot be unadulterated coincidence that the complex moral themes in the *Lord of the


Warner Oland (1879-1938) was famous for playing Asian characters due to his features, which many considered to look vaguely “Oriental”, despite having no discernible Asian heritage. Two of his most well-known roles are Dr. Fu Manchu and Detective Charlie Chan.
Rings trilogy—the shades of grey, as it were—are given far more precedent than the dramatic chiaroscuro of the racial make-up of the films. Tolkein, who wrote Lord of the Rings in a post-imperial Britain struggling during World War II, wanted deeply to give a largely Anglo-Saxon Britain the national mythology he feels it did not have, and his wishes are reflected in the films. The protagonist races in the franchise—humans, elves, dwarves, and hobbits—are all portrayed by white actors and are associated with natural and otherworldly light, healing, and eternal life whereas the forces of Sauron—Orcs, the Haradrim, and Ringwraiths—are associated with darkness, deceit, decay, and death. The Haradrim, in particular, are portrayed in the films with obvious African and South Asian influences in their visual design—as well as containing the only characters of color seen in the entire trilogy—while the Orcs are shown as emerging in the mines of Isengard from filth and refuse. Furthermore, all of the protagonist races belong to hierarchical societies with kingdoms and rites of rule while the antagonist races are shown as militant and obedient towards one supreme ruler at a time, denoting a contrast between order and chaos that recall attempts by European empires to colonize the so-called “uncivilized” natives of Africa, South America, and Asia. Whether such explicit racial connotations were intended by Tolkien has been hotly contested by scholars and fans for decades, but this clear dichotomy in the film trilogy is representative of the typical Eurocentric fantasy schematic, a schematic that has influenced the mass majority of epic fantasy films produced during the latter half of the twentieth century up to the present. It is certainly a schematic that has been projected onto Prince of Persia.

It is important to highlight time travel as a unique plot device in the monomyth of this film because it is the determining factor guiding the lives and decisions of the characters as they travel and come into conflict with one another. In particular, the character arcs of Tamina, Seso,}

and Sheik Amar are altered drastically by Dastan’s use of the Sands of Time in such a way that renders their development solely dependent on his actions. In the case of Tamina, her agency as the only female character in the film is removed by the Sands of Time; Seso and Sheik Amar are pushed to the periphery and essentially removed from the narrative by the film’s conclusion.

The Princess, The Sheik, and the Knifethrower: Stereotypes from “Arab-land”

The treatment of Tamina is typical of the exotic Oriental princess; though presented as a sacred, virginal priestess, she takes after Princess Jasmine from the Disney film *Aladdin* in terms of attire and vocal pitch and her ultimate power comes not from her own swordplay skills, but from her ability to seduce her way in and out of situations as needed. Her actions in the film depend solely on Dastan as the bearer of the Dagger of Time, allowing her to be moved around as it suits his growth. As with many action heroines, she fulfills the definition of Heldman’s “fighting fuck toy” while also satisfying western fantasies of what women from the Orient look, dress, and act like.

Tamina comes from an unnamed, imagined non-Persian culture whose holy city of Alamut is captured by Dastan and his brothers at the beginning of the film and accused of selling arms to Persia’s enemies. Despite her Othering as a non-Persian, Tamina is still treated with relative respect by the main characters because she is royalty and because rumors of her beauty precede her. Before they even capture the city, she is described as a sight to behold, an object to be

---

20 Tamina’s counterpart in the video game progenitor *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2003) is Farah, an Indian princess captured by the Persians as spoils during the opening events of the game, referencing Muslim exploration and expansion during this time period. There is no specific reference to India in the film.

21 Heldman gives the following definition of “fighting fuck toys”: “Fighting fuck toys are hyper-sexualized female protagonists who are able to ‘kick ass’ (and kill) with the best of them. The FFT appears empowered, but her very existence serves the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer. In short, the FFT takes female agency, weds it to normalized male violence, and appropriates it for the male gaze.” For a more complete examination of this gendered trope, please see her article “The Hunger Games, Hollywood, and Fighting Fuck Toys”, published April 5, 2012 on http://carolineheldman.wordpress.com.
possessed. After the Persians lay siege to her city, Tamina is then given to Tus as a bride as a mandated term of surrender, which she acquiesces to after she recognizes Dastan wearing the Dagger of Time, which he acquired during the battle as a spoil of war. After King Sharaman is killed and the blame falls on Dastan, he and Tamina escape together. Though they initially clash, their adventures allow them to eventually fall in love and care for one another even after Dastan exchanges her to Amar as if she were material goods several times throughout their adventures. In fact, Tamina’s body is treated as commodity throughout the entire film and she is frequently treated as subject of the male gaze for both the characters and the audience.

Tamina’s official character poster advertising the film features her posing in a harem-style outfit that is seen only once in the film; non-coincidentally, it is also the most provocative outfit she wears and most clearly exploits her sexuality as a marketing tool. Around her neck is a vial containing the Sands of Time, which Dastan must use in conjunction with the Dagger of Time in order to be able to control time and space. The first time the audience catches a glimpse of the vial in the film is through the eyes of Dastan as his gaze is drawn towards where it rests in her cleavage and when she notices, she asks derisively if he likes what he sees. Perhaps the line is meant to be a reprimand, but it also indicates the convergence of Tamina’s body with the Sands of Time; Dastan must have them together, or not at all. Despite being raised as both a noble and religious figurehead to her people in a role that demands bodily modesty, she has no qualms seducing Dastan in an attempt to steal back the dagger, or stripping down into one or multiple revealing outfits in order to infiltrate Avrat after the king’s funeral.
This is perhaps the best representation of her role in the film as a whole--her identity is written to be fluid and unfixed, adapting to fill whatever role the plot and other characters require. Her clothing relegates her to the “B-image” stereotype of the belly dancer who often sets out to woo the Western hero through her sexuality and feminine wiles, a Middle Eastern combination of the “lotus blossom” and “dragon lady” stereotypes. Indeed, the film sets up the Persian Empire as a foreign time and place, but it is Tamina who represents the truly exotic, sensual side of “Arab-land.” When Tamina is first introduced, she is covered modestly and the gaze of the camera emphasizes her maidenly qualities, focusing on what can be seen of her face underneath her veil, which resembles a bridal veil and foreshadows her betrothals to Tus and Dastan. The color white dominates her wardrobe throughout the film as a symbol of purity and nobility; the only time white is not the main color of her wardrobe is when she is wearing the outfit shown in

---

Figure 1.3. While adventuring throughout the empire she swaps her flowing robes for a billowing white blouse with a low neckline and harem pants—more practical, but also serving as a constant reminder that she is an object of erotic desire. Finally, she chooses to don the revealing, harem-type outfit that would fit squarely into the imagination of nineteenth-century Romantic artists, such as Ingres’ Odalisques. The camera’s gaze shifts accordingly, slowly scanning upwards so that Tamina’s body is gradually revealed as she and Dastan make their way into Avrat, alerting the audience that her role as a figure of spiritual and moral purity has been transformed into one of sexual desire and mystique.

Ultimately, Tamina, having fulfilled her use in the current storyline, sacrifices herself and falls to her death at the film’s climax in order to allow Dastan to defeat Nizam and use the Sands of Time to take him back to the day of the siege of Tamina’s city. With his newfound knowledge, he is able to stop the siege and reverse the deaths of, by this point, his entire family and all of his allies. Nizam’s plot is exposed and he is killed, and Tus apologizes to Tamina for mistakenly waging war on her city. As an apology and a gesture of goodwill, he returns the Dagger and once again seeks a marriage to unite their cities, but this time he gives her to Dastan as he is proclaimed a “true Prince of Persia.” The addition of the word “true” to his title indicates that he is now more legitimately princely than he was before, a somewhat redundant comment as he was first recognized by the King for his noble actions as an orphan. In this way, the Eurocentric heritage of the cast is justified by noting that Dastan is being recognized for possessing the qualities he has always possessed, indicating that the “Prince of Persia” need not have royal blood, only royal character.

The denouement of the film is clearly meant to show Dastan’s improved maturity and close the “time loop” on his Hero’s Journey, but it also retroacts the actions of every character who assisted him along the way. Tamina is once again relegated to the role of a war prize, betrothed to a man she’s never met as far as she is concerned, yet the audience is meant to find satisfaction in their rightful reunion. This can be seen as a return to patriarchal norms, creating a timeline in which Dastan has to give up neither the power nor control bestowed by his position.

More so than Tamina, who gets to reap the “boon” of Dastan’s new wisdom and legitimacy, the characters of Sesé and Sheik Amar have been erased from the new narrative.
provided by the Sands of Time altogether, enforcing how brown and black bodies are easily moved around to suit the needs of the white protagonist. The two men find Dastan near the Valley of the Slaves, a dangerous area saturated with bandits, mercenaries, and other unsavory types. Sheik Amar is the leader of a band of merchant-bandits who once rescued Seso, a member of the Sudanese Ngbaka Tribe, now his indentured servant and bodyguard (Figure 1.4).24 Sheik Amar is really not a sheik in the Arabic sense of the word, but rather another composite of stereotypes that, like the Oriental belly dancer, come out of “Arab-land.” The Hollywood sheik has a long history, one that has placed him in the role of the lecherous villain with designs upon the beautiful white heroine, as enslavers of Africans, as oily and mercenary opportunists, and as rich, lazy moguls.25 Sheik Amar combines many of these stereotypes as he explains that the notoriety of the Valley of the Slaves is just a front so that “small business owners” like himself can evade the taxes demanded by the Persian Empire and operate their ostrich races in peace. Jovial and friendly to Dastan as they watch Tamina evade the lecherous hands that reach out to her from behind the race track fence, he turns cutthroat immediately once he recognizes Dastan as the exiled prince with a price on his head so enormous he would “trade in [his] own mother for that kind of gold.”

Neither Sheik Amar nor Seso is given any backstory as to what brought them together or why Seso would willingly subject himself to Amar’s control for such a long period of time. The two men act first as an additional nuisance to complicate Dastan’s goal of clearing his name and avenging his father’s death, but later turn the other cheek and agree to assist him. Seso is almost entirely silent for his first two encounters with Dastan and Tamina, leaving Amar to do all the

24 Amar claims the Ngbaka Tribe are from the Sudan, which today resides mainly in the Congo, but may have once been part of the Sudan, which was the largest country in Africa until the 1980s. More research is required as to whether this is historically accurate.

25 Shaheen, Reel Bad Arabs. 23-28.
talking, and it is only when Seso is saved by Dastan from being killed by assassins sent by Nizam does he become, as Amar scoffs, a “knife-thrower with a conscience” who wants to help them retrieve the Dagger from Nizam. Suddenly, Seso steps into the role of the noble savage, possibly the most popular archetype of the benign black male in Hollywood history. His sudden desire to help Dastan is the first time he is shown making a decision of his own volition and he stoically accepts the inevitability of his own death as cost. His sacrifice, in turn, causes Amar to have a change of heart regarding his amorality and he agrees to distract Nizam’s assassins in order to allow Dastan and Tamina to escape, leaving him to an unknown and likely similarly deadly fate.

Similar to Tamina’s role opposite Dastan, Seso serves as a convenient foil to Amar and a tool for the writers to use at will to create a hierarchy of Otherness that reflects the geopolitical spread of the Persian Empire. Dastan stands in the center, then Tamina as a conquered but social equal, then Amar as a social outcast, and finally, Seso at the racial and social periphery. The Ngbaka are known for the distinctive style of their ceremonial masks, which often include a ridged browline and is reflected in the line of dots across Seso’s browline (see the top image in Figure 1.4). Like Xerxes’ many superfluous facial piercings, this significant body modification can be seen as an indication of exoticism, an Othering by way of a foreign cultural ritual that is neither understood nor explained. Seso is the only member of the main cast who is not at least partially whitewashed, and the pronounced blackness of his skin makes the artificial darkening of Gyllenhaal, Arterton, and Molina’s complexion even starker.

Amar and Seso are presumably revived alongside Tamina and Dastan’s family at the end of the film due to the powers of the Sands of Time. However, turning back time means that they never met Dastan and were never influenced by him, erasing their heroic actions and character
development arcs. Dastan muses that everyone is in control of their own destiny, but that is clearly not a statement that extends to the whole cast. Amar and Seso remain the same people they were at the beginning of the film: amoral, corrupt, and marginalized outlaws of the Persian Empire. Without the intervention of Dastan, Seso never gets his freedom and none of the non-white characters in the film are offered a second chance at redemption.

Figure 1.4. Dastan meets Seso (top) and Sheik Amar (bottom) for the first time. Even though Gyllenhaal and Molina are both white, Molina’s skintone has been more noticeably darkened.
Sir Ben Kingsley and the Sincere Orientalist Villain

As a last note, Sir Ben Kingsley’s presence in the film offers an interesting caveat to the execution of racial passing in film. As a biracial actor of Indian and Anglo-British descent, he has played Indian, Jewish, Persian, North African/Middle-Eastern, and French characters, many of them un-coincidentally antagonists. While Nizam is not particularly worthy of note as far as fratricidal villains go, his most recent major film role as The Mandarin, a frankly bizarre Chinese-based Oriental stereotype in the superhero film *Iron Man 3* (2013, dir. Shane Black), gives us a glimpse into the increasingly complex and nuanced politics that drive racial masquerade in the twenty-first century. Comparable to the classic James Bond villain Dr. No (who is half-Chinese, half-German—a combination of Britain’s worst fears about communism during the Cold War) in the first installment of the series by Ian Fleming, The Mandarin’s first appearance on the cover of *Tales of Suspense* #50 shows him seated on a golden throne, cloaked and masked except for his squinted eyes and distinctive Fu Manchu-style mustache and beard, shooting a beam of energy at Iron Man (who, incidentally, represents western capitalist ideologies) from one of the many rings on his clawed hands. Eurasian villains have had a longstanding history in both film and literature of being cast as a dangerous, unnatural, and mongrelized blend of races. The stereotype of Asian villains with long fingernails stems from the same place as the Fu Manchu mustache—Dr. Fu Manchu, created by British author Sax Rohmer during the Yellow Peril of the 1930s. Long nails were used as a stereotype to desexualize Asian men and to make them more effeminate.²⁶

Comic books, precursors to graphic novels, are particularly complicit in perpetuating racist stereotypes; many of the first American superheroes were created out of a desire for

---
nationalist pride during World War II and the Cold War. In order to fulfill such a desire, countries and cultures with which the United States clashed became the target of representations of moral corruption.\textsuperscript{27} The Mandarin is widely regarded as one of Iron Man’s main arch nemeses, but after director Shane Black recognized that the comic book character was a “racist relic,” the character was reconstructed for the film as a red herring.\textsuperscript{28} First presented as a fearsome terrorist (another modern stereotype commonly associated with Orientalism) with a worldwide operating network called “The Ten Rings”, he is revealed halfway through the film to be nothing more than a figurehead in the spirit of the Wizard of Oz, played by a slovenly British actor named Trevor Slatterly. The focus then shifts to Adrian Killian, the “man behind the curtain” and a recurring (white American) antagonist from the other two Iron Man films.

![Figure 1.5.](image)

**Figure 1.5.** (Left) Ben Kingsley as The Mandarin in an official film still (Marvel, Inc.), (Middle) The first appearance of The Mandarin in *Tales of Suspense* #50 (1968, Marvel, Inc.), (Right) Joseph Wiseman as Dr. No in *Dr. No* (1962, Eon Studios).

\textsuperscript{27} Matthew Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009), 63-64.

This is a sincere effort by the filmmakers to subvert the dated racist elements of The Mandarin while still including him in the film canon, but what actually occurs is another variation of racial displacement. By giving him the title of “The Mandarin,” Killian—and by extension, Black—evokes a latent image of the face of the Yellow Peril. Though his nails have been clipped and his facial hair groomed into a style less immediately offensive, the Orientalist qualities in his costume are still immediately recognizable; he wears a top knot similar to those favored by warrior classes in several East Asian cultures, and the shoulder pads on his surcoat are decidedly reminiscent of samurai armor. Most telling is the background of the film still, which depicts the detail of a Dragon Wall, similar to the ones found in the Forbidden City in Beijing, and elsewhere in China, placing him once again in the context of an archaic and mythical Orientalized setting. Furthermore, because Slatterly’s *British* qualities are emphasized once his identity is revealed, his performance as The Mandarin can be seen as a twenty-first century form of yellowface. Though the true villain of the film turns out to be all-American, the racist connotations of The Mandarin as a visual symbol of the Yellow Peril remain undiminished. In this, *Iron Man 3* is no different than *Prince of Persia*; even in films that take place in a distant past, we see the social and racial conventions that anchor them to our present.
Chapter Two: The Creation of Race Politics in *The Last Airbender*

The backdrop of the short-lived cult favorite television series *Firefly* (2002) envisions a future in which the United States and China are the only two world powers on earth that manage to expand into space. As a result, though American English is the main spoken language, bits of Mandarin make it into the characters’ speech and many of the aesthetics contain elements that are commonly recognized as Oriental. The characters are seen eating with chopsticks and twirling paper parasols, and one of the main characters plays an intergalactic courtesan with practices associated with geisha culture. The other half of the show’s aesthetic is steeped in images of the Old West, generating nostalgic images of cattle drives, Stetsons, and good old-fashioned shootouts that seem almost at odds with the grander background of a spaceship as it flies through landscapes of stars and planets. Following in the spirit of *Star Trek*, by far the most influential science fiction franchise in history, *Firefly* is a literal “Wagon Train to the Stars.”

In her essays on racial representation in contemporary media, bell hooks writes that “Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.” Commodity has become synonymous with culture; the conceit of one society dominating another lies in the way they are able to control and manipulate the material aspects of the subjugated culture that is different than their own. Rather like Eastern fusion cuisines often advertise their foods with “an Asian twist,” *Firefly*’s premise is considered by mainstream culture to be notable because of its “East-meets-West” aesthetic, but this

---

29 Most of the Mandarin phrases uttered are expletives, which creator Joss Whedon has cited as one way of getting around network censorship.


dichotomy does not function on equal grounds. The main cast features only one (biracial) actress of East Asian descent and even from planet to planet there are seldom Asian characters or extras of any Asian ethnicity despite the fact that Asians currently make up approximately 60% of the world’s population with an increasing growth rate from year to year. Such an incongruity is common in contemporary cinema as well; many film adaptations taking place in Asian-inspired settings allow these white bodies to colonize the foreign cultural environments, turning the unfamiliar into something that reflects Western social conventions.

The last two decades of the twentieth century saw several Asian American actors and filmmakers entering mainstream popular culture, including actors Jackie Chan, Margaret Cho, and Lucy Liu, and directors Ang Lee, M. Night Shyamalan, Wayne Wang, and John Woo. In addition, the explosive popularity of Japanese animation, game, and trading card exports such as Pokémon (1996 - ongoing) and Yu-Gi-Oh! (1996-2004) during the same time heralded several new pieces of North American children’s programming in the early 2000s: Jackie Chan Adventures (2000-2005, Warner Brothers), Sagwa the Chinese Siamese Cat (2001-2002, PBS) Samurai Jack (2001-2004, Cartoon Network), Xiaolin Showdown (2003-2006, Warner Brothers), American Dragon: Jake Long (2005-2007, Disney), and Avatar: The Last Airbender (2005-2008). All of these series were made for youth demographics, and all feature positive and context-appropriate representations of East Asian cultures throughout a variety of time periods. Avatar, the most recent entry in this television pantheon, takes this desire to explore Asian cultures one step further by incorporating South Asian and Pacific Islander culture and aesthetic, making it the most culturally-inclusive show to date.
M. Night Shyamalan’s Celebratory Yellowface

In an interview with SlashFilm in 2010, director M. Night Shyamalan expressed his dismay that any critic would claim *The Last Airbender* (2009), the live-action feature film adaptation of *Avatar: The Last Airbender,* as anything but the “most culturally diverse tentpole movie of all time.” Shyamalan wants to claim that his film is, in addition to being more culturally diverse than the television series, more racially and ethnically diverse, thereby taking it into the realm of post-racism and making it worthy of overwhelming praise rather than criticism. However, the irony in his intent to populate the world of *Avatar* with more racial diversity is that it strips any semblance of meaningful representation of racially marginalized peoples by keeping the white characters at the heart of the narrative. The world of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (henceforth known simply as *Avatar*) takes its aesthetic and cultural cues from a myriad of East Asian and Pacific Islander cultures; considering that Asia is inhabited by 4.3 billion people (60%) of the world’s population and contains thousands of distinct ethnic groups, it would be semantically incorrect to assert that such a world lacks cultural diversity.

Jane Chi Hyun Park asserts that, “race is a fiction that becomes real through its acceptance and reiteration by members of both dominant and marginal groups. We experience this most deeply at the level of the body, or, more specifically, how we inhabit and move our bodies in different spaces.” In the translation from animation to live action, Shyamalan’s

---


33 Not to be confused with James Cameron’s film of the same title, also released in 2010, and which forced *The Last Airbender* to change its title upon release.


attempt to erase racial lines and create a world that follows an erroneous post-racial color-blind logic betrays itself by recreating existing racial power dynamics and privileging the presence of the white body over that of those who are barred from embodying their own culture. This cultural misalignment includes the casting of three young white actors in the starring roles, darkening the skin of the main antagonists, and relegating the East Asian and other “racialized” characters to the background. By doing so, Shyamalan is performing what Park calls celebratory yellowface, or the process by which non-Asian filmmakers and actors appropriate and perpetuate what they would consider to be East Asian culture.

In order to understand how the film is set up to justify the casting of white actors, one need look no further than the interview given by Shyamalan that was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. In it, Shyamalan clearly outlines his justification for his casting decisions:

I don’t know any Inuits that look like Katara on this planet, I don’t know any Asian kids that look like Aang. That’s because there’s a misunderstanding here — the art form of anime in its genetics has ambiguous features… So everyone sees themselves in that art form, which is what I love…

In describing anime as “ambiguous” in feature, Shyamalan displays a profoundly Eurocentric view of how an art style’s aesthetic is intended to be perceived by its audience. The growing popularity of anime in the west in the past twenty years is due as much to its cultural heritage it is in its narrative and stylistic tropes. The exotification of Japan and Japanese culture by the West due to the influence of anime on popular culture is another complex topic to be explored altogether, but Japanese animation as an industry remains rooted in Japan and most titles are intended first and foremost for a Japanese audience, even if Japanese studios are well-

---

35 *Anime*: a style of animation originating in Japan that is characterized by stark colorful graphics depicting vibrant characters in action-filled plots often with fantastic or futuristic themes (Mariam Webster)
aware that it will eventually be exported to other parts of the world.\textsuperscript{36} Thus, regardless of how the characters are drawn, if the setting is Japan then they are ethnically Japanese and are read as Japanese by the audience unless specified as another race or ethnicity. For example, the first shoujo manga and anime series to achieve mainstream success in US markets was \textit{Bishoujo Senshi Sailor Moon} ("Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon") in 1995.\textsuperscript{37} Sailor Moon’s art style epitomizes the conventional and most influential anime style of the 1990s; though the characters have different hair colors and disproportionately large eyes, all are ethnically Japanese. The idea that white bodies can have hair and eyes in multiple shades and combinations while all Asians have dark hair and dark, slanted eyes unless they are somehow exceptional is in itself a form of Orientalization, reducing Asians to a monoculture of interchangeable faces.

In a more general sense, realism as an aesthetic does not in any way dominate the course of art and art history outside of its Eurocentric focus as a discipline. The art style favored by the ancient Egyptians sustained very little change over the course of its three-thousand-year history, to the point where any figure drawn in this style would immediately be read as Egyptian by even a modern viewer despite the fact that their depiction of figures bears little resemblance to actual human anatomy. Despite the unrealistic proportions and anatomy, the depicted figure is still assumed to be ethnically Egyptian. In addition, the ancient Romans—now known for their verisimilitude in sculpture—so admired the Egyptian civilization that they often appropriated formal characteristics of Egyptian sculpture for their own work. The same can be said of the art style for \textit{Avatar}. All animation was done by JM Animation, a South Korean studio, and the aesthetic style takes its main cues from Japanese anime. In addition, all characters in \textit{Avatar} use


\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Shoujo manga}: a genre of manga intended towards a demographic of girls ages ten to eighteen.
the common Chinese writing system, and the calligraphic text is translated and written by calligraphy master Dr. Siu-Leung Lee.\textsuperscript{38} (Figure 2.1). The intent in adopting a specific style is to make the connotations coded within the style immediately recognizable. In this case, *Avatar*'s anime-influenced art style fits squarely within the frame of its Asian-inspired setting; therefore, it would also have made the most sense for all the characters to be embodied by Asian actors, with their corresponding ethnicities to set them apart.

It is not difficult to justify Shyamalan’s thought process in visually diversifying *The Last Airbender*, framing it as a landmark film in minority representation. Presenting a world populated with a wider range of races, ethnicities, and cultures is indeed more representative of reality; however, the conflation of race, ethnicity, and culture—as well as the careless ease with which they are combined and dissociated throughout the film—is far more than just a matter of semantics. Few of the immensely intricate cultural details that show creators Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko wove into the world-building over the span of about 2,000 minutes of animated television make it into *The Last Airbender*, which clocks in at a surprisingly brisk 90 minutes. It is not uncommon in today’s film culture to see thousand-page epic novels adapted into three or four-hour films, or even split into multiple films to accommodate the sheer density of material. For a film that feeds off of a franchise with such an extensive mythology to be so short, the length must be a deliberate choice and with a $150,000,000 budget, it was certainly not an economic one.

The basic premise of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, the series off which *The Last Airbender* is based, is constructed for the comprehension of its younger, family-oriented audience. The world of *Avatar* consists of four nations, each of which is named for the element that it can

control. The Fire Nation bends fire, the Earth Kingdom earth, and so on. Most Benders can only bend the element of their nationality (or a variant of it), the sole exception being the Avatar, the divine spiritual being of the world, who is reincarnated into a human form of either gender from lifetime to lifetime and will eventually learn to Bend all four elements.\(^{39}\) The balance of the world is maintained by the Avatar, and his sudden disappearance for the last hundred years provides the crux of the overarching conflict in the show, his reappearance in the pilot the catalyst. Avatar’s blend of child heroes, lighthearted yet epic storylines set in an Asian-inspired fantasy setting, and extensive martial arts action choreography helped to make it a critically and commercially acclaimed success throughout its three seasons, winning several Annie Awards, a Peabody Award, and a Primetime Emmy. This success eventually led to a sequel that follows the story of the descendants of the first series’ cast, including the next reincarnation of the Avatar—a seventeen-year-old female Waterbender named Korra.

The Aesthetics of Racial Implication

Comparing the title screens for the film and television series already begins to reveal how cultural elements present in the television series are adapted and abstracted for the film. Each of the four types of elemental Bending is tied intrinsically to a different martial arts discipline, and masters of each discipline were brought in to help choreograph the fight sequences for the animators. The figures displayed above are Airbending, which was originally modeled specifically after the defensive Baguazhang and Xinyiquan styles to fit with the nomadic lifestyle of the Tibetan-inspired Air Nomads, and the characters behind the Airbender reads qi he, which

\(^{39}\) There are smaller groups of benders throughout the world that have adapted their bending skills to their unique environments—these include swampbending, metalbending, and bloodbending. However, none of these variations show up until the second and third seasons and do not appear in the film.
translates roughly into “mastering one’s qi”.\textsuperscript{40} All writing was abstracted in the film so that instead of an identifiable language, the audience is given a set of vaguely hieroglyphic scribbles. While there is certainly some unavoidable essentialization in the series that could be interpreted as Asiaphilic, every detail serves to remind the audience from whence the show derives its world-building aesthetic and is consistent in the ways it does so. The film, on the other hand, chooses to attempt to remove itself from reality by abstracting specific cultural signifiers such as language and writing.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{title_screens.png}
\caption{A comparison of the title screens for the film (top) and the television series (bottom).}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{40} Tom Mason, “The Lost Scrolls: Air” in \textit{The Lost Scrolls Collection} (Simon Spotlight/Nickelodeon, 2009), 213.

Qi literally translates into “breath” in Mandarin and in many East Asian cultures is the name for the spiritual life energy that exists in all living things. The concept of \textit{qi} \textit{he} is a bit more difficult to explain succinctly, but Buddhist principles says that once one has mastered one’s \textit{qi}, one can then reach true inner peace. \textit{Qi} \textit{he} also teaches restraint, as \textit{qi} can grant one immense physical and spiritual power but that it must be used wisely.
The title character is twelve-year-old Aang (Noah Ringer), the last surviving Airbender and the most recent incarnation of the Avatar. He is rescued from an iceberg by Katara (Nicola Peltz), a fourteen-year-old Waterbender from the Southern Water Tribe, and her brother Sokka (Jackson Rathbone), a fifteen-year-old non-Bender from the same tribe. The sudden re-emergence of Aang into the world after a hundred years of absence soon draws the attention of Zuko (Dev Patel), a sixteen-year-old prince from the Fire Nation currently in exile who, with the assistance of his uncle, General Iroh (Shaun Toub) and a small fleet, is searching for the Avatar in an effort to regain his lost honor and redeem himself in the eyes of his father. Though the overarching narrative of the series is Aang’s journey to restore world peace, there are also several episodes that stand alone and allow for each of these characters to emerge as complex personalities that experience growth and maturity as they explore and interact with the citizens of other nations.

One of the difficulties of adapting a television show into a film or vice-versa is that they are fundamentally different formats. A film (in some shape or form) always has a beginning, middle, and ending within the timeframe of two to three hours in which, By contrast, a television series begins and at some point it must end, but the middle is far more elastic and can, in theory, be stretched indefinitely. The elongated timeframe of a television series means that audiences have more time to get to know characters, and the characters themselves can take more time to develop and become known to the audience. Most episodes that do not directly contribute to the continuation of the plot but nonetheless contribute to character development are noticeably excluded in *The Last Airbender*, which still strives to follow the same general narrative plot of the first season of the series; this makes it difficult to justify the outcome of certain events that occur due to the decision a character makes after undergoing development. Subsequently, rather

---

than as embodied characters whose natural-seeming actions and decisions bring about the conclusion, they become contrived and are perceived by the audience as devices to force the narrative towards a pre-determined close.42

What occurs in the adaptation is an increase in breadth instead of depth, and with it a surreal sense of confusion. Just as Aang wakes up from his hundred-year sleep and struggles to understand the new laws of a world that has been insurmountably altered by conflict and oppression, so must the audience confront the new racial constructs Shyamalan has introduced into the text. Within the first ten minutes of the film, the audience is introduced to white bodies that not only appear in an exotic Orientalized space inhabited solely by dark-skinned peoples in the animated series, but dominate the screen and the narrative throughout the film. When the main antagonist is introduced soon after, his physical characteristics, as well as the culture of his entire nation, have been changed from East Asian to Middle Eastern and South Asian, and it is revealed that their nation has spent the past one hundred years invading otherwise peaceful and passive lands inhabited by East Asians. It is then up to the ragtag group of protagonists, all white, to defeat the army and restore balance to the world (Figure 2.2).

Even in a fantasy setting--or perhaps because it is a fantasy setting--race plays a major role in the logical fallacies of the world-building of The Last Airbender. Contemporary western society’s working definition of race is dependent upon recognizable physical features shared by peoples who originate from the same place; skin color is one such common determinant. However, the world of Avatar does not function under our society’s racial logic. The characters in the show do not distinguish groups of people with different physical features as racially different and it is most likely that the characters in Avatar have no concept of race as we

understand it at all. Katara and Sokka are able to sneak past both Earth Kingdom barracks and Fire Nation cavalry on several occasions while interacting with those nations’ peoples without arousing any suspicion in reference to their skin, hair, or eye color. Instead, the main method of distinction between different groups of peoples is Bending.

Figure 2.2. Row 1: Noah Ringer as Aang, Nicola Peltz as Katara. Row 2: Jackson Rathbone as Sokka, Dev Patel as Prince Zuko.
In fact, one could go so far as to say that all characters in *Avatar* are Asian in all aspects including name; in addition to their mode of dress and customs, many characters are given names that indicate which cultures informed the nations they come from. DiMartino and Konietzko have tied the reading of their characters to specific ethnic identities by giving them names that are connected to the languages of the ethnic cultures they represent and to see characters who are clearly not Asian using such names is also a form of displacement. For example, General Zhao and Avatar Roku, both members of the Fire Nation, are given real Chinese and Japanese names because the Fire Nation was specifically created with Chinese and Japanese cultural influences. Suki, a character who does not appear in the film, is a member of the Kyoshi Warriors, a group of female Earth Kingdom warriors whose mode of dress and fighting style is inspired by samurai.

Every aesthetic choice that the creators of *Avatar* make are made to fit within a coherent set of signifiers, which Shyamalan *chooses* to disrupt in order to impose his own definition of diversity; the most visually prominent method is through his selective colorblind casting. Instead of casting actors that fit within the cultures exhibited in the world, Shyamalan built his world around the perceived races and cultures of the actors he cast; in other words, the cultures represented in the world of *The Last Airbender* are dependent upon the actors and not vice-versa. Furthermore, these guidelines are not strictly reinforced, providing even more discrepancies.

Shyamalan cites that his influences for the aesthetic of the Water Tribe in the *The Last Avatar* are “Anglo/European/Russian,” which is directly contradicted in the film. Other than Katara, Sokka, and their Grandmother, the inhabitants of the Southern Water Tribe all appear to be Asian (Figure 2.3). One may make the case that Katara and Sokka’s family is “Other”-ed in the sense that they are the only white bodies in the village, but this becomes more of a case of exceptionalism rather than marginality as they are also the only characters to have speaking roles.

---

43 Hardawar, “Interview with M. Night Shyamalan”.
and names, therefore imbuing them with individual identities and importance.

Figure 2.3. Left-Side Images: Villagers of the Southern Water Tribe. Top Right: Katara and Sokka’s Grandmother (Katharine Houghton) in the film. Bottom Right: Katara and Sokka’s Grandmother and several villagers in the television series.

Regardless of why exactly three white characters just happen to cohabitate with a small tribe of Asian characters who are supposedly meant to reflect anglo-Russian cultures, their whiteness becomes a signifier of positive force repeatedly throughout the film against the helpless yellow bodies of the Earth Kingdom and aggressive brown bodies of the Fire Nation, disrupting Shyamalan’s implication that racial equality is synonymous with racial diversity.\(^{44}\) Shyamalan also mentions that as the Earth Kingdom is the largest nation, he wanted to make it the most diverse and had planned to include a city entirely populated with characters played by African American actors. However, this sequence was cut from the film and so we cannot

\(^{44}\) Russia is home to over 180 different ethnic groups, including dozens of smaller but distinct Indo-Chinese, Eskimo-Aleut, and Turkic communities that have inhabited various regions since before the sixteenth century, so it would be entirely inaccurate to generalize the population of Russia as "anglo" in any sense, though this is exactly what Shyamalan does imply.
assume that other races inhabit the Earth Kingdom. The only African American actor who makes it into the film is Damon Gupton as Monk Gyatso, Aang’s old mentor, but he appears only in a single flashback as he was murdered soon after the Avatar’s disappearance and so his presence. While the intent of creating a truly racially diverse world exists, Monk Gyatso ironically falls into the stereotype of the “token minority” that seems always to die early on enough to be acknowledged and summarily forgotten.

Lastly, a shot of Aang looking at a statue of his predecessor, Avatar Kyoshi of the Earth Kingdom, shows us that she has been carved with—ultimately racially ambiguous—but suspiciously Caucasian features (Figure 2.4). While the statue—like the art of the animated series—is only a representation as she is never truly, as Bordwell would say, embodied by an actress who would then give her a concrete racial identity, the physiognomic similarities between herself and Aang may suggest to some viewers that the Avatar’s race does not change from reincarnation to reincarnation, placing the Avatar eternally into the role of the white savior. The “white savior complex” is the self-satisfaction from fulfilling an obligation many Westerners feel while seeking to improve the living conditions of people living in developing nations. Like benevolent racism, the white savior complex is a function of progressive imperialism. It is mentioned in the film that Katara is the only Waterbender left in the tribe as all the others, including her mother, have been captured and presumably killed by the Fire Nation. Though both are initially immature at the beginning of the film, Katara and Sokka are also the only members of the tribe with any sort of power to defend the village against attack by the Fire Nation, inadvertently placing them in the position of white saviors.

---

45 Shyamalan in Hardawar, “Interview with M. Night Shyamalan”.

46 Though nonwhite members of the Northern Water Tribe are shown, all Waterbenders are played by white actors, rendering it unclear as to whether Shyamalan is making a distinct connection between race and bending skills.
Figure 2.4. Aang looks at the Statue of Avatar Kyoshi in the Earth Village.

“Imprisoned”: A Case Study in Filmic Disenfranchisement

One of the few non-plot-specific episodes that does manage to make the leap from series to film is “Episode 6: Imprisoned,” which marks the first time we are shown the scope of Fire Nation oppression that has followed in the wake of the Avatar’s absence.\textsuperscript{47} This is the first episode in which Katara becomes an agent of change and an active participant in the liberation of the Nations. Though Aang’s reemergence as the Avatar into the world has inspired hope in the Earth Kingdom villagers, it is Katara who is acknowledged as the catalyst for action. This twenty-three-minute episode is packed into about five minutes of the film as Shyamalan takes the events of the episode and cauterizes them into something that transfers the focus of the narrative from Katara to Aang.

In the episode, Team Avatar must assist an Earth village in which most Earthbenders, including the leader of the village, have been arrested and imprisoned on a Fire Nation coal rig in the middle of the ocean, completely negating their Earthbending powers, and the remaining

\textsuperscript{47} "Imprisoned." \textit{Avatar: The Last Airbender}. Nickelodeon. 25 Mar, 2005. Television.
villagers are impoverished and taxed heavily by the soldiers. After Haru, the last Earthbender in the village, is discovered and captured by Fire Nation soldiers, Katara concocts a plan to rescue him, making her way to the coal rig alone while the others follow behind. After meeting Haru’s father Tyro, now the leader of the prisoners, and seeing the collective hopelessness in the captured Earthbenders, Katara gives an inspirational speech announcing the return of the Avatar, which fails to incite any sort of response. Twelve hours later, Aang and Sokka arrive to pick Katara up, but she refuses to leave without helping the prisoners escape. The next morning, Aang transports all the coal in the ship to the deck via Airbending and Katara once again tries to inspire hope in the prisoners. Though she once again receives no initial response, the Earthbenders are roused to action after being mocked by the warden of the rig and in a show of strength and synchronicity throw all the soldiers into the ocean by Bending the coal, which originally came out of the earth. On their journey back to the mainland, Tyro thanks Katara for her help and vows to take back all of the villages conquered by the Fire Nation.

The film’s version of events severely narrows the scope of the conflict and continues to minimize the agency and identity of the Earth villagers themselves. Haru is renamed “Earthbending Boy” (Isaac Jin Solstein), bereaving him of his individual identity, and is introduced running away from Fire Nation soldiers when he encounters Team Avatar in the temperate forests of the Earth Kingdom, who are also captured in the process of trying to protect him. The four are thrown into the labor camp adjacent to the Earthbending Boy’s village where all the Earthbenders are being kept, including his father (Keong Sim, who also remains unnamed). Despite now being surrounded by earth instead of on an oil rig in the middle of the ocean, the villagers’ spirits are somehow so broken that they are no longer willing or able to bend. It takes Aang, at this point still disguised, only moments to assess the situation before he
steps forward to remind the Earthbenders that they are a powerful people and that there is still earth beneath their feet. The following exchange ensues:

**Aang:** Earthbenders! Why are you acting this way? You are amazing, and powerful people! You don’t need to live like this; there’s earth, right beneath your feet. The ground is an extension of who you are. ...If the Avatar returned, would that mean anything to you?

**Earthbender:** The Avatar is dead…if he were here, he would protect us.

This line of dialogue casts the exclusively East Asian and largely silent Earthbenders squarely in the role of the passive conquered. Additionally, the Avatar is consistently presented as humanity’s *only* defense against the Fire Nation, which fits in line with the Western preference of a narrative structure that emphasizes individualism and privileging of individual triumph over that of the masses. The Avatar alone becomes the symbol of hope in the face of totalitarian oppression, and only with his physical presence, motivation, and initiation are the Earth villagers able to react and take back their village. Patterns of imperialism in our own world history make the domination of the Earth Kingdom by the Fire Nation plausible as the Fire Nation is far more industrial than the other Nations in the series, but few aspects of this industrialization beyond the warships are reflected in the film. Instead, this sequence becomes a way to showcase the powerful mythic qualities and singular influence of the embodied Avatar and comes at the expense of the entire Earth Kingdom, which is seen as continually helpless without his intervention.

By changing the cultural make-up of the Nations, abridging key events in the plot, and diminishing Katara’s role in the story, *The Last Airbender* not only removes the only possibility

---

49 See Appendix A for the world map. The geography of the Nations would already be familiar to audience members of the show and as shown, the Earth Kingdom is by far the largest in terms of land mass.
for a heroic representation of a young, dark-skinned Asian woman from the film, but also villifies dark skin through the representation of the Fire Nation. Throughout the television series, Katara provides the opening narration for every episode and, as someone who has never left her home but who is now exploring the world for the first time alongside the viewer, consistently serves as a trustworthy narrator and audience-surrogate. In an industry where all female characters make up only roughly one-third of the speaking roles in films, the percentage who are women of color is substantially smaller, making her representation as a complex character and role model for young female viewers all the more crucial.  

There are two female characters of color in the film: Princess Yue of the Northern Water Tribe, who is played by part-Mexican actress Seychelle Gabriel, and Princess Azula of the Fire Nation, played by half-Arab/Indian actress Summer Bishil. Yue sacrifices herself at the film’s climax to save her people from the Fire Nation’s invasion, and Azula—who is in later seasons revealed to be mentally unstable—is charged in the final scene with the task of bringing her brother Zuko back to the capital. Given their smaller roles, Katara is the only female character allotted any meaningful screentime. From the very first episode of the series, Katara is characterized as simultaneously strong-willed and maternal. She calls out Sokka on his casual sexism within the first five minutes of their introduction as characters in the pilot, consistently empowers herself and other people disenfranchised by the Fire Nation, becomes a highly respected Waterbender and healer despite her young age, and is framed as a potential love interest for Aang, Zuko, and other minor characters encountered throughout the series. None of these critical aspects of her character are reflected in the film, relegating Katara to the role of a token female sidekick who cannot function as the Avatar’s equal.

---

Perhaps this chapter is overcomplicating a film that has already been universally panned by critics and viewers alike for its whitewashing and poor filmic execution, as well as being publicly disowned by the creators of the original television series, but its profits of $300 million also indicate a willingness on the part of the international audience to consume the images it was being presented. In the conclusion of his meditation on the development of cinema and its relationship with society, Erwin Panofsky writes:

As is demonstrated by a number of excellent films that proved to be great box office successes, the public does not refuse to accept good products if it gets them. That it does not get them very often is caused not so much by commercialism as such as by too little discernment and, paradoxical though it may seem, too much timidity in its application. Hollywood believes that it must produce “what the public wants” while the public would take whatever Hollywood produces.\(^{51}\)

This sums up the heart of the controversy. Because the original series is so beloved by such a wide demographic of viewers, the Hollywood system attempted to give audiences more of what they wanted with a live-action feature film. However, both Shyamalan and the studio failed to recognize that what made \textit{Avatar: The Last Airbender} a groundbreaking series was not just the technical sum of its parts, but rather its awareness of and willingness to so radically deconstruct the cultural, racial, and gender norms of Western society, providing positive representation to children of color and young women amidst a media culture that claims to celebrate diversity yet continually fails to acknowledge them. It was also the first time many viewers were able to see their non-Western cultures portrayed with dignity and respect in a timeless fantasy setting. Loyalty to the franchise made the film profitable, but it also reinforces the same negative racial stereotypes in cinema that are continually projected onto Asians today: that of silence, passivity, distance, and invisibility.

Chapter Three: Orientalism in the Era of the Post-Racial Body in *Cloud Atlas*

The practice of placing white actors in the roles of non-white characters and/or settings has been in practice since the beginning of cinema, and regardless of intent, such cross-racial role playing is always an assertion of a power imbalance favoring the white hegemonic structures for which all but a handful of Hollywood features are made. In the preceding chapters, we looked at films that are representative of the various Orientalist aesthetics and narrative devices that have endured in our contemporary popular cinema, demonstrating that certain stereotypes about non-Western cultures still persist. From George Gebhardt playing a scheming Chinese waiter in *The Greaser’s Gauntlet* (1908) to Paul Muni as humble Farmer Wang in *The Good Earth* (1937) to Mickey Rooney as the lecherous Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961), yellowface has historically allowed Hollywood to control the public’s perceptions of Asians through the use of stereotype and caricature. This is often accomplished by displacing Asian actors with white actors, either through the convention of yellowface or by literal whitewashing. To compensate, the film then brings forward more recognizably “Oriental” visual signifiers such as top-knots, geisha make-up, and fu manchu mustaches so that the audience understands that the characters are meant to be perceived as Asian even if the actors are recognizably not.

Unsurprisingly, such representations were heavily influenced by the sociopolitical climates of their time. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was made permanent in 1902, so representations of the Chinese—who had immigrated to America at the end of the nineteenth century during the Gold Rush—as amoral, greedy, and underhanded fit with the public’s opinion that they were causing a wage depression for native (read: white American) laborers. Public opinion changed during World War II, when the U.S. and China were allied against Japan and
the Chinese were then perceived to be a humble, self-sacrificing, and hardworking people. Distrust against Japan and Japanese Americans have lingered throughout the mid-twentieth century, though a fascination with the exoticism of Japanese culture after the war caused a boom in films featuring white movie stars who travel to and engage with traditional and archaic constructions of Japan.

Though both Prince of Persia and The Last Airbender certainly fall into the category of “blockbusters” and are generally considered unworthy of serious scholarship, the criticism they have received directly by viewers through the digital sphere designate that they do have a profound effect on America’s cinematic landscape. However, not all films are so transparent or can be deconstructed so cleanly. New modes of storytelling and exponentially more sophisticated technology enable filmmakers to make bolder choices in order to realize their creative visions. As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century and a Hollywood that sincerely prides itself on creating an increasingly liberal film culture, the limits of visual representation have widened and lines defining racial, gender, and sexual representation have become further blurred.52 After all, we live in a world where White Chicks (2004, dir. Keenan Wayans) exists and even has somewhat of a cult following. If two black men can cross not only race, but gender boundaries and perform in drag as two white women in a mainstream Hollywood film, then surely America has entered into a post-racial era?53

Again, the generalization is difficult to make, made harder still by the gradual and increasingly daring disintegration of the actor-character symbiosis. What I mean by this is that in some ways, characters are no longer considered to be limited by the physical bodies of their


53 “Post-racism” is the concept that we live in a society where racial discrimination is by and large no longer a serious social issue. For further information, please refer to H. Roy Kaplan’s book The Myth of Post-Racial America: Searching for Equality in the Age of Materialism (R&L Education, 2011).
actors and the cinematic medium has allowed for films to draw attention to multiple-embodiment of both the actor and the character. For example, Woody Allen plays the title character in his mockumentary Zelig (1998), a Yiddish man who has the extraordinary “medical condition” of compulsively changing his physical appearance and mannerisms to fit in with whomever he is currently interacting with. Throughout the film he is shown as transforming into fat men, tall men, and most notably, “Negroes” and “Orientals,” often for the incongruous comedic effect. Accompanying photographs show Allen in black and yellowface.\(^{54}\) Conversely, when he is in the company of scientists or doctors, he begins to adopt their vocabulary and believes he is one of them. The most telling implication of this, of course, is that Zelig changes based on the most prominent aspects of the people he is around and his masquerade is that he becomes “Other,” but only as long as he is around them. This allows him to fit in literally anywhere, to fully become someone else for a short time. Despite his Jewish roots, he even becomes a Nazi and joins Hitler’s entourage after his fame and reputation in America plummets. Woody Allen is able to take advantage of the paradigm of white-as-default, using his character as a literal blank slate in order to create comedy out of the masquerade.\(^{55}\)

Conversely, in the recent Bob Dylan-inspired biopic I’m Not There (2007, dir. Todd Haynes), multiple actors portray different facets of Bob Dylan’s life, music, and personality. One of the most notable aspects of the film is the cross-gender casting of Cate Blanchett as Jude Quinn, a male musician meant to embody the “acerbic Dylan” of 1955-1956. Film critic Anthony Decurtis wrote that Blanchett’s performance was a “tour de force” because even though she was

---

\(^{54}\) The 1980s-1990s saw a resurgence of comedian-actors who utilized blackface or other forms of racial masquerade in their acts, drawing on particular celebrities or characters to impersonate. Particularly noteworthy is Billy Crystal’s popular impression of Sammy Davis Jr. during the 1980s; Crystal reignited controversy over the nuances of cross-racial performance when he performed as Davis Jr. during the opening segment of the Academy Awards in 2012.

performing in male drag, her feminine characteristics conveyed the vulnerability and anger of
Dylan’s psyche better than a male actor possibly could.\textsuperscript{56} In other words, Blanchett’s physicality
embodies the most important aspects of Bob Dylan’s persona, so much so that her gender no
longer mattered. Likewise, the young African-American actor Marcus Carl Franklin portrays the
earliest Bob Dylan, a runaway named Woody Guthrie who hops a train with his guitar. In this
incarnation, the audience is again not asked to believe that Bob Dylan is being played by a young
African-American boy, but that his identity—which is linked to his body—is symbolic of Dylans’
origins.

The technological make-up of a Hollywood production has also contributed to this sense of
disembodiment, particularly in the ever more popular genres of science fiction, fantasy, and
superhero action films.\textsuperscript{57} In addition to classic conventions such as voice acting for traditional
and 3D animated features, now actors need not even be filmed on the same soundstage in order
to appear on the screen side-by-side, and an increased dependence on computer-generated
imagery has allowed for the emergence of performance capture actors like Andy Serkis to build
their careers on the use of motion capture technology, giving naturalistic movement to iconic
characters like King Kong and Gollum who once had to be created with live animals or through
puppetry.\textsuperscript{58} Motion capture was also used in James Cameron’s \textit{Avatar} (2009) so that actor Sam
Worthington could play both the human main character and his alien Na’vi counterpart. Cameron
conceptualized the film more than ten years in advance of the beginning of its production period

\textsuperscript{56} Anthony DeCurtis, “6 Characters In Search of An Artist,” \textit{The Chronicle of Higher Education}, November 23,

\textsuperscript{57} While neither \textit{Zelig} nor \textit{I’m Not There} are adventure-fantasy films, the multiple-embodiment is still a trope found
in many films that contain elements of magical realism or more extensive suspension of disbelief on the part of the
viewer.

\textsuperscript{58} The mentioned roles are for \textit{King Kong} (2005) and the \textit{Lord of the Rings} trilogy (2001-2003), both directed by
in 2006 in order to give CGI, motion-capture, and 3D technology time to adequately develop to fulfill his creative vision of photo-realistic animation.\textsuperscript{59}

If it now seems the norm for actors to be able to transgress their racial, gender, sexual, or even physical boundaries, and for filmmakers to explore these aspects at will, why does the film industry at large still face so much criticism for how they portray race, gender, and sexuality? In this post-modern age there is certainly no answer that would satisfy all, but one variation might be found by examining the many nuances of the epic science fantasy film \textit{Cloud Atlas} (2012, dir. Andy and Lana Wachowski, Tom Twyker).

\textbf{The Geography of \textit{Cloud Atlas}}

Adapted from David Mitchell’s 2004 novel of the same name, \textit{Cloud Atlas} interweaves six stories that span time and space from the nineteenth century to a distant post-apocalyptic future. The film was split between two directing teams, one led by American filmmakers Andy and Lana Wachowski and the other by German director Tom Twyker. The six stories take place in the following times and locations:

1. Pacific Islands, 1849 (Wachowskis)
2. Cambridge, 1936 (Twyker)
3. San Francisco, 1973 (Twyker)
4. London, 2012 (Twyker)
5. Neo-Seoul, 2144 (Wachowskis)
6. Big Isle, 106 Years After The Fall (Wachowskis)

The novel’s universes, nested within one another, resemble the “rhizome” model developed by Deleuze and Guattari.\textsuperscript{60} Such a model emphasizes heterogeneity and multiplicity, and “can be

\textsuperscript{59}“James Cameron on the Cutting Edge”, \textit{Bloomberg Business Week Magazine}, April 01, 2007, \url{http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2007-04-01/online-extra-james-cameron-on-the-cutting-edge}

\textsuperscript{60} Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. \textit{A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 7-8.
entered from many different points, all of which connect to each other”. The genius of the novel is that each of its stories can indeed stand on its own, and yet all are connected by seemingly innocuous coincidences and chance encounters. Reincarnation—the primary action-based schema in the film—is never explicitly mentioned or alluded to as the reason for certain connecting symbols found between stories because there is no singular timeline for the characters to be reborn into. In fact, Cloud Atlas the novel creates a phenomenon recently articulated as “queer time.” Judith Halberstam defines “queer” as “non-normative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in time and space,” indicating that the multiplicity of timelines in the novel allows for queer bodies—in this case, “queer” extending to all bodies that do not adhere to the white cis-heterosexual hegemonic structure—to be reclaimed by readers, particularly readers of color.

The stories in the novel are epistolary, found in some recorded form by a character in the subsequent storyline and calls into question whether or not the previous stories actually happened. The novel opens with “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing,” which is a physical journal found by the main character of the second story, “Letters from Zedelghem,” which is in turn written as a series of correspondences between himself and his old lover, who is a character in the third story, “Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery.” However, the authenticity of these three previous stories is thrown into question when it is revealed that “Half-Lives” is actually a pulp novel read by the main character of the fourth story, and so on.

Unlike the novel, which tells the first half of each story in chronological order, and then the

---

62 Bordwell, Poetics of Cinema, 140.
second halves in reverse-chronological order with the sixth story told in full to bridge the gap between them (somewhat like a Russian nesting doll), the film tells all six stories simultaneously, cutting to different stories and generally moving them all forward at the same pace (Figure 3.1). Kamilla Elliot would classify this as the “ventriloquist concept” of adaptation, which points to “adaptation’s filmic enrichments of the novel” and seeks to use the source text as a frame that, like a ventriloquist imbues his empty puppet with a voice, the creators can use to fill with new meaning.64 This fundamental shift in the composition of the film attempts to place all the stories on a linear chronology, which deliberately decentralizes the novel’s emphasis on the possibilities that come from an unstable or uncertain temporality, replacing queer time with a more conventional chronology.

Figure 3.1. A visual representation comparing the structures of Cloud Atlas the novel (top) and the film adaptation (bottom). The film adaptation also contains a seventh “epilogue” segment (indicated by the pink stripe).

Certainly, Cloud Atlas is a far more ambitious and sophisticated film in terms of both concept and execution compared to most of the works we’ve discussed thus far, but the exchange

---

64 Elliot, Kamilla. "Literary Cinema and the Form/Content Debate." Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 143.
is that many of the social ideologies it perpetuates—especially in regards to the almost always inseparable coupling of race and gender in its vision of future societies—are also more nuanced, and therefore more imperative—to deconstruct. In addition to the “colonization” mode of adaptation as defined by Naremore, it is useful to think of *Cloud Atlas* through Elliot’s definitions of the “genetic concept” and the “incarnational concept.” In simplified terms, the genetic concept involves inserting visual similarities in film that may not be as strong in the source text in order to heighten connections in narrative structure. The incarnational concept insinuates that the text is only partially real, and does not become truth until adapted into a multisensory medium such as film.

While the multi-spatial/temporal nature of the narrative certainly lends universality and scope to the novel, its adaptation into a live-action visual medium becomes problematic when the timeline is economically compressed into a single chronology and several dozen different characters become “genetically” connected through reincarnation, evoking the incarnational concept by taking away the ambiguity of the realities the characters inhabit. Admittedly, there are few better ways to visually represent reincarnation than to have one actor play multiple characters, but the situation becomes complicated when each embodied character is a different race and/or gender. Furthermore, the distribution of reincarnations is uneven, with top-billed actors Tom Hanks, Halle Berry, Hugo Weaving, and Jim Sturgess appearing in all six stories while the other eight actors appear in some but not others. Nine out of the thirteen headlining actors perform as a gender or race other than their own in roles that do not affect their narrative trajectory and there are several blink-or-you’ll-miss-it moments of blatant masquerade, including Halle Berry as a disfigured Korean surgeon with a fu manchu mustache, Susan Sarandon appearing briefly as an Indian physicist in a video recording, and Jim Broadbent in brownface as

---

65 Kamilla Elliot, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*, 150-173.
one of the prescients at the end of the film.

Perhaps it is a testament to the good intentions of the filmmakers that the transformation of these actors is so complete it can be almost impossible to recognize them. However, this does not excuse them from being held accountable for how they chose to depict racialized groups on the screen, nor for the ways they’ve chosen to draw the line as to when it is acceptable to perform the masquerade and when it is not. The act of racial masquerade in the age of the Cult of Celebrity always privileges the recognizability of the actor and, in fact, the very construction of *Cloud Atlas* depends on it. As one excited crewmember quipped during one of the featurettes on the DVD, “We’ve got Doona Bae playing Tilda, we got Susan Sarandon playing an Indian man—today, we’ve got Jim Sturgess playing a Korean!”66 Though each featurette makes the standard disclaimer that all opinions expressed by the cast and crew are their own and not necessarily representative of the studio, it is telling that only Bae’s character—which she performs in whiteface—is remembered by name while the characters of Sarandon and Sturgess, both white actors, are described first and foremost by their ethnic identities.

Looking at the body of work of the Wachowski siblings, it is little wonder that they would be more interested in the events of past and future, whereas Tykwer handles the three stories that occur closer to our own time. Just as in *The Matrix* trilogy, the Wachowskis explore the themes of free will and enslavement/liberation in a dystopian society. For the purposes of this chapter, we will turn most of our focus onto “An Orison of Somni–451”, the fifth story and arguably the turning point in the historical chronology provided by the film. In addition to the interesting logics created by the building of a future dystopian society, the story contributes to the grander narrative of the love story between Jim Sturgess and Doona Bae constructed uniquely by the film.

The Liberation of Neo-Seoul, 2144

Sonmi’s story takes place in Neo-Seoul (Nea So Copros in the novel)—a totalitarian futuristic Seoul, Korea where corporations and government have become one conglomerate force known as Unanimity. An Archivist (James D’Arcy) is interviewing Sonmi-451 (Doona Bae), a fabricant—genetically engineered clones who make up the majority of Neo-Seoul’s workforce—who was assigned to work at fast food chain Papa Song’s. Sonmi gradually ascends into consciousness after engaging with Yoona-939 (Zhou Xun), a fellow fabricant who is executed while trying to escape Papa Song’s after developing an independent consciousness of her own. Sonmi is rescued from her own capture by Hae-Joo Chang (Jim Sturgess), the leader of the rebel faction Union. Sonmi and Hae-Joo fall in love and he later convinces her to write an abolitionist manifesto, her Declarations, after he shows her that replicants are killed and recycled into food (“Soap”) for other replicants in Soylent Green style. Understanding now that she must sacrifice her life in order to reveal the truth about Unanimity, Sonmi broadcasts her Declarations to the world as the military bursts into the rebels’ hideout, killing Hae-Joo and arresting Sonmi. Returning to the present, Sonmi is executed after her interview concludes, leaving the Archivist unsettled.

Many of the films and series which make up the foci of the preceding chapters attempt to make authentic the fantastic Orientalist landscapes they create through the attention to production detail and severely overlooking the real-life racial and gendered power imbalances they replicate and perpetuate.67 By contrast, Cloud Atlas revels in the artifice of Neo-Seoul—and,

67 This is a filmic manifestation of what Roland Barthes might call “the reality effect,” which in literature refers to description as an aesthetic function. While it may not lend anything to the narrative, the addition of details is meant to connote a greater sense of truthfulness in the reader. For example, Barthes defines the way Flaubert describes the city of Rouen in Madame Bovary as “figures of rhetoric,” using metaphors to construct images of the city in relation to other objects. Applied to Cloud Atlas, the visual image being presented on screen is meant to represent what the object itself does not. Jim Sturgess in yellowface as Hae-Joo Chang signifies the entirety of Hae-Joo Chang, including his ethnic identity. For more in-depth discussion, please refer to Barthes’ essay “The Reality Effect,”
by extension, the cinematic medium—first and foremost through its mise-en-scène. Our first view of the city shows aircrafts zipping around a massive city, backlit against a heavily polluted orange sky (Figure 3.2, top). In front of the huge skyscrapers are smaller skyscrapers, possibly of buildings that were built in our time, and in the foreground a pagoda-like building that signals to an even earlier era. These three distinctly different architectural planes superimposed upon each other at once represent the passage of time; even without the title plate (the immediate preceding shot was of Timothy Cavendish (Jim Broadbent) on the toilet in London, 2012), the pagoda—a universally Orientalist architectural structure—already indicates to the viewer that we are in Asia and through the aircrafts and largest buildings that we have been transported sometime into the future.68

The reveal of Papa Song’s restaurant is even more spectacular, a constant reminder of visuals that can only be achieved through the filmic medium with the help of special effects. As Sonmi narrates the beginning of her daily life as a server at Papa Song’s, the restaurant—like Kansas into Oz—“boots up” before our eyes, the drab greys transforming into a cheerful, supersaturated palette of reds, blues, and yellows as the wall seems to disintegrate into a pristine blue sky, a sky that the viewer already knows no longer exists in reality (Figure 3.2, bottom). The smiling yellow logo of Papa Song calls to mind the pan-Asian motif of the benevolent Laughing Buddha. The film also takes advantage of digital technologies to replicate Bae, Xun, and the other actresses portraying fabricants, creating a sea of genetically identical serving girls. Amidst the chaotic and individualistic punk-inspired fashions of Neo-Seoul, the fabricants

which can be found in The Rustle of Language (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1989), 141-148.

68 The premise of “An Orison of Sonmi~451” bears a debt to Blade Runner (1982, dir. Ridley Scott) both visually and narratively. Blade Runner, which accounted for the increasing popularity of the cyberpunk genre during the 1980s, takes place in a multicultural, overpopulated, heavily commercialized, and Orientalized future Los Angeles that has been militarized due to the threat of replicants, genetically-engineered clones that were developed by humans “Off-world” as slave labor until they revolted and had to be put down.
become another Orientalist manifestation of the interchangeability of Asian actors (Bae is Korean while Xun is Chinese). Debord asserts that the spectacle is “a world vision which has become objectified.” Neo-Seoul makes this true on both a diegetic and filmic level. The world of Neo-Seoul has become a society that is literally synonymous with commodity, where even human bodies are made into objects and quantified. The fabricants, dressed in flashy, revealing uniforms are indistinguishable from one another. Compared to the naturalism of the segments that occur chronologically before it, there is never a moment during the Neo-Seoul sequences we are meant to forget that what we are watching is no longer just a representation of reality, but an illusion that we willingly consume.

This segment of the film also drew the most controversy throughout its production and release periods for its portrayal of Korean characters by well-known white Hollywood actors. Jim Sturgess had been previously established as Adam Ewing, an American lawyer who has traveled to the islands of New Zealand in order to complete a business transaction for his father-in-law. While there, he witnesses the whipping of the Moriori slave Autua (David Gyasi), who he later befriends after he finds him stowed away on the ship.

To connect the events of 1850 and 2144, Sturgess and Bae appear as two pairs of starcrossed lovers. In 1850, Ewing returns home to San Francisco after having narrowly survived the treachery of Dr. Goose (Tom Hanks) and declares to his father-in-law (Hugo Weaving) that he will be taking his wife Tilda (also played by Bae, in whiteface) back east to join the abolitionist movement. When her father forbids her to go, Tilda replies, “I have been afraid of you all my life. I am going with my husband.” The film gives no indication as to whether Tilda also believes in abolitionism, or if she is merely taking advantage of the opportunity to escape the influence of her father, but either way she—like Autua—is being freed by Ewing.
Figure 3.2. Top: Establishing shot of Neo-Seoul with the different styles of architecture in the fore, middle, and background. Bottom: The transformation of Papa Song’s restaurant. Both shots were achieved using digitally-generated effects while also emphasizing the future society’s dependence on technology.

Jim Sturgess is one of the five members of the main twelve-person cast to appear in all six stories and possesses the soul of a staunch abolitionist as two of the stories in which he plays a prominent role involve the liberation of enslaved peoples. His casting as both Hae-Joo Chang and Adam Ewing perpetuates the post-colonial model of the white savior discussed in earlier
chapters by re-centering the white male protagonist as the main agent of liberation while people of color are implicated in their own enslavement.\textsuperscript{69} In literature, one can make an intuitive leap that an Anglo-American man could plausibly be reincarnated as an ethnic Korean because literature is not limited by visual representation or enacted by bodies that are inherently raced and gendered.

Sturgess is always shown as a sympathetic liberator; as Ewing he faints in a swoon upon seeing Autua being whipped (though the faint is later attributed to his sickness, the scene sets him up as a character inherently sympathetic to the plight of the oppressed) and he is the most visible member of Union. Furthermore, though it is Yoona who first prompts Sonmi to “ascend” through contraband books and films, when asked by the Archivist where she learned of the philosophies of Aleksander Solzhenitsyn and other pieces of knowledge fabricants should not have desired to obtain on their own, Sonmi readily replies that it was Hae-Joo who instilled in her the desire to learn.\textsuperscript{70} This is also representative of the privileges that Sturgess’ characters enjoy in their role as white savior. As a “pureblood” or “Consumer”, as those who are natural-born rather than genetically created through fabricant womb-tanks are called, Hae-Joo has far more resources than Yoona, who only had access to the broken bits and baubles in the restaurant’s lost-and-found. Likewise, though both Adam and Tilda Ewing enjoy a high standing in San Francisco society, the construct of nineteenth-century American society would, of course, give Adam a far greater range of personal freedom, as well as a more prominent narrative.

Sturgess’ characters consistently enjoy a higher level of social standing and personal freedoms

\textsuperscript{69} In the 2012 segment, Sturgess “cameos” as a Scottish football fan who starts a bar brawl with the English caretakers of Aurora House, defending the newly-escaped Timothy Cavendish and company. This instance is not directly related to the 1849 and 2144 storylines, but it continues to reinforce his role as an abolitionist and liberator of oppressed peoples.

\textsuperscript{70} The term is never explicitly used in the film, but in the book “ascension” refers to when a fabricant gains consciousness and is considered defective and/or dangerous by the government.
than Bae’s, indicating that even though their souls may transcend the physical body, their social roles and mobility remain consistently imbalanced.

The concept of a transcendent soul, one that can overcome the hurdles presented by the physical, economic, social, and political boundaries of time, is an appealing one. However, such a lofty concept cannot overcome the reality that however one’s soul may try, it is—at least, in this world—still trapped in a body that is constantly subject to being raced and gendered. Insomuch that theories of gender fluidity and performance are becoming more widely accepted in society, there is no true comparable notion of “racial fluidity” and yet that is exactly what *Cloud Atlas* attempts to create through the contrasting bodies and souls of Sturgess and Hugo Weaving (Boardman Mephi, the member of the government who orders the attack on the rebel headquarters and monitors Sonmi’s execution). ⁷¹ Weaving’s soul places him eternally in the bodies of instruments representing the authority of an oppressive society that attempts to drive the lovers apart. Unlike the narrative arc of Tom Hank’s soul, who begins as a villain in 1849 but becomes the hero of the story by “106 Years After the Fall,” Weaving, Sturgess, and Bae are forever triangulated together in the roles of oppressor, liberator, and liberated (Figure 3.3).

---

⁷¹ That is not to say, of course, that the instances of gender performance in the film do not also pose problematic elements to the portrayal of women. However, for the purposes of this chapter I have chosen to focus only on the racial aspects of the masquerade unless gender performance is directly related to it.
Figure 3.3. Adam Ewing (Sturgess), his wife Tilda (Bae in whiteface), and Adam’s father-in-law (Weaving, in foreground) as pre-incarnations of their Neo-Seoul selves.

Doona Bae, Zhou Xun, and the Question of the Authentic Body

Though she is the main protagonist of the Neo-Seoul storyline and becomes a mythological figure after her death, Bae is rarely shown to have agency of her own in the Wachowski narratives, even when playing a white woman. Chronologically, she is first embodied as Tilda Ewing in 1849 and then as Sonmi~451 in 2144. In “106 Years After the Fall,” she does not appear directly, but rather, has become mythologized in a society that has reverted to tribalism after the alluded-to fall of civilization. Regardless of what character she plays, Bae is always in the custody of a white-bodied male authority figure, whether it be her father, her husband, Seer Rhee, or the Neo-Seoul government, and finds a sense of liberation only when prompted by

72 Twyker allows Bae a measure of retribution in the San Francisco (1973) storyline, where she plays a Mexican woman who kills the assassin Bill Smoke (Weaving again) with a shovel after he calls her a wetback and shoots her dog.
Sturgess’ character. This maintains the classic Oriental stereotype of the “lotus blossom” even when she is playing Tilda Ewing because the audience is never meant to believe that she is white, just as they are never meant to believe that Sturgess and Grant actually are Korean. Rather, part of the spectacle of the film is tracing the arcs of the characters as they traverse from lifetime to lifetime.

Jonathan Boulter recognizes the intrinsic relationship between the 1849, 2144, and “106 Years After the Fall” sequences, and notes that when linked together, these three stories indicate that a desire to annihilate or enslave a people will eventually lead to the annihilation of the species. Humanity cannot sustain itself on cycles of literal and symbolic self-cannibalization; Cloud Atlas both opens and closes with literal cannibalistic societies, but this theme is never so clearly presented as through the role of the fabricants in Neo-Seoul.

Laura Mulvey writes of the role of the body in cinema:

The conventions of mainstream film focus attention on the human form. Scale, space, stories are all anthropomorphic. Here, curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world.

Despite the overarching message of reincarnated souls, Cloud Atlas’ focus always remains staunchly focused on the physical body and fabricants are no exception. Though they are artificially created, they cannot ever be thought of as completely separate from purebloods because their bodies are created in the exact likeness of the human woman. Without digressing too much into the extensive history of the artificial human in science fiction, the inclusion of genetically altered or cloned humans as characters—Blade Runner with its replicants once again


comes to mind—is often used to reflect on humanity’s place in relation to them, creating a discourse on the nature of the self and what constitutes personhood.⁷⁵ They are also often used as a metaphor for society’s treatment of marginalized communities; this is especially potent in the case of the fabricants, genetically identical to humans yet bred to be the ideal laboring class and treated as sub-human, drawing parallels to the Moriori of 1849.

The fabricant is, in many ways, the ideal woman as defined by the most reductive patriarchal standards.⁷⁶ Even the name of the restaurant suggests the image of the “Big Brother”-like father figure that looks after his children, and the fabricants constantly refer to each other as “Sister.” Devoid of individual personalities or independent thought, fabricants are essentially bodies without souls, enthused to please Papa Song’s constant stream of Consumers. As Sonmi explains, a fabricant’s life is made up of twenty-four hour cycles that repeat day after day. Each fabricant receives a star on her collar—one for each year—until she reaches twelve, at which time she will be released from her service and taken to Xultation. The promise of Xultation keeps the fabricants complicit in their own servitude as they endure nineteen-hour-long work periods and routine sexual advances from both customers and Seer Rhee (Hugh Grant), the manager of the restaurant.

As service workers, the fabricants are simultaneously maternal and erotic objects, “genomed” to be exploitable. First, they are shown as they are stimulated into wakefulness and prepare to begin the day, dropping off their white shifts and exchanging them for uniforms. While the perspective of the camera is somewhat ambiguous about whether the gaze it invites is


⁷⁶ Though Sonmi meets Wing–027, a male fabricant, in the novel, the film gives no indication that male fabricants exist.
a lascivious one, the female sexuality of the fabricants is emphasized through the lingering shots of their naked breasts and shoulders as they file through the hygiene chamber. The camera then slowly pans upwards as the fabricants march into the restaurant, revealing a seemingly endless stream of bare legs, thighs and calves made more prominent by platform shoes that would be impractical by today’s food industry standards. Bred to be aware but unresponsive to the spectacle of their bodies, they are the perfect commoditized sexual fetish object. There are several instances shown before Sonmi’s liberation from Papa Song’s in which she and Yoona are subject to sexual harassment, cementing the endurance of the Asian woman’s link to sexuality in this period of American cinema. The treatment of the body of the Asian woman as a submissive sexual object, largely bereft of free will, is more explicit than in any other segment in the film. No other women in the film are faced with nearly as much erotic subjugation, nor filmed with a gaze as voyeuristic.

The complacency that has been engineered into the fabricants first manifests itself when Sonmi is shown being brashly fondled by a customer but, properly and passively, she does not respond, indicating that this is a common and accepted occurrence. Later, she discovers Seer Rhee rutting on top of Yoona after the restaurant closes and all the fabricants have retired for the evening. Again, the human-like qualities of the fabricant are emphasized through this carnal act. He licks her foot as she squirms upon the table in ecstasy, though a subsequent close-up of her face as she notices Sonmi, hiding nearby after having been awakened prematurely from her sleep cycle, shows that this act is calculated and that the pleasure is not reciprocal. Rhee’s obsession with Yoona’s foot and the erotic pleasure he derives from it blurs the line between the

---

77 The concept of the fetish is, of course, linked with Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, of which fabricants can be seen as an extension. The extent to which we could apply the many branches and variations of this theory to Neo-Seoul’s political-economic structures would digress too far from this thesis, but it would be a fascinating topic to pursue further.
authentic body of a pureblood woman and the genetically-bred, “workhorse” body of the fabricant.

One might draw parallels and distinction between Yoona~393 and the Mongol slave girl played by Anna May Wong in *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924, dir. Raoul Walsh), whom Celine Parreñas Shimizu discusses at length in *The Hypersexuality of Race*. Though the slave girl is written as deceitful and lascivious, Shimizu offers an alternative reading to her dragon lady persona as “a redeployment of sexuality toward freedom from slavery.” 78 The slave girl’s treachery comes not from an inherent malevolence, but from a desire to liberate herself; likewise, Yoona, who has begun developing a sense of self, simultaneously understands that she is enslaved but cannot exercise her newfound autonomy without first sating Seer Rhee’s sexual appetite. The next day, a Consumer mockingly squirts mayonnaise on Yoona in a lewd pantomime of an ejaculation. This serves as the breaking point for Yoona, who knocks him to the floor (“I will not be subjected to criminal abuse!”) and makes her attempt to escape, an attempt that is stopped by Seer Rhee and results in her death. Once again, the distance between human and fabricant closes when red blood begins to spurt from her neck and she does not malfunction as an android might, but dies in an undeniably human manner.

These initial moments of sexual transgression and bodily violence provide a contrast to the tenderness of Sonmi and Hae-Joo’s lovemaking the night before she witnesses the truth of the fate she has escaped. The question of Sonmi’s sexuality—the possibility that even fabricants are entitled to human pleasure—is not one that is addressed by the novel; Yoona~393’s rape by Seer Rhee was added into the film and Sonmi describes her and Hae-Joo’s sexual encounter to the

Archivist as “joyless, graceless, and necessarily improvised.” Their love story has been constructed for the film, to underscore the strength of the parallel love stories they lead from lifetime to lifetime. As Marchetti notes, parallel love stories are often used to critique social divisions in a culture that keep the lovers apart. Traditionally, it has been used as a commentary on miscegenation laws, class divisions, traditional gender roles, and sexual orientations; in 2144, the division is essentially between different species. Sonmi acknowledges that a relationship between a pureblood and a fabricant is forbidden when she initiates sexual intimacy with him, but this serves to once again emphasize the cognitive separation of a fabricant’s body from that of her personhood since the impersonal sexual advances made upon her and Yoona by Consumers at Papa Song’s were clearly socially acceptable.

But by far the most brutal affirmation of the invalidation of the fabricant body occurs when Hae-Joo takes Sonmi to Xultation, the place that fabricants are taken to in order to receive their reward. As it is revealed, Xultation is actually a slaughterhouse where fabricants are systematically killed and made into the Soap that live fabricants imbibe every day. A Sonmi, one of the dozens in the crowd identical to Sonmi~451, is sat down on a slab and shot through the forehead similar to how one might slaughter livestock. With the camera looking down at her arms splayed wide and open, vacant eyes, there can be no mistaking the significance of the Sonmi’s Christ-like figure as her body is sent down a lone conveyer belt to the slaughterhouse (Figure 3.4, top), simultaneously the ultimate victim of and fuel for the continued prosperity of Neo-Seoul. In the next shot, Sonmi and Hae-Joo witness the horrific process by which the freshly-dead fabricants are turned into Soap. The indifference—even cruelty—with which the camera treats the bodies as they are decapitated, skinned, dismembered, and melted down seems


80 Marchetti, *Romance and the Yellow Peril*, 126.
to reflect the fragmentation of the Papa Song servers as they were shown at the beginning, denied the privilege of being seen as whole and instead isolated by individual shots of shoulders, breasts, and legs. Now it becomes clear that all along, their true value lies in their bodies: in life to serve and in death to feed those who will serve after them.

Figure 3.4. Top: A Sonmi who has finished her twelve years of service receives her reward. Bottom: Sonmi’s first view of the fabricant slaughterhouse.
But perhaps the ultimate irony in the Neo-Seoul sequence is the question it raises of what constitutes an authentic body in our society. Sonmi and Yoona, both played by Asian actresses, portray artificial humans while the Purebloods Hae-Joo, the Archivist, Seer Rhee, and Boardman Mephi are all played by white actors whose characters are meant to be ethnically Asian but remain constantly—and intentionally—recognized as themselves, temporarily in costume with taped back eyes and high-arched eyebrows. In fact, the fabricants are all played exclusively by Asian actresses but the population of Neo-Seoul is much more racially diverse, perhaps alluding to a future in which the majority of the population are mixed-race, or in which globalization has reached such an extent that majority populations of any race or ethnicity no longer exist. If this is the case, it implies that the genome of the fabricants is a remnant of an old social order and that for all of its systematic oppression, Unanimity has, against all odds, achieved a post-racial society of mindless Consumers.

However, it is far more likely that the treatment of the fabricants by the filmmakers represent the best and worst of a neo-liberal Hollywood that prides itself on creating films with a multi-cultural, universal moral message without taking into account that in the twenty-first century, White is no longer the default color. “Our lives are not our own,” begins Sonmi’s first Declaration, and it is true. As a supposedly post-modern film for an equally post-modern novel, Cloud Atlas instead reveals the artifice of how the western imagination constructs fictional societies: despite technological achievements and a world with a completely different social order, Eastern peoples and the cultures they belong to are still stereotyped, exoticized, and displaced in ways that are dispiritedly rooted in a racialized, colonized, brutally real present.
Conclusion: 21st Century Hope for Hollywood?

The complex dialogue surrounding the Asian body today is not limited to negative representation. In early 2012 major news outlets reported that actress Lucy Liu had signed on for the role of Joan Watson in Elementary, CBS’ 21st century reworking of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s iconic Sherlock Holmes series, which had recently enjoyed a renewed interest in mainstream entertainment due to a major blockbuster adaptation starring Robert Downey Jr. and Jude Law as Holmes and Watson in 2008, and a critically-acclaimed BBC miniseries starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman in 2009. The casting incited a flurry of internet debates ranging from optimism to doubt to outrage. One of the most common criticisms against the choice was the casting of an Asian American woman into a role originally written for a white British man and setting the show in current-day New York City as opposed to London, destroying, as some described it, the “sanctity” of the source material. In other words, critics believed in the sincere fiction of a Watson who would be inherently inferior because she is not white and British. Even critics who saw the casting of Lucy Liu as a positive step towards diversifying lead roles on television had their reservations about whether the character would embody modern-day stereotypes of the high-achieving, socially awkward Asian doctor, a stereotype that has emerged alongside more traditional representations of Asian women as dragon ladies and lotus flowers, both types of roles that Liu has filled throughout her career.

Elementary currently enjoys critical acclaim, a high viewership, and is in its second season; Liu is one of only a few leading women of color on screen at the time of this essay. The vehement refusal to accept a Watson who is neither white nor British is clearly indicative of a

81 Other unconventional incarnations of the Holmes and Watson duo have included Daffy Duck and Porky Pig in the Looney Toons episode Deduce, You Say! (1956), Basil of Baker Street and Dr. Dawson, animated mice in Disney’s The Great Mouse Detective (1986); Michael Pennington and Margaret Colin (another female Watson) in The Return of Sherlock Holmes (1987); and Larry the Cucumber and Bob the Tomato of Veggie Tales fame (2006).
society that is still hesitant towards reversing what we might call “Anglo-heteronormativity,” and the decision its writers made in so radically reconceptualizing an iconic character—to essentially carve out a place for Liu—can itself be seen as a reaction against these norms. In this case, the writers of *Elementary* recognized that to attempt to directly translate Sir Conan Doyle’s work for a third time was to uphold the racial, gendered, and cultural norms of late-nineteenth-century England that characterizes its two predecessors, so their response was to subvert it by placing the characters of Holmes and Watson in a time and place where they as characters would have to adapt to current social conventions.

*Elementary* is one of few current-day examples in the mainstream media that actively seeks to give representation to Asian Americans, and it seems that network television has opened its doors to the possibility of more leading women of color where cinema still lags behind. Lucy Liu is a rare example of an actress of color who has been able to take roles regardless of her race. This was not the first time Liu has been color-blindly cast into a role previously occupied by a white actor: in 2000 she was cast as Alex Munday in *Charlie’s Angels* (2000) and its sequel *Charlie’s Angels: Full Throttle* (2001), feature film adaptations of the popular television show (1976-1981) that previously featured an all-white cast. Despite this, the objective truth is that few actors of color—much less Asian actors—have been given the opportunity to step into roles historically occupied by white actors where the opposite is still proliferate; it is not uncommon today to turn on any television screen to see non-Asian characters wield katanas, leave their comfortable western metropolises to reach enlightenment with Buddhist monks in the far east, or traipse through Chinatown where the only Asian characters that appear stay in the background and squawk indignantly in their native language when their produce stands are overturned in a dramatic chase scene.
The tendency to represent Asians and Asian culture as either rooted hopelessly in the “dark continent” of an archaic past or trapped in a decaying future belies an anxiety about the changing role of Asian Americans in present day American society. As Asia becomes increasingly competitive with Western markets and Asian pop idols are topping American music charts, it becomes more imperative than ever that globalization does not become synonymous with cultural homogeneity. While martial arts stars such as Jet Li and Jackie Chan were able to break into American markets without necessarily diluting their Asian identities, there are still few Asian or Asian American actors in American cinema figure who feature prominently in other genres. A few Asian American staples in the film industry today that come to mind are John Cho, who portrays Enterprise helmsman Hikaru Sulu in the latest reboot of the Star Trek franchise (2009, dir. J.J. Abrams), and Maggie Q, who played the title character in the television series Nikita (2010-2013, CW Network) and recently originated the role of Tori in the young adult science fiction film Divergent (2014, dir. Neil Burger). While neither has attained the same amount of exposure as their white costars, their success in the industry can be seen as progress.

Pacific Rim (2013, dir. Guillermo del Toro) is the latest film that may signal a slowly changing attitude towards casting Asian actors into lead protagonists in big-budget films. Cited by del Toro as homage to the Japanese mecha and kaiju genres on a global scale, Pacific Rim posits a future world of 2025 where giant sea monsters have suddenly risen from the depths of an interdimensional rift on the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, forcing the countries of the world to put aside their own international conflicts and pool their resources to create jaegers, colossal humanoid machines capable of fighting the kaiju; jaegers are piloted by at least two humans who

---

must create a neural bridge in order to control it. Though the film follows the narrative of Raleigh Beckett (Charlie Hunnam), a feminist reading of the film places the emphasis on Mako Mori (Rinko Kikuchi), a Japanese cadet adopted by Marshal Stacker Pentecost (Idris Elba), after her family was killed during a kaiju attack on Tokyo as a child. Mako’s ambition to become a jaeger pilot to avenge her parents’ death and perfect test scores on practice simulations make her the ideal candidate for Raleigh’s new co-pilot. Though she is skilled in physical combat and even bests Raleigh during their public spar to determine their compatibility as co-pilots, the camera does not subject her body to the male gaze, and her practical uniforms do not invite it. As a Japanese character, her cultural practices are consistently observed and respected by her peers so that it becomes clear this was not a case of blind-casting; more encouragingly, she is neither sexualized nor infantilized by other characters on the basis of her race. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Mako is not explicitly constructed as a love interest.

Furthermore, the film itself accurately reflects the indigenous population of its setting; the majority of the film takes place in Shanghai, where the “Shatterdome” is humanity’s last stronghold against the kaiju, and the majority of engineers and fellow cadets are played by Asian extras. Asian actors also play important supporting characters: the Chinese jaeger Crimson Typhoon is piloted by the Wei Triplets, real-life triplets who were sought out and cast by del Toro, who did not want to perpetuate the stereotype that Asians are visibly interchangeable. The design of the jaeger also pays homage to martial arts films as Crimson Typhoon is the only jaeger with the range of movement to kick and perform backflip maneuvers.

Though the film still has its problematic elements, most notably the morally ambiguous comic relief figure of Hannibal Chau (Ron Perlman), a shady black market dealer of kaiju organs

---

83 Mecha is a predominantly Japanese genre that focuses on giant machines piloted by humans either internally or externally. Kaiju translates roughly into “monster” and is the basis of creatures such as Godzilla and Mothra.
who cites that his name comes from his “favorite historical figure” and “second-favorite Szechuan restaurant in Brooklyn,” the care with which del Toro crafts his truly globalized, imminently-apocalyptic future indicates a growing consciousness for the growing demand for diversity in film. More importantly, it is evidence that the West can represent and adapt Asian cultures in a respectful and progressive way. If we can gravitate away from the Orientalist visions of the East that have dominated the American conscience for the past 150 years, the science-fiction adventure genre seems to be a widening niche into which Asian Americans can assert themselves.

Figure 4.1. Mako Mori, played by Japanese actress Rinko Kikuchi, may represent the vanguard of new representations of Asians and Asian Americans in American popular cinema.
Appendix A

A1. World Map of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (courtesy of Nickelodeon Animation Studios)

A2. Storyboard of Waterbending duel between Master Pakku (left) and Katara (right) that shows the integration of martial arts and water elements into the fight choreography. Key animation by Hong Kyung Pyo (courtesy of *Avatar the Last Airbender: The Art of the Animated Series*).
Works Cited


Filmography


*Dr. No.* Film. Directed by Terence Young. Santa Monica: United Artists, 1962.


