High-Tech Orientalism and Science Fiction Futures in Astria Suparak's *Virtually Asian* (2021)

KAITLIN CLIFTON FORCIER
PhD Candidate, University of California, Berkeley

ABSTRACT

Multimedia artist Astria Suparak's short video essay, *Virtually Asian* (2021) presents an astute critique of the racism embedded in pop-culture imaginings of the future. Weaving together footage culled from forty years of science fiction blockbusters, the supercut reveals not only how Asian actors have been used as an orientalist backdrop for white characters in these films, but that these Asian bodies are often dematerialized, represented as projections, holograms, and digital images. The piece comprises a trenchant follow-up to scholar Wendy Chun's observations about "High-tech Orientalism," a trope which represents a technologically-advanced future as an exotic Asian landscape. Commissioned by the Berkeley Art Center as part of an online exhibition launched while the gallery was closed by the pandemic, *Virtually Asian* is part of Suparak's ongoing project, "Asian futures, without Asians." Despite its sharp critique, *Virtually Asian* ultimately strikes a hopeful tone. These are after all collective visions of the future: we have the capacity to imagine futures that are less racist, less sexist, more accurate reflections of the world we hope to inhabit.

The luminous face of a woman with a flower in her hair rises many stories high, dispersed across the pixelated panels of a futuristic billboard in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). An outsized hologram of a figure in a traditional kimono, stylized makeup masking her visage, towers over the city in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017). The neon profile of a face, partially obscured by a fan, flashes behind a busy street scene in *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (Steven Spielberg, 2001). These scenes, compiled in multimedia artist Astria Suparak's pithy video essay *Virtually Asian* (2021), foreground the way in which Asian bodies have been used as Orientalist backdrops throughout decades of Hollywood science fiction films. Weaving together footage culled from forty years of blockbusters, *Virtually Asian* presents a vigorous critique of the white supremacy embedded in pop culture imaginings of the future. "If you neglected to cast Asian people in your movie, don't worry!" Suparak chides in voiceover, "you can fix it later in CGI. Fill the screen with outsized, empty, mute Asians." The accompanying footage depicts white protagonists in popular films such as *Demolition Man* (Marco Brambilla, 1993) and *Minority Report* (Spielberg, 2002) striding purposefully through these scenes while the Asian characters - almost all of them feminized and sexualized women - are confined to billboards and advertisements.

Virtually Asian is a short film commissioned by the Berkeley Art Center in Berkeley, CA for an online series of artworks responding to the pandemic. Suparak's stringent supercut is part of a larger project she is developing about the pervasiveness of racist stereotypes in science fiction. This ongoing project, "Asian futures, without Asians," includes live illustrated lectures, gallery installations, Instagram albums and other visual essays that excavate how mainstream films draw upon Orientalist tropes to present vaguely Asian-inflected futures that lack actual Asian characters. Suparak is clear that she is using a very broad interpretation of "Asian" to describe the conflation of a vast and varied group of nationalities and cultures within Hollywood film. As Suparak articulates it, the project responds to a process of "ongoing erasure and racism and violence, and how both in real life and in mainstream media our varied and unique cultures are carelessly misidentified and jumbled together."[1]

It is not only that Asian people are erased from the futures envisioned by science fiction; these films heavily mine the iconography of East Asia in their representations of the future, appropriating and misrepresenting diverse cultures to produce exotic fantasy settings for futuristic narratives. As new media scholar Wendy Chun observes, "High-tech Orientalism" is ubiquitous in science fiction, particularly in cyberpunk, a subgenre which frequently represents technologically advanced futures as "exotic" Asian landscapes. Among the most emblematic of this genre are *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell* (Mamoru Oshii, 1995), both set in cities with imprecisely East Asian features. Although *Blade Runner* takes place in Los Angeles, Asian costumes, languages and faces populate the streets through which the white protagonist moves (a nod to 1980s anxieties about the rising economic influence of Japan and Korea). *Ghost in the Shell*, a Japanese production and international hit, is set in a futuristic Hong Kong that merges traditional architecture and costumes with a high-tech cyborg society. The effect, as is so apparent from the selections in Suparak's supercut, is to present the future as an Orientalist landscape.[2] As Chun argues, this plays into colonialist fantasies: the futuristic spaces of these films are rendered simultaneously unfamiliar and enticing. Chun writes, "High-tech Orientalism seeks to orient the reader to a technology-overloaded present/future (which is portrayed as belonging to Japan or other Far East countries) through the promise of readable difference, and through a conflation of information networks with an exotic urban landscape."[3] The Asian setting serves as a shorthand in these films for an unfamiliar place, one which is a space of thrilling possibility for white protagonists.

Virtually Asian opens with a shot from *Blade Runner*: Deckard's car penetrates a tunnel glowing dimly with acidic green luminescence and emerges into the city – a grid-like space filled with straight lines and cubic shapes. These neatly organized grids rendered in neon are iconic of 1990s depictions of cyberspace. The Net interface in the 1995 *Ghost in the Shell* is depicted in just such a manner, with characters navigating an internet "space" that is represented according to the same visual logic as the city – the columns of information in cyberspace and the stark lines of the skyscrapers mirroring one another. As Chun argues, this intertwining of high-tech futures with East Asian landscapes in the 1980s and 1990s was also related to emergent fantasies of the internet as a space or place. The cyberpunk narratives that both Chun and Suparak analyze in their work associate digital technologies with a futuristic urban space, effectively transmuting the information space of cyberspace into a three-dimensional, occupiable landscape.

But this landscape – so effortlessly navigated by Deckard's vehicle – is also a space of colonialist expansion. As historian Fred Turner has observed, from the beginning the Internet was envisaged according to fantasies of conquest and Westward expansion. Major figures in the developing culture of the Internet in the 1970s and 80s such as John Perry Barlow, Stewart Brand, and Howard

Rheingold painted the internet as a new and unoccupied "frontier." As Turner observes, this ethos is still deeply embedded in the culture of Silicon Valley. Brand and other early champions of personal computing and the Web used the rhetoric of the American West to depict computers as tools to support autonomy and mobility. Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog* idealized the cowboy, the nomad, and the "Long Hunter,"[4] and this notion was further codified in the trope of the "electronic frontier" (a term popularized by Rheingold's 1993 book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* and Barlow's Electronic Frontier Foundation).[5]

In science fiction, the figure of the cowboy recurs as a technologically-enhanced "console cowboy," a term from William Gibson's highly influential cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* (1984). As Chun argues, this figure moves freely within an urban setting that is also a stand-in for the information space of the internet. She writes, "others must be reduced to information in order for the console cowboy to emerge and penetrate."[6] This atomization of the other into digital information is literalized by the holographic characters that populate Suparak's visual essay. The women in *Virtually Asian* not only provide an Orientalist milieu for the centered white characters, they are also largely dematerialized, their virtual bodies rendered as holograms, pixelated images, or luminous backlit screens. Though highly visible, these bodies have no substance and no agency.

The immaterial hologram women in *Virtually Asian* are almost always associated with commerce and sex. In a sequence excerpted from *Minority Report*, Tom Cruise stalks past advertisements featuring life-sized holographic women in bikinis and leis, hovering invitingly on a white sand beach. This image of commercialized sex appeal merges effortlessly with the following excerpt, from the 2017 remake of *Ghost in the Shell*. In this scene, anonymous women in kimonos – sex workers inhabiting the red light district – move silently in the background, providing an alluring frisson of the underworld as the camera follows the film's white star, Scarlett Johansson. The tropes of high-tech Orientalism are often correlated with sex. As Chun writes, high-tech Orientalism "promises intimate knowledge [and] sexual concourse with the other, which it reduces to data or local details."[7] Historically the sexualized other in cyberpunk neutralizes a perceived economic threat from East Asia in the 1980s and 90s. The pervasiveness of sexualized female bodies in the genre works to "[turn] economic threat into sexual opportunity."[8]

The hologram women of these science fiction films prefigured an actual hologram pop star, Hatsune Miku. This J-Pop phenomenon is the invention of Vocaloid, a Japanese voice synthesizing software product. Fans use the software to compose songs for an animated avatar named Hatsune Miku to sing. An active fandom has arisen around her, leading to extensive merchandizing and concerts which feature a 3-D hologram projection of the animated character singing live on stage. (Hatsune Miku was slated to perform at Coachella in 2020 before the concert was cancelled due to the pandemic[9]). Ka Yan Lam has suggested that Hatsune Miku can be seen as a source of empowerment for young fans, who use the avatar as an outlet for creative and intellectual expression. "What Vocaloid users find irresistible is the authority over their own creations of Miku. They breathe life into 'her' by applying their own ideas, suppositions, and artistic talents to the figurations."[10] Her immateriality allows them a sense of freedom. According to Lam, "the satisfaction of escaping from physical reality and achieving virtual empowerment is extended to the thrill of projecting desire onto Miku's body."[11] While in the case of Hastune Miku her immateriality is precisely what allows for her fans to use her as a projection of their selves and their desires, the virtual-ness of the hologram bodies that Suparak has foregrounded in *Virtually Asian* functions quite differently. In

these films, the dematerialization of the body underscores how the Asian characters are rendered as less than human, and incapable of feeling or meaningful action.

Donna Haraway famously saw the female cyborg as a liberatory figure, arguing that by merging with machines women could move beyond prescribed gender roles.[12] However the hologram women in *Virtually Asian* suggest that the technologized female body also serves as a site for amplified misogynist tendencies. As Mary Ann Doane has observed, the female cyborg in science fiction is overwhelmingly a conservative figure. She writes: "Science fiction, a genre specific to the era of rapid technological development, frequently envisages a new, revised body as a direct outcome of the advance of science. And when technology intersects with the body in the realm of representation, the question of sexual difference is inevitably involved."[13] Rather than presenting a liberated post-gender or post-racial body, science fiction uses the female cyborg or android to work out anxieties about technology. The cyborg woman exists outside of reproduction and sexual difference, argues Doane, and therefore represents a threat that must be contained. The mute virtual women of the films profiled in *Virtually Asian* represent a curtailing of the technologically-enhanced female body.[14] The effect of the accumulation of echoing tropes in *Virtually Asian* – of repeated images of Asian women in traditional dress appearing as immaterial set dressing for white characters – is to emphasize how relentless this process of erasure is.

At a mere two minutes in length and featuring footage from eight films, one might argue that Suparak has cherry-picked limited examples in *Virtually Asian* (a problem with the genre of the supercut generally). But these films are so iconic it is hard not to see their influence everywhere. The video essay is book-ended by the two *Blade Runner* films: produced thirty-five years apart, it is striking how little has changed. *Virtually Asian*, released in spring 2021 against the backdrop of the pandemic, is indeed timely. As racialized violence against Asian Americans spiked this year, this film turns a critical lens on just how pervasive anti-Asian depictions are in popular culture. As Kim Nguyen, curator at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts said, *Virtually Asian* "underlines all the ways that power is exercised through representations and through media. […] Tracking that kind of history over the last forty years proves how those reproductions [of the same colonial violence] just keep happening."[15] While many have spent the past year and a half watching movies at home, absorbing the types of media depictions that Suparak analyzes, the pandemic has also offered an opportunity for reflection. Despite its sharp critique, *Virtually Asian* ultimately strikes a hopeful tone. Science fiction films, after all, offer collective visions of the future: we have the capacity to imagine futures that are less racist, less sexist, more accurate reflections of the world we hope to inhabit.

ENDNOTES

[1] Aruna D'Souza, "Asian-American Artists, Now Activists, Push Back Against Hate," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2021 https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/18/arts/design/asian-american-artists-activism.html.

[2] I am using the term as theorized in Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (NY: Vintage Books, 1979).

[3] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*. Cambridge (MA: MIT Press, 2006): 177.

[4] Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism (*Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁵ In a project related to "Asian futures, without Asians," Suparak collaborated on a billboard in Los Angeles depicting Asian actors in iconic cowboy poses. Images of Asian American men in cowboy hats and chaps, their arms arcing overhead as though to release a lasso, are accompanied by the text: "Asians have been here longer than cowboys." Although Asian Americans rarely, if ever, appear in depictions of the American west, they have been living and working there for as long as white Americans. Yet, as the billboards argue, their histories have been erased.

⁶ Chun, *Control and Freedom*, 195.

⁷ Chun, *Control and Freedom*, 177.

⁸ Chun, *Control and Freedom*, 179.

⁹ Claire Shaffer, " Hatsune Miku, Holographic Japanese Idol, Makes her Coachella Debut," *Rolling Stone*, January 3, 2020. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/hatsune-miku-coachella-933263/.

¹⁰ Ka Yan Lam, "The Hastune Miku Phenomenon: More Than a Virtual J-Pop Diva," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 49, no. 5 (2016): 1115.

¹¹ Lam, "The Hastune Miku Phenomenon," 1115.

¹² Donna Harway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentiet Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991): 149-181.

¹³ Mary Ann Doane, "Technophilia: Technology, Representation, and the Feminine," in *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace*, ed. Jenny Wolmark (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999): 20.

¹⁴ The virtualization of Asian bodies in science fiction film raises the question of other gendered and racialized bodies that are less visible in film. Genevieve Yue's scholarship on the "China Girl" offers a real-world counterpoint to the racialized, gendered bodies of *Virtually Asian*. The "China Girl" or "leader ladies" were women whose images appeared at the beginning of a film strip (never meant to be seen by the audience) to help the laboratory processing the film correctly calibrate the colors, particularly the skin tones. As Yue argues, these figures established "a gendered and vaguely racialized practice that formed the basis for the appearance of all film. The China Girl is more than just a woman's face but an instrumentalized image whose values for tone, density, and color are broken down, isolated, and abstracted to establish the material basis for other images." Despite the name, the leader ladies used in Western nations were almost exclusively white – their function in color standardization established whiteness as the neutral ideal. Nevertheless, Yue writes, "As the name suggests, the China Girl encodes attitudes about race. China Girls are often attended by orientalist details in dress, hairstyle, and as reported in some cases, a straw 'Coolie' hat. […] Race is reduced to oriental embellishment, eroticism, and exoticism in the China Girl name, appearance, and apocryphal origin." The China Girl is the inverse of the Suparak's hologram women – invisible but fundamentally material, as opposed to super visible yet immaterial.

¹⁵ Quoted in https://astriasuparak.com/2021/06/28/asian-futures-without-asians_presentation/.

REFERENCES

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.

Doane, Mary Ann. "Technophilia: Technology, Representation, and the Feminine." In *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace*. Ed. Jenny Wolmark (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999): 20–33.

D'Souza, Aruna. "Asian-American Artists, Now Activists, Push Back Against Hate." *The New York Times*, April 18, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/18/arts/design/asian-american-artists-activism.html.

Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentiet Century." In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991): 149-181.

Lam, Ka Yan. "The Hastune Miku Phenomenon: More Than a Virtual J-Pop Diva." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 49, no. 5 (2016): 1115.

Rheingold, Howard. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. NY: Harper Collins, 1994.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism* (NY: Vintage Books, 1979).

Shaffer, Claire. "Hatsune Miku, Holographic Japanese Idol, Makes her Coachella Debut." *Rolling Stone*, January 3, 2020. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/hatsune-miku-coachella-933263/.

Turner, Fred, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Yue, Genevieve. "China Girls in the Film Laboratory," in *Girl Head: Feminism and Film Materiality*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2021, 33–72.

AUTHOR BIO

Kaitlin Clifton Forcier is a PhD candidate in the Department of Film and Media at UC Berkeley, with a Designated Emphasis in New Media. She researches and teaches on the history and theory of screen media, with a focus on the intersections of computation, popular media, and film and video art. Her dissertation, "The Infinite Image: Digital Media's Boundless Aesthetic" analyzes iteration and endlessness in digital media, from the 1960s to today, to consider how this "infinite aesthetic" underpins notions of digital culture as inexhaustible.