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Introduction

Cyberspace, a term coined by the emerging cyberpunk movement in the 1980s, imagined an interconnected world where territorial and cultural barriers were lifted, and the amalgamation of distant world cultures began. This abstract universe, predating the invention of the Internet, revealed both the awe and anxieties that came with the arrival of revolutionary technology and a rapidly globalising world. While on the surface, cyberpunk works are often renowned for keeping a sceptical eye on technology whilst tackling issues of human nature and identity, their narratives are almost always set in familiar near-future societies, which suggests that they are in fact explorations of the more relevant and perhaps politically-sensitive subject of cultural identity in a dramatically changing world. By exploring this thesis statement, I hope to understand whether depictions of the near future express fear or acceptance towards inevitable globalisation, immigration, and cultural change.

In order to explore these issues I will concentrate on Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner (1982)—arguably the film that visualised and defined cyberpunk cinema—as it weaves its narrative into a diverse multicultural Los Angeles where unassimilated immigrants, predominantly of Asian descent, have dramatically transformed the cityscape. Whilst Western cyberpunk works like Blade Runner certainly drew inspiration from the Far East, it is important to remember that this inspiration was not necessarily positive. Indeed, in many ways it is argued to be both a reiteration and reification of the American fear of the ‘yellow-peril’ where an Asian presence serves as an ominous threat to the West. To counterbalance this, I have therefore selected the Mamoru Oshii’s animated film Ghost in the Shell (1995), which is central to the Japanese cyberpunk canon. This allows us to compare Western and Eastern visualisations of the future whilst questioning and critiquing the boundaries of human and cultural identity.

As human history has revealed, there has been a tendency to ostracize outsiders to divide narratives into an ‘us vs. them’ format in order to demonize or dehumanize all that is considered different to the norm. This tendency can be traced all the way from the ancient Greek view of non-Greek speaking nations as barbarians to the current trend of conflating ethnicity and religion. While such topics as immigration and cultural
assimilation remain largely controversial, the ethical questions raised by these films to what is considered as ‘subhuman’ have never been so pertinent.

1. An Introduction to Cyberpunk’s Global Debate

In the late 20th century, the globalisation process intensified through the interconnection of world economics and the creation of a new global platform. Many non-Western cultures became hostile towards globalisation as they saw this as a continuation of Western imperialism that aimed to spread Eurocentric ideology and culture throughout the world (Sen, “How to Judge Globalism). However, the US was also subject to foreign influences, particularly in the 1980s and 90s that saw Japanese manga, anime, and video games explode onto the Western pop culture scene (Allen and Sakamoto 2). Emerging sub-cultures such as cyberpunk frequently incorporated Far Eastern elements into its futuristic milieus, and in some cases, even shifted entire narratives to Japan. Yet, this fascination and appropriation of Japanese culture has become a point of concern for many theorists that claim that the West’s attraction to the East is merely a new form Saidian Orientalism, known as techno-orientalism. Scholars such as David Morley and Kevin Robins argue that cyberpunk’s attraction to ‘cool Japan’ was in actuality a fear of Japanese future hegemony, which seemed “to be transcending and displacing Western modernity” (“Spaces of Identity” 168). Because cyberpunk’s orientalised style and thematic explorations have resonated through science fiction and Western pop culture today, it is important to decipher whether the incorporation of Far Eastern culture is a fear over American cultural loss, or, a genuine acceptance of the shifting geopolitical balance.

1.1 Yellow Peril: American cyberpunk and techno-orientalism

After less than half a century of its shattering post-nuclear defeat, Japan rose to a major contender as a world superpower, and in the 1980s was predicted to supersede US global influence within just a few decades. The possibility of Japan’s future hegemony loomed in the American consciousness, and thus it is important to assess whether the shift within the science fiction narrative was a celebration of Japan’s technological achievements, and rightful place in future global discourse—or, whether the conflation
of technology, dystopia, and the Far East signifies a fear over the loss of American identity, and thus, becomes a reiteration of the Yellow Peril. The ‘Father of Cyberpunk,’ William Gibson argued that this shift in perspective was partly a result of overbearing US exceptionalism:

I had some discontent. It seemed to me that midcentury mainstream American science fiction had often been triumphalist and militaristic, a sort of folk propaganda for American exceptionalism. I was tired of America-as-the-future, the world as a white monoculture, the protagonist as a good guy from the middle class or above. I wanted there to be more elbow room. I wanted to make room for antiheroes. (Gibson *The Paris Review*)

Despite this claim, Gibson’s most definitive cyberpunk work, *Neuromancer*, largely follows the journey of an American expat in Japan, thereby relegating Asia to the milieu. The Far East often remains a background presence in these works, and this stylistic use of the ‘Orient’ has been scrutinised as being a new form of Orientalism used to romanticise and enhance an exotic atmosphere of the future. Timothy Yu argues that Gibson’s particular use, or fascination, with the Orient is “not an incidental setting … but a necessary fiction that structures the entire narrative, ‘haunting’ the action in much the same way it does in *Blade Runner*” (60).

The association of Japan with the future, however, might suggest a sort of reverse Orientalism, as this term usually refers to the West’s denigrating depictions of the East as “backwards, anti-progressive, and primitive” (Sohn 8). However, the “affectual [Japanese] absence resonates as an undeveloped, or worse still, a retrograde humanism” (8). Therefore, techno-orientalism disembodies Japanese characters in order to reassert Western primacy in future global discourse. Western cyberpunk commonly shows that “although challenged by the high-tech superiority of the East, nevertheless maintains moralistic superiority, where the American subject looms as an embattled but resistant fighter” (9).

Jane Chi Hyun Park highlights how the relationship between cyberpunk and film noir may have conditioned these orientalist representations (60):

The Asian theme can in fact be traced back to Dashiell Hammett's earliest hard-boiled stories for Black Mask, which are saturated with low brow Orientalism
reminiscent of the Yellow Peril years before and after World War I … If the Far East was repeatedly associated in film noir with enigmatic and criminal behavior, it was also depicted as a kind of aesthetically bordello, where one could experience all sorts of forbidden pleasures. (Naremore 225)

The depiction of the Orient bordello is not dissimilar to the cyberspace landscape, a free-for-all virtual zone unbound from Western morality and conventions. In *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*, Jane Chi Hyun Park describes the cyberspace in *Neuromancer* as a “distinctly oriental space teeming with Asian trademarks and corporations that exist to be ‘accessed’ by the novel’s protagonist . . . the prototype for the Anglo-American “console cowboy” of subsequent cyberpunk fiction and film” (Park 11). Chun draw parallels between the feminisation of the Orient and an ‘orientalisation’ of technology and cyberspace, as they “function as feminised constructs to be penetrated and contained by the Western male subject” (‘Stylistic Crossings’ 61). Racialization and gendering of technology, particularly computer interfaces is something that has been seen in cyberpunk-esque works such as *The Matrix* and *The Minority Report* which depict “scenes of white and male users experiencing “direct” or immediate relations with computer interfaces, while users of color are relegated to the background, depicted with truncated and relatively distant…relationships to their hardware and software” (Nakamura 96).

Ultimately, these scholars claim that techno-orientalism remains present in contemporary science fiction works, casting the Orient, virtual reality, and the female in the role of the ‘Other,’ and thereby allowing the white male protagonist to conquer aspects of otherness in the narrative, and reassert the traditional Western binaries and boundaries. In order to explore this argument within *Blade Runner*, I will thus attempt to reveal whether depictions of race and the Orient perpetuate an American cultural superiority, or US exceptionalism, or, whether Scott attempts to imagine a city that embraces cultural and racial difference.

1.2 *Japanese Cyberpunk: Identity crisis*

The introduction of American cyberpunk in Japan, specifically *Neuromancer*, *Blade Runner*, and cyberpunk anthology *Mirrorshades*, saw Japanese words and imagery integrated into the American vision of the future (Sato 339). This appropriation, or rediscovery, of Japan “changed the Japanese view of Japanese
American cyberpunk enabled Japan to find itself in the future of the West" (340). Although Japan extols a cultural uniqueness, its leap into the global marketplace quickly saw it pander to the tastes of Western audiences, replicating a ‘Japanoid’ image of the exotic East.

Not only was Japanese culture modified to appeal to Western expectations, but even its ethnicity, as the “universal appeal of Japanese popular culture lies in its non-self-assertive mukokuseki nature” (Iwabuchi 78). ‘Mukokuseki’ refers to a common tendency to suppress ethnic and national characteristic in anime and video games, for example, giving characters pink hair or abnormally large eyes, therefore making the product ‘culturally odorless.’ This is significantly due to the distrust held by Japanese media industries that consider visible ‘Japaneseness’ unappealing in the international market. However, the ‘mukokuseki’ style of anime and video games is not merely an explanation of the appeal of Japanese pop culture, but, arguably an attempt to counter the overwhelming influence of Westernization through exclusive cultural branding. Although Japan has recaptured and refitted its image to recreate a new cultural brand, the whitewashing of Japanese culture and ethnicity, nevertheless, enables the West to continue to live out its science fiction fantasy of an exotic and romanticised future.

Japanese cyberpunk may repress its culture aesthetically, but its uniqueness lies within its narrative and thematic concerns. Unlike American cyberpunk, which frequently pushes issues of Otherness to the background, Japanese anime allows these issues to dominate the narrative. Sharalyn Orbaugh in ‘Sex and the Single Cyborg,’ explores how Japan’s relationship with the West may have influenced this:

When Japan re-opened to the world in the mid-nineteenth century after more than 250 years of isolation, one of the most powerful messages of Western discourse the Japanese absorbed was the “scientifically proven” racial and cultural inferiority of the “Asiatic” race. Less than fifty years later, Japan had replicated every aspect of Anglo-European modernity with astounding success… Nonetheless … Japan was once again relegated to the position of anomalous Other by the other founding nations’ refusal to incorporate a statement of basic racial equality in its charter. (438)

Thus, Japanese cyberpunk becomes an “exploration of the hybrid, monstrous, cyborg subject from a sympathetic, interior point of view rarely found in North American
cultural products” (440). In order to explore this further, I will examine how the transgender female cyborg in *Ghost in the Shell* subverts the boundaries of the Western norm, and raises issues of Japan’s own cultural identity crisis through the fragmented figure of the cyborg.

2. The Cityscape: Cultural and racial issues in *Blade Runner*

For American science fiction writers, there had been a feeling of social obligation to envision utopian societies in the future, however, for SF subculture “this sense of utopian responsibility was slowly eroded in the Cold War period by the dominant dystopian and fatalistic visions of nuclear annihilation” (Ross 142). Although *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell* both echo fears of a nuclear apocalypse—either through ecological decay or a transition from the physical world to the virtual—the threat of nuclear war seemed largely to bring about awareness in science fiction of how our actions can have devastating consequences in the future. This led to the rejection of the out-dated and “quaint fascination…with aliens, outer-space and far-future millennia” (Sponsler 252), and instead led to the exploration of how technological advancements and increasing global interaction today could affect tomorrow. Thus, it is important to deconstruct the city depicted within *Blade Runner*, particularly looking at how issues of race and culture have been modified and presented in the future.

2.1 *Mapping out the dystopian society*

The neo-noir city of LA not only defined *Blade Runner*, but also defined the face of cyberpunk. Its visionary, unique, and highly orientalised style would continue to resonate throughout Western science fiction and even have a large impact on Japanese animation. The multi-layered, class-structured metropolis exemplifies the contrast between “high tech low life” that serves to familiarise yet simultaneously alienate the audience. Scott portrays a Los Angeles that bares more resemblance to the cityscape of Hong Kong or Tokyo, and is completely devoid of American culture; it is radically diverse and vibrant, yet at the same time gloomy and isolated; futuristic and advanced technology dominates everyday life but poverty and waste dominate the streets; the
ecological and social chaos evokes fear towards our own society, while the technological advancements captivate us. Ridley Scott notes that “…[if] the future is one you can see and touch, it makes you a little uneasier, because you feel it’s just around the corner” (Scott, *American Cinema Papers* 37). Which begs the question: what is it about Scott’s LA that makes the audience so uneasy?

From the very first establishing shot of the cityscape we get a glimpse of the industrial nightmare that has taken its toll on the land, as smoke stacks violently spew fire into the foggy atmosphere. The streets are a wasteland littered with garbage and “little people” that do not qualify for the off-world colonies, plunged into darkness by the acid rainclouds that pollute the sky. Although the novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), which *Blade Runner* is based on, is set in a post-apocalyptic society, the film never mentions this, which leads us to assume that the city’s deterioration is a result of human negligence and lack of social responsibility.

The dystopian atmosphere is a direct effect of extreme capitalist excess. This is further cemented through the city’s social structure, resembling that of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, where the extreme class division is represented by the upward expansion of the capitalists while the proletariat are forced underground (Desser 113). The capitalist commercial presence is intrusive and inescapable as neon-signs clutter the streets and advertising blimps promote a ‘better life’ in the off-world colonies. This influence even stretches out to the abandoned city outskirts where an ominous commercial blimp peers through the abandoned Bradbury Building, implying that it is collapsing under the weight of omnipresent commercial power.

Figure 1: *Inside the Bradbury Building*. Image taken from *Blade Runner* (2007) Director’s Cut.
Most strikingly, this capitalist image is predominantly projected through Japanese advertising, signifying Japan’s economic hegemony in 2019 Los Angeles. Although Scott never clarifies this, the overwhelming Japanese commercial presence certainly alludes to its economic and technological emergence in the 1980s, and the predictions of its rise to superpower status. Timothy Yu argues that this period saw a “wave of popular ‘Japan-bashing’ [that] revealed fears of Asian economic hegemony and reverse colonization” (46), which SF often confuses with a fascination of Japan’s futuristic appeal. This theory adds great significance to the capitalist dystopia of Ridley Scott’s Los Angeles:

Within the political and cultural unconscious of the West, Japan has come to exist as the figure of empty and dehumanized technological power. It represents the alienated and dystopian image of capitalist progress. This provokes both resentment and envy. The Japanese are unfeeling aliens; they are cyborgs and replicants. (Morley and Robins, “Techno-Orientalism” 170)

Although in this instance the citizens comprise of a mixture of nationalities, street-level interaction nevertheless seems problematic and impersonal, significantly for Deckard, and explains why the replicants remain so well hidden amongst the citizens. The cyberpunk trend of setting narratives in an orientalised Western city, or even the Far East, is argued to be a typical format of projecting Western fears onto the Orient. This method even dates back to Shakespeare, as most of his plays were set abroad in order to shift the political focus and unfavourable issues from England onto rival nations. By associating these anxieties with Japan, the ‘capitalist nightmare’ appears less political and becomes easier to swallow if projected onto a foreign entity. This does not necessarily mean that Blade Runner is a cautionary tale of Japanese future dominance, but rather a revelation of the Western condition that finds comfort in conflating the undesirable with the Other.

2.2 The racialised city

Ridley Scott’s City of Angels is a hypostatization of cyberspace; on the surface, the glittering and fragmented skyscraper lights resemble the sea of digital data, whilst
the inner city reveals a conglomeration of world cultures. Although there is something beautiful in Scott’s vision, the chaos and decay of city life is unsettling:

The postmodern city of science fiction, while sharing some of the attributes of the globalized, transnational, borderless space of postmodernity apotheosized in the notion of “cyberspace,” remains racialized and marked … by history, exposing the degree to which Western conceptions of postmodernity are built upon continuing fantasies of—and anxieties about—the Orient. (Yu 46)

Understanding the effect of the multiracial and multicultural environment of Blade Runner becomes pivotal in interpreting Scott’s vision of the future—particularly as to whether Scott employs elements of the East to enhance a mysterious atmosphere of the unknown future, thereby distancing the Western viewer from the city of LA; whether conflation of the filth on the streets and its inhabitants turn Blade Runner into an anti-immigration screed; or whether Scott attempts to create a chaotic environment that still embraces racial and cultural differences.

For an unspecified reason, distant world cultures have overrun the streets. The white citizens have fled to seek a better life on the off-world colonies, the only remaining white presence being in the form of street punks, a police force, and corporate power. Commercial blimps are scattered around the city, promoting the benefits of the off-world colonies, “Best future, Breathe Easy, More Space, All New, Live Clean,” to those few English-speakers that remain in LA. Captain Bryant tells
Deckard “you’re either cop or little people,” implying that life amongst the diverse citizens is undesirable and even threatening.

*Blade Runner* presents a society of clear racial disparity where non-whites cannot ascend street-level, turning a first-world city into something that resembles the third-world. The city dwellers, like the replicants, seem to be considered subhuman, as Deckard shows no compunction when firing into a crowd (Kerman 18). Although Scott may be seen as empowering the poor with innovative technology, for example, a Cambodian street-merchant uses an electron-microscope to help Deckard in his investigation. Some argue that the “low life” aspect of cyberpunk is deliberately enforced through the Asian presence in order to melt the “the futuristic high-tech look into an intercultural scenario, recreat[ing] the third world inside the first” (Bruno 66). This is demonstrated when the eye-maker, Chew, uses chopsticks as a tool to pick up an eyeball, as if it were a piece of food. This is not just a reinforced racial stereotype of the ‘primitive’ third-world, but implies that primitiveness is genetically ingrained in Chew and hinders him from progressing both socially and technologically to the standards of first-world society.

This argument, taken further, suggests that the conflation of immigrants with the third-world is a way to reveal how immigration counters the progress of the first-world. The biblical connotations found in *Blade Runner*, particularly the resemblance between the 700-story ziggurat-style building of the Tyrell Corporation and Tower of Babel, proposes that the polyglot city is a form of punishment for man’s hubris of playing god and destruction of his environment. The atmosphere of hopelessness, or even imminent doom, is enhanced by the city’s irreparability, as acid rain on the scale of Noah’s flood erodes the remaining structures, and leads people to flee off-world (Kerman ‘Post-Millenium’ 34). Roy Batty also deliberately misquotes William Blake’s poem ‘America, A Prophecy,’—written after the American Revolution—citing: “Fiery the angels fell,” instead of “Fiery the angels rose,” foreseeing the end of the American nation (Kolb 160). Ironically, the only glimpse of optimism within the city is hidden in the Chinese graffiti on the wall outside of Chew’s laboratory, expressing “hope for prosperous days ahead and wishes passers by a safe journey” (160).

The plethora of neon Asian street signs not only serve as a decoration in creating a vibrant urban backdrop to *Blade Runner*, but also “bewilder the Western eye” (Scott, *American Cinema Papers* 34) and enhance the cultural differences between Deckard and the citizens. Like many cyberpunk works, the protagonist is an outsider, or a loner,
that has difficulty interacting in the physical world, and thus retreats to his insulated apartment 97 stories above ground level. He is “marginalized, unable to participate fully in the economy” (Yu 57), particularly due to linguistic exclusion. However, he is unable to communicate—or refuses to communicate—in the future pidgin known as “cityspeak,” which Deckard describes in the 1982 release as “gutter talk—Spanish Japanese, German, what have you,” almost deliberately excluding English. This amalgamation of different cultures is not just evident in the language, but through blade runner Gaff, who is “refigured as an Orientalized hybrid” (55). Gaff’s racial, cultural as well as his character’s ambiguity gives him an enigmatic appeal, and raises the audience’s curiosity towards cultural hybridity. He is described in the Blade Runner production notes as “a man of the future, a multilingual bureaucrat with oriental skin, Japanese eyes, and blue irises. He is an intellectual and sartorial dandy” (Presskit 11). Gaff not only represents a hybrid race, but a new race that is specifically defined by its diverse set of distinguishable racial characteristics. This suggests that despite the problematic divisions that can occur within a culturally and racially diverse society such as Scott’s LA, there still remains a possibility of a cultural symbiosis that embraces difference.

2.3 The cultural city

Up until the 1980s, science fiction narratives, particularly pulp SF, had largely been set in the far future, outer space, or on alien planets. These works often placed man in a squeaky-clean technological environment, seemingly eradicating millennia of rich human culture. By doing so, this type of escapist literature perpetuated both the ‘man vs. technology’ and ‘organic vs. synthetic’ binaries. These, however, were never fully explored, and consequently as a reaction against this, the New Wave movement emerged, shifting its focus from technology onto the human condition. Cyberpunk is a careful balance of these two SF extremes, as it reasserts human culture into a technologically dominant world. William Gibson, one of the most definitive cyberpunk novelists, claimed that the most radical aspect of Blade Runner was the insertion of urban archaeology into every frame:

It hadn’t been obvious to mainstream American science fiction that cities are like compost heaps—just layers and layers of stuff. In cities, the past and the present and the future can all be totally adjacent. In Europe, that’s just life—it’s
not science fiction, it’s not fantasy. But in American science fiction, the city in the future was always brand-new, every square inch of it. (Gibson The Paris Review)

The insertion of culture is in fact a powerful tool in establishing the human identity, and is even reflected through Scott’s reversion to the styles of 1940s film noir and 1920s German expressionism in portraying the future. This notion is similar to the individual’s attachment to photographs, as they help to establish our own identities. There is an essential connection to be drawn here between cultural and personal memory, as we assert identity through our attachment with symbols from our past. For example, the ziggurat featured in Scott’s LA originates from Mesopotamia—widely considered the birth of civilisation—re-establishing the city within the human historical timeline. Similarly, Rachel uses pictures of her childhood in order to re-establish her own personal identity.

Despite the city’s organic development over time, the city as a whole feels somewhat artificial as its “aesthetic … is a decaying synthesis of various human cultures and empires” (Rad). Thus, what makes Scott’s insertion of cultural landmarks so striking is their fragmented dispersal around the city:

The inauthenticity is unlike that of Las Vegas however, in that Las Vegas is a contained spectacle … cultures are separated and assigned their own space, thus retaining some of their cultural significance. In Las Vegas, a Roman structure is surrounded by other Roman items; however, in the Los Angeles of Blade Runner, landmarks and symbols are clumped together, losing cultural significance and place in collective cultural memory. (Rad)

The city consequently lacks its own cultural identity, yet its embracing of global culture might be a signifier of LA becoming the epitome of a global city, as one of the effects of globalisation is the emergence of globally shared meanings. Thus, cyberpunk’s insertion of global culture into the science fiction narrative re-establishes human identity in the technological world; and therefore the multicultural city of LA can be seen as a celebration of man’s diverse cultural achievements.
3. The Narratives: cultural and racial hybridity

The latter half of the 20th century saw the symbiotic relationship between technology and globalisation intensify, culminating in the rise of the Information Age and consequently leading “the transition of human society into the third millennium” (Waters 1). As a result, local and even national culture gradually came under threat as social and political discourse shifted to a global scale. Due to the threat posed to cultural identities, we can assume that this revitalised debates on immigration and cultural assimilation, particularly as immigration was a controllable force, whereas globalisation was not. In particular, “white men began to be represented as fragmented and decentred and thus traumatized in the 1980s when the discourses of cybernetics and multiculturalism both became incorporated in the dominant culture” (Park, Yellow Futures 16). Therefore, it could be argued that in many ways technophobia is not dissimilar to xenophobia as both threaten to change our environment, and most importantly, show that we are replaceable.

As Western science fiction films typically rely heavily on special effects and high budgets, they become industrial products with a purpose of turning a profit and therefore must remain apolitical. This, however, does not mean they are without ideology, and the SF narrative often becomes a hidden extrapolation of current political, cultural, or economic issues (Desser 111). As the aesthetics of cyberpunk have demonstrated, issues of cultural identity and globalisation are frequently relegated to the background, revealed through the mise-en-scène of cyberspace or physical urban spaces. However, in this section, the exploration of SF narratives in Blade Runner and Ghost in the Shell reveal how the android or cyborg is often associated with oriental and racial otherness, and a signifier for cultural change.

3.1 Blade Runner: Replicants as the racial Other

If you prick us, do we not bleed? If / you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? / And if you wrong us, do we not revenge? If we are like you in the / rest, we will resemble you in that.

Shylock, The Merchant of Venice
Throughout history, the arrival of innovative and revolutionary technology has been welcomed with a mixture of wonder and scepticism. Science fiction has often attempted to explore this complex relationship between man and technology, or, in broader terms, between the familiar and the unknown. However, “no matter how deep our visual penetration into the vast unknown … the camera still seeks … to put man back into the picture, to reposition him as an element of visual order and control” (qtd. in Telotte 3). In the cyberpunk narrative, our fear of the unknown is usually manifested in the shape of a visible antagonist, such as the android, which can be read as a signifier for both technological and cultural change. The android’s ability to replicate so many aspects of our own identity emphasises the delicate nature of the boundaries between the familiar and unfamiliar.

In Blade Runner, the replicants are a source of fear and anxiety for the police force, the “purveyors of the neo-Nazi mentality of the future” (Desser 112). They are outlawed from Earth for unspecified reasons, but we can conclude that it is because they are different. Thus, the nature of replicant discrimination is interesting, as they resemble humans in almost every way, apart from the fact that they are genetically engineered. Although it is not clarified in the film, the novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? reveals that replicants are even organic entities, and can only be identified through bone marrow testing. Despite them sharing more similarities with humans than differences, the voice-of-authority — arguably a symbol of white male hegemony — continuously emphasise their inferiority, being a lack of empathy, in an attempt to mitigate the replicant’s superior strength and intelligence with their otherness (114). This is a clear echo of historical as well as contemporary racial prejudice, and therefore the replicant becomes a symbolic threat to the white Western norm. This calls forth the question of genocide and the “ability of the state to define the human and to destroy those who fall outside the definition” (Scott, American 23).

Throughout the film, the white replicants are racially coded. This not only enhances their otherness within the film, but also allows the audience to view the replicants through a contemporary lens. Their subjection to slavery in the off-world colonies is clearly parallel to that of African slavery in the New World:

The replicants … function as replacements for blacks, whose absence … has made it economically desirable … to construct a new race of slaves. Only this time, the technocrats think, we’ll get it right: we’ll program them with a four-
year life span to keep them from getting uppity … a fearful white technocracy constructs its new race of slaves “better,” meaning white-skinned and blonde. (Barringer)

Although pre-existing binaries of ‘man vs. machine’ separate the audience from the replicants, the Western world’s desirability for slavery in the future evokes a feeling of disgust, as well as sympathy towards the replicants’ struggle. These feelings are further evoked in the 1982 original cut, when Deckard’s voice-over explains, “Skin jobs. That’s what Bryant called replicants. In history books he’s the kind of cop who used to call black men niggers.” The affiliation of replicant discrimination and racial prejudice suggests that the treatment of replicants in Blade Runner is regressive, irrational and inhumane. By doing so the film effectively begins to remove the boundaries that separate us from the unknown.

One of the most interesting moments is the struggle between Batty and Deckard. This is Deckard’s final chance to restore the status quo in the film, and symbolically reassert white male dominance. However, the reason that this scene is climactic in its suspense is that the audience, or the human, is now placed in the role of the Other. “Quite an experience to live in fear, isn’t it? That’s what it is to be a slave,” says Batty, as Deckard turns from the hunter to the hunted. This is Batty’s attempt to reveal the life from the ‘Other’ side, to reveal what it is to be considered inferior and an outcast from normal society. Batty even proves that he is “more human than human,” as his lack of empathy—being the only thing that makes him inferior—is dismissed when he mourns his lover, Pris, and seeks to avenge her. At the end of their struggle, Batty spares Deckard’s life, turning him into the heroic figure, and thus leaving the boundaries between ‘us and them’ completely distorted. The final scene, where Deckard discovers that he is also a replicant, can therefore be read as a total removal of the boundaries that separate humanity, and a hopeful comment on the unification of racial and cultural differences.

3.2 Ghost in the Shell: Cyborgs as the hybrid race

Japan is renowned for its distinctive national culture. After a 250-year seclusion policy known as Sakoku, and its contemporary hard-line anti-immigration policies, Japan prefers to maintain a racially unique and homogenous society; with the foreign
population in 2010 accounting for only 1.7% of the national populace (National Geographic). These ‘boundaries’ that Japan constructs are a typical example of attempting to contain and maintain a strong sense of identity in a globalising world. However, Japanese popular culture has proved to have a strong fascination with the cyborg; a figure that is part organic and part mechanical that both physically and metaphorically deconstructs the boundaries of identity. The cyborg is, particularly in Japan’s case, a “metaphor for that restructuring of boundaries and associations that characterises globalising process where hitherto fixed boundaries between subjects, bodies and the world are no longer stable and impermeable” (Edwards 50). For the reading of *Ghost in the Shell*, LeiLani Nishime’s interpretation of the cyborg is pertinent to my argument as she recognises how the cyborg “subvert[s] the dream of purity and offer[s] instead a future of mutual contamination … [if] the anxieties and fantasies of a culture are projected onto the image of the cyborg, then the cyborg must be read as a powerful metaphor for the historical bogeyman of contamination—racial mixing” (35). In the case of Japanese animation *GITS*, the multiracial human, being the “living embodiment of crossed boundaries,” (35) can also be relevantly expanded to the issue of cultural contamination.

The franchise *Ghost in the Shell* imagines an incredibly complex mid-21st century society, set in the aftermath of a world ravaged by the nuclear war of World War III that has shaken the world’s geopolitical structures. One of the most interesting changes in this imagined world is that former larger nations, such as the United States, were balkanised, becoming divided into fragmented opposition groups, thus, destroying any form of national homogony. A major domestic issue that Japan faces in the *GITS* franchise is the mass influx of Asian refugees which were confined to living in ghettos on the island of Dejima—a man-made non-fictional island built during the sakoku period in order to keep foreign traders separated from the mainland—and as a result, have led to ethnic clashes, uprisings, and occasional terrorist attacks. Although *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) does not delve as far into these contexts as the manga, it is important to keep them in mind.

As cyborg Major Motoko Kusanagi goes on a mission in search for the computer hacker “the Puppet Master,” she simultaneously goes on an introspective journey in search of her identity. During her mission, it is revealed that the Puppet Master has implanted artificial memories within humans in order to gain control of their cyberbrains (which allows connection to computer networks). This leads Kusanagi to
question whether her *ghost*—another word for the soul—is real or artificial. As Kusanagi’s body is almost entirely prosthetic, save from her brain, the *ghost* is the only thing that retains her humanity and keeps her from becoming a full android:

**Batou:** You’ve got real brain cells in that titanium shell of yours; you’re treated like a human, so stop with the angst.

**Major:** But that’s just it, that’s the only thing that makes me human—the way I’m treated.

Even though she is treated like a human, the fact that she does not physically look human leads her to doubt her humanness. This is particularly reflected in the issue of mixed race and ethnic minorities, and the problems of shaping one’s identity according to physical or visible attributes. Donna Haraway argues this in terms of female identification:

> There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism. (Haraway 107)

Thus, identity shaped from invariable characteristics becomes limiting as the social implications attached to race and gender become restricting and unrepresentative. In Kusanagi’s case, despite her interactions in her environment being the same as a human’s, the fact that she identifies herself based on her physical mechanical body means she cannot belong to the human community.

Although Kusanagi represents a new identity as a cyborg, Anne Balsamo points out man’s tendency to rearticulate old identities onto new technology. For example, while cyberspace and the cyborg seem “to represent a territory free from the burdens of history, it will, in effect, serve as another site for the technological and no less conventional inscription of the gendered, race-marked body” (131). This idea is further expressed in *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*, as a cyborg programmer says, “when people think ‘humans are different from robots,’ it is no more profound than thinking ‘white is not black.’ The physical appearance of the cyborgs, unlike the largely
homogenous race of future-Japan, appears to be Caucasian, or Western.

The cyborg could arguably be a manifestation of the Western influence, and its effects on Japanese identity. Waters argues that for many non-Western nations, globalisation is merely seen as force for ‘Westernisation’ that appears to “justify the spread of Western culture… by suggesting that there are forces operating beyond human control that are transforming the world” (Waters 6). The fragmented cyborg, its machine-like body overpowering its human capabilities, begins to resemble America’s overwhelming influence and Japanese fears of losing their culture, their ‘humanness,’ and would thus hinder them from identifying themselves as distinctly ‘Japanese.’

3.3 Evolution: The repression of binaries, boundaries, and identities

“For now we see through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:2).

The Puppet Master, *Ghost in the Shell*

For eons, man has identified himself as a part of the natural and organic world. With the rise of the technology, humans have continuously attempted to draw the line between the organic and synthetic; and through the arts, attempted to emphasise technology as unnatural and artificial:

Every day we are getting news that challenges our identity. Stem cell therapy, genetic sequencing, artificial intelligence, operational robots, new animal clones, trans-species hybrids, brain implants, memory enhancing drugs, limb
prosthetics, social networks -- each of these tools blurs the boundaries between us as individuals and among us as a species. (Kelly “The Future of Humanity”) However, to question our identity, in the traditional sense, is not necessarily an existential crisis because the nature of identity, even human identity, is naturally in a continuous state of flux. According to Madan Sarup, there are two models of identity “the ‘traditional’ view is that all the dynamics (such as class, gender, ‘race’) operate simultaneously to produce a coherent, unified, fixed identity. The more recent view is that identity is fabricated, constructed in process” (14). As expressed earlier, there are dangers of “fixed” identities as they are stagnant and limit us from progression.

Importantly, what the cyberpunk work does, particularly *Blade Runner* and *GITS*, is dismantle identities and binaries that characterise Western thought. This is intrinsic to the evolution of the self, as our understanding of “identities are not free-floating; they are limited by borders and boundaries” (3). This means that defining ourselves based on genetics or social constructs gives us a fixed and inadaptable notion of ourselves, and casts those outside our identity as Other. The idea of a true identity being a ‘process’ is reflected through the replicant Rachel as after she is informed that she is a replicant she still chooses to identify as human despite having implanted memories – choosing to identify herself according to her narrative and interaction with her environment as opposed to her genetics. In contrast to this, Batty and the replicants that return to earth identify themselves based on their physicality of being replicant, and are thus subject to conforming to the limitations of the replicant stereotype of having a lack of empathy (despite this not being true), and thus their violent behaviour becomes a desperate reaffirmation of the identity assigned to them.

These cyberpunk works blur the boundaries between man and machine to reveal that technology is not merely a creation of man, but an extension of man, and thus part of the natural evolution of human identity. The notion of impermanence, one of the ‘three marks of existence’ in Buddhism, is thoroughly explored in *GITS*, as Major Kusanagi explores the confinements of her own ‘fixed’ identity. After self-searching she comes to the conclusion that “[t]here are a remarkable number of things needed to make an individual what they are…. And simultaneously confining ‘me’ within set limits.” She further claims to see ‘hope’ within the darkness of the sea: “As I float up to the surface I almost feel as though I could change into something else.” Kusanagi mimics the evolution process, suggesting that the promise of the evolution of the self, as
well as mankind, is both hopeful and liberating. This leads to one of the most profound messages in the film, spoken by the Puppet Master, a sentient programme, that reveals, “to be human is to continually change. Your desire to remain as you are is what ultimately limits you.” In the end she merges her body with the Puppet Master’s consciousness in order to perpetuate life through their diversity.

These abstract philosophical musings can clearly be applied to cultural identities, and argue the dangers of cultural containment. National-states continuously emphasise their boundaries through ideas of national territories, national army, national theatre, national government, etc. (142). The idea of a national and cultural identity seems to be drawn upon exclusive qualities that separate a nation from the outside world, and thus can seem hostile towards migrants from other nations.

While some boundary walls are breaking down, others are being made even stronger to keep out the migrant, the refugee and the exile… Any minority group, when faced with hostile acts, does several things. One of its first reactions is that it draws in on itself, it tightens its cultural bonds to present a united front against its oppressor. The group gains strength by emphasising its collective identity. This inevitably means a conscious explicit decision on the part of some not to integrate with the ‘dominant group’ but to validate their own culture (their religion, language, values, ways of life). (Sarup 3)

If we interpret the multi-cultural city of Blade Runner in light of this theory, the extreme division amongst cultures in 2019 LA can be explained as a result of American hostility towards foreign influence.
Conclusion

Arthur C. Clarke once claimed that “one of the biggest roles of science fiction is to prepare people to accept the future without pain and to encourage a flexibility of mind.” Although cyberpunk’s depiction of future societies may be seen as visual warnings of technological dominance, these works in actuality encourage a “flexibility of mind” by breaking down the boundaries of Western thought. *Blade Runner* does this effectively by setting up the typical format of ‘us vs. them’ only to subvert the audience’s expectations, not only showing an acceptance of the Other, but a unification with the unknown. Unfortunately, *Blade Runner* failed to impress its audiences upon its release in 1982—its enlightening message and subversion of Western formulas being possibly lost on its spectators. However, since its release *Blade Runner* has risen to cult status, and with Western societies becoming more diverse and multicultural, its philosophical questions have never been more relevant.

*Ghost in the Shell* takes this even further; merging and blurring the binaries that characterise Western thought within Major Kusanagi, which consequently leads to her identity crisis. Being divided between the opposite sides of the binary system, she comes to the realisation that identity is not assigned to us, but rather chosen. Thus, dismantling the constructs of race, gender and class that have been used for centuries to assert power and control over non-Whites, women, technology, nature and the unknown. Ultimately, these films show that humanity is in a constant state of flux, and thus any attempts to confine human, cultural, or personal identity is futile, for it only hinders us from progressing into the future.
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