Mairena Lopez Sastre

LOP19188729

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Research Report

Ex Machina (2015)

(left side Kyoko/ Right side Ava)

HOW ASIAN GIRLS ARE REPRESENTED IN THE FILM EX MACHINA (2015)

--------- INTRODUCTION ---------

Ex Machina is a 2015 science fiction film written and directed by Alex Garland, Domhnall Gleeson, Alicia Vikander, Sonoya Mizuno and Oscar Isaac. The film is about Caleb, a young programmer who works for the dominant search engine company, Blue Book and he is selected to visit the home of the CEO, Nathan Bateman. When he arrives, Caleb learns that he has been chosen to be the human component in a Turing test to determine the capabilities and consciousness of Ava, a beautiful robot with the aspect of a human being.

In the following report we won't be focusing on the main plot of the film, but on the role of the Japanese robot created by Nathan, whose only aim is to serve his creator, both in domestic labour and sexually speaking.

The hypothesis for this report is to present the fetishization of stereotypes of servile Asian women in the film. The explanation behind this is based upon various historical and political conflicts in which many Americans and therefore film producers viewed Asians women as object of exotic desire. In case of not being represented as "dragon ladies" or china dolls", they are stereotyped as "nerds" or as Kung Fu masters and killers and always boxing them into secondary roles. According to an infographic from the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism (2016), only 1% of lead roles in films go to Asians, and only one in twenty speaking roles go to Asians. It is worth mentioning that most of the times any Asian actor is casted in any Asian role. This can be seen mainly in Hollywood films and the wrong idea of thinking that all Asian people look the same way so doesn't matter who plays the Asian role, provided that he or she has Asian features, is due to the cross race effect, it explains why some

people are better at recognizing faces of people of their own race, rather than those of a different race.

Stereotypes about Asian people were particularly common until the 60s, this happened due to the desire for western powers to profit off the newly open trade-routes to China, Japan and Korea in the mid-1800s, at the end of the first Opium war. Professor of Japanese history, Kim Brandt, stated that "the East Asian female in native dress was viewed as a decorative object but also a sexual object". The Figure of a Japanese geisha became fetishized because it was viewed by the western man merely as an object of sexual desire. The fetishism occurs when someone or something is objectified to the point that it becomes separated from the person herself. And when this fetishization applies to a whole group of people, like in this case Asians, it translates to an obsession with the idea of the Asian woman, rather than the individual herself.

It is true that as society evolves so does the film industry. Racism as well as Homophobia´s stereotypes little by little they have been disappearing from the media, however, the representation of Asians remains persistent not only in films but also in texts and television. Not a long time ago, in the late 19th century, David Henry Hwang, an American playwright, wrote a book called *Madama Butterfly* and rapidly it became a classic narrative of Asian eroticism. It is one of the many examples of the ways in which the eroticism of Asian women has been historicized and accepted in pop culture. In the tale he addresses the acceptance of the stereotyping Asian women as submissive and sacrificing herself for a white man. Another example of this is the television reality show, *"The bachelor"*, the show himself refers to one of the Asian American women on the show as a "tigress and "sex panther".

--------- LITERATURE REVIEW ---------

While Eastern man are portrayed as effeminate and asexual people, eastern women are hypersexualized leading to a sexual objectification and violence. This everyday racism and sexism yields deadly results, as the dehumanization creates a climate that makes violence excusable. According to Morgan Dewey, NNEDV Development and Communications Coordinator, 41 to 61 percent of Asian women report experiencing physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner during their lifetime. This is significantly higher than any other ethnic group.

This report will focus on 3 mayor themes surrounding the representation of Asian females in the film. These themes are: the submissive "geisha girl" stereotype, the whitewashing practice and finally the "good Asian" Stereotype.

The first theme is the "geisha stereotype" represented through the character of Kyoko, an Asian girl whose only mission is to fulfil the desire of the white man, Nathan. Geisha, also known as geiko or geigi, are Japanese female entertainers or hostesses in the traditional art, such as, classical music, dance, games and conversation. Geisha has been a predominantly female occupation since around 1800, and gained popularity in World War ll. Around the same time, the term geisha lost some statues due to the fact that the prostitutes started marketing themselves as "geisha girls" to American military men. This is why there is a big misunderstood with the definition of the word, Geisha doesn't 'mean "prostitute" but "artist". The first geisha-like performers in recorded Japanese history were known as *Saburuko*, they sometimes offered the sexual service to their clients, nevertheless, at around the dawn of the 19th century female geisha largely didn´t sleep with their customers, they were strictly forbidden from selling their bodies. Japanese geisha today still live in some areas of Japan but their profession has little or nothing to do with prostitution.

In relation to the film, Nathan reinforce the wrong idea of geishas being sexual toys for men. There are several scenes where Kyoko and Nathan are both having the sexual act, but not because they are in love but because it is her job to arouse him the sexual desire. Moreover, having a Japanese actress playing in an emotionless and subservient role have proven to be harmful to Asian women outside of the realm of fiction and film. Indeed, it is not till the end of the movie that the director reveals the real identity of Kyoko, she is an android programmed to do whatever his creator orders, even so, during the whole movie, there are certain amount of moments where the director tries to humanize the robot to make the reveal more shocking at the end. The Asian girl in a particular moment appears laying on the corridor with an upset face and feeling exhausted. What's more, in contrast to Ava, she has not sounds that a robot makes when it moves and besides, there is a scene where Kyoko appears laying on the bed and gives the impression that she is sleeping. Finally what is more shocking for the viewer is not the bad behaviour that Nathan shows to her servant, but to realize that she isn't a real human and this reaction reflect clearly of how interiorize the society have the role of the Asian girl in the screen.

The second theme is the Whitewashing in films. Despite the fact that the director of Ex Machina preferred an Asian person as secondary character displaying the stereotype of a submissive eastern girl, he at least cast an oriental instead of a white. Even though it sounds nonsense that a person with the features of a non-Asian person, characterize the role of the Asian, there are numerous of directors that use this practice called Whitewashing, in which white actors are cast in roles meant for minority actors. One of the earliest documented examples of "Whitewashing" is the mid 18th century production of *The Orphan of China*. After this, the practice mentioned would soon become an enduring tradition of American Theatre that would persist as a popular practice for centuries. One of the current films that made use of it was *Ghost in the shell* directed by Mamoru Oshii in 2017 and adapted from a Japanese manga written by Masamune Shirow in 1989. In it, the main protagonist of

the book is Motoko Kusanagi, a Japanese cyborg employed as the squad leader of Public Security Section 9, however, in the film Scarlett Johansson, a white actress, is casting Motoko. Due to the controversy surrounding Ghost in the Shell, Asian American actors said there had been an increase in diverse roles in recent years, it would inspired directors and producers to stop whitewashing Asian Characters. However, Asian-American actors still struggle to find roles that are not typecast or stereotyped. In 2018, Jenn Fang, the founder of Reappropriate.co, the web´s oldest and longest-running Asian-American feminism and race advocacy blog, said in the teen Vogue "It is the height of white privilege to think a white person is better equipped to play an Asian character than an Asian person". Despite of seeming an inoffensive decision, the consequences are notorious, only 4,4% of speaking characters are Asian in popular American film according to a recent University of Southern California study.

Finally we will talk about the last theme, the "good Asian " stereotype in the movie Ex Machina. The "good Asian" term, also known as the" Model minority" stereotype, first appeared in the 1960s during the Civil right movement, romanticizing the Asian diaspora as an exemplary ethnic minority "who fulfil the "American Dream" by overcoming harsh circumstances and discrimination while remaining quiet and submissive. The term may seem itself as positive and well-meaning, but it is really maintaining white supremacy and divides Asian-Americans from other people of colour. In addition, being seen as successful on the grounds to your race has detrimental societal implication one´s academic life. This stereotype merges distinct ethnocultural backgrounds into a monolith or creates the idea that these cultures are interchangeable, when this is totally false. Actually, Asian is made up of dozens of countries, each with their own different cultures and traditions. Generalization of distinct countries in one stereotyping them, not only maintain the invisibility of Asians in the media, but wake away jobs from Asian actors who rightfully should be playing those roles.

Kyoko´s role at the end of the film is reminiscent of this stereotype, where an Asian character makes a sacrifice and give her life to aid or save the white hero. Both of the robots have the same status doe to the fact that are both android and not humans. However, it is not a surprise to see that finally the one who survives and escapes from the facility is the white character, Kyoko was simply a tool for her freedom, one stepping stone to get out to the outside world. Another sign that reinforce this image happens when Ava uses another Asian robots body to rebuild herself with the aim of looking like a fully human. She could have taken the skin of other androids, but she didn't subtly conveying that Asian bodies are only there to serve whites.

--------- METHOD AND METHODOLOGY ---------

The importance of choosing the right methodology is essential for an effective research in this report. The research for this report will consist on doing a discourse analysis and a semiotic analysis on the film Ex Machina.

The discourse analysis is one of the approaches that is going to be used to collect and analyse qualitative data. The qualitative method can be referred to as the study of the way in which language is used in text and contexts. The aim of qualitative research is to understand the social reality of individuals, groups and cultures as nearly as possible as its participants feel it or live it. Thus, people and groups are studied in their natural setting. Research following a qualitative approach is exploratory and seeks to explain "how" and "why" a particular phenomenon, or behaviour, operates as it does in a particular context. There are various limitations when doing a qualitative research due to the fact that there is no single reality, it is subjective and exist only in reference to the observer. Because of the subjective nature of qualitative data and its origin in single contexts, it is difficult to apply conventional standards of reliability and

validity. The time required for data collection, analysis and interpretation are lengthy. Moreover, the time required for data collection, analysis and interpretation takes a long period of time. Analysis of qualitative data is difficult and expert knowledge of an area is necessary for a correct interpretation of the qualitative data. Thanks to the researcher deep involvement, the researcher gains an insider´s view of the field. Besides, this analysis allows us to find contradictions/ambiguities in the data, which are a reflection of social reality.

The discourse analysis, the approach that will be used in this research, can be defined as a method of analysing naturally occurring spoken interactions and written text and is concerned with the social context in which the communication occurred. It focuses on how language is used in everyday life and looks at how people express themselves.

Some of the advantages and disadvantages of the discourse analysis according to Angela Morgan, a senior Researcher in the University of Wolverhampton are the following ones:

ADVANTAGES

- Techniques can reveal often unspoken and unacknowledged aspects of human behaviour, making salient either hidden or dominant discourses that maintain marginalised positions in society
- It has a relevance and practical application at any given time, in any given place, and for anu given people: Discourse analysis is context specific.
- It can provide a positive social psychological critique of any phenomenon under the gaze of the researcher.

DISADVATAGES

- Meaning is never fixed and everything is always open to interpretation and negotiation

- The array of options available through the various traditions can render issues of methodology problematic, as each tradition has its own epistemological position, concepts, procedures, and a particular understanding of discourse and discourse analysis;

The discourse analysis involves theories such as semiology, signifier and signified and connotation and denotation. Semiotic is the study of signs and their use or interpretation, communication, interpretation and significance. Semiotics is less interested in what something means than in how it means anything at all to anybody. Ferdinand de Saussure was the theorist behind the idea of Semiotics through his study of signifiers in language and imagery. He was a Swiss linguist and semiotician in the beginning of the XX century. Saussure offered a two-part model of the sign: a "signifier", the form which the sign takes, and the "signified", the concept it represents. A semiotic analysis involves reading these signs in terms of their denotative and connotative meaning. The denotative meaning refers to the literal meaning of the sign and is totally objective. The Connotative meaning instead, is associated with cultural meaning, consequently is subjective, it can mean different things to people.

As we said before, the discourse analysis and the semiology analysis in this report were used to examine how Asian women were represented in Ex Machina (2014). This involved analysing the social and historical context within the text and the impact of the text that consequently affect to the Asian society regarding their social relations with people who is not oriental and how they are seen by the rest of the world. These aspects were looked at thorough the behaviour between the Japanese and the white characters, through visual images and dialogue.

--------- DISCOURSE FINDINGS ---------

The first finding in the film Ex Machina (2014) is that Asian women are often portrayed as characters whose unique aim is to serve the white man sexually and non-sexually speaking. From the semiotic analysis, we can identify this representation from the very first appearance of Kyoko, the Japanese lady, when she is serving the dinner to Nathan, his creator and to Caleb, the host. At one point, she drops a plate and Nathan after speaking rudely to her, he clarifies that she doesn't understand their language and the only way to communicate with her is giving her the towel and this way she would know exactly what to do with it. This instantly connotes that Asian women are born to be at the disposal of the whites.

Another feature is the impossibility to communicate with Kyoko due to her lack of knowledge of the language. During the whole films she is aware of everything that is happening in the establishment however, as she never speaks and only observes, it makes the public think that since she is merely a Japanese servant who has no right to communicate and give her opinion. The choice of the director, Alex Garland´s, of having a Japanese actress to play Kyoko in an emotionless and subservient role and without a verbal script reinforces racial and gender stereotypes that have proven to be harmful to Asian women outside of the realm of fiction and film. In an study made by Shruti Mukkamala, a senior staff psychologist at the University of California, and Karen L. Suyemoto, a professor in psychology and Asian American studies and director of the Transnational cultural and Community Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts, they asked Asian-American adult women if they had experienced discrimination in terms of racism and sexism at some point during their life. The research included online open-ended surveys as well as in person group interview. Out of 107 participants, only 4 said they had never experienced discrimination. The researcher identified 15 types of discrimination, which 6 of them were due to their race and gender. Those 6 themes are the following ones: Exotic, not a leader, submissive, cute and small, invisible and service worker. The results showed that stereotypes

of Asian American women are still alive and it contributes to experiences of marginalization, invisibility, and oppression that these participants have faced in the past and continue to face today.

The vestment features of the character is also a sign of power of the white man towards the Asians. Kyoko is wearing a short and very seductive dress, she is sexualized till the point that she only wears this kind of clothes to please his creator. This sign represents the objectification of women in society. Producers already used to objectified women since ever as a possession of a man, so imagine how sexualized are Asian women due to the false belief that all Asians are geishas and they offer sexual services to the customers. Being treated with respect and dignity is something that most of the Asian females didn´t experienced it in their whole life.

Although the character of Kyoko was simply a machine designed by the human being, the creators of the film preferred to choose an actor with no strong facial features of an oriental girl. Indeed the actress is resembling the geisha image through her delicate pale skin and her hair pinned up. Also, the fact of choosing a white pale face is reflecting the tendency of Japan to adore the naturally fair skin of many European cultures. Again in a subtle way the spectator is receiving the message: Europeans are better that the rest, that is why a white face is sign of beauty success. This preference for whitening of the skin actually took off after World War ll, when western cosmetics were imported to Japan and set as beauty standards for Japanese women to follow.

The face of the Japanese character apart from being white and pale, she doesn't transmit feelings or emotions till the last scene when she stab Nathan with the knife. In that exact moment she seems recomforted, on the grounds that, for once in her life as a robot, she has made something that wasn't an order from the white man. It is curious to mention that the director tried to mislead the audience

by doing the spectator think Kyoko was a real human being. There is a contradiction in all of this, while Kyoko is humanized to make the reveal more surprising, there is a dehumanization in her by making the audience believe that she was born only to serve and become an object of desire for man. The dehumanization in women in general is normalized in many cultures, fortunately, more and more producers try to reinforce the image of a powerful women whose aim is not to pleased man, but to be strong and independent, also economically speaking.

The discourse analysis also revealed that Asian women are submissive and under the feet of the white man. At one stage, Caleb is trying to find Nathan and instead he come across Kyoko, after trying to ask her where is Nathan without success, Nathan appears in the scene and he literally says " I told you, you are wasting your time talking to her, however you would not be wasting your time if you were dancing with her". It is surprising to see that Nathan has given Ava the ability of maintaining a conversation with the rest of the world, even till the point that Caleb have difficulties to remember that she is not a real human, while on the other hand, Kyoko doesn´t even speak a word disabling her to have a relation beyond an accommodating relation with Nathan.

The second found in regards to the representation of the "model minority", is at the end of the film. Despite the fact that the actors do not say much, thanks to their facial expression the viewer can intuit what they are trying to transmit. Kyoko finally stab Nathan in the back, when he turns around and see that the one who has killed him is her Asian servant he doesn't believe it. With this concrete detail that at the first sight can be missed out, the director is showing the "model minority" myth. This stereotype characterizes Asians Americans as polite, law-abiding, smart, diligent and quiet group .

--------- CONCLUSION ---------

To conclude, a number of negative representations were identified in the film Ex Machina (2014). The stereotype was that Asian women are represented as submissive "geisha girls". This was shown through physical and behavioural attributes given to the character, Kyoko. For instance, the impossibility of communicating with the rest of the people and consequently dehumanising her. Showing Nathan and Kyoko making the act also means that she is there to please the man´s sexual desire strengthening the wrong idea that Geishas are prostitutes. The clothes that the Japanese young girl is wearing also are a sign of objectification of woman due to the fact that she is wearing a short and very appealing dress. She is also pale and white skin making reference to the geisha image and finally her facial feature is unperceivable during the whole film, the result of presenting her emotionless is making us accept that Asian people is uneasy going person and very cold with people.

The second finding was that despite the fact that in this case the film director has chosen an Asian girl to do the role of the Asian, in many films they use the technique of the Whitewashing, where white people play the role of the Asian one, affecting people of Asian ethnicity to achieve main roles in films.

The third finding was the "good Asian" stereotype in the film. Finally, Kyoko sacrifice herself to help Ava scape from the house. She was only the key for Ava to achieve her freedom. Despite the fact that it sound like a good qualification for Asians to be hard working, smart, wealthy and docile, the problems comes when an Asian person achieves a good grade at school, and people give the merits to the race. Also, generalizing the characteristic of different countries in one it just monolith or creates the idea that these cultures are interchangeable, when this is totally false.

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