

**You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.**

**Part of what makes up a genre, like science fiction or fantasy, is that certain tropes are repeated. And as a fan, it's fun to recognize tropes when they come up and appreciate how they've been adapted. But I recently learned about a genre within a genre that's been hiding in plain sight – or at least it was for me.**

**I was invited to watch a presentation called Asian futures, without Asians by the artist Astria Suparak. Her talk looks at how science fiction often depicts a future full of Asian iconography that's mixed-up and taken out of context. But there aren't many Asian people in these futures. And this is a talk she's given in person and virtually. And her presentation has been paired with exhibits at museums and galleries.**

**I expected her to cover obviously offensive things like Flash Gordon serials from the 1930s and Ming the Merciless. And that's there, but she wanted to concentrate on more recent history. It was eye-opener for me because I had seen most of the movies and shows she referenced, but I was suddenly seeing them in a whole new light. Apparently, a lot of people feel that way after seeing her presentation.**

**ASTRIA: I mean, a lot of people say it's like being red pill'd in a way where suddenly the veil has lifted, and they see these tropes constantly. And people also say that, um, people of Asian and Arab cultures that are represented in this, uh, project in this presentation will also say that, like I didn't even see that my culture was represented until you pointed these parts out.**

**Now I don't want to give away her entire talk, but I wanted to discuss several different tropes that really stuck out for me.**

**Let's start with costume design. How often do you think white people wear kimonos in science fiction films? I don't know if I could've come up with any before I saw her presentation. But she showed images from the reboot of Total Recall, RoboCop, Alita: Battle Angel, A.I., Looper, and many more movies.**

**ASTRIA: Kimonos are used to mean like Zen samurai warrior, like in Star Wars, to paint a population is neutered and pleasureless like in Demolition Man, or to make someone seem ominously powerful, or eccentric like Jared Leto in Blade Runner 2049. They're**

also used on sex workers to indicate vacation or leisure wear for wealthy people. It's like a quick summary of the racist ideas about Asians and Asian cultures.

**Here's another one. Think about conical hats. They're usually made from straw. They protect against the sun, and especially rain. I thought I had only seen them in films about the Vietnam War. But as she showed images from all these different futuristic sci-fi films where background characters are wearing conical hats.**

ASTRIA: What would be like a waterproof headgear, which sure would be practical in a dystopia where it's perpetually raining, but how they're used in sci-fi since like the main characters are suspiciously hatless, they're not wearing the same hats. If the other people running around the background and the extras are wearing the hats like regardless of weather conditions or whether it's sunny out. So, you know, it's not practical cause they're not protecting themselves from the sun or the rain when they're still wearing these hats indoor or at night. It's like a shortcut to me, not only in Asian or an Asian like population, but also in overpopulated, uh, in, impoverished and immoral and expendable one, if you outfit your background characters in conical hats, you're saying the population is meek and powerless and colonized like a way to say that it's an overpopulated location, a filthy impoverished location and expendable one.

***Can you give me some examples too of where that pops up?***

ASTRIA: So, Demolition Man, when they're underground, there are some of the people who are underground in the dark are wearing these hats. In Mad Max Beyond Thunder Dome there's a beginning scene where a bunch of people are in the desert walking towards what I think is a market. The marketplace, several people are wearing conical hats and then one person has a conical hat on a turban, there's no logical reason to have these clashing, different head gears. And then the weave of that conical hat is so open that again, it's not protecting you from the sun or from possible rain. Oh. And then in Solo: A Star Wars story, there's this conical hat that's so huge and exaggerated that it completely covers the man's body like down to his stomach, so he can't even see out of the hat, even though his job is to see it's, to watch and guard this gambling den.

***That's really funny.***

ASTRIA: Yeah. I think it's just used to mean, like it's a tropical location where they do illegal things!

**And then there's food. These films have created a hierarchy where Japanese food is often presented as highbrow, while Chinese food is presented as lowbrow.**

**Of course, there's the really famous scene at the beginning of Blade Runner where Harrison Ford was eating noodles in a rainy, dark, neon, crowded street.**

**That image felt groundbreaking 40 years ago, but it set a template that got repeated from TV shows like *Altered Carbon* to films like *The Fifth Element*, where Bruce Willis orders Chinese food that is labeled as Thai, and not ironically.**

ASTRIA: Basically, like noodles and rice are eaten by commoners and impoverished Chinatowns and sushi is indulged by the wealthy and powerful people of these worlds. So, I can, you know, *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell* there are these truckers who are eating noodles and their truck and a plastic bag. You would think that there'd be more scenes of people eating spaghetti or mac and cheese in the future also is like cheap foods that are also have a similar, like a cost equivalent I don't know how to ramen, et cetera. And then sushi, like the tech billionaire in *Ex Machina* eats sushi made by a slave android named Kyoko. Virtuosity. I don't know if enough people will recognize Virtuosity, but there is this evil AI program who escapes like of all places to a VR sushi restaurant.

**Let's move on to set design. When the characters go to street scenes that are supposed to be exotic, the sets are often full of food vendors that are clearly based on Asian street markets.**

ASTRIA: Yeah. Street vendors are a pretty prolific in future worlds. So, they often have hanging or skewered food, which is supposed to be gross and weird. So, like in *Firefly*, they have a food stand serving grilled dog, um, in *Cloud Atlas*, there's a food stall with deep fried rats and this techno futurists Korean city.

***In your research, did you find, uh, like set designers talking about this and saying why they, why they did this?***

ASTRIA: Yes. So, the set designer in *Cloud Atlas* in an interview that I had read said, I think it gave the feeling of a classic Asian street market. The dressing team let their imaginations run with references from India, Thailand, and Vietnam. Yes. They were specifically trying to present this as like a dirty place where they eat rats.

**The design team may have thought they were letting their imaginations run wild, but that is an old, pernicious stereotype. In her talk, Astria compares that scene in *Cloud Atlas* from anti-Chinese propaganda posters from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, showing Chinese people eating rats. And those images helped support a ban on Chinese immigrants to the U.S.**

**I should also note that *Cloud Atlas* is the movie that infamously had several white actors playing Asians characters with make-up and prosthetics.**

**Also in these futuristic cities, you'll see a lot of Asian architecture, advertisements with geishas, neon signs with dragons, people carrying Asian-style parasols, and red paper lanterns.**

**And once, when she said red paper lanterns, my first thought was, I don't remember seeing those in sci-fi films. And then she showed images from Mortal Engines, Total Recall, Ghost in the Shell, Firefly, Cloud Atlas, Blade Runner, Altered Carbon, Repo Men, A.I., and Valerian. These neighborhoods often have names like, "Paradise Alley," "Rogue City" or "The Colony."**

ASTRIA: Red paper lanterns are, um, always markers for like you're entering a zone of an illicit and degenerate activities. Um, usually you see them in crowded, urban areas where the residents are supposed to be impoverished and expendable. They're used for areas with sex workers, like in Cloud Atlas and Valerian, A.I. and Firefly, they're used to indicate black markets or other like filthy inner cities. And then the irony is like in real life, if there was a history of illegal work or unsanitary conditions, um, in, in Chinatowns it's because white American governments forced to Chinese immigrants into like small undesirable tracks of land and wouldn't maintain their public infrastructures.

**Interior set designs follow similar patterns. She showed images from ten different movies and TV shows where non-Asians characters that are supposed to be high-ranking lived-in homes full of Japanese shoji screens – you know, the wooden grids with opaque white squares.**

ASTRIA: In Demolition Man, the room that the sexually frustrated white hero played by Sylvester Stallone retires to is like very clearly marked with shoji screens. In Guardians of the Galaxy, there's this home, one of the white military officials lives in, they are very careful to have the shoji screens and all these like minimalist Japanese elements and to create this home. And then everyone in that home, like tramps about stomps about what they're heavy boots. And just like, if you're making a point to reference a Japanese aesthetic and Japanese home, like that's a kind of a basic thing you've missed.

**And in the future, wealthy and powerful white people often decorate their offices with Buddhas and Asian martial arts weapons.**

ASTRIA: I think it's a colonialist urge to collect exotic items specifically from other cultures or to loot them. Maybe they're also like a shorthand to brag about how you've mastered the fighting styles of this other culture. I'm not sure, but there's a lot of Japanese katanas in science fiction films. So many. And then there, there's also a fair

amount of West Asian scimitars, khukuri, who are, which are those, um, double blades with this distinctive curve. Japanese Shuriken, the ninja stars.

***And they're just hanging on the wall, sitting on people's desks.***

ASTRIA: Yeah. Sometimes they're in special display cases. Yeah. Often behind the big, bad evil person's work desk.

**I was also interested to see which movies or franchises came up the most in her presentation. And Star Wars comes up a lot even though it's a very fantastical world that's not supposed to be our future.**

**Now in previous episodes, I've covered Asian influences in Star Wars from Buddhist philosophy to samurai fighting styles. But Astria says this also falls into the trope of creating a hierarchy of Asian cultures.**

ASTRIA: Star Wars pits East Asian cultures against Swana cultures, Southwest Asia, North African cultures. So, the way East Asian culture, especially Japanese culture is used is a way to attribute a group of people, specifically the Jedi to, uh, like a higher level of being, you know, and this is through Japanese clothing, design hairstyles, armor, fighting styles, Buddhist practices, and then also in the East Asian culture is that Lucas and his team take elements from, um, our Imperial Chinese, Korean, Tibetan, Mongolian traditions, especially with Queen Amidala's fashion and makeup in the Phantom Menace.

**In fact, when we talked, I happened to be watching The Book of Boba Fett. There are two minor characters that are part of Jabba the Hutt's clan. They're twin Hutts who are carried around Tatooine on Asian-style litters. The female Hutt is fanning her gigantic face with a human-sized Asian paper fan. And in those episodes, I noticed a droid carrying characters on a rickshaw through the crowded streets. If I hadn't talked with her, I never would've noticed that before.**

**She also points out the original cantina from Star Wars was inspired by an actual Tiki Bar called the Tiki-Ti Cocktail Lounge. George Lucas used to visit there when he was a student at USC.**

ASTRIA: And the son of the owner of the Tiki-Ti about seeing George Lucas sketching out characters that would later be used in Star Wars. It's fitting in a way because Tiki culture itself is this inauthentic pastiche of widely different cultures like also initially constructed by and capitalized on by white Americans.

**Another franchise she brings up a lot is Firefly, and the movie Serenity. The premise of that universe is that in the far future, China and the U.S. have merged into a single galactic federation.**

ASTRIA: You know, we're told the cultures combined, we hear muddled Mandarin, we see Chinese newspapers and we see Buddha sculptures and chopsticks and other east and Southeast Asian cultures like strewn about in every scene. But where are the Asian people? Like none of the main characters, which is a big troop, again, none of their like friends' lovers, any of the government officials or any of the leaders in any of the groups that we meet across the galaxy, like on multiple planets, none of them are Asian. I've been waiting for like a, uh, sci-fi nerd to, to, uh, correct me and say like, actually there is an Asian, there's like two, maybe three background Asians in the entire series. One's a prostitute. And one is a server in a bar wearing like a full geisha getup for no reason. Um, so that is not what I expect to see when I hear that this is like a galaxy run by China and America together.

**In her talk, she also examines the 2014 film Ex Machina. It's about a tech billionaire who creates super realistic androids. The main android, Ava, is played by a white actress. She is a complicated character, both sympathetic and dangerous. The other androids are played by Asian women.**

ASTRIA: There's two Asian women robots. There is Kyoko, who is built to be a languageless, Japanese servant in sexual slavery. And then there is Jade who's one of the earlier prototypes who's stored in a bedroom closet. And both of these Asian robots are used by the white robot. Ava. They're used like tools for, to escape from their shared captor.

**That trope comes up a lot. Androids played by white actors are typically used as metaphors to show that we can find a common sense of humanity in characters that are seen as less than human. But androids played by Asian actors often don't get the same level of agency or empathy.**

ASTRIA: The white robots in a lot of these sci-fi stories are complex. Protagonists. Um, love, interests, someone that we want to root for, um, that we want for them to achieve self-actualization in contrast to the Asian robots who are fundamental threats, like in Ghost in the Shell, and Ex Machina where like Ava in Ex Machina.

**So, if we were to think of Asian Futures, Without Asians as a genre with its own consistent rules and tropes -- what is the backstory? What happened to Asian people in the future?**

**Astria wonders if there was a war between the East and the West which led to a genocide or mass sterilization. Are these Asian cultural artifacts like trophies for the victors in the West?**

**Perhaps. But she thinks the genre might be tapping into the opposite anxiety.**

ASTRIA: So, it's like this fantasy of having been colonized by an Asian country. And then at some point successfully fighting off these colonizers and then weirdly choosing to preserve their, like the colonizer's aesthetic and lifestyle, like still dressing up in the fashion of you're supposed to deconstructors like safeguarding rather than toppling your oppressor's religious effigies and then continuing to protect and rehearse Asian art forms like the fighting styles, still putting up Asian signage on your like buildings and restaurants.

**In the real world, the backstory as to how and why this genre within a genre came about is pretty complex, and it actually goes back to the beginning of modern science fiction in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. We'll explore that after the break.**

**BREAK**

**After talking with Astria, I wanted to check in with Jason Concepcion. He's the host of the pop culture, sci-fi, fantasy podcast X-Ray Vision. And full disclosure, I did a promo for X-Ray Vision a few weeks ago, but that is unrelated to me reaching out to him.**

**Jason is a journalist in Los Angeles. He's a Hollywood insider. And he also moderated one of Astria's virtual presentations. He told me that as an Asian American, he was certainly aware of a lot of these tropes, but her talk was still unsettling for him.**

JASON: It just kind of like brought home what a, what a big part of the genre. This is in, you know, visually, at least, which is something I'm still processing. I had not really reckoned with how, not just like pervasive as like a stylistic flourish it is, but how kind of, part of the fabric of the genre it is.

**One of the reasons I was curious to talk with Jason is because so often in my show, I examine popular culture that I love, while I'm also critical of it. And it's sometimes hard to strike that balance. And I was wondering, how does he deal with this issue as a fan?**

JASON: And I'm speaking just for me now, like sometimes I, as I process these things, I kind of do a cost benefit analysis of, well on balance this is positive, with the kind of, of paucity of Asian representation in, uh, American popular culture, Western popular culture, sometimes like a, a positive, uh, depiction is, is good enough -- sometimes. And then also thinking about, for something like Star Wars or Blade Runner, which came out 40 years ago, what, what was the level of cultural understanding and empathy at that given time, you know, did they, did everybody do the best that they could at that particular time? Uh, and I think the answer is like, sometimes it's like, yes and no, but I have to, with each story, I kind of take it, I kind of take them on their own merits and just it, a lot of times it's honestly just like a gut check. And then there are things, you know, there are, there are times in stories where I'm like, oh, that stands out as that's not good, that's bad, but what am I going to do? Like not take part in culture? You know, at, at a certain point, it's like I can reject things and just kind of wall myself off from stuff that has offensive slash problematic material in it. Or I can engage with the stuff I like about it. Use my voice to say this part of it sucked and hope that we get better as we go forward.

**So how do we get better? Jason says if a production design team is going to mix and match foreign cultures to create something new – which is what production designers do because they're from Earth and there's only so far that their imaginations can stretch – then they need to do their own gut checks, throughout the entire creative process.**

JASON: Generally, when you take something, when you lift something out of a culture without any kind of like, attempt to reckon or understand the milieu from which it comes, that is generally, I think, where you cross over into the kind of like problematic zone, you know, essentially you're saying, here's this fantastical world that's going to be, we want to present something as slightly strange. So, when you take something from a culture and you put it in that context, what you're kind of saying is look how weird this is, but for who's perspective, right? So just being open to having those conversations and to really doing the research about where things come from.

***Do you think things are getting better in that regard or are things, is everyone kind of on autopilot?***

JASON: It's hard to say, I think that better in the sense that these are conversations that people will understand happen now. It feels as if, uh, platforms and creators and production companies are aware that there are fault lines out there and that they're trying to avoid them. People at least feel the anxiety of, of, oh, let's not mess this up because this, even if it's for a cynical reason as the publicity would be terrible, you know, if that's the pressure point that we have, that's the pressure point that we have as



people who take part in the marketplace. So, um, in that sense, I think it's better than it has been, but you know, there's other, but there's also signs that it could get worse. You know, I, I worry that it could get worse too. Uh, I think with the growing geopolitical between the U.S. and the West and China, like the fact that the Chinese look different, I think, than the way America thinks of itself, that has, uh, every potential to kind of like amplify some of the worst aspects of nationalism, et cetera. You know, like one of the, I was doing some research on early sci-fi and one of the, um, one of the things that really influenced the, the, the arc of early sci-fi was, uh, Japan's defeat of Russia, uh, in the Russo Japanese war of 1907, 1908, whatever it was. That was that was like presented as like a wakeup call to the West in the white, uh, ruling class and a lot of dystopian and early sci-fi came out of that, that, and, and a lot of it was, was framed as how do we keep these Asian hoards from rising up. We have to make sure that, uh, we maintain our technological edge. A lot of it, a lot of this early sci-fi from that era was presented as, you know, like a warning. The Japanese have modernized. If they teach the Chinese how to modernize all of the sudden, we're outnumbered, we have to keep this technological edge. And there's a lot of, there's a lot of stories like that. It from the early decades of the 20th century that are direct responses to European country being defeated by an Asian country in a major war.

**What Jason just said has a lot in common with a book of essays I found called Techno Orientalism. The book was edited by David Roh. He's a professor at the University of Utah. And David says Techno Orientalism is playing off the term Orientalism, which was first coined by the late scholar Edward Said.**

DAVID: His argument was that, uh, the West needed something to define of against. And so it models the East as the, basically the opposite of the West. So, if the West is rational, the East is irrational. If the West is masculine, then the East is feminine. The west is modern. Then the East will always be pre-modern that worked for a while, but there was a problem in that the East was quickly rising as an economic threat and competitor during the '70s and '80s. And this mostly manifested in the Japan panic in the 1980s where Japanese manufacturing and the automotive industry in particular was seen as a, almost an existential threat to Ford and GM and Detroit. And that was a real, a kind of difficult moment psychologically for the American psyche, because, you know, Japan was this tiny island nation that had very few resources and completely decimated by the war a couple of decades before. And how is that going to work if according to Orientalism they're always going to be pre-modern, they should not be able to compete on this level?

**The idea of Orientalism had to be revised, or re-rationalized. So the logic of Techno Orientalism goes like this:**

DAVID: Japanese auto manufacturers can do well because they are really good at copying and stealing. So, they're just taking what we have done and building upon it. And, uh, you can see that discourse now being applied to China and Chinese manufacturing, it's just the same, uh, same old story in, in a new form, right?

**So according to Techno Orientalism, the East is catching up and pulling ahead of the West because they don't value original ideas, and they abuse their workers. In contrast, the West respects creativity and humanity. But that may not be enough.**

DAVID: It's their very inhumanity that is allowing them to compete with us in this way. And that led to that being that logic being manifested in a lot of science fiction, because, um, we had this projection of Western anxiety and fears about the East as a competitor in the future being projected to, um, the screen and in, uh, literature.

**And that's how we get these futuristic dystopias where white characters live in worlds dominated by Asian culture.**

DAVID: But the thing I wanted to, to, to stress is how that sort of pre-modernity is emphasized in sort of a hyper modern, uh, space, right? So, the future may look Asian, the future may look Japanese or Chinese or Korean, but there's still an undergirding of this idea of premodern. So, you have these weird contradictions where, uh, in these, uh, science fiction films and, and, and novels you'll have like cybernetic samurai or android geishas.

**And it's not just in film or TV. A lot of these ideas were first explored in the early cyberpunk literature, like William Gibson's novel Neuromancer which took place in a Japanese city.**

DAVID: And of course, William Gibson's Neuromancer has like the, the cybernetic ninja. That's always scaling around the background, right? Again, this, uh, reinforcement of, of pre-modern in the hyper modernist, uh, setting. And what is really interesting about it is that Gibson never had actually been to Japan before he wrote, Neuromancer. And so, it's a really great example of the fact that at Orientalism and Techno Orientalism is a complete fabrication, right? It's a projection by the Western, uh, consciousness of what the East should look like. Um, and in this future, the cyber punk cybernetic future what is really unsettling about it to the reader is that it's feature in which, um, the body has just become meat, right? And it's just an apparatus for other sort of modifications. And so that's that speaks to the anxiety about what it means to be human.

***Why do you think that science fiction was a particularly apt way to express these anxieties? Because a lot of the questions of science fiction are about the future of humanity. What is human versus what is not human?***

DAVID: Yeah, um, what is unsettling is to see how pliable Techno Orientalism is and that is and how quickly it adapts to changing geopolitical conditions. Right. I, I had mentioned how it's not so much driven by Japan panic anymore, but mostly by China panic and increasingly, uh, you know, visions of South Korea and Hong Kong and so on and so forth.

**Science fiction a genre where there is no limit, except our imaginations. So, what we have here is a failure of imagination. Everyone I talked with agreed there is one obvious thing the entertainment industry can do to fix this problem. Again, here's Astria.**

ASTRIA: They should hire Asians behind the camera, like Asians in decision-making positions and multiple agents, not just one consultant or one person. Like, I mean, I would say we could still suggest that they not represent cultures, that they're not a part of. Um, and if they absolutely have to, like, it's integral to the story, they didn't write the story, they were assigned to it and can't change it for some reason, then hire people of those cultures and people who know how to properly care for and treat and represent the culture. And especially like not in a way that's rigid and ancient or mystical or foreign, because a lot of people of those cultures live here in the U.S. too,

**And there are organizations like CAPE, which stands for Coalition of Asian Pacifics in Entertainment. They've a non-profit that has consulted with Disney, Netflix, Amazon, Warner Brothers, and other companies to create works that are more culturally aware.**

**I talked with a spokesperson from CAPE. And they told me the success of those collaborations depends on how seriously the studios take them. If CAPE is brought in early, with access to top talent – and the talent are open to suggestions -- they can make a big difference. But sometimes, CAPE is brought in at the last minute to see a movie that's almost finished, so they can highlight any potential red flags. That approach is less productive.**

**But the first step towards any kind of progress is acknowledging there is a problem and having the humility to ask for help so they can tell new types of stories.**

**That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Astria Suparak, David Roh and Jason Concepcion. Also, thanks to the organization GYOPO for inviting me to watch Astria's presentation.**

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