

Resources: Orientalism in Film Episode

Mulan (1998)

Guiding Question: What is (or isn't) Orientalism, and does *Mulan* qualify as this?

Connie Zeng –

The 1998 version of *Mulan*, the retelling of a legendary Chinese folktale, is a Disney classic. *Mulan* tells the story of a brave, young woman who disguises herself as her father to save him from fighting in a war against the Huns. An especially treasured memory in the childhoods of Asian children growing up in the West. Being able to finally see a heroine with their features and their culture on the big screen has been a huge part of the charm of the Movie.

However, the polarizing receptions of *Mulan* between Eastern and Western film audiences, and within the Chinese diaspora in general - mostly between mainland versus overseas viewers - is reflective of the lopsided way the Eastern world or the “Orient” has been captured by western audiences. Criticism by mainlanders ranged from the addition of the perky Mushu, beloved by Western audiences and that was also noticeably omitted from the 2020 version to *Mulan*'s appearance.

Of course, it's not to be unexpected that a country producing a cartoon about a historical legend prominent in a different country might be filled with inaccuracy or garishness. A Chinese movie about the Revolutionary War may seem equally stifling and uncomfortable to American viewers. Other American movies focusing on other global locations - Europe, Southern America, Southern Africa, Western Asia - also suffer Misrepresentation.

So in what specific way is this subset of cultural inaccuracy or garishness unique to the 'East'? The culprit is Orientalism, the often-condescending mythicization of places such as the Far East, North Africa, and the Middle East.

Mulan, in my opinion at least, is not a daring example of Orientalism by any means. However, it's a good introduction to some of the themes presented in Orientalism. For

example - cultural interchangeability - seen in the Japanese-influenced makeup Mulan wears at the matchmakers. We can thus see in Orientalism that different eastern cultures are made to be overly malleable, either homogeneously woven together or crudely juxtaposed apart. Some viewers believed the Huns were portrayed in demeaning, subhuman ways.

There is also cultural aestheticism, where cultural symbols lose their value by being sold as a commercial gimmick. This is particularly used as a point of criticism against Mushu, the goofy dragon side-kick, and also the over-emphasized honour trope.

Marco Polo (2014–2016)

Guiding Question: Where do we draw the line between historical accuracy (or lack thereof) and creative direction (however “misguided” said approach may be)?

Nujhat Tabassum –

The historical drama adventure series *Marco Polo*, which first premiered on Netflix near the end of 2014, is the realization of John Fusco’s long-standing passion for East Asian culture and history, or “the exotic, erotic, mysterious East”, as he describes it. Framed mostly from the perspective of Venetian merchant and explorer Marco Polo, and based very loosely on the retelling of his experiences as a captive guest in the court of Kublai Khan’s Mongol Empire, the show aims to familiarize Western audiences with the cultures and customs of ancient Mongolia and China during the Song and Yuan dynasty, while depicting the tale of the Khan’s conquest to conquer all of China.

Perhaps the decision to retell East Asian history from the point of view of a European outsider was meant to be a narrative technique, whereby there would be a motive to educate the foreigner, and by proxy, the Western audience, about distinctly Mongolian history and customs, with Polo acting as “an informational bridge between East and West”. However, intentions aside, by placing the white foreigner at the centre of the plot as he witnesses the strange and “barbaric” customs of his hosts, Asian characters become othered in their own countries, side characters in their own story.

To justify the creative decision to craft a protagonist out of a man who was historically more of a travel blogger than a political mastermind, Marco Polo's role is heavily embellished, placing him at the centre of the story's action and political intrigue, making him the white saviour of a nation filled with unsophisticated and incompetent "barbarians". Furthermore, consistent with its nickname of "Chinese Game of Thrones", the show further blurs the line between fact and fiction, by not only altering historical events but altering real historical figures into stock characters depicting Orientalist tropes.

Mongol general Bayan of the Baarin becomes Hundred Eyes, the mystical blind Taoist monk/ kung fu master tasked to train the hero Marco Polo in the ways of combat. The sister of the main antagonist, Jia Sidao, becomes Mei Lin, a conniving, hypersexual concubine dragon lady assassin tasked with murdering the Mongol royals, preferably during the act of intercourse. In line with the lotus blossom stereotype, the first few episodes depict females solely as sexual beings in servitude of the men they're pleasuring. By resorting to these stereotypes to represent the nuanced history of the Mongol empire, the show perpetuates the dangerous message that not only is ancient Mongolia and China bizarre and exotic, but that all of East Asia is a bizarre, exotic monolith.

Kill Bill Vol. 1 (2003) & Kill Bill Vol. 2 (2004)

Guiding Question: What's the difference between homage, or paying respect to a certain cinematic style or cultural aesthetic, and merely using it for kitschy or pastiche purposes?

Corinne Langmuir and Cailin Ball –

Kill Bill: Volume 1, written and directed by Quentin Tarantino, follows a nameless former assassin, dubbed 'The Bride', in her quest for revenge against the assassins who killed her entire wedding party. The Bride wakes years after this attack and begins to seek out her revenge, targeting Vernita Green and O-Ren Ishii, both her former allies. The majority of the film focuses on The Bride's time in Tokyo, where she trains to defeat Ishii, who is now the head of the city's Yakuza. She spends weeks learning to sword fight, and is eventually given

a sword by a legendary craftsman, with which she plans to defeat Ishii. *Kill Bill: Volume 2* details the Bride's training under martial arts master Pai Mei. The Bride uses the techniques Pai Mei had taught her to escape her nearly-sealed fate, and ultimately defeats the remaining Assassins.

Both volumes are packed with references to classic East-Asian films. After all, Tarantino is known for his pastiche. With the director's use of dramatic bloody effects, it's no secret that the diegesis is beyond the capabilities of our normal world. Audiences are expected to suspend their disbelief as Tarantino makes no effort at verisimilitude; however, the comical nature of the two Kill Bills, especially in the treatment of the Asian characters, may come off as disingenuous and insincere.

Tarantino continues to stir the pot as he cherry-picks aspects of Chinese and Japanese cultures to best suit his aesthetic and story-telling desires. Ancient Asian arts such as Kung-fu and Samurai fighting are heavily featured in Kill Bill, but they lack a proper explanation and serve as plot devices. By stripping the historical and political contexts of these cultural arts, Tarantino reduces Kung-fu and Samurai fighting to quick skills for The Bride to learn to seek Revenge.

These arts are easily mastered by the white protagonist, reinstating a colonialist attitude. The Bride defeats Asians in Asia when both opponents are using an Asian skill, namely the entire Crazy 88 and Ishii. Even within dialogue, the director acknowledges how "silly" it is for a Caucasian woman to be playing with a samurai sword. But when addressing Lucy Liu's character, O-Ren Ishii, it is no longer "silly" for a Chinese-American to be using a Japanese sword.

The director's Orientalist mindset doesn't stop there. The settings of Japan and China in the film are used to justify the inclusion of Asian martial arts and give the audience big fight scenes with "refreshing" non-Hollywood looks. Traveling to Asia is just a part of The Bride's revenge story, turning Asia into a mere backdrop until she ultimately crosses everyone off her list. The characterization of his Asian characters and setting a majority of

the films in Asia allows Tarantino to use (or appropriate) tropes from Asian cinema with little consequence.

Doctor Strange (2016)

Guiding Discussion: Is cultural erasure worse for representation than a stereotypical or caricaturish portrayal?

Vikram Nijhawan –

The 2016 superhero film *Doctor Strange*, written by director Scott Derrickson, alongside Robert Cargill and John Spaihts, is the fourteenth installment in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Benedict Cumberbatch plays the titular physician Steven Strange, who after sustaining a major injury to his hands, embarks on a spiritual journey to the mystical ‘East’ in an attempt to find a cure. Upon arriving at the esoteric temple of Kamar Taj, located somewhere in the Nepalese mountains, he meets Tilda Swinton’s character, a wise sorceress known enigmatically as The Ancient One. To compensate for the loss of his hands, Strange begins studying the mystical arts, in which he progresses rapidly, and soon becomes equal to the native sorcerer who has seemingly lived and practiced at Kamar Taj for far longer. When a renegade former student of the Ancient One, Mads Mikkelsen’s Kaiceilus, attempts to subjugate the multiverse with his fellow dark acolytes, Strange must assume the mantle of Sorcerer Supreme, and save the world from this metaphysical threat.

Doctor Strange drew much controversy for its casting of Swinton, a white woman, in the role of the Ancient One, who is an elderly Asian man in the original comic books. While the filmmakers have said their decision to cast a “Celtic” mystical master was an attempt to avoid an Orientalist caricature (which the Ancient One’s traditional comic book counterpart admittedly perpetuated), many criticized it for replacing Orientalism with “whitewashing”. Rather than attempting to craft a more balanced, progressive version of the original character, the creators simply chose to ignore his Asianess, critics argued. This decision is comparable to the rebranding of Ben Kingsley’s character in *Iron Man 3*, another “Fu Manchu”

antagonist in the comics; but while Kingsley's character was generally viewed as a refreshing deviation from *Iron Man*'s source material, Swinton's Ancient One appeared a lazier route to avoid stereotyping, from the standpoint of the film's detractors. Conversely, Benedict Wong's Wong was praised for shifting away from his comic book roots, where the character was portrayed as a sidekick and "manservant" to the Caucasian Strange. In the film, Wong is more of an equal and partner for Strange, and not subordinate.

Doctor Strange's casting and characterization, in conjunction with its adherence to classical Orientalist tropes (namely a white man traveling to the 'East' in search of some spiritual knowledge or enlightenment), its visual pastiche of generic "Asian" aesthetics and chinoiserie, and its hampering of a compelling disability narrative through such a discursive approach, raises many important questions about how Orientalism manifests in the superhero and sci-fi genres more broadly. It also offers many lessons that Marvel can learn for its upcoming film *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*.

Blade Runner (1982)

Guiding Question: What is techno-Orientalism, and why is it especially relevant now?

Marta Anielska –

First released in 1982, *Blade Runner*, which was written by Hampton Fancher and David Peoples, is a science fiction film that has become a cult classic in the cyberpunk genre and more broadly. It stars big names like Harrison Ford and Daryl Hannah and follows the former's pursuit of five bioengineered humans called replicants attempting to increase their lifespan.

Classified as a noir, the movie's dark aesthetic and nihilistic view on life has become iconic, as well as its open-ended conclusion. It asks big questions on what it means to be human and how technology will distort our understanding of humanness. However, the movie is one of several that spawned the aesthetic of techno-orientalism, which combines distinctly American fears of globalization and multinational corporations with the anti-Japanese

rhetoric of the 1980s. In the movie, this is characterized by the cultural and social quasi-colonization of the West by Asian countries.

The movie does not aim to represent Asianess and multi-cultural modernity but rather combines East Asian languages, foods, and peoples to create a landscape that implies a dystopian future. While these cultures seem to dominate the lower rungs of society, they are counteracted by reinforcement of white supremacy at the highest levels of *Blade Runner*'s economy. Its police force is white, its corporations are white, and, perhaps most interestingly, the replicants which threaten the society from afar and are, consequently, enslaved on far-off colonized planets are also white.

Techno-orientalism is a new perspective on the topic we've been discussing throughout the episode. It contributes to the conversation by presenting Asia as a veritable threat, both horrifying and inferior to the West. It presents a fear for our future rather than a justification for our past. Anti-Asian actions are spurred on by the dehumanization that techno-orientalism contributes to, as is the West's oppositional view to Eastern countries' politics and cultures. In some ways, Asia has become a shorthand for a dystopian future in our world.

News Reel

Orientalism in *Dune* –

- Al Jazeera op-ed: the Orientalist implications of Denis Villeneuve's *Dune*, and why these critiques are irrelevant
 - <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/11/10/hollywood-orientalism-is-not-about-the-arab-world>
- NPR: *Dune* as a “post-911 cinematic epic”?
 - <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/21/1047784204/dune-2021-movie-sept-11-frank-herbert-denis-villeneuve>

- Vulture: “Dune Has a Desert Problem”

- <https://www.vulture.com/2021/10/dune-has-a-desert-problem.html>

- Slate: Dune as a “white saviour” narrative?

- <https://slate.com/culture/2021/10/dune-2021-movie-vs-book-white-savior-islam.html>