# Stylistic Crossings

## Cyberpunk Impulses in Anime

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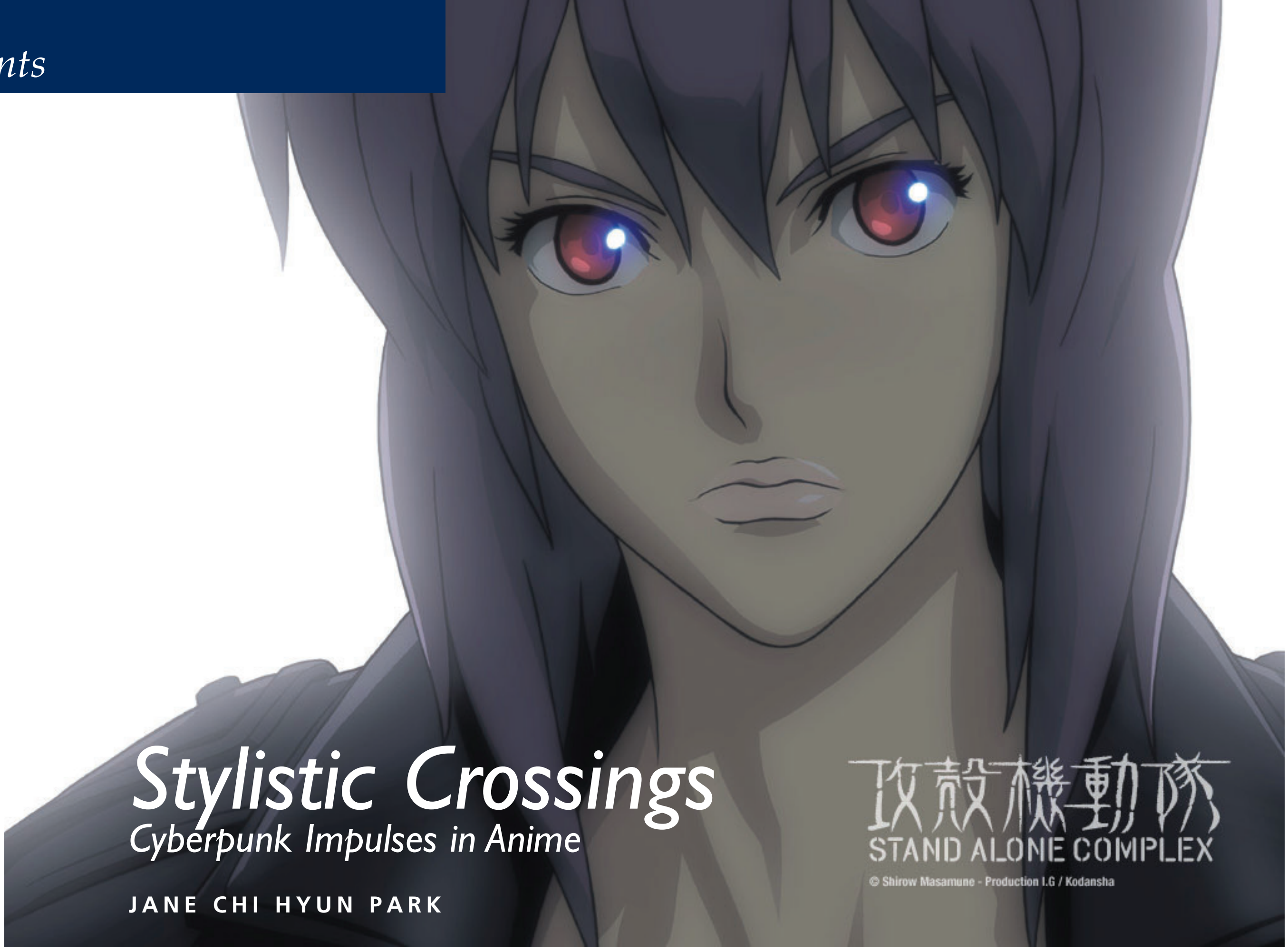

攻殻機動隊
STAND ALONE COMPLEX
© Shirow Masamune - Production I.G / Kodansha

Kusanagi Motoko, from the series *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* (2002–4), dir. Kenji Kamiyama

Courtesy: Hatsubaimoto Kadokawa Shoten

## Introduction

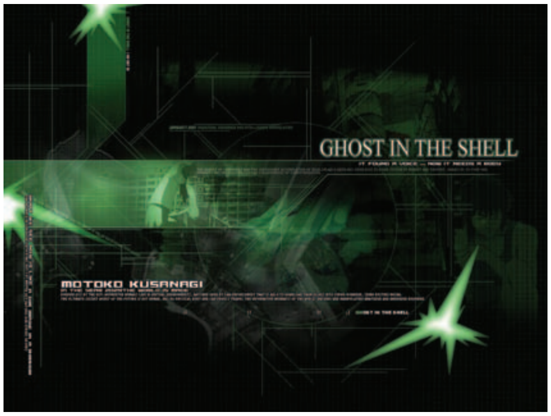
Epitomized by the Wachowski brothers, who with *The Matrix* (1999) introduced stylistic and narrative elements of Japanese animation, or anime, to the general public, fans of cyberpunk fiction and its cinematic counterparts also tend to have a strong interest in mecha anime, a subgenre characterized by "hard" science-fiction themes and tropes. Indeed, while he has not formally declared himself an anime fan, William Gibson, the "father of cyberpunk," has been quick to acknowledge the influence of East Asian and specifically Japanese culture in his work. In a 1986 interview with Takayuki Tatsumi, Gibson confesses he had not known the location of Chiba when he decided to use the name of the city in *Neuromancer*, his first and most influential novel. He describes his literary relationship to Japan in the following way: "Japan interests me more and more, but I'm starting to get embarrassed about having done this thing [i.e., alluding to Japan in his work] without really knowing anything about it. It's just a fantasy. I think in that way it has a weird kind of power. It's like nineteenth-century Orientalia."[1]

Fifteen years later, Gibson, now a regular traveler to the "Far East," continues to ruminate on the relationship between the fictional and the real Japan. In an essay in *Time International*, he notes that his visits to the country have served to confirm his original fantasies: no longer simply a product of his imagination, the vision of an overtechnologized "Japan" has become a sublime reality that emerges, almost organically, out of the Tokyo cityscape. Gibson goes on to legitimate this vision as an *authentic* one through his description of the enthusiastic Japanese journalist who introduces him to the city: "Modern Japan simply *was* cyberpunk. The Japanese themselves knew it and delighted in it. I remember my first glimpse of Shibuya, when one of the young Tokyo journalists who had taken me there, his face drenched with the light of a thousand media-suns—all that towering, animated crawl of commercial information—said, 'You see? You see? It is *Blade Runner* town.' And it was. It so evidently was."[2]

While it would be interesting to unpack Gibson's casual orientalism (and I do so elsewhere),[3] here I am more concerned with what his Japanese tour guide is doing when he projects the mise-en-scène of Ridley Scott's now canonical cyberpunk film onto his hometown. It is tempting to dismiss the journalist's Hollywood-filtered representation of Tokyo as an example of "colonized consciousness" or "self-orientalization." However, this kind of reading precludes a more nuanced exploration of the power dynamics in current cultural dialogues between East and West within the transnational production and reception contexts of popular media.

Even as Hollywood continues to dominate the world entertainment market, Asian media industries have become key players in recent years, as shown by the international popularity of (and revenue generated by) Bollywood musicals, Hong Kong action films, Korean films and soap operas, and Japanese animation and videogames. Furthermore, Asian popular media have affected not only international audiences but also such U.S. media producers as Quentin Tarantino, Guillermo del Toro, and Larry and Andy Wachowski, who are incorporating the styles, themes, and narratives of these media in their movies.

At the same time, it is now common practice for Asian directors, producers, and actors to collaborate with U.S. and European filmmakers on co-productions as generically diverse as *Mission Impossible 2*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and *The Grudge*. The work of such Asian *auteurs* as Ang Lee, John Woo, and Hayao Miyazaki, once relegated to youth and arthouse subcultures, have entered the dominant culture. More generally, Asian "chic" or "cool" shows no signs of abating in the United States, even as American pop culture continues to shape tastes and trends in Asia.



Courtesy: Manga Entertainment

Poster for *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), dir. Mamoru Oshii

Within this transcultural popular landscape, the naturalization of cyberpunk themes and motifs in both Hollywood science-fiction films and Japanese mecha anime provides a particularly rich site for examining the ideological implications of stylistic exchange between Japan and the United States. In this essay I will be looking at anime more than Hollywood, focusing specifically on Mamoru Oshii's *Kōkaku Kidōtai* or *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and Rintaro's *Metoroporisu* or *Metropolis* (2001), both internationally acclaimed anime features that were influenced *by* and influences *on* such cyberpunk films as *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix*.

After reviewing the way in which techno-orientalist discourse structures U.S. cyberpunk narratives, this essay will consider how *Ghost in the Shell* (hereafter *GIS*) and *Metropolis* simultaneously reiterate and rework the power dynamics of techno-orientalism in the following three ways: the use of a non-Japanese mise-en-scène, the privileging of the female subject, and the explicitly ambivalent representation of this subject's relationship to technology.

## Techno-Orientalism in Cyberpunk

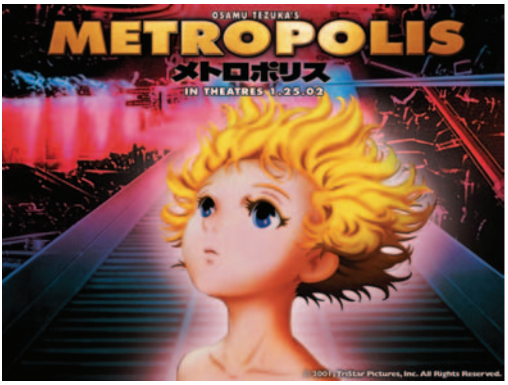
The term *cyberpunk* refers to a subgenre of "hard" science fiction that emerged in the mid-1980s in the work of such North American authors as William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Rudy Rucker, Lewis Shiner, and others. While the specific literary movement ended in the 1990s, the defining characteristics of cyberpunk have since become commonplace in popular narratives about the future. Pam Rosenthal's definition applies as much today to comics, videogames, films, advertisements, and the Internet as to novels and short stories: "The cyberpunk world is always shockingly recognizable—it is our world, gotten worse, gotten more uncomfortable, inhospitable, dangerous, and thrilling."[4]

Cyberpunk texts ask questions about what makes us "human" in a heavily corporatized, media-saturated world. How do we differ from higher forms of artificial intelligence? How do we distinguish objects, places, and experiences from their mediated copies? Where do we draw the boundaries between nature and technology? In such cyberpunk films as *Blade Runner*, *Johnny Mnemonic*, *Strange Days*, *The Matrix*, and *eXistenZ*, the ontological anxiety underlying these metaphysical questions is intertwined with and expressed through social anxieties that arise from the destabilization of identity markers such as race, gender, and class in an increasingly multicultural, multiracial, and multisexual society.

As Nicola Nixon and Sharon Stockton have noted, the often male cyberpunk hero's interactions with his environment are gendered and sexualized: he "jacks into" cyberspace or the matrix, in much the same way that he enters the bodies of the cyborgian females with whom he is coupled. Both encounters force him not only to question his ontological status (as human) but also his social identity (as white, heterosexual male).[5] Wendy Chun racializes this relationship between masculinized hero and feminized space by positing an analogy between cyberspace—and its manifestation in the virtual city—as a doubled Other: both female and "oriental" (primarily Japanese). From this it would follow that as an embodied extension of cyberspace, the protagonist's tough, hypersexualized, and artificial love (or, more accurately, sex) interests also perform as orientalized others, recalling Donna Haraway's swift analogy between the female cyborg and working-class Asian women in "The Cyborg Manifesto."[6]

Along with Chun, other scholars have used David Morley and Kevin Robins's notion of "techno-orientalism" to show how both cyberspace and the "Orient" function as feminized constructs to be penetrated and contained by the Western male subject.[7] These scholars provide powerful critiques of the ways in which East Asian cultures, bodies, and spaces so consistently are conflated with new technologies in cyberpunk texts. However, like Morley and Robins, these scholars continue to stress the Yellow Perilist aspects of techno-orientalism, mentioning only in passing or neglecting to note altogether the element of *fascination*, which also plays an important role in the Western projection of Japan as the "postmodern" future, as somehow inherently "cyberpunk."

It is this fascination that we find in the second quote by Gibson when he describes Tokyo as a virtual city, composed of a "thousand media-suns, a towering, animated crawl of information"—information that entrances him, information in which his Japanese guide is "drenched." Alongside the cyberpunk protagonist's fear of difference is a fascination with this difference; as Julia Kristeva has discussed in her notion of the abject, the two forces work together to keep the boundaries between self and other intact. Fear is expressed through the protagonist's attempts to master and subdue the Other; fascination through his desire to merge with it. Again, in this case the Other is new technology and post-industrial Japan combined: the sea of information that is cyberspace, the city, and the artificial female body. In most cyberpunk narratives, moments of potential identification with the Other also serve as necessary points of rupture, which the protagonist must overcome to reach the closure required of linear narrative. In American cyberpunk, such moments function much like the mise-en-scène and the female characters—as ornaments that decorate the exotic backdrop of the hero's journey to self-enlightenment.



Courtesy: Columbia TriStar

Poster for *Metropolis* (2001), dir. Rintaro

Turning now to *Ghost in the Shell* and *Metropolis*, what happens when these ornaments take over the narrative proper? To put it another way, what happens to the gendered and racialized power dynamics of techno-orientalism when the object becomes the subject, when Japan "looks back" at the United States using the same ideological frame that has been used to render it "other"?

## *Ghost in the Shell* and *Metropolis*

According to Kumiko Sato, the "(re)discovery of Japan [in American cyberpunk] changed the Japanese view of Japanese culture . . . [in that] American cyberpunk enabled Japan to *find itself* in the future of the West." Paradoxically, this American perception of Japan as the future is based on premodern, feudal Japan (specifically the Edo and Meiji periods), a Japan that is read as radically different than Western modernity (hence futuristic).[8] Sato argues that Japanese cyberpunk appropriates this orientalized image of itself under the banner of *nihonjinron*, the notion of Japan's cultural uniqueness, which emerges after World War II. She goes on to note that Japanese cyberpunk fiction deviates from its U.S. predecessor in two significant ways, which capitalize on *nihonjinron:* first, Japanese settings and images take center stage, and second, the cybernetic or cyborg hero is transformed into a transgendered female.[9]

While *GIS* and *Metropolis* both do have female protagonists, *GIS* is set in Hong Kong, and the city in *Metropolis* appears more American than Asian, though its centerpiece is a Middle Eastern ziggurat that alludes to the tower of Babel. According to Oshii, the narrative of *GIS* grew out of the Hong Kong cityscape much as that of *Blade Runner*, according to Ridley Scott, emerged from the combined cities of New York, Los Angeles, and Tokyo. Chun argues that this setting reproduces Hollywood's orientalist tendency toward exoticizing the future by placing the viewer in the position of the tourist.[10] However, I would point out a few differences between this particular form of orientalism and that of *Blade Runner*. Most of all, Oshii depicts the Asian city specifically as Hong Kong rather than as a conglomeration of multiple cities. At the same time, by layering this depiction with Shinto-inspired music and Japanese dialogue, he suggests cultural affinities between Japan and China and points out the similar positioning of Tokyo and Hong Kong as post-industrial East Asian cities that perform futurity for the West and for each other.

Meanwhile, *Metropolis* is set in an unnamed city that looks like a pastiche of 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s New York. We know the city is not in Japan because the private detective Shunsaku Ban and his nephew Kenichi have come to the city from Tokyo. We also know that this city is more advanced culturally and technologically than Tokyo because our narrative guides play the role of lost country bumpkins throughout the film. As well, Duke Red, the primary antagonist who rules *Metropolis*, sports almost caricaturized Western features (blond, feathered hair, blue eyes, and a big nose), and Teema, the girl robot he has created in the likeness of his dead daughter, is blond and blue-eyed although she more closely resembles a traditional anime character. Finally, the film's original score is based on Dixieland jazz, and the music complements the colorful architecture and frenetic pace of the city, which recalls representations of the United States in the "roaring twenties." Rather than using an Asian setting to evoke the future, then, Rintaro does the opposite, performing a kind of occidentalism by setting *Metropolis* in a Western city that alludes to Hollywood depictions of U.S. cities. This is apt since Osamu Tezuka, who wrote the manga on which the film is based, was influenced not only by an image of the female robot in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* but also by Disney cartoons and Betty Boop, the quintessential cartoon pinup girl.

Aside from the large eyes, Teema and Major Kusanagi Motoko have little in common with Betty Boop or, for that matter, the coy, hypersexualized female characters that populate most manga and anime. Both are artificial females who are simultaneously feminine and masculine, strong and vulnerable. Kusanagi is a secret cyborg government assassin searching for an entity known as the Puppet Master, which commits terrorist acts by hacking into computers and cyborg brains. Teema, the successor to her "father" the Duke, is also the missing piece needed for his ziggurat to be activated into the most powerful weapon on the planet. Neither character performs for the male gaze. While Teema has a crush on Kenichi when she believes herself to be a human girl, the crush dissipates when she acknowledges and accepts her robotic roots. And while Kusanagi waxes philosophical with her partner Batou, she never expresses any romantic interest in him or in anyone else for that matter.

Furthermore, both characters are represented in somewhat androgynous terms. While Kusanagi's nude body is showcased in the opening sequences of *GIS*, it is never explicitly sexualized; instead, the film treats her body as a beautiful weapon integral to her work as an assassin and as a disposable shell that temporarily houses her "ghost" or spirit. Likewise, Teema's femininity is imbued with the charming androgyny of childhood: when we first see her, she looks like a fairy or alien surrounded by fantastic blue light; her hair is short and flows up from her face, like flames; eventually, she assumes the appearance of a prepubescent human girl, and Kenichi clothes her in baggy men's trousers.

Finally, both characters are associated most closely with the technologies from which they were "born" and which they rejoin when they "die." As Susan Napier notes in her reading of *GIS*, it is significant that Kusanagi is shown in the body of a young girl after she has merged with the Puppet Master and, by extension, the vast spiritual network of cyberspace.[11] The transformed child-Kusanagi walking out of Batou's apartment to explore the literally worldwide net—and the trace of Teema in the mechanical heart salvaged from *Metropolis*'s ruins—present complementary images of an alternative futurity. In this future, the technological Other is no "other" at all—neither an external space to be conquered nor an object to be used—but rather something that already exists within oneself. And it is perhaps in this sense that Japan's fantasy of the future diverges most sharply from the techno-oriental fantasies of American cyberpunk to which it pays homage. The difference is a rather significant one, and points as much to how Japan is changing the terms of orientalism as it does to how the United States keeps trying to reproduce them.

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[1] Takayuki Tatsumi, "Eye to Eye: An Interview with William Gibson," *Science Fiction EYE* 1 (1987): 13.

[2] William Gibson, "The Future Perfect: How Did Japan Become the Favored Default Setting for So Many Cyberpunk Writers?" *Time International* 30 April 2001: 48.

[3] See my dissertation, "Orientalism in Cyberpunk Cinema from *Blade Runner* to *The Matrix*," University of Texas at Austin, 2004 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 2004).

[4] Pam Rosenthal, "Jacked In: Fordism, Cyberpunk, Marxism," *Socialist Review* 21 (1991): 85.

[5] Nicola Nixon, "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied?" *Science-Fiction Studies* 19 (1992): 219–35; Sharon Stockton, "'The self regained': Cyberpunk's Retreat to the Imperium," *Contemporary Literature* 36:4 (1995): 588–613.

[6] Wendy Chun, "Orienting Orientalism, or How to Map Cyberspace," in *Asian America.Net: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cyberspace*, ed. Rachel Lee & Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (New York: Routledge, 2003), 3–36; Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[7] See Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2002); *Aliens R Us: The Other in Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Ziauddin Sardar & Sean Cubbitt (London: Pluto, 2002); and *Asian America.Net: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cyberculture*, ed. Rachel Lee & Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[8] Sato, "How Information Technology Has (Not) Changed Feminism and Japanism: Cyberpunk in the Japanese Context," *Comparative Literature Studies* 41:3 (2004): 340; Chun, "Orienting Orientalism," 15.

[9] Sato, "Information Technology," 347.

[10] Susan Napier, *Anime from* Akira *to* Princess Mononoke (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 105; Chun, "Orienting Orientalism," 21–23.

[11] Napier, *Anime*, 111.

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