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HL 98

Secondary Source Analysis

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Beyond the Western Gaze

Review of David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, eds. "Introduction." *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*.

(New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 2015)

In their introduction to *Techno-Orientalism*, editors David Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta Niu preface the collection of fifteen essays with a two-fold agenda: first, to demonstrate the discursive conspicuity of techno-Orientalism across disciplines and its conspicuous critical invisibility, especially in the genre of speculative fiction (SF); second, to highlight a turn away from the centrality of the Western gaze in the Orientalist framework and to unearth the opportunities for constructive reappropriations or reclamations of these Asian tropes. The latter shift marks a key departure from Edward Said's canonical framework. While Said's Orient is premodern, static, and exists as a unidirectional Western construction and fantasy, techno-Orientalism is future-oriented, dynamic, and bidirectional in its embeddedness within the global flows of informational and cultural capital. This underlying shift from Orientalism to the new-age, globalist techno-Orientalism finds expression in this provocative question, "Is techno-Orientalism still Orientalist if contemporary techno-discourse is being authored principally by Asians" (15)?

The Introduction's opening task is principally definitional, articulating techno-Orientalism as the "phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse" (2). Tracing the inception of the term to the 1990s, the Introduction situates techno-Orientalism in the tradition of the Western project of representational containment and securing dominance over the Orient. In short, techno-Orientalism updates Said's Orientalism: while Orientalism defines a modern West by producing an "oppositional" and premodern East, techno-Orientalism "symmetrically and yet contradictorily" completes this project by creating a "collusive," futurized Asia to further affirm the West's centrality (7). Japan and China are used as the main examples. Zooming into the principal locales of techno-Orientalist projects in the twentieth-century, the Introduction argues that Japan and China are signified differently in the techno-Orientalist vocabulary: Japan innovates, China manufactures; Japan creates technology, China is the technology (4). Asia thus embodies both the threat of economic competition to the West and the value of a great consumerist market and canvas for technological fantasies. This threat/value dualism is inscribed within a "premodern-hypermodern dynamic" (1)—as much as Asia is the crucial engine of the future, it is mysterious and contradictory. How so? Despite its consumerist society and hyperproduction, Asia is a mere simulacra of Western modernity due to the prevailing sense of the inhumanity of the Asian person, conceived as a vast, subaltern-like, and mechanized labor force—"the very antithesis of Western liberal humanism" (5). Therefore, even as the West projects its technological aspirations onto the techno-Orient, this speculative imagining of Asia—a simulacrum that is more West than the West—threatens the foundational fiction of the West as Future.

Yet, as tempting as it is to regard techno-Orientalism as merely ‘Orientalism, but with technology,’ the Introduction gestures to the role that global consumption and flows of capital play in inventing techno-Orientalism (3). More than a Western fixation on Asian futurism, the Introduction argues that techno-Orientalist tropes have been absorbed, reenvisioned, and replicated by other sites of cultural production, with interesting geopolitical implications. Using the example of how American cyberpunk has reinvigorated postwar Japanese narratives of *nihonjinron* (Japanese essentialism), the Introduction prods us to approach techno-Orientalism from several vantages: while cyberpunk is a techno-Orientalist fashioning and fetishizing of Japan, Japan itself has co-opted and absorbed the cyberpunk vision of Japan-as-signifier of futurity in its own nationalist narrative of postwar renaissance. Although the point of origin still remains solidly in the West, the metanarrative of techno-Orientalism has been embraced by Asia, parodically or reciprocally. Bearing in mind the bidirectionality of such discourses, what then is techno-Orientalism’s capacity for mediating cross-cultural encounters? While predecessors like Masanori Oda caution of “contact without encounter,” the volume proclaims a desire to counteract this skepticism, highlighting the possibility of techno-Orientalism as representational technologies that can engender “encounter” rather than empty contact or misconceptions (10).

Despite the focus on the transnational nature of techno-Orientalism, the volume curiously anchors its methodology in the “critical and theoretical toolboxes” of Asian American studies (10). The Introduction argues that the U.S. techno-Orientalist imagination has always been rooted in a view of “the Asian body as a form of expendable technology” (11). Situating the present-day techno-Orientalist narrative of China in the history of U.S. domestic discourse towards Asian immigrant labor (one example is the Vincent Chin incident of the 1980s), therefore, draws attention to the sustained thread of fear across decades: U.S. jobs and

manufacturing are being stolen by “inorganic, technologically infused persons” who threaten not only our economic but humanistic integrity (12). With this, the Introduction seems to be advocating for a more race-based analysis, cognizant of how racial stereotypes in the U.S. are increasingly intertwined with the dehumanizing, technologizing conventions of the Asian Other as inhuman, efficient, and unfeeling. While this is a compelling argument, and no doubt the stereotyping of Orientalized cyborg bodies is a central feature of techno-Orientalism, the methodology that the Introduction proposes is unclear. In fact, situating techno-Orientalism in the U.S. complicates the volume’s turn away from the primacy and fixity of the Western gaze in the first place. Perhaps, the volume is suggesting that we inspect techno-Orientalism with an ethnocentric lens and foreground the racial politics in techno-Orientalist tropes. However, how we ought to reconcile the transnational turn of techno-Orientalism in this volume with the U.S.-centric methodology of Asian American studies remains ambiguous at best.

After all, as we can tell from the preview of the order of essays in the final section of the Introduction, the volume is divided into two parts, with the second part of essays focused on how Asians are reclaiming or authoring contemporary techno-discourse. The turn towards the global in Asian or diaporic deployments of techno-Orientalism is a central tenet of the volume’s critical ambitions. Part I, “Iterations and Instantiations,” focuses on representational and historical examples of techno-Orientalist otherness across media, starting with the beginning of the twentieth century. More interestingly, Part II, “Reappropriations and Recuperations,” examines ironic and self-referential texts that seek to “recuperate” anti-imperial, anti-Orientalist critical and representational stances via techno-Orientalist reappropriations (16). The organization of essays reflects the Introduction’s own situating moves: from tracing Orientalism’s stranglehold

on representations of Asia in the technological age to an exploration of Asian futurity beyond the Western gaze.

Similarly, the sources that we glimpse in the Introduction also draw attention to the interdisciplinary slate of essays in the collection—historical-archival to literary historical materialist, visual studies, media studies, and of course, the technocultural. From the opening trope of Dr. Fu Manchu to close readings of William Gibson’s writings of Japan, from an image of Chinese factory workers to a screenshot from video game “Mists of Pandaria,” the Introduction engages in an interdisciplinary, multimedia sweep of techno-Orientalist representations across genres—exactly what the essays in the anthology purport to subsequently do. The dizzying array of cultural reference points, even in this short introduction, echoes the effect of schizophrenic significations of the techno-Orientalized subject in the realm of new media: in new media, the Asian subject is perceived to be producer (as cheapened labor), designer (as innovators), and fluent consumer (as subjects that are “one” with the apparatus). The breadth of sources thus not only shed light on technology as the operational mechanism of techno-Orientalism, but also draws attention to the new cultural modalities that facilitate cultural exchanges from manifold vantages.

Ultimately, what the Introduction powerfully does is demonstrate the potential of techno-Orientalism as a strategy of reappropriation as well as a heuristic for global capitalism, catapulting techno-Orientalism beyond the mode of stereotyping. The arc of argument in the Introduction and the preview of essays begs the question: Is techno-Orientalism still Orientalist without the Western gaze? With its breadth of sources and turn towards the global, the Introduction gestures towards an application and understanding of techno-Orientalism outside of the West, and conceptions of Asian futurity that could perhaps eschew the “Orient.” While it

never explicitly questions the relevance of “Orientalist” in “techno-Orientalism,” the Introduction does firmly establish techno-Orientalism as a lens for the age of globalization and technological advancements, setting the stage for the rest of the volume with urgency and analytical force.