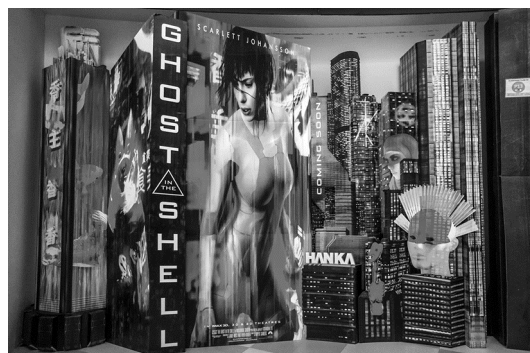


Hollywood whitewashing

adapted from an article by Yo Zushi

- 1 It took Steven Spielberg eight years to get *Ghost in the Shell* into production. His film company, DreamWorks, acquired the rights to adapt the cult Japanese science-fiction comic for a Western audience in 2008. Such a project is always a gamble, but Scarlett Johansson's casting in the lead role — as Major Kusanagi, a hacker-hunting cyborg — was a coup, and financial backers were lured by her star power. The moneymen were happy.



- 2 Online campaigners, however, were not. By the time the first image of Johansson as the Major was released last month, they were demanding: "Stop whitewashing Asian characters!" A petition under that slogan has attracted more than 101,000 signatures. "DreamWorks should be using this film to help provide opportunities for Asian-American actors," they said. The comic-book writer Jon Tsuei tweeted that *Ghost in the Shell* was an "inherently Japanese story", and that the choice of actors represented "the erasure of Asian faces".
- 3 Hollywood has a problem with representation — as the "all-white" Oscars of 2016 demonstrated — and anger over whitewashing is grounded in the obvious scarcity of prominent minority figures in the film industry. When characters written as Egyptian (as in Alex Proyas's *Gods of Egypt*), Native American (Joe Wright's *Pan*) or part-Chinese and Hawaiian (Cameron Crowe's *Aloha*) are played by the conspicuously white Rufus Sewell, Rooney Mara and Emma Stone, respectively, it's no wonder that minority activists get angry. The kind of race-blindness that Johansson's casting as Kusanagi represents, however, feels benign to me — even progressive.
- 4 It's worth thinking back to a similar uproar in 2013, when Benedict Cumberbatch played Khan Noonien Singh in *Star Trek Into Darkness*. At the time, Christian Blauvelt of hollywood.com, for instance, complained that the character had been "whitewashed into oblivion". Khan was a Sikh from northern India and the film-makers, he argued, should have chosen "an Indian actor" for the role. But these critics overlooked the fact that Khan was a villain, and his villainy had been needlessly racialised in earlier appearances. In the 1967 *Star Trek* episode *Space Seed* and in the 1982 film *Star Trek II: the Wrath of Khan*, he was played by the

Mexican actor Ricardo Montalbán. Khan's heritage went unmentioned until later spin-off novels expanded his biography, yet his name and the use of an ethnic-minority actor to portray him seemed intended to present him as an untrustworthy, foreign "other".

- 5 The portrayal of non-white characters by Cumberbatch and Johansson, in its small way, 21 a culture that assumes that the colour of your skin determines who you are. Major Kusanagi is the heroine of *Ghost in the Shell*, not its villain, and her embodiment by Johansson will have different implications from Cumberbatch's Khan. But the casting of whites as Asians serves as a reminder that much of what we understand as race is ultimately just performance, make-believe, a put-on.
- 6 Actress Constance Wu said that DreamWorks' attempts to counter claims of racially dubious casting by using digital effects to alter the shade of actors in *Ghost in the Shell* reduced "our race and ethnicity to mere physical appearance, when our race and culture are so much deeper than how we look". I agree: it was misguided. As the Stoic philosopher Epictetus said, "The true self . . . is not flesh or bones or sinews but the faculty which uses them."
- 7 Yet if our racial identity is not entirely determined by our bodies — if our essence is "deeper than how we look" — surely the authentic elements of our being can be brought to life by actors with "flesh" that is superficially different from our own. All acting is pretending. None of it is real: so why should an actor's race have to be?
- 8 The campaigners' plea for more diversity in Hollywood is valid but their insistence on minorities having exclusive rights over representing those whom they view as "their people" risks 23 colour lines. We will remain "people of colour" — a dubious term that means the same thing as "coloured people" — as long as race is fetishised as the core component of who we are. We should fight those who use stereotypes to define us by our race, not those who behave as if race weren't all that mattered.

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