



## Markets, Globalization & Development Review

Volume 3

Number 1 *Critical Perspectives on Marketing from Japan - Part 1*

Article 6


2018

# Perils of Hollywood Whitewashing?: A review of 'Ghost in the Shell' movie

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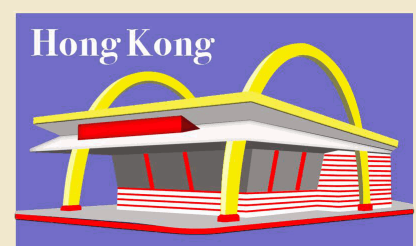
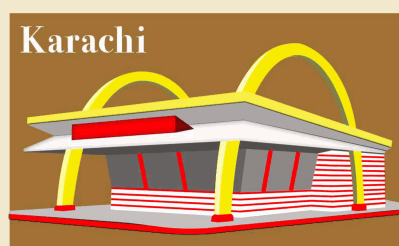
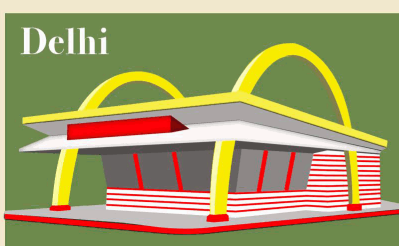
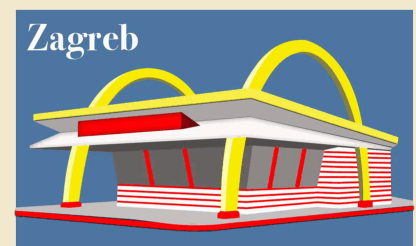
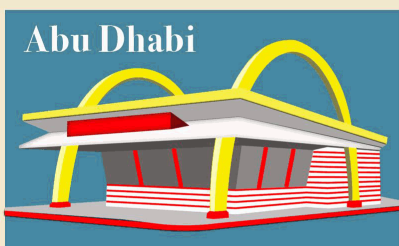
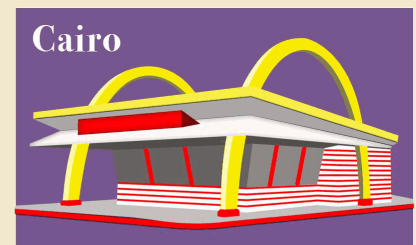
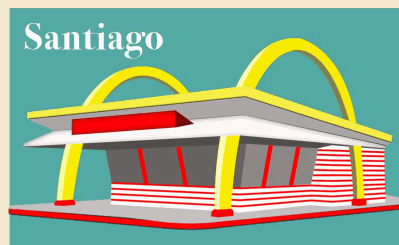
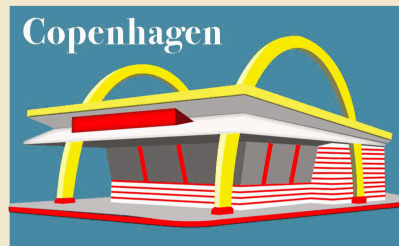
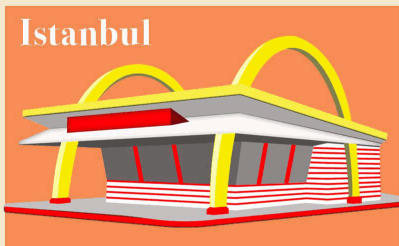
Mizukoshi, Kosuke (2018) "Perils of Hollywood Whitewashing?: A review of 'Ghost in the Shell' movie," *Markets, Globalization & Development Review*: Vol. 3: No. 1, Article 6.

DOI: 10.23860/MGDR-2018-03-01-06

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# Markets, Globalization & Development Review



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# Perils of Hollywood Whitewashing?: A review of 'Ghost in the Shell' movie

Kosuke Mizukoshi

## Abstract

'Ghost in the Shell' was first produced as a Japanese animated film in 1995. The movie and its sequels established a cult status due to the philosophical depth in portraying the posthuman condition. It was remade as a live action Hollywood film in 2017; and this version failed at the box office. One reason had to be the “whitewashing” issue – that the female protagonist was played by a white actress in the Hollywood movie, rather than a Japanese character as in the original anime. This review essay critically discusses issues of whitewashing, racial ‘identity’, the shifting identity of the ‘cyborg’, and the constitutive tension between the human and the machine.

## Keywords

Japan, Hollywood, critical, cyborg, whitewashing, human, artificial intelligence

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## Cover Page Footnote

The author expresses his thanks to MGDR editors, and especially to an MGDR reviewer with deep expertise in film and media, for detailed help in the development of this paper.

## ***Film Review***

# **Perils of Hollywood Whitewashing?: A review of *Ghost in the Shell* movie**

## **Introduction**

Ghost in the Shell was first produced as a Japanese animated film in 1995, and established a cult status due to its philosophical depth and its sophistication in cultivating the 'posthuman' condition in its narrative core. After many similarly successful and both artistically and philosophically sophisticated sequels (in one of which, Donna Haraway – the author of the famed 'Cyborg manifesto' essay, see Haraway 1991 – herself was portrayed as an animated character in a way she would appreciate). It was remade as a live action Hollywood film in 2017. Contrary to expectations, the 2017 Hollywood version performed poorly at the box office. One reason had to be the "whitewashing" issue – that the female protagonist of the narrative had been played by a white actress in the live action movie, rather than a Japanese character as in the original anime. This review essay critically discusses and distinguishes these two issues. Yet, in the course of the much publicized debates of whitewashing focusing on the racial 'identity' of the female protagonist, another divergence from the original storyline, that is actually more profound for the philosophical underpinnings of the cyberpunk thriller went almost entirely unnoticed – the shifting identity of the 'cyborg', and the constitutive tension between the human and the machine. This review essay aims to discuss both representational divergences critically by comparing the original anime and the live action movie, and the Japanese and western cultural contexts for evaluating these narrative tropes.

## **Automation and heteromation**

Technology development and social change are important issues in marketing (Dholakia 2012). In recent years, along with the evolution of artificial intelligence (AI) technology, including deep learning, the argument that human intelligence can be replaced by technology has been made frequently. If AI can be trained to analyze consumer insights and prepare perfect marketing plans, then even marketing itself may become unnecessary in the future (Conick 2016).

Advances in technology may make society better, but also produce dystopia (Dholakia and Firat 2017). The majority of the discussions on 'singularity' – the inter-merging of humans and automatons – focus on the dystopia that can potentially be created by AI. Robots and AI may deprive people of work and create The Matrix world. At some point in the future, can the automatons have rights like

human rights? Or, could they end up controlling humans? It is difficult to predict the future, but there is no doubt that humans have expectations and concerns for AI and robots.

In thinking about a future with AI and robots, it is of great significance to reflect on movies that explore this realm. *Ghost in the Shell*, which was remade in Hollywood in 2017, presents an interesting take. This movie, originally a Japanese manga and later an animated film in 1995, earned cult popularity, including in the United States. Its much-anticipated remake as a live-action English-language Hollywood movie, however, ended in failure. One reason is the movie's whitewashing problem – the casting of a white woman in the central role. According to *The Guardian* many fans complained, with more than 100,000 signing a petition against the whitewashing of the film. Japanese actor Rinko Kikuchi claimed “I am the woman that should have been cast.” The whitewashing issue concerns today's race discrimination problems, but even in the era of automation and heteromation, it seems that problems related to discrimination between humans and robots have been anticipated by this movie, in its various versions. The future problems that this movie points to may be the repetition of certain already existing problems.

In what follows I compare the original 1995 animation version in Japanese and the 2017 live-action Hollywood version in English, paying attention to the differences. I will consider the problems that occur in automation and heteromation, where heteromation refers to dependent coexistence of machines and humans – with the humans often getting exploited, in terms of contributing free or almost-free labor in support of automating processes (Ekbja and Nardi 2017). Two points are emphasized in the sections that follow, namely, the whitewashing and identity (or ghost) issues.

## **Ghost in the Shell in Japan**

The original anime movie *Ghost in the Shell* (*Kokaku Kidotai*) directed by Mamoru Oshii was released in Japan in 1995. It was produced based on the 1991 manga by Masamune Shiro, and it gained cult popularity, becoming highly appreciated even outside Japan. By 2012, the movie video and the DVD had about 1.3 million sales worldwide. Subsequently, diverse related works, such as novels and games appeared, each featuring different settings and characters. The influence of the original *Ghost in the Shell* is also large: the 1999 blockbuster *The Matrix* is said to be a project that the Wachowski Brothers produced after being inspired by *Ghost in the Shell*.

The 1995 *Ghost in the Shell* is set in the 21st century, in a futuristic Japan where science and technology have advanced dramatically. Cyborg technologies have really advanced, enabling direct connection of devices to the human nervous system using

micromachines. Meanwhile, the spread of cyborg prosthetic technologies has made artificial limbs ubiquitous. Many people can access the internet directly through their cyberbrain (den-no). In this advanced world, natural-born humans and androids coexist.

The main character is Motoko Kusanagi, called Major. She belongs to an official public security police organization, Public Safety Section 9 (commonly known as Kokaku Kidotai), which controls crime. Although she is drawn as a woman, in fact she had been made into a full cyborg in early childhood, with frequently an ambiguous sexual identity. She also has advanced combat capabilities due to her prosthetic body.

The important theme in the animation movie is the ghost. The ghost is the basis for being human, similar to a soul. Indeed, the Japanese title 'Ghost in the Shell' is an adaption of the well-known phrase 'Ghost in the Machine', coined by British philosopher Gilbert Ryle in 1949, as a critique of the enlightenment thinker René Descartes (see Ryle 2009). In the western usage, "ghost" similarly refers to "soul". In the Japanese adaption, the "machine" is replaced by the "shell" – which refers to prosthetic body in the narrative, the body of the 'cyborg'. Soul is said to be something that does not exist in machines. In the case of Motoko, who was made into a full cyborg in early childhood, she constantly questions her own ghost. A famous phrase that Motoko frequently speaks – revealing her inner thinking – is this: "My ghost whispers." The 'ghost whispers' phrase seems to imply that the ghost is not herself, but the ghost is always with her.

It is not only Motoko who has a ghost issue. The puppet master, who is positioned as a villain in the film, also thinks about ghosts. The puppet master is initially considered to be an amazing hacker who is the mastermind of many crimes, and Motoko tries to capture him. As the story progresses, however, it turns out that the puppet master is not a human being but artificial intelligence (AI) made through a project by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs gone rogue. The puppeteer has its own will, insists on having a ghost, being an organism, and even demands political asylum.

The puppet master says he is a new life form born in the sea of information. He has a unique idea of life based on information and he wants to change information as if it is a living organism. He wants to fuse and spread information, at times with death, and shift to an upper structure of life.

At the end of the story, Motoko leaves the body and heads to the world of information with him. "Well, where I am going, the net is huge," she mutters.

## **2017 Hollywood version**

In the Hollywood version, Scarlett Johansson plays the role of Major Mira Killian, who is a full-body cyborg. The movie was hounded by charges of a ‘whitewashing’ problem with regard to white people playing Asian characters. It was not certain whether this factor was critical or not, but the Hollywood version’s box office revenue was low. Deadline News reported that after vanishing in its opening weekend, it earned \$18.6 million at the box office. Some sources asserted that the production cost was far north of \$110 million, some estimates even reaching as high as \$180 million. It is said that the movie makers lost at least \$60 million. It was the same situation in Japan: the box office of the Hollywood version was about \$4 million in the first three days, which included a holiday. The movie reviews were not good in Japan, too.

The story was rewritten in the Hollywood version. Mira is a full cyborg, tracking the dangerous hacker Kuze, who is played by Michael Pitt. She is originally an ordinary adult woman who is converted into a full cyborg. This is one of the major differences between the original animation and the live-action version.

In the Hollywood live-action version, Mira is positioned as Robocop. Robocop is a classic trope of American movies: a police officer with a strong sense of justice is seriously injured and then made into a cyborg. The use of such a Robocop trope, rather than the lead character “raised as a cyborg” from childhood, is a cause of the Hollywood version’s low reputation in Japan. Although it is a globally comprehensible composition as a Hollywood version, the theme of the original *Ghost in the Shell* has been changed. In other words, the core issue – of the ghost indicating existence as a human being – has been changed to the problem of identity, as to who the real person is.

In the Hollywood version, as the story goes on, it becomes clear that Motoko was in a resistance several years ago. When resistance activities were oppressed, she nearly died and was made into a full cyborg. Kuze was also actually a member of its resistance, and was about to be made into a full cyborg, but his conversion was incomplete. It is also clear that the two were originally lovers. Mira’s mother also exists in the movie, and she believes her daughter Motoko had left several years ago. Mira was Motoko. Upon regaining her memory, Mira recognizes that the Hanka Robotics that made her into a full cyborg is the real enemy, and heads to the battle.

After the battle, Kuze proposes to go with Mira to the net space, but unlike in the original, she declines it. She indicates what she should be doing now, rather than sticking to the past, and the story ends. She establishes a real identity. It is the same ending as in *Robocop*. He also suffered from his own identity, but finally the story is completed after he

regains the original name Murphy as a human while still being a Robocop.

### **What is the whitewashing problem?**

Whitewashing is one of the important issues concerning race discrimination in video and film settings (Andersen 2003). It is not only the possibility of depriving work but also of perpetuating racial stereotypes. Even now, much of Hollywood movies are played by white people and are often subject to criticism. Ghost in the Shell was aptly subjected to similar criticisms.

The movie attempted to justify the whitewashing. The hero Mira is white after being made into a full cyborg. However, as stated in the story, she was originally Asian, and the role of her mother was assigned to a Japanese actor. In the near future world of automation and heteromation, it is good to say that there is no unique identity based on race. Such considerations, however, are not clear without seeing the movie carefully. At the time when casting was decided, the problem of whitewashing could not be avoided. Indeed, the remuneration received by Scarlett Johansson for this movie made her the highest paid actress of 2017.

Whitewashing, which became a problem in the United States and in western markets for this movie, on the other hand, was not considered a big problem in Japan. Time reported that many Japanese viewers applauded Johansson as the proper choice for the role based on her suitability for the movie's cyberpunk vibe – and her Japan-based roles as in the movie Lost in Translation (see the review of that movie, by Takemura 2016). Even Mamoru Oshii, director of the animated version in 1995, clearly denies this problem in the interview of IGN JAPAN:

“Major is cyborg and her body is completely virtual. The name ‘Motoko Kusanagi’ and the current body are not born names or bodies by nature. So, there is no basis for the assertion that an Asian woman has to play as her. Even if her original body (as if there was such a thing) was a Japanese, it does not change (<http://jp.ign.com/ghost-in-the-shell-live-action-movie/12278/news/>)”.

Likewise, original author Masamune Shiro touched on this matter in a postcard of another cartoon (Kokaku-no-Pandora, vol. 10) and defended the casting:

“The hero of the Hollywood version of the Ghost in the shell seems to be using the movie actress Scarlett Johansson's type of prosthetic body”.



The differences in responses between Japan and the United States may be attributed to the claim that Japanese people tend to prefer Caucasian actors (Strebinger et al. 2018). However, more importantly in this movie, the *Ghost in the Shell* was a work that focused on the ghost component as the basis of human beings. For fans of the ‘*Ghost in the Shell*’ genre of products, rather than race, the constitutive conflict of the narrative is between the human and the machine. This is illustrated in the part where the puppet master says “I am an organism, too, and the people fear and try to deny it”. A ubiquitous network of information that connects everything is depicted as replacing the social bonds in this dystopic future, and that is what makes the *Ghost in the Shell*’s theme so familiar to many Japanese people, as also to the non-Japanese fans of the original film.

If automation or heteromation actually advances in the future, the distinction between humans and machines becomes even more important. Will machines replace humans? Will machines be recognized as being like humans? How is coexistence possible? These problems are the new form of identity-confounding that the future portends.

The “cyborg” figure, which is the subject of ‘*Ghost in the Shell*’, is an “autonomous” being – not an “automatic” one, like a programmed robot. It is sentient, it “thinks”, it acts independently by its reason and senses, by processing information and evaluating situations, not in a ‘programmed’ fashion. It even alters its initial programming, develops itself and evolves by on its own, at both physical and linguistic levels. One of the sequels of the narrative highlights this point even in its title (‘*Ghost in Shell: Standalone Complex*’ — the term “standalone complex” here being a bad translation of “autonomous being/organism”).

In the Japanese anime, the possibility of coexistence of humans and machines is also depicted as a contrast between Motoko and Togusa, who is the only almost natural human in her team. The Hollywood version also includes this interaction, but the scene was comedic — the characters laughing at Togusa, an almost natural human, for using old-fashioned revolvers — and thus degrading the importance of this interaction. In the animation Japanese version, Togusa asks Motoko why he was invited to this team. She answered that a system constituted by the same standard product will have the same fatal defect somewhere, and suggested the significance of Togusa as a “non-standard” person. In fact, this depiction in the older *Ghost in the Shell* works, Togusa occupies a unique position as a human being unaffected by electric brain hacking and the like.

If human beings and machines can make use of their own strengths to complement one another, then a way to coexistence will be opened. The whitewashing issue is based on interchangeable

similarity. Similarity presents a possibility of coexistence, whereas different things are also a cause of conflict. In the same way, however, difference – as diversity – also enhances the possibility of coexistence, whereas extreme similarity could be a cause of systemic collapse.

### **Identity or Ghost**

Whitewashing relates to people's identity. The ghost, which was the criterion for separating humans from machines in the anime version, is read as an identity separating one's fake self from one's real self in the Hollywood version. This meaning replacement received mostly negative views in Japan. The anime version problematized the possibility of coexistence between humans and machines. Replacing the ghost problem as a matter of identity in the story correlates with the fact that whitewashing has happened in reality. Even if it is chosen to affirm ourselves at the end, it is still an identity issue.

In the animated version, the denial of identity seems thorough. This is indicated in a scene where a truck driver, who is planted with fake memory by the puppet master and becomes a terrorist, appears. His existence, which is not seemingly important, is also symbolic in that he is engaged in the most realistic and classic work of driving a truck in a cyberized world. No matter how much digitization progresses, and information processing advances, the work of carrying things has not changed. It continues to be done by people. At the same time, however, the cyberized world has an influence on him. He is hacked and manipulated as a criminal.

The important point is that his own identity is already hacked and planted. He talks to his coworkers, sharing about his daughter and dedication at work for her. However, this is also a fake memory. He believes himself so surely, but what he believes in is not certain. He is a lonely person for his entire life.

This scene is shown in both animated and Hollywood versions. Neither in the anime version nor in the Hollywood version, is he the hero. The hero also has no memory. Even if there is, it is only in the virtual world. However, unlike in the animated version, the purpose of the story in the Hollywood version is to get real memories, which culminates with the hero gaining her own identity. At this time, a whitewashing problem also occurs, because she decides whether she is Asian or not. Further, discrimination occurs between the hero and the truck driver – in that the hero gains identity and the side player does not get one.

What is important to a person in the unfolding automation era is not an identity, but a ghost. The main protagonist says, "The ghost always whispers to me." Whispering is neither a command of enforcement nor a meaningless monologue. Whispering is something that implies the existence of the ghost within us.

Whispering from the ghost seems to be equated with a divine voice in the West. This idea is Japanese and Asian, too. The ghost in the Western worldview today is internalized and refers to subjectification (Foucault 1975). This is the identity. Meanwhile, the ghost is something common to all humans: the component that enables a human being to be a person and to be a part of our human race. Moreover, the scene where the puppet master suggests that machines can also have such ghosts in the weave of information reflects pantheism of the Eastern religion rather than the monotheism of the western religions: the divine lives in all things, even machines. What we may aim for may be such a world.

### **A future that is already arriving**

Automation and heteromation are definitely progressing. However, it may only be that – in this evolving future – the focus changes from a distinction among (biological) race to a distinction between human and machine. What we have to think about at this time is to pay attention to the others that may also have a ghost – the possibility of sentience of machines.

The world in *Ghost in the Shell* will be realized, although it may still be a little way off. Nonetheless, the spread of the internet, which seemed to be a distant future in the 1995 animated film, is already a reality. Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) are also developing (Dholakia and Reyes 2013), alongside AI. The future of AI in human bodies and humans in cyborg bodies may be surprisingly close.

Sony's robot dog Aibo, which became a hotly discussed topic once, remains an interesting case. Aibo was released in 1999. It sold more than 150,000 units in Japan, the US, and Europe. It was developed until the fifth generation. Further releases were canceled in 2006. In 2017, however, a decision was made to relaunch this robotic dog. A new Aibo will appear in 2018.

It seems that there were differences between Japan and the United States regarding what Aibo is. As a Harvard Business School case shows, Aibo was accepted as a pet in Japan. Meanwhile, in the United States, there was a tendency to take Aibo as an advanced toy. In Japan, many users purchased Aibo as a pet that does not die, such that even after the end of the sale, there was a long need for repair and support. Although Aibo is a machine, it is not eternally immortal, as it will eventually break. In 2015, Aibo funerals were held at temples and YouTube videos of them became viral through *New York Times* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8QYDpbLQ-To>).

No one knows if Aibo has a ghost. However, people who at least accepted Aibo as a pet would have felt a ghost in Aibo. It is impossible for others to deny this.

The newly appearing Aibo will be more immortal than ever. The body may still break, but the memory is completely saved in the cloud. Ordinary Aibo had memory in the machine's head, but the new Aibo memory will remain forever in the vast net. What should we think about in terms of these new "lives"? Should we reconsider identity as race? How should we consider the difference between humans and machines, especially intelligent and sentient machines? Should we consider the possibility of coexistence? It is necessary to question these points critically.

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