

LACK OF DIVERSITY IN MOVIES CONTINUES

by REEMA SALEH

Following the release of photographs by Paramount Pictures that unveiled Scarlett Johansson as the main character of this American adaptation of *Ghost in the Shell*, fans of the original franchise and others grew angry at the casting of a white woman to play the Japanese Motoko Kusanagi.

“By casting a white actor into a role that would have been for a person of color, it’s kind of like Paramount telling the viewers that they don’t really care about the story or that they just want to make money,” Senior Chandni Amin said. “I know that’s their profession, but they should have more respect for the actual story.”

The original story, stemming from a Japanese animated film franchise, will be adapted and set for release in 2017. While few details of the plot have been revealed, Paramount has revealed that the film will follow female cyborg Motoko Kusanagi as she leads a fictional counter-cyberterrorist organization called Public Security Section 9 against dangerous criminals and extremists. The backlash against the film producers for casting a white actress to play a Japanese woman has been notable. For Amin, this ‘whitewashing’, where roles for people of color are played by white actors, has limited the number of roles available to people of color.

“Most of the roles are still filled by white actors even though there are also actors of color that could be filling those roles and sometimes could be doing an even better job than the white actors that were picked,” Amin said. “Paramount had this big opportunity presented to them to put an actor of color into a leading role in a major film and they haven’t. By casting [Scarlett Johansson] as Motoko Kusanagi, they chose a well-known white actor or caucasian actor to fill that space.”

For Junior Matthew Cao, the choice of Scarlett Johansson is not because the producers intentionally chose to ignore Asian actors in the casting process, but because they wanted to draw in a larger audience with a well-known actor.

“I don’t think their main purpose is whitewashing, but their primary purpose is, because it’s a business, to make money and Scarlett Johansson is more marketable,” Cao said. “I see it more as just the business industry making what they can. By choosing Scarlett Johansson they would likely garner more support for the film because a lot of people aren’t familiar with the source material since it’s mainly popular in Japan.”

The Japanese publisher Kodansha, which licensed *Ghost In The Shell* to Paramount, Pictures believes that Scarlett Johansson was well cast in the role with the Director of International Business, Sam Yoshida, remarking that they had never imagined for a Japanese actress to be cast and that her casting is the chance for a Japanese property to become popular in the United States.

Senior Errin Baylis believes that this casting is an example of how often ‘whitewashing’ occurs in Hollywood.

“It’s really upsetting because there are the people who actually do follow these and there are the people who can actually relate to these characters and that’s taken away from

them under the guise of wanting more money when in reality, every movie that has been whitewashed ever has bombed,” Baylis said. “These roles are the ones that are being given to white people and people of color are being erased from their own stories.”

While Scarlett Johansson’s casting has been controversial, claims that Paramount Studios have been experimenting with computer imagery to make Johansson appear more Asian has been met with more anger.

“I’m a little bit bothered that rather than hire an Asian actor to play the part they would create and developed technology to make the white actor look Asian or make Scarlett Johansson look Asian and I feel like it would save a lot of time and money in terms of budgeting for the film if they had just hired an Asian actor,” Cao said. “I think Scarlett Johansson is a fine actor, but I don’t think they picked her for her acting ability. They picked her for her marketing ability.”

In the wake of the controversy, online petitions have amounted over 100,000 signatures in favor of Paramount

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Pictures recasting Scarlett Johansson, arguing that “the industry is already unfriendly to Asian actors without roles in major films being changed to exclude them.”

“I understand what they’re feeling in terms of how they feel betrayed in terms of their character,” Cao said. “A lot of people have grown up with the original series because ‘*Ghost in the Shell*’ is old and a Japanese classic. They’ll feel betrayed if it’s not being portrayed accurately.”

This lack of diversity in the film industry has become more evident in the recent aftermath of the #OscarsSoWhite campaigns, but Baylis comments on how the trend of excluding people of color from roles specifically written

for them has been around for all this time.

“In ‘Pan,’ Tiger Lilly is supposed to be Native American, and she is played by Rooney Mara, who is very white. There’s the ‘*The Lone Ranger*’, where Johnny Depp plays a very racist version of a Native American. There’s *Aloha*, where Emma Stone plays an Asian-American character when she is very white. You have ‘*The Last Airbender*’, where only the villains and extras are portrayed by Asian actors in a pretty Asian-influenced film,” Baylis said. “There are so many movies that consistently do this, but all of these movies have bombed. So what’s the reason for continuously doing this other than racism?”

While new Oscar guidelines in response to the controversy include commitments to diversity, hoping to double the number of women and minorities in the academy by 2020 and make the voting body reflective of film industry, this recent ‘*Ghost in the Shell*’ controversy has caused Baylis to believe that any of these commitments are not indicative of real change.

“There aren’t enough roles for people of color and the thing is that the roles that are stereotypical are the ones that the people of color are getting,” Baylis said. “I think as long as we live in a culture where white is seen as better than anyone else, they aren’t actually going to listen, and they’re not actually going to care.”

Cao believes that the film industry will be more open to actors of color as time passes.

“In films like the new ‘*Rogue One*’ Star Wars movie, they’re hiring an Asian actor, Donnie Yen, to play in it,” Cao said. “I think that shows that they’re not specifically choosing by race. I think as years go by, they’ll progress and will be open to more international actors in the future, once they realize the potential with international actors.”

Even with her doubts on how well Paramount Pictures has responded to this controversy, Amin believes that the film industry will eventually respond to the attention on ‘whitewashing’ in Hollywood.

“I don’t think [Paramount] is going to acknowledge that this is a problem because they are part of the problem,” Amin said. “But considering how big the backlash was, they’re going to listen and I feel like it’ll set the pace for coming change.”

