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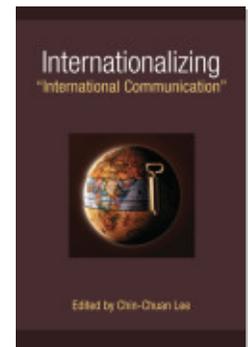Published by University of Michigan Press

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The Enduring Strength of Hollywood

The "Imperial Adventure" Genre and Avatar

Jaap van Ginneken

During the last decade of the twentieth century, we have witnessed the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact, and the eastern European bloc of Communist countries, as well as the emergence of the Internet as an instrument of globalization. The ensuing "free market" euphoria led to a series of economic bubbles and their bursting around non-Western currencies, dot-com shares, and housing mortgages—culminating in the worldwide credit crisis of 2008.[1]

Today, we are witnessing the rapid emergence of new powers such as Brazil, India, and China, not so much because of "development aid," but rather because these countries turn out to be large and diversified enough to kick off cycles of capital accumulation and productivity gains on their own.

One major question remains: To what extent will these profound changes affect the global landscape of international/intercultural/interethnic communication and media? The debate on a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), within the framework of the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO), was sidelined long ago, due to fierce opposition from the dominant media powers: the major Anglo-Saxon countries and their closest allies, representing the largest and most of all the richest media home markets in the world.

Recent years have finally seen the emergence of some significant non-

Western media and media groups. Yet the media materials circulating between continents do still mostly originate from the Western world. This holds for news agency dispatches and syndicated journalism, books and translations, comic strips and video games, toy characters and gadgets. It holds for news pictures and films, television series and formats, as well as movies. True, Hong Kong, Bombay, and other cities have become major film hubs, but few of their movies make an impact beyond the immediate neighboring countries and overseas diasporas of Chinese and Indians, for instance.

To fathom the implications of this state of affairs, we need to focus not on alternative cinema but on worldwide blockbusters instead (Stringer, 2003), which help shape the global conscience, its view of history, geography, and society. The website IMDb provides an elaborate database on movies. Among other things, it carries up-to-date numbers on the "Worldwide box office" revenue generated by individual movies during their theatrical releases. This is also the basis for an all-time blockbuster list. Recently, it had 390 movies that had made more than two hundred million dollars in cinemas up to that point.[2] Let us consider a further breakdown.

Who Makes Global Blockbusters? The Pyramid and the Prism

Of these almost four hundred movies, 70.3 percent mentioned a single producing country: namely, in 67.9 percent (or more than two-thirds) of cases, the United States alone; in a meager 2.3 percent, a country other than the United States. These latter few percent involved four times another Anglo-Saxon country, thrice a European country, and twice Japan. By contrast, 29.7 percent, or almost a third, of the films were listed as international co-productions. Of these, 27.4 percent (or more than a quarter) of all the blockbusters also mentioned the United States as a participant; a miniscule 2.3 percent did not. By far the largest part of the co-productions, or 19.2 percent of the blockbusters overall, mentioned another Anglo-Saxon country (Canada, the United Kingdom and Ireland, Australia and New Zealand), 15.9 percent a continental European country (mostly Germany, because of a special tax law there), and only three films involved Japan.

So the United States remains the mammoth in this field, with even its closest allies playing only a marginal role. Other countries are rather insignificant. Hong Kong was mentioned three times as a territory participating in a production, the People's Republic of China and Taiwan once (for the same brilliant *wuxia* movie, *Crouching Tiger*). But India was not mentioned

at all (*Slumdog Millionaire* was not listed as an Indian production, though partly in Hindi).[3] Nor was any other country from other continents listed: none from Asia and the Pacific, Central and South America, Africa, or the Middle East.

Most blockbusters listed one of the "seven sisters" among the Hollywood studios as the prime participating company: Universal (43), Warner (42), Disney (including Buena Vista, 35), Twentieth Century Fox (including Fox 2000, 32), Paramount (29), Columbia (22), and the relative newcomer Dreamworks (20). Even lesser American studios registered many more hits than (originally) European companies, such as Polygram (3) and Gaumont (1). Sony was mentioned once. A key question is of course why the United States is so far ahead of all others. Is it just its political and economic, cultural, and linguistic clout worldwide? Or are there other structural factors as well?

One major factor is of course that in Hollywood, filmmaking is unequivocally a commercial affair. Participants make an investment and a calculation about how they plan to recoup their money. They gamble, but cover their risks—usually by not departing too far from the ideological mainstream. Films are also "tested" on U.S. audiences before release. If needed, new scenes are shot, other scenes are re-edited. Sometimes, a completely new ending is added (usually more upbeat), until the whole proves to "work" with audiences.

In Europe and elsewhere, filmmaking is often approached in a more "arty" way, by contrast, with government subsidies playing a key role. Producers often cave in to "auteur" directors. But the most important factor is this: the United States is already a mosaic society of immigrant groups, including many recent ones who are not always fluent in English yet. European countries have long lived with more or less monolithic linguistic and cultural reference frames. Most popular French and German films, Italian and Spanish ones, therefore, do not cross cultural borders very well.

Hollywood learned from the start to make movies that crossed lines between communities relatively easily by playing on very primary reactions to impressive "production values": elaborate sets and props, grandiose spectacle and special effects—always employing the latest in technology, however expensive—a cast of recognizable stars, and an attendant star system, with festivals and awards, paparazzi and gossip.

Among the almost four hundred blockbusters on the list, furthermore, there were at least forty different series of sequels of two or more films. Apparently, such recognizable formulas can be marketed globally with ease—

across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans—supported by fast food chains and soft drink companies with considerable clout. They also tie in with games and television series, toys and figurines, posters and clothing, books and comics—alliances making each separate release a multi-billion enterprise. The numbers also seem to be suggesting an accelerating trend on this score.

One key question remains as to what extent this American and G7 predominance affects non-Western audiences. Who can have his or her voice heard on the world stage, and who remains largely silent? The nature of the problem may be illustrated by a crude comparison. The makers of most blockbusters form a kind of pyramid or prism. They are mostly white males with English as their mother tongue, multi-millionaires or aspiring to become one as soon as possible. They look at the rest of the world from the perspective of the major Western urban centers—although most do apparently see themselves as cosmopolitan and liberal.

On a more fundamental level, however, they have usually internalized a mid-Atlantic view of global history and geography, its central myths and legends. Even if they feel they have just freely "thought up creative fantasies," they often unwittingly reproduce clichés from a pre-existing body of folklore and popular culture (pulp novels, comic strips)—often harking back to colonial and segregationist days. So many blockbusters remain ethnocentric, even today: they tend to make non-Westerners look at the world through Western eyes.

But their effect is not always simple, as there is always a "negotiation of meaning" throughout the entire process—from production to reception. The latter has been well demonstrated by early studies on the differing interpretation of central themes in the supposedly "Texan" blockbuster television series *Dallas* by American, Dutch, Israeli, and immigrant viewers there, and ultimately also Japanese (Ang, 1985; Liebes & Katz, 1990).

"Cultural Encounter" Genres and Stereotypes

One of the central notions in film studies is that of "genre," which is derived from a French term for kind or category. The notion was long taken for granted, although a closer look reveals that there are many different, often overlapping and contradictory, ways to distinguish genres. The dominant theme may play a role, or the way in which it is treated, for instance. Genres often bring their own idiom or grammar. Newer films often refer back to famous scenes and characters in earlier "classical" films in the same

category, either explicitly or implicitly. Part of the joy of looking at such films is being able to recognize and decode such "inter-textual" references to predecessors (Altman, 1999; Neale, 2002).

Within the aforementioned list of almost four hundred bestselling blockbusters of all time, "intercultural encounters" often play a major role. One may select some 80 movies or 20 percent in which this is clearly the case, and group them into a dozen categories for closer inspection. Within these categories, one may try to identify "meta-narratives" and "sub-texts" through discourse analysis and similar approaches, and illustrate these with case studies of some prominent and overly familiar examples. But other observations may deal with recurring choices in casting and props, images and sounds. Various academic disciplines, sub- and inter-disciplines, have wrestled with the question of the possible influence of such tropes and clichés.

Like many social sciences, international/intercultural/interethnic communication and media studies are primarily an Anglo-American affair today. Yet, dominant Anglo-American media images have always been critically dissected, often by scholars with some kind of privileged tie to other cultures. The mere reproduction of stereotypes by such media does of course not necessarily lead to their internalization, as the *Dallas* studies point out. Yet it may be illuminating to try and analyze their hidden logic. Popular culture and film studies have increasingly done so over the last generation. Some early examples were Nederveen Pieterse's study (1992) on "blackness," Dyer's study (1997) on "whiteness," Shohat and Stam's study (1994) on "Eurocentrism," and Bernstein and Studlar's study (1997) on "Orientalism" in film.

I myself long taught a video-illustrated course on dominant Western media images of other cultures for students coming from all continents. I developed two English books for it: an earlier one on *Understanding Global News* (1998), and a later one on *Screening Difference* (2007) in the movies. Whereas some of the aforementioned film studies also included rather technical analyses of unfamiliar art house movies, I chose to focus mostly on a discussion of commercial successes in plain, everyday language. The chapters were built around the detailed dissection of some ten different intercultural encounter genres, series, and prime examples—one at the time.

Animated cartoons made for children provided a good appetizer about a wide range of overly familiar stereotypes, for instance, the four major 1990s Disney productions on exotic boys from the Middle East and Africa, respectively (*Aladdin* and *Lion King*), and about exotic girls from the Americas and Asia (*Pocahontas* and *Mulan*). After that introduction, I switched to a

largely chronological grid. In religious movies, Old Testament movies have a clear tendency to include anti-Arab elements (e.g., successive versions of *The Ten Commandments* as well as *The Prince of Egypt*); many pre-war New Testament movies had a tendency to include anti-Jewish elements (partly revived in *The Passion of the Christ*). Antiquity movies, in turn, treat Greece rather differently from Persia (e.g., *Troy, Alexander, 300*).

Of course the cinematic history of European overseas expansion is shot through with familiar tropes. Wilderness adventure has various sub-genres: monster movies (e.g., the successive versions of *King Kong*), jungle man movies (e.g., the successive versions of *Tarzan*), and castaway/survivor movies (e.g., the successive versions of *Robinson Crusoe* and its present-day "reality television" spin-offs). The clichés of the western genre are of course also overly familiar: even a worthwhile revisionist western like *Dances with Wolves* is unable to break clear of all of them. British colonial adventures in turn are of course U.K. centric: whether supposedly historical (*Lawrence of Arabia* or the successive versions of *Anna and the King*) or fictional (the successive versions of *Alan Quatermain*—the key model for the later *Indiana Jones*).

Several special themes stand out. Romantic and erotic encounters between white Western men and "colored" non-Western women show a particular hidden logic, for instance, whether situated in the Pacific (the successive versions of *The Mutiny on the Bounty* as well as almost all other South Seas movies) or in East Asia (the successive Geisha-type movies and movies about China). At the same time "Us" versus "them" is of course at the heart of all armed confrontation abroad: in the spy sub-genre (*James Bond*), the lone commando sub-genre (*Rambo*), and the limited military expedition overseas genre (*Black Hawk Down*). Science fiction further projects these intercultural themes into space and into an imaginary future (e.g., the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* series).

All these genres and films turn out to be ethnocentric in a wide variety of ways: from supposed "research" to overt wish-fulfillment fantasies about characters and story lines. That's the case not only because they obviously prefer Western authors and Western accounts, often dating back to the days of colonialism and segregation, and still bearing many traces of them, or because they mostly consult Western experts or submit to Western pressure groups (e.g., for religious or patriotic movies). It's also because these ideological orientations do determine a wide range of cinematic details that we will usually tend to overlook.

Time and again, it can be demonstrated that even technical choices

concerning light, color, and camera movements, for instance, are used in a highly ideological manner. The choice of (the ethnicity of) actors, their makeup, and their costumes is often ideological. The props, sets, and design are often oriented in similar ways, as are the sound and music, language and speech. In sum, they often reflect the legacy of a large variety of imperial adventure movies. Even where they ostensibly try to "revise" the original drift, they mostly remain mired in the same old idiom and grammar.

Of course similar things also hold for Chinese or Indian or other films aimed at a large home audience. On the one hand, they remain "open" texts that can be "read" in a variety of ways. On the other hand, they are often built around "saming" and "othering." They flatter their own people and denounce the enemy. But their influence abroad is very limited, in contrast to Hollywood blockbusters.

James Cameron and the *Avatar* Project

Soon after the publication of the *Screening Difference* book, the 3D super-mega-giga blockbuster *Avatar* was released. On the one hand, it seemed to be a unique and standalone project. On the other hand, it seemed to be an adept re-combination of all the aforementioned genres, a kind of *Emerald Forest* meets *Dances with Wolves*, or *Indiana Jones* meets *Star Wars*. To what extent was it able to break free of the accumulated body of clichés, or did it inevitably remain mired in it?

We should begin to emphasize that director James Cameron is an extremely versatile filmmaker. Born to a Canadian family that later moved to California, he had done the first treatment of *Spiderman* there, wrote the first version of *Rambo*, wrote and directed the successful science fiction movies *Terminator*, *Alien*, and the *Abyss*, and the romantic disaster movie *Titanic*—the highest grossing film up to that day (Robb, 2002). He always showed great affinity with natural science, advanced technology, and special effects, and was one of the first blockbuster directors to get involved in the development of a new generation of 3D systems after the turn of the millennium. He had also made underwater documentaries, as well as covered mythical and biblical themes (*Exodus Decoded*, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*).

Cameron claimed the earliest inspiration for *Avatar* came from a dream his mother had reported when he was young. Just after the mid-seventies he said he had developed a first screenplay along those lines, and just before the mid-nineties a more elaborate script. But he had to wait ten more years for imaging technology to catch up. Filming started in April 2007, and the film was finally released in time for the Christmas season in late

2009. The term *avatar* originally referred to a Hindu god incarnating in a human body, but it had meanwhile become video game speak for a figure onscreen representing the player. In this case, the characters are supposedly deep asleep in the human world when they are wide awake in the alien world, and vice versa.

The story is set in 2154 on the moon Pandora of a planet in a distant galaxy. A terrestrial corporation has financed a huge space program to send a large-scale armed expedition there in order to mine the rare substance "unobtainium," which is worth "twenty million a kilogram." But the corporation runs into opposition from aboriginals, the Na'vi. A small group of explorers is trained to inhibit native bodies as "avatars," to win the locals over or infiltrate them, or do both. At the very last moment, one of those scientists dies and has to be replaced by his "genetically identical" twin brother. This Marine veteran, Jake, who is in a wheelchair, is the central protagonist of the movie.

The film paints an extremely enchanting fantasy world. It uses the very latest in "synthetic" imaging techniques, blending real actors with elaborate computer animation. It is the first major 3D blockbuster of a new generation, where special glasses suggest an in-depth view. The story and characters seem highly original at first. But upon closer inspection, they turn out to borrow heavily from the entire "intercultural encounter" film library I discussed in my book *Screening Difference*. We will see that it also harks back to specific scenes and story lines in a wide range of similar previous "imperial adventure" movies.

A key question is whether *Avatar* became the greatest blockbuster so far in spite of the fact that it recycled all clichés of the genre, or exactly because it did. Even at a running time of more than two-and-a-half hours, a fantasy movie can be much more efficient if it works with all the stereotypes already pre-installed in the audience's minds. In Hollywood movies, this is often called "research": making a prior inventory of all narratives and visuals on a particular topic, and taking it from there. For major Disney animation features, it is even standard procedure. So let us look at how five major themes of *Avatar* resonate with its forerunners.

1. The Theme of the Underpopulated "Virgin" Land

Films and sequences start with an "establishing shot" of a location that sets the scene and the tone for what follows. Good examples are the 1492 "discovery of America" sequences in archetypical Columbus movies (at least three of which were almost simultaneously released upon the 500th an-

niversary of the landing). They show an aerial shot of immaculate vegetation, suggesting uninhabited "virgin lands" belonging to nobody, and thus seemingly offering themselves up for exploration and exploitation. *Avatar* starts with very similar shots. Somewhat later, there often is an imperative counter-shot. In Columbus movies, we observe the encroachers from and through the foliage as an obviously native hand pushes the branches aside, alerting us to a possible impending confrontation.

Further to the interior of the discovered land, majestic waterfalls are often a key feature of the landscape. They may cover grotto entrances or passages to secret valleys behind them. They denote the deepest heart of the newly penetrated land, between upstream rivers and lakes. The first major Western explorers of Africa went looking for the origins of the Nile, found a lake and falls, which they then named after the British queen Victoria. It has become the arch template for such settings.[4]

The features of that precise landscape and Mount Kilimanjaro also played a key role in the visuals of Disney's African *Lion King*, for example (largely plagiarized from the preceding Japanese *Kimba*, by the way). The first major Western explorers of present-day Zaire explored the higher reaches of the Congo River. Think of Joseph Conrad's terrifying *Heart of Darkness*—also a major source of inspiration for Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam War movie, *Apocalypse Now.*[5]

The "heart of darkness" itself is located in a forest, of course: not just any forest, but a dense rain forest. The largest remaining one still stretches all the way from the Amazon Basin to the Orinoco River in the north. Near the mouth of the latter river lies a small island that had become a key motif in imperial adventure fantasies, the imaginary location of the aforementioned *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe (recycled in present-day popular "reality television" formats).

Such natural settings are of course inhabited by wild and exotic animals, which are used to scare readers and viewers alike in imperial adventure narratives. *Indiana Jones*, *The Mummy*, and their like also capitalize on such animals in a desert environment. Disney's *Tarzan* and *Lion King* even reduce Africa to a tourist safari park and entirely blot out the natives, as a potential source of embarrassment. *Avatar* in turn scares its audiences with sci-fi versions of the same familiar tropical zoo, ranging from "scorpions, lizards and bats" to "hyenas, panthers and rhinos" (according to explanations in the script).

The superlatives of scary animals in such movies are prehistoric monsters, surviving in those very same deep unexplored interiors, derived from

the dinosaurs in *The Lost World* by Conan Doyle, spilling over into the original *King Kong* story co-authored by Edgar Wallace, and also revived in *Godzilla* and *Jurassic Park*. In *Avatar*, they find their parallel in the appearance of smaller and larger dragon-like animals, which are then domesticated.[6]

Matinee audiences for intercultural encounter and imperial adventure movies are also habitually scared with masses of creepy smaller animals (bats, rats, spiders, and so forth) as well as with repulsive animal food. Think of the recurring fried beetles, baby snakes, sheep eyeballs, live monkey brain dishes, etcetera, that are standard fare in the *Indiana Jones* series. In *Avatar*, the natives eat beetle larvae as a delicacy, and live worms as a sacred medicine. They send shivers through the theater—exactly as intended—and further help to "otherize" the aliens.

2. The Theme of the Primitive Native Tribe

We have seen that the imperial adventure story primarily feeds on two major predecessors: the American "cowboys and Indians" story (with "cowboys" including early settlers and later cavalry) and the European "colonial adventure" story (with the travails of British, French, and other pioneers in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere).[7]

In the original versions, ethnic difference between the explorers and the natives is highlighted in a wide range of different ways. In traditional Western thinking, "skin color" was the prime signifier of "race," as can be seen in all popular visual arts. First, the explorers are and remain lily white, to such an extent that they often hardly show a suntan—even after decades in the tropics (as in the case of *Tarzan*). Many often have exaggerated light blond hair and exaggerated light blue eyes (as in the case of *Lawrence of Arabia*).

The natives, with skins ranging from beige to brown, are seen and emphatically depicted as "colored" by contrast, with East Asians as "yellow," Native Americans as "red," and Africans as "black" (in comic strip versions by Disney and others, they are often literally given such primary colors). In *Avatar*, the natives are assigned the primary color cyan blue, in order to stay away from this real-life race heritage, but still remain within the same repertoire.[8] Most also have the long black hair of Native Americans, but some also show the fashionable braids of African Americans.

Second, the whites in imperial adventure movies are implicitly seen and depicted as of "normal" height—even though the male heroes themselves may sometimes be slightly above average. Asians are mostly seen and de-

picted as slightly smaller on average, and therefore sneaky. Africans are of-
ten seen and depicted as slightly larger on average and therefore implicitly
threatening. They are also larger in a sexual sense, in the "rape and lynch-
ing" lore of the segregationist southern United States.

In *Avatar*, the natives are made considerably larger than the explor-
ers. Their ethnicity is a mix of Native American and African. They are
also somewhat "animalized" and explicitly ascribed "feline" characteris-
tics. Jake's love interest, Neytiri, hisses like a cat whenever threatened, for
instance. The Na'vi natives move rapidly through the trees, swinging on
lianas—as in *Tarzan*. The colonel therefore derogatively calls them "blue
monkeys." But the clan leader retorts that the colonel "smells" in turn (an-
other key signifier of racial difference).

The other senses are also enlisted. In *Avatar* and many such movies,
views of the jungle are overlaid with the sound of an isolated pan flute to
denote quiet nature, contrasted with massive drums (and sometimes col-
lective chants), denoting the disquieting presence of a threatening tribe
nearby—for instance, in *King Kong*. A warrior also shouts "an ululating
warning"—familiar from North African Arabs and North American na-
tives. Cameron even took great care to have ethno-linguists develop a local
language—as Gene Roddenberry had already done with great success for
the original *Star Trek* TV series, which he created and produced.[9]

3. The Theme of the Indigenous Natural Worldview

Avatar illustrates that the "creative avant-garde" in the Western metropoli-
tan centers that holds itself to be "most advanced" is trying to rehabilitate
the seemingly most backward natural religions of indigenous peoples and
rain forest tribes—by slightly adapting them to their own tastes as they are
purged of their multitude of personal gods and turned into a new kind of
abstract pantheism.[10]

That is the idea that the entire universe and planet Earth, as well as
its plants and animals, form a godlike perfect whole—the equilibrium of
which should be respected rather than disturbed. Such Greenpeace eth-
ics emerged in a range of previous blockbusters, particularly "revisionist"
depictions of "Indians" with a superior morality—as in the aforementioned
Emerald Forest and *Dances with Wolves*. They embody the "noble savages"
of the Enlightenment philosophers. At one point, the hero of *Avatar* notes
(Cameron, 2007, p. 84 in the script): "They don't even have a word for
'lie'—they had to learn it from us."

The privileged way to experience this connectedness is through Zen-

like meditation, *Avatar*'s heroine suggests (p. 64): "When you hear nothing, you will Hear everything. When you see nothing, you will See everything." Within the media, chroniclers of religion were first and foremost to point to this noteworthy aspect of the New Age fairy tale. A commentator in the *New York Times* noted "Cameron's long apologia for pantheism . . . Hollywood's religion of choice for a generation now." A reviewer for a major Christian film website added that the film was "a virtual apotheosis of Hollywood mythopoeia," as it "is not so much something that has never been done as something that everything else has been trying to be or preparing for," citing among other things "hippie politics" with "eco-spiritual and pacifist themes" (Greydanus, 2009).

This environmental consciousness seems to have taken hold at "five minutes to midnight," when the world's climate is already changing, raw materials seem to be running out, the rain forests are dwindling, and biodiversity is shrinking at an alarming rate, with unique plant and animal species dying out every single day. It is a secular religion worshipping Mother Nature and Mother Earth.

The earth goddess Gaia has maintained subtle balances so far—just like Pandora's equivalent goddess Eywa. This theme is underlined by the exalted design and visuals of *Avatar*, some of them harking back to the first lyrical documentaries about the strange alternative underwater universe by the famous French diver Jacques Cousteau and to the idyllic photo and film reports commissioned by the American National Geographic Society, its magazine and television arms.

The living totem of the tribe is an ancient sacred willow tree, the "well of souls" that helps the natives connect to their forefathers. "Signal transduction" connects all living organisms to an "electrochemical network" of energy, a force field that exists between plant tendrils, animal antennae, and human neurons. Each of the billions of trees has ten thousand connections to other trees—"more than a human brain."

The Na'vi are also capable of thought transmission. "It's a global network" with "uploading and downloading," the movie explains, in an obvious reference to the global Internet. The aggressive invaders threaten to cut such vital connections, sometimes literally. But near-dead people can be revitalized by restoring "the bond." The network is symbolized by a kind of blue-green spiritual luminescence reminiscent of ghost movies.

In *Avatar*, the key figures of this religion are the clan leader and his wife, the high priestess. They are also the parents of the local heroine, and the future in-laws of the hero from Earth: Jake. In the course of the film he turns into the archetypical prophet/liberator hero overly familiar from

western and colonial folklore. He is a kind of Moses from Exodus in the Old Testament, or Jesus from the Gospels in the New Testament, But also *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Indiana Jones*, and many others, whose inborn superiority and charisma as "natural leaders" is demonstrated in their interaction with local crowds.

They are the eternal non-natives who soon turn into better natives than the natives themselves—who feel forced to show their deference and respect. In *Avatar*, Jake becomes the military leader of the uprising, gets to marry "the princess" as his prize, and impregnate her. He will thus become "the new king" or at least the father of the new king, a colonial era fantasy par excellence (already in the twisted popcult version of *Pocahontas*, *Alan Quatermain*, and other films).

Tribal life is also signified by the usual props in *Avatar:* the teeth of wild animals as a warrior necklace, rings lengthening the neck, feathers as headgear, like typical "Indians," the skulls of wild animals on gates and totems. The tribe gathers and chants around a bonfire, as in the famous Bali monkey dance paraphrased in an early version of *King Kong.* They use an intoxicating drink and fragrant herbs for purification and initiation rituals.

When assembling, the tribe even looks like a hippie "Woodstock in the jungle"—so says the script. When praying, they do so "in concentric rings of people, all plugged-in and softly chanting." When mobilizing, they radiate "a dark primeval energy." We are not far from the stirring human sacrifice and cannibal scenes in *Alan Quatermain*, and similar ones in the *Indiana Jones series* (e.g., *The Temple of Doom*).

4. The Theme of Imperial Armed Intervention

The basic premise of *Avatar* is simple. It is basically "cowboys and Indians" catapulted into distant space and into the far future, as in *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*—and by extension, colonialism and neocolonialism catapulted into future space. The home country/planet of the invaders is running out of the necessary resources; they intervene militarily elsewhere to obtain them.

The mineral "unobtainium" on Pandora is like the gold mines in Africa for the British imperial hero Alan Quatermain, or like the references to Middle East oil wells that Disney inserted throughout the *Aladdin* movie. The *Avatar* script contains explicit references to meddling in oil-rich countries like Nigeria and Venezuela, and implicit ones to the confrontations around Iran and Iraq. The script also contains references to "development aid" as a lubricant for unequal exchange. The carrots supplementing the

stick: roads, clinics, schools, and the inevitable learning of . . . English.

Such action and war movies have traditionally been primarily aimed at adolescent boys at home, as "armchair conquistadores." They seem to promote their enlistment for military service overseas only a few years later—as a more virile adventure.[11] They tend to glamorize Western technological superiority, from the eternal gadgets of the British spy James Bond to the electronic savvy and overwhelming firepower demonstrated in most American war movies—an implicit warning to overseas audiences. The relation of *Avatar* to such displays is ambivalent. On the one hand, it impresses us with its oversized weapons; on the other hand, it seems to frown upon their actual use—as natives denigrate the invading soldiers as cowardly, "hiding inside machines."

The movie "shocks and awes" us with these huge contraptions, but we can "read" these scenes as industry promotion, pacifist propaganda, both or neither. It begins with "Mitsubishi MK-6 ampsuits—human-operated walking machines 4 meters tall." They resonate with the giants in ancient folklore and the Golem, with harnessed knights on horses in the medieval armory, but also with Hollywood inventions such as *The Hulk* and *Robocop*. Then there are "Samson tilt rotors: big as a Blackhawk"—familiar from the movie with the same name about a failed military expedition in Somalia.[12]

To confront this "overwhelming force," the native tribes use only some of their traditional means. They put on war paint and utter war cries to try and scare their adversaries away. They use martial arts techniques familiar from man-to-man combat in Asian movies; they are also "Zen" in their concentration and focus. They use the bows and poison-tipped arrows of native peoples everywhere, as well as their white imitators such as *Tarzan* and *Rambo*. Yet when they try to scale the fence around the invaders' compound, they are easily mowed down by gunfire. They are still like the Indians trying to scale the palisades around the cavalry fort.

Toward the end of the film, this confrontation is gradually drawn into the usual orgy of stylized violence, as an air fleet of invading troopships and gunships squares off against a swarm of dragons—some jockeyed by the natives, and the mythical largest one by the new non-native leader Jake. It is esthetically choreographed: with many victims, but little of their suffering in sight. This is also a catharsis—as the good guys win, of course. The final battle takes fifty pages, half as much as the rest of the script taken together. It is made elegant, but also comic book cartoonesque ("Kapow, Kaboom").

Most interesting of all are the two liminal characters ultimately leading

these opposing forces. On the one hand, there is the unsympathetic gung-ho colonel of the mining company's security detail, with a crew cut and multiple scars to denote him as an experienced veteran fighter. And on the other hand is the sympathetic paraplegic reincarnated in his local avatar who comes to the defense of a seemingly desperate cause. As an avatar, he is also a kind of mulatto—and a turncoat who becomes a hero. Not Navy but Na'vi. The colonel to Jake: "How does it feel to betray your own race?"

This is indeed a surprising twist for an American action movie. But maybe even more surprising is that it leaves the further structure of the archetypical imperial adventure story largely untouched. This is also illustrated by a final theme.

5. The Theme of the Beautiful Native Girl

Dating within one's own group has always and everywhere been considered normal; crossing group boundaries is "not done" but sometimes strangely attractive, from the classic *Romeo and Juliet* play to the modern *West Side Story* musical.

In the original imperial adventure genre, and according to the early Hollywood production codes, interracial romance and miscegenation were completely out of the question. In later novels and movies, the taboo was slowly circumvented—as it was in real life, timidly at first, and under various clandestine pretexts. White men abroad often felt drawn to exotic girls (*Suzie Wong*); white women being attracted to exotic men abroad was even more problematic (*The Sheik*). It was the sinful lure of transgressing cultural taboos, of tasting the "forbidden fruit." But after a passionate fling, the native partner was often made to die in such scripts, so that the white hero (or heroine) could return to a regular life and marriage at home.

Of course the semi-nudity and suggestive dancing by the locals had often added to their immediate sexual appeal—for instance, in cinematic Polynesia. In *Avatar*, according to one review, "the girls are sexy enough to be easy on the eyes, but not too sexy for the comfort level of typical parents." The first review in the *New York Times* added that "the humanoid Na'vi come with supermodel dimensions (slender hips, a miniature-apple rear, long articulated digits" and "slanted eyes") (Dargis, 2009).[13]

Neytiri's attire is a difficult Hollywood compromise between prudish covering and provocative uncovering of shoulders or legs (compare *Pocahontas*). The script itself describes the love interest of the hero in *Avatar*: "lithe as a cat, with . . . nubile breasts . . . devastatingly beautiful." Fortu-

nately, at age 18 she has just ceased to be under age. Jake's white superior reproaches him: "You got a little local pussy." After he has made love to Neytiri, his native rival erupts: "You mated with this woman?" On the last page of the script, we learn that she is "obviously pregnant" (Cameron, 2007, pp. 90–105). The girl is played by Zoe Saldana, who also played the "ethnic other" of Uhura in *Star Trek*.[14]

Interestingly enough, "surplus libido" was often ascribed to such cultural others of the opposite sex. They were supposed to be more animalistic, primitive, childish, or at least very much lower class. Lower on the ladder of civilization, therefore more uninhibited, authentic, and attractive. This theme also derived from illicit relations between male masters and female slaves in the U.S. South, between settlers and servants in the European colonies, later between millions of military men and prostitutes in South, Southeast, and East Asia. The theme also runs from the successful classical opera *Madama Butterfly* to its present-day knockoff musical *Miss Saigon*.

Of course most multiracial societies were characterized by grave inequalities. For a "colored" girl to become the potential fiancée or even a marriage prospect for an ordinary white man, she had often to be elevated to the status of a local "princess" in a story—thus almost equaling him in status—to the extent that even a mere chieftain's daughter was depicted as royalty (*Pocahontas*). This is also a theme in one of the original fictional stories about the colonial hero Alan Quatermain—the Indiana Jones of his day. It is the central theme of the romance in *Avatar* as well.

In *Pocahontas* and *Avatar*, there is a further twist. The superior attractiveness of white men in general is further underlined by the fact that the local princess had already been promised to a local partner/fiancé, but she immediately drops him after receiving "a sign" and upon first encountering " the real one." This is a theme in the mythical (but twisted) *Pocahontas* story: in the Disney version she literally falls for the very first young white man she sees setting foot on American soil—and begins kissing him within minutes . . . in the very same sequence. This theme is also maintained in *Avatar*, even though it takes them slightly longer. In the end the native rival cedes, and recognizes the white man's superiority (if not physically then at least characterwise).

This is related to another recurrent racist theme, which we have already pointed out. The white hero soon proves to be a better native than the natives themselves: in fighting and riding local animals, in using local weapons and strategies. This is the central theme of *Tarzan*, but also of all

other imperial heroes such as *Alan Quatermain, Lawrence of Arabia, Tintin, Indiana Jones, Rambo*—and Jake in *Avatar*. The interesting thing is that a movie like *Avatar* may be explicitly anti-imperial, but its narrative structure implicitly retains many pro-imperial traits that derive from the large body of predecessors by which it is inspired. The "free fantasy" of the writer and director feeds on pre-existing stereotypes in their heads, often without them being aware of it.

Avatar's Revival of Hollywood's Strength

The unprecedented success of *Avatar* came along at a crucial moment. Hollywood had seemed to be severely affected by the 2008 economic crisis, the decline of DVD sales, and the rise of illegal copying. Twelve hundred professionals participated in a three-day conference on the state of the industry in Los Angeles, convened by the Producers Guild of America. The *New York Times* reported that "the big studios are cutting back" on the number of productions, largely limiting themselves to "bloated sequels, bloated remakes," whereas "half of the independent distributors in the United States have folded over the past couple of years" (Barnes, 2010).

Whereas it is said that a cat has nine lives, Hollywood may turn out to have ten. Technological advances have always helped restore its preeminence, outdistancing both producers overseas and illegal copiers. In this case, there had already been some renewed experiments with 3D, even by Cameron himself. But *Avatar* became the first mega-blockbuster to demonstrate the attractiveness of this revolution. Movie theaters around the world were adapted in a hurry, and manufacturers of television screens also launched themselves into the breach—even contemplating new ways to get rid of the cumbersome stereoscopic glasses.

Nine and a half months after its release, on 1 October 2010, movie databases already listed *Avatar* as the highest grossing film ever, calling it a "must see" event. It was also a hit in emergent markets such as China, the natural beauty and cultural legacy of which had inspired some of its unique "floating mountains" scenery.[15] The outlay for *Avatar* had been estimated at an unprecedented $300 million for production, with $150 million more for marketing. But the worldwide theatrical box office receipts (ticket sales) were calculated to be $2.8 billion that far—not including video rentals, television rights, merchandizing, and other revenues of further multiple billions. That was already 50 percent more than the runner-up *Titanic*, also made by James Cameron, a dozen years earlier. The director quickly

opened talks with Twentieth Century Fox over two possible sequels.

Other directors quickly followed suit. Steven Spielberg (of the *Indiana Jones* series and many others) was involved in developing an alternative 3D system for which one would no more need special glasses. George Lucas had already rushed into converting his half dozen *Star Wars* films into 3D. Disney was adapting the next installment of *Pirates of the Caribbean*. As a matter of fact, all major studios and blockbuster directors were in the process of hastily shifting major projects to 3D, including a wide array of remakes and sequels already in the pipeline. So *Avatar* proved not only "more of the same" but also the ultimate catalyst for another revolution in Hollywood.

Avatar's Cultural Reception

Meanwhile, *Avatar* had also been rather well received by reviewers. Websites Metacritics and Rotten Tomatoes each aggregated 35 early reviews into scores of 84 percent and 94 percent positive, although the film got "only" three Oscars (as opposed to six for *The Hurt Locker*). Spin-offs included books, music, videos (including a documentary on Cameron's entire life and work), action figures—and of course a first-person "shooter" video game available for all existing game machines, where the player has to choose sides between the invaders and the invaded. There is no Pandora/Na'vi theme park ride at this point, but it will no doubt come about.

But let us return to the question with which we began this essay. What did *Avatar* mean, or what was it made to mean, by viewers around the world belonging to various groups? Early television researchers had alerted us to the possibility of alternative "readings" by other cultures. We have seen that the blockbuster was shot through with contradictory messages, both subliminal and supraliminal. The *Chicago Tribune* even called it "the season's ideological Rorschach blot," after the ambiguous ink stain used to uncover unconscious feelings in psychotherapy.

It seemed apt that it was the first blockbuster movie for which one explicitly had to put on special glasses, in order just to be able to see it as intended. Some people deemed the movie nihilistic, others rather utopian. An article in the *New York Times* noted that over the very first month it had "found itself in the crosshairs of a growing number of interest groups, schools of thought and entire nations": feminists and anti-smoking activists, liberals and conservatives, the Kremlin and the Vatican and whatnot.[16]

Like most people of his social category, Cameron had always felt sym-

pathy for environmentalism and indigenous people. But after *Avatar* he now felt obliged to take an even clearer stand, as Native American groups pressed him to take up the defense of the remaining "real Pandoras" in the world. For instance, in the Amazon Basin, where thirteen native tribes felt threatened by a dam project.[17] The Indians invited him to join a three-day protest. He flew in, put on war paint, and showed them his movie on DVD: for many, it was the first encounter with such modern technology. The meeting predictably became a media event, was filmed in high definition, and shown by television channels around the world (Itzkoff, 2010a).

But there seemed to be a paradox. The first review in the *New York Times* had noted that it was ironic that *Avatar* "feeds you an anti-corporate line in a corporately financed entertainment." It was distributed by Twentieth Century Fox, the Hollywood movie arm of the most global of all media empires—Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.[18] The blockbuster was also promoted worldwide by the usual broad alliance of powerful U.S. corporations. Coca Cola supported the worldwide marketing campaign with specially marked *Avatar* cans and bottles. McDonalds distributed toys of half a dozen major characters with its Happy Meals in half a dozen major countries. Mattel announced that it would produce a line of *Avatar* action figures.

Even more surprising: *Avatar* was embraced as a powerful symbol by people and groups fighting for freedom and resistance against foreign domination. Soon, news channels around the world showed Palestinian demonstrators against Israel, in Nablus on the West Bank, painted blue and dressed like Pandora's Na'vi.[19] Evo Morales, the first indigenous president of dirt-poor and landlocked Bolivia, praised *Avatar* for its "profound show of resistance to capitalism and the struggle for the defense of nature." He maintained tense relations with the United States, which was actively opposing a number of his social reforms. The aforementioned Christian film website had already noted about *Avatar:* "It's noble primitives and warmongering Westerners, imperialist and expansionist guilt and no blood for oil, Cortez and Custer and George W. Bush in one fell swoop." Another website called it "the essence of the white guilt fantasy, laid bare."

So even if such a movie may be chockfull of age-old "imperial adventure" themes, it may still be experienced as an anti-imperial statement overall. Such a complex product has multiple threads running through it that can be "read" in contradictory ways. Audiences "negotiate" its meaning to themselves and their situation. The message of movies does therefore always remain polysemic: audiences with different experiences in varying

contexts can extract their own messages from them. That remains a central finding of international/intercultural/interethnic studies of communication and media.

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Note: More detailed references in Van Ginneken (2007). News items, basic reporting, and key reviews mostly came from the *International Herald Tribune*. The official script of Avatar was downloaded from http://www.foxscreenings.com. Page numbers refer to this document. The global blockbuster list and gross worldwide revenues refer to http://www.imdb.com, 2010. Many American reviews can be found on http://www.rottentomatoes.com. I have also consulted an early version of the elaborate Wikipedia entry on the movie for further leads.

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NOTES

1. Analyzed in my 2010 Dutch book *Gek met geld—Over financiële psychologie* [Mad with money—About financial psychology].

2. 21 February 2010. Of course such a list has a tendency of overweighing the number of visitors in developed countries, as they pay higher ticket prices.

3. *Crouching Tiger* was the first "pan-Chinese" blockbuster, although it was said that the four main actors could hardly understand each other, as they spoke with entirely different accents: from Beijing and Canton, from Taiwan and Malaysia. (Columbia and Sony participated as well.) *Slumdog Millionaire* was officially an English film, although with an Indian co-producer and with a screenplay based on an Indian novel. Critics have claimed that Chinese and Indian movies can only become worldwide blockbusters if they somehow cater to Western tastes and stereotypes.

4. Think of Henry Morton Stanley's highly dramatized accounts of his travels in these regions looking for David Livingstone and beyond, which became the major source for the *Tarzan* novels by Burroughs. (Neither the movie productions nor the novelist ever set foot in the real Africa, though,)

5. Cameron's college years near Niagara Falls may have further resonated with such primeval features.

6. In recent years, this same theme had already been developed by several series of bestselling novels for both children and adults. Improvements in CGI animation techniques had already enabled their inclusion in blockbuster movies.

7. The Belgian comic strip *Tintin* (the film rights of which have been bought by Steven Spielberg) is a good example—which I have analyzed elsewhere in greater detail in the Dutch book *Striphelden op de divan* [Comic strip heroes on the couch, 2002].

8. Green may have been less of an option, as they would then blend too much into the background.

9. This Klingon became highly popular among "Trekkies" or fans of the series, and a popular "pseudo-foreign" minority language.

10. It is of course no coincidence that environmentalism arose whenever and wherever the natural environment had almost disappeared.

11. It is well documented that such movies have often been facilitated and subsidized by departments of defense, particularly in the United States.

12. The images of trigger-happy and gung-ho GIs with huge guns hanging out of the open doors of helicopter gunships, and scrutinizing the jungle underneath for anything that moves, comes straight out of older Vietnam footage, of course: both

newsreel and Hollywood fiction.

13. Steven D. Greydanus on the Christian website http://www.decentfilms.com. And Manohla Dargis in the *International Herald Tribune*, 19–20 December 2009.

14. There is a whole category of stars in Hollywood devoted entirely to playing certain ethnic roles. People such as Anthony Quinn or Raquel Welch easily switched from Latino to Indian to everything in between. Also think of Yul Brunner who built an entire career on "ancient and exotic tyrant" roles.

15. Within a month, *Avatar* reportedly broke all previous box office records in China, for instance, with receipts exceeding 100 million dollars. Like elsewhere, moviegoers proved to prefer the more expensive 3D theaters over the less expensive 2D ones. According to discussions on some Chinese websites, evictions and similar themes from the film resonated with current domestic controversies. Avatar "beat" the newly released major local movie *Confucius*, favored by the authorities, according to Simon Elegant, in "Letter from China/A little bit of flexibility," *International Herald Tribune*, 5 February 2010.

16. Dave Itzkoff, "Sci-fi epic becomes a culture-war battleground," *International Herald Tribune*, 20 January 2010.

17. They were to be displaced by the $11 billion Belo Monte dam project, creating a 500 square kilometer lake in the basin of the Xingu River (a tributary to the Amazon). It was to provide electricity to São Paulo, Brazil's bustling industrial metropolis.

18. *International Herald Tribune*, 19–20 December 2009.

19. Euronews channel, 12 February 2010.