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James Cameron's Avatar: access for all

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

James Cameron's *Avatar*: access for all

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In this extract from his forthcoming book *The Persistence of Hollywood* (Routledge, 2012), Thomas Elsaesser examines James Cameron's film *Avatar* in terms of its auto-representation and personalized narrative, affective engagement with diverse publics and ambition to effect through technology a change of paradigm.

Keywords: James Cameron; *Avatar*; auteur; Hollywood; military–entertainment complex

In every respect other than consistency of themes, James Cameron is the embodiment of the post-*auteur* author (see Elsaesser 2012, for an outline of the post-*auteur* author). Cameron is following in the footsteps of Spielberg and Lucas, but with the two most economically successful films in cinema history to his name (*Titanic* and *Avatar*), he is no mere acolyte either. This (for lack of a better word) post-*auteur* authorship can usefully be discussed in the case of Cameron under several headings: auto-representation and personalized narrative, affective engagement with diverse publics, ambition to effect through technology a change of paradigm. The first I shall discuss as 'control through access for all', the second as 'control through switches of premise and double binds', and the third as 'control through performed self-contradiction'. Each requires some more detailed explanation, but all can, I hope, be exemplified through an analysis of *Avatar*, the much hyped 3-D science fiction fantasy which was released worldwide during the last week before Christmas, on 16–18 December 2009.

Keeping control, maintaining access for all

Hollywood has always produced 'texts' that are highly ambiguous, or permeable, when it comes to assigning meaning: the notorious Hays Code, introduced in 1934, was from one perspective a ludicrously prudish and hypocritical set of dos and don'ts for filmmakers and studio executives, but from another vantage-point it functioned as a devious, but also dexterous manual for producing structured

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ambiguity. Classical Hollywood excelled in creating movies that were ambivalent and even duplicitous, without becoming incoherent: a strategy of multiple entry-points that permitted different audiences – men and women, old and young, white and black – to have 'access' to the film emotionally and intellectually, in the form of identification and (self-)recognition. There has been much debate in film theory as to what constitutes identification and recognition/misrecognition of the spectatorial self with and on the screen,[1] but in the present context it corresponds to what David Bordwell has called the 'excessively obvious' nature of the classical film. Bordwell and others, such as Edward Branigan, have stressed 'comprehension' as the abiding priority of Hollywood storytelling, while others – with equal justification – have pointed to the lacunary, oblique and circular nature of the same classical cinema.[2] For postmodern films, the thesis of a 'two-tiered system of communication' has been put forward: Hollywood films from the late 1960s onwards address themselves to both the 'naive' and the 'informed' spectator simultaneously (see Carroll 1982).[3] I have argued the case for this double register of knowingness elsewhere (Elsaesser and Buckland 2002, 26–79), but here I want to stress that classical, postmodern as well as post-classical strategies of audience-engagement can all be accommodated under a general policy of 'access for all' ('my film is a party to which everyone can bring a bottle' is how the director Robert Zemeckis once replied when asked whether *Forrest Gump* had a liberal or a conservative message). However, I want this strategy to be understood also as offering the means for both director and institution to exercise control over the spectrum of reception. For to open up 'access for all' in this sense should not be thought to imply 'going for the lowest common denominator', or providing 'something for everybody', but usually aims at a textually coherent ambiguity, the way that poetry is said to aim at maximizing the levels of meaning that specific words or works carry, thus extending interpretation while retaining control over the codes that make interpretation possible.[4]

Evidently, in the cinema, such effects of ambiguity are achieved with different means (though the screenplay is an extremely important element), but the result, when attained, represents a mastery over the 'multiple entry-points', such as the ones already named: that a film must make sense to audiences of different gender, different age groups, different national identities and different ethnic as well as educational backgrounds. But a film also quite literally must work for spectators who 'enter' a film at different times during a given performance (e.g. when shown on television) or at different points in history (the permanent repeats of Hollywood classics on network and cable television being a kind of test: classics disclose themselves differently to every new generation).

When *Avatar* reported box-office grosses in the region of 3 billion dollars within no more than 6–8 weeks of its opening, critics wondered how such figures could be explained, especially for a film that, by conventional standards, such as script, storyline or acting, struck them as below average in both interest and innovation even for Hollywood? An impeccably timed (and prohibitively expensive) promotional campaign and advertising offensive, first on behalf of 3-D in general and then targeting Cameron's film in particular is surely one

reason: 20th Century Fox gave itself a year to make worldwide audiences aware of the launch event, arousing curiosity with press reports and raising expectations with two separate trailers. But another major cause (or effect?) of the film's visibility and success was the astonishingly different, in fact contradictory and even incompatible, access points for viewer identification which *Avatar* managed to combine, or rather, compress into a single storyline and textual system.

One of the more surprising access points the film opened up, for example, was the enthusiasm it elicited from biologists, such as the science writer Carol Yoon:

> When watching a Hollywood movie that has robed itself in the themes and paraphernalia of science, a scientist expects to feel anything from annoyance to infuriation at facts misconstrued or processes misrepresented. What a scientist does not expect is to enter into a state of ecstatic wonderment, to have the urge to leap up and shout: 'Yes! That's exactly what it's like!' So it is time for all the biologists who have not yet done so to shut their laptops and run from their laboratories directly to the movie theaters, put on 3-D glasses and watch the film 'Avatar'. In fact, anyone who loves biology, or better yet, anyone who hates biology – and certainly everyone who has ever sneered at a tree-hugger – should do the same. Because the director James Cameron's otherworldly tale of romance and battle, aliens and armadas, has somehow managed to do what no other film has done. It has recreated what is the heart of biology: the naked, heart-stopping wonder of really seeing the living world. (Yoon 2010)

This contrasts sharply with the more 'political' readings of the film. A few days earlier, in the same paper, *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks blasted *Avatar* for pandering to the 'White Messiah Complex':

> Avid moviegoers will remember 'A Man Called Horse', which began to establish the pattern, and 'At Play in the Fields of the Lord'. More people will have seen 'Dances With Wolves' or 'The Last Samurai'. Kids have been given their own pure versions of the fable, like 'Pocahontas' and 'FernGully'.
>
> It's a pretty serviceable formula. Once a director selects the White Messiah fable, he or she doesn't have to waste time explaining the plot because everybody knows roughly what's going to happen. The formula also gives movies a little socially conscious allure. Audiences like it because it is so environmentally sensitive. Academy Award voters like it because it is so multiculturally aware. Critics like it because the formula inevitably involves the loincloth-clad good guys sticking it to the military–industrial complex.
>
> Yet of all the directors who have used versions of the White Messiah formula over the years, no one has done so with as much exuberance as James Cameron in 'Avatar'.
>
> 'Avatar' is a racial fantasy par excellence. The hero is a white former Marine who is adrift in his civilization. He ends up working with a giant corporation and flies through space to help plunder the environment of a pristine planet and displace its peace-loving natives.
>
> The peace-loving natives – compiled from a mélange of Native American, African, Vietnamese, Iraqi and other cultural fragments – are like the peace-loving natives you've seen in a hundred other movies. They're tall, muscular and admirably slender. They walk around nearly naked. They are phenomenal athletes and pretty good singers and dancers.
>
> The white guy notices that the peace-loving natives are much cooler than the greedy corporate tools and the bloodthirsty U.S. military types he came over with. He goes to live with the natives, and, in short order, he's the most awesome member of their tribe. He has sex with their hottest babe. He learns to jump through the jungle and ride horses.

It turns out that he's even got more guts and athletic prowess than they do. He flies the big red bird that no one in generations has been able to master. Still, would it be totally annoying to point out that the whole White Messiah fable, especially as Cameron applies it, is kind of offensive?

It rests on the stereotype that white people are rationalist and technocratic while colonial victims are spiritual and athletic. It rests on the assumption that nonwhites need the White Messiah to lead their crusades. It rests on the assumption that illiteracy is the path to grace. It also creates a sort of two-edged cultural imperialism. Natives can either have their history shaped by cruel imperialists or benevolent ones, but either way, they are going to be supporting actors in our journey to self-admiration. (Brooks 2010)

Brooks is a moderate conservative, generally quite conciliatory when it comes to Republican values of 'America First'. He is thus ideologically at the opposite end of the spectrum from a critic on the far left like Slavoj Žižek, who while taking a predictably stronger tone, nonetheless is in agreement with Brooks:

Beneath the idealism and political correctness of *Avatar* [. . .] lie brutal racist undertones. [. . .] The film teaches us that the only choice the aborigines have is to be saved by the human beings or to be destroyed by them. In other words, they can choose either to be the victim of imperialist reality, or to play their allotted role in the white man's fantasy.

Žižek then goes on to compare *Avatar* to *The Matrix*:

In each, the hero is caught between our ordinary reality and an imagined universe. [. . .] We are dealing – at the level of the underlying symbolic economy – with two realities: the ordinary world of imperialist colonialism on the one hand, and a fantasy world, populated by aborigines who live in an incestuous link with nature, on the other. [. . .] The end of the film should be read as the hero fully migrating from reality into the fantasy world – as if, in *The Matrix*, Neo were to decide to immerse himself again fully in the matrix. [. . .] This is why it is interesting to imagine a sequel to *Avatar* in which, after a couple of years (or, rather, months) of bliss, the hero starts to feel a weird discontent and to miss the corrupted human universe. The source of this discontent is not only that every reality, no matter how perfect it is, sooner or later disappoints us. Such a perfect fantasy disappoints us precisely because of its perfection: what this perfection signals is that it holds no place for us, the subjects who imagine it.

Žižek ends, however, on a more overtly political note:

At the same time as *Avatar* is making money all around the world [. . .], something that strangely resembles its plot is taking place. The southern hills of the Indian state of Orissa, inhabited by the Dongria Kondh people, were sold to mining companies that plan to exploit their immense reserves of bauxite (the deposits are considered to be worth at least $4trn). In reaction to this project, a Maoist (Naxalite) armed rebellion exploded.

[. . .] So where is Cameron's film here? Nowhere: in Orissa, there are no noble princesses waiting for white heroes to seduce them and help their people, just the Maoists organising the starving farmers. The film enables us to practise a typical ideological division: sympathising with the idealised aborigines while rejecting their actual struggle. The same people who enjoy the film and admire its aboriginal rebels would in all probability turn away in horror from the Naxalites, dismissing

them as murderous terrorists. The true avatar is thus *Avatar* itself – the film substituting for reality. (Žižek 2010)

However, soon after *Avatar* became such a world success, the Internet learnt about the Dongria Kondh, who took appropriate action: they began making their children look as beautiful and 'primitive' as they possibly could, in order to present them on YouTube, explicitly suggest analogies with the Na'vi, and appealing to Cameron to become an advocate of their plight.[5]

They were not alone in seeing Cameron's 'racist' film as a useful propaganda weapon in their struggle against oppression. The Chinese government had to restrict the distribution of 2-D versions of *Avatar* in the countryside, since dissident bloggers quickly spotted in the land-grab of the American corporation analogies with the confiscation, appropriation and destruction of villages happening in rural China, on behalf of the land and minerals hungry central or regional governments.[6] Similarly, young Palestinians, not unlike the Chinese, saw political parallels – this time about blockades and occupation – and began to dress up as the blue creatures, in order to protest, in the village of Bilin near Ramallah, against the Israeli security fence.[7] If this might seem like carnivalesque moments of grass roots or online activism, using the film's ubiquity to advertise their cause, what is one to make of the response of Bolivia's president?

> Evo Morales went to the cinema for the third time in his life in order to view *Avatar* which he says is 'a profound sign of resistance to capitalism and the struggle for the defence of nature'. ¡Viva Pandora! One of the only other films he ever travelled to the cinema for was a biopic on Pelé.[8]

Viva Pandora! might also be the slogan of a politically more sophisticated group of admirers, who would probably discount Žižek's strictures as too classically Marxist and Brooks' mock-sarcasm as too bourgeois-idealist. A Deleuzian defender of *Avatar* waxes almost as ecstatically about the film as did the biologist of the *New York Times*, recognizing in *Avatar* all the forms of becoming (becoming-woman, becoming-animal), in short, the Spinozist world-picture of multiple mutualities as advocated in *Mille Plateaux*:

> The movie downloads the viewer with such ferocity and such poetic space that it bends back cinema upon itself, and introduces its content – the question of Avatarship – into the very experience, pulling out from technological increase and its inherent relatability the buried question of sensitivity, of connection and projected identification, in short, the implied organic mutuality in everything our machines have brought us. Cameron and his magicians invade our bodies and throw out our affects into the arms and sinews of operators in such a threshold defying 3D that it defies all of our repeated attempts to take a mapping of where we are. This past movie recognition, this ethnic familiarity – are the Pandorans African Maasai, elegant Native American Indians, Thai-Myanmar Pa Dong Karen, naked Amazon natives, or even cats – inundates and torques the viewer in a transport that is more than pleasured, more than reflective. It is free … free in only the sense that aesthetic renewal can be free. Tossed outward, amid the equally familiar ideological landscapes of ecological nightmare (however this reads for you), and you are vividly aware of its artifice. But in its practical synthetics the technological

nervature examines you and opens you out, across the boundaries of even your well-honed intellectual compass. ('Kvond' 2009)

While followers of Deleuze and Guattari are thus entranced by the film and its promise of sensory plenitude, others responded more pathologically to the same deterritorializing possibilities of becoming. After spending time on Pandora, young viewers in the USA contracted the inevitable 'Avatar Blues', feeling so distraught that they were in need of serious professional counselling. As Žižek had predicted, 'if we subtract fantasy from reality, then reality itself loses its consistency and disintegrates'. For these viewers, real life turned empty and stale, to the point of sapping the will to live in the here-and-now:

> Ever since I went to see *Avatar* I have been depressed. Watching the wonderful world of Pandora and all the Na'vi made me want to be one of them. I can't stop thinking about all the things that happened in the film and all of the tears and shivers I got from it. I even contemplate suicide thinking that if I do it I will be rebirthed in a world similar to Pandora and then everything is the same as in *Avatar*. ('Mike', in Ehrlich 2010)

'Access for all' in *Avatar* thus functions at the level of the code, ensuring multiple readings, while not predicating or privileging any one in particular. It even effected a semantic paradigm change, when one considers that – apart from the analogy with blues as a mood – the *Na'vi blue* became the *new red* (of left-wing politics, in the case of Palestinians) *and the new green* (of environmental causes in India and China). The point, therefore, is not that the film proved controversial, and that professional critics as well as web users had many different views (which, of course, happens all the time).[9] Rather the claim is that these divergences and seeming contradictions were programmed into the film from the beginning, as part of the Cameron concept. 'Access for all' in the Internet era has become a complex, multi-level, multicultural process of mediation and appropriation, which presupposes in the fabric of the film's political and emotional texture not only a planned degree of pluralism of signs, regarding the story, its ideology and affective registers, but a new way of encoding them. Cameron has, I believe, added to the 'textually coherent ambiguity' of classical Hollywood another level, which I shall provisionally call the level of 'cognitive dissonance', heading towards conceptual 'double binds'.

Before examining this further level, here are some of the director's more traditional (classical and post-classical) strategies for creating the kind of ambiguity that allows for the multiple access points just discussed. Firstly, as several of the commentators already quoted have pointed out, the story material is both extremely hybrid in its provenance and at the same time has deep mythological roots. Motifs from different religious or spiritual archetypes as well as fairy tales and colonial fantasies are woven together and cross-pollinated. Post-classical Hollywood is well known for hybridizing its all-time classics: thus, *Jurassic Park* was called '*Jaws* with claws', and *Star Wars* was '*High Noon* in outer space'. Robert Altman's *The Player* features a sequence satirizing the trend, and Mel Brooks is known (wrongly) for calling David Lynch 'Jimmy Stewart from Mars'.[10] In the case of *Avatar*, the

Deleuzian rhapsodist, no less than David Brooks, recognized the film's cinematic ancestry:

> It's *Pocahontas* meets *Full Metal Jacket* meets *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* meets *Alien* meets *Coming Home* meets *Dragonheart* meets *Dersu Uzala* meets *Brainstorms* meets *Total Recall* meets *The Legend of Zu* meets *Tron* meets *Dances with Wolves* meets *Final Fantasy IV* meets *Logan's Run*, all of this meeting Ecological Crisis ideology meets Indigenous nostalgia meets Disney ethnic cliché and New Age ascension, and that sum colliding with the categorical mytho-aesthetic effect of the first *Star Wars* and possibly *2001*. ('Kvond' 2009)

Another critic, Jan Distelmeyer, only slightly less enthusiastic, sums up the story like this:

> Jesus, sitting beneath the Tree of Knowledge, is having sex with Pocahontas and converts to Buddhism, whereupon he declares the 'hereafter' to be the 'here-and-now' and as Tamer of the Dragon restores harmony and equilibrium to a planet, whose sole purpose is to serve as a giant data storage space. You consider this a joke? It's what happens when a James Cameron blockbuster is seeking perfect balance and happily doesn't go for the lowest common denominator. (Distelmeyer 2010, 34)

Secondly, *Avatar* in this respect is not unlike Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927): ridiculed and derided in its time for being a synthetic myth, cobbled together from different bits of fairy tale, folklore and politically reactionary bric-a-brac. But, as with *Metropolis*, whose modus operandi 'the more synthetic the mythology, the better' has outlasted the critics and become an all-time classic, so perhaps with *Avatar*: without crippling its ability to function as a narrative, the hybridity not only allows more 'values', 'things' and 'signs' to attach themselves to the film, but provides the platform from which to launch a franchise, whose component parts can be separately developed and extended.[11]

Thirdly, the ideological message of the film seems to have been precisely calibrated, for instance, regarding – in this case – the degree of anti-Americanism, the manner in which ecological motifs are touched upon, and how – within the mythological matrix of 'the White Messiah' that Brooks calls 'politically offensive' and Žižek calls 'brutally racist' – there is enough room for these indigenous peoples to claim or reclaim through the film their 'rights': whether in China or Australia, in the Middle East or Latin America. Cameron – regardless of his own politics – was well aware of the USA's deeply controversial role in the world, in the midst of two wars of aggression, but also led, for the first time, by a black president. *Avatar*'s anti-Americanism is thus just explicit enough in order to flatter Hollywood's vast international market, while not too offensive for Americans of the relevant demographic to feel repelled or insulted by it. The anti-military–industrial complex message was structurally necessary: it responded to the globalization of the markets Hollywood needs to serve, knowing full well that up to 70% of total revenue for a major film might come from overseas territories.[12] Anti-Americanism is an instrument in Hollywood's arsenal for maintaining its dominance in the world market and thus another example of the paradoxical consequence of exercising power and keeping control under conditions of what Deleuze called 'modulation':

by giving its ideological 'enemies' – who are also its customers – a 'voice' and a 'stake', the Cameron blockbuster does indeed restore 'perfect balance' to an asymmetrical system, though perhaps not quite in the way Distelmeyer meant it, yet very much in the sense that it is a sign of another level of (self-)reflexivity, where the film invites one to read it as an allegory of its own conditions of possibility. The reviews, which accuse *Avatar* of false consciousness, ideological mystification or double standards, are therefore right and yet miss the key point. They overlook the fact that Cameron systematically planned and provoked this false consciousness at all levels, making it the very principle of the film's construction, because – at the allegorical level – these are the objective conditions under which the USA maintains both its military supremacy and its cultural hegemony, the two locking together not (only) by reinforcing each other, but also by openly contradicting each other: the outlines of a double bind.

Keeping control through performed self-presentation

Hence the importance of remembering that 'access for all' is a strategy that combines *opening up* with the need of *keeping control*. Yet how does this double priority also manifest itself for the director as author in the blockbuster environment? There is the power the author has through the director's interview to shape his self-presentation through controlling the personal narrative. As is the case with Coppola and Spielberg, directors have taken an active role in presenting themselves, even before the DVD bonus package along with general media interest in almost any form of celebrity allowed for more targeted interventions in the director's projected self-image:

> from the moment he finished film school Coppola created a serious context for his work. In doing so, he introduced a story, a film history, in which he played the part of an artist at odds with the industry. Such a reputation is profoundly misleading of course. But it is a reputation that promises to preserve the impression that Coppola, unlike Spielberg, was once upon a time a serious filmmaker. (Lewis 2007, 73)

Yet Spielberg, too, has come a long way from the days of his 'popcorn' persona, realizing that he not only can but must present himself as a serious filmmaker. Besides the Second World War topic in most of his films, it has been films dramatizing the fate of persecuted minorities throughout recent European and US history that helped redefine the director's perception by the public: *The Color Purple* (1985), *Schindler's List* (1993), *Amistad* (1997), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Munich* (2005) have elaborated an impeccable Hollywood white middle-class liberal profile, making him perhaps more the Stanley Kramer of his generation than the heir to Cecil B. DeMille or Hitchcock, but with *AI Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *Minority Report* (2002), *Catch Me if You Can* (2002) and *The Terminal* (2004) he has also made films that, thanks to their interest in complicated or dilated time schemes, their involuted narratives and post-identity protagonists, qualify for the more edgy genre of 'puzzle films' or 'mind-game' movies (Elsaesser 2009).

Cameron's personal narrative, such as he presented it, for instance, at his March 2010 TED talk,[13] is notably different from that of either Coppola's film-historical or Spielberg's Jewish identity, but it also has little in common with, say, the ethnically distinct 'New York-Little Italy' narrative that Scorsese so successfully traded in, or Tarantino's identity as fatherless poor white trash, brought up by the Blockbuster video store. The core of the Cameron narrative is that of 'the curious boy' who, from his early years on, was as drawn to biological fieldwork and scientific experiments as he spent hours drawing pictures and doodling during maths lessons at school. Cameron establishes a clear link between science and the arts as his twin motivations: a biologist and techno-geek with an irrepressible artistic imagination, he thinks of himself as much a documentary filmmaker as he is a storyteller, even though 'documentary' here clearly does not mean 'realism', but more the probing, exploring mind of the scientist. It was Jacques Cousteau and his underwater expeditions that truly captivated him as a boy, much more so than the American astronauts' landing on the moon or the adventure of outer space. He even suggests that the main reason he made *Titanic* was to put his hands on a budget and a topic that would justify mounting a deep sea diving expedition to the actual wreck of the Titanic.

Much of this personal narrative provides a perfect foil for *Avatar*. Cameron can draw on excellent credentials for the pro-environmental bias of the film. His interest in biology and forests, as well as his passion for diving, snorkelling and underwater exploration sends out an eco-friendly message of someone whose pursuits and hobbies do not hurt or exploit anybody, and are respectful of nature's beauties as well as her mysteries. It echoes the enthusiasm of biologists for the film, while also making the new age mystical pantheism of Pandora and its Na'vi people seem both less naive and less calculating.

Paradoxically, the strongest echo of Cameron's personal themes in *Avatar* is the presence of water, fluids and the liquidity of metamorphosis and transformation. I am not so much thinking of the amniotic fluid in which Jake Sully's avatar is being grown and incubated, or the underwater tank that lets us witness this spectacle of rebirth. Rather, *Avatar* also effects a subtle but crucial change of register in the bodily experience its images try to engage us with. One could call it the metaphoric displacement of sensations we usually associate with water and deep sea diving, into the representational space of the dense forest and outer space, which is where much of the action of *Avatar* takes place. In fact, the extraordinary kinetic sensations the film conveys are based on a contradiction or impossibility: freed of gravity, bodies in space would not be able to execute – no more than in the thicket and undergrowth of the rain forest – these energetic movements of soaring flight, these leaps and swoops, which we see the Na'vi excel in, especially when they ride or tele-guide the prehistoric monsters with whom they share Pandora. Yet if we imagine, or better, if we unconsciously associate the element of water (as well as Earth's atmosphere) with these movements, then they make sense, with the force of gravity suspended and mitigated rather than abolished. Creatures at home in the depth of the oceans

possess the freedom of movement in all directions, as well as the agility and speed of propulsion, that Cameron deploys to such spectacular and emotionally uplifting effect in *Avatar*.

'True lies': keeping control via the narrative's self-contradiction

However, this switch of elements from air to water (repeating his preference for Jacques Cousteau over Neil Armstrong, and bringing about a switch of sensation that puts our eyes at odds with our body), is only one of several perceptual, cognitive and narrative shifts that literally and metaphorically 'animate' the film, but which are based on dissonance, discrepancy or outright contradiction. My claim would be that it is precisely through the management, rather than the elimination of these contradictions that *Avatar* retains its coherence, in the face of the many different and conflicting entry-points of interpretation. The contradictions, furthermore, establish a level of reflexivity recoverable as part of the system's self-regulation through self-allegorizing, while confirming Cameron as author in the post-*auteur* mode: someone who is both 'true to himself' and 'keeps control' over his work.

A look at the narrative construction of *Avatar* can locate there some of the contradictions or cognitive switches that give the film its 'life'. The Hollywood of complex narratives, but also of franchise movies has refined and perfected a mode of storytelling that can positively accommodate radical switches of story premises in its fictional worlds, when one thinks of films like *The Sixth Sense*, *The Usual Suspects* and *Vanilla Sky* or *A Beautiful Mind*, *Donny Darko* and *Memento*, the work of David Lynch (*Lost Highway*, 1997; *Mulholland Drive*, 2001) and David Cronenberg (*eXistenZ*, 1999; *Spider*, 2002), as well as a blockbuster like Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010). In all of these cases, spectators are given to believe in one sort of reality, only to be obliged to revise their assumptions or suspend them altogether: about whether the protagonist is alive or dead, whether we see the world through a demented or distorting subjective consciousness, whether we are in a dream, or indeed in someone else's dream, whether the film begins at the beginning or we are somewhere in the middle which we mistake as the beginning. For such narratives, the geometrical term of the Moebius strip has been revived, to indicate the coexistence or continuity of one 'side' of the story with its opposite, that is, the premise along with its reversal, each necessitating the other and each depending on the other.[14]

In the case of franchise movies, such cognitive dissonances or reality switches tend to happen across several episodes, or when sequels and prequels are segued into the original story, providing causation and consequence not in a linear fashion, but through inversion – most spectacularly perhaps in Lucas' *Star Wars*, where good and evil, friend and foe, protagonist and antagonist, humans and clones change sides several times across the intergalactic saga of successive generations and empires, motivated on one level by an interminably extended Oedipal family drama of fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, but presenting the spectator with the – to some intellectually onerous but to others spiritually

rewarding – task of sorting out who is the representative of the Force, and when is someone or not the embodiment of evil, leading one to the conclusion that good and evil not so much change sides, as they are, across time, folded into each other, much like the recto and the verso of the Moebius strip. The complexity of the overall design, in its labyrinthine mental architecture and temporal loops is thus a source of spin-offs and proliferating add-ons that can be turned into products and commodities, but it also is a way for Lucas to keep control over his sprawling 'Empire' of signs and meaning, sense and non-sense.

On the face of it, none of this applies to *Avatar*. As we have seen, the narrative is a more or less straightforward adaptation of so many movie stereotypes and mythological archetypes that any analogies with the mind-game or Moebius-strip films just mentioned would seem far-fetched. The plot is constructed out of relatively simple binaries: the military–industrial complex which sends Sully to Pandora is mercenary, colonialist, grossly materialist, selfish and only capable of destruction; the Na'vi are selfless, indigenous, spiritual, community-oriented and peaceful, living in harmony with nature, according to the laws of their environment and their higher Deities. Repelled by the violence, greed and cynicism of his civilization, and attracted to the lure of the exotic beautiful 'other', the central character changes sides and becomes a heroic defender of these counter-values, playing both messiah and redeemer.

Unobtainium

Yet if one looks at the film's conceptual move – how we get from one world to the other, and what it is that joins them to each other – then the rhetorical figures of reversal, of mirroring and inversion are very much in evidence. The ending which seems at first the triumph of nature over technology has a built-in twist, in that the avatar is a piece of technology simulating both human and nature and thus it is in fact *the same technology* in another guise that *rescues nature from the evils of technology*. Similar in certain ways to *The Matrix* after all, but complicating the 'philosophical' premise, Jake Sully here takes the red pill, not to get 'deeper into the rabbit hole' but in order to enjoy the benefits and reassurance of the blue pill, as it were. Yet the principle is not that of a *choice*, or an either-or: rather the modality is closer to something that computer engineers call *bootstrapping* – namely, the way a lower order of complexity produces an (imaginary) higher order and from this higher stage of organization, pulls up the lower order. It is a key technique of software production, but the term comes from the realm of fantasy: Baron Munchhausen, who pulled himself out of the swamp by his own bootstraps. Such impossibilities that nonetheless have their own persuasive plausibility we might call 'true lies' – to borrow this very epitome of a self-contradiction from Cameron's own oeuvre.[15]

This, mutatis mutandis, is the principle of *Avatar*, except that it depends on your beliefs and values, what you consider the 'lower' or 'higher' order. Jake Sully 'creates' (or has the Corporation create for him) his avatar, thanks to whom he is able to transform and transport his own damaged body into a higher state of

being, so that the creature here in fact re-creates the creator, in a sort of benevolent retrofitting of the Frankenstein myth. In the figure of Jake the avatar, the simulated, projected, 'ideal' self rescues the 'real' self, in the manner of a Kantian 'transcendental subject', or according to the Hegelian dialectic of 'Aufhebung' (sublation). In order to get from one realm to the other, the film posits a link, whereby the conclusion becomes its own premise, each pulling up the other by its bootstraps, so to speak, and thereby making it real, or at least making it a support of 'reality'.

The flip or switch operated between technology and nature or between the idealized real and the real real is not something that the film tries to hide or disguise. On the contrary, in the form of a Hitchcock McGuffin, it is exposed and underscored: *Avatar*'s McGuffin is what the Corporation's semi-military expedition force purportedly travels to Pandora for: obtaining the most precious of rare minerals, called 'unobtainium'. It is difficult to think of a better way of 'hiding in the light', that is, of Cameron advertising his own version of 'true lies', that is, a plausible impossibility. One's first thought is that 'unobtainium' must be some kind of private joke, or Cameron thumbing his nose at the spectator by signalling that he himself does not believe the hokum he is telling in the guise of a redemptive fable about ecological catastrophe and the evils of capitalism of the military–industrial kind. But look up 'unobtainium', and it turns out that its origins are in engineering, where the term designates an impossible device needed to fulfil a given purpose for a given application.

> For example, a pulley made of unobtainium might be massless and frictionless. [. . .] Since the late 1950s, aerospace engineers have used the term 'unobtainium' [. . .] when theoretically considering a material perfect for their needs in all respects, except that it does not exist.[16]

Thus, within the philosophical construction, 'unobtainium' would designate precisely the non-existing, but ideally perfect link between the two realms of the real and simulated, at once a place-holder for and the guarantee of the fully empowered agency of simulation that allows the avatar of Jake Sully to absorb the real Jake Sully, and thus, paradoxically, fulfil the initial promise the Corporation makes, namely, to restore his damaged body to perfect functioning. 'Unobtainium', in short, is the name for that which links and joins what cannot be brought together, and thus it is the signifier of *both* the gap *and* of the cognitive switch needed to bridge the gap.

Strip mining or data mining

Abstracting thus from 'unobtainium', what is it that the expedition wants, which after all, is made up of ex-Marines, business types and lab-coat scientists? The 'bad guys' from the military and the corporation want the precious mineral (to make money for themselves and profits for the corporation), while the 'good guys', that is, the scientists – and above all the one played by Sigourney Weaver – want knowledge (of better foodstuffs, new forms of medicine, higher

spirituality). Yet on reflection, both the bad and the good guys are totally committed to the logic of invasion, exploitation and appropriation. For each side acts like – and indeed, are – 'miners': one strip-mines the land of the Na'vi, in order to obtain unobtainium, the other data-mines the flora, fauna, the culture, the religion and the minds of the Na'vi. In other words, a parasite–host relationship can be said to exist not just between Earth and Pandora, but also between the evil corporation and the good scientists: what binds them together is a symbiotic relationship of antagonistic mutuality, united by an ideology of acquisition and appropriation. The action thus dramatizes conflict, competition and antagonism, while the film at the symbolic level draws parallels between the imperialism of the Sigourney Weaver character (who wants to learn and know) and that of the Corporate Yuppie (who wants to grab and seize).

In so far as the scientists' 'knowing' in the film is 'knowing at a distance', through all manner of remotely gathering, sampling and reading of data (rather than through 'immersion') it is an entirely instrumental approach to the world. Since as spectators, in the debates aboard the space station, we are morally and emotionally aligned with the scientists, rather than with the military or the corporate stooge, this raises a further possibility for the film's narrative to become a *mise-en-abyme* of its own relation to its audience, and for such self-reflexivity to be an instrument of self-regulation. Cameron once more puts his cards on the table, comments on the multiple origins and uses of the 3-D technology that allows us to be 'immersed', while the scientists probe and gather at a distance. For the instruments that identify and locate the deposits of unobtainium are shown to rely on 3-D imaging (the holographic model of the 'Tree of Life' makes this evident), and thus draw attention to the fact that the exploitation of Pandora's 'natural resources' (and by implication, the natural resources on Earth, too) depends heavily on the technology of digital 3-D as developed for non-entertainment uses, such as land surveying, geo-tagging, weather prediction, not to mention the many military or medical uses of 3-D. These, of course, are precisely the applications which benefit from the same research and development that underlies digital 3-D in the cinema where we are watching the film, reminding us of the tight mutual interdependence between military and engineering 3-D, and movie-making and computer-gaming 3-D. Translated back into the narrative of *Avatar*: the technologies that are responsible for the beautiful flora and fauna of Planet Pandora – beautiful thanks to the effects that 3-D imaging creates – are the same technologies as used by Pandora's enemies, bent on destroying this beauty, by harvesting it in either material (unobtainium) or immaterial (knowledge) form.

What *Avatar* thus thematizes – in a form that testifies to, critiques and embodies its own contradictions – is the alliance that the high-tech Hollywood of digital special effects and 3-D graphics has entered into with the US military and defence sector, and vice versa: so much so that Tim Lenoir and Henry Lowood speak of a 'military–entertainment complex' as having succeeded the famous 'military–industrial complex'.[17] As a consequence, what *in the film* appears

explicitly as the military–industrial complex of the evil corporation is nothing other than a camouflage (or avatar) for the military–entertainment complex *that de facto sustains the film and makes it possible*.[18]

This overlay of opposites explains the touchingly obsolete and clumsy weapons the corporation uses in order to conquer and destroy the Na'vi, when some sort of psychological warfare, preferably with such beautiful images and feel-good emotions as we ourselves are enjoying while watching, would probably have been a more effective way of getting at the Na'vi 'Tree of Life' and its hidden treasures, than bulldozers, earth-moving vehicles and Terminator-style techno-armour. Through yet another switch, the film owns up to Hollywood's covert collusion with the military–industrial complex, which *Avatar*'s overt ideological message would seem to contest and criticize.

From cognitive dissonance to double bind: empowering the audience

Where does this leave the audience, and especially the millions who watched *Avatar* in awe and rapt attention? Were they mere dupes, seduced by the film's glossy surface and breathtakingly beautiful pictures, misled by the ecological message, enjoying the old-fashioned man–machine fights, or secretly thrilling to the violence of the assault vehicles and massive firepower unleashed on the creatures of Pandora? Was there, after all, something for everyone in the nearly three hours of spectacle that *Avatar* provides, and each viewer could pick and choose?

My thesis has been a different one: I have tried to show how the issue of control, crucial to the author's identity as *auteur*, can manifest itself in 'independent' productions as much as in blockbusters through switches in the reality-status and fictional world premises of the narrative. Cameron's *Avatar* does this in more muted but also more systematic ways than other films mentioned. While not every spectator may be aware of, or be troubled by them, the cumulative effect of these cognitive dissonances is to provoke the spectator into actively producing his or her own reading, in order to disambiguate the 'mixed messages' or to untie the knot of the double bind, if we grant that such shifts of register are comparable to double binds, in the sense that they are as difficult to respond to as they are to resist. Double binds are classic ways of exercising control without coercion, usually effected by enlisting the 'victim's' own active cooperation. If the undecidability of a film's premise motivates the spectator cognitively, it would explain these 'strong readings' that *Avatar* has given rise to: since the message is fundamentally self-contradictory, unravelling its meaning results in a higher 'ontological commitment' on the part of the viewer to his or her particular interpretation – a commitment that works in favour of the affective bond formed with a given film. One could even say that a double bind situation gives the illusion of 'empowering' the spectator, an impression confirmed by the film's reception history.

Yet there is another dimension of this empowerment of the spectator: as we have seen, one of the roles of the Na'vi is to hold in place a fantasy structure, at the same time as they function as the 'conscience' of the Earth world: sensitive

humans want to join the Na'vi, while no Na'vi wants to join the humans, which confirms that life on Pandora can only exist if one recognizes it as the projective/compensatory mirror for various kinds of lack on Planet Earth (peace and spirituality, pride and dignity, but also including the lack or scarcity of more material resources). The fact that the Na'vi are pure projections or idealized versions becomes even more evident when they are taken as standing for or modelled after 'indigenous people' in general, whose real-life counterparts, as we know – from Native Americans, Indian Untouchables, to Australian Aborigines and Roma in Europe – tend to live in poverty and degradation, suffer from exclusion and discrimination, with their families prone to alcoholism, violence, crime and child abuse.[19]

In this respect, the Na'vi are less 'natives' than they are 'navigators': not postmodern versions of 'the noble savage', but cybernauts who are 'digitally native', that is, savvy users and consumers of the latest communication technologies, always 'plugged in' and 'online', interacting with their game consoles or laptops the way the Na'vi plug themselves into their horses, birds or dragons. But the world of Pandora is not (merely) a metaphor for the game and fantasy environments of the geek generation. *Avatar* is also an allegory: a reflexively doubled parable of the communication circuit that Hollywood seeks with its global audiences, where a studio's films are its avatars, 'leading' spectators while ideologically seeming to act on their behalf. The Na'vi are the audiences, tuned in and turned on to Hollywood, so that the enthusiastic response to *Avatar* as a mirror for self-recognition all over the globe was correct: spectators *are* the Na'vi, because, at the allegorical level, the Na'vi *are* spectators in their newly 'empowered' role as assigned to them in the Hollywood blockbuster equation. For while audiences, thanks to the technology of digital 3-D, motion and performance capture and new ways of rendering sound and space, participate in the movie in hitherto unparalleled sensory proximity, the industry is after something else. As far as Hollywood is concerned, it wants audiences *to interact* with images, while Hollywood itself *acts with the images*. Which is to say, for the industry that makes them, images are instructions for actions – they trigger further moves, purchases and events – rather than pictures to contemplate or immerse yourself in, however much 'immersion' might be the stated objective. In this respect, *Avatar* the film functions itself as an 'avatar' in the larger system, of which it is the most successful representative. Hence my argument that when Hollywood films allegorize their own conditions of possibility, which are by necessity contradictory, they perform cognitive switches or enact a reversibility of roles: a master–slave relationship that never stabilizes itself. The films are – in the global market they have to serve in order to survive – almost by definition agents and double agents at the same time: in the words of Cameron's own film about double agents, they are 'true lies', or in terms of my argument, they are the 'special effects' of the truth-trust-and-belief system which is digital Hollywood today.[20]

Notes

1. An overview of identification from a cognitivist perspective can be found at: http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/20/entranced.html; from a sociological one at: http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Students/pjv9801.html; and from an anthropological–narratological one at: http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/classics/cl0499/jdcl1.html. See also Elsaesser and Hagener (2010), especially Chapters 2 ('Cinema as Door: Screen and Threshold'), 3 ('Cinema as Mirror and Face') and 4 ('Cinema as Eye: Look and Gaze').

2. See the chapter 'Film as System: Notes on Close Textual Analysis, or: How to Learn to Step through an Open Door' (Elsaesser 2012), for a more extensive examination of the classical system.

3. Carroll credits (or blames) Roger Corman for this two tier-strategy: 'Increasingly Corman's cinema came to be built with the notion of two audiences in mind – special grace notes for insiders, appoggiatura for the cognoscenti, and a soaring, action-charged melody for the rest. In this, he pioneered the two-tiered system' (1982, 77).

4. See, for instance, William Empson (1949 [first published in 1930]), one of the most influential books on close textual analysis in literature.

5. 'Dongria Kondh – The Real Avatar: Mine – Story of a Sacred Mountain' (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4tuTFZ3wXQ). The video now has a banner, reading: 'UPDATE: Victory! The Dongria Kondh have stopped Vedanta from mining their sacred mountain' (last accessed 28 March 2011).

6. 'Non-3D versions of Avatar to be pulled next week, in order to protect the nation's home grown films. The country's censors ruled that the epic had become too dominant and also worried about its effect on audiences, according to reports. [. . .] Some Chinese bloggers had already said parallels between the plight of the film's Na'vi creatures – who are forced to flee their homes – and Chinese people who have faced the threat of eviction would have raised concerns. One wrote: "For audiences in other countries, such brutal eviction is something outside their imagining. It could only take place on another planet or in China"' (Broughton 2010).

7. 'Bilin Reenacts Avatar Film 12-02-2010', http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Chw32qG-M7E

8. Morales is quoted in Casares (2010). In the 'conversation' following this item one blogger denounces Morales: 'Morales is an idiot who spouts platitudes, he is the "brown guy" front for Álvaro Garcia Linera. Alvaro is using Evo to trap the indigenous populations', while another replies: 'this movie Avatar has a lot of meanings for different people. Green peace activists would draw their own meanings, Iraqis who feel they were invaded for their vast oil resources, would have their own. What Evo Morales drew out of this movie, is relevant to most of us on this planet earth. Capitalism will eat us away, if we don't do something in time.'

9. The Wikipedia entry on *Avatar* lists more than a dozen different voices, pairing the ones that flatly contradict the other. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_%282009_film%29 (last accessed 29 March 2011).

10. 'It was *The Elephant Man's* executive producer Smart Cornfeld (and not Mel Brooks, to whom it was attributed) who so adroitly represented this paradox with the phrase "Jimmy Stewart from Mars". This works both as a humorous binary description and as deceptively simple shorthand for a more complex picture' (Rodley 2004, xii).

11. The IMDb entry on Cameron lists *Avatar 2* and *Avatar 3* as in the works for 2014 and 2015, respectively. However, it should not be forgotten that unlike other franchise movies, *Avatar* presented, by Hollywood standards, original story-content: 'The movie might be derivative of many movies in its story and themes', [Brandon Gray] said, 'but it had no direct antecedent like the other top-grossing films: *Titanic*

(historical events), the *Star Wars* movies (an established film franchise), or *The Lord of the Rings* (literature). It was a tougher sell.' Sarah Ball, 'Why Avatar could Out-Earn Titanic', *Newsweek*, 9 January 2010. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_% 282009_film%29-cite_note-www.newsweek.com-206 (last accessed 29 March 2011).

12. According to Box Office Mojo, by early 2011, *Avatar* had grossed $760 million in the USA and Canada, but $2.022 billion in other territories, bringing the worldwide total to over $2.780 billion, meaning that nearly 75% of income was foreign earned.

13. http://www.ted.com/talks/james_cameron_before_avatar_a_curious_boy.html (last accessed 30 March 2011).

14. 'The Moebius Strip subverts the normal, i.e. Euclidean way of spatial (and, ultimately: temporal) representation, seemingly having two sides, but in fact having only one. At one point the two sides can be clearly distinguished, but when you traverse the strip as a whole, the two sides are experienced as being continuous. This figure is one of the topological figures studied and put to use by Lacan. On the one hand, Lacan employs the Moebius Strip as a model to conceptualize the "return of the repressed", an issue important in *Lost Highway* as well. On the other hand, it can illustrate the way psychoanalysis conceptualizes certain binary oppositions, such as inside/outside, before/after, signifier/signified etc. – and can, with respect to *Lost Highway*, characterize Fred/Pete. These oppositions are normally seen as completely distinct; the Moebius Strip, however, enables us to see them as continuous with each other: the one, as it is, is the "truth" of the other, and vice versa' (Žižek 2007).

15. *True Lies* is the title of Cameron's 1994 action comedy, whose husband-and-wife protagonists not only lead double lives, but where their different kinds of duplicity have to be doubled by another layer of undercover disguise, in order for the couple to find 'true love'. Although two lies do not make a truth even in this film, the principle is broadly that of a double negative becoming an affirmative.

16. The quotations are taken from the Wikipedia entry: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Unobtainium (last accessed 31 March 2011).

17. See Tim Lenoir and Henry Lowood (n.d.), and Tim Lenoir (2000). See also Turse (2003). An early definition and use of the term can be found in an essay in *The New York Times*: 'Call it the military–entertainment complex. The aerospace and entertainment industries, which in the past inhabited parallel universes even as they sat side by side in southern California, are starting to cross-pollinate, bringing a new level of technology to entertainment and perhaps returning dividends to the Pentagon as well' (Pollack 1997).

18. This is evidently even more the case with computer-games, where the US army is an important client and partner of the film industry in developing the digital tools and technical capacities for recruiting, training and combat use of 3-D simulation. A succinct overview is given by Stockwell and Muir (2003).

19. It is a point also made by Žižek (2010), accusing *Avatar* of racism.

20. For an examination of the truth-belief-trust system, see Thomas Elsaesser, 'Digital Hollywood: Truth Belief Trust' (in Elsaesser 2012).

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