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Avatar's 'development' predicament

Rodanthi Tzanelli, 14th March 2012

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The globally-acclaimed film looks back to the past from a futuristic standpoint to simulate an archetypal moral tale of developmental inequality. Is that a good thing?

About the author

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Praise and critical attention for [Avatar \(2009\)](#) [6] over the last two years could fill several pages. The overall project framed its cinematic agents' involvement in social movements in Brazil in a unique way. The movie was a response consistent with James Cameron's overall artistic project but also his self-presentation as a keen traveller. An aficionado of technology, Cameron has always crafted cinematic narratives that tap into the philosophically complex relationship of human nature with 'otherness' - questions embracing the role of the mechanical, the alien or nature itself in emerging visions of humanity. His actual and cinematic journeys merged in more than one way - as a desire for adventure, a bold experiment in visual digital technology, but also a controversial humanitarian intervention in Brazilian environmental policies.

[The plot](#) [7] is set in the twenty-second century around a group of army officials and scientists who set foot on a moon called Pandora with a plan to mine its precious mineral 'unobtainium'. The pursuit of this mineral threatens the survival of the indigenous Pandoran lifeworld - the habitats, customs and memories of the local tribe of Na'vi. The military aims to infiltrate the Na'vi with the help of genetically engineered Na'vi-humanoid hybrid bodies that enable researchers to interact with natives. A disabled soldier, Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), is selected for this experiment. Together with lead scientist Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver) the first inter-species contact is attempted, leading to Jake's symbolic 'naturalisation' into Pandora's cultural biosphere and pacifist Grace's unfortunate death in the heat of a military attack. The cinematic narrative is crafted as simultaneously a military exploratory journey and a journey of self-discovery that Jake commences as a soldier-spy on an exploratory mission and completes by 'going native'. What unfolds thereafter adheres to a familiar post-colonial storyline: the destruction of 'Hometree' (the neural root of Na'vi memory) that stands in the way of obtaining 'unobtainium', signals the destruction of native life, as did the assault on ancient American, Asian and European civilizations by more technologically advanced conquerors. *Avatar* is in this respect a postmodern artefact emulating the structural sensibilities of history: it looks back to the past from a futuristic standpoint to simulate an archetypal moral tale of developmental inequality.

The [renaming of Southern Sky column](#) [8] in Zhangjiajie, Hunan province in China as 'Hallelujah' after *Avatar*'s floating Pandoran Mountains shows how global image mobility contributes to the tourism industry. After having inspired the visual design of the simulated Pandoran landscapes in 2008, the municipal government promptly adopted the slogan '[Pandora is far but Zhangjiajie is near](#) [8]'. *Avatar*'s civilizational allegory constructs links between western and eastern ideological circuits that seem to guarantee cinematic success. The Na'vi accents and the film's soundtrack adhere, it seems, to a Pan-African theme anti-Orientalist research would immediately condemn as 'primitivist'. There have been [various hostile claims](#) [9] that *Avatar* is nothing but a primitivist fantasy. The encoding of cultural fusions in art has been controversial since time immemorial, scholars of



hybridity stressing the roots of such portrayals in racist First World discourses ([Nederveen Pieterse 2006](#) [10]). But the involvement of Cameron and his crew in Brazilian movements [against state-led and corporate](#) [11] 'modifications' of Amazonian forests might diffuse such critiques. The film's overarching plot could be traced in the commitment of *Avatar's* creative leaders to ideals stretching beyond those of narrowly defined 'politics': like China, Brazil inspired [Avatar's CGI work](#) [12], as a political project and an opportunity for the real indigenous populations to partake in global image traffic(king) of what is threatened with destruction at home.

But I want to challenge the innocence we all display when we examine the complex politics of fabulist creativity that hooks itself upon realist projects such as that involving the [Belo Monte Dam in the Amazon Rainforest](#) [13] – *Avatar's* primary ecosystemic inspiration.

Movies, movie-makers and actors are always-already implicated in the cultural politics of their generation. [James Cameron](#) [14] is the child of a glorious age in politics and cinema (addressed to elites and general entertainment audiences alike). As both screenwriter and director he produced work that drew on war trauma, damaged masculinity (*Rambo*, 1985) and technology-mediated human encounters with alien worlds (*Alien*, 1986; *The Abyss*, 1989; *Terminator 2*, 1991). Some of these themes return in the *Avatar*, for example the visual references to American war histories (e.g. the battles in Hallelujah mountains as reference to famous scenes from *Apocalypse Now* and the real War in Iraq) together with all-pervasive guilt for the harm westerners cause to indigenous cultures (see the Na'vi mourning of Hometree destruction, the Na'vi anger against the army and even the musical mourning that envelops the destruction of the moon).

The transition from fabulism to politics is a hazardous business: the generation of a series of videos for the dissemination of *Avatar*-led activism against the construction of Belo Monte Dam (threatening to destroy indigenous ecosystems and human ecologies alike) appears to draw upon *Avatar's* narrative, whereby human progress and development builds upon destruction. Cameron [appears in one of these videos](#) [13] confessing that he has always wanted to travel to Brazil's virgin territories and he is elsewhere depicted amongst local populations like an ethnographic investigator, a detective uncovering evidence of a coordinated crime against localities. [Sigourney Weaver's video](#) [15] on the same controversy gestures towards a similar humanitarian narrative, having established herself as a professional feminist icon (see *Alien's* tough Ripley persona). Together, Cameron and Weaver reconstruct the archetypical ethical conundrum of developmental activism: does privileged intervention limit or enhance indigenous action? Is it merely self-serving (self-promotional) or a true humanist intervention on the side of the 'weak'? While Cameron maps a clash between brainless macho militarists and humanist scientists, thoughtless actors and thoughtful listeners observing before they act - in short, 'evil' vs. 'good' - there is also a submerged gender order in which subordinate masculinities (Jake the disabled soldier) serve as narrative vehicles for experiential authenticity and self-knowledge whereas the Na'vi tribes are viewed as in desperate need for protection.

It can be argued that while *Avatar's* developmental agents did not need the Belo Monte controversy to bolster their business, local activism did appear to benefit from having celebrities fronting the numerous photos of their protests (these populate [Flickr's relevant pages](#) [16] today). In May 2011 [T. Hirsch of BBC Radio 4](#) [17] repeated Cameron's journey, by walking into the contested Amazonian field to speak to the people and transmit their observations back to the First World. But we have to ask, do such global mobilities happen for a noble cause? Where do they leave us?

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Country or region: Brazil



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