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ON *AVATAR*
Digital commerce as activist pedagogy?

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Contemporary media allow digital environments to function as transnational classrooms, a multidimensional public sphere accessible to people with Internet connection. This generates ethical dilemmas, including the right to represent groups with incomplete civic rights and restricted access to representational centers. James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009)–Amazon Watch–Internal Rivers (2011) marriage responds to this phenomenon through uses of digital communication as both profitable enterprise and activist means.

The film narrated the interplanetary corporate destruction of another moon's—Pandora—ecosystem and civilization for its natural resources. But in search of interesting locales to photograph, *Avatar*'s computer generating image professionals stumbled upon the tribes of the Amazonian rainforest whose culture and livelihood face extinction due to a government-backed multibillion project to build the Belo

Monte hydroelectric dam in Xingu River. Director Cameron, producer Jon Landau and the crew joined forces with anthropologists, tribesmen, regional and (trans)national activists to cancel these plans. Today, *Avatar*'s digital contribution to the movement combines commercial and activist enterprise, assisting at once in global circulations of the cause and the promotion of Cameron's industry merchandise.

The generation of videos for the dissemination of *Avatar*-led activism against Belo Monte appears to draw upon *Avatar*'s core narrative that questions human progress building upon destruction. Cameron himself appears in one of these open-access videos—promotional of his relevant documentary—confessing that he always wanted to travel to Brazil's virgin territories. Elsewhere, he is depicted amongst indigenous populations like *Avatar*'s soldier Jake or an ethnographic traveller-investigator, uncovering evidence of coordinated crimes against localities. *Avatar* actor Sigourney Weaver's video adopts a humanitarian style (Amazon Watch, 2011), prompting viewers to sympathize with the cause. Her previous cinematic roles—*Alien*'s (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997) Ellen Ripley hired by a corrupt corporation she ends up fighting against—allow connections with global feminist activism within academia and in popular culture.

Together, Cameron and Weaver question the ethics of activism geared towards development. Does privileged-professional intervention limit or enhance indigenous action (Hobart, 1993)? Can we speak of corporate humanism that "educates"? Or such broadcast initiatives reproduce the ideologies of the developed World? Indeed, some claimed that the film itself projects a patronizing, even racist attitude

against fictional indigeneity and, by extension, its real-life analogues, figuring mostly as a "duty" to save the dispossessed from suffering (Newitz, 2009). The Amazonian tribes in question are one color skin darker than privileged metropolitan Brazilians and several than their Western benefactors.

The *Avatar* project sustains disseminations of ideals, ideas and action that often contradict each other (Appadurai, 1990; Urry, 2007). The "thanks" extended to Cameron by indigenous tribes clashed with film critiques as a racist fantasy, and even the indignation of businessmen in the Amazonian city of Alta Mira, who suspect that the motivations of media business—profit, more prestige—go deeper than we might think (Hirsch, 2011).

Social science scholars might consider how digital activism effectively reproduces paradoxes of knowledge as a positional good: Western technology always appears to control communication tools, "inviting" indigenous cultures to partake in global audiovisual enterprise. A devil's advocate would stress, instead, that local activists actually gained from the involvement of Hollywood celebrities fronting the protest photos that populate today's Flickr collections (Amazon Watch, 2010). In addition, the movie—popular with diverse audiences—served as an introductory narrative to the activist project for audiences with little knowledge of environmental and human rights politics. Both arguments are plausible.

One thing is sure: Cameron's digital lens merges fabulist creativity with political commitment in an ethical plight worthy of further investigation. ■

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