Slavoj Žižek recently claimed brutal racist undertones belie James Cameron’s film, Avatar. The question of racism within the symbolic economy of a popular, box-office record breaking film is a severe charge and its implications far reaching to those who would disagree. But was he right?
I owe many thanks to many people too numerous to count here for their support and kindness throughout this journey – but they know who they are. Most of all I would like to thank Dr David Rudrum for his guiding lights when the path was less than clear.

Avatar - Racism Reinforced: They Know What They Are Doing, Yet They Are Still Doing It

‘When Homer formed the idea of Chimera, he only joined into one animal, parts which belonged to different animals; the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a serpent’
- Gerard, A. Essays on Genius (1953)

‘This is not a profound or sophisticated intellectual exercise. There is very little enlightenment to be gained in consciously recognising the starship Enterprise, in the original series, as a US navy nuclear submarine cruising aimlessly around the Pacific, dispensing the morality of the Age of Liberalism at a vaguely dovish period in the Cold War. But there is nothing like constructing a world, or recognising a constructed world, for teaching you to see your own world as a construct. It is the existence of the technique that is significant.’

‘It is not just the physical laws the science fiction readers want to escape. Just as commonly, they want to escape from human nature. In pursuit of this, sf offers comforting alternatives to the real world. For instance, if you start reading a sf story about an abused wimp, you can be pretty sure that by chapter two he’s going to discover he has secret powers unavailable to those tormenting him, and by the end of the book, he’s going to save the universe...Having been a sf user myself, however, I have to say that, living in a world of cruelty, immersed in a culture that grinds people into fish meal like some brutal machine, with histories of destruction stretching behind us to the Pleistocene, I find it hard to sneer at the desire to escape. Even if escape is just a delusion’
- Kessel, J. ‘Invaders’ Fantasy & Science Fiction, October (1990)
‘If we really want to change or escape our social reality, the first thing to do is change our fantasies that make us fit this reality’


Soon after the release of James Cameron’s film, Avatar (2009), Slavoj Žižek (1949– ) claimed in a critical review1 that brutal racist undertones lie beneath the film’s political correctness. What he insists as the film’s explicit meaning, its utopian ideal of cultural homogeneity, symbolised in the vision of the hero, Jake Sully’s synthesised transformation at the end of Avatar, Žižek claims is achieved by anchoring the narrative structures of the story within a symbolic economy that actually promotes racism which the project of postcolonial discourse looks to expose, and which is at odds with the film’s final vision. The question of racism within the symbolic economy of Avatar’s narrative is a severe charge and its implications far reaching to those who would disagree with Žižek’s reading.

Avatar is what might broadly be called a popular science fiction fantasy – a fantasy Žižek suggests we must change in order to change our social reality2. Its story consists of familiar narrative tropes which have also featured in other stories to which the claim of racism could also be applied should his reading be theoretically sustainable. Žižek’s accusation of Avatar’s underlying racism is also a serious one given that the film’s attributes have been expressed generally in positive terms3, especially as a critique of the effects of capitalism’s global rampage here on earth, above and far beyond a minority of voices who have raised negative concerns, including Žižek’s, of racial discrimination underpinning a popular film. It should raise concern everywhere. Avatar is a piece of ‘pop-culture’ – whatever you hold that concept to be, and the story is littered with familiar tropes certainly. It is written and directed by James Cameron, someone who

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1 Žižek, S. ‘Return of the Natives’. The New Statesman, March 4th 2010
2 Ibid
3 A comprehensive compilation of Avatar’s critical reception worldwide can be found at http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/avatar/
has shown elsewhere, in film’s such as *The Abyss*, *The Terminator*, and *Aliens 2*, to be at least aware of, and - to certain extent, in tune with contemporary political agendas through his renderings of ‘otherness’ – of the ‘female-other’ in Dr. Lindsey Brigman, the designer of the rig deployed in *The Abyss* to rescue the stricken submarine; in Sarah Connor, the real saviour of humanity in *The Terminator*, and Lieutenant Ellen Ripley from the *Alien* franchise. *Avatar* as a racist film would not, then, be seen to reflect current political concerns, but actually repeats the older, out-dated modes of thinking, the same ones that justified slavery, or the eugenic projects of the Nazis to which we no longer adhere.

Or do we? The question is raised because, if Žižek’s analysis can be shown to sustain, it throws into question the political correctness to which the film implicitly supports to critique capitalism should its underlying signifiers be subscriptions anchored to values that underpin racism, and which suggests that *Avatar* does not in fact invite us to think about things differently, or in a new way towards cultural homogeneity, as its overt meaning and ending would have us believe. Rather, it is based on, and simultaneously promotes, existing prejudices and grand narratives based on discrimination and control. Žižek explains, “The film teaches us that the only choice the aborigines [- his encompassing term for the native aliens of Pandora, the planet on which the fantasy takes place] have is to be saved by the human beings or to be destroyed by them…they can choose either to be the victim of Imperialist reality, or to play their allotted role in the white man’s fantasy”. Thus Jake, the hero of the film, becomes for Žižek “le dupe du sont fantasme⁴.” *Avatar* has broken all previous box office records at the time of writing this discussion, grossing over two-billion dollars globally⁵, which could be taken to mean Žižek is incorrect because the film has proved to be so popular – surely someone would have noticed it was racist before it was produced and distributed? And if not, - although unlikely, surely the audiences would not want to be seen to identify with a film that promotes racism. At the centre of this discussion, then, is the ambivalent relationship between the stories we tell about the world, “our fantasies”, and the world in which we live, “our social reality”.

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⁴ Žižek (2009) *Ibid*
⁵ Rotten Tomatoes *Ibid*
The theoretical foundations Žižek uses to arrive at his claim can be traced in part to Sigmund Freud (1865-1930) and to Karl Marx (1818-1883), as Žižek calls directly on the Oedipal and capitalist symbols of their respective discourses. He incorporated the discursive grand narratives of human experience of Marx and Freud in his own seminal work in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), in which he develops Jacques Lacan’s (1901-1981) use of Freud, and the work of Marx, developed by others, such as Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) and Louis Althusser (1918-1990) to which we will refer. Grand narratives, then, and Žižek’s reading of them, are of special interest in this discussion as is the notion of the symbol, the symbolic order, and both the theoretical concepts and ideological implications of postcolonial theory. To that end, I have found it useful to reference Claude Levi-Strauss’s (1908-) work, via the pragmatics of C.S Peirce (1839 – 1914) and Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) with analyzing support from Franz Fanon (1925-1961) and Homi K. Bhabha (b.1948) in particular whose “small group occup[i]es the front ranks of literary and cultural theoretical thought. Any serious discussion of post-colonial/postmodern scholarship is inconceivable without referencing Mr. Bhabha.6” Science fiction (SF) references will be used. This is not to say that *Avatar* is a representation of the SF genre *per se* from which the discussion draws analogies. Research into SF, however, from a speculative association between *Avatar* and science fiction suggested by the interplanetary setting of the film, found homologous theoretical frameworks in SF7, most notably in Fredrick Jameson’s latest work, *Archaeologies of the Future* (2007) who grounds his discussions of SF’s representations of otherness to a notable extent in Marxist and, to a lesser extent, Lacanian theoretical concepts, to which Žižek refers.

The trajectory of this discussion, then, will be to analyse each of the theories Žižek uses to support his claim, which will be then summarised to argue that the metanarrative devices and symbols that foreground ‘race’ and ‘culture’ as sites of conflict which *Avatar* relies upon to assemble its meaning and which constitute what Žižek calls its “political correctness” are preconceived, essentialist assumptions that

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configure cultural difference as conflict, and which, in the repetition of this conflict of cultural difference in Avatar actually promotes racial discrimination in themselves. And to that extent, unfortunately, Žižek is correct.

Structuring Fantasies

What can be explored in the first instance is the notion of the symbol and how it constructs meaning, and more precisely, constructs culturally specific meaning. As a representation a symbol can be both a shortcut to meaning and a detour that constructs meaning in the context in which it appears. A symbol simultaneously encapsulates the literal object itself, ‘scales’ for example, and codifies connotative meaning, symbolizing ‘justice’ in a western cultural sense in this case. In the semiotics of C. S Peirce he tells us a symbol is a type of representamen in which the relationship between signifier and signified, in the terminology of Ferdinand de Saussure, is a learned or imputed contiguity. The symbol requires the interpreter, the reader or viewer, to know and understand the conventional code, its lɑŋɡe, governing its meaning.

For readers of texts, in this case viewers of a film, we recognise symbols, each of which gives us access to the story we are being told. To destabilise a symbolic meaning would be to suggest the theatrical masks of sadness and joy symbolize justice, the bust of which no Westerner would recognise above the Old Bailey, nor would they the bust of the balanced scales of justice on the door a theatre. Anthropologically speaking, structuralist, Claude Levi-Strauss argues that any culture can be seen as a set of symbolic structures, like the symbolic scales of justice and the masks of theatre collectively, to which the people of that culture, in this case Western culture, identify. The collection of cultural symbols can be broadened to symbolic economies that constitute sets of significations which govern the reader’s interpretation of them, such as

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10 Chandler, D. Ibid
the rules governing kinship and alliance, language and art\textsuperscript{12}. From a Lacanian perspective that Žižek develops (1998), the collective of cultural symbols form one of three orders of human existence - the Symbolic, which Lacan developed in his ‘Rome Discourse’ [1953], where he incorporates Saussurian linguistics and the anthropology of Levi-Strauss into his psychoanalytical practice. Creative writers, James Cameron included, could be said to show in their work a complex and illuminating understanding of these structured symbols and codes that constitute our existence. As Reinel explains,

“A culture is a particular network of negotiations for the exchange of material goods, ideas and – through institutions like enslavement, adoption, or marriage – people….a culture’s narratives, like its kinship arrangements, are crucial indices of the prevailing codes governing human mobility and constraint. Great writers are precisely masters of these codes, specialists in cultural exchange”\textsuperscript{13}

The Socio-economic Symbolic Structure of Avatar

\textit{Avatar} is the story of Jake Sully, a wheelchair bound ex-marine on earth, who is recruited by “the company” to fill his murdered brother’s position as a scientist on a distant planet, Pandora. The recognisable western cultural symbols of the imprisoned working class proletariat is emphasised by Jake’s immobility, but the writer, Cameron, does not make \textit{Avatar} a story about the revenge of the death of Jake’s brother, however. The choice Jake has is a choice about his ability (or inability) to work. His position as a marine has enabled and disabled him simultaneously; he is both prescribed and inscribed by is socio-economic position defined by Marx, who said, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, it is their social being that determines their consciousness”\textsuperscript{14}. Throughout \textit{Avatar}, Jake’s dialogue is inflected with the symbolic register of his previous working life in the army, “All I ever wanted in my sorry ass life was a single thing worth fighting for,” “If it ain’t raining then we ain’t training”, “the Jarhead Clan”, and “some dumb grunt”. Each example is not only Jake’s consciousness speaking, they demonstrate the marine’s socio-economic position by the linguistic register of the marines

\footnotesize{(\textsuperscript{12}) ibid


Jake employs that he has been taught because of his socio-economic position as a marine, which he then repeats outside of his capacity as a marine, as the narrator of the story in this case.

Jake’s marine-register is further emphasised throughout the film as he encounters the limitations of communicating in his symbolic economy when, for example, Dr Augustine, the academic science team leader, rebuffs Jake’s initial polite introduction, “Yes, I know who you are, but I want your brother, you know, the PhD who trained for five years for this mission.” Dr Augustine’s hostility can be placated, Jake is told, by imitating the doctor’s language, “Be here tomorrow, Oh-eight hundred. Oh, and try to use big words.” To Dr Augustine, Jake is useless because he has not had the training and thus not learned the language, the symbolic economy, by which the scientists communicate. It is a caricature – essentialist, as Žižek reminds us in his article, but nevertheless, the film quickly draws our attention to the way language is deployed across the different institutions and the difficulty of interpreting connotative metanarratives of meaning between the two by showing both positions to be speaking the same language, yet neither is fully recognised or fully understood by the other. The difference, and thus the conflict, between the two characters is embedded in the symbolic economies of the respective disciplines - the academics portrayed here as the users of longer words than those employed by the army. The conflict induced by Jake’s and Dr Augustine’s different metanarratives, the conventional code, the learned or imputed contiguity of symbols governing their meaning that is required by each character to know and to understand each other does not allow them to greet, even, without a fight.

The film reminds us of how different socio-economic opportunities constitute the subject through language. Jake is rejected by Dr Augustine initially because she perceives that he does not understand the symbolic structures she uses. Both Dr Augustine and Jake speak English, but their conversation is rendered conflictual because of Jake’s limited access to the scientific symbolic register the doctor uses. It could be said that the conflicting registers of language are predetermined which the audience assumes is because of the differing ideological positions from which each character speaks. Althusser, furthering the work of

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15 Chandler, D. *Ibid*
Marx’s materialist philosophy of existence, defined the base- and super-structural institutions by which the subject is interpolated into their ideological predetermined position.\(^{16}\)

The nature of existence, according to Marxist theory, is ideological. Furthermore, ideology is inescapable; everyone within the ideological system of belief has no choice but to be part of it. To define ideology succinctly or articulate briefly is slippery, in the interests of space therefore, put simply; if one person believes in an idea, such as education or going to university is good for you, or capitalism is fair, then a group of people who believe in the same group of idea/s constitutionally is an ideology. Eagleton stresses this especially when pertaining to ideas of power.\(^{17}\) What one might call “common sense”, for example, is ideologically underpinned. Ideology then, according to Marxist theory, is the ruling class’s ideas, and it is their beliefs, forms and values which circulate throughout the cultural spheres of the military and the science academy we have discussed, which can be interpreted as an expression of class interests.\(^{18}\) Avatar presents the capitalist modes of production of the twenty-first century in the form of enormous machinery on Pandora, and it seems common sense, I would argue, to assume that a multinational corporation is exploiting the natural resources of a distant land, which Jake takes time to recognise. Jake, the subject, has been “wait-“ or “weight-listed”, by the government - the differance\(^{19}\) between the two possibilities is elided in articulation over writing but the connotative meaning is the same: Jake is surplus, he must wait, without ability and without a purpose, he is a dead weight for the capitalist economy producing workers. By positioning Jake’s choice of filling his dead brother’s position through work, Cameron is repeating consciously, or unconsciously, the effect of ideology for, without his position as a worker, Jake is surplus – useless even. Jake is useless to Dr Augustine before he learns the ideological symbolizations of the scientists in order to participate fully, which their fraught relationship in the film demonstrates, as does Jake’s learning of Na’vi – the language of the Na’vi, which interpolates him into the symbolic economy of the indigenous population of Pandora, into his ideological already-there position of military attaché on the

\(^{16}\) Althusser, L. Ibid
\(^{18}\) A Critical & Cultural Theory Reader 2nd ed. (Maidenhead: OUP, 2007) pp34
planet. This aligns Jake with what Žižek describes as Marx’s symptom\(^20\), Jake’s socio-economically prescribed desire, “all I ever wanted in my sorry-ass life was a single decent thing worth fighting for.” “The company”, furthermore, is a symbolically characterized – that is an essentialist representation of the capitalist system, and what we see in *Avatar* thus far is an expression of the prevailing economic class system. But this has not proved that *Avatar* is racist or that Žižek is correct. What we have managed to demonstrate is that Cameron, to the best of his abilities is repeating a number of recognisable tropes to tell a fantasy that is actually a reality in Brazil (- to use an analogous comparison rather than Žižek’s Orissa atrocities to which he compares Cameron’s film in his article)\(^21\). But it is in the repetition of the symbolic economy of the prevailing class interests, the capitalist system, in our fantasies that Žižek contends we must change. The reason for which, and the root of *Avatar’s* racism, we will look at next.

**Shoring-Up Belief**

Developing Marxist theory and its basic principles, Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci (1891 – 1937) and Louis Althusser articulated more specifically how, and the modes by which, ideologies operates through the expressions of class interest. A ruling group must govern, Gramsci theorized, through a balance of persuasion and force\(^22\). Gramsci identified the differences between the superstructural levels of Marx’s theory of ideology which ensure, through consensus-building institutions such as education, religion, and family, the media and the mainstream arts, the continuing ideological dominance of all classes by the ruling class. Borrowing the term from Lenin to designate these establishments’ domination, Gramsci called this hegemony\(^23\). Making similar distinctions between the superstructural levels of ideology as Gramsci did, Althusser identified what he called the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA), discussed above, as the establishments and institutions by which the ruling class ideology imposes its hegemonic order. These

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\(^{21}\) At the time of writing, the Brazilian high courts have finally given the go ahead, after much protest, to a conglomerate of international companies to clear another vast area of the already undernourished South American rain forests to build one of the largest dams in the world, the Bela Monte dam. The dam will, they say, generate electricity to provide much needed energy for Brazil’s ever expanding populous. The surplus energy produced will be sold for profit on the open energy markets. Consequently over 20,000 indigenous people of the rain forest and, conservationist claim, over one thousand species of animals that are unique in the world to this area will be without a home due to the flooding this dam will cause. These people are not blue, like the Na’vi in Avatar, but the story of the dam is strikingly similar to the one under scrutiny here. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-12295662, http://www.amazonwatch.org, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/feb/15/brazil-energy, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/earthnews/7614675/Belo-Monte-dam-approval-provokes-bloodshed-threats-from-Amazon-Indians.html

\(^{22}\) *A Critical & Cultural Theory Reader* 2nd ed. pp35

function in varying degrees with ‘relative autonomy’ by methods of punishment or selection, “to discipline not only their shepherds, but also their flocks”. For Eagleton, the link between a text, in this case a film, and ideology therefore is one in which “ideology presents itself...as a set of significations which are already articulated in a certain form or series of forms, displaying certain general structural relations...[and] an ideologically determined set of possible modes of aesthetically producing ideological significations”. The formal and representational modes Avatar deploys do not go as far as Darco Suvin’s principle of “cognitive estrangement” – an aesthetic which builds upon the Russian formalism of “making strange”. But it could be said that Avatar’s ideological symbolic structures embody the empiricist maxim that nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses, and in general, affirms that even our wildest imaginings are all collages of experience, constructs made up of bits and pieces of the here and now.

Accordingly, the sociological manifestations of culture and arts are not independent of social forces nor are they innocent entertainment. They play a significant role in transmitting ideological beliefs, shoring up the hegemonic order. Configured as such, it is here that Avatar’s problem arises, which can now be discussed in more detail.

**Syntactical Repetition**

What we hope to have demonstrated so far is two of the different super-structural institutions - the military and the scientific academics are differentiated and represented in the film as inherently conflictual by the specific language they use. We could extend this to include other institutions here in reality, like religion, or the courts of law, which communicate with differing sets of symbols, different symbolic registers. The difference in the symbolic registers could be said to be syntactical. Dr Augustine, for example, is the ‘Chief Science Researcher’ and is in charge of the scientists. On the other hand, Mr Selfridge is the ‘Chief Operating Officer’ of the company and is in charge of the company’s interests. They

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25 Althusser, L *Ibid* pp44
are both in charge but different cultural signifiers are used to identify and describe that fact. If we were to swap the cultural symbols of the uniform and the gun for a white lab coat and a clipboard the symbols are syntactically different. With this in mind, I would like to show where Žižek would seem to be correct, using a syntactical shift by looking at the Na’vi and then capitalism.

The Na’vi are blue, seven feet tall humanoids, and whose bodies are not dissimilar to a human body, except they are blue and considerably taller. They are portrayed as a spiritual people whose social systems, the sections of which the audience are presented with at any rate, are not dissimilar to recognisable social systems here on earth. They worship a god, for example, ‘Ewah’, which is pronounced as a rather crude reversal of the Hebrew initials for Jesus Christ, King of the Jews, Yahweh. They are tribal peoples whose ‘mother’ – interprets the will of Ewah, like perhaps a church leader would interpret stories of belief such as the Bible, or the Qur’an here on earth. A distinct difference, perhaps, between the religious system of the Na’vi and the religious systems here is that Ewah exists visibly to the naked eye in the life-energy of the ecology of Pandora, which Dr Augustine and her team are studying. The Na’vi tribal leader is a male, Etu’khan, a character who mirrors notions of patriarchy within the political system, and his union with the tribal mother perhaps more precisely mirrors the relationship between the monarchy and the religious establishment from the feudal systems of the middle-ages with no discernable power distribution in the Na’vi people beyond family lineage, religion and the military – there are no analogous representations of a dominant bourgeois middle classes on Pandora and the Na’vi culture appear to have avoided any industrial revolution because they do not have any mechanical systems upon which they reply as modes of production. This is because the electromagnetic field discharged by unobtainium affects technology rendering it useless. The Na’vi hunt with bows and arrows, and their implements, such as knives, are made of crystals, which they also fashion into weapons. The Na’vi military leader and the daughter of the tribal mother will become the tribe’s leader and spiritual leader respectively, and which further demonstrates the representation of the ideological distribution of power of the Na’vi akin to royal lineages of monarchy still practiced in several countries on earth today. What Cameron has done is to characterise, to essential-
ize, cultural symbols; the decorative dresses of the Na’vi, for example, were modelled on the ceremonial
dresses of the indigenous populations of the Pacific Polynesian Islands; the Na’vi’s god, Ewah, is essentially
the Hebrew god, Yahweh - and so on; they are essential characterisations only. At its heart as Žižek
explains, Avatar is a colonial story.

What Cameron is portraying in this essentialist colonial story, in the rail guns, space ships and laser sights;
in “the company”, in the scientists and in Jake – the humans, is an ‘advanced’ Western civilisation pitched
against the bows and arrows of the less advanced Na’vi. In the final battle, the Western might verses the
less technologically advanced civilisation of the Na’vi, the audience feels empathy for the Na’vi, that is we
are made to feel sorry for them being less technically advanced than the humans – the battle is portrayed
as unfair thus the audience cheer when the essentially weaker underdogs beat the humans who are sent
home at the end. It requires the audience to see the Na’vi as less advanced, less well off - in other words,
as inferior. The audience are required to bring with them the assumption of their Western dominance and
power, consciously or unconsciously. But what if if the film were to syntactically change the colour of the
Na’vi’s skin to black, like the skin of a person born of African descent, or the golden colour of those who
are soon to be moved from the rain forests of Brazil, and syntactically change the Na’vi’s height to make
them a bit shorter, say, about five feet eight or nine inches on average, and then syntactically change
Pandora for Earth? If this were the case I would suggest the film would not even have been made. With
this in mind, the essentialist symbolic structures by which the story is constructed are actually deployed to
repeat a colonial story but one in which a white man of an assumed advanced civilisation turns black and
helps the assumed inferior people defeat the great power of colonialism and capitalism, which is a story
that did not happen, and which renders Avatar as a myth. What we find in Avatar Žižek identifies
elsewhere as the "standard notion of the way fantasy works within ideology," the way "a fantasy-scenario
... obfuscates the true horror of a situation. In the same way as it is not happening in South America.

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30 Claude Levi-Stauss (Mythologiques 1964-71) argued what myths do is to make a story out of fundamental and irresolvable human contradictions or enigmas (for example, life and death, humans and animals and so on) which, like Avatar, make order out of the simultaneity of conflicting theories: they narrate over, without resolving the cultural contradiction.

31 Žižek, S “Seven Veils" Plague of Fantasies. (London: Verso, 1997) pg190
indigenous people there are soon to be moved on whether they like it or not, as Mr Selfridge in the film clearly points out when one of the Na’vi (Jake in his Avatar body) stands blocking Selfridge’s gargantuan digger and he explains to the driver “...well, just keep going, he’ll move,” ...and, pressing the forward button on the digger, the Na’vi moves, “see, he moved.”

The final syntactical change I would like to suggest, one which the film obscures, is one which has been mentioned in the course of this discussion that takes us back historically to the beginnings of the industrial revolution. I would like to suggest the imperialist queen’s crown and gown is a business suit, and the imperialist system that paid patronage to the crown enabling the industrial revolution is now capitalism where the patronage is paid to those running “the company”, and its shareholders. In reality, as Denis Judd explains, “[n]o one can doubt that the desire for a profitable trade, plunder and enrichment was the primary force that led to the establishment of the imperial structure.” 32 Judd argues that colonialism was first and foremost part of the commercial venture of the Western nations that developed from the late seventeenth and earlier eighteenth centuries although others date its origins to the European ‘voyages of discovery’ in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries 33. Furthermore, as McLeod reminds us,

“The seizing of ‘foreign’ lands for government and settlement was in part motivated by the desire to create and control markets abroad for Western goods, as well as securing the natural resources and labour-power of different lands and peoples at the lowest possible cost. Colonialism was a lucrative commercial operation, bringing wealth and riches to the Western nations through the economic exploitation of others. It was pursued for economic profit, reward and riches. Hence colonialism and capitalism share a mutually supportive relationship with each other 34

(my emphasis)”

In other words, it doesn’t really matter whether we call it colonising, imperialism, a king, big business or capitalism, we know what we are doing, yet we are still doing it and in the film we are repeating it. By presenting the moment of triumph at the end of Avatar as an outright rejection and conflict between the two systems, thus sustaining the myth, as Gramsci showed, it shores-up the idea that the situation will

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33 McLeod, J. Beginning Postcolonialism. (Manchester: MUP, 2001) pg7-9
34 Ibid
always be in conflict – it’s either inferior them, or superior us. The audience are never told why the humans have invaded another planet for its resources\textsuperscript{35}, only, that “it’s worth $20 million a kilo”. “The Company’s” endeavour is never questioned. The whole premise for being on Pandora at all is not addressed except briefly at the end when Jake prays to Ewah for help in the final battle when he says “they (the humans) killed their planet.” But that is all. The audience are assumed to subconsciously recognise their own superiority and not to question the capitalist endeavour, which syntactically is a colonial story in different clothes. Žižek’s claim thus sustains because \textit{Avatar} is a colonial myth based on the pursuit of money and rooted in essentialist symbols of cultural otherness that does nothing other than to sustain the conflict. The audience must identify with the Na’vi as the weaker, inferior “race” from a superior position for the climax of the film to work.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Žižek’s analysis is accurate. His accusation of racism brings back memories of colonisation which we don’t like to think we do anymore, like the slave trade and the eugenics of the Nazi’s - things we hoped to have moved past. Žižek has shown, however, a fundamental flaw in \textit{Avatar}, and thus the many films like it; a blind adherence to capitalism as a repetition of history, which \textit{Avatar} is complicit in shoring-up as the hegemonic order by representing the film’s final vision as irreconcilable differences based on racial superiority. It requires the audience to bring a preconceived notion, subconscious or otherwise, that Western culture is superior for the end of the film to work. This is not what the Xingu River tribes of Brazil think. Imperial colonialism saw a monarch who gathered wealth by exploiting the ‘other’ via her subjects. It was in the name of the undeniable, unquestionable advantages of wealth and in the name of the sovereign that the English embarked on the high seas to conquer the “savages” and teach them our way employing those we could educate to work like the unwitting hero Jake. Since the industrial revolution, a large proportion of the world now recognise capitalism, and not the monarchy, as the hegemonic order and the

\footnote{I owe this point to Dr Rudrum}
economic distributor of wealth, which seems to have convinced a number of people that capitalism is fair because it facilitates that, with the right resources, anyone can assume the role of the monarch, and can make as much money as they could possibly want for themselves – James Cameron included. But while capitalism drives the forces of social and economic change, as Homi K. Bhabha points out, “it does not provide a foundational framework for those modes of cultural identification and political affect that form around issues of sexuality [or] race...” In other words, capitalism does not care how we behave towards our fellow humans.

Moving on, what this discussion hopes to have shown is the importance of the creative industries and the use language in promoting cultural values, to which Žižek addresses his analysis. As Ngugi wa Thiong’o (b.1938) explains,

“Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politic and at the social reproduction of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other human beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.”

As Ngugi points out, language does not just passively reflect reality; it also goes a long way toward creating a person’s understanding of their world, and it houses the values by which we, either willingly or through force, live our lives. A particular value-system like capitalism is taught as the best, true view of the world. The cultural values of the colonised peoples are deemed to be lacking in value, or inferior. The Empire did not rule by physical and military force alone. It endured and is still enduring by getting both colonised and colonising people (the audience of Avatar in this case) to see their world, and themselves, in a particular way, internalising the language of Empire as representing the natural, true order of life, replaying the inferior/superior binary oppositions.

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37 Bhabha, H.K The Location of Culture. (London: Routledge, 2004) pg8
39 McLeod Ibid
And while we would never adhere to a film whose reconciliation is based upon the exploitation of tribal people like the blue Na’vi, or the Xingu river tribes, it is happening. The king has merely changed his clothing from a crown to a business suit. The new kings are the kings of business who are displacing, killing and taking what they please like the old imperialists from whom they learnt it all in the stories and literature we share, and as here, in the films we watch. By cheering the great achievement of Avatar we thus align ourselves in agreement with this. What Žižek’s suggests is that if we cannot explore the possibilities of changing reality in our fantasies, then reality will be this way. In a similar way Franz Fanon reminds us, “If we continue to race into the future of post-postmodernity without fully recognising the ambivalence of repressive forces used to define “other”, thus “us/ourselves” that have shaped our ontological and epistemological discourses historically and do nothing, there will always be a world - a white world between you and us.”
Bibliography


