

The Inner Logic of Avatar

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IN MARCH 2010, Žižek reviewed *Avatar* for the *New Statesman*; his conclusion was that, at its core, the film duplicates a time-honored "reactionary myth" that perpetuates "vampiric exploitation" in the guise of "compassion for the poor." In short, *Avatar* is racist and brutal in its implications. The film offers up the ideological choice of being "the victim of imperialist reality" or playing the "allotted role in the white man's fantasy." I think Žižek was more or less correct in his evaluation of the film but he could have gone much further and drawn out many more regressive features. *Avatar* is important and deserves more attention, as it provided, arguably, an ideal-typical expression of what we might think of as the pseudo-progressive consciousness of our time. My intention, now, is not to summarize or review the film; readers are either already familiar with it or can read Žižek's adequate summary in his review, which is freely available online.[1] My intention is to briefly tunnel into the inner logic of the film and extract what amounts to its ideological essence — an initial gambit, potentially, in an exploration of cinema and culture in the late American imperialist era.

One of the most obvious and problematic features of *Avatar* is that it imagines that the solution to the pathological functions of the military industrial complex (MIC) is already found inside the MIC — like a Luther inside the Church who, alone, and driven by ethical purity, can undermine ruthless institutionalized tyranny. Nothing is more fantastic than the notion of an ethically pure trooper who could bring the operations of the MIC to a standstill on the frontier of extraction. We have to do nothing about the MIC because the seeds of its own self-destruction are already festering away, internally. We can go on consuming like mad and burying ourselves in debt because the Department of Defense (DoD) can ultimately purify itself. Indeed, the worse the MIC and we become in our malevolence, the more likely a good change will spontaneously produce itself. Bad capitalism is actually the road to freedom!

Avatar splits (fetishizes) capital into two separate species: the classic division between rapacious, evil capital — here it subsidizes the DoD for the purpose of clearing a path for corporate globalization. In the background is the promise of a return to old-fashioned good business. If only the evil excess of capital, the MIC-speculation complex could be pacified, then we could get back to the business of good business and the DoD could get back to what it does best: peace-keeping missions and making the world safe for democracy.

A key promise the film makes is that violent revolution is necessary but will happen somewhere else, literally in another world, another time, and another place. The mess and destruction of a revolution can be avoided here and now because, evidently, "here" is a great place, requiring only minor revisions. Revolution should not cost us "our" world but should come at the expense of the other's world. And if the mass destruction and death involved in revolution is only possible someplace else, then it is because it deserves to be purified. Our world is good; the revolutionary battleground, on the other hand, is defective (but naturally perfect) and in need of annihilation. Pointing to the "speculative identity" of the film, the presence of the evil corporation prefigures the primordial defect of the aboriginals — as if evil capital is forced to appear due to the primitive stupidity of others to get with the program of free market exchange. Of course, what *Avatar* hides is that our almost perfect world of middle class material sumptuousness is built on top of the other's radical impoverishment and free market exchange. And revolution, while unavoidable, will be postponed for the future — somebody else in the future will have to deal with all this; for now, all we can do is just keep doing what we've been doing.

"Radical" or revolutionary potential is not simply embodied by the white male. The white man

hero is the embodiment of justice, a gift that he can bestow on others if and when he chooses. However, actual revolutionary action would require a transformation of the white male into a hybrid, alien being (literally inhuman). Revolution is not something a decent American (white male) would get involved in. The revolutionary situation is a classic case of the person becoming simultaneously more than and less than his individual form: as a "sublimate" (his noble and heroic form) must be purchased at the price of assuming a more 'primitive' form; *Avatar* implies that revolution is not inherently progressive but regressive.

In order to save an environment we should be willing to destroy it in a glorious struggle. We will have to face losing "the tree" in order to save the tree. And the loss of nature is acceptable because the apparently sui generis "network" of nature is greater than the tree — loss of finite parts of nature is a trivial price to pay because we need only retain a fraction of the whole in order to preserve the whole itself. The destruction of a key but finite piece of the natural world is bearable because the very loss itself will spontaneously activate its automatic compensation.

One point that *Avatar* gets right is that sociological altruism (Durkheim) can defeat technology (a lesson that Americans continuously fail to grasp, from Korea, Vietnam, to Afghanistan). But the limits of altruism are reached when war passes over into total war. *Avatar* slips in petit bourgeois justice as a notion that can suspend even the trump card of total war. We can forge ahead in our purely self-destructive mode (domestically and internationally) without regard for total war and nuclear winter because we are white, right, and full of might — or at least we could be if we wanted to. We can be stopped but even in our "defeat" we emerge victorious. As always, for Americans, every situation is a "win-win." This bizarre notion also reinforces the notion that science and technology are inferior to myth, belief, and faith. We may have a lot of high-tech gadgets but what will save us, like the "primitives," is our irrational faith-based society.

Justice in the *Avatar* world is local (particular) and universalism is inherently evil and corrupt. Forces that penetrate or appear on the boundaries with the particular are only evil, and particular communities will always be forced to circle their wagons at the first signs of universalism. Freedom can be actualized only via particular mediation rather than directly, and freedom will come at the price of intellectual stagnation and submerging the mind in faith and myth. It is permissible to degrade the earth so long as it is done in good faith and based on faith. Our lack of reflexivity is our alibi: of course, had we known what we were doing we would never have done otherwise but since we were misled or duped (a defect of faith) we could not know. The very experience of something like global climate change is proof enough that we were well intentioned, a faithful, good people.

Just as *Avatar* fetishizes capital it fetishizes nature. We should be willing to fight to the death for natural resources because they have "value" as if value were inherent in nature. The film hinges on a naïve realism that ordinary people share with orthodox Marxology: value per se. The film redoubles our misplacement of morality into the natural (amoral) domain. *Avatar* makes as much sense as evil sharks and Bolshevik ants that populate nature programming. Further, in *Avatar* we find that some places are sacred and worth dying for; some places are worth the cost of lives — and, if we lose one or two, it is no big deal since our revolutionary fighter is not even human any more.

Avatar also appeals to upper-middle class egoism in that it constructs a morally pure, incorruptible, and noble other for us to project our abstract and impersonal humanitarianism on to — our love of aliens is linked to the inhuman "brotherly love" of the Calvinist and his desublimated descendant, the modern consumer. What *Avatar* reinforces is the fear of the organized spiritual elite. The film structures revolutionary action along two possible lines: the naturally attuned aliens who are bogged down by the collectivist (horde) mentality and, in the second group, the ethically driven individual; the available options are masses or individuals but not the elite cadre — cadres (and success) are for fanatics and terrorists. The good (and imaginary) fight just needs one "activist" or

good guy (with a little good luck thrown in along with common sense and a dash of moral indignation) to mobilize the masses. One could easily see in this fantasy not just narcissism but full-blown psychosis. And since in this arrangement everybody in the category of "mass" would have to agree to follow the singular leader, and since that is impossible, it means that actual revolution would have to remain forever in the domain of fantasy. Either we all pull together or nothing is possible. I'm not going to risk my life unless everybody is willing to die for my adventure. The *Avatar* fantasy also says a lot about the uniquely American conception of self-sacrifice.

Self-sacrifice, here, is a form of degraded utilitarianism. The hero who sacrifices his self actually gains much more: regaining the full use of a (alien) body: sacrifice is worth it only so long as I get a lot more out of it and do not actually lose my life. Revolutionaries qualify for a life upgrade upon completion of the mission. Sacrifice in *Avatar* follows an all-or-nothing logic: either I will save the whole world or I'll just stay at home and do nothing. Something like mundane, simple forms of everyday assistance are too boring and trivial to imagine. It is easier and more fun to imagine my body transformed into an alien who defeats the combined forces of evil capital and to have unlimited sexual relations with a princess than it is to just do something small but potentially helpful for concrete people with actual needs. For *Avatar* fans, the revolution will have to be mightily entertaining and rewarding for them to get interested.