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Black Like Me: Tropes of Racial Transformation in Contemporary Cinema

Fantasy, Gothic, horror and sci-fi fiction have long been privileged genres for exploring anxieties, fantasies and thought experiments about race. In nineteenth-century fiction, Gothic monsters such as Frankenstein's creature, Dracula, and Mr. Hyde were often understood as possessing racial overtones, although interestingly these figures were usually not marked as "raced" in early silent film versions.¹ Instead, the first important Gothic figure of the twentieth century to be widely understood as racially resonant was King Kong.² More recent instances of similarly implicit coding are present in the *Predator* series, while overt allegories of sci-fi multiculturalism include the *Star Trek*, *X-Men* and *Alien Nation* franchises. In *Strange Encounters*, Sara Ahmed notes that space aliens, which have become a ubiquitous if ambivalent presence in popular culture, pose questions about the limits of being human as well as about the nature of community and its borders (Ahmed, 3). In this respect, space aliens are the contemporary heirs of the cultural work of nineteenth-century Gothic monsters.

Two recent science fiction films engage with the question of human nature and community through a nearly identical gambit: that of imagining a

¹ See, for example, H.L. Malchow's *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996).

² I use the word "resonant" in order to avoid the term "allegorical," which is too strong in my view, but other scholars have read *King Kong* as a racist allegory of black masculinity, e.g. Bellin, Snead.

white male mind inside an alien body.³ Although this body is ostensibly of another species it is clearly coded with racial and ethnic markers. Interestingly, the two films elaborate the effects and implications of this inter-species transformation in diametrically opposed directions. In one, Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009), the process is perceived as a grotesque calamity, while in James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), it is experienced as a redemptive empowerment. In the first example, the transformation is described as a degenerative pathology that turns the privileged protagonist into a hunted ghetto-dweller, while in the other it offers the injured white soldier a chance to experience physical completeness and social integration of a kind he could never attain in his own body. Together, the films attest to the ambivalence of white culture in relation to the feared and desired possibility of occupying the embodied subject-position of racially-marked otherness. The two narratives enact the American tradition of "love and theft" of black culture that Eric Lott describes in his work on black minstrelsy but move the frame of reference into a wider postcolonial context, with *District 9* set in South Africa and Canadian director James Cameron's global film event *Avatar* taking place in a jungle on a fictional planet. In his groundbreaking study *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Lott analyzes the "white obsession with black (male) bodies which underlies white racial dread to our own day," and argues that contradictory racial impulses are at work in popular entertainment and have been ever since nineteenth century minstrelsy (Lott, 1995, 3-4). I will examine how these two films stage their contradictory racial politics in terms of a critique of white male masculinity, and will

³ I am choosing to consider *Avatar* as science fiction instead of fantasy, which is another way in which it could be defined, because it assumes a fictional world in which earth exists, as opposed to positing a completely imaginary setting (as much fantasy does). Moreover, according to a recent scholar of popular genres, "at the root of all science fiction lies the fantasy of alien encounter," which is clearly the main issue at stake in *Avatar* (McCracken, *Pulp* 102).

conclude with a discussion of the politics of affect in relation to genre. Specifically, I will be arguing that film and literature scholars tend to assume that genres relying on irony, such as satire, are inherently more progressive than popular genres that truck in emotion and identification, such as melodrama and action films, and this essay means to challenge that critical commonplace.

Before going any further it must be acknowledged that political readings of popular culture texts are notoriously complicated. The two films under consideration are both made by conscientious center-left directors who have tried to make socially-critical films that happen to also be popcorn-friendly entertainment. Furthermore, both are non-realistic texts that flaunt their fantasy effects, inviting approaches that accommodate an analysis of codes, connotations, allegory or analogy understood in the widest possible sense. Beyond the question of realism lies another layer of mediation linked to the issue of affect and genre. *Avatar* is a blockbuster adventure story with a melodramatic structure while *District 9* is a gritty sci-fi satire structured as a faux documentary. It begins and ends with interviews, although the main body of the film adopts a classic narrative perspective following a single protagonist in his “arc,” as Blomkamp calls it, from complacent bureaucrat to hunted “prawn” (the derogatory term used for the aliens). It goes without saying that the emotional effects of a film made by the man responsible for the most successful melodrama of all time, *Titanic*, and a social satire by a director known for *cinéma vérité* techniques are necessarily going to be very different. I will return specifically to this question at the end of the essay.

Despite the difference in emotional impact between the two films, it is striking to see how much they overlap and echo each other. Both are centered on white male protagonists who are responsible for helping to forcibly relocate a population of aliens, thus making the postcolonial issues of displacement and military force key issues. Both protagonists begin as anti-heroes of sorts: Wikus van der Merwe is a self-important and blatantly racist bureaucrat married to the boss’s daughter, while Jake Sully is an

uneducated and wheelchair-bound former Marine. Both begin the story as individuals interested only in themselves and end up helping the aliens out of a sense of moral sympathy or even kinship. A large part of each film is focused on the states of hybrid identity as the transformation from human to Other is underway, with its attendant confusions, but by the end, both white male protagonists have become completely alien physically and have cast their lot morally with aliens as well.

The single greatest difference between the two films is that aliens are represented as attractive in *Avatar* and as repulsive in *District 9*, where they are depicted as wasp-like, dirty, immature, stupid, lying, thieving, fond of cat food and animal heads, reproducing with black slimy eggs laid in dead cow bodies reminiscent of *Alien*, and speaking in a language using clicking sounds which lacks correct grammar (as shown in the subtitles). Whatever the extent to which the aliens are a trope for black South Africans or any human group (such as refugees), they are offensive in the extreme. In contrast, *Avatar*'s Na'vi are an idealized, even fetishized, mix of Native American and Black features, with some lemur and cat thrown in: animalistic but with humanoid bodies and faces (with a single belly button, not six, and "nubile" breasts, as Cameron's shooting script describes Neytiri's; Cameron, 35). They resemble a romanticized notion of Native Americans in most respects (e.g. tribal, warriors, with long black hair and braids, respectful and linked to nature, spiritual, primordially innocent [they have no word for lying], brave, affectionate, strong, beautiful and attuned to beauty).

Although coded mainly as Native American, three out of the four main Na'vi characters are played by African American or black Caribbean actors. These casting choices can be read in a couple of different ways. On the one hand, they may reinforce the way in which racial others occupy a composite symbolic space in the white imagination, which does not bother to differentiate between them. On the other hand, they can be seen as

symptomatic of the fact that there are very few Native American actors, itself attributable to the larger genocide and ongoing marginalization of Native American people in American society. Nevertheless, the fact that African American actors can now play characters representing idealized Native American characters does suggest growth of African American symbolic capital in the cultural economy of Hollywood representation. And on a strictly practical level, the employment of a highly multiracial cast on the *Avatar* project is not to be dismissed either. As Steven Zeitchik of the *Los Angeles Times* points out, there are very few jobs being offered to young black actors at the moment, and the few that exist are usually comic (online). In contrast to *Avatar's* diversity, the cast of *District 9* is almost entirely white, including the actor who plays the aliens (Jason Cope, who plays all the aliens by himself). More importantly for the overall impact of the film, the most terrifying “monsters” in the film, next to the private military company that does lethal medical research on the aliens, are the “Nigerian” gangs that live parasitically within the alien ghetto. Their representation was so vicious, with their callous murder of gullible aliens and their cannibalistic desire to eat Wikus’ mutating arm (in accordance with the African practice called *muti*, and which in fact mirrors the MNU plan to dissect Wikus’ body for weapons manufacture), that the Nigerian government protested.⁴

While questions of casting are one way to approach the politics of film-texts, scholars have traditionally understood “going native” themes in psycho-historical terms. For example, according to Vera Hernan and Andrew Gordon, Native Americans and African Americans are the objects of white fantasies of cross-racial identification in America because of the enormity of the guilt felt by whites about these victims of historical crimes. As a result, stories of racial cross-dressing often turn on white characters saving the Other from white society (Hernan and Gordon, 141). Similarly, Berndt Ostendorf argues that African Americans have sustained white

⁴ Julie Bloom, “Nigeria Says ‘District 9’ is Not Welcome,” *New York Times* (Sept. 9, 2009), p. C2.

America in two ways: first by “setting up the material basis” of white hegemony through their labor, and secondly, by “healing the injuries” to white culture by “maintaining alternative life styles and cultures” (Ostendorf, 77-78). In this way, African American culture overlaps with the healing fantasy offered by cinematic narratives of Native American life such as *Dances With Wolves* or *Little Big Man*. The political effects of such films have been hotly debated. Some critics cautiously laud them for their positive depictions of racial others, in stark contrast to most commercial cinema which portrays Indians and blacks in limited and denigrating ways (Vera & Gordon 141). Others point out that the racial others are depicted as mere props in the hero’s transformation, which remains the only story worth telling (Huhndorf, 3). It is in such terms that James Cameron has taken an extraordinary media beating for apparently trying and failing to make a sufficiently politically correct story. For instance, philosopher-critic Slavoj Žižek has called *Avatar* a “reactionary myth” with “brutal racist overtones.”⁵ The idealization of the impossibly perfect Na’vi, according to Žižek, goes hand in hand with an indifference or even hostility to real native peoples facing ecological and cultural disaster. Žižek’s reasoning seems to be that the patent unreality of the film and its ending implies an escape into deluded fantasy both for the protagonist and for its audience.

The film is indeed something of a postcolonial fairy tale in which the native people get to win. The narrator and protagonist is a disabled Marine who is invited to take his dead twin brother’s place in an experiment using genetically concocted human/alien bodies in order to better communicate with a race of indigenous creatures living on a distant planet. Earth’s resources having been hopelessly overexploited, the planet is being mined for a powerful substance called “unobtainium” which can apparently solve the human race’s energy problems. The military and corporate interests in

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, “Return of the Natives,” *The New Statesman* (March 4, 2010), accessed on internet site: <http://www.newstatesman.com/film/2010/03/avatar-reality-love-couple-sex> (last accessed on October 29, 2010).

the film share a preference for taking the unobtainium by force regardless of local casualties, while a small scientific team wishes to learn to talk to the natives and persuade them to relocate. Jake Sully, the protagonist, is adopted by the natives and taught their ways, which ultimately leads him to take their side in the conflict with the mining company, but too late to save their homes and sacred tree. A final battle between all the creatures of the planet, including the animals and the military forces, results in the defeat of the humans who are forced to leave. The film can hardly be accused of ideological mystification since it does not try to pass fantasy off as reality. Its fantasy remains resolutely fantastic, melodramatic and utopian. It is precisely this utopian dimension that seems to trouble critics like Žižek, who reproach *Avatar* for not being a realistic reflection of reality, an issue to which I will return when I discuss the two works in terms of their respective genres, i.e. melodrama and satire.

In comparison to the criticism of *Avatar*, *District 9* has received largely positive reviews of its handling of race. In fact, the film pretends to sidestep the question of race altogether and to be an allegory of xenophobia instead. In the short film that Blomkamp made before *District 9* and that formed the nucleus of its story, *Alive in Joburg* (2005), the black South Africans who are seemingly being interviewed about their opinion of the extraterrestrials have actually been asked by the film-makers about recent Zimbabwean refugees. South Africa has experienced a very high rate of xenophobia since the end of apartheid, especially towards Zimbabwean refugees who have been entering the country since the beginning of the century, and *District 9* turns on the seeming irony of black South Africans expressing intolerant attitudes towards another disenfranchised population. In the mock-documentary opening sequence of the film, we see black interviewees voicing prejudiced and irrational views that are clearly meant to recall white Afrikaner prejudice against black South Africans. The facile satisfaction that comes with seeing that blacks can be just as intolerant as whites lies at the heart of the film's irony.

To briefly summarize, the premise of the film is that an alien space ship has stalled above Johannesburg and that a large, hungry and disoriented population of alien creatures is found aboard. Moved into a holding camp on the outskirts of Johannesburg called District 9 (a name recalling the historical District 6, a black residential area in Cape Town, which became notorious for the forced relocation of 60,000 of its residents in the 1970s under the apartheid government), the roughly one million aliens have nearly doubled their population in twenty years while the camp has turned into a ghetto. The aimless aliens scavenge in trashcans and engage in petty crime. Antagonisms with human neighbors have sparked anti-alien riots and most humans want the aliens to be removed from the city. The South African government (still under apartheid in the film) has contracted the task of relocating the aliens to another camp, further away and more militarized, basically a concentration camp, to a private military company called Multinational United (MNU). Wikus van der Merwe is a comic bureaucrat whose job it is to inform aliens of their impending evacuation and try to acquire their signature indicating consent. He performs this task with relish for a camera crew as he rushes from one shack to another in the chaotic settlement, bribing or threatening the aliens into signing the form. After coming into contact with an alien chemical (one which it has taken twenty years to develop and which will allow the aliens to leave earth), Wikus's body begins to mutate into an alien morphology. MNU immediately abduct him for medical experiments in the hope that he will be able to operate the aliens' weapons. When it turns out that he can indeed fire the genetically sensitive alien guns, his employers decide to kill Wikus on the spot and recycle his body for their weapons program. After a desperate escape from the lab, Wikus heads to the alien camp and finds the maker of the chemical, where he strikes a deal to retrieve the fluid from the MNU compound in exchange for help reversing the mutation process. The plan goes awry and Wikus ends up protecting his alien friend and battling MNU soldiers before escaping into the settlement and mutating permanently into an alien. The last

scene shows an alien on a trash-heap and we infer that it is Wikus because it is sculpting metal flowers resembling one his wife has found on her doorstep.

To its credit, the film shows something that *Avatar* makes less obvious, namely, that becoming the Other is rarely accompanied by empowerment. Instead, as the film's black satire reveals, Wikus' transformation results in a brutal and instantaneous loss of citizenship, family, home, social identity, and physical safety. He is seen as no longer human but an alien himself, and consequently as an animal whose value lies only in its use to humans. The savagery of his treatment at the MNU labs is the most shocking part of the film by far. If *Avatar* is a paradisiacal fantasy of acquiring agency and community by becoming a non-white Other, *District 9* is its nightmarish opposite showing "going native" as a descent into abject powerlessness. It has as its antecedents a number of politically ambiguous films in which (black) race becomes the fitting punishment for racism, e.g. *Watermelon Man*, *Agathe Cléry*. These films all walk a fine line between a desire to destabilize racial categories and a tendency to rely on the crudest of racial caricatures in order to make audiences laugh.

Blomkamp and his co-writer Terri Tatchell have often insisted that they did not make a "political" film, and here is where a certain willful naiveté flirts with latent racism. First of all, the location of the film in South Africa and the title automatically invite associations with black South Africans. Blomkamp seems to believe that the analogy can work to a certain point and then break off at the moment when the aliens are described as insect-like and irresponsible. To make matters worse, it is specified that this population is a "drone" worker class unable to pilot the ship by themselves or to plan for the future. The film-makers seem to imagine that audiences will appreciate some of the racial analogies but will carefully cordon off the more racist associations that a subhuman worker population may create in a cultural context where black people were once treated precisely in such a way. Blomkamp's stunning lack of historical awareness is best revealed in a

remark he makes on the DVD commentary where he explains that he wanted to make the alien into “someone you wouldn’t want to sit next to on the bus.” Seemingly oblivious to the historical meaning of segregation on public buses in both South Africa and the United States, Blomkamp ingenuously explains that he imagined the aliens as both “sentient” and physically disgusting.

In contrast, the Na’vi in *Avatar* are attractive and idealized in the “noble savage” tradition. Theirs is a warrior society based on honor, rites of passage, and harmony with their environment. Morally, the Na’vi are represented as bearers of an authentic and fully satisfying culture. Physically, they are strong, sleek, graceful and appealing; the plot includes a spiritualized sexual consummation between Jake and his Na’vi Pocahontas, Neytiri. Of course, Jake also has a Na’vi body during this union, so the specter of inter-species sex is raised only to be safely foreclosed. Or so it would seem. However, in September 2010, Hustler released a 3D porn parody of *Avatar*, titled *This Isn’t Avatar XXX*, and there are a number of internet sites devoted to what they call “Na’vi porn,” so that the Na’vi can safely be described a species that one would not mind sitting next to on a bus.⁶

Despite the many differences between the two films, they share something else besides one basic premise: a preoccupation with masculinity that is articulated mainly through issues of affect, bonding and community. The fear and desire of becoming an Other seems to be primarily a masculine fantasy. It is also one that implies in *both* its positive and negative versions a heightened sense of connection to others. In other words, one of the subtexts of racial (and species) cross-dressing seems to be the loneliness and emotional rigidity of traditional white male subjectivity (especially as exemplified by the stereotyped male occupations of soldier and middle-level corporate bureaucrat). Both films insist on this point by showing their

⁶ See, for example, the images at: <http://www.naviporn.org/>

protagonists as incomplete and socially isolated figures at the beginning of the stories. In the original *Avatar* script, Jake is shown drinking himself into oblivion in bars after his injury, and even in the final film version released in theaters it is clear that he has no one in his life. Wikus, though married, is alone in other ways. We see this through the stiff behavior of guests at his surprise party, the way co-workers seem to be either hierarchical inferiors or superiors, but never equals, and the fact that he has no one but the aliens to turn to when he begins to mutate. That his compromised social status is closely linked to a “failed” masculinity is suggested in the film by the way MNU soldiers repeatedly mock and physically threaten him.

Thus, like many war movies and other films about masculinity, *District 9* ultimately becomes a buddy film. Wikus’s homosocial bond with Christopher Johnson and their mutual willingness to risk their lives for each other become an important facet of how Wikus evolves positively as a result of his mutation. Although Wikus starts out being a “dick” (in Blomkamp’s words) he becomes someone we root for by the end of the film because he is no longer fighting only for himself. In *Avatar*, the homosocial element is more muted because the heterosexual romance between Sully and Neytiri takes center stage, yet Sully’s initial rivalry and final brotherhood with the warrior Tsutey is nevertheless an important sub-plot. When Sully first arrives in the Na’vi clan, Tsutey is extremely suspicious and wishes to kill him. His hostility grows further when he realizes Sully is winning his future bride (Neytiri) away from him. By the time of the final battle, this rivalry has been transformed into a different kind of triangle: the three of them (Sully, Tsutey and Neytiri) fly together in a close formation, with Neytiri and Tsutey on either side of Sully, and Sully and Tsutey calling each other “brothers.” In fact, Tsutey dies (in one of the more dramatically important deaths in the film) during the attack led by Sully against the humans. In laying down his life at this moment, the Tsutey is represented as making the ultimate fraternal sacrifice for a fellow warrior, a gesture of complete respect and confidence. This shows that one cliché of American and Western

colonial narratives has not lost any of its power in recent years: that of the ethnic other who sacrifices his life for the beloved white man. In *Avatar*, it represents the larger acceptance of Sully into the tribe as an adopted son and brother, but it also represents the most coveted prize of the racial cross-dressing narrative, i.e. the love of the Indian/native/black man.

In addition to these close parallels, the two films also frame their stories of fraternal redemption as a rejection of a murderous patriarch. In *District 9*, the patriarch is the father-in-law who is a top official of MNU and who personally authorizes Wikus' torture and dismemberment. At the beginning of the film, Wikus is his naively trusting acolyte, but discovers that his father-in-law is in fact a ruthless murderer and manipulator. Particularly humiliating for Wikus (and funny for the film audience) are the false allegations of sex with the aliens that the father-in-law releases to the media as a means of discrediting Wikus and cutting him off from his horrified daughter. By depicting Wikus as mutating into an alien by prolonged sexual contact with the "prawns," the father-in-law kills Wikus socially by making him an object of ridicule and horror. Moreover, since only human women (Nigerian prostitutes) are mentioned as having sexual relations with aliens, these accusations effeminize Wikus in addition to stigmatizing him.

In *Avatar*, the older military character Colonel Miles Quaritch is the ambivalent father figure that Sully will literally need to kill in order to have his freedom and new Na'vi family. Initially, Quaritch is the only person in the film who seems to care for Sully, often calling him "son," and promising to pay for an operation to enable him to regain the use of his legs if Sully works as his spy among the Na'vi, gathering intelligence that will help defeat them. When asked to define his origins to the Na'vi, Sully describes himself as a member of the "jarhead tribe," underscoring his complete identification with the Marines as substitute family at the start of the film. The high stakes of Sully's shift of loyalties to the Na'vi are made clear by the intensity of Quaritch's reaction: he vows to murder Sully. The final

showdown in the film is between Jake and Quaritch, underscoring that the white father would rather kill his white son than to see him change into something else. Jake's choice of allegiance with the Na'vi against Quaritch is thus depicted as a rejection of a white patriarch in favor of an egalitarian sibling family. In the latter part of the film, Jake consistently addresses all the other Na'vi as "brother" and "sister." Part of the utopian dimension of the film, if we can put it this way, is its anti-essentialist premise that one can choose one's family, one's people and even species as an affiliative and ethical act.

Choice is in fact one of the most important themes of the movie, with the act of "choosing and being chosen" (by one's flying dragon, woman, and tribe, as an adult) repeatedly emphasized. As if to make sure that Jake's decision to switch sides is not taken as an exception or fluke, there is the sub-plot of Trudy, the Latina fighter pilot, who also decides to help Jake and the Na'vi instead of participating in their destruction. Initially just one of the many soldiers on the base, Trudy becomes increasingly aware of a gap between her own ethical values and the orders she is being given. On several occasions she chooses to help Sully in direct violation of her military instructions, even at the risk of her own life, which she in fact loses in helping the Na'vi. Choice is thus not depicted in the film as a mere postmodern slipping on and off of alternative identities and subject-positions, in spite of the initial premise of using temporary "avatars," but as an act that entails responsibilities and consequences. For Sully, choosing to help the Na'vi implies losing his human identity, including most pointedly the "jarhead" family which has been especially important to him. The process of choice for Sully is complex and involves his immersion in and gradual conversion to Na'vi values and practices. Although he begins his process of tribal education as a spy, representing both the scientific team and secretly the military team, Sully finds that acting as a Na'vi gradually makes him fully understand and identify with their values and desires. If the consequences of choosing are borne individually, the motives for making

one choice or another often emerge relationally, as a matter of involvement with others. Thus, just as Sully chooses the Na'vi partly because of his growing attachment to and admiration of Neytiri, Trudy decides to help Sully and the Na'vi partly because of her romantic attachment to a member of the scientific team. Or, at the very least, this relationship gives her an insider perspective on the motives of the people she is supposed to be policing or fighting.

The issue of interspecies solidarity brings us back to John Griffin's 1960 book, *Black Like Me*, the ur-text of all contemporary stories of white to black passing. Griffin, a journalist, undertook a medical treatment which turned his skin black in order to study race relations in the late 50s in America. He discovered that living as a black man was like being in a parallel universe, where a large part of his time was spent on mundane necessities of life which had suddenly become very complicated, like finding shelter, public bathrooms and food. He discovered the irrational hatred of bigots, the sexual curiosity of a wide spectrum of white men, and a systematic lack of respect for his dignity and person. In this respect the book resembles *District 9* more than *Avatar*. But Griffin makes two more striking and often quoted discoveries: one is the fact that his blackface is not skin-deep. He finds as he looks in the mirror that it is as if he had acquired an entire collective racial memory with his black skin: "I looked in the mirror and saw nothing reflected of the white John Griffin's past [...] I knew now that there is no such thing as a disguised white man, when the black won't rub off. The black man is wholly a Negro, regardless of what he once may have been" (Griffin, 16). Sully and Wikus also discover that alien blackface is never a matter of mere appearance, either for one's self or for others, and initiates a relentless process of psychic transformation and adaptation to one's exterior. The other discovery Griffin makes, as do Sully and Wikus, is the pleasure of camaraderie with the alien other. Shortly after the realization that his skin color has made him culturally and subjectively black beyond mere outward appearance, Griffin describes the solidarity he

feels even with an African American who *knows* that he is “really” white: “He began to use the ‘we’ form and discuss ‘our situation.’ The illusion of my ‘Negro-ness’ took over so completely that I fell into the same pattern of talking and thinking [...] We were Negroes” (28). Like *Black Like Me*, the allegorical racial cross-dressing of *Avatar* and *District 9* represents what Eric Lott has called “a collective desire (conscious or not) to bridge a gulf that is, however, perceived to separate the races absolutely” (Lott, 1993, 474). This complex structure of feeling, something of a double-bind, characterizes all racial cross-dressing: a “simultaneous drawing up and crossing of racial boundaries” (Lott, 1995, 6). In the case of Griffin, the experience of being black for a while offers him a glimpse into a homosocial camaraderie that finally plays a very important role in the book. If his main discovery about white people as a result of his experiment is the existence of the “hate stare,” his most compelling passages in the book depict the moments of natural intimacy between black men: in the public bathrooms, on street-corners, in backwoods cottages around the country.

As I hope to have demonstrated, the politics of racial cross-dressing are always egregiously mixed. On the one hand, even the most racist caricature is informed by a fascination that often blends envy and desire. On the other hand, the most romanticized idealization relentlessly reduces its object to a mere type, a grotesque parody of a human being. What both variations share is an inevitable falseness of representation. Neither the stereotype nor the idealized version are authentic depictions of ethnic or racial others. The two films I have been discussing share at least the advantage of being grossly unrealistic and therefore transparent about their allegorical intentions. Their revelations are clearly about the white imagination and not in the least about real racial or ethnic others.

If *Avatar* has been criticized for racism while *District 9* has largely escaped censure from film critics and scholars (though it has been the object of heated denunciations by governments) I would attribute this difference in response less to the intrinsic politics of the two films and almost entirely to

their respective genres. *District 9* is a satire and a comedy and a mock-documentary. Its primary rhetorical strategy is irony. The result is often very funny and consistently critical of militarism and official hypocrisy (for example, the heavy-handed eviction of aliens in *District 9* is accompanied by helicopters announcing “we are your friends”). Although it invites spectators to sympathize with the exceptionally intelligent alien single father Christopher Johnson, it nevertheless depicts the rest of the aliens as stupid, thieving idlers, thus evoking the standard racist logic of the “one good black.” Although the film invites spectators to identify sympathetically to a certain extent with Christopher Johnson and even with Wikus (especially at the end, when he proves himself willing to sacrifice his life for the aliens, thus encroaching on the generic territory of melodrama), the film is mainly based on an aesthetic of ironic distance. This is a reception mode that film critics and scholars are particularly comfortable with, because it has been the most prized rhetorical mode in art criticism and evaluation since the ascent of modernism.

Furthermore, since the politics of *District 9* seem so ambivalent and ironically incoherent, it may be tempting to give the film the benefit of the doubt as far as its racial intentions are concerned. After all, it is a funny and clever satire on private contractors, bureaucratic double-speak and the now safely defunct apartheid government. Most importantly, the patent racism of the allegory it peddles, every bit as over-the-top and offensive as *King Kong*, has mostly escaped criticism because it seems incompatible with the film’s cleverly ironic mode. Racism is generally associated with ignorant, literal-minded bigots, not with postmodern wit. Yet *District 9* could best be described as a postmodern minstrel show, reviving in a starkly real Third World context the nineteenth-century theatrical mode through which white men literally put on blackface and performed stereotyped behaviors and situations meant to evoke black culture for white audiences. As Eric Lott has argued, these audiences were far from uniformly hostile to African Americans, just as the performers themselves had complex and often

friendly relations with the men whom they aped. Many abolitionists enjoyed minstrel shows, which they sometimes erroneously took as expressions of an authentic black culture (*Love and Theft* 16). *Uncle Tom's Cabin* itself became the pretext for the longest-running minstrel show of the nineteenth-century, as the stage version of the abolitionist novel morphed gradually into a plantation musical depicting comically stereotyped slave characters cavorting happily behind the backs of harmless masters and mistresses (Williams, 65-87). However, even long before the play was transformed into grotesque "Tommer shows," the stage versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* combined liberal views on slavery with racist representations of African American subjects.

Similarly, although *District 9* is clearly the product of an anti-apartheid liberalism, its racial unconscious is furnished with all the props and devices of nineteenth century minstrelsy. The white actor Jason Cope, who plays all of the aliens, in a body suit and on stilts, gives the aliens a corporeal style that combines farce and superhuman strength. Though easily provoked to violence, the aliens are depicted as too lazy or stupid to revolt in an organized way. They spend their time waiting in line for cat food (the film's equivalent of the watermelon) or committing petty crimes and scavenging for trash on dumps. Just as one of the stock characters of the minstrel show was the black dandy, ridiculous in his ignorant appropriations of white fashion, one of the film's many comic moments involves an alien wearing a bra and apron. Similarly, the minstrel show's fascination with black male sexuality, which is depicted as both comically transgressive and insatiable, appears in the film in terms of the folklore around alien sex with human prostitutes, as clear a sign as any that their sexual appetite is neither confined to reproductive needs nor to their own species.

In contrast, *Avatar*'s form of aesthetic address is not comedy but melodrama of the Hollywood kind. Its rhetorical mode is based on emotion: earnest and larger than life, like the Na'vi. The audience is invited to share Jake's reactions in particular: his awe at their enchanted and luminescent

forest, his dismay at the mine company's attack, his grief at the Na'vi's decimation and displacement, and finally, his satisfaction when the mining company is routed and Pandora saved. Never mind that the plot devices are unrealistic or predictable (and they are both) – film melodrama finds its roots in a genre that dates back in its modern form at least the 18th century and that activates powerful moral dramas meant to offer viewers an emotional ride and an ethically satisfying ending. Although many scholars working on melodrama have demonstrated its complex and often progressive political effects, most film critics and social theorists continue almost automatically and unthinkingly to privilege irony over affect when it comes to gauging a work's progressive potential.⁷ This systematic critical preference for modernist techniques of distanciation impedes a serious engagement with the complexities of popular art forms that, like the minstrel show, and the Hollywood melodrama-adventure-fantasy film, are addressed to mass rather than elite audiences. Insofar as many film critics and scholars are still deeply ingrained with modernist aesthetic assumptions, they prefer distance and irony to the way in which melodrama strives to bridge the distance between spectator and film-text through emotion. Just as nineteenth century sentimental novels openly sought to make readers weep along with their protagonists, contemporary melodrama seeks to break down the distance between real world and narrative world, using ever more sophisticated forms of aesthetic realism to achieve this goal. In the case of *Avatar*, the 3D effects may justifiably be understood as an extension of the realist techniques typical of melodrama's attempts to make the spectator feel

⁷ The re-evaluation of melodrama includes important interventions such as David Grimstead's "Melodrama as Echo of the Historically Voiceless," *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History*, edited by Tamara K. Hareven (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1971), Martha Vinci's "Helpless and Unfriended: Nineteenth-Century Domestic Melodrama," *New Literary History* 13 (1981), pp. 130 & 132, Jane Tompkin's *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (Oxford UP, 1986), and Marcia Landy's edited *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Television and Film Melodrama* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1991).

inside the world of the story.⁸ Like nineteenth-century stage versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, some of which included live dogs and horses and real ice floes, *Avatar's* much-touted 3D technology aims to make the film into a convincing sensorial, and thereby emotional, experience.

By way of conclusion, it bears repeating that so-called political effects are notoriously difficult to measure. Few films convert spectators to a political cause or lead to any direct measurable action. Thus, as Harriet Beecher Stowe argued in her coda to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, getting an audience to “feel right,” in other words, to align its sympathies with those they would not normally empathize with, is no negligible achievement. *Avatar*, for all its shortcoming, aligns audiences with an alien Other against exploitative humans, thereby indirectly aligning audiences with native peoples against global corporate interests. Although, in his diatribe against the film, Žižek implies that real tribes suffer corporate abuse in silence *because* of films such as *Avatar* eclipsing their real struggles with fictional ones, it is equally plausible that a film like *Avatar*, precisely because of its conceptual simplicity and emotional power, provides a moral interpretive schema through which the struggles of real tribes can reach a wider global public. Furthermore, unlike *District 9*, *Avatar* does this with a cast of serious (as opposed to merely comic) multiracial characters, such as Trudy and Max, not to mention all the African diaspora-descended actors playing the Na'vi. In the end, *Avatar* invites audiences to sympathize with insubordination and resistance in the face of unethical military action, an issue that lies at the heart of current political issues in relation to cultural difference and power.

⁸ The close relationship between melodrama and realism is discussed by Linda Williams in *Playing the Race Card*, where she describes the importance of realism as a device in the service of melodrama's “pathos and action” as one of the five key elements of melodrama, pp. 36-38.

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