

LIKE POCAHONTAS ON DRUGS: *AVATAR* AND ADAPTATION

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Earlier this year, I conducted an experiment with our in-coming first year students to help determine their language capabilities before the semester began. This involved students writing an essay on one of a selection of popular films that included *Fight Club*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Gone with the Wind*. The essay question on *Avatar* asked students to comment on the widespread criticism that James Cameron's 3D extravaganza directly "ripped-off" Walt Disney's *Pocahontas*, and to explain why this matters, or not. I was pleasantly surprised to find that none of the students who chose this question seemed to think that the derivation of Cameron's blockbuster was of any import. Although students were all familiar with blog entries claiming that "*Avatar* is a *Pocahontas* Rip-off" as well as with the many obvious borrowings, including those I pointed out to them like the palette and the *mise-en-scene*, none claimed to care about the question of the film's antecedents. Indeed, even the widely circulated article from the *New York Times*, arguing that *Avatar* is just another example of "The White Messiah Complex in Movies" didn't seem to cause them much concern.¹

In the present context, namely a collection that addresses the topic of "expanding adaptations," I think my students' lack of concern that *Avatar* might simply be a "rip-off" of *Pocahontas*, or that Cameron merely offered a hyped-up version of the Disney cartoon, speaks volumes. First, as both myself and Thomas Leitch argued last fall at the fourth annual meeting of the Association for Adaptation Studies, perhaps the time has come to truly put aside the postulated notion that the "book was better than the film" once and for all. Indeed, I have yet to find this notion contained anywhere, including even in the first work on this topic, namely George Bluestone's *Novels into Film*. Rather than forwarding the kind of notions about originality that one might expect from a work written in 1959, Bluestone actually argues for the specificity of each medium and concludes that "cinematic and literary forms resist

¹ The following are the basic tenets of the White Messiah Complex in Movies: "A manly young adventurer goes into the wilderness in search of thrills and profit, meets the native people and finds that they are noble and spiritual and pure. He emerges as their Messiah, leading them on a righteous crusade against his own rotten civilization. In short order, he's the most awesome member of their tribe: he has sex with their hottest babe. He learns to jump through the jungle and ride horses. It turns out that he's even got more guts and athletic prowess than they do". The White Messiah then, of course, saves the more "primitive" civilization. See Brooks, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/08/opinion/08brooks.html?_r=0

JAMES CAMERON'S
Disney's
Pocahontas-AVATAR!

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In 1607, a ship carrying ^{Jake} John Smith arrives in the lush "new world" of ^{PANDORA} North America. The settlers are mining for ^{undotanium!} gold; under supervision of ^{Colonel Quaritch} Governor Ratcliffe. John Smith begins exploring the new territory, and encounters ^{Neytiri} Pocahontas. Initially she is distrustful of him, but a message from ^{the Tree of Souls} Grandmother Willow helps her overcome her trepidation. The two begin spending time together, ^{Neytiri} Pocahontas helps ^{Jake} John understand that all life is valuable, and how all nature is a connected circle of life. Furthermore she teaches him how to hunt, ^{hunt dragons} grow crops, and of her culture. We find that her father is Chief ^{Eytukan} Powhatan, and that she is set to be married to ^{Tsu'Tey} Kocoum, a great warrior, but a serious man, whom ^{Neytiri} Pocahontas does not desire. Over time, ^{Jake} John and ^{Neytiri} Pocahontas find they have a love for each other. Back at the settlement, the men, who believe the natives are savages, plan to attack the natives for their ^{undotanium} gold: ^{Tsu'Tey} Kocoum tries to kill John out of jealousy, but he is later killed by the settlers. As the settlers prepare to attack, ^{Jake} John is blamed by the ^{Na'vi} Indians, and is sentenced to death. Just before they kill him, the settlers arrive. Chief ^{Eytukan} Powhatan is nearly killed, and ^{Jake} John sustains injuries from ^{Colonel Quaritch} Governor Ratcliffe, who is then ^{shot with arrows! yo} brought to justice. ^{Neytiri} Pocahontas risks her life to save ^{Jake} John. ^{Jake} John and ^{Neytiri} Pocahontas finally have each other, and the two cultures resolve their differences. IMHO-MATT BATEMAN

Fig. 1: Matt Bateman's double reading of *Pocahontas*. <http://www.sa-people.com/2010/01/27/avatar-vs-pocahontas/>

conversion” and that “the film and the novel remain separate institutions, each achieving its best results by exploring unique and specific properties” (218). Bluestone speaks for medium specificity here, for what novels and films each in their own way do best and not for the notion that a film adaptation can only imitate the novel to a greater or lesser degree. In other words, the attribution of all the “fidelity” and “faithfulness” talk to Bluestone, that is paired off against “partiality” and “intertextuality,” would seem to be a misrepresentation of his argument.

Notions of adaptation that assume the primacy of text also necessarily assume that the text defines the adaptation as being intertextual and partial, or faithful to the original text – most often a novel – to varying degrees. Yet while film adaptation has expanded from novels into comics like *Sin City*, TV shows like *Sex in the City*, and video games like *Doom*, *Tron* and *Avatar*, the study of adaptations has not much expanded past the argument about hierarchies, origins and textual formalism, no matter how seemingly postmodern we have become. So while it is tempting to think that the generation of my incoming students is no longer concerned with the question of “which came first” that has so plagued adaptation studies, this paper will attempt to highlight a number of other factors that might help to account for the astuteness of these young viewers. What I want to address here is an under-theorized aspect of *what* is being adapted, and the larger question that Linda Hutcheon’s book on adaptation promises yet fails to answer, namely how we got this way. I also want to take up Sanders’s underexplored observation that the current trend is to “adaptations that adapt other adaptations” and the “cross-pollination of mediations” through various cultural practices and modes of production (Sanders 13). Why is it, I want to ask, that we like adaptations? Or, perhaps more importantly, how did adaptations become such a predominant feature of our cultural landscape?

In what follows, I will argue that what is being adapted is something vaster and more generalized than a specific text, yet of equal importance, namely the history of viewing technologies and practices. By way of investigating this issue, I will be concerned with the question of how we got this way and what this has to do with economy. In relation to *Avatar* I will also discuss Buckland and Elsaesser’s notion of “video game logic” and Tom Gunning’s characterization of early non-narrative film as the “Cinema of Attractions.” And finally, at various points throughout my argument I will have occasion to evoke the current expression of economy and viewing technologies in the 3D effects that *Avatar* has recently (re)popularized.

As 18th-century historians point out, a major shift occurred in both aesthetics and viewing practices over that century, along with the financial and industrial revolutions. Increased wealth made available by the institutionalization of banks, and the new practice of extending credit facilitated by

both the Protestant faith and increasing secularization, along with the refinancing of the royal debt, made more wealth available to a wider, growing segment of the population. At the same time, various new technologies made it possible to mass-produce luxury goods which the lower classes could easily afford. According to Ludwig Giesz, this moment also marks the eminence of the word “kitsch,” which he reckons was a German mispronunciation of the word “sketch,” a word that American buyers used frequently when they came to Munich to purchase cheap copies of academic paintings. Peter de Bolla has argued that this same moment also produced the notion of the connoisseur whose educated gaze and superior taste permitted him to make judgments of quality and to sort aesthetic production in terms of “high” and “low.” In the image below then, we see 18th-century visitors to one of the new public galleries where they have gone to “watch the pictures,” marking a moment at which “art” rapidly becomes a source of narrative entertainment and sensation.



Fig. 2 Thomas Rowlandson, “Viewing at the Royal Academy.” Yale Center for British Art, Mellon Collection

The 18th-century invention of public galleries meant that the aristocracy would now be compelled to rub shoulders with the merchant classes, who threateningly found themselves in the same space as these “lofty” individuals, and who were equally in a position to purchase luxuries, view aesthetic objects and express an opinion about them. 18th-century cartoons like this one reassuringly depicted “lesser” individuals, with their untrained eyes and unpolished manners viewing art like simpletons, as opposed to the distinguished connoisseurs on the left who observe and appreciate. So although threes might be dressed as nines, like the bumpkins on the right, their untrained tastes would make them readily visible to persons of quality.

The fear that the popularization of finance and the wide distribution of credit in the 18th century would weaken the lines of class structure is expressed by Montesquieu throughout the *Persian Letters*. Writing as the Mississippi Bubble – the first pyramid investment scheme – was in the process of inflating and making it possible for those of little means to purchase shares and gain wealth, he complains that: “[he] ha[s] seen a detestable conspiracy to acquire wealth suddenly, instantaneously, come into being: wealth acquired not from honest labor or noble industry” (Letter 138, 204). “The consequences of all this,” he explains, “are frequently bizarre. Footmen [...] are today boasting of their birth; they treat those who have just abandoned their livery [...] with all the scorn they themselves experienced six months ago; they shout as loudly as they can ‘the upper classes are ruined; our country is in dreadful disorder! [...] We’re always seeing nobodies making their fortunes!’” (186). This financial intervention into the otherwise stable class system creates a market niche for “a genealogist” who, “hoping that his enterprise will turn a profit if these new fortunes continue, and that all these upstarts will require his services to rewrite their names, polish up their ancestors, and decorate their carriages; he imagines he’s going to create as many gentle folk as he chooses” (Letter 126, 177).

At the same time in England, Hogarth satirized the effects of the South Sea Bubble in a number of cartoons, including *Marriage à-la-Mode*.



Fig. 3. William Hogarth, *Marriage à-la-Mode*, Plate 1

This “progress,” as Hogarth called his comic prints, presents a narrative of the new finance and the breakdown of class structure, in the story of a contractual agreement between a merchant who buys a title by marrying his son to Lord Squanderfield’s daughter, using coin, paper money and mortgages, the latter being new-fangled instruments of credit in the 18th century that permitted social mobility.

Hence while new wealth and social mobility created class paranoia, new modalities of production created sensational forms of culture including serialized sensation novels, comics, themed amusement parks, and cheap reproductions of a variety of aesthetic objects. Better technical means of imitation also led to an obsession with the opposition of appearances to genuine objects as well as a generalized concern for “originality,” genius, and ostensible standards of aesthetic “quality.” At the same time, technology made reproduction an ever-simpler matter, and produced a culture stimulated by greater capacities for mass-producing and disseminating culture. We have inherited these 18th-century means of producing and financing culture, along with a fascination with illusion, sensation, image culture, reproducibility and the narrative potential of images, which now forms the backbone of much of our aesthetic sensibility.

So to return to the case of *Avatar*, this was a film that clearly celebrated sensation and technology as, for example, in the ways that it reproduced video games and promoted 3D effects. But I want to pause briefly to examine the question of narrative in *Avatar*, however slim the narrative potential of this film may have been. *Avatar* creates narrative through suggestion and through what might loosely be referred to as myth, relying on the transference of meaning and story through what I would call the Pocahontas galaxy – that is, the endless images of this figure reproduced in films such as *Pocahontas*, *Dances with Wolves* and *The New World*. As Roland Barthes wrote, “the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be appropriated” (119) and although the story of Pocahontas is perhaps best described as a mythologized folktale or legend, it likewise “lends itself to being persistently relocated in a new social and cultural geography at each occasion of adaptation and appropriation” (Sanders 63), given that “[m]yths ripen as they spread” (Barthes 149). Moreover, myths and legends provide “an accessible code to discuss and communicate complex, and often troubling, ideas” (Sanders 69). In other words, simple iconic stories lend themselves particularly well to film adaptations like *Avatar*, both because they provide basic narrative glue, and because viewers are so familiar with the story that they will automatically perform the essential hermeneutic activity of filling in blanks in order to make the figure mentally come alive.

Quite obviously, however, story is not the major consideration here and while *Avatar* of course repeats the White Messiah myth to which I referred above, something much more interesting is at stake. In their point-form, run-down of adaptation types, Cartmell and Whelehan forward the notion of the analogue adaptation, which includes adaptations of various media, thereby expanding the notion of adaptation to include a much more kinetic account of its mechanics. As I have been arguing, the 18th century saw both a dissemination of wealth and ultimately of dynamic, commercial art forms that

communicate the kind of progressive movement featured in Hogarth's panels.² Indeed, although he is currently considered a canonical author in English studies, in the 18th century Hogarth was also a sign painter and a purveyor of advertising who lent his art to all kinds of exciting, fast-selling, and popular items, from inexpensive prints to women's fans.

As I have also been arguing, the tradition of popular entertainments such as magic lantern shows, themed park spectacles like those that were on offer in Vauxhall gardens, and optical toys, would later cede their place to what would become narrative film. Before the advent of narrative film however, Tom Gunning has located what he calls "the cinema of attractions," or film that people watched for roughly the same reasons that we like roller coaster rides. As he wrote, we should not "forget that in the earliest years of exhibition [before 1906] the cinema itself was an attraction. Early audiences went to exhibitions to see machines demonstrated (the newest technological wonder, following in the wake of such widely exhibited machines and marvels as X-rays or the photograph), rather than to view films" (383). Importantly, rather than supplying complex narrative to involve spectators, "the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle – a unique event" (383). More importantly however, for the case of *Avatar*, Gunning also writes that, "(e)ven with the introduction of editing and more complex narratives, the aesthetic of attractions can still be sensed in *periodic doses of non-narrative spectacle given to audiences*" (386, my emphasis).

In concluding, I want to discuss the notion that *Avatar* might just be one such periodic dose of non-narrative, or at least narrative-light, spectacle of the sort to which Gunning refers. This notion was confirmed by the popular press in which various critics remarked that, "the plot was horrendously cliché, but being transported for a few hours into a uniquely imagined world [heightened by the sensory effects of 3D] really did make for a thrilling experience," or again that "Cameron has simply used [a familiar legend] as shorthand to give his special-effects spectacular some resonance."³ At the same time, *Avatar* quite obviously thematised the aesthetics as well as the goal-oriented conflict structure of many popular video games and, therefore, is a sort of expanded adaptation of video games in general. Likewise, as Warren Buckland and Thomas Elsaesser have suggested much recent cinema also adapts the logic of video games.

² On this point see also Goggin, *passim*.

³ See "Post-Traumatic Avatar Syndrome" (<http://chrisshort.net/post/328532789/cynical-c-blog-post-traumatic-avatar-syndrome>) and "The Messiah Complex" (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/08/opinion/08brooks.html>).

I would likewise argue that *Avatar* remediates what Jeroen Janz and others have called “lean forward” or interactive technology. Although it is a film, which is essentially given to us in a “lean back” or passive medium, *Avatar* has attempted to compensate with all the thrills and chills of 3D technology and, in this regard, the film adapts the commercial sensation culture that comes into view in the 18th century along with themed amusement parks full of sights and sounds, magic lantern shows full of skeletons and other scary sights, and the later developments of these cultural forms in what Gunning called the cinema of attractions. For Thomas Elsaesser, this is also part and parcel of Hollywood re-adapting the kind of 3D technology that *Avatar* made famous, which was first experimented with as early as 1915 in *Jim, The Penman* and at various later junctures, perhaps most notably in Sci-Fi features of the 1950s.⁴

For Andrew Darley, we are witnessing the emergence of a new aesthetics of spectatorship, for which he has coined the term *kinaesthesia*, which combines the notions of force and motion plus perception and sense. This term equally applies to the relationship of spectatorship to interaction, and explicitly to the shift in spectatorship from voyeurism to participation and, particularly where video games and the experience that Cameron attempted to simulate in *Avatar* are concerned, the progressive experience of engagement, immersion and, finally, flow. What Darley aims to describe is the current generation of entertainment products that operate in a pre-designed framework of conditions and possibilities (154) where narrative depth takes a back seat to sensation or a “vicarious sense of presence” (155). The increased sense of presence in haptic [tactile] space is achieved, according to Darley, at the expense of depth of meaning – it’s surface play. In terms of interaction, “visceral thrills” predicated on familiar schematics such as the classic chase scene, are traded off against the kind of deeply meditative, *hermeneutic* play that takes place between reader or spectator and more recondite or complex texts.

But I would like to conclude by returning to the idea that *Avatar* is like *Pocahontas* on drugs and the historical moment with which I began, namely the advent of finance and the mass production of commercial aesthetics. Literally indistinguishable from gambling until an act was passed at midcentury, and as the motor of capitalism itself with its addictive cycle of boom and bust cycles, finance is sensational, exciting and addictive all at once. This is why finance has been the subject of commercial art beginning with Hogarth’s cartoons on the South Sea Bubble, and more recently of films like *Money Never Sleeps*, and *Inside Job*, not to mention video games like *Second Life* which center largely on commerce and finance. Our heritage from the 18th century includes celebrity culture, theme parks and serialized sensation novels, which were accompanied by the mass importation into the west

⁴ See Elsaesser “Tiefe des Raumes, Angriff der Dinge”, http://www.epd-film.de/themen_70544.php.

of the psychoactive substances to which we are all perhaps to some degree addicted such as coffee, tea and tobacco.

So what I'm getting at is this: we have inherited a culture of sensation, mass produced aesthetics and mechanized, mediated viewing practices from the 18th century. It is this heritage, and key moments along the way such as the cinema of attractions that *Avatar* is adapting. I would like to suggest that, in this regard, *Avatar* is perhaps a more "faithful" adaptation of our current condition than it could ever be of the *Pocahontas* legend. This then, would account for the fact that, while the film has been loved or reproached for its appropriation of the Pocahontas story or the White Messiah myth, it has been enormously effective in creating addicted audiences in the tradition of capitalism and 18th-century aesthetics. So while one could dwell on the relationship of text to film, and draw parallels with other similar narratives, this paper has attempted to explain adaptation as a matter of industry, technology and economy, rather than aesthetics and semantics.

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