Alien Perspectives

An eco-critical approach toward aliens in recent science fiction films

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Introduction

Ecocriticism is first and foremost a relatively new term with an expanding field of inquiry. It originated from a regional movement of literary scholars interested in environmental literature in the early 1990s. This movement has grown into an international and interdisciplinary community of scholars that thinks of environmental issues as the source for contemporary philosophical, epistemological and ethical explorations. In the words of literary scholar Pippa Marland:

> Ecocriticism is an umbrella term for a range of critical approaches that explore the representation in literature (and other cultural forms) of the relationship between the human and the non-human, largely from the perspective of anxieties around humanity's destructive impact on the biosphere. (846)

As she mentions, ecocriticism is not limited to the critical study of literary representations of nature in regard to environmental issues. It is an investigation of nature as it is understood within culture, politics and ethics. And it has expanded to the realms of language, literature and popular culture. Because our cultural perception of nature and humanity is considered as the cause of environmental issues, this investigation includes the notions of 'nature' and 'humanity' (Gersdorf and Mayer 14). As literary scholar Jonathan Bate argues, the key intellectual problem of the twenty-first century is understanding the relationship between nature and culture (xvii). At the beginning of the twenty-first century nature and culture are no longer in binary opposition. Instead, they are becoming hybridised entities, of which the same could be said for humanity and technology.

Considering that ecocriticism is a study of environment, which in turn is practically 'everything', it does not offer a clear set of tools to approach the issues. This becomes increasingly difficult when we consider that the environment undergoes constant change. Therefore, to understand our place within it, we need a "broad range of procedures and an ability constantly to critique assumptions and doctrines" (Marland 847). In other words, the future of ecocriticism is unclear because it can develop in various directions. Several scholars plead for a rigorous investigation of nature that challenges its existing conceptions, as Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer write:

> We strongly support the further development of ecocriticism as a methodology that re-

> examines the history of ideologically, aesthetically, and ethically motivated conceptualisations of nature, of the function of its constructions and metaphorisations in literary and other cultural practices, and of the potential effects these discursive, imaginative constructions have on our bodies as well as our natural and cultural environments. (10)

As they argue, this historical approach to the concepts of nature could unveil the constructivist aspects of 'nature' and 'humanity'. Such a paradigm shift from a anthropocentric perspective toward a more eco-centric, or non-human perspective, simultaneously asks us to question our understanding of 'development' and 'progress' (Willoquet-Maricondi 5).[1] An eco-centric approach to humanity juxtaposes our achievements and society to that of other life-forms and the environment. It reveals parts of human nature to which we were blind in the past. It questions the way we treat our environment compared to other animals, our social constructions and our ability to empathise with non-human entities. And ultimately, it asks the question if our actions here on Earth can be considered as 'progress'.

Nevertheless, we must be aware that several scholars argue that it is impossible to approach nature from a (non-anthropocentric) position outside of culture (Gersdorf and Mayer 14). Every attempt to interpret non-human entities is from a position of language, in which we take with us the values, norms and attitudes our culture instigates. This does not mean we should simply accept our anthropocentrism. Instead, we should scrutinize representations of nature and reflect on how we give nature a voice (Willoquet-Maricondi 5). In the words of film scholar Sean Cubitt: "eco-criticism expands the conceptions of agency to non-human actors, it challenges older, exclusively humanist conceptions of subjectivity" (*Source Code*, 483). Here, Cubitt refers to philosopher Bruno Latour who, in his book *Politics of Nature*, calls to bring nature into public life. An 'actor', or 'actant' is "a term from semiotics covering both humans and non-humans; an actor is an entity that modifies another entity in a trial" (237). Put differently, not only humans, but nature too can act and must therefore be taken into account.

A parallel could be drawn between the perception of the self and our perception of the Other. Cultural anthropologist Ton Lemaire, in his study *De Indiaan in ons Bewustzijn*, traces the notion of the Other by looking at the way the sixteenth century Europeans interpreted the Native American after Columbus discovered America. From the beginning the Native

[1] If an anthropocentric perspective entails a view in which only human beings count, an eco-centric perspective entails a view where the whole ecosystem counts. In the latter, non-human entities are considered as moral agents and are placed at the centre. See Bendik-Keymer, p. 116.

American was understood as a 'wild' man and therefore 'Other'. Lemaire explains that this exploration was as much an investigation into the self, our prejudices and illusions, as in America (11). Similarly, the alien encounter in science fiction (sf) films could be regarded as an encounter with the Other. In addition, ecocriticism scrutinises our conceptions of nature and humanity and therefore offers a fresh look into the representations of aliens in sf films. It allows us to look beyond the anthropocentric interpretations of the alien Other. By ascribing agency to the non-human, new perspectives come to the fore. Aliens can represent both the unknown and unfamiliar as well as the foreignness within ourselves. In a way they function as a blank sheet onto which we can project our fears and dreams. In other words, when approached from an eco-centric perspective the alien Other sheds new light on what it means to be human. As such, an investigation into the alien Other is simultaneously an investigation of the self.

Using Lemaire's insights as a blue-print, the first chapter explores the notion of the Other in relation to sf cinema. In particular, it investigates Nicholas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) because of its ambiguous portrayal of the alien Other. Nearing the end of the 1970s, this portrayal exemplifies a development within sf which culminated when Steven Spielberg's *E.T.: the Extra-Terrestrial* hit the screens in 1982. Previously, the alien encounter was something to be either feared or valued. Now it seems the approach toward aliens hinges between fear and affection. As we will see, Roeg's protagonist Thomas Newton is admired for his anthropomorphic persona and unworldly view, but his alien characteristics are unwelcome and neutralised in the process. Yet the film avoids a binary approach toward the Other and moves in between the two strands of sf as proffered by film and media scholar Vivian Sobchack. It refrains from the 'conservative' strand by not portraying the alien as a definite Other, nor is it a 'postmodern' celebration of similitude. This ambiguity makes *The Man Who Fell to Earth* a valuable example for understanding the development of alien representations between the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Building on this development in sf, in the second chapter, an eco-critical approach reveals a remarkable portrayal of the alien Other in James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009). At first sight the film reminds us of the 'White Messiah fable'. The protagonist learns the ways of the natives and starts to reject his own society in the process. It is a wish-fulfilment of a white male who desires to become the alien Other and adopts its utopian way of life. On closer inspection, the film presents us with a shift from anthropocentrism to eco-centrism, and from individuality to communitarianism. It proposes that another form of social reality is possible to attain through a different biological complexion, for the alien Other in *Avatar* reminds us of

a Hive Mind networked society. Simultaneously, the film inverts our anthropocentric perspective by ascribing agency to the non-human entities.

The first part of the final chapter focuses on Doug Liman's *Edge of Tomorrow* (2013). The film revolves around a soldier whose mission is to kill the alien invaders. It is structured in such a way that the annihilation of the alien Other is presented as the only possible outcome of the film. However, on a different level the film confronts its viewers with an endless repetition of war. It shows us how a 'superior' alien race invades Earth and tries to rob humanity from its existence. So, although humanity saves itself, it should learn from the alien encounter. In a way the film reflects on humanity's destructive capabilities and pleads for it to look beyond itself. The second part of the chapter focuses on Denis Villeneuve's first contact film *Arrival* (2016). Rather than seeking destruction, this film revolves around establishing a dialogue. In the film a linguist has to learn the language of the alien Other in order to prevent a war. Traumatised by the untimely death of her daughter the protagonist is able to adopt the alien's non-linear perception of time. But this gift comes at a cost of the self through a confrontation with her past traumas. While the film portrays the alien Other as benevolent beings, it asks us how far we are willing to go in order to understand the Other. Together, the films provide us with insights about where sf cinema stands today. The eco-critical approach uncovers new perspectives which help us reflect on aliens in sf films.

1. The Man Who Fell to Earth: tracing the alien Other

1.1 The alien as Other and the Other within

When the Europeans first set foot in America they understood the Native American as a 'wild' man and therefore Other. Meaning, the notion of the Other developed a comprehensive discourse long before aliens came into our cinemas. Lemaire's investigation offers us useful analogies in identifying the alien Other. He traces the steps of the sixteenth century Europeans in their largest exploration of unknown territories and its cultures (11). Yet it is striking that although anthropology studies the Other, it is at once an investigation into the self. Because, how the Europeans interpreted other cultures says a lot about their own history and prejudices. As we know, the meeting between the Old and the New World was a disappointing one. It showed the failure of the Europeans to look beyond themselves. They tried to understand the Other in their own definitions of language, traditions and culture. The Europeans denied the existence of a New World and ignored that the Other simply is different. Their struggle to acknowledge the Native Americans in their own right leads Lemaire to ask the questions if they eventually managed to do so and how the Europeans managed to escape their ethnocentrism and perhaps attempted to look for the Other within themselves (11).

Because the Native American was understood as 'wild' and 'barbaric' it was allowed to enslave them. They were portrayed as people who did not have cities, laws and trade. And in contrast to the enlightened Europeans they did not uphold the definition of an *animal rationale* (Lemaire 60). Only later would the traditions and rituals of the Native Americans be recognised as those of rational beings. This allowed for a reconceptualization of European civilisation. The Native Americans received a position within history, as they were considered to be point zero. They resembled an archaic state from which European civilization developed. It showed the Old World what would become if they did not live by the highest nature.[2] The Native American became important because he showed what the civilized Europeans were not and should not be (Pearce 5). They functioned as a metaphor, a blank sheet onto which we could project our fears and dreams. Through this process the colonisation of the New World allowed for new conceptions about man and humanity in the sixteenth century (Lemaire 58). In this regard, aliens in sf films fulfil a similar function. Aliens as Others allow us to project our hopes and fears into something tangible. The Others are a

[2] The Native Americans practiced cannibalism and human sacrifice. This was in contradiction with European thinking, in which the human is the highest being and a perfect being. The human is therefore allowed to eat all other living beings besides other humans. See Lemaire, p. 67.

representation of what we do not want to be, but they can also represent what we hope to be or hope to become. Therefore, the investigation of alien beings is simultaneously an investigation of our human being.

For philosopher Emmanuel Levinas it is imperative to understand the Other in order to understand the self. For him, "the *outside of me* is *for me*" (345). He means that the *outside of me* is needed in order to identify the self. This *outside* Other, or being, is understood as alienness. By trying to understand this alien being, one attempts to identify the self. For the alien being is not merely something 'out there', but it interacts with the self. In the words of Levinas:

> The being *enters* into the sphere of true knowledge. In becoming a theme, it does indeed retain a foreignness with respect to the thinker that embraces it. But it at once ceases to strike up against thought. The alien being is as it were naturalized as soon as it commits itself with knowledge. In itself—and consequently *elsewhere* than in thought, *other* than it—it does not have the wild barbarian character of alterity. It has a meaning. The being is propagated in infinite images which emanate from it; it dilates in a kind of ubiquity and penetrates the inwardness of men. (345)

Put differently, the alienness of the Other leads to the understanding of the self and is meaningful because it represents an external embodiment of one's thoughts. In addition, this otherness comes in infinite forms and through its omnipresence continuously points toward the interior of oneself. So, in order for the self to identify itself the alien being has to retain its foreignness, or the comparison is lost.

Philosopher Edmund Husserl understood alienness as "accessibility in genuine inaccessibility, in the mode of incomprehensibility" (qtd. in Waldenfels and Steinbock 20). This seems paradoxical, but in relation to aliens we could read it as the acceptance of not being able to understand or comprehend them, which is precisely what makes them alien. In other words, in line with Levinas, Husserl argues the Other has to retain its foreignness. But perhaps we should try and understand ourselves instead. By trying to access that which is inaccessible we are guided toward that which is accessible within us. This notion of the alien as a representation of the Other within is perhaps comparable to the relationship between the Europeans and the Native Americans. For philosopher Thomas Hobbes, writing on the *state of nature*, the borders of civilisation are fragile and could at any moment fall away. In this state civilised men would once again become 'brutes' and 'savages' (Ashcraft 164). The Europeans

could well become that which they so desperately deemed to be Other. Meaning, the European's definition of the Other as 'wild' could just as well be an expression of the otherness within themselves. However, Hobbes' view of the Native Americans is a negative one. He regards their state of being as the antithesis of civilisation. In opposition to Hobbes, Michel de Montaigne advocates the idea of the 'noble savage' (Lemaire 143). This shows there are both positive and negative notions of the Other from the start.

At the same time, we can regard the alien Other as a representation of the alienness within ourselves, or the Other within. Yet if we are to understand the alien as the Other within we may make the same mistakes the Europeans did at the time. But perhaps, because the alien is a tangible expression of the human mind we are permitted to try and understand them within our own discourse. This leads to a better understanding of our own culture, and by extension, humanity itself. This is similar to the way Native Americans provided European culture of the sixteenth century with new insights. If we recognise there is some otherness within ourselves, a part of us we do not fully understand, we can better understand our relationship with the alien.

Yet, the Other cannot simply be regarded as an expression of the Other within. In a thought experiment, Levinas explains that the Other is needed in order to exist, or to come into Being.[3] Without the Other, the self will face an endless void and remain without meaning. The Other is there to call the self into action, to pull the self out of the void and into Being. Thus, the Other cannot simply be an alter ego, a pure external embodiment of the self, or the relation will be contained within the self. Therefore, it is imperative that the Other retains its otherness, in order for the self not to fall out of Being (qtd. in Butler *Messiah* 183). Put differently, the notion of the Other within is complicated with the importance of maintaining its otherness. On the one hand, aliens can be viewed as an external embodiment of the self, but on the other hand, they must be considered as a definite Other and unmistakeably alien.

1.2 Between xenophobia and xenophilia

After screening a short clip from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) for his students, literary scholar Neil Badmington wondered why his students laughed uncontrollably at the alien invaders. He realised that the relationship between humans and aliens presented in the film is nowadays considered as old-fashioned (*Alien Chic* 2). Alien invasion films of the

[3] Here the distinction is made following Martin Heidegger's philosophy between beings or entities and the act of existing, or Being. See Butler *Messiah*, p. 183.

1950s draw upon "a simple set of binary oppositions … human versus inhuman, us versus them, and real versus fake" (Badmington *Alien Chic* 3).[4] In these films it is clear that there is an absolute difference between 'Us' and 'Them'. In order to define the 'Us' we see humans forget their petty differences and unite against everything which is not human. The 'Them' is constructed by continuously calling the aliens 'They', 'Monsters', 'It', 'Thing', and everything that leads to 'inhuman'. The aliens are real invaders, disturbers of the peace and relentless in their treatment of humans. But nowadays it seems aliens are no longer the inhumane monsters they used to be. Somewhere along the line the representation of aliens has changed and the binary oppositions have faded.

In his study *Alien Chic,* Badmington traces the shift of the fear for aliens in films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *The War of the Worlds* (Byron Haskin, 1953) into affection for the alien, somewhere between the late 1970s and early 1980s. With the advent of Spielberg's hugely popular *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E.T.: the Extra-Terrestrial* the alien invasion narrative was challenged. No longer was the alien encounter something just to be feared (*Alien Chic* 10). Badmington even speaks of 'alien love'. After extensively searching the web he discovered a vast array of 'alien love' products and communities. There is the actual inflatable alien (love) doll, but also the Raëlian Movement that build an alien 'embassy'. Although the true origin of this 'alien love' is unclear, it is perhaps unnecessary to define it. Because it is clear that the reception of aliens has changed and is still changing. Yet, the traces of the past have never fully disappeared and never will. For the fear and affection for aliens are expressions of the same thing, according to Badmington (*Alien Chic* 10). It is the on-going investigation of humans into themselves, which explains the ever-changing representations of aliens.

In their introduction to *Alien Identities*, Heidi Kaye and Ian Q. Hunter note another significant shift in the human-alien relationship. They too recognise the optimistic tendencies toward aliens in the 1970s and 1980s. But, as they argue, in 1990s sf the tide has turned again. Especially *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1989) and its sequels have returned the horror to the alien. They "identify the inhuman with monstrous, gloopy, insect-like otherness, and leave no doubt that the only good alien is a dead alien", as put by Kaye and Hunter (2). Examples like *Mars Attacks!* (Tim Burton, 1996), *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996) and *Starship Troopers* (Paul Verhoeven, 1997) make sure we once again fear the unknown invaders from

[4] Films such as: *Invaders from Mars* (William Cameron Menzies, 1953), *The War of the Worlds* (Byron Haskin, 1953), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956).

outer space.[5] And even though these films are ironic remakes of the 1950s invasion narratives, they bear a significant political shift. The invaders no longer seem to stand for something. The alien is now a faceless enemy, "they are simply and conveniently 'other'" (Kaye and Hunter 2). Whilst Haskin's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is said to symbolise the paranoia surrounding the communist threat from the Cold War Era (Kiyak 5). This marks the shift from the alien as an enemy representing a particular group or ideology to a more general xenophobia. Badmington already noticed traces of this in the 1950s invasion films he discusses. He remarks "the age of conflict between races and nations is … a thing of the past" (*Alien Chic* 18). But now it seems the transition is complete. In other words, the alien is no longer easily identifiable, but rather an expression of fear and affection for the unknown.

Badmington argues the (former) extra-terrestrial threat now seems laughable. He refers to philosopher Henri Bergson's view on humanism to explain this. To Bergson, "laughter marks and makes the human" (qtd. in Badmington *Alien Chic* 24). What he means is that humour is essentially human and that we only laugh at something non-human, animal or alien when we recognise, in it, a human attitude or expression (Gregory 1). When these attitudes or expressions seem mechanical or counterfeit, they become laughable. Regarding aliens, laughter emerges when we no longer recognise these human aspects presented by the aliens, because they seem out-dated or old-fashioned. They no longer mean in the same way, or as Badmington put it, "the aliens of the past are alien to the present" (*Alien Chic* 23). Therefore, the extra-terrestrial threat perhaps needs a different approach, and we should consider this threat to be an internal one.

This becomes more apparent as humans start to explore space. In Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) it is the spaceship's computer HAL which compromises the mission. This man made machine is the danger in space. It suggests that humans should fear their own creations more than the unknown depths of space. And as the opening sequence shows us the evolution of apes into its dominant human other, now the far more knowledgeable and intelligent technological computer will come to dominate man. Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014) is another example in which the human threat to itself is displayed. In the film a group of scientists explore a distant solar system in order to find a habitable planet to colonise. The human threat is underlined by scientist Brand who says, "out there we face great odds. Death. But not Evil", Cooper replies, "just what we bring with us,

[5] This revival of the alien as monstrous does not mean the death of 'alien love'. There are still examples that look toward the alien encounter with optimism and/or move in between these positions.

then". This becomes evident when we see two men fight each other for their lives all alone on a distant planet.

This internal threat is also important when we consider aliens in contemporary sf. Badmington argues Brian de Palma's *Mission to Mars* (2000) concludes with the idea that we are just as much alien as the aliens are 'Us', since the researchers in the film discover that life on Earth originated on Mars. He posits that the alien encounter, as opposed to 1950s narratives, can now be met with optimism and confidence (*Alien Chic* 29). In contemporary sf Earth is no longer under threat of alien invasion, it is the humans who explore and invade space. Simultaneously, the clear distinction between 'alien' and 'human' is disappearing. Aliens are no longer 'Monsters', 'Thing', 'It' or 'Them', but rather 'Us'.

Yet there is another way to Badmington's reading of the alien as 'Us'. In her study *Screening Space,* Sobchack suggests there are two distinguishable strands of sf which deal with this new, more positive, take on human-alien relationships. The first one she calls 'conservative sf', in which human beings are considered to be the primary being. In this reading aliens and foreign worlds are subordinated to (especially Western) human civilisation. Here the acknowledgement of aliens lies in their resemblance to human beings, but they still remain the alien Other. As Sobchack argues, "relations of resemblance are constituted as Yoda proves "aliens are just like us" – only wiser and better" (295). As such, aliens like Yoda and E.T. enable for a new humanism because they are presented as 'more human than human'. But they remain subordinated to humans. Therefore, Sobchack discerns the other strand of sf by its displacement of human beings at the centre and calls this 'postmodern sf'.[6] She argues, "[it] does not "embrace the alien" in a celebration of resemblance, but "erases alienation" in a celebration of similitude" (297). In other words, by not retaining the primacy of human beings, the hierarchisation between the human and the non-human is erased. The resemblance of the aliens to humans is produced through its equality to humanity. Contrasting to aliens in 'conservative sf', aliens are not *like* us, "but rather that "aliens *are* us" … as "We are aliens"" (Sobchack 297). Put differently, we are just as alien to them as they are alien to us.

Here we see the difference between aliens who are 'Us' and 'We are aliens'. On the one hand, Badmington argues that human life is derivative of alien life in *Mission to Mars*, thereby displacing humans from the centre. While on the other hand, Sobchack argues that in 'postmodern sf' it does not matter what life forms stem from where since humans and aliens are considered as equals. We will return to this notion later when we look at *The Man Who*

[6] Here Sobchack refers to: *Liquid Sky* (Slava Tsukerman, 1983), *Repo Man* (Alex Cox, 1984) and *The Brother from Antoher Planet* (John Sayles, 1984).

Fell to Earth and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). In these films the non-human entities play the part of the human, but are not easily recognised as such. Altogether providing new insights into the idea that 'aliens are us'. Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* will function as the main example in this investigation, as it hinges between various strands of sf cinema.

1.3. Positioning The Man Who Fell to Earth

In *The Man Who Fell to Earth* the highly anthropomorphic alien known as Thomas Jerome Newton comes to Earth. His mission is to build a rescue ark in order to save his own race on planet Anthea. In order to do so he finds a lawyer to patent his inventions. His alien technological knowhow allows him to build the multimillion dollar company, World Enterprises. With his accumulated wealth he sets out to construct his rescue spaceship close to where he first landed in New Mexico. While staying at a hotel he becomes ill in an elevator because his alien physique cannot endure the movement. He is then taken care of by Mary-Lou, a young woman who introduces him to alcohol and sex. The way Newton watches multiple television screens shows his alien qualities, as his need for impulses is much higher than that of humans. When his employee Nathan Bryce starts to suspect that Newton is in fact an alien, he secretly photographs him with an x-ray camera. Bryce is now able to see that Newton's physiology is different from human physiology. By the time Newton wants to set off in his spaceship, Bryce has told the government about him. They capture him and keep him in a facility for experimentation. After they x-ray his eyes, Newton is unable to take out his human lenses that hide his alien eyes. But over time they lose interest in the alien and set him free. Mary-Lou visits him once more but they both realise there is no more love between them. Meanwhile, the Antheans have died because Newton was unable to save them. In the final scene we see a bohemian, alcoholic Newton who does not know what to do with his money and life.

In his film, Roeg presents the viewer with an uncanny take on the alien Other. As Butler argues, Newton's fall to Earth could be seen as a parable for a fall into Being. In this reading Newton is the (protagonist) self who encounters other beings on Earth (*Messiah* 182). On the one hand, his encounter with the humans throws him into Being, which suggests that the human characters in the film could be considered as the Others. On the other hand, Newton is the one who is perceived as weird. Without ever having met Newton, Bryce is suspicious of him and later on he acts on his hunch by taking his photograph. In a way Mary-Lou shares this suspicion but does not act on it directly. She is only confronted by Newton's physical weakness and calls him a 'freak' for watching multiple television screens

simultaneously. But when Mary-Lou does discover Newton is in fact an alien she is scared to death. Her hysterical reaction shows that Newton is clearly not what she believed him to be. In this scene it becomes clear that Newton is definitely Other. Roeg stresses Newton's difference from humans by using unconventional intercuts. Newton's 'visions' of (past, present or future) Anthea, and the intercuts to Bryce, suggest a different perception of space and time. For the viewer this style of editing is sometimes inimitable but it expresses Newton's alien experience on Earth.

The film also offers a reading of Newton as an expression of the Other within. According to Butler, Bryce could be regarded as Newton's double, or vice versa (*Messiah* 186). To start, the name 'Thomas' relates to words for twin, pointing toward "Newton's dual nature and his status as *doppelgänger* of Bryce" (Butler *Unimportant* 83). The relationship between Newton and Bryce is also suggested by the intercuts during Newton's visit to a Kabuki performance. Preceding this scene, we see Bryce receiving a present from his daughter followed by a shot of a framed picture of his (ex)-wife and daughter. Their relationship is challenged by one of Bryce's young students who visits him at his apartment to have sex. But before the act, the young woman covers the photograph with her underwear. This becomes striking when one learns that Kabuki performances are often about the moral conflicts in relationships of the heart.[7] The intercuts not only suggest a certain awareness between Newton and Bryce they also refer to the moral conflict Newton faces regarding his wife and children on Anthea. Both Newton and Bryce face these moral conflicts as they both have sex with a woman other than their wives. The relationship between the two is also reflected by the intercutting of scenes in which Mary-Lou tends to Newton. As he lays on the hotel bed trying to recover, the film cuts to Bryce having sex with one of his students the same moment Mary-Lou reaches Newton with towels to clean up the mess he made. It is as if Newton foresees that Mary-Lou will later introduce him to sex. Subsequently, when Newton falls in and out of sleep, Bryce is seen having sex with different students all throughout Newton's feverish recovery. Whether Newton is conscious or not, there seems to be a connection between him and Bryce.

But what does this relationship with Newton as an external embodiment of the Other within tell us about our perception of humanity? For we must also recognise the unfortunate twist in Newton's visit to Earth. He is corrupted by human influence and fails to complete his mission. His love for alcohol and sex becomes an expression of ultimate freedom (Chapman

[7] http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/kabuki-theatre-00163.

137). Literary scholar Hugh Ruppersburg argues this is corruption by human materialism (161-162).[8] And we see this corruption affecting both Newton and his human counterparts. His business competitors kill his lawyer and team up with the government to capture him. But even when the humans aid Newton money plays its part. As Butler clearly sums up: Mary-Lou becomes rich by taking care of Newton, but she ultimately abandons him to his fate; his lawyer agrees to help him but this makes him a wealthy man, and his employee Bryce sells him out to his business competitors (Butler *Messiah* 188). So on the one hand, it is Newton himself who falls into human sin, while on the other hand, he is neutralised by human capitalism (Berman and Dalvi 14). The closing scene shows us a wealthy alcoholic who has lost all motivation to save his family. His only attempt to reach out is through a music album, in the hope that one day his wife will hear it on the radio. And with this the alien's tragic visit to Earth is concluded.

When we look at *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, released twenty years after *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, there is a different human-alien relationship. Today the film perhaps confronts us most with the way humans respond to Newton, ranging from indifferent to hostile (Berman and Dalvi 14). But we see that the alien is taken care of and loved, if only for a moment. When he is exposed, the government and his business competitor capture him. Yet he is not demonised, and they do not threaten to kill him. Although he is interrogated and experimented on, the interest of the humans in Newton is marginal. Because, Newton is peaceful and the only reason he came to Earth is to save his home planet. When he is no longer considered to be a threat to humanity the humans reject him and set him free (Butler *Messiah* 181).

Besides the reception of Newton by the humans, Newton's likeness to human beings is another remarkable feature of the film. *The Man Who Fell to Earth* challenges the anthropocentric perspective Sobchack accredits to 'conservative sf', without succumbing to the arbitrariness of 'postmodern sf'. The film does not overthrow set conventions but moves in between them. A similar thing occurs in *Blade Runner*.[9] In the film, Rick Deckard is a policeman assigned to terminate 'replicants' who have gone rogue. Replicants are humanoids with enhanced capabilities used only for off-world labour and military applications. The

[8] In his article "The Alien Messiah in Recent Science Fiction Films", Ruppersburg refers to the corruption by human materialism of the aliens in *Explorers* (Joe Dante, 1985). He argues a similar thing occurs in Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.

[9] There will not be made a distinction between the different versions of *Blade Runner* that have been released over the years. For its various endings have been widely debated in regard to what extent Deckard is revealed as a replicant or not. But regardless of the ending, the core of the film questions human to non-human relationships and by extension humanism.

problem lies in the difficulty to identify replicants, because their physique and consciousness are made to replicate that of humans. Therefore, Deckard has to be sure he is dealing with a replicant, but how can he be sure? The end of the film hints at the possibility that Deckard himself is a replicant, thereby ascribing subjectivity to a non-human. The film compromises the anthropocentric perspective and is "unafraid to depict authentic posthumanist subjectivity", as Badmington put it (*Blade Runner* 471). Similar to *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, the film subtly moves in between the various strands of sf cinema.

In *The Man Who Fell to Earth* the difficulty to differentiate between what is human and non-human starts with Bryce's suspicion of Newton's identity. His x-ray reveals Newton's physiological difference, but on the outside Newton remains seemingly human. Even on the personal level Newton is human in character. Mary-Lou, after spending all this time with him, does not notice any significant differences. Finally, when Newton is examined by the government scientists, it is hard for them too to find clear distinctions. And by 'sealing' his alien eyes permanently they rob him from his authenticity. But because Newton is not easily identifiable as the Other, unlike Yoda or E.T., he breaks with 'conservative sf's' portrayal of the human-alien relationship. Newton challenges our anthropocentric views because he resembles human beings, but is not one of them. He resembles a different form of difference than Yoda and E.T., whose difference is established through their foreignness. In a way Newton starts out as a 'more human than human' alien through his technological knowhow and his different perception of space and time. But he is robbed of his external difference, which makes him more like humans. Therefore, he is not subordinate to humanity, but nor is he considered as an equal.

When we are unable to distinguish the alien from the human, the borders of humanism become blurred. In this sense *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and *Blade Runner* hint toward Sobchack's description of postmodern sf. Not because the films displace the primacy of human beings, but because they challenge what it means to be human. Yet their emphasis lies on the fine line between the human and non-human, possibly inverting our anthropocentrism. Following this line of thought we will look at *Avatar* next because it holds a different position in regard to 'conservative' and 'postmodern sf'. Although, here the alien Other is clearly distinguishable from humans. And the protagonist leaves human society behind and opts for a life as the alien Other.

2. Avatar: the humane wish for a different social reality

2.1 Introducing Avatar

The film, set in the year 2154, revolves around Jake Sully, a paraplegic ex-marine, who is offered his deceased brother's place on a mission to the distant moon Pandora. Because Jake and his brother share DNA he is able to 'drive' the avatar initially created for his brother. The avatar is a hybrid clone between human DNA and that of the Na'vi, the native (humanoid) inhabitants of Pandora. The humans came to Pandora to mine a natural resource called Unobtanium, which is worth billions back on Earth. Evidently, the Na'vi clan called the Omaticaya live right above a rich Unobtanium deposit in their Hometree. The Avatar Program was designed to communicate with the natives and work out a diplomatic solution.

On his first expedition, Sully gets lost but is saved from a pack of viperwolves by Neytiri, the daughter of the spiritual leader of the clan. He is invited to learn the ways of the Na'vi, a species, as Sully discovers, that lives in harmony with its environment. They worship Pandora's spiritual mother Eywa, with whom they can connect through their neural connection fibres. These tendrils also allow them to make a connection, called 'tsaheylu', with all living entities found on Pandora. After learning their ways and gaining their trust, Sully is accepted into the clan as one of them. He then seals the bond by mating with Neytiri. This allows him to convince the Omaticaya to leave the Hometree before the humans come to remove them by force.

However, the human corporation's military leader Quaritch becomes impatient and attacks one of the Omaticaya's sacred places. Sully tries to stop the bulldozers because he wants more time to negotiate the Omaticaya's peaceful displacement. But his actions are in vain and Quaritch destroys the Hometree, killing many of the clan. After the attack Sully sides with the Na'vi. He manages to tame Toruk, the largest ikran (flying dragon) that only few great Na'vi had tamed before him. This promotes his status within Na'vi culture and allows him to raise an army consisting of several Na'vi clans. Together with Eywa, who enables Pandora's fauna to fight against the humans, they defeat Quaritch's attack on the Omaticaya's most sacred place called the Tree of Souls. After their defeat, the humans, with a few exceptions, are forced to leave Pandora. The film ends with a spiritual ceremony under the Tree of Souls in which Sully's mind/soul is transferred from his human body into that of the avatar.

Prior to its release, *Avatar* was already infamous for breaking the record of the film with the biggest production budget ever made. Subsequently, when the film was released in December of 2009 it trumped all previous box-office records. After running for 238 days, released on approximately 17.500 screens, it grossed almost $2,8 billion worldwide. And with more than 70% of its revenue coming from overseas countries, it is safe to say that *Avatar* was a worldwide phenomenon.[10] The film also pushed the boundaries when it comes to its technological production. Its release on several different platforms including IMAX 3D screening added to the success, simultaneously opening up a new market for 3D televisions and numerous other platforms. But we must not forget the worldwide political impact of the film. It mobilized several indigenous peoples to fight for their land, and made many people more aware of their relationship to their environment. All in all, *Avatar* has made its mark on the world in many different aspects, allowing for a wide variety of studies, not limited to the narrative analysis. It seems that *Avatar* had spoken to its audience in such a way that it affected their daily lives directly. So, despite the fairly conventional dimensions of the film initially proffered by critics, the immense impact of the film shows it has been an important one (Brown and Ng 222). That is why we must take its message(s) seriously. In order to do so we will examine the different readings closely.

2.2 Reading Avatar

The story has invoked critics to write a wide variety of interpretations. The Na'vi have been read as Native Americans and indigenous societies all around the world. This is not in spite, but because Cameron consciously refers to several indigenous societies with his stereotypical portrayal of the Na'vi as a tall, slender, athletic and spiritual race. Their displacement has been compared to similar historical events produced by imperialist colonialism. The intimate relationship the Na'vi have with nature has invoked interpretations such as peace-loving tree huggers. In turn, these peace-loving natives are contrasted to the militant humans, who seem to be driven only by capitalistic materialism. The human disregard for Pandoran nature has led critics to term *Avatar* as an environmentalist film. Sully's change of heart appeals to its viewers, calling for action to save the planet from environmental catastrophe. In this sense Pandora is an ecological utopia with the Na'vi as its eco-conscious humanoid Other. Still, all these readings are complicated or contradicted in one way or another. This has led literary scholer Joshua Clover to argue that *Avatar's* multitude of interpretations are too chaotic for an

[10] http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=avatar.htm.

allegorical reading of the film. However, we need not discard the film entirely. In Clover's words:

> Like Jake, jacked into a hyperkinesthetic body in complement to his human body's immobility, *Avatar* is "three-dimensional" in inverse proportion to the extent that it concerns the actual disposition of space. Its world, its situation, can be realized exactly because it bears no debt to the possible. (7)

Here, Clover reminds us that *Avatar* is a Hollywood production. Despite its weak ecological arguments, paternalistic view on the indigenous and the demonised U.S. military, the movie is amazing (6). Film scholar Thomas Elsaesser relates the chaotic structure of the film to Hollywood logic. He argues James Cameron purposely hid false ideology and double standards behind an open contradiction of the film's structure, with the effect that every reading of the film will be both false and true (254). In other words, *Avatar* has something in it for everyone.

Bearing Elsaesser in mind we will start with David Brooks' review for *The New York Times,* in which he propagates the 'White Messiah fable'. Brooks' fairly conservative reading focuses on a stereotype in which white people are rational and technocratic, while its colonial victims are ecologically-sensible, illiterate natives who need a white saviour. The 'White Messiah fable' tells the story of an indifferent white adventurer who is out on a mission. But once he comes into contact with the local natives and learns their noble and spiritual ways he falls in love with their culture. This opens his eyes to the wrongdoing of his own society, who seeks to displace or kill the natives. He then dedicates his life to protect the natives, and is able to do so because of his 'superior' knowledge and skill. In films like *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990) and *The Last Samurai* (Edward Zwick, 2003) we have seen such white males become the messianic saviour.

In *Avatar,* Sully is the white adventurer who is sent on a mission. His society has rejected him but the mining corporation offers him an opportunity to explore the world of Pandora. And while his role is initially diplomatic, Sully becomes a way for Quaritch to gain inside information about the Omaticaya. However, during his mission Sully quickly becomes a true Na'vi. In a way he even surpasses the indigenous Na'vi. He has sex with the princess and "flies the big red bird that no one in generations has been able to master", as Brooks points out (n.pag.). Although he still reports back to Quaritch, Sully's consciousness has been raised along the way. He has come to love the Na'vi culture because they live in peace, have

deep and meaningful relationships, are not corrupted by materialism and live in harmony with their environment. So, after the attack on Hometree, Sully rises to the occasion and leads the offense against the mining corporation. This leads Brooks to argue that the film "rests on the assumption that nonwhites need the White Messiah to lead their crusades" (n.pag). It is Sully who forms an alliance with the other clans and prays to Eywa for help, resulting in their victory. Brooks concludes by asking the question if the narrative is kind of offensive, as it appears that the fate of the natives is either to be destroyed by white people or to be saved by one. The fact that Brooks questions if the film is offensive or not makes his reading conservative. His reading considers the white man as the highest form of being and turns the Na'vi and Eywa into natural beings without agency.

But even though Brooks underappreciates the role of the natives in the film, he recognizes *Avatar* as a "racial fantasy par excellence" (n.pag). Since the Na'vi represent native societies all around the world. They form a peace-loving race that lives in harmony with nature that accepts Sully, unlike his own society that has rejected him as a paraplegic outcast. For Sully it is not only the avatar body with functioning legs that win him over to the Na'vi culture. As Brooks argues, "the natives help the white guy discover that he, too, has a deep and tranquil soul" (n.pag.). From Sully's perspective the racial fantasy is to become a true Na'vi and live a life in peace with everything the pure Na'vi culture has to offer.

American studies scholar Sabine N. Meyer also recognizes the racial fantasy that is being fulfilled in the film. In line with Brooks, she argues that *Avatar* only hints at cross-cultural egalitarianism. For her, too, the film draws on the 'White Messiah fable' as both the plot and the cinematography establish a racial hierarchy between Sully and the Na'vi (160). In addition, Meyer proposes *Avatar* is in fact a remake of *Dances with Wolves* as they both reinforce the racial hierarchies they try to abolish. She argues that similarities are to be found on the level of the plot, the stereotypization of the natives, the racial hierarchy established by the 'White Messiah fable' and their Manichean worldview. Sully reminds us of the soldier John Dunbar who chooses to be sent to the frontier before it is gone and the ecologically sensible Na'vi remind us of the ecologically portrayed Native Americans in *Dances with Wolves*. Additionally, Dunbar too, adopts the native ways and uncovers his true identity leading him to save the Sioux tribe. Both films produce a Manichean worldview as they leave little room for nuance. They initially portray the natives as bad and the Euro-Americans as good. But in the end the heroes are left with the choice to be either an insane eco- and man-killer or an eco- and peace-loving native (Meyer 162).

While Brooks and Meyer acknowledge the qualities of the natives they do not ascribe agency to them. According to them the natives remain subjected to the Euro-American racial fantasy for the Other. Native scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn proposes *Dances with Wolves* "asks us to believe that all of the crimes and vices of the American/European colonialist's character are somehow outweighed by Kevin Costner's boyhood wish to 'be an Indian'" (10). Put differently, the Native-Americans are there to fulfil Dunbar's utopian fantasy as the Na'vi fulfil Sully's. Elsaesser argues that Pandora functions as a utopia because it compensates for what we lack on Earth, the distant moon provides peace, spirituality, ritual and a life in harmony with nature (261). Thus, it could be argued, since most of these traits are ascribed to indigenous peoples, this particular racial fantasy is a Western one. In addition, the Na'vi are a highly idealized projection of indigenous peoples around the world, as they are known to live in poverty and do not necessarily share the graceful existence of the Na'vi (Elsaesser 261). This leads to Meyer's perhaps most significant comparison between the two films; both being a racial fantasy from a Western perspective (161). Meyer concludes with the notion that both films are paradoxical in the sense that they want to construct a positive representation of indigenous peoples, but at the same time uphold long-held stereotypes (164). Thus, albeit with nuance, Meyer still seems to interpret the film from within the confines of the 'White Messiah fable', where the natives lack agency and the white man is king.

On a different note, film and media scholar Yosefa Loshitzky, in her article for *Third Text,* stresses that "*Avatar* has been mobilised by indigenous movements from different corners of the globe who read it as a subversive film that reflects and projects their own local situation" (151). For example, the Indian tribe Dongria Kondh faced a similar problem to that of the Na'vi. Their mountain, which they regard as their temple and God, contains minerals on which the mining company Vedanta Resources has set its sights. This allowed for the short film *Mine: Story of a Sacred Mountain* (Toby Nicholas, 2009) to go viral on the internet. The film explains the tribe's relation to the mountain, the hills, the rocks and the strength its flora gives them. The protest movement even included a plea to save "the real Avatar tribe".[11] Loshitzky focuses on the resemblance between Pandora as a paradise and the Palestinian conflict. She explains, for Palestinians *Avatar* mobilised resistance against colonisation, occupation and the wall (152). The Chinese government was motivated by comparable movements to restrict the distribution of the film. Bloggers already connected it to cases of similar areas of rural China being appropriated by mining companies (Elsaesser 251). Finally,

[11] Survival International made the film as part of their stride for tribal peoples' rights. http://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/dongria/sacredmountain.

in contrast to Brooks, Loshitzky makes the argument for *Avatar* as an empowerment of indigenous societies worldwide and concludes:

> The resistance of the Na'vi in Avatar can be seen as Hollywood's subversive representation of the globally connected local 'resistances' of the dispossessed. Avatar has been described as racist by some critics and theorists because of the amalgam of stereotypical racial and tribal features in the Na'vi, but it can be argued that this very 'amalgamation' is what makes the film conducive to local interpretations and modifications of struggle on the ground. (162)

In other words, while some find Cameron's portrayal of the Na'vi racist, the combination of stereotypical features Cameron purposely attributed to the Na'vi motivated indigenous societies globally.

With the 'racist' reading of *Avatar* Loshitzky refers to Slavoj Žižek's analysis for *New Statesman*.[12] Žižek argues, "beneath the idealism and political correctness … lie brutal racist undertones" (44). For him, the Na'vi are a deeply spiritual aborigines race with an incestuous link to nature. He also reduces the relationship Sully has with Neytiri to one of mediation. What he means is that Sully only uses Neytiri to fulfil his exotic dream, he never intends to spend his entire life with her. Using psychoanalytic logic, Žižek imagines a sequel to *Avatar* in which Sully starts to reject the Na'vi culture because he misses the corrupted human universe. His new reality, no matter how perfect it is, will eventually disappoint him. The perfection of his new universe holds no place for him, precisely because it is perfect. Thereby, simultaneously saying that a paraplegic outcast human is good enough to marry an aboriginal princess, making the film old-fashioned and conservative (44). In line with Brooks he argues the Na'vi are only subjects in the white man's fantasy, they can either choose to be destroyed or saved by the humans. Žižek also regards *Avatar* (as a film production) as a form of exploitation in itself. For the film made billions by appropriating the real struggles of natives worldwide. When he refers to Dongria Kondh, he states there is no princess waiting to be seduced by a white messiah who will save them (45-46). For them, there is only the harsh reality of living in peril of white imperialism.

[12] Loshitzky does not refer to Žižek directly, as the comment also reminds us of Brooks' analysis. Yet Žižek vocalized his opinion most explicitly.

According to media scholar Mark Bartlett, both Brooks and Žižek "are trapped on one side of the filmic apparatus" (293).[13] He argues their readings of *Avatar* are limited within the confines of the Western gaze. Instead, Bartlett proposes the film does not figure a white messiah, but inverts the anthropocentric view and ascribes agency to the Na'vi and Eywa. While Brooks understands the Na'vi as illiterate, Bartlett recognizes that the Na'vi kids in her school picked up English faster than Dr. Augustine could teach it, and in turn they teach Na'vi to the humans. Bartlett also acknowledges that the Na'vi are a political, scientific and emotional species. He continues by arguing Brooks' description of the Na'vi is precisely that of the 'noble savage' as seen through modernity's eyes. Thereby revealing exactly what Bartlett regards as *Avatar's* socio-political value (293). On the other hand, Žižek argues from within the psychoanalytic discourse. While salient, this discourse privileges the Western ethnocentric gaze and thereby overlooks Na'vi agency. In contrast to both critics, Bartlett states:

> What actually occurs in the film is that a 'collective' indigenous messiah is substituted for a white one, inverting the entire eschatological structure of the West. The Na'vi, as is common to many indigenous societies, function on the principle of consensus and the group 'We', rather than the principle of individualism that is the ground of Western societies. As the shaman, Mo'at, says to Jake: 'Learn well, Jake Sully, and *we* will see if your insanity can be cured.' In other words, *Avatar* subverts by inverting the Enlightenment's most cherished commodity fetish, anthropocentrism … (293)

Here, Bartlett refers to two things, he first mentions the 'collective' being of life on Pandora as its own saviour. Secondly, he notes that the film refrains from an anthropocentric perspective. In the film, the Omaticaya have to make a choice, either to teach Sully the Na'vi way of living or kill him instead. When they agree on the former, Sully becomes a "subject of a Na'vi 'alienology' that aims, on the one hand, to cure and, on the other hand, to learn from him" (Bartlett 294). In other words, the Na'vi are not merely subjected to the white man's fantasy, it is their choice to teach Sully. In addition, an earlier stage of the film shows how Eywa spares Sully from Neytiri's arrow through the luminescent white floating spirits, thereby inverting the presupposed anthropocentric perspective to that of the alien Other. Additionally, the more Sully becomes one of the Na'vi, the more he starts to resist the capitalistic and imperialist ways of his fellow humans (Bartlett 294). Hereby, in the eyes of

[13] Unlike Loshitzky, who acknowledges the film's value for indigenous societies worldwide.

the Na'vi, Sully is 'cured' from his insanity called 'anthropocentrism'. Moreover, Sully is not the only saviour in the film, as it is Neytiri who saves Sully by killing Quaritch in the final battle. But more importantly, in the last stand against the humans, it is Eywa who enables the wild banshees, hammerheads and viperwolves to defeat the humans. Even though it is Sully's call for help that Eywa responds to, it does not necessarily make him the messianic saviour. Considering the inverted anthropocentrism and Pandora's collective struggle for survival, we could regard Eywa, and thus all interconnected Pandoran life, as the 'collective indigenous messiah' (Bartlett 294). This reading from a non-anthropocentric perspective, shows a contrast to those of Brooks and Žižek. And although Bartlett recognises a messianic figure, it is radically different from the one produced by the Western gaze.

Regarding the notions on social reality presented by *Avatar*, Loshitzky argues the film is not particularly political. For her it lacks body when it comes to analysing and suggesting how social reality could be changed (151). She does of course recognise its agency in speaking for indigenous societies. But in a way, she too misses *Avatar's* acknowledgement of the alien Other as proffered by Bartlett. Žižek reads the film's ending as a hero's migration from reality into the fantasy world, similar to Neo's immersion in *The Matrix* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999). For him, Sully's immersion is an escape from the real world and its social reality. Yet Žižek does not reject *Avatar* on this ground and recognises that "if we really want to change or escape our social reality, the first thing to do is to change our fantasies to make us fit this reality" (44). According to Žižek, Sully chooses fantasy over reality, thereby failing to change the social reality in the actual world. Again, this reading disregards the film's acknowledgement of the alien Other. For Bartlett, Sully's passing from a defender of neo-imperialist tendencies to a believer in a future 'otherwise than modernity', shows *Avatar's* address to our social reality (304). Not to say that Loshitzky and Žižek deny this transformation, but for Bartlett it is neither a mild comment nor a fantasy, as he put it:

> [*Avatar*] figures not only the refusal of oppositionality between presence and representation, effectivity and simulacra, but between radically different models of sociopolitical states, suggestive of a future with a promise of a democracy-to-come ordered by a type of justice radically different from the Humanism that still, unfortunately, exists today.
>
> *Avatar*, then, succeeds, not only in portraying the popular imaginary, but in 'moving' it to affective imaginaries that radically condemn representational politics. (304)

In other words, *Avatar* surpasses the fantasy and does indeed suggest how our social reality can be changed. It is a plea for a radically different form of humanism that would benefit from a more collectively oriented society like the one on Pandora. Sully's movement between the avatar and his human body suggests the actuality of the two social realities. It marks the link between the imagined and the possible. Through this process the Pandoran social reality becomes tangible, showing a liberation from modernity, becoming a hope for the future in the actual world.

2.3 The social reality of the Na'vi

In order to explore the social reality of the Na'vi, we will look at the differences between the Na'vi and the humans. Bartlett proposes that the anthropocentric view in *Avatar* is inverted through the narrative, simultaneously revealing a different social reality. For the film does not necessarily portray a single human protagonist but rather a collective Pandoran one. In this reading Sully is an intrinsic member of the entire Omaticaya clan and by extension all life on Pandora. Additionally, an eco-centric perspective comes to the fore by juxtaposing humanity's social conducts to those of the Na'vi.

Ecocriticism has provided a strand of thought called 'deep ecology', which is concerned with humanity's place on earth. As philosopher William Grey explains, deep ecology concerns itself with humanity's impact on the planet and its regard of being separate from nature. Deep ecology rather sees humanity as part of nature, which becomes problematic when one tries to defend humanity's actions from a non-anthropocentric view. Because, if humanity is part of nature, so are its destructive tendencies. Yet, concern for non-human entities can be explained from the anthropocentric concern for our own well-being. If we regard ourselves as part of nature, the concern for ourselves naturally flows into the concern for nature. Still, according to deep ecologists, anthropocentrism is a wrongly appropriated perspective in the first place (465-466). In other words, deep ecology pleads for an eco-centric perspective. It offers a radical break with anthropocentrism and asks for a reconceptualization of humanity's relation to the non-human world.

If we look more closely at the differences between the humans and the Na'vi, several aspects stand out. This has led philosopher Jeremy David Bendik-Keymer to introduce the term 'deep humanity'. Not unlike deep ecology, deep humanity embraces eco-centrism but does not reject anthropocentrism all together. Rather, it recognises a way of being that is not necessarily human, but *humane* (117). For example, the humans regard Pandora as a giant resource, an object, whereas to the Na'vi Pandora is Eywa, a subject. In turn, this might be

problematic for deep ecologists. Because, by personifying a moon one stays within the limits of anthropocentric thinking. The celestial body is still denied its own rights as a non-human subject. In other words, recognising the moon as a personified subject might be the first step toward a more eco-centric perspective. But it could also be seen as a justification of anthropocentrism by ascribing human characteristics to a non-human entity. Still, anthropocentrism carries aspects of eco-centrism in it. Moreover, according to Grey, an entirely non-anthropocentric perspective would only cause confusion. For him the problem lies in short-term and self-centred thinking (466). But as we know, not all humans share the corporate mining company's sense of entitlement. Sully chooses to make the shift from an anthropocentric oriented society toward an eco-centric one, simultaneously making him more *humane* than he ever was (Bendik-Keymer 118).

But it is not only Sully's rejection of the corporate human society which marks the shift toward an eco-centric perspective. Another important difference between the humans and the Na'vi is their connection to each other and the environment. Bendik-Keymer argues, the humans are only out for profit, even if this means exploiting others (119). This becomes evident when the mining corporation destroys the Hometree. Philosopher Dale Murray recognises this as *individualism*. He refers to Hobbes who explains our society is built on social contracts. A social contract entails that I will not harm you and you do not harm me, leaving space for mutual benefaction. This allows us to shape governments who enforce these social contracts onto its subjects, providing trust within the community. As mentioned earlier, this is the same reason why we do not fall back into a brute and savage *state of nature*, according to Hobbes (qtd. in Murray 181). However, the individual, or in this case the corporation, may choose to break the social contract if it stands in the way of higher profit. In the film, the self-interest of the humans comes to the fore through their actions. They hold individual profit in the highest regard, despite the harm they do onto others. While individualism not always leads to the exploitation of others, for Murray it depicts real dangers in *Avatar* (185).

The difference between the humans and the Na'vi, lies, as already mentioned, in the acknowledgement of non-human entities as subjects. To the Na'vi the entire planet is connected, "all life on Pandora is *kindred,* as in one big family" (Bendik-Keymer 119). This leaves hardly any place for individualism in the Na'vi culture. Even killing a viperwolf to save Sully pains Neytiri. She blames Sully for being inconsiderate and sees it as an unnecessary death. Neytiri regards the wolf in its own right and recognises it as part of the ecosystem. Bendik-Keymer argues that acknowledging all entities is the reason that Sully

finds solace in the Na'vi culture, as it offers multiple, deep relationships (120). For the Na'vi the entire forest offers possibilities to make connections, with Eywa, the animals and each other. These connections transcend any human-to-human relationship. They surpass the individualistic social contracts on which human society is based. In other words, when Sully chooses the alien life over his human one, altogether he becomes more *humane* (Bendik-Keymer 122). His transition into the avatar makes him part of the environment. One in which he is able to connect to all entities, Na'vi and non-Na'vi.

While Bendik-Keymer focuses more on the inverted anthropocentric perspective in relation to the subjectivity of non-human entities in the film, and Murray points to the individualistic being of the human race, they both seem to come to the same conclusion. It could be argued that the anthropocentric perspective has led to individualism or vice versa. But whether or not this is the case, the film, on the one hand, shows that being connected to the environment leads to a more eco-centric perspective and sense of a networked community. On the other hand, a self-centred existence leads to the disregard of others and a disconnection from the environment. Another strand of ecocriticism, called 'social ecology', concerns itself not so much with the human impact on the planet, but rather with humanity's long history of dominating each other. Which has simultaneously allowed for the colonization of nature and a search for power and profit (Best 337). While this vision corresponds to *Avatar's* portrayal of the human race, social ecology is often criticized for its "perhaps naïve underestimation of the durability of existing social systems" (Marland 850). The same holds for anthropocentric or individualistic readings of *Avatar*. We must not forget that the social contract has allowed us to build elaborate communities which interconnect worldwide.

Yet the Na'vi community functions radically different from human society. Murray argues the emphasis the Na'vi put on community over individual interests is strikingly different from classical human contractarian liberalism (185). In a communitarian society the individual is not insignificant but rather inseparable from the community. Furthermore, communitarians take tradition, memory and history seriously. Through this 'conservatism', members of the community are able to connect across time. The acceptance of Sully into the Omaticaya clan connects him both to its current members as well as its ancestors. It allows him access to the Tree of Souls, where the memories of passed away clan members are preserved. This connection deepens the sense of community because it also produces traditions, rituals and values that the community should preserve for the future (Murray 186). Along similar lines, Bartlett argues that the humans are depicted as result of an individualistic ideology. They represent a community in which "social relations are defined by 'I' – to – 'I'

relations … while the Na'vi subject is depicted by the ideology of collectivism, in which social relations are defined by 'I' – to – 'We' relations …" (301). Put differently, human social reality is based on individual social contracts, while Na'vi social reality is based on eco-centric communitarianism. Bartlett goes on to argue that humanity would benefit from overthrowing the current capitalist economy by "replacing it with a negotiable value system based on ecology for the reciprocal benefits of a consensual society based on 'we', not on a rampant libertarian individualism" (302). Both authors stress the importance of community in the Na'vi way of living in contrast to humanity's sense of community. But, while Murray focuses on the importance of tradition and Bartlett on the subversion of our economic system, there is another important difference to take into account.

Beyond the social and political structures of the Na'vi, they differ from humans in their biological composition. In the film there is a moment when Neytiri explains to Sully the importance of making the bond, 'tsaheylu', to one of the banshees. A bond with a banshee is, unlike with other animals, made for life and the banshee will never bond with another Na'vi. According to Murray, the animal becomes an extension of the self through tsaheylu. Sully thereby includes a part of Pandoran life into his own being (187). The bonding shows the importance of the Na'vi's naturally occurring connection fibres embedded in their hair. It is important to note that all Pandoran life has connection fibres. For professor of media and technology Ken Hillis this biological difference, the ability to create a biological networked society, perhaps holds the core message of the film. In his article "From Capital to Karma" Hillis says:

> The "rhysomatic wholeness" noted by Delaney – a wholeness manifesting through a wetware- or carbon-based future world network – lies at the core of the film's oddly nostalgic appeal: for two hours and forty-two minutes, spectators experience fluttering on the edges of a collective post-Hive Mind fantasy: an inverted prelapsarian vision of the individual as a networked empath who is also already part of the tree of knowledge.[14] (n.pag)

In other words, this biological characteristic allows for an egalitarian community in which each 'node' has access to the whole system. It even surpasses the Hive Mind fantasy, pointing toward a society driven by collectivism, to which we will return later. The utopian vision that

[14] Hillis refers to Samuel Delany's Facebook review in which he acknowledges "the rhysomatic [sic] wholeness of the alien world is suggested several times".

Avatar provides us with is one where each entity is both an individual subject as well an intrinsic part of the system. We've already noted Bendik-keymer's description of life on Pandora as "one big family" (119). Similarly, Hillis compares the natural connection fibres to USB-like connective links. Illustrating that Pandoran life is a "network linked not through wires or Wi-Fi but through carbon-based forms of wetware. The entire network constitutes a biological life form" (n.pag). Put differently, the biggest difference between humans and the Na'vi is perhaps their biological complexion. Where humans need technology to connect to the world wide network, it seems the Na'vi have evolved biologically in ways humans have not. For Hillis the biological structure of the Na'vi parallels (future) technological possibilities for humans to become part of a global network. Therefore, the Na'vi are allegorical. They represent a possible future and thus become desirable (n.pag). But while for Hillis the film hints at a utopian suggestion in which all beings would transcend the atomistic individual ideology, Bartlett does not see humanity's abandonment of libertarian individualism any time soon and calls this 'solution' a utopian pipe-dream (Bartlett 302). Yet the film offers a rare insight into the conceptualisations of networked societies based on radically evolved biological entities.

Returning to the Hive Mind, how can we translate this notion to contemporary culture and *Avatar*? When Hillis mentions the 'post-Hive Mind fantasy' he refers to philosopher Kevin Kelly who has written on 'the electronic hive'. The Hive Mind can both refer to a technological or a biological dynamic Net. In nature, the beehive forms an example of a Net. As Kelly explains, "the hive is irredeemably social, unabashedly of many minds, but it decides as a whole when to swarm and where to move. A hive possesses an intelligence none of its parts does" (75). A Hive Mind thus represents a community in which the individuals together form a greater entity. In the twenty-first century, computers and the internet have made human systems become as complex as a natural Hive Mind. This technological Net is a network to which billions of people can connect, deciding its direction and content (Kelly 76). Therefore, to some extent, the Hive Mind has already become a reality for humans. However, what Hillis suggests is that Pandoran life transcends the Hive Mind structure by simultaneously acknowledging individualism. In the words of Hillis, *Avatar* depicts:

> the actualization of a networked intelligence through an evolved collectivity of embodied agents, humanoid and otherwise, who retain individuality yet are always collectively conjoined to Eywa, the earth Mother.

> This is one strong reason why the film resonates so powerfully with contemporary audiences increasingly directed to understand themselves primarily as individuals yet also as monads networked through information technologies. (n.pag)

While Hillis acknowledges Pandoran life as networked individualism and the human vision to see itself accordingly, it should not be confused with the (human) electronic hive as Kelly describes it. For in the human Hive Mind each individual is not an intrinsic part of the whole, they do not form a single biological life form. Meaning, that while the Na'vi may be allegorical, there still remains a gap between being electronically and biologically networked.

Thus, it could be argued that the social reality of the Na'vi is primarily determined by their biological complexion. Where the humans are portrayed as anthropocentric and individualistic beings, the Na'vi represent an eco-centric minded and collectively oriented race. The approach of the Na'vi toward the community and their environment stems from their intrinsic connection to it. In a way the Na'vi have a social contract with the ecosystem they inhabit. On the contrary, humans only have a pseudo relationship to the world based on the electronic hive. Yet, our current type of networked individualism could be surpassed and is presented as a real possibility in *Avatar*.

The final chapter will elaborate on the notion of the Hive Mind, as *Edge of Tomorrow* presents us with an alien which social structure reminds us of a biological Net. But in fact the final chapter juxtaposes *Edge of Tomorrow* and *Arrival*. The first film offers an example that shows humanity's destructive capabilities toward the Other, who could have presented humanity with enlightening insights. The latter offers an example in which communication is favoured over violence. In the film an immersive dialogue is established with the alien Other, leading to the enlightenment of the human race.

3. Edge of Tomorrow and Arrival: between destruction and dialogue

3.1 Introducing Edge of Tomorrow

In *Edge of Tomorrow*, Earth is invaded by aliens called 'Mimics' who are actuated by the Omega (their 'queen'). When the humans plan an attack, Major William Cage, a former advertiser, is to be send to the front as a campaign tool. Except, Cage is not exactly a war hero and refuses to go into battle. After his refusal to comply he is arrested and tasered. The next day he wakes up on the tarmac of Heathrow Airport, from which the attack will be launched. Cage no longer holds the status of Major but is now a private and a deserter. When he is sent into combat, unwillingly and unprepared the following day, he is killed within minutes by a distinctive blue mimic, only to find himself waking up on the airport tarmac again. Cage is inexplicably caught in a time loop (a power that belongs to the Omega), forcing him to relive the day after he dies in combat. He soon realizes that every day is exactly the same. This enables him to plan his moves ahead. Cage seeks the help from Rita Vrataski, a decorated soldier, and finds out the same phenomenon befell her. Together they charge into battle with each encounter giving them a better understanding of their enemy. Through trial and error, they slowly manage to drive the Mimics back. When Cage starts to have visions of the Omega he figures out where it is hiding and moves to kill it. Upon reaching the destination Cage finds the Omega is gone and realizes the visions were a trap. The Omega purposely allowed Cage to come so close in order to study human combat methods. Cage and Vrataski now understand how the Mimics were able to advance so quickly. With the help of a special device Cage learns the real location of the Omega and devises a plan to kill it. He can no longer fare on his knowledge of how the day will progress but manages to kill the Omega through all his experience. He dies in the process but wakes up once again. This time he is back in London and learns the Mimics are unable to fight, offering no resistance to the human attack. With the Omega gone, Cage is able to pursue his desires and seeks out Vrataski.

As such, the film repeats alien invasion and Hollywood sf narratives, leading film critics to argue the film is a mere rehashing of old tropes. Jonathan Romney points out we've seen humans go to war in robotic exoskeletons before in *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986) while the inexplicable time loop reminds us of Harold Ramis' *Groundhog Day* (1993) (n.pag). Yet Tim Grierson notes that the protagonist in *Groundhog Day* is learning to become a better person, unlike Cage, who is learning not to die. And rather than rehashing the alien invasion narrative the film offers a critique on the pointlessness of war, being repeated over and over.

With the caricature drill sergeant as a parody to every other war movie (n.pag). In addition, the film's rhetoric is less based on the 'Us vs. Them' trope than it is on video games, in which the player/protagonist gets reset every time he dies and as many attempts as he needs. This video game like structure makes the elimination of the enemy the only possible outcome of the film. For Cage, the only way out of the time loop is to fulfil his destiny, to which we will return later. On closer inspection, the Mimics' social structure reminds us of a Hive Mind network. However, the Hive Mind structure of the Mimics seems unlike the one in *Avatar,* which implied networked individualism. Instead, the Mimics show an uncanny resemblance to our known social insects, such as ants and bees. In the following investigation the Mimics represent the workers and the Omega is their queen.

3.1.1 Mimics and the Hive Mind

Building on the Hive Mind theory used to describe Pandora and the Na'vi, a different approach is needed in order to understand the aliens in *Edge of Tomorrow*. For the Mimics remind us more of Kevin Kelly's explanation of Hive Mind structures found in nature, with the beehive as key example (75). In order to understand the biological Hive Mind, we will look at socio-biologist William D. Hamilton's investigation. Departing from the Darwinian notion of 'survival of the fittest', he attempted to answer the question why animals as well as humans cooperate. In other words, he tried to find an explanation for selfless behaviour which has nothing to do with personal reproduction. This question becomes increasingly difficult when we consider social insects. For a long time, it has been a mystery why ants and bees live in colonies, while not all of the members can reproduce themselves. Before Hamilton biologists did not understand the altruistic attitudes of social species. It appears answers were to be found in genetics, and that (genetic) altruism could be explained with mathematical precision (Buskes 122).

Hamilton's model shows why we care more for our family than for others. It all comes down to the term 'inclusive fitness'.[15] It is about the ability to reproduce your genes as much as possible. For humans it is most common to have sex in order to do so. The other, uncommon way, works through supporting a sibling. Since we share roughly 50% of our genes with our siblings, our cousins share 25% of our genes. Meaning, together, two cousins

[15] The term 'inclusive fitness' entails the total amount of reproduced genetic material spread by an individual – including the material spread by its kin – as a result of one's contribution to their kin's reproductive capabilities. Put differently, the fitness, or 'success' of an individual is defined by both its own reproduced genes as well as that of his kin. Therefore, the evolutionary rule is not by definition 'to reproduce', as it is to maximize one's inclusive fitness. See Buskes, pp. 122-123.

would account for the same amount of reproduced genetic material as an own child would (Buskes 122). In the words of biologist John Haldane: "I will jump into a river to save two brothers or eight cousins" (qtd. in Nowak). By rescuing either he preserves the same amount of shared genetic material, saving his inclusive fitness. This form of altruism is more common for ants, bees, and possibly for the Mimics in *Edge of Tomorrow*.

Worker bees cannot reproduce themselves, so in order to increase their inclusive fitness they serve the queen. In a way, they sacrifice their personal fitness to ensure their genes are being reproduced. On a genetic scale it is more productive for the bees to assist the queen. For their siblings produce more shared genetic material (75%) than their own hypothetical children would.[16] To a certain extent this theory explains the origin of social animals. Although humans are considered to be a social species, they appear highly individualistic compared to Hive Mind organisms. The social ranges of humanity should not be reduced to social contracts, but in principle they only serve their kin. Whereas a Hive Mind structure ensures that individuals serve the entire colony. Keep in mind that a queen will mate with several males, meaning not all worker bees are genetically identical. This implies a common focus when it comes to the genetic interests of all worker bees in the colony, according to biologist Thomas D. Seeley (9). Considering the Mimics and the Omega there is obviously very little to say about their reproductive systems. Therefore, we cannot know their social/biological structures for certain. In addition, the social structures of social species vary on its own. But the resemblance between the social structures of ants, bees and the Mimics is uncanny.[17]

The point of this comparison is to show the qualities and value of the Mimics. In the light of ecocriticism, they should be awarded their own agency and sophisticated levels of design. Seeley argues that highly social animals are vehicles of gene survival on the group level. They have evolved with ingenious mechanisms to organize their colonies. He has no doubt that future studies will reveal that social animals possess functional organisation on a

[16] The hypothetical children of (female) worker bees would only share 50% of their genes. Because they are diploid, meaning they have two sets of chromosomes, they can only ever pass on half of their genetic material. On the other hand, the chance their sisters share the same genetic material is 75%. Because the male (fathers) are haploid, since they are born from unfertilized eggs and therefore have only one set of chromosomes. Meaning, the chance sisters will share the same genetic material of their diploid queen is 25%, but this chance increases to 50% for the haploid male, bringing the total to 75% of shared genetic material. In other words, sisters always share the entire (50%) genome of the father, plus a 25% chance of genetic material from the mother. In comparison, human siblings are born from parents who are both diploid. Therefore, the chance for them to share the same genetic material can only ever be 50%. See Buskes, pp. 123-124.

[17] *Edge of Tomorrow* is not unique in its portrayal of aliens. The films; *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996), *Starship Troopers* (Paul Verhoeven, 1997) and *Ender's Game* (Gavin Hood, 2013) also depict aliens whose social structure reminds us of a Hive Mind network.

high level (264). In essence, the Omega represents a "perfectly evolved world conquering-organism", as dr. Carter points out to Cage when he shows him a hologram of the Omega. Yet in the film, destruction is humanity's only answer. Carter knows an attack from the humans is the Omega's endgame, but he fails to act on it. Here anthropocentrism fails to acknowledge the Other, unable to learn from him. The next section will investigate how humanity could gain from a different approach toward the alien Other in *Edge of Tomorrow*.

3.1.2 Inverting Edge of Tomorrow

As mentioned, the narrative structure of *Edge of Tomorrow* presents the destruction of the Omega as the only possible outcome of the film. The film is set up in a way that places Cage in a time loop which can only be broken by himself. After being killed for the first time he has to accept his fate. The only way out of the time loop is by fulfilling his destiny, killing the Omega. Instead of applauding this outcome, it could be argued this destruction is constituted by a lack. Because by killing the Omega, the humans kill with it, a 'perfectly evolved' alien Other. Here humanity's destructive capabilities and inability to look beyond themselves come to the fore. In order to rethink Cage's destructive actions, we will start by looking at Cubitt's notion of 'irreality films'.

Cubitt discerns a strand of films he calls 'irreality films', in which the presented reality itself is not real. This subgenre, consisting of films like *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010) and *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2011), is not to be confused with films like *The Matrix*, in which the protagonist is immersed in a virtual reality, or *Blade Runner*, which has the protagonist doubt his own reality (*Source Code*, 485). Cage's reality is unreal because it is not based on the ultimate opposition between life and death. The moment he dies, the day is reset and his actions of the 'previous day' have no influence whatsoever. This world, where Cage is unable to make an impact, is not based on the laws of physics. Cubitt explains that this is another trait of irreality films, because the worlds can be regarded as data constructs (*Source Code*, 485). As Cage realises every day progresses exactly the same, he gains more knowledge about his awaiting reality, allowing him to plan his moves ahead in minute detail. This structure suggests a predetermined reality.

At the same time, this reality is limited. By killing the Omega Cage is able to disrupt the time loop, thereby changing the laws that govern his world. This is where *Edge of Tomorrow* differs from other irreality films. At least, the irreality part ceases to be part of the diegesis, whereas in *Inception* and *Source Code* the nature of the protagonist's reality remains unclear. *Edge of Tomorrow* does not leave the audience with the question if Cage has

harnessed the Omega's power, or if his final awakening is in the 'real world'. Yet this aspect is not uncommon for Hollywood filmmaking. It is rather based on a more classical narrative tradition. The film explains the nature of the anomaly and provides a moral shape. It is common to see the individual as the only moral agent in Hollywood cinema. Meaning, "individual actions matter to the extent that the whole world can be rewritten on the basis of one person's acts and that this can be morally justifiable", as Cubitt points out (*Source Code*, 487). Thus, the film negates the alien species, makes sure Cage is victorious and tells the story in such a way that he is the only one capable of doing good. In George Lucas' *Star Wars*, and Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogies we see similar individuals endowed with morally sound objectives. Here, too, the fate of the universe is dependent on individuals. But the antagonists are human figures, rooted in human logic, unlike the unworldly Mimics whose rhetoric is yet to be determined by humans.

To regard the destruction of the Omega as the only possible outcome of the film we need to examine its narrative structure more closely. In his study *The Cinema Effect*, Cubitt identifies the 'neobaroque' film as a distinct strand of cinema. He argues, neobaroque cinema is no longer a time-based medium. Instead, with the advent of the steadicam, cinema has become a medium of movement. Spatialization has taken over from the temporal development of the narrative. The diegetic space is presented as sculptural, architectural, and more structural than temporal (Cubitt, *Cinema*, 224). Rather than the unfolding of the narrative over time, in *Edge of Tomorrow*, the outcome is set. In order for the film to conclude, Cage merely has to act and move on what is expected from him. In the words of Cubitt:

> Deprived of causal chains of anything more than pure luck, good or bad, the protagonists have only to understand, as the audience must, their position in the web of events to realize their goal. That goal, however, already exists as the resolution of the riddle of the world they inhabit. Personal destiny coincides with the destiny of a Hegelian world, whose task is to understand itself. (*Cinema*, 239)

Put differently, in temporal cinema the plot develops over time, whereas *Edge of Tomorrow* plays on the unfolding of necessary steps. In a way, it is not a question of *when* Cage will kill the Omega but *how* he moves to do so. Once he realizes his position in the web, the workings of the world become clear. From the moment Cage is caught in the time loop he merely has to accept his fate in order to succeed. The only way out for Cage and the audience is for him to fulfil his destiny. The same holds for Phil Connors in *Groundhog Day*. Both his and Cage's

world have no will of their own. They are based only on laws that ultimately make the protagonists understand their position within the narrative (Cubitt, *Cinema*, 239). This explains why space itself is malleable in the neobaroque film, and why the Omega's fate is sealed.

As we have seen, the Mimics represent a 'perfectly evolved' species on the one hand. While on the other hand, the film's structure revolves around the destruction of this species. In other words, one individual is destined to destroy a collectively organized biological entity. It could be argued this entails the triumph of one ideology over another. A parallel could be drawn between the mechanisms of capitalism and communism. In this analogy Cage represents the individualistic human rooted in capitalist society, whilst the Mimics represent his social counterpart.

Cage's individualism becomes apparent when we look more closely at his motives. Even though Cage has set out to save the world by trying to kill the Omega, there is a moment when it becomes clear he only wants to do so if he can save Vrataski at the same time. His motivation to save the world becomes substituted by a personal one. Eventually Cage does decide to kill the Omega despite being able to save Vrataski. But he does not really have a choice, killing the Omega is Cage's only way out. Yet the film reunites them at the end of the film anyway, allowing him to live and love again. A similar thing occurs to Dom Cobb in *Inception*, although he has a total disregard for the wishes of others, at the end of the film he is reunited with his children. For Cubitt this is a "secular expression of an ancient individualist dream, admission into heaven" (*Source Code*, 490). This individualistic dream is wrapped in a Manichean portrayal of good versus evil. But on closer inspection, we recognize it is mainly the protagonist who has gained from his actions, as he is able to live and love again.

Therefore, it could be argued that the film celebrates the individual over the collective. Not to say that collectivism and communism are good and that individualism and capitalism are bad. Nor that capitalism is based on pure self-interest. But rather that the film shows a clear attitude toward the alien Other. If the alien Other was not met with pure hostility, we can imagine the encounter could have been beneficial. It is an example of humanity's inability to accept another world into its own, unable to see that their own world is not the best of possible worlds. And unable to imagine a united society consisting of the best from both

worlds. In dialectical terms, the annihilation of the alien Other is simultaneously the best and worst thing for humanity.[18]

The film tells us a great deal about the state of the world and reflects on society on multiple levels. As the Omega represents a highly evolved entity capable of controlling time while presenting a different social reality, pointing toward humanity's realisation of its own deficiencies. Their only answer is violence. Moreover, it is a depiction of ideology in action. It is both a complete rejection of the Other while revealing the true terrors of invasion. In other words, it justifies the disregard for Others (minorities/natives) but simultaneously acknowledges the horror of imperialism and displacement. As we will see in the next section, *Arrival* offers some nuance regarding the approach of the Other. In the film a dialogue is established with the aliens and the alien rhetoric is accepted into the human world.

3.2 Introducing Arrival

Denis Villeneuve's first contact film *Arrival* revolves around the linguist dr. Louise Banks. The film opens with the birth, life and untimely death of Banks' daughter. Living a quiet life as a professor, Banks is summoned when twelve alien space-ships arrive on planet Earth. She is paired with the physicist Ian Donnelley to interpret the alien language. They work from the US military base in collaboration with scientists from all approached countries. Banks quickly figures out that visual communication can be established with the alien 'Heptapods', and after several weeks Banks is able to have a basic dialogue. During this process scenes are more frequently intercut with Banks' 'flashbacks' of her daughter. Meanwhile, society is growing impatient, leading US military soldiers to go rogue and set off a bomb in the communication chamber, thereby starting a chain reaction. The Heptapods take a seemingly defensive stance to which China wants to respond with military action. But before things escalate Banks is invited into the chamber where the Heptapods explain they will need humanity's help 3000 years from now. It becomes clear that Banks has assimilated the alien language and thereby their non-linear perception of time, simultaneously revealing the 'flashbacks' of her daughter are instead 'flash-forwards'. Banks is now able to stop the attack on the Heptapods and another flash-forward shows a conference where Banks' book on the (Heptapod's) universal language has united Earth's nations. The film ends with scenes of Banks and Donnelly being together, deciding to have a baby, while Banks knows what future awaits their child.

[18] Fredric Jameson refers to a passage of Karl Marx which asks us to regard capitalism as positively and negatively all at once. https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/jameson.htm.

Being adapted from Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life" (1998), *Arrival's* emphasis lies less on the concepts of time, free will and life as a journey, than it does on overcoming cultural differences and the unification of humanity. For instance, the film no longer places the US at the centre of the world. Where film critic Nick Statt reads that China and Russia as the aggressors in the film we must not forget that American soldiers bombed the Heptapods first (n.pag). This reading points toward a level of anti-Americanism. Elsaesser argues anti-Americanism is an instrument of Hollywood filmmaking which allows for it to maintain its global dominance, since most of the revenue comes from overseas (253). Nevertheless, as the twelve screens in the command centre show, communication has been established with countries from each continent. And the ending shows a united humanity through the alien language.

In his review for *Entertainment Weekly*, film critic Darren Franich argues, *Arrival* is a stacking of listless ideas. For him the film shifts from being about the difficulty of communication toward the acceptance of loss. These themes are embedded in a race-against-the-clock sub-plot with a *deus ex machina* solution (n.pag). Arguably, the film is about accepting the alien Other as well. In a way the Heptapods function as a kind of alien messiah. With the help of aliens, humanity is able to take a step toward global unification. Essentially, their help enables the continuation of mankind. The next section will explore the notion of the alien messiah in *Arrival*, followed by the notion that Banks not merely accepts the alien Other, but has to wholly adopt the alien rhetoric in order to understand their message.

3.2.1 Arrival and the alien messiah

In his article "The Alien Messiah in Recent Science Fiction Films", Ruppersburg explores the concept of messianic alien figures. He argues that the origin of this cultural phenomenon extends at least back to Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) (159). Released a few years after WWII, the film presents humanity with the alien representative Klaatu who comes from a distant planet collective. His message is clear, humanity should not extend their violent ways into the galaxy. Otherwise, the robotic policeman Gort, created by the other planets, will destroy Earth. Klaatu leaves Earth with the question if humanity wants to join them and live in peace, or pursue their present course and face obliteration. In this sense, the message from *Arrival* is remarkably similar. The Heptapods offer humanity a way to unite its nations and essentially, live in peace.

Matthew Etherden, writing on *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), argues this concept of salvation is a link between the film and religion (Christianity). Despite that

humanity poses as a threat to the other planets, and in *Arrival* a threat to the Heptapods, they are offered a chance to be saved (4-5). In addition, when Klaatu seeks refuge among the humans after his capture, he assumes the alias 'Mr. Carpenter', a reference to Jesus. Another similarity between Klaatu and Jesus is their death and subsequent resurrection. When Klaatu is killed Gort revives him, not knowing how long the resurrection will last. Their similarities are further reinforced by their bringing of important messages after their reappearance, and finally by Klaatu's ascension into space, which is not unlike Jesus' passing into heaven, as Etherden points out (5). At the end of *Arrival*, when the Heptapods know Banks has received their message, they depart all the same.

Before Banks is summoned to aid the US military she lives a solitary life being affected by the death of her daughter. Villeneuve highlights Banks' pain and sense of loss through quiet, blue images of her. Ruppersburg recognises this as the first of two stages regarding the appearance of alien messiahs in sf films. As he explains, the first stage "establishes the vulnerability and weakness of the human characters … the protagonists feel trapped in a meaningless, trivial existence" (160).[19] We can imagine that Banks lives a day to day life with little hope for a better future. The second stage provides an alien encounter that saves the protagonists from their unfulfilling lives. Their lives, determined by closure, are renewed with openness and given purpose once again (Ruppersburg 160). Paradoxically, in *Arrival* the alien encounter will inevitably lead to Banks' suffering again. Indicating the process of understanding the Other comes at a cost to the protagonist. Yet we can find solace in the idea that Banks still wants a baby, knowing what will happen, implying her life is all the richer for it.

Franich explains that there are aliens that represent the freaky imagination of the human mind and that there are aliens that represent an unknown force that guides us, "replacing God with aliens who might as well be God" (n.pag). In both *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Arrival* the aliens are deemed with superior technology. Gort is a member of an advanced race created by humans, and the chemical composition of the Heptapod's spaceship is unknown, it emits no waste, no gas, nor radiation. In addition, the Heptapods are bathed in light and shrouded by mist, heightening their mystical and enigmatic status. Yet there is a difference between Gort and the Heptapods. Since Gort represents a dark version of the alien messiah, it is rather an oppressor with the power to destroy Earth who we should fear (Ruppersburg 164). On the other hand, the Heptapods display no aggression toward humanity,

[19] Ruppersburg refers to *The Last Starfighter* (Nick Castle, 1984), *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977) in which each protagonist feels trapped in his own way.

they come in peace and have only good intentions. For Franich this shows, "the great unknown can become the known; that, in fact, the unknown *knows* us, and loves us. They replace the spiritual higher power with a pop-science Higher Power …" (n.pag). In this sense the alien messiah is not necessarily a religious messiah or God, but instead a more secular expression of faith in the great unknown.

In both *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Arrival* the extra-terrestrials fear humanity's destructive capabilities. Both toward their own existence as well as humanity's threat to themselves. In Wise's film Klaatu warns Earth what will happen if they extend their violence into space. He needs humanity to cooperate in order for the intergalactic community to live in peace. Similarly, the Heptapods need humanity to cooperate. If they fail to unite humanity, they face certain death. Not only because of the military threat, but because they need humanity's help 3000 years from now. In other words, both films present humanity with an alien messiah which warns them of the consequences of their violent existence. However, the Heptapods do not threaten Earth as Klaatu does, but imply humanity will not survive without their gift, being their language. In addition, the Heptapods purposely send space ships to twelve parts of the world, each containing one twelfth of the message. Therefore, the humans must work together in order to decipher the code. As such, the film proposes that humanity needs to keep an open mind toward the Other in order to survive. Museum curator Jennifer Levasseur notes that the film becomes allegorical by addressing geopolitical and cultural conflicts, and suggests empathy and listening is the way to overcome differences (n.pag). In turn, human survival is not necessarily achieved by understanding the extra-terrestrial Other, but rather each other. In essence, the alien messiah in *Arrival* unites humanity through language. But in order for the Heptapods to do so, Banks has to face her past and accept the impending loss she faces.

3.2.2 Adopting an alien rhetoric

Arrival's portrayal of humanity's engagement of the alien visitors is another remarkable feature of the film. Although the initial reception reminds us of the military operation from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, humanity's first reaction is not to shoot the aliens, but talk to them. *Arrival* revolves more about what it takes to understand the Other than about the excitement of an alien encounter as seen in *Close Encounters* (Levasseur n.pag). In Spielberg's film the encounter of the third kind at the end is the climax of the film, while the Heptapods are revealed after a few minutes. In this sense *Arrival* is about communication. The film title already states that they are here, the question of how to proceed remains. Banks

has to find an answer to this question while she slowly discovers what is at stake. The film emphasises the importance of communicating with scenes of frightened civilians. As the public is kept in the dark they respond with fear and panic (Levasseur n.pag). Moreover, the film offers an intelligent, patient approach toward the aliens with a protagonist who uses words instead of bullets.

In a way the film resembles Robert Zemeckis' *Contact* (1997), not only because they both have strong female leads. *Arrival* is also hailed by feminist critics as a welcome change of pace. Both their characters crave contact rather than reject it, as film scholar Sophie Mayer points out (38). In *Contact* Eleanor Arroway has to interpret an alien language in order to build a gyroscopic transport machine. Her motivation to crack the code and learn the secrets it holds, is unchallenged. Later, the machine transports her through several wormholes before landing on a beach of Vega. Here the alien being has taken on the form of her father and explains that she has taken the first step. But when she returns from Vega nobody believes what she has experienced, because on Earth the transport pod falls straight through the gyroscope without having gone anywhere. And while the official report states the camera only recorded static, it leaves out the fact that it recorded eighteen hours of it.

There is a parallel to be drawn between *Contact* and a Christian reading of Plato's allegory of the cave. This reading proposes that Jesus is the one who leaves the cave. Similar to Arroway in *Contact*, nobody takes him seriously when he returns. Even after he performs his miracles the people do not believe he is the bringer of salvation. In this view the people have the choice to either live life in darkness or accept enlightenment through Christ.[20] In contrast to *Contact*, *Arrival* has the protagonist reshape the world by their acceptance of her message. It suggests an openness toward the alien culture and the messenger. People have chosen enlightenment over darkness through the alien language. When Banks walks into the communication chamber for the first time she walks out of a dark tunnel and into the light, as if she leaves the darkness of the cave behind and enters a new world, where sound, colours and perspective are different from that on Earth.[21] Paradoxically, the communication chamber itself highly resembles Plato's cave. There is a tunnel leading out into the real world and the images shown on the wall remind us of shadows. Yet Banks and Donnelley are not held prisoner and they find meaning in the shadows/logograms. It could therefore be argued the

[20] See Marko Ursic and Andrew Louth for more reflections on Christianity and the allegory of the cave. Ursic, Marko, and Andrew Louth. "The Allegory of the Cave: Transcendence in Platonism and Christianity." *Hermathena*, no. 165, 1998, pp. 85–107. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23041272.

[21] Denis Villeneuve explains that the chamber was specially designed to provide a different experience of sound, colours and perspective. https://www.nytimes.com/video/movies/100000004824816/anatomy-of-a-scene-arrival.html?action=click&gtype=vhs&version=vhs-heading&module=vhs&region=title-area.

film proposes that one does not have to look beyond the cave in search for enlightenment. Instead, a closer look at the tools we have, in this case language, could offer salvation.

In order for Banks to convince the Chinese general not to attack the Heptapods she first has to learn the alien language. By learning Heptapod Banks rewires her brain and thereby adopts a different perception of time. Since the Heptapods know they will need the help of humanity in the future, they do not have a linear perception of time. This allows Banks to recall 'memories' from the future. In the climax of the film Banks recalls a conversation she has with the general eighteen months from now. He shows her his phone number which she remembers at the moment of crisis, allowing her to prevent the attack. The film refers to the 'Sapir-Whorf' hypothesis—a position of linguistic relativity—to explain that one's language can determine one's perception of reality.[22] In other words, language dissects the continuous natural world into categories of meaning. Depending on the culture or spoken language this meaning is attributed in its own way. Therefore, people end up with different constructions of meaning and ultimately a different perception of reality (Werner 77). What seems most relevant to *Arrival* is the notion that Heptapods do not write in a linear way. They do not construct sentences out of consecutive words, instead they write whole sentences in a single instant through the logogram. Considering the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, it suggests this is how they perceive time.

Linguistic relativity extends the notion that communication is needed to understand the Other with the idea that one does not simply learn a new language but wholly adopts an alien rhetoric. Learning the language means undergoing a transformation, a sacrifice of the self. This can be accepting the impending trauma of losing a child, or leaving a part of the self behind in order to progress. To a certain extent we recognise similar conditions in *Dances with Wolves*, *The Last Samurai* and *Avatar*. The protagonists in these films learn the language of the natives. Subsequently, their thinking changes which makes them reject their own society. Finally, they become members of the native community and defend it with their lives. But *Arrival* is different because the film centres communication above political and cultural conflict. Banks does not reject her own society, instead she uses her new found knowledge to enlighten all. So unlike a critical reflection on primarily Western society, the film expresses hope in humanity and human potential. *Arrival* asks its viewers to rethink their own perception of difference (Levasseur n.pag). The film proposes that one can reshape his perception of the world when one is open toward the transformation that the Other offers.

[22] The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is still widely debated and knows 'softer' versions as well as more deterministic ones.

Film critic Tim Kroenert states, the fact that Banks starts to think in the alien language lies central to the film (n.pag). Here we must note that it is not the other way around. You may wonder why such an advanced race could not find an easier way to communicate their message. But *Arrival* is not about how well the Heptapods can communicate in a human language. It is about how well humans can learn to communicate in the language of the aliens and to what extent one is willing to go in order to do so. The message itself is not important, but the language, the ability to access time, the rewiring of the brain, is the real gift. And this could not have been received any other way. "This requires a superhuman level of empathy, as well as the emotional strength to see the future, with all its joys and tragedies, and do what is necessary to bring it about", as Anna North writes in her article for *The New York Times* (n.pag). It is this kind of empathy *Arrival* speaks to, asking us not to just learn a foreign language, but to try and understand the alien rhetoric.

It could be argued that *Arrival* bears resemblance to *Edge of Tomorrow* as a neobaroque film. As soon as Banks realises her position in the always-already Einsteinian space-time, she merely has to accept her fate and fulfil her destiny (Collins 56). In addition, both protagonists gain a different perception of time with the arrival of the aliens. Yet they deal with the alien visitors in a completely different way. On the one hand, we have *Edge of Tomorrow*, a film which revolves around the elimination of the aliens from beginning to end. On the other hand, we have *Arrival*, a film which revolves around establishing a dialogue with the Other from beginning to end. Mayer argues that Banks 'betrays' the humans in order to save the Heptapods by using their language, simultaneously decentralising human rhetoric by opting for another. She also points out that Banks specifically betrays militant masculinity (40). In other words, *Arrival* does not share the strongly embedded militant characteristic seen in *Edge of Tomorrow* which only seeks destruction. Thereby, *Arrival* complements *Edge of Tomorrow* by centring around communication. It portrays an empathetic approach toward the alien encounter and shows how personal sacrifice may lead to a productive dialogue with the Other.

4. Conclusion

Looking back at the development of sf around the 1980s the three case studies in this thesis show a noteworthy development of their own. In the light of Sobchack's 'conservative sf', *Avatar* portrays an alien race which is 'better' than humanity, just like its predecessors; E.T. and Yoda. But the Na'vi also seem to surpass them as they represent a Hive Mind oriented race with a utopian way of life. They are 'more human than human' to the extent that Sully rejects his own society and opts for life as the alien Other. And while 'conservative sf' subordinates the non-human, the Na'vi are 'actants' who are considered in their own right. Following this line of thought, *Edge of Tomorrow* could be regarded as a contemporary version of *Alien* or one of its ironic alien invasion predecessors. But besides playing on the gloopy insect like otherness, the film reflects on the pointlessness of war. Its display of humanity's capability of violence simultaneously confronts the viewer with characteristics he should refrain from. In *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, Newton's perception of space and time links him to his family on Anthea. But his perspective is inimitable for the viewer and holds no place on Earth. Unlike the Heptapods, Newton is not humanity's messianic saviour. In *Arrival* the aliens come to Earth in order to share their non-linear perception of time in order to save mankind. It is a gift which can be attained through self-sacrifice. Comparing the three contemporary case studies to earlier sf we see that a more eco-centric perspective is shaping sf cinema. They explore the new age we live in by challenging our concepts of communication, time, humanism and the Other.

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