When Literature Turns into History: *Heart of Darkness* (1902) by Joseph Conrad and *Avatar* (2009) by James Cameron

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More than one century after the publication of *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad's conceptualization of the world and representation of both the Whiteman and the African black characters still have an impact on the representation of the Other whether African or non-African. This article examines the legacy of Conrad's novel through James Cameron's *Avatar* produced by 20th Century Fox and released in 2009. It mainly refers to Roland Barthes's view of connotation and denotation and art, in this case image and cinema, as a means to transit meaning. His framework is developed in *Mythologies* (1972), *Image-Music-Text* (1977) and *Elements of Semiology* (1986). The analysis relies on specific selected citations from Conrad's novel and their equivalent visual quotations from Cameron's media text focusing on four signs. I study *Avatar* as a text that reproduces Conrad's novel, which certifies the internal and external impact of expressions such as "the interminable waterway" and "the European genius" on twenty-first century cinema. Conrad's masterpiece still draws the faces of the non-Western that Hollywood unconsciously reproduces.

There is never *art* but always meaning.
(Roland Barthes)

During the early years of film production that coincide with the early twentieth century, Virginia Woolf describes film as a "parasite" to literary texts, which are nothing more than the poor target or the "prey" and the "victim" of this medium. She considers that film is rescued by literature but "this alliance is unnatural"[1] as the image is nothing more than a shortcut deforming great works of literature. By the twenty-first, transforming a literary work to a film or a media text is referred to as adaptation then an appropriation, a violation, a deformation in some other cases a revival. The reproduction the timeless William Shakespeare's plays, the adaptation of Jane Austen's classic *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and the vampire narratives by Stephanie Meyer amplified the success of these literary works. These adaptations are interpretations and in some ways an appropriation of the text. *Heart of Darkness* is one of the most famous English novels that inaugurated the modern and postmodern arts. The popularity of the novel doubled as many

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[1]See The Essays of Virginia Woolf (1925-1928) edited by Andrew McNeillie.

filmmakers in the image of Francis Ford Coppola[2] and James Gray[3], directly or indirectly, give life to this masterpiece.

Heart of Darkness (1902) is one of the earliest English modern literary works written by the Polish- English author Joseph Conrad (1857-1924). The story is mainly told by Charles Marlow who undergoes a journey from Europe to the Congo River in the African continent, which was a Belgian colony. Marlow's narrative centres mainly on finding Kurtz and bringing him back home. *Avatar* (2009), on the other side, is an American science fiction film written and directed by the Canadian-American director and producer James Cameron (1954), distributed by 20th Century Fox. It was released on December 18th, 2009. The movie's title refers to the controlled blue humanlike bodies in the purpose of interacting with the Na'vi, the Pandora's indigenous population. Jake Sully a paraplegic marine unable to walk replaces his twin brother Tom who works in the RDA Corporation that engages in mining a precious mineral known as Unobtanium. It essentially portrays the experience of the protagonist Sully, performed by Sam Worthington, in his journey from earth to Pandora to spy and collect information about the indigenous population. He is given a Na'vi body which allows him to move and breath.

Heart of Darkness and *Avatar* are produced a century apart by two of the most creative minds of the twentieth and twenty-first century literature and cinema. They both received much attention from scholars and critics. *Heart of Darkness* is often considered for its imperialist and orientalist stance (Roberts; Parras; Siber), its "racist" portrayal of the African characters and land (Achebe; Hansson; Hawkins), its psychological dimension through the journey (Assad Nassab) as well as its colonial and postcolonial rewritings (Farn). Like *Avatar* which is often looked at as an ecological call for awareness (Ordona, 2009), Conrad's novel is also offered an ecocritical reading. Mouhoubi attempts a study of both the literary work and the film, in his Magister dissertation. The author considers the shift or "the transmutations and transformations" of the imperial discourse since William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) to *Avatar* looking at the Power/Knowledge relations[4]. Boumaza and Boucena approaches, in their Master dissertation, both primary sources from a linguistic perspective, arguing that Cameron "Plagiarised" Conrad[5].

On the whole and to my own knowledge no researcher dived into both works considering *Avatar* as an adaptation or even an appropriation of Conrad's novel using a Barthesian perspective. Cameron acknowledges through different interviews that the movie shares themes and issues with many other films and novels[6]. In 2009, Cameron read to the United States District Court a sworn declaration where he explains the resources behind *Avatar* mentioning *Chrysalis*, *Xenogenesis*, *Mother* and *Wind Warrior* (Cameron); but not *Heart of Darkness*.

Therefore, my article attempts a Barthesian reading of *Avatar*, looking at the film as an "adaptation" reworking Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The theoretical lenses are mainly brought from Barthes's *Rhetoric of the Image* and *Mythologies*. I shall argue that a media text combined with a literary text produce meaning outside the historical context of its content, but in relation to present-day issues. Scholars who are trapped in assessing the accuracy and the faithfulness of

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[2] *Apocalypse Now* (1979) with Martin Sheen and Marlon Brando.

[3] *Ad Astra* (2019) with Brad Pitt and Tommy Lee Jones.

[4] See *From Pax Britannica to Pax Americana, Dialectic of Power/Knowledge in* Avatar *(2009),* Heart of Darkness *(1902) and* The Tempest *(1611)*, A Magister Dissertation by Mohamed Mouhoubi.

[5] See *A Stylistic Comparative Study of the Movie* Avatar *(2009) and Joseph Conrad's (1988) Short Story* Heart of Darkness, Master Dissertation by Boumza Walid and Boucena Fatima.

[6] See James Cameron interview with James Jeff (2007) and the 2009 interview at the Los Angeles Times where he mentions Conrad and Rudyard Kipling.

the texts overlook the benefit of creativity in restoring literary works. Linda Hutcheon explains that the issue of faithfulness and authenticity are contradictory elements that cannot be escaped while adapting literary works to the visual. Alterations are effectively an important means to refresh the literary work and treat modern-day relevant issues. The productions include "equivalences" that are intentionally used (10). *Avatar* is not a carbon copy of *Heart of Darkness* and I am not, in any way, trying to make it so; however and because a text is "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture", the film reproduces the single story of the Imperialist tradition where it is the Whiteman's Burden to save the indigenous. Using four specific signs and clearly selected quotations from Conrad and snapshots from the film, I shall clarify the way Cameron reproduces the same words through images, either consciously or unconsciously to build similar conceptions of the Other.

Roland Barthes: Image and the Death of the Author

According to Barthes, cultural elements that have a clear influence on everyday life are reproduced, adapted to the needs of the time to convert their particular "historical class-culture into a universal nature". He, through different publications, argues "culture is 'a language'" investigating and cultivating signs. His critical look at wrestling, soap powders and detergents, the drinking of wine, toys, and his analysis of the young black man in French military uniform, appearing on the cover of the "Paris Match" magazine, are all used to elucidate that it does not matter how simple and innocent the image is, there is always a second level of meaning. In other words, Barthes establishes a theory that can be used to study the language of culture. Hence, his framework, as he confirms, is "an ideological critique" of the language of mass-culture (1972: 08).

The starting point of Barthes's theoretical framework is Saussure's notion of the sign. As far as media texts are concerned, signs can be a sound, an image on screen, a musical tone, a gesture, or an object that stand for something outside the frame. In *Rhetoric of the Image* (1964), Barthes explains that the "analogical representation" produces meaning at two levels: a non-coded iconic message which is the literal denoted one and a symbolic connoted message. The denoted message corresponds to the first degree of understanding, the literal image or the dictionary meaning. It is a clear, innocent and objective description of the content of the image. Though superficial, it offers the details from which the symbolic message can be extracted. He asserts that the sign is "drawn from a cultural code" which gives it a connotative meaning and a cultural dimension. The study of signs varies depending on how they are perceived and interpreted. It is the result of a motivated combination. These signs, as he goes on, are assembled in semiological systems that are snapshots. The result of this combination is signification (37-44).

The power of the discourse of media lies in its multimodality that can announce "the death of the author". However, the new produced images are so rooted in the old. Thus, they are reproductions, interpretations and "appropriations". Noel Carroll, in his essay "The Power of Movies" (1996), explains that films are authoritative because they speak for everyone (78-79). The image, variable framing i.e., camera movement and narrative contribute in the making of the final story. The positioning of the camera helps the audience and guides its gaze. He writes: "Through cutting and camera movement, the film maker can rest assured that the spectator is perceiving exactly what she should be perceiving at the precise moment she should be perceiving it" (84). According to Carl Casinghino, the high and the low camera angles are particularly attention grabbing in the way they highlight different meanings or aims:

The Angle	Camera Positioning	Aims
High Angle Shot	Camera above the subject with lens facing down	This camera position makes character seems weak and allows the audience have control over him or her
Low Angle Shot	Camera lower than the subject	It highlights the stand of characters and objects by giving them magnitude and power.

Table 01: Camera Angles and their Meaning According to Carl Casinghino (2011: 23)

First Sign: The Forest

In one of the most famous passages from *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad writes:

> Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish. There was no joy in the brilliance of sunshine. The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances. On silvery sand-banks hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. (54)

The first sign that I am considering is "the tree" and "the forest". In Conrad's perception, the Congo is the Jungle, and in the jungle trees are the dominant agent on the land. Trees are also vegetation that stands for the absence of civilization, as there are not clearly defined roads among the trees. The times when vegetation ruled the earth were ancient times of the primitive tribe. Graeme Harper and Jonathan Rayner argue that natural landscape and cultural forms have a very complex relationship (2010). From a nineteenth century perspective and both during the age of industrialization and technology, a gloomy thick forest is, in essence, a synonym to primitive stages of development. In the above passage important terms like the river, trees, forest, waterway, hippos and alligators shape not just the content of the novel, but also the stories that are produced about people who are different from the west. The conceptualization of the Other, the African is Conrad's case is linked to these terms that take a cultural significance. This is reason why I look at them as signs with a denotative and a connotative dimension.

In *Avatar*, Sully arrives to this dense forest in another planet ruled by the trees and terrifying sounds of unknown animals to penetrate its silence and emptiness. Figure 01 is among the first images we have about the Pandora. Despite the fact that the film is set in the year 2154, the distant planet is ruled, like the Congo, by trees. The snapshot that I selected is a long shot taken from a high angle Camera. It demonstrates the giant trees with the foggy grey and humid atmosphere. It seems to live in the dawn of history. Because of the thickness of the trees, sun rarely penetrates the land which creates a gloomy atmosphere. Stronger and fiercer animals replace the hippos and alligators on the riverbanks. It seems that Pandora is "new heart of darkness". It is thus assumed that when compared to the west and planet Earth, the Congo and Pandora are stations of savagery and primitiveness. Barthes maintains that the huge power of film lies in its ability "to naturalise" the constructed meaning. In other words, what is more

"normal" and "natural" than an unknown planet with a gloomy foggy forest and a ferocious wildlife!

Figure 01: "Trees are kings" (00:00:33)[7]

The inhabitants of Pandora worship the "Sacred Tree of souls" or "Goddess Eywa". Their "Hometree" listens and cures them. The image of the giant tree is transformed to a cultural mythic aspect that is destroyed by the new arrivals. This mythic representation recalls the power and the symbolic significance of the tree throughout world mythologies.[8] Barthes's definition of myth is complex as he sometimes uses it to refer to connotation sometimes to ideology. In other instances, it is discourse (Gwenllian Jones, 2001: 419). Thus, anything can be transformed to a mythic element. Barthes explains that cultural myths are used as instruments to transform "history into nature" (1972: 129). Thanks to myth, he adds, everything is "immediately frozen into something natural". To clarify this point, Daniel Chandler says that "Barthes did not see the myths of contemporary culture as simply a patterned agglomeration of connotations but as ideological narratives" (2007: 144). Working on this argument, I can say that the tree and the forest as dealt with in *Avatar* are copies based on a material that has been worked on several times. Likewise, "mythical speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication" (Barthes, 1972: 129). This "brute" image that seems "frontal and clear" is transformed to cultural code or a mythic discourse that contributes to making of the eternal image of the tree and the forest as a synonym to fear and primitiveness. This connotation or "mythic discourse" is very common is both western literature and Hollywood[9].

Second Sign: The waterway

The second sign that I think is "mythical" is the waterway. Conrad writes:

> The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished spirits (02).

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[7] All snapshots used here are taken by myself with the VLC media player from the DVD version of *Avatar* (2009).

[8] See Charles M. Skinner, *Myths and Legends of Flowers, Trees, Fruits, and Plants in all Ages and in All Climes* (1911)

[9] Kipling's *Jungle Book* (1894) and Antoine Fuqua's *Tears of the Sun* (2003) are good examples.

The passage is loaded with signs that make a clear reference to the Thames as a source of civilization, the ships that take civilization and bring goods. It is also a strong reference the image of the British Empire that controls the sea and the waters. "The sea", "the Thames", "an interminable waterway", "the offing the sea and the sky welded together", "the luminous space", "sails", "the tide" and the "varnished spirits" stand for the greatness of this English culture. Conrad makes use of the British imperial discourse about the open horizons and the Empire. I shall argue that in the same way Barthes claims the "Italianicity" of the sign of Panzani advertisement (1977: 34-35), I can argue the "Britishinicity" of this view. Like "Italianicity", "Britishinicity" "is the condensed essence of everything that could be" British. It takes us to the glorious days of "La Mission Civilisatrice" and "The White Man's Burden". Mouhoubi uses the snapshot of the spaceship that replaces the Nellie as a connotation of knowledge and thus of power (29-30; 51).

Reading and interpreting the waterway as a sign is associated with a wider social and historical context since it amplifies and extends the literal meaning. To decipher connotations, we need to convert it to a simple clear *communiqué* using extra elements as well as taking into consideration Photogenia, Trick Effects, Pose, Objects, Aestheticism, and Syntax (Barthes, 1977: 21-22-23-24) to exploit its "polysemic values". Overall, the denotation of the sign is nothing more than the description of its content. Connotation, on the other hand, indicates a cultural sophisticated meaning. The combination of denotation and connotation offers the sign an ideological meaning that transforms it to a myth. Again, here an extreme long shot is used with a high angle camera that puts two planets (objects) in the front, Earth and Pandora. The space is luminous with different shades of blue lighting a much darker or unknown space. The immense waterway, the offing view of the sea and the sky joined, the luminous space, all these phrases fit perfectly figure 02. The times when Britain ruled the waves. Now, through *Avatar*, the Americans rule the space. The Nellie moves from the tiny British Islands with its Thames River to a larger Empire. In *Avatar*, the camera and the protagonist move from the tiny Earth to the richer and spacious Pandora, and the interminable space.

Figure 02: "The interminable" Space (00:02:30)

The Third Sign: The Decaying Machinery

Barthes, in his discussion of "cultural mythologies", asserts that they are used as natural substances to serve an external ideological motivation; it "is always a language-robbery". He later clarifies that "the negro saluting the French flag" or "the seasonal fall in fruits prices" are not symbols of nationalism, but signifiers used to connote the French imperialism. This demonstrates the reason behind Barthes's consideration of myth as "a stolen language" where cultural aspects are used "to naturalize through them" certain ideologies. He adds: "nothing can be safe from myth" (131). In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad writes: "I came upon more pieces of decaying machinery, a stack of rusty rails" (22). The expression of "the decaying machinery"

is a reference to an old abandoned rail-way that stands also for the failed past mission. Cameron uses machinery in *Avatar*; a machinery that is more sophisticated and not easily rusted. The director uses high camera angles and long and extreme long shots to demonstrate the strength and the magnitude of the machinery in comparison to the human size.

Figure 03: "The decaying Machinery" (00:04:00-00:04:10)

In 1975, *Cahiers du Cinema* interviewed the historian and filmmaker Marco Ferro. He explains that "images start being considered as 'documents', as 'historical proofs', even as 'weapons?'[10] I would argue that by the Twenty-first century, images of developed machinery are weapons of domination and pride. The decaying machinery of *Heart of Darkness* becomes a historical proof of failure of "la mission civilisatrice"; but a sign of development; sophistication and strength in *Avatar*; informally said "the bigger, the better". Cameron attempts "to undo" and then "redo", or "decode" and then "recode", to reverse Hall's consideration of media texts. He uses the same signs and then reproduces a different image. Barthes argues that a text is "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" (Barthes quoted in Allen: 13). The figure above is a visual quotation from Conrad's work, which is, without a doubt, a cultural ingredient in the American demonstration of power and technological advancement.

The Fourth Sign: The Agents of Civilization
The last sign I am considering in this article is the agent of civilization, the white men in Conrad's and the earth people in Cameron's. Kurtz is the "legendary" "first-class agent", "the painter" and the "universal genius" who represents the "Us". He is "an idol" and Europe's "remarkable man". As an agent of civilization, "all Europe contributed to the making" of this "the gifted Kurtz". He is intrusted by the international Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs to make a report on the indigenous people. This agent of civilization ends up "ill" and in the shape of a "shade" presiding primitive rituals (82). He is white but the connotation is that white is civilization. In his report, Kurtz writes that the white "in the nature of supernatural beings" who must approach the natives "with the might of a deity". Kurtz is transformed to a leader by these "savages". Marlow recalls the moment when "Mr Kurtz had come down the river, bringing along with him all the fighting men of the lake tribe" (95). "It was Kurtz who had ordered the attack on the steamer" (105). In *Avatar*, the agents of civilization are the "sky people". They are also white people who come from a far way "civilized" places.

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[10] See the collection in Daney & Ramonet, 2000.

Barthes says that "there is no fixity in mythical concepts" (1972: 120). Thus, I shall argue that in the same way films are used to reinforce and promote national identity; they are also used to challenge it. Jim Leach asserts that through films, "myths of the national character are represented, examined, reinforced, and/or contested" (2004: 06). In other words, instead of killing the protagonist Sully like Kurtz is killed in *Heart of Darkness*, Cameron depicts Sully as a "White Messiah" (Brooks, 2010) who saves the indigenous people by becoming one of them. It is the eternal idea of the white man's burden or the American burden. Barthes argues the "end of the past" and the emergence of "presentness" that films evoke in us (1977: 44). In other words, films do not report the past, but the whole *mise en scene* makes us feel that it deals with the present more it reproduces the past. Fredrick Jameson names this fact "the eternal present" (Hughes-Warrington, 2007: 59). This brings into perspective, Chimamanda Adichie's vision sameness and *The Danger of a Single Story* which spotlights on the traumatic effect and the power of literature in creating and diffusing the same stereotypes and images about people and culture in the world which creates the impossibility if viewing the Other or the self away from the received representation.

Figure 04: "The Agent of Civilization" (00:07:29) (01:18:00)

The above snapshots refer to the world or the realm of Jake; his new world the one of Pandora. The first one represents Jake's familiar world and his usual life Earth as a place of safety and security. He is introduced as Jake the wheelchair with a white skin. Whereas, the second snapshot represents the new and unknown world of Pandora in which Sully is swallowed in, he is the blue Avatar who walks on his feet. Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* describes the unfamiliar world where Jack is thrown into as "a dream landscape of curiously fluid, fabulous, ambiguous forms" (89). Yet, Pandora is also a dark forest, mysterious and occupied by dangerous creatures and predators. Sully undergoes a metamorphosis turning him to a native but noble savage. He is "swallowed into the unknown and would appear to have died" (83). Jack is the agent of civilization that turns to be a leader of the native. He penetrates Pandora and becomes one of the Na'vi. He is a single connotator of a larger discourse (1986: 91). Sully learns how to be native; He demonstrates a mastery of both the human and the Na'vi worlds. He is one of the Omatikaya and thus a Master in two worlds; the known and the unknown.

Conclusion

Words like agents of civilization, waterways, are very significant and "filled with very rich history". In this case, the view of the ocean that is also a water way, the low camera angle that

shows the greatness of the leader are all "naturalized" "discontinuous scattered signs" of the imperial ideology. These signs appear in different ways and "this repetition [...] allows the mythologist to decipher the myth" (1977: 119) i.e., it is thanks to the reappearance of such signs that we recognize the connoted ideological meaning lying behind, in this case, British imperialism.

Adaptation is not a matter of authenticity and faithfulness but of an issue of creativity and visionary perspectives that set the floor for new ways to link cultural products as ancient as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and as symbolic as the ceremonies of coronation. *Heart of Darkness* and *Avatar* definitely share the "Imperial Gaze" of the white men established by Conrad through the novel. The forest, the tree, the waterway, the white agents, the decaying machinery are the four signs that I selected to consider the way Cameron's *Avatar* appropriates the journey to craft an Americanised British classic. Both texts are trapped in the reproduction of the single story that generates fixed identities. "Conrad's Darkness" is replaced by "Cameron's Blue Light". However, the "Them vs. Us" dichotomy controlled and still controls much of the western discourse, whether it is in literature or in popular arts, which explains the way directors, make and will make of this literary work a fresh material for the silver screen. It seems to me that picture-makers are the unconscious victims of the literary texts.

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