ON AVATAR’S (2009) SEMIOTECHNOLOGIES:
FROM CINEMATIC UTOPIAS TO CHINESE HERITAGE TOURISM

RODANTHI TZANELLI

School of Sociology & Social Policy, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

The article explores the conditions that fostered an unlikely convergence between James Cameron’s Avatar (2009) media industry, his and his colleagues’ travel and activist pursuits in Brazil, and Chinese tourist planning. Focusing on one of the film’s simulated landscape markers, Cameron’s collaborative composition of an audiovisual “Pandorapedia” and his documentary on his Amazonian travels, it debates how cinematic tourism assists in reconfigurations of utopian visions as tourist markers. The particular utopian icon that connected such disparate projects as those of movie making and its digital popular extensions to the generation of tourism in Chinese world heritage sites was that of the fictional “Hallelujah” or “Floating” Pandora Mountains. Highlighting meeting points between semiotechnological assemblages (world “languages,” music, and visual technologies) and human artwork (acting, audiovisual creativity, and activism) it outlines how (a) postmodernist combinations of art travel and tourist commodification relocate into postnational environments but (b) do not lose their regional relevance and applicability.

Key words: Cinema; Heritage tourism; Social movements; Synesthetic performativity; Utopia (digital)

From Semiotechnologies to Human Hermeneutics: Avatar’s Case

Tourism is still studied as movement “‘away from [a person’s] usual habitat, of the industry which responds to his [sic.] needs [while considering] the impacts that both he [sic.] and the industry have on the host socio-cultural, economic, and physical environments’ (Jafari, 1987; Theobald, 1998, p. 8)” (Tzanelli, 2013a, p. 18). Yet today semiotechnology’s role in tourism seems to define such forms of mobility. Prioritizing the “environmental logic” (Ingold, 2000) of participatory media (including new digitized cinema and relevant products such as video games and social media such as YouTube), semiotechnological studies would focus less on human signification and more on the techno-cultural dimension of meaning as constituted by “a range of heterogeneous representational
and informational technologies, cultural practices, and linguistic values” (Langlois, 2011, p. 1). From a tourist theory perspective, the content of what users and the makers of such technologies produce should not merely substitute the conditions or regimes of meaning making and circulation. Tourism theory’s focus on the power human beings possess to create space and culture via experiential interpretations of mobility should still be viewed as the basis of semiototechnology. This is the technology (or lògos of téchne = meaning of making) of semeion (sign)—or the arrangement of words, images, and sounds into coherent value universes.

This article’s theoretical focus is on interpretations of technology in human travel and tourism, where regular routines are suspended and we enter unfamiliar physical and imaginative domains. But human interpretation also extends so as to include potential host communities and their uses of such technologies. “Physical” refers to natural territories humans visit as part of independent exploratory journeys or as part of organized tourist systems. “Imaginative” refers to the travels we undertake in our mind, which in this study are linked to simulated environments (Ingold, 2010). The empirical focus commences with investigations into James Cameron’s Avatar (2009) industry, which today comprises the movie, the soundtrack CD, the movie’s official website, and its audiovisual extensions to a social movement network that connects at least American (California-based Amazon Watch) and Brazilian activist groups via other independent websites such as Flickr. It is impossible to study in detail Avatar’s loose connections of individual cultural industries including music, film, and tourism bound by the same cluster of signs with strategically fixed meaning and market alliances (Ateljevic, 2000; Cynthia & Beeton, 2009; Lash & Urry, 1994; Tzanelli, 2010). More modestly, the article focuses on (mainly) iconic associations produced in this industry around one of the film’s simulated landscape markers: the so-called Pandora “Floating” or “Hallelujah” Mountains. This cinematic marker, which is reinstated in Cameron’s collaborative composition of “Pandorapedia” and his documentary on his Amazon travels, allows us to discuss the role of “cinematic tourism” in reconfigurations of utopian images and sounds as tourist markers before exploring its uses by local interest groups.

“Cinematic tourism” and the “cinematic tourist” are not identical to “film-induced tourism,” which emphasizes the importance of film in location marketing and tourism development (Beeton, 2005; Croy, 2010). As theoretical models, both concepts are internally differentiated by the moves and motions of travel through and after film, as well as the cinematic production of travel and tourism.

Four types of “cinematic tourist” and respective “cinematic tourisms” (Tzanelli, 2013b) (including the film-induced tourism) are considered:

1. Representations and simulations of tourist mobil- ities within cinematic texts.
2. The act and performance of film viewing and interpretation.
3. Virtual travels (web surfing) and constructions of “tourist” online.
4. Film viewing that transforms into embodied vis- its of the cinematic stage.

Links were generated between all four types through agential decisions of Avatar’s artistic leaders (director Cameron, producer Jon Landau, and actress Sigourney Weaver) with real consequences for tourist destinations loosely connected to the film. This investigative component (point 4 above), connects “cinematic tourism” to real representations of cultures and humans (Croy & Heitmann, 2011, p. 190)—what can inform a point “5” in the schema.

An exclusive focus on the iconic potential of cinematic tourism misses the role of other technologies in the industrial production of ideal types of tourist. Here we shift focus from artistic agency to global structures, as manufactured forms of tourist agency unite through enactments of tourist-like pilgrimages that either refer to the audiovisual matrix of filmmaking and other digital media or other embodied art such as acting, dancing, and singing (point 1). I discuss “performative synesthetics” to explore this mind–body complex of performativity: deriving from a real disorder (synesthesia as replacement of one sense with another), it points to a productive reordering of narrative pathways through combinations of image, movement, touch, smell, and sound (on performativity see Butler, 1993; on synesthesia see Tzanelli, 2011). These synesthetic organizations induce pilgrimages that combine the monetary capital of arts (e.g., the generation of tourism or other consumption styles) with the emotional and spiritual investment of artists and audiences in values that exceed this capital.
(Thrift, 2006). By simulating interplanetary conflict, *Avatar*’s audiovisual narrative promotes a form of cinematic tourism embedded in the Western heritage of war and black slavery known as “thanatourism,” a form of pilgrimage manifested across the world in real tourist destinations.

Just as terrestrial thanatourisms, “thanatourism” or “dark tourism” in and through film organizes imaginary, virtual, and terrestrial visits to locations “wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death” (Seaton, 1996, p. 240; see also Halgreen, 2004; Lennon & Foley, 2000). Dann and Seaton (2001) note that slavery, but also industrial working-classness as “dissonant heritage,” has left their mark on tourism across the world. And if slavery connects to perversions of human nature (racism), working-classness promoted perversions of technological industriousness (glamorized conceptions of the *Homo Faber* or Working Human). Productions of elective humanity are sites the arts audiovisualized and disseminated across the world through their makers’ journeys. In such death sites—virtual or actual, digitized or painted—old cultural meanings might also die in favor of new ones. New and old arts contribute to the production of thanatourists journeys: the symbolic and material focus on death, blackness (or “yellowness”), and darkness is pivotal in some literary, pictorial, and cinematic genres. As a form of cinematic tourism, thanatourism may also be a simulated practice within the film: the passage from the death of colonial heritage to the “death of the real” (digital simulations) (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 53) sees the rise of a society that lives through simulations. Scholars that view the trauma of death from genocide as a byproduct of modernity (Bauman, 1991) and national identity (Edmunds & Turner, 2002) mostly focus on European and Western traditions. *Avatar*’s case suggests that we step outside this domain to examine how artistic representation and simulation can become enmeshed into non-European cultures as a sort of host performance without covert influence from European pasts.

*Avatar*’s interplanetary conflict and crypto-racist military characters allegorize actual thanatourist journeys in the enslavement of humanoids and the exploitation of their natural resources by human invaders/travelers. But if, as Seaton (1999) notes, thanatourism dates back to Grand Tourist motivations and the European colonization of the world, then we might also need to examine the journeys of the *Avatar* artistic crews in search of film locations and their filmmaking practices under the same logic. Cosgrove and Jackson (1987), who debate the power of European ways of seeing in the production of cultural geographies, allow us to scrutinize *Avatar*’s landscapes and interconnected websites as audiovisual machines of meaning making (Beeton, 2005; Edensor, 2005; Ren, 2011). Semiotechnologies partake in the articulation of tourist topographies both in national spheres and in global consumption milieus, where we move from individual tourist experience to the real(ist) conditions that actualize cosmopolitan travel (via global automobility networks and tourist transport systems).

From *Avatar*’s potential tourist destinations the article singles out the case of Zhangjiajie, in China’s Hunan province, which partially inspired the film’s Computer Generated Imaging (CGI) design of the Pandora landscape. Only thereafter, resorting to established “film-induced tourism” analysis (or additional “point 5”), it shifts consideration to the ways the film’s digital mountainous icon was co-opted in remarketing Chinese heritage landscape to potential global and domestic visitors. Of primary importance are Chinese enactments of an *Avatar*-like “tourist gaze,” body, and “ear” (Urry, 2002; Urry & Larsen, 2011; for critiques see Veijola & Jokinen, 1994; Veijola & Valtonen, 2007). The likeness of these performances suggests analogy rather than pure emulation: what was performed was not the film but Chinese traditions of contextual resonance. Here, one notes a shift from the decisions of *Avatar*’s artists to those of localities that are nevertheless restricted by the structural necessities of their heritage when it comes to tourism, and need to align strategically with representations more amenable to statist agendas or other global demands (Spivak, 1988, 1999). Zhangjiajie’s tourism advertising was overdetermined by its international earmarking as a world heritage spot so much that when localities became implicated in *Avatar*-inspired marketing, they reproduced their culture’s fictional essence.

Methodology and Epistemology

The article’s methodological statement derives from its epistemological suggestion that any dominant tourist gaze and ear can be strategically...
The ethnocultural domains that inspired this media industry’s artists during Avatar’s production, advertising, and (post)distribution phase were China (for the design of Hallelujah) and Brazil (for the design of virtual rainforests and the artists’ involvement in environmental movements in the Amazon). Both countries provided Avatar’s industry with iconic references from a repository of natural resources, which is geographically located in the national periphery: the Southern Sky Mountains in Zhangjiajie and the Amazon Rainforests in Northwestern Brazil, respectively. Incidentally, both areas are characterized by an ecosystemic exoticism that secured them a place in the chronicles of world (natural) heritage. These areas were not the sole inspiration for Avatar’s artwork but became audiovisually inserted into its hybrid natural and semitechnological complex.

As regions the Xingu River (eastern Amazon basin) and Zhangjiajie present different developmental needs that determine their alignment or rejection of tourist agendas. In what follows the article provides a scholarly understanding of the semitechnological connections provided via Cameron’s Avatar, its official website, and its documentary narratives. Thereafter I proceed to explain the process via which (a) actual landscape markers partook in the (re)production of global tourist imaginaries from the part of the potential tourist host community, and (b) the importance of situated human interpretations of audiovisual referents (Southern Sky Column as Hallelujah Mountains and vice versa) originally earmarked as separate cultural industrial creations. There is a separate debate on brands in film-induced tourism I forgo as the article’s concern is with the process of place (re)productions. Thus, I examine the Hallelujah interpretative potential as a phenomenon conducive to the ways the local becomes inserted into the global to produce an often challenging—if at times conflicting—symbiosis (Robertson, 1992). Instead of considering this “glocalization” as a phenomenon in which one particular locality interacts with globality in one particular interpretative contingent (here the “Hallelujah” simulated narrative), I suggest that many localities can partake in the same interpretative instance (Nederveen Pieterse, 2009; Therborn, 1995). The different responses the Hallelujah iconography induced in Brazil and in China can only be examined in relation to the economic,
political, and cultural horizons and possibilities of their respective regions. But as the specific focus is the region that actually produced tourist mobilities out of Avatar’s (audiovisual) “Hallelujah” narratives, the third section’s analysis is limited to Zhangjiajie in China.

Audiovisual Thanatourisms: Floating Nature and Human Culture

This section provides an overview of some key digital and aural performances in the Avatar industry that promoted “dark cinematic tourism” and the ways these brought into being a simulated landscape marker in Pandora’s fictional environment (“Hallelujah” Mountains), the design of which was allegedly based on actual landscapes on earth. The environmental(ist) subtext of this design cannot be ignored, given the central scenario of the movie: the destruction of alien ecosystems by militarized humans—a neocolonial allegory of thanatourism or dark tourism. First, the section examines the film’s plot and its thanatourist imagery, focusing mainly on the allegorical significance of the “Floating/ Hallelujah” Mountains as a form of diachronic travel that connects both to new ecotourisms and historic dark tourism. Thereafter, it debates the significance of this simulated landscape in the movie’s website and “Pandorapedia,” and through Cameron’s involvement in Brazilian environmental movements. Both aspects inform the production of reflexive “cinematic tourism” on the screen and through music and sound, enabling consumption of the movie’s sights and audiovisual signs (point 3).

Avatar’s mournful death of a reality contributes to its genre classification: as science fiction, it debates the threatening consequences of forced technological change in human(oid) society, crafting a postapocalyptic scenario on another planet attacked by human greed (Langford, 2005). In this respect, Avatar’s script functions as a utopian moral tale that is analogous to the debate upon uncontrolled tourist industrial development in exotic locations. The plot is set in the 22nd century (2154). A group of army officials and scientists financed by “RDA Corporation” land on a moon called Pandora in the Alpha Centauri star system to mine its precious mineral “unobtanium.” This threatens the survival of indigenous Pandora, including the habitats, customs, and memories of the local tribe of Na’vi. The military aims to infiltrate the Na’vi with the help of genetically engineered Na’vi-humanoid bodies that enable researchers to interact with natives. A disabled soldier, Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), is selected for this experiment and together with lead scientist Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver) attempt the first interspecies contact that leads to Jake’s symbolic naturalization into Pandora’s cultural biosphere and pacifist Grace’s unfortunate death in the heat of a military attack. The cinematic narrative is already crafted as a military exploratory journey and a journey of self-discovery that Jake commences as a soldier on an educational mission and completes by “going native.”

The “Hallelujah” Mountains dominate key moments in the film, including battle scenes between human military forces (armed with technology) and native humanoids (armed with knowledge of the Pandora terrain and its natural flying assets such as giant birds) (Fig. 1). Technological manipulation of the natural humanoid landscape complex crowns Cameron’s allegory with key moments from American militarism (Vietnam War) that induced global social movements. Western technology is employed both externally, as a cinematic tool (CGI for the film), and internally as a scopic narrative (CGI of the Na’vi in the mission’s spacecraft), revising McLuhan’s (1964) identification of the message in the medium. Through such visual plays Avatar suggests that strategic alliances of military, industrial, and scientific communities make a crossover into civilian and political sectors “to create a global administration of fear,” capable of merging reality with virtuality (Virilio, 1990). However, the “Hallelujah” Mountains’ role in the film as the battlefield between “evil” human cyborgs (pilots in advanced aircrafts) and “good” humanoids (on exotic birds) allows for a radical departure from the ideal type of “touring terrorist” informing American policies to date. Shrouded in clouds the “Floating” Mountains articulate the language of ecotourism in a simulated fashion. Suggesting a divine view “from above” that can measure, inspect, and photograph a simulated dissonant heritage (wars of planetary proportions and implications), they are places of commoditized thanatourist pilgrimage (Graburn, 1983; Tzanelli, 2013b). The split between civilization versus nature/native culture is granted with a spectacular
background of rocky formations, allowing cinematic viewers to be omniscient, just as any tourist is granted with an “insider’s view” of alien cultures by the advertising tourist industry (Strain, 2003).

This camera-like flying vision at the “Hallelujah” level also guides the lyrics of the score “I see you.” The lyrics focus on the confession of someone who sees himself through his interlocutor’s eyes “living new life, flying high.” The idea of flight permeates the lyrics, accounting for a sort of spiritual uplifting the audiovisual tourist might experience from Pandora’s highest vantage point. Through James Horner’s “brass writing, as the orchestra sweeps us into battle, and through the tumult of defeat [to] ultimate salvation” (Avatar CD, 2009), Cameron’s audiovisual art supports a kind of “digital dreamtime that connects current relationships with those of the dead” (Miller, 2009, p. 8) and makes Avatar’s simulated aboriginal inheritance more real than reality, evoking feelings of loss and the joy of salvation to its consumers. Composer Horner’s liaison with ethnomusicologist Wanda Bryant helped him to invent the right tunes for the alien culture (Marketsaw, 2008). Starry twinkles, strange whistles, and Celtic strings were matched with African rhythms and vocals “rooted in rainforests and savannas” (Diver, 2009) but also South American styles that dominate what Cameron earmarks as the story’s climax: Jake’s mastery of flight (Avatar CD, 2009).

Although these moments operate within the cinematic narrative as an indigenous rite of passage, for audiences they remain a form of audiovisual travel to a simulated world (points 2 and 3). Rendered in similar blends of indigenous and classical rhythms “The Destruction of Hometree,” Pandora’s natural cultural heritage, is an elegiac score connecting to the film’s thanatourist narrative.

As digital touring icons and music nodes, the “Hallelujah” Mountains were successfully linked from the film’s official website to “Pandorapedia,” which allows visitors to discover the planet as an ecosystem with distinctive flora and fauna and its own humanoid race with specific behaviors, customs, and cosmology. Pandorapedia’s animated “Welcome” video extends Avatar’s connections to Western narratives of landscape as memory and travel, tying the “Floating” rocks to art. While watching CGI sequences of Pandora’s ecosystem, Weaver’s voice is taking us on a tour to the moon’s surface against a soothing background of fabricated forest noises and Avatar music. The “Floating” Mountains visually back her comments on the human mission to the planet, which is rearticulated as an ecological discourse: “In a dreamlike landscape, reminiscent of the [René] Magritte
paintings, vast magnetic fields coupled with the exotic properties of unobtanium allow the Hallelujah Mountains to float in flux, constantly moving” (Pandorapedia, n.d.). Weaver’s concluding remark that Pandora should remind us of its ancient Greek mythological namesake (“the box has been opened”) presents the moon’s savage terrain and fierce creatures as a utopia addressed to “all living things” on earth (Pandorapedia, n.d.). One is reminded of Urry’s (2002) note that shifts from land to landscape are constitutive of novel travel technologies and the production of a “tourist system.”

Magritte’s mention assists in the production of Avatar-led audiovisual thanatourisms. References to the Belgian surrealist who became renowned in European art due to his reflections on the power of dreams and visions are already part of Cameron’s references to Avatar’s released soundtrack, where he prompts audiences to “dream lucidly” and mourns Pandora’s ecosystemic fall through the film’s 3D version and its blended (classical indigenous) music (Avatar CD, 2009). This artistic synesthesia articulates the commercial nodes of tourism, media, and other relevant mobilities (Adey, 2010). Bringing together such disparate industries online and digitally, and also terrestrially in the technological hubs of LA and Wellington, where most of the movie’s animation was created (Tzanelli, 2013b), Avatar’s audiovisual node articulates a new blended leisure regime in which the crafts of web surfing or movie watching and the art of touring the belle artes function in unison. At this stage Avatar’s production and consumption chain promotes a form of travel that connects audiovisual consumption of the movie’s simulated sites but does not deal with film-tourism development.

Film-induced tourism is present where it can be sustained. Significantly, the “Hallelujah” Mountains were absent from the artistic digital management of Avatar activism in Brazil. The makers and actors of Avatar became implicated in activist attempts to block the construction of Belo Monte Dam in Amazonia—a long-term corporate plan previously stopped by Brazilian and international activists. Amazon Rainforests partially served as visual templates for the digital creation of Pandora, so the artists’ involvement in relevant global and Brazilian social movements geared towards environmental conservation and protection of indigenous life was not unexpected. I expand on the implications of the involvement of Avatar professionals in this activist project elsewhere (Tzanelli, 2013b). Of relevance here is Cameron’s and Weaver’s dual role in this network as “First World” travelers to the Amazon’s exotic lands and the director’s documentary on the Belo Monte Dam. Avatar’s official website hosts today a link to Amazon Watch and International Rivers websites and is prefaced by a 4-minute taster video of Cameron’s documentary (A Message From Pandora, n.d.).

Communicating a hybrid of ecotourism, volunteerism, and adventure tourism, Cameron commences his narrative from the wings of an airplane with a Hallelujah-like view from above that transforms the simulated mountains into a conspicuous absent presence. The progressively more intimate vision of the camera, backed by indigenous rhythms and Brazilian dialogue, strangely reiterates the feel of death and thanatourism as Brazil’s “dissonant heritage”: portrayed as neoliberal Brazil’s new slavery, Amazon tribes become audiovisual morsels, ready to be consumed by global cinematic tourists—philanthropists. And yet, it is precisely Cameron’s documentary melodrama that will grant the cause with enough voice to block for a while the Belo Monte Dam initiative. Social science scholars might consider how digital activism effectively reproduces paradoxes of knowledge as a positional good (incidentally, also Avatar’s moral lesson): Western technology always appears to control communication tools, “inviting” indigenous cultures to partake in global enterprise. A devil’s advocate would stress that local activists actually gained from the fact that these touring Hollywood celebrities fronted the protest photos that figure today in Flickr’s relevant photo stream (Amazon Watch, 2010).

Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) and Croy and Smith (2005) stress that in scholarly conceptions of thanatourism the dark memories that induce tourism in actual locations might both sink in the background of world history or be within a living generation’s grasp. Such collective traumas that are forgotten so as to be effectively commoditized are central to the contradiction guiding the so-called tourist “experience,” with visitors to destinations always endeavoring to learn about or live the places intimately but always managing in short visits to incorporate an array of subjective impressions “from without.”
Cameron’s “Hallelujah” fiction quenches the human need for harmony and perfection on the big screen, but on the activist plane it has to reconcile with realist needs for justice and equality. The absence of the film’s “Floating” landscape or its recession to a colorful background in blended documentary scenes (from the movie and from Cameron’s engagement with Amazonian tribes and activists) reinstates this ambivalence of thanatourist mobilities: come closer, the camera demands, touch and feel, rather than just view from a distance. The fallacy of a privileged voluntourist-like engagement haunts the discourse, reiterating human guilt and the great traumas of civilized modernity.

What is intriguing in such a polyphonic artistic landscape is not the constant artistic call to resurrect an irretrievable aerial or grounded Eden—notably, also the core project of “tourist authenticity” (Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003; Radner, 2005; Wang, 2000)—but its background in a global location-hunting tour. This background highlights once more that in Avatar’s case the “Hallelujah” topos was in fact an interpretation or fusion of multiple world locations in a single image with a view to achieve global translatability (and marketization) of specificity. This project was completed with the help of semitechnological assemblages. As a result, the film’s website, its connection to Amazon Watch, Cameron’s “activist travel” video, and its Pandorapedia and video-music clips began to produce their own clusters of meanings independently from their artistic makers.

Strategic Calibrations of the Cinematic “Host” in China

There were consequences loosely bound to Avatar’s industry that exceeded Cameron’s semitechnological apparatus, even though they remained one of its offshoots: attempts to induce tourism that acknowledged the film’s influence while demoting it to an accessory of natural national heritage. Most cinematic tourism commences with the encapsulation of the natural and sociocultural dimensions of landscapes around the world, thus tapping into questions of (inter)national definitions of (in)angible heritage (Isar, 2004). Avatar publicized an array of issues regarding the ways new media routes reinv:ent cultural roots through simulated signposting (Clifford, 1997; MacCannell, 1989). Cameron’s hybridization in Avatar that simulates “humans” through their insertion into humanoid bodies with alien DNA also produces a circular logic, whereby nonreal entities, ideas, and customs replace reality through their enactment of and incorporation into other worlds (Milton, 1993). This ontological circuit informs a self-creating cycle akin to that which tourism analysis would debate as the tornos of tourism. This cycle partakes in real policy making. Theobald’s (1998) crucial insight into the origins and sociological significance of the term “tourism” is of relevance here. Etymologically, the word tour is derived from the Latin, tornare and the Greek tornos, meaning “a lathe or circle; the movement around a central point or axis, action, or process; typical behaviour or quality. The suffix –ist denotes one that performs a given action” (Theobald, 1998, p. 6). Avatar’s envisaged tourist mobilities stand at a crossroads between landscape signposting (showcasing human actors as artists or entrepreneurs) and the self-creation of digital custom and habitats, flagging simulation while obscuring human agency and creativity (Urry & Larsen, 2011). This enterprise was effectively reversed when Avatar’s “Hallelujah” name making was effectively hooked on to a real visual topography in provincial mountainous China, in Hunan Province, triggering real tourist ontogenesis (Fig. 2).

The renaming of Southern Sky Column in Zhangjiajie, Hunan, as “Hallelujah” after the “Floating” Pandoran Mountains is an example of global image mobility that partakes in tourism growth (Anders, 2010). Zhangjiajie National Forest Park is China’s first national forest park (est. 1982) and part of the Wulingyuan Scenic Area, which in 1992 was officially recognized as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site on the basis of criterion vii. This includes “superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance” (UNESCO, n.d., emphasis mine). The aesthetic significance of this spot was pivotal in the construction of Avatar’s own artscape but also its reappraisal in China. After achieving World Heritage status, the location was approved by the Ministry of Land and Resources as Zhangjiajie Sandstone Peak Forest National Geopark (3,600 km²/1,400 m²) in 2001. In 2004, Zhangjiajie Geopark was listed as a UNESCO Global Geopark. It seems that this landscape’s
and Avatar’s production designers claiming that the inspiration was drawn from similar mountainous formations from around the world, including those in the Hunan Province. Cameron claimed that about 60% of the film consists of CGI elements, with the remaining 40% involving traditional miniatures and live action. The live action photography started in Wellington in 2007. The cast was also sent to the Hawaiian tropical rainforests to become familiar with the story’s fictional setting before shooting on a soundstage. The training projects the mastery of natural environments as a cultural fusion of science and art, with landscape being mediated by experts “including the myth making of the tourist industry” (Jamal, Everett, & Dann, 2003, p. 155).

Actual inspiration for the film aside, unlike the Brazilian case, the Zhangjiajie landmark generated a debate specific to tourism development, with Cameron’s visit to Beijing in 2009 used as proof of global recognition by the Chinese center. Journalistic sources suggested that during his visit to Beijing, Cameron recalled sending his crew to the beautiful site in 2008 to select scenery and take pictures: “All we had to do was simply recreate Huangshan Mountain [Southern Sky column] in outer space” (Coonan,
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2010). Notably, Cameron’s praise during his visit in Beijing for one of China’s foremost metropolitan artists, director Zhang Yimou (Hero, 2002; House of Flying Daggers, 2004) already suggests Avatar’s iconic link to metropolitan manipulations of Chinese art, as well the power of global artistic networks to influence national reputation. But even such transnational bonds based on shared interests give way to traditional blood bonding (national citizenship): originally stigmatized and persecuted as a dissident by the Communist Party, Zhang slowly aligned his work to the political center’s objectives in recent years. His support of rural subalternity in earlier films aside, he repeatedly had recourse to the great Chinese traditions of theater, painting, and poetry in his movie making and became globally renowned for his ability to combine moving image with techniques of “making still life” on the big screen (Tzanelli, 2013b, p. 134). The pillar-like formations of Zhangjiajie that are seen throughout the Zhangjiajie Geopark are a distinctive hallmark of Chinese landscape, and can be found in many ancient Chinese paintings, so their remobilization in new Chinese heritage discourse after Avatar’s global success is an understandable consequence (on national implications of such image formation see Hudson & Ritchie, 2006).

Cinematic enterprise secures for national artwork a glamorous place in global artscape—albeit in a hybrid version. Yet, it is in fact the human groups largely understood as the topographic custodians of this artwork that have to reclaim a place in the global chronicles of heritage. Thereafter, either by strategy or by necessity, a hybrid form of self-narration emerges to reinstate their lost original, authentic status in the eyes of foreign and national spectators. Tourist flows provide the minimum guarantee for such status—but only if the “claimants” exercise their creative agency. The Tujia people of Avatar’s photographed areas populate the Wuling range of western Hunan province and some parts of the southeastern Hunan. The original connection of their language to the Chinese–Tibetan system has been mostly lost due to state practices of assimilation. Against Western considerations of working-classness as “dissonant heritage,” Chinese communist rhetoric glorifies the country’s postindustrial modernity, but not necessarily its rural equivalents outside nationalist romanticizations. In January 2010 hundreds of Zhangjiajie locals launched in ethnic Tujia costumes an official ceremony to rename the mountains of the region after Avatar’s “Hallelujah” Mountains (Agarwal, 2010). This reporting crafts an agential shift from the production of a simulated authentic stage to “staged authenticity” rituals informed by ethnonational traditions quite independently from the actions of Avatar’s makers (MacCannell, 1989; Tzanelli 2010). Still, no such discourse of reinvented tradition next to a renamed marker would have emerged without Avatar’s artwork.

A more immediate connection is provided to a similar initiative that marked the prelude of Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. This was staged in Guilin by Olympics director Yimou Zhang, who used performers dressed in invented ethnic costumes for the Opening Ceremony. Even today, the Tujia colorful costumes and peoples figure on international travel websites connected to Beijing 2008 as “beautiful,” if actually marginalized Chinese “specimen.” Zhangjiajie’s performative reproduction of this artistic metropolitan initiative makes sense as a form of “social poetics” (Herzfeld, 2005) that ensures the global trade in ethnic fixities, where mobility is deemed to be “better” organized by the national center. Filtering Zhang’s ethnic narratives through Western simulated tales of natural wilderness granted the act with some extra authenticity. It can of course be debated who actually made the decisions for this global performance: Western media sources state that in Hunan the municipal government was prompted to adopt the slogan “Pandora is far but Zhangjiajie is near” to induce tourism in the region (BBC, 2010). The invitation was deliberately designed to connect the Southern Sky Column to Avatar imagery for a global tourist audience, and to Cameron’s recognition of Zhang’s cinematic iconography for domestic tourists (Croy, 2010; Iwashita, 2006). Li Ping, an official with the Zhangjiajie branch of the China International Travel Service, made sure that global reporting included a note on the 25-minute Avatar shots in the region, thus amplifying the fabulist capital of the Chinese region.

Although the Zhangjiajie scenic spot in the newly-baptized “Hallelujah” area is a protected area in need of novel global advertising, ideoscapal and mediascapal clashes were almost inevitable in a capitalist contingent shared by so many different
interest groups. Another local rumor that developed into global gossip suggested that Avatar’s later withdrawal from Chinese cinemas aimed to make way for domestic films such as Confucius (2010) that silenced state practices of forced land evictions in China—a practice turning rural areas into forced migration spots rather than tourist destinations. It is understandable why, just as the Amazon tribes that Cameron and his crew sought to support, Zhangjiajie regional groups opted to ally with Western cinematic apparatuses: as practice and policy, this blended image making was possible at this stage outside the national domain. The simultaneous alignment of the area’s performances with Zhang’s move from the activist artistic periphery to the statist center resembled the Beijing-born artist’s successful mobility to Hong Kong and Hollywood circuits (before he was embraced as a famous artist in the Olympic context).

Zhangjiajie is characterized by undeveloped land and river transportation, and its mountainous terrain makes cultivation difficult. It has been labeled “the Land of the Savage Southern Minority” since the earliest recorded history, whereas additional derogatory descriptors such as those of the “Wuling Rude People” and “Tujia Rude People” remain indicative of discriminatory views held against regional populations. Avatar’s “cool” semitechnologies made possible a shift away from such derogatory views, providing the metropolis with new incentives to support Zhangjiajie’s global tourist profile. Given Zhangjiajie’s UNESCO status, China’s metropolitan priority has been to nominate the region a natural heritage destination (Harrison, 2005). Avatar’s touring semitechnologies complemented this with a different vision of heritage based on audiovisual thanatourisms inspired by Hollywood cinema. Borrowing from UNESCO’s aestheticization of nature and Avatar’s natural human(oid) environments, regional groups proceeded to stage their heritage in the fashion of a mega-event that, unlike Avatar’s technological artifice and commoditized products, can claim natural and cultural authenticity (Jamal & Hill, 2002). The shift from simulated time and nature in Avatar to UNESCO-validated heritage time and ornamented human nature (ethnic costumes), validated Zhangjiajie as an “authentic” tourist site (Jamal & Hill, 2002, on Kirschenblatt-Gimblett’s of three types of time in heritage tourism). In this “event,” some largely unknown variations of national character or human “nature”—or, more correctly, their official representatives—claimed a place in the global tourist stage.

From Digital Utopias to “Natural” Landscapes

The article highlighted connections between audiovisual arts and forms of tourism steeped in conceptions of “human” as a subject aesthetically appealing to the civilized world, reiterating the significance of cosmetic appearances in tourism. Considering Avatar’s fabricated humanoid as a utopian allegory of the beautiful human inhabiting equally beautiful environments, it suggested—against disconnections of artistic representation from simulation—that the film’s industry was implicated in the revival of ethnic self-narration in a Chinese heritage site looking for new tourism. Zhangjiajie’s adaptation of Avatar landscapes and their blending with ethnic traditions of market value in the tourist and media trade produces a novel form of metacinematic adaptation close to MacCannell’s (1973) conception of “staged authenticity.” In Zhangjiajie’s Southern Sky there is no conventional division between local reality and cinematic imagination, only a simulation of a simulation (“Hallelujah” Mountains) that eventually rebrands a natural marker situated in the rural borders of the hegemonic Chinese imagination. At first the process involved semitechnological productions of meaning chains (what “Hallelujah” Mountains stand for in the film, their Internet extensions) but in the latter phases this prompted an internal ethnic performance tied to national self-narration. Borrowing from studies of cinematic tourism and film-induced tourism the article sought to unpack synergies between artistic, digital, and embodied performances to examine how Avatar’s narrative of human as a being in technologically assisted motion transformed into a tale of Chinese ethnic human as a touring object.

Of particular importance is the insertion of embodied (synaesthetic) performances in the locality during ritual celebrations of Southern Sky Column’s heritage renaming. The locality connected embodied performance to Beijing 2008’s spectacular procession of Chinese human types on the
stadium’s mega-stage, where the world unfolded like a movie from a Chinese viewpoint. A bipolar performance developed during the mountains’ renaming in Zhangjiajie that rearticulated ethnic traditions with the help of a global mega-event (the Olympic Games) and a Western industry’s audiovisual referents. Media mobilities replaced other missing articulations, including the national recognition of Zhangjiajie’s ethnic groups and effective transport networks to enable tourist inflows. This move compared to the alignment of Amazonian tribes with the activist interventions of Cameron and his peers in Brazil—Avatar’s other topographic inspiration. In both instances Avatar’s audiovisual mobilities produced a sort of cinematic thanatourism that reinserted marginalized groups into industrial modernity’s narrative as touring objects. One may also suggest that Zhangjiajie’s working/performing rural body ennobled and aestheticized the old “Working Human” of industrialized modernity that inspires thanatourist industries across the world. Otherwise put, Zhangjiajie’s rurality was “redeemed” through strategic alignments with Western cultural industrial conceptions of cosmetic travel. Such thanatourist tropes emerged from this process as both the pinnacle of metropolitan art culture and an interpretative tool for Zhangjiajie’s prospective tourist hosts.

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