Popular Cinema as Popular Resistance

Avatar in the Palestinian (Imagi)nation

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Hailed as Hollywood’s ultimate blockbuster, the most commercially successful film ever made, and noted for its use of the latest pioneering technology, James Cameron’s Avatar (2009) does not fit comfortably into the traditional conception of the ‘political film’. It does not explicitly analyse social reality and suggest how it might be changed; nor does it seem to serve a particular political agenda. Yet, despite a veneer of super entertainment, the film has provided a fertile ground for multiple and complex political readings. Even more intriguingly, 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. There are, for example, reports that Avatar has been removed from cinema screens across China, allegedly because it is subversive in the eyes of the authorities. The Chinese government feared that too many citizens ‘might be making a link between the plight of Avatar’s Na’vi people as they are thrown off their land and the numerous, often brutal, evictions endured closer to home by residents who get in the way of property developers’.¹ Evo Morales, Bolivia’s first indigenous president, said that he identifies with the film’s ‘profound show of resistance to capitalism and the struggle for the defense of nature’;² and George Monbiot, one of Britain’s most prominent environmentalists, echoed this spirit of the indignant indigenous in his assertion that ‘Cameron’s blockbuster offers a chilling metaphor for European butchery of the Americas’. Reading the film as a conscious ‘metaphor for contact between different human cultures’ Monbiot claims that Avatar is ‘the story of European engagement with the native peoples of the Americas’ that culminated in the genocide of the inhabitant population.³

One of the more striking examples of the local reading of this global film is its literal interpretation on the ground by the Palestinian popular resistance. Palestinian peasants, activists and members of the

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non-violent resistance (including the Israeli-Jewish group Anarchists against the Wall) painted themselves in the striking blue of the Na’vi people in their demonstrations and protests against the Wall, ‘a barrier constructed through the entire West Bank to separate Jewish settlements and Israeli cities from Palestinian towns and villages’.4 Some of the protesters even crawled on the ground towards this Apartheid Wall, ‘or what Israel prefers to call in sanitized language the “security fence”’, attempting to jump over it in a symbolic act of defiance.  

This article focuses on the Palestinian appropriation of Avatar in their grassroots non-violent resistance to Israel’s colonisation and occupation of their land and natural resources (mostly water). At the heart of my discussion is the question of why Avatar has triggered so much interest in the Palestinian resistance movement or, to phrase it even more boldly, how does the exotic, lush, rainforest-like Pandora of Avatar resonate in the Palestinian imag(nation) with the dry and semi-arid Holy Land? In short, how did Pandora become Palestine?


Within the framework of the so-called ‘Palestinian Question’, in an ironic twist to the so-called ‘Jewish Question’, *Avatar* deserves special critical attention because it is an example of a popular fiction film produced within the logic of corporate capitalism, epitomised by the Hollywood dream-reel factory, yet read subversively by oppressed people who have mobilised the film’s iconography and hidden ideological ‘message’ to challenge the Israeli occupation. The Palestinian ‘colonisation’ of *Avatar* is even more amazing given Hollywood’s long history of open support for Israel and Zionism. Furthermore, the adoption of *Avatar* by the Palestinian people as ‘their film’ and its integration into their daily struggle against the occupation is exceptional because very few films in cinema history have played any significant role in the arena of popular politics, let alone that of bottom-up resistance. There is no historical precedent for a film like *Avatar*, produced from above, within the system of dominant American capitalist ideology, able at the same time to capture the resistant imagination from below. Obviously the power of *Avatar* to mobilise a constituent part of grassroots anti-colonial resistance raises more fundamental questions about the traditional conception of the political film, invoking, and even expanding, the debate dating back to the 1960s and ’70s about *film progressiste* (progressive film), a notion derived from the legacy of May 1968 and rooted in the revolutionary tradition of early pre-Socialist Realist Soviet cinema.

Most of the readings of *Avatar* as subversive focus on the film’s alleged critique of predatory corporate capitalism, the destruction of the environment and the planet, the colonisation and annihilation of indigenous people, and the militarisation of the globe through the ‘security bubble’ generated by ‘disaster capitalism’. As such, the film has been read allegorically as an anti-corporatist, anti-capitalist, anti-militarist and anti-colonialist-imperialist text which champions the environment and the rights of indigenous people (and non-human animals) against the not-so-holy alliance of the military-industrial complex with science and technology. In this article I argue that while *Avatar* is indeed a spectacular Hollywood blockbuster, and seems to lie comfortably within the boundaries of the dominant capitalist/imperialist ideology, a close analysis of the film may uncover a secondary text that allows it to be read as subverting, or at least challenging, this ideology from within. The final goal of my analysis, however, is to show how the major interpretive frameworks for reading *Avatar* against the grain of the Hollywood blockbuster resonate with the Palestinian condition and so make the local reading of this global film possible, plausible and applaudable.

**FROM PANDORA TO PALESTINE**

Grace (Sigourney Weaver), the female scientist in charge of the Avatar project to infiltrate Pandora, describes it to Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), a former Marine brought into the Avatar Program after his twin brother (a PhD research student) is killed, as ‘the most hostile environment known to man’. The irony of course is that Pandora, this Edenic primeval utopia of harmony with nature and all living creatures, which
seems like paradise to the Na’vi people, the natives of Pandora, and to the spectator’s gaze, looks hostile to the corporate world, the industrial-military complex and the technological man-machine embodied in Avatar by the ‘humans’. Indeed the idea of paradise lost, destroyed by corporate greed, militarism and imperialism, is at the heart of the film’s environmentalist message.

Avatar presents a ‘primitive’ tribal society, living in harmony with nature in its diverse biospheric variations, whose highly developed spiritual life centres on its sacred Hometree, or Soul Tree, the site where the natives worship their female deity Eywa. The indigenous people of Pandora, the Na’vi, have blue skin, which marks them as alien, and have animal-like features such as feline ears, eyes and tails, and are described by Colonel Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang), the head of the mining operation’s private security force which provides military services to the RDA Corporation, as ‘very hard to kill’. The Na’vi’s living environment is also of a hybrid nature. It is a primeval landscape influenced both by the fantastic iconography of science fiction and by real landscapes such as the Chinese mountains in Huang Shan and Guillin. The flora and fauna of Pandora is surrealistic and yet highly realistic in its compliance with the rules of ‘real’ nature (Cameron employed a botanical expert as a consultant). The cultural inspiration for Cameron’s extravaganza was drawn, as he testified in many interviews, from what he called an organic, Pacific, tribal look. Pandora’s landscape is an imaginative heightening of the rainforest and so the film crew spent some time in a real rainforest to ‘get the feel of it’. Cameron’s Avatar contains echoes of the birth of the modern environmental movement that, at least in the United States, dates back to Henry David Thoreau, his passion for nature and plants, and his advocacy of life with, rather than against, nature. Yet Pandora’s Eden is destroyed by the humans, the ‘sky people’ as the Na’vi call them, and in a barbaric act of ‘shock and awe’ their Hometree is set on fire and burnt alive.

It is not surprising that the paradisiacal Pandora, the brutal attempt to destroy it and the ensuing epic struggle between the natives and their colonisers, culminating in the expulsion of the latter from the body of Pandora, found resonance with the Palestinian imagi(nation). The Edenic nature of the Palestinian landscape prior to Zionist settlement is a recurrent motif in the Palestinian imagi(nation). The Palestinian national poet Mahmud Darwish was the poet of the Palestinian landscape from which his family was forced to leave in the Nakba of 1948 when he was six years old.8 His poetic description of this landscape ‘with its water, well, roses, fragrance, grass, groves and their silent music of its soil’ imprinted itself in the Palestinian collective imagination and is repeatedly echoed and retold in many other poetic, literary and oral accounts of the Nakba.9 The view of Palestine as paradise lost is also related to its association with Al-Andalus, the first Arab-Islamic state on the continent of Europe which existed for eight centuries ‘building a citadel of civilisation marked by an intermingling of European, African and Asian elements and possessed of a distinct cultural identity vis-à-vis the rest of the Islamic world’. As such, Al-Andalus, which played a prominent role in Darwish’s poetry was, as Mahmoud Makki argues, ‘able to act as a bridge over which Arab culture passed to the countries of Western Europe’.10

8. Nakba, ‘catastrophe’ in Arabic, refers to the year-long expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians that began with the ethnic cleansing of 1947 and continued through 1948 when the state of Israel was established. The Nakba created what is now the world’s largest refugee population.


The destruction of Palestine is very often described in a highly gendered, sexualised language. The violence brought about by the Zionist settlers on the land and its people is imagined as a rape, a brutal violation of the female body viewed as the emblem of Palestine. Erotic geography is recurrent in many Palestinian literary works, especially in what came to be known as Palestinian ‘resistance literature’. In this literature, epitomised by the poetry of Mahmud Darwish:

... poetic images of Arab Palestinians living off the land in organic harmony with nature are contrasted with dehumanized images both of destruction, brutality, and militarism associated with the Zionist enterprise and of the Israeli occupation, signified by the bulldozer, which violates the integrity of the Palestinian pastoral landscape and rapes its soil.11

Sexual metaphors are ‘intimately tied to the conflict over the land’. Indeed, from its inception the Zionist project of settling Palestine, as well as Arab resistance to it, were portrayed using sexual imagery. The Zionist project was described in terms of both military and sexual conquest: ‘Kibbush HaAdamah’ (conquest of the land), ‘Kibbush HaSafa’ (conquest of the Hebrew language), ‘Kibbush HaAvoda’ (the conquest of labour).12

The rhetoric and practice of the Zionist project immersed in colonial/patriarchal discourse still echo in the Palestinian spectatorship experience of Avatar. After all, Avatar’s Pandora, a cinematic fantasy of Gaia, is also imagined as a female body with its semi-matriarchal society and powerful and eroticised women warriors. The name Pandora is of course loaded with mythical connotations that recall the first biblical woman Eve, responsible, according to the Hebrew Bible, for the expulsion of humanity from Eden. Yet what is most significant about the destruction and violation of Palestine is that it is still an ongoing process. While the 1948 Nakba is commemorated as a pivotal traumatic event in the Palestinian collective memory, in the lived experience of most Palestinians the Nakba is a colonisation project in progress that, in the powerful words of Lila Abu-Lughod:

... continues into the present in every house demolished by an Israeli bulldozer, with every firing from an Apache helicopter, with every stillbirth at a military checkpoint, with every village divided from its fields by the ‘separation’ wall, and with every Palestinian who still longs to return to a home that is no more.13

Perhaps what captured the Palestinian imagination more than anything else in Avatar were two key scenes: the destruction of the sacred tree by the sky people and the epic struggle between the Marine colonel Miles Quaritch, a machine-man locked in a monstrous bulldozer, and Neytiri, the beautiful and courageous daughter of the Omaticaya; the Na’vi clan resisting the invasion of the humans. This struggle culminates with the victory of the native bow-and-arrow-armed David over the super coloniser, the heavily-armed Goliath. The destruction of the Tree of Souls, the centre of the physical and spiritual life of the inhabitants of Pandora, is perceived by the natives as the ultimate catastrophe. In response to being told that the natives are ‘savages who live in the trees’, Grace, who is aware of the importance of the tree to the indigenous people’s ‘hearts and minds’, tries to persuade Parker Selfridge (Gio-

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11. Yosefa Loshitzky, Identity Politics on the Israeli Screen, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, pp 119–120
12. Ibid, p 119
vanni Ribisi), the corporate administrator for the RDA mining operation, and Colonel Miles Quaritch not to attack and destroy the tree by providing them with a rational and scientific explanation. The female scientist talks about the vital relationships existing between the roots of the tree and the networks of other roots and the biological communication that sustains them. Without explicitly saying so, Grace describes a rhizome structure that is always in the process of formation and deformation, a body without organs, capable of adaptation and metamorphosis. Grace’s analysis of the Tree of Souls, driven by vital energy, agrees with current environmental thinking, which views the biosphere as a system based on interconnectivity and warns against the destruction of the rainforest by multinational, mostly American, corporations.

The view of the life of Pandora and its people as a rhizome nurtured by the subterranean roots of the tree (which is shot from below in many scenes) echoes the assertion by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari that ‘The tree is already the image of the world, or the root the image of the world-tree’. In nature, they argue, ‘roots are taproots with a more multiple, lateral, and circular system of ramification, rather than a dichotomous one’.14 Eyal Weizman, the Israeli architect and cultural theorist, revealed in detail how the Israeli Army, and particularly the military institute OTRI (Operational Theory Research Institute), borrowed tactics from Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualisation of space in deploying

their policy of colonial occupation and dispossession of the Palestinian occupied territories. Reference to Deleuze and Guattari, Weizman notes:

...is indicative of recent transformations within the IDF, because although they were influenced by the study of war, they were concerned with non-statist forms of violence and resistance, in which the state and its military are the arch-enemy.

As Shimon Naveh, the co-director of OTRI from 1996 to 2006 explained:

Several of the concepts in A Thousand Plateaus became instrumental for us [in the IDF]... allowing us to explain contemporary situations in a way that we could not have otherwise explained. It problematized our own paradigm... Most important was the distinction [Deleuze and Guattari] have pointed out between the concepts of ‘smooth’ and ‘striated’ space... [which reflected] the organizational concepts of the ‘war machine’ and the ‘state apparatus’. In the IDF we now often use the term ‘to smooth out space’ when we want to refer to operation in a space in such a manner that borders do not affect us. Palestinian areas could indeed be thought of as ‘striated’, in the sense that they are enclosed by fences, walls, ditches, roads blocks and so on... We want to confront the ‘striated’ space of traditional, old-fashioned military practice... with smoothness that allows for movement through space that crosses any borders and barriers.

Indeed, this thinking was brought to full effect by the Israeli army’s destruction of the Jenin refugee camp in the northern West Bank in 2002. This ‘design by destruction’ was implemented through the use of military bulldozers that bear an uncanny similarity to the armoured bulldozer used in Avatar to destroy the tree and the living environment of the Na’vi. Unwilling to risk losses to their soldiers:

[and] unable to subdue the resistance in any other way, IDF officers ordered giant armoured D9 Caterpillar bulldozers to start destroying the camp, burying its defenders and remaining civilians in the rubble.

The bulldozer, with its Janus face as an icon of building in Zionist ideology and an icon of destruction in both the Palestinian lived experience and imagi(nation), also plays a significant role in the uprooting of olive trees in Palestine. Avatar, as Abdaljawad O A Hamayel suggests:

...highlighted the unbreakable and unyielding bond of a people with their land, a bond that Palestinians understand today more than ever as settlers set their eyes on denying us even the scent of olive trees, a scent Palestinians grow up with since the youngest age.

The destruction of Pandora’s majestic tree by a monstrous bulldozer could not but invoke for Palestinians the common image of D9 Caterpillar bulldozers frequently used by the Israeli army to uproot Palestinian olive trees, some of them ancient, dating back long before the Zionist settlement of Palestine.

The olive tree, a universal symbol of peace, has been marked as a hostile object in Israel’s warfare against the indigenous people of Palestine. The uprooting of ancient olive trees has had tremendous ill-effects on the Palestinian agriculture, economy, and identity. In Palestine, as Atyaf Alwazir observes:
The olive tree is prized for its historical presence, its beauty, its symbolic significance, and most importantly for its economic significance. Olive trees are a major commercial crop for Palestine, and many families depend on it for their livelihood. Many products are extracted from the olive tree, these include, olives, olive oil, olive wood, and olive based soap. In fact, olive oil is the second major export item in Palestine; and olive production contributes to about 38.2% of the fruit trees production income.21

The olive tree as an emblem of Palestine has become the enemy not only for the Israeli state apparatus and its military but also for the Jewish settlers in the Palestinian occupied territories who have made harvesting almost impossible with constant harassment. ‘I was in shock, I lost my mind’, eighty-year-old Rasmia Awase from Luban a-Sharqiya, a village in the West Bank, recently told a Guardian reporter. ‘I planted these trees with my bare hands, I gave them twenty years of hard work – and they are all gone.’ The Awase family, as the reporter explains:

... are not alone in their experience. Among the tactics used by Jewish settlers this harvesting season are cutting down and torching trees, stealing fruit and attacking farmers trying to pick their crops, according to human rights organisations.22

Perhaps nowhere in the Western, and particularly American, consciousness has the bulldozer as an icon of destruction of Palestine gained more visibility than through the story of Rachel Corrie, an American member of the
International Solidarity Movement (ISM), killed in Rafah in the Gaza Strip by an IDF bulldozer as she stood in front of a local Palestinian’s home, acting as a human shield and attempting to prevent its demolition by IDF forces. In *Avatar*, when the colonel and his crew attack the Na’vi people with their giant armoured bulldozer, they are faced with Jake, who stands against the menacing war machine to stop it from further destruction of the Na’vi’s habitat. ‘Keep going, he’ll move’, the colonel commands the bulldozer’s operator, who is concerned about harming ‘one of us’, an American ex-Marine who has crossed the line, a ‘traitor’ who has joined the Na’vi’s resistance to the humans’ invasion. Jake, according to the colonel, betrayed ‘his race’ and therefore has no right to live (in one of their verbal confrontations Colonel Quaritch asks Jake ‘How it feels to betray your race? Do you think you are one of them?’). Like Jake, Rachel Corrie also crossed the line. She left the comfort of her American home and in an act of solidarity with the Palestinian people tried, through non-violent means, to help them resist the brutal Israeli occupation.

The story of Rachel Corrie versus the bulldozer, as well as the image of Jake confronting the machine-man colonel, invoke also the image of David and Goliath, a scene that was especially associated with the first Intifada, when stone-throwing youths faced heavily-armed Israeli soldiers. Yet, despite the iconic appeal of Rachel Corrie’s heroic story to the Western imagination (influenced also by the iconic image of a lone protestor facing a tank in Tiananmen Square during the 1989 student protests), confrontations between machines, robot-like machine-men and the ‘bare life’ of ordinary Palestinians is routine in their daily experience under Israeli occupation.

In the perceptive words of John Berger:

> Any comparison between the weapons involved in these confrontations returns us to what poetry is about. On one hand Apache and Cobra helicopters, F16s, Abrams tanks, Humvee jeeps, electronic surveillance systems, tear gas; on the other hand catapults, slingshots, mobile telephones, badly used Kalashnikovs and mostly handmade explosives... If I was an Israeli soldier, however well-armed I was, I might finally be frightened of this something. Perhaps it’s what the poet Mourid Barghouti noticed: ‘Living people grow old but martyrs grow young.’

It is not surprising that the scene of epic struggle between the colonel, locked in his armoured machine, and Jake speaks so powerfully to the Palestinian experience. The resonance is even more compelling given that the ‘human-going-native’ is ultimately saved by the real native Neytiri. Nature and everything associated with it (the animals and the indigenous people, themselves part ‘animal’) has the upper hand in this final struggle for liberation. The fact that the animal/native supersedes the human/machine is significant. In the native world there is no separation between human and animal; the human-animal is one harmonious and perfect body. The human-machine generated by corporate militaristic capitalism in the form of the robotic Marines is exposed as non-resistant to the naked native armed only with bows and arrows.

**CONCLUSION: THE ZIONIST PANDORA’S BOX**

*Avatar* presents a clash of civilisations, ending in the victory of one over the other. Technology-based predatory corporate capitalism is defeated...
by the indigenous, nature-based society of the Na’vi. The film questions the supremacy of Western civilisation founded on scientific rationality and technological modernity. It is not surprising, therefore, that the film appealed to the grassroots Palestinian resistance whose struggle against Zionist colonisation is waged by reclaiming Palestinian land. Yet the victory of the native over the settler colonisers contains some ambiguities. The hybrid natives of Pandora are not based on ‘real’ natives; they are an amalgam of a variety of features which supposedly characterise different groups of indigenous/native people (for example Native Americans, Polynesians, Africans). For that reason they can be read as either epitomising Western ideas of the native (as noble and exotic) and therefore essentialising race and ethnicity or, alternatively, they can be read as embodying the idea of indigenous resistance to imperialism and colonialism. According to the second reading, which I endorse, the hybrid Pandoran natives embody the resistance of indigenous people across the world, from the Amazon to Palestine, against capitalism, the greed of corporations and military aggression. They represent what Naomi Klein calls ‘the rise of People’s reconstruction’.26

*Avatar* also subverts the myth of the conquering of the land of milk and honey from the indigenous Canaanites. This Biblical story of conquest and colonisation prefers the point of view of the colonised to that of the conqueror and invader. The original Biblical story, embraced by ‘biblified Zionism’,27 suppresses this ‘mythical archetype as a paradigmatic narrative of conquest, colonization, and domination (the ethnic cleansing and oppression of the native Canaanites and, by implication, of the indigenous Palestinians)’.28 *Avatar*, on the other hand, inverts the Biblical trope, turning it into a metaphor for liberation from colonial oppression. The Goddess Eywa, embodied in the sacred symbol of the gigantic tree, recalls the Canaanite Goddess Ashera (Ash-toret) who was worshipped under every tree and associated with the tree of life. This Canaanite reading of the film has deep appeal for the Palestinians, perhaps themselves the historical descendants of the Canaanites.

The clash of civilisations that in the film brings victory to the native exposes an underlying fantasy of the coloniser going native. In fact the ideological core of the Avatar project, designed by the corporation and executed by the scientific team led by Grace, is based on mimicry, on cloning the native. One could argue that psychoanalytically, but also ideologically, the colonial fantasy stands on what can be termed ‘native envy’. The exposure of this undercurrent in *Avatar* may add another interesting layer to the appeal of Cameron’s film to the Palestinian imagin(nation). From its inception the Zionist colonial project appropriated the native. Early Zionist discourse represented the Palestinian Arabs, both in literature and in the visual arts, as sensual and powerful. ‘They are the paradigm of rootedness and connection with nature, the absolute opposite of the stereotypical frail, ethereal diaspora Jew... the Arab was the incarnation of the sensual, earthy Gentile of diaspora literature. The Arab as a mythical figure attracts, intrigues and arouses envy.’29 The charm of indigenous Orientalism was called into question early in the history of Zionist settlement following the 1929 Arab uprising. Yet the appropriation of the native has never ceased to exist in the continuing struggle of Zionism (in its diverse forms from the religious to secular

26. Klein, op cit, p 443
Left) to create a cult of Israeli ‘nativism’ in order to reclaim the desired status of the indigenous people of Palestine, its real ‘natives’ and, therefore, the rightful heirs (rather than conquerors or colonisers) of the land. It is not surprising that Zionism going native chose ‘Sabra’ as the name for ‘indigenous Israelis’. The mythological Sabra is the new Jew, born in Israel/Palestine and therefore perceived by Zionist ideology as indigenous and native, an antithesis to the despised ‘old Jew’. The irony is that Zionist colonisation and appropriation of the native ignored the fact that the sabra, the cactus fruit (Indian fig), was not indigenous to Palestine but originated in Mexico and was imported to the Middle East by the Ottomans.

Perhaps the best evidence for the desire to eliminate any trace of the native (even without taking into consideration the physical destruction and erasure of more than 400 Palestinian villages in the Nakba and the expulsion of around 700,000 Palestinians from what is today the state of Israel) was the Zionist attempt to uproot Palestine’s native vegetation and shape the landscape of the Holy Land according to their Eurocentric view. Zionist ideology, and particularly the Zionist youth movements (notable among them the Socialist-Zionist Hashomer Hatzair, the Youth Guard associated until the 1980s with Mapam, the United Workers Party, originally Marxist-Zionist in its outlook), elevated nature (and particularly mountain) worship as a way to conquer the land. The original Zionist colonial project of ‘kibbush ha’adama’ (‘the conquering of the land’) thus became part of the eroticisation of the land, the physical and spiritual liberation of the diaspora Jew. The German youth movements, and especially the Wandervogel, as George L Mosse argued, ‘exhorted the Jews to learn from the German Youth Movement the ways of achieving close identity with the landscape, traditions and beliefs of the Volk’. Thus, Mosse claims, ‘this important movement of Jewish youth, attempting to evolve a deep-seated Zionist identity, assimilated certain aspects of the ideology of the German Youth Movement into its theoretical framework’. It is no wonder that Moses Calvary, one of the Jewish Youth Movement’s spokesmen, said in a remark to a leading Zionist that his dreams ‘ripened under pine trees and not under palms’.

The pine trees themselves were instruments of concealment, strategically planted by the Jewish National Fund (JNF) on the sites of the hundreds of Palestinian villages the Zionist militias evacuated and destroyed in 1948. With forests sprouting up where towns once stood, those who had been expelled would have nothing to come back to. Meanwhile, to outsiders beholding the strangely Alpine landscape of northern Israel for the first time, it seemed as though the Palestinians had never existed. And that was exactly the impression the JNF intended to create. The practice that David Ben Gurion and other prominent Zionists referred to as ‘redeeming the land’ was in fact the ultimate form of greenwashing.

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30. The word ‘sabra’ means cactus fruit, which is tough and thorny on the outside and sweet and tender on the inside.
33. Quoted in ibid, p 183
Israeli historian Ilan Pappe, in his book on the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, discusses the role of Israel’s national parks, where imported European conifers and pine trees replace the indigenous Palestinian flora and fauna, the olive, almond and fig trees, erasing and eradicating the memory of Palestinian life in pre-Israel or even pre-Zionist Palestine. The first director of the JNF, Yossef Weitz, notoriously declared:

It must be clear that there is no room in the country for both peoples... If the Arabs leave it, the country will become wide and spacious for us... The only solution is a Land of Israel... without Arabs... There is no way but to transfer the Arabs from here to the neighboring countries, to transfer all of them, save perhaps for [the Palestinian Arabs of] Bethlehem, Nazareth and the old Jerusalem. Not one village must be left, not one tribe.

The ongoing dispossession of the Palestinians, it should be pointed out, is part of an ongoing global process. Besides the process of dispossession there lies a continuing history of the plunder of assets from the economically and politically powerless – divesting them, as David Harvey observes, of their means of ‘life, history, culture and forms of sociality in order to make space (sometimes quite literally) for capital accumulation’. Common rights to land are converted into private property rights, for example, as land itself becomes a commodity. Across the globe, property developers are ceaselessly expropriating the living spaces of the poor for urban development by expelling ‘low-income populations from high-value spaces by legal (that is, state-backed) and illegal means’, with the consequent ‘disruption of social networks and destruction of social solidarities...’. It seems sometimes as if there is a systematic plan to expel low-income and unwanted populations from the face of the earth. As Mike Davis illustrates, the scale of contemporary population removal is immense: the urban poor of the global South are ‘transients in a perpetual state of relocation’.

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. The Na’vi act as a mirror of desire, reflecting for different dispossessed groups their own local resistance and connecting it with other similar acts of resistance in different parts of the globe. The hybrid nature of Avatar’s natives opens a space for reading how the struggles of native indigenous peoples intertwine and how cultures can resist their erasure. Avatar, much like Michael Mann’s film The Last of the Mohicans (USA, 1992), subverts the notion of the other in that the human race, and ultimately the audience as a whole, are the outsiders. Cameron allows us a glimpse of a utopia in which ultimately no human can survive – even Jack must die and be ‘re-born’ – and so we do not feel entirely welcome even in this fictional world. There are reports that some Americans, suffering perhaps from ‘withdrawal syndrome’, committed suicide after seeing the film. As Liz Thomas observed, ‘Movie-goers have admitted being plagued by depression and suicidal thoughts at not being able to visit the planet Pandora’. It seems that what was
depressing to some Americans was a source of hope for the Palestinian people, who saw in *Avatar* not merely their reflection as victims but rather their image as actively resistant agents. After all, as Frantz Fanon argued long ago: ‘For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity.’
