



## BETWEEN GREEN PARADISE AND BLEAK CALAMITY: ELYSIUM & AVATAR

Cenk Tan

### Abstract

Literary utopias and dystopias reflect a wide variety of concerns, from class and gender issues to the environment. These works not only reflect current social matters but also provide a glimpse of possible futures and a warning of perils to come. This article analyzes two science fiction films that have been in the spotlight during the last decade: *Elysium* (Neill Blomkamp, 2013) and *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009). The two films depict disparate, dystopian visions of humanity's future, yet both center on the themes of colonialism and the exploitation of the natural environment and offer ambiguous, open-ended conclusions. Focusing on these themes, this study applies postcolonial ecocriticism to expose the relationship between colonialism and ecocriticism and to show that the subtexts of both films deliver messages about the irrevocable destruction of the natural environment as an unconditional result of colonialism, impressing upon viewers the urgent need to adopt and implement an ecocentric mentality that will lead humanity to a peaceful and sustainable future.

**Keywords:** *Elysium*, *Avatar*, Utopian/Dystopian fiction, film studies, postcolonial ecocriticism.

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Öğr. Gör. Dr., Pamukkale Üniversitesi Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2451-3612> • E-Posta: [ctan@pau.edu.tr](mailto:ctan@pau.edu.tr)

## YEŞİL CENNETLE KASVETLİ FELAKET ARASINDA: ELYSIUM & AVATAR

Öz

Ütopya/distopya yazını sınıf mücadelesinden, cinsiyet ve çevre sorunlarına kadar sosyal konuları ele almaktadır. Bu eserler sadece sosyal meseleleri yansıtmakla kalmayıp, olası tehlikelere karşı uyarı görevi gören gelecek senaryolarına ilişkin bakış açılarını sunmaktadır. Bu makale, son yıllarda kamuoyunun dikkatini çeken iki filmi: *Elysium* (*Elysium: Yeni Cennet*, Neill Blomkamp, 2013) ve *Avatar*'ı (James Cameron, 2009) analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Makale, bu filmlerde insanlığın geleceğine dair farklılık arz eden iki çarpıcı tabloyu ortaya koymaktadır ve açık uçlu sonuçları ile meydana gelen belirsizlik durumlarını irdelemektedir. Tüm farklılıklara rağmen, gişe rekorları kıran bu iki film arasında birtakım benzerlikler de bulunmaktadır. Bu kapsamda, sömürgecilik ve çevre ile ilgili endişeler arasındaki ilişkiyi ortaya koymak amacıyla sömürgecilik sonrası ekoeleştirici kuramından faydalanılmıştır. Bu noktada, sömürgecilik ve emperyalizmin doğaya etkileri, her iki filmin eleştirisinin odak noktasını oluşturmaktadır. Çalışmanın sonucunda, her iki filmin alt metinlerinde sömürgecilik düzeninin doğal çevreye vermiş olduğu geri dönülemez tahribatın boyutları ve insanlığı daha barışçıl ve sürdürülebilir bir geleceğe taşıyacak ekosantrik bir mantalitenin acilen benimsenerek uygulamaya geçirilmesi gerektiğine dair mesajlar açığa çıkarılmaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** *Elysium*, *Avatar*, Distopya, Film Araştırmaları, Sömürgecilik Sonrası Ekoeleştirici.

## Introduction

*Elysium* and *Avatar* are two dystopian science fiction films which share some common characteristics such as space colonisation, climate crisis, and exploitation. In both films, humans abandon Earth due to environmental failure, colonise outer planets, and engage in fierce conflict and execute violent behaviour. Thereby, these films highlight the scope of human damage delivered to nature as a result of colonial activity and, in their sub-text maintain that Earth's natural balance ought to be restored. The various similarities related to colonisation and exploitation in both films' plots and settings help maintain a discussion related to postcolonial ecocriticism which exposes the effects of colonial activity on environmental concerns.

Dystopias serve as probable premonitions and explicitly display the faults of failed societies and their possible outcomes. Failed societies are visions of social order gone in the wrong direction due to particular reasons such as corruption, totalitarianism, and/or climatic/natural catastrophes. As a result, dystopias allow humans to observe carefully how and in what ways endeavours can result in failure and thereby come up with the required means of avoiding such potential disasters. Thus, the genre of dystopia has two main functions. The first one is to point out that any kind of failure is not as far away as generally assumed and secondly to warn the general public against the possible dangers that might lead to a sheer catastrophe which results in positive contributions to the society. Writers of such works in this genre have claimed an ethical and political responsibility by forewarning people of socio-political upheavals to come by demonstrating the probable outcomes of such scenarios (Banerjee, 2016, p. 22).

As a genre, utopia and dystopia are interconnected with a variety of notions such as colonialism, imperialism, environmentalism, feminism, and socialism. The genre's relation to colonialism and environmentalism is noteworthy as there exists a mutual relationship between the two. Since utopian and dystopian works reflect colonial/post-colonial issues, these in their turn reflect ecological issues, as all are intertwined and co-existent:

Surely, any field purporting to theorise the global conditions of colonialism and imperialism cannot but consider the complex interplay of environmental categories such as water, land, energy, habitat, migra-

tion with political or cultural categories such as state, society, conflict, literature, theatre, visual arts. Equally, any field purporting to attach interpretative importance to environment must be able to trace the social, historical and material co-ordinates of categories such as forests, rivers, bio-regions and species (Mukherjee, 2006, p. 144).

Hence, the notion of colonialism is related to environmental concerns because of the fact that colonialism and imperialism exploit natural resources at any time or place and for this reason, colonialism/imperialism and ecological issues are interrelated. Colonised countries and territories experience notable changes in their natural areas. These changes not only affect the physical landscape of the area but also significantly reshape the colonised country's social, cultural, and economic structure.

Moreover, utopian scholar, Tom Moylan puts forward two types of dystopias; classical and critical. He describes the latter as:

With their epical scope of nascent political challenges to ruling systems, open endings that look beyond the last page to other rounds of contestation and realistically utopian possibilities lurking in the iconic details of their alternative worlds, the critical dystopias do not come down on the side of an unproblematized or a resigned anti-utopia. [...] They linger in the terrors of the present even as they exemplify what is needed to transform it (2000, pp. 198-199).

The critical dystopia differs from its other version in the sense that it carries out a message of hope and change rather than mere oppression and restraint. However, these aspirations towards a better future do not get mixed within a purely utopian context as they embody various problematic notions and open endings. Thus, the critical dystopia does not conclude with a crystal clear happy ending, but rather with an ambiguous ending that raises open-ended questions.

This article strives to analyse two dystopian visions of the human future depicted in the films *Elysium* and *Avatar*. Both films expose the problematic nature of colonialism and its negative results on the environment, society, and individuals. These films not only deliver a message of hope but in their plot also attempt to overthrow the oppressive regime that dominates the societies in both settings. At the end, they both succeed in doing so but conclude with many unanswered and conflicting questions.

## **Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Integrating Colonial with Ecological**

Postcolonialism and ecocriticism are closely related to each other in the sense that colonialism damages the natural environment that ecocriticism aspires to preserve. The damage inflicted on natural areas by colonial activity is one of the subject matters of ecocritical study. All life is dependent on the environment and any form of disorder or decay eventually has catastrophic results on the natural environment and our society. To that end, the criticism of postcolonial texts from an ecocritical window is consistent and serves a constructive purpose for scholars and upcoming generations. The notion of colonialism is described as:

A settlement in a new country ... a body of people who settle in a new locality, forming a community subject to or connected with their parent state; the community so formed, consisting of the original settlers and their descendants and successors, as long as the connection with the parent state is kept up (Loomba, 1998, p. 7).

This description of colonialism not only falls short but is also oversimplified considering the historical reality. In addition, the description promotes justification by ascribing positive connotation to the notion of colonialism which is historically proven to be associated with abuse and suffering. There is no sign of the colonised people, the colonised lands, or of its results upon the environment (1998, p. 7). Nevertheless, long before the European colonisation, there has been abundance in empires and kingdoms from the Romans in Europe to the Mongols in Asia and Aztecs in Mexico (1998, p. 8). Hence, in what ways does modern European colonialism differ from these ancient empires? Tom Bottomore provides an explanation by claiming that there are vital differences between the two: "whereas earlier colonialisms were pre-capitalist, modern colonialism was established alongside capitalism in Western Europe" (1983, pp. 81-85). Modern, European colonialism not only exploited other countries' resources but they also restructured these lands economically and socially (Loomba, 1998, p. 9). As a result, the bond between colonialism/imperialism and capitalism is evident.

Postcolonialism is used in a wide variety of contexts which discuss the notion of:

Ways to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operations of empire, the subtleties of subject construction

in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2013, p. 169).

To that end, postcolonialism studies the effects of colonialism by means of historical, political, sociological, and economic analyses. Thus, it can be asserted that colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism are all interconnected and applied in an interrelated correlation to one another. In a setting where colonialism is present, capitalism and imperialism will inevitably be affiliated. Nevertheless, all of these notions result in similar outcomes: exploitation and destruction.

In addition, there is a certain point where postcolonialism converges with environmentalism and this is where ecocriticism comes into use. A commonly referred definition of ecocriticism is: "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. [...] Ecocriticism takes an Earth-centred approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xix). This concise expression maintains that ecocriticism studies and interprets literary texts and works of popular culture from an environment-centred perspective. As a school of scholarly research, ecocriticism fills up an essential niche in the field of literary criticism by interpreting literary works through the perspective of environmental awareness. In this sense, ecocriticism serves a vital function of bringing together different disciplines such as science and literature. Considered as an interdisciplinary theory, ecocriticism is necessarily combined with other theories such as feminism, socialism, and colonialism/postcolonialism.

As a sub-genre of ecocriticism, postcolonial ecocriticism studies literary works by relating postcolonial concepts to environmental concerns and themes. Despite many problems, postcolonial theory and ecocriticism have managed to intersect at some point. While ecocritics have dealt with nature writing for many decades, postcolonial critics have been analysing the various political implications of literary texts. Andrea Parra and Patrick Murphy have expressed the necessity to "go beyond nature writing to include the social injustices that have been visited on many urban communities. [...] and to address the environmental imbalances threatening urban life just as much as those endangering forests, deserts, prairies, oceans and wetlands and so on" (1999, pp. 1099-1100).

These concerns go far beyond the analysis of nature writing to make a transition into issues of the social sphere. According to this view, natural and social concerns are interconnected and need to be addressed together. These critics have thus contributed to widen the scope of ecocriticism and adapted the theory to the social area rather than keeping it isolated within nature writing or nature criticism. Thanks to these critics, ecocriticism's scope evolved from a descriptive, passive theory to a dynamic, social, and broad literary movement. Ursula Heise defines ecocriticism's objective as the "triple allegiance to the scientific study of nature, the scholarly analysis of cultural representations, and the political struggle for more sustainable ways of inhabiting the natural world" (2006, p. 503).

In this respect, ecocriticism studies nature writing in literary texts, but it also paves the way for a better understanding of Earth, including the need to take up political action so as to adopt a more conscious co-existence with nature. Furthermore, combining postcolonial theory and ecocriticism has led to the notion of postcolonial ecocriticism which Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin define as:

That form of criticism which appreciates the enduring non-instrumentality of environmental writing, as well as gauging its continuing usefulness in mobilising individual and collective support. This insistence on the at least partial autonomy of the literary text, which is a feature of both postcolonial and environmental criticism, will be adhered to although literary choices are rarely without their political consequences (2010, p. 33).

Environmental writing cannot be fully independent from any other political or social tendencies. As well as containing an individual aspect, ecocriticism is also linked to a variety of social matters. Postcolonial ecocriticism offers a direct association of environmental concerns with postcolonialism's affiliations including cultural, social, political, and historical.

In addition, the combination of ecocriticism and postcolonial theory has also led to certain positive effects. Postcolonialism has widened the scope of ecocriticism. The benefit of this merging is that: "it is part of the goal of postcolonial ecocritics to expand what has been predominately American and British ecocriticism to include thinking from other parts of the globe, from other histories, cultural differences, and languages" (Sudmeyer, p. 2013, 21).

On this behalf, a predominantly British and American theory broadened its scope to become a worldwide school of criticism encompassing a large spectrum of territories throughout the world. This is also one of the reasons behind the emergence of postcolonial ecocriticism. To that end, the postcolonial fraction of ecocriticism emerged from the very criticisms directed at this specific notion. Jake Nelson defines postcolonial ecocriticism as:

A way of thinking that seeks to understand how top-level, elite-driven processes like (neo) colonialism, capitalism, international development, interstate alliances or the centralization or devolution of power are connected to the spaces in which people live and act, while at the same time recognizing that the reclamation of space, land and resources is a key part of the process of peoples' liberation. (2015, p. 140).

In this respect, the combination of postcolonial theory and ecocriticism takes place at the utmost comprehensive level. The critique that ecocriticism undermined social matters and that it only concentrated on the Anglo-American territories became no more relevant. Thus, the natural environment's association with social and economic notions has been established so as to build a bridge between the ecological and the social sphere where "postcolonial and ecocritical studies both share a commitment to interdisciplinarity and have often drawn broadly from the social and environmental sciences" (Cilano & DeLoughrey, 2007, pp. 73-74).

To sum up, the specific interdisciplinarity of postcolonial ecocriticism has provided diversity within scholarly circles which eventually filled a significant gap in literary criticism. Since human activities share a social background, postcolonial ecocriticism's intersection is preferred for the analysis of literary texts and works belonging to popular culture.

### **A Vision of Green Paradise: Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium***

*Elysium* was released in 2013 by South-African director Neill Blomkamp. In the film, the year is 2154, and Earth is devastated by natural disasters, making it a place of chaos and turmoil. The wealthy elite have established a satellite into Earth's orbit, a remote, space colony where only the privileged may live. The artificial settlement called Elysium is a heavenly paradise where no wars, diseases, poverty, or struggle exist. They possess all resources, including high technology. Med-bays are units where they



heal every possible disease using a simple scan. However, these means are only at the service of Elysian citizens. Earth, on the other hand, has truly become a nightmarish place. Environmental catastrophes and overpopulation have caused diseases, wars, famine, and perpetual chaos making Earth an uninhabitable place.

Moreover, technology has a central significance in science-fiction. The context is fostered by two thoughts: "on totalitarian thought and the thought of technological and scientific advancement" (İkiz, 2016, p. 22). In this context, oppression is combined with technology. *Elysium* portrays an extremely technologically advanced society in sharp contrast with a forsaken, underdeveloped, and oppressive society. In *Elysium*, sophisticated technology is at the service of the privileged that are blessed with the means of instant healing and many other high-tech inventions. The underprivileged earthlings, on the other hand, are refrained from using such highly-developed technological devices. As a consequence, advanced technology is only meant for the elite.

*Elysium* is an obvious metaphor which can be interpreted in a variety of ways. From a postcolonial perspective, it represents the struggle between the colonisers and the colonised. While the Elysians enjoy the latest science, technology, medicine, etc., the colonised live in an overpopulated, barren desert where death and disease are common. Elysians also enjoy guaranteed security since no other human beings can invade or trespass into *Elysium* from Earth or other planets (Simões, 2014, p. 3). The high-tech defence systems can shoot down any trespasser in a matter of minutes.

In colonialism, the exploitation of the colonised by the colonisers is a long process. However, after the independence of former colonies, this exploitation does not come to an end as imperial powers either continue to exploit these states or create the necessary conditions for them to be obliged to collaborate with them in economic terms. This endless cycle of exploitation is visible in *Elysium* as well. The privileged have set up an independent colony with its own laws and measures claiming to be an autonomous entity. Nonetheless, they keep exploiting Earth's resources and cheap labour as the robot factories are all actively functioning on Earth. Its owner and boss is a citizen of *Elysium* who flies over once in a while to check on his business affairs. Colonial powers in *Elysium* keep exploiting the colonised subject: Earth. The colonisers rule and take complete control of the colonised territories as it is the case in

*Elysium*. Earth is governed by Elysium which claims the right to rule and manipulate this chaotic, old, and polluted planet.

Another factor is the method employed by the colonisers to keep the system going. Brutal torture and zero tolerance are measures that are enforced upon Earth's citizens with a fierce, totalitarian rule. Law enforcement and state service are implemented by robots which show no mercy to any human being. Robots are more valuable than humans in *Elysium*. Due to the epidemic and mass killings, human life has no value. This becomes clear when Max gets stuck in a radioactive chamber and the owner, Carlyle runs over to see what is happening:

John Carlyle: What is going on? Why has production stopped?

Foreman: He's been exposed.

John Carlyle: Don't. Don't breathe on me. Cover your mouth.

Foreman: I'm sorry, sir (Blomkamp, 2013).

In this dialogue, the foreman worries more about the factory unit than about Max, who is fatally exposed to radiation and expected to die within five days. The life of a simple factory worker is insignificant and inferior as he/she can be instantly substituted. Therefore, human life is worthless in this universe of sharp class distinction. The colonised people of Earth are dehumanised in various ways. They live under miserable conditions, are faced with famine, and receive poor medical treatment. Moreover, the state and law enforcement officers (mostly androids) treat Earth's citizens in an inhumane, brutal manner.

To that end, pioneer utopian scholar, Lyman Tower Sargent identifies two types of colonies:

There have been two types of colonies, and both were designed to serve the interests of the home country, not the interests of the colony. One was primarily intended to exploit the labour, raw materials, and wealth of the colony. The second was designed for settlement, either to offload surplus population or as places to send undesirables. (2010, p. 69).

Sargent adds that the typical motive of people for leaving their countries to settle in a new land was based on the utopian ambition to establish a better life (2010, p. 70). While this notion has certain validity in *Elysium*, it also has a drawback due to the sharp class distinction that

stands at the core of this film. The majority of people living on Earth aspire to get to Elysium in some way or the other for the sole reason of leaving their harsh lives behind and obtaining the opportunity to live under better conditions, including those concerning health and security. However, this utopian dream is obstructed by class segregation as the wealthy elite have established Elysium for the well-being and preservation of their own kind and offspring. Thus, the Elysians have confined their colony for their private use and vowed to keep others out at all costs. Due to its strict class distinction principles, Elysium seems to be more of an elitist stronghold rather than a typical settler colony.

In addition to colonialism, the theory of ecocriticism needs to be evaluated along with colonialism, as nature plays a significant role in the film's main storyline. Earth in the year 2154 has become a hellish, desert-like place and the affluent, *crème de la crème* have established an artificial heaven on Earth's orbit. Its vast green areas have improved air-quality compared to Earth. Hence, the citizens living on Elysium are distinguished not just in terms of technology but in terms of material means and life standards in general.

In the film, it is not revealed how the Earth has become such a filthy and useless place but it is assumed that wars and natural disasters have caused this condition. Hence, the elite are left with no choice but to flee Earth and form a colony in space. The fact that once Earth is destroyed, it cannot be restored to its primary condition is the covert message conveyed through the film. Elysium's foundation as a colony is a result of the permanent destruction of the natural environment by human civilisation. Therefore, the ecological balance of Earth has to be preserved.

In short, humans abuse the natural environment, flee from Earth to a colony, and continue to manipulate Earth from the outer colony. The damage given to nature by capitalism and its forms of production are other issues handled in the film via android factories that are highly radioactive. Armadyne Corporation is a gigantic company-owned and administered by an Elysian (Carlyle) who is exploiting Earth at high speed. On the one hand, humans have wrecked the Earth and created a new living space outside of the planet but on the other hand, a distinguished few of the upper class have managed to isolate themselves from the common folk. The dichotomy is clearly visible in *Elysium*.

This dichotomy points out the inconsistency of human conduct in *Elysium*. Environmental ambiguity encompasses controversial and inconsistent human behaviour towards the natural environment. Karen Thornber established this new concept which:

Manifests in multiple, intertwined ways including ambivalent attitudes toward nature; confusion about the actual condition of the nonhuman, often a consequence of ambiguous information; contradictory human behaviors toward ecosystems; and discrepancies among attitudes, conditions, and behaviors that lead to actively downplaying and acquiescing to nonhuman degradation, as well as to inadvertently harming the very environments one is attempting to protect (2012, p. 6).

This is obvious in *Elysium* as humans flee from the Earth which they have left uninhabitable in order to form a new settlement that is ecologically sustainable. As a result, instead of fixing Earth's ecological problems, humans have chosen to abandon their own planet and form a new colony in space. Considering that all human energy, capital, and resources could be used to re-establish Earth's natural areas, those who hold the power in *Elysium* choose not to do so. The actual motive which clarifies this environmental ambiguity is class conflict. The upper classes desire to isolate themselves from the lower/working classes in order to live a privileged life of peace and prosperity. Rather than saving people and restoring nature, they choose to save themselves. To this end, without strict class distinction, environmental ambiguity would not be present in this film as humans would commit themselves into solving Earth's ecological issues.

As a result, nature and ecological issues are central aspects in *Elysium*. The consumption and exploitation of Earth will eventually force human beings to form remote colonies in outer space. Nevertheless, *Elysium*'s amazing green fields and magnificent forests are artificial and provide a temporary solution as the capitalist mentality is to consume those as well. Colonialism and environmentalism are strictly interconnected in *Elysium* with one leading to the other:

Both ecocriticism and postcolonial studies have hence pointed to the ways in which culture is always embedded in material reality, and in which culture and politics are deeply enmeshed with each other. In order to have an impact on world politics, both argue, our ways of thinking have to change. It is in this sense that both ecocriticism and

postcolonial studies have an element of didacticism: Both seek to urge humankind to change its ways (Banerjee, 2016, p. 195).

The essential function of both ecocriticism and postcolonialism highlights the fact that these schools are not simply descriptive, passive theories but rather political tendencies which urge people to take action in order to preserve the natural environment. Hence, these schools strive for change within our society.

In addition to ecological issues, the main idea of the film presents a meticulously constructed metaphor that can be applied to any condition. This metaphor was revealed by the director Neill Blomkamp in an interview:

District 9 was a singular anti-Apartheid metaphor and Elysium is a more general metaphor about immigration and how the First World and Third World meet, the South African director clarifies. But the thing that I like the most about the metaphor is that it can be scaled to suit almost any scenario. Like Elysium can be South Africa and the future of LA is Zimbabwe with people crossing the border. It can be a pocket of LA where it's like Compton and Beverly Hills. It can be California; it can be the U.S. and Mexico (Desowitz, 2016).

*Elysium* can be applied to various structures and is therefore location free. The binary opposition between Earth and Elysium can be interpreted in a wide variety of ways such as: coloniser vs. colonised, European vs. non-European, civilised vs. primitive, immigrant vs. citizen, white vs. non-white, rich vs. poor, or even suburban vs. ghetto. One of the clues concerning the binary opposition between earthlings and Elysians are the languages that are spoken by the two. Earthlings are depicted as speaking Spanish, Portuguese or English with a sharp Latino accent whereas the citizens of Elysium speak unbroken English and French, which is another direct reference to colonialism and class consciousness (Simões, 2014, pp. 6-7). The language they speak determines their identity and social status. In brief, the major struggle is between the haves and the have nots. Thereby, Elysium predominantly consists of white, Caucasian people. In an internet article on *The Guardian*, Blomkamp states that his film conveys a moral message: "the movie's meant to be an allegory, the material inequality that pervades our world today is "an outrage". [...] You'd literally have to change the human genome to stop wealth discrepancy" (Cox, 2018).

This moral message does not effectively reach the public simply because people take inequality and injustice for granted and assume an indifferent attitude towards cases of social inequality (Cox, 2018). It might be true that the message conveyed by Blomkamp is not received in the sense that it was meant but this does not come to mean that the covert messages *Elysium* presents are not void of compassion and morality. On the contrary, the film's sub-text messages regarding egalitarianism and environmentalism are pretentiously manifested to the public opinion. The happy ending enforces idealist messages of equality and humanism while leaving some open ended questions behind such as: for how long will Elysium be able to provide for Earth's citizens and will Elysium truly transform into an egalitarian society?

### **A Futuristic Tale of Colonialism: James Cameron's Avatar**

The second movie analysed in this article is the blockbuster *Avatar*. Directed by James Cameron, the film was released in 2009 and won many significant awards including three Oscars. It was also the film where the latest 3D and state of the art cameras were first introduced to the white screen. The innovative technology resulted in a unique cinematic experience which attracted millions of viewers to movie theatres.

In addition to the high-tech spectacle, the film's plot takes place on Pandora, a planet in the Alpha Centauri star system. In 2154, humans have set up a colony on Pandora and their goal is to get hold of a precious mineral called unobtainium. However, they face the ultimate challenge when they find out that a vast amount of unobtainium is hidden under a sacred tree that belongs to the planet's native species called Na'vi. These living beings are tall, blue creatures living in complete harmony with Pandora's unspoiled and breath-taking nature. Their religion incorporates respect for and worship of nature and of all living beings that belong to her. As the name Pandora symbolically suggests, Americans virtually open Pandora's Box with their presence on the planet.

The Na'vi stand between humans and their mission to take possession of unobtainium. In order to get them out of the way, humans, or as mentioned, Americans come up with a meticulous plan: they send an avatar (remotely controlled surrogate in the shape of a Na'vi) to infiltrate into the Na'vi and learn all their ways including weaknesses. Jake Sully, a paralysed American soldier takes on the mission his deceased brother left unfinished due to his death. Colonel Quaritch gives him the necessary

instructions: "look, Sully, I want you to learn these savages from the inside, I want you to gain their trust. I need to know how to force their cooperation or hammer them hard if they won't" (Cameron, 2009).

The colonel gives Sully instructions that will ensure his survival amidst the foreign territory. Using a sharp and vulgar selection of words, the colonel gives the natives two options: cooperation or devastation. For the colonisers, there exist no rules, boundaries, and ethics in the quest to accomplish their objective. Jake Sully, who is in a wheelchair, discovers his secondary life in the physical shape of an avatar. From this moment on, Jake starts his interaction with the Na'vi. Despite being an undercover spy of the Americans, Jake soon blends in with the Na'vi and enjoys the guidance of Neytiri, the daughter of a major clan leader. Jake soon turns against his own kind and begins to organise the Na'vi for a fierce battle against the foreign invaders. With the help of a group of friends, each one in the shape of an avatar, they manage to eliminate the Americans.

From its release, *Avatar* was severely criticised for promoting Anti-American sentiment. Americans in *Avatar* are reflected as greedy, selfish, disrespectful, violent, materialistic, and militaristic. Although they have no business in Pandora, they claim the planet as if they were the natural inhabitants. Americans claim they own nature whereas the natives claim they belong to nature: "all energy is only borrowed, and one day you have to give it back" (Cameron, 2009).

The American spirit is personified in the character of Colonel Quaritch who is the ultimate villain of the film. At the beginning of the film, he gives a speech to his soldiers, making his intentions clear:

You are not in Kansas anymore. You are on Pandora, ladies and gentlemen. Respect that fact every second of every day. If there is a Hell, you might wanna go there for some R & R after a tour on Pandora. Out there beyond that fence every living thing that crawls, flies, or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat your eyes for jujubes. We have an indigenous population of humanoids called the Na'vi. They're fond of arrows dipped in a neurotoxin that will stop your heart in one minute (Cameron, 2009).

The Colonel's tone is mostly sharp and aggressive. What lies behind this aggressive tone is the intention of plundering Pandora and getting hold of the desired precious element. Despite the fact that Pandora belongs to the Na'vi, the commander speaks as if the area were

human property. The colonisers' use of language clearly reflects their perception and attitude towards the natives whom they quickly address as inferior beings that ought to be oppressed. The soldiers ascribe all types of negative qualities to the Na'vi. They are the ones who are savage, uncivilized, violent, and dangerous. As a result of this reasoning, they cannot be left alone to live freely in the world of Pandora. They must be subordinated and taken under total control to continue their existence under the hegemony of human reign. This is their ultimate and inevitable fate about which they have no other choice but to accept.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, Sargent coined two forms of colonies: settler and exploitative (2010, p. 69). In *Avatar*, the type of colonialism imposed on the planet Pandora is an exploitative one. Americans arrive on Pandora for the sole purpose of exploiting its richness and natural resources, not for the purpose of settling there. On the other hand, some consequences come to the surface:

While the descendants of the original inhabitants were using the settler utopias to justify change, in some countries the descendants of the settlers were beginning to learn about and incorporate the myths, including the utopian ones, of the original inhabitants in their new utopias. In the exploitative colonies, the same use was made of the political traditions of the colonial power to justify independence (Sargent, 2010, p. 82).

In *Avatar*, although the colonisers have no prior intention of settling in Pandora, events take a strong twist as a group of soldiers opposing the dominant colonial ideology form a solid bond with the natives. During this bonding process, Jake spontaneously learns about the Na'vi tradition and as a result establishes a friendly and sentimental relationship with the natives. Led by Jake, this sentiment eventually leads this group to switch sides with the realization that humans are the actual exploiters and warmongers. As soon as the humans arrive in Pandora, they begin making plans about destroying the planet's natives. *Avatar* is the story of colonialism overflowing into outer space. Jea Sophia Oh questions the actual reason why Americans go to Pandora:

*Avatar* creates a world that feeds into the 'human desire' to escape. One could say that the film suggests an "exodus" from the Earth to another place. The aim of the Human Empire is, here, obviously to acquire energy, matter, and natural resources – by all means, CAPITAL.



Spivak defines capitalism as neocolonialism, which always means the largely economic rather than the territorial enterprise of imperialism. As such neocolonialism is another name for late capital imperialism (2011, p. 3).

As a matter of fact, *Avatar* could be interpreted as a representation of neocolonialism. When the world's resources and energy have run out, colonialism spreads out to outer planets. It can be reasoned that this scenario is not so far from reality. While engaging the space race once again, superpower nations have set their eyes on outer planets.

Neocolonialism is directly related to ecological issues in *Avatar*. In other words, environmentalism and ecology are central issues in the film. From the plot to the visual effects, all action revolves around the unspoiled nature of Pandora. The Na'vi Goddess, Eywa is the personification of Pandora's nature. All living beings on Pandora live in harmony with nature and respect one another. The tree of Souls is the place where the Na'vi perform their ritual to naturalise Jack into an original native. The fact that the valuable element unobtainium lies beneath the tree of souls is another symbolical issue. Americans are trying to obtain unobtainium which lies under the sacred tree of souls, a personification of Mother Nature.

The Na'vi lifestyle resembles the lifestyle of indigenous people who live in many parts of the world such as the Native Americans in North and South America, African tribes in Africa, and other indigenous peoples in other parts of the world. Jack's transformation from an aggressive soldier to a Na'vi native is noteworthy. At first, he uses the *Avatar* to spy on the Na'vi for the Americans but once he gets acquainted, his attitude begins to change. His ultimate awakening occurs when he establishes a bond with the Toruk, a huge flying bird-like animal (Oh, 2011, pp. 14-15). This bond makes him a true Na'vi and now he is ready for the final battle to protect nature. This is where Jake makes his heroic speech:

The Sky People have sent us a message... that they can take whatever they want. That no one can stop them. Well, we will send them a message. You ride out as fast as the wind can carry you. You tell the other clans to come. Tell them Toruk Macto calls to them! You fly now, with me! My brothers! Sisters! And we will show the Sky People... that they cannot take whatever they want! And that this... this is our land (Cameron, 2009).

Jake, a paralysed soldier before, is now reborn as a strong Na'vi and Jake embraces his new identity. Finally, the human Jake dies and the new Na'vi Jake is reborn from his ashes. This new Jake is a renewed person that respects all non-human life and nature's elements. From the American perspective, Jake has betrayed his own kind but from an ethical point of view, he has assured his conscience by siding with the natives. Thereby, Jake is at peace with his inner self because he bases his actions on morality.

In *Avatar*, the colonisers are in a state of creating and implementing highly advanced technological devices and weapons whereas the natives, the Na'vi are left with primitive weapons mainly due to their tribal and collective lifestyle. There exists a tremendous contrast between the colonisers and the colonised in *Avatar* and technological advancement is used for the purpose of colonisation and exploitation of natural resources. The only contrast between the two movies is the notion that in *Avatar*, humans set off to exploit a distant planet while in *Elysium*, the elite isolate themselves from the common folk by establishing a satellite in the orbit of Earth so as to enjoy a life of privilege and luxury. In both films, nature is exploited to the fullest extent and social injustice reaches its peak as a consequence of this exploitation.

In addition, *Avatar* is one of the most ecologically aware productions of the last decade as the film defends an anti-militarist and environmentalist spirit. It ends with the Na'vi triumph over the invaders but nevertheless, their battles leave most of Pandora severely damaged. At the end, some questions regarding the future of Pandora remain open and unanswered.

On the whole, *Avatar* is a meticulously constructed metaphor for various binary conflicts. It could be viewed as a reference to a lot of conflicts: Americans in Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan, Americans in the New World (against Natives), European colonisers in Africa and Asia, etc. The conflict could also be related to conflicts between North and South, East and West (Simões, 2014, p. 7). Comparable to *Avatar*, similar analogies were constructed in *Elysium* as well.

The movie is openly associated with active politics, in specific the military intervention of the United States in Iraq which coincides with the release of *Avatar*. The US. was determined to carry out military intervention amidst debates of Iraq's possession of weapons of mass

destruction. The director admits the references to America's various military conflicts including the Gulf and the Vietnam War. In an internet article, Cameron expresses the following:

There is this long, wonderful history of the human race written in blood. We have this tendency to just take what we want. And that's how we treat the natural world as well. There's this sense of we're here, we're big, we've got the guns, we've got the technology, therefore we're entitled to every damn thing on this planet. That's not how it works and we're going to find out the hard way if we don't kind of wise up and start seeking a life that's in balance with the natural life on Earth (Brown, 2009).

On that account, Cameron exposes the colonial, Anglo-American mentality and admits that this is morally wrong and a more peaceful and feasible mentality has to be acknowledged in order to live in peace with one another as well as with nature.

## Conclusion

*Elysium* and *Avatar* share striking similarities in a variety of issues and deal with postcolonial as well as ecocritical concerns. In both movies, there is an escape from Earth to outer space. This escape is the result of the permanent destruction of Earth's natural environment and resources. In both films, there is an exploitation of resources and use of violence and militarism to gain new assets. Both films take place in the year 2154 and have an open ending. In *Elysium*, Earth's citizens triumph over *Elysium* and eventually become Elysian citizens so as to enjoy all their privileges, primarily of advanced medical care. In *Avatar*, on the other hand, the natives prevail over Americans in spite of heavy casualties and serious damage to the planet Pandora. One of the major differences is the fact that *Elysium* is more focused on class awareness whereas *Avatar* on issues of colonialism/imperialism.

In addition, both films are also about the preservation of hope. Raffaella Baccolini discusses the importance of hope in dystopian texts:

Recent novels allow readers and protagonists to hope: the ambiguous, open endings maintain the utopian impulse within the work. In fact, by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those groups-women and other ex-centric subjects whose

subject position is not contemplated by hegemonic discourse-for whom subject status has yet to be attained (2004, p. 520).

*Elysium* and *Avatar* both fall within the classification of critical dystopia as both reflect a dystopian world that is challenged and contested. Both productions present serious forms of opposition against the hegemonic system and thrive to overthrow the oppressive structure. As highlighted by Baccolini, hope is the persisting element in this type of fiction. However, despite all the hope and struggle, a happy ending is not evident:

A sense of sadness accompanies the awareness and knowledge that the protagonist has attained. Instead of providing some compensatory and comforting conclusion, the critical dystopia's open ending leaves its characters to deal with their choices and responsibilities (Baccolini, 2004, p. 521).

*Elysium* and *Avatar* both seem to have a happy ending but nevertheless a short-lasting happiness that results in question marks. In *Elysium*, the system of the wealthy elite is overthrown so that the common people of Earth can enjoy the advanced technological benefits of Elysium, especially the ability to cure chronic diseases. At first glance, this outcome may seem satisfactory but soon leads to immense problems. Along with the flow of new people coming to Elysium, the limited resources of this advanced colony will not be able to provide for the thousands of people streaming from Earth. Thus, Elysium will either collapse or will have to put restrictions and new policies concerning the arrival of new citizens in order to preserve the well-being of the settlement.

A similar condition is true for *Avatar*. As the humans have been defeated by the natives, with the help of the human opposition, invaders are finally returning to Earth. How will the remaining, so called opposition members maintain their lives with the natives for generations to come? Or even worse, what if the invading forces decide to come back for vengeance with more effective weapons and a better fleet of war vehicles? In short, various questions remain unanswered from the open-ended conclusions of these two films.

From the perspective of postcolonial ecocriticism, both productions reflect a similar ethical message. Colonisation goes hand in hand with exploitation. The abuse of natural areas is most likely to result in social injustice. Both films demonstrate the destructive effects of colonisation.

Pandora and Elysium are both allegorical settings of colonisation, similar to the colonisation of African or Asian countries by European powers. The exploitation of natives and the abuse of nature are parallel in both films. Thus, the colonisations of Pandora and Elysium have a highly discriminatory effect and cause social injustice in both the society and the ecological balance. In Pandora, nature gets torn apart due to human greed for precious minerals whereas in Elysium, Earth turns into an abandoned wasteland where the unfortunate and the underprivileged are left to struggle for survival.

All in all, *Elysium* and *Avatar* are both productions that expose colonialism's harmful results on the environment and promote hope through their open endings. Despite the high technology and scientific advancement, these films demonstrate the extent of the lack of morality in human beings and their actions because of the nonprogressive nature of human morality throughout the ages. Finally, they also emphasise the priority to preserve planet Earth and the ecological balance prior to colonising other planets as colonisation only leads to chaos and conflict. As a consequence, it is imperative to establish and adopt an ecocentric mentality that will ensure the preservation of natural areas and the sustainability of Earth's ecosystem. Ecocentrism is the key to the preservation and prioritisation of the natural environment that is necessary in order to maintain and secure the peaceful existence of future generations. This mentality will not only preserve ecological balance but also pave the way for permanent peace on Earth by excluding all exploitative activities such as colonialism and imperialism which are highly detrimental for the ecosystem.

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