

Avatar in the Amazon – Narratives of Cultural Conversion and Environmental Salvation between Cultural Theory and Popular Culture

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Abstract

In 2010 the *New York Times* reported that ‘[t]ribes of Amazon Find an Ally Out of “Avatar”’, James Cameron. The alliance was against the building of Belo Monte, a hydroelectric-dam in the Xingu River in Brazil. Cameron made a documentary about Belo Monte, *A Message from Pandora*. Here he states that *Avatar* becomes real in the struggle against the dam. This appears to confirm U. K. Heise’s observation that the ‘Amazon rainforest has long functioned as a complex symbol of exotic natural abundance, global ecological connectedness, and environmental crisis’. This construal, however, downplays the ‘symbols’ cultural components. In this article I show that the image of an ecological ‘rainforest Indian’ and a particular kind of culture constitutes a crucial part of the Amazon as ‘a complex’ cross-disciplinary ‘symbol’. Firstly, I examine how an Amazonian topology (closeness to nature, natural cultures) is both a product of an interdisciplinary history, and a place to speak from for ethno-political activist. Next I analyze how Amazonian cultures have been turned into ‘ethnological isolates’ representing a set of grand theoretical problems in anthropology, not least concerning the nature/culture-distinction, and how environmentalism has deployed the same topology. Finally I examine how *Avatar* and one of its cinematic intertexts, John Boorman’s *The Emerald Forest*, is used as a model to understand the struggle over the Belo Monte. In a paradoxical way the symbolic power of indigenous people in ecological matters here appears to be dependent upon a non-relation, and a reestablishment of clear cut cultural boundaries, where ‘the tribal’ is also associated with the human past. Disturbingly such symbolic exportation of solutions is consonant with current exportations of the solution of ecological problems to ‘other places’.

Keywords: Avatar, Amazonia, Environmentalism, Narrative and Indigeneity, Cultural Theory

The Amazon is home to hundreds of indigenous communities with traditions of stewardship dating back thousands of years. And yet the Amazon serves an even greater purpose for all life on Earth: it is the living heart of our planet and the heat pump of our global weather system. Without it, our chances of stopping global climate chaos are zero. *For no reason less than the survival of our species*, we need your support to protect the Amazon today.

Amazon Watch (2013a)

Introduction

In April 2010 the *New York Times* reported that '[t]ribes of Amazon Find an Ally Out of "Avatar"' (New York Times 10/4/2010). The alliance in question was formed between James Cameron, the director of *Avatar*, and indigenous people against the building of Belo Monte, a hydroelectric-dam in the Xingu River, a tributary to the Amazon in the state of Pará, Brazil. Opponents of Belo Monte identify damaging cultural and ecological consequences; deforestation and flooding threatens local biodiversity, as well as the global climate due to massive emission of methane. Moreover, the forced displacement of about 20 000 people will have severe consequences for indigenous cultures (Hall et al 2012).

Cameron made a documentary about his journey to the Xingu to fight the dam, *A Message from Pandora* (2010). Here he asserts that *Avatar* (2009) becomes real in the struggle against the Belo Monte. Further, the film shows how the director and leading actor joins indigenous leaders and 'lives *Avatar*'. For instance, we see how Sheyla Juruna, a leader of the Juruna people, paints Cameron's face and greets him as 'our new warrior' – a sign of alliance and cross-cultural collaboration eminently readable in global public culture.

Such co-authored symbolic actions appear to confirm Ursula K. Heise's observation that the

Amazon rainforest has long functioned as a complex symbol of exotic natural abundance, global ecological connectedness, and environmental crisis in the European and North American public spheres (2008: 91).

Yet Heise's construal downplays a crucial component of the 'complexity' of this 'symbol'; its underlying assumptions about 'tribal culture', and how it is constituted by acts of cross-cultural collaborations based on such assumptions. In this article I shall show that the image of the 'rainforest Indian' and a particular kind of culture constitutes a crucial part of the Amazon as 'a complex' and cross-disciplinary 'symbol'. In the words of Stephen Nugent, the 'iconic forest Indian [...] embody the

anti-history of the *ancient tribal isolate* yet also exemplify the survivor of a crushing set of *historical transformations*' (2007: 16, my emphasis). Thus, this iconic figure is placed outside history, in a cultural 'isolate', while he/she simultaneously is a 'survivor' of history (cf. Ramos 1998).

My aim is to examine some salient, cultural and human aspects of the 'complex symbol', and how it is articulated with the paradoxical topology and temporality described by Nugent. I shall be concerned with how different discourses converge around 'the rainforest Indian' and his/her construal of nature, and how particular notions of cultural place and time are mobilized. My main focus will be upon how notions of 'global ecological connectedness' is constructed as a *symbolon* in the etymological sense of the word,¹ namely a token of an alliance, a bond, between 'local' men in the Amazon and 'global humanity', and how certain notions of culture underpin such alliances between 'local men' and the *Anthropos*.

In environmentalist deployments of the 'symbol' Amazonians are construed as local forest keepers for global humanity. In the language of the NGO *Amazon Watch*, for instance, indigenous people are both an instrument for 'our' salvation; as 'the stewards of our planetary life-support systems' they play a global environmental role, and a source of ecological knowledge associated with ancient and indigenous knowledge that 'we' have forgotten: 'The indigenous peoples of the Amazon have long known this simple truth: what we do to the planet we do to ourselves' (Amazon Watch 2014).

This topology (ancient and/or alternative knowledge is found 'there') is also in play in recent cultural theory, not least in attempts to dismantle what is construed as the Euro- and anthropocentric assumptions underpinning the modern nature/culture-distinction. Amazonian perspectivism has, for instance, been a major influence behind the 'so-called ontological turns' (Halbmayer 2012: 9). If based on a different cultural theory than environmentalist 'essentialism', the topology is surprisingly similar; real/new knowledge about nature and culture is to be found, there, in a 'tribal isolate' on the outside of historical time.

A brief tour through the intellectual terrain and the issues associated with perspectivism as a cross-cultural alternative to 'our' notions of nature and culture both illustrates the power of the topology I am concerned with, its 'survival' in high theory, and it offers a set of categories that can be used to analyze the notion of the 'indigenous isolate'. Vassos Argyrou claims that environmentalism has produced a shift in cultural interpretation. He asserts that the exemplary anthropological problem was how to interpret 'natives'' disregard for the demarcation that separates nature, culture and the supernatural – without falling back on evolutionary ethnocentrism (2005: 64-65). The solution was to produce thick descriptions in which the informant's statements about animistic nature were converted into symbolic statements about society (magic was 'really' a social-symbolic event, not an attempt to cause changes in nature). Thus, the demarcation between nature and culture is re-

stored in the anthropological discourse, and the ‘native’ is freed of charges of making category mistakes (constructing an anthropomorphic nature). If, however, it is admitted that indigenous peoples have real insight in ecology, this kind of cultural translation becomes redundant. Now, natives ‘mean what they say and much of what they say is true’ (ibid: 65). As ecology the ontology of others can be taken at face value. Nevertheless, Argyrou claims, the ‘green primitive’ is still seen as a link to past forms of thought that ‘we’ have forgotten: ‘[n]ative populations are once again used as key building blocks in the latest Western constructs – the environmentalist vision of the world’ (ibid: 72).

Amazonian perspectivism could be seen as a case in point. According to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, its main advocate, Western multiculturalism – i.e. the assumption that the world consist of different cultures that construe the same nature differently, the objective world of the natural sciences – is reversed in Amazonian cosmology. Here the original state of all beings is culture, not nature. All beings have soul and share the same cultural project, values and categories; they just perceive their external bodily shape (nature) differently. While the Jaguar may seem (to us) to be sipping the blood of his prey, he is ‘really’, from his own perspective drinking manioc bear. Thus multiculturalism is turned into multi-naturalism. If we turn to one of the ethnographic influences behind Amazonian perspectivism, Kai Årheim’s ‘Ecosofía Makuna’, we actually find that the anthropological and the environmental registers are fused. According to Årheim, the ‘integrated system of ideas’ of the Makuna and the ‘values and practices’ underpinning it, constitutes a ‘shamanistic ecosophy” that is comparable to the eco-philosophy of Arne Næss. This is so because both ‘systems’ invest nature with value (Årheim 1993: 122). Therefore, the shamanistic eco-philosophy, found ‘elsewhere’, provides a lesson in sustainable living for the secular and industrialized world (ibid).

Orin Starn has observed that perspectivism is based upon ‘the idea of discrete and bounded cultures’, along with ‘the treatment of “other” cultures as a kind of laboratory’ and ‘the complete absence of any reference to history’ (2012: 193-94). Moreover, Alcida Ramos has attributed this a-historic essentialism to an heritage from structuralism: ‘perspectivism replicates structuralism [...] without the latter’s ambitious quest to arrive at a universal human mind frame’ (2012: 483). Not least this is due to the fact that perspectivism is based upon a structural comparison of distinct cultural wholes, a cross-cultural topology, that turns out to be perfect inversions of each other in respect to how they construe the nature/culture-relation, the key distinction in ‘high-structuralism’ (Turner 2009).

Despite the absence of a concern with the history and the networks behind the production of this global comparison between Western and Amerindian ontologies, Bruno Latour views Amazonian perspectivism as a ‘bomb’ undermining the cleavage he associates with the modern demarcation of the relation between nature and culture. Moreover, Latour praises perspectivism as the beginning of ‘a bright new period of flourishing [...] for [...] anthropology’, and relates this to a situation of

ecological peril: the bomb is about to go off ‘now that nature has shifted from being a resource to become a highly contested topic, just at the time [...] when ecological crisis [...] has reopened the debate that ‘naturalism’ had tried prematurely to close (2009: 2). In a time of ecological crisis, then, there is an Amazonian foreshadowing of a rupture with ‘the modern constitution’ (parallel to the one taking place in theory). In this ‘constitution’ science is deemed not to be a social product but to be derived from a sphere of nature that existed apart from humans. This demarcation, however, is merely a fact of theory. If we turn to socio-cultural practice, we find processes of translation and mediation that constantly interlink the two domains; all objects are essentially nature/culture-hybrids. These mediations are further balanced by processes of purification that aim to clean up categorical confusions by re-establishing the borders between autonomous nature and the human products of culture. In our context it is highly relevant that the modern dichotomy of nature and culture lies behind the asymmetrical distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Thus, while we shall be critical to the clear-cut topology that enables Latour to prioritize the ‘hybrid’, he also furnishes us with a workable description of the indigenous as a projection or inversion of the ‘ideal self’ of the ‘moderns’:

In order to understand the Great Divide between Us and Them, we have to go back to that other Great Divide, between humans and nonhumans [...]. In effect, *the first is the exportation of the second*. We Westerners cannot be one culture among others, since we also mobilize Nature. We do not mobilize an image or symbolic representation of Nature, the way other societies do, but Nature as it is [...] (1993: 97).

It is this export/import-system, then, that creates the anthropological object, cultures that do not uphold the division between nature and culture. Moreover, we could also say that it also creates the need for the importation of cultural wholeness and ecological salvation, or ‘bombs’, imported from other places. Besides, there is also a long history of mobilizations of ‘traditional cultures’ to establish symbolic reconciliation between nature and culture in the aesthetic realm (*Avatar* being a late case in point). Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs have been concerned with such mediation. They argue that

Latour’s formulation [...] left out two of the key constructs that make modernity work and make it precarious! We can refer to them in short hand as language and tradition (2003: 5).

According to these authors, the textualization of oral culture and tradition played a key role in the construction of modernity (2003, cf. Grossberg 2010: 88-89). The textualization of ‘others’, however, they explained with reference to Latour’s notion of mediation and purification: Texts accounting for ‘pure, traditional cultures’ had to be cleansed for traces of the cross-cultural contact that were their empirical enabling condition, so that a pure ‘other’ could be represented.

In the following I examine such processes of cultural mediation and purification between nature and culture, tradition and modernity, in different discourses and

cultural genres. I first examine how a shared Amazonian topology (closeness to nature, natural cultures) is both a product of an interdisciplinary history, and a place to speak from for ethno-political activist. Next I examine the manner in which Amazonian cultures have been turned into metonyms for a set of grand theoretical problems in anthropology, not least concerning the nature/culture-distinction. Finally I return to *A Message from Pandora* and examine the use of *Avatar* as a narrative model and metaphor to understand the Belo Monte case. *Avatar* quotes John Boorman's *The Emerald Forest* (1985), filmed in the Xingu and dealing with the conflict between ecologically rooted cultures and techno-industrial modernization. In a paradoxical way, then, the symbolic power of the eco-cultural bond here appears to be dependent upon a non-relation, and a reestablishment of clear cut cultural boundaries, where 'the tribal' is also associated with the human past. Disturbingly such symbolic topographies are consonant with current exportations of the solution of ecological problems to 'other places' – an exportation that makes possible the continuation of "our way of life, for instance through a carbon capitalism often rejected by indigenous peoples (e.g. *The Amazon fund*).

Cultural Topology and Amazonian Ecology

Marilyn Strathern (1991) has suggested that particular culture areas are transformed into common places where particular research topics must be dealt with by anthropologists (e.g. Australia= kinship). In line with this we could say that Indigenous Amazonia has served as a topos for the inquiry of the nature/culture-distinction. Not least, this was a consequence of structural anthropology and, as sketched above, the work on Amazonian perspectivism reworks an old locus (Turner 2009). To Strathern's notion of a geographical distribution of research themes, we should add that topics in anthropology both come from, and are translated back into, popular culture, as we shall see below in the case of *Avatar* and *The Emerald Forest* (Nugent 2007).

Furthermore, indigenous people in the Amazon have successfully mobilized notions of ecology and culture to form intercultural bonds with NGO's and celebrities like Cameron. In the wording of Beth Conklin and Laura Graham, a 'shifting middle ground' has been 'founded on the assertion that native's peoples' views of nature and ways of using natural resources are consistent with Western conservationist principles' (1995: 696). Hence, notions of conservation have served as a cross-cultural common ground constructed upon the assumption that respect for nature is an intrinsic part of the culture of 'the Ecologically Noble Savage' – a new version of an older primitivist ideal of 'people dwelling in nature according to nature, existing free of history's burden and the social complexity felt by Europeans' (Berkhofer quoted *ibid*).

The struggle over Belo Monte testifies to the continued relevancy of Conklin and Grahams' conceptualization. Tracy D. Guzmán has observed that 'opposition

[to Belo Monte] is articulated more frequently in relation to economics and the environment than it is in relation to indigenous human rights' (2013: 172). Nevertheless, notions about ecological insight in 'tribal' zones ultimately hinge upon Western notions of indigenous culture and cultural history that are also reemployed in eco- and ethnopolitical discourses. One case in point is the occupation of Belo Monte in July 2012 when more than 300 people from 21 indigenous villages and 9 different ethnicities occupied the construction site (Amazon Watch 6/12/2012). On the demonstrators' website, *Ocupao Belo Monte* (Occupy Belo Monte), we find a moving request for political support along with a self-presentation, which also marks cultural contrasts:

We are people who live in the rivers where dams are being built. We are Munduruku, Juruna, Kayapo, Xipaya, Kuruaya, Asurini, Parakanã, Arara, fishermen and riverine. The river is our supermarket. Our ancestors are older than Jesus Christ (Amazon Watch 2013).

The slogan 'Occupy Belo Monte' inscribes the protestors in a global struggle against neo-liberalism. At the same time, indigenous activist are claiming a differential cultural identity within the 'global series' of protest (Occupy Wall Street etc.). The cultural contrast is made with reference to forms of subsistence and religion: indigenous religion is deeply rooted in the land; it outdates the Portuguese and Christian colonization. Further, the river about to be dammed is an equivalent of 'your supermarkets'. These contrasts underscore the closeness – and dependency – of a way of life upon a particular habitat. Moreover, they indicate that claims for cultural difference through ancestry and indigeneity, a deep history in a particular habitat, are premises for claims about conservation.

Even if the shifting middle ground is, precisely, 'shifting', many of the cultural assumptions it is based upon belong to a cultural topology – locating 'tribal isolates' outside historical time – with a long *durée*. Nugent, however, also underscores that 'essentialist features of Amazonian Indians have contributed in vital ways to the defense of the modern Indian and some improvement of life chances (2007: 59). More generally, Anna Tsing has warned that scholarly fear of 'simplistic representations of wild nature and tribal culture' may lead to the dismissal of 'some of the most promising social moments of our times', namely alliances between 'tribal' peoples and environmentalist NGO's (2008: 409 and 392). Tsing, however, also recognizes that empowering 'green development fantasies' (2008: 393) are conceived in Western language and based upon stereotypical conceptions of tribal cultures: '[O]ne must have a distinctive culture worth studying and saving' to enter international eco-cultural alliances (ibid). Thus, particular notions of cultural distinctness and authenticity serve as both a model *of* the real (there *are* authentic tribal cultures), and as a normative model *for* the formation of the eco-cultural bond between indigenous peoples and NGO's (alliances *should be* formed with 'pure cultures' worthy of aid). To have a distinct culture involves living up to standards imported from abroad. Regularly this also implies erasing long histories of contact and

prior ethnographic translations. For many ethnopolitical projects that also implicates translating oneself into the conceptual schemes of the ‘West’ (ibid) – or, as Manuela Carneiro da Cunha asserts to pass from being ‘culture in itself’ to having ‘culture for themselves’, i.e. turning ‘culture’ into a category of self-identification. This, however, ‘is a double-edged sword, since it constrains its bearers ostensibly to perform their culture’ with reference to imported criteria (2009: 3). In the next part I examine how Amazonian Indians has been turned into a figure for basic anthropological patterns – patterns that have been reemployed in the shifting middle ground. Then I turn to some formal similarities between the construction of the anthropological and environmentalist symbolon.

Ethnological Isolates between Evolution and Devolution

We can use what Michel de Certeau calls ethnological form to analyze the conversion of local topology into a global symbolon. Using a culinary metaphor, de Certeau identifies a particular modern model for producing cultural theory by creating bounded ethnographic places, isolates, and then transforming these into figures for the human in general:

Using the imperatives that punctuate the steps in a recipe, we could say that this theorizing operation consists of two moments; first *cut out*; then *turn over*. First an ‘ethnological’ isolation; then a logical inversion. The first move cuts out certain practices from an undefined fabric, in such a way as to treat them as *a separate population*, forming a *coherent whole* but *foreign* to the place in which theory is produced. [...] The second move turns over the unit thus cut out. At first obscure, silent, and remote, *the unit is inverted to become the element that illuminates theory and sustains discourse* (1984: 62).

de Certeau uses Freud and Durkheim as examples; both reads a universal structure and their own theoretical keywords (The Oedipus-complex, totemism) into and out of ‘isolates’ (the ‘primitive horde’, the Arunta). Local details thus become instantiations of anthropological principles. Through the explanation of that which at first seems inexplicable, theory becomes ‘panoptic’, it ‘sees everything, explains everything’ (ibid). Likewise, Amazonian cultures were ‘cooked’ in Claude Lévi-Strauss’ work on myth. Here Amazonians were first assigned a cultural place foreign to ‘ours’, next they were turned into ‘a metonymic figure of the whole species’ (the Anthropos) by furnishing the local ‘reference myth’ from which the anthropological inquiry of the nature of mythical thought departed (ibid). Bororo myth served as an instantiation of the nature of human mind, and the idea that myth, like the ‘modern constitution’, was founded upon a distinction between nature and culture, which it sought to mediate by creating hybrid entities that traversed the space between the binaries. Essentially, the empirical reference myth illuminated the theoretical premise it was cut out to exemplify in the first place.

Concomitant with this structuration of part and whole in scientific structuralism, a temporal poetics of otherness was at work. Lévi-Strauss despaired over ‘the cannibalistic’ nature of the historical process, and how indigenous peoples have been trapped in ‘our mechanistic civilization [...] like game birds’ (quoted in Silver 2011). His sense of loss is brutal in his comparison of present informants with the past. Living Amazonians were ‘enfeebled in body and mutilated in form’, and not more than ‘a handful of wretched people who will soon, in any case, be extinct’ (quoted in Rabben 2004: 37). Thus, the ‘isolated population’ of the ethnographic present is timed – it is only a ‘fallen’ fragment of the former culture doomed to disappear. This notion of inevitable loss binds Lévi-Strauss’ scientific anthropology to a Rousseauian sentiment significantly older than structuralism (Derrida 1976: 107-144, Williams 1973). To conceptualize this temporal sensibility, we can generalize what Allan Dundes – commenting upon the tacit assumptions of folklore studies – has called the devolutionary premise. Dundes refers to an assumption of a temporal nature: The present state of cultural items and in some cases whole cultures is a mere fragment of the authentic artefact and/or cultural past.² As in Lévi-Strauss loss is inevitable, ‘[a] change of any kind automatically moved the item from perfection toward imperfection’ (1969: 8). This notion of devolution assumes that certain cultural items and types of culture are doomed to ‘decay through time’ (ibid: 6). Figures like ‘[t]he noble savage’ and ‘the equally noble peasant’ were destined to lose their authentic culture ‘as they marched ineluctably towards civilization’ (ibid: 12). Devolution, then, in this Romantic version, is actually a side-effect of evolution and modernization seen as normative and inevitable temporal processes bound to uproot ‘tradition’. Accordingly, devolution is only in play when a valued cultural item (a folktale) or cultural whole (indigenous cultures) comes into contact with the ‘cannibalistic’ historical process. This assumption of inevitable cultural devolution leads ethnographers to seek for ‘ethnological isolates’ comparable to those involved in the culinary poetics of cultural knowledge described by de Certeau. However, it also lies behind a preference for ‘isolates’ assumed to be ancient, and strategies of purification similar to the ones described by Bauman and Briggs. To seek for “pure” precontact cultural data, [s]tudents of the American Indian’, Dundes states, ‘would often write up their field data as if the Indians had never been exposed to or affected by acculturative European influences’ (ibid: 8). The mutual dependency of evolution/devolution, modernity/tradition actually furnishes an explanatory context for Nugent’s paradoxical topology where the ‘iconic forest Indian’ simultaneously ‘embody the anti-history of the ancient tribal isolate yet also exemplify the survivor of a crushing set of historical transformations’. We shall see some example of such temporal purification in the filmic constructions of an eco-cultural symbolon in the next part, and relate them to some paradoxes concerning eco- and ethnopolitical agency.

The Past as Salvation

In environmentalist discourses on indigenous cultures in the Amazon the ‘separate population’ living in a ‘foreign place’ is not only an empirical ‘isolate’ where cultural theories are tested. As we saw in the introductory quotations from *Amazon Watch*, indigenous people, the ‘ethnological isolate’, play a vital role for planetary survival. A salient case in point from the Xingu is the intervention of Sting in rainforest politics in the 1980’es. On the webpage of the *Rain forest foundation*, and in a text that could be read as its charter myth, it is underscored that Sting’s intuitive understanding of the link between man and forest has been corroborated by climate science. Here the eco-cultural symbolon is already in place:

Twenty years ago, Sting went into the Xingu region of Brazil for the first time. He observed the deforestation of the Amazon first-hand, seeing vast stretches of barren land that had once been forest. He had the intuition then that the forest was important, and that those who lived there would best protect it. Today, scientists are recognizing that intuition as true, especially in the context of global warming (Rainforest Foundation n.d.).

A bond between people living ‘there’ and global humanity is formed. The survival of local cultures, in a particular environment, safeguards against global warming, while indigenous peoples, ‘those who lived there’, serve as mediators between life and death by preserving the forest, a life-sustaining force, and thus opposes barrenness and death.

The presence of indigenous peoples is of vital importance not only for the local eco-system, but for all men, the whole planet. In the vocabulary of narratology, we could say ‘those who lived there’ are turned into an actant of ‘helpers’ in a global drama (Rimmon-Keenan 1989: 34ff). Indigenous Amazonians illustrated general theory in the text of anthropology, and even furnished, through anthropological mediation, a ‘bomb’ that could shatter ‘our’ constitution. A symbolon between local culture and global humanity is formed also here: Now, however, it is ecological survival on earth that is at stake, not the epistemic bond between ‘natural men’ and the common cultural constitution of humanity. The role as stewards of the rainforest is linked to notions of Amazonians living close to nature, but even if planetary and panhuman future depends upon indigenous people living ‘there’, the foreign place is simultaneously associated with the past of humanity. The sign associated with human origins, the lost past that Lévi-Strauss mourned, is ‘turned over’ and converted into a hope for the future. Sting makes the temporal translation thus:

We are paying homage to our primeval history. We have stepped back to the Stone Age [...]. In some ways Western man is in reverse evolution, we’ve forgotten our real potential. The Xingu can remind us of what we really are (quoted in Oakedal 2005: 25)

This notion of cultural time could be construed as an example of what Johannes Fabian has called the ‘denial of coevalness’, namely a ‘tendency to place the refer-

ent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse' (1983: 31). Thus Fabian refers to how the informant (the *Xinguanos*), with whom the travelling anthropologist/environmentalist necessarily shares time, is delegated to the past in the text that accounts for the encounter (a travel in space is converted into a travel in time, to the Stone Age). In the eco-cultural middle ground, however, there is symbolic capital associated with the appropriation of what Fabian mainly sees as an asymmetrical form of 'othering' – based upon progress as the yardstick. But it is precisely the 'survival' of a link in indigenous culture to a forgotten wisdom that furnishes many ethno-political moments with a recognizable place to speak from: 'Our ancestors are older than Jesus Christ'. Moreover, as Sting states, Xingu is a place where 'we' are 'reminded' of a human essence that we have forgotten. This illustrates nicely another facet of the premise of devolution: If devolution and evolution really are co-dependent historical temporalities, this 'struggle' also occurs inside 'the moderns' who loose contact with their fundamental humanity as a consequence of the 'civilizing processes'.

I shall now turn to how such conception of culture, time and ecological salvation are calibrated in popular culture. The point of departure for this is Cameron's documentary about the struggle in the Xingu, *A message from Pandora* (2010), and how this film cites *Avatar*.

***Avatar* and the Shifting Middle Ground**

The message of the documentary comes from a fictive place; Pandora. In *Avatar* (2009), Pandora is the name of a planet colonized by humans in need of natural resources (in Greek myth, it connotes both destruction and hope). On the one hand, *Avatar* serves as a model for understanding the Belo Monte conflict. But on the other, Belo Monte is also inscribed in the cosmological plot of *Avatar*. By being inserted in the DVD special features edition of *Avatar*, the story about the dam, we could say, becomes an embedded tale from the real. This also furnishes contemporary eco-political relevancy to the fictive film. Moreover, the cast of *A Message from Pandora* includes Sigourney Weaver and Joel Moore, who played characters that joined forces with the endangered indigenous people in *Avatar*. Intriguingly, Weaver and Moore thus serve as a kind of meta-avatars; even if they are casted as themselves, they also carry with them the symbolical power of the film and the narrative functions of the characters in the actant of 'good white men'.

In contrast to the tight plot of *Avatar*, *A Message from Pandora* has but a soft narrative structure. It begins with a sequence of images of global, environmental degradation. These introductory images – related by a common theme, global destruction – are accompanied by Cameron's voice over, an autobiographical account of his ecological awakening. Next we see footage from the journey to the Xingu and the fight against Belo Monte. The documentary ends with Cameron asserting that 'we' cannot live as the indigenous people of the Amazon, and that they, in any

case, do not want us there. What *we* have to do to live sustainably is to merge the tribal with the technological, and thus create a global techno-culture saturated by tribal insights. *Avatar* could actually be seen as an example of this, for here a tribal and ecological message is produced with the aid of particularly advanced visual technology, but as we shall see, the story of *Avatar* actually takes us in the opposite direction.³

Let's turn to some of the plot features in *Avatar* that might lie behind the assumed equivalence between the fictive film and the Belo Monte struggle. Applying the language of metaphor-studies, we could call the domain to be illustrated the target domain (Belo Monte) and the domain used to illustrate the source domain (*Avatar*) (Kövecses 2002: 15ff.). A synopsis of the plot, seen as a source domain, could go as follows. In 2154, Pandora is colonized by humans backed by military might and corporate power. The aim: to extract a mineral (ironically) called unobtainium. This causes a threat to the indigenous people of the planet, the Na'vi, who live in harmony with nature. Avatars, external techno-bodies modelled upon Pandoran bodies, are developed to study the nature-culture of Pandora in an atmosphere hostile to human biology. Grace Augustin, a xenobotanist, leads this research, while Jake Sully, a former marine confined to a wheelchair, is recruited as a fieldworker. By controlling the avatar with his mind, Jake can move among the natives. In the process of the investigation, however, Jake and Grace 'go native'. This change of allegiance is due to their disgust with the ruthless use of power of the colonizers, an increased understanding of the Na'vi's ways, and, in Jake's case, a romance with Neytiri, a native woman.

Starting with its very title, *Avatar* stages a mind/body-split routinely associated with the 'modern constitution'. This split is reconciled at the end, when Jake becomes a Na'vi, and is able to walk again. Becoming indigenous, then, also heals Jake's injured body. After a healing ritual invoking the maternal goddess, Jake leaves his damaged biological body behind. The conversion is irreversible; the avatar now becomes his permanent body. It is significant that a trace of the colonizing techno-culture will remain on Pandora, even after the colonizers have returned to earth and the original eco-cultural harmony is restored. As mentioned, *A Message from Pandora* ends with a hope; that 'we' can develop a 'techno-tribal' culture 'at home' and stop the intrusion in the Amazon. The end of *Avatar* appears to be an inversion of this. The film deploys advanced technology to reconstitute a 'pure' tribal culture at the end of the film. Thus, the role of cinematic technology, and the avatar in the plot, is to save and re-purify an authentic tribal zone threatened by eco-cultural destruction. To be a source of values and an eco-cultural example 'to us', the 'tribal' apparently have to be situated in an isolated elsewhere; a space different from the one in which theory and movies are produced.

Ethnological Isolates, Ecological Connections

In 2154, Gaia has already been turned into a wasteland by forces similar to the ones now afflicting Pandora.⁴ In the narrative logic of *Avatar*, the ecological devastation on earth leads to the export of an unsustainable regime of extraction to space. Thus, the (future) colonization of Pandora is construed as a repetition of environmental disaster on earth.

If *Avatar* is lived out as reality in the Xingu and other asymmetrical contact zone where extraction meets tradition, this implies that the fictive chronology is synchronized with the real time of Belo Monte. The complexity of this narrative and temporal conjuncture is underscored by the way the concrete threat of Belo Monte for people in the region is associated with the mythical and cosmological generality of *Avatar*. The plot of *Avatar* is developed in the tension between the animistic life force of natural cultures and a death producing culture of extraction. On Pandora, it is a planetary nature-culture, not a 'mere' local, cultural adaptation to a particular environment that is threatened. The use of *Avatar* as a narrative model thus appears to underscore the role of the Amazon as a scene where a struggle of global importance is played out.

The documentary is obviously produced after *Avatar*, but with reference to the fictive time frame of *Avatar* – where the devastation of Gaia has already occurred – it is implied that the chain of events leading to the destruction of earth is at work 'now' in the Xingu. Stopping Belo Monte, therefore involves, in this logic of narrative embedding, preventing the destruction of earth. This turns what could be construed as a 'mere' local struggle into a struggle of cosmological proportions: Making a narrative inference that blends the time scales of fact and fiction, we could say that stopping Belo Monte would stop the regime, the actant, that eventually will result in the colonization of Pandora. Thus, the narrative merger of *Avatar* and Belo Monte inscribe local indigenous cultures in a cosmological drama similar to the one the *Rain Forest Foundation* and *Amazon Watch* outlined to spell out the consequences of deforestation; it is not only about the people living in the forest, it is also about 'us' and the very future of the Anthropos.

Indigenous Culture – Importing the Export/Import-System

The notion of 'Avatar happening here' hinges upon the assimilation of the Na'vi with the indigenous people of the Xingu. The Na'vi has a range of positive traits routinely associated with indigenous cultures: They live close to nature, treat nature with animistic respect. On the negative side, the Na'vi becomes victims of modernization and 'development' schemes that destroy the complex eco-cultural whole in which their traditional forms of life ways are embedded. Thus, they also share an identity with other 'victims' of the cannibalistic historical process, as objects of the actions of the actant of modernity.

Critics have noted that the image of the Na'vi is a stereotype, an inversion of the 'modern culture' and 'rationality' that defines 'us'; that they are depicted as 'irrational' and 'retarded', as 'plain Indians in sci-fi drag', and based upon 'exotic tropes and colonial paternalism' (Benjaminsen & Svarstad 2010: 11, Starn 2012 179, Clifford 2011: 218). The point about the inversion is formally true, but it misses the content of the romantic counter concept of noble savages and ecological Indians, notions that are the cultural conditions for the ecological middle ground. The Na'vi are also 'consistent' with Western notions of conservation, and they are never construed as childish animists with 'irrational' beliefs about nature. On the contrary, real communication takes place between man and nature on Pandora.⁵ This positive stereotype is certainly also constructed through inversion, but the Na'vi does not (only) represent the basic human building blocks that 'we' have evolved from, they also evoke what 'we' have lost; how a certain evolution has caused cultural and natural devolution by estranging man from nature.

The traits listed above could be seen as a product of Latour's 'export/import system' (the Na'vi does not distinguish between nature and culture) and thus just a function of this modern machine for making otherness. The cultural traits in play in both *Avatar* and *A message from Pandora*, however, are also similar to the ones used as contrastive markers of identity in the *Occupy Belo Monte* blog and other instances of eco- and ethno-political activism. And in the case of the equivalence between *Avatar* and the Belo Monte, an Indigenous leader in the Xingu, Arara, is reported to have confirmed it, using the movie as a narrative middle ground: "What happens in the film is what is happening here", while the Achuar leader Luis Vargas also saw it as a good narrative example of relations between the state, corporate power and indigenous people in Ecuador (New York Times, 10/4/2010, Adamson 2012).⁶ Hence, we should not (simply) accuse Cameron for 'representing' others in a stereotypical way; he might actually also be *quoting* Indigenous people who has made the same cultural distinction long before the arrival of *Avatar* in the Amazon.

Indigenous activists, it seems, have imported the export/import-system and reemployed it for their own purposes – to export an image that can be calibrated with 'Western notions' of the tribal. To some extent such importation explains how the eco-cultural middle ground is constituted as a co-authored space. But through such importation and the concomitant exportation of an image of 'distinct cultures', indigenous people have in practice also moved out of the binary structure of the 'modern constitution', as well as the binary that grounds the discourse on perspectivism. For in this shift 'culture' has become a category of self-identification, as well as a vital rhetorical resource. Suzanne Oakdale relates an anecdote that can serve as example: In a bus, on the way to the Earth Summit a leader of the Kayabi-people from the Xingu indigenous park advised his compatriots to take off all Western clothing and don garments that would indicate authenticity. By presenting themselves in traditional gear, he proclaimed, they would also be received as carriers of a distinct indigenous '*cultura*'. Thus, the Portuguese word was imported to

re-conceptualize Kayabi heritage from a culturalist perspective through an act of ‘self-purification’ (2002).

A Tale of Cultural Conversion

Cameron has stated that there is ‘some heritage linking it [Avatar] to “Dances With Wolves”, most importantly the motif of ‘a battered military man who finds something pure in an endangered tribal culture’. Moreover, he goes on

You see the same theme in [...] ‘The Emerald Forest,’ which maybe thematically isn’t that connected but it did have that clash of civilizations or of cultures. That was another reference point for me. [...] I just gathered all this stuff in and then you look at it through the lens of science fiction and it comes out looking very different but is still recognizable in a universal story way (Los Angeles Times 14/7/2009).

The use of *Avatar* to target Belo Monte evokes a set of filmic intertexts and tales ‘recognizable in a universal story way’. Firstly, *Dances with Wolves* (1990) that tells the story of a lieutenant (Kevin Costner) who leaves the army to go living with the Sioux. Secondly, *The Emerald Forest*, John Boorman’s Jungle Book-like film about a white boy who grows up with native people in the Brazilian rainforest. Underneath the particular way of narrating these films there is something similar to a narrative deep-structure (Rimmon-Kenan 1989: 11ff.) The struggle over Belo Monte must, if it is *Avatar* turned real, resonate with this narrative pattern.

I shall now turn to *The Emerald Forest* as a part of the intertextual source domain used to target Belo Monte. What interests me is the theme of cultural conversion that marks the end of the movie; a return to tribal harmony accomplished through the cultural conversion of the white hero, how this sheds light on the end of *Avatar*, and the narrative constraints around the shifting middle ground. The conversion-as-end is the resolution of a state of conflictive cross-cultural coevalness; the happy end is a return to a prior cultural stage, before ‘contact’ and the forces of coeval evolution/devolution were set in motion. This manner of constructing a narrative end could be seen as a resolution of the tensions inherent in the figure of the ‘iconic forest Indian [who] embody the anti-history of the ancient tribal isolate yet also exemplify the survivor of a crushing set of historical transformations’, and consequently also as a purification that re-establishes a clear cut distinction between the tribal and the modern. Clearly such a resolution is impossible in the case of Belo Monte.

Once again I turn to de Certeau to find an analytical point of entry into what I will call the conversion tale: de Certeau identified an ethnological ‘primary scene’ in Jean de Léry’s account of his life among the Tupinambá in *L’Histoire d’un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil, autrement dit Amérique* (1578). The scene took the form of a narrative about a passage from ‘over here’ (Geneva) to ‘over there’ (Brazil) – and back again with a symbolic prize, a ‘literary object, the Savage, that allows him [Léry] to turn back to his point of departure’. Moreover, the ‘story [of this passage] effects his return to himself through the mediation of the other’ (1988:

213). The Tupinambá are already the ‘ethnological isolate’ populated with exotic figures that will illustrate the nature of the sinful human condition for the Calvinist. In the conversion tales, the hero do not return to ‘over here’, but returns to himself by joining the other, going back to a tribal state before the fall.

The Emerald Forrest (1985) was filmed in the Xingu. As in *A Message from Pandora*, the construction of a hydroelectric dam is the cause of the conflict. The plot is set in motion when Bill Markham, a North-American engineer, moves to Brazil to work on a hydroelectric dam that will result in massive deforestation. This move from the North to the South introduces the narrative conflict, and as in *Avatar* it is the destructive capability of the techno-modernity that will make indigenous peoples visible.

Bill brings his wife and children to Brazil, but during a picnic on the edge of the jungle, the little boy, Tommy, is abducted by a tribe called the Invisible people. The picnic takes place in the liminal space between the construction site and the forest; the space where the struggle between life and death takes place in the film, as in the later charter myth of the *Rainforest Foundation*.

The ‘chief’ of the tribe is a wise old man who eventually will become the boy’s adoptive father. Expressing his views with natural metaphors – undoubtedly to illustrate a primitive, ecological mind – he declares that he decided to abduct the boy to save him from a life in the land of ‘termites’, at the world’s end. This combined eco-cultural judgment, then, lies behind the first turning point in the plot.

The boy grows up in the rain forest, in play between two fathers; for his engineer father never stops searching for the boy. Tomé (as he is called in the jungle) will save the Invisible people from destruction. First he secures a fresh supply of the sacred stones that make the people invisible, and through this ensures the persistence of a traditional way of life. Next, he rescues the young women of the tribe from captivity in a brothel, and thus secures fertility and the social reproduction of the tribe. As we shall see, he also brings down the dam of the termite people with shamanistic techniques. After the initial action, the turning point associated with the abduction, Tomé will be the agent producing the events.

To rescue the abducted women, Tomé seeks the assistance of a group of male *caboclos*; Amerindians who have left the rain forest, dresses as whites, and live impoverished in the liminal zone between the jungle and the city – a space structurally similar to the one in which Tommy was taken (between the jungle and the construction site). Towards the end it is foreshadowed that these *caboclos* will marry the rescued women, and return to the forest. Hence, the film ends with a prefigured romance. Romance in the form of marriage to native women is, indeed, a powerful trope of conversion here as well as in *Avatar*.⁷

The character Tomé has a narrative function similar to that of Jake Sully. In the beginning of the story the hero forms a part of the actant of modernity, the ‘opponent’ of tribal culture; the narrative force that brings tribal people into a conflictive but also coeval, narrative time. In the middle of the tales a change of alliance occurs.

Gradually the hero becomes a helper that safeguards the survival of the tribe. Between beginning and end, then, the hero shifts actantial position, the 'opponent' turns into the 'auxiliary', and at and as the end, he is fully assimilated.

As a result of the upbringing in the jungle, Tomé becomes 'territorialized', a local best suited for cultural life in a particular rainforest habitat. When he finally finds him, even the engineer father (himself at home both in the city and the jungle), acknowledges that the boy will have to remain 'over there'. To salvage his son and the natural habitat he has adapted to, Bill decides to blow up the dam – another shift of actant – but his explosives fail to do the work. Fortunately, magic turns out to be more efficient than the arts of the modern engineer. Tomé, who has been initiated as a shaman, destroys the dam with the aid of his power animal, and makes nature itself (torrents) bring down the dam. Even in the field of magic it is white man who creates events. Except for the abduction scene – which turns around the Invisible people's compassion for 'us' and the recognition of human purity (even) in a white boy – narrative agency is attributed to characters associated with intruding modernity; both destruction and salvation are in 'our' hands.

Conversion and Anthropological Mediation

In both films, the entrance to the foreign cultures is through a kind of participatory observation; we could call it an anthropological mediation. Particularly in *The Emerald Forest*, the choice of the narrated events is indebted to anthropology.⁸ We look upon the white hero Tomé as he goes through a series of rites of passages: initiation into manhood and shamanism, marriage and a mortuary rite. Thus, the events are also woven together with a well-known anthropological theme as a constant; the production of a culture-specific person through a ritual process. Jake's conversion in *Avatar* is also gradually accomplished through ordeals and rites of passages, through which he learns the green technology of the Na'vi. In *The Emerald Forest* the white hero learns to live in the jungle from boyhood. Conversion here, then, is the more gradual process of a white, *Jungle Book*-like child who never loses his innocence – not that of a 'battered military man' searching for purity in a lost, tribal paradise.

In both films, the narrative end is a return to the past and harmonious state of nature where autochthonous rites again become the sole markers of time. With reference to Bauman and Briggs, we could say that the mediations that necessarily characterize a story of a 'clash of civilizations or of cultures' here are purified infra-textually, in the plot about the hero's conversion (and not by the anthropologist wiping out external presences of history when writing up of the text). Certainly, the conversion tale resembles other narrative forms – like the cowboy variant about good gringos saving Mexican villages from bad Mexicans but leaving when harmony is restored. In our films, however, the notion of the entity to be saved, 'distinct tribal cultures', is imported from cultural theory.

‘Culture’ as Narrative Conversion

Conversion to the other culture leads to the end in both films – the hero stays ‘over there’. A consequence of this is that the narrative closure also serves as a cultural boundary marker; there is no return ‘over here’. Typical for this narrative of conversion is that the hero, one of ‘us’, leaves his own culture, and, in the logic of the plot, it is this transfer that leads to the salvation of a ‘*pure, endangered tribal culture*’. Obviously, narratives must end, but this particular kind of ending might actually be conditioned by the theological pre-history of the concept of culture.

Frank Kermode has examined ‘the sense of an ending’ as a cultural phenomenon. At the end of a story we expect the narrative equivalent to the *tack* of the clock that gives shape to the unit of time that begun with the initial *tick* (1967). The end, then, is charged with a cultural function; it is the place for resolution of narrative conflicts or the conclusion of an argument, the *tack* that gives closure, and hence form, to the work (ibid, cf. Becker 1979). Moreover, Kermode underscores that expectations of endings are deeply informed by Judeo-Christian cosmology and the apocalyptic notions of a final closure that gives narrative form to salvation history as a whole; and, in the last instance transport the saved back to Eden.

In our films, the salvation of a ‘doomed’ nature-culture only occurs through the cultural conversion of the male hero. It is easy to see that the mediation of Jake Sully and Tommy/Tomé has a Christ-like character; they offer salvation from collective death, and through this intervention traces of Eden remain. Unsurprisingly, critics have argued that *Avatar* is a variant of the ‘White Messiah Fable’, constructed upon the implicit, patronizing assumption that natives need ‘white heroes to come and rescue them’ (Grabiner 2012: 101). However, the conversion story is more complicated. Firstly, the hero is needed to save ancient wisdom that ‘we’ have lost through ‘our’ cultural and human devolution. Secondly, in the environmentalist narrative that the films are intertextually related to, the ‘saved’ natives turn out to be our ecological saviors.

Nevertheless, the purifications accomplished by the conversion story wrap indigenous cultures up as pure and bounded culture-units, as inaccessible as Eden. If they were opened by the mediations offered by the story of civilizational clash, they become, in the end – and this is the function of the happy end – unrelated to ‘us’, since they now are deprived of the narrative conflict that would make them narratively compelling to ‘us’.

Following Viveiros de Castro’s work on the encounter between cannibals and missionaries in sixteenth century Brazil (and thus the early networks and mediations behind the later generalized perspectivism), we could argue that the anthropological concept of culture actually contains an implicit story of conversion. Not least, this has to do with the religious roots of the concept: The ‘themes of acculturation and social change [...] depend profoundly on a paradigm derived from the notions of belief and conversion’. Changing culture, Viveiros de Castro argues, is construed

as equivalent to a change of confession (2011: 11). On this theological model you either belong to a particular confession/culture, or you don't. A corollary is that cultural change, as secular conversion, is final and thus structured as a minimal narrative, a passage from one state to another. The end of a former identity (state 1) implicates the beginning of a new (state 2). From different perspectives, this passage could be seen as a gain (evolution, the civilizing of 'primitives') or loss (devolution, the loss of authentic culture as a result of contact), but in any case as irreversible:

[O]nce they have been converted into something other than themselves, societies that have lost their traditions have no way back. There is no returning; the previous form has been defaced for good. The most that can be hoped for is an exhibition made of simulacra and false memories, where 'ethnicity' and bad conscience feed on the remains of the extinct culture (ibid: 17).

This finality is 'above all' a function of 'our' belief 'that the being of a society is its perseverance: memory and tradition are the identitarian marble out of which culture is made' (ibid). If the symbolic stuff of identity is lost, culture is doomed and can only be celebrated in an inauthentic mode as heritage. Indeed, this evaluation of cultural change presupposes devolution.. If there is 'no way back', indigenous mastery of modern eco-cultural discourses will always be haunted by a suspicion of inauthenticity, or of indigenous spokesmen being dupes of international NGO's playing out the 'white Messiah fable' – a common enough accusation in Brazil (Conclin & Graham 1996, Prins 2002, Ramos 1998).

Closing Texts – Storing Wisdom, Storing Carbon

In *The Emerald Forest*, there is a closing text immediately after the end of the narrative. We could see this as the wrap up of the film's short documentary frame: Before the beginning of the story, a text states that the film was produced in the rainforest. Immediately before the credits, the film returns to this documentary register. A silent text conveys ominous statistics about the deforestation of the Amazon; 5000 acres of forest disappears each day. Associated with this is the extinction of indigenous people; it is stated that only 120 000 remains of an original four million. Thus, the disappearance of the forest is linked to the disappearance of indigenous people. The forest and its indigenous inhabitants are fused in an eco-cultural symbolon reminiscent of Sting and the charter of the *Rain Forest Foundation*. However, Sting reversed Boorman's more anthropocentric priorities. In the closing text of *The Emerald Forest* the protection the forest gives to humans appears to be most important. For Sting, indigenous people living 'there' are also an obstacle to deforestation. Furthermore, in the context of climate change, the forest not only shelters indigenous people from the death producing tribe of modern termites, it also protects humanity from global disaster by storing carbon.

Regarding the ‘uncontacted tribes’, the closing text states that ‘they still know what we have forgotten’. Here the isolation of ‘uncontacted people’ translates into historical distance; protected by the forest, ‘they’ have retained a wisdom that ‘we’ have forgotten. In the last shot of the film, an inter-cultural bond is simultaneously created and cancelled: For ‘our’ relation to ‘them’ should be a non-relation that keeps ‘them’ isolated and ‘uncontacted’; they should remain ‘invisible people’. Perhaps this is a wise strategy for them, but it also seems that this isolation fulfills a cultural function for humanity, storing an ancient wisdom which we have lost.⁹ Storing wisdom, storing carbon; in both cases, a service to humanity.

The conversion stories places ‘us’ in a paradoxical relationship to the indigenous people that shall save us by saving the forest. In the environmentalist story they comprise an actant of ‘helpers’, but to be able to help ‘us’ they must themselves be saved by converted heroes. In the ‘universal story’ played out in the films this ensures a new isolation, a reestablishment of ‘a distinctive culture worth studying and saving’, and thus re-calibrates notions about worthy cultures and participants in the ‘shifting middle ground’.

The films stage tensions between nostalgia for a lost, cultural past and the fear of destruction wrought by ‘modern’ hands. One set of culturally recognized endings, apocalyptic destruction or the softer variant of gradual devolution, is replaced by a return to the beginning – the time before the narrative conflict interrupted harmony in a closed universe: The end of a ‘traditional’ world is postponed, at the end, and as an end. The human figure situated in such a safe space would simply have no need of communicating across an inter-cultural middle ground with ‘moderns’. Thus, such a symbolical division and purification will not help to stop the dam in Belo Monte (now well under way), nor help global nature/culture survive ecological disaster.

The narrative registers of the apocalyptic and the nostalgic can be traced back to Christian salvation history (the fall – the present – the end as destruction *and* final salvation). In the conversion tales ‘culture’ takes the place of man in salvation history. The story of the fall of cultural purity as a consequence of contact is, in the last instance, a story of evolution turned into devolution: people living ‘there’ become uprooted, spread, like the *caboclos*, in the interstices between the city and the rainforest. Eden is perhaps the original ‘ethnological isolate’; it is a place – and a narrative time – ‘foreign’ to our space and time where the pattern of all human history is decided metonymically. Expulsed from Eden, the ancient wisdom is lost, also for ‘us’ who now longer have cultural mediators that can link ‘us’ up with the origin.

On the one hand, such stories of conversion can cause powerful identifications and ‘fantastic collaborations’ around the eco-cultural *symbolon* with imagined ‘pure cultures’. On the other, one can also fear that the clear demarcations between ‘here’ and ‘there’ that the collaborations in some cases are based upon symbolically prepares an outsourcing of ecological problems to a ‘there’ already cleared as a place

for mediations about the relation between human culture and nature – so that culture ‘here’, our daily consumption pattern, can remain the same.

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Notes

¹ *Symballo*: literally that which is thrown or cast together (Etymology Online 2001-14)

² The most salient case in point is perhaps the brothers Grimm who regarded folktales as fragments of ancient Germanic myths.

³ Cf. Duncan & Fitzpatrick 2010 about the visual technology behind *Avatar*.

⁴ Cf. the following description: ‘The Earth is now a decaying world, covered in a haze of greenhouse gasses. Overpopulation, nuclear warfare, pollution, environmental terrorists, significant deforestation, world hunger, ozone depletion, resources depletion, water shortages, and overhunting of what is left of Earth’s very few still living animal species are the main things that are slowly consuming what is left of the once beautiful planet’ (James Camerons *Avatar*.wikia. Earth).

⁵ Cf. the following description for instance: ‘The Na’vi believe that Eywa acts to keep the ecosystem of Pandora in perfect equilibrium. It is sometimes theorized by human scientists that all living things on Pandora connect to Eywa through a system of neuro-conductive antennae; this often explains why Na’vi can mount their direhorse or mountain banshee steeds and ride them immediately without going through the necessary steps required to domesticate such wild animals’ (James Cameron’s *Avatar*, n.d. Eywa)

⁶ Cf. Adamson 2012 for other examples of the accommodation of *Avatar* by ethno-political activists.

⁷ As in Latin-American literature where inter-racial marriage is a foundational trope in national literature, it is a man who marries a native woman (Sommer 1991, cf. Nunes 1996 on Brazil).

⁸ Boorman consulted anthropologist before making the movie (Boorman 1985).

⁹ The exact content of the lost memory remains undetermined, but with reference to the narrated events in the film, it appears to be ancient forms of thinking, and practices like shamanism. A comment from Boorman relating to his stay in the Xingu points in the same direction: [his] ultimate acceptance by the Kamaira led to long talks with its shaman. ‘Increasingly,’ Mr. Boorman says, ‘I felt Takuma was in possession of a knowledge, a consciousness, that far surpassed my own. I can’t imagine ever seeing things quite the same again’ (New York Times 30/6/1985)

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