

New Film History: An Introduction

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This seminar is intended to introduce you to the study of film history, and it does so by focusing on two case studies, namely *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Avatar* (2009). In this introduction, I want to say a few things about film history in general and about the second of our case studies in particular. In doing so, I also want to introduce myself to you.

1 Academic Context

Today, Film Studies is a well-established academic discipline with dozens of specialist academic journals and book series being published around the world, as well as hundreds of undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes being taken by thousands of students. There are many national and international professional organisations for Film Studies, and countless Film Studies conferences are being organised every year.

In many of its conferences, organisations, degree programmes and publishing ventures, the discipline of Film Studies is closely associated, even explicitly combined, with other disciplines, notably Television Studies, Media Studies and Cultural Studies. It is also the case that, beyond the confines of Film Studies, films are being studied in the context of many other disciplines, including not just Television Studies, Media Studies and Cultural Studies but also, for example, Literary Studies, Philosophy, Modern Languages, Economics and Psychology. Indeed, one is likely to find publications and courses on films in almost all disciplines in the Arts and Humanities or the Social Sciences.

Where is this academic interest in films coming from? When I started studying film in the 1980s, first in Germany and then in the UK, my main reason for doing so was that I loved watching movies (whereby the term “movies” refers to films originally made for theatrical release, although I actually had seen most of them on television rather than in a movie theatre). Having failed to get into film school – with the intention of becoming a filmmaker myself –, doing Film Studies seemed to me like the next best thing. Initially I thought that this would primarily entail *film criticism*, that is the analysis, interpretation and evaluation of films: How does a particular film work? What does it mean? How good is it?

However, I quickly became aware of the fact that there had been an important history of *film theory*, that is more or less philosophical writing about the very nature of film as a medium (a particular form of communication, of artistic expression, of audiovisual experience etc.), going back all the way to the 1910s. I also learned that the history of film technology (in the sense, initially, of photochemical-mechanical devices able to display a rapid succession of still images so as to create the illusion of movement) went back to the 1880s, and that the commercial exploitation of this technology had started with coin-in-the-slot peep-hole devices (so-called “kinetoscopes”) running film loops only a few seconds long in 1894 and with the

projection of programmes of short films onto large screens in front of paying audiences in 1895 (the term “cinema” in its narrow sense refers only to the latter). It was possible, therefore, to trace the development of film form, film technology, film companies, film exhibition and film audiences from the 1890s onwards - to do *film history*, in other words.

In fact, Film Studies in the 1980s was undergoing a historical turn. In the 1960s and 1970s, Film Studies had been established (often by people with a background in Literary Studies) as a distinct academic discipline through an emphasis on theory and criticism, complemented by a very general, often imprecise account of the history of film style and genres, with comparatively little attention being paid to film technology, economics and audiences (although, interestingly, *other* academic disciplines, especially Economics, Business Studies and Communication Studies, had been exploring these last three topics for decades). From the late 1970s onwards Film Studies teaching and research (initially under the heading “New Film History”) did not only embark on a systematic review of the history of film form, with a particular emphasis on so-called “early cinema” (that is the period up to 1915), but also paid much more attention to the medium’s technological foundations, the industrial context in which films were made, marketed and exhibited, the ways in which film production, marketing and exhibition were organised and the people involved in this, including the cinemagoers whose ticket purchases paid for it all.¹ The focus was very much on how things changed over time.

Indeed there was a sense in the 1980s that such historical change had accelerated in recent years, notably with the spread of video recorders and the sale and rental of pre-recorded tapes. Ever since the rise of television as a mass medium (initially in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s, later also in other countries), most films made for theatrical release had been seen by more people on the small screen than in theatres, people spending much more time watching theatrical movies on television than in cinemas. However, movie companies in the US and elsewhere had generated much more income from renting films to movie theatres than from the sale of broadcast rights. It is only with the rise of video from the late 1970s onwards that the theatrical income of film companies was finally eclipsed by income generated through people’s consumption of movies in their homes. By the mid-1980s video tapes had become the single most important source of income for the American film industry. For some commentators at the time this was enough to declare the “end of cinema”.

Of course, cinema – the theatrical projection of moving pictures for paying audiences – is still very much with us today, although it is no longer a photochemical-mechanical technology, but has largely gone digital. Billions of cinema tickets are sold every year, and every day millions of people gather in movie theatres around the world. A film’s commercial success in movie theatres tends to be replicated in other media (notably on Blu-ray/DVD and streaming services); in other words, movies rarely reach a

¹ When I did my MA in Film Studies at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in 1985/86, I was taught by some of the foremost practitioners and promoters of the “New Film History”, notably Thomas Elsaesser. See, for example, the important text book he developed from his teaching at UEA: Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, London: BFI, 1990.

very large audience through small screen media without first having been widely shown on big screens in cinemas. (A reminder: “Movies” here refers to films originally made for theatrical release. Of course, films made directly for television – also known as “made-for-television movies” – can reach vast audiences through TV broadcasts without ever having been shown in a cinema, but they usually do so only in one country and they rarely do well in other media such as Blu-ray/DVD.)

If, in addition, we consider the fact that the theatrical release of a movie is often accompanied not only by massive advertising campaigns, but also by widespread reporting in the media and by the sale of a wealth of tie-in merchandise (ranging from toys to soundtrack albums), we can note that the social experience of cinemagoing remains culturally and economically important. However, it would be difficult to argue that it is *more* important than, for example, computer gaming, television viewing, music listening, internet surfing or the use of social media.

It is also worth noting that a substantial share of overall ticket sales, and of the film industry’s total income, is accounted for by only a few big hit movies (rather than ticket sales and revenues being more evenly distributed across the many hundreds of films which are given a theatrical release every year). What is more, since most people around the world go to the cinema very rarely (or not at all), they are likely to see *only* such hit movies on the big screen (while watching a wider range of films on small screens, that is television sets, computers and handheld devices). Cinema, then, is today very much a social experience revolving around hits, and the film industry is a hit-driven endeavour.

This was not the case (at least not to anywhere near the same degree) in the more distant past. In the United States, cinemagoing was very much a general habit from the 1910s to the 1940s. During this time, one to two thirds of the population went to the cinema every week, which meant that most people watched a wide range of films, rather than focusing on a few hit movies. However, from the late 1940s onwards, attendance levels declined. Only teenagers and young adults continued to go to the movies regularly, while the rest of the population attended cinemas only on special occasions, usually for one of the big hit movies, which, already in the 1950s, were known as “blockbusters”. From the 1950s onwards, such hits made up a substantial portion of the American film industry’s overall income while also accounting for a substantial portion of its investment in film production – these films tended to be very expensive.

In other countries, the shift from habitual cinemagoing of large segments of the population to an orientation towards a few big hit movies took place later than in the United States. In much of Western Europe, for example, it happened across the 1950s and 1960s, and in China – for decades by far the largest cinema market in the world in terms of the number of tickets being sold – as late as the 1990s (importantly, in recent years, the Chinese market has recovered and is now one of the world’s largest again).

Given the fact that in the decades after World War II cinemagoing in the United States, Western Europe and elsewhere came to focus on hit movies, one would expect that Film Studies scholars, especially where they claim to deal with “popular” cinema, pay attention to how well individual films performed at the box office and which films performed best overall. Surprisingly, only relatively few scholars have pursued this line

of inquiry.

Among the pioneers was Joseph Garncarz, who I got to know while we both studied at the University of Cologne in the 1980s, and whose systematic research on box office charts exerted an enormous influence over my own work as a scholar and also over the work of a number of other researchers around the world. From the 1990s onwards, Garncarz published academic essays and books on *what* types of film were successful at the (West) German box office (in other words, on the patterns that hit movies formed), *how* these types (or hit patterns) changed over time, and *why* such change took place.² His work has covered most of the 20th century, compared (West) German box office charts with those in other countries, and offered complex explanations for historical change focusing on the dynamic interaction between film industrial developments, shifts in public opinion and generational turnover. In my first monograph from 2005, I applied the same approach to American cinema between the 1940s and the 1980s.³

The systematic study of box office charts produced several unexpected results. Garncarz found that (West) German box office charts were dominated by domestic productions – covering a range of genres and usually featuring German stars – until the 1960s. After a transitional period, in which imports from European countries often ranked very highly, it was only in the 1980s that American films came to rule the annual top ten. Garncarz and other scholars found that in many countries – not just in (West) Germany – the takeover of box office charts by American imports did not happen as early as had previously been assumed. In some countries, like India – in terms of the number of tickets being sold now the largest market in the world – it has not happened even today.

Film Studies scholars had long claimed that the American film industry dominated world markets since the 1910s, because it managed to export its products in large numbers to most countries. What Garncarz pointed out was that, while the American film industry might dominate the *supply* of films in a given country (that is the number of films on release), this did not necessarily mean that there was more *demand* for American imports in that country than for domestic productions. Instead people in that country might actually prefer, and therefore buy more tickets for, domestic productions (if the country was large enough to sustain a substantial domestic film industry).

² See, for example, Joseph Garncarz, *Filmfassungen: Eine Theorie signifikanter Filmvariation*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992; Joseph Garncarz, "Hollywood in Germany. The Role of American Films in Germany 1925-1990", *Hollywood in Europe: Experiences of a Cultural Hegemony*, ed. David W. Ellwood und Rob Kroes. Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994, pp. 94-135; Joseph Garncarz, *Hollywood in Deutschland: Zur Internationalisierung der Kinokultur, 1925-1990*, Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 2013; and Joseph Garncarz, *Wechselnde Vorlieben: Über die Filmpräferenzen der Europäer*, Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 2014.

³ Peter Krämer, *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars*, London: Wallflower, 2005; also see, for example, Peter Krämer, "Would You Take Your Child To See This Film? The Cultural and Social Work of the Family-Adventure Movie", *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 294-311, and Peter Krämer, "Big Pictures: Studying Contemporary Hollywood Cinema Through Its Greatest Hits", *Screen Methods: Comparative Readings in Film Studies*, ed. Jacqueline Furby and Karen Randell, London: Wallflower, 2005, pp. 124-32.

Unfortunately, much film scholarship still fails to take the basic distinction between supply and demand into account, and continues to make false – or at least unexamined – claims about how successful American films are around the world and how long this has allegedly been so. However, it is the case that American imports have come to dominate box office charts in many, possibly the majority of, countries since the 1980s.⁴ This is not to say that American box office dominance applies to the majority of the world's *population* because, as we have seen, the exceptions include India – where about a fifth of the people on this planet live – and also, possibly, other large countries.⁵

The second big surprise revealed by the systematic study of box office charts was that from the 1920s to the 1960s, the most successful exports of the American film industry to Western Europe, which was its most important export market during this time, tended to be films that were set in Europe, dealt with European characters (often played by European-born stars) and were based on European literature and/or important European historical figures and events. What is more, from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, such “Europeanised” films also dominated box office charts in the United States. In fact, quite a few of the American film industry's biggest hits of the 1950s and 1960s were also, at least partially, shot in Europe, and might involve key personnel (such as the actress Audrey Hepburn and the film director David Lean) who had not only been born and raised in Europe, but also continued to live and work there. This raises the question how “American” the American film industry actually was in the decades after World War II.

When trying to answer this question, it is useful to focus on the operations of the major Hollywood studios. “Hollywood” here refers to a suburb of Los Angeles where many American film studios opened in the 1910s. Across the 1910s and 1920s, these production facilities were merged with distribution companies, operating across the United States and much of the rest of the world, and then also with theatre chains so as eventually to form the so-called “Big Five” fully vertically integrated majors (Paramount, Loew's/MGM, Warner Bros., 20th Century Fox and RKO). By comparison, the “Little Three” majors (Columbia, Universal and United Artists) did not own theatre chains.

This distinction largely became irrelevant when after a 1948 US Supreme Court ruling in an anti-trust case against the majors, they were ordered to separate their American theatre chains from the rest of their companies (which could, however,

⁴ I have surveyed the literature on this topic and examined global box office charts since the 1970s in Peter Krämer, “Welterfolg und Apokalypse: Überlegungen zur Transnationalität des zeitgenössischen Hollywood”, *Film transnational und transkulturell. Europäische und amerikanische Perspektiven*, ed. Ricarda Strobel and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann, Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2009, pp. 171-84; and Peter Krämer, “Hollywood and Its Global Audiences: A Comparative Study of the Biggest Box Office Hits in the United States and Outside the United States Since the 1970s”, *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 171-84.

⁵ China, for example, did not import up-to-date Hollywood films until the 1990s, and then initially only in small numbers. In the new millennium the number of Hollywood imports has increased and they can be enormously successful, yet the Chinese film industry also produces blockbuster hits, so that there is no straightforward dominance of Hollywood movies in the Chinese market.

continue to own theatres in other countries). Around the same time, cinema attendance levels in the United States and thus overall film industry income dropped dramatically. The major studios reduced their output of theatrical releases (making fewer films which were, however, on average much more expensive) and fired most of their employees on long-term contracts, instead putting together teams of free-lancers for individual productions.⁶

This meant that from the 1950s onwards, the major Hollywood studios concentrated on financing and co-ordinating film production, and on distributing the resulting films around the world, whereby the actual making of these films could take place anywhere in the world. What is more, from the 1970s onwards, the money the studios used to make these films increasingly came from outside the United States (especially from Japan and Germany), and from the 1980s onwards several studios were (in some cases only temporarily) owned by non-American companies (from Australia, Japan, Canada and France).

Rather than simply declaring Hollywood to be American, it might therefore be more adequate, with regards to the decades since the 1950s, to describe it as an international network of film companies – principally the major studios Paramount, Warner Bros., Sony Pictures Entertainment/Columbia, Universal, 20th Century Fox and Disney (these last two currently attempting a merger) – which are headquartered in Los Angeles and use global resources (in terms of finance, source material, personnel, production facilities and locations) to make big-budget films for distribution all around the world. From the 1960s onwards, these film companies have tended to be part of conglomerates operating across a range of industries (since the 1980s the main focus of these conglomerates has been on media and entertainment).⁷

Hollywood's international dimension is nicely illustrated by *Avatar*, a film financed and distributed by 20th Century Fox, which had been owned since the 1980s by the Australian media conglomerate News Corp., and was written, directed and produced by the Canadian James Cameron, who cast the English-born Australian actor Sam Worthington in the lead role and made the film partly in studio facilities in New Zealand.

Yet despite the international make-up and reach of the major studios, it is to be expected that, to some extent, their operations are shaped by their specifically American context. After all, most people working for the majors – especially script writers and top executives – have been born and raised in the United States, and, first and foremost, their films are designed to appeal to American audiences (although eventually their foreign revenues might be larger than those from the United States).

This raises the question of what is “specifically American” about the United

⁶ When the major studios entered the production of situation comedies and drama series for television across the 1950s, they reinstated a version of the “factory” system they had previously employed for the production of films made for theatrical release.

⁷ It is also worth noting that in the 1980s and 1990s, the major studios took over, or set up, smaller companies concerned with the production and/or distribution of smaller budget films which have traditionally been labelled “independent” – a term which obviously becomes rather problematic in this context.

States. In other words, how does the United States differ from the rest of the world? One way to answer this question is to compare the results of public opinion polls in the United States with those in other countries. Such a comparison (which has been carried out by the people running the World Values Survey) reveals that what distinguishes the United States is the fact that, despite the country's long-term modernisation, a large percentage of the population holds on to what one might call archaic values and attitudes (religiosity, support for gun ownership and the death penalty etc.); in other modernising countries these values and attitudes play a much smaller, and ever decreasing, role.

The Hollywood elite does not share these archaic values and attitudes, partly because it is made up of a wholly non-representative selection of Americans (as well as foreigners), consisting mostly of highly educated, secular, middle-class, white urban men, who are likely to have an international outlook (rather than being more narrowly focused American patriots). And yet both these Americans and the foreigners who have moved to Los Angeles to join the Hollywood elite have to contend with the cultural specificity of the society in which they live and the specific orientation of their primary audience in the United States.

Among other things, this means that they are inclined to draw on religion as a particularly important cultural resource in a wide range of films, most of which are not, in any narrow sense of the word, religious. This can be seen, for example, in the (biblically inflected) titles of blockbusters such as *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) or *Armageddon* (1998). As these examples illustrate, religious visions of the "end of the world" are one of the most influential cultural traditions that Hollywood movies draw on. Indeed, since the 1970s, many of Hollywood's biggest hits – both in the United States and in the rest of the world – focus on (the threat of) large-scale, often *global* destruction.⁸

While recent years (especially since the release of *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004) have seen an increase in academic work on the role of religion in, and for, Hollywood cinema, it is perhaps fair to say that, as far as film criticism is concerned, the predominant approaches in Film Studies focus on issues of gender, race, sexuality, class and nation, and that they set out to determine, and evaluate, the ideology of individual films and indeed of Hollywood's output as a whole (whereby "ideology", broadly speaking, is a certain way of viewing the world, of understanding what it is like and how it should be).

Such critical work is based on the assumption that a film can be said to have a definite ideological orientation (with regards, for example, to matters of gender, race etc.), and also that this orientation tends to be in line with, and thus in support of, the dominant ideology in American society, which, in turn, is assumed to represent the interests of white, heterosexual, middle and upper class, American men. Furthermore, without necessarily stating it explicitly, scholars tend to assume that films have the

⁸ See Krämer, "Welterfolg und Apokalypse".

power to influence how their audiences see the world.⁹

All of the assumptions underpinning ideological criticism can, and have been, challenged, for example along the following lines: A film can have more than one ideological orientation, or none at all; rather than the audience's worldview being influenced by a film, it is more likely that their understanding of that film is shaped by their pre-existing worldview. For our purposes, however, it is most important simply to reiterate here that there is more to Film Studies than ideological criticism.

When confronted with an individual film such as *Avatar*, instead – or in addition to – analysing its ideology, scholars may want to find out how this film came into existence, how it took the shape it did, and why. This might involve research on the companies and people involved in its production, and also on the cultural traditions the filmmakers draw on and the contemporary public debates they engage with. Here the analysis could focus, among other things, on the underlying ideological concerns or explicit political interests of the people involved in the production of the film.

Furthermore, scholars may want to analyse the form and style of a film, paying particular attention to its story, characters and themes, without aiming to reveal the film's (presumed) underlying ideology (which is often imagined to be hidden from view, requiring counterintuitive interpretive moves). Here the aim can be to determine what kinds of sensual and emotional, but also perhaps intellectual and ethical responses the film is likely to generate in viewers, whereby the analysis draws not only on the film itself but also on the results of research in the social and natural sciences about how people perceive and process information.

Related to this, scholars may want to investigate how actual audiences engaged with a given film. For this, it is worth considering the fact that people often come to watch a film only after (sometimes prolonged) exposure to the advertising and publicity surrounding it, and also to critical writing about it (e.g. reviews and viewers' comments on the internet) and word-of-mouth reports from friends, colleagues and acquaintances. In other words, a viewer responds to a film in the light of expectations formed by the way it was marketed by its distributor and received by other people. In addition these expectations may be formed through familiarity with the previous work of a film's star or director, and with the genre(s) a particular film appears to belong to. In analysing all this, scholars can focus on the political issues being raised, and the topical debates being referenced, in advertising, publicity and critical writing.

More generally, scholars may investigate the composition of the audience a particular film manages to assemble (in terms of gender, age, class etc.), how much the different segments of the audience enjoyed the film, what they liked and disliked about

⁹ The concern that films can influence the attitudes, values, outlook and behaviour of their audiences has a long history. Indeed, when the rapid spread of cheap movie theatres (called "nickelodeons" in the United States) after 1905 made films accessible to almost everybody in the Western world, including the poorest (and often immigrant) segments of the population, concerns about how films would influence their audiences gave rise to informal research efforts which in turn led to political campaigns and the institutionalisation of film (self-)censorship. Arguably, these initial research efforts were the foundation of what would later be constituted as the academic discipline of Communication Studies and also, eventually, of Film Studies.

it, and which meanings they ascribed to it, also – and this is particularly important for what are usually referred to as “fans” – whether the film played an on-going role in their lives (through repeat viewings, the purchase of associated products, references to the film in conversations etc.). With regards to this last point, there may be cases in which people feel that their enjoyment and understanding of a particular film has (ethical, political) implications for how they live their lives.

In this seminar we will draw on the kind of scholarly work I have just outlined more than on ideological film criticism. As already mentioned, we will do so with reference to *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Avatar*.

2 The *Avatar* Case Study

My own initial interest in *Avatar*, which I first saw when it had just been released in December 2009, stemmed from the fact that I did not only enjoy it but also experienced it, especially its ending, as a kind of call to action.¹⁰ The film’s story about an American-identified military-industrial complex embarking on a campaign of potentially genocidal, environmental destruction so as to gain access to a precious mineral seemed to relate very directly to contemporary politics as well as, more generally, to the whole history of Western colonialism and of fossil fuel driven industrialisation. At the same time the film’s backstory about the Earth’s natural resources having been depleted, and its biosphere largely destroyed, by the year 2154 offered a glimpse of a likely future for our civilization. I felt that the final close-up of Jake opening his eyes and staring directly into the camera posed a question to me: What are you going to do about it?

I had been reading about environmentalism and especially about anthropogenic (that is man-made) climate change for several years. I agreed with those who argued that, next to the proliferation of nuclear weapons, climate change was the greatest challenge humanity had ever faced in its history, and that carrying on with “business as usual” would lead to a dramatic reduction in the quality of life on this planet and many millions, probably billions of human deaths (as well as the extinction of many other species).

It so happened that the most eagerly anticipated attempt of the world’s governments to agree on a global change of direction (away from “business as usual”) at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen ended in catastrophic failure on the very weekend in December 2009 that *Avatar* was released around the world. This made the challenge that I thought the film posed to its viewers particularly poignant and relevant: If top-down politics was unable to address the issue, a grassroots, bottom-up process involving each and every one of us was our only hope.

¹⁰ It is perhaps worth noting that by 2009 I had published two articles about the films of James Cameron, focusing on *Titanic* (1997), and therefore was primed to take note of Cameron’s follow-up to that record-breaking release; see Peter Krämer, “Women First: *Titanic* (1997), Action-Adventure Films and Hollywood’s Female Audience”, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 18, no. 4 (October 1998), pp. 599-618; and Peter Krämer, “‘Far across the distance...’: Historical Films, Film History and *Titanic* (1997)”, *The Titanic in Myth and Memory: Representations in Visual and Literary Culture*, ed. Tim Bergfelder and Sarah Street, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004, pp. 163-72.

Perhaps, I thought, *Avatar* could help mobilise people for this purpose.¹¹

At first, this sounded all too fanciful even to myself. After all, I am aware that, as a film scholar, I am inclined to take movies all too seriously, to perceive meanings in them others often can not see (unless they are film scholars), and to assign an importance to them that they do not actually have. But then both anecdotal and systematic evidence emerged which appeared to confirm my initial impression.

To begin with, the film turned out to be a huge success at the box office. Indeed, eventually its worldwide gross far surpassed that of the previous record holder – James Cameron’s *Titanic* (1997). Due to ticket price inflation and fluctuating exchange rates between the world’s currencies, it is difficult to compare box office revenues across longer periods of time. Nevertheless, it is likely that within its first year of release *Avatar* reached a larger number of people – first in cinemas, then also on the small screen via pirate copies as well as legal DVDs and Blu-rays, streaming services and pay-TV screenings – than any other film has ever reached in the same amount of time.

Due to varying ticket prices around the world, it is difficult to calculate how many people saw the film in cinemas between December 2009 and December 2010, but I would estimate that it was about half a billion, with at least as many people probably seeing it only on the small screen. This would mean that about one out of seven people on the planet saw *Avatar* in its first year of release (this proportion must have increased significantly since then, not least due to regular television broadcasts of the movie).

Of course, the extremely wide reach of this film did not, in itself, suggest that the people who saw it engaged with it very deeply. But in conversations with friends in the weeks and months after the film’s initial release, I began to hear more and more stories about people being so strongly affected by *Avatar* that they would declare a change in their attitude towards the natural environment and towards other aspects of their lives, and also perhaps express the desire to make changes to the way they lived their lives. While I did not closely follow discussions on fan websites and on social media, nor even the media reporting about the film’s varied impact around the world, I was aware of so-called “Avatar depression” (also known as “Post Avatar Depression” or “Avatar blues”) – a much discussed condition apparently affecting many viewers of the film who were so enchanted by its fictional Pandoran world that they were unable to cope with

¹¹ I was encouraged in my thinking about the potential of *Avatar* by the research I had recently carried out on Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), a film which Cameron has acknowledged as a major influence on his life and work, that influence being particularly noticeable in *Avatar*, especially its final close-up which echoes the shot of the “Star Child” staring at the camera at the end of Kubrick’s film. My examination of letters sent by regular cinemagoers to Kubrick in the late 1960s and early 1970s revealed that many people had been deeply affected by *2001*, to the point where some of them said that it had changed their view of what cinema is and indeed their view of the world; a few even reported that the film had given their lives a new direction. Central to all this was the idea of re-birth as represented in *2001*. Viewers applied this idea to the cinema (which, in their view, was reborn with *2001*), as well as to their own lives and to the society they lived in; *2001* at the very least reminded them that both had the potential to be fundamentally transformed. See Peter Krämer, “Dear Mr. Kubrick’: Audience Responses to *2001: A Space Odyssey* in the Late 1960s”, *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2 (November 2009), <http://www.participations.org/Volume%206/Issue%202/special/kramer.htm>; also see Peter Krämer, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (BFI Film Classics), London: British Film Institute, 2010.

the return to their everyday existence. This certainly suggested that *Avatar* could have a strong impact on people (even if the media reports turned out to be somewhat exaggerated).

Last but not least, throughout 2010 I came across occasional reports about political protests in which activists (the first ones appeared to be Palestinians on the West Bank in February) linked their concerns to *Avatar* by painting themselves blue and wearing costumes inspired by the movie's Na'vi. In addition James Cameron made public statements about his intention to make the world a better place with his films. What I did not fully realise at the time was that he was also already directly intervening in public debates about environmental issues in 2010 – by joining indigenous tribes in the Amazon who were trying to defend their land against the building of a huge dam, and by attacking what has been called “extreme extractivism”, that is the highly destructive extraction of fossil fuels, in this case oil from tar sands in his home country Canada. In this way, there obviously existed many concrete links between *Avatar* and political activism, and my initial response to the film, seeing it as an important cultural event with considerable political potential, did not seem so fanciful after all.

However, the most important influences on my thinking about *Avatar* were two academic friends. At my own university I had been talking for several years with the philosopher Rupert Read about the power of movies. As Rupert had long combined his academic teaching and research with environmental activism and mainstream political work through the Green Party, it was not altogether surprising that he suggested we should go beyond merely *discussing* the political potential of *Avatar* and the instances demonstrating its actual impact; we should also *act* on our understanding of the film's importance and try to work towards actually mobilising people who were deeply impressed by *Avatar* for political purposes.¹²

I could not at all imagine how one would go about doing this. But then I discussed my interest in *Avatar* with Henry Jenkins, an old friend who I had first met at a Film Studies conference in 1987, a time when we had both been historians of American film comedy of the 1920s and 1930s. I then moved on to the study of contemporary Hollywood whereas Henry became, among many other things, one of the founding fathers of Fan Studies. He did not only direct me to two articles he had published in September 2010 on “*Avatar* Activism”,¹³ but also told me about one of his current research projects that dealt with the ways in which organised fandom was increasingly becoming involved in political activism (to do, for example, with human rights), while, at the same time, political activists were increasingly making use of people's interest in

¹² Cp. Rupert Read, “*Avatar*: A Call to Save the Future”, *Radical Anthropology*, no. 4 (November 2010), pp. 35-41 ; and Rupert Read, “*Avatar*: A transformed cinema, a transformation of self, (and then) a transformation of world”, *ThinkingFilmCollective* blogspot, 11 October 2013, <http://thinkingfilmcollective.blogspot.co.uk/2013/10/avatar-transformed-cinema.html>.

¹³ Henry Jenkins, “*Avatar* Activism”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, September 2010, <http://mondediplo.com/2010/09/15avatar>; and Henry Jenkins, “Confessions of an Aca-Fan: *Avatar* Activism and Beyond”, *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, 22 September 2010, http://henryjenkins.org/2010/09/avatar_activism_and_beyond.html.

popular culture to mobilise them for action.¹⁴ This was certainly very encouraging to hear, and prompted me to start doing more extensive research not only on *Avatar* and its audiences but also, more generally, on the connections between media, political activism and social change.¹⁵

Perhaps the single most important thing that reading about the latter taught me was that in most cases the contributions that particular media representations or political actions make to general changes in society are very small indeed (although cumulatively these representations and actions may have a substantial impact). This means that, when examining *Avatar*, its audiences and the political activism that draws on, or is inspired by, the film, we can not expect much in terms of immediate political effectivity; indeed, even at the personal level, we are initially at best looking for subtle shifts and the potential for re-orientation, and not at actual life changes.

Having said this, the by now quite substantial literature on how people have engaged with *Avatar* demonstrates that a significant portion of its total audience (this portion comprising many million people) has taken the film quite seriously – because people were emotionally affected by it and/or felt that it conveyed an important message –, rather than seeing it as mere entertainment and an only superficial and fleeting experience.¹⁶ Debates about the film (in private as well as in public forums) were no doubt most extensive and intense in the weeks after its initial release, yet researchers found that even months and years later the film popped up unprompted in conversations about environmental issues, and that a vibrant fan culture continued to operate through websites and occasional face-to-face gatherings (although fan activity

¹⁴ This project resulted in various important publications, including a special issue (vol. 10 in 2012) of the journal *Transformative Works and Culture* on “Transformative Works and Fan Activism”, ed. Henry Jenkins and Singita Shrestova; and Henry Jenkins, Sangita Shresthova, Liana Gamber-Thompson, Neta Kligler-Vilenchik and Arely Zimmermann, *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*, New York: NYU Press, 2016.

¹⁵ I have to admit that my research on *Avatar* has progressed rather slowly, mostly because it has not been the main focus of my work. However, I have written numerous conference papers on *Avatar*, starting with “Between Hollywood and Copenhagen: James Cameron, Environmentalism and *Avatar* (2009)” (presented at the MeCCSA conference in Salford in January 2011), a revised version of which was published as “*Avatar*: Environmental Politics and Worldwide Success”, *Pure Movies*, 6 November 2013, <http://www.puremovies.co.uk/columns/avatar-environmental-politics-and-worldwide-success/>. Also see Peter Krämer, “The 3-D Experience and Hero’s Journey of *Avatar*”, *ThinkingFilmCollective* blogspot, 31 January 2016, <http://thinkingfilmcollective.blogspot.co.uk/2016/01/the-3-d-experience-and-heros-journey-in.html>; Peter Krämer, “From 2001: *Space Odyssey* to *Avatar*: Reflections on Cultural Impact and Academic Research”, *Screening the Past*, no. 42 (October 2017), <http://www.screeningthepast.com/2017/09/from-2001-space-odyssey-to-avatar-reflections-on-cultural-impact-and-academic-research/>; and Peter Krämer, “‘Enter the World’: James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009) and the Family-Adventure Movie”, *Fantasy/Animation: History, Theory, Culture*, ed. Christopher Holliday and Alexander Sergeant, New York: Routledge, forthcoming in 2018, pp. 261-75.

¹⁶ See Bron Taylor (ed.), *Avatar and Nature Spirituality*, Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013, esp. Part III; and Carolyn Michelle, Charles H. Davis and Florin Vladica. “Understanding Variation in Audience Engagement and Response: An Application of the Composite Model to Receptions of *Avatar* (2009)”, *The Communication Review*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2012), pp. 106-42; and Yosefa Loshitzky, “Popular Cinema as Popular Resistance: *Avatar* in the Palestinian (Imagi)nation”, *Third Text*, vol. 26, no. 2 (March 2012), pp. 151-63.

has been much reduced in recent years, it may be revitalised by the release of the first of four planned sequels in December 2020).

Furthermore, while the use of *Avatar* iconography in political protests appears to have been confined to the first year or so after the film's initial release, James Cameron's political engagement (to do with indigenous rights and environmentalism) has expanded and intensified since 2010, not least with his involvement in the production of the award winning documentary series *Years of Living Dangerously* which was first broadcast in 2014.¹⁷ Cameron may not always directly refer to *Avatar* in his public statements on political issues, but it seems that it was the work on this film that made him more sensitive to these issues and emboldened him to do something about them. In addition, it was the very success of *Avatar* which focused a lot of media attention on Cameron so that his statements are paid attention to by many.

There are, then, many indications that *Avatar* has not only reached more people than any other film in recent years, but has also engaged many of them profoundly, so profoundly in fact that it may have had an impact on their everyday lives. There is also plenty of evidence that the film was widely understood – by its writer-director-producer, by media commentators, by political activists and by other viewers – as a political intervention into public debate. Hence it should be a particularly interesting as a case study.

¹⁷ I have explored the political dimensions of the film's reception and of Cameron's post-*Avatar* activities in a series of as yet unpublished conference papers. See, for example, Peter Krämer, "The *Avatar* Project: Politics and Popular Culture", "The Political Screen" conference, London, June 2015; Peter Krämer, "The *Avatar* Project: Blockbuster Cinema, Academic Research and Grass-Roots Activism", "Media, Politics and Activism" conference, Norwich, April 2016; Peter Krämer and Rupert Read, "*Avatar*, *Years of Living Dangerously* and Beyond: Film and Environmental Activism", "Film and the Environment" conference, Norwich, May 2016; Peter Krämer, "The World of *Avatar* Audiences: From Fan Studies to Political Mobilisation", the annual Fan Studies Network Conference, Norwich, June 2016; and Peter Krämer, "Connectivity in and around *Avatar*: From Film Analysis to Political Activism", the annual Network of European Cinema and Media Scholars conference "In/between: Cultures of Connectivity", Potsdam, July 2016.