PORTRAYALS OF MASCULINITY IN AVATAR

by

Seth C. Eggleston

An Abstract
presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Communication
in the Department of Communication
University of Central Missouri

December 2011
ABSTRACT

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The ways of which mass media frame the representation of masculinity has a pedagogical affect on viewers of Western culture. This thesis examined the portrayal of masculinity in the feature film Avatar (2009) to determine if masculinity is represented in a fixed, hegemonic way or if significant transformation occurred throughout the text. Using a combination of sociological and psychoanalytic perspectives, a close reading was performed by analyzing the characters and media aesthetics present in Avatar. This method provided insights regarding the depiction of masculinity in one example of Western media. The findings of this study reaffirmed that the portrayal of masculinity is represented in a fixed, hegemonic way.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Stories are a primary foundation for people to relate to one another, to become entertained, and to make sense of the world. Movies are the ways in which we get stories today, often reinforcing the values of our culture. This phenomena of the media as storyteller deserves attention in the academic field of Communication due to the effects that media may have on viewers. The study of relationship between media and social behavior is one area that has been of interest in Communication studies.

The portrayal of gender in film is significant to study due to the messages that these portrayals pass on to consumers of the media. As a student of Communication, I am interested in how the media portrays gender, especially in popular media. In particular, I became intrigued by the representation of masculinity in the 2009 feature film Avatar, and decided to analyze it for this study.

One of the assumptions of this study is that American culture is largely patriarchal. Michael Kimmel (1996) explained in the book, Manhood in America, that proving manhood has been a dominant theme in American history and remains to be a dominant issue in American life. A man is supposed to stay true to the characteristics that make up a man; that is, he must be a masculine man. When I think of “masculinity” what comes to mind by default is a not only someone who meets the standard of having male biology, but someone who is very opposite of feminine. Masculine characteristics that come to mind involve having strength or a certain body type that includes muscularity, a commanding or deep vocal tone, minimal grooming, chasing of the opposite sex, and natural leadership. Women are still important, but only come second to men. Kimmel (1996) further explained that this subordination of women is normative:
“men get the feeling of power while woman get the power of feeling; men get the privilege of public action and women get the privilege of private being” (p. 319). In movies, the struggle to attain power is a dominant issue for the male characters.

Another assumption of this study is that gender roles are constructed. Guttman (1996) explained that masculinity and femininity “are not original, natural, embalmed states of being; they are gender categories whose precise meanings constantly shift, transform into each other, and ultimately make themselves into whole new entities (p. 21).” Therefore, it can be said that masculinity and femininity cannot entirely be something that is fixed. Rosen (1993) argued that a fixed masculine idea is passed on to every new generation of men. The ideal “man” is always resisted, questioned or negotiated in several ways which leads to the dominant and opposing images of being morphed together in a new form of seemingly fixed masculine ideal.

According to Julia Wood (2009), men in media, as the majority, are portrayed traditionally as masculine (tough, violent, unafraid, sexually aggressive) although some representations combine elements of masculinity with a more nurturing role. Women are often hypersexualized and serve as peripheral characters. In other words, the roles of men and woman are highly prescribed.

Lines of division are constructed and drawn early on, from birth or even before birth. To paraphrase Stephen Ducat (2004), boys and girls are represented by either blue or pink from the time of exit from the womb when the genitals are identified at birth. Thus, it is not surprising that as adults, the gender gap still presents an issue. The issue that exists, as explicated above, remains one of power.

Therefore, masculinity is seen as a dominant force in Western culture. It is important to question this dominance, especially related to how masculinity is reinforced
or challenged through the medium of film. Along with time comes change, but has anything really changed regarding our cultural power structure? This question led me to decide to analyze masculinity in one very popular film, Avatar. Avatar was selected for analysis for several reasons. The movie is one of James Cameron’s highest grossing films and on the surface it seemed to involve several masculine characteristics. As of mid-November 2010, Avatar grossed over 760 million dollars domestically according to the Internet Movie Data Base (2009), making it comparable to Cameron’s most successful box office film, Titanic.

A reoccurring theme of the films that James Cameron produces seem to feature what appears to be strong female lead roles. For example, Ellen Ripley in Alien and Sarah Connor in Terminator II are women that can successfully battle with whatever comes their way, including aliens and other hostile enemies. These characters appear to possess strong female leadership and power; however, is this truly an advancement of the female role or is masculinity still something that is highly present in Cameron films? For these reasons, including commercial success, masculine elements, and Cameron’s notoriety of featuring strong female lead roles in his movies, Avatar is a relevant example of western film media to use as a text for analysis.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to interrogate the representation of masculinity in the recent popular film, Avatar by examining the main characters, both male and female. The aim is to discover if masculinity is represented in a fixed hegemonic way or in a more flexible way, or if it is some combination of both. I propose the following research questions:

1. How is masculinity represented in Avatar?
2. Does the portrayal of masculinity in Avatar promote or subvert the idea of the hegemonic male?

   a.) Does Avatar reaffirm masculine stereotypes?

   b.) If reinforced, what is the purpose behind such masculine representation in Avatar?

   c.) If subverted, what are the characteristics of this portrayal?

To answer these questions, I analyzed Avatar through a combination of psychoanalytic and sociological perspectives on masculinity. Prior to discussing the methodology more specifically, I review some pertinent studies related to masculinity in popular culture.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

To provide an analysis of Avatar in relation to masculinity in film, I examined the characteristics of masculinity as discussed in previous scholarly work in order to investigate what masculinity means. Below are several references to works that have examined masculinity in the media of Western culture. These references assisted in identifying patterns of masculinity. They also helped me formulate a methodology or lens for which to examined Avatar. This review of literature is divided into two sections: 1. Hegemonic masculinity, and 2. Studies of masculinity in the media.

Hegemonic Masculinity

The concept of “hegemonic masculinity” was first coined by R.W. Connell (1987) and has since been both challenged in academia and updated by the author. Originally, the term dealt with a struggle for power. Connell noted that hegemonic masculinity:

Means ascendancy achieved within a balance of forces, that is, a state of play. Other patterns and groups are subordinated rather than eliminated.

If we do not account for this it would be impossible to account for the everyday contestation that actually occurs in social life, let alone for historical changes in definitions of gender patterns on the grand scale. (p. 184)

Another significant component of hegemonic masculinity, according to Connell, is that “the most important feature of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is that it is heterosexual, being closely connected to the institution of marriage; and a key for subordinated masculinity is homosexual…” (p. 186).
Trujillo (1996) applied the concept of hegemonic masculinity to baseball player Nolan Ryan in his article entitled “Hegemonic Masculinity on the Mound: Media Representations of Nolan Ryan and American Sports Culture.” The theoretical base that Trujillo uses consists of five features of hegemonic masculinity including: (1) physical force and control, (2) occupational achievement in an industrial capitalistic society, (3) male dominance vs. female (patriarchy), (4) frontiersmanship, and (5) heterosexuality. To summarize each of the five areas; first, physical force, strength, power, and domination contribute to masculinity. Men are the holders of power, while women are subordinate. Second, work achievements are either masculine or feminine. Social constructions of “men’s work” and “women’s work” exist, with some tasks being more masculine that other ones. Third, the institutionalization of male dominance over woman and children reinforce patriarchal ideology of society. Patriarchal representations include males being strong father figures, family protectors, and breadwinners. Females are expected to take care of the male and children, clean house, and serve as sex objects. Fourth, masculinity is symbolized by frontiersmanship. This is the image of a daring cowboy standing tall, ready to take on whatever comes his way. Finally, sexuality is heterosexual. Non-effeminate appearance or mannerisms, a sexual relationship should be with woman and no overly intimate relationship with a man contributes to the idea of masculine hegemony.

Trujillo (1996) used an accomplished baseball athlete, Nolan Ryan, to make the argument that media has functioned hegemonically by putting Ryan on a pedestal as the archetypal male athletic hero. He used the five features of hegemonic masculinity as terms of analysis. Trujillo found that Ryan is the epitome of masculinity, representing the “white middle-ages, upper-class, banker-athlete, with working class cowboy values
Avatar

who was raised by a middle class family in a small rural town, and who is a strong father and devoted heterosexual husband” (p. 197).

Schnobelen (2001) analyzed an episode of the popular sitcom *Will & Grace* through the concept of hegemonic masculinity, examining the messages in the TV show through the verbal and non-verbal actions of the cast members – what do these messages say to the viewers about body image, specifically male gay body image? He analyzed the characters of Will Truman and Jack McFarland in *Will & Grace*, defining *what a man is* and also using five criteria for the ideal gay male body attributed to Signoile and Harris (1997) including youthfulness, muscularity, body hair, body weight, and the activity of engaging in maintenance behaviors. The analysis mainly dealt with examining two opposite characters, both gay men. Will is a masculine male. He fits the characteristics of both the ideal male gay body and that of the hegemonic male. Will is not a perfect example of either; but as Schnobelen (2001) noted, he has improved himself physically to be more of a “butch” character that fits these ideals. Jack, on the other hand, is a flamboyant character who rejects the ideals of the hegemonic male (he doesn’t seem to be very strong, has no steady job, is like a child, and very outwardly homosexual). While Jack rejects the hegemonic male image, he embraces some of the criteria of Signorile and Harris (those being that he has a youthful appearance, appropriate body hair, appropriate body weight, and engages in maintenance behaviors).

Schnobelen (2001) noted that in addition to physically being muscular and wearing more revealing clothes, Will repeatedly is the subject of verbal comments regarding his look, which reinforces the hegemonic male ideal. The juxtaposition of Will and Jack reinforces stereotypes about gay males, particular those of the flamboyant Jack. Jack serves the purpose of reinforcing Will’s masculinity. This says to society that if like
Jack, there will be a social stigma or stereotype attached that is unacceptable (p. 75).
Will’s feminine side is greatly reduced to not being noticed compared against Jack. In
other words, masculinity that is ideal and hegemonic is the norm. Deviation from this
kind of masculinity equals the condemnation of not being a real man.

Schnobolen (2001) made the claim that gay males strive for what one might call
“the straight look/appearance.” Gay men who can’t pull off looking masculine are
considered “failed men.” Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) also defined masculinity
along the lines of being a fixed set of characteristics modeled and played out by the true
man.

In 2005, Connell and Messerschmidt released an article entitled “Hegemonic
Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept.” The idea of a hegemonic masculinity is the most
socially acceptable way for men to be seen in culture. To paraphrase Connell’s initial
position, hegemonic masculinity deals with the most honored way of being a man. It
required all other men to measure his manliness in relation to it, made valid the global
subordination of women to men, and was something of the norm (p. 832).

In sum, a normal real man must live up to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity; he
must prove his masculinity by display, secure his masculinity by subordinating other
masculinities and femininity, use force and control secure dominance and gain power,
and be strictly heterosexual.

Studies of masculinity in media

The male gender also was the focus of much of Laura Mulvey’s work. Mulvey is
widely known for her 1975 article in Screen entitled, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative
Cinema.” A main idea in the article was that those who view cinema do so through the
perspective of a heterosexual male gaze, while females represent desire, or the object of
the gaze. The focus of Mulvey’s study was the “look.” There are three elements that make up the look: the look of the camera as it records, this conveys the male point of view and how a heterosexual male sees the female character; the look of the audience as it watches is the perspective of the spectator as they watch the female; and the look of the character is the audience member’s perspective of the male character (p. 68).

Freud and Propp are used as a framework for Mulvey’s (1975) original study. Mulvey’s axis of argument dealt with the “…desire to identify with eroticism and cultural conventions surrounding the look,” however, she revisits this in a later article (1981) to say that she now would “rather emphasize the way that popular cinema inherited traditions of story-telling that are common to other forms of fold and mass culture, with attendant fascinations other than those of the look” (p. 125).

A part of Mulvey’s theory regards active and passive viewing roles. That is, the watcher takes the active role of looking while the passive role is that of the female on the screen as an object to be looked at. Mulvey claimed that identification with the traditionally heroic role of the male is easy to achieve for females taken along through a story but that this can also be (and sometimes is) rejected. Mulvey argued that the ability for female viewers to transition to the male view in a story easily occurs and that it’s more frequent than a complete dissociation from the male gaze.

Since the publishing of “Visual Pleasure” Mulvey has been asked as to why she only used the male third person singular to stand in for the spectator (p. 122). In her follow up piece entitled, ‘Afterthoughts on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun* (1946),’ Mulvey (1981) addressed two issues in her update: the “woman in the audience” and “melodrama.” The woman in the audience dealt with the female viewer being carried along with the narrative, identifying as males
do or whether the pleasure is more complex. Regarding melodrama, she concentrated on films in which “a woman central protagonist is shown to be unable to achieve a stable sexual identity, torn between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of regressive masculinity” (p. 123).

Yet another concept Mulvey (1975) referred to is a woman’s “to-be-looked-at-ness” which is the exhibition and display of a woman and her desire to be looked at. Roxanne Alexander-Barr (2009) clarified that “to-be-looked-at-ness” is where

Women perform or the desire to have male attention and approval. Yet, this approval can only be gained if a woman meets the expectations of the white, heterosexual male majority, or the male gaze. The gaze does not refer only to male voyeurs, but to the patriarchy or our society which requires all people to adopt the view of the majority, the heterosexual white male. (p. 8-9)

The gaze was used to explicate how women are viewed in film. Although the male gaze is a concept that is over 36 years ago, it is relevant to this study as it may be used to investigate how several of these elements of the gaze evaluate men and masculinity and how they are viewed in film.

Mellen’s (1977) views on masculinity aligned with Mulvey (1975) as she asserted that most filmmakers are still overwhelmingly male, offering the image of what manhood should look like. In her book entitled, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in American Film*, Mellen (1977) examined masculinity through analyzing many films from the 1970s era. Particularly, she was critical of the portrayal of masculinity by Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry* and other seventies Eastwood films. Mellen (1977) noted that in the 1970s film after film came to
return to the “Dirty Harry model.” It was in these films that masculinity was heavily associated with both violence and sexuality. Men that were stoic, violent, did not speak a lot, shot his gun often, and were disgusted by student types or anyone educated, were the true great white American heroes in 1970s Hollywood. She also noted that male sexuality relates to the size of his gun, as if it were the ultimate male organ. According to Mellen (1977), “male sexual survival itself becomes dependent upon a man’s becoming a violent vigilante, taking the law into his own hands …physical brutality alone and an outside weapon to reinforce it offer sufficient proof of a penis in good working order (p. 301).” Mellen provided an overview of characteristics of films of the 1970s, but what changes would come about in the next decade of the 1980s?

Yvonne Tasker (1993) discussed the advent of the male bodybuilder in action cinema of the Eighties; specifically, she evaluated two key muscular stars and their movies: Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone. These films achieved a new visibility in the 1980s - the physical acting performance of the male body. According to Tasker, the characteristic of a Hollywood star possessing such physical prowess is associated with being immensely masculine due to this extremely built physique, which is often used as spectacle. She likened this display and spectacle as similar to the figure or the showgirl that Mulvey (1975) refers to in the Classic Hollywood cinema. Tasker (1993) stated that “…contemporary American action movies work hard, and often at the expense of narrative development, to contrive situations for the display of the hero’s body” (p. 79). An example of this is applied to the producer of Rambo III; when searching for a filming location, the producer is known to have jokingly said
“whatever the place is it must be hot so that Stallone can show off his body” (p. 79). Stallone is made, quite clearly, into an object of spectacle due to his body.

Tasker (1993) asserted that the built body is not always the subject of admiration, however. In academic and journalistic commentaries, the built body has rather been the subject of humor. When the movie Rambo was released, critics saw Stallone’s masculinity as ridiculous suggesting that his enormous “breasts” of the male body is revealed as womanly. The muscular body of the action hero for some was an assertion of male dominance, but for other critics, it signaled an unstable image of manhood. This caused a dynamic definition of manhood to exist in Hollywood.

Susan Jeffords (1994) provided insights regarding how Hollywood narratives depict class and white masculinity. Jeffords analyzed the movie Breakdown, a 1997 action-adventure film about a yuppie married couple, Jeff and Amy, whom are travelling cross-country. In the process, they encounter villains along the way who hijack Amy for a $90,000 ransom. Jeffords (1994) asserts that the structures of masculinity in Breakdown typify the villain and his accomplices as possessing outdated model of manhood that includes sexist comments about women as objects and the role of woman as servant to the man. For example, in the film the villain explicitly makes reference to the victim Amy as a “slut,” further describing her as “…5’5”, 115 pounds, 3 or 4 of that just pure tit; nice curly brown hair, upstairs and down” (p. 223). The male antagonist also gives commands to his wife that clarified her place in the relationship by stating, ‘why don’t you go and make breakfast’ (p. 224). These acts of gender typing are consistent throughout the film and are attached to the outdated notions of
nationalism and reassert the notion of necessary patriarchal provider roles.

On the other hand, Jeffords (1994) provided an example of a more modern, up-to-date, and more effective masculinity as represented through the protagonist Jeff as he must rescue his wife Amy and defeat the hijackers in the last scene of the movie when he manages to throw the villain over a bridge. Amy fights the villain indirectly as she releases a parking brake on a vehicle that also falls over the bridge crushing the villain – this act as an indirect revenge reinforces gender typing. Jeff’s violence is sparked by the necessity to save his wife while hers is sparked by the want of getting revenge; not necessary and gratuitous. Gender equality is a theme of the modern corporate economy, however, Breakdown suggests that beneath that surface, there is a continuing need for gender distinctions and gendered roles.

Excessive display of the male muscular body was not limited to the eighties. As Martin Fradley (2004) discussed in the 2000 film Gladiator, masculinity through the characters of the film; the body of Russell Crowe is used to convey evidence of his masculinity, legitimizing his power and authority within the movie. Although Crowe received much attention by the media, having attained a buff body in contrast to his previous on screen roles, he does not possess the defined body of the idea masculine male as represented by Schwarzenneger or Stallone. While certainly appearing physically strong, the visibility of masochistic scenarios throughout the movie is what Fradley argued makes the character masculine. The physical character is clearly strong, but is viewed as more authentic than the previous muscular bodies as advertised in Hollywood in the 80s.
According to Gillam and Wooden (2008), Disney has been criticized for the past few decades of showing only traditional stereotypes of gender in films. Since 1990, there have been masculine protagonists and male driven plots featured in major releases, especially in Disney-Pixar movies. The authors make the argument that these Disney movies indicate a progressive post-feminist model of gender. Three movies are examined in the author’s analysis: Toy Story, Cars, and The Incredibles. The authors indicated that a new model of masculinity prevails in the storylines of these movies. This model is one that explains that the male character starts as highly masculine but through the course of the movie, matures into becoming more accepting of traditionally feminine aspects that he himself possesses. Gillam and Wooden (2008) explained the “New Man” model has four main characteristics: The first characteristic is that the males strive to be the patriarchal alpha male. This is shown in all three movies as the male characters seek to achieve social dominance. The second element of the New Man model is that male characters face emasculating failures, such an example is present in Toy Story when Woody becomes disempowered by another male, Buzz Lightyear, who becomes the relevant alpha toy. The third element of the New Man model involves the need for homosocial male-to-male relationships. The homosocial bond is described as often negotiated through sharing of the desire of a feminized object that two males have in common. For example, in Toy Story, Buzz Lightyear and Woody share a desire for the feminized third, Bo Peep, that encourages the homosocial bond between the two males. Finally, in the new man model, the male that began as ideally masculine is transformed into having a newer and softer masculinity that is not afraid to show feelings. This is the case
with Woody in *Toy Story*, who becomes content as the beta male. Gillam & Wooden (2008) concluded with the argument that this new model of masculinity teaches a softer masculinity to viewers through the analysis of the main male characters in Disney-Pixar’s *Toy Story*, *Cars*, and *The Incredibles*. Disney-Pixar movies may be transforming masculinity in a handful of examples of newer movies, however, it would be of valuable insight to this study to see if more channels of new media are incorporating a new pedagogical aim when it comes to recent the displays of masculinity.

In 2009, Lindgren and Lelievre examined MTV’s *Jackass*, a popular TV and movie series, as an artifact that seems to reaffirm hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously renegotiating gender subjectivities. The article introduced the program “Jackass” as a show all about men. Male performers engage in stunts that are painful, dangerous, and disgusting. All of the performers are men who engage in hypermasculine activities, and when a woman is on the screen, she must follow a traditional gender role. In other words, the text reinforces gender divisions. There is a clear way for men to act in distinguishing himself from women (p. 393).

Lindgren and Lelievre (2009) evaluated all 25 episodes of “Jackass” that aired on MTV from 2000-2002 and *Jackass: The Movie* (2002) and *Jackass Number Two* (2006). They found the each scene was, on average, about 90 seconds and included three movements that makeup the structure of almost every scene in *Jackass*: the setup/presentation/preparation, the performance, and the results. This underscored that *Jackass* is a symbolic and socio-cultural laboratory. Preliminarily, the researchers found *Jackass* to be hegemonic by coming up with patterns, ending up with eight categories: bodily experimentation, sports experimentation, social experimentation, the enjoyment of
risk taking, laughter, animal domination, phallocentrism, the symbolic annihilation of subordinate masculinity.

The authors then argued that Jackass can be read as a text where gender subjectives are constantly being renegotiated. Lindgren and Lelievre (2009) explained:

Our spontaneous tendency to want to label Jackass as either for or against the category of hegemonic masculinity – which is then mistaken as being static and fixed – is related to the prevailing power of ‘the heterosexual matrix.’ Our argument is that the performance of masculinity in Jackass must not be read from the perspective of the clear-cut grid, but rather as expressing such gender discontinuities that Butler, among others, writes of. We maintain that its ‘contradictions’ must be understood in terms of dialectical process of transformation, rather than of clear-cut power or subversion (p. 408).

Lindgren and Lelievre (2009) concluded that Jackass has the possibility of a more blended gender model through a dialectical relationship between hegemonic and subordinated masculinity. Another recent study was conducted that compared two movies spanning a 50 year difference in production.

In her thesis project, Sarah Bradshaw (2010) examined the portrayal of masculinity through the evaluation of comparing two James Bond films, Goldfinger (1964) and Casino Royale (2006). She sought to find out how masculinity was defined and portrayed over 50 years ago versus how it defined and portrayed in the modern James Bond films. She found that the movies are similar in that they both use the formula of violence; for example violent car chases, explosions, and gun fights were found relevant in both movies.
Heterosexuality was also significant to the portrayal of masculinity in addition to a toned physique in order to fight the men that Bond encounters in order to promote a heterosexual image. Bradshaw (2010) found that the movies differed in several ways being that in Casino Royale, Bond was able to be more emotional, yet this was limited in only displaying emotion to a female love interest that later double-crossed him. Also, in Casino Royale, women were given more power than they were in Goldfinger, sharing power with Bond and achieving co-hero status.

These studies aid in understanding how masculinity is portrayed in the contemporary Western film, providing insights regarding the representation of masculinity in Hollywood, which can be applied to Avatar. The methodology or lens used for analysis is next discussed in Chapter 3.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

The prior work on masculinity provides a framework for how I approached masculinity in Avatar. My goal is to answer the question as to whether or not Avatar promotes or subverts the idea of hegemonic masculinity or if it is something that has been transformed or renegotiated, by analyzing key scenes throughout the original 2009 feature film Avatar.

Avatar is consistently referred to by audiences and critics alike as a “hypermasculine” film. For example, Sara Palmer (2011) not only pointed out the hypermasculinity stereotypically expressed through the military character of the Colonel, but she also described a scene that conveys the main character as an image of paternalism: the white, able-bodied savior. In an article by Peterson, Clark, and Nakamuri (2010), rather than highlighting the masculinity of the Colonel, they provide an in-depth analysis including an evaluation of the hypermasculinity of Jake after he acquired a new avatar body. He uses this body to play around on the avatar base, but then is made into a character that develops a violence-capable masculinity while still remaining as having feminine characteristics. In both of these examples, hypermasculinity is embodied through men in the main cast.

After seeing an initial viewing of the film, audiences might find it easy to extract some obvious masculine characteristics; however, other messages could be hidden underneath this façade. Below is a list of masculine features that I used to extract masculine elements from Avatar, as originally used by Trujillo (1996):

1. physical force and control,

2. occupational achievement in an industrial capitalistic society,
(3) male dominance vs. female (patriarchy),

(4) frontiersmanship, and

(5) heterosexuality.

The following, as used originally by Lindgren and Lelievre (2009), will also be used for analysis:

(6) the enjoyment of risk taking,

(7) animal domination, and

(8) the symbolic annihilation of subordinate masculinity.

An explanation of the numbered elements above is necessary for the purpose of easy reader understandability:

**Physical force and control:** Men are the holders of power while women are subordinate to men in power. Patriarchal is widely accepted and encouraged.

**Occupational achievement:** Work achievements are either masculine or feminine. Social constructions of “men’s work” and “women’s work” exist, with some tasks being more masculine than other ones.

**Male dominance vs. female (patriarchy):** The institutionalization of male dominance over women and children reinforce patriarchal ideology of society. Patriarchal representations include males being strong father figures, family protectors, and breadwinners. Females are expected to take care of the male and children, clean house, and serve as a sex object.

**Frontiersmanship:** Masculinity is symbolized by frontiersmanship. This is the image of a daring cowboy standing tall, ready to take on whatever comes his way.
Sexuality is *heterosexual*. Non-effeminate appearance or mannerisms, a sexual relationship should be with woman and no overly intimate relationship with a man contributes to the idea of masculine hegemony.

*The enjoyment of risk taking:* A thrill comes from taking some kind of risk from the norms.

*Animal domination:* true men must tame animals to be in control.

*The symbolic annihilation of subordinate masculinity:* is to reduce subordinated masculinities or femininity. In addition to the above sociological elements, I incorporated a selection of elements of psychoanalysis from Mulvey’s concept of the Gaze, as related to characteristics of masculinity:

1. *(To-be-looked-at-ness):* Women seek the approval, attention and desire of the man; approval can only be gained if woman meets the expectation of the white, heterosexual male (1975, p. 19).

2. *(The look of the camera):* As the camera records, this conveys the male point of view and how a heterosexual male sees the female character.

3. *(The look of the character):* This is the audience member’s perspective of the male character.

To analyze *Avatar*, I viewed the film approximately fourteen times, focusing on particular scenes, characters, and actions that represented the elements and characteristics of masculinity. The subsequent analysis is described in the next chapter.

**Summary of Avatar**

Film director, writer, and producer James Cameron has seen several successes in his film career with movies like *The Abyss*, *Terminator 2*, and *Titanic*; which holds the record to date for global box office grosses of 1.8 billion dollars according to a 2009
article by Goodyear published in *The New Yorker*, entitled “Man of Extremes: The Return of James Cameron.” Cameron’s most recent feature film entitled *Avatar* was no disappointment to his long list of successes. As of mid-November 2010, *Avatar* grossed over 760 million dollars domestically according to the Internet Movie Data Base (2009).

Set in the year 2154, *Avatar* is the story of a paraplegic ex-marine named Jake Sully who takes over his deceased brother’s work contract on a moon called “Pandora.” Sully is offered an expensive surgery that will enable him to regain the use of his legs, but only in exchange for gaining intelligence about the natives then reporting it to Colonel Quaritch. The Colonel, in-line with the greedy motives of the RDA corporation, plans to use the information gained from Sully to forcefully exterminate the Na’vi, combing the sacred land of the valuable semiconductor Unobtainium.

Sully spends much of his time in the form of an avatar; allowing him to live two lives, switching identities back and forth between his crippled human self and as an active member of the Na’vi through his artificial, remotely controlled avatar body. On his mission, he finds that he’s become attached to the Na’vi people including Neytiri, with whom he falls deeply in love with.

Upon speculating that Sully has become too closely bonded with the Na’vi, the power-driven Colonel decides to begin forcing the natives out of their sacred land, which prompts the Na’vi, Sully and his human cohorts to fight back in order to protect the land and people. A large dramatic battle is fought with casualties on both the sides of the humans and Na’vi, ending with a victory for Sully and the Na’vi people.

Provided below is a list of character descriptions of the characters that have been analyzed in the project:
**Colonel Miles Quarich**

The muscle power of operations, the Colonel is in full command of military base staff operations. The Colonel believes that the Avatar Program is full of “limp dick science pukes” and only wants to use Jake as an inside source to gain information about the Na’vi so that RDA can mine for the richest source of Unobtainium, Hometree. Although the Colonel promises to leave minimal casualties, he is not afraid to use force …by any means possible.

**Jake Sully**

An ex-Marine and the film’s reluctant hero, Jake takes over his diseased twin brother’s work contract on a distant planet called Pandora. It is quickly learned that he is paralyzed from the waist down and desires an expensive surgery to be able to walk again.

**Neytiri**

Love interest and teacher of Jake Sully, Neytiri is the daughter of Chief Eytucan and Mo’at (the spiritual interpreter). She intends to kill Jake, but sees a sign from the Godess, Eywa, and instead teaches him how to be one of the people. Their relationship between Jake and Neytiri progresses throughout the film.

**Grace Augustine**

Head scientist in charge of the Avatar Program, an operation designed to use genetically engineered Na’vi bodies controlled by human operators in a link machine for the purpose of getting close to the natives, earning their trust and to gain diplomacy. Grace also serves as a mentor to Jake as she knows information about the Na’vi.

**Parker Selfridge**

Resources Development Administration (RDA) On-site Administrator, the “head honcho.” Selfridge calls the shots, often under the influences of Colonel Quarich. He
cares about the interest of the shareholders of the company rather than people or the land that he destroys.

_Norm Spellman_

Norm is a co-member of the Avatar Program joining at the same time as Jake. He desired leadership and develops begrudging feelings toward Jake when Jake becomes more successful at handling the natives on Pandora.

_Trudy Cachon_

Trudy is a key ambassador to Jake, Grace, and Norm as she pilots their aircraft and takes risks to help them when she is needed.
CHAPTER FOUR
ANALYSIS OF AVATAR

In this chapter, I focus on an in-depth analysis of the film Avatar, using the masculine characteristics earlier described in the methodology section. Each masculine characteristic is discussed separately on the next few pages, describing how specific elements in the film relate to those characteristics. First is the analysis of the sociological masculine characteristics, then the psychoanalytic masculine characteristics.

Analysis of Sociological Characteristics in Avatar

There are several scenes throughout the film that provide a wealth of discussion in regard to how masculinity is portrayed. In this section, I focus on how the film illustrates the sociological characteristics identified in the methodology: (1) physical force and control, (2) occupational achievement in an industrial capitalistic society, (3) male dominance vs. female, (4) frontiersmanship, and (5) heterosexuality (6) enjoyment of risk taking (7) animal domination, and (8) symbolic annihilation of subordinate masculinities (Trujillo, 1996).

Physical Force and Control

The first sociological characteristic of masculinity is physical force and control. In order to secure a patriarchal world, a man must be physically strong and never in a questionable position of control. This is perhaps best clearly demonstrated through the actions of the villain in the film, the Colonel. Several times throughout the film this antagonist serves as the quintessential ideal of power both physically and occupationally. The Colonel is always depicted in a high position of power; he is the glue that serves a means to the end for Jake because he is the one person who can help Jake get surgery in order to walk again. Upon the first audience encounter with the Colonel, he is given a grand revealing: before appearing in full body on screen, a crescendo of paced footsteps
is heard as the camera focuses tightly on the Colonel’s combat boots before slowly moving up his body to a clenched fist and a gun, presumably loaded, attached to his leg. Finally, the camera moves up to his head and shoulders where the audience sees a large battle scar across his head that is easily implied as a sign of overpowering a past enemy. This tilt shot firmly establishes him as a man of power.

In what other ways are force and control embodied? A second significant scene illustrating force and control occurs when Jake goes to talk with the Colonel informally. This time, the Colonel is exuding his physical strength by bench pressing weights and showing off his muscularity through a sweaty tank top. As he and Jake interact, there is a point where he states that he’s had the opportunity to cosmetically fix his scars, but turned it down due to liking the scars. In this scene, he and Jake agree on how Jake can obtain the ability to physically walk again, by spying on the Na’vi. The Colonel exits the scene by getting into a large metal robotic machine called an Amplified Mobility Platform (AMP Suit), while making a few boxing moves before pointing at Jake stating the he will eventually get his “real” legs back.

Throughout the film, the Colonel gives commands to others and is seen as someone that others report to. For example, in one scene, Jake gets lost in the jungle and the science crew searches for him by helicopter until Trudy, the pilot, states that it is time to go home as the Colonel will not allow night operations. In another particular scene, the Colonel becomes angry after finding out that Jake and the science crew are carrying out an unauthorized escape by helicopter in order to help the natives. He kicks open a door and storms out of the building without any protection from the hazardous Pandoran air, grabs a large rifle off of the body of the nearest soldier and begins to violently shoot at the helicopter Jake and the others are using to escape with. After not being able to
breathe the Pandoran air for a minute or so after this occurrence, one of the Colonel’s devoted employees brings him an air mask without him ever having to ask for it. These happenings leave no doubt the he is both a powerful man in regard to physical strength and also in the corporate hierarchy.

*Occupational Achievement in an Industrial Capitalistic Society*

Another criteria of masculinity is occupational achievement in an industrial capitalistic society. It is clear that Jake has achieved a significant career status as he was once a Marine and in the line of duty has survived an injury that has left him unable to walk. However, as Jake arrives on Pandora, this social stigma cripples his occupational status. His peers make fun of him for being in a wheelchair, he knows nothing about the program that he working for and he is compared to being a baby (knowing nothing) by Neytiri. He is viewed as useless by Grace. As the film progresses, however, Jake’s occupational status improves, both in the company that he works for and as one of the Na’vi in his avatar form. As an avatar, he learns how to hunt, tame wild animals, and how to speak the native language. Jake officially becomes one of the Na’vi through a test of his acquired skills and becomes superior to most of them at engaging in Na’vi activities. As the Colonel’s spy, Jake is thus able to relay a significant amount of information about the indigenous population to his employer. Becoming a Na’vi man earns Jake respect among the Na’vi people and the successful act of spying earns Jake respect from his employer. Through achieving a high level of respect in the workplace and by quickly acculturating to the Na’vi, Jake is successful in regard to securing occupational achievement.

Parker Selfridge, the “head honcho” of RDA, always is portrayed as being a leader, telling others what to do, while he is seen sitting at his desk playing with Unobtainium,
Avatar

playing with golf putters on company time, or eating doughnuts all while being “the boss.” The monetary return to the stockholders of RDA is what drives Parker’s actions. Clearly he is not concerned with the feelings of neither his workers nor the native population that his company is about to destroy.

One possible challenge to the idea that occupational roles are a characteristic of masculinity involves the female characters. Females in Avatar may seem to be strong and contain occupational achievement, but eventually revert to traditional gender typed roles. According to Kimmel (1996) a female gender role is often one that involves being a teacher or taking care of children. Grace and Neytiri demonstrate this.

Although Grace has a higher initial occupational status than Jake, they both talk to the same overseer boss, Parker Selfridge. Grace is seen in a higher status as the movie begins, constantly teaching and coaching Jake into what to do and how to act around the Na’vi when in and out of his avatar form. These teachings begin with doubting and sarcastic undertones but shift to being positive and optimistic through each passing scene. Grace establishes herself as very superior to Jake in the beginning of the film. She has advanced degrees, is head scientist of the Avatar Program, has written published books, and knows how things generally work. In addition to these things, Grace talks down to Jake and other characters condescendingly. As Jake becomes more interested in living through his avatar as one of the Na’vi people, Grace becomes more interested in him, eventually to the point of being nice and friendly to him once common ground is established. She also begins to play a motherly role of feeding him and orally defending him when she feels he could use some support.

Similarly, Neytiri initially is depicted as Jake’s superior. Shortly after the audience is introduced to Neytiri, she accuses Jake of being like a baby (not knowing anything).
Like Grace, against her will, she too must teach Jake how to become one of her own people, as dictated by her mother and father. Neytiri is seen as a strong hunter who kills the wild pack of animals that were about to kill Jake. Because of this, Neytiri is established as a woman who can take care of herself. However, as she begins to like Jake romantically, she submits to him and follows his leads in the movie. The teacher becomes the student as Sully has learned how to become a man from Neytiri. Jake performs manhood better than the actual natural born Na’vi males, by attracting the woman of another man (Neytiri), leading a successful war between the Na’vi and the Sky People, and taming the ultimate wild flying animal called “Toruk Makto”, a feat accomplished only five times before in Na’vi history, and considered to be impossible.

These occurrences in Avatar reaffirm and suggest that there are jobs for men and there are jobs suited for women. But what does the film indicate about men and women dominant figures of authority?

**Male Dominance vs. Female**

Male dominance over female is another element of masculinity. Throughout the film, the males are dominant but this does not go unchallenged by the females. In particular, Grace is not afraid to challenge male superiority but fails each time she tries to take control over something.

One big challenge to authority occurs near the start of the film, when she is first introduced as the head of the Avatar Program. She groans and demands a lit cigarette from her subordinate then expresses disappointment to have Jake on her team as he is inexperienced and she considers this an insult from the management. With cigarette still in hand, she marches over to Administrator Parker Selfridge to “kick his butt.” When she finds him, he is not doing any work but rather playing with his golf putter, making hole in
ones into a coffee cup, all the while everyone around him is busily working. As he uses the putter to make a hole in one into a coffee cup, Grace ruins the game as she kicks the cup out of the way, sarcastically declaring “oops” before the golf ball can go any further. As she continues to voice her concerns, Parker tells her that she’s lucky to have Jake, and effectively dismisses her concerns.

Grace challenges male dominance again when she tries to salvage the relations with the Na’vi population, urging Parker not to proceed further on intruding the native lands. As Grace is trying to be persuasive with Parker, the Colonel interjects, telling Grace to shut her “pie hole.” Without missing a beat, she quips, “or what, Ranger Rick, are you going to shoot me?” She then continues to explain, but clearly is not taken seriously by the men in power, even when Jake supports her and tells the men to listen to her. Parker ultimately makes the call to invade a few minutes later. As soon as Grace finds this decision out, she marches back up to him – this time also with minimal success, although it does provide her with an hour of time to convince the native people a war is coming.

Although Grace is egocentric and displays characteristics of masculinity, especially in the beginning of the movie, her role is eventually reduced to more of a traditional female role as the film progresses. The audience can see a noticeable shift of her becoming more feminine as she adapts and accepts Jake as part of her work family. Clear examples of this femininity includes that Grace takes on a motherly role to Jake: when he is given harsh disrespect by the Colonel she gives him a comforting touch on his shoulder, she tucks him in at night and uses an endearing term, “marine,” to coax him to go to bed, and in the scene where Jake becomes accepted by the Na’vi she nearly bursts into tears of motherly joy as he is initiated in his avatar form as a true man.

Another example of male dominance is the male-to-male competition in the movie.
In his avatar, Jake is in competition with a male named “Tsu-ney” who the audience learns was destined to become a mated pair with Neytiri before Jake came along. Every time the Tsu-ney and Jake interact, it involves, sarcastic, comic, or belittling behaviors. In one scene, Tsu-ney approaches Jake on horseback and tells him “you should go away” to which Jake responds, “no, you’d miss me too much.” In a subsequent scene where Jake and others are being tested by being able to successfully ride a flying animal, Tsu-ney arbitrarily announces that Jake will go first. As Jake steps up, he hands his bow over to Tsu-ney which he snatches quickly. Then, as Jake attempts to mount the flying animal, Tsu-ney mocks Jake and makes a condescending comment to the person next to him “the moron is going to die.” As Jake almost dies by being thrown off of a cliff’s ledge by the animal, Tsu-ney lets out a scornful laugh. Jake eventually does succeed in mounting the animal. As he is able to succeed, Tsu-ney is shown as being clearly annoyed or disappointed. The other male bystanders cheer Jake on as he succeeds but Tsu-ney continues with aggression by cutting them off. In this section, I’ve discussed that male dominance as a theme in Avatar is promoted in certain ways: through Grace’s unsuccessful challenges to male authorities and through competition between males. Male versus female dominance provides interesting insight to masculinity, but how else is masculinity promoted or subverted in Avatar?

**Frontiersmanship**

Another characteristic of masculinity is frontiersmanship, what Trujillo (1996) refers to as the cowboy standing tall, ready to take whatever comes his way. Jake becomes the hero of the movie, but frontiersmanship is not displayed in his character until he establishes rapport with the indigenous culture. One thing that initially makes Jake unable to exhibit this characteristic is his permanent disability. He cannot use his
legs; he cannot walk or stand with them. He is made the object of scornful laughter by his peers for not being an able bodied person from the waist down. As the film progresses, however, Jake is transformed from being nearly helpless to being the hero that saves a colony.

He is able to stand tall, settle the Pandoran frontier and become hero, but not until he is aided with technology of the evil company he works for. The very frontiersmanship that Jake eventually embodies is one that is given to him by the evil corporation, as he only is able to use the remote controlled avatar body that they developed to stand, walk, and fight.

In an early scene of the movie, Parker is shown in his office discussing an issue with Grace. As the camera moves in, the audience can see a giant bow and arrow hanging on the back wall of his office. It is not disclosed how this Na’vi weaponry was obtained, but implies that the corporation knows about and has possession of the subordinate technologies of the native population. Yet it is also made clear that the natives do not possess the technology of the corporate empire; heavy machinery, armored battle suits, guns, and bombs.

Jake is somewhat of a double agent; informant to the Colonel by day and a Na’vi in training through the use of his avatar body at night. He has the access of technology from both sides—the corporation that wants to invade the native land and the natives who seek peace and have no desire to give up their land. This fight over land closely resembles the Western genre. Indeed, the characteristic of frontiersmanship is most closely associated with Westerns, and the mythology of the Western hero. In the final battle Jake becomes this type of hero, able to use other technologies than those the corporation developed. The side that Sully chooses is to become identified with is the victimized as he learns more
about them and falls in love with what may be equated as a princess of the village. In the final scene of battle, the corporation struggles from having their own technology used against them by Jake as he has somehow obtained hand grenades and wireless communication devices in addition to the aircraft that Trudy uses to try to fight the aerial crafts. The idea of frontiersmanship is one contributing factor that makes up a successfully masculine man, but what other contributing factors make up masculinity?

Heterosexuality

Yet another characteristic of masculinity is heterosexuality. This idea of masculinity requires men to not have relationships with other men that are sexual, but to only have sexual desires for women. Although there are many interpersonal relationships in the movie, the main relationship that is framed is the one between Jake and Neytiri. As soon as they meet, their relationship with each other is rocky, although there are a few subtle cues that indicate the instant attraction that he has to her. The audience sees that he smiles at her when she expresses disinterest in him. He is daring in the way that he is not afraid to flirt and his looks linger on her as she falls asleep the first night they meet. Initially, Neytiri is annoyed with having to spend time teaching Jake, but the audience begins to see that she doesn’t mind him and is later delighted by his naivety instead of disgusted with it. In a scene after Jake passes the test of being a Na’vi man, Neytiri mentions that he can have his choice of several eligible women in the community. Without wasting much time, he makes it clear that he doesn’t want any other woman except Neytiri. At this point he professes his love to her and without any questions, she returns the sentiment as she declares that she has chosen him also. The two seal their bond by having implied sexual relations under a scared tree.

Further cementing his place as a masculine heterosexual male is his interaction with
other men. Jake has nothing more than a work relationship with the men he interacts with, both in his human body and as an avatar. His sexuality is not questionable; although he befriends males, his closest friend ends up being his lover, Neytiri. Even though Jake is somewhat feminized due to his physical handicap that confines him to a wheelchair, he is soon able to triumph over the men he is in competition with. An example of male-to-male competition in Avatar that leaves no question to the fact that Jake is strictly heterosexual is the one that Jake has is with his co-worker Norm. Jake first wins at becoming “chosen” by the Na’vi while Norm loses out to Jake’s success. As a result of this opposition, Norm treats Jake with a condescending attitude of envy. Norm is more qualified, has had many hours of training, and knows the Na’vi language, yet must be a supporting character and a second best to Jake. In one of their more hostile exchanges, Jake brags to Norm about having a date with the chief’s daughter, dispelling any kind of homosexual notion that audience members could have had and reinforcing the fact that Jake is a heterosexual and that it is expected for Norm to be heterosexual as well in order for the bragging to take the full effect of purposefully offending Norm. Jake, after all, is gloating about this “date” to make Norm envious of both his newly accepted status among the Na’vi and to evoke jealousy over Jake’s superior sexual prowess at being able to charm a woman – two things that Norm has not been able to accomplish. Eventually, Norm finally gets over his grudge with Jake and ends up befriending him and helping him in rough situations. There are no boundaries that are challenged regarding sexual orientation through any of the characters in Avatar, therefore the viewpoint of the white heterosexual male is reinforced in the film. In evaluating the characters of Avatar using Trujillo’s (1996) criteria, Avatar proves to suggest being a traditional example of hegemonic masculinity. But what about other characteristics of
evaluation that could help lend insight on answering the research question of “how is masculinity represented in Avatar?” In the following three headings, I will continue to evaluate characters and scenes in Avatar using three other criteria originated by Lindgren and Lelievre (2009). Those criteria are: Enjoyment of risk taking, animal domination, and symbolic annihilation of subordinate masculinities.

Enjoyment of Risk Taking

Enjoyment of risk taking by doing something dangerous, outside of the norm, also characterizes masculinity. In the first scene where Jake is in his new avatar body, he is in a lab room where technicians are performing tests on him in his avatar body to make sure that everything is biologically functioning properly. Jake soon awakens in his avatar and is immediately fascinated by his new body and disregards what the technicians are doing around him. As they plead with him to sit still, he does the exact opposite and breaks free of the monitors he is hooked up to before storming out of the lab unsupervised. Jake starts to run away with a smile on his face and excitement in his vocal tone as he continues to enjoy this defiant moment. This is a significant scene because no longer does Jake feel inferior because he cannot walk. The risk that he took by running away was worth taking as he received a vast amount of pleasure from regaining physical control of himself that he has not had since becoming disabled.

In a scene that follows, Grace, Norm, and Jake are in the field taking samples of plants. Jake’s assigned role is to be an armed guard in case anything goes wrong, but he begins to explore the field area on his own. As he does this, not too far from Grace and Norm, he comes across a large triceratops-like animal that doesn’t seem very happy with him. Jake is warned by Grace to stay still, but he does not heed Grace’s warnings and as the animal charges toward him, he charges toward it. The animal stops and backs away,
as this happens, Jake begins to yell victoriously at it assuming that he has scared it into submission. In actuality, a fierce predatory beast scared the large animal away and has come up behind Jake. The adventure begins as the animal chases Jake. He escapes with his life, but only succeeds by jumping into a waterfall.

Risks are also taken and enjoyed when taming animals. In one scene, Neytiri introduces Jake to one of her own tamed animals that flies down to her from a tree. As the animal fiercely descends, Jake emits a nervous type of laughter that indicates enjoyment. In another scene, Neytiri is with Jake as they go atop a floating mountain to pick out an Ikran for Jake, a type of flying animal with wings. In this scene, Neytiri tells Jake that he has one chance to make the bond with this animal and proceeds to inform him that the wild animal will try to kill him as he attempts to bond with it. Although Jake knows that he is about to risk his life, he does not hesitate to attempt subduing the creature. As Jake spots the Ikran that he wants, he hisses at it and it hisses back at him. Immediately following these shots is a shot of Neytiri smiling excitedly as Jake engages in this daring activity. The tension mounts as Jake is thrown off to the side of a cliff by the animal, but he is able to get up eventually and finish the bonding process. After Jake successfully tames the animal, he goes with Neytiri and other Na’vi people to fly all around the area while occasionally making “whooping” noises in the process of flying to express enjoyment and excitement. As they fly around daily, a predatory flying animal catches them off guard. Jake and Neytiri escape the predator successfully and when this happens, they look at each other and laugh in an excited way from escaping death.

The animal that attacked Jake and Neytiri is an ultimate animal that Jake also ends up taming. The process of him accomplishing this task is left up to the viewer’s imagination; however, as viewers witnessed the struggle with Jake subduing his first
animal, it can be implied that the task of doing it a second time with a larger more vicious animal was not an easy one and that he risked his life yet another time.

Risk taking is an occurrence that both Jake and Neytiri enjoy. This is clearly expressed through the enjoyment of taming animals; however, it is not the only way he takes the risk of sacrificing his chances to walk again when he goes against the Colonel.

*Animal Domination*

Another characteristic of masculinity is animal domination. Taming any type of wild animal on Pandora involves making a bond with the animal. Once this bond is made, it signifies the animal’s acceptance of the handler. The way that the Na’vi bond with animals is through a type of physical connection, called “tsaheylu,” rather than strictly communicating through verbal and non-verbal acts. Tsaheylu is achieved when the handler doing the taming matches the end of his or her ponytail to the long ear of the animal. This represents a connection to the animal through mind and body; essentially the handler and animal become one unit when connected through Tsaheylu. After a bond between animal and handler is successfully made, the animal will not accept any other handler for the duration of it’s life.

On Pandora, several types of animals are encountered and dominated by both the corporation and Jake. This is demonstrated in the movie explicitly; after all, the test of being a man is being able to tame an Ikran, a type of flying wild animal with wings. In the scene where Jake is tested, he successfully tames the Ikran within a matter of a few minutes, but not without struggle from the reluctant animal. As he starts to gain control of the animal, Jake is able to become one with it, flying in sync with his peers as they too have all apparently passed the test of manhood. The taming of animals does not end there.
Another flying animal labeled by Jake as “the biggest, baddest thing in the sky” is a “king” version of the Ikran called the “Toruk Makto.” This type of Ikran is male, much larger in size, flies higher and above the other Ikran, is more fierce, and has a whole different set of hot colors. At one point in the movie after taming the Ikrans, Jake and Neytiri escape death by being expectantly attacked from above by Toruk Makto. They fly fast, swooping down into the canopy of the jungle on their Ikrans, eventually making it so that the Toruk Makto cannot get to them in such a small place.

Above becoming a man in the Na’vi culture, an ultimate element of gaining immediate respect involves taming the Toruk Makto. It is revealed through the story of Avatar that this has only happened five times in history. Before Jake tames this animal, the Na’vi people shun him after he reveals his initial intent to help the Sky People advance their “demonic ways” that involve forcing the Na’vi to move away from their lands. He finds his way back into acceptance among the people, but only by taming the ultimate animal, the Toruk Makto. Through the successful act of being able to tame animals, the character of Jake continues to prove as fitting the mold of the manhood model.

Symbolic Annihilation of Subordinated Masculinities

Feminine traits must be reduced in order to highlight masculinity. In some instances, women are silenced or killed to ensure that they do not compete with the masculine ideal. These types of character role reductions are a form of symbolically annihilation (Lindgren & Lelievre, 2009). Many examples of women being symbolically annihilated by men are shown throughout the movie. A woman that challenges authority must often pay a high cost for being a challenger. This is particularly shown through the lead and supporting female cast of Avatar. Female roles are reduced in the movie, if not
entirely eliminated literally through death, in service to the dominant masculinity. In several ways, Grace is a masculine character; she is both a smart person and the boss of several people. Yet, in several scenes throughout the movie, males silence Grace both in her human form and in her avatar form. This silencing was a sufficient subordination until the last half of the film where, instead of being silenced off, she is physically taken out of her avatar link machine by the Colonel’s henchmen when they discover the location she is hiding at in a mobile office location in the mountains. After this scene Grace and Jake learn that Parker intends to drive the Na’vi out of their land by physical force. She storms into the control room that Parker is in, with a security guard closely behind her telling her to stop. As she keeps moving forward, the guard touches her and she hits him back telling him to stop. He proceeds to tell her that she cannot be there and touches her again prompting the same response from her. This stops as she finally gets to Parker and he dismisses the guard, signaling that it’s okay for her to talk with him. She gets into an argument with Parker, trying to persuade him to stop his planned invasion. She is not successful until Jake suddenly shows up and pleads to Parker the same way Grace does. Through their combined persistence, Grace and Jake get one hour from Parker to complete the task of getting the Na’vi to move or else several Na’vi people will be injured or destroyed when the invasion occurs. The significance of the scene is that Grace is physically violated by the security guard despite her efforts to repeatedly stop him and she cannot influence Parker through stand-alone efforts to persuade him, she is only successful having been assisted by Jake.

In a scene that follows an hour has passed and Grace and Jake have fail to get the Na’vi people to move, resulting in their arrest and detainment back in human form at RDA. Norm is arrested with them and are they are all held in a prison cell somewhere on
the base. Trudy, only with the help of a male cohort, breaks the crew out of the prison and attempts to escape with them by helicopter to the mobile avatar link area where Jake and Grace can get back into their avatars safely without the company management catching them. As they flee from the base they almost get away without being noticed, however, an informant notifies the Colonel and he violently chases after them shooting bullets at the aircraft after kicking open a door. The helicopter is at a steady pace and distance away from the gunfire and the crew thinks they’ve made a successful escape, cheering. As Grace does not join in the celebration with Jake, Norm, and Trudy, it is discovered that through the gunfire Grace has been shot through the stomach. Not only does this gunshot wound lead to her death, the shooter was none other than the Colonel, the epitome of the masculine male model in the film. Each time Grace tries to gain control, the men that hold the control put her back in her place as a woman, dismissing anything she has to say no matter what it is she says or how she says it. Her attempts for control result in failure. As she continues to challenge authority with increasing intensity, she is put in her subordinate place.

Another example of women being subordinate to men is that Trudy, who is almost another masculinized female character, is also shot at with guns. In the final battle scene, RDA is at war with the natives who appear to be losing. In what is seemingly a turn of events, Trudy comes out from behind a hiding spot with her helicopter and opens fire at the RDA aircraft, especially the one containing the Colonel. However, he has the bigger guns and the bigger aircraft and without hesitation upon discovering her, he states “light her up” to his faithful crewmembers, which then obey the Colonel and shoot her down to her death. As they succeed, he offers words of encouragement and praise.
Several sociological characteristics including (1) physical force and control, (2) occupational achievement in an industrial capitalistic society, (3) male dominance vs. female, (4) frontiersmanship, and (5) heterosexuality (6) enjoyment of risk taking (7) animal domination, and (8) symbolic annihilation of subordinate masculinities (Trujillo, 1996), served as a lens to view the ways that characters in Avatar acted. These actions described through the methodology above suggest that promotion of masculinity is a theme throughout the movie. However, will examining how characters act through a different set of characteristics yield similar or different results?

Analysis of Psychoanalytic Characteristics in Avatar

In addition to analyzing the sociological characteristics of masculinity already discussed, I also will examine masculinity using concepts from psychoanalysis, in particular, the three elements discussed in the methodology: (1) To be looked-at-ness, (2) the look of the camera, and (3) the look of the character.

To be looked-at-ness

Neytiri is a distinctive female from the rest of her people in the village in regard to appearance; the way she is represented invites the white heterosexual male to look. Some of these differentiations include that she is very decorated to make herself look a certain way. She has colored beads in her hair in addition to feathers, wears a necklace, an armband, and has an ear pierced. Although all of the Na’vi have one long ponytail, she has her hair further divided and tied up to represent more traditional feminine dress. While accessories highlight her features, an important element of promoting the look is the body. Neytiri has a very slender body that serves as an object of male desire. The audience learns that Jake is not the only male attracted to Neytiri. In addition to her successful social attraction among males, the look of Neytiri reinforces her desirability as
a sexual object. In the initial scene where Jake and Neytiri meet, she enters the screen, performing the action of fighting off animals, but does so in a sexual way. She is shown almost nude in full body on screen and although the audiences know the action she is performing is quick in real time, the camera emphasizes her body and movement through slow motion. Many of the shots that show Neytiri, especially in the initial scene where she meets Jake, are close ups, medium, or full body shots that do not cut away very quickly. These things promote the audience to look and examine Neytiri. A major way in which Neytiri’s body is sexualized is through movement, which will be discussed in the next section.

*The look of the camera*

Through evaluating movie scenes, it is important for audiences to realize that there are several ways that the action in the frame, unfolding before the camera, can be filmed. The choices that are made in regard to how something is framed often reflects a male point of view or “gaze” (Mulvey, 1975). This is especially true when a female love interest is captured on screen. As soon as Neytiri is introduced to the audience, she is an object that is filmed in ways that reinforce male spectatorship. In a scene where Neytiri is introduced to Jake and she saves him from wild animals, she comes onto the screen in a slow-motion jump that emphasizes her full body. This slow motion sequence continues for several seconds as she rescues Jake from an otherwise uncertain fate. At this point in the film, Neytiri is conveyed as the dominant person of the two, being filmed from a low angle shot. This implied that she has power. This scene is one of conflict between the two characters; however, as sacred seeds from the tree of life attach to Jake, the interaction of the two characters turns into a more pleasant one. This is the first time the audience sees Neytiri smile at Jake, and when she does, close up face shots are captured
that emphasizes sexuality, lingering on her open mouth. Close up shots emphasize the detailed creases of Neytiri’s lips. When Neytiri is seen walking or running, she always skips gracefully, almost as if in a rhythm, highlighting her femininity. This skipping is kept consistent throughout the film whenever the audience sees Neytiri walk.

The look of the camera continues to affirm a male point of view, as the shots that capture Neytiri are often taken from an overhead position. While teaching Jake how to be one of the Na’vi, Neytiri takes a drink of water from a plant. In this shot, she is filmed from a high angle from above that emphasizes her breasts, body, and tilted back head as she enjoys the activity she is partaking in. This type of look of the camera was not necessary; that is, Neytiri could have been filmed through many other different angles while drinking the water to achieve the same ends. Instead, the look of the camera as it records sexualized a non-inherently sexual act. A trend throughout this movie is such that when Neytiri is filmed in scenes with Jake, there are a variety of camera angles and shots used; including low shots and overhead shots. When she is interacting with people other than Jake, such as her parents or Tsu’tey, the camera angle is mainly limited to straight on shots.

The way that Neytiri is framed through the camera in the acculturation/training sequence is such that the shots are mainly medium, tight, or extreme close up shots. This is a contrast to earlier in the movie (and in later scenes) as the camera focuses in and out when Neytiri is on screen, mainly when shooting with her bow and arrow and finally upon rescuing Jake from the link chamber at the end of the movie. This particular cinema technique may have been used to add emphasis to fast moving action or perhaps to emphasize the drawing power of beauty that Jake gazes her through when coming into a contact. Readdressing the closeness of camera shots, when we see Neytiri through Jake’s
avatar, it is clear that Neytiri is an object of sexual desire for Jake. The look of the camera as it records shows the audience the intended composition of what a scene or character is to look like, which brings me to asking: What about the look of the male character through the audience member’s perspective? Next I will discuss this, the look of the character.

*The look of the character*

*Avatar* establishes itself as the story of Jake Sully from the very beginning of the movie to the end. The audience easily realizes that this is his story; he is the sole narrator throughout the movie and has the most screen time. The adventure on screen highlights the journey that he takes through his own prospective, inviting the audience to take a vicarious active role as heroes through Jake’s journey. As this happens, the other lead role is one that is passive and objectified. Neytiri is the object that is feminine, stylized, and desired, which drives the male character’s actions throughout the film. It is not until Jake Sully is able be at peace with Neytiri does he achieve his full potential as the film’s hero. The audience only has Jake’s perspective as they are taken through the story. Spectators are not offered any kind of alternate point of view, and nothing from the female protagonist that would hint at promoting a feminine gaze. The look of the camera mirrors how Jake looks at the world around him as a heterosexual male. Neytiri nor any of the female characters have any kind of flashback in the movie that might have indicated an alternate perspective of how things happened. Neytiri does begin to tell Jake a story about her grandfather in one scene that may have been able to lead the audience to visualize perspectives from her own views, yet it is reduced to a general story about how great her grandfather was as a male warrior. She ends the story by stating that all of the Na’vi people know about the story of her grandfather.
By examining *Avatar* through the methodology described in Chapter 3, there are significant acts and scenes that promote the portrayal of masculinity as the traditional hegemonic ideal. Men are to be leaders, tough, able-bodied, physically and emotionally strong. Men are expelled from being a legitimate male when they are disabled, weak, or display emotion. Woman are made the object of the active viewing audience, framed from a straight white male perspective. When authority, a characteristic of masculinity, is challenged, female challengers are kept subordinate to the point of suffering the penalty of death to ensure that they are kept in their place and become extinguished as competition. Hegemonic masculinity is taught to function as the traditional, fixed ideal, teaching viewers that persons in opposition to it is not an acceptable position.

Chapter 5 summarizes the analysis through discussion, providing answers to the research questions previously mentioned above. It also discusses implications of the research and provides suggests for future critical study research pertaining to the portrayal of masculinity in media.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSIONS

How is masculinity portrayed in western media? In order to provide a partial answer to this question, I closely examined one example from the media, the 2009 film entitled Avatar. The film is a significant artifact due to both its commercial success and the masculine characteristics present in the film from start to finish. The previous chapter dealt with several characteristics and elements of masculinity that I discovered in the film Avatar. This chapter addresses these results through a discussion of the findings, answering the research questions posed in Chapter One:

1. How is masculinity represented in Avatar?

2. Does the portrayal of masculinity in Avatar promote or subvert the idea of the hegemonic male?

   a.) Does Avatar reaffirm masculine stereotypes?

   b.) If reinforced, what is the purpose behind such masculine representation in Avatar?

   c.) If subverted, what are the characteristics of this portrayal?

The chapter concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for future study.

Discussion

How is masculinity represented in Avatar?

As noted above, in my analysis of Avatar, I was able to identify several elements of masculinity. Prior to beginning this project, I believed that the movie was a prime example of masculinity found in western culture. After examining the movie several times, using varied critical categories as a means for extracting examples of masculinity, I have determined that Avatar does, indeed, reaffirm traditional masculinity. In order to
support this claim, I will turn to Connell’s (1987) concept of Hegemonic Masculinity in addition to other studies referenced in Chapter Two.

Hegemonic Masculinity, the idea that there is an ideal norm for male behavior, deals with a struggle for power (Connell, 1987). This struggle is always something that is in play between the characters in Avatar from beginning to end, supporting Connell’s contention that masculinity is something that is appropriate and desired, but which takes effort to accomplish. Kimmel (1996) subscribes to Connell’s definition of hegemonic masculinity, asserting that a major theme in movies today among male characters is power – a struggle for gaining power. This struggle of attaining power is one way that masculinity is portrayed and represented in Avatar and is a concept that assists in answering my first research question, “how is masculinity represented in Avatar?”

Avatar follows the ideal male model that manhood is a dominant theme in American history and remains an ideal goal for men to live up to (Kimmel, 1996). The movie does not show failed masculinity as something that is acceptable, but rather perpetuates the male roles to function hegemonically. A good example of this seen through the character of Jake. The struggle that Jake encounters to rise in power and to become a proper example of manhood is made obvious to the audience through the ways he initially fails as a man: handicapped, not respected by other men and women, and not in a position of power. Jake is a man who is physically disabled, thus he automatically holds lower status than other males in contrast who are able bodied. This low power position is one that Jake does not desire – it is made clear that he would like to be able to use his legs but cannot afford to have the operation. Further, he is made into an object of ridicule by his peers who are more masculine than he is, which implies that they do not approve of him or that he is not normal. In the movie’s exposition, he is condemned for
being in a wheelchair by people who do not know him. An example of this is when he is told to hurry up and get off of an aircraft by a male authority figure that calls him a “special case,” and is also told “lookout hot rod” by a man operating a robotic suit who nearly steps on him from being on a wrong path. He is further made fun of by soldiers who call him “meals on wheels” and make remarks pertaining to his visible disability, such as “that is just wrong.” I believe that through this example, audiences see that Avatar does not support the failed masculinity that Jake is an example of initially. Avatar does, however, show that in order for Jake to gain respect, he must struggle through making several changes to achieve power and dominance in order to gain legitimacy as a man. In the beginning of Avatar, Jake is not manly in relation to other men, but is eventually able to reverse his deficiencies, only after he is able to use his new avatar body that can fully function. By the end parts of the movie, he gains control of his new body and becomes the ideal male, able to tame wild animals, influence peers effectively, and attract the desired female. Above all – he passes the test of Na’vi manhood, and only after that end, gets the woman he desires after being in competition for her with another man. Jake has essentially learned how to perform manhood better than most of the native Na’vi population.

Also answering Research Question #1 is the portrayal of subordinate female roles in relation to superior male roles. Regarding power, women do not achieve it in the film as do men and serve in marginalized roles to make room for males to succeed in their masculinity. This is witnessed in Avatar as women attempt to rise to their potential of becoming the power holders, but end up failing to men. An example of this is embodied in the character of Grace. She attempts to persuade men in power to simply listen to her even when they know that she knows better than they do about certain issues. Jake
ignores her when she initially advised him about his first encounter with a large animal, telling him what not to do. He, of course, does the exact opposite, but does not end up being punished. Grace, however, is punished by being silenced or dismissed when she is similarly told what to do by her own superiors. Examples of this include when Grace is silenced by her boss Parker when she has an issue, she is also told to shut up by the Colonel in a subsequent scene, and she is even told that it is not her place to speak by Tsu-ty. She never fully succeeds in influencing the men in power and is eventually killed off by the man that dislikes her the greatest.

Grace attempts to achieve power in other ways rather than persuasive efforts given to men. As she finds out that the Colonel and Parker are influencing Jake, she develops plans of her own to foil these men in power and prevent them from running what she considers to be her operation. She takes her crew away from the Colonel and Parker by going to a mobile office in a region of Pandora that is not traceable by modern technology. She is successful, but only for a short time. As wrecking crews invade Hometree, the men eventually find out her new location and begin to take over her operation. Grace is one of the characters of the film that knows best; however, she is the most frequently silenced character when she attempts to give input in practical situations. In yet another scene of the movie, she gets into a heated discussion with Parker and the Colonel and sarcastically asks if the Colonel is going to shoot her if she keeps talking. The irony of the situation is that Grace is shot shortly after by none other than the Colonel after attempting to get away from him a second time. As the movie moves forward, Grace’s role has been diminished, while Jake’s role achieves success.

Trudy is also a character who is held back by submitting to males. She is portrayed as obedient to her superiors – the Colonel has orders and she follows them.
Later, as she becomes involved with helping Grace, Jake, and Norm, and less involved with paying attention to the Colonel, she is portrayed as having shifted her obedience to Jake and even apologies when her ship goes down before she dies, also from being killed by the Colonel’s guns. Trudy has strong ethical standards and what appears to be strong leadership; after all, it was her idea to take a lead in breaking Jake, Grace, and Norm out of their prison cell. However, strong female roles seem to be rewarded by death in order to ensure that the males may keep their power and are no longer threatened by female competitors.

There is one instance where a female triumphs over male power. At the end of the movie in a scene of battle, Neytiri is trapped under her fallen horse and is about to be killed by the Colonel in his armored suit. Jake, however, suddenly comes onto the scene and to her rescue by fighting with the Colonel so that he cannot get to harming her. While Jake and the Colonel quarrel, Neytiri is able to get up from under her fallen horse and shoots the Colonel with an arrow through his heart. She repeats this two or three times to ensure that he dies. Was this an instance of the female overcoming male dominance? After all, her motive for shooting the Colonel was because he is was going kill her male lover. The ending of the movie is left open, but it can be implied that Jake remains a tough leader and Neytiri defaults to the more submissive role of making sure he survives as a Na’vi, which is much of what her role has been in the movie.

Continuing to answer the research question of “how is masculinity represented in Avatar,” I discovered that another way masculinity portrayed is through the physical body. Tasker (1993) asserted that muscular male actors were used as spectacle and translated to male dominance in the eighties with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone movies. This spectacle and dominance rings true for much of the male
characters in *Avatar*, especially the extensively muscled Colonel. No other character in the movie comes close to matching his size and power. In one scene he is shown wearing a white sweaty tank top while working out; no other characters are depicted as fanatic gym-goers or shown with such revealing clothing. He happens to be the most masculine character in the movie; an insensitive, killing, war-mongering man who reaches for his gun at a moment’s notice. Jake and members of the Na’vi are also depicted as have a toned musculature put on display as spectacle for the audience. In viewing the movie several times, it is easy to notice that there is a difference in body type between Jake and the other Na’vi. The Na’vi are a fit population, none are depicted as being overweight or malnourished, but rather depicted as toned slender people who are not too short and not too tall. Jake, contrasted to the general Na’vi population, is different not only because his body is artificial, but it is also wider and more muscular than the rest of the Na’vi characters on display. Although his avatar body was genetically created and is artificial, it still serves as the most muscular compared to all of the other artificially created avatar bodies. For these reasons, Avatar promotes ideals of masculinity through body-type.

Another element of masculinity that answers the research question of “how is masculinity represented in *Avatar,*” is acts of violence. Mellen (1977) noted in the 1970s era of film, the portrayal of masculinity was associated with violence. Violence in *Avatar* is sometimes left implied, and at other times, it is more explicitly shown. An example of implied violence includes a scene when Trudy’s helicopter is shot down by the Colonel and his men. There is no loud crash or explosion, but as the aircraft quickly descends, the audience can fill in the blanks. A previous scene includes the violent act of the Colonel shooting rounds at the science crew trying to make a helicopter escape from base, which also ends with a female victim (Grace) dying. Other scenes show people being crushed
by bombs or large animals, or being thrown off of ledges, chopped up by helicopter fan
blades, or having arrows shot through their bodies. Although violent acts are non-
extreme (no blood and gore), it is still worth noting that several violent acts occur in the
movie, implied or otherwise.

Another approach to answer the research question of “how is masculinity represented in *Avatar*,” involved examining the movie through psychoanalytic perspectives; in this case, through the male gaze. Mulvey’s (1975) original theory dealt with the “male gaze” a concept that the audience views cinema through the prospective of a heterosexual male. The look includes the way things appear before the camera and how females are framed in a way that promotes sexual desires of the male spectator. The audience sees this by the way Neytiri is shown and made into a sexualized being. One of the noticeable ways that Neytiri is shown depicts her graceful movements. Neytiri is also shown on screen through close up shots that are able to show detail in character reactions. The camera shots are close to medium shots that emphasize her facial and body expressions. Some shots emphasize cleavage while other shots focus on her facial reaction. The mise-en-scene in *Avatar* is sexualized. Bright colors of blue and green highlight lush the world of Pandora. At nighttime, plants and animals can be seen glowing, but this is particularly emphasized in scenes that include flirtation or loving exchanges. These scenes that I have described assist in answering the question of how masculinity is represented in *Avatar*. Another perplexing question to answer regards whether or not these portrayals promote or subvert masculinity. In the next section, I provide a discussion regarding whether or not the movie promotes or subverts masculinity.

Does *Avatar* promote or subvert masculinity?
After performing a close reading of Avatar, I am able to answer Research Question #2a. One of the things that I aimed to gain insight on was to be able to answer the question of “does Avatar reaffirm masculine stereotypes?” Masculine stereotypes are reinforced in this movie through several examples. Men are not depicted as being afraid, submissive, emotional or nurturing. Instead they are portrayed as leaders, tough, unafraid, and violent. The male characters are unsuccessful at tasks unless they possess a majority of the characteristics that Trujillo (1996) describes in order to live up to being an ideal male: (1) physical force and control, (2) occupational achievement in an industrial capitalistic society, (3) male dominance vs. female (patriarchy), (4) frontiersmanship, and (5) heterosexuality. An example of failed masculinity and lack of success is when Jake is first introduced to the audience. He lacks physical force and control, used to be occupationally successful, is not dominant, not seen as a frontiersman, and may or may not be heterosexual. Jake is condemned by his peers for not living up to expectations of being the hegemonic male, until he acquires these characteristics only then is he shown in the most positive light and considered the hero of the movie.

When the audience is introduced to the main male cast, it is predictable as to how these characters will play out their scenes from the characters being so traditionally stereotypical. The masculine character of the Colonel and Parker are both portrayed as boss figures and remain to be in power positions until the conclusion of the film, reinforcing stereotypes.

Research Question #2b aimed to answer “if hegemonic masculinity is reinforced, what is the purpose behind such masculine representation in Avatar?” This is a question that I found difficult to answer, even after several viewings of the movie and through my research. I can only speculate that a reason why such a fixed masculinity is promoted is
due to providing the audience with a film that meets traditional expectations of what masculinity looks like. A common thread runs through real life and in movies alike: patriarchy is dominant and men do not want to lose power to women. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) masculinity requires all other men to measure a particular man’s manliness in relation to hegemonic ideals of masculinity, reinforcing global subordination of women to men, (p. 832). The subordination of women to men is a theme that is present throughout the movie and is displayed through the characters of Grace and Trudy in opposition to characters like Parker and the Colonel. These women must remain in line regarding being subordinate to men or else there are consequences that occur. Both female characters end up dying from the gun of the extremely masculine Colonel after the struggle to rise in power. Therefore, it is only realistic that men be portrayed as the dominant sex in film.

However, significant strides have been made recently that subvert traditional expectations of masculinity. I turn to two studies from the literature review to support the idea that Avatar could have easily been less masculine yet successful. Gillam and Wooden (2008) make the argument that a “New Man” model of masculinity does exist in popular cinema that includes movies with male driven plots. These movies show the main male characters going through a loss or reduction of masculinity before embracing his feminine traits. The idea of this New Man model is that it shows the character as he progresses through a journey of accepting his feminine traits yet still being masculine. This display of modern portrayal of manhood promotes a softer masculinity for audiences to identify with.

Brashaw’s (2010) thesis research comparing James Bond in past and present film, also asserted that the portrayal of masculinity is not entirely fixed, although several
traditional masculine elements remained the same between the films she compared. Bradshaw (2010) noted that a major transformation between the films is that the title of “hero” was only given to Bond in Goldfinger 1964, but in Casino Royale (2006) the title is shared between Bond and Vesper Lynd.

Avatar does not risk defying traditional conventions of masculinity, but could have made exceptions that may have conceivably helped to transform masculine representation in film toward the New Man model. If this were to have occurred, other producers and directors of major Hollywood movies may have followed a model that promotes more equality between the portrayals of the sexes and highlights women as true heros. Recall, Cameron is known for his reputation of featuring strong female characters in his movies, but these characters are still often reduced in their power, as especially found in Avatar through the character portrayals of Grace, Trudy, and Neytiri. Grace and Trudy are both killed at the hands of men when they serve as a potential threat to gaining power. Neytiri is willing to risk her own life to save Jake and to promote patriarchal leadership in the end. In this fashion, Avatar parallels other Cameron movies such as, Terminator II (1991), a film that features Sarah Connor (played by Linda Hamilton) as the strong lead female hero in the movie. The problem is the same as it is in Avatar, she is ultimately overshadowed by the male lead.

Finally, the last question that I aimed to answer in Research Question #2c is: “if subverted, what are the characteristics of this portrayal?” In Avatar, subversion of masculinity does not occur completely; however, I was able to notice that the character of Neytiri provided challenges to stereotyped masculine representation, but in a limited fashion. As noted earlier, she is represented as a sex object, yet also ends up performing heroic acts such as rescuing Jake from being killed three times: once as they meet and he
is about to become a meal for hungry savage animals, she saves him a second time when Tsu-tey attempts to slit Jake’s throat in a scene, and lastly in the final scene of battle where she kills the Colonel to stop him from killing Jake. Perhaps Neytiri is the true hero in the film, if she hadn’t saved Jake, he would never have been able to claim the highest level of power and status. Neytiri is able to be a tough character that has power; however, this power cannot be stand-alone as she too must be aided by someone else to achieve successful ends. Although she possesses some characteristics of masculinity, she is objectified and reduced to playing a nurturing role to Jake in the end. Male characters in Avatar play only one dimension: masculine or feminine. When men like Jake possess characteristics of femininity, they are condemned while women such as Neytiri are able to play both masculine and feminine roles without condemnation; however, the female role is reduced to being marginalized in every case through the main characters in Avatar. Although Neytiri saves Jake and contributes in the war to save her people, Jake is the only hero that emerges at the end of the movie and he is rewarded with getting everything that he wants. Hegemonic masculinity is not subverted due to the traditional displays of masculinity present and persistent throughout the film. There is a large selection of movies that audiences have to chose titles from in today’s western world, so the findings and conclusions in this study might not hold true through close analysis of other media artifacts.

Next, I will address limitations of this particular study before discussing suggestions for future research.

Limitations of Study

While it is my hope that this project will lend significance to the study of masculinity in film, it is limited in many ways. The movie Avatar is only one instance of
Avatar

recent film in western media. This study was based on one film that may not represent or encapsulate the entire genre of western film, but is rather a single artifact. I chose to analyze Avatar over other popular films such as Surrogates (2009) or Gamer (2009) because I knew information about Cameron’s previous cinema work, which also appeared to display a high surface level of masculine characteristics and have strong female lead characters. Avatar seemed like the most logical choice in doing a full analysis for the purposes of this thesis project due to the masculine representation on the surface level. Cameron has developed a reputation for defying expectations of audiences due to his female leads possessing strong female roles. In an article written by Scott Bowles (Jan. 5, 2010), Zoe Saldana (Neytiri) credits Cameron for her desire to become an actress, indicating that through characters in Cameron’s movies such as Ripley (Alien) and Sarah Connor (Terminator franchise) he has shown her that actresses are able to become action heroes. This particular study does not find that the claim of female characters having strong roles is not entirely true regarding the movie Avatar, but is this true for other artifacts of western influence?

Another way that this study may be limited is that it only analyzed one movie and it’s main set of characters. This was done for time manageability of the project. The results could differ greatly if several action/adventure films were compared through analysis.

An addition limitation of this study may include the methodology itself. Although the methodology is a combination of significant perspectives, it may be dated as Trujillo’s (1996) sociological work originated fifteen years prior to this study. Mulvey’s (1975) psychoanalytic concepts that were used were from over thirty-six years ago. The most recent lens used in the methodology was based off of sociological
concepts of Lindgren and Lelievre (2009), about two years before the date that this thesis was completed.

The above limitations are not an exclusive list, but provide readers with a few considerations to keep in mind regarding this study. I will now continue with providing suggestions for future research.

Suggestions for Future Research

Cameron’s film franchise presents a wealth of potential opportunity for media scholars to analyze regarding masculinity. The films that were most commercially successful were the ones featuring patriarchal or masculine storylines. Among some of the most popular titles are the Terminator franchise, Alien, and Titanic. When analyzing masculine portrayals in Cameron films, there are approximately twenty full-length movie titles that could potentially be artifacts of analysis. Perhaps a future study may yield interesting results if the lead characters in several of these movies were analyzed and compared. Insight could also be of value by comparing one of Cameron’s first movies to one of his most recent movies. Yet another possible analysis that could provide significant masculine trend information may be the comparison of two Cameron films that seem entirely different. At the time I began this study, it was rumored through the Internet Movie Database that two Avatar sequels will be released over the next few years. It would be of interest to compare two or more of these films to see if any changes of masculine portrayals seem to have occurred over the span of several years. While studies of masculine portrayal continue in academia, it is my personal desire that people also continue to evaluate one of the most relevant sources of storytelling, popular media, to become literate of the potentially denigrating effects of masculine portrayal that continues to flourish in the media of Western culture.
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