Race and Imaginative Resistance in James Cameron’s Avatar

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Abstract: This article modifies philosopher Tamar Szabó Gendler’s theory of imaginative resistance in order to make it applicable to film and analyze a distinctively adverse kind of resistant response to James Cameron’s Avatar (2009). Gendler’s theory, as she states it, seeks to explain resistance to literary stories in a straightforwardly cognitivist, but narrowly rationalistic fashion. This article introduces elements from recent work at the intersection of philosophy of film and the emotions to augment Gendler’s theory so that it can be used to explain why some viewers hesitate or even refuse to imagine some cinematic fictional worlds. The method used is analytic philosophy of film. The analysis reveals that some viewers are cognitively impoverished with regard to imagining race in general: they will likely have extreme difficulty in centrally imagining racially “other” characters, which also bodes ill for their real-world prospects for moral engagements concerning race.

Keywords: emotions, epistemology of ignorance, imagination, morality in fiction, philosophy of film, racism, spectatorship, white gaze

What happens when our imaginations falter or even fail at the movies? What makes cinematic worlds or characters so difficult to imagine that we find it nearly or actually impossible to do so, even when presented with otherwise vivid and compelling audio-visual cues? Such imaginative hesitations may arise from multiple sources, but I would argue that many of the more interesting ones are empirical rather than conceptual. Imaginative failure can be purely a matter of logic: some phenomena may simply lie beyond our human capacity to create ideas, images, or sensations that are not and perhaps never have been present to our senses, such as Quine’s ([1948] 1963) round square cupola or Hume’s ([1740] 1978) mountain without a valley. But particularly with regard to issues of race, these sorts of imaginative failures are of peripheral interest. Instead, what come to the fore are certain difficulties concerning imagining alternative moralities that have been discussed under the rubric of “the puzzle of imaginative resistance”; that is, the distinctive difficulty we
sometimes experience in imagining certain claims stipulated by fictional narratives.

This puzzle has been underapplied to problems of race, given the relevance and topicality of these problems to most people’s lives. Even as some of this puzzle’s most salient potential examples would appear to be those regarding how we resist or refuse to imagine the lives of racially different others, much recent scholarly literature has focused on how it is or is not possible to imagine logical impossibilities (e.g., Stock 2003; Weatherson 2004; Yablo 2002). Although interesting in its own right, this kind of analysis does not offer us much by way of resolving questions concerning why we might resist or refuse to imagine the complicated inner lives of other human beings or their fictional representations. In order to bring the debate back to grounds more pertinent to racial depictions in film, I outline issues crucial to the conceivability of this topic articulated in recent literature on imaginative resistance. I then set forth some recent advances in philosophy of film, particularly its discussion of the roles that affect and the emotions play in our engagement with film narrative, which are critical to how I propose to modify a theory of imaginative resistance that is aimed mainly at literature. I apply this modified theory to the recent blockbuster Avatar (James Cameron, 2009) by discussing a distinctive type of resistant spectatorship to it as a form of not wishing to imagine a fictional world in which presumptions or values deeply held by the viewer must be thought of as otherwise. I go on to consider what sorts of difficulties this form of resistance may have in imagining racial others cinematically, especially for what might be thought of as full-bodied, “central imaginings” of such characters—imagining these characters “from the inside.” I conclude by speculating how this analysis of imaginative resistance provides insights concerning different viewers’ capacities to understand both film-fictional and real-world racial others. My purpose here is largely diagnostic: I aim to analyze one particularly adverse kind of reaction to Avatar because accounting for it fully requires not only a political explanation but also a detailed epistemological one. Yet this epistemological explanation has implications regarding the consequences of accepting or rejecting moral challenges presented to us by film, particularly with regard to race. In this way I hope to highlight an underappreciated connection between emotional learning and racialized points of view in film.

Recent Work on the Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance

Although the puzzle of imaginative resistance reaches back to remarks by David Hume ([1757] 1977), since the early 1990s philosophers Kendall Walton (1990, 1994), Tamar Gendler (2000, 2006), and others have determined its cur-
rent shape through their analyses of various obstacles to full-fledged participation in fictional worlds (see also Moran 1994). Scholarly discussion of the puzzle has now reached a point where it is a familiar problem to many aestheticians as well as epistemologists, although it has been curiously underapplied to problems of race, and even when only in passing. As Walton notes, this puzzle is actually “a tangled nest of importantly distinct, but easily confused, puzzles” (2006: 137); however, the relevant sub-variety for this article is what Gendler calls “Humean resistance,” where readers have distinctive difficulty engaging in an imaginative act concerning a moral claim stipulated by a fictional narrative (2006: 152–157; see also Weatherson 2004: 2).

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Interestingly, we do not ordinarily experience the same sort of difficulty with regard to most fictional stipulations of facts that run counter to what we believe to be true. Time travel, talking pigs, flying carpets, and gelatinous monsters oozing their way to world domination usually present us with no great obstacles when stipulated by a story, yet alternative moralities can present distinctive hesitations and refusals: morally approved female infanticide, torture as a form of recreation, and somehow fitting or appropriate racist beliefs generally give us pause or repulse us. Unlike Babe the Pig, Aladdin’s carpet, or the Blob, we typically find such fictional directives more onerous to take up. For this reason, many theorists have observed, following Hume, a striking asymmetry regarding our willingness to imagine contrary facts, on the one hand, and alternative morals, on the other (Hume [1757] 1977: 21–22; see also Gendler 2000: 57; Walton 1994: 35). Although not absolute—we can, for example, be induced to imagine what strike us as deviant alternative moralities in some circumstances, just as we sometimes resist imagining counterfactual fictional descriptions in others—this general difference reveals a salient peculiarity concerning the puzzle.

Gendler has proposed an explanation for a subset of examples involving Humean resistance by focusing on why we resist conceiving of certain “imaginatively involved, valenced normative appraisals” (2006: 153–154). For example, many of us have experienced at least momentary difficulty when reading the *Euthyphro* due to Plato’s tacit presumptions that “it is morally acceptable to beat one’s slave to death” as well as being “morally acceptable to own a slave in the first place” (Ibid.: 154). Gendler hypothesizes that this resistance is due to a combination of imaginative barriers and a sense of imaginative impropriety. In other words, we not only “find it difficult to ‘enter into’ [Plato’s] world-view,” we also have a vague sense that it is somehow improper to do so:

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“the sentiments in question are “vicious” ones [to us and] . . . if we somehow succeed in adopting them, we will have violated a norm that we hold ourselves to” (Ibid.). Such imaginings require noticeable cognitive effort to perform and are typically accompanied by a sense of moral distaste (Ibid.: 155). Thus, imaginative resistance of this variety does not depend on any fundamental cognitive incapacity on our part, but rather a certain unwillingness that makes it difficult or at times even impossible for us to imagine in the way the narrative directs us.

In addition, it is important to note, as Currie does, that Humean forms of imaginative resistance do not only arise in people “who have correct moral views. People whose morals are, by our lights, very misguided experience imaginative resistance to better views when they are exposed to them; if it were not so, moral education would be an easier business” (2002: 203). Thus analyses of Humean resistance may be used to understand not only our own (presumably) morally “correct” responses, but also others’ often misguided imaginative difficulties or failures. It can furthermore be used, as Currie’s observation implies, to explain our own decisions to change aspects of our moral values or perspectives as the result of exposure to alternative moralities and subsequent reflection.

In applying her analysis to written fiction, Gendler argues that sometimes our resistance to imagine is the result of “authoritative breakdown”; that is, a failure of the author’s authority such that readers resist or refuse to take up the suggested moral imagining (2006: 157–159). This breakdown results in “pop-out,” where the reader deems the author to be suggesting that the specified moral imagining be taken as true not only in the fictional world, but the real one as well (Ibid.: 159). There is, in other words, a sense on the part of the reader that the moral proposition to be imagined in the fictional world should also be “exported” (to use a term Gendler offers in her earlier essay) to the real world, “a simultaneous invitation to imagine and believe—and we reject the invitation to believe” (Ibid.: 160). (As Gendler makes clear, these invitations may be intended or simply perceived on the part of the reader.) Because we have difficulty disentangling these two invitations, in cases of refusal we reject both and thereby “pop out” of the fictional world. For example, if asked by a story to imagine African Americans as generally infantile and amoral, I think that most of us would resist due to its possible real-world implication that somehow this analogy should be taken as apt. Many of us would probably pop out of the fiction as a result and have difficulty taking up not only this narrative stipulation but the author’s subsequent imaginative suggestions as well.

Crucially, Gendler thinks that such rejections further depend on our refusal to adopt certain “generation principles” presupposed by the moral proposition to be imagined.3 These generation principles, which we might think of as background presumptions and dispositions to act that undergird the explicit
normative appraisal suggested by the fiction, become especially crucial when it comes to the second, implied invitation concerning the real world. Such adverse reactions occur because these alternative generation principles run counter to the reader’s currently held norms and presupposed values, which ordinarily they do not wish to violate or set aside. For these reasons, Gendler concludes,

*Classic imaginative resistance arises when a reader can’t imagine a certain moral claim being true in a story (Imaginative Barriers) because she won’t bring herself to adopt the requisite set of generation principles governing the use of [such] moral appraisals (Imaginative impropriety). So classic imaginative resistance arises when we can’t because we won’t.* (2006: 164)

Such an analysis, Gendler argues, resolves certain important cases of imaginative resistance. While by no means addressing all cases, her explanation provides a useful theoretical structure with which to address some instances involving resistance to imaginatively detailed, value-laden normative appraisals stipulated by written fictions. It also provides a potentially better understanding of certain problems of imaginative resistance arising in film, for suitably modified Gendler’s hypothesis could be applied to cases where Humean resistance takes place not only when reading, but also while watching a movie.

**Literature, Philosophy of Film, and the Emotions**

It is a commonplace in philosophical aesthetics to argue that literary fiction can sometimes challenge us to overcome limits of our personal experience (see, e.g., Murdoch [1970] 1985; Nussbaum 1990). For example, Dickens’s mid-nineteenth century novels like *David Copperfield*, *Hard Times*, and *Oliver Twist* challenged his Victorian British audiences to overcome their prejudices about the poor, especially biases involving destitute children. These novels engaged the imaginations of many of Dickens’s contemporary middle- and upper-class readers to better understand what it was like to be an “other”—namely, a child mired in poverty and facing the prospect of working in “dark, Satanic mills,” to use William Blake’s striking phrase (Blake [1804] 1970: 95; see also Diamond [1982] 1991: 299–301). Dickens exploited detailed, narrative points of view to invite his readers both in thought and feeling to grasp (that is, centrally imagine in the sense I am using that term) the conditions of orphaned working-class children facing the prospects of poverty, monotonous stultifying factory labor, and a crippling lack of proper sanitation and education in their lives. He challenged his readers to not only sympathetically but also empathetically understand these “others” and see them in a new light; namely,
as children undeservedly suffering from social and economic conditions over which they had little or no control. In this sense, Dickens got many of his readers to think differently from the ways in which they had thought before, thus contributing significantly to an atmosphere of reform that helped foster legislation and philanthropy to improve the lot of “paupers,” especially those who were underage (Cunningham 2008). But Dickens is hardly an isolated case. Consciously mimicking her British contemporary, Harriet Beecher Stowe passionately depicted American slavery as cruel and inhumane. She thereby so affected her 1850s American readers that President Abraham Lincoln is said to have quipped about first meeting her after the outbreak of the Civil War, “So you are the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war” (cited in Tobin and Jones 2008: 33).

It is not insignificant that cooperative readers grasp fictions like Dickens’s and Stowe’s emotionally as well as intellectually. As Susan Feagin argues (1996), part of what it is to appreciate literary fiction is to come to understand it in a feeling-based way involving our empathy and sympathy for narrative characters, which depend critically on our capacities to imagine in terms of feeling what others are like and what their situations are. Similarly, Walton recognizes this crucial convergence between imagination, thought, and feeling by stating, “[i]t is when I imagine myself in another’s shoes . . . that my imagination helps me to understand him” (1990: 34).

Arguing that such insights regarding feeling-based understanding and the moral challenges implied also apply to film, Stephen Mulhall points out that their very possibility depends on “our own willingness to rethink our own status and our own experience of life,” and—especially in cases of significant moral challenges—a willingness “to look at everything differently” (2008: 138, 140). Such willingness makes possible “fundamental shifts in ethical perception” rather than mere changes in particular moral decisions or judgments, for the former kind of shift allows us “to find moral significance where it did not previously seem to exist” (Ibid.: 141, 140). Dickens, for example, “enhances our understanding by engaging with and altering our affections and sensibility” (Ibid.: 141). However, he is not just crassly appealing to our emotions, as the mainstream Western philosophical tradition would have it, because “imaginative and emotional responses themselves are answerable to the claims of reason” (Ibid.). Our emotional and imaginative responses thus need not be irrational, but may also be in conformity with reason. It is further worth noting that if we are generally unwilling to look at things differently, then such challenges to our morals will seldom, if ever, occur. If our unwillingness is absolute, then we are unlikely to consider these challenges even in imagination—for example, in stories, such as those presented by novels or movies. Such resolute unwillingness would therefore constitute a substantial barrier to seeing the world from any moral perspective save our own.
Mulhall’s insights about the rationality of emotions are relevant for theorizing how imaginative resistance operates in film. First, he underscores the fact that the very possibility of moral challenges mounted by fiction often depends on the idea that “some degree of open-mindedness in moral matters is a good thing,” as Currie notes (2002: 203). Second, the inclusion of emotion into the realm of rationality means that many of our affective responses can be seen as coherent, concern-based construals, evaluations, or appraisals, and therefore subject to the sorts of scrutiny that philosophers have typically used to evaluate beliefs (viz., rationalistic criteria). This second theoretical innovation, of course, has recently made its way into cognitive film theory (e.g., Carroll 1999; Plantinga 2009). In any case, both insights figure crucially into revamping Gendler’s theory for cinema.

Before turning to revising Gendler, however, it is important to emphasize two additional points that are frequently acknowledged but still often undervalued. First, moving images typically engage us in ways even more direct than literature—namely, through bodily based means as well as more narrowly cognitive ones—and that this increased sensory access provides film with an enhanced capacity to elicit certain responses, from perceptual and affective ones to, ultimately, those narrowly involving our higher-level understanding of the narrative’s details. In part because cinema engages us aurally as well as visually, its increased somatic access means that it has a distinctive facility to evoke what used to be commonly called “non-cognitive” reactions. Obviously, our grasp of a character or story may be partly generated through higher-level mental processes stimulated by the explicit story of a film that is analogous to how narrative operates in novels and short stories. But movies, in addition, may generate fellow-feeling and understanding for others directly through our bodies, by virtue of arousing us in ways of which we may not be explicitly conscious, thus giving the art form more immediate access to how we think and feel.

The work of Amy Coplan and Carl Plantinga has been particularly instructive here. They bring to our attention previously neglected elements of cinematic affect such as emotional contagion, facial mimicry, and other “automatic” responses. These more direct forms of sensory engagement are, as they note, “pre-reflective,” “autonomic” processes that typically operate below the level of awareness and beyond our conscious control (although of course we can, in some cases, both become aware of and influence them). These processes can fundamentally shape not only how we feel about a film, but also how we understand and imagine it. Thus as Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2010) argues, when an audience member watches Peter Jackson’s recent version of King Kong (2005), she may feel an “embodied” sort of empathy for
Kong as antique biplanes approach and attack him while standing atop the Empire State Building, a feeling that also fundamentally affects her understanding of this scene in the movie. Through mechanisms such as emotional contagion, affective mimicry, and reflexive mirror reactions, she may not only empathetically feel King Kong's anger, frustration, and finally resignation toward the attacking biplanes, but also understand these responses as important to the movie's narrative as a whole (e.g., its tragic dimensions). Mainstream films are full of such emotional cues that aim to make us feel in ways preferred by the filmmakers (Vaage 2010: 168). Close-ups, for example, often cue us to forms of facial mimicry, while point-of-view shots can startle us with some fast-approaching object, and reaction shots may provide crucial information about how we should feel toward what is depicted in the sequence as a whole, which we pick up through muscular mimicry or other forms of embodied mirroring. Moreover, these forms of more direct access to our emotions as well as understanding differ markedly from those available to literature, where our primary mode of access is mediated through interpretation of words on a page.6

Second, there is a noticeable ontological difference in terms of artistic contribution concerning most films as opposed to literature. As Berys Gaut (2010) has argued, mainstream Hollywood-type films are almost exclusively collaborative enterprises: significant aesthetic contributions arise from many different artists involved in the process of making these movies, including not only writers, directors, and producers, but also actors, cinematographers, editors, composers, computer animators, set designers, and others (see also Gaut 1997). Although as Gaut (2010: 106) notes there exist single-authored movies—such as those by experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage—most films have many “authors” rather than one, even as we typically refer to certain works as “a Scorsese film” or “a Woody Allen film.” In terms of a more accurate theoretical understanding, however, we are far better off recognizing the significant aesthetic contributions of all the different artists who work on the film. Rather than literature, a closer artistic analogue to film would be jazz, which is similarly a complex art form typically dependent on performance, improvisation, and thoughtful interaction between artists (Gaut 2010: 132). Many artistic collaborators should thus be recognized for the significance of their aesthetic input into particular films. There are, in short, film artists, rather than just one auteur who is aesthetically responsible for a given film (Ibid.: 104).7

These different discussions have significant impact on Gendler’s theory regarding imaginative resistance and its proposed application to film. First, it seems clear that we should talk about the possibility of “artistic breakdown” rather than “authoritative breakdown,” given Gaut’s criticism of auteur theory, and thereby recognize that breakdown may occur in multiple ways ac-
cording to how various artists’ contributions mesh, conflict, succeed, or fail in a given film. Second, the many differences between literature and film in terms of emotional effect in general and direct affect in particular mean that not only do these matters have a different etiology, they also possess differing scope as well as depth. Film cuts across affective strata that contrast markedly from those engaged by literature, even as these arts also share substantial emotional terrain. In short, film affects us emotionally in many ways that differ significantly from those of literature. Gendler’s theory, by contrast, leaves the role of emotions in imaginative resistance largely unanalyzed, so her theory requires a crucial modification before it would be appropriate to apply to film.

Catrin Misselhorn has suggested that an emotion-based theory of imaginative resistance, especially one that integrates the body’s role in emotions with the mind’s, would better accommodate cases involving the moral emotions because emotion-based imaginings “affect[] us to a far greater degree. . . . Feelings get under the skin and therefore threaten our personal integrity constituted by psychological and bodily aspects at a much deeper level” (2009: 141). Aligning Misselhorn’s suggestion with Gendler’s theory enables us to see that film, with its greater access to the body and greater influence through nonconscious processes, is potentially a more likely generator of Humean resistance than is literature, where such resistance is bred much more frequently and to a greater degree through mediated, higher-level cognitive processes. Thus recent work in the philosophy of film and emotions helps to reveal some of the ways in which imaginative resistance often works differently in film, particularly when it offers provocation to viewers who do not wish to reconsider their typical moral appraisals, values, or outlooks.

It may seem obvious that fiction challenging us to think differently about morals will typically evoke imaginative resistance more frequently than fiction that does not, and that this may occur with distinctive emphasis in cinema because of the medium’s more visceral nature. Given these facts, however, Humean resistance becomes an even more urgent problem to address because such cinematic challenges can not only bring us to reconsider and potentially change our moral presumptions, dispositions, and even our moral perspectives, it can do so in more subtle and previously unappreciated ways than can literature. Because film has an enhanced capacity to encourage us to adopt new standpoints concerning our generative principles, the appraisals that follow from them, and even potentially our overall moral points of view, this phenomenon cries out for a more detailed explanation than the one Gendler offers us for written fiction. Film’s enhanced capacity for change is therefore particularly salient because it can be affected through augmented means. Its distinctive emotional charge and expanded array of affect suggest that it can potentially challenge us in much more complex and deeply felt
ways, for its challenges may arise not only at the level of conscious mental processing, but also at the level of emotional, body-based response. Written fiction may do so on occasion as well, but film’s broader and more direct access to our automatic and pre-reflective emotional levels means that its challenges to our standard moral outlooks—particularly our “default values” that help to generate moral appraisals—can be that much more powerful, and potentially that much more effective.

This difference may be a reason why people sometimes reject fictional presentations of alternative moralities in film so vehemently. It is, perhaps, significantly harder for them to merely suppose for the sake of imagining in the case of film, whereas in literature the level of fictional supposition is typically at a higher cognitive level, so the feeling of threat to one’s morals can generally be held more at arm’s length. Gendler touches on this distancing effect of higher-level supposing when she notes that considering or contemplating involved normative appraisals in a detached way “is sufficient to eliminate at least some of the relevant imaginative barriers” (2006: 155), but this matter of distancing arises in the opposite fashion due to the greater immediacy of movies. When such challenges are mounted through film, they are typically and more directly posed through our bodies as well as our minds because, for example, our sensory processes (especially those involving seeing and hearing the film) continue to occur as an integral part of our ongoing experience and evaluation of the cinematic narrative. Many of our appraisals and judgments that arise in the form of emotional reactions do so by virtue of autonomic, nonconscious responses rather than aware, rationalistic considerations. This difference implies that we should recognize that film can sometimes produce stronger negative reactions to such challenges than literature because the challenges themselves are felt as being so much more comprehensive and subtle. In other words, negative reactions to implied norms may operate in ways analogous to disgust; they can be strong, adverse, nonconscious reactions to what are perceived to be serious threats to our bodily integrity or even personal identity (see Plantinga 2009: 204–207). Similar to Plantinga’s point that disgust often “has an important political dimension” (206), I argue that Humean resistance to movies may as well, particularly if they mount significant but subtle challenges through presupposing divergent generation principles that require us to entertain judgments and appraisals that are in conflict with some cherished moral norm. Gendler’s theory as she presents it lacks an explanatory mechanism to account for this sort of direct, autonomic phenomena. But through recognizing crucial differences between
literature and film, we can better accommodate her theory's application to cinematic narrative.

**Imaginative Resistance to Avatar**

James Cameron’s groundbreaking film has garnered laudatory as well as praiseworthy responses since its theatrical premiere in December 2009. Many viewers feel this artwork offers a rich and nuanced cinematic experience suggestive of myriad issues that matter critically to them. Yet others have roundly condemned it as manipulating them into imagining fictional worlds that are deeply anti-American, anti-human, or anti-white. Some further argue that Avatar advocates a dangerous form of animism to the disadvantage of monotheism, especially Christianity. *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat argues that *Avatar* is a “long apologia for pantheism” and the embodiment of “every left-wing cliché—about politics, religion, the environment, the military, imperialism, big business, Vietnam, George W. Bush, you name it,” and thus constitutes an attack on “Republicans” (Douthat 2009a, 2009b). Movie critic John Podhoretz (2009) analogously judges *Avatar* to be “a deep expression of anti-Americanism” and “anti-human.” John Noite (2009), writing for the conservative website Big Hollywood, describes Avatar as “a Big, Dull, America-Hating, PC Revenge Fantasy” with “a garish color palette right off a hippie’s tie dye shirt.” Further, the conservative Christian website movieguide.org (2009) declares *Avatar* to be “reverse racist,” possessing a “New Age, pagan worldview [containing] extremely anti-capitalist content with a strongly Marxist overtone,” and “argues in favor of the destruction of the human race.” The film critic for the Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano*, Gaetano Vallini, judges Avatar to be anti-imperialist, anti-militarist, sentimental, and bogged down in a spiritualism linked to a rather confused form of nature worship (cited in Piangiani 2010). However, Vallini thinks the film well worth seeing, while these other critics judge *Avatar* to be “blitheringly stupid,” “relentlessly stupid,” “boring,” “slow,” “shallow,” “abhorrent,” and generally a bad work of cinematic art.9

How is it possible that such critics are talking about the same movie as the late Roger Ebert (2009), who gushed that *Avatar* was “extraordinary” and “sensational,” “with a flat-out Green and anti-war message”? The divergence in assessment here is jarring; these critics hardly seem to have viewed the same work of art. Some sort of explanation to account for these marked evaluative differences would seem to be required, particularly one that addresses why some critics reacted so adversely to *Avatar*. My aim here is not to psychol-
one possible explanation for critical reactions such as these would hypothesize that some viewers who dislike *Avatar* do so because they perceive the film as working against norms and values that they hold dear. Sensing a double invitation to imagine the film’s detailed, normative appraisals as holding true in the real world as well as the fictional one, they experience a form of artistic breakdown because they refuse to adopt those suggested appraisals’ generative principles. This lack of openness causes such viewers to experience a form of pop-out with regard to the story *Avatar* presents. For example, some viewers may take the film’s depiction of pantheism as a simultaneous invitation to imagine it fictionally as an element of Pandora’s Na’vi religion and also as a legitimate possibility in the actual world. An implied invitation to consider exporting pantheistic beliefs to the real world strikes these viewers as offensive, as suggesting that there could be more than one true faith, a generative proposition that they consider not open to question. Thus they reject both the fictional and the implied real-world invitations because they do not want to imagine them; in other words, they can’t imagine the normative appraisals about religion suggested by *Avatar* because they don’t want to do so. Moreover, because *Avatar* is a work of cinema operating not only at higher levels of constructed narrative but also

*Figure 1. Neytiri (Zoë Saldana) forms a bond with the Na’vi god Eywa through the Tree of Souls*
the visceral, such a challenge to consider alternative normative appraisals might well seem more provocative than if the same challenge had come from a piece of literature, where such challenges might be held more at arm’s length. Rejection based in part on these additional modes of affective influence may thus help to explain some viewers’ vehemence in rejecting Avatar so categorically as stupid, boring, and abhorrent.

A similar analysis could be worked out for alleged perceptions of Avatar’s “reverse racism”: some viewers might sense a double invitation to imagine anti-white sentiments and alternative generative principles that are antithetical to their cherished norms and presumptions. Again, according to the modified Gendlerian theory of imaginative resistance described above, viewers who are resistant to setting aside their own generative principles will pop out of the fiction when they refuse to take on in imagination an alternative set of norms and values. For example, Avatar’s suggestion that the mainly white humans on Pandora embody a flawed, racially biased approach to the indigenous Na’vi culture strikes these viewers as requiring at least a bracketing of one’s approval or acquiescence with traditionally dominant Eurocentric approaches to indigenous cultures, both past and present, and a challenge to these approaches’ presumptions of white dominance and/or superiority as being undeserved due to, say, greater moral probity, racial destiny, or perhaps even pure dumb luck—challenges that such viewers will not allow. The artistic authority of the movie thus breaks down, so they pop out of the fiction and reject the perceived double invitation to imagine because they cannot accept these moral challenges that they see the movie as inviting them to take up.

Furthermore, perhaps the viewers described here feel these challenges are intended, outright attacks by the filmmakers on their real-world political perspectives, so they reject them on these grounds as well. They see, for example, Colonel Quaritch (Stephen Lang) advanced as the chief representative of colonizing, imperialistic whiteness in Avatar. A factor that no doubt intensifies this impression is that Lang plays Quaritch as an American Southerner who ultimately asks the hero, Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), “how’s it feel to betray your own race?” Quaritch does not regard the Na’vi as deserving respect or dignity, as possessing intrinsic worth or incomparable value; they do not achieve the moral status of personhood in his eyes. He thus treats them as what Kant ([1785] 1993) describes as things (i.e., as entities in the world that may be treated as means only) that may be cleared from his path as needed. This character’s militant brutality and violence may also feel aimed to alienate the sympathies of cooperative audience members, thereby even more in-

Avatar’s suggestion that the mainly white humans on Pandora embody a flawed, racially biased approach to the indigenous Na’vi culture strikes these viewers as requiring . . . challenges that such viewers will not allow
tensely stigmatizing him in the eyes of the kind of viewer discussed here. Similarly, actor Giovanni Ribisi’s character Parker Selfridge, the chief administrator of corporate mining operations on Pandora, refers to the Na’vi as “blue monkeys” and “flea-bitten savages” who pose obstacles to achieving greater profitability, so he grants Quaritch’s request to violently drive them away from their traditional dwelling, “Hometree.” Moreover, having African American and Native American actors fill many lead Na’vi roles (e.g., Zoë Saldana, Wes Studi, CCH Pounder, Laz Alonso), as well as giving the indigenous culture familiar Native American associations involving religion, artifacts, and their relation to nature and the environment reinforce this perceived intentional opposition. In the same vein, having mostly white actors fill the lead colonizer roles reinforces the connections between their imperialistic takeover of Pandora and racial whiteness. With apparently intentional aims such as these, the film may come to seem like an assault on the worldview held by the type of viewer being analyzed here.10
Philosopher Charles W. Mills has argued that modern categories of race are “sociopolitical rather than biological, but . . . nonetheless real”—that is, real in their impact on the social world, but not rooted in scientific fact (1997: 126). Racialized categories thus amount to sociopolitical constructs rather than natural kinds, so racial whiteness, for example, “is not really a color at all, but a set of power relations” (Ibid.: 127). Moreover, the chief form that racialized thinking has taken during the modern era may be accurately characterized as “white supremacy,” “the system of domination by which white people have historically ruled over and, in certain important ways, continue to rule over nonwhite people” (Ibid.: 1–2). This system of domination produces an “epistemology of ignorance,” a distorting pattern of social norms for cognizing the world. These norms, while at times locally functional in terms of psychology and society, are more generally globally dysfunctional because they systematically misidentify whites as superior and nonwhites as inferior with regard to their moral, social, political, evolutionary, and other forms of value (Ibid.: 17–18). While easy to acknowledge as a fact about dominant Western thinking of the past, Mills further argues that this distorted way of cognizing the world continues to affect us in the form of institutionalized presumptions and practices that have fallen well below the level of conscious awareness (Ibid.: 72–74).

Mills (2007) further notes that his analysis of race is a logical outgrowth of the broad philosophical movements to “naturalize” and later “socialize” epistemology. As such, Mills hypothesizes that the epistemology of ignorance “requires a certain schedule of structured blindesses and opacities in order to maintain and establish” itself and its underlying structures (1997: 19). In short, it produces a way of seeing the world such that whites systematically misperceive their place in it. They see their privileges and advantages as “normal,” and perhaps even “natural,” while seeing nonwhites’ general poverty, lack of opportunity, disadvantage, and perceived inferiority as being nothing out of the ordinary, rather than as unjust or iniquitous. I have argued elsewhere that these blindesses and opacities amount to what Frantz Fanon refers to as the “white gaze”—that is, a way of seeing from the perspective of racial whiteness, which can be imparted to whites and nonwhites alike through social enculturation (Flory 2008: 39–43, 2010; see also Fanon [1951] 2001). Given this line of reasoning, it is appropriate to say that Mills’s theorization of race aims to identify an ongoing, dominant form of white moral psychology and its profound racialization by means of the processes described above. Although not inescapable and no doubt a weaker force now than it has been historically, the epistemology of ignorance remains a predominant form of flawed social cognition embedded into societies such as the US.

Bringing this discussion to bear on the type of viewer described in this article, some of their resistance may be rooted in an implicit sense of white priv-
ilege. Due to an unwillingness to consider, even in imagination, challenges to their white perspective, some viewers experience artistic breakdown because the nonwhite hominid point of view that *Avatar* presents through the film’s careful presentation of the Na’vi culture and its status vis-à-vis the human colonizers are antithetical to these viewers’ most cherished norms and values, which are implicitly raced as white. Consequently, such viewers experience pop-out from the movie in part because its perspective challenges the “white gaze.” To their minds, the generative principles involving race that *Avatar* requires them to entertain are ones that apply to the real world as well as the fictional one. Thus, they pop out of the cinematic fiction because *Avatar*’s alternative generative principles call into question the presumed moral probity and dominance of whiteness, as well as the actions, judgments, and perspectives that flow from such generative presumptions (see also Dyer 1997: esp. 62–70). *Avatar* thus amounts to a threat to their identities, as Misselhorn’s argument would imply, insofar as their identities are racialized through this still prevalent form of whiteness. In addition, it is worth noting that, if this general line of explanation is correct, such a response is probably at least as much emotional as rational, as one might expect from typical reactions to Hollywood films.

Aside from interesting political arguments we might have about the objective validity of such responses, the explanation posed above reveals distinctive prospects for more generally imagining the inner lives of “otherized” characters—understanding them “from the inside.” Such prospects would appear to be greatly impoverished, given that those who will not let themselves be challenged by movies that require them to take on in imagination different generation principles from those they already hold are far less likely to grasp the internal workings of radically “different” characters than those who do. Part of what these viewers lose by resisting or refusing to engage such fictions are opportunities to consider and engage with alternative moral and political outlooks, which as noted by Currie (2002) sometimes work out for the better. Because such viewers are not open-minded toward certain crucially important alternative possibilities, they miss key occasions to challenge, improve, or transform their ethical perspectives, particularly concerning race.

The foregoing analysis aims to explain only one form of imaginative resistance to *Avatar*; many others remain unaddressed. For example, some viewers might find its presumption of being able to bond with aggressive, predatory, wild animals by means of nerve-laden ponytails too laughable to be taken seriously, or its dense jumble of peace-loving and warlike qualities attributed to the Na’vi too inconsistent or contradictory to cooperatively imagine for the film, let alone in real life. More significant, some more racially conscious view-
ers may be troubled by the presumed need for a “white savior” (Jake Sully) for the nonwhite Na’vi, or the movie’s apparent presumption that the life of the white scientist played by Sigourney Weaver is more valuable than those of the many presumed Na’vi casualties who have been seriously injured by their violent eviction from Hometree. Such narrative elements as well might occasion forms of Humean resistance. However, they would be due to different reasons—that is, they require viewers to possess very different generative principles regarding race—and thus operate in a different moral dimension from those analyzed here. Being troubled by Jake’s status as a white savior or the presumed higher value of Grace Augustine’s life would necessarily involve presumptions quite contrary to those of the imaginatively resistant viewers analyzed earlier. Such troubled viewers would already have to embrace some sense of racial equality at a deeper level of generative principle and thus would make value-laden normative appraisals distinctly at odds with the viewer type outlined above.

There is also more generally a serious question to be raised regarding the issue of whether imaginative resistance to Avatar might be generated by too many alien beliefs being foisted on the viewer—a sort of cognitive overload of the foreign and unfamiliar that would impede or prevent imaginative uptake. For example, the sheer density of exotic supernatural beliefs and assumptions blithely imposed on the audience might amount to an imaginative barrier for some. This point lies outside the scope of this article, but I want to acknowledge that such a difficulty is plausible and might well lead to forms of imaginative resistance beyond the one analyzed here. Untangling that problem, however, remains a topic for future research.

It is furthermore intriguing to note that Django Unchained (Quentin Tarantino, 2012) did not arouse the same sort of negative response that Avatar did concerning race. I speculate that this difference is partly due—in the United States at least—to there being a somewhat different political atmosphere currently in ascendance. A generally more positive reaction to Django Unchained may also be partially due to a different set of norms and default values being invoked that de-emphasize pressing matters of race in the eyes of certain viewers (e.g., themes of freedom, tyranny, and gun control; see Dulis 2013). In addition, Django Unchained may not seem to be such a threat to the identities of many viewers because it is set in a mythical past and therefore may be perceived as critical of old-time, “bad” kinds of white supremacists rather than currently existing or possible future ones. To put the matter rather flatfootedly, Django Unchained seems to be less about “us” than Avatar due to the fact that it critically depicts narrative figures that have already been deemed immoral by the dominant (i.e., white) culture, without the implication that such figures have any apparent salient relation to who we are now. In any case, this too remains an area for further research.
Imagining Race in Fiction and Reality

Theories of imaginative resistance can assist us in better detecting as well as diagnosing certain forms of cinematic viewership concerning race. For one form of spectatorship, its potential for greater understanding of issues concerning this topic appears bleak. Because this form of spectatorship strongly resists or outright refuses to consider alternative moral outlooks, possibilities for remedying internal flaws, conflicts, or contradictions are greatly reduced. Its overall sensitivity to threat or moral affront is such that it does not possess the degree of open-mindedness typically needed to change or improve its own moral perspective. On the other hand, this cinematic analysis of Humean resistance can also help us to see how imaginative cooperation with non-white cinematic points of view such as Avatar presents us through its detailed depiction of the Na’vi and their way of life may offer occasions for emotional learning and moral insight into the real world as well as the fictional one, so long as one is willing to be relatively open-minded toward challenging normative appraisals and the presumptions they require. For example, such imaginative cooperation can help to “reveal[] the central epistemic importance that empathy plays for our understanding of rational agents,” whether fictional or real (Stueber 2011: 157). The foregoing analysis thus assists us in better understanding the integrative nature of cinematic experience with respect to emotion and reason, which of course has implications for how we might want to view our real-life experience as well.

Furthermore, theorizing imaginative resistance for the sake of their application to movies can help us see how some viewers of films like Avatar may frequently be struck by what they perceive as the imaginative impropriety of certain moral appraisals suggested to them by cinematic narratives. The value-laden, negative depiction of whites as having erred in their moral treatment of Pandora’s indigenous peoples, for example, strikes them as “inappropriate”—morally distasteful or even vicious—because the principles required to take up such evaluative depictions are not ones such viewers are willing to entertain or imagine, in fiction or reality. Instead, they put up a barrier and vehemently reject such suggested imaginings, and judge a willingness to depict them uncritically as anti-white and “reverse racist” in the real world as well as in the fictional one. These reactions occur because the film’s depictions conflict with entrenched background presumptions and dispositions such viewers possess that constitute an implicit, nonconscious commitment to a racialized epistemology of ignorance. As such, films like Avatar strike them as threats to their identities, particularly insofar as those identities are racialized as white.

This theoretical explanation provides us with a sense of how cinematic experiences may reflect moral commitments, as well as the strength of those
commitments. For certain viewers of Avatar, those commitments and their strength lead them to resist and in some cases refuse to imagine what the film presents them, which seriously affects their evaluation of the film overall. Thus they judge it a bad work of cinematic art, but more important they fail to appreciate much of what the film offers them in terms of imagining worlds outside of the racially white one in which they hermetically live. As a result, their capacities for change and greater understanding are drastically reduced. Part of our way of knowing the world is thus revealed to be moral, even political and racial, as well as deeply emotional. Still, for all that it continues to be (partly) subject to the claims of reason, as Mulhall’s argument implies. (What this implication means exactly remains unclear, but in any case it contrasts sharply with the old traditional view that reason and emotion should be kept quarantined, to the detriment of emotion.) It remains possible that spectators of this ilk could reconsider and reflect on their background assumptions and predispositions. However, their staunch resistance to imagining others’ racialized viewpoints presents a significant obstacle to such possibilities—as well as, unfortunately, an obstacle to their prospects for learning more about race, reason, emotion, themselves, the world in which they live, and enhanced senses of human flourishing.

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Notes

1 The exception here is Gendler, who has repeatedly noted the relevance of imaginative resistance to race.
3 The idea of “generation principles” refers to Walton’s “principles of generation” (1990: 38–41, 138–140).
4 For more detailed arguments about emotions as concern-based construals, evaluations, and appraisals, see de Sousa (1987); Prinz (2004); Roberts (1988); and Robinson (2005).
6 For an overview of this perspective, see Plantinga (2009: 112–139). For an interesting comparative discussion of the capacity to elicit non-cognitive affect by film and literature respectively, see Coplan and Matavers (2011).
7 Following Choi (2011), I refer to cinematic aesthetic contributors as “artists,” rather than “authors,” as Gaut often does, because I agree that the former term better characterizes the outcome of Gaut’s own argument.
8 I borrow the idea of “default values” as applied to film from Smith (1995).
9 See Piangiani (2010) and the reviews by Douthat (2009a, 2009b), Podhoretz (2009), Nolte (2009), and movieguide.org (2009).
10 There is an interesting open question concerning whether the invitation to imagine many of these criticisms as applying to the real world is actually intentional, as well as a question of whether the criticisms should be carried over. While the intentions behind Avatar would not be particularly complicated to untangle, I will not pursue that possibility here. For more on the topic of emotional carryover and when it is legitimate, see Friend (2010).

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