

Research Article

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Encounters with the Other: Transcultural Possibilities in the Wachowskis' and Tykwer's *Cloud Atlas*

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Abstract: The Wachowskis' and Tykwer's *Cloud Atlas* indicates strong potential for an investigation into the advancement of transcultural messages in global cinema because of its conceptual commitment to narrate the story against the backdrop of sexuality, race, gender, and class. By combining critical discourse analysis (Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge, Power/Knowledge*) with literary criticisms of postcolonial works (Hall, Hardt and Negri) and transcultural concepts of culture (Welsch, *The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today*; Rings, *The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema*), this paper investigates how far *Cloud Atlas* promotes transcultural identity constructs. Upon analysis of central themes and prominent characters *Cloud Atlas* transmits a message that if the aforementioned socio-cultural barriers can be overcome, we can cultivate something akin to a transcultural society. However, linkages to colonial discourse and quintessential cinematic conventions *vis-à-vis* white individualistic heroism demonstrate that *Cloud Atlas*'s liberal-humanist worldview is one that can ultimately be branded as compromised by monocultural assumptions of US values and ideals as superior.

Keywords: transculturalism, monoculturalism, discourse, postcolonial cinema.

Preliminary Remarks

In the face of a return to the propagation of monocultural identity constructs in mainstream right-wing media and politics (Torreblanca and Leonard, Ramalingam), cinema has been discussed as a medium that confronts such discourses and critically interrogates nationalistic and racist ideas of Otherness—often encouraging cultural exchange and drawing attention to concepts of shared humanity over difference (Berghahn and Sternberg). Contemporary intercultural films such as Eastwood's *Gran Torino*, Kaurismaki's *Le Havre*, and Lioret's award-winning *Welcome*¹ have been discussed for their potential in this regard (Schein, Valesi, Ceuterick), with Rings concluding that *Le Havre* in particular highlights individual human agency by reminding its viewers of "historical parallels in monocultural suppression under the Vichy regime" (*The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema* 108).

The term "monoculturalism" has been debated as a notion of culture that is both "closed" (Benessaieh 13) and "essentialist" (Rings 9), serving to enable racist hierarchies and support nationalistic ambitions. It is also notable by its attempts to exclude the Other from an assumed "pure" homogenous space of the Self—an example of which can be seen in the infamous "no Irish, no blacks, no dogs" signs placed in the

¹ The positive reviews of the film led to a campaign from French Socialist politician Daniel Goldberg for the French parliament to decriminalise a controversial law that prosecutes citizens for aiding illegal immigrants (Hird).

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windows of British bed and breakfasts in the 1960s. Beyond monoculturalism, a range of terms exists to define varying scales and manifestations of cultural relations: "multiculturalism" for one was adopted as a political policy in Europe before being later publically denounced by the leaders of the United Kingdom, France and Germany in 2011 (see Saad). While it advocates coexistence within a society, Ang's comment on multiculturalism as fundamentally "living apart together" (14) best highlights the problematic nature of the way it relies on essentialist assumptions of culture similar to monoculturalism. Furthermore, interculturality as a method to "bridge" cultural difference has been criticised by Rings (The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema 10) and Huggan (58) for its perpetuation of separatist mentalities and a focus on difference.

Transculturality, on the other hand, stresses fluidity (Lewis 75),² promoting the "hybrid" (Canclini, Bhabha) nature of culture as a phenomenon that "blurs the boundaries" of our supposed collective differences (Antor 30). Pereira-Ares elaborates and reminds us that transculturalism:

can be described as a discourse that seeks to give an account of our increasingly globalised and globalising world, where cultures are no longer easily circumscribed within a particular territory, society or nation-state. Transculturalism proposes new models of understanding culture and cultural transactions, recognising difference as well as commonality, dialogue as well as silence (477).

Elaborating further Estevez-Saa and Pereira-Ares agree that transculturalism "advocates the need to regard cultures as entities that are constantly influencing one another" (272) with Ortiz suggesting that the "give and take" (98) nature of the phenomenon separates it from other essentialist concepts of culture. Epstein contends that transculturalism provides "freedom" to exist on the frontier of one's birth culture, moving beyond or within as the individual sees fit (334). Taking these opinions into account, in the framework of this discussion transculturalism can be defined as the positive outcome of extensive self-reflective cultural exchange and interaction wherein individual human agency transcends discourses of race, nationality, and creed. Unlike mono, multi, and interculturalism, transculturalism ultimately rejects any form of cultural and ethnic hierarchy, the notion of national homogeneity, and/or (neo) colonial binary discourses.

In identifying the limits of traditional monoculturalism, Welsch proposed that it "proves to be factually inadequate [and] cannot cope with the inner complexity of modern cultures" (The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today 194). While this might seem self-evident—drawing our attention to the need to revise approaches to idealist concepts of culture in response to increased human contact in the age of international migration and globalisation, in many cases even the most optimistic attempts in cinema to distance characters and stories from traditional monocultural ideas are unsuccessful. Popular Hollywood films like Cameron's Avatar and Blomkamp's District 9,3 in addition to European migrant films such as Chadha's Bend It Like Beckham and Akin's The Edge of Heaven,4 demonstrate this well in the way that they revert to stereotypical portrayals of Otherness and reconstruct aspects of colonial discourse through their representation of central characters and background settings. Furthermore, despite Welsch's confidence that the impact of globalisation will naturally facilitate a move towards transculturalism (The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today 198), the recent appeal of far-right parties promoting essentialist myths of racial purity against the backdrop of anti-Europeanism—as well as the enduring presence of ethnic and cultural hierarchies in cinema—means that this optimism is misplaced.

Of the myriad of multiple historical and socio-political factors influencing the growth of the recent far-right movement (see Barbour and Carmichael on language and Vilas Bohlman on nation-building), this paper chooses to focus specifically upon transcultural patterns from a postcolonial perspective, with the aim of assessing the influence that colonial discourse (Said, *Orientalism*, *Culture and Imperialism*; Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, Black Skin/White Masks; Bhabha) continues to hold over questions of identity in global and transnational cinema. Whereas Hollywood has received criticism for its dissemination of

² Lewis writes: "transculturalism seeks to illuminate the ways in which social groups interact and experience tension. It is interested in the destabilising effects of non-meaning or meaning atrophy. It is interested in the disintegration of groups, cultures, and power. In other words, transculturalism emphasizes the transitory nature of culture as well as its power to transform" (25).

³ See Veracini, Trinder, Weaver-Hightower, and Kaveney.

⁴ See Rings, The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema.

neoliberal, xenophobic, and monocultural perspectives (Belton, Rieder, Geraghty), wider cinema finds itself under relatively less pressure to observe formulaic cliché, deliver a financial profit, and adhere to the demands of studio executives (Elsaesser, King). As a result, such factors on occasion combine to provide a platform for advancing transcultural possibilities and blurring binary discourses of Self and Otherness.

In this context, Lana and Andy (now Lilly) Wachowski and Tom Tykwer's science fiction fantasy epic *Cloud Atlas* indicates strong potential for an investigation into the advancement of transcultural messages in cinema. The film's conceptual commitment to narrate the story against the backdrop of the struggle for liberal values of freedom and equality of sexuality, race, gender and class singles it out in this regard. *Cloud Atlas* encompasses six interweaving storylines that take place over the course of 500 years and can be described fundamentally as a tale of reincarnation built upon a philosophy of how "the actions of individual lives impact one another in the past, present, and future" (*Cloud Atlas Official*). By combining critical discourse analysis (Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge, Power/Knowledge*) with literary criticisms of postcolonial works (Said, *Orientalism*; Hall, Hardt and Negri) and transcultural concepts of culture (Antor, Welsch, *The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today*; Rings, *The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema*), this investigation will attempt to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How far does Cloud Atlas promote transcultural identity constructs?
- 2) To what extent does the film revert to traditional monocultural patterns in its portrayal of the Self and Other?

Cloud Atlas has been primarily selected for in-depth analysis because of its significant impact as a multimillion-dollar grossing independent feature, which surely allows for relative creative freedom on the part of the directors. In this way, it should be comparatively free from the pressures that Hollywood studios place upon filmmakers to perpetuate stereotypical imagery and cultural hierarchies for the purposes of entertainment. On the other hand, it may assist in identifying the potential and limits of independent cinema in breaking with traditional monocultural representations.

Cloud Atlas in Context

After high-profile Hollywood studios turned the project down for being too much of a business risk (Hoad), funding for *Cloud Atlas* ultimately came from a number of German sources: the *Federal Film Fund* (DFFF) and a subsidiary of the German government: the *Film und Medien Stiftung* (NRW) (Von Jana). However, the ambitious script—in conjunction with the high profile directors and actors attached—made *Cloud Atlas*, with its \$102 million budget (*Box Office Mojo*), the most expensive independent feature of all time.⁵

Despite initial production problems, it took \$130 million at the box office thanks to an intensive marketing campaign from Warner Bros. The film polarised critics. Mintzer, Ansen, Hemon for instance, applauded the three directors for undertaking such an ambitious project, while Collin and Kane were disapproving of the nonlinear method that the six stories were presented (as opposed to the chronological sequence employed in Mitchell's original book). *Cloud Atlas*'s strong liberal underpin was a prevalent topic of discussion (*Indie Wire*, Kall), but despite clear support for values of freedom and equality of sexuality, race, gender, and class, the directors were reluctant to admit that the film had any particular political inclination. In an interview with Robinson, Lana Wachowski claimed: "we don't want to delimit interpretation, and we don't want to say, 'We are making *this* to mean *this*.' What we find is that the most interesting art is open to a spectrum of interpretation".

Actor Jim Sturgess, who played a number of characters including the nineteenth-century American lawyer Adam Ewing and twenty-second century Korean revolutionary Hae-joo Chang, appeared to contradict Lana Wachowski's comment on artistic neutrality. This happened when he was asked about the how the film explores the human condition, and whether it promotes (among other motifs) a transcultural understanding of collective belonging: "I think it was really an ingenious idea to have all the actors play

⁵ A statistic that led Rodek to label the film "the first attempt at a German blockbuster."

different characters because it does bring out that whole [liberal] idea. [The film's narrative] does transcend race [and gender and age]" (Sci-Fi London). In his reading of the film, Estrada was correct to point out that Sturgess' statement is problematic in that the concepts of race and tribe central to Cloud Atlas are "distinct legal, cultural, and religious categories" (10) deriving from Western formulations of demography.

Despite a modest canon of scholarly criticisms of the novel (Economides, Edwards, Bayer), commentaries on the film version of *Cloud Atlas* are relatively limited, particularly from a cultural studies perspective. Notwithstanding, most discussions focus on themes of interconnectedness, race, and identity, which may prove useful in this investigation into the film's transcultural possibilities. Guo discusses fast food restaurant clone Sonmi-451's (Doona Bae) humanistic global broadcast for equality and compassion (7), which to a certain degree aligns with popular definitions of transculturalism put forward by Antor, Rings (The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema) and Welsch (The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today). Baccolini is of the opinion that the trope of "relationality" central to Cloud Atlas exposes "individual struggles against different forms of colonial, corporate, neoliberal and globalised powers—struggles that succeed when an individual...recognises an 'other', and trusts that other" (74). This quote suggests a rejection of traditional monocultural identity constructs and emphasises Pereira-Ares' assertion regarding transculturalism as a more harmonious means of understanding "our contemporary cultural order" (477).

Nishime primarily criticises Cloud Atlas for its "racebending" vis-à-vis increasing fears around globalisation and shifting labour (29). On-screen disseminations of these kinds of themes represent an example of a monocultural mentality in that, accordingly, yellow face⁶ tendencies are the psychological manifestation of "a fetish...that conceals racialised immigration fears [primarily from Asia]" (33). This can, in turn, be linked to the right-wing political construct of the Other challenging and undermining an imagined social order, potentially culminating in the dissolution of illusory boundaries of national identity (see Sandercock 221f.). Estrada also recognises monocultural patterns in Cloud Atlas' attempted criticism of "racist Christianity from a secular humanistic perspective", which inadvertently "replicates the legacy of Western Christianity that refuses to acknowledge [the] Indigenous worldview [of the Moriori peoples]" (24). On the other hand, highlighting the ambiguous nature of socio-political messages in many cinematic works as discussed by Monaco, the same article debates the "social vision" of director Lana Wachowski in the face of her own gender transition in the early 2000s, lllustrating an example of the film's transcultural potential through its:

...parallel editing of the racially diverse actors and actresses who reincarnate across the six eras...the Wachowskis intimate that all people are ultimately transgender and transracial actors in a universal soul struggle for freedom (2).

Taking this into account, the extent to which Cloud Atlas breaks with monocultural messages and promotes transculturalism will be discussed in the next section. The preceding part will then examine how far monocultural patterns are stabilised with a focus on the Pacific Islands section of the film.

Transculturalism in Cloud Atlas?

Cloud Atlas's leitmotif of reincarnation and the artistic commitment to have the same actor play different characters throughout history means that typical cultural encounters in the context of European migrant cinema features like Kaurismaki's Le Havre and Armendariz's Letters from Alou, 9 or Hollywood films such

⁶ The practice of using make-up to make non-Asian actors look like Asians.

⁷ Monaco reminds us that films are "circumscribed by certain economic realities" and therefore "especially susceptible to the distortions caused by economic considerations" (33). He goes on to write: "the elaborate economic infrastructure of film—the complex rules of production, distribution, and consumption that underlie the art—set strict limitations on filmmakers, a fact that is often ignored by critics. These economic factors, in turn, are related to certain political and psychological uses to which an art can be put" (33).

⁸ At the time of the publication of Estrada's article, Lily Wachowski (formerly Andy) had not yet completed her own gender

⁹ See Rings, The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema.

as Haggis' *Crash* and Brooks' *Spanglish*, are largely absent. The cultural aspect seems to have been omitted so as not to muddle the film's message of fundamental human interconnectedness. However, Baccolini's reading of *Cloud Atlas*, discussed briefly in section two, requires further elaboration in that it can be linked to attempts to disseminate a wider transcultural message:

Through this idea of interconnectedness and relationality, the utopian horizon of the film is retained, particularly each time the difference between the dominant group and the dominated one, which lies at the basis of all systems of oppression, is exposed. Each story, in fact, presents the individual struggles against different forms of colonial, corporate, neoliberal and globalised powers—struggles that succeed when an individual opens him- or herself, recognises an "other", and trusts that other (74).

Baccolini's Levinasian interpretation is useful as it alludes to Welsch's definition of transculturality as "multi-meshed and inclusive, not separatist and exclusive" (*The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today* 202), a description which would appear both legitimate and reasonable in the contemporary globalised and technologically interconnected world. In spite of this, as Foucault illustrated in his work on discourse and the function of competing statements in producing "truth" (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*), the process of transcultural edification is constantly under threat from monocultural agents. Ramalingam has shown us in his article on the rise of the far-right in Europe that, in recent years, these agents have been relatively successful in the dissemination of their message. Regardless, *Cloud Atlas* attempts to endorse a transcultural outlook by constructing the image of the white, patriarchal male as the embodiment of monocultural agency, impeding our efforts to understand, and then overcome, the imagined boundaries of difference that divide us.

The mysterious apparition of Old Georgie (Hugo Weaving), a terrifying figure who plagues the conflicted psyche of superstitious villager Zachry (Tom Hanks) on post-apocalyptic Hawaii, can be suggested to advance this trope. He adheres quite strongly to traditional monocultural ideas of separatism and tribalism (not to mention racism) as articulated by Welsch (*Transkulturalität. Zur veränderten Verfassung heutiger*) and Benessaieh. For example, in one particular scene, Zachry becomes distressed at Prescient Meronym (Halle Berry) for revealing the true nature of twenty second-century clone-turned-deity Sonmi-451's tribulations hundreds of years previously. As he reflects on what he has heard, Old Georgie appears over his shoulder and attempts to coerce Zachry into murdering her using monocultural rhetoric:

You ain't let go that rope cos you a lustin' for that darkly, sweet meat...This whore, with her cokeynut skin and her slywise mask, smilin' n' wormin' her way, so you trust n' bring her here, scavin' n' sivvin' for what? For what, fool? They want the island. The Prescients want it all. You judasin' your kin for a piece of ass. She ain't your tribe; she ain't even your colour. This jezebel ignores you your yarns n' ways, spinnin' n' spoutin' her whoahsome lies an' you lap it up, like a dog in heat! Protect your tribe. Protect your sister, little Catkin. Kill her now, before it's too late!

The racist context of Old Georgie's words is apparent enough. Moreover, they also conveniently fit with the same far-right notions of "pureness" that are often employed to invoke irrational fears of an Other that may "invade" or "contaminate" a host culture. This can be linked to contemporary politics in that such concepts are central to US President Donald Trump and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's speeches for example. In the run-up to Hungary's 2018 elections, Orban enacted monocultural discourse in his advocating of "ethnic homogeneity" to "stop [our] worst [immigration] nightmares coming true" (see Dunai). Trump, on the other hand, famously described Mexicans as bringing only "crime and rapists" to the US (Korte and Gomez). The rationale for this kind of dialogue has been discussed by Sandercock, who supposes that:

Individual identity is often suffused with an anxiety that is projected onto the figure of the stranger, the alien, whose very presence seems to challenge and undermine the known social order. In numbers, strangers may come to be seen as an invading mass or tide that will engulf us, provoking primitive fears of annihilation, of dissolving of boundaries, the dissolution of identity (221f.).

In the scene under discussion in *Cloud Atlas*, Old Georgie's words form a potential barrier to the development of a meaningful relationship between simple tribesman Zachary and the more cosmopolitan Meronym.

The antagonist follows monocultural discourse in his articulation of difference vis-à-vis Meronym and the Prescients, as does another of Hugo Weaving's characters: nineteenth century sociologist and businessman Haskell Moore. This is apparent in one of the film's early scenes set on the Chatham Islands in the South Pacific, where Moore's formulation of a racist, pro-slavery "ladder of civilisation" doctrine is praised by the plantation owner Reverend Giles Horrox (Hugh Grant) 10 over dinner with his wife (Susan Sarandon), Moore's stepson lawyer Adam Ewing (Jim Sturgess), and doctor Henry Goose (Tom Hanks).¹¹

Here, Horrox enthusiastically comments: "when I first encountered Haskell Moore's writing, its perspicuity struck me as though delivered through divine revelation. The learned doctor here and I have already spent many a night debating Mr Moore's tractus." At the same time surrounded by black servants, Dr Goose responds by announcing: "I'm only willing to concede that he makes a compelling case as to why we are sitting here, enjoying this divine lamb, while Kupaka (played by Keith David) stands there, content to serve."12

As a successful businessman, a clergy reverend, and a "learned" doctor, Moore, Horrox, and Goose represent respected authority figures of nineteenth-century US society. In this way, their palpable racist beliefs, enthusiastic support for the slave trade, and lack of compassionate humanity for the local Moriori population out working in the stifling heat of the island's plantations, further illustrates the directing trio's desire to portray white male patriarchy and colonialism as a threat to the advancement of transcultural values. This point is highlighted further when Horrox's wife displays visible unease with her husband's comments at the dinner table, requesting with some irritation that he "shuts up" with his incessant praise of Moore's work. This, in addition to her questioning of organised religion's marginalisation of women, suggests an ostensive feminist connotation to the scene at a time in the mid-nineteenth century when the feminist movement in the US was beginning. However, the framing of Mrs Horrox in this way as a feminist liberal could be suggested to gloss over the role of white women as an integral part of the colonial process as has been discussed at length by Harris and Ware.

Cloud Atlas's other antagonists lend more support to this assertion regarding the demonisation of white men. A different Weaving character incarnated in 1970s San Francisco—hired hitman Bill Smoke, refers to a Latino immigrant as a "wetbag" for instance, institutional racism is alluded to in the Neo Seoul story when an English-accented government officer crudely refers to protagonist Hae-joo Chang's (Jim Sturgess) ramblings in Korean as "fuckin' migrant monkey talk!" Additionally, we are informed early on in the same story that Korean itself is designated "sub speak" in twenty-second century Seoul, which—in addition to the English accent of ruling corpocracy's racist officers—explicitly reconstructs the darker aspects of European colonialism.

This means that Cloud Atlas' attempted transcultural message is transmitted through a motif of racial and gender liberalism, a persistent element to the Wachowskis' other popular movies. 2015 feature Jupiter Ascending lends weight to this suggestion, as does the hugely successful Matrix trilogy, something upon which Estrada elaborates:

The Wachowskis' previous garnering of support for race, class, and gender critiques [is seen] in the Matrix series that featured a multicultural cast, male and female protagonists, and a presence of African-American actors in supportive roles including Laurence Fishburne as Morpheus. The diverse Matrix cast successfully fends off the oppressive computer reality that is designed by the white male Architect and defended by the white male Agent Smith (11).

Cloud Atlas continues this trend with its own multiracial cast and a storytelling narrative that highlights the need to reject traditional notions of monoculturalism—not to mention multi and interculturality, with the

¹⁰ Estrada discusses Cloud Atlas' anti-Christian agenda, which is notably evident in the Pacific Islands story: "thoroughly tainting Christianity with a bestial Christian approval of enslavement, the white Reverend Horrox notes how his economic partner and sociologist Haskell Moore is correct in his formulation of a pro-slavery 'ladder of civilisation,' commenting that his writings are 'delivered through divine revelation.' In contrast, no Cloud Atlas character uses Christianity for abolitionist purposes, a curious absence given that many historical abolitionists such as Frederick Douglas did utilise Christian rhetoric against slavery" (16).

¹¹ In the film's closing scene, Moore finally appears in person to deliver his racist conviction that "there is a natural order to this world, and those who try to upend it do not fare well."

¹² Goose's racism is later explicitly confirmed when he calls Autua an "ignorant ape" and a "dirty nigger."

interracial relationships between the characters of Tom Hanks and Halle Berry and Jim Sturgess and Doona Bae given prominent attention to support this.

The characters played by British actor David Gyasi also provide an interesting point of discussion in the same context. The idealisation of Gyasi's three characters—Autua, Lester Rey, and Duophysite, is symbolic of a riposte to institutionalised racism and the construct of racial homogeneity and nationhood promoted by right-wing parties in the US and Europe. As a result of Autua's liberation from slavery on the Chatham Islands, his "soul" goes on to inhabit the body of prominent investigative reporter and Korean War veteran Lester Rey. Many centuries later, the same soul embodies Duophysite, leader of the dark-skinned Prescients: a tribe whose invariable Blackness signifies an inversion of the European colonial belief that the "white race" is superior in terms of intelligence and technological development.

The role of Duophysite, whose soul begins the narrative as a slave, only to eventually rise over time through a cultural and ethnic hierarchy draws the spectator's attention to the contribution of African Americans to US history. This is accomplished through a depiction of Lester Rey as a soldier on the frontline of a major historical event in the shape of the Vietnam War—and later as an award-winning reporter who exposes racial injustice. Duophysite's position as leader of the Prescients strongly promotes the possibility that an imagined transcultural utopia might be established once the presence of white conservativism embodied in *Cloud Atlas*'s various institutions like Haskell Moore's slavery business and Neo Seoul's Unanimity government is surmounted.

Hence it can be interpreted that *Cloud Atlas*'s message is that monocultural mentalities are by nature dangerous and destructive—as academics like Welsch (*The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today*), Benessaieh and Rings (*The Other in Contemporary Migrant Cinema*) have asserted. It also attempts to promote a construct akin to transculturalism in stripping away the imagined boundaries of status, race, gender, and class through the interactions of its characters. However, the extent to which this is achieved remains critical in deciding how far *Cloud Atlas* can be considered a feature that disseminates a transcultural perspective.

Monoculturalism in Cloud Atlas?

The Pacific Islands story in *Cloud Atlas* warrants further interrogation on account of the colonial narrative reconstructed on the nineteenth century Chatham Islands—notably, the nature of American protagonist Adam Ewing's relationship with stowaway slave Autua aboard a San Francisco-bound ship. The post-apocalyptic Hawaiian part of the film also deserves scrutiny in the same way for its depiction of the cannibalistic tendencies of the "Kona" tribe *vis-à-vis* New World discourses of the savage Other and its correlation to monocultural notions of the civilised Self (Hall).

Shohat and Stam (62) discuss the impact that Christopher Columbus's voyages to the Americas, among other Age of Discovery expeditions, have had upon cinematic depictions of the Other in a postcolonial framework. Idealised accounts of native encounters in Bartolomé de las Casas' transcript of Columbus' logbook (see Jara and Spadaccini 2) for instance have been argued to be the foundation of what would later comprise aspects of colonial discourse. These aspects remain central to constructs of traditional monoculturalism today¹³ (see Hall 209¹⁴). In this context, this study would support Burnstein and Studlar's claim that these accounts have been continually reproduced aesthetically in cinema: with Ludwig's *Caribbean Gold*, Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and more recently the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise providing good examples of films that contain imagery comparable to the "Age of Discovery" artwork of Giuliano Dati and Caspar Plautius.

¹³ Loomba and Paquette and Brown, for example, are of the opinion that the chronicles have largely been internalised and normalised in the Western subconscious as genuine constructs of the Other.

¹⁴ This is discussed in detail by Hall: "Columbus's friend, Peter Martyr, later used his descriptions to express a set of rich themes which resound across the centuries: 'the inhabitants live in that Golden World of which old writers speak so much, wherein men lived simply and innocently, without enforcement of laws, without quarrelling, judges and libels, content only to satisfy Nature ... [There are] naked girls so beautiful that one might think he [sic] beheld those splendid naiads and nymphs of the fountains so much celebrated by the ancients."

Corresponding images of an exoticised colonial space appear evident in Cloud Atlas's Pacific Island story, which initially begins on the isolated Chatham Islands¹⁵—historically home to the pacifist (Gallant) Moriori people. Gautam writes that "imperial representations of the colony are always underwritten by the fantasy of the empty land" (90), an assertion that suggests a recurring dichotomy with regards to the construction of space in a colonial milieu. In the same way, famous novelist and critic George Orwell many years ago discussed an invariable feature pervasive to British literature that he claimed was essential to the concept of Otherness, and of European understanding of the world "beyond" the continent:

[In literature] adventures only happen at the ends of the earth, in tropical forests, in Arctic wastes, in African deserts... everywhere, in fact, except the places where things really do happen (qtd. in Davidson 251).

Cloud Atlas follows this upon the film's opening, in which an establishing shot sees protagonist Ewing approaching Dr Henry Goose on a vast, empty beach. A wide crane shot, complete with giant rocky peaks on either side of the frame, accentuates the untouched, pristine environment of the beach, correlating with Gautam's theory. The high shot and the small figure of Ewing versus the expansive natural surroundings create an atmosphere of what Ryan and Lenos describe as "dangerous empty space" (38)—which signifies the establishment of something comparable to the "land of adventure" paradigm. The imperial underpin to this scene is underlined by Goose who employs colonial discourse to inform Ewing that the beach "used to be a cannibal's banqueting hall", providing evidence of his claim in the form of what are supposed to be discarded human teeth that he has uncovered from beneath the pebbles.

The proceeding scene in which Ewing observes Autua being ceremoniously whipped while a crowd of tribesmen and women watch on, further supports the colonial notion of an imagined "civilised" US/ European society versus a backward "savage" native community. In addition, the Wachowskis'16 apparent conscious decision to depict the Chatham Islands as a tropical location—with "unbearable" heat according to Ewing, also works to maintain a cognitive link to the land of the Other as somewhere warmer-and therefore more exotic—than the imagined "centre" associated with the more temperate climate of "home". In reality, located hundreds of kilometres southeast of New Zealand, temperatures in the Chatham Islands rarely rise above 22°C in the summer and winter day time temperatures peak at 5°C (Chatham Islands Enterprise Trust).

Just before the whipping scene, protagonist Ewing can be seen visiting a slave plantation with Dr Goose and Moriori servant Kupaka. In the film's epochal context, the plantation is significant in that it appears to have been included to facilitate a symbolic link to the eighteenth-century slave trade of the American Deep South. This rather clumsy amalgamation of historical circumstances into one singular narrative draws attention to an agenda that is ultimately unconcerned with a factual depiction of history. Rather, it is one that Estrada correctly demonstrates as an example of the Wachowskis' "Eurocentric liberal fantasy situating white US abolitionism at the cutting edge of 1800s world human liberation struggles" (11).

Here, Cloud Atlas would seem to follow mainstream Hollywood, which has been accused of similar misrepresentations. In the past, high-profile films like Mostow's U-571 and Maté's The Far Horizons, for example, both presented similarly fictionalised accounts of historical events (von Tunzelmann) that serve to promote nationalist glorification associated with monoculturalism. Estrada's later comments regarding Cloud Atlas's liberal standpoint being undermined by the directing trio's inability to "differentiate between abolitionism, assimilation, anti-racism, and anti-settler colonialism" (27) would go some way to support this article's claim that increasing globalisation and technological developments in communication will diminish the potential for the perpetuation of monocultural predispositions.

The genre of science fiction has been the focus of much scholarly work with regard to its critical interrogation of human subjectivity and Otherness (Cornea 176), as well as its potential to challenge stereotypical representations of history and culture (Rieder, Geraghty). In this way, Ewing and Autua's

¹⁵ Filming for this part of *Cloud Atlas* took place in Mallorca, Spain.

¹⁶ The Wachowskis and Tykwer divided their directorial responsibilities for Cloud Atlas, with the German director taking charge of the Cambridge/Edinburgh, San Francisco, and London stories, and the Wachowskis' directing the Pacific Islands, Neo Seoul, and Hawaii narratives.

relationship could be described as typical of the coloniser/colonised paradigm (Memmi). This character dynamic between the two deserves a detailed analysis in response to *Cloud Atlas*'s explicit attempts to reconstruct the encounter through a transcultural lens of sameness. Moreover, Estrada's claim that "antiracist ideologies [and] Indigenous... concepts and epistemologies can greatly contribute to [sci-fi] themes of liberation from oppression" (14) must be scrutinised in the framework of Sanchez's remark on the colonial trope of whiteness in film as "central to human progress and the pursuit of divine utopias" (32).

After their initial encounter in the ship's storeroom, Autua quickly becomes indebted to the American lawyer after he helps him gain a place among the crew, with the stowaway declaring with some exaggeration that Ewing "saved his life" from the "savage" natives of the island. Moreover, throughout the voyage, the character typifies the Other in the strong degree of loyalty he displays toward his "white master" Ewing, demonstrating a continuity with "paradigmatic" (Said, *The World, The Text and The Critic*) colonial encounters seen in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* ¹⁷ (between the eponymous protagonist and Friday) and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* ¹⁸ (Prospero and Caliban).

In spite of the ostensive human connection between the two characters, the perpetuation of an implied ethnic hierarchy is evident in the way that, from the camera's perspective, we can see Autua placed below Ewing in a number of their scenes together. For example in one instance, as they discuss their first encounter in the village, Autua can be observed crouching while Ewing sits; in another scene, he is seated while Ewing stands to provide him with food stolen from the captain's quarters. Autua takes on more of a subordinate role in the relationship as Ewing's health deteriorates, diligently feeding the ailing lawyer and carrying him up to and below the ship's deck. This culminates in the story's penultimate scene as Autua risks his own life to protect Ewing from the murderous Dr Goose, explicitly revealing the master/slave dichotomy.

Reflecting upon this moment, in particular, this study would certainly concur with Estrada's analysis of the pair, in which it is claimed that Autua can be interpreted as a character that "replicates the colonial fantasy that enslaved Africans will always give their lives for the good white master race" (17). Reading more into this comment, it is important to note that despite the fact that he is supposed to be a Moriori, in a symbolic sense Estrada is correct to describe him as an "enslaved African" considering Autua's stereotypical central African accent and the Pacific Island story's cognitive links to images of the African slave trade. In spite of an unequivocal rejection of biological racism in *Cloud Atlas*, the embedded hierarchy exposed in the master-slave relationship of the two lends more support to Hardt and Negri's debate on the contemporary shift to "cultural racism" (189ff.). While this form of monocultural representation cannot be classified as one related to archetypal racist identity constructs, it can be aligned to separatist notions of difference in the context of monoculturalism—i.e. the Other as essentially the antipode to the Self.

Autua to some extent aligns with noble savage discourses in the manner he rejects the norms of the tribe on the Chatham Islands. In one of his conversations, he discusses how he has "seen too much o' da world" and is "no good slave [sic]" because his sailor uncle took him around the world when he was ten years old. The noble savage trope is discussed in-depth by Ellingson, who writes:

The myth of the Noble Savage has succeeded in its intended purpose of obfuscation. It draws us in by its invitation to an act of disbelief in an apparent absurdity...in so doing, it diverts our attention toward particular peoples...and away from its own concealed assumptions; toward its substantive objects of reference and away from its rhetorical manipulations (373).

In this context, Autua's worldliness and rebellious nature deflect attention from his characterisation as a stereotypical Other, but the essence of his relationship with Ewing overrides this nevertheless.

Complimenting Autua's noble savage role, the Other as an instinct-leg, savage cannibal (Hall 321) that originates from chronicles of first contact (see Boruchoff), is present not least in the form of the Moriori islanders seen whipping Autua at the outset of the Pacific Island story. More so, they are present in the Kona cannibals that terrorise the farming villagers of twenty-fourth century Hawaii. Even though such images of the cannibal Other tend to align with traditional ideas of monoculturalism rejected by Welsch as "untenable" in the modern era (*The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today* 194), they are present in *Cloud Atlas*.

¹⁷ See Rings (Throwing Off the Shackles of Colonialism?).

¹⁸ See Fernández Retamar et al.

Ng discusses cannibalism as the ultimate signifier of Otherness:

...cannibalism remains one of the greatest taboos. As Western contact increased with New World cultures in the Americas, the Caribbean, and later on in the Pacific Islands, the widespread belief that these cultures practised cannibalism came to symbolise the clear demarcation between Western civilisation and the pure savagery of native peoples (109).

Cannibalism itself is a theme that has captured the imagination over many years. As well as in literature, ¹⁹ the subject has on occasion been part of popular film storylines with Demme's The Silence of the Lambs, Bird's Ravenous and Hensleigh's Welcome to the Jungle illustrating good examples. Rings' discussion of Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and the protagonist's ongoing fear of being eaten by the Caribs living on the neighbouring island as "a process that highlights the subversive character of [Crusoe]'s radical individualism vis-à-vis European colonial discourse" (Throwing Off the Shackles of Colonialism? 124) is similarly reconstructed from a storytelling perspective in the Hawaii story, where the peaceful existence of Zachry and his tribe is tainted by the periodical attacks of the murderous Kona cannibals. The relative rapidity with which the tribe begins undertaking the abhorrent practice of consuming human flesh after the breakdown of the (relatively) "civilised" (albeit covetous) society that existed before the nuclear apocalypse also magnifies this anxiety.

The savage barbarism of the Kona and enduring irrational fear of cannibalism is demonstrated in the scene where tribe chief (played by Hugh Grant) slits the throat of Zachry's brother-in-law Adam (Jim Sturgess) and proceeds to lick the blade of the blood-stained knife. The close-up shot of the character's face as he slides the blade across his mouth, barely able to contain his appetite to feast upon human flesh, illustrates a cognitive reference to the concept of the instinct-led native as described in fifteenth-century chronicles by Spanish scholar Nicolò Scillacio (Boruchoff 23). Moreover, it reconstructs stereotypical film references to the cannibal as seen in Korda's Sanders of the River and Thompson's King Solomon's Mines. In addition to Hugh Grant's character, the long hair, body paint and skull trophies worn by the rest of the tribe further essentialises the Kona and reinforces links with the colonial discourse idea of the cannibal Other, which illustrates an underlying monocultural mentality to Cloud Atlas.

Conclusion

Cloud Atlas seeks to communicate the idea that if barriers of race, class, and status can be overcome, we can cultivate something akin to a transcultural society. However, evidence of ethnic hierarchy and colonial discourse vis-à-vis white individualistic heroism (see Ryan and Lenos 147) demonstrate that Cloud Atlas's liberal-humanist worldview is one that can ultimately be branded as compromised by monocultural assumptions of Western values and ideals as superior.

Transcultural principles are portrayed primarily in two of the film's six narratives: The Hawaii and Pacific Island stories. In the former, village tribesman Zachry rejects Old Georgie's racist and monocultural agenda, going on to establish a relationship with Prescient Meronym, whose beliefs, race, and culture are different from his. Aboard a nineteenth-century ship, lawyer Adam Ewing also overcomes racial and classbased prejudices to institute a friendship with black slave Autua. However, the invariable theme of male whiteness as tied to the notion of monocultural guardianship is where the transcultural theme starts to become problematic. The presence of a narrative that promotes the notion that there has always been an ongoing struggle between a multiracial liberal minority and a conservative white majority establishes a simplistic binary that overlooks the complexity and dynamism of the globalised world we live in today. Cloud Atlas's crude promotion of superficial liberalism as essentially morally superior in the film's key moments exposes a monocultural underpin to the humanistic themes it tries to uphold, which means that to a large extent, it is unsuccessful in disseminating the fluid and hybrid nature of transculturalism.

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