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# *The Promise* and *The Lost City of Z*: Diasporas, Cinematic Imperialism and Commercial Films

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**Abstract:** Through a mutual interview exchange, the authors reflect on two recent commercial films – *The Promise* and *The Lost City of Z*. The films deal with the Armenian genocide and British exploration of the Amazon, respectively, both chronicling events that took place in the early twentieth century. The authors' inquiries address questions of diasporic imperialism through film, Othering, violence, and the US movie industry. While differing in their readings and opinions of the films, the authors argue that both movies reflect contemporary US fantasies and preoccupations, and that commercial cinema – and pop culture in the Global North more broadly – ought to be taken more seriously by anthropologists.

**Keywords:** film, Hollywood, representation, the Amazon, Britain, Ottoman Empire, Armenian genocide

**Résumé:** Dans le cadre d'une interview réciproque, les auteures examinent deux films commerciaux récents : *The Promise* et *The Lost City of Z*. Ces films traitent respectivement du génocide arménien et de l'exploration britannique de l'Amazonie, relatant tous deux des événements qui ont eu lieu au début du XXe siècle. Les auteures abordent les questions de l'impérialisme diasporique par le cinéma, l'altérisation, la violence et l'industrie cinématographique américaine. Bien qu'elles en fassent des lectures et des critiques différentes, les deux films reflètent selon elles les préoccupations et les fantasmes américains contemporains. Les auteures soutiennent en outre que le cinéma commercial - et plus largement la culture populaire (pop culture) dans le Nord global - devraient être davantage pris en compte par les anthropologues.

**Mots clés :** cinéma, Hollywood, représentation, Amazonie, Grande-Bretagne, empire ottoman, génocide arménien

Here we explore our differing reactions to commercial films that tell histories of places in which we have personal investments. The struggle we make public here is one we believe is common to many anthropologists, because it is the struggle with our own personal and professional concerns as anthropologists living and acting in the present world. We focus on two commercial films we have both seen and contemplated, in part because we believe films such as these remain undertheorised in anthropology.

Through our discussion, we dig into the ways in which Hollywood movies – the histories of their production, the stories they tell, and the nature of their consumption – can be important sites of anthropological inquiry. The movies we discuss here lead us to consider issues such as diasporic claims-making and the afterlife of imperialism. More broadly, commercial films merit anthropological attention at least as much as ethnographic films or documentaries (even though it is the latter on which anthropologists have typically focused). How to watch commercial films is the question for many of us. Some anthropologists disdain them, but many of us, while selective in our choices, still enjoy them – or at least enjoy going to the movie theatre to watch a spectacle, a thriller, a master actor or actress, or even a film we know we will criticise on many grounds but still enjoy viscerally.

We, the coauthors of this piece, both watch films quite frequently. We watch films as anthropologists and as consumers. And every so often we watch films because we feel we must, though we do not expect to enjoy them. Dominguez watches most films made in Israel or about US wars in the Middle East. Balakian watches films about Africa, especially about East Africa and definitely about refugees. Yet this past spring (2017) we both saw two films in commercial movie theatres for other reasons and thought about each other.

Balakian is of Armenian descent; Dominguez was born in Cuba and spent her childhood and youth mostly

in Latin American countries. When *The Promise* came out, Dominguez saw it first but thought constantly about Balakian. When *The Lost City of Z* came out, it was screened where we both lived at the time, in Champaign, Illinois. Since previews and reviews made it seem like a movie about British colonialism and exploration in the Amazon, Dominguez decided she had to see it. She did not expect to enjoy it since it seemed like a throwback to the days of Joseph Conrad and *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen) and *Out of Africa* (1937), or even the television series *The Jewel in the Crown* (O'Brien and Morahan), which first aired in 1984 (based on Paul Scott's four-novel series *The Raj Quartet*). And she wondered why this film was being made now, why the reviews on the Internet in English were so positive, why so little of British or French colonialism or imperialism even got mentioned in the reviews, and what our many Brazilian colleagues would think of it. She was far more positive about *The Promise*, but wondered what Balakian thought of it because of her Armenian background (and whether she had also seen the Turkish-government-backed film *The Ottoman Lieutenant* [Ruben 2016], which, like *The Promise*, used World War I as its backdrop but denied that Armenians had been singled out by Ottoman Turks during this period in what most historians consider a genocide perpetrated by them). As we then discovered, after we had each seen both films, Balakian was more reserved about *The Promise* than Dominguez was, and she was more positive about *The Lost City of Z* than Dominguez was. We both wondered why, thinking that it might just be too easy to assume that "identity politics" or even proximity and life experience could be so central to our consumption of these films. But we persisted because, as anthropologists, we realised that our own diasporic positions and differential investments in truth claims and historical narratives warranted a closer examination.

The result is this exploration, in part a reflection and in part a mutual interview. Dominguez posed questions to Balakian about *The Promise*, and Balakian asked Dominguez questions about *The Lost City of Z*. Popular cinema outside of the United States comprises an important area of anthropological investigation (see, for example, Hoek 2013; Larkin 2008). But while several anthropologists have delved into the world of the Hollywood film industry and Hollywood movies (Benelli 2002; Chalfen 2003; Kapur 2009; Ortner 2013; Rall 1993; Williams 2004), mainstream US movies remain a minor arena of anthropological inquiry. We have replied to each other's questions with candour and depth, hoping that they broach questions about the historical moment in which we live and the possible role of anthropologists in

understanding diasporas, war, violence, and the afterlife of imperialism and colonialism, as well as the subject of representation and commercial movies.

*The Lost City of Z* was officially released in the United States on 14 April 2017. The web synopsis of the plot states,

At the dawn of the 20th century, British explorer Percy Fawcett journeys into the Amazon, where he discovers evidence of a previously unknown, advanced civilization that may have once inhabited the region. Despite being ridiculed by the scientific establishment, which views indigenous populations as savages, the determined Fawcett, supported by his devoted wife, son, and aide-de-camp, returns to his beloved jungle in an attempt to prove his case.

James Gray directed it.<sup>1</sup> It is described as an American film but clearly drew largely on non-US actors. The film grossed USD \$14.4 million at the box office.

*The Promise* was officially released in the United States in fall 2016. Terry George directed it, and it grossed USD \$8.2 million at the box office.<sup>2</sup> Shot on the island of Malta and in Spain, its official web description says,

Brilliant medical student Michael (Oscar Isaac) meets beautiful dance instructor Ana (Charlotte Le Bon) in late 1914. Their shared Armenian heritage sparks an attraction that explodes into a romantic rivalry between Michael and Ana's boyfriend (Christian Bale), an American photojournalist who's dedicated to exposing the truth. As the Ottoman Empire crumbles into war-torn chaos, their conflicting passions must be deferred as they join forces to get themselves and their people to safety.

Reviews in the United States have generally been more favourable toward *The Lost City of Z* than *The Promise*. Below we include some examples.

Anglophone reviews of *The Lost City of Z* include the following:

- Manohla Dargis (2017) in the *New York Times*, who wrote that film is "a lush, melancholic story of discovery and mystery, with a mesmerizing Charlie Hunnam."
- David Sims (2017), who wrote in the *Atlantic* that "Gray's film is beguiling and poetic, gluing you to the screen for every minute of its languorous running time and lingering in the brain for many weeks after."
- Bob Hoose (2017), who wrote for *Plugged In*, "So what we have here is a meticulously crafted and slow-moving film that captures the life of a man consumed by the heady beauty and aching magnetism of the unknown."

- Joe Morgenstern (2017) of the *Wall Street Journal*, who came across as seriously critical of the film when he wrote that “the book’s subtitle was ‘A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon,’ and the film gets that part wrong. It’s deadly dull and conspicuously short on obsessiveness.”

Anglophone reviews of *The Promise* include the following:

- Peter Debruge (2016), in *Variety*: “The events being considered deserve better than a sloggy melodrama in which the tragedy of a people is forced to take a back seat to a not especially compelling love triangle.”
- Andrew Lowry (2017), in *Empire*: “Undeniably effective, in its own blunt way, this deserves credit for shining light on a crime that’s – unbelievably and controversially – still denied to this day.”
- Mark Jenkins (2017), in the *Washington Post*: “Amid all the swooning and speechifying, *The Promise* does depict individual executions, mass slaughters and a work camp where prisoners’ only choice is between slow or quick death.”

We watched, and then commented on, these films as anthropologists and as members of specific diasporas invested in how they are depicted in literature, film and popular culture, and their complexities came out in ways we found illuminating.

*Virginia R. Dominguez*: What, overall, did you think of *The Promise*?

*Sophia Balakian*: I found *The Promise* to be disappointing. One of my major questions and critiques is about how well suited the style of the movie is for the topic. To give some context, *The Promise* was the brainchild of Kirk Kerkorian, an Armenian American and former owner of MGM Studios in Hollywood. Kerkorian’s family were survivors and victims of the Armenian genocide, and after several decades of thinking about and even pitching a film on the subject, Kerkorian launched the project, putting up much of the \$100 million budget for the movie just before his death at age 98 in 2015 (Bart 2017). Kerkorian financed the production company Survival Pictures to create an epic story about the Armenian genocide that would draw large audiences. Survival Pictures, which was officially launched in 2015, uses the purple forget-me-not flower that was used as the international emblem of the 100-year anniversary of the genocide that same year (Khachatourian 2015). So the making of the movie was part of a deeply personal quest, tied to a particular diasporic identity, to share a story that had never been showcased through a

big-budget Hollywood production. Kerkorian, who was both a Hollywood insider and a billionaire, saw it as part of his legacy to make the movie happen – and to make it have a big impact. An article in the *Armenian Weekly* quotes the producer at Survival Pictures, Eric Esralian, as saying, “Because of who inspired us to make the film [Kerkorian], there is an important Armenian aspect to it, but it really is a universal story” (Khachatourian 2016).

It seems that Kerkorian was committed to telling the Armenian genocide history, but also to making that history reach a very broad audience. The movie’s PG-13 rating, and PG-13 content, makes it easily digestible for a wide range of viewers in North America and elsewhere. But genocide is not really a PG-13 topic, and this seems fundamental to some of the movie’s major weaknesses. Genocide is one of the most troubling elements of human history and behaviour. So a film on genocide, or on slavery, for example, should evoke its horror – the dehumanisation of a group of people subjected to it, the mindset of the people who plot and carry it out, and the historical and social contexts that create the conditions of its possibility. Even if a film doesn’t deal explicitly with these questions of context and motivation, then the human costs of such an event, in my mind, should be portrayed more compellingly than they are in *The Promise*.

*The Promise*’s tone, or visual schema, includes bright colours and clean lines. Costumes often look like costumes. Take, for example, the uniform voluminous trousers, fez hats, and vests of Turkish men or the identically distressed prisoner’s outfits of Armenian labourers. Props look like props – a velvet bag of gold coins or the torches and Turkish flags carried by rioting men under a certain cast of light. These remind us that this is a fictional story. As Jeannette Catsoulis of the *New York Times* put it, “We never forget for one second that we’re watching actors in fancy dress; behind the curtain of cattle cars and starving workers, above the noise of the explosions, we can hear the moviemaking machinery clank and whir” (Catsoulis 2017). Except for a few key moments, the glossy tone of the movie, the generic Hollywood music, and the clichéd romantic storyline fail to capture the terror or trauma that one might expect from a film on this topic.

The plot centres on the love triangle between an Armenian medical student, a young Armenian woman raised in Paris, and an Associated Press reporter from the United States. The (for me, unconvincing) love story is at the centre, while the political crisis and the human suffering it inflicted is underexplored. Part of the movie’s weakness owes to the classic Hollywood formula, or “Hollywood hegemony,” as Timothy Corrigan (2015, 97) puts it,

that forecloses possibilities of deeper investigations of this history. Instead, we have the requisite US hero who is savvier at navigating the local landscape than the locals; the central, heterosexual romantic love story; and the *Titanic*-esque death at the end. The losses that are suffered in the movie may also affect the audience less because the characters and their relationships are not as complex, relatable or well developed as they could be.

*VRD*: So, you were disappointed, but would you watch it again in any case?

*SB*: Probably not, though it could be interesting to teach. I have been teaching a course called “Africa in Cinema” at Penn State. At some point I’d like to teach a similar course on human rights in film. How have what are often described as human rights or humanitarian disasters been represented in cinema? Certain Hollywood directors, such as Terry George, who made both *The Promise* and *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), and actors such as Angelina Jolie have taken on projects that focus on global “human rights” stories. How does Hollywood, as a powerful cultural and commercial enterprise, act as an engine for disseminating messages about certain issues, and how does it shape US and global perceptions of such issues in particular ways?

Scholars have been quite critical of many of these films (Evans and Glen 2010; Higonnet and Higonnet 2012). Margaret and Ethel Higonnet argue that “compassion does not equal the assumption of responsibility” (51) – and that the harmonious endings that often conclude Hollywood movies limit transformative possibilities for audiences. Moreover, many of these films centre on the transformation of a white protagonist who changes from cynic or sceptic to empathetic or even sacrificial hero in the end, as with Leonardo DiCaprio, who plays a diamond mercenary in *Blood Diamond* (Zwick 2006), or Reese Witherspoon, who plays a refugee resettlement case worker in *The Good Lie* (Falardeau 2014). *Blood Diamond* concludes with righteous white people doing the right thing – setting up an international process to prohibit the sale of conflict diamonds. In *The Promise*, the US journalist played by Christian Bale communicates what is happening to Armenians in the Ottoman Empire to the rest of the world through his reportage, and the French and British navies ultimately rescue the Armenian resisters. In other words, Hollywood’s choices about what to highlight often reflect the ways in which mainstream US audiences already see themselves and “the West’s” relationship to other parts of the world. So *The Promise* could be a useful addition to the kind of course I’m imagining and would like to teach.

*VRD*: Had you heard about *The Promise* before, and did it make you hesitate to see it? I knew that your father (or at least his work) played a role in the making of the movie (or at least in many Armenian American discussions of the movie).

*SB*: A couple of books written by my father (Peter Balakian) were used in the research for the movie, so we had discussed the film. He was pleased that the movie included certain historical details that were gleaned from his work. I had also heard about the movie through the Armenian American community, mostly via social media. I had read an early review in the *New York Times*, which was very negative. I did hesitate to see it because I worried that I would be disappointed, in part because of my own relationship to the history – as a descendant of survivors. My expectations for a movie on this subject, in other words, were high, and what I had heard suggested that I would be disappointed. Maybe my hopes for such a movie were that it would resonate with, or reflect, stories I grew up with, or even answer unanswered questions by visually representing the events. But I suspected *The Promise* wouldn’t do that.

However, many Armenians I know have embraced the movie, as demonstrated on social media. Even people who were more reserved about the movie itself commented that it was important for the Armenian community to have this history receive such a large platform. In certain ways, the social life and history of the movie are more interesting than the movie itself. The Turkish government has not acknowledged the genocide and has actively worked to suppress its memory and construct a narrative that denies that the deaths of 1.5 million Armenians and other minorities were a systematic government initiative (see Akçam and Cooper 2005; Suny 2009). Because of this, and perhaps also because most of the land on which Armenians historically lived belongs to Turkey today, many Armenians feel strongly about international recognition of the genocide. It’s an open wound, even for people several generations removed from the events portrayed in *The Promise*. As an anthropologist and insider to the community (though not an anthropologist of the community), I find that the positive response to the movie among Armenian diasporans speaks to some central communal dynamics and desires. Armenian Americans encouraged their friends to buy tickets, to bring friends and to write reviews. These activities reflect a desire within a diaspora (that was forged out of the genocide) for acknowledgement of this history.

VRD: Now that you have seen it, do you think that *The Promise* is really about the Armenian genocide? You had heard about it before seeing it, and it was mostly from Armenians on social media who did see it as a film about the Armenian genocide, but now that you have seen it, and as an anthropologist, do you think they are (or were) right?

SB: That's interesting. What does it mean to be "about" something? In my "Africa in Cinema" course, the first movie I teach is *Tarzan the Ape Man* (Van Dyke 1932). Students are sometimes surprised that we are not just learning "about" Africa but, initially, primarily learning about representations of Africa in Hollywood. So we discuss whether and in what ways *Tarzan* is or isn't "about" Africa. Perhaps most centrally, *The Promise* is about a love story, about courageous acts, about survival against adversity. As much as being about the Armenian genocide, *The Promise's* "universal" themes, as the producer put it, are set against a backdrop of the Armenian genocide history. Any historical narrative that deals with individuals' stories is always about both the themes that arise out of human dramas and about the period in which it's set. But Hollywood filmmakers probably foreground the so-called universal themes – the human dramas – so that movies appeal to broader audiences and histories are easier to swallow. This is certainly true in *The Promise*.

VRD: Of course, I must ask in what way you think the film warrants anthropological commentary, critique or attention, or does it?

SB: I think that the most anthropologically interesting thing about *The Promise* concerns the making of the movie more than the movie itself. There is a longer history of Hollywood, and MGM Studios in particular, trying to make a movie about the Armenian genocide, beginning in the 1930s. Franz Werfel, a German Jewish writer, became fascinated by the Armenian genocide on a trip to Syria, and wrote a novel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, based on the Armenian resistance against the Ottoman army from Musa Dagh mountain (a culminating event in *The Promise*). Werfel's book came out in English in the United States in 1934, and it became a bestseller. The same year the rights to the book were bought by MGM, which had high hopes of making a hit movie out of the book. Over the course of decades, pressure from the Turkish embassy in the United States, the US ambassador in Turkey, the Turkish press, and the US State Department quashed the project (Wekly 2006).

I don't know how widely that history is known among Armenian Americans, but I suspect most would not be surprised because it fits into a common narrative that circulates in the Armenian diaspora.

Speaking for myself, the story of the "unmaking" of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* movie was something I heard about growing up. It was part of a larger discourse about a policy in Turkey to silence the Armenian genocide history. The story of the *Musa Dagh* movie exists alongside other experiences and stories. Here I would include, for example, Turkish protestors protesting Armenian genocide commemoration events or protesting talks about the subject on university campuses. This is anecdotal, so I don't make claims about how widespread such occurrences are, but I am noting that those types of events add fuel to feelings of anger and grief among some in the Armenian diaspora. Inside Turkey, journalists, writers and others have been tried under Article 301 of Turkey's penal code, which makes it a crime to "insult Turkishness" – amended in 2008 to make it a crime to "publicly degrade the Turkish nation" (European Commission for Democracy through Law 2016, 99). The writer Orhan Pamuk, the Armenian-language newspaper editor Hrant Dink (who was assassinated in 2007), the publisher Ragıp Zarakolu (PEN International 2006), and the writer Elif Shafak (Lea 2006) have all been tried under Article 301 specifically for writing and publishing on the topic of the Armenian genocide.

With these events as a backdrop, I was moved that the main characters in *The Promise* take part in the famous resistance against the Ottoman army at Musa Dagh toward the end of the movie. Though *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* was never made into a major Hollywood movie, the historical event finally got its screen time – 80 years after Werfel's novel was originally slated to be made into a film.

So to the question of how *The Promise* invites anthropological inquiry, the story of the movie's making invites anthropological attention. That story tells us about the ways in which an aggrieved diaspora copes with a sense of unfulfilled recognition of its wounds, and the ways in which the government of Turkey has paid attention to, cared about and attempted to thwart some of those efforts. That Hollywood plays a role in that political dynamic demonstrates the power, or at least perceived power, of the US movie industry and popular culture more generally in making historical claims about an event a century old. Perhaps that suggests that anthropologists might even pay more attention to Hollywood.

VRD: You know that I know what you typically work on, but I think it would be useful to make sure readers know as well. Would you tell us in brief what you yourself work on, and if it is in any way related to the content of this film or to the Armenian genocide in particular?

SB: My research deals with refugee resettlement systems – the processes coordinated by governments and non-governmental organisations that bring refugees from a country of first asylum to countries in the Global North. I have worked primarily in Kenya and with communities from Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In studying resettlement systems, I think about refugees' narratives – both the ones I hear in my interviews and the ones that refugees tell United Nations and government officials. Those narratives are often sites of contestation about truth and evidence, what constitutes a credible story, and what kinds of stories merit resettlement to countries such as the United States and Canada.

Some refugees I have worked with feel betrayed by an erasure of their collective histories, while others feel betrayed by the denial of their individual circumstances as meriting aid and resettlement. I'm interested in the relationship between truth claims, denial and power. Given Kerkorian's motivation for making this movie, we can also think about *The Promise* as part of a community's attempt to cope with the Turkish government's denial of the genocide. The fact that Armenian Americans have employed Hollywood as part of their call for remembrance and recognition is interesting and not surprising, given that Armenian Americans are a well-organised and relatively affluent community. As a scholar of refugees and migration, I'm interested in the ways in which diasporas call upon various resources to further cultural/national projects of different kinds, especially around questions of both a national past and a national future. In Kenya, I found that there were myriad organisations, including one called "Eastleighwood" (named for the Somali neighbourhood in Nairobi), which promotes peace and youth empowerment through the arts, including online TV programs. In Columbus, Ohio, there is "Somaliwood," which produces Somali-language movies. So, the kinds of resources people employ to make their stories heard, on either individual or collective levels, animates my work. These questions have high stakes when it comes to contested histories and their attendant traumas, and to the political processes whereby people are granted asylum and citizenship or denied these supposed human rights and left in limbo, as many of the people with whom I work are.

Now SB (asking VRD): What compelled you to go see *The Lost City of Z* in the first place?

VRD: It sounded like an old-fashioned film, like computer games I spot and check out precisely because they use language contemporary anthropologists now rarely use but apparently much

of the public still uses, and primitivising approaches to people in "out-of-the-way places," as Anna Tsing (1993) calls them. Since I start out teaching my advanced undergraduate introduction to socio-cultural anthropology by warning my students against "anthro-lite," I am especially attentive to things in popular culture that perpetuate those light, culturalist, Orientalist, or primitivist ways of thinking about many people on the planet.

I had seen some previews at the cinema and wondered if this film might be a good example of "anthro-lite" I could share with my students. I also thought I should see this because it looked like something that would rile the thousands of Brazilian colleagues we have, many of whom do advocacy work against the lumber companies and their allies in the Brazilian Amazon. But I also wondered why anyone would make a film now about a British explorer that seemed much like Livingstone or Stanley exploring sub-Saharan Africa at the height of the British Empire or Cartier, Pizarro, Cortes, or even late fifteenth-century Columbus exploring the hemisphere they came to call "the Americas" in the early days of "modern Europe." Little in the preview suggested that the film was ironic, critical, or even aware of many anthropological and indigenous critiques of that kind of exploration or desire for "discovery." But previews, I have learned, tend to be loud, exaggerate the "action" elements in many films, and are often misleading, so I had to see the film myself.

In that introductory course I teach I often show excerpts of interviews with Edward Said talking about *Orientalism* (1978) and a terrific 30-minute film made by the American Social History Project in 1995 titled *Savage Acts: Wars, Fairs, and Empires, 1898–1904* (Breitbart 1995). I also always assign Haunani-Kay Trask's 1999 book, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i*, which is very critical of historians, archaeologists and socio-cultural anthropologists who work on and write about Hawai'i. Most of my students find her too angry but typically come to understand her perspective. So I wondered about this film that never seemed to consult Brazilian, Peruvian, or Bolivian anthropologists, or even British anthropologists writing about science and colonialism.

To be fair to the film, it is based on a book about Percy Fawcett (Grann 2010) and on Fawcett's own writing early in the twentieth century (originally published posthumously in 1953 and only republished in 2010, and now available through Amazon), and it is in many ways about British scientists and explorers not trusting him. One could argue that the film is really about colonialist exploration, failures as well as successes, and the role of class and epoch in fuelling

that kind of exploration. But I still find it remarkable that no one in the film itself – and no narrative during, preceding or following the film – mentions colonialism, imperialism, neocolonialism, and all the ideologies those fuelled deep into the twentieth century.

*SB:* Yes, that makes sense. I thought the film went deep enough into Fawcett's psyche to provoke critical questions. But that may be too generous. I can see that many people could see this film without being provoked to think critically about colonialism. On that note, how do you see the film as inviting anthropological commentary or critique?

*VRD:* Where do I begin? The timing of the film warrants exploration itself. Why was this film made now and why to such general acclaim? Does the movie-going public today crave primitivising adventures in general? Is it just tired of any reference to colonialism, neocolonialism, race or exploitation? It may be. Perhaps such a film is safe now, whereas it would not have been some years ago. Perhaps it follows in the footsteps of the many *Survivor* television series (2000–19), typically set somewhere the TV viewing audience regards as primitive and dangerous.

All of these are important questions about people who do not see themselves as living in “out-of-the-way” places, and who largely ignore anthropological writing. I am reminded of the many Harrison Ford movies (with him playing the lead role as archaeologist Indiana Jones) (Spielberg 1981, 1984, 1989, 2008) about archaeologists from the North Atlantic going to non-European settings to explore ruins, temples and gravesites, and finding danger and wonders along the way. I have at times been envious of archaeologists, but I have also been grateful to be ignored, indeed to go under the radar. Every so often a character appears in a popular film or TV series who is a socio-cultural anthropologist and who is an expert on “voodoo” or “cannibalism” or some “hunting and gathering” people, and I cringe. And here we have a well-received film (*The Lost City of Z*) that may capture much of the historical, colonial, neocolonial and, yes, racist thinking of the British in the early twentieth century but that is made a century later without reference to those frames.

But other elements warrant anthropological commentary, too – some of it positive, but some quite negative. Interesting is the way the film handles class in Britain in Fawcett's day. Fawcett, after all, was a British military officer who kept trying to do something grand to erase the shame his father had brought upon him and his family. The film never tells us what caused that shame, but it certainly presents the consequences of that shame. The impact of

such shaming in Britain early in the twentieth century and the fact that something grand could possibly erase that shame is noteworthy. It puts the spotlight on Britain, and that reversal of “the gaze” is a welcome surprise in the framing of the film. Likewise, the fact that Fawcett was gone from England for such a long time and that, according to the film, his wife was faithful to him all those years, raising his children and supporting him in his ideas and voyages of discovery, is a quiet but interesting point about gender in middle-class (or upper-middle-class) Britain early in the twentieth century. But the fact that the film never once comments on this – not even when she suggests she would go to South America with him so that they would not be separated for so long – strikes me as a seriously missed opportunity, and for sure one socio-cultural anthropologists would not miss today.

Lastly, there is the story of Fawcett's obsession with the Amazon, British scientists' general scepticism about his claims, and material evidence that might have indicated that an indigenous population had once lived there and risen to the early twentieth-century British standard of a “civilization.” British exploration prior to World War II was not all that different from what the film depicts, but I do imagine that there were pockets in Britain already in the twentieth century who saw the world as more complex than the film depicts. After all, the South American spaces with which he became obsessed were not even part of the British Empire – not then and not ever – and had been independent countries for many decades prior to his voyages of exploration. That they are largely irrelevant in the film's narrative certainly warrants anthropological commentary and critique. It is not clear to me whether the British scientists who were sceptical of his trips at the time were sceptical because they thought about South America differently, or thought that the era of exploration was over, or thought about the many nationalist movements already in existence in the British Empire in the 1920s and 1930s. Exploring those as part of the history and anthropology of science would be good and, it seems to me, necessary.

*SB:* Could we read the film as nostalgic for this age of “exploration”? Does the film express other cultural notions about race, class and/or gender that interest you?

*VRD:* As you know, this film is about a British man obsessed with the Amazon, its dangers, and its potential rewards. South American countries are heavily backgrounded here, so it is really Britain that matters, including his own, the British public's, and British scientists' perceptions of South America, all of which I find very Othering, probably racist

and racist, and quite oblivious to the history, nationalist standing, and social, economic and political organisation of any of the countries in South America. And, yes, I am Latin American, and it may well be relevant here.

But I am reminded of the anthropological film *Cannibal Tours* (O'Rourke 1988) set along the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea (see also Ames 1995). I used to show it frequently in my introductory courses in anthropology, and I recall that many, and perhaps most, of the tourists on that tour were European, or at least those who frequently talked with the cameramen and the film-makers were. I recall that they said very liberal but condescending things on camera about people they encountered along the Sepik River; and I imagine they thought of themselves as good liberals.

But social liberalism is problematic because it pats itself on the back while not being all that critical, and it might be in play both in *Cannibal Tours* and *The Lost City of Z*. Percy Fawcett was a social liberal, in my view, much like those Sepik River tourists were when *Cannibal Tours* was made. He believed that there had been a high-level civilisation in the Amazon sometime in the past; most of the acclaimed scientists of his day in Britain did not believe that. Some reviewers and producers of this film have said that the British scientists sceptical of Fawcett's claims just could not believe that a high-level civilisation of Amazonian Indians could ever have existed. Clearly Fawcett thought that such a civilisation could have existed. So, was the scepticism those scientists exhibited scepticism about all non-European people or, more specifically, about non-European people that Europeans encountered as their empires spread across the planet, including in Latin America? Or was it specifically about tropical rainforest people, like people in the Amazon? I genuinely do not know.

*SB*: Do you think the film is at all self-aware of the ways in which it reproduces a colonial fantasy?

*VRD*: I would like to think so, and I suspect you think so, but that was definitely not my reaction when I first saw the film. I think one could see the film as a film about Britain's zeal for scientific exploration, and the historical and domestic conditions that made it possible. One could also see this film as a film about failure, one that highlights why Percy Fawcett never succeeded in garnering the praise and credit he so obviously wanted, and one could, therefore, see this film as a film that spotlights success as socially, historically and imperially constructed. But if the film-makers intended that, then I think they failed to communicate it. Perhaps one could interpret the film that way, but I think one

has to do a good amount of interpretive work to see the film in that particular way.

The story comes across as that of a valiant British explorer who kept going to the Amazon despite scientific scepticism more than as a story of a colonial fantasy. I would be less sure of this if we were talking about any part of the then British Empire – sub-Saharan Africa, the subcontinent, or Oceania, or even British Protectorates like Palestine. But Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela had long been independent countries for decades in those days – and all outside the British Empire. Only British Guiana (now Guyana), British Honduras (now Belize), and the British West Indies (now Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Grenada, etcetera) were part of the British Empire at the time. So Fawcett's trips were never to a British colony or quasi-colony, nor is there even a hint of British desire to incorporate them as part of the British Empire.

Perhaps this 2017 film that uses British actors, but is really a US film, produces and reproduces a US colonial fantasy – both about Britain and about Latin America. Note that the story is not one of a US scientist or explorer but, rather, of a British man exploring the Amazon. The film does what many US films and TV shows do with, and to, Britain: they “Other” it, sometimes with fascination (especially about class and sometimes about the British Empire prior to World War II) and sometimes with humour (especially if the acting is good and the setting is more or less contemporary Britain).

And I wonder if there isn't a “hispanicism” at play here – on the part of the film-makers and their audience alike – something akin to Orientalism as Edward Said described for the Muslim world, or “the invention of Africa” as Valentin Mudimbe described in 1995 for sub-Saharan Africa, but with respect to common US attitudes toward Latin America, much as Walter Mignolo described most recently in 2005. There is extremely little knowledge of the geography, politics and history of Latin America in the contemporary United States, and it is not unusual to find many people in the United States who assume that all of Latin America is like Mexico, or their fantasy of Mexicans as disorganised, poor, mestizo or Indian, corrupt, rural and wanting to move to the United States. The only other narrative I often find in the United States about Latin America is about the Amazon and how important it is to the planet's ozone layer. If James Gray was at all self-aware of how the film's story reproduces colonial fantasies, it is only in these two ways, in my mind. It makes the British not look too good, and it largely ignores most of Latin America, except for the Amazon.

*SB:* You think a lot about representations of “Others.” How did you become interested in difference and representation?

*VD:* That is a great question and one I might never have thought to ask. I think I have always been interested in representations, their consequences, and the work it takes to sustain those representations, but I have been just as interested in claims to “sameness” as I have been in claims to “otherness.” They both have consequences, they both seem natural but aren’t, and they both take a great deal of work to sustain them (that is, to ignore evidence to the contrary).

On a personal level, I recall learning as a child that we were white and members of the Cuban upper class. And I recall noticing that this mattered to my family. My best friend in school when I was seven or eight and still in Cuba lived up the street from us, and her father was an attorney. My family did not object to that friendship (I think for class reasons), but I have never forgotten that my father would refer to her father as “el pobre Gonzalo” (the poor Gonzalo) and that when I asked my parents about it, they would explain that he had some racially mixed ancestor. So, I quickly learned that her family was different from ours and that something about her and her father made him (and them) disadvantaged. Lines were drawn. We were all Cuban, but she was a different kind of Cuban for one very particular reason.

Some years later (and before I became an anthropologist), several things happened that I remember well. I remember learning that my father’s secretary in Montevideo was interesting but was not “Other,” because she had dual Turkish and Uruguayan citizenship. The fact that she was also Jewish made no difference, except to add to ways she was interesting. But I also recall how one of my grandmothers had turned off the TV set, this time in the United States, because (as she put it when I asked why), there were too many blacks on US television. This was in the late sixties, and I still remember the exchange. Race mattered to her a lot.

I also remember my parents saying that we needed to change our licence plate quickly after moving to northern New Jersey, having spent a year in Puerto Rico. My parents explained that our new neighbours there were commenting on how a Puerto Rican family had moved into the neighbourhood and that this was not good. Clearly my parents agreed that it was important for them not to be seen as a Puerto Rican family. On the other hand, my other grandmother – then an elderly widow – sent money each year to a particular Catholic boarding school in South Dakota that enrolled “Indian” children, and I recall her saying quite matter-of-factly that

it was something she did each year because “we have done so much damage to the Indians that it is the least I can do.” The “we” was a reference to the Spaniards, the Portuguese, the French, the English, and any other European power that had conquered the Americas, settled on indigenous lands, and discriminated against indigenous people on the grounds of race.

So, I learned quickly that we were not Indian either but that we ought to take some responsibility for the ways in which “we” had caused harm to indigenous people all over the hemisphere. Clearly (and long before I encountered anthropology at Yale) I was learning about lines drawn. The family was united on one front but not all. Difference was largely thought of as “racial,” class mattered but did not trump race, and location and citizenship mattered but again did not trump race. However, family members disagreed on whether this drawing of lines was good or bad and what one should do about it.

*SB:* Percy Fawcett’s obsession with finding a lost city, amid the dangers of the Amazon, reminded me in certain ways of anthropologists’ obsessions with their field sites. Am I going too far? In what ways are anthropologists like or unlike explorers?

*VRD:* Sadly, I do not think you are going too far. Anthropologists definitely used to be like explorers throughout much of early anthropology, but I worry that anthropologists are still too much like explorers. Socio-cultural anthropologists now exist in many countries of the world, but that was not always the case. The history of museums of natural history is evidence enough of the similarity between explorers and anthropologists (see [Ames 1995](#); [Desmond 2016](#); [Haraway 1984](#)). For much of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, the typical museum of natural history around the world included rocks, plants, and taxidermied animals but also depictions of contemporary “hunting and gathering” societies now much more frequently referred to as foraging societies. Geologists, botanists, oceanographers and zoologists collected, managed and exhibited those rocks, plants and taxidermied animals, but socio-cultural anthropologists were responsible for the things, statues and narratives about the people thought of as appropriate for a museum of natural history. Those people in far-off places, especially if they were rural and perceived to be close to “nature,” were the province of anthropologists, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1991) aptly said in that famous essay of his on “Anthropology and the Savage Slot.”

This was not just the case in Franz Boas’s era but well beyond his death in the early 1940s. Some museums have since changed their names, but others have not. The Field Museum of Natural

History in Chicago became just “the Field Museum,” but the American Museum of Natural History in New York and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC, retain their original names. Canadian museums that house First Nations’ materials and histories tend not to use the phrase “natural history” (such as the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto or the Canadian Museum of History in Ottawa-Gatineau), but many museums in Canada still call themselves museums of natural history (and in 2002 they formed the Alliance of Natural History Museums of Canada, and their website claims that together the member museums house about a third of the natural history specimens in Canada).

Of course, other things have changed in the past 30–40 years. Many anthropologists say that anthropologists should not just study “the Other” and that anthropology should not side with colonial or neocolonial powers. Few professions, in my experience, are as self-critical as socio-cultural anthropology. And yet (1) we largely still insist on long-term fieldwork (as associated with Bronislaw Malinowski), (2) most anthropologists who study people in their own societies tend to study named groups of immigrants or racialised minorities, and (3) many anthropologists still specialise in areas of the world far from their own society, not unlike those explorers like Fawcett and Darwin, who concentrated on regions well beyond England.

But is it adventure we seek, and are the groups of people we study seen as inferior or more primitive than the people the anthropologist knows well from training or employment “back home”? My answer is “clearly not,” and yet, if we look beyond intentions and more at the behaviour, I am less sure that anthropologists are really that different from the explorers represented by Darwin, Scott, Livingstone, and indeed Fawcett. Anthropologists, as professionals, do care about the value of all of humanity (past and present) and not just as evidence of human evolution, and this may differentiate us from people in other disciplines, but is this the sole – or even main – reason we go abroad and tend to specialise in people that urban, middle-class and frequently prosperous people look down on? I wish I were more certain.

## Insights and Reflections

Earlier in this essay we wrote that we thought this exploration could shed light on some of the possible roles of anthropologists in understanding diasporas and their investments, war, violence and colonialism. We were intrigued by the making of these two historical films set in the early twentieth century outside of the United

States, but which were made by US film-makers, funded by US backers and distributed by US companies. We were also intrigued by each other’s reactions to the films and wondered if some of our more central and enduring intellectual concerns and diasporic positions illuminated certain aspects of each film, while possibly backgrounding others.

Ultimately, we were both compelled to think further about the ways in which a US movie portrayed a history of elsewhere and how our own backgrounds and anthropological interests intersected with that portrayal. Dominguez was disturbed by the Othering of the Amazon and people living there. Balakian, in turn, was concerned with a sense of unconvincing sameness, in which the story and characters seemed to be created to make it easy for mainstream audiences in the United States to care about Armenians in Ottoman Turkey. At the same time, Balakian saw the story of the movie’s creation as meaningful ethnographic information about a diasporic identity. It should be clear by now that Dominguez liked *The Promise*, even if Balakian was more reserved about it, and that Balakian liked *The Lost City of Z*, even if Dominguez was quite critical of it, but the question is not just why we had these reactions as individuals. Both films clearly warrant serious anthropological engagement and commentary, something we do not do often enough as socio-cultural anthropologists and should. Our differing initial reactions to the films suggest that contemporary Hollywood movies – even (or especially) mediocre or problematic ones – may offer more fruit for engaged conversation than anthropologists have often noticed.

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## Notes

- 1 The cast consisted of Robert Pattinson, Charlie Hunnam, Sienna Miller, Tom Holland, Angus Macfadyen, Daniel Huttlestone, Bobby Smalldridge, John Sackville, Michael FitzGerald, Johann Myers, Nicholas Agnew, Frank Clem, Aleksandar Jovanovic, Ian McDiarmid, and Franco Nero.
- 2 The cast consisted of Christian Bale, Oscar Isaac, Charlotte Le Bon, Angela Sarafyan, Shohreh Aghdashloo, Jean Reno, James Cromwell, Marwan Kenzari, Rade Serbedzija, Michael Stahl-David, Numan Acar, Tamer Hassan, Kevork Malikyan, Alain Hernandez, Roman Mitichyan, and Daniel Gimenez Cacho.

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