

ABSTRACT

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“Lacan and the Unconscious Function of Ideology: Subjectivizing *Avatar*’s Hyperreal Fantasy”
(Under the direction of Professor David Rieder).

To the apparent delight of record-breaking audiences, the propagation of remakes, superhero sagas, and toy-based franchises – dominated by fantastic feats rendered in more pixels than visible by the human eye – has cemented CGI extravagance as a mandatory feature of the average Hollywood blockbuster. Countless CGI-driven films have overcome their hackneyed narratives to the tune of hundred-million dollar box office receipts, but no film captures the cultural celebration of hyperreal visuals more than James Cameron’s 2009 sci-fi adventure, *Avatar*. After grossing over \$1 billion in its first three weeks of release, *Avatar* quickly became the highest grossing film of all time, despite its widely-ridiculed, predictable Oedipal narrative. *Avatar*’s technical brilliance is crucial to its historic celebration, but fantastic visuals are not the source of the film’s fundamental attraction; rather, *Avatar*’s hyperreal visuals supplement the unconscious function of the film as *fantasy* – the ideological narrative to which we unknowingly submit, to cope with and manage the overwhelming flow of our unconscious desire.

Following Slavoj Žižek, and Paul Verhaeghe, I will turn to the late theory of Jacques Lacan to explore *Avatar*’s unconscious function as a strengthened, hyperreal fantasy and the implications of its worldwide celebration. As a fantasy, which structures and maintains subjects’ pursuit of their unconscious desire, *Avatar* mediates a fundamental castration complex that is, in part, responsible for the film’s success. I will argue that *Avatar*’s hyperreality reinforces the film’s persistence as a fantasy, which allows the subject to more convincingly mask their true cause of desire: the blatant Oedipal wish fulfillment that the film stages. Accordingly, the ability of hyperreal visuals to strengthen a subject’s fantasy – and allow more sustained enjoyment of the Oedipal desire it disguises – underlies the celebration of hyperreal experiences in this cultural moment.