

## **Predator Anthropologists, Anthropologists Predators: Anthropological Metaphors in Popular Movies**

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Time spent viewing anthropological films rarely yields the intellectual rewards of comparable time spent reading. Yet, ironically, time spent with merely 'entertainment' films is richly rewarded with ideas about the culture and society in which they originate. (Jarvie 1983 323)

### **Introduction**

The cover of one of my anthropology textbooks has a white man in a white shirt, pressed pants, shoes and the accoutrements of academia (glasses, pen, notebook) talking to a woman with facial tattoos and cloth wrapped around her body. She's "local," with local knowledge and he's the embodiment of Western-style education. He's going to take her information, compare it to other knowledge from other cultures, add in some theory and publish. He might get more grants to go out in the "field" again and interview some more locals, perhaps end up with tenure.

But what if the local woman, as she is passing along some native wisdom, hands him a cup of a native beverage, which he accepts, of course, wanting more local experiences. The drink turns him into a terrible beast and, after a frightful rampage, he's killed by his own colleagues. That's the plot of *The Relic* (1997).

When I first saw the movie, I didn't think of it in terms of anthropology, it was just a fun summer movie. But thinking about it later, I felt it was right on so many levels: the dangerous beast killing people in the museum is not 'other' or 'exotic'; it's the white, male academic who cluelessly went out to gather local knowledge without any respect for what that knowledge might entail. And after more than 14 years of living on the Arabian Peninsula, the movie is more relevant to me than ever. Going into the "field" changes an anthropologist in unexpected, sometimes unwanted, ways which are captured in films with a variety of metaphors.

Rewatching *The Relic* (1997) over the years has made me realize how unusually, wonderfully subversive it is and started me thinking about how popular movies can slotted into a taxonomy of the possibilities what can happen when an anthropologist leaves a homespace to enter a world of foreign "local" people.

Although I am not an aid-worker in 1995 in the war-ravaged Balkans, *A Perfect Day* (2016) is the best cinematic portrayal of my life in the Middle East. I live middle-class comfortable, teaching at a university but the feeling of the characters is very similar: the getting up and spending the day trying to do the right thing in a foreign environment, with no sense if one is ever actually helping anything but doing it anyway. I can relate to that. Tying ropes on the body of a dead, white man so that the local people can later use the ropes to haul the body away and have clean water. That's an eerily helpful metaphor for teaching Shakespeare, Milton, Wilde and Shaw on the Arabian Peninsula.

And most people who have lived expat for years, even those not in the military, can relate to the scene in *Hurt Locker* (2008) in which James (Jeremy Renner) stands stupefied in the cereal aisle and the continual displacement/ disorientation of Billy-Lynn in *Billy-Lynn's Long Half Time Walk* (2016) and Krebs in *Soldier's Home* (1977), based on a Hemingway short story.

### **Homespace and "Local" Space**

Displacement and disorientation are key to the anthropologist's experience. To do anthropology, the anthropologist has to come out of some kind of homespace where the rules are known and go out into the "field," a new place with unknown rules which the anthropologist must learn well enough to explain to people back in the homespace, especially the academics.

The point is to gather knowledge and then go home: "The conventional Western anthropologist, remember, is not really a native and, therefore, finds it necessary to determine when enough is enough, when it is finally time to emerge from the fray of the field to write-up" (Jarvie 2004 34). Sometimes anthropologists do work in their own [known] community, in which case they need to explain the culture in academic terms to foreigners.

At heart there are two places: homespace and 'away,' and the two main characters: protagonist/ anthropologist and the locals. Appadurai, using the term "natives," writes an excellent description:

Natives are in one place, a place to which explorers, administrators, missionaries, and eventually anthropologists, come... Natives are those who are somehow confined to places by their connection to what the place permits... They are confined by what they know, feel, and believe. They are prisoners of their 'mode of thought'... [they are] are in one place, a place to which explorers, administrators, missionaries, and eventually anthropologists, come (1988 37)

I use "locals" because natives are often not native. Where I work one group claims the status as "natives" but most people I know explain that their tribe originated in another place and moved here centuries ago. In anthropology and movies, the locals are the "marked" set - they are different, distinct. They are the ones who are maybe magic, maybe from another planet, and as the protagonist/ anthropologist is gathering information about the locals, the locals are gathering information about the protagonist/ anthropologist.

There are multitudes of dangers: misunderstanding the locals, over-identifying with locals, romantic entanglements, being pulled into fights (siding with one group of locals against another group of locals, with outsiders against locals or with locals against outsiders) or, most dangerously, switching loyalties and becoming local.

The key film for the last possibility is *Avatar* (2009), anthropology porn. The hero Jake (Sam Worthington) effortlessly melds with the locals, not needed the pedantic knowledge-based approach of Dr. Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver) and Norm Spellman (Joel David Moore). Jake learns, adapts and in the end blends seamlessly into the local society. From my experience, anthropologists are more similar to Richie Lanz (Bill Murray) in *Rock the Kasbah* (2015) and Kim Baker (played by Tina Fey) in *Whiskey Foxtrot Tango* (2016); they arrive lost and clueless, acquire some hard-won knowledge and leave with a better sense of all that they don't know.

### **Kids' and Action Movies - A Short Taxonomy**

Two kinds of popular movies often have a character leaving homespace and attempting to understand, perhaps assimilate, into new territory for survival purposes: kids' and action movies. Kids' movies are interesting because the new land is adulthood which, once crossed into, can't be left. The homespace, childhood, is left behind forever. I think part of the reason *Avatar* was so popular is that it shows that even after you grow up, you can revert to Peter Pan. Jake was a child, became a soldier and then has the chance to go live in a brightly colored, happy culture where he is the equivalent of royalty.

Action movies are also useful for thinking about representations of anthropology because it's a genre in which assuming one knows how to navigate unfamiliar territory is

almost always punished. Many action (and horror) films are based on the principle of a person going to (or staying in) a place the locals shun and getting chomped.

Without trying to be comprehensive, I would like to briefly sketch out how movies might be sorted out in terms of an protagonist/ anthropologist v. local framework. First, there are the self-contained alien places; people from different areas might interact but there is no one from outside the invented framework, i.e. *Hobbit* (2012)/ *Lord of the Rings* (2001, 2002, 2003), *Princess Bride* (1987), and *Golden Compass* (2007), *Star Wars* and all the *Star Trek* iterations.

There are movies in which someone goes to a foreign land in a way which can't be duplicated such as an innate ability for the main characters as with *Inkheart* (2008), the *Harry Potter* films and *Stardust* (2007); a foreign object that enmeshes you such as the board game in *Jumanji* (1995); or a location in movies for children such as the *Never-ending Story* (1984), the three *Chronicles of Narnia* films (2005, 2008 and 2010), and *Night at the Museum* (2006, 2009, 2014); in action and horror movies, someone finds or makes a portal such as *Stargate* (1994).

A third type is the protagonist/ anthropologist figure who ends up in foreign territory inadvertently, as with the children's movies *Lost in the Desert/ Dirkie* (1969/1970), *Walkabout* (1971), *A Far-Off Place* (1993) and countless action/ horror movies such as *Pitch Black* (2000), and even in cases when the "locals" are not even sentient such as the deadly vines in *The Ruins* (2008). In this kind of movie, the protagonist/ anthropologist figure needs to get up to speed quickly on the local culture or die.

A fourth type is when the protagonist/ anthropologist is ordered into the foreign territory. In children's movies this is usually because the parents have moved, for example *Tiger Eyes* (2012) and *Inside Out* (2015). In the action/ horror genres it is usually because of military orders, i.e. *Avatar* (2009) and *Billy-Lynn's Long Half Time Walk* (2016).

Sometimes the protagonist/ anthropologist goes deliberately into the new territory specifically to learn about the people, as with *Spiderwick* (2008) and *Epic* (2013) for children and the *Relic* (1997), *Rock the Kasbah* (2015) and *Whiskey Foxtrot Tango* (2016). Some of the action movies throw in a romantic twist, as in *Continental Divide* (1981) and *Crocodile Dundee* (1986). At the end of all of these types of movies, the protagonist/ anthropologist usually returns to the homespace having learned about the place and him/herself - "other" serves as a place to grow and develop as with *A Far-Off Place* (1993) and *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* (2017) and whoever survives in the horror/ action movies. In some movies the portal stays open and the protagonist/ anthropologist manages a way to stay connected to homespace and the "other"; this happens most often in children's movies such as *Night at the Museum* (2006, 2009, 2014), *Spiderwick* (2008) and *Epic* (2013).

Another option is that the protagonist/ anthropologist will choose the new territory and stay there forever, again this is usual in children's movies when the main character has a magical connection to the new land such as the three *Chronicles of Narnia* films (2005, 2008 and 2010), and *Stardust* (2007). For children without inherent magic, those who choose the new territory are always seen as "lost," as with the *Emerald Forest* (1985). This type of ending is so perilous, the ending of the books are changed when made into movies so that the child safely re-assimilates as with *Light in the Forest* (1958) and *Jungle Book* (1967 version). This tension fuels all the versions of *Tarzan*.

In adult movies, choosing the new territory over homespace is also almost always dangerous. In a few cases, the protagonist is no longer 'at home' in the homespace and accepts a better life with the new culture, as with *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Avatar* (2009), but most often the protagonist/ anthropologist becomes trapped in a nightmarish existence as with *Silence* (2016).

The movement can be reversed in which a “local” person from the “marked” territory comes to the “normal” world. This is a staple in children’s movies: *Mary Poppins* (1964), *Peter Pan* (2003)/ *Pan* (2015), and *Nanny McPhee* (2005). In action movies, the out-of-place character is usually dangerous, i.e. *Men in Black* (1997), and sometimes danger mixed with humor, i.e. *Rush Hour* (1998). The “local” usually rejects the “normal” space, for example *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980) and *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002).

Movies in which the “local” comes into the “normal” space and successfully assimilates are almost always comedy and romantic, i.e. *Enchanted* (2007). If not romantic, then it’s usually the sub-genre of sci-fi/ horror such as with the *Species* and *Alien* franchises.

### **The Dangers of Static Frames of Reference and Moving Knowledge**

The movies I am most interested in are the ones which center on two aspects of knowledge: learning and bringing it home. In their classic anthropology text, Michrina and Richards explain that the anthropologist “gathers data,” “attributes some meaning” and “constructs an understanding of the whole group from interpreted pieces of data,” most importantly by placing “him- or herself in a ‘one-down’ position in trying to obtain an understanding from informants” (1996 7, 23). From this ‘one-down’ position, one gathers knowledge that is for the benefit, in Jarvie’s term, of the “home society”:

The ethnographic report (E) is evidence *about* (not part of) the anthropology of a society (S). The anthropological book (B) discussing E is *part* of the anthropological history (AH) not of the society (S), but of its home society (HS). (1983 324)

Or as Agar puts it, “The important part was to come home and address colleagues in anthropologese” (2011 10). This can all go wrong in so many terrible (when it happens to you as an anthropologist) and fabulous (when you watch it on a screen) ways.

#### *Static Frames of Reference*

The first danger is not seeing what is in front of you. This is the standard opening of so many entertaining movies in which a character (usually one of the first to be munched) declares something along the lines of: the bats are sure acting funny these days, seems like a lot of spiders around, we have all possible security precautions in place, or of course the sharks can’t learn how to.... Large footprints by the lake, a jump in temperature readings, something that looks like an egg but couldn’t possibly be an egg, etc. are explained away because the people in charge know what is there, know what is what, know what is going on and know what will happen. Until the T-Rex eats them.

Exactly like anthropologists arriving in “local space” with a knowledge of the language, a living stipend and a research plan approved by their advisor and the university ethics board only to find out that the plan won’t work. It means fully preparing to study X, arriving in the “local space” and realizing that studying X is not possible; for example in Menoret’s *Joyriding in Riyadh: Oil, Urbanism, and Road Revolt* (2014).

In *Behind the Veil in Arabia: Women in Oman*, Wikan writes, “I harbored a dream to meet the real, authentic Arabia” (1982 3). However, Wikan notes that the women’s “calm, quiet, self-control, that mute self-assured poise, was to prove the major obstacle all the way through to getting to know, really to know, the Soharis” (10). In the introduction and appendix, Wikan makes it clear that she finally understood after leaving Oman that this “gracious facade” (13) was the fundamental truth, “what matters is how the other acts, not what he or she ‘really’ thinks”; it is “an axiom of Omani culture that persons are endowed with different natures which determine the way they behave. It is for others to acknowledge and accept this” (13, 238).

This kind of anthropological journey of understanding is portrayed in cinematic terms in *Kong: Skull Island* (2017) in which the characters learn that what they thought was the problem, isn't the problem. Watching Preston Packard (Samuel L. Jackson) argue that Kong is the enemy which needs to be destroyed reminds of two important lessons: don't let traumatized survivors make tactical decisions and don't take out the target unless you understand ramifications.

The film is made with the battle lines of good vs. evil, the hero battling the monster. But I read it as the protagonists (who are not exactly heroes) battling their own dangerously static frames of reference for understanding. At the beginning of *Kong* Gunpei Ikari (Miyavi) and Hank Marlow (John C. Reilly) think they are each other's enemy until they realize there is a bigger threat. Bill Randa (John Goodman), the only survivor of a battleship which was destroyed by an undescribed monster, comes to the island looking to flush out and kill the monster(s) he assumes are there. When Kong appears in response to the bombs, ordered by Randa, and starts swatting the helicopters, it is assumed he is the dangerous monster which needs to be killed.

James Conrad (Tom Hiddleston), Mason Weaver (Brie Larson) and the soldiers think they are looking at walls when they are looking at people; a soldier sits on a log which is actually an insect, which he shoots, although it is harmless, and the noise of the gun bring the actual danger. Other soldiers think the legs of a giant spider are tree trunks and that a giant moose is an island. Everyone from off-island thinks Kong is the threat but it's actually the "skull crawlers." In the final fight, the soldiers, scientists and journalist distract the large skull crawler, but it's Kong who (before and again now) saves the day. The interlopers brought the monster up out of the ground with their bombs; Kong has to clean up the mess.

One of the characters, Hank, is the patron saint of people like me who, having lived and researched as an expat in a foreign country for an extended period of time, must deal with newly arrived researchers happy to explain everything to me. Hank, who has been stuck on the island for decades, brings the newly arrived soldiers, scientists and journalists to the local's village. When the male and female leaders come to meet the group, Hank looks at them silently. After a minute, the two locals bow their heads slightly. Hank says quietly, "Thank you, thank you," then turns to the Americans and says more loudly, "So, good news, they say you can shack up here." The lead soldier says, "I didn't hear them say anything." Later Hank mutters, "I've only been here 28 years, what do I know," as the soldiers insist on walking into a death trap.

That's my life. I do research with a group of people who signal violent disagreement with an almost inaudible intake of breath, show anger with a barely perceptible tensing of the body, express displeasure by giving compliments and say "Yes, we will definitely..." when they mean, "No." Trying to explain this to other expats and researchers leads to the question: "Well why don't they just say what they mean?" They are saying what they mean, just in signals and words outsiders don't correctly decipher, often thinking that there is nothing to decipher.

The same faulty premise of an anthropologist landing in new territory and believing they understand what is happening runs through the *Predator* movies. Both *Kong* and *Predator* are fundamentally about the painful process of realizing one's misunderstandings and recalibrating knowledge

In the original *Predator* (1987), an elite military team is sent to a central American jungle to rescue a "cabinet minister." They soon realize that the premise was a set-up and that they, in turn, are being hunted by an alien Predator. Lied to by the CIA agent, lost in every sense of the word, the group are killed off one by one and the hero survives by covering himself in mud, the ultimate blending into the landscape. One woman also survives.

The sequel, *Predator 2* (1990), was less successful: I believe partially because it has the more standard premise of ‘alien creatures show up and get killed.’ There’s nothing new or remarkable in terms of theory or execution.

However, the third iteration takes an interesting turn. *Predators* (2010) starts with several humans waking up in the middle of a parachute drop into a tropical forest similar to the one in *Predator*. The ones who survive the drop band together when it becomes clear that they are being hunted by a team of 3 super-evolved Predators. They eventually realize that they are on a different planet and they were assembled because “we’re the monsters of our own world,” a serial killer, a gangster, a drug lord, etc. A human who has survived several hunting seasons eventually betrays them and the two remaining humans end up untying a captured, lesser-evolved Predator to help them fight. When all the Predators are dead, the remaining man and woman look up to see another group of humans dropping in parachutes and walk away to see if there is a way off the planet with a hopelessness equivalent of Charlton Heston at the end of *Planet of the Apes* (1968).

The set-up of *Predator*, the person pursuing knowledge who ends up as prey, is also found in the low-budget *Alien vs. Predator* (2004) in which a team of scientists and military looking for a mysterious pyramid under Antarctica find themselves in the middle of a fight between the Alien and Predator monsters. The small band of survivors eventually align with the Predator, as Predators and humans are ruthless hunters with a veneer of mortality while the Aliens are simply killers.<sup>1</sup> It’s notable that the only person to survive is a woman of color; in the original *Predator*, the only survivors are a Latina woman and Arnold.

The last film in the series, *Alien vs. Predator - Requiem* (2007), is like *Predator 2*. The Predator’s spaceship seen at the very end of *Alien vs. Predator* is carrying an Alien. When this is discovered, the fight onboard leads to the spaceship crashing in a small-town Colorado and the townspeople are caught in the middle of the fight between the two species.<sup>2</sup>

If you sidestep the gore, the first and third movies in the series focus on the danger of thinking you know what you are getting into when navigating new territory and species. In the first *Predator*, Arnold thinks the enemy are the “guerillas” who shot down a helicopter and took hostages. He is very clear that he only does “rescue missions.” After killing a lot of people, he and his soldiers realize the CIA set them up; it’s a CIA mission, not rescue. Angry at this betrayal, they take the only surviving guerilla as hostage and try to get back to a place where they can be picked up by helicopter. As the move through the thick jungle landscape, they realize the real threat is something else, a creature with super powers which they can’t see. The Predator is not only stalking them, but studying them, recording and practicing their words.

The hostage “enemy” is the one who understands what is going on but won’t trust Arnold with the truth until he cuts off her handcuffs and treats her as an equal. He, finally understanding the situation, kicks a gun out of her hands as he realizes the Predator only hunts prey worth killing, i.e. something that is trying to kill it. He tells her to run and draws attention to himself to allow her to escape. He then learns, by accident, that being covered in mud masks him from the Predator’s infrared sight. At the end of the movie, the Predator takes off its’ armor, as it wants to kill Arnold on equal terms; both the Predator and Arnold build traps to catch each other. Arnold backs out of the Predator’s trap but manages to catch the Predator in his trap. The Predator then sets off a massive explosion, assuming it will destroy evidence of itself and kill Arnold.

In other words, the anthropologist arrives in country assured of moral superiority (Arnold only does “rescues”), starts to research, realizes all previously held assumptions are wrong, learns the “enemy” is actually the most helpful person, and it is not just the previous training (how to build traps) but sacrifice, luck, and caution that allow success.

*Predators* shows that it's not just a matter of following Helmuth von Moltke's advice that "no plan survives contact with the enemy," but that one often can't figure out what or who the enemy is. The characters first assume the other humans are the adversary, then realize it's the Predators, then comprehend that there are different kinds of Predators, and lastly, that some of the humans are actually the most dangerous opponent.<sup>3</sup> A Mexican drug cartel enforcer, a Spetsnaz soldier, an Israel Defense Forces sniper, a Revolutionary United Front office, a Yakuza enforcer, and a mercenary/ former Black Ops soldier can't see that it's the meek doctor who is the biggest hazard to survival.

The humans are constantly misreading the landscape by not understanding that they are on a different planet, they need to band together against the Predators, the person who comes to their 'rescue' is leading them into a trap and the doctor is only pretending to help them.

To look at the situation from the other side, the Predator arrives to hunt for material, figures out the locals are gathering knowledge about it as it is gathering knowledge about the locals, believes itself to be fully capable of decoding the landscape (unaware of the concealing properties of mud), and finally comprehends how far behind the learning curve it is. In *Predators* they misread the situation, assuming they are the ones in charge of what is happening, not imagining that some of the humans will set the lesser-evolved Predator loose to hunt them.<sup>4</sup>

The real-world implications of this are important. In an article about killings of Americans by Afghan security forces, Nissenbaum (2011) mentions the Afghani perceptions of Americans "violent, reckless, intrusive, arrogant, self-serving, profane, infidel bullies hiding behind high technology" and the American perceptions of Afghans: "cowardly, incompetent, obtuse, thieving, complacent, lazy, pot-smoking, treacherous and murderous rascals."

In a later article, Nissenbaum (2012) quotes the draft of a US Army handbook, "Understand that they may have poor conflict resolution skills and that insults cause irrational escalation of violence." Who do you think the "they" refers to? Who exactly have the "poor conflict resolution skills" and who cause an "irrational escalation of violence" if insulted? Not the Americans who wrote the handbook. Discussing this handbook, Mullins (2012) writes that it "takes the position that the killings of coalition forces by Afghans security personnel is caused at least in part by a cultural ignorance of some American and European troops in dealing with Afghans."

I know that hunt for information predominantly from one side, me talking to the local men in my research group, asking questions, trying out theories, watching, taking notes, reading other researchers etc., but I have also been on the receiving end of the hunt for information when relatives of female friends try to proselytize me. My friends know that I will not change my religion, but they can't simply tell the other women "she won't convert" as that would be impolite. I always smile and give my standard answer that "I can't change from the religion of my parents," and I tell my friends to make sure everyone knows that my friends have tried often to convert me.

Often the women back down after a few tries, but some keep fighting. They try to explain Islam to me and when my friends say that I have read about it, they express frustration. They can't understand how someone who lives in a Muslim country, who knows about Islam could refuse to become Muslim. They have found peace and joy in their religion and wish the same blessing for me; that I would find peace in my own religion makes no sense. There's always a sameness and a sadness to these conversations: I am sitting in their style of clothes, at their relative's house, speaking their language, why aren't I crossing over to their religion?

Sometimes people's frameworks can stretch. I was sitting on a beach with one of the men (Z) in my research group and he asked if I had ever been married. I said no; one man wanted to ask me, but he wanted me at home with children and I... I paused. Z was a very religious, conservative man, and I wasn't sure how he would take my choice. He waited a moment, then said, "You wanted to see the world, you wanted your career." Z made the jump; he could envision the path to happiness that was right for me, although it was antithetical to his all beliefs. People talk about failure to communicate, but I think it's actually a failure to imagine the possible correctness of actions that aren't correct for you.

### *Moving Knowledge Between Homespace and Local*

A second type of film focuses on the time after the protagonists/ anthropologists have finally acquired the knowledge that they left the homespace to acquire. What they know has to be codified/ organized/ structured and made to fit into homespace norms. But what happens when the knowledge so changes the person that there is no way to explain what one knows? As Tedlock explains

It is as though fieldwork were supposed to give us two totally independent things: reportable significant knowledge and unreportable mysticism and high adventure. If we were so foolish as to make the mistake of combining these elements, it would somehow seriously discredit our entire endeavor. (1991 71)

The danger for Whittlesey in the *Relic* (1997) is he gets his high adventure, but it's so unreportable, that he can't impart the scientific knowledge he picked up along the way. In the book *The Relic* (1995), there is a thought-out reason why the culture created a way to turn a human into a monster, but the movie starts with the anthropologist Dr. Julian Whittlesey (Lewis van Bergen) being offered a "local" beverage during a night-time ceremony. Clearly in the quest for authentic knowledge, he drinks it and turns into a monster.

The slogan on the movie poster is: "They did the unthinkable. They brought it back." But it's misleading, there's no "they," only Whittlesey and "it" wasn't "brought back," he returns of his own volition. The movie ad plays on the assumption that danger is from outside, but the monster is Whittlesey, who returns to the museum where he worked. He's got all the "local" knowledge he was so hungry for - an amazing scientific discovery about gene mutation, now that he can't fit back into his homespace and he's killed. The movie gives a fictional rendering of the danger of the protagonist/ anthropologist going "native," not being able to create the necessary academic distance.

The characters printed with words in *Inkheart* (2008) are another fictional representation of the chaos created when a person is caught between two worlds. "Half read out of the book," they live in the "normal" world but words from the books they come from are etched on their skin to show they are still partially attached to their homespace. They can't live fully in either space. As T.E. Lawrence in his classic *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* writes:

In my case the efforts of three years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundations, quitted me of my English self and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes; they destroyed it all for me. At the same time I could not sincerely take on the Arab skin; it was an affectation only. Easily was a man made an infidel... Sometimes these selves would converse in the void: and then madness was very near, as I believe it would be near the man who could see things through the veils at once of two customs, two educations, two environments. (1953 30)

In Steve Caton's book about the movie, *Lawrence of Arabia*, Caton expands on this theme:



According to the movie, the cost of living with such a split cultural identity for a man like Lawrence is madness or burnout. This view is very much a modernist one, expounding the need for a stable, grounded, and holistic subject, not matter how complex and ambiguous that subject may be. The idea that a person could contain many different identities, depending on the context of action, some of the contradictory, is something that we are only now beginning to entertain as same and perhaps even desirable in a “postmodern” world. (1999 166)

Agar talks about what happens when two people “encounter each other in a way that estranges them from themselves” (2011 15). When I meet one of the local men in my research group in a public place like a café, every person who sees us, local or expat, codes our relationship as romantic. It isn’t but there is no way to make that clear. A large neon sign with the words “NOPE - JUST RESEARCH” would be seen as protesting too much. We want to talk and it’s not appropriate for him to come to my apartment nor me to his, so we meet, talk and then go home to face our respective communities.

## Discussion

Beyond the fact that it’s not a good sign that soldiers stumbling around in foreign lands shooting people are so easily compared to anthropologists what is the lesson of *Kong and Predators*? I don’t want to hash out or join the ‘anthropologists as government-funded oppressors’ argument, but to focus on one aspect: their certainty.

Many expat researchers I have met have been imbued with a sense of conviction I find both admirable and lamentable. I don’t want to break the confidence of someone setting out in the field, but it is worrying to have so many conversations in which I am told X is dangerous, when it is not, and that Y is not dangerous, when it actually is. Not dangerous in the terms of action movies, large apes or lizards, but dangerous in terms of getting in the way of accomplishing one’s research.

I know researchers who have come with prestigious scholarships and fellowships who have told me that they have no interest or need in talking to the locals. Others seem unprepared for the draining emotional and mental displacement that living in a foreign country, no matter how beautiful the scenery and how charming the people, entails. Some brush aside my caution that living on someone else’s terms is difficult.

When I sit on a beach with local men from my research group, they are never my antagonists. My misunderstandings, cultural prejudices, inability to get out of my own perspective and inattention to detail are what are holding me back from understanding. I have had luminous times, moments of clarity and insight, but also a lot of time spent cold, wet, exhausted, and hungry.

“It’s all different,” I try to explain to researchers and am told something along the lines of, “Yes, of course, I know, I understand” but when the difference happens, the results are almost always painful. Agar says, “It is obvious that social/ cultural anthropology *translates* various emic ‘cultures’ into a shared etic framework” (2011 5) but what happens when the researcher and I, both expats, can’t find that shared framework? It is a mystery to me why, although here are frequent misunderstandings between me and my research group, I feel cultural gaps most frequently when talking to people whose life’s work is reaching across cultural gaps.

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### **Movies Mentioned**

*Alien*

*Alien vs. Predator* (2004)

*Alien vs. Predator - Requiem* (2007)

*Avatar* (2009)

*Billy-Lynn's Long Half Time Walk* (2016)

*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005)

*The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian* (2008)

*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (2010)

*Continental Divide* (1981)

*Crocodile Dundee* (1986)

*Dances with Wolves* (1990)

*Emerald Forest* (1985)

*Enchanted* (2007)

*Epic* (2013)

*A Far-Off Place* (1993)

*The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980)

*Godzilla* (2014)

*Golden Compass*. (2007)

*Harry Potter and the Sorcerers Stone*. (2001)

*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. (2002)

*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. (2004)

*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. (2005)

*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. (2007)

*Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*. (2009)

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows - Part 1*. (2010)

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows - Part 2*. (2011)

*Hobbit* (2012)

*Hurt Locker* (2008)

*Inkheart* (2008)

*Inside Out* (2015)

*Jumanji* (1995)

*Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* (2017)

*Jungle Book* (1967 version)

*Kong: Skull Island* (2017)

*Light in the Forest* (1958)

*Lord of the Rings* (2001, 2002, 2003),

*Lost in the Desert/ Dirkie* (1969/1970)

*Mary Poppins* (1964)

*Men in Black* (1997)

*Nanny McPhee* (2005)

*Night at the Museum* (2006, 2009, 2014)

*Pan* (2015)

*Passengers* (2016)  
*A Perfect Day* (2016)  
*Peter Pan* (2003)  
*Pitch Black* (2000)  
*Planet of the Apes* (1968)  
*Predator* (1987)  
*Predator 2* (1990)  
*Predators* (2010)  
*Princess Bride* (1987)  
*Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002)  
*The Relic* (1997)  
*Rock the Kasbah* (2015)  
*The Ruins* (2008)  
*Rush Hour* (1998)  
*Silence* (2016)  
*Soldier's Home* (1977)  
*Species*  
*Spiderwick* (2008)  
*Star Wars Episode I—The Phantom Menace*. (1999). America: George Lucas.  
*Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones* (2002)  
*Star Wars: Episode III—Revenge of the Sith* (2005)  
*Star Wars Episode IV A New Hope*. (1977). America: George Lucas.  
*Star Wars: Episode V—The Empire Strikes Back* (1980)  
*Star Wars: Episode VI—Return of the Jedi* (1983)  
*Star Wars: Episode VII—The Force Awakens*. (2015)  
*Star Wars: Episode VII—The Last Jedi* (2017)  
*Stardust* (2007)  
*Tarzan* (with various titles and subtitles, 1932, 1981, 1984, 1999, 2013, 2016)  
*Tiger Eyes* (2012)  
*Walkabout* (1971)  
*Whiskey Foxtrot Tango* (2016)

<sup>1</sup> The other point of difference is that Aliens incubate in humans, while Predators take human skeletons as trophies. Bursting out of one's stomach is generally seen as more awful than displaying one's bones. Another researcher could look at the importance of physiognomy in the hierarchy of monsters but in match-ups, the more human-like/ less insect-like one always win: Predator vs. Alien, Godzilla vs. MUTO, Kong vs. Skull-crawlers, etc. Further, the Predator has the human aspect of laughing in contemplation of a future event at the end of *Predator*.

<sup>2</sup> My point about people who go looking for something and find an alien is more interesting than "aliens show up and get killed" is somewhat confirmed by review percentages: *Predator* (1987) (Rotten Tomatoes Tomatometer 80 / Rotten Tomatoes Audience Score 87 - 7.8 IMDB), *Predator 2* (1990) (28/43 - 6.2), *Predators* (2010) (64/51 - 6.4), *Alien vs. Predator* (2004) (20/ 39 - 5.6), *Alien vs. Predator - Requiem* (2007) (11/ 30 - 4.7). The ranking is *Predator* (killers become prey), *Predators* (killers become prey), *Predator 2* (aliens show up), *Alien vs. Predator* (scientist become prey), *Alien vs. Predator - Requiem* (aliens show up).

<sup>3</sup> The same sequence obtains in the 2014 version of *Godzilla*. In the opening credits, it is made clear that Godzilla is the monster, but it turns out that Godzilla is the only one who can save humans from the truly destructive monster, the "Massive Unidentified Terrestrial Organism."

<sup>4</sup> There is no escaping the grisly comparisons. A Predator standing in a tree holding up a skull, "Hey look at the thing from a foreign culture that I procured for myself" and me holding up what I have accumulated: an oryx horn, an old and traditionally made piece of fabric, a porcupine quill, a handmade basket, etc.