

Opening Pandora's Film

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Abstract

By metaphorically taking on the themes of imperialism and the suppression of indigenous peoples, by implicitly criticizing industrial capitalism with its voracious appetite for natural resources, while also participating in it, by linking militarism with ecocide while finding hope only in redemptive violence, and by presenting a religious worldview at variance with that of billions of people, the film *Avatar* has generated great controversy. Only through a multi-disciplinary analysis that examines the cultural tributaries of the film and takes on-the-ground and cyber spaces seriously, will it be possible to begin an assessment of the significance and influence of this form of nature-related cinematic art.

James Cameron's *Avatar* has likely been viewed by more people than any other motion picture. After its release on 18 December 2009, the blockbuster quickly became the highest grossing film of all time, a worldwide cinematic phenomenon. Indeed, the film has been so widely viewed, sometimes repeatedly, that many readers of this special issue focusing on it will need no synopsis of the narrative. Nevertheless, for those who could use one, here is an introduction to the film and the ferment it has precipitated.

Avatar was set on Pandora, a stunningly beautiful and lushly vegetated moon circling a gaseous planet in the Alpha Centauri star system. There, in the year 2154, human invaders had established a mining colony, intent at all costs on gaining access to an energy source (reminiscent of uranium) that in the film, following a mining engineers' in-joke, was called unobtainium.

The film quickly established that human beings had been waging a military campaign to subjugate the moon's indigenous inhabitants, the Na'vi, who stood in the way of their exploitative plans and had already mounted a violent resistance. During the course of the film, the Na'vi were joined by a diverse coalition of Pandoran animals, as well as by a few well-placed human defectors, as they fought back. The imperial humans were ultimately defeated and expelled from Pandora. Several humans, who had joined in the battle against their own kind, elected to remain behind, becoming a part of the Na'vi world. Especially interesting from the perspective of religion and nature scholarship is that the bio-neurological network of the planet itself, a Gaia-like, organicist being who was personified by the Na'vi as the goddess Eywa, played a decisive role in the resistance. This included answering a prayer-like appeal from one of the humans who had 'gone native'—an appeal that Eywa answered by rousing Pandora's animals for battle; during the movie's final climactic battle, when all seemed lost, the most fearsome of Pandora's animals arrived and routed the invaders.

The Na'vi were depicted in the film—as indigenous people have often been in popular culture—as living in spiritual and ecological harmony with nature. *Avatar* was not original in this regard, of course, and it is important to note that critics including Deloria (1998), Churchill (1998), and Krech (1999) have argued that portraying Indi-

ans as ecological and countercultural heroes can be harmful to *real* Indians. Displacing them to another planet, however, may have the effect of providing audiences with an alternative, and more respectful, context in which to gain understanding about what being indigenous might mean.

Specifically, in this case, the indigenous Na'vi lived in a kind of communicative embrace with Eywa. In contrast, the invading humans were disconnected from nature on planet Earth, having by then made it nearly uninhabitable, and also from the wonder-world of Pandora. While some from the human colony were engaged in scientific efforts to communicate with and learn about the Na'vi and their world, and were moved by its beauties and mysteries, these biological and anthropological efforts were trumped by the more powerful military-industrial forces, which were driven by their need to find more energy to maintain their mechanized existence. This energy source happened to be found in its greatest abundance beneath the sacred trees of the Na'vi. Thus, as depicted by Cameron and his collaborators, the film's conflict was nothing less than over whether a sacred world, and its most sacred of places, would be desecrated and destroyed by the materialistic, mechanistic, and militaristic human invaders.

One of the soldiers brought to Pandora with a special role in subduing the Na'vi was a former marine named Jake Sully. Although a paraplegic without the use of his legs due to an earlier military injury, he was brought in to replace his deceased brother in a genetic engineering program that produced human-Na'vi hybrids (named avatars). These avatars provided the humans with Na'vi bodies, enabling them to breathe the Pandoran air, which was otherwise toxic to humans. By means of their avatar bodies, these humans could communicate and interact with the indigenous inhabitants. Sully's designated role was to learn enough about the Na'vi to convince them, if he could, to leave the regions targeted for commercial extraction. Failing that, he was to identify Na'vi vulnerabilities and thus ensure an easy military victory.

The other main human character was the scientist Dr. Grace Augustine, who also worked through an avatar body. She had, apparently, been studying Na'vi culture and ecosystems before the events shown in the film. As an anthropologist and ethnobiologist, she was passionately curious about Pandoran natural systems, and like many contemporary anthropologists who express solidarity with the indigenous people with whom they work, she hoped her insights could be used to help protect the Na'vi. Augustine apparently also thought that by learning from the Na'vi, she might be able to convince those who had come to the moon to exploit its mineral resources that the true wealth of the place was in its natural systems and the living things that constitute them.

What the imperial forces did not anticipate was that both Augustine and Sully, and several other humans, would fall for the Na'vi and Pandoran nature; in Sully's case this also involved a romance, and eventual mating, with the Na'vi princess Neytiri. Through their avatar bodies, Sully and Augustine both came to understand and embrace the holistic ecological spirituality of the Na'vi. This spirituality also involved what could be called relational animism, which was seen in the way in which respect toward prey

animals was obligatory, as well as in the intimacy and bonding that was considered possible with some other species. With their newfound understandings of ecological interconnection, and their intense relationships with various Pandoran life forms, these humans committed a kind of ‘emotional treason’ against their own species (Taylor 2010b), and were thus able to play decisive roles in the resistance to the invaders. Whatever else might be said, through the film Cameron metaphorically called for a defense of life on earth by all humans who understand their dependence on, and embeddedness in, a biosphere considered sacred.¹

The larger context surrounding the film is also important background for its interpretation. *Avatar* was Cameron’s longtime dream film, one he had first thought of making in the 1970s, although he only began to write it in the early 1990s. The combination of computer graphics, motioncapture, and 3-D cinema that Cameron utilized was not even available until this decade, and the film arguably pushed these technologies to levels heretofore unseen. As illuminated by the articles in this journal, the film’s narrative had many influences, including in science-fiction culture, in films and literature celebrating putatively nature-beneficent indigenous cultures, and in cross-cultural (and cross-species) romances. The popularity of such narratives has crested and ebbed over time, alongside Westerners’ thinking-through of the implications of their own mistreatment of indigenous peoples.

Avatar presents many ironies and contradictions. It appears to criticize sharply imperialism and militarism, yet it presents the spectacle of war in all the gratuitous and gory detail commonly found in Hollywood action films. Cameron’s sympathies are clearly with the indigenous Na’vi, but the central hero was the American Marine Jake Sully—a courageous and good-hearted one, of course, as Marines are supposed to be. The story implies that the Na’vi could not have successfully defended themselves from their enemies without his decisive intervention. And it is ironic, if not hypocritical, as many critics have argued, for Cameron to critique harshly industrial capitalism while exemplifying that same capitalist drive through the exceptionally expensive, profit-driven blockbuster film model. The ecopsychologist Renee Lertzman presented another sardonic critique, this one more clearly motivated by environmental concerns: ‘While the film purports to be proenvironmental—“Enter the world,” the tagline says—the psychic message delivered by the story is about leaving the world [while ignoring] the trees and exotic species likely to be endangered on our own planet’ (2010:42). Perspicuously sifting through the many readings to be found online and in the press, the film scholar Catherine Grant (2009) distilled all of these into no less than ten different allegorical variants: of rainforest destruction, ‘slash-and-burn’ extractive industries’ neo-colonialism, the Gaia hypothesis, indigenous people’s genocide, the White Messiah, the Iraq War/War on Terror, American foreign policy in general,

¹ Evidence of such an intent can be found in Cameron’s post-release eco-social activism and interviews, including one by Elizabeth Renzetti, who documented his longstanding environmental radicalism and the pride he expressed at not filming in and damaging any rainforest during the production of *Avatar* (Renzetti 2009).

the postcolonial condition, cinema itself, and ‘cultural understanding through immersion’. To that could be added at least one other: Pandora as the Internet, or as Caleb Crain (2010) satirically dubbed it, ‘the church of Facebook’, in which the Na’vi are ‘digital natives’ and ‘all the creatures have been equipped by a benevolent nature with USB ports in their ponytails’.

Cameron has responded to many of the criticisms voiced about *Avatar* during interviews. Marguerite Suozzi reported on one in a progressive online news source that was particularly illuminating. She began her write up of it by establishing her skeptical credentials, indicating that she had long been suspicious of ‘celebrity endorsements of struggles for social justice’ (Suozzi 2010). Particularly interesting in the following back-and-forth discussion was Cameron’s response to the criticisms she posed about Sully, the ‘white messiah’ character: ‘I don’t buy that’, Cameron responded, adding, ‘I don’t think that any of these indigenous people that see their reality in the film felt that at all’. He stressed that the reaction of the indigenous people has ‘been overwhelmingly positive’, and that the very survival of these people is at stake as these ‘highly mechanized, industrialized force[s]’ destroy their forests.² Responding directly to the ‘white messiah’ critique he added, ‘When all you’ve got to fight back with is bows and arrows, there has to be intervention from the international community. So I don’t care what race the messiahs are, but we all have to be those messiahs, we have to help these people because you can’t stop a bulldozer with a bow and arrow’.

Cameron also responded, if indirectly, to criticisms that the film did nothing to challenge the consumerism that drives the destruction of native habitats and people, at least by acknowledging the problem: ‘It’s us as consumers and our consumer society which through market forces cause a continuous expansion of our industrial presence, our extraction industries and so on’; this is what ultimately leads to the destruction of indigenous societies and the habitats they depend on. He then spoke of the tragic, global loss of indigenous knowledge, and asserted that humanity at large has much to learn from indigenous societies:

The main point is that there is a value-system that they naturally have that has allowed them to live in harmony with nature for a long time and those principles, that wisdom, that spiritual connection to the world, that sense of responsibility to each other, that’s the thing that we need to learn. It’s a complete reboot of how we see things. I’m not even sure we can do it, but if there is hope, it lies in our ability to have a sea change in our consciousness—to not take more than we give.

Although Cameron won over his interviewer, his responses would certainly not satisfy all of his critics. Indeed, some would find even more to criticize in these responses, such as that this last quoted statement recited the ‘ecological Indian’ stereotype, which can be counterproductive to the interests of indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, it is also

² But for one example of an indigenous critique of the film, see Justice 2010.

the case that most of Cameron's critics have not sought out his responses. A robust analysis of the film, however, should carefully consider all pertinent points of view about it, including that of the artists who produced it.

Whatever its strengths and shortcomings, *Avatar* is an innovative and technologically sophisticated action adventure movie that lends itself to a range of allegorical interpretations and uses. It should come as little surprise, then, that the film's popularity gave it currency among mediasavvy environmental and indigenous activists as widely dispersed as South America, Palestine, and South and East Asia. Bolivia's indigenous president, Evo Morales, praised the film as an 'inspiration in the fight against capitalism' (*Huffington Post* 2010). Cameron has steered proceeds from the film to reforestation projects in South America and has spoken against destructive tar-sands mining in Canada. In India, the Dongria- Kondh tribal group appealed to Cameron to help them stop the mining of a mountain by the (somewhat perversely named) Vedanta Resources mining company (Hopkins 2010), surprising many by securing a victory in August 2010 (Rahman 2010). In China, however, as the film broke box office records, the government moved to restrict the film to a small number of 3-D screens, presumably due to its (counter-)revolutionary potential (Stanton 2010). Meanwhile, tourist operators there promoted the Huangshan and Zhiangjiajie mountains as models for the 'hanging mountains' of Pandora (Moon 2010).

For all these reasons, anthropologists, especially those who study indigenous cultures or who work with them on issues related to their environmental and cultural well-being, have found cause to both celebrate and lament the film. Kerin Friedman aptly likened the film to 'a giant anthropological piiiata' that would precipitate many lines of conversation and debate (Friedman 2009). Some on the environmental anthropology listserv, for example, noted the resemblance between the film's 'avatars' and the role of anthropologists in supporting imperial conquests in the past, as well as in the ongoing U.S. military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. The film's pro-mining humans, another anthropologist suggested, are even recognized as akin to the private security companies at extractive mines around the world, who regularly abuse human rights while suppressing worker and environmental activists (E- ANTH listserv, January 29, 2010). Yet others on the listserv reported that audiences as far apart as Brazil and Malaysia left theaters energized and mobilized, discussing imperialism, globalization, capitalism, struggles over natural resources, and modes of resistance.

Avatar thus raises critical questions for anyone concerned with the clash between industrial-extractive capitalism and the health of environmental systems, or between capitalism and its nature-allied victims. The film's depiction of Na'vi religion ventures deeply into the terrain described variously by such terms as animism, pantheism, panentheism, paganism, ecospirituality, and 'dark green religion' (Taylor 2010a).³ Like

³ Online resources that illuminate 'Avatar and dark green religion', including articles about James Cameron's views and activities, as well as regularly updated news stories, video, and commentary, can be found at www.brontaylor.com.

other aspects of the film, its spirituality, variously understood, has been both criticized and welcomed. The *New York Times*' columnist Ross Douthat, for example, echoed a common conservative sentiment when he criticized what he took to be the film's pantheism. Douthat contended, moreover, that, 'the human societies that hew closest to the natural order aren't the shining Edens of James Cameron's fond imaginings' but are 'places where existence tends to be nasty, brutish and short' (Douthat 2009). In striking contrast to Douthat's assessment, however, were the nearly ninety per cent of his commentators who disagreed with it, often vehemently, generally by sympathizing with the film's spirituality and seeing in it either something deeply American (and akin to Transcendentalism), much more broadly religious (such as a mixture of animism and stewardship), or just something that represented eco-pragmatic commonsense. Many of these commentators would agree with the Jewish contemplative author Jay Michaelson, who challenged Douthat in the *Huffington Post*, arguing that the film's spirituality was panentheistic (blending theism and pantheism) and that it did not, therefore, reject the existence of God or the efficacy of prayer. Instead, in Michaelson's view, such spirituality coheres with modern scientific understandings while simultaneously reflecting insights from the world's diverse mystical traditions (Michaelson 2009).

Most of those who expressed sympathy for the film's nature-related spirituality would seem to have affinity with other film viewers who were taken aback by, and who found emotionally evocative, the sheer beauty of the natural world on Pandora; the film certainly presented the most spectacularly alluring vision of another planet ever presented in cinema. One such reaction came from those who, after leaving the theatre, experienced what Ryan Croken called 'Post-Avatar Ecological Depressive Disorder' (Croken 2010). Croken reported that he shared these feelings because he had no access to as beautiful and sublime an earthly place as he saw in the depiction of Pandora. His essay also provided links to *Avatar* forums where scores of people shared similar feelings with others.

Another reaction the film provoked was not depression but ecstasy. The biologist Carol Yoon, for example, in the same *New York Times* pages where Douthat expressed his antipathy toward the film's nature spirituality, wrote effusively that *Avatar* 'recreated what is the heart of biology: the naked, heart-stopping wonder of really seeing the living world'. Yoon stated that she identified with the scientist in the film, who at its end, approached 'the most sacred and most biologically important site on Pandora'. There, in Yoon's view, it became clear that Augustine had learned there was 'no line between her wonder, her love of the living world and her science'. Yoon also explained that she had spent much of the last six years working on a book entitled *Naming Nature* (2009), in which she sought to express the same sorts of themes she found so enthralling in the film. For Yoon, the film was about how, 'inside of all humans there is a deep desire and ability to really see life, to see order among living things, and about the joy that comes with it'. She added that, at the end of her own book, she urged readers 'to go out into the world and see the life and find the order in the living world around them'. She would likely also recommend such practice as an antidote

to the post-Avatar depression. Cameron and the others responsible for *Avatar* might well have been subtly suggesting precisely such a spiritual practice, just such ways of knowing, through the film.⁴

By metaphorically taking on the themes of imperialism and the suppression of indigenous peoples, by implicitly criticizing development-obsessed and expansionist capitalism while participating at least indirectly in it, by linking militarism with ecocide while finding hope only in redemptive violence, and by presenting a religious worldview at variance with that of billions of people, the film was destined to generate controversy. This said, the film itself, the negative and positive reactions to it, as well as the artist's own responses to these reactions, are all 'good to think'.⁵ Whether opening a multi-disciplinary analysis of *Avatar* will be like opening a hopeless Pandora's box, or more like opening the door to an adventure-filled and Eden-like Pandoran forest, will no doubt be in the eye of the beholder.

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⁴ The evidence here is intriguing. Cameron has often talked about the importance of connecting with nature and his own feelings in this regard. His own passion for marine ecosystems is one reflection of such perceptions, and it likely was part of what motivated him to make *Aliens of the Deep* (co-directed with Steven Quale, 2005), a documentary that introduces viewers to the mysteries of the ocean's greatest depths. More direct evidence can be discerned in Cameron's response to a question about the meaning of *Avatar*, wherein he said it tries to address critical questions about our relationships to other people, other cultures, and 'our relationship with the natural world at a time of nature-deficit disorder'. The phrase 'nature-deficit disorder' was coined in a popular book by Richard Louv (2005). It reflects a common environmentalist epistemology, and a corresponding eco-spiritual prescription, namely, that time in nature is essential if people are to reconnect with the sources of their being and reharmonize life on earth. Louv himself recognized Cameron's affinity with such a view when he used the phrase and wrote an open letter to him that was published in *Psychology Today*. In it he appealed to Cameron for help in creating a mass back-to- nature movement (Louv 2010).

⁵ The phrase 'good to think' is borrowed from Claude Levi-Strauss, who once used it with regard to animals (Levi-Strauss 1962).

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