

# War of the Worldviews: Why *Avatar* Lost

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The competition for Best Picture is over. But the war of the worlds, and worldviews, in *Avatar* and *The Hurt Locker*, continues.

In *The Hurt Locker*, Kathryn Bigelow provided a terrifying depiction of efforts by US soldiers to survive while fighting insurgents and disarming bombs in Iraq. Their battle was both against an evil enemy and to retain their sanity and humanity.

As is typical in Hollywood war films, *The Hurt Locker* carried a subtle anti-war message compatible with patriotic sensibilities. Underscoring her own patriotism, when accepting the best picture and best director awards, Bigelow dedicated them to the “women and men in the military who risk their lives daily to keep us safe.” With these words and in the film, Bigelow reminds us that war is hell, while reassuring us of our good intentions.

For all the terror it depicted, the message was predictable and safe.

## A Modern Form of Nature Religion

In *Avatar*, director James Cameron told the emotionally wrenching tale of the Na’vi, the aboriginal inhabitants of a distant world, defending themselves against an invading human army. The film was obviously a metaphor for the long war between large-scale civilizations and the small foraging societies that they supplant.

Because most of Earth’s people are citizens of such civilizations, *Avatar*’s message was anything but safe.

Why, then, has *Avatar* so clearly won the global battle for hearts and minds, becoming the most profitable motion picture of all time?

The answer is, I believe, that the heart of the film lies not in its criticism but its expression of our natural love of nature. The film evoked our longing for connection and belonging to the sources of our existence.

Cameron understood this, as seen in a recent interview, attributing the success of *Avatar* to the ways it is connecting the audience to nature and the environmental cause.

Additionally, the film was appealing because it offered a meaningful worldview and a reverence for life ethic compatible with modern scientific sensibilities. This was nowhere more apparent than in the delight expressed by the scientist, Dr. Augustine (Sigourney Weaver), as she explored Pandora’s living systems. The evocative power of the film was thus rooted in nothing less than the way in which it expressed and promoted a modern form of nature religion.

With nature religion, all life is sacred, related as kin, and mutually dependent. The term ‘sacred’ generally refers to the places and forces that precipitate healing, rebirth, and transformation. The word is also used to refer to the source of life, so with nature religion, the universe, biosphere, and habitat are sacred. These things constitute a new Holy Trinity in contemporary nature religion because life is absolutely dependent on them.

Nature religion is, of course, commonly associated with Native Americans and other indigenous people, as it was in *Avatar*. But the film suggests that all open-hearted humans can come to such spirituality, just as did several of the invaders. These humans learned to perceive the magic and intrinsic value of nature, converted to Na'vi ways, and fought to defend life itself. Some, like Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), were even reborn in Na'vi bodies, able to breathe the air of their new home

## Emotional Treason?

As Cameron put the conversion motif, the film urges people to look at themselves from “nature’s point of view.” He then noted that the biggest cheer consistently erupts from the audience when the reptilian hammerheads rout the destructive human invaders. Cameron expressed delight that, by the end of the movie, everyone is “rooting for nature.”

This is a remarkable achievement since most in his audience belong to the very civilizations which, for millennia, have labored to bend nature to their will, while eliminating, often violently, the small-scale societies that are inconveniently in the way.

When we root for nature in the film, at least subconsciously, most of us are committing emotional treason against our own civilizations.

This unlikely event is possible because feelings of belonging and connection to nature are part of our emotional repertoire. We evolved here and find biologically intact ecosystems beautiful because, when we are drawn to and protect such places, we flourish.

This affinity for nature may explain the global appeal of *Avatar* but not why it ran second in the Oscar competition. Ironically, in the battle between these cinematic epics, *The Hurt Locker* was portrayed as countercultural, when it actually pandered to patriotic convention. Meanwhile, *Avatar* was cast as technologically radical while few commented on its radical critique of a militarized technological civilization, or on its countercultural religious vision. These are things some Academy voters, little doubt, found too radical to support.

*Avatar*, nevertheless, spoke the deeper truths. It reminded us about true belonging and how we should live. It evoked in us what we know deep in our genome, that our wellbeing, and the wellbeing of all life, is mutually dependent. It urged us to recognize that all life is sacred and worthy of reverent defense.

Not everyone who enjoyed *Avatar* will grasp and act on the message. But we ignore its message to our impoverishment and peril.

The Ted K Archive

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