

Avatar: An Anarcho-Primitivist Picture of the History of the World

Layla AbdelRahim

2009

Avatar is rich in historical allusions and James Cameron deftly weaves into the fabric of the film the core of the relations between humans and their world. Namely, the film is primarily about the two clashing world-views at the core of the relationship between the civilised and the wild. Informed and justified by the Darwinian narrative, the civilised perspective stresses competition and violence, in which the balance of power is achieved by the strong teaming up together against everyone rendered weaker for the purposes of conquest and use as resources, whereas the wild position sees life as a process of cooperation and the balancing of forces, not powers. This is the debate between Kropotkian and Darwinian evolutionary science as well as between the wild and civilised, between pacifism and oppression, between anarchy and imperialism, and between life and death.

Avatar's storyline begins with a paraplegic marine, Jake Sully, who agrees to take his deceased brother's place on an expedition to the far away planet Pandora. Through Jake's eyes, we learn of the deeply enmeshed corporate interests in "natural resources" and the realisation of corporate interests by means of military operations and scientific research. The parallel between the handicapped Jake — victim of his own subscription to war — and our handicapped world is played against the backdrop of the relations between the obsessive interests of the scientists, personified by Grace. These scientists like to think of themselves as neutral, if not empathetic towards the "primitive", "weak" "natives" and yet they know all too well that they are puppets of the political and corporate dictates and that the military can press the wake-up call button at any moment. Still, Avatar presents the scientist as possessing much more information than the average person or the leaders of the game, and because of that has the ability to care more for the fate of the "field-research" than the alien business, political, and military bullies. What the scientist often lacks, though, is the strength of character to make an honest decision, because science relies on the grace of the structures that fund it. Scientists are prostitutes, in other words, and rarely dare to take a responsible stance. The film also shows that, even though they use scientific information, the financiers and the military rarely take scientists and the knowledge they provide seriously.

The film is, thus, an overt commentary on the historical and present-day place of anthropologists in imperialist expeditions and of the role the hard sciences play in, both, elaborating the philosophy of imperialism and in providing the necessary information for its execution. As Col. Quaritch makes clear, the scientist is the carrot and the military is the stick in operation corporation. One can miss the truth of this commentary only if one is totally ignorant of how the social and political world functions and of how knowledge is being produced. Jake, however, we learn later, is chosen by Pandora for several reasons, among which are, both, his ignorance and the strength of conscience, which the Na'vi refer to as the strength of "spirit" to speak the truth and to act upon it, even if he is totally unaware of any of it.

In fact, the film begins with his ignorance. For, even though Jake has lost his ability to walk, he still fails to learn from his experience and to identify the link between his civilisation and his impotence. Deluded in that this is the right way of life, he believes

that he will get a second chance to walk if he agrees to help “his” people kill and destroy life on other planets as well. In other words, his civilisation brings him to an impasse, to his ambulatory impotence, which also dumbs him down and renders him unable to mature or even to learn from his experience. “You are like a baby” were the first words Neytiri addressed to Jake on Pandora: a stupid and irresponsible brat who fails to understand that the death of Viperwolfs was needless and, actually, very sad, and that his irresponsibility, stupidity, selfishness and disregard for life — not only accounted for the futile loss of life — but prompted him to dare and thank Neytiri for their death. It is here, among the Na’vi that Jake will begin to learn that the scientific white supremacy model of knowledge is what “evolves” humans into ignorant and impotent, yet lethal, invalids who, having turned their own planet into grey metal limbs of death, continue to ravage other worlds.

Here, Cameron displays his solidarity with the aborigines of the world and his understanding of the knowledge of north American First Nations, while concomitantly linking the history of colonisation of the “New World” to the whole history of civilisation and its war of terror on the seven continents. The hunt for the precious Unobtanium, whose true value is, precisely, in it remaining untouched and unattained is an obvious parallel with the diamond mines of Africa, the petroleum of the Middle East, the tar sands of the Americas, et al, the material ends of which are short-lived but the disastrous effects on the life of native human and non-human populations is agonising. The extraction of all of these “natural resources” for the purposes of civilisation spells death to the intricate system of connectedness between all forms of living and non-living beings, depicted in the film as the Hometree of the Na’vi and a whole variety of life-form that rests on Pandora’s biggest deposit of Unobtanium.

This struggle for the control and extraction of “natural resources” is a historical saga that dates back to the beginnings of civilisation with its inherent propensity for imperialism. To ignore the actuality and the dark history of the problem of the displacement of natives, the dispossession, the murder of trees, birds, and human and non-human animals by corporations and their armies today and yesterday in lands that are ravaged by tar sands, bio-fuels, petroleum, diamonds, coal, among others, reveals a complete paralysis of the emotional and intellectual ability of the “civilised” to know and to feel the pain of the world.

The internet, however, is infested with thousands of messages that echo, basically, a couple of American critics who have appreciated the film’s technological innovation but dismissed the story-line as a bad first draft, ignorant of “real knowledge”, or even totally absent. Most ironic, though, is the review, *Blue in the Face*, written by a black critic, Armond White. White raves his outrage at Avatar’s implication of white man’s guilt and Cameron’s suggestion that his redemption lies in the renouncement of his white body and will to power as Jake became the other in everything, including his body and soul. It is sad that White fails to see the irony in his own indulgence in renouncing his blackness by having fully accepted the white-man’s outlook on the world with the only problem that, unlike Jake, he couldn’t change body and skin. White’s new outlook is

so complete, that even white people no longer dare to openly exclude the aborigines from the category of human, but White complains that “Avatar condemns mankind’s plundering and ruin of a metaphorical planet’s ecology and the aboriginals’ way of life”. In other words, the logic of this sentence is that the whole of “mankind” ravages. That’s what “mankind” is and, by its very nature, meant to do. That’s the job of that wonderful, highly evolved “mankind”. Now, if the Aborigines, or whoever else, do not ravage or are themselves ravaged, it is because they are not “man-kind” and hence, who cares?. Just don’t blame the white man for what he has supposedly been created to do.

This reminds us of a lot of things, such as British and French colonialism, Nazi Germany, and Japan in the rest of Asia during WWII — just as a couple of illustrations. But the problem here is not to blame every single white man for everything gone awry in the world. The problem here is the perspective and the knowledge that allows people to justify their acts of violence against other living beings. It is the problem of civilisation and of everyone who subscribes to its knowledge, regardless of their colour of skin. It only so happens, that the most recent and most successful development in the application of this knowledge was elaborated, mostly, by European and North American white men. A glance at the faculty and researchers in North American universities and their social and hard science departments or research centres will reveal how pale that body is and, just as it was in the 19th century, this is still true today.

The most important point of Avatar is Cameron’s turning of the table on the question of who is the alien and what is the definition of “alien”. The film demonstrates that the alien is not only the one who invades from without, the alien is the one alien to the community of life and thus threatens it with its disregard for its value. The alien is alienated from its own essence when it fails to adapt to life around it.

The chorus of the viewers and reviewers who dismiss this point in Avatar, points to the inability or, perhaps, the unwillingness of the civilised to take a look at themselves from aside and to question their own ability — or rather lack of ability — to adapt to life instead of death. In this respect, Jake represents the conscience of the civilised awakened by his ability to finally learn. Interestingly, it was his ignorance that won Grace’s favour, in the first place, when she said “now empty your mind. You won’t find that difficult to do”. But Grace is not alone in her appreciation of this quality in Jake, Col. Quaritch finds it beneficial for his goals and, most important, it is a big part of the reason for which Pandora’s consciousness chooses him to join its community. It is important to note, however, that even though Jake joins the Na’vi as an important, probably a key, element in the survival of the planet, he does not come there as a leader, but as someone responsible for the disclosure of vital information about the enemy Pandora faces and the extent of the enemy’s brutality. Without this information, Pandora’s natives will never be able to imagine the scope of the alienation of these aliens.

Through Jake, *Avatar* makes its statement, that if one is to preserve life, as a scientist, soldier, or human being, one is responsible for recognising the nature of the civilised self and is responsible for sharing this information with the world. Again, this knowledge of the lethal nature of the civilised — or rather the unavailability of this knowledge — is the story of the First Nations first encounter with the Europeans when they adopted them and helped them to acclimate to the new continent the Europeans landed five hundred years ago. This is the story behind native generosity even today, when these invaders have shown their lack of gratitude and the scope of devastation, dispossession, suffering and violence that they are capable of inflicting. As an example, just recently, two First Nations were ready to adopt the Viviers, a white South African family seeking residency in British Columbia because they are allergic to the sun, but the Canadian government refused to grant them the residency status, at first. The Aboriginals fail to see the alien for what he is, not because of some inherent flaw in native intelligence, but because their own perspective, that favours empathy and mutual aid, would not allow them to defeat their own being and to become so alienated from their essence as to ignore the cry for life of even that very same alien who kills them then.

Avatar's logic based on the lessons from history is perhaps what really angers the civilised, and which leads us to his response to the violence of colonisation. This colonisation is achieved by education (reference to the brutal residential schools in Canada, as well as, to the French, English, and Italian missionary schools in Africa and the rest of the world), by exploitation (the South African diamond mines come to mind), and military occupation (all the wars are present here without exception). The film tells us that as history has shown, pacifism is not going to solve matters here. If life is to survive against the machine, it is vital to respond as brutally as the invader attacks in order to stop the disease. Resistance is going to cost lives, but it is necessary, if one wants to save the balance of life. Without the role played by the white people in the Underground Railway, blacks wouldn't have succeeded — not because of some inherent lack — but because the enemy is powerful and those with a "strong spirit" need to make their stance from within the system of abuse to rectify the injustice. The same applies to all the battles for resistance. This resistance cannot succeed without the conscientious "aliens". And hence, Jake plays a vital role as the one who can make it happen because he knows who he is and where he comes from.

There are, however, problems with this anarcho-primitivist work of art.

First, there is the problem of art itself, for, if it is based on the symbolic representation relying on the use of the same materials that are at the basis of our alienation from the world, how can a medium that is based on acting, i.e. on the overt acknowledgment of the "fakeness" of the experience told, convince us of truth? This is a larger problem with cinema, but it is a problem for all works of art, including writing.

Second, the film's logic has anarcho-primitivism stamped in every scene and on every page except for the fact that to relate the story, Cameron uses the same machines, technologies and money that devastate the wilderness he tells us we need to save. And

although I see the point in that if nothing is done from within the field to challenge it and to undermine its violence, the picture of the consistency and righteousness of the civilised model would remain intact and bullet-proof, this point of infiltration (a strong theme in the film itself that goes both ways: Jake infiltrates the Other and then as Other infiltrates the Civilised Alien self) of the machine still leads to the question of intent on the part of the author and on the part of the audience.

The audience, according to the thousands of messages and posts on social networks and internet, wants entertainment and a 3-dimensional experience of violence and sci-fi. They don't want some sap about natives and nature. They don't want the "crap" about white man's guilt or white man's burden or whatever. We're done with that, they say. We're postmodern. We want blood.

Fine, perhaps not every single one out there wants that, but I hadn't had the time yet to dig beneath the thousands of these messages to uncover an alternative stance. I'm sure it will come, but, still, the majority speaks for itself. Particularly dismissive appear the anthropologists — of course, their role in the whole galore is under attack. For example, a male, white American anthropologist in Asia, Kerim Friedman, saw the film as "clichéd" and as nothing to do with the "representation" of the Indigenous people. First of all, the film is not about Indigenous people, but about historical relations and outlook on life. But then, since the topic of Indigenous populations is implied it is interesting that Friedman appeals to his position as a teacher on Indigenous matters and representation: he knows, he says, because he teaches courses on Indigenous People in Taiwan and the Indigenous people he teaches do not recognise themselves in the teaching. Now, how cliché is that: **he** teaches on **indigenous** peoples! He is **not** a student of indigenous people. He doesn't understand that by occupying this position of the "holder" "possessor" of knowledge, as a white male, particularly there in Asia, he oppresses by his mere existence in that position in science and academia for he embodies that perspective and replaces the Indigenous other with his body, mind, appetite and all. No wonder he doesn't find Avatar inspiring. How many Indigenous people are there teaching in France about the French people, at Columbia University teaching about white immigrant culture, at the University of Montreal teaching about the Franco-Anglo relations, at Oxford revealing the history of the British Empire, for example? How many Indigenous people are invited to teach anywhere at all about anything at all — even about themselves?

Such rejections of the critique presented in Avatar betray the extent of the threat felt by scientists and the lesser bolts of civilisation, which leads us to the question of Cameron's intent when he spent the hundreds of millions of dollars on this film and what plans does he have for the hundreds of millions expected to be harvested?

For, if his intention was to invite the masses to a leap of imagination that was to give them a chance to exercise empathy and to expand their narrow horizons, judging by the majority of responses, he has failed, not because the film was a failure, but because it might be futile to attempt to infiltrate the sphere that is, to an extent, responsible for the zombification of the "masses" in the first place. They go to the movies to see

blood, to forget their invalid lives where they crave to imagine that they are fit because they can conquer, ravage and kill. They don't go to the movie-theatre to hear truth, they want film to live up to its promise of falsehood.

"Truth is outmoded. We're done with Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Tarkovsky and their soap about conscience and truth. We are postmodern," scream the audiences, "and there is no truth in our postmodern misery except for the future of death. Technology guarantees us just that, through entertainment and through that something we call life but by which we really mean war".

An interesting sidetrack is that Cameron was the producer of Soderbergh's re-make of Tarkovsky's *Solaris* and obviously has learnt a great deal from Tarkovsky's quest for the meaning of conscience, truth, and art as well as from the book, originally written by Stanislaw Lem. I strongly disliked the trashy love-line of the re-make and so did the book's author, Lem, who said that "the book was not dedicated to erotic problems of people in outer space... Had "*Solaris*" dealt with love of a man for a woman — no matter whether on Earth or in Space — it would not have been entitled "*Solaris*"!"

Solaris was about alien consciousness and Tarkovsky interwove it with the question of conscience on a personal level: a moment of truth that every mortal had to face, one day or another, even out in cosmos. *Avatar* takes this question of conscience and consciousness even further, on to the level that tests the human possibility to know the world and if so, how can we live with this knowledge. If we look at the world through the lens of speceism — i.e. that knowledge that the civilised call scientific and which is the basis of all racism, sexism, animalism and discrimination it will turn ugly wherever we go. This brings us back to the basic distinction in knowing the world from the perspective of Kropotkin's theory of evolution through cooperation and mutual aid rather than from Darwin's claim that nature is a gladiators' rink that always favours the fittest.

The scene in which Neytiri catches Jake saying a prayer at the sacred place spells this out. Jake's prayer was not meant to beg salvation, but to warn and to relay vital information for Pandora about the enemy: this enemy is ruthless and is here to spell the end for all life. Jake knows, like no one else, what these aliens from the sky are capable of because he is one of them.

"Your prayer is useless. Mother nature does not take sides," Neytiri tells him. "She guards the balance of life". And yet, having received this information, Mother Nature makes a critical decision, and, all forms of life on the planet come together in fighting the invader. In the end "the aliens return to their dying world". The balance of life prevails, at least in the film. Now what are we going to do about the impending threat by our own alienism to the world we have renounced?

For more specific examples on the struggle for life around the globe, read *The Real Avatar Story: Indigenous People Fight to Save their Forest Homes from Corporate Exploitation* (news.mongabay.com).

The Ted K Archive

Layla AbdelRahim

Avatar: An Anarcho-Primitivist Picture of the History of the World
2009

Retrieved on January 21, 2010 from layla.miltsov.org
review by Layla AbdelRahim, 23 December '09

www.thetedkarchive.com