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Avatar

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Avatar

Abstract

This is a review of *Avatar* (2009).

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By now, everyone who has seen *Avatar* has noticed that it expresses religious themes in its depiction of the eco-spirituality of the Na'vi, the blue-skinned humanoid natives of the planet Pandora. Director James Cameron articulates an ethic of environmentalism through their eyes as they react to the despoilment of their planet by the Sky People, natives of Earth who mine Pandora for the precious substance "unobtanium." As such, it expresses postcolonial white guilt about the destruction of the environment and the native peoples of the world. It might well have been titled *Dances with Wolves in Space*, as it seems to have almost the same story as Kevin Costner's 1990 film; a white man learns the way of the primitive, nature-oriented tribe and finally joins them to help them fight off his own people's colonialism, recognizing that the cause of the natives is just and the conquerors are the villains.

As with *Dances with Wolves*, it can be observed that the problem with this ahistorical vision is how easy it makes it for the descendants of the invaders to enjoy cheap and guilt-free identification with the people their ancestors destroyed. In the case of *Avatar*, it is literally rendered all the more fantastic by a storyline that allows the native peoples to win, as the conquerors return to their home planet. In any real scenario, the colonists would surely be back soon, as invaders do not usually turn their backs on immense profits that can be made from the natural resources of conquered territories. (Of course, Cameron has already discussed the possibility of

sequels, so the return of the conquerors can form part of the extended storyline; still, even the initial success of the natives seems highly unlikely in the face of a technology that allows for interstellar travel.)

It might also be noted that the depiction of the Na'vi continues a trend to romanticize and exoticize native peoples that has been present in cinema for decades. Although it may be objected that the Na'vi are not representative of any actual tribal peoples, one can observe that the actors who provided the basis for voice and motion capture characterization of the Na'vi are mainly African American, along with one Cherokee (Wes Studi). The Na'vi are a cipher for the victims of white America, expressing as they do a combination of Native American and African spirituality which (in this romanticized construction) is based on living in harmony with nature. Scholars of tribal religions such as Sam Gill have long noted that such idealization does not really serve actual tribal peoples as it fails to represent them in their contemporary reality; instead, they are viewed as trapped in a pristine and uncontaminated realm of nature which perhaps never existed, and as such simply function to indict our own wasteful and non-environmental materialism. In the case of the computer generated Na'vi, they are depicted in a way to heighten their exotic and sensual nature, painted in phosphorescent blue with phallic tails (that contain sensual organs) and lean, muscular bodies that are largely unclothed.

Let me be clear; I am not suggesting that it is bad to learn an environmental lesson from a film like *Avatar*, and perhaps some viewers will think twice about their own environmental ethics after seeing it. More likely, however, they will not apply such lessons as they will not see themselves in the conquerors. The fascistic Colonel Quaritch is depicted as the sort of stereotypical villain we often see in action movies, and corporate stooge Parker Selfridge works as his sidekick to support his diabolical schemes, albeit with some guilt. Americans today will not identify their own behavior or the current behavior of their nation with the colonialism of the Sky People; if anything, they might identify it with the America of 150 years ago, but that is a distant lesson of history.

And yet, there are more than a few ironic parallels between events of the last decade and the storyline of *Avatar*. The rainforests of the world grow smaller every day, and the people who live in it lose their homes like the Na'vi; and yet, the average American is largely unconcerned with the environmental impact of this, and makes little effort to change consumptive habits that use up environmental resources at a rapid rate.

Furthermore, in the last decade the US has been involved in two controversial wars in a part of the world that is filled with another precious substance that lurks underground, and it is often suggested that our political and economic interest in the area is integrally connected to our dependence on that

substance for our consumptive lifestyle. Even the link between the military/political and the financial sectors of society, expressed in the film in the fact that soldiers protect the corporate miners of unobtainium, is mirrored in the link between US corporations and the US Government. This aspect was especially highlighted when it was noticed that Vice President Cheney used his influence to secure contracts for Halliburton in Iraq, suggesting economic motives for his support of the war, and that there had long been such inappropriate influence from the private sector on the government. (A cynical bumper sticker from a few years ago summed it up this way: “Thanks for the money. Sorry about your kids. – Halliburton.”)

I would imagine, however, that few viewers of *Avatar* draw these parallels. They are busy being impressed by the amazing visual effects and enjoying the roller coaster ride that provides thrills along with a satisfying conclusion in which the white man gains his legs, as well as the beautiful native princess, as he becomes part of her harmonious and ethical world. In fact, numerous viewers become depressed after viewing the film, not because they recognize themselves in the oppressors of the planet, but because they cannot escape to such a pristine paradise as the heroes of the film do. On fan-sites, viewers contemplate suicide in the hope that they might be reborn on Pandora, and express the frustration that it is just a movie.

For myself, on the other hand, the most intriguing and disturbing aspect of the viewing experience was not actually in the film itself, but in the previews that preceded it. Among these was a commercial for the National Guard, shown in 3D, no less. Just as Avatar depicts the virtue and nobility of the Na'vi warriors as they defend their way of life, the commercial depicts the glory of fighting for the noble values of American freedom. Some scenes seem to depict landscapes that look like Afghanistan or Iraq. What may be missed by most viewers is that, to the people in the lands our soldiers visit, we look more like the Sky People than the Na'vi. It is all too easy for us to assume identification with the oppressed, when we may in fact be the oppressors.