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A View from the Inside: James Cameron's Avatar

Abstract

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

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One of the most surprising aspects of the success of James Cameron's *Avatar* is how surprised Cameron appears to be at its success. At the time of my writing, *Avatar* has made the same sort of exponential box office leaps as *Titanic*,¹ and yet Cameron, possibly seeking to overcome the impressions of egotism left after the success of *Titanic*, feigns disbelief. My guess, and it's only a guess, is that Cameron knew prior to his efforts that he had a winner, as his finger is tuned to the pulse of the concerns many viewers share. If Cameron knows anything, he knows what will draw a crowd.

What is it about this film that draws viewers? What is its gravitational pull? For starters, *Avatar* is an absolute spectacle. It is well known that Cameron has spent anywhere from 300-400 million dollars and several years of his life developing the technology to create an unending series of visually magnificent images onscreen, and in the estimation of most people (myself included), his time and money paid off. Or, second, one could point to the unlikely romantic relationship between the film's two central characters, a paralyzed veteran and a soon-to-be-mated native. Unlikely relationships are a theme in Cameron's movies with which viewers seem to resonate. Third, one can point to the politics of it all, the use and abuse of power, and the moral depravity of exploiting cultures that have a commodity the dominant power wants. It's no coincidence that Cameron began writing *Avatar* in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, and it's no coincidence that

he finished it in the aftermath of the second. Fourth, fewer people will point to the music and its composer, but I think James Horner is the unsung hero of Cameron's success. Without even recognizing it, the viewer is immersed in the story beyond what even 3D can accomplish by the majestic orchestrations operating behind the scenes. For many moviegoers, this package of goodies makes for a truly engaging, repeatable activity.

But one can also point to the film's obvious religious themes, as this issue of the *Journal of Religion and Film* is doing, and there is much grist for that mill. Some viewers will notice that Cameron's perspective on the inherent value of humanity has changed. In the *Terminator*, all efforts are made to save humanity from the advances of modernity, yet Cameron puts into the mouth of Sully that humans have "killed their mother." This interpretation suggests that what Cameron fought to save in *Terminator* he has given up on in *Avatar*: the human race. And this is a religious observation insofar as inherent value in the human presumably comes from without. Second, there will be interpretations of *Avatar* that focus on the religious expressions of native or indigenous peoples, particularly as they view the earth in spiritual terms, as being part of a spiritual body, etc. Even within various mainline religious traditions (Hinduism, Islam, Christianity), there are scholars working on "eco-theologies" in which humanity and nature are seen in dynamic interaction; their fates are intertwined. And a third group of religious interpretations

will explore other aspects of the Na'vi religion: divinization of the dead as the ancestors "live within Eywa," demon possession, the use of myths in religious life (Toruk Makto), etc.

Fourth, there will no doubt be those who, as farfetched as it may be (to this author), will see Jake Sully as some sort of pseudo-Christ figure, chosen by Eywa to become incarnated into a Na'vi body in order that he might bring about salvation from evil. In my views of *Avatar*, there is not so much to the christological interpretation² as there is to the predestination theme. Consider a number of events: the seeds of the great tree still Neytiri's arrow and end up resting upon Jake. Jake prays to Eywa, "you chose me for something," and then ultimately does play a part in their salvation (with the help of the Na'vi and Eywa).³ Fifth, there will be those who interpret the religious significance of *Avatar* aesthetically: beauty is a pathway to God, enlightenment, or whatever. The world Cameron has created in Pandora, I dare to say, is beauty itself. And to encounter Pandora's beauty is to encounter the deity who made it.

But none of these religious themes will be my focus, as rich as their exploration might be. Rather, I am going to concentrate on the statement Cameron makes with respect to the inside/outside distinction in religion. There are three prominent views. First, some scholars suggest that the value of a religious worldview can only be fully seen from within that religious tradition: inside its

beliefs, inside its practices, inside its patterns of thinking, etc. For example, if I want to know the value of Buddhism, I need to become a Buddhist: practice its rituals, believe its tenets, live its life, see through its eyes. The so-called “Yale school” of postliberal theology can be seen in this sort of way (though it resists it on other levels).

Second, representative of the Enlightenment hopefulness for complete objectivity, some scholars sense that the value and/or truths in religious worldviews are best evaluated externally, from the outside. From this perspective, very often the rules of logic govern the discourse about God or the world. From this “objective” standpoint outside of any one religious tradition, these scholars hope to be better positioned to evaluate them all. The removed observer is best positioned to judge whereas the religiously affiliated observer is compromised. Instead, these scholars prefer the dubious “view from nowhere.”

Third, there are some scholars who suggest that the distinction between insider and outsider is a false one. In *Theorizing Faith: The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*,⁴ a number of contributors argue it is a false dichotomy to speak of “inside” and “outside.” Ranging from Quaker meeting houses to Muslim prayer practices, from evangelical churches to some new religious movements (e.g., Soka Gakkai), these writers suggest that there are insider/outsider issues even within religious traditions and groups. So to posit a

strict separation of the two is misleading as a hermeneutical and/or ethnographic device. Either perspective fails to recognize that, at some level, “inside” and “outside” are relative, constantly changing and evolving concepts. No religious tradition or expression is so monolithic so as to justify the use of “insider” and “outsider,” these scholars say.

Cameron’s view as expressed in *Avatar*, however, is not as nuanced as this recent treatment of the insider/outsider problem, and his script adopts the perspective that certain benefits are conferred as a result of the insider’s view. Cameron’s “insider” perspective is not, however, that one is precluded from understanding the religion from the outside. Jake’s early exchange with the film’s main antagonist, Colonel Quaritch, makes this clear, as the Colonel asks Jake to “learn these savages from the inside,” and by doing so, Jake will be able to force their relocation or know how to “hit them hard” if they won’t move.⁵⁵ For our purposes, merely knowing the religious culture is insufficient to become an insider. Nor is the view from “inside” a matter of being incapable of appreciating the religion. This is made abundantly clear in the character of Grace Augustine. She is a scientist who is deeply disturbed by the Na’vi exploitation, and she desires to learn more about them. Her personal investment in the world of Pandora and its inhabitants is one of appreciation. But this does not qualify her as an “insider.”

For Cameron, what is at stake in being an insider is not understanding the world or even appreciating it, but rather receiving the benefits, as it were, of understanding and appreciating it without seeking the benefits for their own sake. And this is where Jake Sully fits the bill. Jake's arc is a process of learning the People, seeing through their eyes, "trying to understand the deep connection the People have to the forest... the network of energy." And Jake's dialogue with the Colonel centers on this theme: which team Jake is playing for, forgetting and betraying his own race. Jake begins to understand the People nonetheless. But this mere understanding doesn't necessarily make Jake an insider. Nor is Jake an insider because it affords him the ability to use his legs; this too was a part of the early Jake, one more advantageous element of his incarnation to be exploited. Something else had to happen: he had to "fall in love" with the world, as he confesses to Neytiri. He had to personally appropriate it and love it for what it was, not for the benefits it could give him. And by not seeking the benefits Pandora and the People provided, by simply giving himself over to the world for what it was, he became an insider. And becoming an insider then gave him the benefits the People's religion offered, chief among them a rebirth into a new life.

When brought before the People, Moat (who interprets the will of Eywa) tells Jake that it "is hard to fill a cup which is already full." In response, Jake says, "My cup is empty. Trust me. Just ask Dr. Augustine. I'm no scientist." Jake's

brother, (doubting) Tommy was also a scientist. Something about taking a scientific approach to the Na'vi – an approach that contributes to understanding and appreciation of the culture, to be sure – limits the extent to which one can receive the benefits of the Na'vi connection to Eywa. For it is one more method of exploitation, using the culture for the benefits it provides: explanatory power.

This is ironic, of course, because it was Grace who told Jake to try to see the forest through Neytiri's eyes when, ultimately, she is unable to do the same until it is too late. Being unable to accept (or wholeheartedly believe) the Na'vi religion, on her deathbed Grace tells Jake "I'm a scientist, remember? I don't believe in fairy tales." Jake responds: "The People can help you. I know it." The transition from Grace's human body into the body of her avatar is unsuccessful, because as Moat says "Her wounds were too great. There was not enough time." Might it be possible that Grace's wounds were more than physical? Might more time have enabled her to become an insider who accepts the beauty and religious life of the People for what it is instead of for the scientific explanations/benefits it affords her? Until Grace dies, she is only ever a scientist. Even as her broken body is carried to the Tree of Souls altar, she doesn't get it. Earlier she had said, "It's their most sacred place. There is something really interesting going on there biologically. I would die to get samples. Outsiders are strictly forbidden." It is only after her transition into her avatar body has failed that Grace encounters Eywa, and she seems surprised to

be in her presence. Her last words: “I’m with her Jake. She’s real.” In short, what Grace saw as a fairy tale until it was too late, Jake saw as real, and it played the part in the success of his own “birth day” at the film’s close. Grace was an outsider; Jake was an insider.

In sum, on this interpretation of *Avatar*, Jake became an insider by accepting and loving the People and their religion not for the benefits provided, but for the sake of the People and their religion itself, and that made all the difference in his ability to receive the benefits, to be reborn in their midst. As an insider, he saw the “aliens” off; they “went back to their dying world.” The film is obviously set in the future, so let us hope that Cameron’s gifts do not include prophecy and that our world can be saved. One of my favorite *Avatar* moments was actually not in the film. It was when the film’s art director received his Academy Award and reminded the audience that our world is every bit as beautiful as the one they created. We would do well to remember that.

¹ Currently, *Avatar* has grossed well over 700 million dollars in box office revenue and 2.6 billion dollars worldwide. If the viewing trends continue at their current rate with steady-but-slow declines in theater attendance, by mid-May the film could break the 800 million dollar mark in domestic box office revenue and over 3 billion dollars globally. (All three *Lord of the Rings* movies did not even do this well, together.) *Avatar* is poised to do the same exponential leaps, bypassing the 700 million dollar mark domestically and headed for 800; bypassing the 2 billion dollar mark worldwide and headed for over 3 billion dollars.

² The christological interpretation would make more sense had Jake not come from the race of people who largely intends to exploit the Na’vi and if they refuse, destroy them. Pre-corporeal

location matters for christology, as Christian theologians maintain that the Word was part of triune God who sought humanity's good before the Word's incarnation.

³ The predestination point could go back further, too. If Eywa chose Jake for the Na'vi salvation, then perhaps Eywa had a hand in the death of Jake's brother, thereby opening the door for Jake's involvement. Or it could go back further still to Jake's paralysis... the regress is infinite. But this also means that Eywa is a deity not only on/for Pandora, but beyond.

⁴ E. Arweck and M. D. Stringer, eds., *Theorizing Faith: The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion* (Birmingham: Birmingham University Press, 2002).

⁵ I will spare the reader of an extended discussion of how this connects to the aforementioned theme of predestination; suffice it to say that what humans intended for evil – using Jake as a means of diplomacy and subjugation – Eywa intended for good.