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Review

Avatar and Nature Spirituality

Bron Taylor, ed. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013. 367pp.

Martin Schönfeld *

“To put it mildly, the world is a mess.”

Madeleine Albright, former U.S. Secretary of State, 27 July 2014

James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009) was the first film to combine stereoscopic imaging and motion-capture animation for a flawless 3-D presentation. It was nominated for nine Academy Awards, including Best Director and Best Picture, and won three, for Cinematography, Art Direction, and Visual Effects. It was also the first box-office hit to gross more than \$2 billion, and it remains the highest-grossing film to date. It made cinematic history. But it was more than an aesthetic triumph. *Avatar* is also a cultural critique and an intellectual provocation. It’s a science-fiction about Earthlings fighting with extraterrestrials—tall, blue humanoids called the Na’vi—on a forest world called Pandora. The conflict is the old battle of good against evil, but with a twist: in *Avatar*, it

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is the aliens that are good. The human hero, the soldier Jake Sully (played by Sam Worthington), deserts his unit and switches sides to fight with the Na'vi against his own colony and ultimately against his own civilization.

Avatar's backstory extrapolates from today's growth-based market economy, which has pushed us into environmental overshoot, climate change, and food insecurity, to an even worse situation in the twenty-second century, blighted by corporate fascism, economic injustice, and a planet-wide environmental crisis. Ubiquitous resource scarcities drive an exodus into space, with miners and mercenaries arriving on Pandora, to exploit a much-needed metal. The Na'vi culture stands in sharp contrast to that of the Earthlings. It resembles a pre-modern society, yet suggests a better future, a tomorrow in which culture and nature are in sync. Pandora's natives manage to live within the biophysical limits of their world and coexist in empathy with other life.

Cameron braids both outlooks, the corporate future and the vista of Pandora, into one story, pitting the mining colony against the sustainable society. The scientists in the employ of the mining colony study Pandora's biosphere and communicate with the natives through Na'vi-human hybrids called Avatars. The more the scientists learn about the world of the Na'vi, the more they come to appreciate it, but their research, funded by the corporation, serves the goal of persuading the natives to cede the forests, to let the land be strip-mined, and to part with the metal the humans had come for. Fighting erupts when the humans turn against each other, in an ideological cleavage worthy of Aldo Leopold, with one group seeing Pandora in terms of profit, and another seeing it as what it is, as a world. The scientists flee, protected by a few deserters, and join the natives, sharing intelligence and taking up arms in the spreading Na'vi insurgency.

Avatar and Nature Spirituality, edited by Bron Taylor, is a collection of fifteen studies and essays organized into three parts, with a prologue ("*Avatar* as Rorschach") and an introduction ("The Religion and Politics of *Avatar*") by Taylor, and an afterword ("Considering the Legacies of *Avatar*") by the first nations scholar D. H. Justice. The book is a multi-disciplinary study of the implications of the Na'vi point of view. It is not on the eco-critique of the political economy that was, perhaps, Cameron's main concern, but instead about the religious aspects of *Avatar's* environmental message. What motivated this research was not only the cultural significance of the film, but also the lack of cross-disciplinary, systematic studies about it. It is this lacuna that *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* intends to fill.

For Taylor, the religious dimension of the film matters because of its roots in social reality. The events driven by ecological overshoot and climate change range from biodiversity loss to rising food prices and freshwater scarcity in the highly developed nations, and to political instability, migrations, and civil unrest elsewhere. The planet is stricken with a fever. For many young people across the world, this fosters an unprecedented environmental awareness, which culminates in the rise of what is essentially a nature-based spirituality. *Avatar* is an artistic mirror of this emerging “dark green religion,” as Taylor puts it (5). But the film doesn’t just reflect the zeitgeist; it also shapes it, working as a social engine of the new spirituality. It channels the growing unease, ties it to a story, and gives it direction, effectively advancing a new faith. The core message of this faith may well be what Cameron said in his acceptance speech at the 2010 Golden Globes for Best Picture: “*Avatar* asks us to see that everything is connected, all human beings to each other, and us to the Earth.”

Part one of the book, “Bringing *Avatar* into Focus,” contains two essays, S. Rust’s “Eco-Realism and the Blockbuster Melodrama” and T. Bjørnvig’s “Outer Space Religion and the Ambiguous Nature of *Avatar*’s Pandora.” Rust writes,

By inviting viewers to see through the eyes of the ... victim-hero [Sully], *Avatar* represents global environmental change as a scientific and a moral catastrophe, just as ... Al Gore argues in ... *Inconvenient Truth* (2006). Artists like Cameron recognize that melodrama can tap into the cultural zeitgeist and can thus become an effective means of promoting environmentalist worldviews and action. (32)

Effective promotion of such values threatens the powers that be. In China, for instance, *Avatar* could be screened only in few cinemas, “reportedly over fears that its socio-ecological message might cause social unrest” (32).

Part two, “Popular Responses,” consists of four studies: “Avatar Fandom, Environmentalism, and Nature Religion” by B. Istoft; “Post-Pandoran Depression or Na’vi Sympathy” by M. Holtmeier; “Transposing the Conversation into Popular Idiom: The Reaction to *Avatar* in Hawai’i” by Rachele Gould et al.; and “Watching *Avatar* from ‘AvaTar Sands’ Land,” by R. Haluza-Delay et al. Several authors (e.g., Istoft, Bjørnvig, Holtmeier) engage with the intensity and depth of audience responses to the movie, a phenomenon variously called “the Pandora effect,” “*Avatar* blues,” and “Na’vi sympathy.” Watching the movie can leave one shaken. According to a thread in fandom sites, the

effect begins with “the depression of the dream of Pandora being intangible” (47).

Bjørnvig explains:

The movie is like a dream of a higher reality that at first energizes. Then comes the realization that it was only a dream and subsequent feelings of depression. Joining the *Avatar* forums gives some comfort, but the movie has created a rift in normal, Earthly reality that seems to forever render that reality colorless and depressing. And at all times, the movie is on one’s mind. (47)

CNN devoted a story (11 January 2010) to this phenomenon, dubbing it the “*Avatar* blues.” The fandom largely rejected this news feature as corporate spin. What is in reality the dawning, painful recognition of a fundamental wrong is for mainstream U.S. media nothing but juvenile emotional distress. For CNN, misfits are saddened by *Avatar* because they realize they don’t live in paradise; young people should get over it and get a life. In response, a fan posted on a forum:

I saw the really horribly misrepresentative CNN story about people experiencing post-avatar feelings. The psychologist ... offered [that] people who get caught up in ‘fantasy’ are lacking something in their ‘real’ experience and need to make general adjustments in their lives with regards to work, family, friends, etc. ... I don’t think this is true ... I think the strong response to *Avatar* has a much more specific origin, having to do with a profound and perhaps spiritual questioning (or rejection) of the structure of human society and how that influences our relationship to nature and to one another. (70)

Istoff quotes another fan: “*Avatar* causes depression in people who can see what is going on with the world” (70). Holtmeier adds that the recognition of environmental crisis manifested in “post-Pandoran depression” (84) is paired with what he calls “Na’vi sympathy.” Humanity is at a fork in the road, and the question is which way to go. The recognition is not melancholic pathos but rather revolutionary ethos—the recognition of the material necessity and social possibility of a paradigm shift, or the idea Cameron suggested at a fundraiser for the Natural Resources Defense Council: “*Avatar* asks us all to be warriors for the Earth” (89).

Na’vi sympathy yields political gestures against wrongs of any kind. Hemmed in by Israeli security forces, for instance, Palestinian youth dressed up as Na’vi in a 2010

protest against the West Bank barrier (91). Such rebellious gestures raise the question of whether the willful identification of ecowarriors and other progressives with the blue-skinned Na'vi owes more to romantic projections about what an indigenous culture ought to be, than to a sober, realistic appraisal of native perspectives. Interestingly, this issue can be determined empirically. Studying the reaction to *Avatar* in Hawai'i via polls, Gould et al. conclude that white male respondents generally perceive the Na'vi figures as "nice fantasy" or "unrealistic," whereas aboriginal Hawai'ians largely fail to see the Na'vi connection as far-fetched. On the contrary, "one [native] respondent suggested that people with [ethnic] backgrounds different from his might not understand the connection" (110).

The third and longest part of *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* concerns critical, personal, and spiritual reflections. This part comprises eight studies, followed by an epilogue and an afterword. Going by the subtitles of the work assembled here, C. Klassen's "Becoming the 'Noble Savage'" is on "nature religion and the 'other' in *Avatar*"(143); P. Munday's "The Na'vi as Spiritual Hunters" is "a semiotic exploration" (161); B. MacLennan's "Calling the Na'vi" is on "evolutionary Jungian psychology and nature spirits" (181); J. H. Greenberg's "*Avatar* and Artemis" is on "indigenous narratives as neo-romantic environmental ethics" (201); D. L. Barnhill's "Spirituality and Resistance" is on "*Avatar* and Ursula LeGuin's *The Word for World is Forest*" (221); L. Sideris' "I See You" is on "interspecies empathy and *Avatar*" (241); M. B. MacDonald's "Knowing Pandora in Sound" is on "acoustemology and ecomusical imagination in Cameron's *Avatar*" (261); J. v. Heland's and S. Sörlin's "Works of Doubt and Leaps of Faith" is on "an Augustinian challenge to planetary resilience" (277); and the editor's epilogue, finally, is on "truth and fiction in *Avatar*'s cosmogony and nature religion"(301).

The essay "Becoming the 'Noble Savage'" strikes the only jarring note here, with its author Klassen claiming that *Avatar* is a "thinly veiled misogynistic plot" (143), and that the film hinges on a "diminishing ... construction of the Other that relies on common tropes of the noble savage tied to primitive ecological sensitivity" (155). *Avatar* is misogynistic, the argument goes, because "if the plot had been narrated through the eyes of Neytiri or Augustine, we would have a very different story" (153). Also, the human women, "although not actively denigrated, are simply not allowed to survive" (155). These contentions are not convincing. First, it seems silly that a protagonist's

gender is adduced as evidence for the misogyny of the plot, all the more so since the plot articulates eco-feminist values. Second, it is unclear how the protagonist, Sully, can embody misogyny when, at the same time, he happily follows a female supervisor, Augustine (played by Sigourney Weaver), gladly submits to a female mentor, Neytiri (Zoe Saldana), and decides to fight the chauvinist, hyper-masculine Colonel Quaritch (Stephen Lang). Lastly, many men, human and native alike, do not survive the final battle either, not even Sully, who dies as a human and survives only in avatar form.

While the charge of misogyny is simply false, the insistence on the fundamental opacity of native identity is insidious. In this deconstruction, one line of reasoning goes like this: *Avatar* plays out the trope of the “noble savage” or “ecological Indian” against modern capitalism, which “creates ‘an ideological distance between ourselves (*sic*) and native peoples’,” and which “serves to limit the acceptance of indigenous peoples into contemporary modern life,” worsening their alienation and disregard (151–52). Another line of reasoning is that the “ecologically noble savage presents ‘Indian-ness’ as ‘the elixir’ to fix white civilization,” which “oversimplifies a complex set of identities,” and which is bad because “oversimplification equals dehumanization” (152). The problem here is that whatever you do, you can never do right. If you ignore differences between traditional societies and modern capitalism, you’re disrespecting indigenous people, but if you address such differences, you’re disrespecting them, too. Likewise, if you scorn traditional societies, you’re denigrating them, but if you find some element worthy of admiration, you’re *also* denigrating them. For Klassen, we ought to be mute in the face of *alterité*, since the most important ideological goal is, as mentioned, to facilitate “the acceptance of indigenous peoples into contemporary modern life” (151–52). But should we really abstain from seeking patterns for fear of “oversimplification” and “dehumanization,” when the first order of business in the environmental crisis must be *to connect the dots*, thus impose structure on the data flow regardless of anomalous details, and the second task must be *to embrace alternatives*, and thus take what we can from traditional, non-conventional ways of life to guide us to a sustainable future? And should we really pursue the goal of integrating indigenous peoples in contemporary capitalism when contemporary capitalism has become unsustainable? Finally, should we politely ignore the alterity of indigenous peoples, when it may be precisely their differences that may help us in the project of culturally engineering a sustainable civilization?

It appears that even the editor concurs. In his “Epilogue,” and addressing the question of whether *Avatar* is misogynist, colonialist, or racist, Taylor declares, “if by *misogyny* we mean the hatred of women (and girls), the criticism that *Avatar* (and by implication, Cameron) is misogynist can be quickly dismissed, for it appears to be based on weak, if any, evidence, as well as upon a remarkable ability to ignore evidence to the contrary” (308). Apart from this issue, Apart from this infelicitous slip, Taylor’s collection is first-rate throughout. The contributions assembled in *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* are knowledgeable, well-researched, and carefully reasoned. Each furthers the stated editorial goal of cross-disciplinary appraisal. The scholarship includes work in religious and mythological studies, philology and musicology, geography and environmental studies, and sociology and film studies. On the path of civil evolution towards a stable climate and a recovered planet, *Avatar* is a cultural, spiritual, and artistic milestone, and *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* is a highly recommended scholarly companion.