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Spirituality as Anti-Structure in James Cameron's Avatar

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

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Avatar creates a future scenario, in which the raw materials of the earth are exhausted and humanity is looking for alternatives. Scientific progress (genetic engineering, neuroscience, space technology) turns out to be a human hubris and humankind could not overcome the dark side of civilization (environmental degradation, exploitation, colonialism). Humanity is placed in the tension between technological progress and moral regression; the question is compounded: When will people learn to live in accordance with its environment? Is the human race – which ends up not by chance at a moon that bears the name of Pandora – just a deadly disease, a rapidly spreading virus?

On this question, the film provides an answer that draws on a variety of religious ideas. First, of course, the avatāra concept stands out, which was borrowed from the Hindu context, was reshaped theosophical, and is interpreted here – as in other contexts (e.g. in The Matrix, or in the online role-playing game Second Life) – in respect of opportunities new technologies will offer: Jake Sully conjoins neurologically with his "avatar", rises in this incarnation down to the moon Pandora and navigates a genetically modelled self. There are many more explicit and implicit religious references. Two topics are highlighted here: (a) The use of biblical narrative structures; (b) The propagation of a concept of spirituality that seems to be an antithesis to institutionalized religion.
Although direct biblical references are rare, on the structural level, the narrative plays with set pieces from the paradise story. Pandora is paradise and anti-paradise in one: The Na'vi and the animals live in harmony with each other (paradise), even if flora and fauna are not peaceful creatures, but - on the contrary - life-threatening challenges (anti-paradise). When Sully’s avatar lands on Pandora and is separated from the group, he must defend himself against the attack by predators and kills a wide variety of animals. Despite her distrust, Neytiri, a native daughter, helps him in his fight. Neytiri regrets the death of the predators and complains that Sully is responsible for the massacre, in which she has been complicit because of his misconduct: “You are guilty!” Biblically speaking, Adam’s sin results in Eva's.

This anti-structure is further deepened: The sinner is not rejected by Yahweh, but chosen from Eywa, the goddess of the moon Pandora: The seeds of the sacred tree settle on Sully’s avatar and this omen shows Neytiri that he should be integrated into the world of Pandora. As in the paradise story, Cameron's story ends in a sexual encounter of the protagonists. In the bible, however, sexuality appears as a negative consequence. In Avatar it is pictured as a sacred moment: The union under the sacred tree is a profound expression of spirituality.

At this time Sully was already tempted by the serpent, Colonel Quaritsch, the personification of evil: When Sully spies the Na'vi, the paraplegic soldier is
promised the complete restoration of his physical health. Quaritsch, who calls the paradise of the Na'vi a hell, plunges in the final battle with a spaceship which is called "Papa Dragon". With this symbolism, the film spans the entire biblical narrative: At the beginning Quaritsch appears in the structural role of the serpent; the dragon at the end embodies the beast of John's Revelation. The apocalyptic battle ends with a kind of a court scene: the exploitative humans are banished from Pandora, the righteous shall remain: They will receive new bodies (avatars) and have the "Heaven" reclaimed.

Although the cinematic narrative structure gains meaning only in the context of the Judeo-Christian framework of thought, the film promotes no Christian religion, but a form of nature religion, which includes both shamanic elements and aspects typical of New-Age-spirituality. The Tree of Souls is reminiscent of the World Tree, which plays a central role in many shamanic traditions. Even the transfer of Dr. Augustine’s soul recalls the shamanic practice of soul travel and retrieval. The fact that Eywa is presented as female deity and the religious leadership of the tribe is up to a woman stresses that mental models inspired by the feminist movement are at the heart of spirituality: not separation and struggle, but unity and networking. The Na'vi establish a spiritual bond (tsaheylu) with all living things – even with Eywa, the consciousness that permeates all nature. Their philosophy is a spiritual version of the Gaia hypothesis, which has
been developed by Margulis and Lovelock. It does not need a mediator figure or a churchlike institution: Anyone can come in personal contact with the deity and communicate directly with her. The movie’s message can be summarized in one of the shortest definition of modern spirituality: connectedness.