



4-1-2010

## The Sacred in James Cameron's Avatar

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### Recommended Citation

Linnitt, Carol (2010) "The Sacred in James Cameron's Avatar," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.14.01.14>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol14/iss1/14>

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## The Sacred in James Cameron's Avatar

### Abstract

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

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Although *Avatar* will not likely become enshrined as a provoking religious film, it does prompt an opportunity to reflect on how modern cinema utilizes concepts such as 'the sacred.' Certainly there are many ways to imagine the sacred, but when creating sacrality for a general audience, how do you make it both meaningful and palatable? How were the Na'vi in *Avatar* handcrafted to be sacred? And further, what does this reveal about a contemporary appetite for the sacred and the capabilities of the contemporary religious imagination?

*Avatar* is a familiar story: the failure of a Eurocentric colonial enterprise due to the resilience of the noble savage unfolding alongside a Pocahontas-style romance. A militarized American faction represents the Western imperial regime, pitted against the Na'vi, a graceful alien race inhabiting the planet Pandora.

The success of *Avatar* as a story largely relies upon the audience's ability to identify with the Na'vi. And they are indeed compelling, neatly and ideally composed. It could be argued that, in many ways, the Na'vi are crafted in response to a general social nostalgia for the sacred. Following this argument, the cathartic vision of Na'vi life is seen to offer a type of sacredness from which the general audience is alienated in their everyday life. While the Na'vi's unadulterated way of living in almost no way resembles modern life, it is based upon many modern ideals of a sacrilized life in commune with the planet, community and a powerful transcendent.

All aspects of Na'vi life reveal something of their sacred nature. They are the romanticized indigene, living in a small hunter-gatherer society that in a semi-panteistic way gives praise and thanks to the planet for its provisions. Their lifestyle exemplifies what Mircea Eliade would have considered primitive man's existence within the sacralized cosmos, except with a technological turn. The planet Pandora provides the physical domain of the people's omnipresent and transcendent power, their 'spirit mother' Eywa. The Na'vi have access to Eywa through a physical linkage to their environment. Through the fibrous ends of their hair, the Na'vi perform a sort of 'neurological' link with their 'spiritually networked' surroundings, allowing them a direct and yet mystical correspondence with beasts, plant life, their ancestors and Eywa.

This physical connection, while infused with sacred qualities, makes believable this transcendent exchange in a pointedly un-transcendent way. Here we see the strange and mystical elements of traditional religious interaction, such as ritual, worship and prayer, replaced with a simplified and highly technologized interaction. The elements of devotion, piety, desire and, perhaps most significantly, faith are virtually eliminated from the scenario. Religion in *Avatar* has undergone a significant re-imagining, where the incalculable, the ineffable are reduced to component parts. The metaphysical becomes the physical; the transcendent becomes the immanent.

Thus believing in Na'vi religion is not unlike believing in electrical circuitry. As is the case with electricity, the details are not necessarily essential for the whole enterprise to become believable. The connection is sufficiently observable or sufficiently reliable to be trusted.

The Na'vi religion is meant to be accessible for the contemporary imagination. And beyond mere accessibility, the audience is meant to identify empathetically with Na'vi existence.

This leads us back to our original question: how does one make something as complex as 'the sacred' or 'the transcendent' palatable for a general audience?

In objectifying Na'vi religion, director James Cameron collapses the distance between the mundane and the transcendent so the audience is free to submit to their sentimental sympathies without suspending their empirical sensibilities. Here we see religion freed from the mess, the inconsistency and the inaccessibility of traditional religious forms. Religion here is not bound to negotiate the troublesome questions of faith. Rather, this version of religion provides the unmediated interaction with the sacred that Christianity after the Reformation has long desired.

This feat is performed not by relying on perfected and familiar religious themes or frames, but on anticipating the audience's inherent comfort and

comprehension of technology. The religious, in *Avatar*, is cogently mediated through the technological.

The Na'vi have a desirable and specifically technological access to their spiritual transcendent: conditioned, structured, available, instrumental, tangible. These are the comforts, the limits, of the modern imagination, of the modern ethos.

For Gianni Vattimo, this trend towards the objective belongs to the enlightenment order: “the history of modernity is... the history of the imposition of a scientific conception of truth, and thus the history of the progressive affirmation of the enlightenment.” But, as Vattimo concludes, “it is also the history of a process via which our awareness of the essentially interpretative character of every consciousness of truth has been lost” (After Christianity 44).

The reliance upon objectivity has indeed transformed the landscape upon which forms of religion and the sacred present themselves, as *Avatar* has shown. By responding to our need for the objective and technological and also our nostalgia for the sacred, *Avatar* is ultimately suggesting something to us about our modern religious sensibilities. There is room here for a rich application of post-Heideggerian philosophy of technology and the onto-theological tradition.

The film's significance as one of the highest grossing films in history will surely overshadow the significance of its latent, suggestive qualities. It is meant to

be enjoyed as a visual feast, with the plot and character interactions playing a secondary role. And while the graphics do make it a worthwhile watch, perhaps only so much can be gleaned from an incisive critique. Ultimately, despite its suggestive implications, *Avatar* is only unintentionally provocative.