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“I See You”: Na’vigationg the Bridge between Scientific Observation and Religious Apprehension in Avatar

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“I See You”: Na’vigating the Bridge between Scientific Observation and Religious Apprehension in Avatar

Abstract
This is a review of Avatar (2009).

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I. Put On Your Glasses.

*Avatar* overtly invites consideration of the role of vision in its premise. Viewers are asked to don 3-D glasses and are invited into a rich, panoramic world complete with transmedia components including several video games for multiple platforms as well as books and websites like pandorapedia.com devoted exclusively to the flora and fauna that populate the planet. The deeply visionary experience the film offers is evident in the deep engagement by viewers and the half-serious claims by some viewers that they experienced “*Avatar* blues” upon repeated viewings, instilling an unfulfillable desire to fully enter into the Na’vi world. Seeing as a form of immersion is a central metaphor of the film, integrated with implicit arguments about how seeing and interconnectedness relate to different modes of apprehension, particularly scientific and religious ways of knowing. But which kind of seeing is privileged in *Avatar*? Despite the importance of observation of all kinds in the film, *Avatar* betrays an overt, problematic, and ultimately inaccurate preference for religious apprehension over scientific observation, arguing implicitly that while vision is important in both ways of seeing, religion offers a fully transformative experience enabled by seeing rightly, whereas science is incomplete in its presumed inability to afford such transformative vision.

II. Frames and Transformations.
Rite of Passage. When scholars discuss ritual, they frequently focus on the rite of passage as the means by which many rituals are structured. A rite of passage, in a ritual context, is typically the place or time within which a participant crosses from one mode of being into another, typically via a symbolic limen or “threshold.” Thus, one can think of a rite of passage as inviting the participant into the “frame” of the ritual - that is, the space and time in which the individual's transformation occurs. In his Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure (1969), Victor Turner describes the liminal state as formative and transitional:

The characteristics of the ritual subject are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state... [One in this stage he] slip[s] through the network of classifications that normally locate state and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial (94-95).

Turner says of the neophyte ritual subject: “It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life… Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized” (95). In other words, the “frame” of ritual can be seen as a period of uncertainty resulting in a life-changing transformation. Indeed, one could say that once emerged from the transitional, liminal moment, the neophyte is “observed” to be changed by the experience, as when a boy undergoes a rite of passage to become a man, or a couple undergoes marriage after which the community views them differently.
Scientific observation. The scientific method is built on a remarkably similar structural and experiential framework. The cyclical process of inquiry begins with a naive participant. The participant's observation of the natural world leads him or her to reasoning a possible explanation, the hypothesis, which in turn leads to predictions of what further observations would be expected if the hypothesis is true. The scientist makes new observations to compare to these expectations, and revises the explanation in their light. Both modes of encounter, then, involve an “area” or “frame” carved out for specific experiential purposes, and both invite the participant to think about how “seeing” shapes his or her interaction within the specified frame. Both also invite new knowledge upon exiting of the “frame.” Like ritual, the scientific process begins in uncertainty and results in a transformed understanding of the world. The scientific process is, however, an ongoing process; whereas a typical rite of passage occurs once and definitively, the scientific method is recursive, building at each cycle.

III. Frames and Transformations in Avatar.

The Frame of the Rite of Passage: Jake Sully

Although one could look at a number of characters as a site for rite of passage in Avatar, Jake Sully is clearly meant to be the point of entry into a vicarious mode of encounter for viewers of the film. Before his training by Neytiri, Jake exhibits a marked inability to see properly. For example, after being attacked by the
viperwolves, he is perplexed by Neytiri’s nurturing attention to one of them as it dies, whimpering. As Neytiri prays over the animal and blesses its passing, Jake peppers her with gratitude and then chases her, meeting the blunt end of her bow and being put squarely into his place: “You are like a baby, making noise, don’t know what to do.” He cannot appreciate the connectedness of life. He doesn’t yet see properly. In fact, this is precisely what Neytiri says when Jake asks her to teach him: “Sky people cannot learn. You do not See.”

But Jake does learn. He enters into the world (or frame) of Na’vi life as an avatar, the liminal space in which he is neither human nor Na’vi, in which he begins to experience the connectedness of all of life. Although Neytiri claims that “No one can teach you to See,” it seems that Jake does in fact have the ability to learn to see, as evident by his wit and skill acquiring the wisdom of the Na’vi.

Jake’s transformation is complex, and takes up much of the film, resulting in his full identification with the Na’vi and his ability to fully appreciate the connectedness of life, as articulated in Na’vi spiritual beliefs. He emerges fully changed, “seen” and recognized by the Na’vi as one of them - not for his birth body, but for his ability to use his visionary capabilities to see what is already there and to act accordingly. When Jake is rescued by Neytiri in the climactic moment of his expulsion from the pod housing his human body, she cradles his weak human form
in a Madonna-like pose and they exchange ritualized statements of recognition using the metaphor of seeing as a marker of transformation: “I see you.”

The Frame of Science: Grace Augustine

In Avatar, scientific observation is aimed at acquiring the same comprehension of knowledge that religion enables. Science and religion are presented as parallel, not antagonistic, ways of knowing, as evident in the introductory training Jake receives in each context: whereas Neytiri tells him he needs to “see,” Norm tells him, “Yeah. You just need to get in the habit of documenting everything -- what you see, what you feel -- it’s all part of the science. Good science starts with good observation.” Nonetheless, the film suggests that science is not transformative in the same way that a rite of passage is, suggesting somewhat problematically that science is an incomplete way of seeing, even if its insights may be fully compatible with religious knowing. This view of science is best personified in Dr. Grace Augustine.

Grace Augustine is a remarkable film character in that not despite of but because of her scientific understanding she is the moral voice of the film. From her first conversation with Selfridge, Grace objects to violence against the Na’vi. In her interactions with the Na’vi, Grace treats them not as subjects or aliens, but as an equal people: “All this exists to build a bridge of trust to these people, who could teach us so much”. This is a remarkable and encouraging departure from the classic
scientist as “villain.” In this case, the “evils” of technology, although the product of science, are assigned to the military and defined as “evil” purely by the abusive ways they are utilized. Grace and her scientist crew, using technology for the purposes of insight and understanding, are aligned with the “good,” “seeing” the Na’vi.

However, while Grace is portrayed as a positive moral advocate, her portrayal as a scientist is deeply limited. Grace is allowed to observe the Na’vi and Pandora only through “samples” – an indirect observation through microscopes, probes, and digital readouts. She never uses direct observation, the immediate apprehension, permitted by the neural link of the queue. Even Grace’s explanation of her findings is kept in technical jargon to reinforce a removed, impersonal science. When explaining the connectedness of the Na’vi with nature, she remarks that “there’s some kind of electrochemical communication between the roots of the trees. Like the synapses between neurons. Each tree has ten to the fourth connections to the trees around it, and there are ten to the twelfth trees on Pandora.” Such technical language is starkly contrasted with the more mystical and experiential language used by the Na’vi themselves.

Despite the film's rather shallow caricature of science as a process, Grace’s scientific findings do bring her to a recognition of Eywa that is, in many ways, the same recognition that one could receive via more traditionally religious means. The
film’s representation of Eywa is strongly reminiscent of the Gaia Hypothesis, that is, of a living, self-regulating earth; as a Gaia figure, Eywa is very unlike traditional depictions of a separate, transcendent monotheistic (and characteristically male) deity who exists above and beyond nature. In the film, both science and religion allow one to arrive at a recognition of Eywa as the source of interconnectedness. Both human scientific observation and the Na’vi assessment is that Eywa is the collective interaction of the living world. Rather than a supernatural personality, Eywa is an emergent property of the ecosystem. Thus Grace is prepared by her scientific understanding of the world to arrive at the religious notion of ultimate connectedness; but within the film, this awareness is insufficient for her to pass successfully through transformation to become part of the system. Grace cannot complete the rite of passage via science alone. In the end, it is through the connection of the Na’vi religious community that she is permitted to fully see Eywa, and dies in a state of “Grace.”

IV. The Scientist in All of Us

Although Avatar portrays science as an incomplete means of apprehension, as modeled in Grace Augustine, both Jake and the audience are invited to utilize these very modes of observation. Despite Jake’s repeated declarations that he is not a scientist, Avatar’s everyman hero in fact uses scientific insight repeatedly as he immerses into the Na’vi world. He constantly is investigating, observing,
experimenting - what happens when he touches this plant? And this one? With the true spirit of inquiry, Jake uses the senses given him by his Na’vi avatar to learn more about the world he finds himself in, and thus blends a religious and a scientific mode of apprehension at once. Having learned to cope with how one Pandora creature feels and reacts through the neural link of the queue, he uses that knowledge to inform his approach to another. In perhaps one of the most pivotal moments in the movie, when Jake tames the Toruk, his narration describes a thoroughly modern scientific reasoning process: “The way I had it figured, Toruk is the baddest cat in the sky. Nothing attacks him. So why would he ever look up?” His hypothesis is supported when Jake uses this observation to successfully trick the Toruk and land on his back, thus earning his allegiance.

The audience too, is implicitly expected to use scientific observation. The world of Pandora comes so alive to us because the flora and fauna have been crafted with such care to reflect accurate evolutionary relationships. The creators of Pandora spent an unprecedented amount of money to reverse-engineer an alternate model of the real world using scientific principles to make such complete imaginative systems seem possible. Such a technique is believable precisely because we, as viewers, apply our prior familiarity with what real organisms look like and how they tend to behave. Indeed, in our media-saturated hyper-wired society, one might even argue that Avatar briefly brings the audience in closer
contact with a fictional natural world than that audience generally has with their own real natural world, and invites them also to experiment, observe, and think critically about the world with Jake and Grace.

Our cultural love affair with increasingly detailed and interactive virtual worlds like the one in Avatar can be viewed as a signal of our disillusionment about the decay of the natural environment in our own, real world. When viewed this way, then our desire for the virtual can itself be seen as a “hunger for the real” – for a sense of meaning, order, and definition in our own real lives, for a way of seeing that is consistent and that leads to an appreciation of the connectedness of all living things. Scientists have been warning us for decades about the damage we are doing to our own Eywa, but it will take the spiritual mobilization of the audience to defend the real world. The overt inadequacy of science in Avatar’s narrative masks the fact that both scientific and ritual understanding are necessary, and that both have the potential to be transformative if we use our vision properly. Even after removing our 3D glasses, the film seems to be urging continued observation with its invitation to “see” religiously, scientifically, and transformatively.