

Science and Faith at the Movies: “Avatar”

BY BRIAN GODAWA

Avatar, the special effects extravaganza by James Cameron, is the number one domestic box-office blockbuster of all time. But more importantly, in our modern global world, *Avatar* is also number one in the worldwide box office, reaching \$2.78 billion and blowing the previous reigning champion, *Titanic* – also by Cameron – out of the water.

Because of its explicit religious worldview and political overtones, *Avatar* drew a flaming frenzy from news sites and blogs across the Internet upon its release. Conservative columnist Jonah Goldberg wrote of it as plagiarized political propaganda: “Cameron rips off Hollywood clichés to the point you could cut and paste dialogue from ‘Pocahontas’ or ‘Dances with Wolves’ into ‘Avatar’ without appreciably changing the story.”¹ Liberal writer Jay Michaels defended it as a legitimate attack on monotheism because the pantheistic worldview of the third world natives in the movie, “not old-school-theology, holds the ideological promise of a more sustainable future on our planet.”² Liberal film critic Roger Ebert likened his viewing of *Avatar* to his viewing of *Star Wars* in 1977, calling it “not simply a sensational entertainment, although it is that. It’s a technical breakthrough...predestined to launch a cult.”

To be sure, the movie is a simplistic tale of Manichean morality without nuance, two-dimensional characters without complexity, and thinly veiled political propaganda without subtlety. But those who attack its faults are missing a much more important point: *Avatar*’s success cannot be dismissed. It is resonating with tens of millions of people around the planet. Regardless of *Avatar*’s faults, James Cameron knows storytelling better than his detractors. Ebert is right. It is not merely special effects entertainment; it is cult-like in its effect.

THE STORY

The hero of the story is Jake Sully, a crippled marine who arrives on a lush green planetary moon light-years from earth called Pandora. He replaces his deceased twin brother in a scientific experiment being headed by nature-loving scientist Grace Augustine. They have developed technology to splice human DNA with the DNA of the native inhabitants, called the Na’vi, ten-feet-tall blue bipeds that dress, act, and worship like alien versions of historical Native Americans. This genetic engineering has led to the creation of Na’vi bodies without consciousness that can be remotely controlled like avatars in an online multi-player role-playing game. Jake gets in a tech pod that connects his consciousness to the Na’vi body, resulting in a remote virtual link, seeing and feeling through the avatar, similar to “jacking in” in the 1999 sci-fi movie *The Matrix*.

Jake soon discovers that his mission is to make contact with the Na’vi as “one of them,” for the purposes of a corporation that controls the project. That corporation is led by Parker Selfridge, a greedy capitalist fat cat who doesn’t care about the natives, but only wants to get them out of the way so he can exploit Pandora’s richest natural resource, “unobtainium.” The problem is that the Na’vi village is in a massive tree that sits over a massive deposit of that unobtainable resource.

Parker has hired a mercenary force of military men as security, led by the gritty, heartless, “take-no-prisoners” warmonger, Colonel Miles Quaritch. Quaritch enlists Jake to report secretly to him with military intel for nefarious purposes. Grace, the scientist, can’t stand either Parker or Quaritch, but tolerates them so she can get the funds to study the natives and explore the natural and biological wonders of this world, in the manner of a Victorian naturalist.

We then follow Jake on his journey as he meets the Na'vi, who at first distrust him because they can smell his alien DNA, and don't like anyone who speaks English. He wins their confidence, however, through Neytiri, a female Na'vi who rescues him in the forest. Neytiri is then commissioned to train Jake in all their Na'vi traditions.

He spends months learning how to hunt with a bow and arrow and ride the land beasts and flying dragons. He also enters into their religious views that seek to interact with the flow of energy that they believe unites all the life on the planet with Eywa, the Mother Goddess.

Just when Jake is falling in love with Neytiri and the Na'vi people, we see the monster-sized corporate machines clear-cutting the jungle on their way to blow up the Na'vi tree and scatter the Na'vi.

Jake escapes, but is rejected by the Na'vi because of his betrayal. But when he discovers that the military is on their way to blow up the sacred "Tree of Souls" that holds the souls of all the Na'vi ancestors, Jake switches sides and manages to regain the Na'vi's trust and lead them in an all out battle against the "sky people" in their flying machines.

After Jake wins the day, he discovers that the sacred tree has the mystical power to transfer life from one organism to another. He decides to transfer his soul from his human body into the Na'vi avatar body he had been using, in order to permanently become a Na'vi and live the rest of his life with his love interest, Neytiri.

POSTMODERN MULTICULTURALISM

Avatar is a postmodern pagan myth of nature worship. It's a condemnation of western culture as racist "imperialism" and scientific exploitation of the environment and a replacement of that worldview with the Gaia hypothesis, a scientific theory that asserts that the earth is a living organism, and humanity a servant unto it.

If you want to know what worldview a filmmaker is attacking, look at the villain. The villain is the bad guy who we root for the hero to overcome. The way the villain (or antagonist) thinks and lives is condemned by the storyteller through the villain's failure to win. Cameron's trio of antagonists in *Avatar* are all archetypes of Western civilization: the corporation, the military, and science.

According to the postmodern narrative, the biggest evil in civilization is the corporation, which only cares about money, not people, and will exploit third world natives without a concern for destroying their sacred spaces or their lives. Parker is clearly depicted this way as he throws out racist epithets against the Na'vi as "blue monkeys" and "fly-bitten savages." At first, he wants to avoid public outrage by negotiating with the Na'vi to get them to move, only because "killing the indigenous people looks bad." When Jake turns against his own people, he questions the benefits to the Na'vi of making a deal with the humans, crying "for what, lite beer and blue jeans? There's nothing that we have that they want" In this story, there is no benefit to primitive natives from Western civilization, only the plundering of natural resources and product exploitation of the masses.

Next in line of Western villains for postmodern storytelling is the military class, who are not peacekeepers protecting the freedom and lives of a people, but tools of the corporation to protect financial interests through violence against "the other." Thus Quaritch is a warmongering mercenary who can't wait to kill the Na'vi and, drinking his coffee in battle, muses over his decimation of both environment and creatures as if it were a fun party. And every one of Quaritch's bad guy militia is white, save the sole minority female pilot who mutinies with Jake.

Cameron also makes a political allusion to the Bush administration’s War on Terror as being morally equivalent to this exploitation of Pandora. The human warmongers use phrases and slogans against the Na’vi reminiscent of Bush-era phrases such as “shock and awe,” “pre-emptive attack,” and “we will fight terror with terror.”³ The mercenary military is an obvious parallel of Blackwater, a Bush-era private security force employed in Iraq. RDA, the big energy corporation led by Parker, is an apparent analogy to Halliburton, the energy company attacked by Bush opponents for its alleged questionable interests in the war. One of the good guys fighting with Jake against the corporate military onslaught refers to their impossible odds as “martyrdom,” a moral equivalency of freedom fighters with Islamic insurgents and terrorists in Iraq.

Last on the list of questionable characters in this postmodern narrative is the scientist, Grace Augustine, who depersonalizes nature in the name of materialistic explanation and helps create the very technology that exploits, indeed, “rapes” Mother Earth—or in this case, Mother Pandora. This is a more complex character because in the story, Grace begins as a begrudging tool of the corporation, with an impersonal interest in the alien biology, but ends up falling in love with the Na’vi and providing the scientific theory that supports their religious beliefs. Their religion of the oneness of all things in the Goddess (explained below) is described as an “electro-communication between the trees,” and all things. “It’s not pagan voodoo,” she proclaims. “It’s a biological global network.” The Na’vi’s religious mystical beliefs are supported by science.⁴

In one of the very few subtleties of the film, Western civilization is also linked with Christianity. The scientist’s name, Grace, happens to be the name of a defining doctrine of historic Christianity. The namesake of her surname, Augustine, is an ancient fourth-century church father who was considered one of the foremost influences on Western civilization. He taught the dominion mandate of Genesis for man to rule over creation, which included cultivating and keeping it.⁵

This depersonalization of nature and its subjugation to man was the philosophical foundation of science. The Enlightenment then dispensed with this Christian foundation and turned science into a materialistic pursuit of exploitation. Grace is shown in pictures on a refrigerator with the natives, teaching them and learning from them, a visual parallel to missionaries who are historically known for this kind of ministry to primitive peoples. Apparently, the scientist as the moral conscience of cross-cultural concern has replaced the Christian.

Another subtle reference is in the name “sky people,” given to the earthlings who have descended from the sky to Pandora. The sky father (god) and his patriarchal nomads killing and replacing the earth mother (goddess) and her matriarchal farmers is another narrative used against Christianity that was made popular by anthropologist James Frazer in his classic on comparative religions, *The Golden Bough*.⁶

The true global multicultural appeal of *Avatar* lies in its *Matrix*-like syncretism of many religions and cultures: Hinduism (powerful deities of Hinduism are blue like the Na’vi), Animism (Na’vi mirroring Native Americans and other primitive tribes), Judaism (*Navi* is the Hebrew word for prophet), Christianity and other Christ stories (the messianic anointing and journey of Jake), religious environmentalism (Gaia theory), and pantheism and panentheism (the oneness of all living things).

PANTHEISM/PANENTHEISM

If you want to know the worldview that a filmmaker is affirming, look at the good guys. Look at the hero and how he ends up seeing the world. In *Avatar*, the worldview of the good guys (the Na’vi) that the

hero ends up embracing is a pagan religion of nature worship. The Na'vi are clearly the “oppressed” and exploited third world indigenous peoples of Pandora.

The Na'vi worship Eywa, the Great Mother goddess, who is described as “a network of energy that flows through all living things,” connecting them as carriers of the deity whose energy is “borrowed, and someday we will have to give it back.” This panentheist belief of a deity within all living things is further exegeted as a “oneness” or unity between those things. God is in all and all is part of God. Like in Native American religion, the Na'vi kill animals for food, and then speak to their prey as a “brother whose spirit goes to Eywa, and the body to the earth.” Their sacred burial ground is the “Tree of Souls” that contains the souls of their dead ancestors to whom they petition. When they accept Jake into their community through ritual, they create a circle of interlocking hands connecting to each other, symbolizing their oneness in Eywa. The Na'vi are able to unite with horse-like beasts and flying dragons through an organic connection that allows the beast and rider to move symbiotically as one creature.

Jake turns out to be a multicultural messianic redeemer for the Na'vi, incarnate in their flesh, yet from the sky above. When he is first discovered by Neytiri, she mistrusts him until she sees a “sign from Eywa” that persuades her he may be an anointed one: Seeds that are pure in spirit from the Tree of Souls float down on him and bathe him in a transfiguration of mystical light. Later in the story, he becomes the warrior who will free their people by leading them in battle against the forces of darkness. And when he does so, it is through the “Great Mother” fighting back with him, as all the animals that once sought to eat each other now become a united army fighting the marauding militia of humans.

Samantha Smith, in her book *Goddess Earth*, lays out three major principles of historic paganism, much of which is embedded within the worldview of *Avatar*:

1. Animism—the belief that everything is imbued with a soul;
2. Polytheism—the belief that many gods exist and each one has a function to preside over various aspects of nature and life; and
3. Pantheism—the belief that all things, animate and inanimate, including the earth and humans, are manifestations of God; God is *all*.⁷

The pagan religious dogma of the interconnectedness of all life and the pantheistic deity that emerges to protect it is verified by the scientist as being a biological organic response of the planet seeking to maintain an equilibrium of life. There is a name on Earth for this theory, and that name is the Gaia Hypothesis.

THE GAIA HYPOTHESIS

In the 1960s, scientist James Lovelock formulated a theory related to his work detecting life on Mars for NASA. He hypothesized that the earth's biosphere, atmosphere, oceans and soil was a complex entity, “constituting a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life.”⁸ Earth is a self-regulating living organism with a consciousness. He called this the Gaia Hypothesis, based on the Greek goddess of the earth, Gaia. In later years, noted microbiologist Lynn Margulis collaborated with Lovelock to develop the theory, attracting both scientific and public attention.

On his website, Lovelock writes of a current Gaia movement to return to the ancient Greek notion of a symbiotic dance between religion and science: “In those days, science and theology were one and

science, although less precise, had soul. As time passed this warm relationship faded and was replaced by the frigidity of the schoolmen...Now at last there are signs of a change. Science becomes holistic again and rediscovers soul.”⁹

Gaia theory is apparent in *Avatar*’s pantheistic “Great Mother” who, as Neytiri explains, “does not take sides” in the battle with earthlings, “she protects only the balance of life.” So Gaia comes alive when all the animals on Pandora unite as one force to protect the sacred Tree of Souls (the cerebral cortex of Pandora) from destruction by the marauding crusaders.

The scientific justification of a pagan religious worldview that drives the Gaia Hypothesis is readily apparent throughout *Avatar*. Many of the religious beliefs of the Na’vi have natural biological explanations. The Na’vi’s have the ability to become one with other living things through their “neural queue,” a hair-like extension of their nervous system that has living tendrils.¹⁰ These tendrils look and operate exactly like fiber optic cables—the naturalistic explanation of a mystical belief. When Jake transfers his consciousness into the Na’vi body, the tendrils of the Tree of Souls (a neural network of fiber optic cables) connects to his cerebellum and relocates his soul like a computer upload of software from one hard drive to another. When Grace, the materialist scientist, is dying while connected to the Tree of Souls, even she converts and says to Jake, “The Great Mother, the All Mother, she’s real. I’m with her.” In the Gospel according to *Avatar*, Gaia is a personal emergent consciousness with scientific foundation and religious expression.

Although most scientists do not seek such explicit syncretism of religion with science, influential members of the environmentalism movement do (not to be confused with movements like creation care or the Cornwallis Alliance, which promote stewardship of the Earth). A seminal thinker in the origins of modern environmentalism was Lynn White, professor of history at Princeton, who wrote in 1967 of “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis”: “By destroying pagan animism [the belief that natural objects have souls], Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects...Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not.”¹¹

A CLOSER LOOK

Space does not permit a detailed critique of the philosophies of animism, panentheism, and pantheism that are embedded within *Avatar*. What I want to do is a brief deconstruction of the narrative of *Avatar*, illustrating its own internal contradictions and anomalies as a paradigm of political and religious prejudices.

First, as a postmodern multicultural narrative, *Avatar* suffers the condemnation of its own accusations. Its attack on Western civilization and elevation of primitivism through the journey of the hero is by its own multicultural standards, a “white savior” racist myth. It reinforces imperialist notions of scientifically ignorant primitives being saved from superior forces by a white man who is anointed above them (remember Jake’s transfiguration?), condescends to be one of them, and redeems them through his superior technological and cultural transcendence. As one political writer concluded, “The ethnic Na’vi, the film suggests, need the white man to save them because, as a less developed race, they lack the intelligence and fortitude to overcome their adversaries by themselves.”¹²

Second, *Avatar* is also an exaltation of the “noble savage” myth, made popular by eighteenth-century Romantic Jean-Jacques Rousseau that imagines “an idealized concept of uncivilized man, who symbolizes the innate goodness of one not exposed to the corrupting influences of civilization.”¹³ This is a

common Hollywood motif that shows up in movies such as *Pocahontas*, and *Dances with Wolves*, which portray peace-loving indigenous peoples at one with nature—a politically constructed fiction that doesn't bear out in historical reality. Depraved cultural traditions such as female circumcision, head hunting, cannibalism, human sacrifice, slavery, and bloodthirsty warring are commonly present in indigenous tribes unaffected by Western civilization throughout history. It is not civilization, but human nature that is corrupt. The tragic reality of pagan culture is more like the bloodthirsty human sacrifice of *Apocalypto* than the oneness of all life of *Avatar*.

The other conceit of *Avatar's* mythology of oneness with nature is in its moral condemnation of humanity and beatification of nature. Like the noble savage, this is another self-referential absurdity. If the “circle of life,” that is, the cycle of “eat or be eaten” is indeed a harmonious beauty, then humans cannot be condemned for consuming natural resources, which is in effect eating the life of others. Humans are just as much a part of nature as anything else, and moral condemnation of gluttonous excess and exploitation is arbitrary subjective manipulation by those being eaten. Blowing up trees, killing Na'vi, and consuming unobtainium is just as natural as Na'vi killing and eating viperwolves and Thanators killing and eating Na'vi.

Richard Dawkins's infamous atheist description of natural selection as “blind, pitiless indifference” is exactly the description of Selfridge and Quaritch's characters, so supporters of Dawkins should have nothing to complain about with these villains. They are the incarnation of an atheist worldview where the circle of life that is nature is in fact hostile, “nasty, brutish and short,” destructive, “red in tooth and claw,” and full of thorns and thistles—which brings us to the war of cultural narratives: Earth and nature worship versus man's dominion stewardship.

ANCIENT/MODERN SACRED MYTHMAKING

I believe that the reason for *Avatar's* success lies in James Cameron's skill as a mythmaker. *Avatar* is essentially a postmodern pagan myth on the level of the Babylonian Enuma Elish or the Ugaritic Baal Cycle of ancient Mesopotamia. Like *Avatar*, these epic myths were tales of warring deities of nature embodying the claims of religious and political supremacy.

Despite our very scientific modern culture, mythology still connects with our human hearts because it appeals to transcendence, that is, a reality outside of the world that gives meaning and purpose to our existence within the world. Humanity, created as it is in the image of God, craves transcendence regardless of our technological advancement. Unfortunately, as the apostle Paul revealed, that craving for the transcendent God is suppressed out of moral guilt (Rom. 1:18–21) and results in pagan worship of the environment as the most primal natural instinct. Humanity exchanges the truth of God for a lie, and worships and serves the creature and creation rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25).

The battle between cultural narratives of worshipping Creator or creation is an ancient one. Augustine was right (the church father, not the fictional character): the creation narrative of Genesis 1 teaches man's rule over the environment (Gen. 1:26–28). Critics of Judeo-Christianity are right when they suggest that the Bible desacralized nature by draining the deity out of it, but wrong when they conclude that such theology necessarily leads to destructive exploitation of the environment. Genesis also teaches man's responsible stewardship over the earth (Gen. 2:15). God gave laws that reinforced man's responsibility toward his environment (Deut 20:19–20; Ex 22:6), and even blessed or cursed the environment in response to Israel's obedience or rebellion (Deut 7:12–15; 28:15–24). In paganism, man is the earth's servant, but in the Bible, man is the earth's steward.

It is no coincidence that the salvation theology in some Psalms that describe God's election of his people is expressed through creation imagery (Psa 33; 74; 89; 136; 148). Covenant and creation are deeply interwoven. "Myths," as Ronald Simkins writes, "are simply narrative elaborations of culturally shared perceptions of reality."¹⁴ One of the purposes of mythic narratives in modern as well as ancient times is to encode literarily the religious and political overthrow of one culture by another. When new kings or kingdoms would rise to power in the ancient world, they would often displace the vassal culture's creation stories with their own stories of how their deities triumphed over others to create the world in which they now lived. Ancient Near Eastern scholars call this battle "chaoskampf." It denotes deity struggling over the forces of chaos to create order in the social and national lives of a people.¹⁵

The Enuma Elish tells the story of the Babylonian deity Marduk's battle with Tiamat, the sea goddess of chaos, and his ascendancy to power in the Mesopotamian pantheon, giving literary mythical justification to the rise of Babylon as an ancient world power.¹⁶ The Baal Cycle of Ugarit tells the story of the storm god "Baal the Conqueror," and his epiphany in becoming "Lord of the earth" in Canaan by defeating the god of chaos, Yamm (the Sea).¹⁷

Even Moses, according to scholar Bruce Reichenbach, wrote Genesis 1 "as a theological-political document that describes how the Supreme Monarch establishes his kingdom and thereby justifies his claim to exclusive possession of everything in it."¹⁸ God was preparing Israel to displace the pagan Canaanites and their gods both physically and literarily so He inspired Moses' authorship of the creation account to express that ancient Near Eastern motif of establishing transcendent authority.¹⁹

Avatar is a *chaoskampf* myth that incarnates the battle of worldviews and their gods, of Gaia overcoming the destructive forces of chaos (the Christian West) to establish order through earth and nature worship. It is a modern narrative of the most ancient conflict of worldviews.

A WAR OF NARRATIVES

Atheistic and secular humanistic texts of materialism are quaint myths, but ultimately inadequate in describing reality. Only a transcendent personal divinity will satisfy the hearts and imaginations of humanity. We are not in a culture war. We are in a war of gods, and the three dominant religions proclaiming the supremacy of their deity over the earth are Christianity (Jesus), Islam (Allah), and Paganism (Gaia).

Christian mythic narratives in movies such as *Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* have surely captured the imaginations of many. For the moment, *Avatar*, like a newly written *Epic of Gilgamesh*, heralds the rising influence of a pagan global religion of nature worship that posits humanity, not as a unique creature in God's image ruling over nature and the earth as God's vice regent, but as a common part of nature, serving the earth and its ruling authority over all energy and life. It's not that *Avatar* is itself the game changer, but rather, that it is part of a cultural wave of ideas affecting all areas of global culture, from religion to entertainment to science to politics—promising pagan redemption, but providing subordination and slavery to nature.

Notes

1. <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=YTE4NTY2MTM0MMDIzZDFiZDhYTMwNDkyOTJjYzhmZWE=>.
2. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jay-michaelson/the-meaning-of-avatar-eve_b_400912.html?view=screen.
3. Although fighting “terror with terror” is not a Bush administration phrase, it indicates Cameron’s interpretation of exactly what America was doing. In other words, the Iraq war is not just, it is the moral equivalence of terror.
4. Ironically, this reduction of religious beliefs to natural causes is normally used to demythologize religion, but in the face of Christian “dominion,” it magically morphs into a mysticism/science fusion against the West. After all, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.
5. Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God* XII, 24, *Confessions*, XIII, 23.
6. <http://www.archive.org/stream/goldenboughstudy01frazuoft#page/n11/mode/2up>.
7. Quoted in “The Pagan Roots of Environmentalism,” American Policy Center Web site: <http://www.americanpolicy.org/un/thepaganroots.htm>.
8. James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1979, 1987, 1995, 2000), 10.
9. http://www.ecolo.org/lovelock/what_is_Gaia.html.
10. <http://james-camerons-avatar.wikia.com/wiki/Queue>.
11. <http://www.zbi.ee/~kalevi/lwhite.htm>, quoted in Joseph Brean, “The Green Fervour,” National Post, Saturday, February 10, 2007: <http://www.canada.com/nationalpost/news/story.html?id=07407be3-1f9f-4f41-a16a-5a286a5b374c>.
12. Will Heaven, <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/willheaven/100020488/james-camerons-avatar-is-a-stylish-film-marred-by-its-racist-subtext/>.
13. “Noble Savage,” Encyclopedia Britannica online: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/416988/noble-savage>.
14. Ronald Simkins, *Creator and Creation: Nature in the Worldview of Ancient Israel* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 1994), 46.
15. Bernard F. Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 75–77.
16. Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis: The Story of Creation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1942, 1963), 14.
17. Michael David Coogan, trans., *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press), 75–115.
18. Bruce R. Reichenbach, “Genesis 1 as a Theological-Political Narrative of Kingdom Establishment,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 13, 1 (2003): 48.
19. This explanation of a theological-political purpose behind Genesis does not mean it is fictional or any less truthful as God’s Word.