Warriors, Women, and Woo-Woo:

Implications for Cultural (Mis)Understandings in *Avatar*

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Framing a Conversation

James Cameron's 2009 film *Avatar* presents an opportunity to discuss complicated issues surrounding themes of social justice. This essay will examine issues depicted in *Avatar* and the potential impact this film may have in defining and creating a space where conversations about privilege, gender, and faith can occur. Mass media can be a powerful tool for creating a common experience and engaging people to think and feel in ways that would be difficult within their proscribed everyday experiences. As *Avatar* is the highest-grossing film in history, it becomes useful to look at the ways this film champions social justice, while commenting on the ways in which it falls short. In this way, we can understand how viewers around the world could be persuaded to a certain set of understandings about social justice. As Jenkins (2011) points out, "the meaning of a popular film like *Avatar* lies at the intersection between what the author wants to say and how the audience deploys his creation for their own communicative purposes" (para. 3).

Following Davidson (2010), I focus on three binary themes depicted in the film: corporate imperialism and technology against romanticized indigenous peoples, embodied in the Warrior; persistence of masculine/feminine gendered roles in both cultures; and, soullessness in opposition to eco-spirituality, also known as Woo-Woo.[1] In juxtaposing these themes, *Avatar* presents these issues in challenging ways. There is a gap between what seems to be the moral and ethical attitude of the film and the awkward, if not outright naïve, implementation of those convictions by the filmmaker. Ultimately, *Avatar* becomes a film with disturbing implications for cultural understandings and cultural misunderstandings. For each binary theme, I will explore how *Avatar* creates understanding and misunderstanding. Potential prompts for

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[1] Woo-woo: (*slang*) readily accepting supernatural, paranormal, occult, or pseudoscientific phenomena, or emotion-based beliefs and explanations (Google dictionary). Typically ascribed to beliefs of female eco-activists.

discourse will be offered within the conclusion. Therefore, the aim of this essay is to provide a foundation where dialogue can be set in motion as a crucial step for stimulating cultural awareness.

Synopsis of the Film

Avatar is the story of a paraplegic veteran, Jake Sully, who is enticed to join a mission to the moon Pandora as a replacement for his twin brother, a scientist murdered on Earth. Pandora has been colonized by corporate interests from Earth to mine 'unobtainium', an ore that will solve Earth's energy problems. The corporation, Resources Development Administration (RDA), employs a private heavily armed security force to protect their operations from the indigenous beings, the Na'vi. Along with the industrialists and the military, a group of scientists is studying the planet and the Na'vi using 'avatars'. Avatars are genetically engineered hybrid bodies of a Na'vi and a human, accessed by the human through a computerized machine suggestive of an MRI machine crossed with a tanning bed. This allows the human to breathe the Pandoran atmosphere, thus escaping their militarized mining compound and interact with the Na'vi and Pandoran environment. For Sully, it also allows him the full use of a body outside of a wheelchair.

While training in his avatar body with the scientists, Sully is separated from the group and is lost in the lush Pandoran forest. Neytiri, a Na'vi woman, finds and reluctantly saves him after divine beings – looking something like phosphorescent jellyfish – gather around them. As Sully has been asked by Marine Colonel Quaritch to infiltrate the Na'vi and report to him secretly, Sully persuades Neytiri to take him to her home. Sully is introduced to Neytiri's parents, Eytukan and Mo'at, who are the civil and spiritual leaders of their tribe, the Omaticaya. Mo'at decides Sully should stay and Neytiri should teach him their ways. This upsets Tsu'tey, a

warrior who is heir to the civic leadership of the tribe and betrothed to Neytiri, who repeatedly finds ways to belittle and harass Sully.

As Sully falls asleep with the Na'vi, his human body wakes up in the computerized chamber. He tells his story to the group of scientists, but subsequently to Quaritch, who determines that Sully has three months to persuade the Omaticaya to abandon their ancestral and spiritual home before the corporation's bulldozers arrive to mine the huge deposit of unobtainium that lies beneath their giant Hometree. During the course of the three months, Sully learns Na'vi skills and falls in love with Neytiri. He also is enlightened as to the dignity of the Na'vi. He attempts to warn them the humans plan on obliterating their Hometree, but fails in his persuasiveness.

The bulldozers arrive, the Na'vi are brutally displaced as their home is destroyed, and Sully must make a decision as to his loyalties. He chooses the Na'vi, as do the other scientists and a pilot, and leads them in a counterattack against the humans. They gather the other Na'vi tribes on Pandora and fight against the technologically superior humans with Na'vi arrows and weapons stolen from the humans. The Na'vi are ultimately successful and evict the humans from their planet, except for a few of those who helped them.

Sully determines that his human body is no longer the body he wants his soul to inhabit. The Na'vi take him to their spiritual center, the Tree of Souls, where the spirit of the planet, Eywa, is beseeched by the entire congregation of Na'vi to convert Sully. The final moment of the scene is Sully's reincarnation as a Na'vi without the need of his human form.

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As of April 2011, *Avatar* has grossed $2,783,556,202 worldwide (the-numbers.com). Determining the number of viewers from the box office gross is not quite possible, since people

see films multiple times and ticket prices vary, but a reasonable assumption is to consider the film has been widely seen based on revenue.   However, the fact that a film is financially successful does not translate to the film being especially 'good'. Oscar nominations notwithstanding, *Avata*r is not a particularly well told story, as there are significant plot holes and unexplained motivations and happenings. What makes the film so successful are the whiz-bang eye-candy visuals and the formulaic narrative, which simultaneously allows the film to be interestingly new and comfortably old. Essentially, the film is an exercise in style over substance. Indeed, the spectacle disguises the film's narrative and thematic weaknesses and follows the trend in science fiction (SF) film begun in the late 1970s for "a primarily visual idiom of poetic imagery and spectacle" (Roberts, 2005, p. 279). One must not forget that major Hollywood films are fundamentally a capitalist project, no matter the artistic sensibilities. *Avatar* is not an exercise in *ars gratia artis*. Nonetheless, based on popularity and the resultant common global experience, the film easily becomes a tool for initiating dialogues about the themes contained in the film.

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Critical Examination of Issues of Social Justice

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Corporate Imperialism/Romanticized Indigenous Peoples

Science fiction narratives are frequently viewed as allegorical to contemporary society (Kuhn, 1990). As Edwards (2010) notes, "the tensions and alliances between species in science fiction often reflect contemporary issues of race and gender in the real world" (p. 59). *Avatar* fulfills this aspect in echoing the historical treatment of indigenous peoples, such as those in North America or South Africa, at the hands of White men. The history is one of genocide, violent displacement, and institutionalized racism stoked by fear and greed. For the 21st century, White colonialism is reinvented as corporate imperialism. The avarice of the nation-state is

replaced by that of global capitalist enterprises, yet the outcomes remain the same. The

privileged use their political, financial, and technological power to subjugate the marginalized

and the 'different' to gain wealth.

Interestingly, the binary of the privileged and the marginalized is not confined to SF texts

and can be found in the discourse on justification of social systems. "In the social scientific

imagination, it is as if the advantaged are relentlessly looking to cash in on their dominance and

the disadvantaged are proud revolutionaries-in-waiting" (Jost, Banaji, & Nostek, 2004, p. 883).

Understandings

Avatar plays upon the collective understanding of the audience to portray corporate

imperialism as the antagonist of the film. Both the CEO of the Resources Development

Administration (RDA) and the head of security, Colonel Quaritch, are characters developed to be

'the bad guys'. The Na'vi, as the indigenous peoples, and Sully as their champion, are portrayed

as 'the good guys'. This simplistic binary sets the stage for juxtaposing the themes of 'greed is

bad' and 'nature is good' as they battle for control of the natural resources of Pandora. However,

there is an additional portrayal of the human scientists with their technological advancement in

contrast to the pastoral lives of the Na'vi. Within this understanding, the 'good guys versus bad

guys' and 'greed is bad/nature is good' are joined by the mind-set of 'empirical knowledge is

immoral', while 'woo-woo is virtuous'.

In this reading of the film, there is little cause for concern. The film appears to uphold

basic liberal American sentiments, while the narrative allows for "a little socially conscious

allure" (Brooks, 2010, para. 6). Behaviors to the contrary, Americans collectively shun greed,

appreciate the environment, root for the underdog, and have suspicions about scientific

knowledge in favor of spiritual truth. So, where do the implications for misunderstandings begin?

Misunderstandings

Simpson (2010) correctly directs attention to three interrelated themes of *Avatar*, which unsuccessfully explore colonialism, capitalism, and racism. The most glaring issue for misunderstanding the cultural implications of *Avatar* is the role Sully plays in the drama. As Meade (2010) and Brooks (2010) have explained, the film continues an unpleasant tradition of depicting White men as the saviors of non-white peoples. This theme has been played out in films such as *Dances with Wolves, The Last Samurai,* and *Lawrence of Arabia.* Meade (2010) specifically views the dominant theme of the film as suggesting the Na'vi, as a substitute for Earth's indigenous peoples, do not have "the spiritual, physical or intellectual capacity to compete with their European counterparts and thus have not the ability to adequately govern themselves, much less in times of adversity ergo the need for a White savior" (p. 209). Brooks (2010) points to the assumption that "nonwhites need the White Messiah to lead their crusades" (para.17) and considers the film to be "a racial fantasy par excellence" (para. 8).

As a Warrior for both cultures, which coincides with other White Messiah films mentioned above, Sully usurps the authority of the Na'vi leaders through his physical prowess, military acumen, and unexplained anointment as a 'Chosen One' by Eywa, the planet's spiritual entity. As Meade (2010) succinctly states, "the ethos of White superiority is consummated by Jake's perpetual dominance" (p. 208). As in other fantasies, Sully has a moment of enlightenment causing him to reject his own heritage and convince the Na'vi to engage in armed combat against the imperialists in ways that only he knows as a member of the oppressors. We are led to believe his enlightenment stems from a new understanding of the Na'vi as noble,

peaceful, spiritual beings. The spark of his internal change is the destruction of the Omaticayan

Hometree. However, several commentators have accounted for Sully's transformation as a

benign schizophrenia from his repeated travels between his human and avatar forms, which

causes him to doubt what is his reality and what is his dream (Sideris, 2010; Lertzman, 2010;

Hillis, 2009).

Nevertheless, the romantic concept of orientalism, which traditionally justifies

colonialism, is prolonged in *Avatar* as "the white man is still the centre of the narrative and the

protagonist through which we view events; the Na'vi are still exotic, alien, other, noble savages"

(Davidson, 2010, p. 16), thus providing nothing more than another Westernized view of the

Other. Using a narrative technique of voiceovers to explain events through Sully's perspective

underscores this understanding. In addition, the overarching perspective of the film is to portray

the Na'vi as 'noble savages' lacking human accoutrements, such as walled homes, industrialized

weaponry, or a fiat money economy, but imbued with moral authority through their spiritual

foundation, which is simply patronizing. Depicting the Na'vi as strong virtuous warriors is

undermined by preventing their success except by divine intercession as embodied by Sully. The

racism expands by depicting the Na'vi as intellectually inferior through the scenes of Na'vi

warriors repeatedly shooting arrows at military helicopters as if they cannot understand their

arrows are ineffectual against steeled hulls and ballistic missiles. The uselessness of Na'vi

technology against human technology underscores the film's perspective of corporate

imperialism's malevolence enacted through engineered technologies. Though, as Jones (2010)

remarks, "imperialism is only bad in the film when it involves a direct military assault…

Everyday imperialism, the imposition of capitalism without carpet-bombing, is apparently OK"

(para. 9).

Furthermore, the film appears to have a view of rational knowledge as flawed, if not outright superfluous. The male scientists in the film are portrayed as 'geeks'; denigrated for their scientific knowledge in what passes for humor and plays on archetypal understandings of educated people. Indeed, other scientists are more fully qualified than Sully to treat with the Na'vi, but they are neither warriors nor (apparently) cognizant of their irrational or spiritual natures. This theme tied to corporate imperialism becomes quite problematic as the film ultimately reflects an aversion to structured education in favor of tacit knowledge. The scientists are critical to the long-term success and public perception of progressive human advancements being benevolently underwritten by the company, but the CEO of the corporation is dismissive and unreceptive to the scientists' evidenced-based advice, completing the circle of criticism through humor at the expense of the scientists.

In view of this, Sully also becomes the savior of the scientists as he persuades them to fight against the corporation, thus allowing them to regain their moral authority by renouncing their heritage as scientists. Perhaps they will continue their exploration of Pandora and the Na'vi after the other humans are evicted from the planet, but their efforts would be for personal use – not to advance human knowledge to gain understandings, particularly surrounding issues of difference.

Avatar creates uncomfortable messages around issues of difference. Viewers, with even a modicum of sophistication, should certainly be able to see the reflection of White American aggression against Native Americans, but the film only offers another White fantasy to counteract the narrative. This use of the Warrior/White Messiah trope is the most egregious message. When coupled with the creation of the romanticized Other of the Na'vi and the disparaged Other of the rational scientist, the message is not only naïve, but also crude and

counter to any insistence of generating understanding. The vulgarity is only compounded by the use of an avatar, which Edwards (2010) correctly calls out "as a model for approaching new cultures [that] is already inappropriate: dressing up to infiltrate or assimilate into another culture suggests the kind of racism implicit in blackface parodies" (p. 63).

Persistence of Gendered Roles

Science fiction texts hold the possibility of 'worlds' wherein culturally proscribed roles based on gender can be explored by either portraying the ultimate female deconstruction, as in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, or an unsettling absence of gender, as in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Primarily, SF has explored gender through the subgenre of feminist SF, particularly in the works of Joanna Russ and Sheri Tepper (Roberts, 2005). Conversely, aside from Le Guin's *LHD*, for example, masculinity tends to be ignored as an area of discussion in favor of comfortable heroic archetypes that propel the action. SF film inherits these understandings as part of the genre's megatext, but generally upholds the concept of the masculine archetype, with a nod to gender diversity in the workplace.

Understandings

Avatar presents the viewer with three major female characters: Dr. Augustine, the head of the scientific division of the corporation; Neytiri, daughter of the Omaticayan leaders, heir to the role of spiritual leader, and Sully's love interest; and, Chacon, a marine pilot assigned to the science team. Each female character is presented as smart, resourceful, strong, able to use weapons, and willing to engage in combat. Their competence and authority is unquestioned, even as the portrayals contain moments of compassion or emotional distress. Cameron has a sensibility for portraying strong authoritative women in his science fiction films, such as *The*

Terminator, *Aliens*, *Strange Days*, and *The Abyss*. If they tend to be less than fully realized, that could be said for many characters in his films.

As role models for girls or young women, *Avatar* offers an understanding of females being as capable as their male counterparts. Cameron seems to understand the need for these female characters, as women are becoming a larger presence in science fiction fandom. Female fans enjoy fantasies of conquest and power through their own gender and producers of theatrical films and television are keen to target this audience (Young, 2011).

Typically, science fiction films derive from male fantasies and are fostered by a male-dominated industry and culture (Santerre Hobby, 2000). *Avatar* continues this tradition in also highlighting male fantasies of conquest and power, particularly through the character of Sully, and the romantic visions of military life and the harsh marine officer in Quaritch. While Sully achieves a certain level of empathy with the Na'vi, which can be coded as feminine, the character, like Tsu'tey, is a warrior structured within the cultural context of male gendered domination. In effect, the male characters are products of the dominant ideology in both cultures.

Misunderstandings

Dr. Augustine is introduced to viewers as she emerges from an avatar chamber spewing obscenities and impatiently hollering for her assistant to bring her a cigarette. Her science team appears to be simultaneously awed and frightened by her. What are we to make of this? The film does not make clear whether Augustine is the head of the science team because of her intellect, which apparently compensates for her personality, or if her personality bullied others into submission so she could grasp power. She is the leading authority on the Na'vi and Pandora, but that is a result of her efforts – not necessarily the cause of gaining the leadership position. In

fact, one of her staff comments to Jake about how she is better with plants than with people.

Augustine's leadership seems to be constructed of heroic qualities, such as control, assertiveness,

and domination, which are not masculine traits in and of themselves, but culturally understood to

be so (Fletcher, 2004). Seemingly, in the Earth year 2154, humans have still not worked through

the issues of a culturally contextualized masculine/feminine beyond the tokenism of position.

Indeed, the only scene that demonstrates a cultural context of feminine qualities is when

Augustine insists Sully eats breakfast before returning to his avatar form. Yet her nurturing is

tempered by her reasoning that he would not be able to continue the research if he starved.

Conversely, Augustine is depicted as having strong maternal feelings for the Na'vi. Part

of the film's back-story includes a school she ran for the Na'vi children, which was disbanded

for reasons that are not fully explained. Those with even a passing knowledge of the relationship

of Whites and Native Americans can clearly understand the implications of cultural imperialism

present in this short line of dialogue, which is included more as an explanation of how she knows

the children of the Omaticayan than a statement about refuted imperialism by the Na'vi.

However, what is not spoken about becomes more important for understanding the underlying

implications for misunderstanding. Augustine's maternal feelings can just as easily be attributed

to her role as a scientist. The Na'vi are her research subjects (the use of this noun being specific,

as they no longer willingly participate in her research). This is made evident as she describes the

betrothed Neytiri and Tsu'tey as Na'vi who will become "a mated pair", as if their sentience

makes little difference for according them any dignity beyond wild animals. Nonetheless, their

health and well-being, as well as their acceptance of her, are critical to the success of her

research and her objective of seeking a diplomatic solution to the rejection of corporate

imperialism. Augustine appears to know this as her deferential actions and demeanor in avatar

form with the Na'vi is quite the opposite of her conduct in human form. In essence, this is one more example of patronization of indigenous peoples depicted in the film.

Through the character of Augustine, we also see another repudiation of rational scientific knowledge in the film. During the initial confrontation with the corporate military, Augustine is wounded. Sully takes her to Neytiri and pleads for the Omaticayans to place her in the Tree of Souls and pray to their deity, Eywa, to heal her by transferring her soul completely to that of her avatar. The prayers do not work and Augustine dies. While this may seem a typical plot point, a major character dies to give the survivors (and by extrapolation the audience) one more reason to 'fight the bad guys', there are concerns. One concern is that Augustine represents rational knowledge, as opposed to spiritual knowledge, thus Eywa's rejection of allowing her to be reborn in Na'vi form. The other concern is the Na'vi deity may not be as powerful as the Na'vi declare her to be. In either circumstance, reading the death of Augustine becomes problematic.

The challenging use of Augustine as a role model is compounded by the character of Neytiri. Put bluntly, Neytiri is another native 'babe' who cannot help but be attracted to Sully, thus continuing the myth of non-white women preferring their White male oppressors. In addition, the skills and abilities of Neytiri as a contributing member of the tribe are seemingly denigrated in favor of her virginity, which she "gives" to Sully, thus sparking a fist fight between Tsu'tey and Sully as if she is a prize to be won. However, the implicit conflict defined here lasts mere seconds as Sully breaks off the fight to explain the Na'vi are in danger and Neytiri immediately renounces him as a betrayer of herself and her people.

Ostensibly, the film encourages viewers to identify with the Na'vi and the tradition of hereditary succession to gendered leadership roles, where men are the civic leaders and women are the spiritual leaders, and arranged marriages provide a stable succession. Interestingly,

Neytiri's father, Eykutan, hands her his bow as he dies in the conflagration of the Hometree

attack and commands her to protect the people. Yet, how should she accomplish this? She has

been groomed to be the spiritual leader, not the war leader. Neytiri, for her part, does little to

protect the people besides hand over responsibility for leadership to Sully and Tsu'tey. The

simultaneous effect of this portion of the story is to uphold the possibility of women being

secular leaders, but destroys the notion by Neytiri's abdication of her father's instructions in

favor of male authority. We leave with the understanding that women *can* be secular leaders, but

it is not an appropriate role.

　　　　Another character that plays upon traditional notions of the female role is Trudy Chacon,

a former marine who is now a pilot on Pandora assigned to ferry the science team to their avatar

missions. Depicting women fighter pilots, or more generally warriors, in science fiction films

has been done frequently, particularly since Ridley Scott's 1979 film *Alien* and more recently in

the television series *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009). The archetype of the "tough, beautiful

pilot devoted to a good cause", as the fan written character biography states on IMDb, is clearly

present. What are not clear are Chacon's motivations for turning against her employer and

joining Sully in his plan to counterattack the security forces of the RDA. Beyond her statement,

"I didn't sign up for this sh—," as she veers away from shooting the Na'vi, we are left with little

understanding of how she so quickly changes allegiances after years of working with RDA.

(There are several indications that RDA has used weapons against the Na'vi before.) While her

actions are virtuous within the context of the film, they can also be misunderstood by playing on

the entrenched notions of women not being fit for military duty because they cannot be trusted to

stand and fight – to kill the enemy. To complicate matters, Chacon's helicopter is targeted by a

missile and she crashes to her death during the battle against RDA. The plot point begs the

question as to whether she is a tragic victim of corporate imperialist warfare or whether her death

is a justified consequence of her lack of loyalty in a system that values the aggressive dominant

male. Additionally, the film's dichotomous attitude towards women and their roles seems to

conclude that those who accept their cultured gender roles, like Neytiri and Mo'at, survive, but

those who do not, such as Augustine and Chacon, die.

Unfortunately, the male characters fare little better when it comes to persistence of

culturally gendered roles. The simplistic archetypes of warrior, messiah, science geek, military

leader, and morally bankrupt corporate executive all present one-dimensional fantasy visions of

how these roles are fulfilled by men. These archetypes not only affect the sensibilities of male

viewers, but they also maintain the dominant male narrative for female viewers.

Santerre Hobby (2000) takes the issue of male dominance a step further in her

exploration of patriarchal myth and power in SF film. Her thesis concerns the preponderance of

phallic imagery in SF film as a means of continuing the dominant male narrative through visual

representations of rape. Indeed, *Avatar* perpetuates culturally acceptable male fantasies of

dominance through the sequences of Sully's training. The Na'vi use beasts akin to horses, called

a direhorse, for land travel. A Na'vi must 'bond' with the direhorse before they are able to ride

them. A description of this bonding involves tube-like antennae, where:

> The touch of the antennae is for pleasure and affection… [And so,] to bond with (or, in
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> human terms, to 'break') a direhorse, a Na'vi must mount the animal and connect his or
>
> her neural queue (or 'neural whip') to one of the animal's two antennae. Once queue and
>
> antennae touch, the feathery tendrils automatically intertwine, almost as if possessed by
>
> free will… [and] makes it seem as if the direhorse is an extension of the rider's own
>
> body. (Wilhelm & Mathison, 2009, p. 72)

Sully's experience with connecting to the direhorse is problematic, but rather mild. However, the same process is used for a 'rite of passage' capturing of an Ikran, which is a flying animal resembling a fantasized pterodactyl. This sequence more clearly resembles rape. The Ikran is unwilling to accept Sully's neural whip and he must wrestle with the snarling thrashing animal. When Sully successfully forces his neural whip into the Ikran's antenna, an unsettling extreme close up of the animal's eye shows rapid dilation of the pupil – at once depicting the animal's shock and, seemingly, orgasmic pleasure at being subjugated.

When uncoded, this scene is very troubling in terms of the perpetuation of male rape fantasies and power, as well as the mind-set that this is appropriate male behavior to be accepted by females. In fact, the overwhelming spectacle of *Avatar* may be the cause of Sideris' (2010) passage, "His [Sully] moral progress was marked by particular rites of passage, as he was inducted into the Na'vi community, as well as *moments of empathic bonding* with other creatures and, especially, with Neytiri" (italics mine, p. 466). Clearly, embedded understandings of gender roles and lack of reflection can cause even thoughtful scholars to miss the narrative's subtext. Granted, Sideris indicated she was commenting from a reading of the screenplay and the visual imagery of male phallic domination of three "creatures" may not be apparent.[2] Nonetheless, Sideris (2010) comments that Sully's capture of the Ikran seems to be less than genuine for someone who is supposed to be embodying an empathetic relationship to the beings of Pandora, but characterizing Sully's empathy as moral progress is off the mark and casts her in the role of apologist for the filmmaker.

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[2] Sideris' article is rather unclear on whether she is writing based on just the screenplay or if she also viewed the film. She discusses particular visuals, such as the dilation of the Ikran's eye, but this screenshot direction would typically be included in a screenplay. My point is that the phallic imagery and sense of rape is not as easily experienced and understood unless the completed film is viewed.

Cameron gives the impression of progressive thinking by placing women in roles of leadership and depicting them as competent role models. Yet, he ultimately dismisses them in favor of male characters. Cameron's male characters are similarly portrayed as role models, yet they are just as constrained by culturally gendered roles. This persistence in portraying men and women in culturally gendered roles does little to advance our understandings and overcome the obstacles that preclude pursuit of one's individual non-gendered sense of place within society.

Soullessness/Eco-Spirituality

As well-argued by Roberts (2005), the history of science fiction narratives can be reduced to the tensions between understanding human experience through rational empiricism or mystical transcendence. Moreover, as Csicsery-Ronay (2008) explains, through science fiction images "we draw many of our metaphors and models for understanding our technologized world, and it is as sf that many of our impressions of technology-aided desire and technology-riven anxiety are processed back into works of the imagination" (p. 2). Paradigm tensions and anxieties deriving from rapid changes in technoscience underlie the overt juxtaposition of the soulless technocrats and the neoplatonic demiurge of the eco-spiritual indigenous beings in *Avatar*.

Understandings

Davidson (2010) aptly characterizes *Avatar* as "the new age environmentalist worldview made literal" (p. 14). That literalness is created through the conflict presented of corporate imperialists and indigenous beings. The RDA corporation and their military forces are depicted as ruthless and lacking any sense of morality. Conversely, the Na'vi are portrayed as interconnected to their environment, which is a manifestation of their deity, Eywa. They pray and worship in several scenes demonstrating for the viewer not only their spiritual character, but also their moral authority as guardians of the divine world. The conflict manifests as the soulless

technocrats battle the eco-spiritual Na'vi to exploit the resources of Pandora. The outcome would be the destruction of Pandora similar to what has occurred on Earth.

In contrast to other issues within the film, the filmmakers are abundantly clear on their view of the destruction of the Pandoran environment as unacceptable – *and that it has spiritual associations*. Douthat (2010) notes, "We pine for what we've left behind, and divinizing the natural world is an obvious way to express unease about our hyper-technological society" (para. 7). The film enacts an ancient collective unconsciousness of the interdependence of humans and the environment. As Lertzman (2010) observes, "In this film we can experience in a safe and culturally sanctioned context the deepest longings we have for the return to the Mother" (p. 41).

Avatar brings an awareness of ecology and the environment to audiences on a grand scale. There is increasing anecdotal evidence that viewers are empowered and politicized by the film to act on environmental issues, such as planting trees, sometimes as a means for dispelling their sense of depression about living on contemporary Earth after seeing the film (Holtmeier, 2010). It is difficult to argue with a film that can empower viewers to act in positive ways, but there are still some troubling sequences for understanding the eco-spirituality of *Avatar*.

Misunderstandings

In furthering romanticized notions of indigenous peoples, Westernized views perpetuate an understanding of ecological respect through spiritual beliefs as a cultural trait that defines indigeneity, even though historical facts are mixed on this issue (Harvey, 2003; Fennell, 2008). *Avatar* continues this misunderstanding and in doing so creates a White fantasy of Utopian simplicity; "an imperialist nostalgia for the primitive" (Seegert, 2010, p. 114). But Douthat (2009) argues, "Nature is suffering and death. Its harmonies require violence… [T]he human societies that hew closest to the natural order aren't the shining Edens of James Cameron's fond

imaginings. They're places where existence tends to be nasty, brutish and short" (para. 11).

Viewers see this short brutishness in the hunting, capture and rape, and death of Pandoran beasts

at the hands of the Na'vi and the humans.

Furthermore, the film emphasizes a gendered understanding of eco-spirituality through

the characters of Mo'at and Neytiri as the spiritual leaders of the Omaticayan, which builds upon

notions of female privilege with Nature. Eco-feminism asserts the entitlement of women as

protectors of the environment as "women have an inherent connection to nature based on their

relationship with the environment and their consistent proximity to natural resources" (Shiva &

Mies (1993), as cited in MacSwain, 2009, p. 26). While a review of eco-feminism is beyond the

scope of this paper, it is helpful to explore Cameron's use of this common wisdom as the film at

once supports and opposes this cultural understanding.

At issue is the sequence where Sully prays to Eywa. Neytiri has explained to him that

Eywa does not respond to prayers, but Sully prays anyway. Because of his prayer, various

Pandoran beasts come to the aid of the Na'vi in their battle against the imperialists. Neytiri

joyfully hollers out in the midst of battle, "Eywa has heard you! Eywa has heard you!" In this

moment, Sully is once again portrayed as superior to the Na'vi. *He* is the one whom the deity

listens to and usurps the role of spiritual leadership from the Na'vi women. Seemingly, Cameron

is not content to allow Sully the role of White war leader for the Na'vi, but must buttress it with

Sully's ability to influence divine intervention.

A final issue of the intersection of spirituality and the environment is the megatext of the

film. Within the DVD case, is a flyer that encourages viewers to contribute financially to the

planting of trees. A glossy paperback by Wilhelm and Mathison (2009) is subtitled "An Activist

Survival Guide", which is a supplemental fiction that aggressively promotes the sacredness of

nature and the superiority of Na'vi culture and wholly implies that contemporary humans should

be activists for the Earth. Cameron has frequently commented on his intention to bring greater

awareness to the issue of ecological sustainability and the plight of indigenous peoples

(Holtmeier, 2010). Clearly, the intention is to create a cultural phenomenon for greater support

of the environment. Yet there is an absurd irony in the use of paper to promote saving trees.

The irony is furthered through the thematic storyline of 'seeing', where relational

understanding is attributed to the ability to see others through an unfiltered mind-set – but as

audience members, we only *see* through Sully's outsider perspective and experiences.

Furthermore, nostalgic sentiments for a simpler pastoral existence in harmony with the

environment are hard to swallow in a film of immense proportions for technological innovations

and financial profit.

One More Troubling Issue

Beyond the binary themes discussed above, the film depicts a related issue in troubling

ways. In the final moments of the film, Sully is undergoing a spiritual rite that will transfer his

soul from his human body to his avatar form. (This same ritual was unsuccessful for Augustine.)

This scene is reminiscent of White fantasies that have the White male "going native", but

surpasses it as Sully *becomes* the Other. His own identity is lost – his empathy pulls him away

from his own nature in favor of a nature that he empathizes with and appears to be 'better' than

the one he has (Sideris, 2010). The final moment comes when his eyes pop open and the

audience cheers as they are assured that Sully has survived. The transformation is quite

problematic. As Sully is a paraplegic, what does this say to the disabled? The conclusion

appears to be adolescent wish fulfillment for Whites as well as the disabled. However, the result

carries an undercurrent of denigrating the disabled by having the hero reject his physical

limitations. Furthermore, the metamorphosis is integral to an idealized resolution for the romantic subplot. By transforming Sully into a Na'vi, audiences will never be troubled by the possibility of miscegenation through the human/alien children of Sully and Neytiri.

Understandings and Misunderstandings

There are several positive cultural understandings in *Avatar*, which include scorning corporate imperialism, supporting respect for indigenous peoples, prominent female characters in leadership roles, and reverence for the natural world. In addition, Cameron had the grace to hire actors of color to provide the voices and physical framing of the computerized Na'vi characters. Yet these understandings are outweighed by the disturbing implications for cultural misunderstandings. There is a rejection of empirical knowledge and education. The film devolves into a White guilt fantasy where historical sins can be redeemed. There is a complete neglect of miners as characters, so class-consciousness within White culture is ignored in favor of racial consciousness. There is a megatext that indicates planting trees is more useful than engaging in difficult dialogues about difference. The impact on non-white global viewers is more problematic as White colonialism and corporate imperialism is a lived experience within their cultures, and the film is naïve and simplistic in its depiction of indigenous peoples and White male messiahs. In light of the contrasts presented in the film, and the global audience, there is an ideal opportunity to begin a conversation.

Creating the Conversation

Since the film essentially avoids difficult conversations on the themes depicted, perhaps educators and community activists can take the film and use it as a tool to begin reflection and discussion. As *Avatar* has been hugely successful, the film provides the potential of being a text that is familiar to large groups of diverse people. A common experience as the point of entry for

discussions is not only useful, but also utilizing a film can provide a context that is safer than actual lived experiences.

Kaveney (2010) insists there are positive consequences for the film's troubling neo-colonialist themes:

> In a post-colonial world, in which we are all dealing with our unconscious assumptions about racism, sexism, imperialism, and capitalism as normative, it is imperative that stories about contacts between cultures be told. [It is also] inevitable and correct that they will be subject to criticism. These are conversations that need to be had, rather than a set of demands and rules to which creators should sign up. The demand that creators not screw up needs to be the demand that creators try to minimize their screw-ups--and this, I would argue, Cameron has at least endeavoured to do (para. 10).

While I disagree with Kaveney's conclusion that Cameron tried not to "screw-up", I agree that creators should not have demands placed on their creative actions. It is just as important to have a narrow-minded view, as it is to have a progressive mind-set.

Implications for Leadership

Films and other art projects that neglect the progress made by compassionate reflective people to overcome barriers to social and political parity are arguably necessary. There is value in being able to point to financially successful films and indicate where the socio-political understandings are not credible in an enlightened contemporary society. The point is not to decide that immature voices, such as Cameron's, need to be dismissed or that his films require a boycott protest. The point is to redirect the understandings through the collective experience of both the film and dialogue.

Challenging acceptance of superficial understandings requires leadership. Yet, I would argue, the challenge does not necessarily need to be organized mass activism. Indeed, there is always a possibility for a backlash and a defensive posture against protestors. Quiet, thoughtful dissension can perhaps be more beneficial within a structure of relational practice. Everyday leadership within one's own community and sphere of influence can allow for informal discussion of the poorly conceived narrative as it relates to social issues. There should be an appreciation of the positive understandings of the film, such as planting trees. However, an informal everyday leader could also begin conversations with their fellow tree planters about the socio-economic issues that trigger the depletion of the rain forest in emerging nations or prevent wealthy nations from embracing sustainability. An everyday leader can discuss the significant racial issues, perhaps finding communal spaces, such as houses of worship, to offer a conversation that will advance cultural awareness of the Other. Advocates for women, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, higher education, and preserving the environment all have an opportunity to view and discuss the issues covered in the film with community groups.

I would encourage leaders – formal and informal – who are concerned with issues of social justice to present the positive and problematic issues of the film in a forum for honest reflection and conversation. When the film is viewed without the emotional suction of the spectacle, there are challenging ideologies being presented. The film is not wholly malicious, nor is it wholly virtuous. A little like the real world. The greater cause for apprehension would be to allow superficial understandings of important social issues to go unchallenged.

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