

THE AVATAR BLUES

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All Souls NYC

We've seen it all before: a love story set against the backdrop of a battle between good guys and bad guys. The good guys are far outnumbered; the bad guys are far better armed. Against impossible odds, the good guys win and the boy gets the girl in the end.

We've seen it all before, and yet for some reason millions of us humans are seeing it again these days in the form of the movie Avatar. Avatar is the biggest grossing movie of all time, currently at \$2,618,020,264. Even if you haven't seen it, you probably know the plot by now: A paraplegic Marine Jake Sully is sent to the far-away planet of Pandora where the U.S. military is trying to drive off the native people, called the "Na'vi" in order to mine their land for a precious material. Jake's job is to infiltrate the Na'vi people and gain intelligence with the use of an "avatar" identity.

The word "avatar" is a Sanskrit word that means a "manifestation" or "incarnation." The word is used in two ways. In theological terms, an avatar is incarnation of a deity in human or animal form. It's usually used in Hinduism, but Christians might think of Jesus an avatar as well – God in a human body.

The other use of the word "avatar" is the one James Cameron had in mind for the movie. In the computer gaming world, an avatar is a computer user's onscreen representation. The computer user sits at home online and plays God manifesting as the avatar within the fantastic world of the game. In the movie, Jake's avatar looks like one of the Na'vi people – it's blue and nine feet tall and has a tail. But he controls it remotely from a control center. While he's hooked up to the control machines, he sees what the avatar sees, hears what the avatar hears and is completely immersed in its world. Through his manifestation, Jake begins to bond with the native tribe and eventually identifies more

closely with his avatar body and the culture of the Na'vi than with his own body and his own culture.

We, the viewers, get to see the Na'vi world through Jake's eyes. What he sees on planet Pandora is a deeply spiritual people living in harmony with one another and with nature. Here they celebrate the interdependent web. When the Na'vi greet each other, they say, "I see you," deliberately recognizing the sacred essence of the other and offering respect and connection. They form a physical bond with humans and animals through connecting tendrils with them. The tendrils look like brain neuron endings connecting. They speak of a great force called Eywa, but it doesn't seem that they so much worship this force as experience it in the interconnections of nature. The focal point of their spiritual life is a giant luminescent tree called the Tree of Souls with a root system so vast, it connects with the nervous systems of all living things. The Na'vi are part of nature. And the natural world they inhabit is a beautiful wilderness, pristine and unsullied.

And then the viewer continues on this journey with Jake and we see our world contrasted with Pandora. As Jake begins to feel more and more Na'vi himself (Na'vi, by the way, means "prophet" in Hebrew), he looks back at earth and we get to see *our* culture through his *alien* eyes. It's not a pretty sight: he sees a culture of greed that wants to plunder the natural resources of a beautiful planet. He sees a hierarchical, militaristic civilization with little respect for the peace-loving Na'vi. He sees a society in which people do not really "see" one another.

Pandora is a vision of paradise. It's a version of the Promised Land that people have longed for since the beginning of civilization. We've seen it all before, but we humans hunger to see it again and again – images and promises of that land, again and again. It's an ancient archetype; both a place and a time. For many Jews and Christians the symbol of this place and time has been Zion-- a place flowing with milk and honey; a time when, in the words of the Hebrew prophet Micah, "they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against

nation; ...they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.” Since the Babylonian exile, Jewish and Christian art has given us recurring dreams of this time and place. And the portrayal of Pandora in Avatar conjures it as well.

Avatar seems to have hit a nerve internationally. The story is universal, and people around the world are interpreting it and adopting it as their own. Palestinians in the Gaza strip are painting themselves blue like the Na’vi people to protest against Israeli domination. The Chinese government, fearing that people might equate the Na’vi with Tibetans or the Falun Gong, shut the movie down in most theatres in China. Conservatives in the U.S. are calling the film an anti-American attack on the war in Iraq and saying that “seeing the movie avatar is nothing but a tithe to far-left cultists.”

And according to CNN thousands of people have come down with a syndrome now known as “Avatar depression.” One blogger wrote, "When I woke up this morning after watching Avatar for the first time yesterday, the world seemed ... gray. It was like my whole life, everything I've done ... just seems so ... meaningless. ... I live in a dying world." If you go online, you can find this kind of sorrow echoed in a thousand different ways.

These intense emotional reactions to the movie have engendered an even more intense backlash from people who feel threatened by its message. They're all leaping to analyze the cause of the avatar blues: Conservatives see it as part of the liberal agenda. One blogger wrote, “I’m just guessing here, but those [depressed] folks are probably Obama voters. ... I think liberals overall have a hard time with reality.” Another wrote, “This is all about liberals whining-can’t we all just get along? No. I’m sorry. We never have and we never will.”

A CNN story came out investigating the cause of the avatar blues and they were trying to be objective, so rather than politicize the story, they psychologized it. They literally interviewed two psychologist experts asking, “Why are all these people depressed after

watching Avatar?” One answered that these folks were probably lonely or depressed to begin with – they had few friends and maybe were out of work because of the economy. The other said that the effects and the 3-D technology were so good, these poor victims were completely transported into an escapist, perfect world of princes and princesses that real life could never match and so they emerged depressed.

Everyone blamed the individuals for being deficient in some way – lonely, addicted to fantasy, victims of liberal propaganda, gullible, needing to “get a life.” But no one that I could find in my research stated what to me was the obvious:

The people struck with the Avatar blues are *legitimately* grieving the tragedy of our world – grieving the destruction of our environment, the wars, the cruelties, the isolation, and all the ways in which we as individuals are rarely really seen by others. The movie heightened their awareness of the chasm between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be. They came away feeling alienated from our culture, and *appropriately so*. Sometimes one can feel depressed about something because it’s depressing! As Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, “There are some things in our social system to which all of us ought to be maladjusted.”

This kind of grief is not new. Avatar the film is an expression of a kind of Avatar blues that long pre-dated the film. We heard an older version in the Biblical lament that Cory read earlier – “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and *wept* when we remembered Zion.” This kind of lament has been cried by every people that has been oppressed or exiled or denied their full humanity by powerful cultural institutions.

It is not just a few lost souls who feel this grief. In fact it may be those of us who are most accepting of this world as it is who are the true lost souls; we who have lost touch with the part of ourselves that can imagine a different world. Maybe we who react with such vitriol when we encounter the Avatar blues in others are overcompensating for the pain of all the losses we’ve had to endure. We’ve all had to do some internal gymnastics

to adapt to this world and maybe being reminded of that is just too hard. It's easier to try to forget the ways in which our own divine spark has had to be buried.

But I believe that the divine spark still resides within each of us. In the original Sanskrit sense of the word I believe that *we are all avatars*. We are all divine creatures manifesting in human form, walking around on this earth. We are all tender in the middle with a sacred soft spot of hope, innocence, love, and wonder. We all know deep down that we are truly interconnected and that one cannot flourish at the expense of another.

And yet, we also know that our sacred essence often goes unrecognized in this world of calculations, greed, prejudice, and efficiency. We are not often seen as the avatars that we really are. We yearn for someone to say, "I see you" as the Na'vi say to one another in greeting. How we long to be recognized for what we are! On some level I think we *all* have the avatar blues. Whether it's deeply buried or close to the surface, whether we feel it all the time or haven't felt it since we were ten years old, I think there's a part of each of us that grieves.

And so we replay the story of the exile from Zion to Babylon. We replay stories that reflect our deepest longings for the world as it ought to be – a natural world where we live at peace with all the creatures of the earth; a world in which we respect one another, really *see* others and are seen. We replay stories of our own innocence -- the simple, childlike core of all of us that is free and full of wonder.

We've seen it all before, but we want to see it – we need to see it – again and again. We need to talk about it, write about it, make movies about it, weep about it because only by keeping the vision alive can we have any hope of making it a reality. If you feel that longing, I urge you to honor it. Honor that voice within you that says, "There is something not right in this world." Honor that voice that insists that you are a divine being and so is everyone else.

To those who say that liberals have “a hard time with reality,” I say that our tradition calls upon us to *change reality*. Our tradition calls upon us to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person; to respect the interdependent web of which we are a part; to create a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; to never rest as long as we remain in Babylon and to never give up on the dream of the Promised Land.

[Closing hymn: By the Waters of Babylon]