

## Book Review

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Taylor, Bron, ed. *Avatar and Nature Spirituality*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013.

James Cameron's 2009 blockbuster motion picture might be best understood, according to Bron Taylor's Prologue, as a Rorschach test: everyone who sees it sees it differently.

Look past the shimmering 3D graphics and the mind-blowing panoramic spectacle, if you can – is *Avatar* meant to be a cautionary tale, a depiction of the ecological destruction our petroleum-addicted society is currently wreaking upon the earth? Is this a film about climate change and environmental justice? Or is it meant to be a condemnation of rampant global capitalism in general?

Is this in fact a scathing political film, which seeks to address the brutal realities of colonialism and the historical displacement and genocide of Indigenous peoples? It seems obvious that the Na'vi, the iconic tall, blue-skinned aboriginal inhabitants of the planet Pandora, represent Indigenous North Americans. Or is it?

But perhaps we're reading too much into this. What if none of these interpretations are true? What if Cameron's cinematic masterpiece is just that: an exemplary science fiction movie, a hi-tech space opera, a *Star Wars Episode IV* for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Can we not simply enjoy it for its own sake or for its technical wizardry and groundbreaking special effects?

Then again, many viewers have experienced powerful—even primal—emotional and visceral responses to the movie. With that in mind, perhaps we should think of it as a film about the potential that lies within every human being to connect, deeply and spiritually, with the natural world. And if so, might *Avatar* not be considered a legitimate work of religious art? This is motion picture as icon or sacramental, as psychopomp or spiritual guide. Or on the contrary: does Cameron's movie represent the next generation of dangerous New Age cults? Does it contribute to the desensitization of impressionable youth, and muddy the waters of faith and belief with syncretism?

The answer to all of these questions about possible interpretations of the movie is, in a word, "yes." As with the Rorschach inkblot it all depends on who you ask and in what context you pose the question. As the contributors to this anthology demonstrate, the film might appear to be all these things and more. *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* is divided into three parts, three broad categories that attempt to contain and organize some of these diverse voices and points of view. The essays assembled in Part 1, "Bringing *Avatar* into Focus," discuss the technical and literal aspects of the film: the details of its release, and its reception by the public. Readers are

guided through the cinematic, cultural and philosophical context into which *Avatar* was introduced.

Part 2, “Popular Responses,” gives the reader a glimpse into the online communities that formed following the film’s release: these include websites and internet forums for people who closely identify with the Na’vi. This section also features conversations with residents of Hawai’i, and with church communities in the province of Alberta. Both groups, due to their own unique geographies and histories, provide fascinating insights into the ecological and political issues that the film raises.

The third section’s title alone—“Critical, Emotional & Spiritual Reflections”—probably gives you some idea of just how many different scholarly perspectives this anthology represents. In that regard, *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* might best be understood as a reference book or encyclopedia: that is, not the type of book you want to sit down and read from cover to cover (having said that, I did read it from cover to cover and enjoyed it immensely). Part 3 is longer than Parts 1 and 2 combined, with forays into ecocriticism and embodiment, Indigenous studies and religious studies, semiotics and musicology.

The anthology’s most memorable moments, for me, are the chapters in this section by Bruce MacLennan and Joy H. Greenberg. MacClennan’s “Calling the Na’vi: Evolutionary Jungian Psychology and Nature Spirits” is a fine example of interdisciplinarity, exploring and testing the boundaries between archetypes and anthropology, and providing new insight into the “Post-historic Primitivism” that was introduced by Paul Shepard in 1992. Equally interdisciplinary, Greenberg’s “*Avatar* and Artemis: Indigenous Narratives as Neo-Romantic Environmental Ethics” facilitates a movie-club discussion between postmodern deconstructionism and Classical Greek myths of the hunt. And Greenberg’s is not the only chapter that addresses hunting, which is not only a salient theme in the movie (the Na’vi are hunter-gatherers, with intricate rituals surrounding the killing of game) but is also arguably one of the most potent and divisive topics in current eco-thinking.

It is difficult to come up with something critical about this anthology. One thing that surprised me was the apparent lack of Indigenous representation among the contributors’ voices. Surely *Avatar* made more waves, and bigger waves, among Indigenous thinkers? Where is the chapter by Jeannette Armstrong, or Winona LaDuke, or Makere Stewart-Harawira? Or Gerald Vizenor? Where are the literary heirs of Vine Deloria Jr.? To be fair, several chapters do explore Indigenous perspectives, and address the issues of colonialism and cultural appropriation that come up again and again regarding the film—and the Afterword by Daniel Heath Justice in this regard is certainly impressive on its own—but I was still left with the sense that there is so much more to be said. Of course this is not a fault of the anthology or its editor; in fact perhaps

it becomes the highest form of compliment. How many books will you read this year that create the potential for so much discussion? Bron Taylor should be commended for his far-sightedness and his sense of balance, for his deft handling of so much disparate material, which has resulted in such a scholarly yet accessible and genuinely enjoyable anthology.

If you're a sci-fi buff or a student of film studies or simply a devoted *Avatar* fan, this might be the book for you. If you're interested in ecocriticism and the analysis of popular culture, this is the book for you. If you find yourself drawn to the complex intersections of religion and environmentalism—and indigeneity and myth—you should definitely read *Avatar and Nature Spirituality*.

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