

The Battle To Define ‘*Avatar* Spirituality’

Bron Taylor

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What inspired you to write *Avatar and Nature Spirituality*?

When I first saw *Avatar*, like most viewers, I found the bio-luminescent landscape of Pandora stunningly beautiful. I was also moved by the story lines: the against-all-odds resistance by the native inhabitants of Pandora against violent, imperial invaders; the turncoats from the invading forces who joined the resistance, in part by coming to love the habitats and inhabitants of the moon Pandora.

What really struck me about *Avatar*, however, was that it so closely exemplified what I had labeled *Dark Green Religion* in a book that was printed the very month it was released in December 2009. (See *Losing Old Gods / Finding Nature* here on RD.) In the film, the moon's aboriginal inhabitants, the Na'vi, had a reverence for nature and even an apparent biocentric value system, which was grounded in both Gaian and animistic spiritualities. Moreover, their resistance was to an imperial, mechanistic, industrial civilization that had already destroyed its own earthly habitat and was thus, inevitably, looking to seize resources from others. The film metaphorically expressed nature spiritualities and radical political understandings common among those engaged in what I had labeled dark green nature spiritualities.

I had observed through fieldwork in religious countercultures the ways in which the arts, including in popular culture, sometimes played important and even decisive roles in kindling or shaping the lives of environmental activists. So, noting the blockbuster nature of the film – which banked \$2.8 billion within the first two years after its release, 73% of which came from outside of the United States, and would have done even better had the Chinese government not cut short its run fearing it might precipitate resistance to its own development schemes – I wondered if the film might play a similar role for today. In short, I was especially curious about its reception – whether it would effectively promote dark green spirituality and resistance to environmental practices and policies that degrade environmental systems. So I was especially interested in the reception to the film among ordinary people around the world and issued a call for papers analyzing the film's reception.

I was also interested in the reception of the film by my scholarly colleagues. I expected, in a way that proved prescient, that it would face harsh criticism and from many angles, as well as ambivalent and more sympathetic critiques. I was certain that the ferment it would precipitate would be worth critical reflection and debate, so I reviewed submissions from diverse scholarly schools. Much of what I received I expected, and it is represented in the book, but there were also many surprises, including things I discovered in my own research for the book.

In short, I was inspired to produce this book because I thought the issues it raised, as well as the ferment it produced, would be good to think about and of interest to diverse audiences. I thought that it might even precipitate valuable discussions regarding the accelerating, global decline of biocultural diversity on our own planet, and what we might do to arrest it.

What is the most important take-home message for readers?

In my own wrap up to the book I argue that, despite the many disagreements about the film, there are important truths in the film's central themes, namely, that the spread of what we call civilization (first agricultural, later agro-industrial) has inexorably led to the destruction of both biological and cultural diversity. This is a reality that is seldom expressed in *any* nation today, for they are all wrapped up in pursuing economic growth with little concern for the damage this entails for peoples at the social margins let alone other species and environmental systems.

Is there anything you had to leave out?

No. I am glad the press made room for the best of the work I received, which accounts for its disciplinary and regional diversity.

What are some of the biggest misconceptions about your topic?

I think the biggest misconceptions result from people superimposing their pre-existing cognitive frames on the film without considering evidence that is contrary to their critical predispositions. As a result the filmmaker and the film have been labeled pro-civilization and anti-civilization, pro-science and anti-science, un-American and too American, anti-marine and pro-marine, racist and anti-racist, anti-indigenous and pro-indigenous, women-respecting and misogynistic, leftist and neoconservative, progressive and reactionary, activist and self-absorbed; and last but not least, pagan, atheistic, theistic, pantheistic, panentheistic, and animistic.

Avatar and Nature Spirituality is, I think, a salutary antidote to the knee-jerk judgments many people made about the film. It does so by providing diverse perspectives and a robust debate about it.

Did you have a specific audience in mind when writing?

I had multiple audiences in mind. Certainly those who love the film will find much of interest in it, even though some of the perspectives in it they will find challenging. By recruiting scholars from diverse disciplines to examine the film and its reception, think it will appeal to a wide range of scholars, including those in environmental, religious and indigenous studies, and those rooted in postmodern, post-colonial, literary, and film criticism. There are also mixed methods, social scientific studies of reactions to the film, perspectives engaging scientific resilience theory, and the reflections from an ethnomusicologist. Those drawn to interdisciplinary cultural studies will find much to ruminate in it.

Are you hoping to just inform readers? Entertain them? Piss them off?

I am hoping to complicate, and in many cases disrupt, everyone's views of the film: those who have categorically dismissed it as ethically, politically, or spiritually dangerous, as well as those who lionize it in an uncomplicated way as a heroic eco-revolutionary epic. I think the book will aggravate those who simply loved the film, and perhaps especially, will piss off those who love to hate it. That is also the fun of putting this book together and having one's own say in it. I like messing with those who think their own critical perspectives are 'all that.'

What alternative title would you give the book?

I would have liked for the contested, political nature of the book to be more clearly reflected in the title. One might get the impression from the title that the book is an airy-fairy volume extolling the virtues of the book, rather than a down-in-the-dirt wrestling match between those who resonate with it versus others who hate it, with many others both troubled and moved by it. I played with other titles that got to the notion of *Avatar as Cultural Battlefield*, but they all ended up too wordy to make a good title.

How do you feel about the cover?

I like it. The motion picture industry is very territorial about its images so the publisher managed to create a cover that is beautiful and that resembles Pandora fauna, without using images from the film. At the same time, I would have liked a cover with the mythic image of Hometree or the Tree of Souls, which would have better captured the arborphilia common among our species and that the film works with, to its emotional advantage.

Is there a book out there you wish you had written? Which one? Why?

Not really, except the ones that I have in mind but have not yet found the time to write.

What's your next book?

I am writing a book about radical environmentalism in North America, based on archival research and intermittent but substantial field work over more than twenty years. I am also excited about a complementary project, providing an open access digital archive of the movements most important tabloids and journals at its inception. The creation of this archive has been supported and will be hosted at the Environment and Society Portal of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich, Germany, which since its inception only about four years ago has rapidly become the world's premier think tank in the environmental humanities.

The Ted K Archive

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