

Nature Strikes Back: A Post-human Gaze into Eco-critical Narratives of James Cameron's *Avatar*

*Dođanın Geri Dönüşü:
James Cameron'ın Avatar'ının Eko-eleştirel Anlatılarına
İnsan Sonrası Bir Bakış*

Sutirtho Roy

MA Student
Calcutta University,
Department of English Language and Literature
ORCID: 0000-0003-2871-5916
sutirthoroy1998@gmail.com

The Dodo and the Bear: Nature Strikes Back: A Post-human Gaze into Eco-critical Narratives of James Cameron's *Avatar*

Abstract

The success of James Cameron's *Avatar* can be located in its stunning visuals, imaginative world-building and a straight-forward narrative propounding colonial and ecological concerns, which culminate in the oppressed successfully rooting out the white, Eurocentric oppressor. However, such allegorizing is limited by a gaze that locates the "human" as separate from the "animal" and "nature". This study aims to analyse the speculative biology of Pandora and its symbiotic ecosystem, which is posited as "better" than the 'invading' humans' metal-based technology. It questions the romanticised idea of nature as an assemblage of indigenous people, fauna and flora. Finally, this paper investigates the various anthropocentric currents running through the film, critiques the Na'vi's subtle 'humanistic' dominance over other fauna, and delves into the possibility of adopting a truly unbiased lens to encapsulate the experiences of the marginalized non-human.

Keywords

Avatar; post-humanism, anthropocentric, animal, nature, deep ecology, non-human, human

Öz

James Cameron'ın *Avatar*'ının başarısının sırrı onun çarpıcı görsellerinde, hayali dünya inşasında ve sömürgeci-ekolojik kaygıları öne çıkartan beyaz ve Avrupa-merkezci tahakküm kuran bakış açısında bulunabilir. Ancak bu tür bir alegorik anlatımın, "insan"ı "hayvan" ve "doğa"dan ayrı olarak konumlandıran bir bakış ile sınırlı olduğu açıktır. Bu çalışma, *Pandora*'nın yorumu açık biyolojisini ve "istilacı" insanların metal-bazlı teknolojisinden "daha iyi" olduğu öne sürülen ortak yaşama dayalı ekosistemini analiz etmeyi amaçlamakta ve yerli halkın, faunanın ve floranın romantize edilmiş doğa tasavvurunu sorgulamaktadır. Son olarak, bu makale film boyunca görünür olan çeşitli insan merkezli tasavvurları değerlendiriyor, Na'vi'nin faunanın diğer bölgeleri üzerindeki kırılğan "hümanist" hakimiyetini eleştiriyor ve ötelenmiş insan-dışı tecrübeleri gerçekten tarafsız bir mercekle tahayyül etme olasılığını araştırmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Avatar; post-hümanizm, insan-merkezlilik, hayvan, ayı, tabiat, derin ekoloji, insandışı, insan

James Cameron's *Avatar* made an everlasting impact on cinematic history through its stunning visuals, speculative world-building and a simple yet heart-warming story about an underdog who adopts the mantle of the 'chosen one' in an extra-terrestrial adaptation of the hero's journey¹. The eco-critical message is deceptively simple, in that it pits man against nature, the "good" natives against the "bad" invaders, colonized against the colonizers and so on. The film finds increasing relevance in an era of climate change, not only through its promise of sequels and its re-release across several countries (including China in 2021) but also through an analysis of the director's recent words:

We've got climate change, we've got deforestation, our relationship with nature is more at risk than it's ever been, and 'Avatar' is about those things, but it also is a timeless film... It was something that everybody everywhere could understand and emotionally related to.²

The allegory here speaks on several levels. The blue-skinned alien Na'vi, whose way of life is brought out to be implicitly superior through the narrative structure, secure victory over their attackers in a way that may have universal appeal to any marginalized group. Furthermore, in an inversion of the trope of alien invasion, the technologically superior human beings in their silvery robots and missile-firing helicopters are pitted against a multi-species assemblage of creatures, including sentient feline aliens (of whom several share the humans' language), a host of extra-terrestrial fauna, and a deified floral organism worshipped by the natives. This tree-like being is dubbed as "Eywa". It has roots extending throughout the forest, and functions as the focal point of a speculative hive mind with a neural network connecting creatures telepathically, through hair-like appendages which every Na'vi is born with. The very presence of this mother goddess, or world tree, seems to counter the deeply humanistic notions of Aristotle where he privileges the human mind over every other, while also regarding plants to be the lowest form of being.³

However, this paper aims to explore how, by positing a clear victory of nature against culture as we understand it, the movie reinforces the human/nature binary of the Anthropocene. This anti-humanist counter-gaze looks at human beings as the Other as opposed to the natural Self and brings to mind the fetishized notion of an untainted environment. Such a notion may have had its roots in The Age of Romantic

1 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), chap. 3.

2 Zhang Rui, "James Cameron: 'Avatar' Just as Relevant Today," China.org.cn, accessed March 12, 2021, http://www.china.org.cn/arts/2021-03/12/content_77302567.htm.

3 Aristotle, "On the Soul," in *Aristotle: De Anima*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (New York: Penguin Publishing, 1987), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00263604>.

Revival while possessing strong colonial undertones. Western Romanticism, partly originating as a response to the Industrial Revolution, associated the evils of society with the destruction of rural areas and poor living conditions and attributed them to rapid scientific and technological progress. Such progress, borne of humanistic notions of the Enlightenment, has been extrapolated into a speculative future, where, in the fictional universe of *Avatar*, the depletion of resources and current climate crisis of Earth have reached their heyday in the year 2154. The very backdrop of the plot makes it a converging site for several contemporary narratives in fiction and the real world. It embodies the desire to rethink exploitation of non-humans and ecology (envisaged in films such as *Ainbo: Spirit of the Amazon*, *Finding Dory*, *Padak*, *Rio* and *Ferdinand*, as well as a revamped popularity of older animation⁴) which highlight the necessity of critical animal studies and ecofeminism in discourse.

Avatar echoes an increasing scepticism with technology⁵, the uncanny fascination with dystopia⁶ and the ethical debates of the Alienocene⁷. The film subtly delves into the necessity of fleeing a doomed planet in an age of space exploration, an idea that has gripped the imagination in recent years⁸. Humanity's colonial impulse is transformed into a desire to mine the distant moon of the planet Pandora for resources. This endeavour is complicated by the presence of a thriving ecosystem with sentient extra-terrestrials whom the invaders try to relocate. The vessel for doing so is the avatar program, in which the selected candidates have their minds transferred into the body of a Na'vi tribesperson, which they can use to integrate themselves into the Other's society. The attempts to relocate occur in two phases – firstly by verbal coercion, where the avatar attempts to convince the Na'vi to move instead of humanistic health benefits, education and technological privileges, following the failure of which, the invaders resort to destructive fear-mongering. Such an extra-terrestrial

4 Steve Reviews, "Steve Reviews: The Plague Dogs," filmed June 2018 at YouTube, video, 16:23:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nw9Nb1Vuw-U>.

5 "Cyberphobia – the Fear of Technology," FearAZ.com, accessed August 31, 2021, <https://fearaz.com/cyberphobia-the-fear-of-technology/>.

6 "The Boom of Dystopia: Why We like to Imagine a Catastrophic Future," Teller Report, last modified October 15, 2019, <https://www.tellerreport.com/news/2019-10-15--the-boom-of-dystopia--why-we-like-to-imagine-a-catastrophic-future-.HyfoH5zFB.html>.

7 "What Is Alienocene?," Alienocene, accessed May 3, 2021, <https://alienocene.com/what-is-alienocene/>.

8 Fred Kennedy, "To Colonize Space or Not to Colonize: That Is the Question (for All of Us)," Forbes, last modified December 18, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/fredkennedy/2019/12/18/to-colonize-or-not-to-colonize--that-is-the-question-for-all-of-us/?sh=1572fa462367>.

exaggeration of the white man's burden is perhaps intentional, leading to it being dubbed as anti-Western, anti-American, anti-military and anti-human⁹.

Despite dismissing such critique as off base, Cameron seems to be consciously portraying such colonial mentality as inherently destructive, which is further reinforced when he depicts the corporate military contractors as the "Blackwater types"¹⁰. Characters such as Administrator Parker Selfridge and Colonel Miles Quaritch adopt overtly antagonistic roles, often in a comically extreme manner, evident in the former's response to the idea of genocide:

Killing the indigenous looks bad. But there's one thing the shareholders hate more than bad press, and that's a bad quarterly statement.¹¹

However, despite attempts to relocate the human to the margin, the narrative is implicitly coloured by Eurocentric humanistic notions throughout. By viewing the film through a post-human lens, this study aims to uncover how the film re-establishes binaries, complicates the problems it may have intended to solve, and raises meta-textual questions regarding the possibility of escaping the anthropocentric gaze entirely to solve said problems.

Anthropocentric Gaze on the Ecological Indian

The film, despite its design, fails to fully transcend Westernized anthropocentric ideals. Essentialist notions and rigid anthropogenic dualisms of mind/body, human/nature and nature/technology determine the course of the story. Humanity or the white, masculine Self is set up as the antagonist to the ecological Indians of nature. Shepard Krech defined such an archetype as one who is in deep harmony with nature, understands the systemic consequences of his actions and attempts to ensure that the Earth's harmonies are always in a state of balance.¹² The cultural misappropriation is evident in the Na'vi's scanty clothes, physiology of the Na'vi huntress Neytiri and the directorial intent of designing the indigenous woman's clothes akin to a Mayan Indian loincloth simply because a bikini-wearing alien would be unrealistic in an

9 "Is 'Avatar' a Message Movie? Absolutely, Says James Cameron," Los Angeles Times, last modified February 10, 2010, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-feb-10-la-en-cameron10-2010feb10-story.html>.

10 "Is 'Avatar' a message movie?"

11 *Avatar* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2009).

12 Shepard Krech, "The Ecological Indian: Myth and History," *Environmental History* 5, no. 3 (2000): 415, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3985490>.

alien world¹³. Their presence on screen is often associated with musical scores from the Na'vi culture, based on an assortment of Vietnamese, Northeast Indian, central African and other indigenous sounds “not readily recognizable by the average American movie-goer”¹⁴; a combination of musical material and devices which could be culturally identifiable as “indigenous”.

Such an assumption points to a homogenized idea of indigenous people which, in the words of Francesca Merlan, “presuppose a sphere of commonality among those who form a world collectively of ‘Indigenous peoples as opposed to the various others’”¹⁵. The Na'vi people are originally represented as ignoble savages before some Sky People (human beings), by adopting Jake's point of view, gradually regard them in a more benevolent light. The politics of representation bring to mind Edward Said's idea of the orient as a system of representations, framed by forces that brought the other, the exotic, the ‘orient’ into general Western learning, consciousness and Empire.¹⁶ This is perpetrated even by the most benevolent of the Sky People, such as Grace, whose English-language school, originally intended to confer Eurocentric scholarship on the natives, is only funded because it serves to further the invaders' exploitative endeavours. It is implied that the school “only teaches the Na'vi English so that they can trade away their natural resources and become better colonial subjects ... The classroom setting reinforces a kind of obedience” that is submissive¹⁷.

Justin Fritz rightly remarks on the use of the Na'vi, a “purposefully stereotypical indigenous population” to push forward its environmental message.¹⁸ The portrayal of tribal populations as the ideal stewards of nature arose with new environmental concerns during the last century, leading to the emergence of a public notion of nature as one “which “they” as a single entity are part of”¹⁹. Such an idea, despite its design

13 Richard Rushfield, “James Cameron Reveals His Quest to Build More Perfect CGI Boobs,” Gawker, accessed July 27, 2021, <https://gawker.com/5403302/james-cameron-reveals-his-quest-to-build-more-perfect-cgi-boobs>.

14 Wanda Bryant, “Creating the Music of the NA'VI in James Cameron's Avatar: An Ethnomusicologist's Role,” *Ethnomusicology Review*, (2012).

15 Francesca Merlan, “Indigeneity”, *Current Anthropology* 50, no. 3 (2009): 303-333, <https://doi.org/10.1086/597667>.

16 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 6.

17 Tom Ue and John James, “‘I See You’: Colonial Narratives and the Act of Seeing in Avatar,” Academia.edu, accessed July 24, 2021, https://www.academia.edu/11766875/_I_See_You_Colonial_Narratives_and_the_Act_of_Seeing_in_Avatar.

18 Justin Fritz, “Environmentalism and the ‘Ecological Indian’ in *Avatar*: A Visual Analysis,” *The Arbutus Review* 3, no. 1 (1969), 67-90, <https://doi.org/10.18357/tar31201211530>.

19 Fritz, “Environmentalism and the Ecological Indian in *Avatar*”, 67-90.

to posit a counter-gaze to exploitation, bears an ontological similarity with the Capitalocene, which Jason W Moore critiques:

...capitalism was built on excluding most humans from Humanity – indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, nearly all women, and even many white-skinned men (Slavs, Jews, the Irish). From the perspective of imperial administrators, merchants, planters, and conquistadores, these humans were not Human at all. They were regarded as part of Nature, along with trees and soils and rivers – and treated accordingly.²⁰

Such dualisms echo John James and Tom Ue’s belief that “Western culture’s failed attempts at anticolonialism hint at the continuance of Eurocentric values of superiority, which remain latent in the public consciousness”²¹. This occurs on two layers in the film. Firstly, by a meta-narrative homogenised vision of indigenous people, the film ties in with Richard A Rogers’ ideas of cultural exploitation, where commodification (for example, use of the *‘taparrabo* or the Mayan loincloth) plays a major role in how a dominant culture steals, distorts, and misrepresents the culture of subordinate peoples²². Secondly, the events of the film perpetrate a similar strain of thinking through the avatar project. The Na’vi body, in its inherent superiority over that of the human in purely physiological terms, allows its avatar to run, jump and climb trees and is better attuned to a jungle ecosystem. For the protagonist Jake Sully, the body of the tribesman returns his legs to him, thereby offering a temporary escape from his wheelchair-bound Self.

The very use of technology to commodify, not only the culture but the very flesh, bone and genetic endowments of the native inhabitants, is almost hyperreal. For Jake Sully, the avatar is not merely a device to understand and communicate with the natives, but a virtual-reality headset. It grants him the powers of an alien life-form in an open-world role-playing game while his feeble body is stuck in cryostasis. A common narrative device in science fiction texts such as *Ender’s Game* or *Ready Player One*, such a transformation affects the alienation of the real from the virtual, thereby highlighting the anthropocentric privileging of the mind over the body as a marker of identity. The creation of this split replicates only the physiological aspects of a Na’vi’s identity while ignoring the linguistic, socio-cultural and religious facets of the same, metanarratively playing upon the audience’s fantasy to possess the body of a blue-skinned Übermensch. The very word ‘avatar’, borrowed from Sanskrit, has

20 Jason W. Moore, “The Rise of Cheap Nature,” in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: CA: PM Press, 2016), 78-115.

21 Ue and James, “‘I See You’”.

22 Richard A. Rogers, “From Cultural Exchange TO Transculturation: A Review And Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation,” *Communication Theory* 16, no. 4 (2006): 474-503, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00277.x>.

been defined by Merriam Webster as “the incarnation of a Hindu deity”²³, and the usage of the same in movies and games hint at a sort of innate exotic appropriation, embodying mystical associations with the Orient; possessing the Na’vi body with the human mind, becomes an act of manifesting power.

The Na’vi are hardly the first freedom fighters on-screen who thwart foreign invaders. Their portrayal echoes George Lucas’ depiction of the Ewok as “a primitive creature that was still using sticks and stones and spears... lived in a primitive society that would be forced to take on the highly technological Empire”²⁴. Cameron’s feline Na’vi, Lucas’ furry Ewoks and Ursula Le Guinn’s Athsheans²⁵ not only combine nature and natives in a glorified package for Western consumption but through echoes of the Vietnamese War, act as their creators’ mouthpieces on issues of imperialism, war and conservation. This conservation has been rightly deemed by Paul Nadasdy to be “biased, judgemental and western in construct”²⁶, which looks at nature as pristine and in a constant movement towards homeostasis. The film’s idealisation of the Other way of life transforms indigenous cultures into stereotypical tree-huggers, brought to life for envisioning a Eurocentric attempt of relocating “nature” to the centre for propounding environmentalist concerns.

At the heart of such propaganda lies a tendency to marginalise and exert power over the exotic Orient. The wildness of this savage race, the extra-terrestrial Caliban, is implicitly hinted at throughout the narrative structures via the portrayal of the Na’vi’s animalistic gait. As the hypothetical camera follows Jake through the Na’vi’s home, they snarl and grab at him like caged animals. They are linguistically alienated from the ‘Sky People’ through their tongue, a good portion of which is comprised of snarls and growls. Francesca Ferrando attempts a post-human critique of anthropocentrism, to denote how the very term “human” is often used by a dominant culture to signify a privileged marker, which is denied to other *Homo sapiens*, who are then animalized²⁷. This is evident in cultures across space and time, through the paradigms

23 “Avatar,” Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster), accessed September 15, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/avatar>.

24 “Star Wars Was a Commentary on the Vietnam War,” In A Far Away Galaxy, last modified October 12, 2018, <https://www.inafarawaygalaxy.com/2018/10/george-lucas-star-wars-scripts-were.html>.

25 Ursula K. Le Guin, *The World for World Is Forest* (London: Granada Publishing, 1977).

26 P. Nadasdy, “Transcending the Debate over the Ecologically Noble Indian: Indigenous Peoples and Environmentalism”, *Ethnohistory* 52, no. 2 (January 2005): 291-331, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-52-2-291>.

27 Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, ed. Rosi Braidotti (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 80.

of Nazi/Jews, whites/ blacks, hetero-normative/ homosexual, upper caste/ untouchable, civilized settlers/ aboriginals, and so on.

The Na'vi, in the eyes of the Sky People, are denied of any humanity, and the very film can be said to perpetuate the same injustice by clubbing the misconceived ideas of indigenous identity and nature in one glorified package, without offering either the nuance that they deserve. Grace is regarded as the expert on the Na'vi culture without ever actually having been a part of their tribe, and such storytelling can be metanarratively linked to the filmmaker's adoption of indigenous cultures and belief systems, coloured by a white lens, to paint the picture of an alien world on the global screen. Both Grace and her creator dangerously stray into the realm of misrepresentation, which is often used to "say something"²⁸ to members of the dominant culture, such that the one who represents has the power to influence how the subordinate culture is perceived by the hegemonic overlords. Such an intention may not be entirely malicious as Grace and later on, Jake Sully, act as bridges of communication between the Na'vi and the humans with a fair degree of accuracy but reflects the very inability to separate one's anthropocentric biases or agenda from an objective depiction of experience.

The reinforcement of the civilization/ savagery dichotomy by outdated modes of anthropogenic thought, can not only be criticised by Ferrando's post-dualistic praxis of post-humanism²⁹, but is also inherently false. Instances of indigenous people destroying their environment abound throughout the world and can be traced back to the Palaeolithic Era.³⁰ There is no absolute, recorded point at which a community stops being 'indigenous' and becomes 'civilized', simply as it is impossible to point out when one group of people start becoming the 'indigenous' owners of their land considering *Homo sapiens* had always been a nomadic species.

The very concept of nature, as an assemblage of disparate elements (indigenous people, animals, inanimate objects) must thereby be called into question.

Nature Fights Back: A Technophobic Ecotopia

The director James Cameron remarks, in an interview conducted by the Los Angeles Times:

28 Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 2013), 15.

29 Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, 60.

30 Christopher Joyce, "New Study Says Ancient Humans Hunted Big Mammals To Extinction," NPR, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/04/19/604031141/new-study-says-ancient-humans-hunted-big-mammals-to-extinction>.

I think there's something amazingly satisfying when the hammerheads come out of the forest and start mowing down all the bad security enforcers... Nature gets to fight back... When did nature ever get to fight back in a movie?³¹

Such a view, especially about “bad” security enforcers, posits a simplistic and reduced view of the world in which the depicted identity of the security enforcers is made to adhere to a black-and-white morality. These enforcers are mostly denied a name, screen time or even a back story. What made them choose this job? What would be the repercussions if they quit? Do they have families they need to care about? The film ensures that such questions are not named, often overtly by placing these enforcers in large, metallic machines, homogenizing them not as individual men but as representations of the evil Man, in ways very similar to J. R. R. Tolkien's orcs³². Such an idea contrasts the film with the Japanese animated feature film, *Princess Mononoke*, where, despite the activities of human beings being deemed inherently destructive, the very perpetrators of said action are not brought out to be irredeemable villains, but actual people who are often left with no better option. However, in attempting to create an “environmentally conscious mainstream movie”³³, Cameron dismisses nuance to put forth an easily digestible didactic narrative as to why one must take the climate crisis seriously.

However, his choice of portrayal seems to be counter-intuitive to the very purpose. In response to Entertainment Weekly (“*Avatar* is the perfect eco-terrorism recruiting tool”), Cameron responds that he believes in eco-terrorism.³⁴ Such a statement, in conjunction with his aforementioned interview, hints at the impossibility of mutual coexistence with the environment, and presupposes the notion of nature as a composite, static entity, which Krech rebels against: “In the absence of human interference... natural systems are not inherently balanced or harmonious, and that left alone, biological communities do not automatically undergo predictable succession towards some steady-state climax community, which is an illusion”³⁵. This is evident in the very fact that modern human beings have been alive on Earth for a minute portion of the Earth's history, and have been absent for any of the five mass extinction events. To imply that human beings are responsible for all environmental disasters reinforces humanistic notions of human beings having supreme power, agency and responsibility. It is perhaps the large scale globalisation that makes the humanistic

31 “Is ‘Avatar’ a Message Movie?”

32 “Racism in Tolkien's Works,” Tolkien gateway, accessed September 15, 2021, http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Racism_in_Tolkien%27s_Works.

33 “Is ‘Avatar’ a Message Movie?”

34 Kim Priestap. “James Cameron: I Believe in Eco-Terrorism,” *Wizbang*, January 17, 2010, <https://www.wizbangblog.com/2010/01/17/james-cameron-i-believe-in-ecoterro-rism/>.

35 Krech, “The Ecological Indian”, 415.

processes of expansion more impactful, but elephants have been known to transform large swathes of forests into grasslands, as have long-necked, sauropod dinosaurs in the past. If the film had delved into a deeper exploration of its speculative fauna, we may even have witnessed the impact of the hammer-headed titanotheres³⁶ in shaping their topology.

The ontological division of the natural from the artificial, the cultural and the technological has been highlighted by Jason W Moore³⁷ who locates the very idea of the Anthropocene in the rise of capitalism; in the division of civilized Man's Society from that of Nature, associated with the former's exploitation of the latter. The Romantic poets, as well as Cameron's *Avatar* attempt to pose a counter-gaze to the same by calling for a return to Nature³⁸, but such a statement automatically places human beings as an entity opposed to it; something out and away from a naturally occurring ecosystem rather than another creature with a shared ancestry with apes and monkeys.

Emmanouil Aretoulakis believes that a post-humanist ecology "would dismiss nature altogether as a human(ist) construction that has the marks of objectification and anthropocentrism all over it"³⁹. The chronological split between culture and nature is further problematized by naturally occurring examples of animals using tools⁴⁰, livestock⁴¹ and even fire⁴², to therefore deconstruct the privileged status of *Homo sapiens* as the privileged possessor of such markers. The cinematic language of *Avatar* brings out fire as a foreign element as the camera pans around Jake Sully in a circle when the viper wolves attack him; such action is accompanied by snarls, growls and tense music. The light of this fire falls on the combatants, which combines with the close-up shots to illuminate their teeth, sweat and bestial expressions unnaturally. These scenes of battle are opposed to the aftermath when they are painted by the

36 "Hammerhead Titanotheres," *Avatar Wiki*, accessed September 15, 2021, https://james-camerons-avatar.fandom.com/wiki/Hammerhead_Titanotheres.

37 Moore, "The Rise of Cheap Nature", 78-115.

38 R Teubner and A Latter, *An Analysis of William Wordsworth's Preface to The Lyrical Ballads* (1st ed.), (n.p.: n.p., 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781912453290>.

39 "Towards a PostHumanist Ecology," Taylor & Francis, accessed July 24, 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13825577.2014.917005>.

40 "Toolmaking," Jane Goodall Institute UK, accessed September 15, 2021, <https://www.janegoodall.org.uk/chimpanzees/chimpanzee-central/15-chimpanzees/chimpanzee-central/19-toolmaking#:~:text=Eventually%20it%20was%20discovered%20that,and%20throwing%20rocks%20as%20missiles>.

41 Katy Willis, "Ants Farming Aphids and What to Do about It!," *Sufficiency*, August 18, 2021, <https://realsufficiency.com/ants-farming-aphids/>.

42 Julia John, "Australian 'Firehawks' Use Fire to Catch Prey," *The Wildlife Society*, May 24, 2018, <https://wildlife.org/australian-firehawks-use-fire-to-catch-prey/>.

bioluminescent flora of the forest and a more soothing silence colours the scene. The flora automatically lights up when the firewood is extinguished – further clarifying the divide between “natural” and “man-made” through an implied mutual exclusivity.

Our very language and gaze which objectifies and romanticises nature risks unloading our anthropocentric biases onto what nature should be, instead of rethinking the very terminology to look at the environment, of which one has always been a part, and hence, to which there is no necessity to return. The environment around us had always been in a state of flux and includes both concrete jungles and pastoral idylls. Grass does seem greener in such a conventionally naturalistic environment, both literally and figuratively, as brought out by the film’s treatment of the environment with and without the presence of technology. Jake first enters the world in his new body and starts running, with the camera focussing on his gleeful expressions, the thuds of his feet as he kicks up dirt and his foot prints on the ground. This is contrasted with his life indoors, accompanied by the harsh clanking sound of the machines and the mecha suits⁴³ piloted by the Marines. The verbal exchange between Grace and Jake is coloured by rebukes during their first meeting indoors, but this is replaced by a more gleeful happier exchange as they meet in their avatar bodies. Grace even throws him a fruit to eat. The avatar skins and mecha suits are two different kinds of bodily extensions that are piloted by human beings, but one is deemed more natural than the other. While the former shows up on screen while accompanied by soft forest sounds and stealth movements, the latter is accompanied by harsh clanking noises. The avatars roam, jump and climb around on the natural landscape, with the camera making full use of the creative aspects of fictional topography; the robots are rarely afforded a similar visual privilege. The aerial view of the landscape, accompanied by an epic score is contrasted with the dead silence indoors and close-ups of rusty metal in dark or dimly lit rooms, even though one may arguably find the technological innovations majestic in their own right.

Even the helicopter which touches down in the forest seems to disturb its natural quietness through harsh chopper sounds, accompanied by the sight of several native fauna fleeing the scene. The audience, who seem to meta-narratively shift into their ‘avatar’ bodies along with Jake, has little to no problem agreeing to his words regarding his new avatar:

Everything is backwards now, like out there is the true world and in here is the dream.⁴⁴

The dimness of the interior with harsh blue light is contrasted with the soft sunlight of the outdoors, and even the dripping of water indoors seems to act as a foil to the epic grandeur of the waterfalls in the floating mountains. The constant cinematic usage of flashbacks and cuts between Jake’s experiences in the human world to his new

43 “Mecha Suit,” Avatar Wiki, accessed September 15, 2021, https://avatar.fandom.com/wiki/Mecha_suit.

44 *Avatar* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2009).

life as an avatar emphasizes the blurring of time and identity. Jake seems to become Cameron's mouthpiece when he records his transformation from a paraplegic Marine to an extra-terrestrial life form of nature in his video log (an aspect of technology he abandons at the end of the film before embracing his new identity). The rush of wind and swift tracking shots as Jake and Neytiri fly on their banshees is accompanied by steady gleeful smiles when they hold each other's gaze. We, and especially the first movie-goers who experience such scenes in 3D at the movie theatre, can almost nod along with a simulated adrenaline rush when Jake says: "I was born to do this."⁴⁵

The film posits a counter-gaze to Aristotle's essentially superior notion of a man for whose sake nature exists as a teleological resource⁴⁶, an idea critiqued by Moore⁴⁷ and Haraway⁴⁸ in their discussion of the Capitalocene. However, by reconstructing the same binary instead of dissolving it, or by determining anything human-made to be unnatural and destructive, it shifts the unequal power differential to the other side. The solution may lie in post-anthropocentrism, as conceived by Cary Wolfe, which relegates the nonhuman to a position alongside the human, instead of above or below it⁴⁹.

The point of view which *Avatar* espouses, negates deep ecological concerns about the inherent worth of all life – emphasized not so subtly by the film's end, where the 'Sky People' are forced to return to their dying world. While here, the human beings are truly an invasive species, their very retreat, almost like a foreign pathogen being coughed up by the biosphere of Pandora, makes an uncomfortable use of the imagination to potentially portray anti-humanistic ideas – what if we human beings were to go extinct? Would the Earth benefit from our absence, and become an ecotopia like Pandora? Francesca Ferrando argues against such a fatalistic stance:

Even if post-humanistic and post-anthropocentric social performances may eventually overcome some forms of discrimination, such as racism, sexism, and speciesism, if we do not embrace post-dualism and critically address, and deconstruct, rigid forms of dualistic identity-formation practices, other forms of discrimination will consistently continue to arise.⁵⁰

45 *Avatar* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2009).

46 Aristotle, "Politics," in *Oxford World's Classics: Aristotle: Politics*, ed. R. F. Stanley, trans. Ernest Barker (USA: Blackwell Publishing, January 1995), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00258611>.

47 Moore, "The Rise of Cheap Nature", 78-115.

48 Donna J. Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 1 (2015), 159-165, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615934>.

49 Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis, Minn: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2011), 49-98.

50 Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, 189.

Ferrando agrees with Graham Harman’s view regarding Object-Oriented Ontology, a philosophy that rethinks the privileged position of human beings over non-humans; the removal of *Homo sapiens* from the centre of the universe does not automatically entertain the lack of worth in humanity itself⁵¹. However, *Avatar*, by chasing away most of humanity back to Earth, seems to posit such a mindset. The Na’vi lets them live and leave, but such benevolence is rendered null by the ending, which fails to guarantee a sustainable life to the returning Sky People.

Jake Sully, despite being portrayed as the Messiah of the indigenous people, is hardly more heroic than the human beings he fights against. His reason for turning against the human beings is in part, owing to his love affair with the huntress and daughter of the chieftain Neytiri (“I fell in love with the forest and the Omaticaya people... And with you”⁵²). Cameron remarks that the movie can work as a straightforward adventure or a romance but “the message isn’t going over people’s heads”⁵³. The didactic and escapist aspects of the film complement each other, especially in how they intersect in Jake’s actions. His love for Neytiri and the freedom he associates with this new life – a freedom that was denied to him due to the loss of his legs, invoking anthropocentric ideas of ableism – affects a positive transference to feelings for his ‘new home’. This may have led to his portrayal as the poster boy for the film’s environmentalist campaign. It is Jake’s position as the privileged outsider, with a deeper view of the ‘Other’ world that had allowed him a gaze not afforded to others – who can say if just another ‘evil’ security enforcer had been in his place that he would not have come up with a better way of negotiating between two worlds? Jake’s Machiavellian motivation⁵⁴ to learn the culture of the Na’vi evolves into a desire to integrate into their society, and one may even locate the sting of betrayal in his sudden siding with the natives, to not only fight against but, at the end of the story, righteously condemn them to habitation on a dying planet. Before the battle, he speaks to Eywa regarding human beings:

See the world we come from. There’s no green there. They killed their Mother.⁵⁵

The progression from “we” to “they” within the span of a few words reflect his shifted allegiance which interchanges the Self with the Other instead of attempting a union of both. He becomes a part of ‘nature’ but such is ironically possible because of

51 Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: a New Theory of Everything* (London, UK: Pelican, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2018), 255-261.

52 *Avatar* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2009).

53 “Is Avatar a message movie?”

54 “Second Language Acquisition By Rod Ellis,” ID:5c2e70ccbfad6, accessed July 24, 2021, <https://baixardoc.com/documents/second-language-acquisition-by-rod-ellis-5c2e70ccbfad6>

55 *Avatar* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2009).

his initial initiation into the ‘avatar’ program through advanced technology designed by the insane Sky People.

The idea of technology being destructive is hammered home throughout the film, in no small part by villainizing the people who seem to represent it. The close-up shots on the characters’ eyes are important formal strategies used throughout the film. During the linkage to one’s avatar, the camera focuses on the eyes, often open in wonder and amazement in either body, to highlight the fascination and desire to embrace nature. Wide eyes are contrasted with a form of narrowed vision⁵⁶, tight lips, dismissive tone and a cold expression, which are traits associated with antagonists like Quaritch and Selfridge.

Colonel Miles Quaritch is the overarching antagonist of the film, and his conflict with Jake and Neytiri seems to place the ideas of technology and masculinity in opposition to nature and femininity. The association of land with woman, often through images of fertility, have occupied the human imagination across cultures, such that “the idea of the joint oppression of women and nature by male-controlled societies”⁵⁷ sits at the centre of eco-feminism. Eco-feminist concerns come into play through the image of the Mother Tree Eywa as well as the idea, that the home planet of the Sky People was the mother that they had killed. It is finally reinforced by shifting the power differential when the Colonel, piloting a giant robot, is killed by an arrow fired from Neytiri’s wooden bow. The re-establishment of this particular anthropocentric binary, despite playing into anthropocentric dualisms, does posit the victory of the oppressed over the oppressor in a manner that has universal appeal. However, concurrently, it alienates technology as the Other through the re-creation of the Nature/Technology boundary, in its attempt to offer a counter gaze to transhumanist, techno-centric concerns of one-directional technological progress. Such a line of thought may posit an essentialist way of thinking, and possibly risk demeaning the benefits of technological advancements – especially in the realms of medicine, locomotion and enhancements of both ‘able’ and ‘disabled’ bodies.

It may also raise questions as to what comes under the wide umbrella of technology – is it limited to the missile-firing helicopters or does it also comprise of the Na’vi’s simple hunting equipment? Where do we draw the line at progress before it becomes destructive? However, the film does not grapple with post-dualistic questions. This dualistic mode of storytelling, which romanticises the idea of nature untainted by technological forces, is no less anthropocentric than the Romantic poetry of the

56 Stephen D Angelo. “Why Our Eyes Give Away What We’re Feeling Inside,” *Futurity*, April 16, 2017, <https://www.futurity.org/eyes-emotions-evolution-1402832-2/#:~:text=Why%20are%20our%20eyes%20so%20expressive%3F%20It%20started,new%20research%20suggests%2C%20and%20evolved%20to%20communicate%20emotion>.

57 “Avatar - The Littlest Vulpes,” *Google Sites*, accessed July 24, 2021, <https://sites.google.com/a/elmira.edu/melissa/movies/avatar>.

1800s, in the way that it makes use of anthropogenic biases of opposition and exclusivity like the very the ideas to which it reacts.

The natural ecosystem with Eywa at the centre is repeatedly deemed superior to any technology. Colonel Quartich promises Jake new legs, and while this is temporarily achieved through the ‘avatar’ program, a final shedding of disabilities occurs only with the fantastical neural science of Eywa. The camera pans over still, silent images of the forest, which is only disturbed by large explosions and accompanied by the entry of large metallic vessels, in air and on land, as objects which do not belong there. A barrage of missiles destroys the Tree of Souls. As the destruction takes place, the camera shifts between close-ups of the assailants in their grey machines, often sipping coffee with indifference, while the natives on the ground flee from a destroyed ecotopia with wounded bodies and tear-stained eyes.

The use of wide shots, once used to establish the majesty of Pandora, soon pans over a destroyed landscape with metallic helicopters hovering before it like a plague of insects. Pandora undergoes a visual transformation on-screen after human technology comes into play, and only negatively so. Having been faced with the destructive potential of technology – which is often implicitly deemed more alien than the extra-terrestrial landscape – the audience is allowed to revel in cathartic joy when nature fights back and the Pandoran wildlife, in their myriad forms and shapes, attack and destroy the machines in sequences full of spectacle and thrill. Jake, as the protagonist, enacts this symbolic destruction on a microcosmic level by attempting to disable a bulldozer with a rock, which also serves as one of the first signs of his shifting allegiance. Donna Haraway specifies the location of a human in a hybridised oneness with nature and technology:

...a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.⁵⁸

The film refuses to admit such an assemblage as a viable reality, even if it seemingly does so on certain occasions. Mary Anne Potter dubs the film’s depiction of technology as means through which this new ecosystem is not only “accessed and invaded”, but also “explored and understood”⁵⁹. The instances of the second are limited, subtle and often merely intended for audience exposure through a simulated knowledge of the alien ecosystem. Despite the pods facilitating a cryogenic transfer of consciousness that is linked with greater knowledge and awareness of the Other, Pandora, as

58 Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” *Manifestly Haraway*, Edited by Donna J Haraway. (Minneapolis, Miss: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2016), 3-90, <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816650477.003.0001>.

59 Mary-Anne Potter, “Human-Nature-Technology Interfaces within the Avatar Cinema-Scape,” *Image & Text*, no. 33 (2019), 12, <https://doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2018/n33a9>.

an ecotopia, is inherently brought out to be better off without such technology. The hero Jake Sully defends his new home against the threat of a colonized, militarised Technology.⁶⁰

Adopting the Na’vi Gaze: The ‘Other’ Fauna on Pandora

Colonel Quaritch warns “that every living thing that flies, crawls, or squats in the mud”⁶¹ of Pandora wants to devour any human who sets a foot on land. Such is hardly the view that the film espouses, but is meant to emphasize the antagonistic nature of the Colonel. With due credit, the wild life on Pandora is painted in a fashion akin to the observable ecosystems of Earth, and not as exaggerated monsters as one may find in *Anaconda*. The film even condemns Selfridge’s scornful response upon being informed of the similarity of electrochemical communication between the tree roots of Pandora to the synapses of the brain: “What the hell have you been smoking out there?”⁶² Indeed, in its contrast of a positive, humanistic desire to explore and know about the world with the anthropocentric urge to control through denial of complexity to the conquered entities, the film is successful.

However, it is truly in an accurate representation of the ecosystem and its relationship with the Na’vi that other anthropogenic dogmas seep in. Nature is portrayed in a harmonic *telos* but the text is littered with instances where the disturbance of this balance, mostly through the intentional or unintentional actions of the Sky People and their avatars, manifests its destructive potential, red in tooth and claw⁶³. Jake spooks the hammerheads, endangers himself (and consequently his fellow avatars) through his obliviousness to the thanator’s presence.

The film’s stance about humanity being a disease that ails this foreign ecosystem is no clearer than in Jake’s first encounter with the viperwolves, where having been offered a sign from Eywa, the huntress Neytiri kills an attacking horde of predators to save Jake’s life. Neytiri strikes him savagely when he thanks her for her “apparent” benevolence, bringing out her frustration and anger at having taken lives “which did not need to die” if Jake had not ignorantly bumped into their territory “like a baby”⁶⁴.

Jake, attempting to form a bond (*tsaheylu*) with the mountain banshee, grabs onto its neural fibres and forcibly tries to establish a telepathic connection. The film,

60 Potter, “Human-Nature-Technology Interfaces within the Avatar Cinema-Scape,” 12

61 *Avatar* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2009).

62 *Avatar* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2009).

63 Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, ed. Susan Shatto (Oxford: Clarendon Pr., 1982), Canto 55.

64 *Avatar* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2009).

through the expressions of the other Na'vi, construes this sequence as a ridiculous humanistic desire for control, to bring out the human being as an entity disjoint from his environment. This chaotic encounter is contrasted to the calm panning of the camera over the direhorse's features as well as close-ups, as Neytiri describes the process of forming a telepathic connection:

That is *tsaheylu*. The bond. Feel her... feel her heartbeat, her breath... feel her strong legs...⁶⁵

Such scenes bring out the film's seeming adherence to ideas of deep ecology, manifested through the neural fibres which enable a Na'vi to establish a connection with other creatures of the forest. However, it not only serves as a visual metaphor that connects indigenous people to their environment but establishes a subtle hierarchy between the human and the animal. 'Human' here refers, not to the actual Sky People but the very members of the Na'vi tribe, who, despite being depicted as extra-terrestrials, are limited in scope by having been designed by human filmmakers, thereby denying them the scope of transcending essential anthropogenic ideas in their way of life. Even this very agglomeration of neural fibres, acting as an extension of the body and the self, is used as a device to control and conquer – stated quite explicitly in Neytiri's words to Jake regarding his direhorse:

You may tell her what to do... inside. For now, say where to go.⁶⁶

The Na'vi people try to lead the direhorse to the figurative water, and also drink it. Their lifestyle, through contrast, posits a better relationship of owners with their domesticated creatures than that of the Sky People, but the very power hierarchy of owner/ owned is not dissolved. This is further seen in the fact that this bond is established, through a science fictional take on shamanistic practices, between a Na'vi and some other creature (mountain banshee, direhorse, thanator), and never between two non-Na'vi creatures.

Jacques Derrida addresses the very word "animal" to be a construct composed of "all the living things that man does not recognize as his fellows, his neighbors or his brothers"⁶⁷. Humanity, in inflicting such a homogenization on a diverse array of creatures despite the "infinite space that separates the lizard from the dog, the protozoon from the dolphin, the shark from the lamb, the parrot from the chimpanzee"⁶⁸, may be deemed guilty of perpetrating a crime of the first order against animals. The Na'vi never refers to the Pandoran fauna as animals, and their very ideas of conservation seem to foster an environment of deep ecology where each life is valued equally.

65 *Avatar* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2009).

66 *Avatar* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2009).

67 Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore i Am," trans. Simon Morgan Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary*, (London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 208-210, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350250307-0212>.

68 Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am", 208-210.

However, such a construction dissipates upon further inspection. The film's depiction of this Na'vi culture, constructed around the Home tree (Eywa), implicitly creates a power differential where the Na'vi become the transcendental signifiers occupying a privileged position over other creatures. While highlighting Neytiri's grief after having killed the viperwolves to save Jake's life, Kyle Burchett asks "How could it possibly be Eywa's will to save the life of one who does not see, one who could actually be thankful for a killing?"⁶⁹

The answer to this may paint a less benevolent picture of Eywa that we may have been led to assume. Despite his alien origins, Jake Sully is destined to be the chosen hero Toruk Makto. Perhaps Eywa, as a deity-like figure with omniscient abilities of foresight, seems to regard his life as more important than that of a simple viperwolf whose absence does not really affect the grand scheme of things. Such a deconstruction may cause us, as audience members, to rethink the ideas of deep ecology that the film seems to perpetuate and raise post-human dark ecological questions instead. Dark ecology, as understood by Timothy Morton, seeks to rethink contemporary concerns with the environment, including the notion of a harmonious balance⁷⁰, to ask uncomfortable questions and critique ideas such as nature being a construction that is opposed to civilization.

Here, the possibility of a deep ecological framework is challenged by the idea that the Mother Tree does not love all of her children equally. Neytiri's grief at having slaughtered the viperwolves does not bring them back. When the narrative successfully envisions a tender scene where a viperwolf suckles her young, the multi-faceted aspects of nature are highlighted. This scene is deemed important not for its own sake but to effect a change in Jake Sully's outlook of the native fauna. Paul Patton locates the anthropocentric fascination with horses in their "infinite capacity to respond to human desires"⁷¹ and highlights the exercise of power in the act of riding a horse. Such a dynamic is manifested metanarratively in the creation of the direhorse, a hexapodal extraterrestrial organism that looks and behaves like a horse, and narratively in the Na'vi's training and use of the same for locomotion. A similar but magnified fascination with dragons may have led to the birth of the mountain banshee on the screen, which the Na'vi are said to partner with, but in effect control, to soar through the skies. The creatures inhabiting the landscape of Pandora, all of which have been

69 Kyle Burchett, "Seeing the Na'vi Way," *Avatar and Philosophy*, ed. George A. Dunn, (United States: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 2014), 87-103, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118886717.ch7>.

70 Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology* (New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.7312/mort17752>.

71 Paul Patton, "Language, Power and the Training of Horses," in *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 83-99.

remodeled off earthly species, bear enough difference to the same through their intermingled designs, to be regarded as fantastic specimens of speculative biology. However, the Na'vi people, despite having both simian and feline characteristics possess a distinctly bipedal gait. Such anthropomorphism even in a distant world, points to the subconscious association of sentience with a two-legged, two-armed body; a notion that has been recurrent through human consciousness since time immemorial, from the very ancient civilizations' personification of their deities to the depiction of magical creatures and aliens in contemporary popular culture.

Pandora can be regarded as a place of Edenic bliss, where any form of knowledge is denied to its inhabitants, lest they destroy the static nature of their ecosystem. In such a way, the environmental message may be said to tie in with establishment propaganda and a refusal to accept the new. The Christian undertone is evident in the film's portrayal of the godlike entity Eywa, which becomes the all-powerful force presiding over a prelapsarian society. Rather than positing a truly deep ecological interconnectedness among different species, the biosphere assumes the role of a Medieval Chain of Being with pantheistic undertones. A strong vein of anthropocentrism underlies such theocentric notions, so that the Na'vi, as they implicitly portray themselves to be, are the privileged Adams and Eves who serve as the heads of "every other thing that moves on the ground"⁷² – the perfect beings whom other creatures exist to serve, often directly through their appendages of telepathic connections.

Such an allegory springs out at us rather overtly, when Eywa summons the Pandoran wildlife to champion the cause of the Na'vi, many of whom ride them into battle. Anthropocentric desires of possessing power occur in three ways – becoming (the 'avatar' program which allows one to enter the body of the Other), riding (made possible through the mountain banshee and direhorse) and slaughter (hunting of prey, killing for self-defence, et cetera). The Na'vi have few natural predators, but through their acts of riding (Neytiri rides the thanator, Jake rides the Great Leonopteryx), they establish themselves as the dominant forces over their hunters. Jake's very process of being perceived as a reincarnation of the legendary hero Toruk Makto by the Na'vi entails his need to bring the greatest of all predators, the dragon-like Toruk, under his control – thereby evoking long-standing anthropocentric linkages of power, wealth and status with an individual's steed. Even the Na'vi ritual of honoring the deceased animal that had been killed for nourishment is regarded as a tragedy, but is nonetheless reflective of the dynamics of power, through its inherent privileging of one life over another.

72 "Genesis 1:26 - Meaning and Commentary on Bible Verse," biblestudytools.com, accessed July 24, 2021, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/genesis-1-26.html>.

Conclusion: The Possibility of a Post-human Future

Such a killing for sustenance, as well as for self-defence, may be located in a desire for self-preservation which is inherently anthropocentric, but an argument for anthropocentrism can be made for any form of self-preservation where the self is human (or humanoid alien). The film, even if inadvertently, seems to posit the best viable negotiation between humanity and nature, by seeking to kill only when one has to – however, such a stance seems to destroy any foreseeable attainment of a truly deep ecological future that *Avatar* advocates. But where does self-preservation end and exploitation begin? Such questions may lead us into areas of murky morality. Despite *Homo sapiens* not having evolved during the last mass extinction, arguments may be made in favour of humanity being partly responsible for the very next one. On discussing human agency concerning extinction Martin Gorke remarks:

Species are dying worldwide at a rate of three per hour, or more than seventy per day... Extrapolating from present trends, we can expect an even greater increase in the loss of species.⁷³

Great power is, in fact, often accompanied by great responsibility, neither of which we can deny humans of possessing. How can we negotiate the agency of human beings in the world of post-human ethics that seeks to seemingly deconstruct the idea of human authority? Ferrando offers a solution by addressing this liminal space, in which philosophical post-humanism reflects a promising approach where human and nonhuman actants are characterised by agency as well as modes of existence; post-human agency becomes extensive and one which “can be traced in the modes of existence that employ strategies of encounter, recognition, and relationality, rather than hierarchical attitudes, rigid dualistic models, and assimilative techniques”⁷⁴. Post-humanism becomes, not simply a reaction that opposes, but also envelops and addresses the human in a state of being that transcends the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene to emerge into the Chthulucene.

The Chthulucene, as formulated by Donna Haraway, was deemed to be an epoch that would provide a haven for both human and non-human refugees of environmental disasters.⁷⁵ This “unfinished Chthulucene must collect up the trash of the Anthropocene, the exterminism of the Capitalocene, and chipping and shedding and

73 Martin Gorke, *The Death of Our Planet's Species A Challenge To Ecology And Ethics* (Washington DC: Island Press, 2013), 1.

74 Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, 187.

75 Chris Parsons, “The Call of the Chthulucene?,” *Southern Fried Science*, March 9, 2017, <http://www.southernfriedscience.com/the-call-of-the-chthulucene/#:~:text=Donna%20Haraway%20%282015%29%20proposed%20that%20there%20will%20be,%28or%20what%E2%80%99s%20left%20of%20it%29%20in%20%E2%80%9Cmixed%20assemblages%E2%80%9D>.

layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures”⁷⁶. *Avatar*, in its banishment of the humans from Pandora, fails to make space for the mixed assemblage of human beings at the Centre and the margin, non-human animals, the Na’vi, other Pandoran life forms and even the robots, machines and mecha suits. Furthermore, Jake explicitly voices the perfection of the existent Na’vi’s lifestyle as he stares at his video log with eyes wide open in wonder and realization:

There’s nothing that we have that they want. Everything they have sent me out to do is a waste of time.⁷⁷

This romanticized way of life is associated with anthropocentric dualisms, which looks at nature as balanced and static rather than one that is dynamic and open to prospects of betterment. It looks at the present as the ultimate state of being instead of embracing the possible pasts, futures and presents which the Chthulucene demands. The Na’vi’s very inability to defend themselves against invaders to protect their own may speak of cracks in this perfect image, leading to the necessity of adopting a post-dualistic form of thought.

The possibility of embracing a mindset where the binaries of mind and body, animal and human, nature and machine have been deconstructed may be impossible even meta-linguistically while talking about overcoming the same. “To oppose humanism by claiming to have left it behind is to overlook the very way that opposition is articulated”⁷⁸. In that light, we might never truly leap outside the human and understand the other. Can an ant think with its Hive mind, or individually? How do the mountain banshees truly feel when being used as steeds by the Na’vi? Can the robots in the film dream of electric sheep, or even dream at all?⁷⁹ Thomas Nagel hints at the impossibility of accessing the Other’s consciousness⁸⁰ through any known means. Our desires to know the animal via anthropomorphic extensions shall limit the extent of our recognition of a different creature, preventing us from truly ever forming a “tsaheylu” with a non-human. Sandra Harding’s preference of “strong objectivity”⁸¹ may set the

76 Donna J. Haraway, “Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene - Journal #75 September 2016 - e-Flux,” e-flux, September 2016, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/75/67125/tentacular-thinking-anthropocene-capitalocene-chthulucene/>.

77 *Avatar* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2009).

78 Neil Badmington, “Posthumanism,” In *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*, ed. Michael Ryan (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444337839.wbelctv3p003>.

79 Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (U.S.A.: Boom, 2011).

80 Thomas Nagel, “What Is It like to Be a Bat?,” *Mortal Questions*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 165-180, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781107341050.014>.

81 Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is “Strong Objectivity?,” *Feminist Theory Reader*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York: Routledge, 2003),

ground for a post-humanist epistemological discourse, based on embodied accounts of perspective. However, how can we understand what the non-human subaltern thinks or feels, considering that they cannot speak in ways which may understand speaking? The very mineral “unobtainium”, which the ‘Sky People’ seek to mine as an energy source, etymologically becomes an ironic reflection; a metaphor for what we cannot seemingly achieve or understand.

The solution, even if not an absolute one, may be partially located in the use of AI technology.⁸² In fact, the film’s strong technophobic stance is ironic, considering that most of the traversed events are initiated through the use of technology. The protagonists’ decision to root out all forms of man-made machines, symbolically enacted by Jake’s final fusion with his Na’vi skin, seems to adopt a dualistic, reactionary solution to a nuanced problem. Human technology in philanthropic hands⁸³ may not only have lent the Na’vi a better way of life but the film is deeply entrenched in didactic essentialism that seems to locate a technological rejection as the only alternative to scientific hubris. In such a light, the Anthropocene is not just marked by our mistakes but genuine attempts to undo them.

To abolish any form of technology would be a reaction to the anthropocentric ideas of progress, but in rejection of it, the film circulates and falls back into the limits of the anthropocentric tendency to think beyond dualisms. *Avatar* is itself a technological marvel, made revolutionary in its time through state-of-the-art imaging technology and cinematography. Despite its mistakes and self-contradictions, its message of saving the planet which sustains us – is truly a heartfelt one. Its dualistic storytelling is hardly a factor potent enough to take away from the overarching narrative, but the post-human critique only seeks to establish what it could have done better. To say that the characters do not exhibit nuance would be a false and a dualistic statement in itself. Doctor Grace’s genuine desire to understand the Na’vi through technological means is a recurrent theme throughout. Colonel Quaritch becomes less antagonistic when we look at his respect and affection for his soldiers while Selfridge, despite his selfish actions, does attempt to give Jake additional time for establishing a diplomatic connection that benefits both parties, even if such a benefit may not have been desired by the Na’vi. Finally, the film itself, through its use of advanced technology and rich human imagination, creates an ecotopia where moviegoers can escape to – thereby

127-140, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003001201-38>.

82 EFY Team, “How Technology Is Enabling Communication With Animals,” *Electronics For You*, September 17, 2019, <https://www.electronicsforu.com/technology-trends/tech-focus/technology-enabling-communication-with-animals>.

83 “Environmental Technology: Impact of Technology on the Environment,” *Edinburgh Sensors*, October 28, 2020, <https://edinburghsensors.com/news-and-events/impact-of-technology-on-the-environment-and-environmental-technology/>.

envisioning Haraway's desire to acknowledge the existence of the human, the natural, and the technological in an interconnected network of hybridised pluralism⁸⁴.

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