

Heroic Habitus vs. Sustainable Cyborg

or

The role of role-models – a critical analysis of the specular Hero in James Cameron's epic ecofiction *Avatar* (20th Century Fox, 2009)

Govinda Dickman, May 2010 – University of West England

SLIDE ONE

May I present the *avatar* *Neytiri*.

What are you looking at? What are you *seeing*? What are you looking for and what are you being shown? No matter how perceptive you are, most of what you are looking at is invisible to you: either imperceptible, or elided by what you are *seeking*.

We are looking at the product of a gargantuan material and ideological apparatus that extends way beyond the frame in time, space, and matter, but what we “see”, or more more precisely *what we encounter as a synaesthetic sensory and symbolic object, HereNow*, is *Neytiri*.

The kind of *spectre* seen relies upon what kind of *spectator* you are, and what kind of *speculum* prefers you. Or is that vice versa?

BRING UP TITLES & EXPLAIN WAYS OF ASKING, “WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?”

Index – What are you actually looking at? What is this direct evidence for? A whole material history is masked or encoded in what appears: Everything that had and has to happen in order for it to make the trace it does, *HereNow*...

Icon – What does it look like? To which senses does it appear, and how is it brought there? It’s a synaesthetic spectre, or *simulacrum*: Megarealistic iconography is a fusion of symbolic memory-cognition and corporeal perception-synaesthesia. These “icons” are intertextual syntheses that creates a hyper-real *spectre* (presence-that-masks-absence-of-self-and-absence-of-indexical), which we experience as both new and uncannily familiar: sacred, mesmeric, erotic, threatening, phantasmatic, cool, huge, tiny etc.

Symbol – What does it mean and to whom? What kind of tool is it, and what system of representation contains it? What is it *for*? Symbols are *tools* - both technological and abstract - serving a generalisable function...

Diagram – What does it program/imply/entail? What do the manner in which appears, and the manners in which it does not, *just tell me* about it, myself and the world? It is biogrammatic...

SLIDE 2

***The avatar is what appears when the worshipper gazes upon the deity, or vice versa.
The avatar is what appears when the cyborg gazes upon the speculum, or vice versa.***

Lens, screen, mandala, mantra, mirror, telescope, microscope, language, taxonomy, paradigm, theory, toy, story, quest... All "ways of looking" are representational or simulatory techniques (*specula*) which repress/elide some phenomena and foreground/magnify others in order to bring *something* into focus for *someone*.

The entire corporeal and cultural field of the subjectivity, for whom the "something" appears, is implied by the mode of address: a taxonomy implies taxonomists and everything required for them to taxonomise; megareal cinematic icons imply synaesthetic corporeal subjectivities capable of comprehending them, and somewhere for their encounter to occur etc.

This is why I say *specula* are *simulacra*: they make some things visible and other things invisible, and in doing so create something completely new, spectral, specular: *hyper-real*...

For example...

SLIDE 3

In this case, the spectre is an iconised stereotype: a megarealistically portrayed Pocahontamazon whom I know is not real, but experience as an almost-real 3D 10ft tall tribal killer witch from Hollywood heaven...

...the kind of **hero** you see or seek relies largely upon what kind of **other** you fear and desire, and what kind of **quest** you prefer...

An avatar is a spectral spectre appearing to a specular cyborg: From the very beginning, Time & Space are saturated with Desire...

SLIDE 4

All media are modes of cultural utterance, as well as being culturally embedded modes of utterance

Avatar really is all around you, and I'm not referring only to the 3D audio-visuals. Each "medium" creates a massive network of people and things, linked and defined by (visibilised and invisibilised by, uttered into and out of being by, *cultured* by) countless thousands of synchronized technological performances, or **habits**.

*The system of systems of habits and things linked by Avatar is... vast, to say the least. Cameron is everywhere Murdoch, media and memory are, and Murdoch, media and memory are **everywhere**.*

HYPERBOLIC ZOOM OUT : read text as it fades in

Media are EveryWhere & NowHere, and NoWhere & HereNow

To make a cultural utterance is either, to iterate the culture in which the medium is embedded, or to change, challenge, baffle or elude it: Media are how culture utters itself to its selves, and avatars (identities) are the media which people must utter within culture in order to be and be understood: *identity* precedes and defines *entity*.

To make a non-cultural utterance, to appear not as an avatar, but as **alterity** itself...

...is difficult to imagine.

The irony is, we encounter alterity all the time: The internal and external truth of each object we encounter in experience, including the self who encounters, is genuinely alternative to what we imagine.

It's right there, in front of our noses. Why do we see spectres instead?

From the very beginning, Time & Space are saturated with Desire...

SLIDE 5

Does a megarealistic representation of Jake Sully (the protagonist) or the *Na'vi* constitute an ecologically and environmentally sustainable ideal for the mental and physical disposition of human beings toward the objects that comprise their reality, *and how are people likely to respond to these representations?* Do they present a credible model for a “sustainable habitus” (Karol & Gale, 2005)?

Are megareal heroes sustainable? I suppose it really depends on what you think heroes (or sustainability) are...

By this I mean three things:

1. what you think *is representative* of the heroic, and why?
2. what you think heroes *are made of*, and why?
3. what do you think heroes *are for*, and why?

Habitus is the orthopaedic term for “the way we tend to hold our bodies in certain situations”. In psychoanalysis and cultural theory it is linked to the Gaze, and also denotes the attitudes and predispositions we carry into archetypal situations (or by which we perceive those situations): our habitual perceptions of things and our resulting habitual comportment toward them.

Bourdieu's theories about social identity performances focus upon the interdependence of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital*: The identities performed, perceived or embodied by our habitus are “durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.72). Cultivated performances express a learned, conditioned or contingent belief in the value or identity of the things we perceive. For a social being, the “meaning” or *cultural capital* of any given object, practice or attitude is inextricable from the *field* where it has value.

What is the identity of the Na'vi? What do they embody for us?

Avatar is “a structuring structure that tends to structure” people and their habits regarding things and each other. It's inseparable from other cultural structures iterating the same identity patterns (because it arises from them.) Avatar exists because some things and people become visible and others invisible, in order that a hyperbolic megareality could appear...

SLIDE 6

If habitus is a kind of synaesthetic speculum: a culturally constituted cyborg that sees, embodies and enacts *identity*, then perhaps an ecotopian revolution begins within the feedback loop between individuals' performative attitudes towards things, and the manner in which these things are represented in their cultures?

That the *Na'vi* are performative exemplars of an ideal ecological habitus, is integral to the much hyped notion that there is an "ecological" message to the film: *It's a mainstream ecofictional epic with an anti-colonial subtext...*

But, although its makers are *acutely* aware of the changing cultural capital (ahem) of environmentalism in the shadow of climate crisis, a conservative and realistic response is *not* what Avatar the film, Avatar the cultural fairground, induces in its audience: Despite its ostensible ecological and colonial topicality, the behaviours and attitudes, the comportment-towards-things, the *habitus* that Avatar mediates in all its intertextuality, is ***denialistic consumer frenzy...***

Ecstasis.

FADEOUT NEYTIRI

The visible is made invisible, and vice versa; the material is made immaterial, and vice versa; the near is made far, and vice versa.

Certainly, *in the story...*

...the Na'vi are hip and heroic stereotypes: majestically endowed ecowarriors, blessed by nature but made tragic in the image "bows and arrows against gunships". They're a kind of sexy blue phantasm, a not-quite-alien superbeing who *performatively* and *narratologically* symbolises the "conservationistism" and "interconnectedness" reminiscent of other autochthonous Others we have known: American and Indian Indians, and Africans and Rastas, and the Elves in Lord of The Rings, and pussycats. The story happens "very far away" in time and space (NowHere, here pronounced *nowhere*), but it's set in an uncannily familiar place that is really very intensely *present* (HereNow) both inside and outside the cinema.

SLIDE 7

Of course, in the story...

... the Na'vi may be heroes, but they're not the hero! They are the human protagonist's enemies-turned-mentors/lovers, in heroic contention with (mirrored by/opposed to) the technological forces of the acquisitive and destructive capitalist war machine, which has brought the true Hero to their planet: *Jake Sully*, a paraplegic mercenary seeking legs.

In the story...

...the Na'vi are real, and the Avatar of the film's title is a mixture of human DNA (Sully) and the DNA of an unrevealed Na'vi donor: a "suit" for Sully to wear so that he can breathe an atmosphere poisonous to humans. A *speculum* that will allow him to spy among the Na'vi and perform superhuman feats...

Intertextual references in Avatar's plot and mise en scene to other westerns (especially Pocahontas and Dances With Oscars), to post-digital war movies, to sci-fi & fantasy, and to "deep cover" thrillers, bringing the binarisms of urban paranoia, nationalism, and the post-colonial condition to the reading of the racial and political semiotics of Avatar...

In reality, which does and doesn't have any relation to the diegesis, the Na'vi continue a long line of exoticised Others in post-colonial narratives, which provide both the racial and gender stereotypes for Avatar: They're not real alterity, they're what the white protagonist wishes he was, when in truth he is / regards himself as the bad guys...

SLIDE 8

Since Na'vi culture is a idealisation of, rather than an alternative to, the colonial worldview whose actual manifestation is abhorrently performed by "the humans", it may or may not be genuinely sustainable (or even feasible!), but *in comparison to the brutal technological agency of the humans in the story*, the use to which the Na'vi put their environment is troped as the epitome of an humble and skillful self-sufficient habitus.

So what is this habitus? The Na'vi are competitive, and have a very technologicistic relationship with their planet; they don't farm but they **conserve** (coexist, befriend, avoid, respect etc.) and **use** things (fashion, craft, master, enslave and hunt).

The key metaphor is the binarism of control and union symbolized by the Na'vi "bond" with the planet, which they achieve by literally "jacking in" with their capital genitalia. The horses and dragons with whom they "bond" become *their* mounts, not vice versa, and the ritual by which they bond with the earth itself is based upon the Balinese performance of the Ramayana: The centre directs the circumference, the ego is at once transcended and iterated in the collective. Very beautiful to behold and better to participate in, but not **alterity**, not yet...

Though (Because?) they ecstatically worship the planet the humans call Pandora (interesting name but no time here...), the Na'vi seem to regard Her as more a kind of dangerous playground than a sacred mother; great fun, if you know the rules and have the skills...

If the Na'vi are role-models, what they actually embody and perform is dichotomy: *They are made of the same stuff as their enemies!*

Schizophrenia: Regarded as iconic symbols in a megareal story that is and isn't about how we should relate with the environment, they're tragic 10ft tall superwarriors, ecosensitive dragontamers *who serve* as love interest, healers, competitors and mentors to the story's flawed/broken/seeking protagonist, Jake Sully, in a battle against the technologicistic agents of human greed...

SLIDE 9

...but regarded indexically they are technology incarnate: pure tool, pure user, pure player.

When you look at what the Na'vi are *actually made out of*, they are an amazing synaesthetic synthesis of inner and outer reality, completely unique in each person who perceives them: We each relate differently with "amazing CGI", and the shot of adrenalin and serotonin which our bodies produce in response to the scale and speed and volume of the technological extravaganza, and the diegesis, all of which appears because or instead of CGI.

We are all situated slightly differently within the field of cultural memory where "climate crisis" and "10 ft blue ecowarriors" and "Pandora" and "dragons" and "augmented reality" and "pervasive locative media" and "3D BluRay" find their meaning...

Megareal avatars are phantasmatic as well as representational technology. They utter culture, and are uttered within culture: Not only the digital and narratological wizardry that produces *ecstasis* but also the whole material and immaterial world that such wizardry implies, or entails:

What is the absent, unseeable "god" whose manifestation is the avatar: Visible only to the cyborg; all that is visible to the cyborg?

The whole assemblage of material and psychological techniques each of us is linked into, which creates spectatorial cyborgs, hungry and ready for the appearance of phantasmatic Avatars in the pervasively megareal medium of *culture*...

...and the whole rapidly diminishing world of material things, the real world which invisibly becomes subsumed by the rapidly expanding matrix in which the medium is embedded.

SLIDE 10

Regarded as diagrams, well...

The 3D film had the longest and largest ever cinematic release, running up to the day of the DVD/BluRay release, *and it was sold out every day in many places*. It has earned more than any other film, ever, given birth to a new era of 3D digital cinematech that includes interactive domestic merchandise and...

Hysteria... The aesthetic effect of megarealism is *ecstasis*, the rollercoaster from HereNow, to a NowHere very like it, and Back Again, and it is present in every aspect of the film and its merchandising carnival.

Avatar is a *hyperbolic happening* in the pervasive medium of culture itself: It's an intertextual cultural fairground and marketplace that proliferates around the 3D rollercoaster ride of the film, which is "loosely based on real events". Both inside and outside the film, Avatar creates a hyper-reality where the insubstantial is made substantial, and the material is rendered immaterial: The *sheer presence* of hyperbolically realistic ecological icons and environmental sounding symbols, systematically veils their decidedly non-ecofriendly material and historical indexicality.

On the eve of total climatic disaster, there are many possible roles an ultrarealistic ubiquitous synaesthetic representation of an ecological Hero in 10 dimensions could play, will play, especially since there are *millions* of them: drug, living, inspiration, model, exemplar, ally, crutch, hurdle, gatekeeper, competitor, enemy, friend, proxy, scapegoat, tool, target, treasure, toy...

Ultimately, *tool* is the key word: Heroes, like all avatars, are tools to lead subjectivity in the direction of certain attitudes and behaviours – they create the reality that requires them, and are created by it.

Megareal digital eco-warriors are both more and less diagrammatic than the term "role model" implies: they "show the way" or "open the door" to many things, each of which will be sustained, but not one of which is actually notably sustainable.

SLIDE 11

Buy me, I'm ecological!

This fantasistic denial of material reality via the megareal representation of the realish is the precise antithesis of sustainable behaviour, but it should not come as a surprise: Historically, the environmental impact of actual and literary heroes, especially since the age of mass production and the birth of the consumer, has not been notably sustainable, in either the current environmental or the strict semantic senses of the word!

How can a role-model that is fundamentally alienated (i.e. competitive and manipulative) and a system of representation that is ontologically simulacric (i.e. specular and phantasmatic) be deployed in communicating either the real or the notion of interconnectedness, which many now recognise as an essential characteristic of any truly sustainable human ethos?

SLIDE 12

If we are truly lucky, our heroes will lead us gently and wisely to the present moment and demand no fee for it, for we have no choice but to follow them (in our way) once we perceive them (in our way) **and that is what the heroic archetype means, in the simplest sense...**

We are most fortunate, then, that the antagonistic or manipulative/acquisitive relationship with Other is not true of all heroes.

It is far from true of truly heroic people, **and this is the real problem:**

Agonistic heroism has a tendency to repress the very existence of the truly heroic, **for in a cultural marketplace, it is in competition with it.**

BRING UP BIG MIRROR

The *truly* heroic worldview really *embodies* interconnectedness. The subjectivity it implies imagines Selves and Others and Time and Space very differently from the alienated individual, and so perceives very different objects than those that appear to the protagonist Hero.

Truly heroic people embrace a union with alterity that is grounded in the present moment, not the ecstatic HereNow, and so in the truly heroic habitus, fantasy and perception are not opposed, and bliss is found in the boundless openness of the present moment...

Bibliography

Bacon, T and Dickman, G (2009). *Who's The Daddy? The politics and aesthetics of representation in Alfonso Cuarón's "Children of Men"*. London: Continuum

Baudrillard, J (1981). *Simulations and Simulacra*. Accessed online 24/04/2010 at <http://files.meetup.com/1392983/Baudrillard.%20Jean%20-%20Simulacra%20And%20Simulation.pdf>

Bourdieu, P (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Campbell, J (1968 / 2003). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton : Princeton University Press

Dickman, G (2008). *From HereNow to NowHere and back again: ThereCam and the politics of megarealism in contemporary Hollywood cinema*. University of West England Online Repository.

Haraway, D (1991). "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York : Routledge, pp.149-181.

Irigaray, L (1985). *The Speculum of The Other Woman*. York : Cornell University Press

Karol, J and Gale, T (2005). *Bourdieu's Social Theory and Sustainability: What is 'Environmental Capital'?* Accessed online 204/04/2010 at <http://www.aare.edu.au/04pap/kar041081.pdf>

Kennedy, B (2000) - *Deleuze and Cinema: The Aesthetics of Sensation*. Edinburgh : Edinburgh University Press

LeGuin, U K (1989). "A Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*. New York : Harper & Row, pp. 165 -171

Massumi, B (1987). *Realer Than Real – The simulacrum according to Deleuze and Guattari*. Accessed online 26/01/2010 at http://www.anu.edu.au/HRC/first_and_last/works/realer.htm

Mühlhäuser, P (2003). *Language of environment, environment of language: a course in ecolinguistics*. London: Battlebridge

Stibbe, A. (2004) "Environmental education across cultures: beyond the discourse of shallow environmentalism." in *Language & Intercultural Communication* (4:4 pp. 242-260)