When Species Meet: Human Exceptionalism in James Cameron’s “Avatar”

On the surface, James Cameron’s Avatar (2009) articulates a coherent criticism of humanity’s destruction of the biosphere by presenting the audience with the story of a world where sentient individuals live in harmony with nature. In reality, this is a fantasy that allows the audience to confront its anxieties about environmental destruction without forsaking their anthropocentric commitment to the idea of the liberal human subject. Films like Avatar smooth over the violent contradictions of liberal humanism through depictions of successful eco-managerialism and benevolent technological determinism. While it might seem environmentally conscious at first glance, Cameron’s Avatar uses visual spectacle to reify the fantasy of human exceptionalism and privilege the liberal human subject.

Cameron’s Avatar presupposes that humans are independent entities. Human characters like Jakes Sully (Sam Worthington) and Miles Quaritch (Steven Lang) are self-contained, self-referential individuals. They exist in contrast to the Na’vi, whose subjectivity is inextricably linked to that of Eywa, “the indivisible ‘mother’ who emanates from and is the crystallization of Pandora itself” (Hills 1). This relationship, which is both spiritual and biological, frames the Na’vi as dependent, interconnected and close to nature. For the Na’vi, subjectivity is predetermined by their biology and by external forces like the will of Eywa. In other words, the Na’vi are constructed as the antithesis of the liberal human subject, which has traditionally been defined by its ontological commitment to independence and personal autonomy.

The Na’vi ability to merge, physically and psychically, with other native inhabitants of Pandora, inhibits traditional humanist interpretations of individualism. The
defining characteristic of liberal humanism is “its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities…the human essence is freedom from the wills of others” (Macpherson 1). This is a physical impossibility for the Na’vi, who are biological conduits of Eywa’s will. It is this inability to assimilate to liberal humanism that distinguishes the Na’vi from other oppressed, indigenous populations and makes them “true” aliens. As Parker Selfridge (Giovanni Ribisi) explains to Sully, the humans try “to give [the Na’vi] medicine, education...uh...uh...roads! But no, no, no! They like mud” (Cameron, Avatar). The binary Cameron constructs is clear: humans are separate and distinct from nature, while the Na’vi are a part of it.

Cameron reinforces this binary by depicting the human characters in Avatar as ontologically self-referential and autonomous. The premise of the plot relies heavily on one of the central tenets of human exceptionalism: the idea that human beings are distinct from their bodies. The border between mind and body is firmly established when Sully, who is disenchanted with his own body, transfers his consciousness into a new body. According to Katherine Hayles, the “erasure of embodiment is a feature common to…the liberal humanist subject. Identified with the rational mind, the liberal subject possessed a body but was not represented as being a body” (4). Sully, by virtue of this status as a liberal human subject, has the option of renouncing his biology while simultaneously leaving his subjectivity intact. The Na’vi do not have this option—even if a Na’vi were to pilot an Avatar, he or she would maintain their psychic and physical relationship to Eywa.

Other human characters make a similar, but less drastic, decision to renounce their species. Trudy Chacon (Michelle Rodriguez) and Dr. Grace Augustine (Sigourney
Weaver) are two examples of humans who choose to prioritize the well-being of the Na’vi over traditionally ‘human’ concerns like profit motive. This, too, represents an anthropocentric privileging of the liberal human subject. The Na’vi do not get to choose which side of the species binary they occupy. Humans are capable of thinking and acting like Na’vi, but the Na’vi can never think or act like humans. The Na’vi will never mine for unobtainium or colonize an alien planet. Their choices are always constrained by Eywa, which is why Selfridge has to rely on Sully, instead of simply bribing a member of the Na’vi community to betray Pandora.

By constructing the Na’vi as passive conduits, defined by nature, Cameron creates a binary that sustains the fantasy of human exceptionalism by positioning the human subject as independent and distinct from nature. It is a false binary: the notion of biological independence is an anthropocentric fallacy. According to Donna Haraway, all “organisms are ecosystems of genomes, consortia, communities, partly digested dinners, mortal boundary formations” (31). Human beings are not independent in any sense of the word. We exist in a constant process of co-creation with a host of other species. Our very bodies are sites of commitment and biological entanglement. This is because “human genomes can be found in only 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the...body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to...being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing...no harm.” (Haraway 1-2).

To interpret Avatar as the story of humanity’s first encounter with an alien species relies on a very anthropocentric notion of subjectivity. The mundane truth, eclipsed by the magic and mysticism of Pandora, is that our very bodies are already always sites of
alien encounter. According to Donna Haraway, our bodies are “material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings co-shape one another” (30). The microbiotic organisms, parasites and aliens that invade and colonize our bodies at the cellular level aren’t just an inescapable part of our biological makeup—they also speak to our existence as embodied individuals. They’re a reminder that we’re shaped in cooperation with other species. We build our subjectivity out of bones and blood and flesh. It’s impossible for us to turn our backs on that without losing something of ourselves, as Cameron’s film unintentionally demonstrates.

Cameron’s depiction of Pandora as an interconnected biosphere appropriates the mundane and uses the thrill of visual spectacle to recreate it as a fantasy. If embraced uncritically, this fantasy becomes problematic and potentially limiting because “when we make moves that erase the world’s multiplicity, we risk losing sight of the variegated leaves, fractal branchings, and particular bark patterns that make up the forest” (Hayles 12). Cameron’s Pandora perpetuates the idea that biological symbiosis is a context-specific phenomenon, instead of the default condition of every living organism. The notion that “ever more complex life forms are the continual result of ever more intricate and multidirectional acts of association of and with other life” (Haraway 31) is framed as “science fiction” in Cameron’s Avatar in order to sustain the myth of human autonomy.

This process occurs because the myth of human autonomy is politically and ontologically useful. It justifies profitable practices of eco-managerialism. If human beings are separate and distinct from nature, then they are uniquely situated to manage nature. Cameron’s narrative presents the audience with a fantasy of an ecological utopia that is accessible through technological development. Space travel and cryogenics take
Jake Sully to Pandora, gene splicing and biological engineering are what allow him to stay. Revealingly, Cameron’s Avatar does not ask whether humanity can save Earth. Instead, the film asks whether humanity will make the same mistake the second time around. The destruction of Earth is presented as a foregone conclusion, as is the notion that humanity will get other chances on planets like Pandora. This is the paradox of the liberal human subject’s commitment to eco-managerialism: technology is presented as both the problem and the solution.

Cameron’s depiction of the Na’vi originally seems like a rejection of this paradox. Since the Na’vi are part of nature, they have no need for “human” eco-managerial practices like domestication or agriculture. Closer inspection of Pandora reveals a world where Eywa has created a place for everything and everything is assigned a place. The fantasy of a perfectly ‘balanced’ ecosystem, controlled and regulated by external forces, is the end goal of liberal humanism. On Pandora, the “messiness” of nature is sanitized, replaced by a structured, well-organized and anthropocentric utopia that erases the “contagions and infections that wound the primary narcissism of those who still dream of human exceptionalism” (Haraway 31-32). It is a mistake to interpret Cameron’s depiction of Pandora as a rejection of managerialism. Pandora’s splendor, cultivated through the benevolent governance of Eywa, is proof that nature can and must be subject to administration.

The problem, in other words, is not that humanity has anointed itself steward of the earth, but that humans currently lack the technology to administer and regulate the biosphere effectively. Cameron’s commitment to technological determinism is reinforced by characters like Grace Augustine, who compare Eywa to a computer. According to
Augustine, Eywa is “a network, it's a global network. And the Na'vi can access it, they can upload and download data, memories; at sites like the one…destroyed” (Cameron, *Avatar*). The implicit assumption behind this metaphor is that humanity could govern nature more effectively if it had larger, more efficient managerial networks. Such assumptions are predicated on deep anthropocentric bias and lend themselves to theories of human exceptionalism.

Augustine’s description of Eywa, and the very existence of the Avatar program, reflect a humanist interpretation of molecular biology, which “treats information as the essential code the body expresses…a defining characteristic of the present cultural moment is the belief that information can circulate unchanged among different material substrates” (Hayles 1). When the subjectivity of human beings (and other self-referential, autonomous entities like Eywa) is framed in such technological terms, “it can be a shock to remember that, for information to exist, it must always be instantiated in a medium…abstracting information from a material base is an imaginary act” (Hayles 13). Put simply, people don’t lose weight, get rhinoplasties or undergo gender reassignment surgery because they want to go on being the same person they’ve always been. Our bodies shape our subjectivity, which means we can’t escape them with our identities intact.

This erasure of embodiment, like the myth of human autonomy, only persists because it has utility within the grand narrative of liberal humanism. The dream of ecological paradise, achieved through technological development and humankind’s ability to manipulate biology, isn’t enough to sustain the fantasy of technological determinism. The promise of a new Eden might excuse our humanity’s current
destruction of the biosphere, but there’s not much point in a paradise that none of us will ever live to see. Cameron’s separation of the human subject from its body (and the body’s attendant biological commitments) symbolizes the promise of secular immortality. If human beings are simply information, a code that can be divorced from the flesh, then we can be “saved” – transferred into new bodies that have been cloned from our very own DNA.

Many people insist that humanity is on already on the brink of achieving this technological utopia; that something very close to the world of Cameron’s Avatar will be realized in our lifetime. Ray Kurzweil, a computer scientist and the director of engineering at Google claims that “the early 2030’s is a reasonable time frame for the computational performance, memory, and brain-scanning prerequisites of uploading…the end of the 2030’s is a conservative projection” (200). The issue of embodiment is positioned as an afterthought, since it is assumed that “by the time we have the tools to capture and re-create a human brain with all of its subtleties, we will have plenty of options for twenty-first-century bodies” (Kurzweil 199). In the world Kurzweil and Cameron envision, nothing but time stands in the way of humanity’s ability to achieve paradise and immortality.

It is precisely this promise that make narratives like Cameron’s Avatar so politically problematic. When the audience loses itself in the grand spectacle of Pandora, they absorb the assumptions of liberal humanism without attending to its inherent contradictions. It is too easy to forget that—in the world that James Cameron creates—the technology Kurzweil so optimistically envisions is not enough to stop humanity from destroying planet Earth. It took ten years to develop the technology James Cameron
needed to film *Avatar* – are we *really* supposed to believe that we are only a few years away from developing the technological apparatuses necessary to secure Eden *and* immortality? While there are many individuals, like Cameron and Kurzweil, who might subscribe to this belief, it is a belief that must be rejected—*even if* parts of it turn out to be true.

The issue with Cameron’s depiction of humanity’s future, and other cultural narratives like “Avatar,” is that they remove the individual from his or her obligation to act responsibly in the present. Human beings are presented as biologically autonomous individuals so that we can position ourselves as the ultimate administrators of the natural world. In Cameron’s film, the destruction of Earth (while tragic) is a temporary setback on the path to progress because there are other worlds and technological solutions that are out there waiting to be discovered. By reinforcing these anthropocentric assumptions, cultural narratives like James Cameron’s *Avatar* shape our collective imagination in ways that frame the fantasy of human exceptionalism as an objective, self-evident truth. In doing so, they perpetuate the apathy and human arrogance that make the destruction of our planet an ontological and political inevitability.
Works Cited


