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Avatar & American Indian Spirituality (/stories/2010/1/2/821305/-)



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2010/01/02 12:44 (https://www.dailykos.com/story/2010/1/2/821305/-#comments)

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The recent movie Avatar has won critical acclaim for its use of 3D and its special effects. The underlying plot seems to be inspired by the American Indian experiences in the United States with the American government, corporations, and missionaries. In this diary I would like to look at a few of the movie's themes as they relate to American Indian spirituality.

Regarding the indigenous people, the Na'vi, which are shown in Avatar, Roger Ebert at the Chicago Sun Times writes: (http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20091211/REVIEWS/912119998)

The Na'vi survive on this planet by knowing it well, living in harmony with nature, and being wise about the creatures they share with. In this and countless other ways they resemble Native Americans.

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The film has been subjected to a sustained assault from many on the right, most notably by Ross Douthat in the New York Times, as an "apologia for pantheism." Douthat's criticisms hit the mark, but the most relevant point was raised by John Podhoretz in the Weekly Standard. Cameron wrote "Avatar," says Podhoretz, "not to be controversial, but quite the opposite: He was making something he thought would be most pleasing to the greatest number of people."

Animism:

In looking back over the past 150,000 years of human existence on this planet, it seems that animism was probably the first religion and provides the foundation for many contemporary religions. Having said that, let me explain a bit about animism. It begins with the idea that everything is alive, and therefore everything has a "soul" or "spirit."

Since human beings, like all living things, have a "soul" or "spirit," this means that they can communicate with all other living things. This is a two-way form of communication: humans can talk to trees, animals, rocks, and so on, and all of these other living things can talk to human beings. This form of talk should not be viewed as prayer: it is simply conversation.

In Avatar the communication with other living things is made by a direct link, while among Native Americans and other indigenous people here on Earth, this communication is done via dreams.

In both Avatar and in American Indian cultures, the behavior of other species can be seen as symbolic. Thus in Avatar we see the "jellyfish things" signaling that the avatar can be trusted by the Na'vi. It is common in American Indian cultures for the actions of birds, for example, to signal future events.

American Indians often say "we are all related," meaning that humans are related to all other living things. While not a strong theme in Avatar, the idea of interconnectedness is also expressed.

Interconnectedness in animistic world views is often expressed through the concept of reincarnation—the idea that certain experiences and knowledge may be transmitted from living body to another at death. Again, this is a theme seen in both the movie and Native American cultures.

Among American Indians, and also among many other indigenous people, the earth (often designated as Mother Earth) is seen as having healing powers and there are many ceremonies to connect humans to this healing power. In Avatar the healing connection with the earth is visible, and tangible, but the earth is seen as having the ability to heal, to transform.

"Spying:"

When Meriwether Lewis and William Clark set out with the Corps of Discovery to explore the newly purchased Louisiana Territory and to travel to the Pacific Ocean, their orders from President Thomas Jefferson included making observations on Indian religions and on trade possibilities. We see here the intersection of Christianity and capitalism: in order to obtain Indian land, the United States sought to get Indians deep into debt purchasing American goods and to convert them to Christianity so that they would appreciate and need these goods more. In the film, the avatars are to "spy" upon the indigenous people so that the company can obtain their land for development.

Many of the early Christian missionaries, particularly the Jesuits in New France (now called Canada) learned first the Indian language. Then they learned enough about the Indian religions so that they could attach these concepts to Christianity and thus begin the conversion of the heathens.

Resource Development:

In the United States and many other countries, indigenous people are not viewed as being capable of developing natural resources through activities such as mining. Their religious traditions have often been viewed as a barrier to natural resource development. In the United States, when minerals such as gold were discovered on Indian reservations, the land was taken away from the Indians and then given to corporations for development. In many instances this resulted in massive environmental degradation and created health hazards for the Indians.

In Avatar one of the movie's themes is about corporate greed, about the need to mine with little concern for either the environmental impact of this activity or the destruction of indigenous cultures.

Summary:

I suspect that we can look at Avatar as a kind of American Indian film which allows people to look at values and world views which are different from their own. In fact, Ty Burr at the Boston Globe writes:

(http://www.boston.com/ae/movies/articles/2009/12/17/avatar_is_an_out_of_body_experience/?page=2)

In terms of plot, then, this is "Dances With Wolves." Seriously: It's the same movie, re-imagined as a speculative-anthropological freak-out.

Like many movies and books about American Indians, Avatar takes a rather idealistic view of indigenous spirituality. It makes visible some of the spiritual connections between humans and other people which are sometimes difficult for non-animists to understand.

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