

NEWS



The paradoxical politics of ‘Avatar’

Bill Weinberg • February 10, 2010

The science fiction writer Harlan Ellison, when asked where he gets his ideas, famously always answers: “Schenectady.”

Well, Ellison may get his ideas from Schenectady, but James Cameron, the director of “Avatar,” appears to get his ideas from Ursula K. Le Guin.

For all the ink that’s been spilled on “Avatar,” no critics have noted that the plot appears to be drawn directly from that of Le Guin’s 1972 book “The Word for World is Forest,” set on the distant forest planet of Athshe. A couple of centuries in the future, all of Earth’s forests have long since been destroyed, so timber is being imported from this pristine woodland world. But there is a native race on Athshe of indigenous humanoids.

Instead of giant blue men as in “Avatar,” its little green men. But it is still a hunting and gathering society of tribal peoples who use bows and arrows and spears – and have psychic abilities, communicating by going into dreamlike states. After seeing their forests gutted, their tree-dwellings destroyed by helicopters mounted with flame-throwers, they use these extrasensory powers to organize a planet-wide uprising and drive off the technologically superior human invaders. Sound familiar?

In “Avatar,” the Earthlings are seeking a mineral rather than timber, but that’s a minor point. The most significant difference is that in the novel there is no human who actually fights for the little green men – the hero who leads the rebellion is himself a little green man.

“Avatar,” to Cameron’s undoubted joy, has become a football in the current culture wars. Right-wing pundits bash it as anti-white propaganda, while the politically correct lament that it is another picture in which the hero is a white guy who goes Native, in the tradition of “Lawrence of Arabia” or “Dances With Wolves.”

On the other hand, South America's first indigenous head of state – the Aymara president of Bolivia, Evo Morales – has praised “Avatar” as a “profound show of resistance to capitalism and the struggle for the defense of nature.”

Morales may have a point that after seeing the movie, people will be more inclined to side with indigenous peoples in their struggle against the global industrial leviathan.

But while the current FX fest, set on another world in the distant future, is on the tip of the tongue of every teenage popcorn-head and media pundit – whether they are praising or bashing it – the real-world survival struggles of indigenous peoples are safely invisible.

Last year saw an indigenous uprising in the Peruvian Amazon, over government plans to privatize tribal lands to oil companies – climaxing in the June massacre at Bagua, where the security forces opened fire on a protest roadblock. It made practically no headlines in the U.S.

In Indonesia's restive West Papua, armed attacks are growing against the mineral operations of the U.S. multinational Freeport McMoRan – and rights groups are protesting the appointment of a new regional military commander who is a veteran of several bloody campaigns against peoples struggling for land and autonomy throughout the archipelago.

Yet while everybody knows about the fictional Na'vi, practically nobody knows what is going on in West Papua.

Yes, there's a possibility that movie-goers who have seen “Avatar” will be more likely to root for indigenous peoples on the six o'clock news; except that indigenous peoples don't make the six o'clock news.

The struggle of the Papuans against Freeport McMoRan's gold and copper interests in Indonesia doesn't make the six o'clock news. The struggle of the Ijaw people fighting against the Nigerian military and Shell Oil in the Niger Delta doesn't make the six o'clock news. The struggle of the Penan, blockading the logging roads in the rainforests of Malaysian Borneo, doesn't make the six o'clock news – despite the fact that these peoples are fighting and dying for their land every day.

The fact that remote Ashuar bands in the Peruvian Amazon are threatened with actual extermination as their lands are sold to oil companies without their informed consent – that doesn't make the six o'clock news. And even when the rainforest peoples of Peru – the Ashuar, the Ashaninka, the Matsigenka, the Harakmut – block the access roads and seize the oil pipelines, armed only with spears, blowguns and machetes, it still doesn't make the six o'clock news. And when they are fired upon by the security forces of a government that has just entered into a Free Trade Agreement with the United States – as precisely happened last June at Bagua – even then, it doesn't make the six o'clock news.

And when, in the wake of the massacre, a general uprising is threatened across Peru's jungle, and the government blinks and agrees to negotiations, and indigenous leaders with their face-paint and feathers meet with cabinet ministers in Lima, an utterly unprecedented victory – still nothing on the six o'clock news up here in Gringolandia, the intended destination for most of that rainforest oil.

So how are we in North America – where we consume some 60 percent of the world's resources, the destination for a disproportionate share of that oil and copper and timber – supposed to root for indigenous peoples if we don't know about them? We don't know the names of the Ijaw and Papuans and Ashaninka. But we all know about the Na'vi.

The languages of indigenous peoples are threatened all over the world, a wealth of cultural information dying along with them – and the world pays no note. Meanwhile, geeks and popcorn-heads throughout the industrial nations are teaching themselves Na'vi – an artificially created language for a movie.

Something, as the saying goes, is wrong with this picture.

Pun intended.

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