Avatar and Environmentalism

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James Cameron's popular film *Avatar* (2009) shows the horrible way that humans entered the faraway planet of Pandora to attain unobtainium and, in doing so, almost completely destroyed the Na'vi, the native people, as well as other creatures and wildlife present on the planet. Despite this depressing undertone, the movie was a huge success at the box office, in no small part because it follows the paradigmatic plot that Robert Ray describes as so typical of Hollywood movies. In his article "The Thematic Paradigm," Ray argues that the outlaw hero, who often times lives with "two sets of 'truths'" tries to escape civilization and then finds himself in a situation in which he has to choose between his own self interest or that of the community. In *Avatar*, Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), the ex-marine who replaces his scientist twin brother in an experiment, lives as a paralyzed marine on Earth, and – through his "avatar" -- as a powerful, physically fit Na'vi on Pandora. In his Na'vi form, he roams freely on Pandora, escaping his everyday reality of being stuck in a wheelchair. As learns about and becomes close to the Na'vi people, however, he has to decide whether to help them protect their planet, or deceive them and help his corporate employers, who will pay for corrective surgery to allow him to walk again. Within this typical Hollywood plot lies a political message that Cameron tries to convey to his audience, a message that draws heavily from Dave Foreman's dark green political ideology. Foreman, author of *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior*, argues that planet Earth is suffering from humans' assaults on the environment. *Avatar*'s ability to draw in audiences with its typical Hollywood plot brings it much popularity, but it leaves us with Foreman's idea that because they think too rationally, many anthropocentric (human centered) people are far too careless about the planet's valuable resources and should develop a proper relationship with the planet in which they learn to appreciate all that it provides.

Like Foreman, *Avatar* illustrates how human beings are greedy and anthropocentric. Foreman refers to them as "fiends who hold nothing of value but a greasy dollar bill [and] are tearing down the pillars of evolution" (5). This perfectly describes the humans in *Avatar*, who are there only to profit financially. As Parker Selfridge (Giovanni Ribisi), who runs the mining operation, states early

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in the movie, "This is why we are here. Unobtainium. Because this little gray rock sells for $20 million a kilo. That's the only reason." This comment emphasizes the humans' lack of concern for all life on Pandora. To attain the unobtainium, they literally tear down the pillars of the enormous cathedral-like tree on Pandora in which the Na'vi make their home. As Cameron states in an interview, "it's the nature of business, it's the nature of all the economies of the last thousand years, to 'just take' what they want" (Cieply). *Avatar* proves the truth in this statement when the humans tear down the trees that are so essential to the Na'vi. Though Jake starts off as no different from the rest of the humans, he changes as the movie progresses. Initially, he is motivated to take the mission for the sole reason of attaining his legs, promised to him by Colonel Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang) in exchange for information about how to defeat the Na'vi. Jake is a typical anthropocentric human being who cares only for himself. This selfish and childish behavior, common in outlaw heroes, makes him appeal to us, according to Robert Ray's "The Thematic Paradigm." It is not until after he learns the plight of the Na'vi by experiencing it firsthand that he realize he must help them. To further emphasize the greed of the humans, Cameron contrasts them to the biocentric Na'vi, who live their lives completely immersed in nature. They sleep in trees and have learned to coexist with all the other creatures on Pandora. Foreman encourages this biocentric view by explaining that "all living things have the same right to be here" (3).

In an argument against anthropocentrism, *Avatar*, like Foreman, encourages the audience to give up rationality and to start to think more emotionally. Foreman states that although "rationality is a fine and useful tool, equally valid, perhaps more so, is intuitive, instinctive awareness" (29). Foreman feels that not all decisions regarding the planet should stem from rational cost-benefit analyses. Some are better decided intuitively, which privileges our emotional connections to the earth. This switch from rational to emotional thinking is shown in Jake's character as the movie progresses. At the beginning of the movie, Jake is a rational thinker. Though he is not a scientist, the main reason he is helping them is to attain his legs. When he first meets the Na'vi and tells them that he wants to learn (solely for the sake of his legs), he is told by Mo'at (CCH Pounder), the spiritual leader of the Omaticaya clan, that "it is difficult to fill a cup which is already full." Mo'at is referring to the fact that Jake and the other humans think so rationally that they leave no room to reason emotionally. This rational emphasis is exemplified by the humans' reliance on computers and all the other technology that they brought with them to Pandora, especially the oxygen masks that they would die without. It is not until Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver), the head scientist, tells Jake to "try to see the forest through [Neytiri's] eyes," that he starts to understand the Na'vi point of view. He begins to empathize with the Na'vi as he becomes one of them, gaining some real emotional insight into their lives. His enthusiasm to learn about the Na'vi way of life takes off when he asks Neytiri (Zoe Saldana) to