

Article

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Anthropocentrism and Eco-Feminism in Avatar: Visual Narratives



Avatar (2009)

Abstract

James Cameron's "Avatar" (2009) and "Avatar: The Way of Water" (2022) transport viewers to Pandora, a lush, habitable moon orbiting the gas giant Polyphemus in the Alpha Centauri star system. These movies reveal how ordinary things take on extraordinary significance. When stargazing at the Alpha Centauri cluster, one imagines the wonders awaiting discovery.

The protagonist, Jake, represents humanity's struggle on a crowded Earth and the search for solace in escapism. His transformation from a crippled state to an able-bodied hero symbolizes the potential

positive shift in human mindset from anthropocentric to eco-centric.

Neytiri, the heroine, embodies both nurturing femininity and fierce protectiveness. She unintentionally guides Jake to a new life and represents modern women and the three stages of mainstream feminism. Neytiri's gender role reversal is particularly evident as she saves Jake at the end of the first movie.

The movies explore the early stages of colonialism, illustrating how colonial masters normalize and corporatize the colonization of natives. Cameron's detailed depiction is based on scientific assumptions about the skin colour of native flora and fauna in a new

environment. Cameron's use of Mise-en-Scene extends to the cultural elements of the Na'vi, including their rituals, architecture, and even their body language, which add authenticity to the alien world.

The movie is filled with Easter eggs, such as the precious material 'Unobtanium'—a name that signifies its elusive nature, proven true as the plot unfolds. From the development and use of the Na'vi language to the monkey-like body language of The People, Cameron has created living art.

The "Avatar" movies are artistic masterpieces, revealing new layers with each viewing. The movies' narrative is fluent in the Mise-en-Scene elements which allows a glib execution of the concept. Through the arrangement of everything that appears in the frame, including sets, props, actors, costumes, and lighting, "Avatar" transcends simple visual spectacle, becoming a living, breathing world that audiences can repeatedly explore and discover new dimensions within.

Key Words: Visual narrative, Eco-Feminism, Mise-en-Scene, Humanity, Transformation.

Phallocracy and Nature

"The earth, symbol and former preserve of the great mothers, has had a harder life and has resisted longer; today, her conqueror has reduced her to agony. This is the price of phallocracy." (D'Eaubonne)

Françoise D'Eaubonne, in *Feminism or Death* excavates history of the earth itself and brings forward the undeniable correlation between patriarchy's emergence and environmental exploitation. Around 5000 years ago, when power hierarchies shifted, the

earth like women was also influenced by dominance and unchecked expansion. A system designed to conquer rather than coexist took shape, breeding a mindset in the early human race that muscle over balance, conquest over preservation.

This power dynamic is translated into visual narratives, shaping how characters embody phallocratic ideology. They depict it not just in their words, but in their posture, expressions, framing, even the textures of their existence. Colonel Miles Quaritch and Tsu'tey (Neytiri's brother) are unquestionable manifestations of patriarchal excess. It is noticeable in their rigid forms, clenched jaws, and unwavering need to dominate.

Tsu'tey's introductory scene communicates everything just through some subtle mise-en-scene elements. He is perched atop his horse-like creature, looming above Neytiri, his downward gaze is a deliberate representation of hierarchical imbalance. His posture is rigid, his movements are calculated, as if his stance is a statement of authority. This framing subtly mimics historical depictions of male superiority like the statues and portraits of kings on thrones to colonial rulers surveying conquered lands. Though the Na'vi preach equality, even within their world, masculinity finds ways to assert dominance.

Colonel Miles, however, isn't subtle rather he is the embodiment of conquest, visually designed to invade and consume. His costuming done with tight military gear, sweat-streaked skin, jaw locked in perpetual intensity screams calculated aggression. The cinematography props him up as a force of sheer imposition, placing him at the centre of

the frame in moments of destruction, shadowing him against explosions. His movements which are often sharp, definitive, relentless are a contrast to deeply fluid, adaptive grace of the Na'vi, a physical representation of industry vs. nature.

Colonel Miles doesn't just want unobtainium, he feels like he has a right over it. He believes in his right to strip the land bare because of power for him is earned through weaponry. His dialogues drench in dismissal which includes referring to the Na'vi as "*blue monkeys*", refusing to acknowledge their leaders by name, brushing off Grace's attempts to explain their civilization as anything beyond primitive tribes. His very language reflects the arrogance of patriarchal conquest, echoing historical attitudes where indigenous communities were erased under the guise of "progress."

His mindset aligns with negative anthropocentrism, where nature exists solely for human benefit. In every scene featuring military discussions, the landscape is reduced to an obstacle, something to clear, mine, and pillage. The blocking in these scenes tells a story too—Miles stands above, his subordinates always seated, obedient, reinforcing his absolute control over both human power structures and the land he intends to ravage.

Mise-en-scène further intensifies this conflict—Miles' metal war machines, his bulky choppers, his mechanical walkers, all tower over the Na'vi's organic ecosystem. The camera angles exaggerate the contrast—the sharp, angular designs of human technology clashing violently against the curved, intertwined existence of Pandora's creatures. The land breathes while Miles'

world devours, visually reinforcing phallocracy's insatiable hunger for dominance and control.

Even Jake Sully, in his human form, initially mirrors this disregard—he views the Na'vi's ways as primitive, underestimating their deep-rooted connection to the earth. It is only when he falls in love with Neytiri and is included in the tribe that he surrenders individual conquest. He then abandons the patriarchal framework and recognizes the issues in anthropocentric entitlement.

The fall of Miles at the end of the first movie when his machine is swallowed by the land he sought to conquer; it is not just a narrative climax. Rather it is a visual rejection of patriarchal conquest itself. Nature reclaims, just as suppressed voices demand restoration.



Avatar: The Way of Water (2022)

Transitioning feminism

The *Avatar* films don't just flirt with feminism rather it charts a transition through it. What begins in the forest as a negotiation between autonomy and partnership gradually matures, in the water clan, into something more rooted, more unshakable. Different communities on Pandora reflect different moments in feminist consciousness—with Neytiri and Jake's dynamic capturing the

tender clumsiness of early equality, while Ronal's unspoken authority signals a world in which female leadership is not aspirational—it's foundational.

Take that moment when Jake tells Neytiri they need to leave the forest. He doesn't instruct. He doesn't declare. He *persuades*. And it's subtle—the camera holds them in a shared frame, letting their faces soften into one another's. Jake's shoulders curve slightly toward her, not in dominance but in deference. His voice lowers, seeking agreement rather than commanding it. It's a gentle scene, easily missed, but it tells us something important: this is a man trying not to lead from ahead, but from beside. It's not perfect—it still carries the seed of direction—but it's deliberate. A gesture of budding feminism, not quite flowering yet.

Contrast that with the water people. The moment Ronal gives a single nod of approval for Jake's family to stay, the decision is complete. Her mate, the clan leader, doesn't argue—he looks to her as the final word. The camera placement here reinforces it: Ronal is center frame, and even when not speaking, she's the gravitational core. Her partner leans slightly into her space, an almost imperceptible tilt that shows not submission, but recognition. He *knows* where power resides.

Her costuming is visually distinct, too. Where the male warriors dress for agility and defense, they are seen wearing woven straps, the practicality of movement. On the other hand, Ronal wears pieces that shimmer under sunlight, ocean-colored, adorned but not flamboyant. There's weight to what she wears, and her body language with spine anchored, arms often folded or still, it

demands attention without ever asking for it. Her authority is not theatrical, but deeply embedded.

This kind of quiet power defines the shift *Avatar* makes. With Neytiri, we see a woman who is fierce, capable, but often interrupted by a plot that moves through the decisions of men. With Ronal, we see the plot stop and wait. A woman whose consent isn't requested—it's required.

Then there's the performative feminism that begins to unravel as the Marines return, donning blue skins and borrowed language. On the surface, it looks like integration. They speak Na'vi, mirror their customs—but only until they're back in human company. Then the mask slips. The camera catches these moments in glances—side-eyes, mocking grins, subtle postural shifts when they're no longer being watched. It's like they're cosplaying empathy. And isn't that the heart of false allyship? Doing just enough to seem like you've crossed over while clinging to the comfort of the old order.

Colonel Miles's arc is even more revealing. He adopts the ecosystem the way one wears camouflage—not to understand it, but to hide within it long enough to strike. His movements change—but out of necessity. When he flies the creatures, his posture is always taut, his hands tight on the reins. Unlike the Na'vi, whose bodies lean into the rhythm of their animals, the Colonel rides with resistance. The camera frames him differently—tighter, always keeping part of the frame closed in, as if Pandora herself is reluctant to let him fully in. He adapts to the terrain, yes—but his thoughts stay mechanized, violent, bent on control.

The dialogue reinforces it: he never speaks of the land with reverence. Even when cloaked in Na’vi form, his eyes betray it—calculated, tracking, assessing the forest not as kin, but as terrain to be outsmarted. His evolution is a camouflage, not a conversion.

In the middle of all this, Jake and Neytiri’s relationship continues to evolve. It’s halting, sometimes clunky, often contradictory—but it holds the shape of *trying*. That matters. Feminism, here, is not presented as a polished ideology, but as something that grows in the friction of choices—between partnership and control, invitation and insistence.

By the time we see Ronal exercising effortless authority, it no longer reads as a reversal of patriarchy—it feels like a world in which patriarchy was simply never needed. That’s where *Avatar* lands its most radical point—not just in asking who holds power, but in suggesting that power itself can be redefined without echoing male structures at all.

This isn’t a story of women gaining access to power. It’s a story about who power belongs to when society isn’t built to keep it from them.

Humanesque Agency

The Na’vi approach to warfare is not merely strategic but ancestral. Like the colonized peoples across history, they resist not with uniformed drills or towering machinery, but with the land folded into their palms and lungs full of memory. Every movement feels like a footnote in a longer story of resistance, one that began long before the humans arrived on Pandora.

The Na’vi don’t dominate the forest—they move with it. Their warfare feels intimate, instinctive. The camera mirrors this with long, fluid dolly shots and uncut tracking sequences that follow them through trees, almost breathing in sync. There’s rhythm here—motion that feels earned, not forced. In contrast, human battle scenes use shaky handhelds and rapid, disjointed cuts that fracture the frame. The forest recoils under their weight, and even the cinematography pushes back.

The Na’vi don’t fight with force—they fight with familiarity. Their weapons and movements grow out of the land itself. They set traps with branches, disappear into trees, and let the forest speak for them. It’s not a battlefield rather it’s their homeland defending itself through them.

But let’s not get seduced by this harmony without seeing its framing. For all the reverence *Avatar* pays to Pandora, the storytelling lens remains decidedly narrow. The narrative is obsessed with two species: humans and the Na’vi. Why? Because they are the most like humans. Upright spines, language that forms metaphors, familial structures, tears, guilt, love. It’s not just that they speak but also they speak in ways that mirror our ethics. In a world dense with biodiversity, the camera follows the ones that remind us of ourselves.

Immanuel Kant, in his *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), postulated that animals lack moral autonomy, and therefore, we have no explicit duties towards them. In his view, animals cannot be wronged in the same way humans can. As he writes:

“Man has duties only to men (himself and other men)... we know of no being other

than man that would be capable of obligation.” (*Metaphysics of Morals, Part II, “Doctrine of Virtue”*)

Kant believed that while cruelty to animals is morally wrong, it is wrong in an indirect manner because it damages our own moral character, not because the animal itself has rights. This supports a strictly anthropocentric framework of the society, where the moral value of non-human life is measured solely by its impact on human virtue. This sentiment is reflected in a subtle way in the Avatar movies as well.

This isn't a flaw per se, but it's telling. The Thanator exists as terror. The Tulkun, though revered, become emotionally relevant only once their slaughter devastates a Na'vi child. Their grief is not shown; it is felt through someone else. That's the sly thread of anthropocentrism—it doesn't shout, it whispers. Agency is granted selectively. The stories that unfold are the ones we recognize as versions of our own.

Even in a world that claims to center nature, empathy follows the human form. We grieve with Spider and Lo'ak, not the reef. Nature's suffering only registers when filtered through someone we know. That's the quiet betrayal of anthropocentric cinema, even when nature leads the story, it's human emotion that takes the stage.

Colonel Miles embodies this rot most explicitly. His obsession with “winning back the planet” is not just militaristic but it is deeply patriarchal in its framing. For him Pandora is not a world to understand but it is a ‘thing’ to conquer, a possession temporarily lost. His language is saturated with entitlement. Watch his posture: square shoulders, mechanical stride, always looking

down—whether it's at a monitor, a soldier, or the land beneath his feet. His violence is framed not as chaos, but as control. Burn the forest, herd the animals, drop a bomb into the sea. His methods scream utility. He doesn't adapt, he imposes his agency.

But the story itself is complicit. It allows us to grieve for the reef only when our protagonists lose shelter. It mourns the Tulkun not for what they are, but because of what they meant to someone. It centers around species whose evolution echoes our own and lives while others hovering in the background who are beautiful and strange but mostly silent.

The Na'vi as Prehistoric Echoes—Or Future Us?

The idea that the Na'vi echo prehistoric humans lingers in the minds of the viewers. It is because of their tools and rituals but also because of *how* they live inside their world rather than atop it. There's something hauntingly familiar in their interspecies connection which is not mystical, but primal. They don't coexist with nature rather they *negotiate* with it. Every interaction be it ritual, movement, or mode of survival feels like an echo of the early human instinct to adapt.

What makes them noteworthy isn't their stillness contrastingly, it's their *shift*. The Na'vi don't simply communicate with animals they ride them, direct them, and, when it is necessary to them, they put them at risk in battle. Their bond with the ikran, for instance, appears symbiotic on the surface, yet the framing often shows them mounting the creatures from above and being in an authoritative position. The neural connection, while intimate, is initiated and ended by the

Na'vi. Which raises the tension: is this harmony, or a soft evolution of control?

It's this paradox that makes them a mirror—one angled just slightly behind us or perhaps disturbingly ahead. Because while they live in sync with their environment, there's already a whisper of hierarchical arrangement, a hint that they too might outgrow the balance they embody. The difference between them and us is in degree, not in kind. And that's what unsettles—the Na'vi are less an alien species than a speculative memory.

Then the character of Spider who is awkward, semi-feral, always at the edge. He doesn't move like them but he desires it for the sense of conformity and belonging. He watches with a mix of reverence and recognition, like he knows he's missed something he can't name. His gaze is never fully inside the world, but never fully outside it either. Thus, by adding the character of Spider the film showcases a quiet intricate psychology, that humanity's longing to belong didn't die it was just buried under machinery.

Spider doesn't bridge the gap between human and Na'vi rather he reminds us there was never truly a gap. Just time. Just forgetting. Perhaps, if the Na'vi are any indication, the future still remembers the past.

Conclusion

The tensions explored through this paper has been between phallocracy and its resistance, between human-cantered arrogance and ecological balance. These tensions do not always show up in obvious dialogues and book titles. They emerge where the camera lingers too long, or not long enough. *Avatar's*

most gripping social comments happens in the shadows of its own worldbuilding. It is subtly slipped in how a body moves through space, in what is left unsaid, and in how often we're asked to read with our eyes instead of our ears.

Take Neteyam. From the start, he's cast gently to the periphery—not because he lacks importance, but because his disposability is written into the frame. He's the perfect son, the soft-hearted protector, the one who doesn't interrupt or rebel too much. And we, as viewers, are trained by the genre to know what that means. His screen time is quieter, more fragmented, his character development more suggested than shown. So when he is wounded, we already know—it's him. It was always going to be him. The narrative prepares us not through obvious foreshadowing, but through quiet absence. He's made precious by being underused. His death hits hardest not for the loss of what we saw, but for the echo of what we never got to.

Then there's Neytiri. Her evolution is not charted by lines of dialogue or turning points—it's sculpted in her body. In the forest, she moves like wind slipping through leaves—fluid, instinctive, animal-fast. In the Metkayina village, her posture changes; she folds inward, carries her arms closer to her chest, her gaze wary even when her voice says otherwise. There's a caution in her steps, in how little space she takes up in a world not shaped by her traditions. And then, in the final battle, she erupts. Her body unfurls again, not into freedom, but into fury. Every movement is deliberate, sharpened, fierce with grief. The shift isn't just physical—it's emotional choreography. The camera knows this, too. It frames her wide when she's moving like

herself, and closes in as she fractures. We don't need to be told what she feels. We're shown it—in muscle, in breath, in the deliberate return of her voice to her limbs.

This is what makes *Avatar*'s visual storytelling so potent. Not every message is named. Some slip through in color palettes or postures, in who gets framed alone and who is kept at the edge. The Omaticaya and Metkayina aren't just different peoples—they're different visual languages. One built around branches and sky. The other around tide and pulse. Their differences live in skin tone gradients, in how their bodies hold water differently, in how they greet outsiders—with spears, with silence, or not at all. These aren't costumes for show. They are signals, and they ask us to read carefully.

Which brings us to Jake Sully's line—

"All energy is only borrowed, and one day you have to give it back."

It's easy to hear that as a farewell. But it's more than that. It's a way of understanding narrative, too. These ideas of gender, power, evolution, and resistance aren't new. They are

borrowed energy. What makes them resonate is how we've shaped them here. Through watching. Through asking what's being said without words. Through noticing the small ripple beneath the plot.

This research is part of that borrowing. The narratives I explore, the tensions I trace, the philosophies and contradictions, they aren't mine in origin. They're pieces I've inherited. From Aristotle's hierarchy to Kant's cold logic, from Cameron's panoramic eye to Ronal's stillness framed like a painting, it's all borrowed. And I'm just shaping it, carving it through a lens I've been learning to use.

Because that's what makes a narrative meaningful. Not the originality of its parts, but the intimacy of how it's rearranged. Cameron does it with intention, with atmosphere, and with a quiet challenge tucked beneath the spectacle.

We borrow perspectives. We borrow energy. And in return, we create frames others might step into. That's the only circle that matters.

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Research Design:

- Qualitative, interpretive, and text-based analysis of filmic narrative.
- Focused on how meaning is constructed through nonverbal storytelling.

Theoretical Framework:

- Ecofeminism: Intersections of gender, nature, and resistance.
- Anthropocentrism: Philosophical perspectives from Aristotle, Kant, Plumwood.
- Visual semiotics and film theory: mise-en-scène, camera logic, emotional geography.

Primary Text(s) / Data

- *Avatar* (2009) and *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022), dir. James Cameron.
- Key moments from the films analyzed in depth:
 - Neytiri's shifting body language across environments
 - Neteyam's foreshadowed death
 - Scene construction of Na'vi resistance
- Philosophical and theoretical texts:
- Aristotle's *Politics*, *Parts of Animals*
- Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*
- Val Plumwood's ecofeminist critique

Methods

- **Close visual reading** of cinematographic elements:
 - Dolly shots, tracking sequences, shot composition, lighting, costume, spatial politics
- **Symbolic and emotional analysis** of nonverbal shifts in characters and environment
- **Philosophical synthesis:** Applying classical and postmodern theories to visual language
- **Narrative empathy mapping:** Where the camera positions viewer attention and emotion

Discussion

Key Interpretations:

- *Avatar* suggests ecological harmony, but still centers human-like suffering.
- The Na'vi's resistance is crafted through earthbound intimacy, not militarized confrontation.
- Neteyam's minimal narrative space signals his disposability.
- Neytiri's body carries the arc of her story—freedom, suppression, and fury written through movement.
- Empathy is visually encoded: nature's pain is felt only when filtered through familiar faces.

Broader Contributions:

- Reframes visual storytelling as ideological and ethical ground.
- Highlights how even “progressive” cinema holds traces of patriarchal or human-centered logic.
- Proposes new ways of reading narratives as cyclical, borrowed, and reshaped—both thematically and ethically.

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- Scene studies, philosophical commentary, and relevant cinematic analysis.

Would you like me to script the speaker notes for these slides, or help you design visuals and suggested film stills for each one? I can keep building this out with you.

Core Filmic Texts:

- *Avatar* (2009)
- *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022)

Both directed by **James Cameron**, these films are used not as passive entertainment, but as **visual archives of ecological, philosophical, and gendered anxieties**.

Philosophical & Theoretical Anchors:

- Aristotle’s *Politics* and *Parts of Animals* – origins of human supremacy narratives
- Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* – moral exclusion of nonhuman life
- Val Plumwood’s ecofeminism – deconstructing human/nature dualism
- Françoise D’Eaubonne’s *Feminism or Death* – feminism as planetary imperative

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