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Riffing with myth

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'Avatar,' like all good sci-fi films, asks, 'What does it mean to be human?'

People can say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that what's we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alone. That's what it's all finally about, and that's what these clues [myths] help us to find within ourselves.

?Joseph Campbell

James Cameron's much anticipated animated 3-D epic "Avatar" is the most expensive film ever made, coming in at about \$300 million. It is a science fiction adventure that takes place in the future and asks what all worthy sci-fi films wonder about: What does it mean to be human? Are we who we say we are, or are we avatars, both the captains of our own destinies as well as the victims of our own machinations?

Briefly, the story is about Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), a veteran who is paralyzed. The year is 2154. To get enough money to pay for spinal surgery, Jake takes the place of his deceased twin brother, a

scientist who was part of an experiment to go through a process of transformation to become one of the Na'vi, a humanoid race on an inhabited moon called Pandora, in order to subdue them.

A corporation had colonized Pandora for years, teaching the Na'vi English, building schools and hospitals. But the Na'vi finally rejected these efforts, realizing that the company wanted Pandora's natural resources, especially a mineral called "unobtanium," not the good of the people. Some of the scientists become avatars of the Na'vi, so they can infiltrate the people and convince them to cooperate so the militaristic branch of the corporation will not exterminate them.

James Cameron knows about science fiction and myth. He seems to have taken mythologist Joseph Campbell at his word, developing his definition of myth from a search for meaning to an experience of life. Cameron's past films, especially "Terminator 2: Judgment Day" (1991) and "Titanic" (1997), were not only spectacles but gave moviegoers a deep experience of life vicariously through the characters in his films.

James Cameron also knows history and pays attention to what is going on in the world. In "Avatar," Cameron turns his considerable filmmaking toolbox upside down and splashes a memorable experience on the screen.

But for all its glory, we don't obtain this experience from our attachment to any one character in the film; they are relatively undeveloped. They are "avatars" all of them.

Worthington's character takes the place of his dead twin brother in an experiment that turns him into a Na'vi character ? a representation of himself in the body of a Na'vi. Jake can take his brother's place and represent him because they share the same DNA . Jake, and his new physical alter ego in the form of a Na'vi, ultimately becomes a Christ figure for the people of Pandora.

The film's women, who are either human, human transformed into Na'vi (Sigourney Weaver's character, Dr. Grace Augustine), or Na'vi, represent strength, courage, relationship and transcendent values. The film is about living vicariously, through representation. It is about walking in the footsteps of others and feeling what they feel, understanding their reality, then reflecting and choosing to act as human beings.

Most people already know about avatars from playing video games or even choosing one to take the place of a person's photo on Facebook so as to remain anonymous. If you have played Wii, you choose an avatar to play games for you, even as you wield the hand-held device.

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Cameron, who both wrote and directed the film, seems to have contemplated the meaning of the word avatar, and exploited it for the story and themes the term suggests.

I went to an online dictionary and found the definition as "embodiment" and "manifestation." Some of the synonyms listed are "archetype," "example," "incarnation," "personification," "realization." You can find all these ideas explicitly and implicitly in the movie "Avatar."

The shared experience of myth, as defined by Campbell, comes from the shared experience of the characters on the screen, those of us in our seats, and cultures and societies that have suffered from war, injustice, oppression, and the consequences of capitalism and greed. Cameron depicts the path human beings have taken since the beginning of the practice of colonization and takes it to outer space. The Na'vi

represent indigenous people throughout history, and the corporation represents multinational corporations' never-ending search for resources and profits no matter the collateral damage.

My sister, with whom I saw the film, said it reminded her of Kevin Costner's 1990 film "Dances with Wolves." "Avatar" reminded me of Roland Joffe's "The Mission," released in 1986.

The sisters in my community who saw the film were impressed by the matriarchal role the female characters embodied. As the conflict is resolved, the women make the sacrifices and the man is the hero.

"Avatar" is a big film and obvious in its commentary on politics and corporate greed. The role of religion in the primal mythology of "Avatar" is strong. The role and image of the tree in the film is straight out of Genesis, and Pandora seems like a Garden of Eden.

Though filmgoing is a communal activity, each of us is alone in the cinematic experience. "Avatar" chooses one key character to take our place and enter into the world of Pandora and feel what it is like to be both conqueror and a conquered people.

More than a narrative, this is a concept film driven by theological, historical, social, political, economic and anthropological themes and shaped by the style and force of myth. Dr. Grace Augustine? A character's name in a film is almost always intentional. An analysis of the film from the perspective of Augustine's theology of sin, grace, beauty, truth and goodness would make for excellent reading.

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