

Bravemole, Superman and Avatar: Children's 9/11-Fictions

In January this year I was involved in a public debate with film critic Michael Tapper of *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* about the possible merits and demerits of James Cameron's *Avatar*. What this dispute showed me was that the film was part of a much larger discourse than I had imagined at first and that it merited a closer examination than that made possible by the fragmentary and indecisive article-ripostes in *Sydsvenskan*. So, this lecture, then, is an attempt to spend some quality time with *Avatar* and related material, untangle some of the film's ideological intricacies and to expand my initial argumentation. I will ask, for instance, how the film relates to similarly themed earlier books and films. Specifically, I will look at children's picture books, comics and science fiction. My working hypothesis is that the film, and children's 9/11-fiction in general, is part of an ongoing reconfiguration of American (and Western) identity.

The first thing that struck me when I saw *Avatar* was that I knew the story already. It rang a bell. In fact it rang several bells. Ed Anglesey was one of them. He is the protagonist of Poul Anderson's short story "Hey Joe" (1957) and is, just like Jake Sully in *Avatar*, a paraplegic who connects telepathically to an artificially created life-form. In both stories the main characters eventually come to prefer their new bodies and the alien environment to their previous and doubly earthbound existence – through handicapped bodies and an ecologically depleted Earth. The film also resonates of SF-novels like Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonflight* (1968), with its depictions of bonding between humans and dragons, and Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), in which the chosen one rides a gigantic sandworm to victory over the intruders who want to have control over a natural resource ("spice") only available on that planet. [Or the, as yet unidentified short story which describes a planet and ecosystem which, like with Pandora and its spirit, Eywa, can strike back against intruders when threatened. The shared idea here is that these worlds constitute one interconnected organism.] It has also been noted that Boris & Arkady Strugatsky's *Noon: 22nd Century* (1962/1978) features a lush planet named Pandora, hosts natives called Nave (not Na'avi), and that the man from earth goes native in this case too. Finally, Ursula Le

Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) has surely served as a template for *Avatar* when it comes to the description of a colonised forest world, where the native humanoids with bows and arrows ultimately defeat high-tech capitalists and militaries. In both stories anthropologists play a crucial role, and Le Guin's jingoistic and aggressive Don Davidson and James Cameron's Miles Quaritch could have been twins. Moreover, the underlying conflict has to do with natural resources: timber in Le Guin's book; the precious and aptly named ore Unobtainium in Cameron's film.

I will come back to the differences later; they are important.

[All in all – and I may very well have missed something along the way – one must concede that Cameron is well read in older SF. This impression is confirmed by an interview with Cameron, who says, “I would have to say that in my youth I was an absolutely rabid science fiction fan. I read all the classics, all the old Ace paperback novels. I was really into people like Arthur C. Clarke, Robert Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, and Kurt Vonnegut. When I read science fiction I saw stuff in my head that I had never seen in films” (Shapiro, 30).]

In a sense the film lives up to the the Na'avi saying, “all energy is borrowed.” But one could also say that storytelling whether oral, written, visual, filmic always depends on borrowings, and that recognition of intertexts is part of the genre expectations. To use another *Avatar*-quote, Cameron's “marine in an avatar body is a potent mix” – in more than one sense. [No worries, as long as Cameron himself does not say that he got the story or plot or character from this or that author he does not run the risk of being sued for plagiarism, which was what happened with *Aliens* (1986). In this case he admitted that two short stories by Harlan Ellison from the collection *Outer Limits* had inspired him, the result being that he was sued for plagiarism and had to compensate Ellison economically as well as acknowledge the debt to him in the movie's credits. Cameron will certainly not walk down that road again.]

To pursue the contextualization of *Avatar* and move beyond the science fiction genre, it is frequently pointed out that Disney's animated movie *Pocahontas* (1995) shares some of the same basic structure with *Avatar*: a white soldier arrives in the new world with the mission to secure natural resources for the colonists. He meets an alien woman, who turns out to be a princess. She teaches him about living in harmony with nature and the spiritual connectedness of everything. They fall in love. An evil superior military uses the situation to get at the natives. Another animated film that has been mentioned in connection with *Avatar* is the Australian-made *Ferngully* (1992) in which a lumberjack is shrunk, like another Nils Holgersson, and initiated into the fairy community of the "last rainforest," now threatened by deforestation. The native fairies band together and fight the human exploitation successfully. There is a love story in there as well. More realistically, the theme of going native is famously explored in *Dances with Wolves* (1990). Here the soldier John Dunbar's initial reconnoitering mission, becomes a quest for a new cultural identity. Incidentally, an interesting parallel to the narration of *Avatar* is the use of voice over – John's journal and Jake's video log – which chart their respective development.

On a more general level, the idea of the white male hero who becomes accepted by a native people/race/species and ultimately assumes leadership is prevalent in western literature and culture under names such as Tarzan, the Phantom, Kurtz, Natty Bumppo and many more. But never vice versa: for, per definition, the subaltern cannot become white or assume white leadership. The superior being can seemingly descend into "lower" forms of existence (in terms of power and agency), transcend the oppressing hegemonic power structure (ultimately because s/he is not essentially restrained by it) and emerge a hero. In the case of *Avatar* this pattern is complicated by the fact that Jake Sully has a Na'avi body – at first temporarily, but then permanently. But does this make him an image of the Other, as some critics (no names!) would have it? I think not. Whatever such a process would involve *really*, the film portrays it as less traumatic than having one's appendicitis removed. Jake Sully's brand new alien body fits him as a pair of blue coveralls, and his sense of self is not affected by the body-change in a fundamental way. Luckily for him, perhaps, the sapient species on Pandora were not giant spiders, or even hairy apes as in the case of Tarzan, but slim, fit and attractive cat-people.

Culturally Jake Sully has to adapt of course, but certainly much less than John Dunbar in *Dances with Wolves*. One can make the experiment of thinking what it would take to assume the human culture of someone from a different social class, gender, or ethnicity. The values that Jake has to embrace are actually in line with Western norms: monogamous heterosexuality, lifelong fidelity to one's spouse, nature and ecology as a source of religious veneration, respect for traditions, bravery and self-sacrifice. What is so revolutionary or revolting about that? There is actually nothing in the Na'avi cultural makeup that rubs a westerner the wrong way, except, possibly, their undemocratic governance. On the other hand, as a soldier, Jake Sully should have no problems with authority in undemocratic forms. And in any case, the human settlement on Pandora is hardly a model of democracy.

So, severing the links with his old life does not come at a very high cost it seems. His twin brother is dead. If Jake has any other family or group of friends they remain unknown. Earth is reportedly a sterile place. And he himself is handicapped – indeed when he comes to the Na'avi he is, unlike the to-full-of –themselves-scientists that have gone before him, like a “cup ready to be filled” [; incidentally, a good fairy tale formula to indicate readiness for adventure.] In exchange he gets a fit and healthy body and is able to live in a natural paradise, is taught the ways of the land by a beautiful princess, and eventually becomes the savior and hero of the people. Who, in his situation, would not have made the same choice? Jake's words in his video log about the uselessness in trying to sway the Na'avi could be applied to himself: “they have all they want, what can we offer? Low calory beer?”

At the end of the film Jake leaves his human body altogether to live completely as a Na'avi. Jake calls it his birthday. He is being born again. What we have here is a version of the culturally acceptable way of stripping away one's old sinful life through the symbolic “death” of baptism, and resurrection to new life and identity. It is a powerful image, but even so, Jake Sully in his Na'avi body is hardly representative of alterity and Otherness to viewers, as I see it. What we are witnessing here is not someone becoming the

Other, if by this we mean the radically different – hardly even “born again,” but the mirror image of what we all would want to be. It is a wish-fulfilment fantasy: keeping our essential identity, yet seeing with new eyes; being innocent and experienced at the same time; communing with animals and spirits; being able to fly; having strong bodies and brave thoughts; being loved and feared; living keenly in paradise.

It also ties in beautifully with what Robert Jewett and Shelton Lawrence have called the American monomyth – a story pattern which pervades much of American popular culture. In shorthand it can be rendered as:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity.

But the text is also informed by Rousseauan and Romantic ideas of the noble savage, American transcendentalism, with its spirit-imbued nature, and not least with the idea of the frontier as the place where the true American self is defined in direct contact with nature and natives. Pandora is just one example of the identity and character-building frontier; it is a common trope in SF; after all, space is “the final frontier,” to quote from *Star Trek*.

What I have hoped to do so far is to provide a context for *Avatar*. I have marshaled the evident precursors in the science fiction genre, as well as narratives and myths that tap into similar motifs (intercultural encounters, ecological awareness, identity politics). I will now turn to the post 9/11-context and children’s literature.

In a past era, the numbers 9 and 11 in connection with children’s literature would have referred to books written for young readers between 9 and 11 years of age. Post “9/11” this is no longer so. Today children’s fiction about the 9/11 terrorist attacks on America have become an important topic in itself. Numerous picture books, comics, illustrated books and novels that deal with the traumatic events have been (and continue to be) pub-

lished. Hence, both for broad political and ideological reasons, as well as from a more specialized children's literature perspective, it is important to analyze and assess this new body of children's literature. In what ways does it reflect changing ideas and attitudes? Does it depart in any significant ways from corresponding adult discourses about 9/11? Does 9/11 affect children's fiction as a whole? Some attempts have been made earlier to address these questions, but Jo Lampert's, *Children's Fiction about 9/11: Ethnic, Heroic and National Identities* is probably the most wide-ranging (in its choice of genres) and critically informed effort to date. Let me revise some of her findings here. As the sub-heading indicates, Lampert focuses on the interdependent constructions of ethnic, national and heroic identity in the texts. One of the interesting things she is able to show is that ethnic identity in 9/11-texts is subsumed by national (American) identity. Although still paying lip service to multiculturalism, diversity is in effect played down; difference is no longer celebrated, but something that must be contained. The Arab-American siblings in Joseph Geha's "Alone and All Together", for instance, choose different strategies when negotiating identity in the new and for them precarious situation, but in the end it is Sally, the girl who clearly chooses to be American first and foremost, who is shown to have done the right choice. From this and other examples, one sees that the more postmodern situation prior to 9/11, where one could indulge in a hybrid play of identities, is under pressure.

Heroic identities have also changed somewhat, and with that, a somewhat complacent self-image. 9/11 showed that America and its citizens are vulnerable. Therefore it is not surprising to find that uniformed hero-protectors such as policemen and firemen are drafted into the ranks of children's fiction to a much greater extent now than previously. More importantly, another category, the common working man (for it is usually a male in 9/11-narratives) is also frequently invoked as a hero, and often in anthropomorphic form. In *Bravemole* by Lynne Jonell a dragon destroys two great molehills. An ordinary mole then makes an individual, heroic choice to "dig through the rubble to find the missing moles". As Lampert writes "moles are the builders of the world, not the destroyers". *Bravemole* becomes a leader of moles, telling his fellow moles that "they must fight the dragons 'so that our babymoies won't have to'" (140).

One can infer several things from stories such as these. America is under attack, its heroes are small but strong. Americans are positioned “as the underdog (or undermole), needing to band together to overcome a collective axis of evil” (141). Regularly, these narratives show heroes that may be uncertain about what is right, but who are brave and caring nevertheless. They are not soldiers – yet! However, these fictions ultimately work to justify war. These are texts that prepare a nation and its young for war. And this is a trendshift; western children’s literature has been decidedly pacifist at least since the 1970’s.

I will now turn to comic books that were published in the aftermath of 9/11. The day after the attacks an issue of *Superman* hit the stands. The cover bore the caption “This is not a job for Superman” and on one of the pages there was an image of the Twin Towers burning after an alien attack. The publication was entirely coincidental, but DC Comics offered retailers to return these magazines. However, later, when DC Comics published a fund-raising collection of 9/11-comics, this theme recurred: “not a job Superman, but for other, human heroes”. In several pictures Superman and other superheroes are seen standing in awe before firefighters and workers and soldiers.

There is of course a tradition of enlisting superheroes in the armed forces. During WWII Superman was clearly on the side of the United States, as can be seen in these slides of covers from the early 1940’s.

In the war on terror, the superheroes act more in the background. They are comforting symbols rather than agents, as when Superman makes toy towers with a group of children, or when Batman and Superman approvingly look at Wonderwoman’s handiwork, stitching flags together. The authors show an awareness of metatextual devices – the fictitious heroes frustratedly comment on their own textuality and inability to break free from the pages, as when a copy of Superman helps archild to escape from a too harsh reality. Or when a distressed child imagines and draws Martian Manhunter and Superman in the act of reconstructing the twin towers.

The collection contains a huge variety of responses both in terms artistic and aesthetic sophistication and in the attitude to the attacks. Tolerance and pacifism is preached in one contribution. In another – a story about a scared ant – the simple everyday heroism involved in returning to work is celebrated (Aragones). But in contrast to picture books like *Bravemole*, the DC collection contains some narratives and images which openly advocate war, and no quarter to the enemy. Out of these differing and sometimes contradictory responses a pattern emerges. America is under attack. America is made up of ordinary, innocent and “small” people, who will now have to assume heroic responsibility.

Now, let us return to *Avatar*. It was after having reviewed Jo Lampeter’s book on *Children’s 9/11 Fictions* for an academic journal (*IRCL*), and, having, subsequently read up on *Bravemole* and the commemoration DC-comics referred to above, that I saw *Avatar*. Thus, my understanding of the film was coloured by what I understood as an ongoing reorientation of children’s literature, and a changing discourse of what it means to be American.

It explains the film’s extraordinary openness to interpretation and its global appeal. On the one hand it contains a critique of imperialism, militarism and consumerism. So, it is quite possible to see it as a tree-hugging, pacifist and anti-American movie. But had this been unambiguously so, *Avatar* would not be the greatest box office success ever. We are not ruffled by it, and Americans are certainly not offended by it; they (and we) do not identify with the likes of Miles Quaritch, and even less so with the administrator, Parker Selfridge. Instead, the audience is avatarized through identification with Jake Sully. The story is his story – told from his perspective, an illusion boosted by the use video logs, among other things – but this also means that when his priorities and allegiance change, the audience follows.

The alternative story that emerges through our identification with Jake is that the Na’avi are the true Americans – spiritual, in contact with nature and God, innocent, brave, and – under attack. This is exactly the discourse that we have seen in the children’s fiction and

the comics. Quaritch & co are just a foil. They represent an image of the US as an un-touchable superpower which no longer can be true, at least in the eyes of Americans. The Na'avi on the other hand, are literally and figuratively – “true blue”. The skin hue is not only patriotic, but uniform – erasing ethnic diversity as in children’s fiction of 9/11, and adopting a colour not already racialised – as with white, black, brown, yellow and red. Green could have passed, but it is the SF-standard for Bug-Eyed-Monsters (and the colour of Le Guin’s Athsheans), but that might have constituted them as evil.

One central image – the destruction of the Home Tree – can illustrate the alchemy involved in turning Quaritch and the human colony on Pandora into the enemy, while turning Jake and Na'avi to “us” or even “US.” Many commentators have mentioned the similarity between the footage of the collapse of the Twin Towers with that of the attack on the Home Tree –the planes, the projectiles, the tall burning buildings, the collapse, the people fleeing and stumbling through the debris and ash-rain. Due to the immense exposure most grownups have had to the images of the burning towers, I am sure that few viewers will fail to make the connection, at least on a subliminal level (just like Cameron himself, if we are to believe him), thus staking out friend and foe in no uncertain terms. In addition, both attacks come without warning on innocent, simple and unsuspecting people, striking at the heart of the symbolic and actual centre of their civilization. Moreover, in the rhetoric surrounding 9/11 the attacks were labeled as cowardly and vehement, epithets that seem even more appropriate in the case of *Avatar*. The deed was also carried out with the help of high technology which had been hijacked by evil and cowardly “barbarians.”

Finally, I want to return to the intertext that to me displays the most striking parallels to *Avatar*, Ursula Le Guin’s *The Word for World is Forest*. I have already dwelt on some of the most conspicuous similarities, but the differences are also illuminating, and bring out the change in American self-representation that I believe have taken place since 9/11. The most obvious difference between the two texts is that the Athshean’s in Le Guin’s novel liberate themselves. This is crucial. There is no Jake Sully, no white male marine, to save the day. Here the hero is a short, green-skinned native called Selver who has learnt about

violence and killing from Captain Davidson (who among other things rapes Selver's mate). Up to that point, the Athshean's have been incapable of hurting or killing humans, something that the colonists from Earth of course have taken advantage of. Selver, however, teaches the docile Athshean's about the possibility of insurrection and war. *The Word for World is Forest* was partly written as a critique of the Vietnam War. To Le Guin it was apparently important to show that the Athshean's were able to empower themselves. And it was important to show the American readers an unflattering image of American warfare and exploitation.

In *Avatar*, that image becomes an image of the enemy, impossible to reconcile with American self-understanding post 9/11. Instead, through identification with Jake Sully and the Na'avi, America is reborn on Pandora.

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