I See You: Interspecies Empathy and *Avatar*

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Abstract

Seeing others is a central metaphor in James Cameron’s film *Avatar*, used as a means to express empathy and empathic bonding throughout the film, both between humans and the Na’vi, and between the Na’vi and the animals that inhabit their world. Empathy entails an ability to see and feel the world from another’s perspective—feeling with rather than feeling for. Jake Sully’s shifting and boundary-crossing identity makes him an especially good candidate for empathic cultivation. Sully assumes an avatar identity, stepping into a Na’vi form but also trying on a range of different perspectives, as part of his education in empathy and his spiritual transformation. The film sheds light on the complexity, fragility, and potential dangers of empathy, as well as its potential as an environmental and humanitarian value. *Avatar* suggests empathy’s perils, but also illustrates that, properly oriented and cultivated, empathy is an important environmental disposition encouraging appreciation of otherness.

Introduction

Carl Sagan once predicted that were the earth ever visited by alien lifeforms, humans would have little to fear and much to learn from them, science fiction and film depictions of aliens notwithstanding. Sagan’s argument went roughly as follows: any civilization with the technology required to visit our planet from remote space would necessarily be much more advanced than our own; that would also mean that they would have passed through the critical, perilous stage in their technological development when they realized the possibility of...
self-annihilation by global nuclear war.¹ Having survived its technologi-
cal ‘adolescence’, Sagan reasoned, such a civilization would be unlikely
to wage unprovoked war against another civilization. They would have
long ago learned the art of peaceful coexistence. A message from
extraterrestrials should inspire profound hope, not fear, Sagan believed,
for it would signal that ‘someone has learned to live with high technol-
ogy’ (1980: 302). Though Sagan did not put it in quite these terms, such a
message would also mark the dawn of an unprecedented era of empathy
between the most disparate lifeforms and civilizations imaginable.

Unfortunately, the prospect of encountering alien forms of life
(including unfamiliar or strange inhabitants of our own planet) is more
often greeted with fear or revulsion than hope. In the film Contact (1997),
based on Sagan’s further musings about human–alien encounters, the
advanced alien civilization seeks to mitigate such fear by having the
emissary from their world greet the earthling space traveler, Ellie, in the
familiar form of her beloved, and long deceased, father. In that instant,
Ellie’s emotions—her childhood memories and longing for her father—
are comprehended but also manipulated (in largely benign ways) by the
superior alien civilization. In James Cameron’s film Avatar, a similar
arrangement occurs between the earthlings who have colonized an
earth-like moon called Pandora and the Na’vi who are Pandora’s native
inhabitants. To interact with the Na’vi, humans take on an avatar form
that resembles the Na’vi outwardly but is an engineered hybrid between
human and Na’vi genetic material. By appearing in familiar form to the
natives, the humans hope to gain their trust—and (for some, at least)
their valuable natural resources. Unlike the technologically advanced
races envisioned by Sagan, the humans on Pandora in the year 2154 have
mastered a full range of biotechnologies, as well as space travel, yet
without having made the ethical breakthrough Sagan optimistically
predicted.

Reflecting upon scenarios such as Sagan’s and Cameron’s, we begin to
discern some of the moral ambiguity that attends empathy and the uses
to which it is put. What, for example, are the limits of human empathic
capacities (does empathy depend upon sameness and familiarity)? What
are the ethically appropriate and inappropriate uses of empathy (when
does empathy qualify as a virtue)? Avatar, as I interpret it, is replete with
themes of empathy and empathic bonding, as well as spiritual and

¹. In the 1980s, Sagan promulgated the theory that nuclear war, even on a small
scale, could usher in a ‘nuclear winter’—a period of extreme cold and dark—that
would devastate the biosphere; he spoke out against nuclear proliferation until his
death in 1996.
physical interconnection. In many ways, *Avatar* is a tale of moral awakening, focused on the character of Jake Sully, a paraplegic marine who infiltrates and is ultimately absorbed into the Na’vi world. As I hope to show, a number of Sully’s characteristics, and his situation generally, make him an almost ideal candidate for empathic conversion. To say that Sully is ideally disposed toward empathy (or well positioned for empathic education), however, is not to say that his behavior is always ideal in an ethical sense. Sully’s behavior and other aspects of the plot serve to illustrate some potential abuses of empathy, as well as empathy’s enormous potential as a basis for humanitarian² and environmental virtue.

There are, of course, many (sometimes incompatible) definitions of empathy.³ I touch upon only a subset of these definitions and debates about what constitutes empathy. My discussion focuses especially on normative claims about empathy, and owes much to Nancy Sherman who proposes that empathic imagination entails an often imperfect but salutary struggle to see the world from the perspective of others who are really alien to us (Sherman 1998).

*Empathy: A Brief Overview*

It is common to hear empathy touted as a virtue, and there has recently been a flurry of writing on the moral necessity of empathy in the modern world.⁴ The notion that empathy is unambiguously good is a function of empathy’s close association with sympathy, which suggests feelings of compassion, solidarity, concern, fellow-feeling or (somewhat less positively) pity. But these are dispositions that may or may not resemble or be engendered by empathy. Indeed, the term empathy emerged much more recently than sympathy.⁵ The earliest usage of the word empathy had to do with human encounters with aesthetic objects. ‘Empathy’ first appeared in English as a translation of the German *Einfühlung*, a term meant to convey the sense of projecting oneself into an object of beauty (Wispé 1987: 18). In 1909, the psychologist Edward Titchener translated *Einfühlung* as empathy, drawing upon the Greek *empatheia* (literally, ‘in-suffering’). A useful, if not terribly nuanced, distinction commonly drawn between empathy and sympathy is that the latter term suggests

². Or whatever the equivalent term (inclusive of aliens) might be.
³. See, for example, Batson (2009) who identifies eight distinct phenomena referred to as empathy in scholarly literature.
⁵. Adding to the confusion is the fact that what some philosophers, notably Hume, call sympathy is probably more accurately labeled empathy.
feeling for another, while empathy entails feeling into another, imagining oneself in, or projecting oneself into another’s situation. If I see that you are distressed and feel distressed as well, I am empathizing; but if I feel sorry for you in your distress, that response is more in line with sympathy. A number of theorists define two basic types (or dimensions) of empathy: cognitive and affective. Cognitive empathy entails awareness of another’s state of mind and is associated with role- or perspective-taking—imaginative attempts to step into another’s shoes.\(^6\) Affective empathy refers to a shared (or matched, or mirrored) emotional response.

Moral philosophers are often interested in the question of whether empathy can or ought to allow one to leave behind entirely one’s self and perspective or interests—what Sherman calls the ‘home base’—in the act of empathizing. Some theorists draw a distinction between empathic projection in which one imagines oneself in the position of the other (how one would feel in another’s place), as opposed to imagining how another’s situation is experienced by that person. The first form, sometimes referred to as self-focused role-taking, may lead to ‘egoistic drift’, where one becomes lost in egoistic concern, including concern with one’s own empathic distress (Hoffman 2000: 56). Regarding the second form, empathy resembles what a good character actor does: ‘we do not pretend to be the characters we are acting, we become those characters. This is not a transfer, but a transformation’ (Sherman 1998: 101). Transformation requires relinquishing—temporarily—the home base, and it is not easily accomplished, particularly for those of us who are not character actors. Sherman suggests that transformational empathy be viewed as ‘an ideal to aim for’—a state rarely if ever achieved perfectly, and one that can radically challenge us to imagine the experiences of others whom we find truly ‘alien’ (1998: 101-102).

As one considers the nature of the relationship between the self and others with whom we empathize, two problematics present themselves. One possibility is that the self and its perspective remain dominant, perhaps to the extent that the other’s feelings and perspective are grossly distorted by one’s own lenses. A second possibility is that one may radically, even irrevocably, lose oneself, one’s sense of identity or objectivity, in the other’s perspective or emotional state (as with Stockholm Syndrome and other forms of traumatic bonding where return to sense of self is severely jeopardized). If the first extreme suggests the problem of parochiality—the difficulty of breaking out of the biases and boundaries of our own perspectives—the second underscores the perils of

\(^6\) More fundamentally, cognitive empathy entails awareness that the other has a mind, as it is closely connected to what philosophers refer to as theory of mind.
becoming overly enmeshed in another’s psychic reality. Genuinely helpful and compassionate responses to others demand ‘that we navigate between the Scylla of self-absorption and the Charybdis of vicarious possession’ and that we remain alert to ‘unhealthy fortifications or transgressions of the boundaries of the self’ (Piper 1991: 751). Examples of the first pole, or something approaching it, can be discerned in the storyline of Avatar. It is more difficult to find evidence in the film that vicarious possession—erosion of the self’s boundaries or of one’s critical stance—is understood as a danger of empathy. By recognizing these different types we can see that the film portrays empathy in largely positive ways, as a transformative step toward enlightenment.\footnote{The film departs from the screenplay in subtle and interesting ways, regarding Jake Sully’s empathic loss of self, as I discuss below.}

A related concern regarding the self and its relation to the other has to do with the motives behind empathy. Here the danger is that one may feel oneself into another’s perspective only to manipulate or betray another in the pursuit of one’s own ends. Empathy, after all, can be fully consistent with sadism, narcissism, or other sociopathic tendencies. ‘It all depends on why one is interested in the other’s perspective’ (Darwall 1998: 261). Empathy ‘need not yield prosocial behavior’ (Decety and Meyer 2008: 1069). Illuminated in these ways, the capacity for empathy is a morally neutral ‘method of gathering data’ (Wispé 1987: 32). Empathizing may or may not lead to a moral response, such as by expressing sympathetic concern or providing concrete assistance. These possibilities are also represented in Avatar.

Our ability to modulate and direct empathic responses may be partly under our control but our basic capacity for empathy appears to be innate. Research in a variety of disciplines points to the conclusion that from the time we are infants ‘we see through others’ eyes, take on others’ emotions, imagine what others believe’ (Sherman 1998: 83). For example, infants engage in motor mimicry—imitating movements and facial expressions of caregivers—almost from birth (Decety and Meyer 2008). Day-old infants cry in response to other infants crying, and infants and their mothers readily synchronize their emotions (2008: 1056-57). Neuroimaging studies have focused on mirror neurons in the brain which are activated during a given motor action—say, smiling or reaching for an object—and when observing the same action done by another person. These neurons appear to play an important role in social cognition; defects in this system correspond to empathy deficits seen in a variety of disorders such as autism.
Empathy and Role-Taking: Sully’s Empathic Education

Jake Sully’s identity may be ambiguous, and in transition, but his personality consistently demonstrated mental strength, resourcefulness, and adaptability. All of these features made him a good candidate for empathic cultivation, but we also see, in the story of Sully’s transformation, hints of empathy’s darker side. Sully inhabited a variety of worlds, belonging fully to none. First and foremost, his identity was mingled with that of his deceased twin brother Tommy, a scientist selected to work for the Avatar program. The program was overseen by Dr. Grace Augustine whose team of botanists studied Pandora’s flora and fauna in order to understand the mysterious ‘network’ of communication pervading the planet. These researchers have developed genuine sympathy and admiration for the Na’vi and their understandings of Pandora’s living world. Despite his lack of scientific training, Sully was hired to take his brother’s place—much to the dismay of Augustine and her team. He likewise transitioned regularly between human and Na’vi identities (via his avatar form); and as a paraplegic marine, he was marginalized in the highly aggressive world of his fellow marines, whose epithets for him—‘meat’ or ‘meals on wheels’—objectified Sully and likened him to an animal to be consumed.

Because Sully was an identical twin, he could readily link with the avatar originally designed with and for his brother’s genetic material. When Sully joined the science team and assumed his avatar form, he thus surrendered his own (or parts of his own) identity. His mission was explained to him in terms immediately evocative of empathy: ‘Since your genome is identical, you could step into his shoes, so to speak’. Sully became (at least temporarily) a hybrid of sorts both with his twin and with the Na’vi genetic material. At the same time he joyously recovered the freedom of movement not possible in his own paralyzed body.

As Sully’s masculinity was assailed by the marines, his intelligence was routinely derided by the scientists who (reluctantly) put him to work in their lab. When he introduced himself to Augustine, she responded flatly, ‘I need your brother’, and shortly thereafter dismissed him to others as a ‘jarhead’. ‘Try to use big words’, one of the scientists advised, though he clearly doubted that Sully could do so. The Na’vi are equally unimpressed. Once in his avatar body, Sully finds himself again castigated by the Na’vi as a ‘moron’ and a ‘baby’ for his inability to instantly absorb their language and customs, though for the most part he maintains admirable equanimity throughout.

The one marine who recognized Sully’s usefulness was the man in charge of the military operation, Colonel Quaritch. Quaritch secretly
attempted to persuade Sully to give up ‘intel’ on the Na’vi in exchange for a promise that Sully would receive an operation to restore his legs at the completion of his mission. Quaritch’s instructions point to yet another layer of Sully’s multiple identities. He coached Sully to assume two false identities at once, as the most effective way of accomplishing his mission. He must blend in with the Na’vi—‘learn these savages from the inside’—in the guise of a scientist (whom the Na’vi distrust somewhat less than the marines), while keeping his mission a secret from the team to which he was officially assigned. ‘Walk like [the scientists] and quack like them’, Quaritch instructed, ‘but report to me’. Now Sully has stepped into not one but several sets of ‘shoes’: he has taken on his brother’s role among the scientists (and the avatar hybrid designed for him); with his avatar form, he hopes to pass more easily as a member, or at least a friend, of the Na’vi people; all the while—assuming he accepts Quaritch’s mission—he is a soldier mimicking a scientist (trying to pass as a Na’vi), carrying out a mission that may restore his (compromised) status as a respected member of the marine corps. Throughout much if not most of the film, Sully’s identity and loyalties remain obscure and contested.

What does this have to do with empathy? It is clear that Sully is learning—or being coerced—to view the world from multiple, and alien, perspectives, and this is an important step in developing empathy. For most of us, imaginatively taking on the role of another is more difficult the more different from us they are but, as some researchers argue, there may be great benefits to doing so: ‘we increase in self-awareness through comparison and contrast with those we encounter empathically… [W]e must stretch to connect empathically with such diverse experience, and we are creatively “enlarged” as a result of this enrichment’ (Everding and Huffaker 1998: 423). An increasingly common method of cultivating empathy, in both children and adults, is through role-taking exercises. Experiments in psychology have demonstrated that ‘taking the perspective of another person increases empathic arousal’ (Sherman 1998: 111). With the express goal of instilling empathy, a number of international NGOs have established immersion programs, such as a Village Immersion Program that allows international staff to spend several days living with poor families in developing countries, helping with household tasks and experiencing daily life from their perspective (Krsnaric 2008: 5). Participants in such programs often report enhanced ability to empathize. Sully’s mission essentially landed him in one such immersion program.

Psychologists have also noted an association between the capacity for empathic arousal and what is sometimes called ego resilience. Resilience
assesses ‘flexible, adaptive behavior across broad social and behavioral domains’ and ‘such adaptive behavior is facilitated by understanding others’ feelings and points of view’ (Strayer and Roberts 1989: 227). Individuals with a resilient ego can more easily change places with others (imaginatively), in part because they do not feel overly threatened when confronted by difference. In other words, resilient individuals are more able to consider different points of view, and that allows them to understand better another’s perspectives, which further increases their adaptability in times of stress or in unfamiliar settings. Resilience is particularly seen in individuals who have experienced major physical or psychological trauma and who have a strong sense of themselves as survivors. ‘Characteristics of survivor personality traits are quite similar to the attributes of ego-resiliency’ and include flexibility, sociability, confidence, and curiosity, among others (Wilson 2005: 389-90).

Sully fits the profile of a highly resilient and potentially empathic individual. His identity may be in flux, but the one constant in his character throughout his many transformations is what the Na’vi princess Neytiri immediately identified (despite her initial distrust and dislike of him) as a ‘strong heart’. Not only had Sully sustained major trauma in the past, but, as noted above, he was routinely marginalized and ridiculed by every subculture he encountered during his mission, whether scientists, fellow marines, or the Na’vi. Despite this treatment, he survived and persevered in the midst of extreme mental and physical adversity. As the plot progresses, we learn that the qualities Neytiri discerned in him will make him a great warrior (according to Na’vi, if not also American warrior paradigms) as well as an individual marked for spiritual excellence. Sully turns out to be the sixth in a succession of spiritual leaders/warriors known as Toruk Macto—a rare breed of individuals known for their ability to bond with and tame one of Pandora’s top predators, an enormous birdlike creature; more significantly the Toruk Macto has the ability to unite the many clans that inhabit Pandora, and near the conclusion of the story, Sully did precisely this. So effective did Sully become as a trans-species communicator that under his leadership even Pandora’s wild animals joined forces with the Na’vi in the final battle against humans.

For much of the film, Sully appears inscrutable: it is not clear what his intentions are with regard to his conflicting orders, or where, if anywhere, his loyalties lie. Sully must decide what he will do with the bonds of trust and empathy he is able to forge. Is he simply gathering ‘intel’ or

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8. Quaritch similarly described Sully as having a lot of ‘heart’ in an earlier scene.
is his bond with the Na’vi genuine? Will he use his connection to the Na’vi to betray them, as Quaritch requests? Within this suspenseful element of the story, we see a nod to the idea that empathy, as a means of gathering data, can be used for good or for ill. Insofar as he follows Quaritch’s orders, Sully demonstrates precisely how empathic connection is readily abused. For their own part, the Na’vi too may glean information from Sully in order to outwit their human colonizers. ‘We must understand these Sky People if we are to drive them out’, Neytiri’s father observes.9

Embodiment and Empathy

The act of assuming a Na’vi form had an immediate and heady effect on Sully. Upon first awakening in a Na’vi body, he wreaked havoc in the hospital-like setting, overturning furniture and equipment as he raced outside to enjoy the sensation of being not just able bodied but preternaturally strong and agile. Interestingly, studies that use virtual reality headsets to create the illusion of body transfer suggest that people adapt their behavior to fit their appearance, and that subjects feel a strong connection to their virtual body even after leaving it. One study found that subjects behaved more aggressively when given virtual avatar bodies taller than the bodies of other avatars around them (Biever 2006). While body transfers that increase aggression may not bode well for cultivation of empathy, other studies with virtual body transfers indicate that subjects feel a strong sense of ownership of their avatar bodies, and retain some degree of identification with their avatar body once they have ‘returned’ to their own body. Men who were given the virtual body of a 10 year old girl, for example, reported feeling that the girl’s body was their own (Zukerman 2010). More surprising was that when these subjects (no longer in the perspective of the girl’s body) watched the girl being slapped, their physiological reactions such as heart rate were similar to those of individuals who feel themselves threatened. We might venture, then, that an individual in Sully’s position would feel a strong sense of connection with his Na’vi avatar—and perhaps some degree of identification with other Na’vi as well who resemble his avatar form.10 Sully did increasingly identify with the plight of the Na’vi and

9. This dialogue appears in the screenplay.
10. This is speculation, of course, as I know of no studies of this sort using alien—nonhuman—bodies as avatars and/or measuring subjects’ reactions to aggression against other bodies that resemble their virtual body.
came to view their human enemies as his own; and like subjects in virtual reality studies, he reported that he could no longer clearly distinguish reality from unreality as a result of repeated body transfers.\footnote{Sully keeps a videolog that tracks his experiences and impressions in the Avatar program.}

Initially, Sully did not take on these various roles and perspectives completely voluntarily; insofar as he did so of necessity, he was not exercising empathy as a virtuous disposition. But changes in his perspective pulled him along and began to transform him, almost against his will. His moral progress was marked by particular rites of passage, as he was inducted into the Na’vi community, as well as moments of empathic bonding with other creatures and, especially, with Neytiri.

**Empathic Bonding, Eye Contact, and Spiritual Awakening in Avatar**

Like Quaritch (though for different reasons) Augustine ordered Sully to listen closely to Neytiri, to learn the Na’vi customs, and especially to ‘see the forest through [Neytiri’s] eyes’. References to what Sully sees—and to the act of seeing in general—recur throughout *Avatar*. He implored Neytiri ‘Teach me to see’, but he was ridiculed by a Na’vi warrior who observed that ‘a rock sees more’ than Sully. The traditional greeting among the Na’vi (and the title of the film’s theme song) is the phrase ‘I see you’. To say ‘I see you’ to another can simply convey that I recognize or acknowledge you, much as a brief hello or wave might do. But as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the phrase contains a more profound range of meanings, including something akin to ‘I love you’, and allusions to the transformation of one’s perspective that may occur through love. ‘I see you’ is also associated with gaining an accurate apprehension of another: in one scene, as a member of Augustine’s team coached Sully to use the phrase in appropriate contexts and with proper intonation, he stressed its core meaning as ‘I see into you, I understand you’. This expression (particularly as fleshed out in lyrics) also suggests seeing through another’s eyes, and seeing oneself through the other’s eyes, both of which are important dimensions of empathy as ‘we learn about ourselves through others’ intimate understanding of us’ (Sherman 1998: 84). Lyrics to the theme song make these meanings explicit: ‘I see you … /I see me through your eyes’, ‘Now I live through you and you through me’; and perhaps most dramatically, ‘I offer my life as a sacrifice/I live through your love’.

Visually, *Avatar* places great emphasis upon the act of seeing as well. The film’s characters—and to some extent, viewers who see the film in
3-D—have the opportunity to experience the world through different
eyes, to experience a new reality. There is little doubt that the 3-D
technology in Avatar has created renewed interest in 3-D cinematogra-
phy, yet much of the commentary on Avatar fails to treat the use of 3-D
as more than an impressive technological feat or visual treat.12 The
immersive experience of 3-D is, however, not peripheral but integral
to the film’s message about the importance of enhanced perception through
immersion in other perspectives. In a variety of ways, Avatar suggests
that the eyes play a crucial role in spiritual transformation. Avatar begins
with a shot of Sully’s eyes popping open, after a long journey to Pandora
in a cryo-vault. The film similarly ends with his eyes opening wide to a
new life and new world after he experienced ‘rebirth’ into a Na’vi form.
In scenes depicting Sully moving in and out of his avatar body—a
transformation, incidentally that takes place in a ‘link unit’ remarkably
similar to an MRI machine13—the focus is always on his eyes.

Eye contact is critically important in experiences of empathy between
humans, and between humans and other species, and so it is no surprise
that Avatar places much emphasis upon eyes as a symbol of meaningful
connection. Nonverbal forms of communication may add far more to the
process of communication than verbal forms, and proper eye contact is
crucial for developing empathy and trustworthiness (Morrison 2009).
Where verbal communication is not possible—as with human–animal
interactions or (we might imagine) human–alien encounters—nonverbal
cues become profoundly meaningful.14 The significance of eye-focused
forms of communication is affirmed (though largely anecdotally) by
numerous encounters in the field between humans and animals. Etholo-
gists and primatologists such as Mark Bekoff and Jane Goodall believe
that the primary means of communication for many animals is through
the eyes: ‘in many species eyes reflect feelings, whether wide open in

12. At least one critic makes this connection between the technology and the film’s
message. See Adam Cohen’s piece (2009), ‘Next Generation 3-D Medium of “Avatar”
Underscores its Message’.

13. The resemblance to an MRI unit is explicit in the screenplay which describes
link units as a cross between a ‘coffin’ and an ‘MRI’. MRI units offer the possibility of
‘seeing into’ others’ mental and emotional states. Characters in the film comment on
(and are surprised by) the impressive—‘gorgeous’—activity of Sully’s brain as seen
through the machine, particularly since they had judged him a simpleton.

14. Staring openly is perceived to be a threat by many social animals, including
humans (the tendency to avoid eye contact altogether is a pervasive trait among
autistic individuals). Fear of certain types of eye contact may have to do with the
manner in which predators stare fixedly at prey—and may explain why many species,
such as butterflies, have evolved eye-like spots to ward off their enemies (Midgley
2002: 11).
glee or sunken in despair… [T]here is no more direct animal-to-animal communication than staring deeply into another’s eyes’ (Bekoff in Taylor 2010: 24). In his writing about human–animal encounters and animistic perceptions of the natural world, Bron Taylor refers to such encounters as eye-to-eye epiphanies—moments when locking eyes with another being conveys more information and greater depth of feeling than words can communicate (Taylor 2010). The belief that humans can enter imaginatively into the world of nonhuman lifeforms through the experience of eye-focused communication, and other ancient forms of nonverbal communion, is common among nature writers, ethologists, and environmentalists generally. At the heart of this belief, Taylor writes, ‘there is at work a kind of empathetic and animistic moral imagination’ (Taylor 2010: 26).

Yet another way in which Avatar emphasizes eyes as symbolic of spiritual transformation is in the frequent references to waking and sleeping. The imperative to ‘wake up’ is voiced by various characters in the film and in a variety of contexts; often the phrase is exchanged by characters with different agendas regarding the Na’vi and radically divergent views of reality in general. At a point in the story when Sully was ostracized by the Na’vi who perceived him as a traitor, he found himself ‘in the place where the eye does not see’. For their own part, the Na’vi refer to the engineered avatar forms as ‘dreamwalkers’, and as Sully came to identify with the Na’vi and with the world he experienced as an avatar, he was no longer certain which life was ‘real’ and which merely a ‘dream’. At the end of the film, his dream existence as a Na’vi, as a dreamwalker in their world, becomes the reality.

Waking up thus signifies awareness of a higher consciousness or a more ultimate reality. This is most clearly seen at the end of the film when Sully participated in the sacred ritual that permanently transferred him to a Na’vi body and perspective.15 Here we have an example, one might say, of empathic identification so complete that the former self is eclipsed. The film’s theme song refers to sacrifices, and the scene resembles a sacrifice with Sully’s human and Na’vi forms laid out at the foot of a profoundly sacred site. The ritual has little of the solemnity of death because Sully will be reborn as a more enlightened being. The text of the screenplay, however, portrays Sully’s relentless identification with the Na’vi, culminating in his complete transformation, as a dangerous and potentially self-destructive obsession. Omitted from the film, for

15. We might say that Sully’s soul or spirit was transferred to Na’vi form, though by this time Sully has undergone such radical transformation, physically, mentally, and emotionally, that it is difficult to pinpoint an ‘essence’ that remains of his former self, other than those qualities Neytiri recognized in him.
example, are Augustine’s warnings that Sully is getting in ‘way too deep’, and her efforts to call him back to his identity: ‘no matter what you prove out there, you are still in here’. As Sully gets in deeper and deeper, he utterly neglects his physical health, and the screenplay increasingly likens his link unit to a ‘coffin’. The Na’vi rite of passage that marked him as a clan member is depicted in the screenplay as a suicidal ‘vision quest’ that Sully almost hopes he will not survive: ‘It’s okay. Mo’at [Neytiri’s mother] says an alien mind probably can’t survive the Dream Hunt anyway’. The most dramatic difference is apparent in the ceremony that permanently installs Sully in his avatar form. Described in the film as Sully’s ‘birthday party’, it is characterized in the screenplay as a funeral. ‘There’s a funeral tonight’, Sully records in his final videolog. ‘It was someone very close to me’; when the transfer is complete, Neytiri ‘gently closes his dead eyes’.

The more somber tone of the screenplay, and its explicit references to Sully’s death, suggest a degree of ambivalence about his radical transformation. In the film, however, empathic identification shades into spiritual rebirth, and a welcome and celebrated end to the former self—an ideal that finds resonance in many religious traditions. Empathy implies the possibility of oneness, of dissolution of boundaries between self and other; seen in this light, it shows affinities with ideals of spiritual communion, nonduality, or the essential oneness of reality. Because *Avatar* unambiguously depicts the Na’vi worldview as superior to that of humans (who have destroyed their own world), there is nothing to fear or lament in Sully casting off the vestiges of his former self. We sense that, from the film-makers’ point of view, the Na’vi’s world and way of being is the superior reality and mode of existence. Indeed, there is an unmistakable *empirical* dimension to the Na’vi worldview that leaves little doubt about the truth of their beliefs. Empathic connection is depicted most dramatically—and quite literally—in a bonding ritual that the Na’vi initiate with animal companions trained for labor and transport. Na’vi tradition maintains that animals choose their masters and that only animals that have voluntarily bonded will assent to training. The bonding ritual involves actually plugging into the animal by means of a long braid worn by the Na’vi. The braid connects with a similar

16. On the other hand, Augustine later regrets having ‘held back’ and commends Sully for giving the Na’vi his ‘heart’ (also omitted from the film).

17. Some theorists would reject this interpretation of empathy as suggesting that we are blurred selves or part of an ontological whole (as, I think, *Avatar* does). Snow (2000), for example, insists that empathy involves numerically distinct states held individually by separate persons.

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(presumably) cluster of nerves in the animal’s body; at the moment the connection is made, the camera zooms in on the dilated pupils and widened eyes of the bonded animal whose perception of the world is now attuned to its master’s. With this bonding, a kind of neural interface occurs between the Na’vi rider and his or her steed; the rider now feels what the animal feels and synchronizes perfectly with its movements and thoughts (though with the rider in control).

A symbiotic relationship between the Na’vi and animals is depicted in other ways as well, and not infrequently in ways that borrow from practices and beliefs commonly attributed to native peoples. Killing of animals is permitted only when done with an attitude of reverence. In one scene, Neytiri demonstrated to Sully the proper method of killing which involves reciting a prayer of thanks and a quick kill with a sharp and carefully aimed knife. Sully’s first clean kill constituted a rite of passage to manhood, according to Na’vi custom. Yet, it seemed to me (and perhaps others) that Sully was rather mechanically mimicking behaviors of reverence and compassion as modeled by Neytiri. In fact, Sully appeared to botch some sacred rites, voicing what seem shallow, inappropriate, or disingenuous sentiments, as though just going through the motions. When it was Sully’s turn to demonstrate his ‘readiness’ and understanding of the Na’vi hunt, for example, he appeared to rush through the prayer and eagerly plunge the knife in, as a hungry child might mechanically mumble a prayer before eating. In another scene depicting an important rite of passage, Sully tamed one of the large dragon-bird creatures that the Na’vi use as transport.\(^{18}\) Though viewers are apprised of the Na’vi belief that the animal chooses its rider—and then bonds exclusively with him or her for life—Sully’s enactment of this rite appeared anything but reverential. Having finally wrestled the thrashing animal to the ground, Sully forced the bond, while muttering, ‘That’s right. You’re mine’. His remark and his enjoyment of dominance toward this creature are what we might expect from a marine, but not from the enlightened Na’vi warrior he was supposed to have become. We would expect that, were his empathic transformation genuine—or complete—so would have been his expressions of compassion, reverence, or gratitude.\(^{19}\) What makes the Na’vi admirable, after all, is not just

\(^{18}\) It is significant that the creatures chosen for bonding are (in more than one instance) hybrids as well (like Sully), and in particular a hybrid of bird and reptile, a creature that in mythological literature often symbolizes a unity of heaven and earth or spirit and body.

\(^{19}\) The screenplay states that during his first clean kill, Sully speaks the customary Na’vi words ‘haltingly, but with feeling’.
their capacity for empathy but the way that their empathic abilities predispose them toward a whole host of (other-regarding) virtues. Put differently, becoming a Na’vi entails not just understanding the world from their perspective but understanding that their perspective is also the perspective of the animal being hunted or tamed. Sully appears to get it wrong.

That Sully seems at certain points to revert back to a jarhead mentality can be read as a flaw in the film itself (or in Cameron’s view of what constitutes moral progress or harmony between species). On the other hand, such moments illustrate that Sully’s transformation and empathic education remained imperfect and incomplete. Nancy Sherman notes that the process of transformation to a wholly different perspective is bound to be halting and at times deeply flawed. The transformative model of empathy ‘serves as an ideal to aim for, though one, typically, only imperfectly achieved and that never fully escapes some residue of the home base’ (Sherman 1998: 102). Early on in the film Sully verbalized doubts about his capacity for radical change: ‘There’s no such thing as an ex-marine. You never lose the attitude’. Rather than interpret Sully’s regressive behaviors as a flaw in the film, we might read it as an illustration of the challenge of inhabiting (fully, emotively and cognitively) alien perspectives and values. It remains incumbent upon all of us to ‘hone and refine our empathic skills so that we can be appropriately sensitive to the emotional needs of others’ (Snow 2000: 75).

**Conclusion: Empathy, Education, and Environmentalism**

*Avatar* has been identified by viewers and critics as an environmental film because it upholds common environmental themes and values, e.g., understanding the land as sacred and lifeforms as intricately interconnected and innately valuable; the film also rejects the duality of the physical and the spiritual, and casts doubt on technological advance as synonymous with progress. The Na’vi, as we have seen, exhibit attitudes of reverence and ideals of symbiosis in their dealings with the land and animals. In all of these ways, *Avatar* affirms values held (in varying degrees) by those who consider themselves environmentalists. But I want to stress that empathy—arguably the dominant theme of the film—has enormous potential as an environmental value as well, and it is integral to the environmental message of the film.

20. In my mind, these problematic scenes are so glaring as to seem deliberate; on the other hand, subtlety is not among Cameron’s chief strengths as a filmmaker.
It might appear that empathy is a current buzzword but the history of environmentalism is bound up with cultivation of the empathic imagination. In the first half of the twentieth century, the American conservationist and founder of land ethics, Aldo Leopold, famously urged readers to ‘think like a mountain’—to step outside of limited human perspectives, to imagine ecological and evolutionary timeframes. Doing so would enhance appreciation of the role played by predators in an ecosystem, and other forms of life that humans fear and sometimes vilify if not hate. Leopold’s phrase has since been adopted by environmentalists of many varieties as a way of expressing their rejection of anthropocentrism and their respect for difference. Writing both contemporaneously and then after Leopold, Rachel Carson’s writings similarly emphasized empathy as, for example, in her writings about the sea, which evocatively transport readers into ocean worlds inhabited by strange and unfamiliar creatures. Engaging the empathic imagination was a primary objective of Carson’s narrative style. Because most popular works on the sea take the human perspective, Carson set out ‘to avoid this human bias as much as possible. To bring this about I had first, of course, to think myself into the role of an animal that lives in the sea… I wanted my readers to feel that they were, for a time, actually living the lives of sea creatures’ (Carson 1999: 55-56).

Many environmentalists can pinpoint a kind of conversion experience, a moment of awakening when they first comprehended that humans inhabit a world filled with wonderfully strange lifeforms—creatures whose values, and whose perception, are independent of human values and perceptions. Think again of Leopold who, as he watched the ‘fierce green fire’ dying in the eyes of a wolf gunned down by foresters, sensed that a unique and valuable perspective on the world, an alien form of knowing, lay behind those eyes. ‘I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain’ (1949: 130). What Leopold glimpsed was the world as seen through the eyes of the Other—the wolf, the mountain, the alien. As Lucas Johnston notes, moments of awakened consciousness to the affinity of all life can lead individuals to discern a broader set of moral concerns, the outlines of a ‘biophilic ethic’, manifest in new forms of ‘empathetic engagement’ (2010: 19). Leopold’s story resembles Sully’s story.

Recent developments in the global environmental crisis present further challenges to our empathic imaginations. How do we generate concern for environments and creatures with which most humans have little direct experience, such as marine ecologies that remain distant and inaccessible to us? How might we persuade current generations of
humans that they have moral obligations to future generations—persons unknown to us—who will bear the full brunt of our fossil fuel addiction? Here empathy is key. Climate change, for example, challenges us to feel ourselves into the situation of individuals remote from us both in space and time—future generations as well as distant communities hit hard by its effects. Roman Krznaric refers to this challenge as one of ‘outrospection’.21 ‘Generating empathy both across space and through time is one of the most powerful ways we have of closing the gap between knowledge and action, and for tackling the climate crisis’ (Krznaric 2008: 2). Krznaric particularly endorses perspective-taking or cognitive forms of empathy (encouraged through workshops, immersive programs, and other means) as highly susceptible to intentional cultivation. ‘Taking the perspective of others through a leap of the empathetic imagination erodes our ability to dehumanize strangers and treat them as being of less worth than ourselves’ (2008: 4).

We can be fairly certain that humans have innate, evolutionarily based capacities for empathy; we know too that this capacity may find expression in ways that actually benefit other humans and the biosphere generally. In our evolutionary past, however, empathy likely did not extend beyond one’s family or group but ‘with the growth of civilization and human cognitive abilities, humans have gained the ability to familiarize themselves with increasingly diverse and distant cultural groups’ (Chismar 1988: 263). Education and exposure to diversity and difference can thus expand empathy’s range. But is such familiarity actually conducive to empathic engagement? Does our constant bombardment with images of suffering, disaster, and injustice inure us, leading to what experts call empathy or compassion ‘fatigue’ (Moeller 1999)? Perhaps. It makes sense, after all, that the same evolutionary processes that established empathic capacities would also circumscribe them, setting minimum thresholds and outer limits to empathic expression so as to safeguard its adaptive function (Rifkin 2009: 124). As environmentalists often worry, bombarding the public with bad news and predictions of environmental disaster—oil spills, global warming, species extinction—may engender despair and apathy, even anger, rather than motivate action; moreover, doing so fosters a stereotype (frequently voiced by climate change deniers) of environmentalists as preoccupied with end-of-the-world scenarios.

Clearly, there are no simple solutions or easy answers to problems such as these, but I remain largely persuaded by those such as Rifkin

who see education for empathy, with all its caveats, as part of the solution. I am particularly heartened by environmental education for children that (explicitly or implicitly) incorporates empathic education. Many educators and environmentalists are returning to the idea that children need to form an emotional, visceral bond with the natural world and with nonhuman forms of life before learning the dispiriting details of the environmental crisis (Louv 2005). Empathy’s scope—as Avatar illustrates so well—is not limited to ‘negative’ emotions such as distress but is strongly implicated in positive feelings of identification, wonder, and attachment. Empathic environmental education should not begin with or focus upon negative emotional responses as a way of motivating action. Some of the objectives of Nature-Study movements from a century ago remain relevant here and are discernible in current programs aimed at empathy. A kind of revolt against formal science and mechanical memorization, Nature-Study aimed to teach not facts but ‘spirit’—‘a point of view, a means of contact’ with the natural world (Bailey 1911 [1903]: 18). Early attachment to the natural world can form the basis for ethical engagement later in life, as writers ranging from Rachel Carson to Richard Louv have understood. Sociobiological interpretations of children’s innate attachment to nature, notably the biophilia hypothesis first developed by E.O. Wilson, suggest that young children are particularly predisposed to empathic engagement, curiosity, and attraction to the natural world. Assuming that the ‘fundamental development of any biologically rooted tendency [such as biophilia] is likely to occur during childhood’ (Kellert 2005: 64), education should target early childhood as the ‘age of empathy’, a time to encourage live

22. For examples, see the Children and Nature Network, online: http://www.childrenandnature.org/ and a white paper titled ‘Helping Children Learn to Love the Earth before We Ask them to Save It’. Online: http://www.arborday.org/explore/natureexplore_whitepaper.pdf.

23. The idea is not new. The Nature-Study movement of the early twentieth century had precisely such objectives, instilling what it termed ‘nature-sympathy’—more accurately termed empathy—for nature and animals, as part of a child’s daily education away from the confines of the classroom and distinct from science education. Nature-Study advocates worried that children who did not form sympathetic bonds with nature would suffer from developmental problems—mental, physical, and emotional—much as Richard Louv has recently argued (2005).

24. Some studies suggest that in young children, affective or emotive empathy occurs prior to development of cognitive forms of empathy that entail awareness of other minds. See Hoffman (2000) and Snow (2000).

25. Rifkin similarly endorses teaching children what he calls ‘empathic science’ in lieu of mechanistic models that portray the world as ‘a cold, uncaring place, devoid of awe, compassion, or a sense of purpose’ (2009: 608).
animal contact, sensory engagement, and nature-based storytelling (White 2001: n.p.). For older children and adults, the sort of perspective-taking exercises and empathy workshops described by Krznaric and Rifkin may be highly effective, particularly those that encourage participants to make connections between their own lifestyle choices, on the one hand, and impacts on the natural world and on the lifeways and communities of distant people, on the other. We inhabit a world where network concepts are almost second nature, where systems thinking is increasingly the norm; yet we fail to make the most important connections. ‘If we can harness holistic thinking to a new global ethics that recognizes and acts to harmonize the many relationships that make up the life-sustaining forces of the planet’, Rifkin argues, ‘we will have crossed the divide into a near-climax world economy and biosphere consciousness’ (2009: 600).

*Avatar* gives us a glimpse into just such a world. On Pandora, systems thinking, network relationships, and biosphere consciousness are one and the same. As the story ends, all life on Pandora has joined together in solidarity against a common threat emanating from the far more technologically advanced (but spiritually impoverished) ‘sky people’ of Earth. Sagan’s prediction that technologically advanced civilizations would encounter less advanced worlds in a spirit of peace and understanding is not borne out by this scenario. But his belief that citizens of a planet could join together in common cause against a threat to their continued survival remains relevant. On Pandora, the threat is from an alien civilization; here on earth, we have created threats for ourselves—not only the threat of global nuclear annihilation but the nightmare of catastrophic biosphere destruction, which may prove more difficult to avert because, to many on Earth, it does not yet seem real. Sooner or later, to paraphrase Sully, we will have to wake up.

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