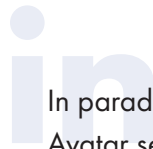


Ayahuasca and James Cameron's Avatar

By Erik Davis



In paradoxical and altogether predictable terms, James Cameron's dazzling Avatar sets a blue man group of mystically attuned forest dwellers against the aggressive and heartless exploitation that characterizes the military-industrial-media complex, with its virtual interfaces, biotech chimeras, and cyborg war machines. The paradox, of course, is that an avatar of this technological complex is responsible for delivering Cameron's visions to us in the first place.



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To wit: Before a recent screening of the film at the Metreon IMAX theater in San Francisco, we hapless begoggled ones were barraged with military ads, along with a triumphant techno-fetishist breakdown on the IMAX gear that would soon transport us to the planet Pandora almost as thoroughly as the handicapped jarhead Jake jacks into his avatar body—a body that is, in reality, generated by computer, and so not quite reality after all. The message of all these nested media prostheses is clear: We are imaginatively handicapped, and need an commanding apparatus of virtuality to achieve fusion with the bygone but utterly concocted world of wisdom and myth represented by the Na'vi and their world.

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But those are behind-the-scenes ironies, and like most people, I just gave into the ride. With its floating Roger Deanscapes and hallucinogenic flora, the manifest world of Avatar instead spoke another truth about our era's visionary consciousness: The jungle pantheism that now pervades the psychoactive counterculture has gone thoroughly mainstream.

Of course, noble savage narratives of ecological balance and shamanic wisdom have been haunting the Rousseau-mapped outback of the Western mind for centuries. That said, Avatar represents some important twists in that basic tale.

The most important of these is that the Na'vi's nearly telepathic understanding of their environment is grounded in more than ritual, plant-lore, and that earnest sobriety that afflicts Hollywood Indians everywhere. Their enviable at-oneness with things is also grounded in an actual organic communications network. The fibrous, animated, and vaguely repulsive pony-tail tentacles not only allow the Na'vi to form direct control links with animals but also, through the optical filaments of the "Tree of Souls," to commune with both ancestors and the Eywa, the biological spirit of the planet Pandora.

Eywa resonates with Erda, of course; Pandora is a dream of our own Earth. Contact with Eywa is clearly a visionary operation, one perhaps best seen as "ayahuasca lite." For while Avatar features nothing like the South American shaman songs and stupendous ayahuasca visuals that litter the otherwise very bad 2004 Western released here as Renegade, Cameron's film does suggest that the bitter jungle brew, and the spirit of ecological wisdom now attached to it, is having a trickle-down effect.

After all, as ads for ayahuasca retreats readily point out, the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine that gives ayahuasca its name (though not its most hallucinogenic alkaloids) is also known as the "Vine of Souls"—an echo of the Na'vi's "Tree of Souls." And at one point in the film, when Sigourney Weaver manifests the Tree's powers through a neuro-electrical connection, the corporate tool Parker asks what she's been "smoking"—a backhanded way of acknowledging how much Avatar's visionary take on jungle unity is grounded in psychoactive consciousness.

After all, beyond a thriving and in many ways damaging ayahuasca tourist market largely centered in Brazil and Peru, clandestine "aya" circles

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manned by South American shamans and all manner of Euro-American facilitators are now well established throughout the West. Among the professional creative classes who make up a sizable portion of West Coast seekers—after spirit and thrills alike—ayahuasca itself could almost be said to be mainstream.

So it no longer matters whether Cameron or his animators have themselves drunk the tea; its active compounds are already swimming in the cultural water supply. Indeed, whether you are talking form (ground-breaking 3D animation) or content (cyber-hippie fantasy decor), Cameron's visual and technological rhetoric is impossible to disentangle from a hallucinogenic experience.

If there is a psychedelic-*Avatar* connection—as suggested by a deleted scene available on the DVD extras in which the hero Jake ascends to meet his power animal after being given a psychoactive combination of scorpion venom and a worm—it would at least explain the most crucial way in which the film differs from conventional noble savage mysticism. Rather than ground the Na'vi's grooviness in their folklore, spiritual purity, or access to supernatural powers, the film instead argues for a direct and material communications link with biological consciousness.



This means that Eywa (aka Aya) is not a religious position that has to be believed—rather, she can be experienced through corporeal fusion. After temporarily plugging into the Tree of Souls, Weaver's chain-smoking left-brain doctor happily confirms Eywa's existence even as she dies. She is smiling, no longer needing to explain or be explained.

Like the Vine of Souls now winding its way from the anthropological margins into the developed world, the Tree of Souls is a bio-mystical medium, a visionary communications matrix that uplinks the souls of the dead into the networked mind of the ecosphere itself.

In the end, though, it is tough to say what the real object of enchantment is: the possibility of a biological interface with the plant mind of the planet, or the technological communications networks—the Hollywood blockbusters and ayahuasca vacation packages advertised online—that already circulate our desires and fantasies, our hopes and fears. Indeed, if anything, *Avatar* suggests that eco-futuristic dreams are now indistinguishable from the visionary potential of media technology itself, a technology that must disguise its own poisoned environmental footprint through a continual invocation of beckoning phantasms. •

"Caduceus" by Simon Haiduk. Oil and digital painting (2009).
High-quality giclée prints available at www.maps.org/art.