

“Eywa has heard You!”
James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), as an Example
of Cinematic Diffusion of Religion

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1. Picking up the thread again

In our article that was published in the previous issue of the journal –the first of the two that have been dedicated to the Diffused New Religiosity–, we have tried to give prominence to the cinematic spectacle’s decisive role in the visibility and diffusion of the religion in the so-called “postmodern” period (or era of “late” modernity)¹. By utilizing the typology of the relations between Religion and Cinema proposed by the religious scholars William L. Blizek and Michele Marie Desmarais, we have attempted to trace four ways through which this specific diffusion takes place. We’ve referred to the *interpretive* diffusion of religion – when religious notions, categories, and concepts are used for the interpretation of films that, in most of the other aspects, are secular; to the *critical* diffusion of religion – when cinema brings to the forefront the problematic aspects of a religious institution, behavior or tradition; to the *catechist* diffusion of religion – when cinema unapologetically and straightforwardly promotes various religious attitudes, beliefs, values, narratives, sacred worlds and symbols; and finally, to the *value-based* diffusion of religion, when cinema encourages certain cultural values at the expense of others, by indirectly

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1. See D. Oulis, «‘Η “διάχυση” τῆς θρησκείας στὸ κινηματογραφικὸ θέαμα: μία τυπολογία», *Θεολογία/Theologia* 94, 1 (2023), pp. 85-123.

indicating which of them are “friendly” to religion, could be promoted by it, or become a sort of *via regia* that leads to it.

We would like now to, sort of, “ground” the typology mentioned above by using a representative example to make it clear – that is, to show the ways through which an important cinematic oeuvre can function as a vehicle of religious diffusion in most or all, the ways we’ve mentioned at the beginning of our essay. As an ideal case study for the realization of our programmatic goal, we chose James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009); our choice was based mainly on the belief that one of the main reasons that this particular movie has by now been established as one of the most emblematic neo-mythologies of the 21st century, is because it constitutes an astounding example of this multifaceted diffusion.

Nevertheless, our basic research hypothesis exposed in the previous paragraph needs to be corroborated. Therefore, in the first section of our study, we will try to suggest the reasons for the invocation of religious categories to better understand the film is not only legitimate but mandatory. In the second section, we will try to point out the implicit yet perspicuous ways through which the film criticizes certain aspects of the Judeo-Christian narrative (without reaching the point of outrightly rejecting it). In the third section, we will try to underscore the movie’s “catechetical” intentions, by examining the hierophanies, symbols, sacred narratives, and forms of religious experience it explicitly advocates. Finally, in the fourth section, we will attempt to highlight the fundamental value premises of the film, its critique of dominant cultural values of the Western world, as well as the ways through which this specific critique indirectly invites the viewer to adopt an alternative perception of the world.

2. *Avatar* – is there a religious interpretation?

We’ve already ascertained that, in many cases, the use of religious categories and concepts for the interpretation of films that do not have the ambition to serve a certain religious agenda, and, therefore, are self-defined as “secular” can prove to be an extremely fruitful one. This view is valid not because there is always a latent religious meaning in a

“secular” screenplay, but because it can often be implicitly present in it, can be indirectly embraced by it, or, in any case, is not fundamentally incompatible with it. We should nevertheless point out that the religious categories we’re invoking to interpret a “secular” movie are usually *extraneous* – that is, they cannot be directly deduced from its script, but they presuppose a kind of secondary mediation on behalf of its interpreter, who is obliged to show that this particular movie, apart from its literal meaning, does also possess a religious one. For example, we’ve already noted that, seen through this particular interpretative frame, a movie like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975), directed by Milos Forman, could also be perceived as a Christian allegory; or, Harold Ramis’s *Groundhog Day* (1993) could be viewed as a cinematic representation of Purgatory or Samsara etc.².

We believe that the case we’ve chosen to study in the present essay is alien to such a secondary mediation. That is because the invocation of religious categories for the interpretation of *Avatar* is nothing else but extraneous; on the contrary, we must say that they are directly derived from its screenplay – in a certain way, they are imposed by it. The Wikipedia entry for *Avatar* says that it’s an “epic science fiction film”³ a successful definition from a typical point of view. Yet, even though the elements of adventure and fantasy are running through the movie’s veins, we believe that only a theoretically naive reading of the work would fail to see that it is indissolubly –though excessively– articulated with the religious one.

It would not be an exaggeration if we claim that the movie is filled with sacred symbols and narratives, with hierophanies, rituals, and types of religious experience. The movie’s rich religious repertory does not simply function as a directorial pretext or a special effect of a mainly “fantastic” adventure; it constitutes a building block of its script – and this explains why it is classified in this particular cinematic genre and not in another one. To put it differently, if *Avatar* is a “fantastic adventure”, then a religious interpretation of it helps us to clarify where exactly the “fantasy”

2. Cf. D. Oulis, «Ἡ “διάχυση” τῆς θρησκείας στὸ κινηματογραφικὸ θέμα: μία τυπολογία», pp. 96 and 98.

3. See the Greek, English, French and German version of the Wikipedia entry.

resides, through which dialectical contradistinctions the “adventure” emerges, and which elements bind those two features together.

There is yet another reason that explains why, in *Avatar*’s case, the invocation of religious categories must not be seen as extraneous: it is dictated by the need to critically engage with certain apologetics [negative criticisms] that were articulated from the outset against the film by Christian or fundamentalist cycles. Although *Avatar*’s apologists didn’t hesitate at all to accuse it as a vehicle of “New Age” syncretism and to express their profound skepticism for the pagan and pantheistic motives it reproduces, they nevertheless realized from the beginning the movie’s abundant religious elements, grasping the fact that the latter represents a constitutive part of its screenplay. The fundamentalist apologists, willingly or not, confirmed *a contrario* the view that we also wish to defend within the context of the present article – that the invocation of religious notions and terms constitutes a *conditio sine qua non* for *Avatar*’s reception and interpretation. For if we claim that a cinematic artifact defends the “New-age” religious ideal or that its symbolism is copiously “pantheistic” and “pagan”, our remarks remain unsubstantiated if: a) we have *not sufficiently comprehended* the aforementioned terms from the point of view of the history and phenomenology of religions; b) we are not in a position to define the *specific* content that these terms assume, according to the particular circumstances or the context within which are being used; c) if we are unable to discern the special emphasis that the script gives to these specific terms, as well as their implied hierarchy⁴. There is indeed

4. None of those three terms is met in the cases of “orthodox” Christian apologetics against *Avatar* that we’ve managed to find in the Internet. For example, the anonymous author of the article “Deciphering ‘Avatar’”, in the webpage of the Christian Students’ Action (Χριστιανική Φοιτητική Δράση) (xfd.gr), assumes that *Avatar* is “a science fiction movie seasoned with plenty of ‘new-agist’ sauce” and that “is yet another step in the international campaign that is waged for the alienation of the people and the worldwide enforcement of one single religion”. Furthermore, the author thinks that the film is in absolute accord with the program of the New Age for “a philosophical cocktail, a soup made by all religions, which the whole planet will greedily, uncritically, unwittingly swallow”. Another author –again anonymous– in the webpage of the “Church of the Greeks”, equally considers *Avatar* as “yet another, in this case cinematic, ‘pedagogical’ implementation of the ‘New Age’”(http://elekklesia.blogspot.com/2011/09/avatar.html), while archimandrite David Tselikas, following the same track, says that “the film is a hymn for the new-agist, naturalistic-pagan creeds connected with the cult of ‘Mother

a lot of “pantheism” in *Avatar*. This does not mean, though, as it might have seemed at first glance, that this specific “pantheism” is the absolute protagonist; on the contrary, it happens to be at the service of messianism that is far more prominent. There is, accordingly, a lot of “nature worship” in *Avatar*; however, is this “nature worship” as predominantly “pagan” as Christian apologetics wish to imagine it is, or might it be capable –under certain conditions– to enter into a productive dialogue with the idea of an infinitely creative God – ever-present and all-pervading within His (universal) Creation⁵;

Of course, variations of analogous rhetoric are not absent from the realm of the Roman Catholic Church. It is characteristic enough that, in full correspondence with the warning that Colonel Miles Quaritch addresses to the protagonist Jake Sully, *Osservatore Romano* rushed to warn the Catholic brethren “to not get lost in the woods”⁶: – that is, to not let themselves be enchanted by the cinematic spectacle that *Avatar* is to such a degree as to be converted to the religion of “ecology”. As Jason Eberly aptly observes, the central argument of this Roman Catholic “warning” lies in the pre-judged position that *Avatar* “represents a spirituality associated with the worship of Nature – i.e. a modern pantheism, in the context of which Creator and Creation are identified. Moreover [...], *Avatar* cleverly turns a blind eye to all those false doctrines that turn ecology into the religion of the millennium [...]. Nature is no longer a creation we defend, but a deity we worship”⁷.

Earth’, which the last few years are being advocated as the new world religion” (https://freemonks.gr/index.php?page=news_info&lang=1&id=151).

5. The philosopher Jason Eberl, by trying to answer to this last accusation, distinguishes three, at least, features of the Christian conception of Creation residing in *Avatar*’s paganism: firstly, planet Pandora’s huge biodiversity, as a token of God’s infinite creativity; secondly, the interdependence of the beings as a token of their rationality, as well as their providential relationship that connects them; and thirdly, Nature’s innate goodness, as a creation which is *καλὴ λίαν*. By supporting these three points, Eberl does not of course want to insinuate that *Avatar*’s cosmology “is identical” with Christianity’s perception of Creation, but that it is not that much alien to it either, at least to the degree that Christian apologetics would like to believe. See J. Eberl, “Eywa Will Provide: Pantheism, Christianity, and the Value of Nature”, in: G. A. Dunn (ed.), *Avatar and Philosophy: Learning to See*, Wiley/Blackwell, West Sussex 2014, p. 28.

6. Quaritch: “Haven’t gotten lost in the woods, have you?” [*Avatar*, 01.31.15].

7. J. Eberl, *ibid.*, p. 21. Cf. the article: “Vatican critical of *Avatar*’s spiritual message”,

Even if we are going to subscribe to this position, we should be honest enough to admit that it cannot claim absolute primacy or exclusivity. This is the case not only because, as we shall see later, things are far from being unequivocal, but also because the easiness with which the argument discredits as “false arguments” anything that distances itself from it, constitutes a strong indication that it is pronounced *ab initio* within the framework of an *odium theologicum*. At the end of the day, why everything must be perceived as secret offshoots of a worldwide conspiracy? What sort of factual data permits us to deduce that ecology is the “religion of the millennium”? Why do we see everywhere enemies? Why do we feel the need to blast a popular culture blockbuster only because we think that is not in accord with our beliefs? Can any act of interpretation be successful enough when it takes place within an environment dominated by fear and an inclination to devalue its object? Is it possible to offer a fair interpretation of something we have banished beforehand to the realm of fallacy?

We believe that a “religious”—that is, theologically informed— interpretation of *Avatar* is necessary; it significantly contributes to mitigating the aphoristic and conspiratorial overtones we’ve just mentioned. Above all, however, this interpretation seems necessary because it is the only one capable of exorcising our ideological specters and reversing the climate of moral panic and theological rage that those specters are nurturing.

in: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/vatican-critical-of-avatar-s-spiritual-message-1.916958> [last access: 30.09.2023]. Robert Barron’s critical presentation of the movie is more friendly and theologically more informed, yet the Catholic bishop adopts the same interpretative line. See “Bishop Barron on ‘Avatar’”, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtZyku2H1PI&ab_channel=BishopRobertBarron [accessed at 30.09.2023].

3. “And I’m probably just talking to a tree right now”:
Avatar “judges” religion

Just before the decisive battle between the Navi⁸ and the “Sky-People”⁹, Jake Sully speaks to Eywa –planet Pandora’s great Mother-Goddess– and tells her to take sides: “If Grace is there with you – look in her memories – she can show you the world we come from. There’s no green there. They [Sky-People] killed their Mother, and they’re gonna do the same thing here”¹⁰.

An easy conclusion that might be drawn from this statement, is that the protagonist evokes here a true female deity – a fact that proves, on the one hand, that he has espoused Na’vi’s pagan religion, and on the other, that he has fully turned into a “native”. Nevertheless, a more careful reading of the scene could lead us to suspect that this “easy” conclusion is at least doubtful – if not superficial. Jake addresses Eywa driven by an impulse to bet on a possible miracle, but under no circumstance recognizes her clearly and unequivocally as Mother-Goddess (“And I’m probably just talking to a tree right now”, he characteristically asserts)¹¹. Furthermore, it is not at all clear why Jake’s ascertainment should be unquestionably perceived as a sort of pagan confession. Jake proceeds to a succinct –if not epigrammatic– commentary upon human destructiveness by simply highlighting something that is dead obvious: Pandora’s human conquerors have killed their Mother (that is, planet Earth) – they burned her forests and they wiped out every crop from her face. In other words, the “matricide” to which Jake is referring doesn’t suggest as much a kind of pagan nature worship, as the “Sky-People’s” complete failure to rise to the occasion, as

8. The Na’vi (English: The People) are a species of sapient humanoids who inhabit the lush moon of Pandora. Their skin is within the blue color spectrum, their average height is close to 3 meters and, as colonel Quaritch notes, their bones are reinforced with a type of naturally occurring carbon fiber – thus, “it is difficult for someone to kill them”. For a much more detailed description of the Na’vi, see entry “Na’vi”, *Avatar Wiki* (https://james-camerons-avatar.fandom.com/wiki/Avatar_Wiki).

9. “Sky-People” is the name given by the Navi to the Humans, planet Earth’s natives, who conquered Pandora.

10. *Avatar*, 02:22:43-02:22:54.

11. *Avatar*, 02:22:24.

guardians and custodians of the Creation. To put it in other words, we could say that Jake's statement comes simply as an attestation of the biblical request's tragic refutation, which is related to man's work as guardian of the world: "*The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it*"¹².

Conversely, Avatar (through Jake's mouth) perceives man as above all else a subject of the Fall – a Fall, though, that is in no way pregnant with a "protoevangelium"¹³, with no hope of redemption or possibility of salvation. Trapped as he is in his diabolical pride and will for power, the man may excel in the fields of technology and science, succeed in making intergalactic voyages, and conquer the most exotic planets, yet he always carries with him the ugliness and gloom of his Fall. Within this context, the anthropology of the Book of Genesis seems that it has altogether been canceled: not only because the "Sky-People" proved incapable of safeguarding and taking care of anything else than their corporate profits, but also because there is nothing in the movie's script to imply that they constitute an "image" of a God-Father, who loves them and is being loved by them – all the more so that they are committed themselves to this god in terms of a *testamentum*. Exactly because "Sky-People" act of their own volition and are not accountable to anyone, Jake realizes very early on that, to become himself again and redefine his humanity, he must abandon their camp, outrightly reject their hierarchy of values and join the "enemy's" camp. We could suggest, and this an oxymoron, that Jake, to become again himself, should firstly "lose" himself and become someone else.

"*For whoever wants to save their life / soul will lose it, but whoever loses their life / soul for me and for the gospel will save it*"¹⁴: in this allusive and unexpected maneuver of the script, we suddenly hear another demand of the Gospel – Find yourself by getting rid of the narcissistic sublimations

12. *Gen.* 2, 15.

13. With the term "protoevangelium" we're referring to the passage *Gen.* 3, 14-15, which, according to a certain patristic tradition, "presages" –already from the Old Testament– Jesus's coming to the earth and the ultimate annulment of the Fall's consequences – sin, pain, decay and death.

14. *Mark* 8, 35.

and ideological hardenings of your identity; discover who you are, by killing the things you think you are and that other people “have told you” that you are. On the one hand, the film questions Genesis’s anthropological narrative; on the other, it proclaims one of the Gospel’s major anthropological constants as a cornerstone of its protagonist’s self-consciousness. Those who are capable of grasping this specific dialectic must think as obvious the fact that the creators of Avatar have no intention whatsoever to get involved in a “new-agist” conspiracy to reject the Judeo-Christian narrative; rather, they are targeting the puritanic, racist, and warmongering instrumentalization of this particular narrative as the American evangelical fundamentalism expounds it. Dan Dinello reminds us that RDA’s¹⁵ behavior towards the Navi recalls to a great extent, the “Christian” U.S.A.’s stance against the Pre-Columbian natives¹⁶, against Iraq, and of course against the Vietcong during the Vietnam War. Furthermore, Dinello makes the crucial observation that Colonel Quaritch’s remark, “Our only security lies in a pre-emptive attack. We will fight terror with terror”¹⁷ refers directly to George Bush’s rhetoric about “pre-emptive” strikes and the “war against terrorism”¹⁸. The ambition that lies behind the decision of the movie’s creators to present Jake defecting to Navi’s camp is the articulation of a discourse that rivals this fundamentalist approach and reminds us that, perhaps, the only way we have in our disposal to acquire a deeper relationship with our national, political or even religious identity is to *abandon* its hegemonic manifestations, to *be estranged* from its established and dogmatic preconceptions, to *cause cracks* in its self-righteous and bellicose aspects – and to act likewise not to embrace the “all-encompassing religion of ecology”, but to manage to pick up again the thread that connects us with our role as Creation’s caretakers and

15. RDA = Resources Development Administration: It’s the largest single non-governmental organization in human space. It finances the colonization and the economic exploitation of the planet Pandora; one of its priorities is the extraction of rare resources like *unobtainium* from Pandora’s substratum

16. The very word *Na’vi* is a corruptive form of the English word *Native*.

17. Quaritch: “Our only security lies in pre-emptive attack. We will fight terror with terror” (*Avatar*, 02:20:08-02:20:15).

18. See D. Dinello, “‘See the World We Come From’: Spiritual versus Technological Transcendence in *Avatar*”, in: G. A. Dunn (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 161.

guardians – a role, let us repeat once more, that is a *biblical* par example and not at all “pagan”.

To put it differently, we would say that *Avatar* criticizes “Sky-People’s” identitarian fundamentalist Christianity, as it implies the idea that, to establish a totally different relationship with the whole Creation, to run again in its forests, to swim again to its water and enjoy their fruits, we truly need to discover a Christian religion with a much higher moral fiber and a *different* conception of the body, which will be constituted through more profound sensibilities and more demanding initiations or rites of passage.

We shall return to the fundamental Christianity’s criticism when we shall talk about the criticism that *Avatar* reserves for the dominant cultural values of our era. Here we simply wish to insist on the element of the movement towards *alterity/otherness* and the need for the *appropriation of the uncanny* [*unheimlich*], as ideal ways for grounding our identity that will be more solid, enriched, and inclusive. In *Avatar*, Jake represents an example of a successful grounding of this identity. On the contrary, in the cases of Colonel Miles Quaritch, RDA’s CEO Parker Selfridge, but also of the “Sky-People” in general, the movie recognizes the total failure of such a grounding. Jason Eberl cites two examples to render this particular failure more explicit. The first relates to the demonization of alterity by Colonel Quaritch during the first, unofficial, briefing of his soldiers: “You are not in Kansas anymore. You are on Pandora, ladies and gentlemen. Respect that fact every second of every day. Out, beyond that fence, every living thing that crawls, flies or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat your eyes for jujubes”¹⁹.

In contrast with Jake, who is appropriating alterity with sincere humility – as he states characteristically, “my cup is empty”²⁰ – Colonel Quaritch reverses reality to the point of completely distorting it; it appears that his cup is overflowed by his identitarian fundamentalism and from the interests of the company that he represents. Yet, planet Pandora threatens only those who

19. *Avatar*, 00:10:24–00:10:56. Cf. J. Eberl, *ibid.*, p. 30.

20. This is the answer that Jake gives to Moat, Neytiri’s mother, when she claims that “Sky-People” are learning with difficulty, because “it is hard to fill a cup which is already full”; see *Avatar*, 00:51:52–00:52:03.

have already threatened it in the first place. Seen *eo ipso*, it is rather a world of consummate natural beauty; his inhabitants are living harmoniously and in close cooperation between them, therefore it reminds us of many aspects of the Garden of Eden before the Fall²¹. It is very indicative –and that is the second example that J. Eberl invokes– that in this pre-Fall world, the agent of Evil is not embodied by the serpent of the Old Testament, but by the “Sky-People”: “When [the People of Heaven] try to lure the Na’vi with consumer goods [...] they are playing the role of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. In this case, Pandora turns out to be not only a pre-Fall world, but also a world that resists the very lures that led humans to their fall. Avatar is the story of the Garden of Eden”²².

Navi’s greatest sin is that they are in no need of anything that the “Sky-People” might be able to offer them: beers and blue jeans, economic progress, and material and technical development²³. And yet, in contrast with their exploiters, the Na’vi are proved to be much more open towards alterity and the Other: they are studying in the school established by the astrobiologist and xenobotanist Grace Augustine [Kyriesi]²⁴, they are learning the English language and they accept, after certain rights of passage, yet another stranger as a “dream walker” [= *uniltirantokx*], as an equal member of their tribe²⁵. What does that mean? That their

21. As J. Eberl remarks; see op.cit., p. 30.

22. Ibid., p. 31.

23. As Jake confesses to his digital diary: “[The Omatikaya] will not leave their home; they will not negotiate any deal. Why should they? For beer and blue jeans? There’s nothing we have that they want” (*Avatar*, 01:46:22-01:46:40).

24. Grace Augustine is the scientist responsible for the program “Avatar” and writer of the most prestigious scientific study about Na’vi and Pandora’s flora. Having arrived to the planet some thirty years earlier than the period where the movie’s plot is unfolding, Grace contributed significantly to the “Sky-People’s” acquaintance with the Navi by establishing a school where the latter had had the chance to learn English and acquire some general information about humankind. See the entry “Grace Augustine” in Avatar Wiki. For the history of the school and the dramatic events that led to its closure, see Grace’s narration in *Avatar*, 01:13:09-01:15:05.

25. “Dream walkers/avatars” have a genetically engineered human/Navi-hybrid body, designed to serve as a remotely controlled vessel for a human mind. They are produced in the laboratory from a combination of DNA taken both from humans and Navi. Among other differences, these “avatar” “they have five fingers instead of four, their neuronal ‘tails’ start at the top of the skull (not the base) and they also smell bad, at least if we

identity has been corrupted or that their openness to alterity/otherness confirmed it anew, only through a different path? When people's identity is being distorted or "corrupted"? If they close themselves up like an oyster or when they open themselves towards alterity /otherness to enrich it and at the same time to be enriched by it? We could better understand now why we persist to our original claim: *Avatar*, despite its apparent "paganism", does not have the ambition to play the role of a "new-agist" Trojan Horse, to demolish Christianity's walls, but rather to criticize the latter's fundamentalist rigidities – its identitarian wrapping up to itself against any claim of alterity and its failure to render humans guardians, caretakers and servants of the Nature. *Avatar* is not only the history of the Garden of Eden with a happy end; it is also a mirror through which we can see more clearly the history of our Fall, our ecological depravity, and the fundamentalist distortion of our "Christianity".

4. "Teach me how to see": *Avatar* indoctrinates/catechizes

For someone to be a Na'vi and an equal member of the Omatikaya's clan²⁶ it means to live and "see", and perceive the world in a certain way. When Jake asks Neytiri to teach him how to "see", she tells him that this is impossible: "No one can teach you how to see"²⁷. It is worth noting, though, that, compared with the ideal way of doing science, Dr. Max Patel suggests the exact opposite: "Good observation is good science"²⁸. The two sentences are referring to two different epistemological approaches. To "see" things by following Navi's way means, above all else, to be a Navi, to be personally involved and participate in Navi's way of life – in other words, the way Navi perceive the world must have been inscribed into

believe Eytukan". See A. Terjesen, "It doesn't take an Avatar: How to empathize with a Blue-Skinned Alien", in: G. A. Dunn, *op.cit.*, p. 63.

26. Omatikaya (literally, the Blue Flute clan), is a Navi clan, that share a deep connection with Pandora's forests and is responsible for protecting the Tree of Souls. Jake becomes finally member of that clan. See entry "Omaticaya Clan" in: *Avatar Wiki*.

27. Neytiri: "No one can teach you how to see" (*Avatar*, 00:45:23-00:45:27).

28. Dr Patel: "Good observation is good science". *Avatar*, 00:13:57-00:13:59. Dr. Patel is Grace's close scientific collaborator.

your being as a habitus. On the contrary, if you want to do “good science”, it means that you have to look at things as an outsider, to examine them with the critical detachment of the “objective” observer – or, as Theodore Roszak has put it, to systematically cultivate “a state of consciousness cleansed of all subjective distortion, all personal involvement”²⁹. In the first case, it is impossible to observe something, if you haven’t already experienced the things under observation; in the second one, there is no need for you to have experienced anything – all you need is to observe well.

Apparently, this tug-of-war seems to lead to an impasse. Nevertheless, after a closer look, we realize that the movie’s screenplay is not that much dogmatic – that is, it does not perceive those two epistemologies as being mutually exclusive. There might be some disagreements in their respective methods or deviations regarding their conclusions, but this does not mean that they are doomed to live perpetually in parallel universes. Stretched to its end, the “outside” can only be met at some point with the “inside”, the external observation to be crisscrossed with the initiation – and vice versa: if there is something that can guarantee that our initiation will be completed, it’s none other than a deeper and more rounded observation of the object, in which we are going to be initiated. Grace, just before succumbing to her injuries, “sees” Mother-Goddess and exclaims: “I’m with her, Jake! She’s real!”³⁰. Jake is initiated in Omatikaya’s life not only through participating “from within”, but also, by Neytiri’s side, through observing the endless paraphernalia of this life. At the very moment when the scientist is going through the rites of passage and the man under the initiation process is an observer, we see that a strong current of empiricism runs through both Grace’s science as well as Omatikaya’s religion. Grace’s scientific empiricism collects samples and studies data; Omatikaya’s religious empiricism is highlighted by the immediacy of their relationship with Eywa: if your cup is empty enough, you could even hear the voices of the Omatikaya’s ancestors rustling through the

29. Th. Roszak, *Η Γέννηση της Άντι-Κουλτούρας: Στοχασμοί γύρω από την Τεχνοκρατική Κοινωνία και τη Νεανική Άμφισβήτησή της*, Greek translation F. Terzakis, Futura Publications, Athens 2008, p. 245.

30. Grace: “I’m with her, Jake! She’s real!” (*Avatar*, 02:14:51-02:14:56).

branches of the “Tree of Souls”. On the one hand, therefore, *Avatar* breaks science away from techno-scientism’s positivism and dogmatism; on the other, it thoroughly distances itself from every abstract religion, every notion or conception of God as *absconditus* or *otiosus*; it promotes a religion grounded in the human being’s life and at the same time a Goddess which is ritually reincarnated and reveals herself into Nature: *Dea sive natura*.

There is no doubt that Omatikaya’s religion is pagan. Nevertheless, if we wish to confer with analytical power the term “pagan” and not limit ourselves only to its superficial, “journalistic”, use we should fit it into its specific framework and analyze its special features. In other words, we have to focus on the hierophanies of Omatikaya’s religion to define the particular kind of paganism that is represented by them. Indeed, by following closely the script sequence, it wouldn’t be pointless to examine this hierophany in order of their appearance:

1. *Atokirina*. The first hierophany of the film is the seeds of the Tree of Souls, which are called “atokirina”: they are very pure and sacred spirits³¹, that rest upon Jake and illuminate his body’s contours, making it look like the ethereal body of a Budha or a Boddhisatva³². Atorikina’s role in the narrative is predominantly preternatural, prophetic; they presage and at the same time symbolize Jake’s subsequent evolution into Toruk Makto – that is, a Messiah. Their appearance is decisive because they

31. ‘Very pure spirits’ Neytiri calls them. See *Avatar*, 00:46:59.

32. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, boddhisatvas are being called the Budhas of the future, who, although they can bypass the perpetual cycle of reincarnations and lead themselves directly to nirvana, they intentionally prefer to remain within its bounds in order to contribute to the salvation of all living beings. According to the sutra Prajna-paramita, the boddhisatvas “do not wish to only achieve their individual nirvana; rather, knowing all about the painful world of existence, and desiring to attain maximum illumination, they are not afraid to re-enter the cycle of birth and death. They are reborn for the benefit of the world, in order to help and have mercy on the world. They have decided: ‘We will be the refuge and rest of the world, the final redemption of the world, the islands of the world, the lights of the world, the guides of the world to salvation’” M. Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 2, transl. W. R. Trask, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1982, p. 219. Cf. St. Papalexandropoulos, *Ἀνατολικὴς Θρησκεία*, Gutenberg Publications, Athens 2016, pp. 428-430. The scene where atorikina are resting on Jake’s body in: *Avatar* 00:46:10-00:47:25.

prevent Neytiri from killing Jake when she finds him inside Pandora's wood, alone and defenseless into the night.

2. *Tsahik*. Obeying this revealing connotation, but also foreseeing Jake's fearless heart, Neytiri leads him to the huge Hometree of Omatikaya for the latter to decide about his fate. Under this tree, Jake is being interrogated, initially by Eytukan, Neytiri's father and clan leader [Olo'eyktan], and subsequently by Moat, Neytiri's mother, whom she calls "tsahik". The term indicates the spiritual leader of the clan, a sort of female sheer, hierophant, and mystic; she is entrusted with two very important tasks: the first one, is to interpret Eywa's –the Mother-Goddess– will and to be the spiritual leader of her people, by observing that will³³. Her second task is to oversee and perform important rites of passage, of which the following should be mentioned: a) *Unitaron*³⁴, that is, the quest for the living companion, with whom every single member of the Omatikaya clan is going to establish a relationship – unique, exclusive and for life³⁵ and b) the "*transfer of consciousness*" ritual, during which a human spirit, after having passed "through Eywa's eye", is transferred from one body to another. This last ritual incorporates the notion of reincarnation into the specific pagan context of Omatikaya's religion. However, it would be an exaggeration to assert that the movie intends to emphasize this element, much more as a "Hinduist" loan, since it is well-known that many similar beliefs regarding reincarnation can also be traced outside the Hinduist context – from the "primitive" religions right through Orphism and Late Platonism³⁶. According to our view, the film's creators have wished to primarily focus on the ritual element that permeates the whole of Omatikaya's religion – that is, the fact that, initially, Eywa's will is being

33. From that point of view, *Tsahik* might be compared with Pythia or the Socratic Diotima [cf. Plato's *Symposium*].

34. It can be translated as "Dream-Hunt".

35. In most cases, the animal with which this relationship is sealed, is called *ikran*. Neytiri's *ikran* is called *Seze*, while Jake's *ikran* –before he managed to tame the great leontopteryx Toruk [= "last shadow"] – is called *Bob*.

36. For the beliefs regarding reincarnation in the primitive religions, see J. Head & S. L. Cranston (eds.), *Reincarnation: The Phoenix Fire Mystery*, Point Loma Publications, San Diego 1991, pp. 187-201. For the reincarnation during the Ancient Greek, Hellenistic and Roman times, see *ibid.*, pp. 202-237. Cf. entry «μετενσάρκωση», in: M. Begzos (ed.), *Θρησκευολογικό Λεξικό*, Hellenika Grammata Publications, Athens 2000, pp. 381-383.

interpreted by the tsahik, to be transformed into a socially useful message, but it afterward is being felt (“is being incarnated”) in the community’s (the clan’s) rituals, and indeed at the very moment that Omatikaya “utter the same cry, pronounce the same word or address the same gesture to an object [i.e. the Tree of Souls], with which they feel and believe they are united”³⁷.

This ritual incorporation of Eywa’s will structures the subjectivities of the clan’s members and shapes the powerful bonds of “organic” solidarity that exist between them. At the same time, we would suggest that this incorporation follows Jake’s every step and lies behind every possible ordeal or rite of passage to which he is about to be subjected.

3. *Tsaheylu*. Jake, having Neytiri as his instructor and spiritual guide, passes through another hierophany: the Tsaheylu (= “the bond”). It’s a kind of mystical harmonization or convergence of thoughts and wills between an animal and his/her rider, which typically takes place when they connect their neural “queues” – this is why Omatikaya treats it primarily as a natural process. Nevertheless, within the context of the present study, we perceived Tsaheylu as a hierophany, because we very much doubt if the manifestations of this bond can be reproduced in laboratory conditions – that is, independently from the ways they are related with Pandora’s whole complex of hierophanies. It would be a gross oversimplification to assert that tsaheylu resembles two terminals that are connected with a USB port – in most cases, it is presented as a caricature. Tsaheylu is not simply a connection or an exchange of information; above all, is the sublation / abolition [aufhebung] of the ontological solitude that reigns among creatures, is the rupture of the contours that leads a creature to shut itself up completely and render it “independent” from all others – and at the same time is the unutterable and mystical bridging of this solitude. To speak with the terms adopted by the Council of Chalcedon [451 AD], *tsaheylu* is an unconfused, unchangeable, indivisible, and inseparable [ἀσύγχυτος, ἄτρεπτος, ἀδιάρρητος, ἀχώριστος] union of two different beings, one that does not lead to fusion, identification or absorption of each other, but rather to a condition of partnership marked by communion and empathy, which even permits mutual access

37. E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Free Press, Glencoe, IL 1954, p. 254.

to their sensory data – e.g., they feel the pain or the joy of whatever they are bonded to. Jake confesses that this empathy permeates as a whole Omatikaya's relationship with the wood and its creatures: "I am trying to understand the profound relationship that people have with the forest. [Neytiri] talks about a network of energy that flows through all living things; she says that all energy is borrowed and that someday you have to give it back"³⁸.

Of course, this "energy-like" connection simply constitutes a different way for us to denote the incomprehensible, to symbolize the ineffable, or, in any case, to summon a word, that will help us to name the thing we don't know how else we could name it. Similarly, we could talk about the presence in *Avatar* of the "mysticism of Nature" or the "religion of Nature", not because these specific terms possess some greater analytical power than the term "energy", but because they testify more emphatically to the fact that, according to Omatikaya's religion, nature is the only pole or source of sacredness. According to the hierophany's point of view, as Michael York suggests, "in paganism as *a* or *the* religion of nature, there is *nothing* other than nature"³⁹: – there is no transcendental sphere on which nature depends and to which is subject, nor any ontological "depth" on which it is grounded. Nature is simultaneously *fons et origo*, source, foundation, and expression of its sacredness; from this, we can deduce that any dualist distinction between "matter" and "spirit" is rejected from the outset. The natural, the physical, and the corporeal are both sacred and spiritual elements – *corpus* means *spiritus* as well. Having been initiated to this *corporeal spirituality*⁴⁰ and having recognized the latter's liberating power, Jake will decide to abandon his (crippled) earthly body, to live forever inside a Navi's body.

4. *Eywa*. The most fundamental hierophany of Navi's religion can be traced back to the well-known cosmological archetype of Goddess-Tree (or Goddess-Vine); her existence is inextricably intertwined with the Tree

38. *Avatar*, 01:11:02-01:11:21.

39. M. York, "Pagan Theology", in: M. Pizza & J. R. Lewis (eds.), *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, Brill, Leiden / Boston 2009, p. 287: "In paganism as *a* or *the* religion of nature, there is *nothing* other than nature" [emphasis in the original].

40. For the coarticulation of the corporeal and the spiritual (*corpo-spirituality*) as a phenomenological feature of paganism, see M. York, *ibid.*, pp. 295-300.

of Souls. Concerning this sacred interweaving, Mircea Eliade observes: “The Great Goddess personifies the inexhaustible source of creation, the ultimate basis of all reality. [...] The presence of the Goddess beside a plant symbol confirms one meaning that the tree possesses in archaic iconography and mythology: that of being *an inexhaustible source of cosmic fertility*”⁴¹.

Eliade’s interpretation explains why Jale and Neytiri made love for the first time enmeshed in the lush foliage and the illuminated branches of the Tree of Souls: Mother-Goddess, as an inexhaustible source of fertility, is first and foremost an erotic and life-giving power⁴², which represents the sacredness and the non-reversibility⁴³ of every sexual consummation. Yet, and exactly because she possesses such great power, Eywa carries within her the life’s second pole: death. This is the reason why the Tree of Souls, apart from being a place for sexual intercourse, is also one where the alive are meeting with the ancestral voices of the dead – and, of course, it is a place for prayers. Again, this is the reason why Neytiri claims that Eywa’s primary function is not to choose camps, but to protect and guard the equilibrium of life (the life cycle). Eywa, as a Nature-Goddess, is truly the Goddess of the eternal natural return, the Goddess who guards the perpetual process of “borrowing” the life-force energy to the creatures, and the return of this energy to its original Source.

Even though Eywa is personified and named, she should not be perceived as separate from Pandora or transcendental to her (if that was the case, she would have simply transformed into a “female” version of Yahweh, introducing dualism to Navi’s religion). Within the framework of the inextricable interweaving of *corpus* and *spiritus*, about which we spoke earlier, we believe that it would be proper to perceive Eywa as a kind of Pandora’s “planetary consciousness”, which is incorporated in all

41. M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, transl. by Rosemary Sheed, Bison Books, Reprint Edition, 1996, pp. 286 and 280.

42. We must not forget that the very name of the Goddess –Eywa– is a corrupted form of the Jewish name Eva, which means life.

43. Hence the angry reaction of Chu-Tay, who perceives the Jake-Neytiri pairing as a kidnapping of his future mate by a “dreamwalker”. However, the fact that this mating occurred “in front of Eywa” constitutes its ultimate legitimacy and is not open to question..

forms of life and acts as a connecting thread between them⁴⁴. To put it differently, we could say that Eywa and Pandora are the two sides of the same coin: if Eywa is Pandora's planetary consciousness, then Pandora is Eywa's external demonstration and material manifestation. Thus, *Avatar*, being a movie typical in its pagan and pantheist inclinations, promotes the idea of Mother-Goddess, which is Nature's *alter-ego*, is infused into the latter's infinite ontic demonstrations, while at the same time, she hypostasizes it as a compact entity. Eywa is at the same planet Pandora's *ἐν* and *πολλά*, *πᾶν* and *πάντα*, *corpus* and *spiritus*.

5. *Toruk Makto*. How come, though, that a Goddess like she came to "listen", to obey a human being's will? How it was made possible for the Great Mother to reverse her "ontology" and to finally select a camp by putting herself into the service of this will? After all, who is that man dictating to whom all the creatures and the elements of nature abide? «Ποταπός ἐστὶν οὗτος, ὅτι καὶ οἱ ἄνεμοι καὶ ἡ θάλασσα αὐτῷ ὑπακούουσιν»⁴⁵;

That man is Toruk Makto, the "knight of the Last Shadow"; he is the one who induces the messianic rift to the movie's otherwise pagan canvas; who proves that, if *Avatar*'s religion is pagan, then its last word does not belong to *paganism* but, on the contrary, to *messianism*. This is the case because Toruk Makto's calling splits up the flow of the eternal natural return, laying the foundations of the "new life" («καινῆς ζωῆς») at Pandora; because Toruk Makto is riding the Last Shadow that you are ever going to see –the shadow of death– and tames it for the benefit of this new life; because Toruk Makto unites the scattered Na'vi clans, giving them back hope and a destination in life; this is the case because Toruk Makto is the only true *judgment* of the "Sky-People" and their Luciferian pride; because, ultimately, Toruk Makto's calling abolishes every previous "equilibrium" of life, by turning everything into thirst and hunger for

44. Jason Eberl observes that: "unlike the Christian God, Eywa does not simply interact with the world of Pandora; she is Pandora itself, revealed through the intricate neural network of the plant and animal species that inhabit it (including the Navi). See J. Eberl, *ibid.*, p. 21.

45. *Matth.* 8, 27. [= "what kind of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"].

justice, as well as hope for the possibility of a *new* world, where «οὔτε πένθος οὔτε κραυγή οὔτε πόνος οὐκ ἔσται ἔτι»⁴⁶.

There is no doubt that, from the moment Jake manages to tame the great leonopteryx (Na'vi name: Toruk), gains immense prestige as he is connected with the movie's greatest hierophany, while he becomes again member of the Omatikaya clan as a, literally, Jake Redivivus (it is worth noting the awe with which the members of the clan are stepping aside when he passes through them). Now Jake really "sees" Omatikaya because he is ready to serve them. He also "sees" Neytiri –and the same goes for her– not only because they pick up again the lost thread of their love, but also because they share the experience of a common fearlessness ("I was scared, Jake, for my people. I'm not afraid anymore", Neytiri says). Even the great warrior Tsu'tey, who was cautious and distrustful until very recently, declares his intention to follow Toruk Makto, and, assuming thereof the role and the duties of a Tsahik, he conveys his word and his will to the people⁴⁷.

We've seen before that *Avatar*'s creators are approaching negatively certain aspects of the Judeo-Cristian narrative. Now we think that our analysis of the film's hierophanies permits us to risk formulating some more general conclusions about the religious beliefs, the sacred symbols, and the forms of religious experience it promotes. Paganism is undoubtedly a dominant aspect of the film; yet, we must emphasize the fact that it is an eclectic paganism, which is in touch but is never identified with a certain form of paganism, at least with those that are known from the history of religions⁴⁸. This is something to be expected, given the fact that the movie aims at a worldwide audience; therefore, his creators deliberately choose to incorporate in its narrative certain phenomenological features of paganism, in full knowledge of the fact that, on the one hand, these more

46. *Rev.* 21, 4. [= "there will no longer be sorrow and anguish, or crying, or pain"].

47. For the whole scene of Jake's return as Toruk Makto, see *Avatar*, 02:09:11-02:12: 36.

48. The reputable pagan site Celebrate Pagan Holidays proposes the following typology of paganism: a) Celtic and Druidic, b) Greek and Roman, c) Ancient Egyptian (Kemetism), d) American native, e) Scandinavian, f) Slavic (Rodnover), g) Wicca and h) Eclectic. See <https://www.celebratepaganholidays.com/pagan-intro>. According to our opinion, *Avatar*'s paganism represents type (g) of the classification mentioned above.

or less penetrate all of its various realizations and, on the other, that in this way every viewer of the movie is in position to identify with the form of paganism with which he or she is more familiar.

This eclectic paganism is characterized by certain motifs:

a. *Feministic*: Goddess-Mother, female spiritual leadership (Moat, Neytiri, Grace), corpo-spirituality.

b. *Depth Ecology*: Nature's sacredness, as Mother-Goddess's alter-ego, the interdependence of the creatures, "borrowing" and the eternal return of the life force, reasonableness, volition, and planetary consciousness of Nature (Eywa).

c. *Mystical*: creatures combined through the "energy", mystical union of their thoughts and wills (Tsaheylu), the primacy of the inner experience as a sort of access to a different perception of the world ("I can see you").

d. *Mantic and ecstatic*: "tsahìk", "atokirina" ["woodsprite"].

e. *Ritualistic*: incorporation of the otherness/alterity, cure, "Uniltaron" ["Dream-Hunt"], and consciousness transfer.

The motifs mentioned above are the most prevalent; that doesn't mean, though, that they are holding the leading part: Toruk Makto's appearance as a messianic figure, which turns on its head the whole narrative sequence of the film, overturns also the primacy of its paganism. If the first conclusion that emerges from the analysis of the movie's hierophanies is that the latter directly promotes paganism, the second one is that paganism, despite its abundance, eventually submits itself to messianism and becomes its servant. This hierophanic reversal becomes apparent at the point when Neytiri shouts full of joy: "Jake, Eywa has heard you! Eywa has heard you!"⁴⁹.

This shout is not simply an emotional outburst. It is above all Toruk Makto's public confession/profession – a hierophany superior to the pagan ones of the planet Pandora; it is the solemn certification of the fact that Mother-Goddess, and consequently the whole planet, hear and obey the Messiah's calling and voluntarily submit themselves to it, exactly as the flying "ikran" submits itself voluntarily to the will of its rider – or, as in the following scene, an angry "thanator" ["palulukan"] voluntarily

49. *Avatar*, 02:35:34-02:35:47.

submits itself to Neytiri and lowers its back for her to ride it⁵⁰. The entire kingdom of nature floods into the earth and the heavens, to fight alongside Toruk Makto. While messianism takes precedence over paganism and is being served by it, we observe that this kind of “messianic” paganism marks at the same time its most glorious moment. Nature has never before exhibited its hierophanic dynamism to a greater extent and intensity than the moment it obeyed the Messiah’s will; never before paganism was exalted to such a degree than the moment it gave up its primacy in favor of messianism. This kind of dialectics is a mark of genius but also deeply “Christian” in its profound implications, as it accepts the view that nature is glorified only when it bows in front of the Messiah and that it discovers its true face and its real destination only when it satisfies the Messiah’s will.

5. “We’ll see if your madness can be cured”:

Avatar as a Judge of the dominant cultural values

We’ve already mentioned *Avatar*’s critique on the identitarian Christian fundamentalism –especially its US evangelical version of it– and the latter’s demonization of alterity/otherness. We’ve also talked about the criticism concerning dogmatic positivism and techno-scientism’s abuses. At the same moment, by analyzing the film’s hierophanies, we have been given the chance to determine their specific religious content, as well as the values they promote: horizontal and comradely solidarity among the creatures, which derives from their deeper (“ontological”) affinity; respect of the Nature’s beauties and life’s equilibrium; cognitive humility (“my cup is empty”) empathy, and ritual inclusion of alterity/otherness; and finally, messianic justice and hope, as the rival awe of the will for power, represented by the “Sky-People”.

Most of these values could be characterized as “eco-feminist” – not because ecology and feminism are identifiable with paganism or are obliged to always be accountable to it, but because they are often embraced

50. See *Avatar*, 02:36:25-02:36:31.

by it or represent various versions of it⁵¹. Yet, we could observe that, even values like messianic justice, which neither possess a kind of feminist veneer nor can they be perceived as “pagan”, are supported by female figures, at the same time cosmological (Eywa) and historical (Grace, Moat, Neytiri). Toruk Makto is unquestionably a male Messiah; Mother-Goddess and the whole of Nature hears and obey his will. Nevertheless, Toruk Makto’s messianism is always framed by the female element and, to a large extent, owes its existence to its constant interaction with that element. In this meaning, and given the fact that fundamentalism is always patriarchal, we could say that *Avatar* promotes an anti-patriarchal and anti-fundamentalist social, political, and moral vision which, without giving up everything to paganism and eco-feminism, is always enriched by their insights and perceptions. To put it differently, *Avatar*, far from being an “engaged” paganist and eco-feminist film, nevertheless frames its moral, social, and political ideas by constantly being in dialogue and interdependence with those two worldviews. It is no coincidence that “Sky-People” are in their vast majority men, while women represent only a tiny minority. Yet this minority is the one that makes all the difference – as it is, for example, in the case of Grace Augustine and Trudy Sakon⁵². Nor it is accidental that, within the context of this gender perspective, *Avatar* heavily criticizes certain masculinity models, as well as their moral and cultural byproducts: from the one side, the “macho” and tough commando Miles Quaritch, who is inspired by militaristic ideals

51. Brian Morris, for example, underlies the fact that paganism promotes a deep love for nature, which is not in accordance with Roger Bacon’s ethics of “dominion” over it, nor with capitalism’s view that nature is simply a commodity and a source of wealth to be exploited. In parallel with this, Morris, without identifying feminism with neopaganism, he points out their close relationship, as they both emphasize the “female” element of the world. See B. Morris, *Religion and Anthropology: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 275.

52. Trudy Chacon, although at RDA’s service, refuses to open fire against Omatykaya’s “Hometree”. His intervention will be proved decisive when she helps Norm, Grace and Jake to escape from their prison where they’ve been kept captives (*Avatar*, 02:02:15-02:05:00). Later on, during the great battle between “Sky-People” and Navi, she will help again Jake to find refuge from the guns of the powerful assault ship “Dragon”, under the command of Miles Quaritch – although her actions led her to her own death. See *Avatar*, 02:30:30-02:33:07.

and appears as an avid admirer of the “Shock and Awe” dogma; from the other, the coward and corrupted *homo oeconomicus* Parker Selfridge, for whom corporate interests represent the highest ideal and who profits from the *disaster capitalism*. We could say that militarism, corporate greed, and disaster capitalism are perceived by *Avatar*’s creators as a triple function of the “Sky-People’s” depravity and moral decline: “On earth these guys were lifers, marines, fighting for freedom. Here they’re mercenaries, they get paid, they work for the company”⁵³.

Seeing the (disabled) Jake right after his return to Pandora, one of those infamous “freedom fighters” calls him “*meals on wheels*”⁵⁴. A little bit later, during his first visit to the woods, Jake peers somewhat awkwardly into the holes from the bullets at Grace’s school – which, in the meantime, had been converted into a warehouse. Army at schools, police at the universities – it couldn’t be more blatant the hint to the massacres that have been taking place in US education institutes, with the Columbine shooting to simply be the most infamous case of them all. Again, the notion of the “pre-emptive” and “humanitarian” war⁵⁵ is completely delegitimized within *Avatar*’s context, for at least five reasons: a) the one-hour window that Selfridge gives to Jake to “negotiate” the Hometree’s evacuation is inadequate and proves beyond doubt that the “Sky-People” are pushing for a veritable parody of negotiation⁵⁶; b) a war can be declared only from one state against another, not from a company against a whole planet; c) there is no distinction between the armed and the unarmed members of the population – on the contrary, for the “Sky-People”, the *indigenous* are indiscriminately perceived as the enemy; d) there is no balance of power: against the “Sky-People’s” vastly superior firepower, Omatikaya

53. *Avatar*, 00:09:43-00:10:04.

54. *Avatar*, 00:10:04-00:10:07.

55. Just before the destruction of the Hometree from the “Sky-People”, Miles Quaritch says to Parker: Selfridge: “I will do it with the least possible loss to the natives. I’ll drive them out with gas first. It will be humanitarian [sic], more or less” (*Avatar* 01:48:06-01:48:18).

56. Grace aptly underlines the hypocrisy of this “negotiation”, when she says to Jack: “You know, they never wanted us to succeed. They flattened a sacred site on purpose to provoke a reaction. They’re staging a war to get what they want” (*Avatar*, 01:48:28-01:48:41).

have nothing else to counter other than arrows, bows, and spears; and e) the two belligerent parts do not accede voluntarily to the armed conflict – instead of that, the second part is drugged into a battle for its survival, after a “Shock and Owe” operation: the destruction of the Hometree⁵⁷.

From all the above, it becomes apparent that *Avatar* is self-introduced as a relentless criticism that targets fundamentalism's patriarchal premises, as well as a defense of specific eco-feminist values – respect and love for Nature, trust to the women's leadership skills, “horizontal” solidarity and companionship, ritual integration of alterity/otherness, fight against corporate profiteering and warmongering. Those values cannot be attributed solely and linearly to “paganism”; they exist independently of it and they dynamically framed the messianic current that runs through the film, wishing to demonstrate the need not for messianism's subjection anew to paganism (we've already seen that this is not the case), but for an eco-feminist perfection of the messianism itself – in other words, we could say that *Avatar*'s creators promote eco-feminist values not because they believe that messianism cannot be conceived independently of them, but because they wish to stress that, by constantly framing it, they will help it to serve its requirements and normative propositions more fully. Supported by eco-feminist values, messianism becomes better, not worse – this, it seems, is the movie's final verdict. Yet, for this framing to be accomplished, we need for us to become disciples of those values, by approaching them with the cognitive humility of an “empty cup”. Then and only then a certain hope for us to be cured of our fundamentalist and patriarchal madness will loom into the horizon.

6. Summing up

The programmatic target of the present paper was our effort to “ground” the Blizek-Desmarais typology, which we referred to in the previous issue, in an important cinematic blockbuster, such as James Cameron's *Avatar*

57. We are borrowing those five reasons from the excellent analysis by J. J. Foy, “‘We Will Fight Terror with Terror’: *Avatar* and Just War Theory” in: G. A. Dunn (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp. 173-178.

(2009). If it is true that cinema diffuses religion as a subject of religious interpretation, as a criticism of religion, as a vehicle of direct (“catechetic”) promotion of religious ideas, and as a vehicle of promotion of values that are friendly to religion, then we have good reasons to assert that *Avatar* fulfills the requirements of the typology mentioned above and diffuses religion with all four ways:

- as an object of *religious* interpretation, because the film’s script is dotted with a rich religious repertory, that is been recognized not only by its devotees but also by its adversaries;

- as a *critique* of religion, because it points the finger to the abuses of the identitarian (Christian) fundamentalism, human beings’ failure to become caretakers and stewards of the Creation, and their total adherence to those very temptations which led to their “Fall” and their moral depravity;

- as a vehicle of *direct* (“catechetic”) promotion of religious ideas; through the representation of specific hierophanies, the movie promotes fundamental phenomenological features of messianism and paganism; finally,

- as a vehicle that promotes eco-feminist values, which are not only extremely friendly to paganism (although not identical to it), but they are also able to frame and perfect messianism, to be in a position to serve more fully its requirements and presuppositions.

Avatar is a cinematic spectacle dotted with religious references, which fully renders religion socially and culturally visible, as a public narrative and as a public affair. Above all else, though, it is a mega-spectacle that, through its representational power, refutes the erstwhile almighty mantra of the secularization theory: “The more modernity, the less religion”. Now, during the third decade of the 21st century, we can be quite sure that the truth is exactly the opposite: in our state-of-the-art cinemas, religion has become abundantly conspicuous; and blockbusters like *Avatar* have functioned –and will continue to act likewise– as vehicles of the diffusion of religion with more socially visible, more unexpected, but also more fascinating ways.