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Ran Prieur on Avatar

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2010

January 11. By popular demand, I'm going back to Avatar. First, we shouldn't be surprised that conservatives hate Avatar¹ ... unless we think about the meaning of "conservative". The movie supports the most traditional of traditional values: a tribal society living in balance with nature, and defending its culture through violence. So how can "conservatives" hate it? Because in practice, conservatism is an emotional state, and people in that state don't care what's traditional or radical for humans in general — they only care what's traditional or radical for them personally. So you can make the most untested and wildly maladapted society in history, and after a couple generations, all the traditionalists will angrily defend it and attack the ways of the previous hundred thousand generations.

It also turns out that leftists hate *Avatar*, but only a particular breed of leftists, those with academic training in identity politics. Annalee Newitz wrote *When will white people stop making movies like Avatar?*² And David Brooks, a centrist, calls

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Retrieved on January 20, 2010 from ranprieur.com

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¹ www.salon.com

² io9.com

Avatar the White Messiah fable³. Their point is that this is one of many films that turns someone from our culture into the leader and “most awesome member” of an alien culture, and that it would be more politically correct to show the aliens saving themselves without our help.

That’s a good point, but it’s hard to count the number of points they’re missing: A movie must take viewers on a journey, and the journey has to start from where we are. If the people from the alien culture were the protagonists, only a few dedicated liberals would go see it. How many of you have seen *El Norte*?⁴ And any Hollywood blockbuster must make its protagonist super-awesome. Nobody complained that Bruce Willis was more awesome than anyone else in *Die Hard*. *Avatar* opens the door to that complaint by putting its hero among another race, but you’d have to be blind to think that race is the heart of the movie.

Of course, Newitz and Brooks are blind. Newitz is a techie and Brooks is a huge supporter of “progress”, so they can’t stand the thought that *Avatar* has made a billion dollars with a message about ecology and the *human* race: that we are not the rulers of a pile of resources but the servants of a living planet, that an extractive economy is not just unsustainable but evil, that our place is among dangerous wild creatures and not our own sterile devices, that it was wrong for us to conquer the Indians, not because their skin was a different color, but because they lived better.

Did we conquer the Indians? When lefties say that *Avatar* purges white guilt, they are making several questionable assumptions: that we are white, that we feel guilty, and that white guilt is a good thing. This is an obsolete view of race. A more helpful view was pioneered in the zine and book *Race*

³ www.nytimes.com

⁴ www.imdb.com

*Traitor*⁵: that “white” is a social class only loosely connected to pale skin, that thinking of ourselves as “white” makes us obedient to an unjust system, that the best thing “white” people can do is not to sit around feeling guilty for the crimes done in the name of whiteness, but to disown whiteness and take the other side. Every one of us has ancestors who lived more or less like the Na’vi, and who were violently conquered by disconnected, resource-extracting cultures. If we all stop identifying with those cultures, the whole game is over.

We did not conquer the Indians. The Babylonians, the Romans, the English, the Spaniards, the Americans conquered *us...* but not completely. The reason Avatar is so popular, and so important, is that it is helping us to remember who we are.

Of course, what to do with that awareness is a much harder question. No matter who we think we are, we are still dependent on the conquering system for our survival. We’re not going to voluntarily kill ourselves, and I think it’s silly to try to limit ourselves to technologies that existed 20,000 years ago. The important thing is that we make the shift from an extractive economy to a sustaining economy, and from the made world to the found world. And we might not be able to make that shift once and for all — we might have to keep making it again and again.

January 14. Since I’m still talking about space and ecology, I want to go back to Avatar. Maybe my disagreement with the lefty critics boils down to ethics vs tactics. It’s disrespectful to indigenous people to show them being saved by a leader from the invading culture — but the result is that hundreds of millions of viewers in exploitative systems are learning the story of shifting their allegiance to nature-based cultures.

⁵ www.amazon.com

But on another level, *Avatar* is both inaccurate and tactically misleading. The inaccuracy is that the Indians win. In *The Holocaust We Will Not See*⁶, George Monbiot writes:

...engineering a happy ending demands a plot so stupid and predictable that it rips the heart out of the film. The fate of the native Americans is much closer to the story told in another new film, *The Road*, in which a remnant population flees in terror as it is hunted to extinction.

Then he goes through a great summary of the atrocities of the European invaders... and fails to answer the fascinating questions he raises: What if *Avatar* had followed history? And why didn't history happen like *Avatar*? To answer the first, I would love to see a movie where the Na'vi get crushed, Pandora is developed to near extinction, the resources are wasted on space suburbs, and as the whole system collapses, the avatar population finally learns to appreciate the ways of the Na'vi. That movie would have sold about 17 tickets.

It's the second question that reveals the tactical mistake: no ecological society has ever won a violent war against an extractive society, because an extractive society is inherently more ruthless, and if there are resources to burn, more physically powerful. The Seminoles held out for decades in the swamps of Florida. Now Disney World is there. In a hundred years, squid and jellyfish will swim through its ruins. You cannot defeat the Empire with force — you can only outlast it.

But then, as any given empire declines, it *is* defeated with force... by the next empire. I'm not sure how that story will play out in the future, with so many resources used up.

⁶ www.monbiot.com