



# Films

# Avatar vs Mononoke

Alejandra Mancilla compares two films' views on ecology.

Blockbusters in their respective countries, the American *Avatar* (2009) and the Japanese *Princess Mononoke* (1997) are arguably both better sources than many text books for anyone who wants a quick introduction to environmental ethics. However, *Avatar* and *Princess Mononoke* offer radically different views about the relationship between human beings and the environment. *Avatar*, directed by James Cameron, forces the spectator to choose between two extremes, as if no intermediate path were available: on one hand, there's way-too-deep ecology; on the other, pathologically anthropocentric environmentally-destructive utilitarianism. By contrast, *Princess Mononoke*, from *animé* director Hayao Miyazaki, offers a much more balanced and less idealized way forward, where compromise is acknowledged as the only realistic possible arrangement between human beings and non-human nature. *Avatar* is literally in 3D and in colour, but figuratively, it's in black and white; while *Princess Mononoke* is about the shades and nuances that occur between extreme possibilities. The first is about a struggle where the winner has to annihilate their rival; the second is about a struggle where both sides end up learning from each other. One is filled with nostalgia for innocence lost; the other with hope for a new beginning.

## The Plots

In *Princess Mononoke*, the eponymous human girl is raised by the wolf-goddess, and wolves. She shares the starring role with Ashitaka, a young prince under the curse of a demon, who puts him on a mission to see the world "with eyes unclouded by hate."

The film is inspired by the Muromachi period of 1392-1573 AD – a time where firearms were introduced to feudal Japan, changing the traditional relationship between humans and nature, and bringing new conflicts and problems. The story begins by recalling a time when the land was covered in forest and inhabited by little spirits: a time when humans, animals and gods lived in harmony. We soon learn,

however, that that harmony has been lost, and humans are wiping out the forest and killing the animals to obtain material riches, such as iron ore. In filthy Iron Town, the apparently ruthless Lady Eboshi rules over men and nature thanks to hand cannons and gunpowder. The only opposition to her plans of absolute dominion comes from Mononoke, who, clad in a wolf-skin and wearing a wolf-mask, is ready to use her special powers to protect the animals and the besieged forest.

When Ashitaka arrives on the scene, Eboshi reveals to him her plans to kill the Forest Spirit – an ethereal stag who is the last bulwark of the natural world against humans. Meanwhile, Mononoke, who has been saved from death by Ashitaka during an attack on Iron Town, swears she will kill Eboshi. The two parties are then set on a path of conflict which doesn't stop until the very end – when the death toll is so high and the overall destruction so thorough that neither side can plausibly proclaim themselves winners. In the end, Mononoke remains the guardian of what nature is left, while Eboshi, whose life has been spared by her enemy, promises to build "a better town this time." Ashitaka, cured from his curse, stays in Iron Town, to ensure that things are done in a better way, and that dialogue replaces war. The end is not blissfully happy, but it is hopeful.

In *Avatar*, Jake Sully, a crippled ex-marine, arrives on the planet-moon Pandora to serve in a special diplomatic mission: he

has to help convince the native Na'vi to let the company he works for exploit a precious metal which, unfortunately, lies under Pandora's lush forests. (In this, *Avatar* and *Princess Mononoke* are similar.) Incarnated in an avatar – a Na'vi body controlled by his human mind – Jake gets to learn the ways of the natives, with the help of brave and wild Neytiri, the chief's daughter, with whom he falls in love. As the film progresses, Jake identifies more and more with the tribe and

their ideals of reverence and respect toward nature, even as his contempt toward his human peers intensifies. However, Jake's employers have already decided to resort to violence to subdue the natives and obtain the ore. After a full-blown land and air battle the Na'vi triumph, and escort the surviving humans to their spaceships. Through the intercession of Eiwa, Pandora's Gaia-like goddess, Jake leaves his human body for ever, and is fully reincarnated into his Na'vi avatar.

## Humans in Nature: *Avatar's* view

"You have a strong heart, but you are stupid, like a child!" Neytiri shouts to Jake in their first encounter. As a representative of our species, Jake is first depicted as wantonly destructive when it comes to dealing with the non-human world. On the other side, the indigenous Na'vi have kept the lore and wisdom of their ancestors, and although their technology is primitive and their science non-existent, they 'see' better than humans. What both species share are static



Neytiri

AVATAR IMAGE © 20TH-CENTURY FOX 2009



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the need to replace the Western ideal of 'standard of living', which alludes to paradigms of high income and high consumption – with the consequent heavy ecological footprints – by the ideal of 'life quality', which is based on a greater connection with the environment. However, the Na'vi's situation is rather that they have already achieved the ideals proposed by Naess's platform, and they have to discover how to preserve them, now that they're under threat from the humans.

The picture of humanity presented by *Avatar* should by now be sufficiently clear. Seeing things from the opposite perspective to the Na'vi's worldview, Cameron's humans behave like machines programmed by cost-benefit analysis. They're ruthless conquerors and staunch believers in unlimited technological progress. These humans resemble the [Bernard] *Mandevillian* individual (seventeenth century cynical Dutch philosopher), whose only pursuit in life is his own material self-interest, and for whom 'ethics' refers to a convenient system of rules which enables him to deal in relatively peaceful terms with his equals, who are just as narrowly self-focused.

Thus, the standard human in *Avatar* is individualistic, cynically pragmatic, and suspicious of everything which seems mysterious or sacred. Instead of considering themselves part of a whole, they see themselves as essentially separate, and superior to everything and everyone outside their species. The world is their handkerchief and they're ready to blow in it.

At first sight *Avatar* could appear an optimistic film, following the classic Hollywood formula where the goodies suffer but finally triumph over the baddies. But really, *Avatar* is tainted from beginning to end with a doomed vision of the future of our species. In 99% of *Avatar's* cases, human beings are seen as incapable of evolving in harmony with their environment, inflexible in their beliefs, and insensitive to realities

Na'vi can be said to be an oversimplified characterization of the 'holistic biocentric' approach. In fact, they comply thoroughly with the first three points of Arne Naess's *deep ecology* platform (as listed for example in his 'The Basics of Deep Ecology' in *The Trumpeter* journal of ecosophy of 21/01/05, p.68), as follows:

- 1.) The flourishing of human [Na'vi] and non-human [non-Na'vi] life has inherent value. The value of non-human [non-Na'vi] life-forms is independent of the usefulness of the non-human [non-Na'vi] world for human [Na'vi] purposes.
- 2.) The richness and diversity of life-forms are also values in themselves, and contribute to the flourishing of human [Na'vi] and of non-human [non-Na'vi] life.
- 3.) Humans [Na'vi] have no right to reduce this richness and diversity, except to satisfy vital needs.

This is why a big part of Jake's re-education consists in getting to know the diversity of life, 'creating bonds' with the creatures, and realizing the interconnectiveness of all things alive on Pandora.

The next two points in Naess's platform, referring to overpopulation and the depletion of natural resources, clearly do not apply to the Na'vi. As is usually the case among hunter-gatherers, their numbers are sparse and they are far from overusing their natural resources.

The last three of Naess's eight principles refer to the changes humans should make, and the responsibilities we ought to undertake. Naess here emphasizes



natures poor at adapting to new scenarios.

*Avatar* relies on a Manichaean worldview, where two incompatible forces or principles oppose each other and seek to triumph by annihilating the opposite. At one extreme are the Na'vi who cherish and live amid nature with religious awe and respect, understanding what surrounds them not through rational insights but through intuition and instinct. At the other extreme are the humans, who stampe over new lands paying no respect to their indigenous inhabitants, imposing their conditions through force, and using knowledge in a purely instrumental (technological) way. Thus *Avatar* can also be read as a quite literal metaphor of Western colonialism.

Cameron's Na'vi remind us of Rousseau's ideal of the noble savage: they form a hunting-gathering community living hardly above subsistence levels, unblemished by progress, and chanting and dancing in unison to their goddess. The Na'vi ask for forgiveness to the game they kill for food, acknowledging that they are sacrificing intrinsically valuable lives. Wherever and whenever possible, they avoid wanton destruction. They only kill humans in self-defence, when the humans have become serious threats. There are no Na'vi cities, roads, or commerce. One message of *Avatar* seems to be that there is no other way to lead a life in true harmony with nature. The underlying assumption is that humans could only get back that harmony by retreating to the 'caves' (as Jake does).

This is a caricature of ecologism which has served to discredit it as a serious element of policy-making.

In terms of trends in environmental ethics, the



different from their own. That is why the only possible way to end the story is for them to be defeated and sent back. But this end is not really the end, merely a temporary resolution which has left the door open for *Avatars 2* and 3, where ever-more-powerful and vengeful human beings or other 'sky creatures' can besiege the Na'vi again. The deep cause of the conflict has not been eradicated: to wit, the difference in clashing worldviews and conceptions of what a good life should look like.

*Avatar* teaches a poor lesson. Its conclusion is that the vast majority of our species are incapable of learning from their mistakes until it is too late and nothing can be done to avert disaster. So weak is the film's faith in humanity that the only exemplar who actually undergoes a thorough process of learning – defeating his prejudices, and reshaping his beliefs – has to suffer a full-blown metamorphosis to do so, leaving his human body to become a Na'vi. To change means to completely change one's self; in Jake's example, from human to non-human. The solution *Avatar* offers is thus unrealizable, and so useless for guiding action.

When the curtain falls on this film, viewers are left with two options: to resume their individualistic and hedonistic *personae*, and to party while the global party lasts, or to retreat to a hippie commune, preferably in some big old forest. No intermediate paths are offered.

### Humans in Nature: *Mononoke's* view

In *Mononoke*, on the contrary, what gives flavour and interest to the characters is precisely their capacity to stop and question their own beliefs, and to adapt themselves to the demands of ever-flowing reality. At the end of *Princess Mononoke*, the wolf-princess remains in the forest as its guardian, true; but she has met and accepted a human as a friend – something which seemed inconceivable at the beginning of the story, when we see her charging furiously against them. Ashitaka's anger against the demon who cursed him, and his initial impotence in bringing forest, animals and humans together, has evolved into the hope that once-apparently-irreconcilable parties will be able to live in harmony. Even Eboshi is given a chance to change her mind: after Mononoke spares her life, she takes a new attitude: she promises to improve Iron Town, both for those inside it, and for those surrounding it.

In contrast to *Avatar*, the message in *Mononoke* is that the human character and

the course of things it shapes is not irrevocable or fixed, even if sometimes suffering and destruction are the only way to shake the characters and make them modify their conduct. If this is achieved, then the suffering was not meaningless but necessary for the characters to develop and to avoid committing the same mistakes in the future. As Ashitaka says at the end, "Even in the midst of hatred and slaughter, there is still much to live for. Wonderful encounters and beautiful things still exist." But while in *Avatar* the characters transform themselves to fit the established paradigms, in *Mononoke* the paradigms themselves are changed.

Regarding its underlying philosophy, *Mononoke* is more subtle and thus more difficult to pin down than *Avatar*. In terms of its content, the influence of the Shinto religion and its animistic elements is undeniable (it's a ubiquitous feature of Miyazaki's cinematography). Meanwhile, in terms of its ideological development, the film follows quite a neat Hegelian dialectic:

**Thesis:** In former times, nature and man lived in harmony; but this harmony is broken when men, through the use of guns, set out to conquer and establish dominion over all.

**Antithesis:** Nature and man are in conflict. There is hatred, intolerance and warfare. The parties do not seek to resolve their dispute by dialogue, but by brute force.

**Synthesis:** After the battle, both sides have lost. Iron Town has been destroyed. The Old Forest has been burnt down, and the era of the Forest Spirit has come to an end. Yet the leading figures of the new period, Ashitaka and Mononoke, have the power to connect both worlds. Primeval innocence is gone forever, but all hope is not lost.

I can hear the objection: Don't humans win in the end, forcing nature to submit?

After all, the iron ore will not disappear, and the guns will not be sent to the museum, but will continue to protect the town from foreign invaders, etc... The answer is a qualified 'yes'; and herein lies the strength of *Mononoke's* message. Instead of aiming for the impossible – either overcoming nature completely, or alternatively, retreating to an original 'state of nature' – the characters assume there is no way back, but make a compromise for the future. This is not optimal for either party, but it's closer to what a real-world solution would look like.

Thus, rather than utterly changing their selves, in *Mononoke*, human beings evolve toward a state of greater awareness and wisdom, which comes only after having experienced and realized the mistakes of the past. For sure, a new tension will develop, which will have to be resolved in turn. But what is crucial is that in the new synthesis a new worldview has arisen for both sides: the natural realm will have to accept limited intrusion from humans, and humans will have to accept that co-existence and not rampant exploitation is the right relationship with the natural world, and the only way for humans to live in it.

All in all, as fables of environmental morality, down-to-earth *Princess Mononoke* offers a much more realistic and effective lesson than over-simplistic *Avatar*.

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The wood spirits look on in horror...

What about plot development?!

