

“The Pandora Effect:” James Cameron’s *Avatar* and a Trauma Studies Perspective

SILVIA MARTÍNEZ FALQUINA

Universidad de Zaragoza

smfalqui@unizar.es

The controverted responses to James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), as well as its use to support a variety of political and ideological agendas, seem to imply that there is something in this film for almost everyone. An analysis from the perspective of trauma studies suggests that the key to its impact may lie in the way the movie reflects the fundamental fear of human alienation from nature, which is part of the wounded condition of our contemporary culture. This article embarks on a study of the representation of and working through of trauma in the movie, both based on the reiteration of stereotypes and the recreation of ecotopia. It also reflects on the implications of the phenomenon known as the Pandora Effect, or the reported feelings of depression at discovering the impossibility of real immersion after watching the movie. It ends with a problematizing of the uncritical application of the trauma paradigm and a revision of the model into a culturally sensitive trauma theory that avoids neo-colonial appropriation and takes into account the historical unresolved grief of colonized peoples.

Keywords: *Avatar*; trauma studies; Indian stereotypes; Native Americans; historical unresolved grief; postcolonial trauma

. . .

“El efecto Pandora:” *Avatar*, de James Cameron, y una perspectiva de los estudios de trauma

De las respuestas controvertidas a *Avatar* (2009), de James Cameron, así como de su uso para apoyar diversas agendas políticas e ideológicas, parece desprenderse que hay algo en esta película para cada espectador/a. Al analizarla desde el punto de vista de los estudios de trauma se observa que la clave de su impacto puede residir en el modo en que el filme refleja el miedo fundamental a la alienación humana de la naturaleza, lo cual formaría parte de la cultura contemporánea herida. Este artículo emprende el estudio de la representación y resolución del trauma en la película, basadas en la reiteración de estereotipos y la recreación de la ecotopía. Ofrece asimismo una reflexión sobre las implicaciones del fenómeno conocido como Efecto Pandora, o los sentimientos depresivos relatados tras ver la película y descubrir en ella la imposibilidad de inmersión real. Culmina en una discusión crítica de la aplicación del paradigma del trauma y en una revisión del modelo hacia una teoría del trauma que sea sensible a las diferencias culturales, que evite la apropiación neo-colonial y tenga en consideración el sufrimiento histórico sin resolver de los pueblos colonizados.

Palabras clave: *Avatar*; estudios de trauma; estereotipos de los indios; nativos estadounidenses; sufrimiento histórico no resuelto; trauma postcolonial

“Pandora Effect”

A condition causing one to feel a strange mix of emotions (which may include awe, disappointment, giddiness, emptiness, warmth, and most of all depression) after watching James Cameron’s *Avatar* movie. For many it has changed the way they see the world and life in general. (Urban Dictionary)

1. THE CONTROVERTED RESPONSES TO *AVATAR*

More than three years after the release of *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), its impact, far from diminishing, has continued to grow at all levels.¹ While it remains, as of today, the highest-grossing film ever made, new DVDs, games and merchandising keep adding dollars to its already astonishing takings. The number and variety of people who have watched it all over the world make it by no means an exaggeration to also consider it the most effectively global film ever made. On the other hand, from the very moment of its release, reactions to *Avatar* have been as diverse as Pandorian wildlife, though by no means as harmonious, ranging from unconditional praise to total rejection of, even anger at, the film. It is both the scale of its impact and its controversial nature that call for a close critical analysis of the movie.

The fact that, in the characterization of the Na’vi, the film recycles “a set of shopworn tropes about indigeneity in general, and American Indians in particular” (Starn 2011, 179) has been widely recognized by reviewers and critics. In spite of some authors’ references to the elasticity of the Na’vi (Morris, *Globe*, 10 January 2010), who have been seen by one reviewer as “a mélange of Native American, African, Vietnamese, Iraqi and other cultural fragments” (Brooks, *New York Times*, 7 January 2010), and who could be “American Indians, Polish Jews, or bald eagles” (Morris, *Globe*, 10 January 2010), the film has generally been interpreted as “a sort of a Native American parable” (Edelstein 2009). There seems to be no doubt, in fact, that “these are alien versions of stereotypical native peoples that we’ve seen in Hollywood movies for decades” (Newitz 2009), and the connection—even to the point of imitation—to movies like *Dances with Wolves* (1990) or *Pocahontas* (1995), has also taken up much of writers’ attention.² Emphasis has often been laid on “the commonplace figure of the ‘ecological Indian’” (Adamson 2012, 144), and the references to the Native American holocaust (Cokinos 2010) and the “crime

¹ The research carried out for the writing of this article is part of a project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (MINECO) (code FFI2012-32719). The author is also grateful for the support of the Government of Aragón and the European Social Fund (ESF) (code H05).

² Although these are the two movies that come up most often—and in the case of *Dances with Wolves*, Cameron has actually acknowledged the connection (*Los Angeles Times* [Latimesblogs], 14 August 2009)—other examples are explored by Brooks (*New York Times*, 7 January 2010); Burr (*Boston Globe*, 17 December 2009); Caviaro (2010); Feeney (*Boston Globe*, 10 January 2010); Reelz (2009); Newitz (2009); and Westfahl (2009).

scene of white America’s foundational act of genocide” (Newitz 2009). But it is when writers refer to the formulaic nature of the script that criticism becomes harshest. Put very simply—but then, the plot *is* strikingly simple—this is just another going-Indian narrative: the white hero, discovering that the indigenous peoples he is supposed to be fighting are spiritually superior to his own corrupted race, rejects his origins and chooses to take sides with the Natives, finally becoming their leader with the help—and love—of the indigenous princess. Even as they acknowledge the amazing technological innovation used to tell it, reviewers and critics have characterized the plot as predictable (Starn 2011, 179), frustrating (Justice 2010) and even “totally offensive” (Brooks, *New York Times*, 7 January 2010). Not surprisingly, there have been many negative responses to the movie as a whole because of the stereotyping and colonial presuppositions that support it. Angry reactions to *Avatar* because of its racism are linked to references to the “white man’s burden” (Barnard, *Toronto Star*, 11 January 2010), the movie’s emphasis on “the usual presumed radical divide between us and them” (Starn 2011, 179) or its being “a fantasy about race from the point of view of white people” (Newitz 2009).

But speaking only about the negative responses to *Avatar* would be a terrible simplification of the reactions it has originated. People from all over the world, both indigenous and non-indigenous, have also watched *Avatar* enthusiastically, and some are even using it to support their particular vindications. Joni Adamson explores examples of how the film is playing a very important role in global environmental justice struggles (2012, 146). Besides the relevant motivation of making the ill-treatment of nature more visible, authors mention the values emphasized in the movie like relatedness and connection (Good Fox 2010), and involvement, activism and environmentalism (Barrionuevo, *New York Times*, 11 April 2010). Perhaps most strikingly, Bolivia President Evo Morales has stated that the movie “depicted the resistance against capitalism and the fight for the environment” (*Buenos Aires Herald*, 12 January 2010). In fact, “the indigenous acceptance of *Avatar*’s capacity to depict their contemporary strife” has not escaped authors like Briones, who have also referred to this as an interesting contradiction (2011, 314).³

Apart from making *Avatar* fit a series of political and ideological agendas, a number of fans have expressed a desire to escape their own lives and live on Pandora, some reacting by admitting to reaching the point of depression and thoughts of suicide after watching the movie (Sodahead 2010; Piazza 2010). As Mulrooney has noted, *Avatar* makes people so sad that new terms have been introduced into the vernacular: “Post-*Avatar* Depression,” “*Avatar* Blues,” or “The Pandora Effect” (2011, 201). Starn interprets the *Globe* headline “WARNING: AVATAR CAN MAKE YOU SICK & SUICIDAL!” and the ensuing article in which some viewers indicated “they’d rather DIE than return to Earth’s gritty reality,” as an obvious exaggeration, but also as “a reminder of just how a certain idealized vision

³ Other interpretations include Hillis’ (2009) analysis of *Avatar* as an example of the “contemporary resuscitation of Neoplatonism,” or the presence of the movie in discussions of the current role of anthropology in, for example, the work of AbdelRahim (2009), Briones (2011), Clifford (2011), Simpson (2011) and Starn (2011).

of indigenous peoples answers to the longing for Otherness, a space of freedom outside modernity and the West” (2011, 197-98). This would explain why, after watching *Avatar*, some viewers may have experienced a “sort of hunger for our virtual selves, our avatars to take on . . . the final frontier, which is maybe in our own minds” (Edelstein 2009). The virtual and the real are less clearly distinguished in some reviewers’ expressed desire that a movie like *Avatar* will encourage research to make this fantasy real in the future (Sodahead 2010) or that “it will someday not only be possible, but even desirable, to give up one’s natural identity and assume an artificial identity” (Westfahl 2009).

Some of these responses are more understandable than others, but what such diversity suggests is that *Avatar* may be functioning like a sort of Melvillean white whale, a blank surface on which each viewer inscribes his or her own interpretation, and which acts like a mirror that reflects back on individuals, telling us something about ourselves in what we each see in the movie. In order to explore the full potential of this dynamic, an analysis from the point of view of trauma studies seems especially useful, because the fact that there might be something in *Avatar* for everyone may be related to the way it reflects on the traumatized nature of our world. In “Trauma within the Limits of Literature,” Geoffrey Hartman (2003) characterizes contemporary society as deeply wounded, especially due to its incapacity to assimilate and express pain, and he notes that it is the role of literature to make silence audible and verbalize pain in order to express that repressed suffering. If we look at *Avatar* as a narrative that reflects and expresses the wounded condition of our contemporary culture, it becomes relevant to examine the way it embarks on the articulation of traumas that are very much alive, and simultaneously assess the effectiveness of the images it presents and whether or not they succeed in achieving some kind of healing.

2. “A HOLE IN THE MIDDLE OF MY LIFE:” REPRESENTING AND WORKING THROUGH TRAUMA

The first reference to trauma in *Avatar* comes with the protagonist’s initial view of himself as having “a hole blown in the middle of [his] life.” Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), a paraplegic ex-Marine who travels to Moon Pandora to take his dead twin brother’s place in the avatar program, is both physically and psychologically wounded, and his numbness, his confusion of dream and reality, as well as his desire to escape and avoid the traumatic event, all fit the common definition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Caruth 1995, 4). Jake’s pain is also directly related to the fact that he has lost his physical link with the land, not only because his legs are paralyzed, but also because, as he says, there is no green left on Earth anymore. The displacement of the Earth’s wound onto Pandora and the relevance of Jake’s individual trauma for the human race as a whole become obvious, as this hole in the middle of his life is visually articulated as a huge crater that the humans are digging in Pandora to extract unobtainium, a mineral that is considered the solution to the Earth’s energy crisis. The parallelism of the two holes becomes a symbol of the inassimilable and

unexpressed pain which is articulated in the narrative, namely, the fundamental fear of human separation and alienation from nature.

A useful theoretical support to this reference to trauma in the film can be found in the distinction between the acting out and the working through of trauma, which LaCapra takes from Freudian psychoanalysis in order to engage with historical problems like that of the Holocaust (2001, 141). For LaCapra, acting out emphasizes traumatic memory, that is, the compulsive, repetitive re-enactment of the traumatic event, which remains an open wound, whereas the working through of trauma, or narrative memory, is the overcoming of traumatic symptoms through the distinction of past and present experience, which ultimately leads to healing. Of special relevance for our analysis is LaCapra's understanding of the two options not as opposites but rather as part of the same process, as well as his concern with avoiding both a sublime acting out, in which trauma is magnified, on the one hand, and a redemptive narrative, in which trauma is denied, on the other.⁴ The point, therefore, is to examine the way trauma is represented in *Avatar* as well as how it is worked through; in other words, we need to look into the narrative strategies used to fill in those two symbolic holes—the one at the center of Jake Sully's life, and the one on Pandora—as well as the ideological implications of the particular choice of strategies.

The narrative is set 200 years into the future, when the worst predictions by today's environmentalists have been confirmed: the Earth has been completely colonized and its natural riches plundered to the extent that humans have to look for resources elsewhere, which results in the expansion of imperialism towards space, the new frontier. The motif that sustains *Avatar* is precisely the conflict between the human invaders, who come to exploit the resources of Pandora, extremely rich in biodiversity, and the indigenous inhabitants of the place, who struggle to defend their way of life. Following the idea that humans are intrinsically superior to all other beings, and that nature can be controlled and appropriated without asking or giving anything in return—an idea that will be challenged as the plot develops—the members of the Resources Development Administration, a corporate and military entity, are looking for unobtainium, which sells for twenty million a kilo. The only problem they need to overcome is the resistance of the indigenous Na'vi, who are getting in the way of the humans' lucrative operation, because the biggest reserve of unobtainium is right beneath Hometree, the epicenter of the Na'vi. In Colonel Miles Quaritch's (Stephen Lang) initial conceptualization of their enemy, the Na'vi are characterized as “blue monkeys,” “savages that live in a tree,” or as the threat that is linked to the inhospitable land they are trying to conquer: “Out beyond that fence,” says Quaritch, “we have an indigenous population of humanoids called the Na'vi. They're fond of arrows dipped in a neurotoxin that'll stop your heart in one minute. . . . They are very hard to kill.” By promising him an expensive operation that will heal his legs, Quaritch convinces Jake to learn about the Na'vi from the inside in order to gain their

⁴ For the full account of these definitions, which LaCapra has also dealt with in *Representing the Holocaust* (1996), see especially *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001, 43-85; 141-53).

trust so that the humans will discover “how to force their cooperation, or hammer them hard if they don’t.”

In fact, Jake—who refers to himself as being an empty vessel, an aspect of his personality that makes him a symbolic blank page on which new meanings can be easily written—starts out with a confrontational view of the Na’vi, but soon goes through a radical process of transformation. He is offered an opportunity to leave his wounded body behind temporarily and use a new, virtual one, by means of which he recovers his mobility and consequently his link to the land: in the scene where he is trying out his avatar, he runs freely in Pandorian nature and, in a very symbolic move, buries his feet in the earth, feeling it. His new body also allows him to breathe in an atmosphere that is toxic for humans, and to approach the Omaticaya tribe of the Na’vi. A good example of the frontier-man type, Jake is rough but noble: he embodies the qualities of his dead scientist brother and his own training as a Marine, being, in his own words, “a warrior who dreamed he could bring peace.” When Neytiri (Zoe Saldana), the Na’vi version of the American Indian princess Pocahontas, sees a sign from Goddess Eywa and saves Jake Sully—who shares much more than the initials with Captain John Smith—from the jungle, she introduces him to the tribe. As well as his guide in this unknown land and a teacher of the Na’vi way of life and values, Neytiri ultimately becomes both a partner and a symbolic mother to Jake, visually exemplified in the scene in which she holds his limp and minuscule human body in her arms towards the end of the movie. After moving between one world and the other for much of the narrative, in the end, Jake Sully actually becomes fully Na’vi, symbolized in a ceremony of acceptance by the Omaticaya. He rejects his real/human self—his body, his wounds, his race—and embraces his virtual/Na’vi self, staying in Pandora and starting a totally new life with a new stronger body and life purpose in his helping of the Na’vi, uniting the various clans in the fight against his former people. Jake’s wound is thus completely healed and his trauma has been worked through.

The crater on Pandora, excavated on a massive scale by people like Jake Sully before his conversion, does not, unfortunately, heal as easily. The wounds on Pandora—the destruction of Hometree by a monsterlike army being the most dramatic example—cannot be avoided by the Na’vi, even with the help of Jake Sully and the forces of nature, which fight together for the first time in Na’vi history. The pain of massive natural destruction is made more obvious by the overwhelming beauty of Pandora, which encourages viewers to distance themselves from Quaritch’s military and imperialistic view and take sides with the defence of the environment and the ideal of tribal living exemplified by the Na’vi. This is the key aspect that connects *Avatar* to current environmental issues in general and the concept of ecotopia in particular. Ecotopia, defined by Lisa Garforth as a “self-conscious ecological utopianism,” which emphasizes “ways of living with rather than at the expense of the natural world” (2006, 8), incorporates the themes of ecocentrism—“the displacement of human consciousness from its privileged position at the centre of knowledge and value”—sufficiency—or the emphasis on “a philosophy of enough” that favors “an enhanced and vibrant relationship with the natural world”—and embeddedness—which focuses on

the need to recover proximity to nature, “both in the sense of physical closeness to the earth and in terms of cultivating an ethics of empathy and interconnection with all living things” (9). A good example of ecotopia in these terms, Pandora is a remote and idealised land in the line of the mythical Atlantis or El Dorado, a no-place where a perfect balance among all beings is preserved—or was, before the men from the Earth arrived. The world of Pandora—in the creation of which, as mentioned above, a number of images related to the Natives of the United States have been used—is inherently ecocentric in the sense that the Na’vi are by no means the center of knowledge or power, but only part of a network of flowing energy in which all beings, including animals and trees, the living and those already gone, communicate and relate on equal terms. The key to Na’vi life is interconnection, embodied by their goddess Eywa, and materialized at relevant places like Hometree or the sacred Tree of Voices, where ancestors can be heard and prayers made, something that the human scientists try to explain as some kind of electrochemical communication between the roots of the trees. As for sufficiency, it soon becomes clear that there is nothing that humans have that the Na’vi could possibly want, for they live in perfect harmony with the environment, which provides for all their needs. Neither material possessions nor human learning will be of any real value to the Na’vi, whose life, strongly centered on ritual and spirituality, is characterized as the opposite of expansion or consumption. The most obvious example of embeddedness is what the Na’vi call *tsahaylu*, or the bond, a link that is established between different creatures so that they can communicate and become complementary. This happens with the Pandora equivalent of horses and the *ikram*, the flying creatures that, once dominated by the young hunter in a rite of passage, will be her/his life companion.

To imagine this kind of world and to desire an escape into it as Jake manages to do is the only possible healing that is offered in *Avatar* for the trauma of human alienation from nature. At the end of the movie, when the good humans in their avatar selves are expelling the villains from Pandora, one may wonder what is going to happen to people on Earth now that unobtainium cannot be obtained anymore, but the solutions the movie offers are only available for the lucky few who can blend with their avatars, escape their previous lives and become inhabitants of this ecotopia. Pandora here is functioning as a projection of wish fulfilment, an imaginary Edenic world through which, by means of a tribal ideal that has been oversimplified, open-minded humans like Jake Sully—and with him, open-minded viewers—can find a chance of environmental reconciliation that is already impossible on Earth. James Cameron has commented on the utopian component of the movie, saying in an interview that “the Na’vi represent something that is our higher selves, or our aspirational selves, what we would like to think we are,” and that even though there are good humans in the film, the humans “represent what we know to be the parts of ourselves that are trashing our world and maybe condemning ourselves to a grim future” (*Telegraph*, 18 August 2009). This conflict is articulated through the struggle between Colonel Quaritch, as an embodiment of human exploitation of nature, and Jake Sully’s disposition to let himself be transformed by the land. As we see in the final battle between

the two, the triumph goes to the man who simply rejects his old identity and embraces a new self, the virtual becoming the real to him when he becomes his avatar. Rieder has referred to the “emotional satisfaction” (2011, 46) that this ending provides through the “fetishistic identification” of the scapegoat figure of Quaritch (41). He notes how popular resentment and generalized anger towards the status quo are addressed not to “the group directly responsible for the world’s affairs,” but to “some fictional, demonized object” (43), the result being a “displacement of the revenge fantasy object” (43) that represses the hero’s “own participation in the same project as the villains” (47). Apart from pointing at its own impossibility as a feasible response to trauma in the real world, the resolution of *Avatar* is disappointingly simple insofar as it excludes any reflection on the complications of the self, the old and the new, and allows Jake to distance himself from the part of his identity which is at least partially responsible for what has happened on Earth and what is now happening on Pandora.

Although this may be considered a happy ending by some, when looked at critically, we see that the emphasis is laid on a totalization of the kind that LaCapra warned against in his account of the working through of trauma: that is, a radical overcoming of traumatic symptoms in the form of a fictional closure aimed at redemption but that, when looked at closely, shows a series of unresolved traumatic threads through its fissures. One way in which this totalizing narrative is articulated in the film is by repeating a well-known series of commonplaces and stereotypes related to Native Americans. Besides resorting to feathers, bows and arrows, war paint and howling for the characterization of the Na’vi, their extra-terrestrial version of horses makes the final battle more colorful; we also have a rite of initiation for the young warrior, as well as exotic song, ritual and ceremony. The cinematic *Indian* roles that are recovered in *Avatar* include the expected types: the Pocahontas-like Indian princess Neytiri, who starts by saving the hero and is the helper at the service of the white man; the warrior chief Eytukan (Wes Studi), who follows in the dying *Indian* tradition; the spiritual mother Mo’at (C.C.H. Pounder), who immediately recognizes the value of the human hero; and the young rival Tsu’Tey (Laz Alonso), who takes time but ultimately accepts Jake’s leadership, and who also dies in a courageous fight. There is mention of different clans, those of the Plains and of the Eastern seas, which implies the presence of some Na’vi diversity. The only absence in the usual cast is the bad *Indian* type, which can be explained by the movie’s romanticized focus. Needless to say, it is hard to expect deep critical analysis or real healing from the systematic and unquestioned repetition of essentialisms and stereotypes. In fact, rather than an effective working through or overcoming of traumatic symptoms, which would have required a much more complex development of the plot, the possibility of leaving one’s identity behind that Jake Sully chooses is more of a regression, an expression of a nostalgic vision of a simpler way of life. Regression is the first of the three interdependent stages of the response to trauma that Granofsky locates in fiction dealing with trauma, the other two being fragmentation and reunification. It implies a return to a more protected and less independent existence, often a return to childhood

or an assimilation of the individual to “inferior [*sic*] ways of living,” which “may stem from disabling fear or from an inability to cope with a perceived responsibility for the occurrence of a traumatic event, in other words, with overwhelming guilt” (1995, 108). Jake Sully’s return to a world that lives according to values that could be considered primitive is an obvious example of regression, a form of denial which is, unfortunately, far from the accommodation or change in the worldview that is required for a plausible healing of trauma in real life.

3. THE PANDORA EFFECT: PSYCHIC, CULTURAL AND VIRTUAL TRAUMA

It could be argued that science fiction should not be expected to provide realistic responses to trauma or any other serious issues. However, a critical view is not only justified but also urgent insofar as we are considering a movie that represents trauma in a way that surpasses the boundaries of fiction and becomes part of some viewers’ reality, most notably those claiming to be affected by what has been called the Pandora Effect. The fact that a good number of people are reporting depression, thoughts of suicide and anxiety at realizing that Pandora is not a place they can inhabit, as well as a feeling of alienation with respect to the real world they live in, extends the connection of this movie to trauma in intriguing ways. In this respect, one issue that we necessarily have to consider is whether one can truly be traumatized after watching a movie or reading a text. Kalí Tal stresses that the traumatic event that “displaces [one’s] preconceived notions about the world” (1995, 15) needs to be experienced first-hand and not vicariously perceived or mediated through any textual conduit, such as a book or a movie (5-6). In the same vein, Horvitz affirms that second-hand or vicarious perception of trauma is not tantamount to experiencing it (2000, 21). In principle, then, it would be risky, to say the least, to consider *Avatar* as the direct cause of someone’s depression or to equate its viewing to the suffering of, say, colonized peoples like those represented in the film. However, when analyzing the Pandora Effect we are not exactly talking about experiencing a traumatic event that psychologically wounds some viewers—that is to say, *Avatar* is not, and has never claimed to be, a traumatic event in itself—but rather about an event that may trigger a previously existing trauma, something that re-opens a wound that was already there in those viewers’ minds. The framework through which to understand this process is the belated nature of psychic trauma, observed by Freud and articulated by Caruth as the haunting of an individual by a past event which was unassimilated or unknown at the time (1996, 4). The first trauma in this case would be the individual’s view of him/herself as disconnected from nature, alienated in this technological world, and isolated from both people and the environment. The watching of *Avatar* would then be the triggering force, or second wounding, that could bring this previous traumatized condition to the surface.

Since the Pandora Effect is not merely individually but also collectively experienced, being as it is articulated by a community of viewers that are giving voice to their individual pain, especially through blogs and forums, and engaging in some kind of group therapy in

the process, another concept that may help us further understand the Pandora Effect is the idea of cultural trauma. As opposed to psychological or physical trauma, cultural trauma refers to a loss of identity and meaning affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion (Eyerman 2004, 61). Cultural trauma is defined by Alexander as a socially mediated attribution (2004, 8), with the emphasis falling not so much on trauma itself as on the way certain phenomena are believed to have affected collective identity and are therefore interpreted as traumatic (10). The focus here is on the sociocultural process that attributes meaning to a certain event, making it traumatic, and the role of imagination in the very process of representation of trauma, irrespective of whether the reference is to something that has actually occurred or not (9):

Sometimes . . . events that are deeply traumatizing may not actually have occurred at all; such imagined events, however, can be as traumatizing as events that have actually occurred. . . . Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. Collective actors "decide" to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go. (8, 10)

In addition to this definition of cultural trauma, Redfield's account of "virtual trauma" is also helpful in understanding the Pandora Effect brought on by *Avatar*. The virtual trauma concept was introduced "to describe the ambiguous injury inflicted by the September 11 attacks as mediated events" (2009, 2). Although one can only take the comparison of an object of entertainment with the visual experience of a very real and painful terrorist attack so far, the idea of the virtual as suggesting "the trembling of an event on the edge of becoming present: one that is not fully or not properly 'actual,'" as in a virtual threat that has arrived "without quite (yet) arriving" (2), further illuminates our analysis of the movie. The roots of the impact of *Avatar* can be traced to a large extent to the threat of ecological disaster and the total rupture of any balanced relation with the environment. Pollution, the energy crisis and global climate change are already very present in our lives, but the potential for destruction within the current dynamic of the exploitation of resources announces many more terrible scenarios to come. In other words, to most people today it would seem quite realistic to imagine a future in which there is no longer any green, unless we do something to stop the current way of dealing with things, and in this sense *Avatar* does reflect a virtual threat. Just as the people who watched the September 11 attacks on TV were not generally traumatized in the technical or psychological sense (Redfield 2009, 2), *Avatar* fans cannot claim—or should not claim—to be suffering from a real trauma. Nevertheless, virtuality here, as in the terrorist attacks, functions "as both a consolation and a threat, retaining the power to haunt, sharing something of the force of the kind of wounding we call 'traumatic'" (2). In this approach to the movie, the perpetrator is today's technological, dehumanized world and the victims are the individuals who feel there is nothing they can do to change it.

4. PROBLEMATIZING TRAUMA: *AVATAR* AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES’ HISTORICAL UNRESOLVED GRIEF

Again, telling the story exclusively from this point of view would be a problematic simplification, one reason being that, in the characterization of cultural trauma, we should always expect a great deal of contestation among the different groups involved, since “the answers to the questions of who are the victims and who is responsible for the victimizing are always central,” and this is the reason why no traumatic story “can be told without tracing these themes of suffering and blame” (Smelser 2011, 282). In the tracing of such themes, when referring to the different groups involved in identifying with this movie, a reflection on its impact on indigenous peoples and their representation is also necessary, and such a reflection goes hand-in-hand with a problematizing of the application of the trauma paradigm. As seen in the controverted responses to *Avatar*, no generalization can easily be made about indigenous peoples’ responses to the movie, since they have varied from unconditional praise to harsh criticism. However, in all cases, the identification of the alien Na’vi with the indigenous peoples of the Earth has come automatically, and although the trauma of colonization as it is seen in Pandora is not exclusively related to a particular human group, as mentioned above, most references have been made to the case of Native Americans.

According to Native critics involved in the study of American Indian trauma, the massive loss of lives, land and culture derived from European contact and colonization have resulted in a long legacy of chronic trauma across generations, a phenomenon known as “historical unresolved grief” that has contributed to “the current social pathology of high rates of suicide, homicide, domestic violence, child abuse, alcoholism, and other social problems among American Indians” (Brave Heart and DeBruyn 1998, 56). It is obvious that, when watching what happens to the Na’vi in *Avatar*, Native Americans may see a direct reference to their own history of massive death through military action, the destruction of the natural environment, the separation of the people from places sacred to them, the disintegration of Native life and other dark features of the American continent conquest. With respect to this trauma, understandably, “for American Indians the United States *is* the perpetrator of [their] holocaust” (61). The Pandora Effect, as mentioned above, implies an abstract perpetrator that could quite automatically be associated with the United States and what it symbolizes in terms of capitalism, consumerism and technology. This points at an interesting connection of different communities of victims—viewers alienated from their world and Natives suffering from historical unresolved grief—that become allied against what they perceive as a common victimizer. If this allegiance leads to real changes in the state of things, that is, if it is aimed at making a difference, few objections will of course be raised against it. However, there are several problematic points that derive from this connection that ought to be critically considered.

The Pandora Effect can already start to be questioned from within the perspective of trauma studies, for some trauma critics attend to the risk of over-identification with the

victims of a trauma, which may problematically lead to an appropriation of the experience of the other (Whitehead 2004, 9). When considering this risk, LaCapra offers a useful distinction between the desirable empathy, “which should be understood in terms of affective relation, rapport or bond with the other recognized and respected as other” (2001, 212-13), and identification “or fusion with the other” (212), which is to be avoided because it would lead to “identifying with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim” (Whitehead 2004, 14). As trauma critics have often emphasized, “the experience of transmitted trauma should necessarily differ from the trauma experienced by the survivor” (2004, 9). Jill Bennett develops this idea more fully when she claims that in postcolonial literature, theory and politics, it is an ethical imperative to share suffering “via a form of heteropathic identification” (2003, 181), in other words, that art and its reception should avoid an identification with the pain of the other based on sameness which is centered on the self and risks annihilation of the other’s experience, and promote instead a relationship of identification at a distance that acknowledges the other as other.⁵ This does not seem to be the case with viewers’ reactions to *Avatar* when they are claiming the traumatic experiences of genocide and ecocide as theirs to some degree, making these claims very problematic. In addition, Daniel Heath Justice, in his acute review of *Avatar*, calls the film ultimately “a story about ‘those bad guys who aren’t us,’” which distances the audience “from any complicity with these evils in our world” and therefore fails at approaching what is really required “to effect real and lasting change.” While recognizing that the genocide perpetrated against the Na’vi is undeniably evil and despicable, he reminds us that “genocide isn’t enacted only by wicked, bloodthirsty soldiers—mundane, ordinary people participate in all kinds of atrocities at home and abroad, knowingly and unknowingly, every day.” What is lacking in *Avatar*, then, is a view of the sense that “good intentions can actually be far more destructive to a people (and have much more lasting impacts) than shooting napalm into the Hometree” (Justice 2010). From our twenty-first-century perspective we know that the history of white Americans’ longing for Otherness, the projection of Western discontent on the Natives, and the claim for a more legitimate link to the land by associating with the Indian—from the going-Indian to the wannabes—is not only as long as the history of colonization, but also, very importantly, just as complicit with its disastrous effects on the Natives. Not only is this point not addressed in *Avatar*, but, on the contrary, by encouraging both a distanced position from those held responsible for the evils of colonization and an identification with their victims, the movie ultimately becomes complicit in this history of colonial appropriation.

Trauma theory, regarded as “one of today’s signal paradigms” (Visser 2011, 270) has been the focus of critical controversy, the most heated debates on its adequacy coming from the field of postcolonial studies, which questions the possibility of applying it to

⁵ Jill Bennett is here drawing from Kaja Silverman, who in turn recovered the distinction between idiopathic and heteropathic identification from the German philosopher Max Scheler.

non-Western contexts.⁶ The first acknowledged problem of the trauma paradigm is its difficulty “to recognize the experience of the non-Western other” (Craps 2012, 15), which requires an attention to traumas on non-Western or minority groups in their own right, and an approach to them which comes from a culture- and context-specific perspective. The second, related, problem of an uncritical application of the trauma paradigm is the risk of preventing rather than allowing for real political transformation (124-26), a risk present in both the aporetic, deconstruction-oriented trend, characterized by Cathy Caruth and Geoffrey Hartman, which considers trauma an inaccessible and unspeakable experience, and in the therapeutic, working-through oriented trend, associated with the work of Judith Herman, who, according to Visser, argues “that narrative is a powerful and empowering therapeutic tool, enabling integration of the traumatic experience and aiding healing and recovery” (2011, 274).⁷ The analysis of the representation of trauma in the movie requires close attention to these problems.

An uncritical application of the trauma paradigm to *Avatar* would interpret Jake Sully’s wound—a projection of the white man’s pain—as a stage that can be overcome or worked through by means of connection, the right choice of values and an escape into a utopian world where his technological, capitalistic, consumer-oriented and environmentally unfriendly origins can be left behind and forgotten about. Jake’s rejection of his old self, the repetition of stereotypes and the recreation of an ecotopia are offered as a way to achieve connection, but they ultimately reinforce alterity. One undeniable positive element in the movie is the recognition of both the values and the suffering of indigenous peoples, but we are also in the presence of an appropriation of those values and suffering. The “I see you” idea, which condenses the act of spiritually connecting in the film, illustrates this ambivalence. This is supposed to be the sign that Jake Sully has finally learned to understand the true value of the Na’vi way of life instead of staying on the surface of things. However, “I see you,” in the end, also means that “I can know you and become you when I want,” in an unequal relation where the opposite is not possible, and the “you” is not a subject, but just a convenient object of the white man’s desire. As Seegert has pointed out, Cameron has missed the opportunity of construing the “seeing into [another] in terms of regard, as acknowledgement of another in her or his Levinasian otherness rather than in terms of complete access in transparent fullness” (2010, 121). The film may be functioning as a catalyst for white pain, as an attempt to expiate colonial guilt, but, needless to say, the appropriation of the values and trauma of another cannot possibly help the latter in the healing of their own trauma and, in this respect, it becomes obvious that the representation of trauma is articulated from a clearly Eurocentric, neo-colonial perspective that makes the white man’s trauma the protagonist, denying ongoing colonial suffering.

⁶ For relevant analyses of the debates on postcolonial trauma theory, which fall outside the scope of this paper, see Borzaga 2012, Craps 2012 and Visser 2011.

⁷ Critics have referred to these two contrasting—to the extent of being opposed—views of trauma as “the trauma theory contradiction” (Luckhurst 2008, 82; Visser 2011, 274).

A simplified view of trauma like that we find in *Avatar*—with the possibility of total and complete healing or working through—becomes available for possession and assimilation into discourses of therapeutic recuperation and it runs the additional risk of critical appropriation and misrepresentation, or what Spivak called epistemic violence. As Jo Collins argues, using western paradigms of trauma “may seem like an ethical act of recuperating memory, but may ultimately be a way of appeasing guilt about the West’s imbrication in such trauma without impelling real intervention” (2011, 14). When viewers of a movie or readers of a text—both critics and the general public—are allowed to find some disavowed salvation in the narrative, they can deal with guilt from a safe distance, which precludes real political engagement. In this way, a totalizing, redemptive kind of narrative—as found in *Avatar*, and what we would be promoting in an unquestioned application of the trauma paradigm—may become a form of traumatic denial. As is often the case with established paradigms, we need then to consider whether, in its current mainstream use—as has been noted when applied to the postcolonial situation—“trauma’ becomes more of a barrier than a fruitful epistemological tool” (Borzaga 2012, 68). Being critical of the trauma paradigm—especially of its Eurocentrism and its risk of restricting political transformation—does not entail, as Craps contends, that trauma theory needs to be abandoned altogether, but rather that it should be expanded into “an inclusive and culturally sensitive trauma theory” (2012, 127). In other words, an analysis of a work of fiction like *Avatar*—which is an example of how the trauma paradigm, including narratives and criticism, has become so extended as to be at the point of being formulaic right now—should pay close attention to the cultural and context-specific features of the people whose characteristics it incorporates, as well as an awareness of the political implications of that analysis, in such a way that it makes possible—as opposed to hindering—transformation. Needless to say, the global impact of this particular movie makes this need more compelling.

Avatar is successful as a spectacular entertainment object, and one that has sold very well. It is precisely by voicing—and selling—contemporary preoccupations that it helps make visible an unfair reality which needs to be considered and, if possible, stopped; namely, the ill-treatment of indigenous peoples and the environment. In this respect, it is undeniable that *Avatar* has made many people think, especially some that would probably not be considering these issues otherwise. But the movie also—and problematically—succeeds, by means of a simplistic, stereotypical and formulaic representation of traumatic events, which allows for a somewhat gratifying feeling for the victims of genocide and ecocide, a self-distancing from the perpetrators of those very real crimes and a related wished-for expiation of colonial guilt. The problematic nature of this element lies in the fact that it buttresses conformity as opposed to attempting to make a true difference. This is the aspect of *Avatar* which can be most clearly called a failure: because of the themes it deals with, it promises much but then proves disappointing, both in its representation of traumatic realities and in the resolution that is offered. It could have included a lesson for real, positive change, but it stays on the surface of things instead. One cannot help wonder whether *Avatar* succeeds commercially in spite of its faults, or whether it is precisely thanks

to those faults, which make the film so disappointing for some of us, that it has succeeded. In the end, when watching *Avatar* we should always wear, in addition to the 3-D glasses, the critical lenses that help us consider whether this mass-consumption cultural object offers an opportunity for the end of injustice, or whether it is simply, as we have seen so many times before, contributing to perpetuating it.

WORKS CITED

- ABDELRAHIM, Layla. 2009. "Avatar: An Anarcho-Primitivist Picture of the History of the World." *Infoshop News*, 23 December. <http://news.infoshop.org/article.php?story=2009avatar-primitivist>
- ADAMSON, Joni. 2012. "Indigenous Literatures, Multinaturalism, and *Avatar*: The Emergence of Indigenous Cosmopolitics." *American Literary History (ALH)* 24 (1): 143-62.
- ALEXANDER, Jeffrey C. 2004. "Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma." In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser and Piotr Sztompka, 1-30. Berkeley: U of California P.
- BENNETT, Jill. 2003. "Tenebrae after September 11: Art, Empathy, and the Global Politics of Belonging." In *World Memory: Personal Trajectories in Global Time*, edited by Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy, 177-94. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- BORZAGA, Michela. 2012. "Trauma in the Postcolony: Towards a New Theoretical Approach." In *Trauma, Memory and Narrative in the Contemporary South African Novel*, edited by Ewald Mengel and Michela Borzaga, 65-91. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- BRAVE HEART, Maria Yellow Horse and Lemyr M. DeBruyn. 1998. "The American Indian Holocaust: Healing Historical Unresolved Grief." *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research* 8 (2): 56-78.
- BRIONES, Claudia. 2011. "Scientific Avatars or Doing Anthropology of (and against) Our Modern Discontent." *Postcolonial Studies* 14 (3): 313-29.
- CARUTH, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.
- CARUTH, Cathy, ed. 1995. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.
- CAVIARO, Juan Luis. 2010. "Avatar: ¿Quieres leer el guión que escribió James Cameron?" *Blog de cine*, 10 January. <http://www.blogdecine.com/otros/avatar-quieres-leer-el-guion-que-escribio-james-meron>.
- CLIFFORD, James. 2011. "Response to Orin Starn: 'Here Comes the Anthros (Again): The Strange Marriage of Anthropology and Native America.'" *Cultural Anthropology* 26 (2): 218-24.
- COKINOS, Christopher. 2010. "Science and Empathy in James Cameron's *Avatar*: A Response to Gary Westfahl." *New York Review of Science Fiction* 22 (6): 21-22.
- COLLINS, Jo. 2011. "The Ethics and Aesthetics of Representing Trauma: The Textual Politics of Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47 (1): 5-17.

- CRAPS, Stef. 2012. *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- EDELSTEIN, David. 2009. "When 10 Won't Do: David Edelstein's Top 13 Films." *NPR*, 24 December. <http://m.npr.org/news/Arts+%26+Life/121823646>
- EYERMAN, Ron. 2004. "Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity." In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser and Piotr Sztompka, 60-111. Berkeley: U of California P.
- GARFORTH, Lisa. 2006. "Ideal Nature: Utopias of Landscape and Loss." *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal* 3: 5-26.
- GOOD FOX, Julia. 2010. "Avatars to the Left of Me, Pandora to the Right: An Indigenous Woman Considers James Cameron's *Avatar*." 21 January. http://lastwoman.wordpress.com/2010/01/21/48_avatar/
- GRANOFFSKY, Ronald. 1995. *The Trauma Novel: Contemporary Symbolic Depictions of Collective Disaster*. New York: Peter Lang.
- HARTMAN, Geoffrey. 2003. "Trauma within the Limits of Literature." *European Journal of English Studies* 7 (3): 257-74.
- HILLIS, Ken. 2009. "From Capital to Karma: James Cameron's *Avatar*." *Postmodern Culture: An Electronic Journal of Interdisciplinary Criticism* 19 (3).
- HORVITZ, Deborah M. 2000. *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction*. New York: SUNY.
- JUSTICE, Daniel Heath. 2010. "James Cameron's *Avatar*: Missed Opportunities." *First Peoples: New Directions in Indigenous Studies*, 20 January. <http://www.firstpeoplesnewdirections.org/blog/?p=169/>
- LACAPRA, Dominick. 1996. *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*. Ithaca: Cornell UP.
- . 2001. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.
- LUCKHURST, Roger. 2008. *The Trauma Question*. London: Routledge.
- MULROONEY, Jonathan. 2011. "The Sadness of *Avatar*." *Wordsworth Circle* 42 (3): 201-04.
- NEWITZ, Annalee. 2009. "When Will White People Stop Making Movies Like *Avatar*?" *io9*, 18 December. <http://io9.com/5422666/when-will-white-people-stop-making-movies-like-avatar>
- Urban Dictionary. 2010. "Pandora Effect." *Urban Dictionary*, 2 January. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Pandora%20Effect>
- PIAZZA, Jo. 2010. "Audiences Experience *Avatar* Blues." *Special to CNN*, 6 January. http://articles.cnn.com/2010-01-1/entertainment/avatar.movie.blues_1_pandora-depressed-posts?_s=PM:SHOWBIZ
- Reelz. 2009. "Movie News: *Avatar* to Follow a Pocahontas Narrative." *Reelzchannel.com*, 6 August. <http://www.reelzchannel.com/movie-news/3537/avatar-to-follow-a-pocahontas-narrative>

- REDFIELD, Marc. 2009. *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror*. New York: Fordham UP.
- RIEDER, John. 2011. "Race and Revenge Fantasies in *Avatar*, *District 9* and *Inglourious Basterds*." *Science Fiction Film and Television* 4 (1): 41-56.
- SEEGERT, Alf. 2010. "Till We Have [Inter]Faces: The Cybercultural Ecologies of *Avatar*." *Western Humanities Review* 64 (2): 112-31.
- SIMPSON, Audra. 2011. "Settlement's Secret." *Cultural Anthropology* 26 (2): 205-17.
- SMELSER, Neil J. 2011. "September 11, 2001, as Cultural Trauma." In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser and Piotr Sztompka, 264-82. Berkeley: U of California P.
- SODAHEAD. 2010. "Avatar Making Movie Goers Suicidal." *Sodahead*, 11 January. <http://www.sodahead.com/entertainment/avatar-making-movie-goers-suicidal/blog-234367/>
- STARN, Orin. 2011. "Here Comes The Anthros (Again): The Strange Marriage of Anthropology and Native America." *Cultural Anthropology* 26 (2): 179-204.
- TAL, Kali. 1995. *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- VISSER, Irene. 2011. "Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47 (3): 270-82.
- WESTFAHL, Gary. 2009. "All Energy Is Borrowed: A Review of *Avatar*." *Locus Online*, 20 December. <http://www.locusmag.com/Reviews/2009/12/all-energy-is-borrowed-review-of-avatar.html>.
- WHITEHEAD, Anne. 2004. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.

FILMS CITED

- Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009).
- Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990).
- Pocahontas* (Michael Giaimo, 1995).

Received 17 February 2013

Revised version accepted 10 April 2014

Silvia Martínez-Falquina teaches US literature at the University of Zaragoza. Her research centers on ethnic literatures of the US. She has published *Indias y fronteras: el discurso en torno a la mujer étnica* (2004) and co-edited *On the turn: The Ethics of Fiction in Contemporary Narrative in English* (2007) and *Stories through Theories/Theories through Stories: North American Indian Writing, Storytelling, and Critique* (2009).

Address: Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras. Calle Pedro Cerbuna, 12. 50009, Zaragoza. Tel.: +34 976761515.