To See the Face:
Ethical Infinity and Ecological Responsibility in the *Avatar* Films

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Abstract: Commercially successful and artistically ambitious, *Avatar* (2009) and *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022) represent landmark achievements in sci-fi cinema by fusing epic storytelling with a broad ethical vision. The two films chart the evolution of ethical consciousness in the face of the Other. While the first film dramatizes the ethical awakening of a human protagonist toward the Na'vi people, the sequel advances to an ethical infinity, including nonhuman others and multispecies entanglements. Through detailed examination of character arcs and interspecies relationships, the paper argues that both films articulate a movement from utilitarian domination to multispecies coexistence. The *Avatar* series thus function not only as a critique of colonial violence but also as a speculative imagination of ecological responsibility and planetary ethics.

Keywords: *Avatar*; *Avatar: The Way of Water*; the face of the Other; ethical infinity; ecological responsibility

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1. Introduction

Avatar is an American science fiction film, written, directed and produced by the world acknowledged film-maker James Cameron, whose other famous works include *Titanic* (1997)[1], *The Terminator* (1984) and *True Lies* (1994). Since its premiere in London on December 10, 2009, *Avatar* has secured its position in the pantheon of American cinema, remaining the highest-grossing film of all time with $2.9 billion at the global box office[2], and its grade on IMDb is 7.8[3] on a scale from one to ten. These figures indicate that *Avatar*,

[1] *Titanic* won James Cameron three Academy Awards in Best Picture, Best Director and Best Film Editing.

[2] The data is quoted from https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/top_lifetime_gross/?area=XWW, May 1st, 2025.

[3] IMDb is regarded as one of the most influential websites about movie ratings.

as a cinematic phenomenon, acquired both commercial success as well as critical acclaim.

Cameron's *Avatar* has captivated audiences and scholars with its rich visual world and provocative ethical questions. Through a Levinasian lens, the film can be read as a reflection on the ethical encounter with the Other — a call to move beyond utilitarianism and violence toward a face-to-face responsibility for alterity. However, *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022) [1] as a sequel reveals an even broader ethical vision. Moving beyond the interpersonal conflicts between human colonizers and the Na'vi, the sequel expands the horizon of responsibility to include nonhuman life forms and oceanic ecosystems. The face of the Other, once represented by the Na'vi people, now finds expression in the living seas and marine creatures.

According to Emmanuel Levinas, ethics is not a matter of rational deliberation but begins in the direct encounter with the face of the Other. In his ethical theories, the face locates in the center with perplexing meanings:

> The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face. This mode does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its ideatum—the adequate idea. It does not manifest itself by these qualities, but [...] expresses itself. (Levinas, *Totality* : 51)

First of all, the face does not merely mean facial features or physical appearances of a people; it transcends them and expresses its essence. Secondly, the face belongs to the Other, and the Other confronts me with its face. Thirdly, the face of the Other expresses itself to me directly, or nakedly. In this sense, it is not about knowing the Other but about responding to the Other's call. Drawing upon Levinas's theories, as well as postcolonial and ecological thought, this paper examines how the two *Avatar* films chart an evolving ethical landscape, from the recognition of the Other to an infinite and planetary ethics of coexistence. The films not only display the persistence of colonial violence but also imagine new modes of living ethically in a posthuman world.

2. The Face of the Alien: Ethical Awakening in *Avatar*

Avatar tells a story in the mid-22nd century on an alien planet named Pandora, whose inhabitants are called the Na'vi. At that time, Earth has become infertile due to over-consumption and over-exploitation, while the Pandora represents the very opposite. The encounter between the Earth people and the Na'vi is inevitable, and there are three distinctive approaches: utilitarian domination, scientific objectification, and genuine ethical openness.

On Pandora, the Company's representative Parker and the Colonel Quaritch, describes the Na'vi people as "blue monkeys", "the roaches" and "humanoids", which are clearly based on the physical differences from humans. To Parker, they are an obstacle on his way to unobtanium, an extremely profitable ore, which is "the only reason" why the Company comes here. His communication with the Na'vi is indirect and ineffective. He

[1] *Avatar: The Way of Water* ranks third on the chart of the global box office with 2.7 billion US dollars, grades 7.5 on IMDb.

does not bother to see the face of them. His only goal is to move them away because "[t]heir damn village happens to be resting on the richest unobtanium deposit", so he first entrusts the task to the scientists with a more civilized approach, which turns out to be in vain. Therefore, he turns to the mercenaries with a more practical and violent solution by smoking and bombarding them out of their village. Quaritch is actually a more aggressive version of Parker. His pep talk to the new recruits clearly demonstrates his disgust to the Na'vi, "[i]f there is a hell, you might want to go there for some R&R after a tour on Pandora. Out there, beyond that fence, every living thing that crawls, flies or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat your eyes for jujubes." He reduces the natives to animals, and his only target is to execute the orders given by the Company.

While the Company is the profit-driven force behind the exploitation, its representative Parker cannot be simplified as anavaricious stereotype. He occasionally shows his empathy towards the Na'vi. Before bulldozing the village, he has his hesitation until Quaritch assures him that "I'll do it with minimal casualties to the indigenous. I'll drive them out with gas first. It will be humane. More or less". And when the attack begins, he even allows Jake Sully, the protagonist, one hour to persuade the Na'vi to move. Wars are not real violence; true violence is "to kill the face and the other, and hence to avoid all responsibility" (Morgan 69). Parker's acts at least suggest the existence, no matter how vague it is, of ethical concerns in him. But the Company forces him to advance, since "[t]here's one thing that shareholders hate more than bad press, and that's a bad quarterly statement." Levinas believes, when I encounter the Other, before I determine whether they are useful or dominatable or not, I must guarantee their chance to live (Morgan 66). Parker wavers for he sees the face of the other and the need of taking responsibilities is imprinted in his mind. He wants to allow the Na'vi to live, but the Company urges him to dominate them, which shows exactly the conflict between the ethical appeal and the destructive utilitarianism.

The first scene of *Avatar* is the landscape of Pandora with the collage of its vegetation and creatures, all of which are designed to give prominence to alterity.[1] To deal with the alien planet, the scientific response is to analyze and study it. The scientific research team is led by Grace Augustine, once called by the Na'vi children as "Mother". She has formed a benign connection with the Na'vi by helping build a school and teach them English. But since some children are killed by the hired guns due to their vandalism of the bulldozers, the school is shut down and Augustine is cast out by the natives. However, it does not quench her scientific enthusiasm. Leading her fellow researchers, she continues the study of Pandora. They name the plants and the animals, map out the social structure of the Na'vi, discover the connecting system of the sacred trees, all of which suggest a triumph for the modern science. It looks like they have disclosed the mysterious essence of the planet as well as its inhabitants.

Without any doubts, the encounter between the scientific team and the Na'vi can be regarded as polite and friendly, but not in a Levinasian way. "All encounter begins with a benediction, contained in the word 'hello'; that 'hello' that all *cogito*, all reflection on oneself already presupposes and that would be a first transcendence." (Levinas *Alterity*: 98) To Levinas, the Other says "hello" with their naked face, which reveals its vulnerability and appeal. It denies attempts to disclose or understand, and in this sense, it is a transcendence. Augustine is

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[1] There is one thing that merits attention here: the hills in the film are based on those at Zhangjiajie, Hunan, China, which will certainly evoke the sense of alterity in the Western audiences.

passionate about discovering the truths of the other, but the other is beyond comprehension. When I try to grasp or understand the other, I try to take them into my knowledge system, so much so that the other is dissolved in me, and that is the biggest problem of the western philosophy to Levinas, which is exactly what the scientists do on Pandora.

According to Michael Morgan, the Same is the self, mind, thought, and reason; in one sense or another, everything outside the self becomes the Same as the self or spirit (89). Moreover, the Same endeavors to perform "acts of assimilation of that which is other to the Same into something identical with the Same" (Ladyga 15). In the film, Augustine introduces the creatures on Pandora to Jake with constant references of their earthly counterparts. She acknowledges the differences and she cognitively dissolves them in the Same's discourse. And she knows that scientists must stay "objective" and "can't be ruled by emotion." Compared with the Company and its mercenaries, the scientists take a further step on the ethical path, but they still fail to reach infinity. The Levinasian infinity is "a revelation of the Other, and more specifically is located in the face of the other", so "consciousness [...] is initially a moral event that recognizes and welcomes the already established and inexhaustible other" (Hand 38). The face of the Other is beyond comprehension, and in this sense, it is infinite. One cannot exhaust its infinity as they are unable to grasp it. What they can do is to encounter and respond to the Other ethically.

Jake Sully is an amputated ex-marine, who isenrolled into the Avatar program because his twin brother is accidentally killed by a robber, and Jake with the identical genome is the only person who can drive his brother's avatar. Jake's subjectivity is in question here and his enrollment is met with two different attitudes. Quaritch welcomes him, since he wants Jake to "learn these savages [the Na'vi] from the inside" and report to him; while Augustine rejects him at first due to his lack of scientific training. Despite his physical disability, Jake still identifies himself as a soldier; thus, he enjoys Quaritch's recruitment and actively reports to him with intelligence about the Na'vi. However, as his connection with the Na'vi getting deeper, Jake begins to have difficulties in distinguishing the two worlds, "I can barely remember my old life. I don't know who I am anymore." When the Na'vi shaman declares that "[i]t is hard to fill a cup which is already full", he answers: "My cup is empty." On Pandora, he is a strayer (A soldier? A member of the science team?) and it is perhaps his wavering subjectivity that makes him more sensitive to the face of the Other. On the one hand, he gains gradual consciousness about the Company's violence: "When people are sitting on shit that you want, you make them your enemy. Then you're justified in taking it." On the other hand, he grows empathy on the Na'vi. The face means "imploring, a plea of the weak to the powerful or the poor to the rich" (Morgan 66). Apparently, the bows and arrows of the Na'vi are way powerless to the helicopters and missiles of the Company. When the shaman looks at him in his eyes and says: "Help us", it is a plea of the weak to the powerful, and Jake sees her face and takes his responsibility to the Other by leading them to fight back.

After Quaritch collects enough intelligence on the Na'vi, the Company decides tocommandeer the unobtanium mines directly with bulldozers and armed helicopters. In order to minimize the casualties, Jake decides to come clean about his secret tasks to the Na'vi and is therefore rejected by them because of his betrayal. At that time, he feels: "Outcast. Betrayer. Alien. I was in the place the eye does not see." He hears the Other's petition but he fails in helping them, which causes a heavy burden on his ethical consciousness. "In the presence of the Other, one can make neither an unconstrained act of will nor an impartial decision. We are

speaking of compulsion rather than choice" (Eagleton 228). Jake feels the compulsion to help them, and therefore he becomes the Rider of the Last Shadow[1], which is the symbol of the greatest warrior and leader of the Na'vi. He then speaks the Na'vi language and asks for the next leader's assistance to fight together against the mercenaries. By doing that, he becomes one of the Other, instead of trying to absorb the Other into the Same. Eventually, his soul is transferred into his Na'vi-like avatar by using the power of Eywa, the sacred consciousness of Pandora. He "infiltrates and is ultimately absorbed into the Na'vi world" (Sideris 459).

As for the other human "betrayers" in the film, they are probably the bestembodiment of the Levinasian infinity. Trudy, a fighter pilot, works for the Company, but when she is ordered to shoot the Na'vi people, she simply refuses and flies her plane away. Later she even breaks Jake and Augustine out of custody and fights the Company with the Na'vi. Another avatar driver, Norm Spellman, also assists Jake to win the war. According to Nancy Sherman, "we see through others' eyes, take on others' emotions, imagine what others believe" (qtd. in Sideris 461). These "traitors" breach their contracts with the Company and even betray their fellowmen, for they have seen the Na'vi's eyes, taken on their emotions and imagined their beliefs. They do not try to grasp the Other's face or to become one of them; they simply help. At the end of the film, most people are expelled back to Earth, and these "betrayers" are allowed to stay on Pandora, which forms a panorama of infinity with both the self and the Other.

3. Beyond the Human: Ecological Infinity in *Avatar: The Way of Water*

In *Avatar*, this Levinasian idea is dramatized through Jake Sully's gradual awakening to the alterity of the Na'vi people. Yet, as *Avatar: The Way of Water* demonstrates, the scope of ethical responsibility can extend even further.

The sequel tells the story of Jake and his wife Neytiri over a decade after the events of the original film. The peace of Pandora is again disrupted when humans return, this time with even more aggressive methods. A Na'vi-bodied version of Quaritch, who is killed in the last film, is resurrected and sent back to eliminate Jake. To protect his people, Jake and Neytiri flee with their four children to the oceanic Metkayina clan, a reef-dwelling Na'vi group. To better adapt to sea life, the Sully family develop strong emotional and spiritual connections with the marine ecosystem. Conflict erupts when Quaritch hunts them down, and their eldest son dies in the battle. In the end, the family decide to remain with the Metkayina and continue the fight against the human colonizers.

David Abram insists that human beings live in "a more-than-human world", where "[o]ur bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth—our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other eyes" (22). The Metkayina's relationship with their oceanic world reflects this "more-than-human" ecological thought. A key example is their bond with the tulkun, whale-like creatures, whom they regard as their spirit siblings. Influenced by the oceanic culture, Lo'ak, Jake's son, forms a bond with a tulkun named Payakan. They connect because they both feel like outsiders. Lo'ak struggles to fit in with the Metkayina and often feels misunderstood by his family. Similarly, Payakan is exiled for breaking the tulkun's code of nonviolence. Their relationship presents what Donna Haraway calls a

[1] The Last Shadow is the top predator in the sky on Pandora.

"becoming-with," where "[o]ntologically heterogeneous partners become who and what they are in relational material-semiotic worlding" (12-13). When Lo'ak encounters Payakan, he does not judge him by his past but instead recognizes his pain and isolation. This shared sense of rejection creates a deep emotional connection between them. Through their bond, the film shows how true relationships can form through compassion and shared experience, even across species.

The tulkun's philosophy of life is a radical form of pacifism: "killing, no matter how justified, only brings more killing. So all killing was forbidden." This principle becomes tragically evident in the scene where a tulkun mother and her calf are hunted by humans. Even in great danger, they do not fight back. Instead, they simply swim away, offering no violence in return. Such a non-retaliatory choice echoes Levinas's insistence that "[t]he face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill" (*Ethics* 86). Their vulnerable presence calls for responsibility. The tulkun's refusal to fight back is not weakness, but a profound ethical cry: do not kill. Kyla Schuller argues that Cameron, through the plot and 3-D visuals, makes it possible for his viewers to experience the others "through imagining to feel and move as their bodies do" (178). This scene forces them to grieve for nonhuman lives, to recognize their suffering as ethically significant.

Kiri, Jake's adopted daughter, is one of the most mysterious characters in the film. Born from the avatar body of Grace Augustine, Kiri occupies a liminal space between the human and the Na'vi. This might explain why she is able to possess a unique sensitivity to Eywa. In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett emphasizes that human beings are "vital materiality" and immersed in it constantly, so our ethical task is "to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it" (14). When Kiri lies in the water, placing her hand gently on the sand, she is open to Pandora's vibrant nonhuman forces. She is not just observing nature; she is listening to it as an ethical subject.

Earlier in the film, when talking about Eywa, Kiri says: "I hear her breathing. I hear her heartbeat. She's so close. She's just there…like a word about to be spoken." This answer shows her deep emotional connection to the world around her. Instead of trying to control the animals, Kiri relates to them through empathy and understanding. She doesn't see them as tools, but as beings she can connect with. When her family are trapped in the sinking ship, Kiri follows glowing underwater creatures that lead her to rescue them. This moment reinforces Kiri's unique bond with Pandora's ecosystem. The ocean responds to and helps her not because she commands it, but because she listens. Her relationship with the more-than-human world echoes Karen Barad's notion of "intra-action". In typical thinking, interaction assumes that entities already exist and then come together to affect each other. But Barad argues this is misleading. Instead, she proposes "intra-action", which means that entities don't preexist their relationships, but emerging through their entanglement with others (Barad 33). In other words, things like identity and agency aren't fixed or independent. They arise only in and through their relationships. For example, you are not fully "you" apart from the relationships, environments, and systems that you are in. Lo'ak and Payakan will never be who they are, if they haven't saved each other. And Kiri can only find her identity in the oceanic system.

By foregrounding the ocean, the film reinforces the notion that "Water connects all things", which calls for an ethics no longer grounded solely in the face-to-face encounter between humans, but extended into ecological relations. The film insists that to be ethical is to be wounded by the death of a tulkun, to be transformed by the

rhythms of the sea, to be called into responsibility by the planet. As Haraway reminds us, "It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" (12). The *Avatar* story is one of seeing the Other in the eye of the whale, the pulse of the ocean, and the call of an ecological responsibility still waiting to be answered.

4. Precarious Ethics and Ecological Responsibility

Despite the ethical possibilities opened up by encounters with the Other, both *Avatar* films also portray the devastating persistence of the violence of totality. There are always powers that seek to force the Other into a system that can be understood, or to destroy it altogether. This totalizing violence "reduces the other to the same, promotes freedom—the freedom that is the identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other" (*Totality* 42). In the films, colonialism and economic exploitation function as totalizing mechanisms, so the call of the face is easily overwhelmed by the identification of the same, and it is hard to achieve the ethical infinity.

In *Avatar*, the Company displaces the Omaticaya clan in order to extract unobtanium, which represents the triumph of totality over infinity. To the colonizers, the living world is mere expendable resources, and their utilitarian philosophy reaches its peak in the scene where the Company attempts to destroy Eywa. Despite Jake's ethical awakening, he is unable to stop the assault; he can only mitigate its effects. Although the Na'vi achieve a temporary victory and the human colonizers are expelled back to earth, the film ends with a sense of uneasy optimism. The colonial forces are wounded but not destroyed.

Avatar: The Way of Water emphasizes how violence is cyclical. After a decade, the humans return to Pandora, more ruthless and determined than before. The introduction of the Recombinant Quaritch marks a new level of totalization. The Company is no longer content to dominate the Na'vi externally; it now seeks to internalize them from within. Quaritch's existence totally reverses the Levinasian ethics: instead of responding to the Other's call, he utilizes its alterity in order to conquer it. Moreover, the hunting of the tulkun for their brain enzymes, which are supposed to help humans stay young, parallels the pursuit of unobtanium. As David Harvey warns, "the commodification of everything can all too easily run amok" (80), humans' relentless drive to commodify life exposes the persistence of colonial violence that causes chaotic devastation. In this context, the ethical relation becomes a precarious defiance against the overwhelming momentum of totality.

Importantly, betrayal is another recuring motif in both films. In *Avatar*, Jake's initial deception of the Na'vi is an ethical betrayal, for which he struggles to atone through his later actions. In *Avatar: The Way of Water*, Spider, the human boy raised among the Na'vi, faces a similar dilemma. His biological father is Quaritch, and he is left behind on Pandora for babies cannot survive interstellar travels. He is taken in by Jake and Neytiri, growing up in the close-knit Na'vi society. However, despite his strong emotional connection to the Na'vi, Spider is still biologically tied to the human world, particularly to Quaritch. His decision to save Quaritch makes it very difficult to arrive at a clear ethical judgement. Spider's act suggests that the call of the face persists even when the Other is the violence itself. For Levinas, one has to respond to the face with responsibility, and "[e]ven when there may be ill will on the other's part, the attention, the receiving of the other, like his recognition, mark the priority of good in relation to evil" (*Alterity* : 98). In other words, ethical responsibility is asymmetrical and unconditional, and it does not depend on the Other's goodness. Consequently, Spider chooses

to save his biological father, an ethical decision, but refuses to go with him and returns to the Sully's, an emotional act.

The evolution from *Avatar* to *Avatar: The Way of Water* suggests not only an expansion of ethical responsibility but a redefinition of ethics itself. By tracing the shifting modes of encountering the Other across the two films, it becomes possible to chart an evolution from a human-centered ethics to a planetary ethics. In *Avatar*, the ethical awakening unfolds primarily through Jake Sully's progressive transformation. At first, Jake embodies a utilitarian gaze, reducing the Na'vi to resources. Yet Jake's prolonged immersion among the Omaticaya clan causes an ethical rupture. His growing intimacy with Neytiri and his exposure to the Na'vi way of life awaken a capacity to respond rather than dominate. Still, the scope of this ethical vision remains relatively narrow. Although the Na'vi are treated ethically, the animal life and the planet are primarily symbolic forces rather than ethical subjects. *Avatar: The Way of Water* significantly enlarges the moral universe displayed in the first film, by enhancing the "planetary awareness", which is "an uncanny realization of coexistence with a plenum of ungraspable hyperobjects — entities such as climate and evolution that can be computed but that cannot directly be seen or touched (unlike weather or this rabbit, respectively) — and nonhuman beings" (Morton 207). Lo'ak's bond with Payakan embodies this planetary awareness. Moreover, the ocean on Pandora is portrayed as a living entity out of the anthropocentric frames. As Abram argues, "[t]he landscape as I directly experience it is hardly a determinate object; it is an ambiguous realm that responds to my emotions and calls forth feelings from me in turn" (33). The ocean is thus not merely a setting but an ethical subject that must be encountered with humility and care.

All in all, *Avatar: The Way of Water* offers a more radical ethical vision than its predecessor. Where *Avatar* focused on human-to-Na'vi relations, the sequel suggests that ethical responsibility must be multispecies and planetary. It is not enough to see the Other; one must also recognize the infinite faces of oceans, ecosystems, and nonhuman consciousness, all of which demand ethical care. As Rosi Braidotti claims, "posthuman ethics urges us to endure the principle of not-One at the in-depth structures of our subjectivity by acknowledging the ties that bind us to the multiple 'others' in a vital web of complex interrelations" (100). This expanded ethical framework challenges traditional human-centered thinking and urges us to rethink our role within it.

5. Conclusion

From a Levinasian perspective, *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of Water* together chart a profound evolution in the representation of ethics. Beginning with Jake Sully's awakening to the face of the Na'vi, the narrative journey moves toward a broader ethical vision, which encompasses nonhuman lives and planetary ecosystems.

Yet this ethical awakening remains precarious. Given the returning of the colonial violence, it is difficult to retain the ethical encounters. By embracing a planetary ethics, *Avatar: The Way of Water* offers a vision of coexistence rooted in vulnerability, empathy, and multispecies solidarity. If there is hope in Cameron's cinematic universe, it lies in this ethical orientation: another kind of world is possible, if only we are willing to see, and to respond. But this ethical vision also demands a rethinking of the subject itself. As Braidotti argues, "[a] posthuman subject thus constituted exceeds the boundaries of both anthropocentrism and of compensatory humanism, to acquire a planetary dimension" (89). In the more-than-human world, the ethical subject must no

longer be confined to humans.

Within this framework, characters like Kiri exemplify a new kind of posthuman subjectivity, which is defined by openness, receptivity, and embeddedness in planetary networks of life. Kiri's deep affinity with Eywa is what Levinas would describe as "Being-for-the-Other", which is not a conceptual recognition but a moral stance rooted in "goodness", where "conscience" reflects a transcendence that redefines the self through ethical responsibility to the Other (*Totality* 261). The *Avatar* films offer not just a critique of colonial violence and ecological devastation, but a tentative ethical vision in the posthuman age. The challenge is how to live responsibly in the glowing pulse of the world around us.

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