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Rooting for the Fascists in James Cameron's Avatar

Introduction

James Cameron's new box office champ, *Avatar* (US, 2009), depicts the invasion of a planet called Pandora by human forces in search of a rare mineral called "unobtainium." The native inhabitants of Pandora, the Na'vi, are part of a primal culture that has no modern technology, worships nature and lives in mystical interconnectedness with all other things on their planet. They initially are no match for the human invaders who mobilize a mechanized, para-military force, which utilizes the latest technology to attack the Na'vi, destroy their home and uproot them from their territory. However, when one of the human characters named Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) becomes disillusioned with his mission, he joins the Na'vi and leads them in a successful war against the human invaders.

Conservative critics have united in attacking James Cameron's newest blockbuster for its "liberal" political message, since *Avatar* is an allegory that is highly critical of imperialism, militarism, corporate greed, exploitation of the environment and capitalism.¹ The human characters in this film are cast as villains, utilizing rhetoric, tactics and weaponry that conjure up memories of the Bush administration.² The destruction of the Na'vi's "hometree" by the humans is, furthermore, clearly intended to call to mind the collapse of the World Trade

Center. The horror of this scene casts the invading human aggressors as terrorists on par with the 9/11 hijackers. In sum, audiences are encouraged to sympathize with the “primitive” Na’vi collectivists and to detest the “modern,” profit-driven interlopers. The overall, manifest message of *Avatar* appears to be that primal, organic cultures, with their lack of technology and with their harmonious attitude toward nature, are morally praiseworthy while modern, mechanical cultures (like the US), with their aggressive technological development, dominating attitude toward nature and capitalist motives, are fanatic and corrupt.³ It’s no wonder that conservatives have become so upset with this movie.

But underneath all of the manifest liberalism of *Avatar* there is also a latent message, no doubt unintended by Cameron, and yet still lurking in the shadows. My thesis is that in his valorization of the organic and primal interconnectedness of the Na’vi, and in his denigration of the modern mechanical disconnectedness of human culture, Cameron comes very close to advocating a form of fascism. “Fascism” is often used as a derisive label, usually intended as a way of discrediting governments, policies or personality types that are considered to be overly authoritarian and aggressive. In what follows, I will avoid this evaluative usage of the term and simply describe the philosophy of fascism in as neutral a fashion as possible, in order to understand the worldview that it promotes. Once I have described fascism’s overarching philosophical perspective I shall then draw on the work of Jay Y. Gonen, who, in his book *The Roots of Nazi Psychology*,⁴ has distilled Hitler’s foundational ideology down to nine basic principles. As we scrutinize these principles, we will find striking overlap with the ideals that Cameron attributes to the culture of the Na’vi. My intention here is not to discredit Cameron’s ideas or to malign an otherwise outstanding piece of film-making, but rather to understand the implications of the worldview presented in this motion picture and perhaps gain a better understanding of why fascist ideas remain appealing to many people today.

Fascism

While there are many forms of fascism, some more threatening than others, what they all share in common is a monistic and totalitarian view of society. All fascist ideologies promote the view that the best form of social organization is that in which the people and their leaders are “bound together” into a functional whole, the way that in ancient Rome the lictor’s rods were bound together around an axe-head, forming the handle by which the blade could be wielded. The lictor was a

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bodyguard to the Roman magistrates, and his axe was called a "fasces." Hence, the term "fascism" derives from the weapon carried to protect Roman judges. It is intended as a "symbol of unity" according to Benito Mussolini, the man with whom the term "fascism" originated, and who adopted this axe as a symbol of his regime.⁵

The unity of fascist societies is ensured by a hierarchy that is envisioned as the organic and natural outgrowth of the will of the people. Although it is in many ways anti-democratic, fascism contends that the people consent to the rule of such a leader on the basis of their instinctual understanding of the rank order found in nature: some people are natural leaders, but most are naturally born to be led. There is a place for everyone, and under fascism, all people gravitate toward their proper positions. The state is conceived as a living being in which the people are organs.⁶ The leader is not thought of as "better" than those that follow; he is simply thought of as the "brain" of the body politic, while others serve equally necessary functions. Some people are like the hands. Some people are like the eyes. Some people are like the heart. An organism needs all of these parts in order to function properly, and so too does a healthy nation. Those who do not serve a function in the state are likened to a disease or to a parasite,⁷ and like a disease or a parasite, such individuals must be removed and neutralized in order to ensure the integrity of the national "body." In fascism, it is the collective welfare of the people that is most important, and anything thought to interfere with the well being of the people is targeted as an enemy.

United behind a supreme leader, the members of the fascist state are to act and think as one. Hannah Arendt has claimed that the growth of fascism during the 20th Century developed as a reaction against existential feelings of "isolation," "fragmentation" and "atomization."⁸ The "loneliness" of humans during this "age of anxiety" created a sense of nihilism and meaninglessness. In response, fascism reinvigorated a lost sense of "rootedness" in nature by encouraging people to work in concert with others who shared a common bond of blood, race or purpose. While the modern age of technological industrialism encouraged people to view themselves as autonomous individuals, separate from nature and in competition with one another for jobs, wealth and resources, fascism is a counter-movement to this trend. It encourages people to think of themselves as part of a greater whole, in which they play an indispensable part. It is "primal" in the sense that it harkens back to a time before the dominance of the spirit of modernity, when individuals

existed as parts of an organic (rather than mechanically organized) whole.

Because, in its view, the individual is so completely integrated into the life of the whole community, fascism encourages the attitude that each individual should be prepared to sacrifice him or herself for the good of the collective. One is encouraged to identify with the welfare of the state rather than to think about one's own self-interest, and so an instinctual habit of selfless action (and the resultant willingness to give one's life in service to the nation, state or race), is held to be the highest virtue imaginable. Fascism, thus, "glorifies surrender; it exalts mindlessness; it glamorizes death."⁹ It encourages a non-rational, felt connection to the whole for which the individual is willing to fight, kill and die. Fascism is suspicious of intellectualism, which fosters analysis and calculation. Instead, under fascism, feelings of primal unity are encouraged among the people, so that the individual becomes absorbed into something greater than the isolated self.¹⁰

As Mussolini observed, "The Fascist conception of life is a religious one."¹¹ But the concept of religion that fascism promotes is not belief in a God that stands outside of and separate from the universe, acting as the ultimate lawgiver. Fascism, as a totalitarian system, has no room for that sort of God. Rather, the religion of fascism is a kind of pantheism that finds the holy within the state and within nature. It is pagan and primal in character, viewing the Abrahamic religions as superstitious, otherworldly fantasies that cover over the only true reality: it is the struggle and sacrifice of human beings within the universe that determines the destiny of our world. The vicissitudes of "will to power" replace the 10 Commandments as a guide to proper behavior and the supreme leader becomes the mouthpiece of God.¹² This is a more thorough and consistent form of monism than that promoted by any other religion, before or since.¹³ Because everything is one and interconnected, nothing can transcend the tug-of-war struggle of life in the here-and-now. Rewards and punishments are doled out in this life, not in heaven. The strong are good. The weak are evil. That is fascism's holy law.

Under the total control of fascism, all parts of society are unified and mobilized into action. Fascist dictatorships exercise complete oversight in order to insure that not only the people, but all aspects of culture – government, art, business, religion, food production – work in concert and coordination so that the state is able to achieve its goals more efficiently and effectively. Control of all parts of society is total. Fascism does away with alienation, nihilism and fragmentation at the expense of individual autonomy. And yet, in the fascist way of thinking, the

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individual only becomes fully and authentically realized through the operations of the state. In the words of Mussolini:

Liberalism denied the State in the name of individual; Fascism reasserts the rights of the State as expressing the real essence of the individual. And if liberty is to be the attribute of living men and not abstract dummies invented by individualistic liberalism, then Fascism stands for liberty, and for the only liberty worth having, the liberty of the State and of the individual within the State.¹⁴

Fascism is more than just an anti-liberal political philosophy, however. It also describes a way of thinking about reality that may, to greater or lesser extent, be present in anyone. I'd like to suggest that we should imagine fascism on a continuum, and that we gauge differing levels of fascism in relation to what Jay Y. Gonen has identified as the nine "basic ideological principles" that underlie fascist (and specifically Nazi) psychology.¹⁵ The more of these principles that we find operational in a person, the more fascist we might say that person's way of thinking tends to be. This is useful in identifying fascist tendencies in others, but also in ourselves.¹⁶

In what follows, I will examine each of Gonen's nine principles and consider how they compare to the world-view of the Na'vi culture as it is sympathetically presented in *Avatar*. I contend that the striking parallels I will outline demonstrate that this film is advocating something akin to fascism. Furthermore, I will suggest that the immense popularity of this film can be explained in part by the general population's enthusiasm for, and susceptibility to, fascist ways of thought.

Nine Principles of Nazi Psychology

In his book *The Roots of Nazi Psychology*, Gonen argues that Hitler's success in German politics during the 1930's and 1940's was not simply the result of coercion and oppression, but was also due to the intuitive, psychological resonance of his message with the German people. Hitler was a man of his culture, who shared a way of thinking and a set of values with his fellow Germans. Far from being considered an aberrant monster, Hitler was a leader who understood his people and helped them to act on a set of principles that they already believed to be true. There are nine of these principles, according to Gonen, and they lie at the foundation of fascist/Nazi forms of thinking. These principles are not unique to Germans of the 1930's and 1940's, but seem to be held by many people across national borders and periods of time, either consciously or unconsciously. Let us

consider them in order:

Principle #1: “The world is permeated by an ill-understood mortal danger. At this eleventh hour, the historical clock for removing this danger is about to run out.”¹⁷

The “mortal danger” in the case of Nazi Germany was posed by the Jews, Slavs, communists, capitalists, gypsies and other supposed threats to the purity of the Aryan race. Hitler harnessed this fear by targeting various groups, both internal and external, that were thought somehow to be dangerous to the health of the German national “body.” In a more general, psychological sense, this principle is rooted in a feeling that “we” (meaning those who are like “us” and share our ways of life, beliefs, values, traditions, etc.) are under attack by “them” (meaning those who are different from “us” and who do not share our way of life). This “us” versus “them” mode of thought paints the world as split between friends and enemies. It also characterizes the enemies as waiting at the gates, ready to pounce and to dismantle “our” way of life. “Our” world is in crisis and it is “our” way of life that is at stake. This feeling of perpetual emergency, of impending disaster, primes those who adhere to this principle for focused action in defense of the fatherland.

In our own time, we have seen this principle embraced by many Americans, and by Western cultures in general. Especially after the events of 9/11 and the worldwide financial collapse, Americans feel as if some “ill-understood” force seeks to bring about our downfall. This threat originates not only from outside of our borders (in the Middle East, or Mexico, or South America), but from within (in the form of illegal aliens, religious radicals, corrupt politicians and/or greedy business executives). We are in immanent danger, and if we do not take action to combat the forces of chaos and anarchy, “our” way of life will come to an end. It is a matter of “us” or “them,” and if we wish to continue enjoying the “American way of life,” we had better get busy, get tough and take defensive measures.

In the film *Avatar*, this mode of thought comes naturally to the Na’vi, who are under attack by the violent, greedy and technologically superior forces of the invading humans. The humans are viewed by the Na’vi as “crazy,” suggesting that they cannot be understood or reasoned with. The Na’vi, whose society is represented as seamlessly interconnected with nature, are soon to be uprooted and their organic relationship with the planet broken by this disease-like human threat. This is a threat that has, in fact, already gained a foothold within their society. The “sky

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people” are members of the human race, like Sully, Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver) and Norm Spellman (Joel David Moore), who have infiltrated the alien civilization by occupying cloned Na’vi avatars in order to study, manipulate and (if need be) destroy their culture. Thus the threat, like that of the Jews in Nazi Germany or of terrorism in our own country, is both an inner and an outer one. And time is running out for the Na’vi; the humans are poised to strike and take what they want unless something is done quickly.

Principle #2: “To cling to the magic substance of life is to cling to biomystical health.”¹⁸

Among the Nazis, this principle was realized in the preservation and propagation of Aryan “blood.” Hitler and his officers conceived of Aryan blood as a magical substance that ran through the veins of the German people in greater or lesser concentrations. All that is great originates magically from such racially pure individuals, while terrible things spring from its pollution. “All the human culture, all the results of art, science and technology that we see before us today, are almost exclusively the creative product of the Aryan,”¹⁹ Hitler wrote, and furthermore, “Blood mixture and the resultant drop in the racial level is the sole cause of the dying out of cultures; for men do not perish as the result of lost wars, but by the loss of that force of resistance which is contained only in pure blood.”²⁰ Blood is a holy fluid that is the mystical source of the power of the German nation. If it is not kept pure, the vivacity of the race will be lost. For this reason, it is absolutely imperative that the people resist the forces that seek to adulterate this precious substance.²¹

In the United States today, we can detect a variation on this kind of thinking in the myth of the “melting pot.” America is popularly thought of as a place where people of all races, beliefs and backgrounds may productively live together as one. The American “spirit” has always been associated with individual opportunity, personal freedom, and the energy to get things done, regardless of social class or background. President Obama thrilled listeners when he characterized himself as a “mutt,” implying that there is nothing more American than someone who draws strength from diversity and intermixture.²² The strength of the nation is thought of as emanating from something less literal (but no less mystical) than “blood,” resulting in what Republicans refer to as “American exceptionalism.” The

“magical substance” of America is a mysterious infusion that has been distilled in the “melting pot” of our culture. Ironically, there seems to be a growing fear that this magical substance is somehow being adulterated by non-western forces like Islam, as well as by immigration from Third World countries and other internal threats. Somehow, these new elements threaten to neutralize the magic that once served to energize the American nation.

In *Avatar*, the Na’vi are depicted as existing in perfect harmony with nature and possessing the ability to access the collective consciousness of their planet’s history by means of a neural interface that grows out of their heads. Like a plug that enters a socket, each individual member of the race is endowed with the capacity to tap into this life force. The force of this collective consciousness is represented in the film as a kind of glowing light that pulses through their world and that is centralized in a magical “tree of souls.” This tree channels the power of “Eywa,” which is something like the God of the Na’vi. This concretization of “world spirit” in pulsing light parallels the Nazi’s concretization of the people’s strength in “blood.” In both instances, this mystical, flowing force is the source of power, vitality and life. The humans in the movie threaten to destroy this well of magical potency, and toward the end of the film, the efforts of the natives are directed toward defense of the all-important “tree of souls.” As the reservoir of the people’s spiritual life, it must be protected at all costs.

Principle #3: “The omnipotent leader confers magic power.”²³

The *führerprinzip* (“leadership principle”) holds that hierarchies are natural, and that (as Plato had argued in his *Republic*), society is best organized around the inborn capacities of its members. Some people are suited to be workers. Some people are born leaders, but there is only one person suited to be the supreme leader. In this supreme leader all power culminates. If society is organized in this natural, hierarchical fashion, the “magic substance” will flow efficiently and amazing things then become possible. In Nazi Germany and other fascist nations, the supreme ruler channels the will of the people and directs it to dominate their (supposed) enemies and pursue national glory. Anything is possible when the people are unified and when they put their unquestioning faith in their supreme leader. Otherwise, confusion, inaction and defeat are the inevitable results.

Happily, Americans have always been suspicious of authority, and especially

of supreme authority. A person should, of course, do no harm to others, but the will of the majority should not be imposed on others. A centralized, authoritarian system, certainly hierarchical, is not a president who, however, is not his power. American leaders who exclude rules. American naysayers and against popular thought to be solutions to problems possess a special mixture of the to remain suspicious of the people, and

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of supreme authority. The whole basis of democracy rests on the idea that no one person should be allowed to impose his or her will upon the people. Fascists, of course, do not conceive of the supreme leader as someone who *imposes* his will on others, but rather as someone who *channels* the collective will of the people into action. In fact, Mussolini writes that fascism is a kind of “organized, centralized, authoritarian democracy.”²⁴ American representative democracy is certainly hierarchical, with the people voting for representatives, senators and for a president who sits at the top of the national chain of command. The President, however, is not a supreme leader, as the other branches of government balance his power. Americans do, nonetheless, have an almost religious reverence for leaders who exert their will and get things done, even if this means breaking the rules. Americans love mavericks and non-conformists who prove the opinions of naysayers and pessimists wrong. They love leaders who take chances by going against popular opinion, so long as the purposes they pursue are, ultimately, thought to be worthwhile. Americans love pragmatists who cobble together solutions to problems that others considered insoluble. Such individuals seem to possess a special, almost magical power that distills out the best from the vital mixture of the American spirit. But in the end, Americans generally tend, I think, to remain suspicious of anyone who holds *absolute* power. In America, it is always the people, and sometimes the mob, that has the last word.

In *Avatar*, the primal society of the Na’vi is naturally hierarchical. It is led by a king and his wife, who serve as the spiritual heads of the tribe. As fascist principles dictate, the members of the tribe are assigned their social roles on the basis of their natural born capacities. At one point in the film, Neytiri (Zoë Saldana) offers Sully a profile of the predominant skills of the various female members of her tribe (as a prelude to mating with him). She mentions that one person is the tribe’s best singer, while another is identified as its best hunter. Part of the primal appeal of the Na’vi is the fact that all of its members naturally fit into useful slots in their society. Everyone is valuable and serves a purpose.

But the real message of the film emerges when the tribe places its faith in the power of Sully himself, who leads them in battle against the invading human enemies. In a plan to establish himself as the supreme leader, Sully, like a Germanic knight, dazzles the natives by subduing the fearsome red dragon that is a symbol of tribal leadership. He then directly channels the mystical wisdom of the tree of souls in order to mobilize *all* of the planet’s living creatures in a total war against

the invaders. Against all odds, Sully magically engineers the defeat of the enemy. As in all fascist societies, his true glory is achieved in warfare, domination and the expulsion of a threat to the people's purity.

Principle #4: "The urge to merge is nature's way of making people feel both good and powerful."²⁵

This, perhaps, is one of the most important of all the fascist principles. It holds that by merging into one corporate body, individuals lose themselves in a collective unity, which brings individual ecstasy and maximizes collective power. The proper hierarchical ordering of society creates a circumstance in which the magical powers of blood may come to full expression through the body of the nation, and this is accompanied by health, happiness and the expansion of power.

Just as Americans tend to be suspicious of supreme leaders, they have also traditionally been suspicious of the notion of losing oneself within the collective. Think of the chronic American fear of "socialism" or "communism" and you get a sense that in this country we prefer to stand alone rather than being "bound together" with others. All governments must, to some extent, unite individual members into a group that possesses a collective identity, but in America this sense of identity has remained amorphous and easily dissolved. There have been, of course, points in the history of the country during which a group consciousness has (for better or for worse) emerged, and during such periods America has acted as a single, unified organism. In accordance with principle #1, this unity coalesces when there is a perceived threat, such as during a catastrophe, war or when responding to terrorism. However, these episodes wax and wane on an ongoing basis in the US. When Americans have the "urge to merge," they tend to turn toward religion, to participate in sports or go to rock concerts. These outlets, in fact, may act to dissipate what might otherwise be transformed into fascist political tendencies.

In stark contrast with American individualism, James Cameron's depiction of the Na'vi characterizes them as a group whose members are naturally inclined to merge with one another and with their world as a whole. The very bodies of these creatures are configured to allow them to fuse with other organisms, and "plug into" their planet's magical essence. In doing so, they are able to share in the collective wisdom of their race, experiencing a mystical unity that generates a shared feeling of ecstasy from which they draw their power. The Na'vi are so

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Principle #5: "It is only just that no one should do it to us, but we should do it to them."²⁶

Gonen characterizes this as the Nazi "justice principle." It depicts the world as a place in which any struggle for power is a zero-sum game. If one side wins some sort of benefit, then that means others must lose something. Since in fascist societies the people imagine themselves as magically special and meritorious, it follows that justice requires them to enforce their will and claim as many of the world's "material and cultural assets" as possible. Thus in Nazi Germany there was no question that the German Third Reich was entitled to the resources of its neighbors; especially if those neighbors were Slavs, Jews, communists or capitalists. Such "decadent" peoples had no right to nature's resources or territory, and the only way that they had ever been successful in amassing these things was through trickery and fraud. After WWI, there was a widespread myth among the Germans that the only reason why they lost the war, and thus had to endure the burdensome conditions imposed upon them by the Treaty of Versailles, was because they had been collectively "stabbed in the back" by traitors and sub-men both within and outside of Germany.²⁷ Justice therefore demanded that the Germans take back what was rightfully theirs all along. It was unjust for others to take from Germany, but because Germany is special, it may legitimately take whatever it wants.

The US has, at various times in its history, been led by a similar "justice principle." Beginning in the 1840's, leaders promoted the idea of "manifest destiny" as a justification for the westward expansion of US territory and the subjugation of Native American tribes. There was no way, it seems, that European

immigrants could possibly live together and share resources with the natives, who, it was thought, were backwards, living in a state of anarchy without the “magical substance” embodied by democratic institutions of government.²⁸ The displacement and murder of these people was, thus, justified. Indeed, the closest analogy in American history to the struggle in *Avatar* can be found in the expulsion of the Indians from their homelands, and Cameron’s sympathy for the Na’vi is reminiscent of such late revisionist Westerns as John Ford’s *Cheyenne Autumn*.

Later, during the Cold War with the Soviet Union, we once again adopted this sort of thinking. President Eisenhower, in a 1954 speech, articulated what became known as the “Domino Theory.” It justified US involvement in the Vietnam War by claiming that if Vietnam were to fall to the communists, this would lead to the loss of all of Southeast Asia and of Japan.²⁹ The world, in other words, cannot be shared with non-democratic nations. If the communists win, we lose. Additionally, we became convinced that the only way the communists could win was through trickery, force and intimidation. Therefore, we ourselves had to use these tactics in order to insure that our own (inherently superior) way of life triumphed and prospered. It would be against nature to stop the march of democracy, and so we should fight for it by any means necessary. Most recently this way of thinking seems to have emerged, and to have come under question, during the US war in Iraq.³⁰

In *Avatar*, Cameron executes a clever somersault of perspective in order to justify the totalitarian claim of the Na’vi to the planet Pandora. The humans are depicted as outside invaders who come to Pandora only because they have already destroyed their own environment on Earth. The element that they seek is called, appropriately, “unobtanium;” a name which suggests that these humans will never be satisfied in their exploitation of the universe. If they are granted anything, they will take everything. This is a zero-sum game, since the humans are corrupt, greedy, decadent and insatiable in their desires; all characteristics that the Nazis attributed to the Jews, Slavs, communists and capitalists. In this movie the humans, in fact, have been trying to negotiate with the Na’vi, who refuse to broker any deal with the outsiders because the entire planet and everything in it is sacred to them. They have a natural birthright to the resources of the planet, and it would be unjust to concede any territory or resources to the invaders. After all, just because the humans *need* the resources doesn’t mean that they *deserve* them. Thus, the Na’vi feel that they themselves are entitled to everything and the humans

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are entitled to nothing. The Na'vi have a special connection to Pandora that cannot be shared with outsiders. Consequently, at the end of the film, the only outsiders who are allowed to stay on Pandora are those who have, through the magic of the "tree of souls," been transformed into Na'vi. The Na'vi are special and thus have a unique claim to the "material and cultural assets" that they command.

Principle #6: "We can do it."

This principle expresses a people's confidence in its own "will to power," a belief that contradicts what I have elsewhere called the third principle of nihilism.³¹ Whereas nihilism derives from the fatalistic conviction that nothing can be done to change the world for the better, fascism is based on an optimistic faith in the perfectibility of the world. The people, bound together under the direction of their supreme leader, are in a position to channel their special powers for the enhancement of the community. This is why fascism was such an attractive alternative to the alienated feelings of nihilism that Arendt describes in her monumental work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In the fascist way of thinking, anything is possible.

Americans share this "can do" attitude with fascist societies. One of the iconic WWII images in American propaganda is the Rosie the Riveter poster, which proclaims, "We can do it!" During war time such an attitude on the part of a nation is crucial, but the overall character of American culture has always tended toward the pragmatic, leading George Santayana to refer to Pragmatism as the only truly American philosophy. Only after the Vietnam War ended in failure did America experience a period of defeatism and lack of confidence in its capacities.

The Na'vi also exhibit complete confidence in their powers and an unshakable resolve to resist the forces that threaten them. They are never depicted as giving up or lapsing into fatalistic passivity. The closest that they come to despair is after their "hometree" is destroyed by the human gunships. However, even then, they do not abandon hope. Instead they immediately retreat and regroup, eventually uniting behind Sully in order to fight back against what appear to be impossible odds. There is never an indication, however, that it ever crosses any of the tribe member's minds that the struggle is lost. They always seem to retain the belief that "we can do it."

Principle #7: "We shall gobble them up!"

One of the primary Nazi doctrines was the push for *lebensraum*, or living space. The aggressive expansionism of the Nazis was motivated by the belief that the nation needed to expand, not only to accommodate more pure-blooded Aryans, but also in order to supply them with room for agriculture and with natural resources like oil. This seventh principle is an imperative that describes the German desire to incorporate more and more land into the empire. Ultimately, the Nazis envisioned their Reich dominating the entire world. "Gobbling up" land, of course, raises the issue of what to do with the sub-human inhabitants of those lands, and the Nazi solution to this is now infamous. Those who are not pure of blood must be enslaved, expelled or exterminated.

Imperialistic "gobbling up" of territory is not unique to Nazis, and the US has engaged in its own share of this type of activity. Manifest Destiny has already been mentioned, but such behavior, many people argue, continues today whenever the US attempts to expand its military sphere of influence overseas. In another sense, the economic power of America is unstoppable in its capitalist drive to open up and exploit new markets for the consumption of American products and culture. Even when it is not literally "gobbling up" territory, then, the US is "gobbling up" new markets and opening them up to capitalist exploitation.

In *Avatar*, it is most obviously the humans who are intent on "gobbling up" the planet of Pandora in order to exploit its resources. The whole purpose of their mission is to mine "unobtainium" and bring it back to Earth as a solution to a global energy crisis. In this sense, it is the villains in the film who resemble the Nazis and their aggressive, militaristic desire to open up *lebensraum*. However, the noble Na'vi are also quite insistent that the entire planet of Pandora is theirs, and it is precisely because they refuse to negotiate or to compromise with the humans that they come into inevitable territorial conflict with the invaders. From the perspective of the humans, this need not be a zero-sum game since all that they desire is the unobtainium. They neither need nor desire to occupy any territory. From the perspective of the Na'vi, however, this is a zero-sum game since to them the conflict is about living space and not about unobtainium at all. Once their dominion on the planet is threatened, they must gobble back up all of the things they have lost; like the Germans after WWI. This is why they are eager to fight, kill and, as will be observed in regard to the next principle, expel the outsiders.

Principle #8: "healing."³²

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Principle #8: “We shall spew out evil since the urge to purge is nature’s way of healing.”³²

The most horrendous atrocities in Nazi Germany occurred as a result of the government’s concerted, organized and willful attempt to “spew out” those people who were identified as poisonous to the national blood. In nature, those organisms that are unfit to survive perish. Since the Nazis believed Jews, Slavs, homosexuals, the mentally retarded and the physically deformed were unfit, they must, by the law of nature, be eliminated. Such sub-humans were a threat to the purity of the Aryan race, and were thus thought to be “evil.” Only by purifying the species could the race heal and reclaim dominion of the world. This was nature’s way.

Nazi doctrines about race were influenced both by mystics like Madame Blavatsky and by Charles Darwin’s scientific theories of evolution.³³ These influences, however, were not isolated to Germany. They had an impact worldwide. The US actually began instituting eugenics laws before Nazi Germany, and it was only in 1979 that all of these laws were repealed.³⁴ The Nazis studied and emulated American policies concerning eugenics, racial segregation and the destruction of Native American tribes. In the US, until the repeal of Jim Crow laws in 1964, black Americans were considered inferior to white Americans, and thus needed to be kept separate so as to avoid contamination. The visual differences between the races were thought to be an indication of the fact that nature intended for blacks and whites to remain segregated. Any mixing of blood was thought to contaminate the white skinned offspring, and thus the “one drop rule” was followed. Anyone with even a trace of black ancestry was, and still is, considered to be “black.”³⁵ Though the US never went to the extremes of the Nazis to purge the “evil” of those thought to be inferior to whites, it is clear that there was, and still is to some degree, a sense in which Americans think it “natural” for those who are different from the white majority to be isolated and separated so as to retain some strange sort of biological and cultural health. The “urge to purge” remains.

In *Avatar*, this urge is clearly present in the Na’vi. At the end of the film, they quite literally expel the humans from Pandora, only allowing those who have magically taken on a Na’vi body to remain. The expulsion of the human invaders is depicted as the first step toward healing the planet, which has been violated and damaged by the outsiders. The natural environment of the planet, furthermore, makes it impossible for non-natives to survive and prosper on Pandora in the long run, and so the presence of outsiders is something that cannot naturally be

sustained. Nature dictates that the physically fragile, and morally wicked, human race must leave. It must be "spewed out" and purged so that the planet and its rightful inhabitants may regain dominion.

Principle #9: "Sacrifice is the best investment."³⁶

Connected with all of the previous principles is that the idea that the individual should be prepared and eager to sacrifice him or herself for the overall well being of the nation. In Nazi Germany, such sacrifice was expected of both men and women. Men were required to contribute their skills to the Reich in industry, warfare, art and business. Ultimately, all men were called upon to be willing to sacrifice their lives in the defense of Germany. Women were expected to contribute by bearing pureblooded children, whether they were married or not. In the infamous *lebensborn* program, women were even encouraged to mate with members of the SS in order to produce Aryan babies and then to hand them over to SS families once the children were born.³⁷ Sacrifice was the name of the game for both men and women under the Nazis. As organs in the collective body, individuals contributed what they could so that the national organism would continue to function properly. The individual was merely part of a larger whole, and the more that individuals were willing to sacrifice for the benefit of the whole, the more secure their investment in the future became.

Americans admire sacrifice, but they do not expect it. Rather than the individual existing for the sake of state, in the US, it is the state that is thought to exist for the benefit of its citizens. Americans conceive of themselves as living in a "melting pot" rather than functioning as organs within a national body. Individuality is valued to such an extent that we often admire anti-establishment character types, as portrayed by such stars as James Dean or Jack Nicholson. Many American national heroes are rebels who have resisted going along with the collective in order to pursue their own personal interests.

On the other hand, Americans also revere those who willingly sacrifice their own well being for what they see as a good cause. Just one recent example is Pat Tillman, who after 9/11 gave up a spot playing football in the NFL in order to join the Army and fight in Afghanistan, where he was killed.³⁸ Americans almost universally admire Tillman for his voluntary sacrifice; even those who otherwise do not support the war. Whereas the Nazis expected everyone to sacrifice themselves

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for the good of the nation, in America we admire those who voluntarily sacrifice themselves so that the rest of us don't have to.

Like the Nazis, the Na'vi consider the members of their tribe to be integral parts of a larger organism. We see this dramatized during the final conflict, when even the planet's animal species join in the fight. All life forms are depicted as sharing a mystical bond that leads them to feel one another's pain and to come to one another's aid when threatened. The sacrifice of each individual is an investment in long-term the health of Pandora.

Clearly, there is a profound resonance between each and every one of Gonen's nine principles of Nazi fascism and the world-view of the Na'vi. In fascist cultures, the people unite behind a supreme leader who channels the magical energy of the collective will-to-power in order to fight internal and external enemies. These enemies are thought to be especially dangerous because they threaten the purity of the race or national character. Members of the community are thus moved to sacrifice themselves for the good of the collective, and in so doing they ensure the success of their people, securing their living space and expelling or exterminating the evil, contaminating forces.

Conclusion

Does the similarity between the names of the heroic Na'vi tribe and the nefarious Nazi movement somehow reveal James Cameron's nascent fascism? It is no secret that fascism and Nazism still possess a strong psychological fascination, if not an outright attraction, for many people today. This allure extends beyond the realm of fringe political movements and racist subcultures into mainstream media and society. In her landmark essay "Fascinating Fascism," Susan Sontag suggests that this magnetism results from the theatrical, dramatic and (above all) erotic elements in fascism.³⁹ In our examination of Gonen's nine principles, we have seen that the erotic allure of fascism is not necessarily related to any sort of overt sexuality. Rather, it is an expression of a broader desire to submit to authority and bond with others in order to merge into a larger unity (and thus overcome distressing feelings of alienation, fragmentation and nihilism). Freud described this psychological tendency as indicative of "libido" or the "life instinct," which he carefully distinguished from "thanatos," or the death instinct.⁴⁰ It is ironic that this libidinal drive toward life would so often culminate in the death of the self under fascism, but Freud believed that both instinctual drives sought to return us

to that blissful “oceanic feeling” we enjoyed before birth. While fascists threaten the integrity and autonomy of the individual, they do offer a rather seductive solution to the problem of alienation and loneliness. For some people this may be a tempting trade off.

By depicting an idealized, attractively alien, fascist culture and stripping it of all its negative historical baggage, Cameron has succeeded in tapping into a deep well of fascist sympathy in Western culture. As we have seen, although American values diverge in some ways from those of fascist cultures, many of the principles of fascism still resonate with the US population, and indeed with all people. In our present historical period of change and uncertainty, as the phenomenon of nihilism makes another of its recurrent appearances on our cultural scene, perhaps Americans have become especially susceptible to the lures of fascist thinking.

CNN reports that there have been over 1,000 posts on an *Avatar* fan site from people who fell into a state of depression and entertained thoughts of suicide after seeing *Avatar*.⁴¹ The reasons given for the onset of these dark thoughts have to do with a realization that our real-life Earth in no way matches up to the beauty of Pandora. It is interesting to note that these feelings of depression occur when viewers leave the theatre, not when they are actually viewing the movie. When viewing the movie, they report feeling happy, and even exhilarated. It seems temporary immersion in the idyllic setting of Pandora, where all living creatures share a mystical interconnectedness, is the perfect antidote to a contemporary world where people are disconnected, alienated and cut off from nature. Of course, this is what fascism was designed for. It binds people together into a unity so that no one is ever alone, everyone has a purpose, and they always know who the enemy is.

John Marmysz

Notes

- 1 Huma Khan, “The Politics of ‘Avatar:’ Conservatives Attack Film’s Political Message,” *abcnews.go.com*, Jan. 6, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/politics-avatar-conservatives-attack-movies-political-messaging/story?id=9484885> (28 January 2010).
- 2 There are references to “shock and awe” and “daisy-cutter bombs.”
- 3 Cameron is, obviously, not completely against technology. His movies are among the most technologically advanced films ever made. In an interview with David Chen, Cameron says, “For me, technology in and of itself is not evil, but there is great potential for evil in the human misapplication of technology. ...I’m not trying to

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make people feel guilty. I just want them to internalize a sense of respect and a sense of taking responsibility for the stewardship of the earth...and I think this film can do that by creating an emotional reaction." David Chen, "The/Filmcast Interview: James Cameron, Director of Avatar," /Filmcast, December 18th, 2009, <http://www.slashfilm.com/2009/12/18/the-filmcast-interview-james-cameron-director-of-avatar/> (28 January 2010).

- 4 Jay Y. Gonen, *The Roots of Nazi Psychology*. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000).
- 5 Benito Mussolini, *The Doctrine of Fascism* (1932), *World Future Fund*, <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/Reading/Germany/mussolini.htm> (28 January 2010).
- 6 Mussolini, *The Doctrine of Fascism*.
- 7 Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* (1925) is filled with references to "parasites," "syphilis," "toxins," "plagues" and "disease"; usually in connection with Jews who are conceived by him as the inner enemy of the German "body." See especially Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Volume I, "Chapter X: The Causes of the Collapse." (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), pp. 225-283.
- 8 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1950), (New York: Harcourt, 1976), p. 317.
- 9 Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," *The New York Review of Books*, Volume 22, Number 1. February 6, 1975, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/9280> (28 January 2010).
- 10 "...the strength of a political party lies by no means in the greatest possible independent intellect of the individual members, but rather in the disciplined obedience with which its members follow the intellectual leadership." Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p. 457.
- 11 Mussolini, *Ibid*.
- 12 This is given dramatic illustration by the proposed "thirty point program for the 'National Reich Church'" authored by Alfred Rosenberg under Adolf Hitler's Nazi government. Among the proposals were the following: "5. The National Church is determined to exterminate irrevocably...the strange and foreign Christian faiths imported into Germany in the ill-omened year 800. 13. The National Church demands immediate cessation of the publishing and dissemination of the Bible in Germany. 19. On the altars there must be nothing but *Mein Kampf* (to the German nation and therefore to God the most sacred book) and to the left of the altar a sword. 30. On the day of its foundation, the Christian Cross must be removed from all churches, cathedrals and chapels...and it must be superseded by the only unconquerable symbol, the swastika." See William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), p. 240. *The Occult History of the Third Reich* (Dave Flitton, US, 1987) documents the Nazis' pagan beliefs and their plans to replace Christianity with a mystical form of earth worship.
- 13 Wilhelm Reich asserts, "Fascism, we are told, is the arch-enemy of religion, and a regression to paganism. On the contrary, fascism is the extreme expression of religious mysticism." Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Theodore P. Wolfe (ed.), (New York: Orgone Institute Press, 1946), p. x-xi.
- 14 Platonism, Hegelianism and Hinduism come to mind as close contenders. However it is likely that all three systems played a role in the development of fascist ideology.
- 14 Mussolini, *Ibid*.

- 15 Gonen, *The Roots of Nazi Psychology*, pp. 167 - 173.
- 16 As Wilhelm Reich suggests we ought to do in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, p. xii.
- 17 Gonen, p. 169.
- 18 Gonen, p. 170.
- 19 Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, p. 290.
- 20 Hitler, p. 296.
- 21 Mussolini was less literal when it came to the idea of race. "Race: it is a feeling and not a reality." Mussolini, fn 19.
- 22 CNN Politics, "Obama: New Dog could be 'mutt like me'," November 7, 2008, <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2008/11/07/obama-new-dog-could-be-mutt-like-me/> (28 January 2010).
- 23 Gonen, p. 170.
- 24 Mussolini, p. 7.
- 25 Gonen, p. 171.
- 26 Gonen, p. 171.
- 27 Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, p. 31.
- 28 PBS.org, "The US-Mexican War. Prelude to War. Manifest Destiny," http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_introduction.html (28 January 2010).
- 29 History.com, "Eisenhower give famous 'domino theory' speech," <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history.do?action=Article&id=2630> (28 January 2010).
- 30 CNN.com, "US officials rethink hopes for Iraq democracy," August 22 2007, <http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/08/22/iraq.democracy/index.html> (28 January 2010).
- 31 John Marmysz, *Laughing at Nothing: Humor as a Response to Nihilism*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), p. 71.
- 32 Gonen, p. 172.
- 33 See *The Occult History of the Third Reich*.
- 34 Kara Rogers, "Beyond Darwin: Eugenics, Social Darwinism, and the Social Theory of the Natural Selection of Humans," February 9 2009, <http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2009/02/beyond-darwin-eugenics-social-darwinism-and-the-social-theory-of-the-natural-selection-of-humans/> (28 January 2010).
- 35 F. James Davis, "Who is Black? One Nation's Definition," *PBS.org/Frontline*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jefferson/mixed/onedrop.html> (28 January 2010).
- 36 Gonen, p. 173.
- 37 The Shoah Education Project, "Lebensborn: The Unnatural Selection," <http://www.shoaheducation.com/lebensborn.html> (28 January 2010).
- 38 Pat Tillman Foundation, "About the Foundation," <http://www.pattillmanfoundation.org/about-pat-tillman.aspx> (28 January 2010).
- 39 Sontag, *Fascinating Fascism*, p. 13.
- 40 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990).
- 41 Jo Piazza, "Audiences experience 'Avatar' blues," *CNN.com*, January 11 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/SHOWBIZ/Movies/01/11/avatar.movie.blues/index.html> (28 January 2010).



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