

Avatar: A Descent to Square Dante's Eighth Circle

by [Larry McCloskey](#) (February 2023)



Garden of Earthly Delights (detail), Hieronymus Bosch, 1503-04

I'll concede it is visually stunning—though in my simple ways I prefer visual simplicity. Call it the Occam's Razor approach to the concept of beauty. That is, according to 14th century logician and theologian William of Ockham, the simplest solution is almost always the best. And yet today's films are notable for their reliance on technical complexity for ever more attention-seeking effects. Computer generated millisecond scenes are so manipulated and over the top as to make fantastical ubiquitous and therefore un-fantastic. A simple beautiful image, especially a scene that holds for a couple of seconds, would be too trite to survive the cutting room floor.

It had been three covid heavy years since my wife and I went to a movie theatre, and seeing Avatar left me feeling blue. I hope I'm not appropriating mood.

In fairness, the fifteen-minute coming features segment that preceded the film—a disturbing distillation of nihilistic contemporary culture—instilled depressive mood more than Avatar pigment. Coming films are all about Superheroes with special effects churned out at a Gatling gun pace. Character development, plot and carefully crafted language, are the archaic relics of another, to be forgotten, era. And most disturbing, the anaesthetizing effect of super hero heroics is antithetical to remembering the previous split-second scene, let alone that lonely thing called history. We are primed to hunger for the next, more thrilling scene. Narrative arc has been replaced by non-narrative Blitzkrieg nonsense. Comic book simplicity does not mesh with historical complexity. The movie theatre experience is to feast upon the unthinking smorgasbord of distraction.

Which serves to free film-makers from sweating historical context or fidelity to anything real, I guess. Avatar: The Way of Water, is set in the future on Pandora, a paradisal moon far removed from earth. And yet the film targets earth-bound contemporary life with a decidedly political bent. Never mind the pretence of being cut loose from humanoid activity. On

futuristic utopian Pandora, the film remains a morality tale about messy, messily man.

Having destroyed earth, man had to seek new peoples or species—inclusive of both blue and green—to subjugate, and new planets to colonize. Pandora fills every frame with unspoiled, soon to be spoiled beauty, that man is uniquely qualified to spoil.

Though arch-enemy Colonel Miles Quaritch is killed in Avatar #1, Director Cameron finds a way to continue moralizing about how male military types represent all that is bad in the world. Death 13 years earlier does not mitigate original sin, or the badness of the bad still intent on being bad. Before dying, Colonel Quaritch and his crew had their memories and evil ways of thinking put on to futuristic memory sticks to be implanted into the empty brains of cultivated blue bodies. So, having made the transition from human white to Na'vi blue, the badness of Avatar #2 begins.



The Colonel and his crew reinforce every stereotype about white military dudes, and they have superior machines and killing weapons to boot. The few blue Na'vi and the more

numerous green Metkayina have goodness, determination to protect their people, and cool Appa, or sky bison for air and underwater travel. Thing is, indigenous weapons are a tad bit out of date or at least unable to compete with futuristic machine gun and helicopter rage. And yet, with capable heroines like Ronal (green), who goes into battle minutes before giving birth, and Neytiri (blue), whose arrows never miss and can pierce helicopter exteriors, the outcome is never in doubt. Common sense and credulity are out the window because the former white, now blue, imposters have to be defeated and utopian ideals have to be maintained. It is an unwritten expectation, a shared cultural phenomenon that gratuitous predictability will be the trajectory of the film, and no other outcome is possible. Momentary, predictable thrill and woke purpose are the film's only menu items. (Makes me wish I could write an Avatar sequel with blue and green folk taking over earth, now headed up by the World Economic Form. The Avatars win and we of the un-WEF are forever grateful). Cameron had a quarter billion dollar budget to share his purpose and dull our senses with special effects, that in a film over three hours long, has ever diminishing returns of specialness. Aspirational appetites sated, we leave the theatre with a borrowed sense of purpose. Or else with brains withered to mush, we no longer have the capacity to think about purpose.

The question is why? Why have films, our cultural narrative, become enmeshed in such technically over-the-top, thematically simplistic cliché ridden corn ball mush? And my mush-less response is that when we took down everything other than belief in self—that is, the scaffolding of civilization—we left a vacuum wider than the distance between earth and Pandora. The promise of fulfilment of all personal wants and desires as substitute for transcendent purpose requires a reality deficit that is our modern Pandora's box.

[Merriam_webster.com](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Pandora) describes the mystical origin of Pandora's

box as such: Zeus gave the beautiful Pandora a gift, a box she is told never to open. But curiosity being irresistible, once out of sight Pandora took off the lid and all the world's troubles swarmed out never to be recaptured. Only hope was left in the box, stuck under the lid. The lesson being, that which looks ordinary may produce harmful results or Pandora's box.

There you have it, an insightful explanation of modern times, and a prescription for continuing woes. President Biden and Canada's Prime Minister Trudeau make aspirational claims everyday with a whiff of the ordinary about the robust health of the economy, contrary to all objective economic indicators; the absolute unassailable national enrichment of unlimited numbers of illegal immigrants without consideration to measly details like process, housing, jobs or those waiting for years for legal recourse; the prevalence of systemic racism everywhere and at all times, same and directly related to the existence of white supremacy; the subversion of merit over equality of outcome in the name of hierarchically valued exteriors; or the coming epoch of limitless emission free energy that will not only create a Pandora on earth, but will inspire the creation of millions of green jobs (not blue?) in the utopian process.

We live in an aspirational world, consequences and reality be damned. We believe, reinforced or led by the entertainment juggernaut—into which we plug ourselves like Avatars into sky bison— that the realizing of utopia is simply a matter of identifying wrong-doers and defeating oppressors. As economies convulse and culture devolves with predictable political repercussions, we tilt further left and believe even more. And in a weird way it makes sense, because while the myth of Pandora's box may claim to hold hope, if there is nothing upstream from culture, if not only God but even the context that allows for discussion of possibility is absent, hope too is merely a never to be realized aspiration.

Reminds me of a quote by science fiction writer Philip K. Dick, "Reality is that which when you stop believing in it, it doesn't go away." So, killing our hope in God doesn't make her go away. She just goes somewhere else. My up-stream of consciousness thought meanders into something like this: culture has always been upstream from politics, and spirituality and God upstream from culture, but since she no longer exists, our upstream beliefs and sensibilities have flooded downstream to lowly politics, where politicians seek to square their faux spiritual progressive deeds with Dante's eighth circle of hell (fraud) that is our political reality. Make sense?

We continue down the path of hopeless aspiration without substance in politics and entertainment precisely because in the absence of God we have no where else to go. Infusing transcendence into politics is not a healthy development for an occupation that has become synonymous with lying.

Films and books— the latter being museum pieces we used to indulge in— didn't always lead or reinforce static, prevalent cultural orthodoxy. From the 1932 Marx brothers film *Horse Feathers* (Groucho singing, "Whatever it is, I'm against it"), to Chauncey Gardiner's empty proclamations about gardens and seasons taken as economic wisdom, in *Being There* (1979), to British television series, *Yes Minister* (1980), subversive satire and farce have served to remind us of the excesses and follies of the political elite, and to offer refuge from the seriousness and absurdities of their political ambitions.

In refusing to take political ideology too seriously distant days ago, we didn't take ourselves too seriously. Which may help to account for how we used to exchange words about politics in a public place without fisticuffs necessarily ensuing. And with some separation between our person and our politics, we maintained a semblance of objectivity and critical thinking. *Horse Feathers*, *Being There* and *Yes Minister* may be politically intended, but unlike *Avatar* and

its Hollywood juggernaut, their intent doesn't espouse a political view; rather they point out the folly of holding one too tightly. It is the nature of satire. After all, if there is a downstream more lowly than the lowly pool of politics, it is the cesspool of human conceit. Until we tame and temper our own deadly sins, there can be no progressing upstream.

And with another application of Occum, there may be a simple way to test the efficacy of our freedom to think for ourselves and withstand the maelstrom of cancel cultural: humour. Still, if humour—as one of the few, true respites from the vicissitudes of life—is not enough, we might want to consider just how flawed the product is that has us singing and not laughing from the same cultural hymnbook. No ideology or conformity is ever heard from Groucho Marx who famously quipped, “I'd never join a club that would have me as a member,” or Chauncey Gardiner, whose grasp of monetary policy exceeds Canada's PM—however absurdly people try to interpret their farcical proclamations. Because when everyone is either of one mind or unwilling to speak up against the close/one-mindedness of the present woke world, proclamations take on whole new humourless and cliché ridden meaning.

I know we are supposed to arrive at another point of view. After all, Avatar the movie purports to be profound. Avatar is a Sanskrit word meaning 'descent' and is a Hindi concept about the incarnation of a god or goddess descending to earth, or in this case, as a post-earth utopian ideal. Still, consider the poetry, the mantra, the anchor of Avatar: The Way of the Water, and then assess whether scenes with the following oft repeated lines of poetry are deeply profound or merely cheesy:

The way of the water has no beginning and no end.

Our hearts beat in the womb of the world.

Water connects all things, life to death, darkness to light.

The sea gives and the sea takes.

When Hollywood comes calling for political and cultural conformity in scenes like this, *whatever it is, I'm against it.*

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Larry McCloskey has had eight books published, six young adult as well as two recent non-fiction books. *Lament for Spilt Porter* and *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* (2018 & 2020 respectively) won national Word Guild awards. *Inarticulate* won best Canadian manuscript in 2020 and recently won a second Word Guild Award as a published work. He recently retired as Director of the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities, Carleton University. Since then, he has written a satirical novel entitled *The University of Lost Causes*, and has qualified as a Psychotherapist. He lives in Canada with his three daughters, two dogs, and last, but far from least, one wife.

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