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## *Dedications*

*This dissertation is wholeheartedly dedicated to our beloved parents who have been always a source of inspiration and provided us all along our career with the moral and financial support.*

*We also dedicate this accomplishment to our brothers, cousins and friends who have been there for us throughout the entire process. We will always appreciate their encouragement and support. To all our teachers who contributed to the making of this work, especially Mr. Benmechiche Hacène.*

*Fares Nesrine*

*Djafour Walid*

## *Abstract*

*Our dissertation has evaluated concepts of Anthropocentrism, Gaia, Technotopia and Ecotopia in Cameron's movie Avatar. Cameron contributes to the public debate about climate change and acknowledges his moral responsibility to remind viewers -through Avatar- that humanity is destroying its habitat. Our research relies on Karl Mannheim's "Ideology and Utopia" (1949). Mannheim claims that people's thoughts are influenced by the social group and historical epoch to which they belong. Furthermore, Mannheim explores the concept of "Utopia", an idea transcending reality, which presents better alternatives to the "Topia" thus threatening the continuity of this latter. Cameron's set of ideas in the movie reflect the dominant ideologies practiced in his time, mainly those of capitalism. Throughout the analysis of Avatar, we conclude that the movie: reveals inhuman relation to nature fostered by anthropocentrism, reinforces the Gaia notion of ecological symbiosis, informs about ideologies and environmental policies of some capitalist countries mainly the USA, and most importantly operates as an Ecotopia whose purpose is to counter the capitalist ideologies and to promote ecological sustainability.*

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## **I- Introduction:**

Along all other artistic forms, cinema remains arguably one of the most popular means of entertainment in our modern time. It is equally a means of tremendous influence which may guide humans' minds either to enlightened thoughts or to corrupt ones. Indeed, apart from being a business industry that grosses billions of dollars, cinema is also an art form, an art of appearance that represents reality in an aesthetic way. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, movies are considered the most influential art form used to vehicle values, morals, education and propaganda. In fact, movies, produced either for aesthetic values or commercial ones, are preachy and most of the time hold ideological dimensions<sup>1</sup>. That is to say, each movie is a sort of propaganda of some thoughts, feelings and ideas.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, Hollywood cinema witnessed an unprecedented production of utopian and dystopian movies. The desire and success of this genre of cinema can be related to its power to reflect upon emerging themes and conditions in the contemporary societies. Indeed, dystopian movies, with the grim and disturbing setting, draw special attention to real-world issues and fears such as environmental degradation, technological progress and other flaws of the modern world. The utopian movies, however, with their ideal setting shot on screen, operate as critical means interrogating the current state of affair and provide a bold vision of a better place<sup>2</sup>. The utopian thinking integrated within movies is a manner to endeavour risk for an effective social change.

Within the same realm of cinema, ecology is the most dominant discourse evoked by the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century utopian movies. The rise of Ecotopia, which is any ecologically ideal place or situation, came as a response to the global ecological crisis fuelled by anthropocentric philosophies, exacerbated by humans' obsession with capital, and facilitated by technological innovations of the contemporary world. The main purpose of Ecotopia is to address the current environmental crisis through promoting a mindset which

places ecological sustainability at the core of humans' interests, and promoting the idea that "earth is not the environment. Earth is us. Everything depends if we have this insight or not".<sup>3</sup>

### **1- Literature review:**

James Cameron's fantasy blockbuster *Avatar* has produced contentious readings on the significance and the implicit messages the movie articulates. In chapter 9 of 'Fantasy Film 9/11' (2013), Pheasant Kelly perceives *Avatar* as an allusion to the "War on Terror" and the bombings of 9/11 and more particularly, the invasion of Iraq<sup>4</sup>. In the same work, Kelly draws special attention to the sublime effects granted by the technological innovations used in the moviemaking. He further explains how scenes -reminiscent of 9/11, "War on Terror" and environmental catastrophes- turned to evoke sensation of pleasure rather than unpleasantness<sup>5</sup>.

After analysing Kelly's analysis of James Cameron's *Avatar*, one can inevitably notice that throughout this critique, the devastating event of 9/11 and the "War on Terror" draw parallels with the falling of the "Tree of Souls" on Pandora in the movie. Indeed, the falling of the Twin Towers brought about huge and negative changes to the capitalist systems all around the world and cost the international finance a lot. Consequently, the USA invaded Iraq under the pretext of 'War on Terror'. Actually, these events resemble the falling of the Tree of Souls of the Na'vi in the movie as Kelly assumes in his analysis. The Tree of Souls in the movie - just like the Twin Tower in the real world- is the pioneer in the functioning system of all the creatures on the planet.

However, if we look at this analysis from another perspective, many questions might remain not answered. Speaking of the "War on Terror" -which was a mere response to the 9/11 attacks and the impact it had on the international economic systems and the Americans' psyche- Kelly exhibits in a way or another his inclination to the American politics toward the third world nations and pays more attention to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 that cost the United States a significant number of losses. By doing so, the author explicitly expresses his



disregard toward the casualties in the war of Iraq triggered by the American Army. In this light, is there any ideological connotation in the author's analysis of the movie?<sup>6</sup>

In a book entitled *The Post-2000 Film Western* (2013), Marek Paryz and John R. Leo make an appeal to M. Elise Marubbio's study in which she tackles another issue of James Cameron's *Avatar*. According to her, the movie is a representation of the indigenous people all around the world. She actually contextualizes the movie by making reference to some events which occurred during the period of its production<sup>7</sup>. An illustration of these incidents is the election of an indigenous president in Bolivia in 2009, and the adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People by the United Nations two years later. Indeed, for her, it is an embodiment and coverage at the same time of the contemporary real-world struggles. Thus, it becomes clear that the movie highlights the survival and the resistance of the indigenous people to the genocides and the ecocides they have endured for centuries. It also reflects the good riddance -made by the indigenous- of the ongoing systems of colonialism and oppression. Marubbio supported her study of the movie by appealing to Julia Good Fox's statement:

*Of course the viewer will think of Pocahontas and Iraq and Viet Nam when watching Avatar. Of course we will remember Cowboys and Indians and Billy Jack and other films and histories while watching Avatar. Cameron is absolutely encouraging us to do so. He helps us along by purposely making heavy-handed cultural references.... The ability of the audience to recognize the network of connections to other films, history, and recent political and contemporary events, is one of the points of the film.*<sup>8</sup>

From the revisionist and Neo-Western perspectives, Marubbio explains Cameron's movie as an attempt to blend together Antimilitary Imperialism, Environmentalism, Pro-Nativism and Indigenous sovereignty as a means to criticise the notion of Manifest Destiny and the imperialist nations' relationships with indigenous people.<sup>9</sup>

What may attract the reader to this analysis is that the movie was analysed based on its historical context. To put it simply, the movie is considered as an abbreviation of given events which have occurred during or just after the year of its production. Thus, Marrubio spotlights

on what have surrounded the movie's production or what might have influenced its director to produce it. However, what can really hold our attention here is the fact that Marrubio -despite being a Western film critic- considers the movie as a torch in the hands of indigenous people by calling their attention to the ramification of the Western expansion on their lands and cultures.

Jaan Van Genneken (2015) approaches the movie from the angle of the implicit messages it really targets to convey. According to him, *Avatar* is simply a set of catapulted real-world events related to Imperialism, Neo-colonialism and extension into distant space and into the far future. Throughout his analysis, Genneken refers to the military intervention in Pandora by recalling several historical events such as the meddling in the oil-rich countries like Nigeria and Venezuela. Moreover, he assumes that *Avatar* as a war and action movie, trends -as the majority of the American movies do- to promote enlistment for military services overseas. In addition, it tends to glorify the Western technological superiority as well as to demonstrate the American dominance over the entire world.<sup>10</sup>

The impression Genneken has on the movie stimulates our curiosity to read between lines the message (s) introduced in his analysis. Subsequently, we as readers are invited in a reflexive way to wonder whether the movie critic sympathises with the Americans or the natives. To clarify, Jaan Van Genneken initiates his analysis of the movie by putting emphasis on two principal aspects. He starts by comparing some particular scenes of the movie to real world events, then he moves to introduce the real message the American movies in general and *Avatar* in particular, tend to transmit. In the same context, the attractive point in these two aspects is that they both share the idea that humans in general and Americans in particular - regardless of other species and other nationalities- are the centre of existence. By this, the expressed thoughts in Genneken's analysis open the doors to several interpretations about his ideological inclination. In a word, Genneken, from all that have been cited above, takes *Avatar* as a reflection of Americanism.

## **2- Issue and Working Hypothesis:**

From the previously cited works in our research, one can notice that the majority of critiques carried on Cameron's *Avatar* have dealt with the movie from a thematic perspective. They were mainly interested in themes related to colonial and racial discourse. It is undeniable that these analyses provide a renewed perception of the different themes surrounding *Avatar*. Yet, this does not mean that these critiques are free from any lacuna. In our humble opinion, critics have overlooked substantial points in the study of the movie, like the interference of ideological elements and the socio-political context of the filmmaker with the movie narrative.

To this, the main objective of our dissertation is to provide an ideological and political interpretation of Cameron's *Avatar*. Our attempt through this work is to analyse the anthropocentric vision of nature contrasted with the recent vision advanced by Gaia concerning human relation to nature. We aim also to explore *Avatar*'s reflections upon U.S capitalist ideologies regarding environmental degradation. We finally tried to explain the role of ecological utopia in the movie in promoting the protection of earth ecology. To accomplish our purpose, we rely on Mannheim's key concepts about ideology and utopia introduced in *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (1949), mainly in the chapter "Ideology and Utopia".

## **3- Methodological Outline:**

Our dissertation starts with a general introduction in which the research problem is identified. It is followed by a brief review of literature carried out on the movie. The Methods and Material consist of a presentation of the theory as we intend to deploy, and a brief synopsis of the movie. The Results section presents the findings. The Discussion section is devoted to three main chapters. The first one explores the concept of Anthropocentrism

juxtaposed with Lovelock's Gaia as both reflected in the movie. The second one is concerned with the manifestation of Ideology and Technotopia. The last chapter deals with Ecotopia and its function as a counter ideology in the movie. Finally, the work ends up with general conclusion.

#### **Endnotes:**

1 Mathew Flisfeder, "Cinema, *Ideology, and Form. In: the Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek's Theory of Film*". Palgrave Macmillan, New York.2012.

2 Jael Ragowan, "*Crave For Dystopia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*", (MA-Thesis, The Professional Master Film Studies Faculty of Humanities, Amsterdam University, 2016)10-15.

3 Gerd Bayer, *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in Contemporary American Cinema: Utopian Studies*, (Pennsylvania: Penn state university press, 2006), 537-541.

4 Frances Pheasant-Kelly, *Fantasy Film Post 9/11: Shock and Awe: Terror, Technology and the Sublime Nature of Cameron's Avatar*, New York; Palgrave Macmillan, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137531285>

5 Ibid, 163

6 Ibid, 163

7 Marek Paryz, John R. Leo, *The Post-2000 Film Western Contexts, Transnationality, Hybridity: Decolonizing the West: Analysis of Avatar With Twist* Palgrave, London Macmillan,167 <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137531285>

8 Ibid, 169

9 Ibid, 169

10 Jaap van Ginneken, *The Enduring Strength of Hollywood: The "Imperial Adventure" Genre and Avatar*, accessed May 25<sup>th</sup>, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv65sxh2.9>

## **II- Method and Materials:**

### **1- Method:**

It is clear that the material selected to explore the concept of Ideology and Utopia in science fiction cinema is James Cameron's film *Avatar* (2009). To fulfil our purpose within a theoretical framework, we make call to Karl Mannheim's book *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to The Sociology of knowledge* (1949) with a special emphasis on the chapter entitled "Ideology and Utopia".

As a pioneer in the field of Sociology, Mannheim introduced "The Sociology of Knowledge" as a sociological theory whose key purpose is the analysis of the connection between knowledge and society. For him, the appearance of any individuality in an intellectual activity is nothing than a manifestation of the social position held by the individual.<sup>1</sup>

To support this view, the "Sociology of knowledge" was intended to study the dependence of outlooks, theories and doctrines on the "social position of the knower"<sup>2</sup>. In other words, the theory aims to demonstrate that whatever human beings believe they know about the world; their knowledge and beliefs are, according to the sociology of knowledge, overpoweringly bound by the outlook they inherited by the force of their social position.<sup>3</sup>

Mannheim also aims to examine the correlation between ideas or thoughts and the historical setting in which these ideas are produced. For Mannheim, the historical setting is a valuable tool to understand the origins of knowledge. Michael Freeden states that "Karl Mannheim realised it was a feature of any social environment to influence the thought process of human beings and moreover, that knowledge was a co-cooperative process of group life"<sup>4</sup>. This confirms that knowledge is socially constructed and the body of individuals' behaviours are to be interpreted in relation to the position they hold in their social context.

In chapter “Ideology and Utopia”, Mannheim explains how our perception of the world is never absolute, but rather constructed as absolute by the dominant group in society. He claims “[t]here is implicit in the world “ideology” the insight that in certain situations the collective unconscious of certain groups obscure the real condition of society both to itself and to other and thereby stabilises it”<sup>5</sup>. Accordingly, ideology stands for the outlook of the ruling elite that recognises the ongoing order as ideal by concealing its flaws to assure its perpetuation. Mannheim furthermore distinguishes between two meanings of the term, particular and total perception of ideology. He states that:

whereas the particular conception of ideology designates only a part of the opponent’s assertions as ideologies—and this only with reference to their content, the total conception calls into question the opponent’s total *weltanschauung* (including his conceptual apparatus), and attempt to understand these concepts as an outgrowth of the collective life of which he partakes.<sup>6</sup>

The particular conception refers to the set of idiosyncrasies, such as lying for personal interests, as ideologies. The total conception is concerned with the overarching “world view” or “total mental structure” of either a social group or a temporal epoch. The latter influences the way particular individuals interpret their world.

Mannheim introduces the concept of “Relationism” to refute the notion of “autonomous knowledge” and designates that all thoughts are influenced and linked to the historical situation of the intellectual actor. By relationism, Mannheim rejects the existence of “absolute truth”. He rather claims “such a system of thought is possible and valid only in a given type of historical existence, to which for a time, it furnishes appropriate expression”<sup>7</sup>. By this, the truth we formulate is only absolute in relation to a given condition. When the condition changes, the truth ceases to be in harmony with it.

While Mannheim refers to ideologies as a means used by the ruling class to maintain the existing order, he also introduces another concept “Utopia”. He defines the latter as the body of thoughts that transcend reality or “wishful dreams”, yet clarifies that “only those

orientations transcending reality will be referred to us as utopian, which when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at that time”<sup>8</sup>. This explains that the utopian thoughts are those which inspire the collective action of opposition group aiming to transform the existing order. Utopia, just like ideology, is a mental fiction which does not reflect the true nature of a situation. It rather provides a reasonable and persuasive system of ideas to bring about changes in the predominant state of affair and transform the society. “Utopias” are often generated in the mind of oppressed groups to allude to the prominent order as unfair and discriminatory<sup>9</sup>. By this, the existing order looks to those oppressed groups -advocators of a new order- as “utopians”, whereas the advocates of a new order look to those representatives of the existing order as living an ideological imagination.

Mannheim claims that ideology and utopia are the two faces of the same coin. Both are mental fiction created by two competing classes whose primary motive is power. On the one hand, the group in power tends to maintain it by describing the actual existing order as the absolute and ideal one thus, needs no change. That is called the ideological thought. On the other hand, the group aiming to reverse the existing order tends to demonise the ongoing order by describing it as biased; thus, needs to be changed. That is called a utopian thought which operates as a counter ideology since it seeks to alter the prevailing social order or “topia” created by the ideological thought.<sup>10</sup>

By exploring Mannheim’s philosophy and concepts, we intend to assert that James Cameron’s *Avatar* is a socio-political manifesto which reveals some facts of the society in which it is produced. We likewise want to affirm that the movie reflects upon the prevailing mentality and thinking of the 21<sup>st</sup> century which is marked by industrialisation, rapid economic growth, and mass consumption fostered by capitalist ideologies. We eventually aim to demonstrate that the movie operates as a utopian instrument rather than an ideological one.

## 2- Materials:

### The crew of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009):

- **Script:** James Cameron
- **Direction:** James Cameron
- **Cinematographer:** Mauro Fiore
- **Production design:** Rick Carter, Robert Stromberg and Martin Laing
- **Special photographic effects design:** Steve Ingram and Wita Digital
- **Special photographic effects supervision:** Joe letteri
- **Animation:** Andrew R Jones, Paul Kavanagh and Richard Baneham
- **Editing:** James Cameron, John Refoua and Stephen E Rivkin
- **Music:** James Horner
- **Costumes design:** Mayes C.Rubeo and Deborah Lynn Scott.

**Cast:** Sam Worthington (Jake Sully), Zoe Saldana (Neytiri), Sigourney Weaver (Dr Grace Augustine). Stephen Lang (Colonel Mile Quaritch), Giovanni Rimisi (Parker Selfridge), Michelle Rodriguez (Trudy Chacon), Laz Alonso (Tsu'tey), Carol Christine Hilaria Pounder (Mo'at), Wes Studi (Eytukan).Dileep Rio(Dr Max Patel).

James Cameron's *Avatar* is an adventure epic in outer space, written in 1995 and cinematographically realized in 2009. The movie is a blend of science fiction and fantasy genres, directed and edited by Cameron. It is characterised by a thematic elasticity which reflects upon several world issues during the period of its production. Issues related to the struggle of indigenous populations worldwide to gain cultural recognition, and to the imperial invasions of strong societies over weak ones to exploit their resources. However; it seems that the movie is much concerned with the worst predictions of today's environmentalists regarding the ecological crisis caused by Industrialisation and cotemporary Capitalism. The



movie sets in 2154 and tells the story of a human colony established on a distant planet called Pandora. The humans are seeking after the extraction of a raw material “Unobtainium” to solve the resource crisis on earth. However, their plans are resisted by Pandora’s inhabitants called the Na’vi, whose village is resting upon the deposit of the rare ore the humans need. To solve this problem, colonel Quaritch sends ex-Marine Jake Sully out to the Pandoran wilderness using an avatar -a remote controlled hybrid body that will allow Jake to breathe in the poisonous air of the planet- to gain the trust of the Na’vi and convince them to leave their territories. As Jake discovers the new world of the Na’vi, he falls in love with one of their woman called “Neytiri”, who teaches him the values of her race. As Jake starts to see the world through her eyes, he realizes that this world should be saved before humans destroy it as they did with their home planet earth.

This scenario mirrors most of the capitalist ideologies and the intervention of capitalist corporations in indigenous people’s lands to exploit their resources and thus, destroy their habitat and environment. As a response to this issue, Cameron implements “ecotopia” or the ecologically perfect world of Pandora as a way to reflect upon the flaws of those ideologies as well as to mobilize humanity to save earth’s ecology. These interpretations are actually inspired from Mannheim’s concepts of “ideology” and “utopia”.

#### **Endnotes:**

- 1- Edward Shill, *Ideology and Utopia by Karl Mannheim: Twentieth-Century Classics Revisited*, accessed July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20024190>.
- 2- Ibid, 85
- 3- Ibid, 85
- 4- Michel Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University press: 2003), 12-13.
- 5- Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, Trans Luis Wirth and Edward Shills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD, 1949), 36

6- Ibid, 50

7- Ibid 76

8- Ibid 173

9- Hacene Benmechiche,” *Utopia and Dystopia in BNW and NEF*”, 31.

10- Ibid

### **III- Results:**

Throughout our approach and analysis of Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), we have deduced that Cameron articulates the modern philosophies and some of the ideologies standing behind environmental degeneration in the contemporary world. We have ultimately learnt that Cameron responds by creating an Ecotopia so as to demonise the ideology and Technotopia advanced by the ruling class. These inferences have been made possible by the assistance of Karl Mannheim book *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (1949), particularly the chapter "Ideology and Utopia". Mannheim explains that ideology or thought is socio-historically constructed. Through this, we understand that the movie narrative and characters' personalities are reflections of the dominant mode of thought influencing Cameron in the real world situation.

In the first chapter, we conclude that the movie carries out a contrast between anthropocentrism, as the early legitimizing philosophy of humans' abuse of their natural surroundings, and Gaia theory which refutes human centrality through a series of scientific evidence showing the necessity of a symmetrical relationship between humans and their environment for the sustainability of life on earth. Next in the second chapter, we came to the conclusion that movies are born from the ideologies of the period in which they are produced. Cameron's *Avatar* reports about U.S. among other Western, capitalist ideologies which promote private enterprise, mass production, industrialisation and technological advancement as the ultimate way to reach the ideal life "Technotopia". In the last chapter, we concluded that *Avatar* is an Ecotopian movie with a utopian longing whose main purpose is to unveil the flaws of the ruling ideology regarding the environmental destruction. The ecological utopianism is purposefully implemented by Cameron to: denounce the ideologies of capitalism, bring about positive change in the existing order, and most importantly fuel our mobilisation to mitigate global warming and ecological crisis.

Finally, one can argue that the modern conditions of Earth are widely resonating through ecological media, particularly science fiction and fantasy movies. Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) is a utopian movie which stresses the urge to reconsider capitalist policies relation to environment and humans' relation to nature in general.

#### **IV- Discussion:**

In this section of our paper, we discuss the issue of Ideology and Ecotopia in *Avatar* in the light of Mannheim's theory developed in *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (1949) with an emphasis on the chapter "Ideology and Utopia". In the first chapter entitled "*Anthropocentrism and Gaia theory in Cameron's Avatar (2009)*", we explore the humans' relation to nature within an anthropocentric discourse. Then, we demonstrate how Cameron rejects this latter through the endorsement of Gaia notion in the movie. This chapter juxtaposes the tradition of Enlightenment placing humans as sovereign over nature with the scientifically constructed theory Gaia claiming humans' fate is dependent on the fate of other species. The second chapter entitled "*Ideology and Technotopia in Cameron's Avatar (2009)*" deals with the influence of U.S. ideology upon Cameron and *Avatar* narrative alongside the analysis of the myth of Technotopia. It is about the dark side of U.S. capitalist ideology celebrating economic growth and technological development so as to reach utopia, while obscuring the ecological crisis they trigger. The last chapter "*Ecological Utopianism in Cameron's Avatar (2009)*" discusses the utopian thought of Cameron implemented in the movie. The movie's purpose is to re-orient humanity from an anthropocentric vision of the world to an eco-centric one in which ecological sustainability is at the pedestal of humans' interests.

## **Chapter One: Anthropocentrism VS Gaia in James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009)**

### **1- Introduction:**

In pre-modern age, prior to the emergence of individualistic attitudes that accompanied the introduction of modern industrial methods of production, and long before the widespread of the notion of progress instigated by Enlightenment, man conceived himself as an integral part of nature and spiritually linked to it. This view reinforces the conception of nature as an enveloping, ordering and unifying process that assigns each of its species, sustains their living and provides the principles of unity to the whole diversity of the world<sup>1</sup>. We can ultimately summarize the pre-modern view in the one that idealised the cooperation with nature and the respect between all living forms.

This conception was soon rejected by enlightenment philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Both divorced man from nature, reduced the latter into a mere storehouse of physical entities to be exploited and made into human's private property and benefits<sup>2</sup>. This modernist endorsement of 'conquest of nature' is highly supported by "anthropocentrism". Centuries later, James Lovelock introduces the Gaia theory in "Gaia hypothesis" as a reaction against the anthropocentric principles advanced during Enlightenment. In this chapter, we demonstrate how Cameron's *Avatar* juxtaposes between the anthropocentric vision of human's relation to nature and the one advanced by the Gaia Theory.

### **2- Anthropocentrism: Definition, History, and Development:**

Anthropocentrism refers to the belief that human beings are the most significant entities in the world. That is to say human beings stand as the cornerstone of existence. Basically, in the anthropocentric point of view, nature is seen in term of its capital value to human. And this ultimately, implies that humans are unique with regard to other aspects of existence.<sup>3</sup>

From a philosophical perception, anthropocentrism is defined by the discourse from which it emanates. Indeed, it becomes complicated to be defined as it has tended to be used interchangeably with “humanism”, “speciesism” and “homocentrism”. Although the concept was defined ontologically, ethically, and epistemologically, the three interpretations share the premise that human being is privileged over nonhuman. In this light, Aristotle, maintains that “all animals must have been made by nature for the sake of man”<sup>4</sup>

One of the most dominant responses to the ancient question of the human being’s role in existence is “anthropocentrism”. The initial premise of anthropocentrism takes its roots from Biblical statement in Genesis in which God said:

Let us make men in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild animals and all the creatures that creep along the ground.<sup>5</sup>

On this understanding, some tend to sanction a privileged role for humans. While the spread of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam meant that anthropocentrism held sway for centuries and, indeed, continue to hold sway over much of the globe, anthropocentrism’s influence was strengthened in the modern period by others who tried to justify it from a secular premise. An important thinker in this respect is Rene Descartes who, in the second of his “Meditations on First Philosophy”, takes off from the method of doubt established in the first meditation to argue that, because he doubts and because doubting requires a being that thinks which, in turn, requires a being that exists, thinking proves his own existence and essence. With this, Descartes establishes humans’ cognition as the foundation of all else and so secures a privileged place and role for it.

Years after Descarte’s assumption, Sartre famously claims that God is replaced by Men. A God, who creates all things including humans, is disallowed by Sartre. By doing so, the atheistic move of Sartre legitimises a little human God and establishes anthropocentrism: “The best way to describe the fundamental project of human reality is to say that man is the being whose project is to be God”.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, humans are created in the image of God,

thereby ensuring that they have a special status and hold sway over all else created, thereby reaffirming the centrality of human being.<sup>7</sup>

In overall, Anthropocentrism has marked the end of the pre-modern vision of nature. In the modern world, nature is viewed as a standing reserve for state and human extraction. This perception eventually paved the way for the emergence and development of contemporary state systems and policies such as capitalism and colonialism. *Avatar*, for instance, echoes clearly the outcomes of the anthropocentric vision of nature in what regards environmental degradation. Indeed, the Resource Development Administration and its crew are vivid examples of how nature is considered a mere storage of resources to be exploited by humans for their personal benefits regardless the ecocide and genocide this exploitation process may include.

The kernel of *Avatar's* story centres on the journey of earthlings into a lush planet "Pandora" to extract a raw material "unobtainium" -regardless of the mass destruction they cause to its ecosystem- to solve a resource crisis on earth. In the early scenes of the movie, the administrator Parker Selfridge explains to the scientist Grace that:

This is why we're here .Unobtainium. Because this little gray rock sells for twenty million a kilo. No other reason. This is what pays for the party. And it's what pays for your science. Comprendo?.<sup>8</sup>

He later reveals his anthropocentric vision of nature claiming "What the hell have you people been smoking out there? They're just. Godman. Trees".<sup>9</sup> This shows that parker perceives the vegetal life as being dispensable for ecological sustainability. For him plants and animals are simply created to serve the interest of humans as they are privileged over non human creatures. As the movie progresses colonel Quaritch explains to the corporation agents that:

The hostile believe that this mountain stronghold of theirs is protected by their deity [laughs at the room]. And when we destroy it, we will blast a crater in their racial memory so deep that they won't come within 1000 clicks of this place ever again.<sup>10</sup>

By this, Quaritch reveals his determination to lead a military assault against the Na'vi to secure the mining process of Unobtainium. Just like Selfridge, he mocks on the Na'vi sacred belief in nature. This scenario is actually reminiscent of similar events in our world. The Resources Development Administration in the movie just like the West in the real world has exhausted their countries' resources, thus intervened military elsewhere to mine them. An outstanding example is Africa. Just like Pandora, the continent has witnessed devastating waves of Western imperial extension disguised in the mythical "civilising mission" and bringing "the torch" to what they call "the darker spot" on earth. Actually, this "White Man's Burden"<sup>10A</sup> pretext of Western invasion hides the true intention of mining processes of gold and meddling in oil rich countries like Nigeria, Libya, and the Amazon.

Again, *Avatar* echoes interestingly the threats facing aboriginal societies posed by mining and logging activities conducted on their territories. It is important, however, to note that these projects are presented as an opportunity to bring development to indigenous people. Similar to Omaticaya tribe in the fictional world "Pandora", tribes in the Amazon rainforest of Peru, Brazil and Paraguay where most of indigenous people live, are at imminent risk of extinction as loggers and oil companies invade their territories<sup>11</sup>. In 2012, the Survival International -human right organization- urged the Brazilian government to stop the logging industry in the Awà tribe as well as the genocides endured by its members. The Awà is one of the nomadic hunter-gathering tribes left in Amazon .Their troubles began with the inauguration of European Economic Company (EEC) to extract the iron ore deposits in the Carajas mountain<sup>12</sup>. A scenario that bears resemblance with the Na'vi whose Home Tree "Eywa" has been bombed by the Resource Development Administration (RDA) to extract the unobtainium that lies beneath it.

*Avatar*, therefore; sheds light on these environmental vulnerabilities as the outcome of the pervasive philosophies of the modern age, mainly anthropocentrism. It has enhanced humans' progress at the expense of their physical world and other species. Modern societies are



depleting their natural resources and threatening the biodiversity of their ecosystem on the grounds of economic interest. It becomes then evident the more modern societies pursue rapid economic growth, the more they disregard environmental concerns.

### **3- The Gaia: an Anti-Anthropocentric Theory**

While anthropocentrism implies the dominion of man over other living forms and his right to satisfy his desires and interests, the Gaia theory comes exclusively to refute such argument. The scientific theory was formulated by the chemist James Lovelock and co-developed by the micro biologist Lynn Margulis in 1970. It was initially received with hostility. However; in 2004 the theory proved to be fruitful and started to gain support. The name of the theory was suggested by the novelist William Golding to signify the earth goddess in Greek mythology, yet this does not mean the theory is mystical. It is instead a pure scientific construct. It is important to note that the early inkling of the theory came at the time Lovelock was working at the NASA, seeking methods to detect life on Mars. The theory emerged as way of explaining why Earth's atmosphere, unlike others planets, contains high levels of nitrogen and oxygen thus, suitable for life.<sup>13</sup>

Among the major claims the theory holds are “earth and all creatures on it constitute something akin to a vast living being” and “earth is a self-sustaining organism and all species that constitute it have their vital place and purpose”<sup>14</sup>. The theory defended this view by appealing the “Part-Whole Thesis” which claims “no parts of a living being which do not constitute the whole being can have much intrinsic value as the being itself has”. By this, the Gaia theory discredits the anthropocentric view of humans' centrality. It rather explains that humans well being is tightly intertwined with the fate of other species. Lovelock asserts further that all the living and non living elements on earth evolved together as a single living system which, in its entirety has the power to maintain our planet as fit and comfortable habitat for life. Indeed, the Gaia system is believed to be the global regulator of temperature,

atmospheric content and ocean salinity<sup>15</sup>. In this respect, the living system of earth is analogous to some extent to the working of any human body in which all the constituting organs are involved in its optimal functioning.

Let us take the example of atmosphere. In its early years, earth atmosphere was mostly carbon dioxide due to its emission by volcanic eruptions. Bacteria produced nitrogen-an inert gas-and photosynthesising plants produced oxygen-a reactive gas. The former gas keeps oxygen levels balanced so that it does not fuel. Meanwhile oxygen supports life on earth. Ever since, the atmosphere contained the suitable amount of the two gases to support life on earth. Overall, these processes prove the intertwined connection between organisms constituting earth working all together in natural cycle to keep the earth hospitable for life.<sup>16</sup>

In 2006, Lovelock introduces the “Revenge of Gaia” in which he warns humans eloquently about the disruption they caused to earth sustaining mechanism due to the damages done to the rainforest and planetary diversity. He argues that earth or “Gaia” will fight back through floods and global warming to readjust and become less habitable by humans.

To sum up, the Gaia theory does not only reject humans’ stewardship over nature, but provides also compelling evidences that earth sustainability is related to the interdependent relation between its constituents including species and human beings. The theory offers, likewise, bold insight into the environmental crisis brought about by humans’ disruption of natural cycle of life on earth.

#### **a- *Avatar* (2009): The Revival of Environmental Consciousness**

The ideas surrounding the Gaia theory were weaved out into the mainstream of cinema as an attempt to rehabilitate the relation of humans to their environment and ultimately reconstruct the harmonious link between man and his biosphere. As it has been already discussed by James Lovelock, *Avatar* features the Gaia-like network on the planet Pandora- in which all the organisms have the ability to connect<sup>16A</sup>. Indeed, it is that unique energy

produced by Pandora's bio neural system and that special link between the Na'vi and their biosphere that mirrors the concept of earth's Gaia. In a given moment Grace Augustine-the leading colonialist scientist- draws from Lovelocks' theory to explain to the earthmen that the relation between the Na'vi and their environment is not a pagan voodoo, but a biologically explained process. She presents the scientific explanation as follows:

What we think we know is that there's some kind of electrochemical communication between the roots of the trees, like the synapses between neurons. And each tree has ten to the fourth connections to the trees around it. And there are ten to the twelfth trees on Pandora. [...] it's more connections than the human brain. Get it? It's a network. It's a global network and the Na'vi can access it.<sup>17</sup>

In the early scenes of the movie, when Jake experiences his first Avatar link, he expresses his happiness for the simple contact of his bare feet with the soil. The Avatar body turns to be the means by which Sully overcomes his disability and revives the physical contact with land, not because his legs are paralysed but for the reason that "there is no green left on earth anymore"<sup>18</sup>. Jake' statement is emblematic of both the need of each human being to connect with earth and of the bleak reality on earth.

Later when the movie progresses, we are given many references to the way mother earth is mistreated. An illustration of Sully addressing "Eywa", Pandora's Gaia equivalent, "sees the world we came from, there is no green there. They killed their mother and they will do the same here", yet Neytiri clarifies: "Our great mother does not take side, Jake. She protects only the balance of life"<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, in the closing scenes Gaia comes alive and supports the Na'vi to achieve victory over the disruptive forces of humans. The Gaia manifests clearly in the movie when Eywa answers to his call, she sends all the creatures to help the Na'vi.

#### **b- Gaia Endorsement:**

Unquestionably, the most evocative scenes of Na'vi interconnectedness with Pandora's ecosystem are underscored by Na'vi anatomy. The tall blue humanoids are able to connect

with all the species on Pandora through their tail, a hair-like extension of their nervous system that has living tendrils. The Na'vi tail allows the 'tsaheylu' or the bond and contributes to the impression of a tightly knit ecosystem as an integral part of the daily life of the Na'vi. This ecological harmony manifests more noticeably during the ritual in which Na'vi engage in a collective connection with their tree of souls "Eywa". The spectacle transcends when pulses of light trace the pathway of energy from Eywa to the Na'vi's bodies. The evocative imagery of nature nexus repeats itself along the movie. Of course this is purposefully foregrounded and idealized for audience appreciation.

At another level the, the unified ecosystem of Pandora is celebrated through allusion to indigenous people. The Na'vi physical appearances, mainly the markings on their faces and the hair braids, remind the spectators of the tattoos and body painting of American Indian tribes. The Na'vi, just like many indigenous people, live in total symbiosis with nature and regard with disdain any interference with the modern world. In this light Sully's explains to imperialist:

They're not going to give up their home. They're going to make a deal. For what? Lite beer? And blue jeans? There is nothing that we have that they want. Everything they set me out here to do is a waste of time. They are never going to leave the Hometree.<sup>20</sup>

Once again the ecological refinement of Pandora becomes more appealing when juxtaposed with the impoverished scenes of earthlings' disconnection from the natural world. On Pandora, each one of the earthlings is imprisoned in his capsule, giant robots and mining equipments. Furthermore, the Resource Development Administration fortress exhibits a grim and gloomy place with a lot of armour, metal and most advanced technological weapons. Therein, the dichotomous editing in *Avatar* urges us as spectators to take position where emotions can be awakened. Indeed, as spectators we can hardly be insensitive to the beautiful landscape and biological diversity and to the dangers that threaten their sustainability. Thus

we merge with Pandora spectacle and identify ourselves with the Na'vi's intense interconnectedness. Cameron stresses the incentive motive of *Avatar* as the following:

I'm not trying to 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[...] I think the film can do that by an emotional reaction.<sup>21</sup>

We understand from Cameron's statement that the power of the artificial natural beauty of the movie operates through a massive use of therapeutic romantic representation of nature to appeal audience's emotions and identification with the dreamful fictional world created.

#### 4- Conclusion

Cameron's *Avatar* follows the development of societies through history with close intention to the impact modernity had on the natural world human beings inhabit. In one hand, the movie sheds light of some manifestations of anthropocentrism as the major philosophy brought by Enlightenment placing human beings at the centre of existence. *Avatar's* narrative illustrates implicitly how human beings- along anthropocentric view- have depleted their planet's resource and made the survival of Earth and its constituent species in peril. On the other hand, the movie refutes humans' stewardship over nature by creating a fictional world "Pandora" in which the functioning and sustainability of its ecosystem rely heavily on a tight interconnection between the Na'vi, fauna, and flora. Interestingly, this thread is inspired from James Lovelock theory-the Gaia- in which scientific evidence show that Earth functions as a super organism in which all of its living creatures have their vital place and purpose in sustaining earth habitability.

By this, we understand that earth is not made for mankind, but mankind for Earth and ultimately all living species have an equal share in what Earth offers and equal responsibility for its safety. The Gaia endorsement is achieved through massive use of magnificent imageries of natural beauty displaying Na'vi's bond with their environment, along the grim depiction of humans' isolation from nature, and their confinement in the most developed

machineries of the modern world. Of course, the juxtaposed worldviews of pre-modern societies with modern ones invite us as audience to side with the view which is more emotionally appealing and pleasing.

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## **Chapter Two: Ideology and Technotopia in Cameron's *Avatar* (2009)**

### **1- Introduction:**

It is extremely difficult to make a verdict about the ideological stands of James Cameron. Once *Avatar* was released, most commentators positioned this science fiction as a radical movie vilifying the U.S. capitalist ideologies and blasting against consumerist societies which go beyond the pale in depleting natural resources. These societies are making the organic symbiosis of our earth in peril. Others however; were sceptical of the innocence of the movie and classified it as patriotic movie supporting white man superiority and glorifying U.S. military power. To this, this chapter will be devoted to discuss the idea of ideology and its manifestation in Cameron's *Avatar*.

### **2- Ideological Manifestation in *Avatar*:**

In most dictionaries, ideologies are defined as a set of beliefs, especially one held by a particular group, which influences the way people behave. They can also be the set of ideas that an economic or political system is based on.<sup>1</sup> In Mannheim's philosophy, ideology is viewed as a mode of thought which aims to veil the real conditions of society thereby stabilising the shared social reality so as to serve the interests of the dominant group in a given society i.e. maintain the social order. He explains further that "this mode of thought will always strive in accordance with the psychology of interests"<sup>2</sup> and in both perception of ideology -total and particular -" opinions, statement, propositions and systems of ideas are not taken at their face value but are interpreted in the light of the life situation of the one who expresses them"<sup>3</sup>. These two latter statements explain how thoughts are formulated to function in favour of those who hold them and also how these thoughts are influenced by the social conditions of the subject who expresses them. It is equally important to note that Mannheim is a historicist who believes in the notion of relationism "we must realize once and



for all that the meanings which make up our world are simply a historically determined and continuously developing structure in which man develops and are in no sense absolute”<sup>4</sup>.

By this, we deduce that Mannheim rejects the existence of any absolute truth in a social and historical context. He, instead, explains that they are those who are satisfied with the existing order -mainly the ruling elite- who tend to describe the situation as absolute and ideal so as to maintain power and minimise opposition. It is then the social determination that gives a certain outlook a distinct truth and accuracy regardless of its weakness and flaws. Mannheim accordingly assumes:

The concept ideology reflects the one discovery which emerged from political conflict, namely, that ruling group can in their thinking become so intensively interest-bound to a situation that they are simply no longer able to see certain facts which would undermine their sense of domination”.<sup>5</sup>

#### **a- Capitalist Ideology Reflected:**

*Avatar* demonstrates well how capitalism is able to shape the way we perceive our place in the world. As a socio-political and economic system, it embodies the philosophical belief that self interest and competition, not cooperation, should pervade every aspect of our lives. This system was advanced by Adam Smith -known as the father of capitalism- to set a social organisation based on perfect liberty and private enterprise<sup>6</sup>. This vision of a society where individuals are following their self interests without state interference is expected to lead in the direction that may bring foreseeable beneficial results for the society. In other words, capitalist ideology make us believe that the free market and the pursuit of self-interest benefit consumers more than producers since competition between individuals leads to mass production, thus making products more affordable for instance.

Actually, the movie unmasks the dysfunctions of capitalism the dominant class want to conceal. A prevailing example in the movie is the undeniable tension between maximisation of individuals’ welfare and a sustainable and healthy environment. Indeed, the relational structure of human beings to their environment under capitalist system is conditioned by the

concept of ownership<sup>7</sup>, the already discussed belief of man as a sovereign over nature and all other living species.

In *Avatar*, Cameron succeeds to allude to the darker side of capitalist ideology of private ownership and profit maximisation in regard to environmental crisis of our contemporary world. The Resource Development Administration, due to a resource crisis on earth, intervenes in a distant planet “Pandora” and destroys its fauna and flora only to procure a valuable substance “Unobtainium”. In this light, Grace explains: “They bulldozed a sacred site on purpose, to trigger a response. They’re fabricating this war to get what they want.”<sup>8</sup>. The corporate entity in the movie is a vivid example of several capitalist corporations all around the world which seek to procure resources for profit even if this operation ends up with wars and destructions.

The Na’vi’s situation is akin to the native community of Bristol Bay in Alaska which is in permanent danger due to the Anglo America and Rio Tinto’s gold mine copper mine. The same threats are faced by indigenous communities in Philippines due to illegal nickel mining in Mindoro Island<sup>9</sup>. It is also worthy to mention that indigenous people are considered as passive agents in formal capitalist economy which explains the disrespect and vulnerabilities they endure by most corporation managers. Back to the movie, when the negotiations with the Na’vi to leave their territories failed, Quaritch resorts to secure the mining operation using violence regardless the amount of casualties this act will cause: “I can do it with minimal casualties to the indigenous. We’ll clear them out with gas first. It’ll be humane. More or less.”<sup>10</sup> Quaritch declares to Selfridge.

## **b- Parker Selfridge and Colonel Quaritch: Archetypes of Western Capitalist Society:**

In *Avatar*, Parker Selfridge, the corporate administrator of the Resource Development Administration describes the Na'vi as “They are fly-bitten savages that live in tree” and stresses in one of the most appealing scenes:

This is why we're here. Because this little gray rock sells for twenty million dollar a kilo. That the only reason. This is what pays for the whole party, and it is what pays for your science. Those savages are threatening our whole operation. We are on the brink of war and you are supposed to be finding a diplomatic solution”<sup>11</sup>

Parker as the antagonist in *Avatar* illustrates well Mannheim's notion of particular and total ideology. As an individual, his world perception and system of thought are shaped first by his interests. His ideas and representation are “regarded as more or less conscious disguises of the real nature of the situation, the true recognition of which would not be in accord with his interest”<sup>12</sup> and likely these same ideas and thoughts emerge from the collective life situation of the individual. This is to say Parker is influenced by the “Weltanschauung” or “world view” of his group and epoch to which he belongs. He is an epitome of individuals living an industrial age under capitalist system in which the individual self-worth is measured by his economic output. The above statement explains how Parker distorts the real reason for mining “Unobtainium” claiming the operation serves to procure the needed money to sponsor humans' science. In fact, he tells lies to sustain his interests, power and position in the corporation.

Once again, the character Colonel Mile Quaritch evokes an interesting point in Mannheim's philosophy. The latter states “to-day we have arrived at the point where we can see clearly that there are differences in modes of thought, not only in different historical periods but also in different cultures”<sup>13</sup>. This explains further that the individual's mind and its function are only instances of the objective spirit which means the culture in which they are born. Quaritch stands as a model of the Western culture or civilisation which is

proclaimed objectively superior to other existing ones. He did not hesitate to lead the military assault on the Na'vi and their Home Tree triggering massive destruction only to obtain the “Unobtainium” just because they regard those Na'vi as inferiors and unable to protect their civilisation. Actually, Quaritch's decisions remind us of George Bush administration. The later engaged in war for oil in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. In one of the scenes of the movie, Quaritch replays the same statement of Bush when he invaded Iraq: “Our only security lies in pre-emptive attack. We will fight terror with terror.”<sup>14</sup>

This legacy of Western superiority has its cultural roots in colonisation and transatlantic slave trade. Europeans for instances constructed their identity as white and imagined themselves as more developed and humans compared to the dark skin, “other” including both Africans and aboriginal groups whom they dominated. These ideologies of human evolution serve to justify the violence against this “other”<sup>15</sup>. In brief *Avatar* clearly articulates the inherited ideologies which inform the two antagonists' behaviour.

### **c- Economy, Politics and Environmental Decay:**

*Avatar* takes place in the year 2154. Obviously, the prophetic message of the movie invites us to think about current environmental crisis of our world and the eventual degeneracy of life on earth. Without doubt, we are aware of the contemporary environmental problems including global warming, resources depletion, and the precipitous decline of biodiversity yet, very little is done to tackle these issues seriously. These symptoms of environmental decay should not be regarded as purely physical and calling the intervention of environmental experts, they are instead problems related to human attitude, desires, expectation and behaviours.

It is arguably agreed that the rapid increase of population resulted in dramatic increase in resources and energy consumption especially since the Industrial Revolution. However; it is the emergence and development of capitalist world economy and short term patterns of

decision-making which are to be blamed. The former -along the fundamental dynamic of endless growth- allowed the unrestricted exploitation of natural resources. The latter encompasses all the decisions exhibited by government, companies or individuals which place greater emphasis on short-term profit than ecological sustainability. In this context, two recent world events may be provided to illustrate the issue discussed:

In 2017, Donald Trump has announced the withdrawal of United States from the Paris Conference of Climate Change-an international treaty aimed to reduce the emission of carbon dioxide responsible for global warming. The treaty required all countries including major carbon emitters to reduce their emission of CO<sub>2</sub> and green house gases<sup>16</sup>. China, India and the United States announced their endeavour to invest in low-emission technologies and climate resilient development.

In a speech in the white House garden, Trump reverses the Obama's administration policies to reduce domestic carbon emission and advances the reasons of his country withdrawal. Indeed, he states "the deal subjects American citizens to harsh economic restriction", and "restrict industrial activity leaving in millions of families trapped in poverty and joblessness"<sup>17</sup>. One can argue that Trump policy is making American industry, thus economy at the pedestal of his interest no matter how hostile this decision can be for the environment and life sustainability on Earth. In a striking sentence he states himself an environmentalist and the United State as having the cleanest air and water, probably, to refute any charge attributed to the second larger greenhouse emitter.

The second illustration concerns the devastating fires which have been ravaging the Amazon forest lately. The Amazon, the largest and most bio diverse rainforest which produces 6 percent of planet oxygen and stores great amount of carbon dioxide, is being burnt intentionally for economic purposes. In a study conducted by the Brazilian government, there were 80 percent more fires in 2019 than there were the year before. This accelerating rate is fundamentally connected to the change of Brazil political leadership. Indeed, just after the

election of Jair Bolsonaro as president, there were remarkable shifts in the policy concerning the preservation of the Amazon. During his electoral campaign, Bolsonaro promised to weaken the Amazon environmental protection and open up the rainforest for economic development<sup>18</sup>. This displays the extent to which humans' relation to Earth has been materialized by the economic policies.

The fires grazing in Amazon for days are subject of Brazil's business lobbies which seek benefits in destroying and burning large areas in the Amazon for farming, mining and logging. It is estimable that large cleared areas by fires are most of the times used to graze cattle, also known as cattle ranching, an activity which makes Brazil the largest exporter of beef with a total of 20 percent of total global beef export<sup>19</sup>. This led us to conclude whenever politics work in favour of economic interests, which is generally the case, environment, is consequently the one to be at stake. In this, Cameron's *Avatar* has been successful in far seeing the impact of the growing business industry on the environmental sustainability.

### **3- *Avatar* and the Myth of Techno-Topia:**

The revolution in science, technology, and industrial production that took place in Europe during the 17<sup>th</sup>, the 18<sup>th</sup>, and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>20</sup>, catapulted the human existence to a completely renewed world based on science and technology. A world in which Men's desire to reach a utopian life, and/or at least a better place to live in, topped. The term "Technotopia" in this case, stands as shorthand of utopia Men seek to reach. The former complex concept "techno-topia" then, refers to the ideal place where everything is run with technological precision and convenience<sup>21</sup>. This can be exemplified by the contemporary societies which have become increasingly accustomed to the modern technological appliances. Indeed, technology, over time, received optimistic perception with regard to the benefits it grants to humanity. Thus, considering modern technology as the backbone of contemporary civilisation is not an unexpected thing.

However; if we consider technology in the modern world as a coin, then the pioneer role it plays in the development of humanity and the conveniences it offers to the modern individual stands as the first side of that coin. Whereas; the unintended consequences inherited from the misuse of technology is, in consequence, the other side of the same coin.

With the development of the new technological commodities, the human greed is evidently stimulated to have access to all that may alter his present life and make it comfortable. Machines, the products of technology, enable humans to manufacture cheaper stuff. Consequently, mass production, in this way, becomes inevitably more than a necessity. In the same context, the philosopher Lewis Mumford writes, “Every theoretic innovation, no matter how innocent in intention, automatically multiplies the number of practical products – and, more significantly, profit-making wants.” In short, technology separates us from the natural world by diverting our focus from natural to human-made wonders.<sup>22</sup>

From this, an important question arises. Where does all that hyper-production land us? In a snowball effect, mass production -mainly in the military field- leads to the intensification of arms race between the different powers of the globe<sup>23</sup>. Unfortunately, the consequences are tragic. We need just to refresh our memories to see to what extent arms race, caused by the technological advancement of course, is harmful. Actually, it gave birth to imperialist movements which led in their turn to the inflammation of wars on earth. In our personal point of view, the WWI, WWII, and the different colonisations in the last few centuries, are vivid examples of these sorrowful consequences.

In addition to this severe destruction humanity has suffered from since the appearance of new technologies, environment has also taken part in the list of these victims. Technology is in fact the cause of the collapse of environment. It has disrupted the harmony in which our ancestors were living in with nature. Through the misuse of technology, we are poisoning our air and drinking water, poisoning ourselves and wildlife with pesticides, and quite literally trashing the oceans. We are rapidly depleting non-renewable resources like fossil fuels and

rare earth metals and stripping renewable resources like forests, aquifers and fisheries faster than they can regenerate.<sup>24</sup>

In short, one can notice from all that has been mentioned above, the contemporary world depends on the facilities of technology in a hope to reach the utopian life dreamed of. However, this hope is reversed by the defects technology contains. Hence, the utopian life tended to be reached through technology remains a myth and turned in contrary to a dystopian one.

Although, *Avatar* was produced thanks to the innovative contemporary technologies, it seems to condemn harshly technological advancement of the current world. Indeed, James Cameron's *Avatar* echoes clearly the butcheries committed against humanity and earth in general. Through *Avatar*, James Cameron allegorises the humans' excessive exploitation of resources on earth by drawing analogy between "Unobtainium" and "Uranium" that America abused of. As Cameron said in an interview, "*Avatar* is about imperialism in the sense that the way human history has always worked is that people with more military or technological might tend to supplant or destroy people who are weaker, usually for their resources".<sup>25</sup>

In *Avatar*, we are introduced to Western military dominance and the overwhelming use of advanced technologies. Two outstanding examples are those of Resource Development Administration use of highly sophisticated laboratories allowing the mingling of the humans and Na'vi DNA to create a pure hybrid body "Avatar" able to survive in the poisonous atmosphere of Pandora and ultimately infiltrate the Na'vi society. The second illustration is about the massive destruction of the Na'vi's Home Tree by the application of advanced weapons.





Figure1 <sup>25A</sup>

In figure 2, taken from the movie, appear the advanced military helicopters used to shell the Home Tree of the Na'vi. It shows in fact, the shock and awe campaign used against the home of the "Omaticaya". The fact of destroying the giant tree does not only mean a destruction of the environment, but also a devastating attack to the psyche of the Na'vi. we think the most emotionally disturbing scenes in *Avatar* for many people are those where Neytiri and her mother Mo'at, as well as the other Na'vi, are crying in horror after Home Tree is destroyed, and several Na'vi die, including Neytiri's father.

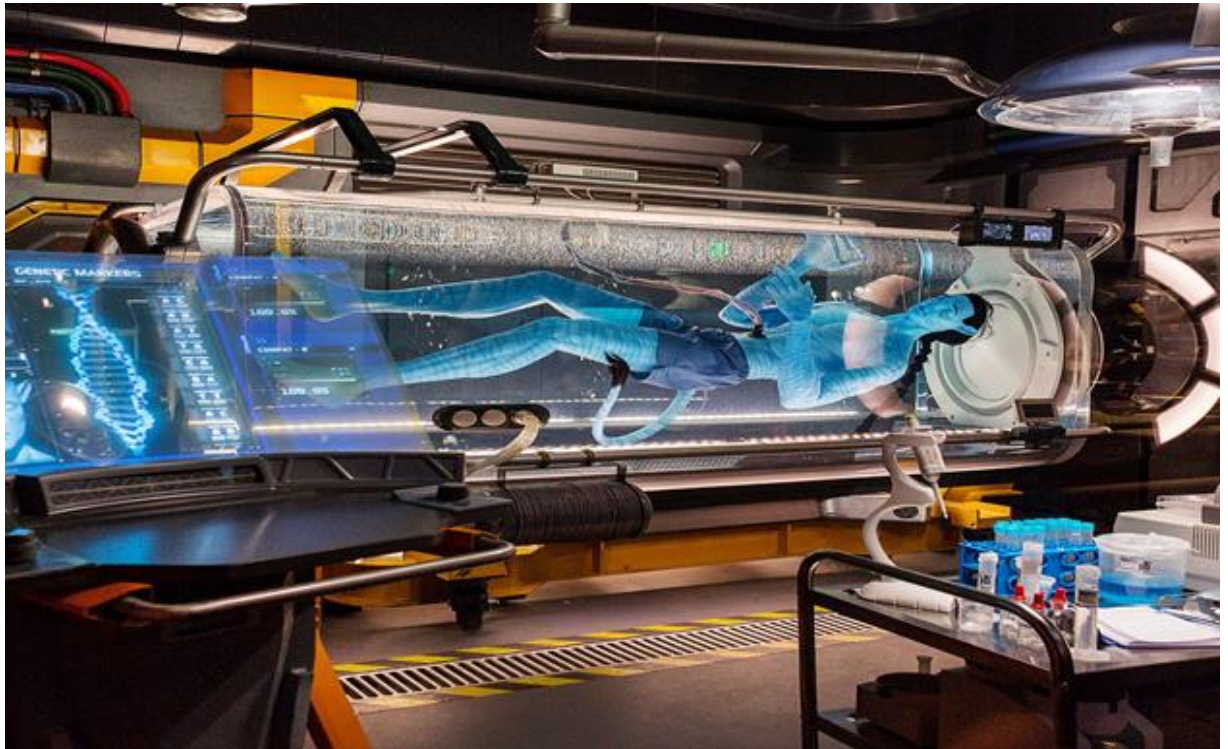


Figure2 <sup>25B</sup>

The second figure shows an Avatar inside an incubator tube. This advanced technology was used by the scientists in the movie to create hybrid creatures, through mixing the DNA of the Na'vi and humans, for the unique reason to spy and negotiate with the natives to leave the floor for the humans to exploit their territories.

In overall, *Avatar* portrays the technologically-induced butcheries so as to unveil the dark side of technology. Throughout the different scenes of the movie, technology was clearly taken as a carrier of serious risks threatening life sustainability and human life ultimately. Therefore, one can assume that rather than enriching the quality of human life, technology diminishes it. In other words, *Avatar* was released not only to problematize the excessive use of resources which has led to their depletion but, to highlight also the misuse of technology. Consequently, *Avatar* draws parallels between Pandora and earth to show the contribution of technology in the human well-being which is dramatically transformed to a contribution in the human traumas. In a word, *Avatar* portrays technology as the stimulator of humans' dystopian life rather than being the pioneer of the utopian one.

#### 4- Conclusion:

Following the analysis of Cameron's *Avatar* we realize that the movie narrative reflects upon the dominant ideologies of its time and those of our current world. Mannheim defines ideology as "those complexes of ideas which direct activity toward the maintenance of the existing order"<sup>26</sup>. The movie showcases this notion with reference to the neoliberal or capitalist ideologies which promote economic growth, privatisation, and less state intervention in economic affairs as the ultimate way to bring progress to the society, while obscuring the broad exploitation of the natural environment and the imminent ecological crisis it causes. In *Avatar*, The Resources Development Administration stands as an outstanding example of the various capitalist corporations worldwide which venture and invest in natural environments, and end up with committing both ecocide and genocide for the simple quest for economic interests. Once again, Mannheim explains the mentality of those in power "the conceiving and thinking subject is prevented from becoming aware of incongruence of his ideas with reality by the whole body of axioms involved in his historically and socially determined thought"<sup>27</sup>. This view is reflected through the characters of Parker and Quaritch who, as most of the capitalists, live in an industrial age and under capitalist reign. Their worldview is oriented unwillingly -by the force of their social situation- toward the pursuit of their economic interest and accumulation of their capital to prove themselves sufficient and economically active agents in their societies. It is also highlighted that politics most of the time works in favour of economic progress and both disregard environmental protection and sustainability. This case was demonstrated by both Trump and Bolsonaro politics.

The second part "Technotopia" informs how technology evolved from a tool which is supposed to better our world conditions to a means of domination and oppression. Throughout multiple scenes in *Avatar*, great arsenal and advanced technologies are implemented to gain

control over Na'vi territories and exploit their resources and consequently, degenerate their environment. The whole can classify technology as the ideological means by which the dominant group preserves its economic interests.

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## **Chapter Three Ecological Utopianism in *Avatar* (2009)**

### **1- Introduction:**

Apart from describing *Avatar* as a manifesto of political and ideological agendas, it is also an escape for those who feel discomfort with the constraints of their time. It has been stated that a number of fans have expressed a desire to escape their own lives and live on Pandora. It seems that the paradise-like world is created purposefully by Cameron to instil the audience with a utopian thinking and direct their longing toward reconciliation with their environment.

In his book “Hollywood Utopia”, Brereton shows how omnipresent nature and excessive representation of landscapes on the big commercial-cinema screen introduces ecological issues into numerous blockbusters to create a sense of Utopian longing. For him, Hollywood movies first, stage a conflict between technology and the ecological environment, and then resolve that conflict in a way that reinforces the power of nature<sup>1</sup>. It is through creating imaginary reality accessible to the viewers that they become aware of the permanent danger facing nature and the environment. Brereton contends that:

[t]he greatest evolutionary power of human beings is their ability to (re)create in their own mind, if nowhere else, the capacity to transcend the physical limitations of their constructed environment and achieve a form of ecological nirvana, outside the noirish[sic] waste of everyday meaningless existence.<sup>2</sup>

It may be dangerous if we believe that imaginary worlds can replace reality, but it will be more dangerous if we live without these faculties. Utopian thoughts are an important catalyst to bring about positive change in society. To better understand the role of utopian thoughts, this chapter will be devoted to cover the ecotopian element that underpins *Avatar*.

### **2- Definition of Utopian Thought:**

What is meant or at least understood by utopia is the perfect, yet imagined, society where everything works in order. The word, however, was first coined and popularised by English

Renaissance Humanist Sir Thomas More in his book *Utopia* (1516). More describes a utopia as “a nowhere land, a perfect society in another place, where justice prevails, the people are perfectly content, and where sadness, pain and violence are banned”<sup>3</sup>. In this light, M.H Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham add:

The term utopia designates the class of fictional writing that represents an ideal, non-existent political and social way of life. It derives from Utopia, a book written in Latin by the renaissance humanist Sir Thomas More which describes a perfect commonwealth; More formed this title by conflating the Greek words “eutopia” (good place) and “outopia” (no place).<sup>4</sup>

From this, we understand that the ideal place is actually no place. It is rather a fiction in individuals’ minds and ultimately can never be concretised in real life situations. To gain more insight into the meaning of Utopia and its function, we appeal again Mannheim “Ideology and Utopia”. Mannheim maintains that “the contemporary connotation of the term “utopian” is predominantly that of an idea which is in principle unrealizable”<sup>5</sup>. He explains further that “a state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs”<sup>6</sup> and “only those orientation transcending reality will be referred to as utopian which, when they pass over conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of thing prevailing at the time”<sup>7</sup>. By this, Mannheim presents the key features of a utopian thinking which is practically unrealizable, antagonist toward the real state of affair and whenever it is to be materialised, it definitely reverses the dominant status quo in a given society.

In cinema as in literature, utopian societies are drawn as to interrogate the flaws of the existing reality and ultimately empower people to rebel and take risks for a positive shift. In this regard, Charles Nnolim argues:

Man writes utopian literature, it seems either as a personal revolt against the human condition (ie against things as they are) or in his perpetual search for a heaven on earth- an earth that partakes of the kingdom idea, namely: fullness, richness, manifoldness, satisfying individuality, paradise on earth. Utopian literature has always expressed man’s longing for things as they might or ought to be.<sup>8</sup>



In the case of *Avatar*, Cameron embraces a utopian outlook, by creating a wonderful planet with a healthy environment so as to blast against the destructive environmental policies and neoliberal ideologies that were and still are dominant in the United State of America and other nations. Indeed, *Avatar* demonstrates how private property, and mass production and pursuit of self-interest are bringing about environmental decay rather than bettering human life condition as it is claimed by most of the capitalist nations. The Pandoran world is thus, implemented to challenge the reality drawn by most of the capitalist ideologies. This can be illustrated through the scene when Selfridge addresses to Sully “find out what these blue monkeys want. We try to give them medicine and education. Roads! But no- they like mud” Selfredge statement illustrates how the ideal place the capitalist believe in is rejected by the Na’vi.<sup>8A</sup>

### **3- Relation Between Ideology and Utopia:**

It is obvious that the two concepts hold the same distortion of reality. Ideology invests in altering the real condition and presents the reality as absolute to avoid any resistance or uprising of the oppressed groups. Utopia, however; transcends the reality providing better and wishful alternative, thus jeopardising the “topia” which is “any existing order”. Mannheim holds that:

It is always the dominant group which is in full accord with existing order that determines what is to be regarded as utopian, while the ascendant group which is conflict with things as they are is the one that determines what is regarded as ideological.<sup>9</sup>

This displays that the ruling class is the one which imposes the perception of a social situation or social order as the ultimate one. This perception is consequently accepted as the reality. On the contrary, the opponents of the existing order -generally the lower classes- went into developing outlooks which demonise the “topia” advanced by the ruling class through the use of ideological elements. We conclude that Ideology and Utopia are two polar concepts

which are in permanent struggle for power. When the former is used to maintain the state of affair by presenting reality as the ideal one, the latter provides compelling wish-dreams to dismiss the existing order.

#### **4- Ecotopia: its Manifestation and Function in *Avatar*:**

In a book entitled *Ecotopia. A sustainable vision for a better future* written by Nuno Coelho and Ecotopia team members, Ecotopia is taken as both a physical and virtual concept across multiple platforms exploring the appeal of utopian thinking in envisaging a sustainable and better future for our planet and society<sup>10</sup>. It means that the only difference that exists between utopia which is “a place without significant intrusive or particular characteristics where a social or political organisation is brought to an ideal state”<sup>11</sup> and ecotopia is that the latter focuses its interests to strive for an ecologically ideal place. Otherwise the two are interrelated. On this understanding, Gihan Hanallah and Riham Faragallah claim in their book *THE UTOPIA OF TRADITION* that:

The only true utopia is one where humans are intimately and consciously connected to their physical environment...the only successful utopia would be a sustainable utopia. This would mean a utopia where the intimate and conscious physical connection to the environment is one that fosters the health and continuance of that environment.<sup>12</sup>

In simple words, Ecotopia means the quest for an ecologically ideal place or situation. In his “Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture”, David Landis describes an ecotopian society as one that operates in interactive harmony with ecological systems, with humans and nonhuman nature mutually flourishing<sup>13</sup>. Within the same context, Ernest Challenbach explains that:

But what matters most is the aspiration to live in balance with nature, to walk lightly on the land, to treat the earth as a mother. It is no surprise that to such a morality most industrial processes, work schedules, and products are suspect.<sup>14</sup>

Evidently, Ecotopia believes in collaborative participation in the protection of nature, sustainable progress, and human interdependence with nature.<sup>15</sup>

As these values show, the participation in the process of protecting our environment is the spinal column on which the sustainability of our environment bases. Therefore, Dr Mara-Daria Cojocaru said in this interest:

It is not about that one grand vision, but about education. And by the way, let's get real at some point, let's start while we are seeking consent by means of persuasion, making some real laws, let's use law and politics as real drivers for change. Govern, lead and, most importantly, do lead by example!.<sup>16</sup>

In *Avatar*, the ecotopian values are clearly displayed through several scenes in the movie showing the high respect between Na'vi and other living forms. An outstanding example is Neytiri's reaction after she was obliged to kill the wolves which were chasing Jake. When Jake thanks her for having saved him she replied "don't thank! .You don't thank for this! This is sad. Very sad, only." She adds "all this is your fault! They did not need to die"<sup>17</sup>. Latter on she assumes a prayer posture over the dead animal. By the same token, as the movie progresses, Neytiri -in one of the most significant scenes- teaches Jake Sully how to hunt in the Pandoran wilderness and how to prey upon the dead animal. Jake Sully speaks haltingly, but with feeling, in Na'vi: "I See you Brother, and thank you. Your spirit goes with Eywa, your body stays behind to become part of the People."<sup>17A</sup>

Actually these scenes illustrate the high respect the Na'vi approve for other living forms and their interdependence with fauna and flora of Pandora. Once again, it is noticeable that the Na'vi live in a pandoran world with no technological facilities or economic systems yet, their world is much ideal and perfect than the one of their invaders.



Figure3<sup>17B</sup>

Figure 3 shows the Na'vi connecting to Eywa through their hair extensions. In this scene taken from the movie, the Na'vi are praying for their goddess nature to intervene and help them to save Pandora from the destructive attack of humans. This illustrates the degree to which the Na'vi are dependent to their nature.

Most of Cameron's *Avatar* viewers, both indigenous and non-indigenous, have expressed their delight regarding the imaginary world it portrays. Actually the movie's depiction of the ecological symbiosis of Pandora and its constituent species holds the function of an ecological "utopia". Cameron's ecological world is in practice unrealisable. This fits Mannheim's definition "idea which is in principle unrealisable is utopia" and "a state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs"<sup>18</sup>. This ecological utopianism which transcends reality is actually the eye-opener for humanity. Indeed, this is foregrounded as to unveil the dark side of capitalist environmental policies which are deeply

exploitative and bringing about a serious environmental calamity. Pandora operates as a “utopia” which presents another wishful reality standing against one presented by the capitalist ideologies.

By this, we understand that Cameron paints an imaginary perfect planet to awaken the human awareness about the global environmental struggles.<sup>19</sup> Within the harmonious depiction of Na’vi mode of life and tight relation to their physical world, we as human beings turn eager to rehabilitate our links with nature, and fight back the political policies which threaten its sustainability. In this light, Bolivia President Evo Morales stresses that the movie “depicted the resistance against capitalism and the fight for the environment”.<sup>20</sup>



Figure 4<sup>20A</sup>

Figure 4 shows an extract from the fascinating imaginary of Pandora’s ecosystem where all the plants of the planet are luminescent as a way of communicating with the other species. This shows the extent to which the wildlife of Pandora is ecologically harmonious.



In the last few decades, more of the natural world has been destroyed than in all previous human history. In the last fifty years alone, humans have stripped the planet of a quarter of its topsoil and a third of its forests. A third of earth's resources have been consumed in the last forty years. We are living under the illusion that constant economic growth is possible using our planet's finite resources, but the reality is our irrational use of our planet's atmosphere, oceans, and wildlife, has obliged us to confront the painful reality of our ecosystem<sup>21</sup>.

On this understanding, one can say that *Avatar* echoes the reality of earth before the changes it received over centuries; tries to illuminate the public world view, and sounds the alarm to awake the humanity about the environmental calamities earth suffers from.

A study made by scholars from the University of Zaragoza in Spain claims that the key of the success of James Cameron's *Avatar* lies in its portrayal of the regrettable realities about our environment and the issues it suffers from through the imagined perfect world of Pandora. After its release, *Avatar* left a shared impression in the movie viewers' spirits. Some of the viewers claim that they feel lost after watching it, they wish if they could belong to such perfect world. Indeed, according to this study the increasing awareness about our ecosystem problems -awakened by the movie- gave birth to what some call "The Pandora Effect" or "The Post Avatar Depression"<sup>22</sup>. In sum, the movie stands as both an insight into the reality of earth before the defilement of its ecosystem, and what must earth be at the same time. However; as it is mentioned above, Mannheim indicates an idea is utopian when it transcends reality and provokes a change in the ongoing order. Therefore, the attempt of the embodiment of that idea will never be possible yet, it might at least bring some changes to the existing situation. That is to say that although the imaginary ecotopian world of *Avatar* cannot be in any way transposed in earth, the attempt of the recreation of ecotopia on earth can bring some optimistic results and may mitigate the ecological crisis.

## **5- *Avatar* and Environmental Activism:**

After the release of *Avatar*, the environmental messages it holds boosted in an unprecedented way the waves of activities in favour of our environment. In the last decade, many environmentalists, organisations, and even some governments worked hand in hand to save our ecosystem, our environment, and our mother earth. The protests of “Friday for Future” against climate change which occur in more than 100 countries all around the world since few months are vivid example of this movement<sup>23</sup>. UN, in its turn, organised several summits to discuss the climate change issue. The summit of September 23, 2019 ,for instance, was held in New York to take some realistic actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 45 percent over the next decade, and to net zero emissions by 2050<sup>24</sup>. In the same context, many governments took the initiative to use the renewable sources of energy like sun, wind, and waves. Iceland for example, is in the top of the list of the leading countries in the use of renewable energies with almost 100 percent of its energy come from renewable resources<sup>25</sup>.

Although this mobilisation to make our environment better cannot recall the ecotopian situation of earth again, it brings at least some positive changes and makes our perception optimistic about our future.

## **6- Conclusion:**

Relying on Mannheim’s definition of “Utopia” along with the analysis of Callenbach’s Ecotopia, we deduce that Cameron made use of an ecologically perfect place “Pandora” where the native inhabitants “Na’vi” live in intense symbiosis with other species to reflect about the bleak realities on earth. The ecological longing is achieved through the utopian description of Pandora’s biodiversity and mutual respect between its species. This ultimately comes to awaken humans’ awareness about the imminent risks facing environmental sustainability. Mannheim explains that the truly utopian idea is the one which is revolutionary in nature and brings about change in the ongoing order. As an environmentalist, Cameron

creates *Avatar* so as to promote the virtues of biodiversity and non conformity and challenge the ruling capitalist ideologies which are destructive to nature. We have also learnt through this chapter that the ecological crisis may be dealt with through the espousal of clean energy alternatives such as sun and wind energy which are less damaging to environment.

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This dissertation explored the ideological as well as the ecotopian elements embodied in Cameron's *Avatar* (2009). Throughout the analysis of the movie, we deduced the pro-environmental stand of Cameron and his avowed interest in the global environmental crisis.

In the course of this dissertation, we have shown how the movie's narrative articulates and reacts to the dominant ideologies and philosophies of the modern world. Indeed, *Avatar*, highlights the fragmented relation of humans to their environment and relates this phenomenon to the anthropocentric philosophy and capitalist ideology whose central interest is money. By this, we have learnt that the depiction of Cameron is inspired from the conditions of the contemporary world in which capitalist policies are deeply exploitative of nature.

We have also shown the function of Cameron's *Avatar* as an ecotopia with reference to Mannheim's Utopia. The latter explains the ideas which transcend reality as powerful means to endeavour positive change in the existing order. Thus, Cameron's ecologically ideal place serves to blast against the capitalist policies which are bringing about ecological crisis. His interest is to mobilise humanity to take side with nature and preserve its sustainability. All in all, our analysis of the movie revealed that Cameron's motive urges people abandon the anthropocentric view of their world and adopt instead an ecocentric one which will eventually insure earth and human race sustainability.

At the end of this dissertation, we would like to remind that our study was a contribution to the analysis of the selected movie. Further peace of research may be conducted on this movie in relation to the ideological and utopian elements that it underpins. We suggest that the theme of "Ecotopia" can be extended in another paper with applying the theory of "Ideology and Utopia" to gain more insight into the influence and contribution of utopian movies in the struggle against global warming

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