How humans come to harmony with nature in James Cameron’s ”Avatar” – A case study on worldviews, values and emotions in one of the most popular sustainability tales

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Since the discourse on sustainable development has established itself in public political debate, cultural industry produces sustainability tales which have a broad impact on the reception of these ideas. While most of these tales are told by the means of documentary film, feature films envisioning an alternative sustainable society (or the transition to it) are rather rare. Among those movies with a fictional storyline Cameron’s Avatar [2009] is the most successful production. It presents a science fiction novel featuring Jake Sully, a paraplegic marine who became disabled in a war over energy. Replacing his deceased twin brother on a mission requiring his identical genome, Sully is given the opportunity to become acquainted with a rainforest moon called Pandora and its resident society, the Na’vi. The supremacy of the Na’vi civilisation over humans’ destructive patterns of action is the overall issue of the movie.

Since both the popularity and the logic of construction support the view on Avatar as an exceptional case worth to be studied in order to understand form and function of narratives of sustainable development in popular culture. In my presentation, therefore, I provide a case study (Flyvbjerg 2011) to discuss the formative role of world views and values for the anticipated future of society, may it be catastrophic decline or hopeful beginning or both. I interpret Avatar as a tale of a transition from our growth-driven society to a society that is harmoniously embedded in nature. Based on reflections on cinematic history I take a semiotic approach to analyse the narrative structure of Avatar and the characteristics of both societal dynamics presented in the movie. Based on narrative theory I finally identify the core problems of a pantheistic worldview and its transformative power toward sustainability which are implied in this tale.

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