

Waterscapes in *Avatar: The Way of Water*: A Blue Humanities Perspective on Cinematic Storytelling

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Abstract: This article explores the intricate role of waterscapes in *Avatar: The Way of Water* through the lens of Blue Humanities, an interdisciplinary framework that emphasizes the cultural, ecological, and ethical dimensions of water. By examining the film's portrayal of aquatic environments, this study highlights how waterscapes serve not only as visual backdrops but also as active agents that shape narrative and character development. The analysis draws on material ecocritical theory to investigate the agency of water within the storyline, revealing its significance in reflecting contemporary ecological concerns such as climate change and resource exploitation. Furthermore, the article critiques anthropocentric narratives by emphasizing disanthropocentric perspectives that recognize the intrinsic value of water and its ecosystems. Ultimately, this research underscores the potential of cinematic storytelling to foster greater environmental awareness and advocates for a deeper understanding of human-water relationships in both fiction and reality.

Keywords: Blue Humanities, Waterscapes in Film, *Avatar: The Way of Water* Analysis, Cinematic Storytelling, Disanthropocentrism, Indigenous Knowledge and Water, Aquatic Ecosystems in Film.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Water is not merely a physical necessity; it embodies a complex interplay of cultural, ecological, and spiritual significance that shapes human experience. As the 2021 World Water Development Report asserts, “the fate of humans and water is inextricably linked,” highlighting the profound relational values attributed to water across various cultures (UNESCO, 2021). In this context, cinematic representations of water gain critical importance, as they can both reflect and shape societal attitudes toward this vital resource. James Cameron’s *Avatar: The Way of Water* serves as a compelling case study in this regard, immersing audiences in the vibrant aquatic landscapes of Pandora while engaging with pressing environmental themes. *Avatar: The Way of Water* continues the saga of the Na’vi people and their intricate relationship with their environment.

The film not only showcases stunning visual representations of water but also weaves these elements into its narrative fabric. As characters navigate the challenges posed by both natural and human threats, dialogues such as “The way of water has no beginning and no end” resonate with viewers, emphasizing the cyclical nature of life and the interconnectedness of all beings (Cameron, 2022). This portrayal invites deeper reflection on how waterscapes function as dynamic agents within cinematic storytelling. To analyse these representations, this article employs the framework of Blue Humanities, an interdisciplinary approach that emphasizes the cultural and ethical dimensions of water. Blue Humanities draws on various fields, including oceanography, limnology (the study of freshwater systems), social sciences, and environmental humanities. This multidisciplinary lens allows scholars to critically examine the planet’s troubled seas and distressed freshwaters from socio-cultural, literary, historical, aesthetic, ethical, and theoretical perspectives (Mentz, 2022). As Lovina and Oppermann (2014) note, Blue Humanities promotes disanthropocentric discussions about water ecosystems and engages with immediate water issues through material ecocritical perspectives. This theoretical framework enables a nuanced examination of how *Avatar: The Way of Water* not only depicts aquatic environments but also critiques anthropocentric narratives that prioritize human interests over ecological well-being. This research seeks to explore how waterscapes in *Avatar: The Way of Water* serve as more than mere visual backdrops; they are integral to character development and narrative progression. By employing a Blue Humanities perspective, this

study will analyse the ecological implications embedded within the film's waterscapes, critique traditional storytelling frameworks, and highlight the intrinsic value of aquatic environments in shaping human experiences.

2. Main Body:

2.1 Blue Humanities: Interdisciplinary Approach to Water Studies

- **Definition and Significance of Waterscapes**

Waterscapes are defined as the visual and conceptual representations of water in various contexts, encompassing oceans, rivers, lakes, and even artificial water bodies. They hold significant cultural, ecological, and aesthetic value, serving as vital elements in storytelling across different media. In film, waterscapes are not merely backdrops; they often symbolize deeper emotional states and societal issues. As noted by D'Aloia (n.d.), water can visually convey human desires, dreams, and secrets, eliciting suspense and fear. The significance of waterscapes lies in their ability to evoke complex emotions and themes, making them essential for narrative development. Historically, water has been a potent symbol in literature and art, representing life, death, renewal, and transformation. Its multifaceted nature allows filmmakers to explore a range of human experiences—from joy and tranquillity to despair and conflict. The representation of water can also reflect cultural attitudes toward nature and the environment, making it a critical element in understanding cinematic narratives.

- **Historical and Cultural Contexts**

The portrayal of waterscapes in film is deeply rooted in historical and cultural contexts. Different cultures have attributed various meanings to water based on their geographical locations, spiritual beliefs, and societal norms. For instance, in many indigenous cultures, water is revered as sacred and is integral to rituals and community practices. This reverence contrasts sharply with industrialized societies that often view water primarily as a resource for exploitation. In contemporary cinema, the significance of waterscapes has evolved alongside environmental awareness. Films increasingly depict the fragility of aquatic ecosystems and the consequences of human actions on these vital resources. As such, waterscapes serve as both aesthetic elements and critical commentaries on environmental issues. The duality of water- its capacity to sustain life while also posing threats- makes it a powerful symbol for exploring themes of colonization and exploitation in films like *Avatar: The Way of Water*.

2.2 Understanding Waterscapes in Film

- **The Role of Water in Film Narratives**

Water plays a multifaceted role in cinematic storytelling, often serving as a symbol of life, death, transformation, and conflict. In many films, water represents both a source of sustenance and a site of danger or destruction. For instance, in *Avatar: The Way of Water*, the aquatic landscapes are integral to the narrative arc and character development. The film explores themes of belonging and identity through its portrayal of water as a life-giving force for both humans and Na'vi. In cinematic narratives, water often acts as a catalyst for character transformation. Characters may undergo significant changes when they interact with water-whether through physical immersion or metaphorical engagement with their emotional depths. This thematic richness invites viewers to reflect on their own relationships with water and its broader implications for life on Earth.

- **Visual and Symbolic Significance of Water**

Visually, water is often depicted using striking cinematography that emphasizes its fluidity and dynamism. Filmmakers employ various techniques such as slow motion or aerial shots to capture the beauty and complexity of aquatic environments. Symbolically, it can represent emotional states or societal issues; for example, turbulent waters may signify chaos or conflict while serene lakes can evoke tranquillity or reflection (Mentz, 2022). In *Avatar: The Way of Water*, visual representations of underwater landscapes serve not only to showcase technological advancements in filmmaking but also to reinforce thematic elements related to harmony with nature. The film's lush visuals invite audiences into an immersive experience that emphasizes the interconnectedness between characters and their environment.

2.3 Avatar: The Way of Water - A Cinematic Analysis

- **Plot Overview**

Avatar: The Way of Water, released in December 2022, continues the saga of Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) and Neytiri (Zoe Saldana) as they navigate new challenges on Pandora amidst escalating tensions with human colonizers seeking to exploit its resources. The film introduces viewers to new Na'vi clans who inhabit Pandora's oceans, expanding the narrative's ecological themes while providing a stunning visual experience that captivates audiences.

The plot centres around Jake's family as they seek refuge among the Metkayina clan, who have adapted to life in the ocean. This transition highlights themes of adaptation and resilience in the face of environmental threats. The film explores how familial bonds influence decisions regarding environmental stewardship while emphasizing the interconnectedness between characters and their aquatic surroundings.

- **Visual Aesthetics and Special Effects**

The film employs cutting-edge visual effects to create immersive waterscapes that enhance storytelling. Techniques such as underwater motion capture allow for realistic portrayals of aquatic life and environments (Cameron, 2022). Critics have praised the film's visuals; Roger Ebert noted that

“Cameron invites viewers into this fully realized world with so many striking images.”

This innovative use of technology not only showcases the beauty of Pandora's waterscapes but also reinforces their significance within the narrative.

The visual aesthetics serve not just as eye candy; they are integral to conveying themes related to harmony between humans (and Na'vi) with nature. The stunning underwater sequences evoke a sense of mystery and wonder while immersing viewers in a richly detailed world that feels both alien and familiar.

- **Narrative Themes and Symbolism**

Central themes in Avatar: The Way of Water include interconnectedness, environmental stewardship, cultural identity, and transformation. The film emphasizes the importance of preserving aquatic ecosystems through dialogues such as

“We protect our home,”

which underscores the Na'vi's commitment to their environment (Cameron, 2022). Critics have noted that while visually stunning, the film struggles with narrative depth; for instance, one review remarked that

“the plot is thin and predictable”

despite its impressive visuals (Kain, 2022).

Water serves as a powerful symbol throughout the film—representing life, rebirth, and transformation. As Kiri discovers her unique bond with marine life, viewers witness her journey toward self-discovery amidst themes of ecological balance. This connection between characters and their environment highlights the necessity for humans to coexist harmoniously with nature.

2.4 Blue Humanities Analysis of Waterscapes in Avatar: The Way of Water

- **Ecological and Environmental Interpretations**

From a Blue Humanities perspective, the waterscapes in Avatar: The Way of Water serve as critical reflections on pressing ecological issues such as habitat destruction and climate change (Oppermann & Lovina, 2014). The film's portrayal of vibrant marine ecosystems compels viewers to reconsider their own relationships with water resources while emphasizing the urgent necessity for sustainable practices. The lush underwater visuals not only captivate the audience but also function as a stark reminder of the fragility of these ecosystems, which are increasingly threatened by human activities.

The narrative intricately weaves ecological themes into its storyline, showcasing the Na'vi's harmonious relationship with their environment. As one critic pointed out regarding the film's ambitious scope:

“The movie is too long... but it's hard not to admire its ambition,”

suggesting that despite its narrative flaws, there are significant ecological messages embedded within its framework (Kain, 2022). This commentary aligns with the goals of Blue Humanities, which seeks to provoke critical thought about humanity's impact on aquatic environments and encourages a reevaluation of our responsibilities toward nature.

The film's depiction of industrial exploitation—particularly through the hunting of the tulkun for their valuable brain extract—serves as an allegory for real-world environmental degradation. It critiques corporate greed and anthropocentrism, illustrating how these forces can lead to ecological collapse. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings, *Avatar: The Way of Water* not only entertains but also educates its audience on the importance of preserving natural resources for future generations.

• Cultural and Societal Representations

Moreover, *Avatar: The Way of Water* presents cultural representations that challenge traditional narratives surrounding indigenous relationships with water. The film depicts the Na'vi's profound connection to their environment—expressed through rituals such as

“the way of water has no beginning and no end,”

which emphasizes their spiritual and ecological worldview (Cameron, 2022; Ebert, 2022). This portrayal advocates for a more respectful understanding of indigenous knowledge systems regarding natural resources.

Critics have noted that while *Avatar: The Way of Water* attempts to engage meaningfully with these themes, it often falls short due to its reliance on cliché dialogue:

“the dialogue is laughably blunt.”

This critique highlights an important tension within cinematic representations—while filmmakers strive for authenticity in portraying indigenous cultures' connections with nature, they must navigate potential pitfalls associated with oversimplification or stereotyping.

The film's representation of the Metkayina clan introduces new dimensions to the Na'vi culture, showcasing their unique practices and beliefs related to aquatic life. For instance, their use of sign language underwater and their spiritual connection with the tulkun reflect a deep understanding of their environment that contrasts sharply with the exploitative tendencies of human colonizers. This nuanced portrayal emphasizes that indigenous cultures are not monolithic; rather, they possess diverse traditions and worldviews that deserve recognition and respect (High On Films, 2023).

2.5 Comparative Analysis with Other Water-Centric Films

• Selected Films for Comparative Study

To further contextualize *Avatar: The Way of Water*, this article will compare it with other notable water-centric films such as *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *The Shape of Water* (2017). Each film offers unique perspectives on aquatic environments while addressing themes related to identity and belonging.

Finding Nemo presents an adventure through vibrant coral reefs where family bonds drive character motivations; conversely, *The Shape of Water* explores themes surrounding isolation through its portrayal of an unconventional romance set against an industrial backdrop filled with secrecy. Both films utilize water not only as a setting but also as a metaphorical device that enriches character development and thematic depth.

• Themes and Approaches

In *Finding Nemo*, water serves as both a setting for adventure and a metaphor for parental love and loss; similarly, *The Shape of Water* explores themes of isolation and connection through its aquatic narrative framework (Del Toro & Kraus, 2017). By analysing these films alongside *Avatar: The Way of Water*, this study will highlight how different cinematic approaches can shape audience perceptions regarding critical issues related to conservation efforts or cultural representation.

In addition to thematic parallels, these films also reflect varying cultural attitudes toward water. While *Finding Nemo* emphasizes familial bonds within an adventurous context, *The Shape of Water* delves into deeper existential questions about love and acceptance in a society that often marginalizes those who are different. By juxtaposing these narratives

against *Avatar: The Way of Water*, this analysis aims to underscore the multifaceted roles that waterscapes play in shaping cinematic storytelling and cultural discourse.

3. Conclusion:

In examining *Avatar: The Way of Water* through the lens of Blue Humanities, this article underscores the profound significance of waterscapes as both narrative devices and reflections of ecological and cultural realities. The film's intricate portrayal of aquatic environments not only captivates audiences with its visual splendour but also serves as a poignant commentary on pressing environmental issues such as habitat destruction and climate change. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life forms, *Avatar: The Way of Water* invites viewers to reconsider their own relationships with water and the ecosystems that sustain them.

Furthermore, the film challenges traditional narratives surrounding indigenous cultures and their relationship with nature. Through the Na'vi's deep spiritual connection to their environment, expressed in rituals and communal practices, the film advocates for a respectful understanding of indigenous knowledge systems. However, critiques regarding the reliance on cliché dialogue highlight the complexities filmmakers face when striving for authenticity in representing diverse cultures.

Comparative analyses with other water-centric films such as *Finding Nemo* and *The Shape of Water* reveal how different cinematic approaches can shape audience perceptions about critical issues related to conservation and cultural representation. Each film utilizes water not only as a setting but also as a powerful metaphor that enriches character development and thematic depth.

Ultimately, *Avatar: The Way of Water* exemplifies the potential of cinema to engage with ecological and cultural narratives in meaningful ways. As we confront the realities of environmental degradation, films like this serve as vital platforms for fostering awareness and promoting sustainable practices. By bridging artistic expression with ecological consciousness, *Avatar: The Way of Water* contributes to an ongoing dialogue about humanity's responsibility toward the natural world, urging us to protect the waters that connect us all.

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