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## **A Phenomenology of Pandora** **The subversive potential of embodiment technics in James Cameron's *Avatar***

“When I was lying there in the VA hospital, with a big hole blown through the middle of my life, I started having these dreams of flying. I was free.” - Jake Sully  
*Opening line of Avatar by Director James Cameron*



Jake Sully riding an Ikran in his avatar body (1:12:13)

Avatar is a deeply political science fiction film. A militarized corporation is mining a profitable resource on a distant planet, having exhausted Earth's natural resources. Their exploitation creates tension with the ecology, people, and animals of Pandora. The Na'vi, an indigenous humanoid species, resist the imperial forces, with the Omaticaya clan being the primary group in conflict with the humans. Ultimately, a small group of humans defect from the corporation and allies with the Omaticaya, using the corporation's own military technology to help defeat them.

However, the film offers more than just a critique of imperialism. Through motifs of mobility and touch, it invites a deeper understanding of Cameron's political vision—one that envisions a post-colonial society built on connection and embodied knowledge.

### **Mobility and power**

We are introduced to the human, corporate mission on Pandora through long, wide shots that emphasize the scale and cost of the operation. Hundreds of military-trained personnel are arriving, landing on a runway where resources are being moved from one location to another (Image 1). The business is in full swing. Set in the future, the film reveals that Earth's natural ecosystems have been destroyed, and humanity has come to Pandora as a new frontier. Before the spaceship lands, we see the corporation's excavation site and headquarters—barren, dry,

and desolate, in stark contrast to the lush, vibrant trees and mountains surrounding it (Image 2).



Image 1 (5:06)



Image 2 (3:59)

The military colonel offers his perspective on the planet:

*You are on Pandora, ladies and gentlemen. Respect that fact, every second of every day. If there is a hell, you might want to go there for some R&R after a tour on Pandora. Out there beyond that fence, every living thing that crawls, flies or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat your eyes for Jujubees. (6:39)*

Humans cannot survive on Pandora without technological assistance. In one of the early scenes, as the personnel prepare for arrival, they are instructed to put on their equipment: *“Exo-packs on! Let’s go! Exo-packs on! Remember people, you lose that mask, you’re unconscious in 20 seconds, you’re dead in 4 minutes!” (3:41)*

So why go to such effort, expense, and sacrifice for an operation on Pandora? The answer comes when we first meet the senior corporate figure. The humans are on Pandora for unobtainium, a mineral found underground on Pandora. It’s worth 20 million dollars per kilo on Earth.

Every shot showing humans touching down or interacting with Pandora is abrasive, loud, and uncomfortable. The imagery - close-ups of exhaust fumes, helicopters disturbing animals and plants, and massive, ugly machinery - emphasizes the invasive, imperialist nature of the human operation. They are encroaching, and they demonstrate their power through their ability to go wherever they want (Image 3).



Image 3 (22:43)

Protagonist Jake Sully is brought to Pandora as part of the corporation's "Avatar program". This is the research branch of the business that seeks to understand the planet and the native people through science. It includes efforts to establish cultural connections, including teaching the Omaticaya English. The program includes the creation and use of, "*remotely controlled bodies called avatars. And they're grown from human DNA mixed with DNA of the natives,*" (8:26). Jake is to become one of the avatar operators. Though he is no scientist. He hasn't studied Pandora or the Na'vi, and he has no interest in research. The avatar was originally intended for his twin brother. But after his brother's death, Jake is asked to take his place. Since the avatar is genetically linked to his brother, it should still work. Grace, the leader of the research division and the avatar program, who "wrote the book on Pandora botany," makes it clear that Jake is not who she needs: "*I don't need you. I need your brother. You know, the PhD who trained for three years for this mission?*" She then, referring to the business leaders, adds, "*I mean, they're just pissing on us, without even the courtesy of calling it rain.*"

These three sectors of the corporation - business, military, and research - conflict with one another. Each has a different philosophy about how to interact with the Pandora natives, how to treat the environment, and what is most important. However, as Grace is sternly reminded, they are all funded by unobtanium: "*That's the only reason [we're here]. It's what pays for the whole party. It's what pays for your science. And you're supposed to be finding a diplomatic solution,*" (13:41). Despite their differences, they are all fed by the same hand.

### **Mobility withheld**

The metaphorical hand that feeds the operation is also responsible for Jake Sully's disability. As a marine, protagonist Jake Sully suffered a spinal injury while on duty. His injury made him paraplegic. His mobility is limited because he cannot use his legs. However, Jake is not defined by his disability. It's not until several shots of him that we discover his condition. The earlier shots focus only on his face. And in the first full body shot he is floating in zero gravity (Image 4). It is not until everyone else exits the aircraft that we see his wheelchair (Image 5). Even in the opening quote, Jake refers to a "big hole blown through the middle of my life" rather than to his specific injury. Cameron conceals Jake's injury at first, while still sharing his status as an injured veteran.



Image 4 (2:07)



Image 5 (5:19)

Jake is fully aware that his injury *can* be treated. In the scene you first see his wheelchair, he narrates, *“They can fix a spinal, if you’ve got the money. But not on vet benefits, and not in this economy,”* (5:29). This line is delivered as we take in the scale and cost of the operation on Pandora, highlighting that the country responsible for Jake’s injury is unwilling to provide him the medical care he needs.

Not only is Jake’s treatment denied, but the colonel tries to use it to manipulate him. When the colonel learns that Jake is a marine, he summons him for a conversation in which he asks (or perhaps threatens) that Jake unofficially report to him and gather intelligence on the Na’vi. The colonel tells him, *“I want you to learn these savages from the inside. I want you to gain their trust. I need to know how to force their cooperation or hammer them hard if they won’t.”* (22:50) In exchange, the colonel promises, *“I’ll see to it you get your legs back. Your real legs.”* (23:30). Later, when Jake interferes with the colonel’s plans, the colonel secures the operation and schedules Jake to leave Pandora immediately for treatment. Manipulation presented as benevolence.

### **Forced mobility (displacement)**

The Na’vi exist in a harmonious relationship with other nature and animals on Pandora, of which they understand they are a part. The first sign of human-like life on Pandora is bows shot into the wheels of a tank (Image 6). The colonel describes the Na’vi as *“very hard to kill”* and *“hostile.”*



Image 6 (6:26)

For the corporation, moving the Omaticaya clan from their homeland is a priority. The business leader on Pandora tells Grace, *“Look, look, you’re supposed to be winning the hearts and minds of the natives. Isn’t that the point of your whole puppet show?”* referring to the avatar program. He continues, *“You look like them and you talk like them, then they’ll start trusting us. We build them a school, we teach them English, but after, what—how many years? Relations with the indigenous are only getting worse.”* Grace responds sharply: *“Yeah, that tends to happen when you use machine guns on them.”*

The humans’ goal is to displace the Omaticaya from their ancestral home, a towering tree they call Home Tree, because the largest deposit of unobtainium lies beneath it. If the Omaticaya refuse to leave voluntarily, they will be forced out. This displacement symbolizes American imperialist power exercised through forced mobility.

## ***A Phenomenology of (Pandora) Technics***

As previously discussed, mobility (particularly through expansion and imperialism) is how humans express power on Pandora. However, as also described, humans cannot naturally survive on Pandora. The atmosphere kills them within minutes. To interact with the planet—whether to walk on it, mine its resources, or establish relationships with the indigenous people—humans must rely on technology that enables their mobility and facilitates interaction. The human relationship to Pandora, then, is mediated through mobile technologies.

Most humans use exo-pack face masks, which cover the entire face and connect to a tube and pack that supplies breathable air. Some military personnel operate large mechanical (mech) suits. The user straps into sensors inside the suit that mirror the user’s movements, allowing them to use the mech body as a proxy for their own. Some members of the research division, like Grace and Jake, use the avatar bodies (Images 7-9).



Image 7 (5:30)

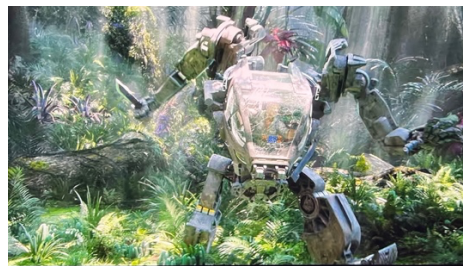


Image 8 (2:34:36)



Image 9 (6:01)

### **Why Jake Sully is different**

The exo-packs, mech suits, and avatar bodies are all mobile technologies that mediate interaction with Pandora. However, there are key distinctions between the technologies and how people use them. This phenomenological exploration, rooted in Don Ihde’s chapter *A Phenomenology of Technics* within his book *From Garden to Earth*, exposes what distinguishes Jake Sully’s mediated relationship to Pandora from everyone else.

*A Phenomenology of Technics* details a framework for describing existential human-technology relations. Ihde is interested in technology's role as a mediator between the human and the world. Using any of the three of the mobile technologies on Pandora is an example of an embodied relation. Embodiment relations augment the subject's perceptive abilities to interact with and understand their environment. Ihde uses the example of eyeglasses, for whom the wearer's visual perception improves. Additionally, "*Embodiment relations are a particular kind of use-context... the technology must 'fit' the use...*" (Ihde, 73). The mobile technologies increase humans' ability to explore and move on Pandora.

The first differentiator of relations is the visibility or transparency of the embodiment technology. The condition of being seen-through is essential. "*...the technology must be technically capable of being seen through; it must be transparent,*" (Ihde, 73). This transparency, and the degree of embodiment, is a spectrum. The exo-packs and mech suits, while they can be seen-through, are also highly visible and obtrusive. The exo-pack suction to the face and the rim likely obstructs peripheral vision. The mech suits require you to climb into them and strap in. They similarly have visual obstructions between the glass windows. The avatar bodies, by comparison, become fully transparent. They allow the driver to breathe and move normally. They bring the subject incredibly close to total embodiment. These affordances grant Jake a different relationship to Pandora than the individuals using exo-packs and mech suits. The avatar body makes the distance between *I* and *world* in the phenomenological representation (*I-artifact*)-*world* smaller.

The second differentiator is what Ihde describes as the "desire which can arise from the experience of embodiment relations," (Ihde, 75). He continues:

It is the doubled desire that, on one side, is a wish for total transparency, total embodiment, for the technology to truly "become me." Were this possible, it would be equivalent to there being no technology for total transparency would *be* my body and senses; I desire the face-to-face that I would experience without the technology. But that is only one side of the desire. The other side is the desire to have the power, the transformation that the technology makes available. Only by using the technology is my bodily power enhanced and magnified by speed, through distance, or by any of the other ways in which technologies change my capacities. These capacities are always *different* from my naked capacities. (Ihde, 74)

All three technologies were developed as weaponry to exert power and control over Pandora. That is present in the application of Ihde's second desire applying to most of the humans, especially the military. The scientists who drive the other avatar bodies have academic and research motivations. They have some to gain from their interactions with Pandora and the Omaticaya, be it publications, prestige, or money. Jake, despite his military past, didn't come to Pandora with a mission.

The desires are not mutually exclusive. Many of the same scientists also express admiration for Pandora and relish the opportunity to experience it through the avatar body. Jake is different from these individuals in another way too.

Separate, but not exclusive from, embodied relations, Ihde defines the hermeneutic existential object relation. As opposed to embodiment, in which the mediating technology augments or expands the perception ((I-technology)-world), the hermeneutic relation allows the subject to see the world through a representation of it (I - (technology-world)). Ihde uses a thermometer as an example. It allows you to know the temperature without feeling it directly. "Instead, you read the thermometer and in the immediacy of your reading you *hermeneutically* know that it is cold," (Ihde, 85). The temperature is *seen* (or read) through the mediation of the thermometer. This is the essential nature of the hermeneutic relation. "A hermeneutic relation mimics sensory perception... but it is a referential seeing..." (Ihde, 85).

While the scientists' avatar bodies are still an embodied relation to Pandora, they use the avatar bodies hermeneutically. Grace and another scientist use their avatar bodies to allow them to gather samples and data on the planet, as well as read scans on other technological devices (Image 10 & 11). The bodies themselves provide data about the Na'vi, as it's built from native genome. They also use them as a research tool for studying the Omatiyaya. This difference between Jake and Grace's uses of the avatar bodies is illustrated by Grace's avatar wearing shoes and human clothing. The Na'vi's direct connection with the ground through their feet is important for how they move through the forest. Grace doesn't use the sensorial experiences afforded by the avatar body to understand the Omatiyaya.



Image 10 (26:21)



Image 11 (26:16)

Hermeneutic is a useful term for generally characterizing the scientists' approach to understanding Pandora and the Omatiyaya. They seek data to quantify characteristics of the planet and understand its functions rather than understand it on Omatiyaya terms. (This is further explored in the sections on the embedded communication network within Pandora, and also demonstrates a general colonial impulse.)

Jake has no academic background for his role as an avatar driver. He hasn't studied Pandora or the Omatiyaya through books. He is, in a sense, a blank slate (or an empty cup). He finds joy in using his avatar body to experience Pandora because he can run around and touch fantastic

wildlife. For him, the use-context of the avatar body is embodiment in and of itself. During his first visit to the forest, the scientists start collecting data and samples. Jake, fully uninterested in their science, wanders off to explore. He encounters beautiful wildlife, which he realizes reacts to his touch (Image 12). This action, the touching of several plants as they shrink down to the ground, is the catalyst for Jake's involvement with the Omaticaya.



Image12 (27:31)

## Mobility and embodiment in the Omaticaya way of life

The Omaticaya are highly adaptable to their environment. They move seamlessly through it with a deep connection to and knowledge of it. Their mobility is central to their way of life. It is also one of the first qualities we learn about them from Grace. In Jake's first trip to the forest, an avatar driver asks, *"So how will [the Omaticaya] know we're here,"* to which Grace replies, *"I'm sure they're watching us right now."*

Grace is right. The first native we encounter is stretching her bow to shoot Jake after he becomes stranded. A seed from the sacred tree lands on her arrow, and she decides not to kill him (Image 13). She instead brings Jake to the Omaticaya's home, and he is chosen to learn their way of life.



Image 13 (32:47)

## Embodied knowledge and learning

The Omaticaya's emphasis on movement is rooted in a greater epistemology of embodied knowledge. Their ways of knowing and connecting with each other and the world are rooted in bodily experience and sensory perception. (In this context, "embodied knowledge" refers to a way of understanding the world through the body and senses, rather than as technical mediation like before. But, as Ihde acknowledges, all perception is mediated and interpretational (Ihde, 93).)

Before the Tsahik (the Omaticaya spiritual leader, as described by the scientists) decides that Neytiri will teach Jake their ways, she tells him, *"It is hard to fill a cup that is already full."* This refers to their previous, unsuccessful attempts at teaching humans about their way of life. But unlike the past avatar drivers, Jake is not a scientist. He doesn't come to Pandora believing he already understands the Omaticaya or their home. Instead, like the Omaticaya themselves, he seeks to understand the world through sensory and embodied experiences.

Neytiri sets out to teach Jake about the Omaticaya way of life primarily through movement. She makes Jake learn to run, jump, and climb smoothly through the forest and how to use Omaticaya weapons. Her lessons are physical: *"With Neytiri it's 'learn fast or die,'" (1:02:19).* When teaching Jake how to use a bow and arrow, Neytiri corrects his form and muscle engagement (Image 14 & 15).



Image 14 (1:01:08)



Image 15 (1:01:06)

Neytiri also encourages Jake to learn about Pandora through touch. She encourages him to tap a small creature to learn how it reacts, much like when he touched the reactive plants before getting lost (Image 16).



Image 16 (1:03:13)

This shot, like many others, is a close-up of Jake's hands and feet. These shots emphasize his tactile interactions with Pandora and mobility through his avatar legs, both of which drive his character growth and motivations.

Grace is somewhat dismissive of Jake and Neytiri's methods. She interrupts Jake's video log to say, *"This isn't just about hand-eye coordination, you know. You need to listen to what she says,"* (1:01:52). This quote, interspersed among footage of Jake and Neytiri running and swinging from trees, demonstrates Grace's non-embodied approach to knowledge. Grace then instructs Jake to *"try to see the forest through her [Neytiri's] eyes,"* (1:01:58), failing to realize that is precisely what Jake is doing. Or the significance of hand-eye coordination.

The Omaticaya have a linguistic emphasis on "seeing." In their first encounter, Neytiri tells Jake that he *"cannot see."* When Jake asks her to team him, she says *"No one can teach you to see."* For Neytiri, this can only be learned through experience, not instruction. Later, a scientist explains to Jake that *"I see you"* has special significance to the Na'vi. *"But it's not just, 'I'm seeing you in front of me,' it's 'I see into you. I See you,'"* (1:00:50). reflects the Omaticaya's belief that perception, and embodied experience, is central to understanding and acknowledging one another.

After regular lessons with Neytiri, Jake narrates, *"My feet are getting stronger. I can run farther every day. I have to trust my body to know what to do,"* (1:01:15). The more he experiences through his avatar body, the less he understands it as a mediating technology. It has disappeared or, as Ihde might say, "withdrawn" from his awareness. The avatar technology is not separate from Jake, it is part of him. They are "my feet" and "my body."

Eventually Jake video logs, *"Everything is backwards now, like out there is the real world and in here is the dream. I can barely remember my old life,"* (1:17:50). Jake's affective experiences in his avatar body come to define his sense of self. This is why, when the colonel secures Jake his mobility-restoring surgery, Jake denies the day-of transport back to Earth. Jake chooses his avatar life over surgery, valuing the embodied experiences Neytiri has shown him over his old life on Earth. For Jake, his time in the avatar body has become more than just regaining the use of his legs; it has come to represent a more meaningful, holistic connection to the world around him.

### Embodiment through Shahaylu

One of the first ways Neytiri teaches Jake about the Omaticaya way is through Shahaylu. Neytiri describes shahaylu as *“the bond.”* It is a connection made between two living creatures through intertwining tendril like sensory organs that come out of the head. For the Omaticaya, these tendrils are located at the end of their braids. Other animals have similar appendages, while some flora—like the Sacred Tree—possess them as well, hanging like leaves or branches (Image 17).



Image 17 (52:37)

After Jake forms his first Shahaylu with a horse-like creature, Neytiri instructs him: *“Feel her. Feel her heartbeat. Her breath. Feel her strong legs.”* (53:00). Shahaylu is an affective experience, allowing Jake to connect with the creature in an intimately embodied way.

For the Na'vi, Shahaylu is also an embodiment technique that expands their perception and mobility. Through shahaylu they can access the embodied experience of animals and the planet. This empathetic bond characterizes the Na'vi relationship of their planet. It is not just a place they inhabit, but a world they experience.

### Eywa and shahaylu as mass communication technology

After Jake is formally accepted into the Omaticaya through a ceremony, Neytiri brings him to establish Shahaylu with their Omaticaya ancestors. They connect with a sacred tree that allows them to hear the voices, or souls, of those who have passed (Image 18). This moment illustrates the interconnectedness of all life on Pandora. It is further explained by Grace, who offers a hermeneutic understanding:

*“I’m not talking about some kind of Pagan voodoo here. I’m talking about something real, something measurable in the biology of the forest... What we think we know is that there is 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... It's a network. It's a global network, and the Na'vi can access it. They can upload and download data. Memories." (1:32:08)*



Image 18 (1:22:32)

Pandora itself functions as a kind of mass communication "technology." The Na'vi, among other animals, possess a sensorial relationship to it. The entire world is connected, and shahaylu grants the Na'vi explicit access to the network.

Eywa is the name for the personification of the planet, or what the scientists refer to as the Na'vi's "deity." Shahaylu isn't the only connection with Eywa, or the Great Mother. Neytiri interpreted the seeds of the sacred tree that landed on her arrow, and later all over Jake himself (Image 19 & 20), as communication from Eywa. This communication directs her not to kill Jake but to bring him back to Home Tree. It reinforces the idea that the planet, and Eywa as its embodiment, is always actively communicating with its inhabitants.

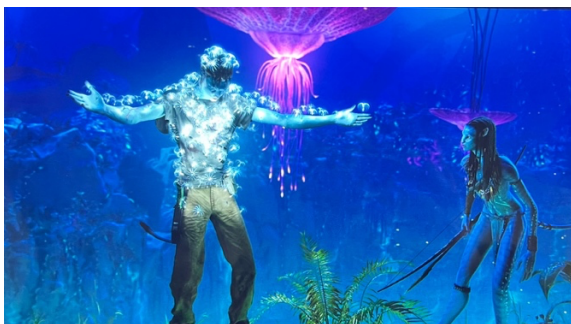


Image 19 (41:14)

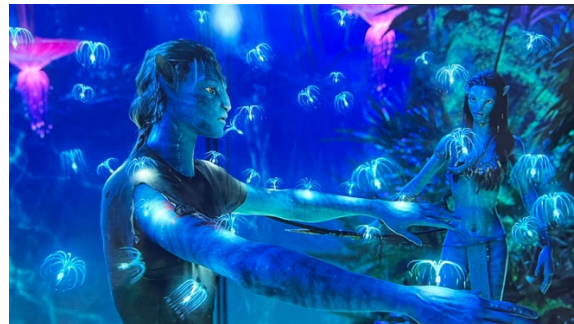


Image 20 41:38)

## Mobility in resistance

The climax of the conflict begins when the humans bulldoze the sacred site where the Omaticaya connect with their ancestors through Shahaylu. This site is strictly forbidden to outsiders, but the humans exercise their power by moving into a place where they are explicitly told they are not allowed. Again, mobility is exercised as a tool for domination.

The humans then attack Home Tree with gas and bombs, destroying the tree and killing many of the Omaticaya. The survivors are forced to flee.

This violent act catalyzes Jake, Grace, and three others. They abandon from the corporation and other humans to side with the Omaticaya resistance. They steal a helicopter, weapons, and avatar link equipment, then head to the flux vortex—a region of Pandora with gravitational irregularities that disrupts human navigational and tracking technology. The humans' advanced technology becomes useless there, and the resistance gains a crucial tactical advantage.

Next, the humans target the Tree of Souls, aiming to break the Omaticaya's connection to Pandora entirely. The final battle takes place in the flux vortex, where the Omaticaya's unique mobility in their environment gives them the upper hand. The Ikran riders—Omaticaya who bond with and ride large flying creatures—play a vital role in the fight. Their deep connection with the land and their ability to fly through the mountains gives them a significant advantage over the humans, who rely on advanced weaponry and tracking technology. In response to the remark, *"We're going up against gunships with bows and arrows,"* Jake retorts, *"Now we know these mountains. We fly them. You fly them. They don't. Their instruments won't work up here. Their missile tracking won't work. They'll have to fire line of sight. If they bring the fight to us, then we have the home-field advantage."* (2:07:29). As Jake's quote suggests, the Omaticaya's connection to the land and ability to expertly move within it becomes the key to their resistance.

Before the attack, Jake asks Eywa for help at the tree of souls through shahaylu (Image 21). He warns Eywa of what human ecological destruction looks like: *"I need to give you a heads up... See the world we come from. There's no green there. They killed their Mother. And they're gonna do the same here... I need a little help here,"* (2:08:38).



Image 21 (2:08:40)

During the battle, as the tides turn in favor of the humans and the Na'vi start to retreat, Eywa mobilizes the wildlife of Pandora, to join them fighting the humans (image 22 & 23). Neytiri is invited to form shahaylu with and ride a tiger-like natural predator. The interconnected planet of Pandora fights as one. Neytiri celebrates, "*Jake, Eywa has heard you!*" (2:21:26). The combined strength of all of Pandora defeats the humans and send them back to Earth.



Image 22 (2:21:35)



Image 23 (2:21:07)

## Affect for the audience

James Cameron masterfully crafts an emotional and sensory connection between the audience and Pandora. This connection that mirrors Jake's own journey. As viewers, we are invited to fall in love with the planet—its lush landscape, glowing forests, colorful creatures. Pandora's visual beauty is more than a movie setting; it becomes a central character in the narrative. This happens through the autonomy of Eywa herself, as well as the motif of touch and interaction between Jake, the Omaticaya, and the wildlife of Pandora.

At times, one could argue that Pandora itself is the true protagonist of the film. Pandora takes the foreground, while Jake Sully's presence in it withdraws into the background. The montages of the Pandora are full of wide shots featuring the landscape, as Jake and Neytiri become small and relatively unimportant to the composition. As Jake grows more connected to the land, so does the audience.

The movie created its own phenomenon, "post-avatar depression" (Cain, 2022). It serves as a diagnosis for the widespread sadness or longing many viewers felt after watching the film—specifically, a longing to experience the world of Pandora, long after the movie ended. Cameron doesn't just transport you to a fictional world, he immerses you in it. Viewers feel as though they are part of it. This is an embodied presence with the film. Watching *Avatar* is not a passive experience. It is an active and emotional one. In this way, the film itself an embodied technic.

## Touch and be touched

James Cameron wants us to touch and be touched. In his *Avatar* world, touch is both metaphor and praxis for empathy, connection, and understanding. He challenges us to feel the world

around us. Jake Sully's use of the avatar body teaches us how to use embodied technology to humbly expand our inner worlds. In his avatar body, Jake *feels* Pandora. He learns through the tactile experience of running, touching, and moving through the forest.

After the humans are gone, the Omaticaya take Jake's human and avatar bodies to the tree of souls. There, Eywa permanently transfers his consciousness and soul into the avatar body (Image 24). It is no longer an embodied technic. It is now just his now his body. The technology disappears, and what remains is Jake's physical presence, completely in tune to the world around him. In a world where technological can increasingly alienate us from ourselves and our environments, Cameron's invites us to consider the subversive powers of touch and movement.



Image 24 (2:35:10)

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