

Representing Displacement and the Displaced in *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022)

تمثيل التهجير والمهجر في أفاتار: درب المياه (2022)

Asma BELAZOUZ ★¹

¹ University of Algiers 2, Algeria Email: asma.belazouz@univ-alger2.dz

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Abstract:

This article explores the representation of displacement and the displaced in contemporary cinema. After outlining Nelson Goodman's theory of worldmaking, the paper illustrates how imaginary worlds are constructed to metaphorically represent the idea by means of referential exemplification using symbols and symbol systems. It argues that systems and components of a film world are dynamically constructed to depict pressing issues in the actual one. It relies on the five-step process of worldmaking, composition and decomposition, weighting, ordering, deletion and supplementation, and deformation, to examine *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022). The article confirms that the film functions as a reflexive symbol itself. It is creatively and aesthetically made to embed the narrative of displacement and the displaced with actual contextual and social structures.

Keywords: Avatar: The Way of Water; Displaced; Displacement; Film World; Worldmaking.

ملخص:

يناقش هذا المقال تمثيل الهجرة والمُهَجَّرين في السينما المعاصرة وهذا من خلال تطبيق نظرية صناعة العالم لنيلسون جودمان كما يوضح أيضا كيفية بناء العوالم الخيالية لتمثيل الأفكار مجازيا عن طريق التمثيل المرجعي وذلك باستعمال الرموز وأنظمة الرموز. يقدم المقال هذه الدراسة السينمائية وهذا بطرح إشكالية أن أنظمة ومكونات عالم الفيلم مبنية للإشارة إلى القضايا الملحة في العالم الفعلي. كما يعتمد الموضوع على دراسة خطوات صنع العالم الخمسة: التكوين والتحلل، الوزن، الترتيب، الحذف والتتيم، والتشويه، لتحليل أفاتار: درب المياه. يستنتج المقال أن الفيلم نفسه هو رمز انعكاسي في حد ذاته صُنِع لتضمين الهجرة والمُهَجَّرين في السينما المعاصرة مع الاعتماد على الهياكل السياقية والاجتماعية الواقعية

كلمات مفتاحية: أفاتار: درب المياه، المُهَجَّرين، الهجرة، عالم الفيلم، صناعة العالم.

Introduction:

Cinema represents the natural world as a site for migration, exile, and displacement. The latter refers to “contexts in which people are dislocated from their original homes, communities, and networks” (Grabska & Clark-Kazak, 2022, p. 5). Displaced characters are forced to leave their homes and live alienated while navigating unfamiliar new terrains. Daniel Yacavone, in *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* (2015), conceived *film world* to identify a space that “provides ‘virtual’ and actual experiences that are at once cognitive *and* immersive *and* ‘sensuous’” (Yacavone, 2015, p. 2). For this end, filmmakers create landscapes to depict this motion along with a loss of the sense of identity and belonging. It is a pressing issue not only relevant to many parts of the world today but intersects with many contemporary film worlds. The dynamic interplay of senses of belonging and nonbelonging, home and absence of home, and identity and loss of identity particularly pronounced in cinema of the displaced articulate expressions of representation. As it successfully encounters reality, expression “is a mode of exemplification peculiar to art” (Elgin, 2000, p. 12) conveying the features of what is metaphorically exemplified. Even though viewers instantaneously engage with the complex and dynamic components of the spaces of displacement, they might as simultaneously question the rules and conventions of the film’s world metaphorically associated with their expressions.

In this sense, narratives of displacement in cinema provide audio-visual descriptions of motions of characters from one space to another depicting a diverse version and vision of their world. Worldmaking, if approached through the analytical study of types and functions of symbols and symbol systems, starts from a world that is already existent and known. The processes of building a world indicate its *remaking* out of others rather than its *making* from nothing (Goodman, 1978, pp. 5-7). Made worlds are therefore not found since “if worlds are as much made as found, so also knowing is as much remaking as reporting (...) comprehension and creation go on together” (Goodman, 1978, p. 22). It is accordingly relevant that fictional worlds within narratives are but visions with a function attempting to present and represent elements of the actual world. Their events are “predicated on cultural rather than material knowledge” (Webb & Webb, 2013, p. 64). Worldmaking is intrinsically social and “cannot do without symbols that represent or embody knowledge of the past, present, and future and have the capacity to circulate in social groups” (Neumann & Zierold, 2010, p. 103). A film world in cinema is inherently social and cultural in nature relying on symbols to represent abstract concepts, ideas, and experiences.

In the scope of film art, this research relies on Goodman’s philosophical, cognitive, and aesthetic insights to help examine film productions as exemplifications of an existing knowledge. It explore *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022) as a contemporary fiction film world made to depict displacement and the displaced. It argues that components and systems of this made world are modes of reference to the actual one. Considering Marsha Meskimmon’s ideas on worlds in art as activators of “the ‘possibilising’ force of imagining” (Meskimmon, 2013, p. 40) and Nelson Goodman’s model of worldmaking, this article attempts to illustrate how the five elements of worldmaking represent the construction of a space for the displaced through a process of imaginative referential exemplification.

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Goodman provides a five-way process of worldmaking that concerns itself with the interrelationships among worlds, or at least between two worlds: the made and the actual. They are composition and decomposition, weighting, ordering, deletion and supplementation, and deformation. He also recognizes “that exemplification involves reference by what possesses to the property possessed, and thus that exemplification (...) is no less a species of reference” (Goodman, 1978, p. 33). A symbol exemplifies the features of what it symbolizes metaphorically. Film aesthetics will be the target of analysis focusing on how they depict displacement and the displaced. This investigation attempts to confirm that art and worldmaking are contributors in the process of social change given that “the new and the different emerge from past and present worlds, re-made, re-seen, re-heard” (Meskimmon, 2013, p. 37).

1. Review of Literature

World makers bring their own visions and versions of the world to audiences through cinema. Film worlds present immersive experiences to viewers who, through active imagination, enter the depicted reality. With emotions that do not involve conscious judgement about the world, film narratives might prompt responses that link viewers to characters (Plantinga, 2009). Film worlds become symbolic and aesthetically communicative and referential. Similarly, Yacavone argues that the immersive nature of the film world is “rooted in first-person, psychological realities” (Yacavone, 2015, p. 167). While he believes these views to be out of the scope of Goodman, he, however, notes that for Goodman “all art worlds remain primarily the vehicle for the articulation and conveyance of semantic contents” (Yacavone, 2015, p. 167).

Petersen and Schramm discussed this as challenging to imagination and representation. They suggest that creating worlds to present historical examples of the theme of (post-)migration and the concepts central to its social consequences to be the role of art, culture and aesthetics (Petersen & Schramm, 2017). Montes follows the same pattern and examines how arts rewrite and interpret Colombian history through cinema. He views forced migration as symbolic displacement people face. He questions the role of characters in fiction with reference to reality in portraying how “the person loses his or her culture, which is full of local practices, family and social ties that break down and that place the processes of individual and collective identity at risk” (Montes, 2017, p. 146). Montes argues that spaces staged in films give us insights about the conditions of the phenomenon. He continues to confirm that “leaving one place and reaching another can be even more violent when the land itself is the specific objective of the violent agents” (Montes, 2017, p. 146). This forms the link between cinema and its context as a place of its selected themes. Through powerful representations, filmmakers build bridges of empathy between the displaced and the diverse new spaces, communities and cultures.

2. Displacement in Avatar: The Way of Water

James Cameron’s (JC) long-awaited sequel of *Avatar 1* (2009), *Avatar: The Way of Water* (AWW) is a 2022 science fiction film that continues to focus on the conflict between the inhabitants of planet Pandora and the people of the skies: humans. Jake Sully, who fully lives as a Na’vi, is the chief of the Omaticaya clan. When humans return to colonize their forest homeland, Jake and his family are forced to seek another space to live. Their presence in Omaticaya would lead the entire clan to

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persecution. Jake, his wife Neytiri and children Neteyam, Lo'ak, Tuk, and adopted Kiri find refuge in the Metkayina clan located in Pandora's eastern seaboard (Cameron, 2022). Their displacement to this sea village is both physical and emotional causing as well as a partial loss of identity, an inability to fully adapt to the way of water.

The Sullys are first physically displaced. They travel through air from their clan in search of another one experiencing along the way a sense of dislocation and disorientation. They begin their journey into the unknown terrains by looking behind at what they are leaving instead of ahead at what they are about to explore. The depicted locations, settings, weathers, and atmospheres symbolize the unfamiliar, unwelcoming and estranging. Although not explicitly explored in AWW, Jake's double displacement seem to represent the link between home and the displaced new space. His first, from human life to Na'vi, consolidates his position as the vessel of movement. He leads his family into another self-conscious displacement metaphorically highlighting the expression of its inherent nature. In the sense, Jake's children's ability to adapt to new spaces is a natural trait. However, this is met with the social implications often associated with displacement involving hostility and anger.

Figure N°1. Neytiri and daughter Tuk looking back at their home village.



Source: (Cameron, 2022, 00:47:04)

However, they are often at the center of conflict and fights with the Metkayina clan children. They associate their loss of belongingness to violence as a symbol of unrooted presence. Their physical displacement is also emotionally charged. Displaced individuals unconsciously transfer their feelings and emotions onto another person or situation. Lo'ak, for example, arrived to the Metkayina space with conflicting emotions of resentment and anger. He first projects his unresolved anger onto Ao'nung who unintentionally led him to face his resentment underwater through symbolically fighting with Akula, a large marine predator. It is only then that his frustration and anxiety due to displacement is reduced. He connects with an outcast Tulkun, a whale-like intelligent creature. Like Lo'ak, this Tulkun is not only rejected by his own species but by the Metkayina clan as well. They both represent the inability to fit within displaced spaces but a natural and inherent connection to the unfamiliar.

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Both physical and emotional displacement cause a partial loss of identity. The Sullys struggle to adapt to a water life that is completely new to them. This is symbolic of the implications of adapting to new cultures and customs displaced individuals experience in the actual world. They can neither defend themselves of this invasive culture as they become part of it, nor be completely oblivious of their own. If so, the displaced would lose their sense of purpose and will to adapt. The Sullys' struggle to fit was doubled with a sense of guilt due to the prosecution of oceanic clans and creatures. Jake recognizes the destructive mission Colonel Miles Quaritch endeavors to complete. The renewed awareness restarted his sense of purpose, but his feelings of displacement are not overcome. The death of his eldest son Neteyam, who expresses his despair and longingness to return home just before his last breath, is representational of a continued sense of displacement and partial loss of identity for him.

Goodman recognizes art as dynamic establishing new conventions through world constructions. In *AWW*, Pandora is highlighted as a space of displacement with representational symbols indicative of the elements to which they reference in the actual world. These features will be understood through the process of worldmaking that provides insights on the design of symbol systems that supply structure for a narrative of displacement.

3. *Composition and Decomposition*

The first process of worldmaking Goodman defines is a twinship between *composition and decomposition*. He states that “worldmaking consists of taking apart and putting together, often conjointly” wholes and parts, kinds and subspecies, and system and components (Goodman, 1978, p. 7). In films, viewers accept to regard the newly composed or decomposed object as a symbol of what it represents. It is this transformed reality that depicts the meaningful world of the creator. In *AWW*, we are presented with different natural landscapes, new species, unfamiliar methods and unseen objects. The chosen objects and their chosen aspects with perceived properties and qualities “cast the object in question in a new light but also stand apart from them as abstracted or otherwise detached” (Yacavone, 2015, p. 100). Through such dual presence of world components in the perception of viewers, elements exist both independently and as metaphoric representations of symbols.

Figure N°2. Jake's first Tsurak ride failure.



Source: (Cameron, 2022, 01:02:05)

Water plays a central role in the unknown space of displacement the Sullys were moving towards. The forced displacement of the family interrupted their structured social life on land consequently leading them to a complete alienating undersurface, the ocean. The Metkayinas are an aquatic species inhabiting a coral reef island. They are physically different from forest inhabitants possessing stronger fin-like arms and tails. The film images compose and decompose the new space using both foregrounding and backgrounding. They are manipulations of visual elements to draw the viewer's attention to the usually imperceptible and unnoticed. Jake's first unskilled ride of the Tsurak is emphasized and brought to the forefront of the screen. Although he tied the riding rope firmly around his wrist, he lost hold of the Tsurak and dived underwater. The camera positions Jake's symbol of failure, his hand, prominently in the frame foregrounding his disappointment. Displaced viewers recognize his frustration due to inadaptability as first-hand life experience.

Figure N°3. Kiri discovering the ocean for the first time.



Source: (Cameron, 2022, 00:58:27)

The ocean life is discovered by means of decomposition as well. Kiri explores the shore and sea life creating a sense of curiosity towards this new and different space. Her reflexive interest in the details of what she examines is often backgrounded in the film. Although camera focus is often emphasizing her curious expressions, it is combined with a significant background of varied-size creatures, cross-path movements, and a larger distance with connected surroundings. All of these decomposed elements set the environment of an unknown new terrain with visually inundating aspects for the exploratory displaced.

4. Weighting

Displaced individuals make sense of their new reality by composing and decomposing its components with emphasis given to some more than the others. This is the second worldmaking process that Goodman identifies as *weighting*. It refers to the way different world components within a system of representation are given varying degrees of importance. Goodman argues that “what

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counts as emphasis, of course, is departure from the relative prominence accorded the several features in the current world of our everyday seeing” (Goodman, 1978, p. 11). In this sense, what is emphasized is dynamically relevant to current systems of representation in order to construct worlds with specific interpretations of reality. One way of weighting in Avatar is giving different textures of the visual composition of the aquatic landscape through lighting.

Figure N°4. Lo’ak fighting the Akula near the Three Brothers Rocks.



Source: (Cameron, 2022, 01:17:01)

The similarities and differences between water landscapes accentuate on the characters’ inability to form a new sense of belonging. The movement of water and the texture of rock formations in the Three Brothers Rocks, where Lo’ak finds himself fighting the Akula, conveys a cooler and darker atmosphere than the usual water landscape near the shore. The underwater minimal use of light casts a deep shadow across the frame to create a sense of tension and fear associated with unknown and dangerous spaces.

Figure N°5. Lo’ak helping the Tulkun after it saved his life from the Akula.



When saved by the Tulkun, Lo'ak wakes up to a surrounding more naturally lighted followed by a warmer texture conveying the newly formed bond characterized by comfort and familiarity. Between characters and audiences, this creates a sense of authenticity and sentimentality weighting on the occasional moments displaced individuals might find comfort in the unfamiliar. They are also arranged in ways that highlight their purposes.

5. Ordering

The process of arranging the different elements of a world into a coherent and meaningful system is known as *ordering*. Goodman states that “worlds of different constructional systems differ in order of derivation” (Goodman, 1978, p. 12). Meaning alters with different orderings of the elements of a film world. For example, Jake was chief of his clan before invaders threatened his family's safety. By means of introducing displacement as a major theme, his abandoning of his chieftainship is a way of reordering. Other nonnarrative orderings involve “the deliberate arrangement of shots and sequences” (Yacavone, 2015, p. 106). In ‘an actor-driven process’, the director's vision on the movement he developed for the Na'vi characters asserts that “the human body has been a source of meaning” (Clarke, 2014, p. 147). JC's films use digital technology and 3D for their expressive value and potentials to depict “the human body as a site of meaning and value” (Clarke, 2014, p. 146). The director highlights the Na'vi characters experiences using a variable higher frame rate of 48 frames per second (fps) alongside the standard 24 fps.

With the alienating and disorienting implications of displacement, characters show a sense of confusion and uncertainty about their environment. This variable higher frame rate technique represents that feeling of displacement related to body motions and experiences. It reflects the construction and ordering of an immersive world that lacks the harmonized continuity spectators expect. They instead suspend their comfort and engage with the unsettling film world about displacement and the displaced. Although this technique requires more frames to be added, other elements could eventually be deleted and edited out of the film world.

6. Deletion and Supplementation

Filmmakers filter the surplus material deleting what is deemed unnecessary for the narrative and film aesthetics. Other material is added and multiplied to enhance reflexive interpretations of representational characters and objects. Goodman identifies this process as *deletion and supplementation* arguing that “our capacity for overlooking is virtually unlimited, and what we do take in usually consists of significant fragments and clues that need massive supplementation” (Goodman, 1978, p. 14). Viewers are provided with a representational visual information to support the film world's metaphorical symbols. In *AWW*, emphasis on family life through dynamic dialogue and its action exemplifies artistic deletion and supplementation. In some scenes, both dialogue and action develop the conflict of post-displacement Jake's family seem to disagree about. They lead phases of opposition between themselves and with the antagonist natives of the Metkayina clan.

On the one hand, conflict is supplemented in the narrative. It is necessary for filmmakers to build tension for it to explode. This is not an exclusive task of dialogue and action but could be generated by foreshadowing. The filmmaker hinted at the outcome of this displacement before characters

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intended it in the narrative. Neteyam's death is anticipated early in the film when he almost dies after ambushing a train full of weaponry. His movement from his sky position, where he was assigned air surveillance, to ground trophy collecting almost cost him his life. That is the first indicator that displacement is the process that would lead not only to his movement from his homeland to a new one but also indicative of his untimely death.

On the other hand, Jake does not confront the subject of displacement. He is unable to admit his own weaknesses that symbolize his unwillingness to sacrifice his Na'vi family life and return to the Jake he used to be. When he first arrives to the Metkayina clan, he is apologetic, overprotective, and in denial of his Toruk Makto spirit. His journey as leader of the Na'vi undergoes a deletion process. In a 3-hour duration film, Jake's 15-year post-heroic legacy is remembered and reviewed in less than 5 minutes. In the narrative of displacement, it was this history that needed to be forgotten to live a peaceful life in a new space and assimilate into its unfamiliar way of water. As a matter of survival, displaced individuals escaping political persecution, for instance, would only find it possible to adjust by forgetting the past. It is true to Jake that when "one life ends, another begins" (Cameron, 2022, 47:17-47:21). His urge to protect his family provided enough drive to accept another drastic change in his way of life.

7. Deformation

Goodman considers changes made, in their symbolic and aesthetic sense, for corrections or distortion *deformation*. It is the final principle in worldmaking which "may be taken to refer to artistic versions and variations where aspects of content, theme, subject, or story remain constant from one (earlier) work-world to another (subsequent) one" (Yacavone, 2015, p. 18). Representations from one version of film world to another are dynamic and subject to deformation. The Na'vi species of the Omaticaya clan are no longer the most depicted as in *Avatar I*. The Metkayina clan is inhabited by Na'vi who have evolved to better fit an oceanic environment. Their existence enlarges the biosphere of Pandora and presents new landscapes that are visibly hospitable and become spaces of displacement.

Figure N°6. The Metkayina leaders' first encounter with the Sullys.



Source: (Cameron, 2022, 00:50:46)

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The differences between the two clan inhabitants emphasize the implications of displacement. The Metkayina is an all-new introduced clan in AWW. Contrarily to tree dwelling Omaticaya Na'vi, they are physically different with visually distinct feature adequate to sea life. Their skin shade is a greenish blue comparing with the vibrant blue of the Sallys which allows them to blend with their aquatic surrounding. Their translucent extra eyelids, larger chests, fin-like hands that extend to their forearms, and stronger tails help them both underwater to respectively protect their eyes, hold their breaths longer, swim with greater endurance, and steer with better maneuverability. These distinctive features of the people displaced individual encounter in the new spaces are symbolic and representative of actual world experiences. Viewers recognize the similarities of differences noticed between people of cross ocean countries. Deformation, thus, changes appearances to convey images distorted by displacement.

8. Conclusion

Avatar: The Way of Water (2022) is an aesthetic remaking of displacement and displaced experiences. Its film world portrays spaces created for this representational purpose. In accord with Goodman's five step process of worldmaking, this article established that distorted events within the narrative are expressive of the dissociation and associations displaced individuals make of the new spaces. It has been argued that this helps them discover their new surrounding and familiarize with strange territories. Displaced individuals would eventually find specific elements that are more favorable to connect with. The significant object or situation becomes a strengthening foundation to their existence. They could arrange it or rearrange it in their life in the manner they see fit multiplying its components and/or filtering what is deemed unnecessary. The constitutive elements of the film world that structure the narrative are familiar to audiences. Their aesthetic exemplification is rather unique and dynamic and recreates experiences of displacement. The film is also a description of reflexive symbols and symbol systems that are creatively and aesthetically embedded with the narrative and concordant with contextual and social structures. The function of this film, and perhaps of art in general, is to bridge between the displaced individuals and the hosting nation. It constitutes the core of the principle of Goodman's general theory of symbols. The cultural approach of this theory is in practical application in world filmmaking. With ongoing reflection and refinement of the storyworld from the first *Avatar* (2009) to the second (2022), displacement experiences within Pandora emphasize the significance of implementing actual world contexts to challenge the taken actions and the desired outcomes.

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