AVATAR

EVALUATING A FILM IN A WORLD OF ITS OWN

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James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) is a difficult film to write about. The problem is not so much with its elements – the story, the imagery, the acting, the direction – but the fact that in some ways it is incomparable to any other film. Grossly expensive (something like US$250 million to make and another $150 million to promote[1]), seventy-five per cent computer generated, a visual extravaganza of Herculean proportions, it is now the highest grossing movie of all time.[2] 'Game-changer' is the term commonly used in relation to *Avatar*'s use of CGI, motion-capture technology and special effects (just as *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* [1991] was a game-changer earlier in Cameron's career). Like a World War One tank, *Avatar* rumbles over the cinema landscape, lurching clumsily, hiding its unremarkable qualities with its breathtaking spectacle. 'What the hell is it?' we might ask, and more importantly, 'According to what standards do we assess it?'

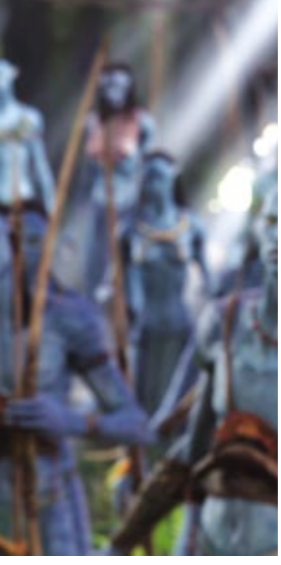
At first glance, to criticise *Avatar*'s shortcomings seems to miss the point: the film was not designed to show us the intricacies of human (or non-human) social relations, but to astound and excite, and especially to introduce the new 3D camera technology that Cameron himself helped create. To criticise it on the grounds of good filmmaking makes one sound a little naive, just as to critique *Titanic* (1997) for its juvenile love story is to miss *its* point, which is to dramatically film the sinking of an almost complete replica of the *Titanic*. Cameron achieved his goals with wild success in both films. World viewers and Hollywood have rewarded him for this. After receiving his Best Director Oscar for *Titanic*, Cameron declared himself 'King of the world!' and the same could apply to what he has achieved with *Avatar*. Is there a more powerful director in Hollywood than James Cameron? And yet, for all its successes, *Avatar* is a film with all the same elements as any other. What, then, are its strengths and weaknesses, and is *Avatar* more than just a glittering spectacle?

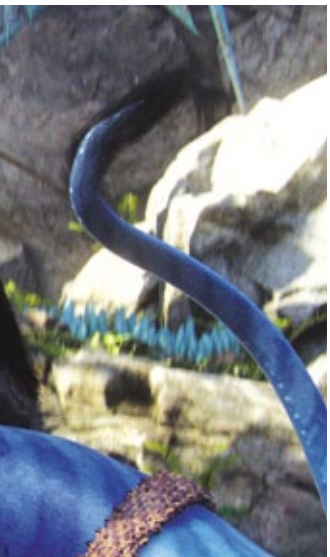
Avatar and science fantasy

Like Cameron's earlier films, *Avatar* is an example of the most successful film genre in history: science fantasy. Discarding the claims to scientific plausibility of the mature science fiction that emerged after the 1940s, science fantasy relies on an earlier generation of writers working in 'pulp' magazines that were popular in the 1920s and 1930s and re-emerged in the 1950s. The standard practice of these writers was to take an already established adventure story – a crime story, a western, a naval drama about clashing empires, a lost world story – and place it in space or on an alien world. The narrative was already known and readers would recognise it immediately, but it was decorated with trappings of the 'fantastic': the indigenous populations were perhaps presented as little green men, the forests were possibly made of giant mushrooms, the sky might be forever red. It is to this tradition that Cameron, like his contemporaries George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, has turned to find his material. It is from here that *Avatar* springs, for it is – like *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) before it – first and foremost, a western in space.

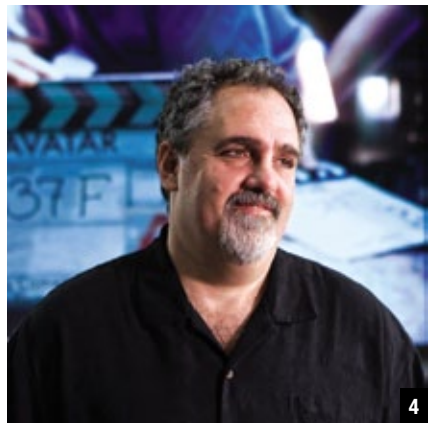
Avatar has all the trappings of a western: a group of Na'vi, indigenous to the moon Pandora (read: Indians), live in a giant tree that has grown over the largest deposit of the valuable mineral unobtanium (on valuable mining land). The Na'vi – nine foot tall, blue and catlike – oppose the colonisation of their world by humans, rejecting 'schools' and other efforts to 'civilise' them. The colonisers – led by corporate interests and supported by the military – want the unobtanium. Their strategy is to send paraplegic marine Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), in the form of an

ALL IMAGES FROM *AVATAR*





'avatar' created by combining Na'vi and human DNA, to infiltrate the indigenes and convince them to leave their ancestral home. Jake enters the Na'vi society, learning their customs and the way in which they interact with the world around them. He realises that their way of life is in harmony with the world around them, that they truly appreciate the beauty of the world's spirit, and he falls in love with the Na'vi chief's daughter, Neytiri (Zoe Saldana). Finally, having proven himself a great leader, Jake leads the Na'vi in a war for freedom against the greedy humans to defend their way of life and their home. The story is reminiscent of a number of westerns, including *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990). Its one original narrative beat is that when the corporation and the military are finally defeated, Jake stays with the Na'vi, rather than deciding to leave, which would have been the cliché we might have expected.



The politics of the counterculture

Politically, *Avatar* is what we might call countercultural. The corporation, bolstered by the military, is the 'bad guy'. The Na'vi understand not only the value and beauty of the environment, but also (and here is *Avatar*'s only real science fiction premise) that the world is *literally* a huge and interconnected organism – a massive information system capable of transferring data from one element to another, and connected by an earth-mother spirit called 'Eywa', which the Na'vi worship.

Avatar is the new-age environmentalist world view made literal. Like the 1960s counterculture from which it springs, this world view has its strengths and its limitations. It draws our attention to the fundamental role of corporations in the destruction of the ecology. It shows the way that indigenous cultures who often have a much more sensitive relationship to their environment are thrust out of the way by giant corporations, more often than not supported by military force. It is an allegory for the dispossession of many indigenous cultures around the world, both historical and present day. Indeed, *Avatar* explicitly critiques US foreign policy when it describes the military's campaign as one of 'shock and awe' in which they will fight 'terror with terror'. This is an explicit censure of the US's occupation of Iraq: the invasion of 2003 was known as a campaign of 'shock and awe' while the US president of the time, George W. Bush, constantly described the campaign against terrorism as a vicious 'war'.[3] For these reasons, *Avatar* has been applauded by a number of leftists around the world. For example, American socialist

ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENTS

1. Draw up a list of Na'vi traits and find similar traits in indigenous cultures.

2. Hold a debate on the topic: '*Avatar* is patronising towards indigenous cultures.'

3. Discuss whether *Avatar*'s environmental politics are convincing.

4. Are there ways in which *Avatar* undermines the values it purports to hold?

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Nagesh Rao claims that what 'really stands out' in the film 'is its unabashed critique of corporate greed — and its inspiring tale of solidarity and resistance against occupation'.[4] Rao claims:

Avatar *re-enacts the genocide of indigenous populations by colonial capitalism, and links this history to the rapacious resource wars of our own times.*

The film is not a moralistic wringing of hands that relies on 'white-guilt fantasies' as some commentators have claimed; rather, it is an uncompromising defense of the principle of self-determination and the right to resist exploitation and plunder.[5]

Another commentator, Carlos A. Quiroz, has written a piece titled '*Avatar* is Real: Pandora is in Central and South America'. He notes that:

It's happening already in the tropical forests and mountains of the continent. Mining, oil, tourism, real estate and other corporations are trying to take over the indigenous peoples' ancestral lands, in complicity with the local puppet governments.[6]

It is hard to deny the fundamental truths of these arguments. Yet the question is whether *Avatar* does justice to the processes that it allegorises. Is it accurate and sophisticated enough as a narrative and world view? There must be some serious doubts about this, for despite Rao's denial that *Avatar* is a 'white-guilt fantasy', the film romanticises indigenous populations, falling into a patronising 'noble savage' myth that is too often the

1–4: BEHIND THE SCENES WITH JAMES CAMERON AND THE CAST AND CREW OF *AVATAR*
5–8: *AVATAR*

flip side of the racism it opposes. Indeed, this countercultural politics sometimes works in simplistic binaries: technology versus nature; white culture versus indigenous culture; developed world versus developing world; industrial soullessness versus spirituality. It does not recognise that there might be a more complex relationship, in which both societies, human and Na'vi, have failings and also strengths. In the case of *Avatar* this is further confused by the fact that it is *Jake* who leads the Na'vi to victory, which is even more patronising – an example of the kind of orientalism someone like well-known intellectual Edward Said spent much of his life combating. For Said, orientalism has since antiquity been 'a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences'.[7] While for Said the orient is perhaps more a European invention, the point remains that Cameron's setup is specifically a Western view of the 'other', a kind of colonial view of 'natives' irretrievably enmeshed in the fact of colonisation. If 'orientalism' tends to justify the act of colonisation, then Cameron's view tends to invert that view without changing its terms. The white man is still the centre of the narrative and the protagonist through which we view events; the Na'vi are still exotic, alien, other, noble savages.

Avatar, then, still falls into a liberal version of 'orientalism' – in the vein of movies such as *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Steven Spielberg, 1984) or *The Power of One* (John G. Avildsen, 1992) – in which a messianic white man liberates the oppressed population. Indeed, there are other ways in which Cameron betrays his relatively safe liberalism. While his earlier science fiction movies, *The Terminator (1984), Terminator 2: Judgment Day* and *Aliens* (1986), featured strong women characters, Neytiri plays a lesser role to Jake. More importantly, the structure of the Na'vi group is conservatively patriarchal: Neytiri's father is the 'chief' while his wife is the spiritual leader. Hence *Avatar* upholds the traditional notions of political leadership belonging to men while the world of the spirit is women's dominion.

FURTHER RESOURCES

For those interested in more research on the politics of *Avatar* and its place in James Cameron's career, there is a multitude of resources available on the web. The following are good places to start:

- **For a fascinating and comprehensive profile of James Cameron and his career, see Dana Goodyear, 'Man of Extremes: The Return of James Cameron', *The New Yorker*, 26 October 2009, <http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/10/26/091026fa_fact_goodyear>, accessed 31 January 2010.**
- **For video resources on the technical aspects of *Avatar*, including creating the world of Pandora, see the dedicated page at Making Of: <http://www.makingof.com/film/184/Avatar>.**
- **For a piece from the perspective of the science fiction field, see Roz Kaveney's review: '*Avatar*', Strange Horizons, 6 January 2010, <http://www.strangehorizons.com/reviews/2010/01/*Avatar*.shtml>, accessed 31 January 2010.**
- **There are a number of links to different articles about *Avatar* here: Jake Simpson, 'Colonialism, Capitalism, Racism: 6 *Avatar* "Isms"', *The Atlantic Wire*, 26 January 2010, <http://www.theatlanticwire.com/opinions/view/opinion/Colonialism-Capitalism-Racism-6-Avatar-Isms-2310>, accessed 31 January 2010.**

Genre conventions and politics

Avatar's conventionalism may spring not only from Cameron's politics but also from the genre conventions on which he has drawn. In a typical western, we are either on the side of the cowboys or the Indians: one side is good, one side is bad. The pre-1960s science fantasy from which *Avatar* springs was also usually simplistic; it was, as writer Thomas M. Disch has argued, a genre for children. Disch points out that this is a limitation rather than a flaw; children are not worse than adults, just different. Disch – himself a brilliant science fiction writer whose aim early in his career was to 'elevate SF to its true potential as the heir of Joyce and Kafka, Beckett and Genet'[8] – wrote that science fiction's 'basic repertory of images – rocket ships and robots, aliens and dinosaurs – are standard items in the fantasy life of any preschooler'.[9] The most successful science fiction writers 'do not pay much heed to those matters of family and career that are the usual concern of mature, responsible adults'.[10] Sex, politics, class, the nuances of character and action – none of these are likely to be found in science fiction before 1960. As T.S. Eliot noted of one of science fiction's great early figures, Edgar Allan Poe:

The forms which his lively curiosity takes are those in which a pre-adolescent mentality delights: wonders of nature and of mechanics and of the supernatural, cryptograms and ciphers, puzzles and labyrinths, mechanical chess players and wild flights of speculation.[11]

Such 'wonders of nature' are certainly central to *Avatar*.

There is thus a convergence here between science fiction and film. It is often said that blockbuster films are aimed at teenage boys. If this is true, then Disch's claim makes sense, for the science fiction of the 1930s and Hollywood blockbusters have exactly the same audience. As Disch notes, the most successful science fiction movies 'such top ten moneymakers as *E.T.*, the *Star Wars* trilogy, *Terminator 2* and *Independence Day* – have been those that have most scrupulously honoured the Boys Own Adventure formulas of the genre's humble beginnings'.[12] Surely some of *Avatar*'s simplicity emerges from just this pressure.[13]

The moment when other science fiction movies move away from these genre conventions, to more mature adult concerns, is the moment that they narrow their audience. *Brazil* (Terry Gilliam, 1985), *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004), *Solaris* (Steven Soderbergh, 2002), *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2009) – all these trade in box office success to the extent that they tackle adult concerns (and all are influenced, in one way or another, by 1960s science fiction). If *Avatar* pales in comparison to these films, it at least gestures to some political depth, and in this act it is certainly more progressive and humane than the kind of colonial you would find in the traditional western. But if its simple narrative is important to its success, of greater significance is its technical virtuosity. *Avatar* is a triumph of spectacle, it mesmerises us with a brilliance that dazzles as much as it illuminates.

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Endnotes

1 David Stratton, 'Invaders of a Perfect World', *The Australian*, 15 December 2009, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/arts/invaders-of-a-perfect-world/story-e6frg8pf-1225810368966>, accessed 30 January 2010.

2 See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/8482058.stm>.

3 See, for example, Sue Chan, 'Iraq Faces Massive US Military Barrage', *CBS Evening News*, 24 January 2003, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/01/24/eveningnews/main537928.shtml>, accessed 30 January 2010.

4 Rao's piece was republished in the Australian radical newspaper *Green Left Weekly*, but was originally published as Nagesh Rao, 'Anti-imperialism in 3D', SocialistWorker.org, 7 January 2010, <http://socialistworker.org/2010/01/07/anti-imperialism-in-3D>, accessed 30 January 2010.

5 ibid.

6 Carlos A. Quiroz, '*Avatar* is Real: Pandora is in Central and South America', *Green Left Online*, 24 January 2010, <http://www.greenleft.org.au/2010/823/42355>, accessed 30 January 2010.

7 Moustafa Bayoumi & Andrew Rubin (eds), 'Orientialism', in *The Edward Said Reader*, Vintage Books, New York, 2002, p.67.

8 Thomas M. Disch, *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of*, The Free Press, New York, 1998, p.14. Disch's early essays, collected in his *On SF* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2005), express his desire to revolutionise science fiction. Later in his career – especially in *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of* – Disch abandoned his faith in ever transforming science fiction.

9 ibid., p.1.

10 ibid., p.5.

11 Quoted in Disch, p.35.

12 ibid., p.2.

13 For this reason, a science fiction novella like Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Word For World is Forest* (1968), whose narrative setup is very reminiscent of *Avatar*, is unlikely to be made into a film. Le Guin's book contains a peaceful species who are 'one' with the forest world on which they live and who are enslaved by the cruel humans who are deforesting their planet. *The Word for World is Forest* is a direct analogy to the Vietnam War.