

Why are the critics lauding Avatar?

David Walsh

23 December 2009

Written and directed by James Cameron

“I hate a cinema that’s been taken over by special effects. I’ve given up going to almost all of the contemporary action movies. I still enjoy action movies, I like exciting films, but I don’t find the contemporary ones exciting. They’re just boring.” —Film critic Robin Wood (died December 18, 2009), in an interview with the WSW, September 2000

In March 1998, filmmaker James Cameron received the Academy Award for “Achievement in directing” thanks to his work on the immensely successful *Titanic*, released the previous year. Over the better part of the next decade, Cameron directed several documentaries, a television special, and an episode of a television series, prior to working directly on *Avatar*, his newest film, which took some four years to put together.

In other words, after accepting the film industry’s highest official honor for feature film directing, Cameron turned his back on the activity, primarily devoting himself instead to the development of various film technologies. This seems entirely fitting.

A technician and producer of considerable skill and energy, the Canadian-born Cameron (*Aliens*, *True Lies*, *The Abyss*, and the *Terminator* series) is not, based on the evidence, driven to be a writer or director, and indeed has only a rudimentary—one-sided, organizational—grasp of either activity. His views on society and human relations are extremely limited and stereotyped, and his manner of expressing them is crude and inartistic for the most part.

Cameron’s *Avatar* takes place in the future, when Earth has become a bleak wasteland. On the planet Pandora, a large corporation is mining for a precious mineral, whose greatest deposits lie beneath a site sacred to the indigenous people, the Na’Vi.

Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), a former US Marine, paralyzed from the waist down, comes to Pandora in place of his twin brother, a scientist who worked in the “Avatar Program” before his death.

The program, directed by Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver), involves the creation of human-Na’Vi hybrids. The human being who shares genetic material with the hybrid (as Jake does with his dead twin’s) can link to and guide its activities, while remaining asleep in the laboratory.

Augustine assigns Jake (or Jake’s blue, 9-foot-tall, Na’Vi-like “avatar”) to provide security for the scientists as they explore Pandora, but he becomes separated from the others and ends up stranded overnight in the jungle. He encounters a female Na’vi named Neytiri (Zoë Saldana), who rescues him from the wildlife and takes him back to her clan. They decide to teach the former Marine their ways.

Jake has an ulterior motive. The head of security for the mining company, Col. Quaritch (Stephen Lang), has secretly recruited him to

act as his agent among the Na’Vi. Jake has a few months to convince the local population to abandon their mineral-rich home territory, after which time the company will send in bulldozers, accompanied by heavily armed mercenaries. If Jake succeeds in this, he will be rewarded with an operation at the company’s expense restoring the use of his legs.

The film plays out along these lines. Jake learns to respect the Na’Vi, who live in harmony with their extraordinary natural world, and falls in love with Neytiri, the daughter of the tribe’s chief. Meanwhile Quaritch and company representative Parker Selfridge (Giovanni Ribisi) apply immense pressure on Jake to carry out his mission at the expense of the native population. Eventually, their patience runs out, and the humans attack the Na’Vi stronghold with all their fearful firepower. A fierce conflict unfolds.

Cameron’s technical achievements are real. There are many striking visual elements in the film. They apparently involved the concerted efforts of some 2,000 people.

Popularmechanics.com explains that the “performance-capture stage,” where Cameron and his crew filmed most of *Avatar*, “was rimmed by 120 stationary video cameras, which could record the movements of all actors at once in 3D, with submillimeter precision.” Data from the cameras were streamed into software that “translates actors’ movements into digital characters in real time within a low-resolution computer-generated environment.” So a scene shot in mockup onstage “instantly translated to CG [computer graphics] footage....

“To transition from the CG produced on set to the photorealistic world of the finished movie, Cameron sent his rough footage to Weta Digital in New Zealand. There, special-effects programmers used a facial solve program and facial action coding to translate the actors’ every minute muscle movement—blinks, twitches, frowns—to believable expressions on the faces of Pandora’s aliens.”

An astonishing technology, but not necessarily the same thing as important or interesting filmmaking.

The comments we made on *Titanic* in 1998 seem appropriate to *Avatar*’s drama: “Nearly every element in the film, including the love story, is presented in a clichéd and predictable manner. Each character exhibits modes of behavior and personality traits, even facial expressions, which are immediately identifiable and remain unchanged throughout the film.”

The rotten Quaritch acts harshly and cruelly “from the first time we see him to the last, without respite”; the cynical, sneering company administrator is “untiringly” cynical and sneering; the spiritual Na’Vi are “unfailingly” at one with nature.

The spunky, newly mobile Jake encounters the slender alien Neytiri. Do we have any doubts that after initially sparring with one another, they will come to a deep understanding, fall in love, make love, endure hardships, be torn apart, triumph over the difficulties, etc.,

etc.? Everything on Pandora, other than the flora and fauna, can be anticipated, as fully known in advance as the ultimate fate of humanity according to the Christian gospels.

This is a work created from a familiar template. The story of the white man who lands among the natives and learns to admire them and their traditions, and ultimately fights alongside them against his own people, has been depicted (and perhaps even lived) before, with varying degrees of sympathy and authenticity. Here the drama, for the most part, feels like something created at third- or fourth-hand. It becomes tedious in the course of its nearly three hours.

The dialogue is primitive, and patronizing, and often makes one wince. This is from the first scene between Neytiri and Jake (in his avatar form). After she rescues him, by killing one of the jungle creatures, and turns to go, he says: "Where are you going? Hey, slow down. I just want to say thanks for killing those things." She knocks him down, exclaiming in pidgin English: "Don't thank. You don't thank for this. This is sad. Very sad only." Jake: "Okay, I'm sorry. Whatever I did I'm sorry." Neytiri: "All this is your fault, they did not need to die." Jake: "My fault? They attacked me, how am I...?"

She, angrily: "Your fault! You're like a baby. Making noise, don't know what to do!" He: "Fine. If you love your little forest friends, why not let them just kill me? What's the thinking?" She: "Why save you?" He: "Yeah, why save me?" She: "You have a strong heart. No fear. But stupid! Ignorant like a child."

On the other hand, one of the elements that carries some power is the presentation of the mercenary armed forces in their attack mode. Some water has flowed under the bridge since 1997. Clearly, Cameron is bringing to bear feelings and images generated by the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. (He reportedly dropped his application for American citizenship after the election of Bush in 2004.) The scenes of the brutal ground and aerial assault on the virtually defenseless Na'Vi are chilling and convincing.

That is not enough, however, to make up for the film's fatal artistic and psychological weaknesses. A work of art makes a difference to the extent that it brings out what is not obvious, and encourages a critical attitude toward conventional thoughts and emotions.

Cameron downplays the direct Iraq-Afghanistan parallels, contending he had a "broader metaphor" in mind. Human beings, he explains, have "a sense of entitlement—'We're here, we're big, we've got the guns, we've got the technology, we've got the brains, we therefore are entitled to every damn thing on this planet.... That's not how it works and we're going to find out the hard way if we don't wise up and start seeking a life that's in balance with the natural cycles of life on earth.'"

This is pretty limited stuff, and not directed at the political and economic status quo, but at humanity in general. Inordinate claims are being made for the film in some circles, which don't stand up to serious examination.

We can repeat what we wrote about *Titanic*, with only minor qualifications: "What Cameron gives his audience with one hand [in this case, the 'anti-colonial,' environmental argument]...he more than takes away with the other, by submitting it to his banal and conformist outlook.... How can any of this encourage critical thought?"

The critics, for the most part, are once again enthusiastically praising Cameron's work. David Denby in the *New Yorker* writes that *Avatar* "is the most beautiful film I've seen in years," although he finds the movie's story "a little trite." For Roger Ebert, Cameron's film is not merely "a sensational entertainment.... It's a technical

breakthrough" that "contains such visual detailing that it would reward repeated viewings." In the *Wall Street Journal*, Joe Morgenstern notes that most of the time, "you're transfixed by the beauty of a spectacle that seems all of a piece. Special effects have been abolished, in effect, since the whole thing is so special."

Even some of the previous skeptics have mended their ways. In December 1997, Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote a review of *Titanic* sufficiently critical ("Titanic Sinks Again (Spectacularly)") that Cameron felt obliged to respond to it, publicly and contemptuously. To paraphrase, bombast and box office in Hollywood not only conquer, they convince. Turan has come around.

He now writes: "Perhaps the most surprising thing about Cameron's visual accomplishments is that they are so powerful we're barely troubled by the same weakness for flat dialogue and obvious characterization that put such a dent in *Titanic*."

Perhaps Mr. Turan should speak for himself.

His contention, that the obvious, hackneyed elements don't "matter as much" this time because of *Avatar*'s visual strengths, is echoed by numerous commentators (Denby and others, including Manohla Dargis of the *New York Times*, who asserts that "the movie's truer meaning is in the audacity of its filmmaking"). This is a bad argument. Stereotypes and clichés are not neutral, "value-free" phenomena in any artistic context—they falsify life and stunt thinking.

The "left" variant of this argument, and it is one presently circulating, that cartoon characters are permissible as long as they bolster a "progressive" theme, is just as pernicious. This takes for granted that the population could not come to terms with more complex, contradictory movies.

The critics and the media generally are terribly impressed with Cameron and *Avatar* because of the massive amounts of money involved, both in its production (close to \$400 million, including marketing) and now in its worldwide release. They don't want to be left out. Cameron is powerful in the industry, presumptuous, and tells everyone his film is important. That's good enough for the various media outlets and the critics. In reality, that line of reasoning is as unconvincing as the film's story.

The author also recommends:

Why are the critics lauding *Titanic*?

[30 January 1998]



To contact the WWSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsw.org/contact