

Avatar: The Way of Water—James Cameron’s latest effort

David Walsh
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Canadian-born James Cameron is one of the most economically successful filmmakers in history, with *The Terminator* (1984), *Aliens* (1986), *The Abyss* (1989), *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), *True Lies* (1994), *Titanic* (1997) and *Avatar* (2009) on his roster as director. He has also written (*Rambo: First Blood Part II* [1985]) or produced (*Strange Days* [1995], *Solaris* [2002]) a host of other large-scale films.

According to statisticians, Cameron is the second highest-grossing director of all time (after Steven Spielberg), his films having earned some \$2.5 billion in North America and \$8 billion globally. He directed the first two films that grossed over \$2 billion worldwide (*Titanic* and *Avatar*—the latter the most financially rewarding film in history) and is the only individual to have directed three films with more than \$1.5 billion earned at the international box office (*Titanic*, *Avatar* and the new science fiction film, *Avatar: The Way of Water*).

Cameron unmistakably possesses considerable organizational skills, technological know-how (or access to those with the know-how) and great personal drive and persistence. He has benefited from structural changes in the film industry and the broader economy, the advent of the “blockbuster” and the emergence of a vast global audience. His very limited writing and directing skills, his “flair” for the obvious and trite, all of which might have held him back in an earlier era, have not proved a hindrance at all in an artistically-ideologically regressive and stagnant climate. On the contrary. Cameron, in other words, has been fortunate to have emerged—and could *only* have emerged—in a culture that demanded so little: efficiency, productivity, special effects innovation, sustained bursts of mechanical spectacle, a minimum level of dramatic believability.

His most recent film, *Avatar: The Way of Water*, is one of the most costly films ever made, with a budget estimated at \$350–\$400 million. Cameron suggested to an

interviewer that the Disney-owned product would need to earn \$2 billion globally to turn a profit. It is the first of four (or perhaps more) planned sequels to the original *Avatar*. *Avatar 3* is apparently completed and set for release in December 2024.

The first *Avatar* followed Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), a former US Marine, on the planet Pandora. Earth has become a bleak wasteland. Pandora possesses vast amounts of a precious metal, but the latter’s development and extraction require driving off the indigenous people, the Na’Vi.

Scientists generate Jake’s “avatar,” a Na’vi body with his human brain and memory—in Cameron’s words, “human technology in the future is capable of injecting a human’s intelligence into a remotely located body, a biological body.” This hybrid—like the indigenous people, a tall, blue creature—interacts with the local population and, in the end, through a mystical process, becomes one of them. The Na’Vi repel the forces of the Resources Development Administration (RDA) in scenes that bring to mind the brutal US effort to subjugate the Iraqi population.

In the new film, Sully lives with his wife Neytiri (Zoe Saldaña) and several children, and serves as chief of his clan. The lethally equipped RDA military forces return, headed once again by the malevolent Col. Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang) or what’s left of him, and carry out a ruthless counterinsurgency operation.

Again, the strongest images of the film refer visually to various US military interventions. The torching of a local village forcefully recalls scenes from the Vietnam War. According to a 2009 *New Yorker* profile, Cameron “revoked his application for American citizenship after [George W.] Bush won the election in 2004.”

Sully leads a guerrilla campaign against Quaritch and his troops (Earth is now dying), but ultimately is forced to flee to the coast and seek the help or at least the tolerance

of another tribe, of reef people. The remainder of *The Way of Water* takes place in or by the sea, as the RDA forces track down Sully and his family and a full-scale conflict erupts. Numerous sequences, involving a host of fantastical creatures, occur underwater. Cameron and his team were obliged to invent new technologies for this portion of the film.

The resulting work, despite its innovative appearance and occasionally provocative imagery, is tedious (at 192 minutes) and formulaic. The dialogue, characters and relationships have been culled from dozens of (often much better) Western, science fiction and war films. There are also faint echoes of *Moby Dick* and other works.

Almost exactly 25 years ago, we noted about *Titanic* that 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.”

These comments also apply to *Avatar: The Way of Water*. No genuine complexity exists in Cameron’s invented universe, simply fixed, unchanging personalities and “types” that violently collide.

One ill-advised critic refers to the film as a “populist masterwork ... accessible, sincerely romantic, and packed with action.” If the term “populist” here is anything more than an empty phrase synonymous with box office success (and it’s probably not), it must refer to works that speak in some *insightful* manner to the conditions and needs of wide layers of the population. The expression at least implies opposition to the rich and powerful.

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Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, William Wyler’s *The Best Years of Our Lives* and John Huston’s *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* are “populist masterworks” by this definition. (One could add various lesser known films, King Vidor’s *Our Daily Bread*, Edgar Ulmer’s *Ruthless*, Michael Curtiz’s *The Breaking Point*, Fritz Lang’s *Fury* and others.)

Arguments in favor of the latest film on the grounds that it encourages opposition to Western imperialism are also seriously misplaced. The ferocity of the RDA attack is genuine enough, but much of it seems attributable to Quaritch’s personal sadism and vindictiveness. The film’s principal concern is with the defense of family, as the dialogue consistently emphasizes. (A number of features of *The Way of Water* evoke the dreadful Roland

Emmerich-Mel Gibson collaboration, *The Patriot*, 2000).

Sully: “I can protect this family—that I can do,” “This family is our fortress,” “A father protects, that’s what gives him meaning,” “I can’t save my family by running ... This is our fortress ... This is where we make our stand” and so forth.

There is nothing oppositional in the bone and marrow of the new *Avatar* film. Cameron is obviously concerned with ecological devastation, but instead of angry protest against the profit system’s threat to the planet, he advances a vague, toothless reverence for the ocean: “The way of water has no beginning and no end,” we are told, and “Water connects all things.”

In any event, as we further commented a quarter-century ago, in terms of *Titanic*’s supposed “radical” political edge: “What Cameron gives his audience with one hand—a shallow critique of class relations—he more than takes away with the other, by submitting it to his banal and conformist outlook. There are no ambiguities in human behavior; there are no problems that require painful, wrenching decisions; everything about society and life is transparent and obvious; the world is the way it appears at first glance... It is as vacuous as a Nike commercial. How can any of this encourage critical thought?”

As there are no “ambiguities” or “problems” requiring “painful ... decisions,” no *need* for genuine artistry, whose task is to peer beneath the surface at the currents and interconnections that are not “transparent and obvious.” For the prosperous and complacent technocrat-engineer, art and its stern obligation to complexity are largely pointless, little more than irritating confusions.



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