Debating Avatar

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Contents

Avatar: Revenge of the Action Movie

- Matt Jones

Perhaps "war is glorious after all," George Orwell wondered darkly while fighting fascism in the trenches of Catalonia. Watching the final battle scene of *Avatar*, in which a race of blue aliens teams up with Mother Nature and a handful of riotous war resisters to kick Yankee imperialist ass Terminator-style (in 3D), you can't help wondering if he was right. In fact, I'd guess several million people around the world have been nursing this kind of fantasy since the first wave of smart bombs fell on Baghdad seven years ago.

Avatar is not the first action film to propose that the U.S. is the bad guy: The *Bourne* films pit Matt Damon against the CIA, *The Watchmen* laments the exploitation of superheroes as Cold War poster boys. *Iron Man* was a sophisticated attempt to reign in this aesthetic by setting up Jeff Bridges as a kind of corrupt Kissingerian America that had to be replaced by the nicer (Obama-era?) humanitarian ultraviolent imperialism represented by Robert Downey Jr.

Cameron evades the problem of relying on the Pentagon simply by being a guaranteed investment: a lifetime of making sentimental drek to satisfy the culture industry makes him a safe bet to sink half a billion dollars into, no matter what the film is. But it also says something about the time we're living in: that investors think there's a buck to be made flogging anti-imperialism to the masses.

Avatar tells the story of Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) a marine who goes Native after he figures out that the only reason the U.S. Army is interested in exploring the lush, glow-in-the-dark planet of Pandor is to exploit its minerals, even if this means wiping the Natives out. His consciousness is helped along by a love affair with a blue girl named Naytiri (Zoe Saldana) that includes a steamy alien sex scene that was apparently too much for the PG-13 rating. The blue people are a weird composite of various oppressed groups that eerily crystallizes the Orientalist view of the romanticized Other as effeminate, violent, irrational, close to nature, and in need of leadership. The women strut their naked comely blue bodies around, but our sensibilities are saved by petals that dangle conveniently from their necklaces. Compared to this sensual world, the hyper-competitive, über-macho, techno-magical world of military braggarts doesn't seem like much to go back to. Sully transcends the trappings of both species, becomes a bigger person who is able to lead the blue people and defeat the white people.

If *Avatar*'s cheesiness comes from its romanticized Other, what makes it gutsy is its sweeping condemnation of imperial power. The anthropologic research of Dr. Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver) is shown to be just another way for the intruders to know their enemy. Liberal humanitarianism is reduced to bribery: "We offered them schools, we offered them roads," one commander complains, but the blue people are unwilling to exchange their sovereignty for a little philanthropy. In the end, if the campaign to manipulate their "hearts and minds" doesn't work, the reins will be handed

over to Colonel Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang), a General Patton-esque psychopath who is dying to unleash "shock and awe" on Pandor.

Avatar has been criticized for being unsophisticated, simplistic, New Age-y, anarcho-primitivist, a white man's fantasy of redemption for the crimes of his race. All that is more or less true, but it misses the point: Cameron is mobilizing the action movie against its natural ally, Uncle Sam. Dazzling special effects, smug one-liners and American firepower are thrown back at the belligerent U.S. Army. It's a spectacle, but one that leaves the audience rooting for the Viet Cong instead of the Marines.

Avatar: Politics Made Easy – Too Easy

- Sam Gindin

A good portion of the Left, coming to a James Cameron 3-D flick with relatively low political expectations, emerged excited about the politics of *Avatar*. That the film is a gross over-simplification is readily acknowledged, but its enthusiasts insist that the film contributes to a popular delegitimization of American imperialism. The bad guys are a resource-hungry corporation backed by the U.S. army, and the film has you cheering against the Americans and for the environmentally friendly natives (the Navi). And a marine – a paraplegic no less – makes the moral choice to switch sides and join the opposition. What more could one ask for in a film that will soon be the largest grossing film of all time, not just in the U.S. but also abroad?

I don't think the film's political problems lie in its over-simplifications, but in the easy and ultimately apolitical sympathies it evokes. Let's start with the ending. The Navi are overseeing the defeated American soldiers shuffling into their inter-planetary ships to return to earth. How can this obvious link to the Vietcong victory in Vietnam not be progressive? The question, however, isn't being critical of the American role in Vietnam; that hardly seems all that radical (especially with Vietnam now comfortably integrated into the capitalist fold). The issue rather is whether or not the film's sentiments translate into our identifying with the resistance in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Palestine. And the answer clearly is that they don't because those masked and shadowy fighters ambushing conveys in deserts or setting off bombs in devastated cities can't match the innocent nobility of the sleek Navi living in their utopian green world.

Moreover, imperialism is only bad in the film when it involves a direct military assault. The tension only emerges when the Americans (including the decent liberal scientists) can't co-opt the natives in other ways; when education, health, and market relations (selling their precious resources) don't get the job done. Everyday imperialism, the imposition of capitalism without massive carpet- bombing, is apparently OK.

In fact, if the film's anti-colonialism resonates, it's not in terms of the wars in the Middle East but with the destruction of Native society in the Americas. Yet for all the sympathies for Native people wanting to retain their land, history is rewritten so

the actual tragedy and ongoing native struggles are replaced – and belittled. What we get is a feel-good fantasy of their defeating American power. They can tame and fly prehistoric birds, and their link to nature brings other prehistoric animals to join the battle on their side. Above all, the paraplegic American marine comes to lead them (incidentally winning the heart of the chief's daughter Pocahontas and gains legs so along with what actually happened to Native people, we don't have to think too much about paraplegics either).

Yes, there is a progressive message lurking here, and it's nice to see Natives routing the U.S. army. But what does this vicarious pleasure really mean? What does it teach or inspire? Does the film really delegitimize the U.S. army, or just the John Wayne stereotype? When the marine asks "What do have to offer them other than light beer" is it challenging our consumerist culture or is this $500 million dollar film a much more substantive affirmation of that culture?

Is the film anti-capitalist, as suggested by its critique of the one corporation in the film, or only anti capitalism's bad apples? And if the only alternatives are capitalism or going back to nature (the movie offers no other option), doesn't that really guarantee that most people will only become jaded and cynical with capitalism – or even enjoy watching films critical of particular capitalist values – but never really move to a collective attempt to transform it?

James Cameron Is the Message

- Ed Janzen

James Cameron's *Avatar* is in one sense just the latest of numberless colonial fantasies in which white guilt is formally redeemed when a dissident white man "goes Native." From Paul Gauguin's "savage man" to James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* to the German followers of Karl May, the prospect of going Native is perhaps the nearest thing the world's white population has to a pan-racial ritual. I do hope that Indigenous people everywhere are laughing at us, for we must look quite ridiculous.

But *Avatar* has another dimension, which is that the film isn't really about what it's about. Rather, it's about itself. This film by James Cameron is exactly about the experience of watching a James Cameron film. You couldn't find a better textbook case for Marshall McLuhan's famous aphorism, "the medium is the message."

As a media textbook of sorts, *Avatar* also verifies philosopher Paul Virilio's observation that, in today's world, war is a thoroughly cinematic experience. Often for us in the West, war and cinema become as one – and indeed, as the *Avatar* story moves irrevocably toward war, the special effects are ramped upward and upward. What begins as a potentially intriguing and even possibly subtle sci-fi narrative quickly transforms into a military-industrial orgy.

If you don't believe in medium-as-message, here – that *Avatar* is really about itself – think, then, about how non-CGI story elements simply disappear. Gone by the board is Sully's disability, which begins as an intriguing possibility, as his avatar allows him to enact his fantasy of having legs again. He should have remained human; his struggle with his disability would have made a more interesting story. But Cameron simply flips the off switch; as a story element, Sully's war injury ceases to exist.

And the plot – remember when sci-fi flicks had those? The plot is doomed once the fighting begins in earnest, since in blockbuster movies victory by the good guys is assured. That's simple box-office economics – and perhaps, too, a case of Middle Earth envy.

Special effects are the ultimate shock-and-awe pornography; it's about seeing EVERYTHING. When you make a movie that way, it's nearly impossible to retain subtleties like narratives, internal struggles, or complex plots, because, as often as not, subtlety is about what *isn't* shown, what *isn't* seen.

Understanding Indigenous Struggle

- Ben Powless

Despite several shortcomings, and commonly repeated themes elevating white saviours, *Avatar* carried a number of important themes and ideas in a way that allowed people to understand some of the elements of Indigenous struggles, even if they aren't familiar with the Indigenous situation per sé.

I think if *Avatar* gets people to understand these struggles and act on them, or allows us to demonstrate those connections for people, it will have served as useful. The movie can be useful in making people reflect upon themselves, and also creating discussions.

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