Film Analysis samples: *Avatar*

Overview: Below are two discussions of the film *Avatar:* One an article with extensive quotes from the filmmaker and one of the actors. As you read the two pieces, consider them rhetorically and take note of some features of this form of argument. **Be prepared for a quiz on these!**

1. Who is the audience, and how can you tell?
2. What is the writer’s thesis? Where is it (often more than one place)?
3. How/where does the writer bring in the context for the film and the conversation about it?
4. What enduring human concerns are at issue here?
5. How is it structured? What are the sections/organizing principles?

James Cameron: Yes, ‘Avatar’ is Political

“People say this film is un-American … part of being an American is dissenting”

[Brent Lang](http://www.thewrap.com/author/brent-lang/) | January 13, 2010 @ 2:24 PM

"Avatar" director [James Cameron](http://www.thewrap.com/tag/james_cameron/) responded to right-wing critics of his blockbuster hit movie on Tuesday night, saying that "as an artist, I felt a need to say something about what I saw around me."

Speaking at a private industry screening of the film, the director with his star [Zoe Saldana](http://www.thewrap.com/tag/zoe_saldana/) said that "Avatar" — with its depiction of mineral exploitation on a distant planet and a cadre of trigger-happy mercenaries charged with instituting a scorched earth policy — is very much a political film.

But he rejected comments by critics that the film is un-American even if it is an allegory for American military forays.

"I’ve heard people say this film is un-American, while part of being an American is having the freedom to have dissenting ideas," Cameron said, prompting loud applause from a capacity crowd at the ArcLight Hollywood.

"This movie reflects that we are living through war," Cameron added. "There are boots on the ground, troops who I personally believe were sent there under false pretenses, so I hope this will be part of opening our eyes."

Conservative commentators such as John Podhoretz and John Nolte have blasted the film in recent weeks. In "The Weekly Standard," for instance, Podhoretz [wrote](http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/017/350fozta.asp), "The conclusion does ask the audience to root for the defeat of American soldiers at the hands of an insurgency. So it is a deep expression of anti-Americanism– kind of."

In an hour-long question-and-answer period with TheWrap’s editor-in-chief [Sharon Waxman](http://www.thewrap.com/tag/sharon_waxman/), Cameron and star [Zoe Saldana](http://www.thewrap.com/tag/zoe_saldana/) discussed the film’s environmental message, its technological innovations, the future of 3D and another long-gestating project of the director’s, "Battle Angel.”

The director said:  "I don’t know if there is a political agenda exactly, but as an artist I felt a need to say something about what I saw around me. I think we all need to take stewardship of our planet."

"I think everyone should be a tree hugger," Cameron added.

In creating the long limbed, blue skinned Na’vi, the aliens that lives in commune with the lush naturescape on the fictional planet Pandora, the director said he was attempting to create a race that was aspirational.

"The Na’vi represent the better aspects of human nature, and the human characters in the film demonstrate the more venal aspects of human nature," Cameron said.



Beyond just being thought-provoking, the famously meticulous filmmaker said he hoped that his planet would be a tactile, realistic and ultimately transformative place.

"I wanted it to be believable and a sort of wish-fulfillment," Cameron said. "I wanted to tap into a sort of child-like dream state where you don’t know your limitations and you think you may be able to fly someday."

"I set out to not fetter my imagination," Cameron added. "I wanted to create a whole life on film that was another planet or biosphere."

It was clear that the audience at the ArcLight Hollywood enjoyed its stay on Pandora with many return visitors among the crowd. Based on a show of hands, about two thirds were seeing the film for the second or third time — a phenomenon that has helped propel "Avatar" past the billion-dollar mark, good enough for second place on the list of highest grossing movies of all time. Cameron said he never expected to have another hit on the level of the top film on that list, the director’s 1997 Oscar winner "Titanic"

"I had no reasonable expectation that this would happen twice in a lifetime," Cameron admitted. "I’m just enjoying it while it lasts, because the second awards season is over and the box office is done it evaporates."

In contrast to his "King of the World" persona, Cameron came across as unfailingly modest.

"Not to challenge the auteur theory, but this was a collaborative experience," Cameron said. "People mistakenly imagine that these movies spring out of my forehead fully formed."

Cameron said that creating Pandora’s mythical beauty came out of working in concert with a team of designers and engineers over a three-year process. He also credited Saldana and her co-stars with developing the Na’vi’s distinctive movements and dialect. Among Saldana’s challenges, the director said, was learning how to ride the film’s flying dragon-like creatures, called banshees.

"I didn’t want these characters to just be riding dragons in saddles as we’ve seen in many films," Cameron said. "I wanted the actors to be sort of standing in a more athletic pose."

Despite the technical hurdles of creating a virtual world, Saldana said that Cameron constantly counseled the actors to remain focused on their performances and to leave the logistics to him.

"Jim, Sam (Worthington), and I would spend hours talking about these characters," Saldana said. "We had to create this movement where the Na’vi always faced forward because they had such trust in life and in their mannerisms. We had to make everything genuine and pure."

Central to this, Cameron said, was having the ability to convincingly depict the facial expressions of Saldana and her fellow actors through motion-capture helmets that were designed for the film.

"It’s all about the closeup," Cameron said. "Think of CG as makeup. It’s the same idea as embellishing upon Zoe’s features."

Saldana was the first person cast, but she had actually read for the director a year prior to signing up for "Avatar" for the movie that was to be his follow up to "Titanic," "Battle Angel."

"I was first put on film for ‘Battle Angel,’ so when I went in a second time, I was like, ‘Wait a minute,’" Saldana said. "I went from being a robot to a jungle warrior."

Part of what spurred Cameron to switch gears from "Angel" to "Avatar" was a belief that technology had matured to the point where he could finally realize Pandora. It was not until he realized that film was entering a 3D renaissance that he decided to make his alien film in three dimensions.

Cameron linked his decision to undertake such an ambitious undertaking to an lifetime spent trying to recapture the sense of wonder he felt as a child seeing movies like "2001: A Space Odyssey."

"I could not understand how that magic happened," Cameron said. "Trying to crack that code set me on the path to being a filmmaker."

Befitting the film’s ecologically friendly message, Cameron stressed that the wondrous scenery brought to life in "Avatar" was not consigned to the silver screen.

"People don’t have to go to another planet," Cameron said. "There are a lot of wonderful things in nature that are all around us."

<http://www.thewrap.com/james-cameron-yes-avatar-political-12929/>

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Print the legend, and put it on Youtube

**Avatar activism**

Pop culture has now become the basis for a participatory approach to world activism – Harry Potter fans for gay rights in the US, defiant Palestinians protesting about Israeli occupation with their traditional keffiyahs over skins painted blue after Avatar’s Na’vi people

**by Henry Jenkins**[> September 2010](http://mondediplo.com/2010/09)

Five Palestinian, Israeli and international activists painted themselves blue to resemble the Na’vi from James Cameron’s blockbuster *Avatar* ([1](http://mondediplo.com/2010/09/15avatar#nb1)) in February, and marched through the occupied village of Bil’in. The Israeli military used tear gas and sound bombs on the azure-skinned protestors, who wore traditional keffiyahs with their Na’vi tails and pointy ears. The camcorder footage of the incident was juxtaposed with borrowed shots from the film and circulated on YouTube. We hear the movie characters proclaim: “We will show the Sky People that they can not take whatever they want! This, this is our land!”

The event is a reminder of how people around the world are mobilising icons and myths from popular culture as resources for political speech, which we can call Avatar activism. Even relatively apolitical critics for local newspapers recognised that *Avatar* spoke to contemporary political concerns. Conservative US publications, such as *National Review* and *The Weekly Standard*, denounced *Avatar* as anti-American, anti-military and anti-capitalist. A Vatican film critic argued that it promoted “nature worship” while some environmentalists embraced *Avatar* as “the most epic piece of environmental advocacy ever captured on celluloid”. Many on the left ridiculed the film’s contradictory critique of colonialism and embrace of white liberal guilt fantasies, calling it “Dances with Smurfs” (from the simplistic pro-Native American 1990 movie success, *Dances With Wolves*). One of the most nuanced critiques came from Daniel Heath Justice, an activist from the Cherokee nation, who felt that *Avatar* was directing attention to the rights of indigenous people even as Cameron over-simplified the evils of colonialism, creating embodiments of the military-industrial complex which are easy to hate and hard to understand.

Such critiques encourage a healthy scepticism towards the production of popular mythologies and are better than critics who see popular culture as trivial and meaningless, offering only distractions from our real world problems. The meaning of a popular film like *Avatar* lies at the intersection between what the author wants to say and how the audience deploys his creation for their own communicative purposes.

The Bil’in protesters recognised potential parallels between the Na’vi struggles to defend their Eden against the Sky People and their own attempts to regain lands they feel were unjustly taken from them. (The YouTube video makes clear the contrast between the lush jungles of Pandora and the arid, dusty landscape of the Occupied Territories.) The film’s larger-than-life imagery, recognised worldwide thanks to Hollywood, offered them an empowered image of their own struggles. The sight of a blue-skinned alien writhing in the dust and choking on tear gas shocked many into paying attention to messages we often ignore.

By appropriating *Avatar*, activists have made some of the most familiar criticisms of the film beside the point. Conservative critics worried that *Avatar* might foster anti-Americanism, but as the image of the Na’vi has been taken up by protest groups in many parts of the world, the myth has been rewritten to focus on local embodiments of the military-industrial complex: in Bil’in, the focus was on the Israeli army; in China, on indigenous people against the Beijing government; in Brazil, the Amazonian Indians against logging companies.

Without painting themselves blue, people like the Indian writer Arundhati Roy and the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek have used discussions about *Avatar* to call attention to the plight of the Dongria Kondh peoples of India, who have just won a battle with their government over access to traditional territories rich in bauxite. It turns out that America isn’t the only evil empire left on Planet Earth. Leftists worry that the focus on white human protagonists gives an easy point of identification. But protestors just want to be in the blue skins of the Na’vi.

The Avatar activists are tapping into a very old language of popular protest. The cultural historian Natalie Zemon Davis reminds us in her classic essay “Women on Top” ([2](http://mondediplo.com/2010/09/15avatar#nb2)) that protesters in early modern Europe often masked their identity through dressing as peoples real (the Moors) or imagined (the Amazons) seen as a threat to the civilised order. The good citizens of Boston continued this tradition in the New World when they dressed as Native Americans to dump tea in the harbour. And African-Americans in New Orleans formed their own Mardi Gras Indian tribes, taking imagery from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, to signify their own struggles for respect and dignity (a cultural practice being reconsidered in HBO’s television series, *Treme*, by David Simon, about the post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans).

**[. . . .]**

This new style of activism doesn’t require us to paint ourselves blue; it does ask that we think in creative ways about the iconography that comes to us through every available media channel. Consider the ways that Dora the Explorer, the Latina girl at the centre of a popular American public television series, has been deployed by both the right and the left to dramatise the likely consequences of Arizona’s new immigration reform law; or how the US Tea Party has embraced a mash-up of Obama and the Joker from *The Dark Knight Returns* (one of the Batman films) as a recurring image in its battle against healthcare reform.

Such analogies don’t capture the complexities of these policy debates, just as we can’t reduce the distinctions between American political parties to the differences between elephants and donkeys (icons from an earlier decade’s political cartoonists). Such tactics work only if we read these images as metaphors, standing in for something bigger than they can fully express. *Avatar* can’t do justice to the old struggle over the Occupied Territories and the YouTube video is no substitute for informed discourse about what’s at stake there. Yet their spectacular and participatory performance does provide the emotional energy needed to keep on fighting. And that may direct attention to other resources.

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([1](http://mondediplo.com/2010/09/15avatar#nh1)) See Colin Murphy, “[Avatar, not as liberal as it looks](http://mondediplo.com/2010/04/16avatar)”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, April 2010.

([2](http://mondediplo.com/2010/09/15avatar#nh2)) Natalie Zemon Davis, “Women on Top: Symbolic sexual inversion and political disorder in early modern Europe”, in Barbara Babcock, *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1978.

([3](http://mondediplo.com/2010/09/15avatar#nh3)) Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*, The New Press, New York, 2006. <http://mondediplo.com/2010/09/15avatar> (for a longer discussion: <http://henryjenkins.org/2010/09/avatar_activism_and_beyond.html>

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