**Movie Review | 'Avatar'**

**Avatar (2009)**



WETA/ 20th Century Fox *Zoe Saldana plays the warrior Neytiri in “Avatar.”*

A New Eden, Both Cosmic and Cinematic **By** [**MANOHLA DARGIS**](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/d/manohla_dargis/index.html?inline=nyt-per) **Published: December 17, 2009**

With [“Avatar”](http://movies.nytimes.com/gst/movies/titlelist.html?v_idlist=158896;449423;442069;441249;384764&inline=nyt_ttl) [James Cameron](http://movies.nytimes.com/person/10397/James-Cameron?inline=nyt-per) has turned one man’s dream of the movies into a trippy joy ride about the end of life — our moviegoing life included — as we know it. Several decades in the dreaming and more than four years in the actual making, the movie is a song to the natural world that was largely produced with software, an Emersonian exploration of the invisible world of the spirit filled with Cameronian rock ’em, sock ’em pulpy action. Created to conquer hearts, minds, history books and box-office records, the movie — one of the most expensive in history, the jungle drums thump — is glorious and goofy and blissfully deranged.

The story behind the story, including a production budget estimated to top $230 million, and Mr. Cameron’s future-shock ambitions for the medium have already begun to settle into myth (a process partly driven by the publicity, certainly). Every filmmaker is something of a visionary, just by virtue of the medium. But Mr. Cameron, who directed the megamelodrama [“Titanic”](http://movies.nytimes.com/gst/movies/titlelist.html?v_idlist=50122;113936;174347;158894;373122&inline=nyt_ttl) and, more notably, several of the most influential science-fiction films of the past few decades ([“The Terminator,”](http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/49101/The-Terminator/overview) [“Aliens”](http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/1524/Aliens/overview) and [“The Abyss”](http://movies.nytimes.com/gst/movies/titlelist.html?v_idlist=659;141484&inline=nyt_ttl)), is a filmmaker whose ambitions transcend a single movie or mere stories to embrace cinema as an art, as a social experience and a shamanistic ritual, one still capable of producing the big WOW.

The scale of his new movie, which brings you into a meticulous and brilliantly colored alien world for a fast 2 hours 46 minutes, factors into that wow. Its scope is evident in an early scene on a spaceship (the year is 2154), where the passengers, including a paraplegic ex-Marine, Jake (Sam Worthington, a gruffly sensitive heartthrob), are being roused from a yearslong sleep before landing on a distant inhabited moon, Pandora. Jake is woken by an attendant floating in zero gravity, one of many such aides. As Jake himself glides through the bright cavernous space, you know you’re not in Kansas anymore, as someone soon quips (a nod to [“The Wizard of Oz,”](http://movies.nytimes.com/gst/movies/titlelist.html?v_idlist=140342;76636;55016;55014;305284&inline=nyt_ttl) Mr. Cameron’s favorite film). You also know you’re not in the gloom of [“The Matrix.”](http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/177524/The-Matrix/overview)

Though it’s easy to pigeonhole Mr. Cameron as a gear head who’s more interested in cool tools (which here include 3-D), he is, with “Avatar,” also making a credible attempt to create a paradigm shift in science-fiction cinema. Since it was first released in 1999, “The Matrix,” which owes a large debt to Mr. Cameron’s own science-fiction films as well as the literary subgenre of cyberpunk, has hung heavily over both SF and action filmmaking. Most films that crib from “The Matrix” tend to borrow only its slo-mo death waltzes and leather fetishism, keeping its nihilism while ditching the intellectual inquiries. Although “Avatar” delivers a late kick to the gut that might be seen as nihilistic (and how!), it is strangely utopian.

It doesn’t take Jake long to feel the good vibes. Like Neo, the savior-hero of the [“Matrix”](http://movies.nytimes.com/gst/movies/titlelist.html?v_idlist=31831;31830&inline=nyt_ttl) series played by Keanu Reeves, Jake is himself an avatar because he’s both a special being and an embodiment of an idea, namely that of the hero’s journey. What initially makes Jake unusual is that he has been tapped to inhabit a part-alien, part-human body that he controls, like a puppeteer, from its head to its prehensile tail. Like the rest of the human visitors who’ve made camp on Pandora, he has signed on with a corporation that’s intent on extracting a valuable if mysterious substance from the moon called unobtainium, a great whatsit that is an emblem of humanity’s greed and folly. With his avatar, Jake will look just like one of the natives, the Na’vi, a new identity that gives the movie its plot turns and politics.

The first part of Jake’s voyage — for this is, above all, a boy’s rocking adventure, if one populated by the usual tough Cameron chicks — takes him from a wheelchair into a 10-foot, blue-skinned Na’vi body. At once familiar and pleasingly exotic, the humanoid Na’vi come with supermodel dimensions (slender hips, a miniature-apple rear); long articulated digits, the better to grip with; and the slanted eyes and twitchy ears of a cat. (The gently curved stripes that line their blue skin, the color of twilight, bring to mind the markings on mackerel tabby cats.) For Jake his avatar, which he hooks into through sensors while lying in a remote pod in a semiconscious state, is at first a giddy novelty and then a means to liberation.

Plugging into the avatar gives Jake an instant high, allowing him to run, leap and sift dirt through his toes, and freeing him from the constraints of his body. Although physically emancipated, he remains bound, contractually and existentially, to the base camp, where he works for the corporation’s top scientist, Dr. Grace Augustine ([Sigourney Weaver](http://movies.nytimes.com/person/75144/Sigourney-Weaver?inline=nyt-per), amused and amusing), even while taking orders from its head of security, Col. Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang), a military man turned warrior for hire. A cartoon of masculinity, Quaritch strides around barking orders like some intransigent representation of American military might (or a bossy movie director). It’s a favorite Cameron type, and Mr. Lang, who until this year had long been grievously underemployed, tears into the role like a starved man gorging on steak.

Mr. Cameron lays out the fundamentals of the narrative efficiently, grabbing you at once with one eye-popping detail after another and on occasion almost losing you with some of the comically broad dialogue. He’s a masterly storyteller if a rather less nimble prose writer. (He has sole script credit: this is personal filmmaking on an industrial scale.) Some of the clunkier lines (“Yeah, who’s bad,” Jake taunts a rhinolike creature he encounters) seem to have been written to placate those members of the Michael Bay demographic who might find themselves squirming at the story’s touchier, feelier elements, its ardent environmentalism and sincere love story, all of which kick in once Jake meets Neytiri, a female Na’vi (Zoë Saldana, seen only in slinky Na’vi form).

Mr. Cameron has said that he started thinking about the alien universe that became Pandora and its galactic environs in “Avatar” back in the 1970s. He wrote a treatment in 1996, but the technologies he needed to turn his ideas into images didn’t exist until recently. New digital technologies gave him the necessary tools, including performance capture, which translates an actor’s physical movements into a computer-generated image (CGI). Until now, by far the most plausible character created in this manner has been slithery Gollum from Peter Jackson’s “Lord of the Rings” cycle. The exotic creatures in “Avatar,” which include an astonishment of undulating, flying, twitching and galloping organisms, don’t just crawl through the underbrush; they thunder and shriek, yip and hiss, pointy teeth gleaming.

The most important of these are the Na’vi, and while their movements can bring to mind old-fashioned stop-motion animation, their faces are a triumph of tech innovation, with tremors and twitches that make them immediately appealing and empathetic. By the time Neytiri ushers Jake into her world of wonders — a lush dreamscape filled with kaleidoscopic and bioluminescent flora and fauna, with pink jellyfishlike creatures that hang in the air and pleated orange flowers that snap shut like parasols — you are deep in the Na’vi-land. It’s a world that looks as if it had been created by someone who’s watched a lot of Jacques Cousteau television or, like Mr. Cameron, done a lot of diving. It’s also familiar because, like John Smith in [“The New World,”](http://movies.nytimes.com/gst/movies/titlelist.html?v_idlist=65186;304430;439756;423463;454359;135095&inline=nyt_ttl) Terrence Malick’s retelling of the Pocahontas story, Jake has discovered Eden.

An Eden in three dimensions, that is. In keeping with his maximalist tendencies, Mr. Cameron has shot “Avatar” in 3-D (because many theaters are not equipped to show 3-D, the movie will also be shown in the usual 2), an experiment that serves his material beautifully. This isn’t the 3-D of the 1950s or even contemporary films, those flicks that try to give you a virtual poke in the eye with flying spears. Rather Mr. Cameron uses 3-D to amplify the immersive experience of spectacle cinema. Instead of bringing you into the movie with the customary tricks, with a widescreen or even Imax image filled with sweeping landscapes and big action, he uses 3-D seemingly to close the space between the audience and the screen. He brings the movie to you.

After a few minutes the novelty of people and objects hovering above the row in front of you wears off, and you tend not to notice the 3-D, which speaks to the subtlety of its use and potential future applications. Mr. Cameron might like to play with high-tech gadgets, but he’s an old-fashioned filmmaker at heart, and he wants us to get as lost in his fictional paradise as Jake eventually does. On the face of it there might seem something absurd about a movie that asks you to thrill to a natural world made almost entirely out of zeroes and ones (and that feeds you an anticorporate line in a corporately financed entertainment). But one of the pleasures of the movies is that they transport us, as Neytiri does with Jake, into imaginary realms, into Eden and over the rainbow to Oz.

If the story of a paradise found and potentially lost feels resonant, it’s because “Avatar” is as much about our Earth as the universe that Mr. Cameron has invented. But the movie’s truer meaning is in the audacity of its filmmaking.

Few films return us to the lost world of our first cinematic experiences, to that magical moment when movies really were bigger than life (instead of [iPhone](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/i/iphone/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) size), if only because we were children. Movies rarely carry us away, few even try. They entertain and instruct and sometimes enlighten. Some attempt to overwhelm us, but their efforts are usually a matter of volume. What’s often missing is awe, something Mr. Cameron has, after an absence from Hollywood, returned to the screen with a vengeance. He hasn’t changed cinema, but with blue people and pink blooms he has confirmed its wonder.

*“Avatar” is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). Gun and explosive violence, death and despair.*

Written and directed by [James Cameron](http://movies.nytimes.com/person/10397/James-Cameron?inline=nyt-per); director of photography, Mauro Fiore; edited by Mr. Cameron, John Refoua and Stephen Rivkin; music by James Horner; visual effects supervisor, Joe Letteri; production designers, Rick Carter and Robert Stromberg; produced by Mr. Cameron and Jon Landau; released by 20th Century Fox. Running time: 2 hours 46 minutes.

WITH: Sam Worthington (Jake Sully), Zoë Saldana (Neytiri), [Sigourney Weaver](http://movies.nytimes.com/person/75144/Sigourney-Weaver?inline=nyt-per) (Dr. Grace Augustine), Stephen Lang (Col. Miles Quaritch), Michelle Rodriguez (Trudy Chacon), Giovanni Ribisi (Parker Selfridge), Joel David Moore (Norm), C C H Pounder (Mo’at), Wes Studi (Eytukan) and Laz Alonso (Tsu’Tey).

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/18/movies/18avatar.html?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=ping.fm&_r=0&pagewanted=all>

*Avatar* review(from *The Telegraph*—a British newspaper)By [Sukhdev Sandhu](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/sukhdev-sandhu/) 17 Dec 2009

Avatar arrives swathed in hyperbole. It’s meant to be the most eagerly awaited film of the last few years. The most expensive movie ever. The film with the wildest, most breathtaking and out-there digital effects any director has ever hatched up. It’s the envelope pusher, the film that redefines the possibilities of cinema, the work whose trickle-down effects on other artists will be felt for decades to come. At a point in the decade when critics are looking back, this is a film that is meant to be looking forward and boldly going where no film has gone before.

Some people love movies to be talked up in this way. They respond to the drama and buzziness of it all. Others — including you? — perhaps feel a little bullied and coerced. What if you neither knew or cared about how Avatar was the long-drawn out follow-up to director James Cameron’s Titanic? Does that make you any less of a film lover? Movies as aggressively marketed as this feel less like art, and more like maximum-impact juggernauts.

Avatar is set in 2154. The world is dying. Its energy resources are almost spent. Its inhabitants, represented by the US military, have travelled to a distant planet called Pandora where they hope to extract a valuable mineral called Unobtanium (My sides! My sides!) that will save the earth. In their way stand the Na’vi, fierce, proud and very blue-skinned tribespeople who are determined to resist the rape and plunder of their precious eco-system.

The earthlings, led by bull-headed Colonel Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang), aren’t able to handle the atmospheric pressure on Pandora. Helped by star biologist Grace (Sigourney Weaver), they create an avatar — a half-human, half-Na’vi hybrid — to go on information sorties and to act as a cultural diplomat.

The person chosen for this role is Jake Sully (Sam Worthington). He’s a former Marine who lost his legs in action. Worse, his twin-brother, a super-intelligent scientist, has died. Grace dismisses him as a “Jarhead dropout”. This of course means (Cameron is not a director for whom complexity and moral ambiguity rate large) that the story, among other things, will be one of personal redemption.

Jake, on one of his recces, is saved by a Na’vi called Neytiri (Zoe Saldana). She may have strange yellow eyes, but she can speak English, tame wild creatures, and has the toned body and skimpy clothing of a beach volleyballer. She’s a hippy, Climate Camp version of Lara Croft. They fall in love. He goes native. Soon, helped by Grace and a gang of humans (or Sky People as they’re known to the Pandorans), he tries to save them from what seems inevitable annihilation.

To this fusion of science fiction and environmental parable Cameron adds a contemporary spin by lacing his script with War On Terror allusions. “Well, well, well!” smirks Quaritch as he looks forward to the bloody violence he’s about to wreak on the tribe he regards as 'blue monkeys’ and 'savages’, “I’d say diplomacy has failed.” Later, he laughs: “We will blast a crater in their racial memory so deep they won’t come within a thousand clicks of here ever again.” These topical jibes feel superfluous. Largely, because Quaritch — like Grace, Jake and every other character — represents a type rather than an individual. The actors do what they can with their roles, but they don’t get the chance to invest their roles with the gravity of Weaver in Alien or the emotional heft of Winslet and DiCaprio in Titanic.

Cameron, whose fastidious micro-management of the film’s journey to the big screen has been endlessly marvelled at by interviewers, has cloth ears. Neytiri’s post-coital statement — “You now Jake. We are mated for life” — has all the lyricism of “Me Tarzan. You Jane.” As for James Horner’s soundtrack? Imagine if you will a collaboration between Sting, Enya and Celine Dion — a ululatory, cross-legged, over-ripe symphony of faux World Music. Actually, it’s worse.

As a visual spectacle, Avatar works much better. Not all of you will be in a position to watch it in 3D, and those of you who wear glasses may tire of donning two sets of spectacles for 161 minutes. But still: the fogginess and dimmed images of so many previous 3D films — Pixar’s Up the most recent offender — have been replaced by an impressive crispness and clarity.

The scenes in which Jake’s avatar runs out of his compound, skidding and sliding with glee at his new ability to use his legs, are rendered in almost tactile fashion. Later, when he wanders through the alien forests of Pandora, the sense of a world opening up — its lush orange flowers, its mysterious fragrances, its hissing animals that lunge at him from all angles — are brought to life to magical effect.

Later still, when a landscape of floating mountains hovers into view, or when a Lord of the Rings-style epic battle between humans and the Na’vi is in full force, it’s hard not to be a little awestruck. Most pleasingly, teams of artists and digital tweakers have succeeded in making the blue faces of the Pandorans twitch and grimace and wrinkle with rare realism.

These moments are spellbinding, but not enough to obscure the fact that Cameron should have been more brutal in his editing: the start has too much talky exposition, the middle section meanders, and the final half hour, while it manages to avoid the Transformers-style mayhem it threatens to ape, doesn’t do enough to convince you that all you’ve been watching is a tricked-up, digitally-sophisticated mash-up of Pocahontas, Dances With Wolves and Last of the Mohicans.

So no: Avatar is not the future of cinema. It’s not the present. In fact, it’s barely even the past of cinema. It’s an achievement to make 3D look as good as it does here, but that counts for little if the characters are all in 1D. The film is a triumph of effects over affect.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/6832593/Avatar-full-review.html>

**AVATAR** |  [Roger Ebert](http://www.rogerebert.com/contributors/roger-ebert) December 11, 2009

Watching "Avatar," I felt sort of the same as when I saw "Star Wars" in 1977. That was another movie I walked into with uncertain expectations. [James Cameron](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/james-cameron)'s film has been the subject of relentlessly dubious advance buzz, just as his "[Titanic](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/titanic-1997)" was. Once again, he has silenced the doubters by simply delivering an extraordinary film. There is still at least one man in Hollywood who knows how to spend $250 million, or was it $300 million, wisely.

"Avatar" is not simply a sensational entertainment, although it is that. It's a technical breakthrough. It has a flat-out Green and anti-war message. It is predestined to launch a cult. It contains such visual detailing that it would reward repeating viewings. It invents a new language, Na'vi, as "Lord of the Rings" did, although mercifully I doubt this one can be spoken by humans, even teenage humans. It creates new movie stars. It is an Event, one of those films you feel you must see to keep up with the conversation.

The story, set in the year 2154, involves a mission by U. S. Armed Forces to an earth-sized moon in orbit around a massive star. This new world, Pandora, is a rich source of a mineral Earth desperately needs. Pandora represents not even a remote threat to Earth, but we nevertheless send in ex-military mercenaries to attack and conquer them. Gung-ho warriors employ machine guns and pilot armored hover ships on bombing runs. You are free to find this an allegory about contemporary politics. Cameron obviously does.

Pandora harbors a planetary forest inhabited peacefully by the Na'vi, a blue-skinned, golden-eyed race of slender giants, each one perhaps 12 feet tall. The atmosphere is not breathable by humans, and the landscape makes us pygmies. To venture out of our landing craft, we use avatars--Na'vi lookalikes grown organically and mind-controlled by humans who remain wired up in a trance-like state on the ship. While acting as avatars, they see, fear, taste and feel like Na'vi, and have all the same physical adeptness.

This last quality is liberating for the hero, Jake Sully ([Sam Worthington](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/sam-worthington)), who is a paraplegic. He's been recruited because he's a genetic match for a dead identical twin, who an expensive avatar was created for. In avatar state he can walk again, and as his payment for this duty he will be given a very expensive operation to restore movement to his legs. In theory he's in no danger, because if his avatar is destroyed, his human form remains untouched. In theory.

On Pandora, Jake begins as a good soldier and then goes native after his life is saved by the lithe and brave Neytiri ([Zoe Saldana](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/zoe-saldana)). He finds it is indeed true, as the aggressive Col. Miles Quaritch ([Stephen Lang](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/stephen-lang)) briefed them, that nearly every species of life here wants him for lunch. (Avatars are not be made of Na'vi flesh, but try explaining that to a charging 30-ton rhino with a snout like a hammerhead shark).

The Na'vi survive on this planet by knowing it well, living in harmony with nature, and being wise about the creatures they share with. In this and countless other ways they resemble Native Americans. Like them, they tame another species to carry them around--not horses, but graceful flying dragon-like creatures. The scene involving Jake capturing and taming one of these great beasts is one of the film's greats sequences.

Like "Star Wars" and "LOTR," "Avatar" employs a new generation of special effects. Cameron said it would, and many doubted him. It does. Pandora is very largely CGI. The Na'vi are embodied through motion capture techniques, convincingly. They look like specific, persuasive individuals, yet sidestep the eerie Uncanny Valley effect. And Cameron and his artists succeed at the difficult challenge of making Neytiri a blue-skinned giantess with golden eyes and a long, supple tail, and yet--I'll be damned. Sexy.

At 163 minutes, the film doesn't feel too long. It contains so much. The human stories. The Na'vi stories, for the Na'vi are also developed as individuals. The complexity of the planet, which harbors a global secret. The ultimate warfare, with Jake joining the resistance against his former comrades. Small graceful details like a floating creature that looks like a cross between a blowing dandelion seed and a drifting jellyfish, and embodies goodness. Or astonishing floating cloud-islands.

I've complained that many recent films abandon story telling in their third acts and go for wall-to-wall action. Cameron essentially does that here, but has invested well in establishing his characters so that it *matters* what they do in battle and how they do it. There are issues at stake greater than simply which side wins.

Cameron promised he'd unveil the next generation of 3-D in "Avatar." I'm a notorious skeptic about this process, a needless distraction from the perfect realism of movies in 2-D. Cameron's iteration is the best I've seen -- and more importantly, one of the most carefully-employed. The film never uses 3-D *simply because it has it,* and doesn't promiscuously violate the fourth wall. He also seems quite aware of 3-D's weakness for dimming the picture, and even with a film set largely in interiors and a rain forest, there's sufficient light. I saw the film in 3-D on a good screen at the AMC River East and was impressed. I might be awesome in True IMAX. Good luck in getting a ticket before February.

It takes a hell of a lot of nerve for a man to stand up at the Oscarcast and proclaim himself King of the World. James Cameron just got re-elected.

<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/avatar-2009>