



Avatar

Sophie Lister

One of us

Author: Sophie Lister

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Film title: Avatar

Director: James Cameron

Screenplay: James Cameron

Starring: Sam Worthington, Zoë Saldaña, Stephen Lang, Michelle Rodriguez

Distributor: Twentieth Century Fox

Cinema Release Date: 17 December 2009 (UK); 18 December 2009 (USA)

Certificate: PG-13 (USA); 12A (UK) Contains moderate violence and intense battle scenes

[Image]

The statistics are every bit as mind-boggling as the spectacle. A reported budget of \$280,000,000 makes James Cameron's *Avatar* one of the most expensive films ever made. In just a record-breaking 17 days, the film reached the \$1 billion mark in its takings worldwide. It was reportedly over fourteen years in the making. Touted as a work that would break new ground for CGI technology and so change the face of cinema, *Avatar* certainly made a noise when it arrived in cinemas back in December. But the question is, beneath the hype, does the film really have anything to say?

In a future where the human race has set off into space in search of new worlds to plunder, a paraplegic marine called Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) is given an unusual mission. Human

mining activity on the moon Pandora is being disrupted by the Na'vi, alien natives who refuse to co-operate. With his mind inhabiting an artificially-grown alien body, or 'Avatar', Jake must go among these blue-skinned rainforest-dwellers and win their trust. He is ordered to manipulate the Na'vi into leaving their beloved home. However, it isn't long before he falls in love both with their peaceful way of life and with Neytiri (Zoë Saldaña), and he begins to question where his loyalties lie.

The film is undeniably jaw-dropping to look at, and, particularly when seen in 3-D, an utterly immersive experience. The technical wizardry involved in creating the lush, exquisitely detailed rainforest environment and the beautifully organic, expressive Na'vi is certainly to be applauded. In this respect the film far surpasses anything that has gone before it. It seems almost petty to wish, when confronted with such dazzling visual riches, that as much creativity had been expended on the script as on the special effects. But sadly, as a political parable about colonial intervention and our abuse of the environment, *Avatar* is overly simplistic. Both are complex and pressing issues, but by drawing both its villains and its conclusions with extremely broad brush-strokes, *Avatar* fails to really add much to the debate. It also fails to be as liberal and outspoken in its causes as it clearly believes itself to be – the film is plagued, in fact, by that old Hollywood assumption that the only worthwhile story to be told about native peoples is the tale of a white man who 'goes native'.

Avatar's most (literally) three-dimensional and compelling character is the incandescent Pandora jungle itself. Where stilted dialogue fails, the alluring setting speaks eloquent volumes. Man's longing for some kind of Edenic paradise is writ large in its every lush detail, even as his baffling innate compulsion to destroy this paradise is made equally plain. We dream magnificent dreams and yet we are in so many ways consumed by greed and selfishness. Despite its flaws, *Avatar* succeeds in achieving occasional moments of mythic grandeur precisely because these two truths are pushed to the fore, and they resonate with us. The Bible explains this tension as a result of the fact that, though we have rebelled against God and wrought havoc with our world as a result, we were made in his image and so have a deep longing for somewhere better, somewhere unspoiled, where our relationships

with each other and with the natural world are restored. Perhaps the appeal of the pantheistic spirituality practiced by the Na'vi is its apparent promise to return us to such a home. But the biblical view is that our damaged relationship with nature is not the heart of the problem but rather a symptom. God is not nature but the creator of nature, and our true 'home' is in relationship with him.

The film also echoes biblical themes in the fascinating concept at its heart. What would it be like, the film asks, to experience life in a new body? Jake's progression from his weak and paralysed human form to the liberating strength of his Avatar self echoes the Bible's teaching that Christians will have new, everlasting bodies in the life to come: *'Our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will be raised in strength.'* (1 Corinthians 15:43)[1]. The Christian life is often described by the Bible as a struggle between two 'selves' – the weak earthly self or 'flesh', and the stronger, real self or 'spirit'. It is when we live as this 'spirit' prompts us to that we experience true freedom to be ourselves, just as Jake finds that he is actually more 'himself' as an Avatar than as a human. Eventually he chooses to make the full transition of his consciousness into his Avatar self, an event which he refers to as his 'birthday'. Christians look forward to their own new birth in the life to come, the end of the struggle between their earthly and spiritual selves when old bodies are left behind.

Chief scientist Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver) and her team determine that the only way to truly reach an understanding with the Na'vi is to experience life within their skin, and to reach out to them as one of them. In Hindu understanding, an Avatar is a deity who has chosen to come from heaven to earth in a representative form. The Bible teaches that Jesus was fully God, more than just a representation, but nevertheless *Avatar* gives us a useful picture of what it really might have meant for him to experience life as a human. Unlike the paralysed Jake, whose Avatar body allows him to rediscover the freedom he had lost, Jesus relinquished freedoms in order to become a man. Though he was the omnipotent and eternal one who *'gave life to everything that was created'* (John 1:4), he chose to limit himself to human form. In

staggering humility he *'gave up his divine privileges'* (Philippians 2:7) in order to win us over, not for his own selfish ends, but for our sake.

There is a unique kind of empathy that comes from not merely 'knowing' what it is like to be in another's shoes but truly *experiencing* it. Jesus is fully able to sympathise with our weaknesses because he *'faced all the same testings we do'* (Hebrews 4:15). The extraordinary message of Christianity is that God the almighty creator expressed his desire to be close to his creation by actually stepping down into it, walking in our world and becoming one of us.

[1] Todd Hertz, 'Human Frailty in Avatar' *Christianity Today*, January 2010

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Author: Sophie Lister

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