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James Cameron's Cathedral: Avatar Revives the Religious Spectacle

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Abstract
This is a review of Avatar (2009).
Filmmaker James Cameron knows how to get us off the couch and into the theater. *Avatar* was a genuine IMAX-worthy event. It required spectacles to get the truly special effect. It now plays so much smaller at home, even on a Blu-Ray equipped, large-screen TV. Yet, such substantive profits make it a canary in a cinematic coalmine. *Avatar* has been followed by underwhelming 3D versions of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Clash of the Titans*, and *Shrek*. Will more desperate and unimaginative studio pandering follow? Is *Avatar* an empty headed spectacle that will fade in critical estimation over time or the harbinger of more potent stories to come?

In its most exhilarating sequences, *Avatar* connects to the best of the silent film era. James Cameron extends the legacy of pioneering showmen like D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille. No dialogue was necessary to communicate the sweeping ideas of *Intolerance* (1916) or *The Ten Commandments* (1923). Like *Avatar*, they were easily translated across cultures and oceans. Pioneering cinema achieved an early Esperanto. Unfortunately, spectacles don’t always age well. It is tough to recreate the shock of the new. The best picture Oscar won by Cecil B. DeMille for *The Greatest Show on Earth* looks regrettable fifty years on. The digital stick figures walking across the deck of the Titanic already look embarrassing.

*Avatar* also borrows from DeMille’s trick of selling the salacious and the sanctimonious in the same film. Audiences can ogle (virtual) native nudity while the Na’vi prepare to worship. It is the oldest saw in the cinematic playbook, combining the sacred and the sexual. We’re jolted back to Salome’s Dance of the Seven Veils that wooed King Herod and knocked off John the Baptist’s head. Or even the ancient Babylonian goddess Ishtar and her strip tease through the gates of the underworld. Are we similarly deceived? Falling for a totalizing capitalist trap under the guise of
an attack on American military might? As Guy Debord noted in Society of the Spectacle (1967), spectacles can be political weapons meant to distract.

In this scenario, we think we’re watching a film about protecting native cultures and the environment. But we’re really watching a cynical film intended to simply sell tickets. Avatar could be labeled the biggest, loudest, highest grossing conclusion of an era of excess. Might it be the ultimate hypocrisy – a $300 million dollar public service announcement against commercial development?

I will extend more faith to the filmmaker and the moviegoers who flocked to Avatar in such significant numbers. Coming a decade after Titanic, Avatar may serve as an apt conclusion to our uncertain moment. Prior to the events of 9/11, we had no idea how prescient Titanic’s elegant destruction would appear. To see the sacred tree fall in Avatar snaps us back to the collapse of the World Trade Center. We’ve all been brought low by unsustainable economies and reckless overdevelopment. Avatar could be read as a bracing cautionary tale.

But do cautionary tales generate repeat business and positive word of mouth? I would suggest that Avatar’s unparalleled success resides more in religious spectacle, the positive side of being bowled over by a beatific vision. Avatar insists that worship can and should be transformative. As an audience wowed by the spectacular effects, we are getting literally carried away, transported to Pandora.

Given the huge gap between the inspiration and the completion of this project, it seems right to consider Avatar as James Cameron’s Cathedral. How many artisans were required to create his most ambitious film? It took half a lifetime for technology to even catch up with his plans. Like
the cathedrals of Europe, it depended upon new technical breakthroughs to be completed. And like a cathedral, it is intended to build a sense of awe, to cause us to cherish creation (and maybe the Creator). The Wow Factor is seen as an irresistible experience clerics may need to recover.

Of course, *Avatar* can be seen alongside a variety of religious spectacles. The word ‘avatar’ comes from Hinduism, especially Vishnu’s divine descent. Did James Cameron sneak a peek at Vishnu’s big blue body before landing on the Na’vi oceanic skin? The sacred tribal gatherings resemble Tibetan tapestries. Those circular mandalas weave a complex portrait of the cosmos, demonstrating our interconnections. I’ve just returned from making a documentary in Indonesia, where I visited Borobudur, the world’s largest Buddhist temple. It rises amidst seven hills, telling the Buddha’s story up ten stories of solid rock. *Avatar* aspires to a similar scope and grandeur (though I doubt it will last 12 or 13 centuries!).

Many have (rightly) criticized the perfunctory aspects of the script. Yes, we have seen this story many times before. Forget 1990’s *Dances with Wolves*. How about 1970’s *A Man Called Horse*? Yet, critics of the script miss what kept viewers entranced. *Avatar* traffics in Rudolph Otto’s notion of the numinous, the wholly other that operates beyond reason. It appeals to our small brain, bypassing reason as unnecessary to plot. We’re not supposed to get hung up on the overly familiar story of ‘going native.’ Instead, it shouts, “Hey Ma, look at what we made!” As spectacle, *Avatar* remains virtually critic proof, a trip to Otto’s mysterium tremendum et fascinans.

Not since the first time I saw *Star Wars* have I felt so giddy, so transported by sheer visual splendor and delight. Viewers describe flight scenes with boundless enthusiasm. Few were satisfied seeing it just once. Kids will recreate scenes in their backyards for years. James Cameron and his team created an eye-popping spectacle that took filmgoers on a ride. *Avatar* is the real
(digital) deal. Within minutes, I forgot I was watching digital characters. The performance capture technology blew away lingering doubts created by the creepy humans in *The Polar Express* or *Beowulf*. *Avatar* delivered on the promises of a technological breakthrough. But it never called attention to the effects. It sweeps us up in an epic journey. I did not want the experience (or even individual scenes) to end. Movie magic abounds.

To Cameron’s considerable credit, *Avatar* doesn’t depend upon 3D tricks to wow the audience. Things rarely pop off the screen into the viewers’ space. A space shuttle approaches a distant moon, Pandora; but not with the original “wow” factor of *Star Wars*’ opening shot. Why duplicate or imitate that which has gone before? Cameron seems confident that *Avatar* had plenty of thrills to come.

Never has so much technology been poured into getting back to nature. Cameron employs ground-breaking techniques to turn the ten-foot, translucent blue Na’vi people into the most compelling natives possible. Their distant moon, Pandora, teems with jungle life. The mountains float, the forests glow in the dark. What a verdant, vibrant vision of a world apart!

Moviegoers may be too dazzled by the imaginative vistas to worry about the geo-politics embedded in *Avatar*. It promotes responsible science and celebrates diplomacy. But as a native Canadian, Cameron offers a strong critique of America’s imperialist impulses. Some critics may deride *Avatar* as a violent plea for peace. But a surprising sincerity animates Cameron’s cinematic wizardry. When was the last action movie that inspired genuine awe? That emboldened our imaginations? *Avatar* pauses to honor Mother Earth. It dares to bow down in goddess worship. It makes us question who owns the land we inhabit. Who is truly the alien? And where does divine favor reside?
*Avatar* is a riveting example of our contradictory impulses circa 2010. We celebrate simplicity while cradling our smart phones. We long for quiet, as our entertainments grow louder. We seek community via virtual worlds. *Avatar* embodies all the inherent paradoxes we face as digital natives. Cutting edge technology challenges us to cherish our planet. We shout, “Drill, Baby, Drill” until the Gulf Coast is sullied with crude oil. James Cameron offers filmgoers and filmmakers and Jake Sully, a second life. Will we act on the invitation?

As Mark Galli, editor of *Christianity Today*, has noted, “The problem with spectacle, especially religious spectacle, is that the steady, repeated, raucous noise will eventually make us hard of hearing. And that will make it impossible to hear God's normal tone of voice. He is not usually found in earthquake, wind, or fire, but in the small whisper, heard only by those who enter with Elijah into the dark cave.” Not much whispering amidst *Avatar*’s surround-sound.

So what are the quiet truths embedded within *Avatar*? It taps into our ongoing desire to get back to the Garden. It offers the possibility of a new, glorified body, escaping this mortal coil, or at least the confines of a wheelchair. Aussie actor Sam Worthington brings a brooding presence to the role of paraplegic Marine, Jake Sully. He seems weary, wise, and eager to experience a virtual escape. In the lab, Sam comes face to face with his avatar, a blend of his DNA with the native Na’vi. It is an enchanting first encounter with timely connections to Francis Collins’ real life announcement of thirteen new stem cell lines. Scientists like Dr. Grace Augustine introduce Jake to the procedure. The researchers’ computer monitors float across the screen in glorious 3-D. (It almost pre-sold the iPad!) *Avatar* really starts to take off when Jake wakes up in his new Na’vi body. Finally freed from his paralysis, Jake relishes the bright blue, ten-foot version of himself. He is swept up in this new creation. He cannot wait for instructions or tests. Jake breaks out of the
lab. Seeing him rediscover the gift of movement is a kick. We share in his vicarious thrills – an apt metaphor for the movie.

The jungle of Pandora is remarkably vivid, like earth before the fall (or before the jungles were tamed). The attention to detail poured into each frame is thrilling. The insects, the leaves, and the beasts all shimmer and glow. Grace serves as Jake’s spirit guide, talking him through the environment. (How cool to think about Sigourney Weaver’s Ripley, passing on her wisdom to James Cameron’s latest warrior, Jake). The monsters they encounter resemble nothing we’ve seen before. While Ray Harryhausen offered a single stop-motion creature to battle in Jason and the Argonauts, Avatar teems with entire families and abundant species that must be outfoxed.

The most enchanting scene takes place at night. Jake creates trouble for himself by lighting a torch. It is an announcement to all the animals, “Come, eat me.” Only the fierce intervention of Neytiri saves Jake’s avatar. When Neytiri extinguishes Jack’s flame, the forest begins to glow in the dark. What a gorgeous and magical scene for their first meeting. Translucent seeds of a sacred tree float down upon Jake like dancing dandelions. Pure digital delight! They scramble across tree branches in a world that seems upside down. I did not want their transfixing night to end. Cameron and company packed so many details into each gorgeous frame.

Another riveting sequence involved breaking a banshee. It echoes the old westerns, where a cowboy tames a wild stallion. On Pandora, the transportation is of the ferocious winged variety. So Jake must capture and bond with a wailing bird of post-historic fury. When Neytiri teaches Jake to fly, the action soars across an upside down world where rocks float and mountain are suspending in the sky. A Yes album cover or Frank Frazetta illustration come to life.
The dark vision of *The Matrix* was fascinating. The abundant splendor of *The Lord of the Rings* was enchanting. *Avatar* combines the best of both those worlds. It is scary and beautiful, wild and wonderful all at the same time. Jake is discovering how to move, how to fight, how to survive in a foreign land. We are equally disoriented, not knowing whether to laugh or scream at any given moment. Pandora feels deliriously alive, a throwback to the rain forests as we’d like to re-imagine them – unspoiled, untamed, limitless in their secrets and species.

There is some irony that *Avatar* employs the most rigorous technology in a story about saving native cultures and habitats. Cameron’s digitized world makes us value God’s glorious creation anew. Native peoples may not appreciate the comparisons that will be drawn between themselves and the alien Na’vi. Yet, *Avatar* clearly wants to offer a warning and wake up call. Our allegiance (and Jake’s) sides with the Na’vi, rather than the humans.

Like *Titanic*, *Avatar* combines romance and wreckage, soul and spectacle. They both started slowly and built (onscreen and at the box office). Plenty of bullets fly in *Avatar*’s perfunctory final battle. Tanks, spaceships and soldiers face off against spears. For those wanting to experience visceral thrills, *Avatar* delivers. For those who want their imaginations re-ignited, Pandora’s space is the place. For people who want to remember why they first fell in love with the movies, James Cameron offers a roaring mnemonic aid. *Avatar* is an old-fashioned adventure fueled by tomorrow’s technology. It echoes our first cinematic blockbusters, the religious spectacle, but leaps forward in invigorating ways.