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## Culture & Civilization

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# James Cameron's Unbelievium

### *The many idiocies of Avatar*

By STEPHEN HUNTER

**A**VATAR, the latest cinematic science-fiction epic, turns out to be a half-a-billion-dollar case of reinventing the Ferris wheel. The final product is a hyper-gaudy, brainless attraction that goes round and round and deposits you exactly where it picked you up, only you're poorer and dumber and you'll never get your 2 hours and 40 minutes back.

The longtime dream project of writer-director James Cameron, the perpetrator of *Titanic*, *Avatar*

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STEPHEN HUNTER'S *latest novel*, *I, Sniper*, is out from Simon & Schuster. He won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2003.

is big, impressive, and stupid. In fact it's so stupid, it might well be called stupefying. What is so mystifying about it is that a man of Cameron's technical sophistication could be so blinded by the banality of his vision. Stylistically, Cameron draws his inspiration from two sources, the westerns of the 1950s and the Vietnam War of the 1960s, about which he is an expert, having watched it on television.

The plot is a perdurable liberal gizmo, the noble-turncoat thing. It was first (and best) featured in Delmer Daves's gritty 1950 western *Broken Arrow*, with James Stewart, Debra Paget, and Jeff Chandler as Cochise, in which the Indian chief saves Stewart's character and lobbies for peace. In the late 1960s, the message became ugly and violent, shaded by Vietnam; *Soldier Blue* re-created in slo-mo a famed Custer massacre, and *A Man Called Horse*

showed an imperialist white man going native. And of course the ne plus ultra of noble-turncoat expressions arrived in 1992, the appallingly cloying *Dances with Wolves*, an atrocity sprung on the gullible by Kevin Costner, in which an American soldier actually becomes a Sioux and fights against his own countrymen.

Cameron adds high-tech production and science-fiction tropes to this 19th-century fable. His story is set on a planet called Pandora 150-odd years down the pike. The times may have changed, but Western manunkind is still up to its dirty tricks: it has invaded the Endoric splendors of this jungle paradise strictly for exploitation, as a gigantic corporate entity with a military subdivision means to strip the place bare of a mineral called (is this somebody's idea of a joke?) "unobtainium." They mine by

applied destruction. Gigantic bulldozers grind the flowers and the trees and the birds and the bees to pulp and gravel, splintering thousand-year-old majestic Redwoods in order to uncover a vein of the dull space-gold that is sent back to home-planet Earth for God knows what purposes. Surely Cameron missed a trick here: could he not have specified unobtainium to be a key ingredient in producing prolonged sexual experiences in aging white men?

But just think how much more provocative the movie would have been had unobtainium been a source of cheap, abundant, clean energy or a cure for cancer or some other plague on the universe—maybe a universal pain debilitator, without narcotic side effects. Then, of course, the cost-benefit analysis that underlies most “exploitation” of Third World resources would come into play, and the issue would become genuinely interesting. But Cameron wants to keep it at the greenie agitprop level.

In any event, the problem is that Pandora is peopled by small tribes of eco-Sioux called the Na’vi, pictured by Cameron as 10-foot-tall refugees from Blue Man Group. These creatures are imbued with an unusual grace and mobility, cute chipmunk ears, 22-inch waists, and a litany of Third World affectations such as dreds, warpaint, and beads. They glide noiselessly through the snarled trees, leap the lumpy boulders, slide in Tarzanic freedom on the ever-convenient freeway of vines, even patrol the skies from atop giant flying lizards, and, when pressed, fire off arrows the size of telephone poles. All this without ever getting their blue toes dirty.

**I** SUPPOSE Cameron means to make the Na’vi some kind of ideal of eco-purity—an Aryan race of Übermensch in über-harmo-

ny with the environment—but, like so many of his creations, the conceit feels a little off. Despite the highest technology ever deployed in feature filmmaking, he can’t get much out of their faces, which remain Olmec stylizations throughout, with an upper nasal thickness that suggests that Woody Harrelson was the Genghis Khan of Pandora. Their movements are so balletic as to make them even more unreal, which, coupled with V-shaped torsos and Japanese-anime eyes, adds up to a race of creatures for which we are required to feel empathy (that empathy is the fulcrum of the movie) but cannot. They remain distant, even comical, ectoplasms of Picasso’s id after an absinthe binge during his blue period.

The problem with them, as a Marine officer turned corporate mercenary puts it, is that they’re “damned hard to kill.” Ordinary military means are stifled by their guerrilla skills. (Sound familiar?) Thus the corporation has invested in a bioscience initiative to complement its mining and military components run by a small group of rump intellectuals (headed by Sigourney Weaver, in the movie’s best performance) whose superior intelligence and freedom from the greed for unobtainium and for kills allows them to see the bigger picture and, in classic intellectual expression of instinct, attempt to subvert the corporation’s aims.

**T**HEY create avatars—artificially created biomechanical Na’vi replicants with which humans can mind-meld. The avatars are then dropped in the jungles, though it’s a homo sapiens brain in their skull cavity. The object is for the faux-aliens to penetrate Na’vi tribal culture and either attempt to nudge the tribe toward a diplomatic solution or, failing that, steer it into a kill zone. It’s kind of like the CIA’s Vietnam-era Operation Phoe-

nix. But of course the Stockholm syndrome comes into full play. The avatars quickly see the Na’vi point of view, enter the Na’vi culture, intuit the Na’vi moral superiority, fall in love with the Na’vi chicks, and yearn for and in some cases fight for Na’vi victory.

Our hero is grunt Jake Sully, well played by the young Australian Sam Worthington. Jake’s a paraplegic Marine fulfilling his late twin brother’s contract (the fact that they are a perfect genetic match enables him to get into the program without prescreening). He immediately reaches an allegiance with the military division’s commanding officer (the great Stephen Lang in the least great performance of his career as a one-note buffoon blowhard), who makes Robert Duvall’s Colonel Kilgore in *Apocalypse Now* seem positively Dostoevskian in his complexity.

But freed from the blasphemous culture of the military, softened by the ambivalences of the intellectuals, and impressed by the grace and delicacy of a Na’vi princess, Worthington’s Jake is soon leading the Na’vi against the oppressors. He’s gone native in ways Lawrence of Arabia would never understand. Thus the last half of the movie becomes essentially a battle hymn of the Na’vi republic in which we are invited to side with the Blues against the oppressive oppression of the oppressors who would actually destroy the Na’vi’s most sacred site in order to obtain the unobtainium. (Once they obtain it, do they call it “Obtainedium”?)

Perhaps I’m thinking too hard about all this. After all, there’s not that much to think about. The issues play out on the rebus level, and the script feels as if it were written by the old and crabby Brecht in the East German paradise of 1953. Humans bad, Na’vi good, 24/7, without subtlety, nuance, tonal variety, po-



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litical sophistication, complexity, or much in the way of characterization.

YOU could think of the movie as the answer to a 12-year-old's What-if question: what if the Lakota Sioux of 1877 fought the First Air Cav of 1969? Cameron has a reputation for action sequences and has electrified audiences throughout his career; particularly in his breakthrough film, *The Terminator*, he brought a new energy to the generic staleness of the gunfight and gave that movie a dynamism that has sustained his career. But the fights here have yielded to the generic; they are mostly on the level of men running at each other amid huge blasts of earth and wood pulp. A final confrontation is an airborne battle between the Na'vi aboard pterodactyls and the corporate militiamen in their futurized Hueys. Perhaps younger people, schooled by cyberfantasy to enjoy the mixture of genres, can get with it; but to me, blue Indians on flying lizards against helicopter gunships just seemed like a fool's gold called Unwatchablaniam.

If the movie has a pleasure, it's to be found in the fretwork. Cameron's control-freak personality seems to have spent at least \$200 million of his reported \$500 million budget on exquisite if meaningless detail. Each helicopter cockpit, for example, has not one but three holographic screens: forward, port, and starboard, and each animated with a steady flow on mil-spec graphics. To what end? Were the two extra boards worth it? Then there's the planet itself, its flora, its fauna, its misty waterfalls, and endless rolling forests and far-off mountains. Too bad the plot gets in the way of what, to pervert a Pauline Kael line, could otherwise be called nature-Nazi calendar art. Each insect, each vertebrate, each leaf, each stem, seems realized

to perfection, some of them quite lovely. My favorite was a helo-bug, some kind of shell-less oyster affixed to rotating whirls of blade that give it a soft, easeful trajectory.

BUT ALL the way through, small idiocies intrude, indicating a lack of rigor on the part of the conceptualizers. Why, for example, would one bird-form be bright red? Why in fact would the Na'vi be blue? Has off-world nature given up on the principle of protective coloration? Why would all vertebrates have six limbs, while the birds and the humanoids have four? Why would the Na'vi's sacred site resemble the magical tree in the 1950s potboiler *Raintree Country*? Why would a military a century and a half down the way still be using smokeless-powder cartridges and recoil-powered small arms, communicate by old-time radio, and transport personnel by carbon-fueled helicopters? Why is the only real technological advance we see here an exoskeleton fighting machine Cameron has clearly cribbed from his own *Aliens* (1986), where a younger Sigourney Weaver used one to stomp a queen alien?

In the end, the movie essentially decodes into a 1960s pseudo-intellectual's power-trip dream. At its most basic, *Avatar* is about a Green Beret from the Harvard English department. Imagine: the dreams of the cognitive elite given strength and sinew and courage and high pain endurance not to march in demonstrations but to wage actual war on behalf of the faculty. The movie watches as such a man actually takes the field and fights against the oppressors of his day, which happen to be those of our own: the nation-state, the corporation, hoi polloi, the vast and useless unenlightened. *Avatar* is every assistant professor's dream come true. **S▶**