

# Entertainment

# 'Avatar' shocks, awes

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Let's get one thing straight. James Cameron knows what to do with a couple of hundred million dollars. His newest feature, "Avatar," was released on December 18th of last year. In just a little over a month the film has taken the world by storm. It won the Golden Globe for Best Picture- Drama, as well as one for Cameron's direction. More impressively, it has surpassed another one of Cameron's big budget epics, "Titanic," as the highest grossing movie of all time (unadjusted for inflation). But the film's most impressive element is the futuristic world, Pandora, that Cameron and his special effects teams create. It might have cost upwards of \$300 million to make, but "Avatar" is money well spent.

The film's runtime is 163 minutes and yet it hardly drags. The year is 2154. Pandora, a moon of the Alpha Centauri star, is rich in unobtainium, a mineral that sells for \$20 million dollars a kilo back on Earth. To gain access to the valuable unobtainium deposits, humans have to go through the planet's native inhabitants, the Na'Vi. The Na'Vi are a race of ten feet tall giants with blue skin, golden eyes and tails. They're also none too happy about the idea of being displaced by foreign invaders. Humans can't breathe Pandora's atmosphere. In order to go amongst the Na'Vi, avatars are grown by mixing human DNA with that of the natives. What you get is a Na'Vi lookalike that is remotely controlled by its human counterpart back on the ship.

Our protagonist is Jake Sully (Sam Worthington). When his twin brother is killed, he's called upon to take his place in the program because his DNA is a perfect match for his brother's avatar. He's an ex-marine and a paraplegic. His mission is to go amongst the Na'Vi, learn their ways and return with information that will help the military wipe them out. He is told by Colonel Miles Quattrich (Stephen Lang) that if he succeeds, he will be rewarded by being able to walk

again. It seems simple enough at first.

But when Jake meets a Na'Vi female named Neytiri (Zoe Saldana), his view of the natives and their culture begins to change. He learns their language. He is taught their ways. He is accepted by them. And yes, he falls in love. So when the military send giant bulldozer-like machines to tear down the Na'Vi village, Jake's loyalties have changed. He is now both human and an accepted member of the Na'Vi. A civil war of sorts breaks out amongst the avatar program's leader, Dr. Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver), and Quattrich. One wants to negotiate. The other wants to fight. The final battle for Pandora is a truly stunning sequence of awe-inspiring courage and mayhem.

There are some underlying

initiative. Simply put, Pandora's wealth lies not in the unobtainium deposits beneath the ground, but in the world of nature. One look at Pandora's flora and fauna is all it takes to realize why this place is worth fighting to save.

There are those settings in movies that are unforgettable. Oz from "The Wizard of Oz." The dinosaur inhabited island from "Jurassic Park." Middle Earth from "The Lord of the Rings" films. Add to that list Pandora from "Avatar." It's a world that's as bright at midnight as it is at noon. Full of illuminated rivers, grass that glows with every step and a wide array of unique plants and animals the likes of which have never been seen, Pandora is the real star of the film. Beasts that look like a cross between a rhino and an elephant, with a

also compare the Jake/Neytiri relationship to that of John Smith and Pocahontas in the Disney film. The movie starts fast and continues that way until the third act rolls around. The climax sees some characters become heroes. Others become martyrs. Lang's colonel, who early on is great as the cocky, macho military leader, becomes a cartoonish, blood thirsty, machine-like killer in the end, much like any other cliched action movie villain. The Na'Vi, who believe in a network of energy that flows through all living things, agree to an all out war that decimates much of their pristine environment. The cast is sufficient but doesn't dazzle. Let's be honest though. The plot isn't what justifies paying \$14 to see this film in 3-D. The special effects are. Masterful dialogue isn't Cameron's trademark.

below. Many have gone to see "Avatar" more than once. It's understandable. You'll watch in awe during your first viewing. You need a second just to catch your breath.

Cameron has some experience when it comes to making movies with massive hype surrounding them. It was true of "Titanic" in 1997 and it was true of "Avatar" this past year. It was a project years in the making. Now it's at the forefront of ushering in the next generation of movie special effects. It cracked Time magazine's list of the ten best films of the decade after just two weeks in theaters and will certainly be nominated for a number of Academy Awards. I can't help but wonder how it will stand the test of time.

The only movie I can compare "Avatar" to is "Titanic." Both directed by Cameron. Both critical and fan favorites. Both utilizing state of the art special effects; the two highest-grossing films of all time. "Avatar" is changing the way movies are made. "Titanic" has taken its place among America's most iconic love stories and greatest disaster films (not to mention launching two of the greatest actors of this generation into instant superstardom). It's becoming a trend that when Cameron makes a movie, the world takes notice.

Cameron could retire tomorrow and his legacy would be set. Before he started making hundred million dollar epics, he was a master of the science-fiction genre, directing such films as the first two "Terminator" movies, "Aliens," "The Abyss," and "True Lies." He'll go down as one of the greatest leaders for the advancement of special effects technology on film. Lastly, he'll be remembered as the creator of the two highest grossing movies in history. In terms of 3-D and special effects, "Avatar" is the undisputed champion. But the best movies remain great long after their groundbreaking aspects become commonplace ("Citizen Kane," "2001: A Space Odyssey"). Will the same be true of "Avatar?" Only time will tell. As a whole, "Avatar" doesn't surpass "Titanic." But as Roger Ebert says, Cameron remains the king of the world.



Photo courtesy of Gawker.com

messages to be found here. "Avatar" is undoubtedly an anti-war film. However, Rolling Stone film critic Peter Travers makes a valid point when he says, "it's unnerving that a movie preaching peace hits its visual peak with scenes of mass destruction." There is one scene following the initial military attack in which thousands of natives leave their now destroyed forest home in hopes of finding refuge. Is this Cameron's futuristic take on the tragic Native American "trail of tears?" The second message is that of the green

trunk like a hammerhead shark. Airborne mountains floating in the sky with waterfalls that tumble over a cliffs' edges and evaporate into thin air. It's a wondrous land that it is nearly impossible to describe accurately because it's unlike any ever produced before on screen. Pandora is undoubtedly "Avatar's" crowning achievement.

The only aspect of the film that won't amaze audiences is the relatively familiar and predictable plot. It's basically a futuristic "Dances With Wolves." You could

Thrilling visuals are.

One heart-pounding scene finds Jake taming and riding his Mountain Banshee, a dragon-like creature that once chosen, remains with its master forever. In another, the enormous Hometree is fired on by military airships and eventually collapses to the ground, killing many natives. It is both breathtaking and horrifying. I can't help but think back to a scene in another Cameron epic in which a doomed ocean liner rises high out of the sea, breaks in two and slams into the freezing water