

Avatar

Study Notes



Directed by: James Cameron
Certificate: 12
Running time: 156 mins
Release date: 18 December 2009

Synopsis

The most successful film of all time, *Avatar* has smashed box office records across the world and redefined cinema as an experience. The story sees paraplegic soldier Jake Sully given the opportunity to infiltrate the native race of the distant moon Pandora. In order to do this his mind is transported into an alien body, an Avatar. However, once he arrives on the planet and is introduced to its spiritual culture by the beautiful Neytiri, he faces a decision: allow his military unit to decimate the planet in search of renewable sources or stay and defend it with the Na'vi race.

Before Viewing: The James Cameron Ethos

Many of Cameron's films concern the military, nuclear weapons and mankind's role in the future of the planet. His movies feature muscle-bound heroes, big weapons and huge explosions. Conversely, James Cameron has been criticised for having a liberal agenda in his films. View or read synopses of Cameron's previous films and tick off how many feature the following James Cameron themes:

Focus on *Terminator*, *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, *Rambo: First Blood Part 2* (written by Cameron), *Aliens*, *The Abyss*, *True Lies* and *Titanic*.

- Strong female leads
- A pessimistic ending
- An optimistic ending
- Nuclear weapons
- Anti-corporate attitudes
- A military unit defeated by 'lesser' opponents
- Romance
- Traditional family values
- A foreign enemy

Now that you have explored Cameron's filmography, how does *Avatar* conform to your idea of Cameron's political and filmic ideology?

Avatar has been described by some critics as 'un-patriotic' and 'un-American', especially in the context of Western Forces' involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, as Cameron's film portrays American soldiers as the 'bad guys'. What do you think about this suggested subtext?

See <http://forum.nationstates.net/viewtopic.php?f=20&t=29571&start=50> for more criticisms of the film.

Intertextuality

Throughout *Avatar*, there are many visual and musical allusions to Cameron's previous films. Look out for the huge 'power-loader' robotic machines and musical cues from *Aliens*. These 'nods' to other films can be referred to as 'intertextuality' and can be used to make a political, cinematic or respectful reference or simply to please fans of a director or genre.

- Why might Cameron have chosen to reference *Aliens* in this way? Think about when *Aliens* and *Avatar* were both made.
- Where else have you seen homage or intertextuality? Think also about parody and pastiche – imitation for humorous purposes.
- Are any other James Cameron films referenced in *Avatar*?

The Avatar Effect: Activities

The huge success of *Avatar* has prompted many cinemas to begin converting all of their screens to digital format. This means films will no longer arrive at cinemas on reels of films in several huge canisters, but will be uploaded from a server and projected digitally without the image ever becoming blemished or tarnished. It costs tens of thousands of pounds to convert a single screen from 35mm film projection to digital. This inevitable shift in the way films are captured, distributed and exhibited has become known as the *Avatar Effect*.

Below is a list of just some of the effects of a complete switch to digital cinema. Discuss and research all these arguments, find examples and evidence and then decide as a class to what extent this shift is a positive move for the film industry:

1. Young or first-time filmmakers no longer need expensive cameras and film stock to make hit movies.
2. The film industry will save billions by not having to buy film stock and then physically transporting and distributing it across the globe.
3. The discipline of projecting a film manually could be lost; films can now be shown with the click of a mouse or the touch of a button; trained projectionists will lose their jobs.
4. Small independent and arthouse cinemas will not survive if they cannot find the money to convert their screens to digital.
5. Film piracy will be reduced because of digital cinema.
6. Cinemas can now show sports, theatre, opera and music events via the server.
7. Films shown a thousand times digitally could never diminish in audio-visual quality like film stock would: picture quality and viewing experience, will improve.
8. Audiences could be more involved with what is shown at their local cinema; seasons and themes could be arranged far more quickly and theoretically an audience could vote for a certain film to be shown that night and it could be downloaded and screened instantly.
9. Hollywood blockbusters that bring in huge crowds and make use of 3-D technology will get priority in cinemas.
10. Classic films can be restored, converted and preserved for ever. Many older movies have already been screened digitally, such as *The Sound of Music*, *The Godfather* and *The Thing*.

Teacher's Notes: A useful breakdown of the implications of digital cinema is available on YouTube: The clip 'Digital Cinema' (17th Feb 2007, 03:28, spartannews) is a student project video and, though amateurish in places, nicely illustrates the impact of screening films digitally at every level of the process, including production, distribution and exhibition.

Written by: Gareth C Evans