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Cameron, the Mechanical Humanist

A FILM THAT raises the hackles of many American neocons and right-wing evangelicals can't be all bad. And, to be fair, *Avatar* isn't. It tries hard to draw you into the action, especially in its 3D format, and it looks beautiful. But if films were only pictures, we could look at photographs instead. The fact of the matter is that *Avatar* epitomises all that is wrong with Hollywood cinema.

George Monbiot, the environmental activist, wrote a piece in the *Guardian* (12th January) in which he described it as a 'profound, insightful, important film' because, although ostensibly about aliens, it is really a metaphor of European engagement with the native peoples of the Americas. Monbiot treats us to a history lesson on the butcheries of Columbus in Hispaniola, the conquistadors in central and south America and the British settlers in North America, right up to the Sand Creek Massacre of Cheyenne Indians in 1864 or, we might add, Wounded Knee in 1890 or the modern destruction of the Amazon rainforests. For Monbiot, *Avatar* prompts our memories of these genocides on the American continent and thus entices us to seek ultimate justice in our imagination by rooting for the defeat of the American soldiers at the hands of the Na'vi, the native tribe of planet Pandora at the centre of the story.

The modern parallels from Vietnam on aren't lacking either. The mercenaries are led by the snarling badass Colonel Quaritch, played by Stephen Lang, upstaging Robert Duvall's Lt Colonel Kilgore in *Apocalypse Now* (he loves the smell of napalm in the morning, noon and night). They want to nuke the natives and seize the vital energy resource unobtainium, promising 'shock and awe' and 'pre-emptive strikes' as if they are about to fight in Iraq all over again, or preparing for Iran.

Yet, in one of its many ironies, *Avatar* attacks imperialism while itself constituting a prime agent of American cultural dominance. It has invaded practically every cinema in the universe – often twice, in normal as well as 3D formats – and has brought in a massive \$2bn already. The result of this cultural colonialism is that highly praised non-American films like *The White Ribbon* or *A Prophet* are not shown in the big omniplexes but relegated to 'art house' cinemas (or, in the case of Northern Ireland, to the one art house cinema in Belfast). Most of the public therefore tend to treat film and Hollywood as if they were synonymous, and American film stars dominate the media as if they were God's gift to the human race (probably further proof that if He existed He would be a poor judge of his created characters). At least, apart from Sigourney Weaver as the chainsmoking scientist Dr Grace Augustine, Cameron has eschewed big names in the cast.

The chainsmoking is perhaps another irony in a film which also has a strong ecological theme. Here again Cameron's mind is in the right place. The Vatican newspaper attacked the film because it 'gets bogged down by a spiritualism linked to the worship of nature'. In other words, the Christian God is ignored in favour of a pantheistic reverence for



'Mother Nature', called 'Eywa' by the Na'vi. Cameron, who has described himself as an atheist, has created the Na'vi as peacenik tree people, though admittedly good at guerrilla tactics and carrying bows and arrows. They are noble savages who are so much in harmony with nature that they can plug their super-sensitive tails into plants and animals and communicate with them.

Their hippie jungle paradise stands almost for heaven itself, with its floating mountains, misty waterfalls, massive trees, spiral plants, airborne jellyfish and flying lizards. Cameron's simple point is that we could make heaven on earth if we mastered our greed and our selfishness. He has said: "there's this sense of we're here, we're big, we've got the guns, we've got the technology, therefore we're entitled to every damn thing on this planet. That's not how it works, and we're going to find out the hard way if we don't wise up and start seeking a life that's in balance with the natural life on earth".

Sure, most Humanists would go along with this green message, but here's the biggest irony of all: this cinematic tract against the mechanical age exemplifies the very thing it is deploring. The film uses \$250m worth of technology to condemn technology, or at least its misuse. The Na'vi are created by motion-capture in which human actors are basically converted into CGI and, although it's very well done, they still appear unreal and distant, making empathy difficult. The final battle is an extended video game, the customary Cameron action orgasm, which naturally enough gets longer as he gets older.

The first hour of *Avatar* is **as tedious as** an oft-told Western tale: *Pocahontas*, *Dances with Wolves*, *Broken Arrow*, *Little Big Man*, *A Man called Horse*, etc. etc, with Blue rather than Red Indians, again with bows and arrows, but now in a sci-fi forest instead of the Great Plains and on giant lizards not horses, optimistically attacking helicopter gunships. The drawing-in device of 3D quickly proved no substitute for emotional and dramatic power. Instead, I became all-too-conscious that it was just a gimmick, like everything else in the film. I did waken out of my stupor when the White Messiah Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) galvanises the Na'vi to fight back, but why couldn't they do it themselves? Why do white Americans have to be both villains AND heroes?

And while I cheered for the Pandoran natives to defeat rapacious US militarism and greed, it was a case of what I was against, not what I was for. When a film is all colour and special effects, not emotion and character, it's difficult to care what happens to anybody. The romance between Jake and Neytiri (Zoe Saldana), the daughter of the local chief, doesn't help because it is lifeless and largely lacking in sexual tension. Indeed, all the characters are clichéd, the dialogue is risible and the plot is wafer-thin. Despite its anti-imperialist, anti-war, eco-friendly message, *Avatar* encapsulates the fundamental flaw of America cinema in its obsession with crude spectacle at the expense of real thought and real emotion.