

Avatar (2009) – Summary

Directed and written by James Cameron.

Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) is an alienated and aloof ex-marine confined to a wheelchair. When his identical twin dies, a corporation in need of mercenaries makes Jake an offer he can't refuse: in return for an expensive operation that will restore the use of his legs, Jake must infiltrate a native tribe known as the Na'vi, inhabitants of the planet Pandora, and bring back military intelligence. The catch is the natives are tall, slim, graceful, gigantic, and blue—and they breathe an atmosphere that quickly kills any of the “Sky People” exposed to it. Fortunately, scientists have perfected the use of an avatar, a Na'vi body combined with the DNA of a specific human, which can be animated through human brain energy channelled technologically. Essentially unconscious in a coffin-like Link device with a bio-sensor, Jake controls the real-life activities of his genetically-constructed avatar in the otherwise hostile environment of Pandora. The avatars are controlled by the human mind in a manner akin to the beings who actually do things—like go to work—in the movie, *Surrogates*. Grace Augustine, an anthropological researcher on this alien planet, played by Sigourney Weaver—who else? (Cameron directed and co-wrote *Aliens*)—has made contact with the natives through her avatar. The Na'vi are simple, spiritual, graceful, and athletic, but not rational or scientific. The cultural clash on Pandora is shaped by typical Western dualities of the primitive and civilized, the spiritual and the rational, mind and body, innocence and original sin. Grace seeks to learn from their culture and, as a benevolent missionary, to implant some of her own, such as schooling. The image of Pandoran noble savages sitting in desks and rows and learning to shut up is somewhat incongruous. The natives are suspicious of the avatars, or ‘dream walkers’, but are not necessarily hostile. The avatars smell funny and, when the humans controlling them regain consciousness, the avatars keel over, motionless and inanimate.

As Jake's avatar explores Pandora at the behest of the Company and Jake experiences, once again, the pleasure of mobility, curiosity drives him into trouble in an environment with more ways to kill you than the Australian outback. It is very difficult to imagine any other world. In most cases, the plants and animals of any imaginary alien habitat in the film world are composed of strange mixtures of common earthly creatures. On Pandora, there are skeletal, wolf-like packs of carnivores (viperwolves), hammer-headed beasts like triceratops, and mystical, floating, delicate jelly-fish (woodsprites: “Seeds of the Great Tree -- very pure spirits.”)

The imagination that goes into recombining earthly species into new arrangements fails writer-director James Cameron when it comes to plot and characterization. Jake is an outsider who goes native, like Kevin Costner in *Dances with Wolves*. When night falls on Pandora, Jake is pretty much dead meat until he is rescued by Neytiri (Zoe Saldana), a young, female Na'vi, who interprets a mysterious sign to mean the intruder is to be rescued, not killed. Jake is dependent on her for survival and finds her attractive; she is initially uninterested and dismissive, a cliché of romance novels. No surprisingly, Neytiri is the daughter of the Chief (Eytukan); reluctantly she is assigned by her father to teach Jake the ways of her people; predictably, she is supposed to ‘marry’ a young, Na'vi warrior, Tsu'Tey, who is destined to be the future leader of the tribe. Jake now has a plausible rival—all standard fare of Hollywood romances and oddly reminiscent of *Pocahontas*. With hardly a pause, Neytiri's initial dislike turns to love in a few weeks as Jake's avatar becomes as skilled as a native. This entails learning to leap nimbly or free fall from limb to limb high in the branches—the Na'vi evolved strangely, developing lanky, strong legs instead of long, agile arms even though their world is largely arboreal. On the forest

floor they ride six-legged, horse-like beasts (Dirhorses) and have tamed a flying creature that appears to have been birthed from the mating of a dragon and a pterodactyl (mountain banshee).

Love sweeps Jake into the mental and spiritual world of the Na'vi and he undergoes a rapid change of perspectives that would make any anthropologist blush, learning to 'see' through the eyes and think with the concepts of the Na'vi. The religion of Pandora is a form of transcendentalism, through which every creature and thing is connected by mystical bonds that extend from the past into the future. On Pandora, connections are physical, not just spiritual. Entrail-like nerve fibres intertwine to actualize the interface between beast and Na'vi, between an individual and nature, and between entranced lovers, though we don't learn how Na'vi reproduce.

Hollywood requires that the path of true love never runs smooth. Something has to separate the erstwhile lovers and make Jake's Na'vi rival a force to be reckoned with. Jake's secret is that he began his infiltration as a company spy, and once he is revealed as the fifth column, Neytiri spurns him—temporarily. Only the extraordinary feat of taming the most wild thing on all Pandora, which fulfills an ancient Na'vi myth, which Neytiri had related conveniently to us earlier, reveals Jake to be the long-awaited messiah and brings him back into the good graces of the tribe and the warm embraces of his native wife. Jake, the ex-marine, becomes the great white hope of the Na'vi, who would be leaderless and lost without him.

The politics of the film are also conservatively romantic. The Na'vi are noble savages, living in complete harmony in their ecological niche, offering ceremonial thanks to the animals they hunt, whose sacrifices provides raiment for their tables. All of nature on Pandora is part of a single spiritual web both symbolized and actualized by the intertwining roots of the giant forest. Like good Hollywood natives, the Na'vi gyrate and chant in synchronized rhythm to celebrate ritual ceremonies and bring about such miracles as physical rebirth. Native religion is not presented as merely the stuff of ignorance, but as a genuine and effective new-age means of connecting spiritual forces with life. Only arrogance and greed would drive humans to demystify the worldview of the Na'vi, which apparently has deeper, spiritual truths on its side.

Demystification, however, is hardly the motive force for the military occupation of Pandora. Part of this single and interconnected world is a mineral, unobtainium, a rock that is more valuable than a career of blockbuster movies. Unobtainium is buried deeply within the bowels of Pandora, but not so deeply that the gigantic earth-moving machines of the Parker Selfridge Mining Corporation can't dig them out—that is, once the Na'vi are driven off the land and the forest is uprooted for open-pit brutality. Military might in the hands of corporate greed and the resulting rape and destruction of nature are the twin villains of the morality play-within-the-movie. Bombing the Na'vi back to the stone age might appear redundant, but a mighty army of machines and heavily-armed mercenaries is unleashed on the Na'vi, who have only bows and arrows, guerrilla tactics, and their beasts to resist invasion. They also have an outsider-leader, Jake's prophet-like avatar, who organizes the various tribes and inspires them with an impromptu battle-scene speech. The natives have to be saved by a Western warrior-king.

The game-like, CGI battle is soon engaged in the floating mountain region of Pandora (Hallelujah Mountains), which is probably near the Bermuda Triangle because a "flux vortex" causes navigation technology to go haywire in the Dr. Seuss-like skyscape (Grace used *The Lorax* in her English school). Early victories over the mercenaries give the Na'vi and us (the silently partisan audience) some hope, but the private army of G.I.-Joes pick themselves off the canvas and rain down the technological equivalent of elbow smashes and drop kicks, flattening the Na'vi and readying their arms for a victory salute. In the world of Western colonialism,

bravery and justice appear to be no match for brute force and technological might. The Na'vi are about to be overwhelmed, yet, when all seems lost, Pandora holds more surprises. The hammer-headed beasts, impervious to mere bullets and in defiance of any flight instinct, instead enact a "territorial threat display". Charging like so-many monstrous rhinos, they rout the intruders. In any Hollywood script, however, the battle has to become personal. The hero has to go head-to-head with the chief villain, Colonel Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang). In this typical movie trope, the individual fight sequence parallels the wrestling format of the major battle. Neyteri is sidelined temporarily while Jake's avatar battles single-handedly against Quaritch in a formidable man-machine. Quaritch has the early upper hand. The battle occurs simultaneously in the world of avatars and in the physical world – the real Jake, alone and vulnerable in his mind-control box. Ultimately, the villain is felled, although with a nod to modern gender conventions, he is killed by poison-tipped arrows shot by the hero's warrior mate.

But Jake's native warrior is an avatar. How can love triumph? When Jake awakens from his box, his avatar will deflate and so will his ability to make love. Fortunately, his actual body is dying as a result of the battle. Pandora's spiritual magic comes to the rescue. Through another life-giving ceremony, in which the native swing is at least a little more dignified than the usual tribal ceremonial in Hollywood, Jake's soul or life force is transferred to his avatar. He becomes a living Na'vi forever.

In the end, the Na'vi survive and the mercenary POWs are repatriated to a no-longer green Earth. Yet, Pandora still contains the richest source of unobtainium in the universe. How long will it be before more greedy humans return in greater force and with even more powerful machines to subdue the Na'vi and grow obscenely rich in the process? How long will it take for James Cameron to produce a sequel to the long-awaited and excessively expensive *Avatar* and grow obscenely rich in the process?

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