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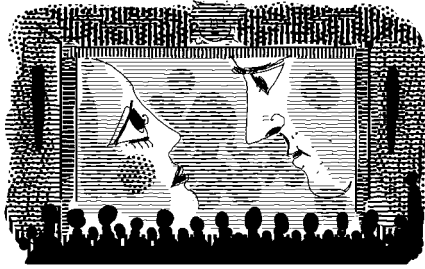
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SHADOW PLAY

by Martha Bayles



Propaganda in Paradise?

THE ORIGINAL AVATAR, DIRECTED BY James Cameron and released in 2009, is set on Pandora, a lush tropical moon orbiting a Jupiter-sized planet in the Alpha Centauri star system about four light-years from Earth. It is inhabited by the Na'vi, a species of lithe, blue-skinned humanoids who, despite their deep connection with nature, their harmonious society, and their perfect gender equality, are as fierce and warlike as the Comanches.

The Na'vi astonished the world not just for these qualities but for their uncanny appearance. Neither cartoons nor actors in costume, they are the product of “performance capture,” an evolving technology that records actors’ movements in real time, then maps the data onto imagined characters in virtual space. In 2009 the process was able to produce lifelike action of all kinds, from whole-body motion to hand gestures to facial expressions. Today it can do much more, as seen in the 2022 sequel, *Avatar: The Way of Water*.

Open to Interpretation

THE ORIGINAL AVATAR IS SET IN 2154, but the bad guys are straight out of 2009: a unit of burnt-out U.S. Marines hired as mercenaries by an interstellar mining company seeking a precious mineral called “unobtainium.” One of them, a paraplegic named Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), is recruited by the company’s scientific team to connect his brain to a digital system that can “pilot” a genetically engineered Na'vi body, or “avatar,” for the purpose of infiltrating the Na'vi and persuading them to abandon their dwelling place amid the gigantic roots and branches of their sacred Hometree, which

stands atop a major unobtainium deposit. The lead scientist, Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver), agrees to this plan because the alternative is to let the lunatic security officer, Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang), attack the “blue monkeys,” as he calls them, with the full force of his futuristic gunship.

But Grace’s plan fails, and in a genuinely horrific, even tragic sequence, Miles proceeds to decimate the Hometree. But this being a movie, the Na'vi warriors rally, and with the help of Grace’s team—and Jake, who has fallen in love with Neytiri (Zoë Saldaña), the fierce but enchanting daughter

million piece of state propaganda about the revered sage, in time for Chinese New Year.

To promote *Confucius*, the party pulled *Avatar* from 1,600 of China’s 4,000-plus theaters and pressured local officials to buy *Confucius* tickets for busloads of workers and schoolchildren. But the film flopped anyway, and *Avatar* was returned to China’s big screens, where it earned a record \$203 million, only 13% of which went to Cameron and his main co-producer, 20th Century Fox. In 2012 that percentage going to foreign producers rose to 25%, as Beijing sought greater cooperation with—and control over—them.

But revenue was not the only reason why *Avatar* was allowed to return. The party was enthralled by Cameron’s technical magic, his willingness to flatter China in public statements, and, not least, his choice of bad guys. Indeed, ever since 1981, when Hollywood movies were first admitted to China, the party has encouraged the import of films that expose America’s social ills, derogate its political institutions, and criticize its foreign policy—on the theory that such fare would reinforce Beijing’s message that China is superior to the decadent West.

But Chinese people are not sheep, and some of these imports have had the opposite effect of impressing audiences with the enviable freedom enjoyed by Americans. This happened with *Avatar*, with several independent bloggers interpreting it as an allegory about the forced evictions of Chinese citizens from their property by corrupt party officials. As one wrote, “I am wondering whether Cameron had secretly lived in China before coming up with such an idea.”

Such freedom of interpretation is a key difference between art and propaganda. Hollywood is quite capable of propaganda,

Discussed in this essay:

Avatar, directed by James Cameron.
Screenplay by James Cameron.
20th Century Fox

Avatar: The Way of Water, directed by James Cameron. Screenplay by James Cameron, Rick Jaffa, and Amanda Silver. 20th Century Studios

of the Na'vi chief couple—they fight back. The battle is Homeric, the special effects brilliant, the good guys victorious.

Today, *Avatar* is the top-grossing film of all time, having earned over \$2.9 billion in the “worldwide” market, a term of art that includes every country that reports box office revenue. (Of course, in the digital age the actual size of any film’s global audience is incalculable.) Crucial to that triumph has been China, where *Avatar*’s initial success spooked the Chinese Communist Party, which was about to launch *Confucius*, a \$22




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needless to say. We can all think of “message films” eager to instruct us in the “correct” view of certain problems and urge us toward particular solutions. Most of these films are left-leaning, and there is no denying their influence. But in America we are still free to ignore them, criticize them, or create alternatives. There is no better way to defang propaganda.

Artisan vs. Assembly Line

WHICH BRINGS US TO AVATAR: *The Way of Water*, which since its release in December 2022 has earned more than \$2.3 billion in the worldwide market, putting Cameron in the unique position of having created three of the four top films on Box Office Mojo’s list of “Top Lifetime Grosses Worldwide.” The original *Avatar* is still number one with \$2.9 billion; *Avatar: The Way of Water* is number three with just over \$2.3 billion; and *Titanic* is number four with just under \$2.3 billion.

By the way, number two on this list is *Avengers: Endgame*, which since its release in 2019 has grossed \$2.8 billion. As the 22nd entry in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Avengers: Endgame* is one of hundreds of “superhero” blockbusters produced by Marvel and other brand-name franchises that for the past several decades have dominated the global box office. Because of their success, these superhero blockbusters are often equated with Cameron’s films. Yet the two differ greatly in the way they are made.

Far be it from me to disparage the skill and talent involved in making a superhero blockbuster. But Marvel and its fellow franchises are the cinematic equivalent of an assembly line, turning out products that might as well be titled *Cash Cow*, *Cash Cow 2*, *Cash Calf*, *Cash Cow in the Multiverse*, *Cash Cow Reloaded*, and *Cash Cow: Eternal Recurrence*. Cameron, by contrast, painstakingly crafts each film as a one-of-a-kind luxury item. It may seem a stretch to credit one artisan with creating *Avatar: The Way of Water*, a \$460 million production employing 2,299 people. But as anyone close to the business will attest, Cameron is an obsessive polymath whose hands-on manner of working is both a blessing and a curse—a blessing to fans, and a curse to investors for whom the bottom line is more important than, say, whether or not the Tulkun, an armored whale native to Pandora, exhales through its blowhole before or after it surfaces.

In one sense, these production differences don’t matter, because regardless of how they are made, all movies are reproducible on a

mass scale. But recent changes in the China market threaten to put Cameron at a disadvantage. Put simply, the Chinese censors are acting less like pandas and more like dragons every day. For example, they recently refused to admit *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021) unless the producers, Marvel and Sony, removed the Statue of Liberty from the film’s climactic ending. To their credit, the producers refused, and *Spider-Man* had to find another way home. Which he did, by grossing \$1.9 billion in 72 countries that are not China.

Cameron could probably have done the same with *Avatar: The Way of Water*, if the Chinese dragons had barred the gate. But here’s the rub. Subtract the \$246 million that the film made in China from its worldwide earnings of \$2.3 billion, and its position on the Mojo Box Office list plummets to a humiliating number four. This would not be a problem for the blockbuster franchises, which have a new Cash Cow rolling off the assembly line every few months. But it might be for Cameron, whose films take years to make and, by his own reckoning, are “very f-king” expensive. As he told an interviewer for GQ on the eve of *Avatar: The Way of Water*’s release, that film was probably “the worst business case in movie history,” because in order to “break even” it would have to become the world’s “third or fourth highest-grossing film.”

Narrow Focus

WHICH IT BECAME, OF COURSE. BUT no amount of bravado can change the fact that Cameron’s time- and money-consuming mode of production exposes him to greater risk than, say, Marvel and Sony. My question, then, is whether Cameron might be willing to kowtow, just a little, to the Chinese, who have long admired his technical prowess, friendly attitude, and (don’t forget) choice of bad guys—and who might be willing to help, just a little, with the three more *Avatar* sequels he is hoping to produce in his lavish, state-of-the-art New Zealand studios.

I raise this question for two reasons. First, in the acres of print I have read about Cameron while working on this essay, only one article, a column in *The Washington Post* by Sonny Bunch, even mentions China. In this respect the media may have been taking their cues from Cameron himself, who as Bunch points out, has not uttered a word about China since the dragons opened the gate to *Avatar: The Way of Water*.

My second reason is a certain disquiet with the sequel, which lacks the political

resonance of its predecessor. One standard criticism of the original *Avatar* is that its plot was stolen from *Dances with Wolves*, Kevin Costner's 1990 film about a Union soldier who after bonding with a band of Lakota Indians fights with them against the U.S. Army. To that criticism my reaction is: so what? Artists always steal ideas; the test is what they do with them. *Dances with Wolves* is an American tragedy that does not, as some have charged, romanticize the Lakota so much as humanize them. Human beings have always told tales of heroic resistance, because there is never enough of it in real life.

All the more troubling, then, that instead of regaling us with a new chapter in the epic tale of the Na'vi fighting to save their beautiful biodiverse moon, *Avatar: The Way of Water* focuses narrowly on Mom, Dad, and the kids. As Miles and his mechanized army advance on the ravishingly beautiful coastline where a seafaring tribe of Na'vi have given refuge to Jake and his family, all the latter seem to care about is themselves. "A father protects, that's what gives him meaning," intones Jake. "This isn't a squad, it's a family," hisses Neytiri. And so on: "The family is our fortress." "I can't save my family by running." "This is our fortress, this is where we make our stand." I kept waiting for one of them to say, "What the hell, blow Pandora up, we don't give a rip. Just give us a ticket out of here."

This narrow focus is either stupid or craven. Cameron is not stupid, so it must be craven. But why, and to whom? He is on record criticizing the blockbuster franchises for avoiding the topic of family: "All these superheroes, they never have kids," he told GQ. And the publicity for *Avatar: The Way of Water* is full of references to Cameron's four beloved children, one by his fourth wife and three by his fifth. There's nothing wrong with this family emphasis; it is sorely missing in Hollywood these days. But in *Avatar: The Way of Water* it is wielded in a way that diminishes the political resonance of the larger story—and in the process, makes this film less likely than its predecessor to set off sparks of resistance in China.

Not Open to Interpretation

THE BATTLE SCENES IN *AVATAR: THE Way of Water* are longer, more spectacular, and (to this viewer) more boring than those in the original *Avatar*. But in terms of length and tedium, *Avatar: The Way of Water* is no match for the two-part "historical drama" making the most money in China these days. The latter two films, about what the Communist Party still calls "The

War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea," were produced in China under the close supervision of the party, and offer a jingoistic, historically distorted portrayal of the horrific winter battle at what the Americans, using an old Japanese map, mislabeled the Chosin Reservoir. And they are selling a lot of tickets. The first, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021), has made \$913 million; the second, *The Battle at Lake Changjin II* (2022), has made \$626 million. Each has far exceeded *Avatar: The Way of Water's* Chinese earnings of \$246 million.

The battle at Changjin took place over a vast mountainous area during the winter of 1950-51, one of the harshest on record, and while not a great victory for either army, it contained enough error, horror, and heroism on both sides to inspire a dozen compelling war dramas. But these two films do not qualify. Just to cite one detail, they show the Chinese soldiers wearing thickly padded uniforms, head coverings, and gloves, when according to historian Sheila Miyoshi Jager in *Brothers at War: The Unending Conflict in Korea* (2013), "The Chinese soldiers were supposed to have been issued winter uniforms, but many did not get them. They wrapped themselves in cotton scarves or covered themselves with 'carpets,'" with the result that "[t]ens of thousands...died from freezing."

According to a review of the second film in the *South China Morning Post* (a Hong Kong newspaper), the sole purpose of this spectacle is to hammer home the message that this battle was "a victory for the indomitable spirit of the Chinese people, even as the film once again completely erases Koreans—both North and South—from their own war." Or as Park Min-hee, an editorial writer for the South Korean newspaper *The Hankyoreh*, put it, "Xi has emphasized the historical interpretation that China's military intervention in the Korean War was just. That emphasis signifies two things...that the Chinese Communist Party was correct to intervene in the war and that no more criticism of China's involvement will be tolerated."

In the same interview quoted earlier, James Cameron was asked if he ever felt like quitting the movie business, given his many other pursuits, such as technical invention, deep-sea exploration, and the large-scale cultivation of plant-based protein sources. His reply was a rambling yes and no, perhaps intended to cover all the bases, ending with "I'm not done until the big hook comes out from the side curtain."

For the sake of the Na'vi, I hope that hook does not come from Beijing.

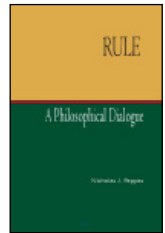
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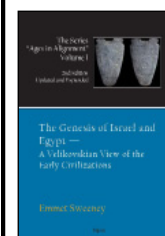
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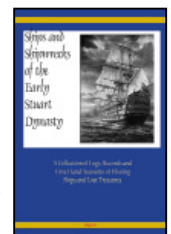
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