

Analysing to what extent the visual appeal of *Avatar* (2009) deviates from the historical and social significance of the film

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Introduction

James Cameron's epic science-fiction film "*Avatar*" (2009) enthralled audiences globally with its groundbreaking visual effects, often described by critics as "ahead of its time". The film's awe-inspiring world-building set a new standard for cinematic immersion. As the highest-grossing film of all time ¹, "*Avatar*" drew both critical acclaim and vehement fanfare, establishing itself as a cultural phenomenon.

The film follows Jake Sully, a paraplegic ex marine, who is sent to a human outpost on a foreign planet, wherein a corporate unit from Earth are mining a resource known as 'unobtainium', of which there is a rich deposit beneath the settlement of Pandora's natives, Hometree. The resource is one of immeasurable value, such that it would solve a catastrophic energy crisis, in a vision of Earth that has overused its natural resources to the point of fatal damage.

However, the 'Resources Development Association' (RDA) who are trying to retrieve it are prevented by the opposition of the native race inhabiting the planet Pandora, known as the 'Na'vi', blue-skinned humanoid aliens, who the humans perceive as a savage and primitive civilisation.

Jake is transferred to the scientific unit, despite being of a military background, where he meets Dr Grace Augustine, whose opinions towards the Na'vi are much more enlightened having dedicated her life's work to research of Pandora, and spent time observing the natives. To explore Pandora, scientists use genetically matched Na'vi-human hybrids called 'avatars' - a 'driver' which functions by using a whole-body remote neural interface to control and animate the avatar body.

On his first expedition on Pandora, Jake is chased by various creatures and nearly killed, when a native woman, Neytiri saves his life. In an impulsive reaction to both her mystique and the relief of being saved, Jake asks to be taught the ways of the Na'vi. She takes him to her clan, the forest tribe, known as the 'Omatikaya', where the chief and the 'tsahik' (spiritual leader) accept Jake's wish to be taught, assigning their daughter Neytiri as his mentor.

As Jake learns more about the Na'vi way of life from a native perspective, he grows to see what was once described to him as a hellish nightmare as a spiritual wonderland. He is accepted into the clan as one of the Omatikaya people. His respect and admiration for the tribe, the place and the deity, 'Eywa' the entity of all living things whose presence is felt in

¹ Gray, Brandon (January 26, 2010) "'Avatar' Is New King of the World". Box Office Mojo. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/article/ed2256143364/> (Accessed: 21st December 2022).

Pandora's biological wildlife, begins to grow as a romance blossoms between him and Neytiri. As a result of his newly found love for Pandora and the woman who's helped him see it for what it truly is, his position working for the RDA conflicts him. The RDA grows impatient with Jake's slow 'negotiations' to extract from under Hometree. So, they start deforesting holy land, and order the destruction of Hometree to access the *unobtainium*. The *Omatikaya* feeling a sense of betrayal nearly kill Jake, but the chaos of attack grasps them. They are tragically uprooted from their home, and Jake's guilt is insurmountable. To win the trust of the clan back, Jake leads the clans to victory against the RDA. In an act of rebellion and justice, he, Dr Grace Augustine and the scientists supporting them pledge their loyalty to the justice of Pandora and the Na'vi, where Grace is fatally shot and returned to *Eywa*, the subject of her work all these years.

When the war is over, Jake sends the RDA back to Earth and returns to the *Omatikaya* clan where they ascend his status and pass the baton to him as chief.

The film ends with Jake's avatar and his human body strewn side by side at the 'Tree of Souls', the holy site which the RDA attacked, wherein *Eywa* takes, holds and gives life. His human body dies, and Jake is 'reborn'; while yes, mainly as a Na'vi into his human body, his values have been reborn. He is changed from the marine he once was.

Beneath Cameron's mesmerising spectacle lies a complex interplay between its stunning visual appeal and its intriguing social and historical significance. This essay endeavours to examine the extent to which the visual appeal of "*Avatar*" deviates from its deeper social and historical implications, shedding light on the multifaceted dimensions that make this film an emblematic icon of modern cinema.

In the first section of this essay, the historical context of "*Avatar*" will be meticulously examined, delving into the genesis of its inception and the factors that influenced its creation. It aims to explore how the environmental movement of the 2000s, rapid technological advancements, and political events of the early 21st century shaped the film's narrative and thematic underpinnings. It will also examine the effect of famous historical colonisations on the plotline of "*Avatar*". By analysing Cameron's visionary storytelling within the context of contemporary global concerns, we can appreciate the film's attempt to address pressing issues of the time and its effort to resonate with a diverse audience.

Subsequently, the second section will thoroughly explore the social significance of "*Avatar*." From its portrayal of cultural clashes and the perils of imperialism to its emphasis on unity and interconnectedness, the film evokes a powerful allegory for real-world socio-political

struggles. By breaking down the characters' motivations, the representation of indigenous cultures, and the resonance with contemporary social movements, we can unravel the film's profound influence on the audience's collective consciousness.

The third section will undertake a comprehensive analysis of the visual appeal of "Avatar." The film's pioneering use of 3D technology and motion-capture techniques revolutionised the cinematic landscape, redefining the possibilities of visual storytelling. I aim to examine the integration of visual effects, intricate world-building, and unparalleled attention to detail that transports viewers into the lush, fantastical realm of Pandora. By delving into the technical brilliance and creative vision behind the film's visuals, we can comprehend how "Avatar" stands as an innovation in the realm of filmmaking.

The objective of this essay is to critically assess whether the film's visual splendour eclipses its intended social and historical significance. While the film undeniably dazzles with its breathtaking visuals, it is essential to address whether it adequately addresses the complexities of the themes it touches upon. My conclusion will explore the potential pitfalls of prioritising style over substance, as some critics have argued since the film's release in 2009, and re-opened the debate since its long-awaited sequel "Avatar: The Way of Water"'s release in 2022.

It is here that is best suited to explore whether "Avatar" successfully strikes a harmonious balance between its stunning aesthetics and the deeper messages Cameron seeks to convey.

This investigation unravels the intricate web of "Avatar," drawing connections between its visual brilliance and its profound social and historical significance. Through a thoughtful examination of its historical context, social commentary, and visual splendour, one can gain a more nuanced understanding of the film's impact on popular culture and its enduring legacy in cinematic history.

Historical Context and Social Significance: *Of which Avatar was released, the movie's reference to injustice through history, spirituality, the climate crisis and ecology.*

"Avatar" premiered in theatres in 2009, an era in which there was high tension in regards to global politics; the controversial use of military interference under arguably inadequate circumstances was a subject of relevance and echoed likeness towards the historical pattern of 'settler colonialism'.

Viewers have often drawn comparisons from *Avatar* to the Iraq and Afghanistan War, which were ongoing events of the 2000s and to this day, remain a topic of hot discussion and controversy. The conflicts of historical influence and the type the movie portrays are different by principle, in the fact that the Iraq war was, by critic Ahsan Butt's opinion, instigated by "the US [need] to reassert its position as an unchallengeable hegemon."² The violence in *Avatar* however, is caused by a fight for **resources**; a war of the entitled 'Other'³, against the Native 'Na'vi' the race inhabiting Pandora. In this case, those seen as 'Other' are actually the RDA, the 'Sky People', as female lead, Neytiri, refers to them.

Though Cameron uses the RDA to symbolise the injustice reaped by 'Otherly' settlers, the film has received modern criticism due to this concept of 'Other' versus 'Native', being one that almost glorifies a White Saviour archetype, which will be developed more on further in this essay.

Though the inception of the US conflict aforementioned is different to the one between the *Sky People* and the *Na'vi*, Cameron weaves his narrative around a criticism towards the militaristic nature of powerful nations against marginalised groups whose way of life and ultimate spiritual and social views do not align with their own. Heavily resonating themes in relation to this storyline include that of colonialism, imperialism and capitalism, which the movie clearly highlights such effects of these on native groups as a central appraisal to the

² Butt, A.I. (2019) *Why did Bush go to war in Iraq?*, Opinions | Al Jazeera.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/3/20/why-did-bush-go-to-war-in-iraq> (Accessed: 14 December 2022).

³ Staszak, J.-Francois. (2009) 'Other/otherness', *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, 8,(12), pp. 43–47. doi:10.1016/b978-008044910-4.00980-9.

Otherness is due less to the difference of the Other than to the point of view and the discourse of the person who perceives the Other as such. Opposing Us, the Self, and Them, the Other, is to choose a criterion that allows humanity to be divided into two groups: one that embodies the norm and whose identity is valued and another that is defined by its faults, devalued and susceptible to discrimination. Only dominant groups (such as Westerners in the time of colonisation) are in a position to impose their categories in the matter. By stigmatising them as Others, Barbarians, Savages or People of Color, they relegate the peoples that they could dominate or exterminate to the margin of humanity. The otherness of these peoples has notably been based on their supposed spatial marginality. In addition, certain types of spatial organisation, like segregation or territorial constructions, allow the opposition between the Self and the Other to be maintained or accentuated. Although it seems that the Other is sometimes valued, as with exoticism, it is done in a stereotypical, reassuring fashion that serves to comfort the Self in its feeling of superiority.

beating heart of *Avatar*. The narrative bears a huge likeness to the genocide of Native American peoples, an ongoing slaughter lasting from the 1700s-1900⁴.

Mini Case Study: Genocide of Native Americans, 1700-1900

The RDA's role in *Avatar* mirrors that of the European settlers in America, wherein there was once an estimated population of over 10 million Native Americans living there⁵ and by the time, settlers had exploited their resources, raped their women and murderously ravaged the tribes, the figure shockingly reduced to under 300,000.

Cameron's *Avatar* is a narrative that comments on the divisive nature of colonialism, including violence resulting directly from settler expansion, intertribal violence (frequently aggravated by colonial intrusions, demonstrated in how certain *Na'vi* turn on Jake despite accepting him into their tribe), enslavement, disease, loss of land and resources, forced removals, and assaults on tribal religion, culture, and language.⁶

Due to the parallel of *Avatar*'s political narrative, towards previous hollywood releases that depicted similar themes, including Disney's "Pocahontas" (1995) and "FernGully: The Last Rainforest" (1992), James Cameron and his label Lightstorm had three plaintiffs launch lawsuits against them for "stealing" ideas, and collectively demanded more than \$2.5bn in damages.⁷ His response was to release a forty-five page document presented in court entailing in extreme detail the very thoughtful and long-term process the conception of *Avatar* turned out to be, of which I have read upon my research and been able to derive the meticulousness of his creative process.

⁴ Fixico, D.L. (2023) *When Native Americans were slaughtered in the name of 'civilization'*, History.com. Available at: <https://www.history.com/news/native-americans-genocide-united-states> (Accessed: 24 August 2023).

⁵ "Genocide of indigenous peoples" (2023) Holocaust Museum Houston. Available at: <https://hnh.org/library/research/genocide-of-indigenous-peoples-guide/> (Accessed: 17 August 2023).

⁶ Shields, K. (2022) *James Cameron's avatar has an anthropocene problem*, Orion Magazine. Available at: <https://orionmagazine.org/article/avatar-james-cameron-anthropocene-colonization/> (Accessed: 25 June 2023).

⁷ Walker, T. (2012) *Avatar was my idea, says James Cameron (and I've got a 45-page document to prove it)*, *The Independent*. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/avatar-was-my-idea-says-james-cameron-and-i-ve-got-a-45page-document-to-prove-it-8406656.html> (Accessed: 21 June 2023).

On page 20 of the aforementioned document, Cameron states:

"Avatar is a Science-Fiction retelling of the history of North and South America in the early colonial period. Avatar very pointedly made reference to the colonial period in the Americas, with all its conflict and bloodshed between the military aggressors from Europe and the Indigenous peoples. Europe equals Earth. The Native Americans are the Na'vi. It's not meant to be subtle."

Avatar's war is not concerned with only portraying the conflict, but the massacre and the impropriety of Europeans against indigenous practices of spirituality, heightening this sense of Other versus Native.

The RDA's constant dismissal of the Na'vi's way of life, being referred to as "savages", the misunderstanding between the two distinguished groups of people (minus the select few humans whose intentions run deeper than extracting the unobtanium of the planet), is very prominent. Spirituality is a key theme of Avatar and the RDA's ignorance to it can be compared to the historical event of the "Wounded Knee Massacre" of the 1800s.

The incident involved a heavy amount of European anxiety about the 'Ghost Dance', which is said to have began in Nevada in 1889 when a Native American man of Piute identity, named Wovoka prophesied the extinction of white people and the return of the old-time life and superiority of the Indians." Faithful dancing, clean living, peaceful adjustments with the whites, hard work, and following God's chosen leaders would hasten the resurrection of dead relatives and the restoration of days of Indian prosperity.⁸

The ghost dance spread to the Great Plains in 1889 as a four-day round dance. Spiritual leaders waved eagle-wing fans before the faces of the dancers, inducing 'trances'. In trance, they believed the dancer would be transported to the afterworld where departed relatives were seen living the old, happy life of the pre reservation era when bison abounded, according to the Library of Congress.⁹

⁸ Young A. Gloria. "Ghost Dance." The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture, 2009, Available at: <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=MI024>. (Accessed: 19 June 2023)

⁹ Research guides: Wounded knee massacre: Topics in Chronicling America: Introduction (2023) Introduction - Wounded Knee Massacre: Topics in Chronicling America - Research Guides at Library of Congress. Available at: <https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-wounded-knee-massacre> (Accessed: 02 October 2023).



Figure 1 - Ghost Dance of the Sioux, print from a wood engraving, 1891.

Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Digital file no. cph 3a51166) Depicts the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Wichita, Caddo, and Apache tribes, gathered on the South Canadian River that danced every night for two weeks (Young, A. Gloria, 2009)

In the movie itself, Cameron attributes an ode to this dance in the film, where the Na'vi gather around the Tree of Souls, which connect them to their ancestors.



Figure 2 - The Na'vi forest tribe gather around the Tree of Souls as Jake transfers his conscience through Eywa into his Avatar body. A rebirth, the final step of becoming one of 'The People'
Lightstorm Entertainment, 2009

Throughout this movie, the Na'vi are connected to their deity Eywa through their sacred environment, much like indigenous tribes including the Inuit, which accounts dating back to thousands of years ago show occupied regions of Northern California.

This expression of spirituality, which was by nature peaceful and kept within the indigenous community, was thought by European settlers to be a pagan and devilish ceremony, a ceremony that would initialise a violent battle against them. This perception prompted US Army troops to shoot participating Native Americans at Wounded Knee, a massacre of almost three hundred dancers. After a realisation of their wrongful perception, there are no records of Europeans interfering in the Ghost Dance post Wounded Knee, but the legacy of sorrow and unnecessary wiping out of these people highlights a form of religious oppression¹⁰, a social theme that is undoubtedly lamented on at various points in 'Avatar'.

¹⁰ Thornton, Russell. "Native American Demographic and Tribal Survival into the Twenty-First Century." *American Studies*, vol. 46, no. 3/4, 2005, pp. 23-38. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40643888>. Accessed 7 Oct. 2023.

The meaninglessness and regret is heavily weighed in on in a moment of the movie wherein Parker Selfridge, instigator of Home Tree's deforesting, looks upon what he has done, a subtle but important detail that is touched upon in *Avatar's* script:

"SELFRIDGE watches a video feed of the destruction on one of the monitors. Max and NORM stare in shock.

SELFRIDGE
Pull the plug.

A TROOPER crosses to the console and grabs the handle of the
MASTER BREAKER –"

This is a moment of the film that is nuanced but unmissable - truthfully, the tragedy is best portrayed by the Na'vi grieving their home and that moment that Home Tree falls "*like the end of the world*", as Cameron specifies in the script, but this is a moment that heavily resonates the relationship between Settler and Native and the protruding gap of Otherness.

From this, we can see that when analysed from a historical viewpoint, *Avatar* is a complex story with more than just visual effects to its legacy - it can be interpreted as a historic and social commentary due to its representation of indigenous turmoil, a theme recurrent of time and perhaps a pattern that Cameron suggests will always repeat itself.

When referring to the social significance of the film, and its intertwining historical theme, the inference made towards the storyline in accordance with real life parallels is best supported by analysing the case study of the 'Belo Monte Dam' project of 2010. I seek to examine Cameron's active role in this project and the controversial duality of its nature.

By analysing this closely, one can gain a closer insight into not only the historical events that influenced the film, but also the social impact of which the film had on a wider scale.

Case Study: The Belo Monte Dam and James Cameron's short documentary 'A Message From Pandora'.

Though a blockbuster most distinctly remembered for its cinematic legacy, Cameron's influence has reached further than a seated audience. '*A Message From Pandora*' is a special

feature documentary from 2010, that highlights the worldly relevance of *Avatar* to all audiences.

In an act of advocacy, James Cameron travelled to Brazil to show his support for a Native Amazonian tribe known as the 'Xingu' tribe, against the planning for a hydroelectric project called the Belo Monte Dam on the Xingu river (a tributary of the Amazon river). The director took both Sigourney Weaver and Joel David Moore on this expedition with him - both actors, who play the role of the scientists who rebel against the RDA and side with the native peoples to defend Pandora.

His commentary in this documentary was about how the dam symbolised the "collision of rapidly economically growing economic society with its demand for power" (Cameron, 2010), and the untouched world of the rainforest, much like what can be seen in *Avatar*.

The dam was projected to displace 25,000 people - destroying people's homes, livelihood and culture, while the government would compensate them with monetary gain. However, the main income was due to be received by the shareholders of the dam, while the government lacked transparency of how indigenous people local to the planning area would be affected. This real-life example reveals to us the Capitalist greed and destructivity of its philosophy, closely paralleling that of the RDA within *Avatar* and thus making it a narrative drawing pertinent historical inspiration.

Though he is best-known as an Oscar-winning filmmaker, James Cameron is also an "intrepid explorer, inventor and avid creator of cutting-edge technology" (National Geographic Society, 2022), which not only applies to his more recent engineering feat assembling a submersible that successfully reached the deepest point in the Mariana Trench, but also to his research of the logistical capability of the dam back in 2010 when the issue of licensing permissions for the project ensued.

He discovered that the Amazon river would need more than one dam, which in turn would create a negative domino effect and alter the river's natural function. As someone whose understanding of engineering is about as successful as his career in directing, he and his research team saw the unfit means the government intended to utilise the Amazon, which he himself described as the wrong "investment into technology."

From an analytical lens, one can argue that though *Avatar* was released in 2009, its narrative projects recurring historical themes, and Cameron's involvement to support an indigenous struggle is one that highlights the reach of *Avatar* aside from visual excellence.

While this may be true, the alternate perspective must be considered for a thorough evaluation of the historical significance the film obtains. There have been criticisms of Cameron's role in the protest against the Belo Monte Dam. As mentioned before, the 'White Saviour complex' is one that critics have been offended by considering *Avatar's* narrative and some would argue that actually the case study being used can be viewed as "off-screen [act of the] white saviour complex"¹¹, especially considering the parallel to Jake, an American-born soldier eventually becoming accepted into the Na'vi society. Perhaps back in the early 2000s, this may have landed a subtler blow due to the widespread popularity of other "White glorifying" tropes in media, like in aforementioned Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995), whereby John Smith takes on a 'woke' and enlightened persona after spending time with an exotic woman who seems otherworldly to himself, an almost fetishisation of the indigenous that portrays a 'white man's fantasy of Native American resistance,' (Asenap, 'White Man's fantasy': *Indigenous groups call for a boycott of avatar 2*, 2022).

By some viewpoints the way Cameron forefronts the controversy of the Belo Monte Dam in 'A Message From Pandora' is contradictory of what he is against; it is as though instead of highlighting the struggle of the indigenous native, the ally (Cameron himself, and in the same context, Jake Sully being *Avatar's* main character) is made the focal point of what is a centrally native struggle. He even inherits the Xingu appearance in the feature film, the locals donning him in feathers and paint not dissimilar to the design of the Na'vi and their *Avatar* counterparts. Taking this perspective into consideration, the term that would be used to refer to this would be that of 'cultural appropriation', in which multiple terms including that of 'Blueface' (the word that came about following *Avatar's* release in 2009, commenting on its parallel to its real-life predecessors Blackface, Redface and Yellowface) emerge. The textbook definition of cultural appropriation refers to "when members of a majority group adopt cultural elements of a minority group in an exploitative, disrespectful, or stereotypical way". In the movie, the Na'vi have been designed using inspiration from inherently black and Native American tribes, with their braided locs, beaded ornaments and seemingly 'primitive' clothing (this will be developed further in the report) with actors of varying ethnic groups portraying them, which by modern standards some are offended by.

However, as we know, the film received *mixed reviews* upon release, but figures show that its success trumped its failure to resonate with a global audience. In fact, the first film had incredible staying power at the box office, running in theatres through August 2010, a

¹¹ Rose, S. (2023) *Evaluating the Avatar film franchise through a decolonial lens: Indigenous representation communicated as Popular Culture*. thesis. The Department of International Relations.

whopping 234 days (Whitten, 2022)¹². Considering its heavy criticism, my research finds that though his work has reached some audiences negatively, ultimately Cameron has held the issue of indigenous turmoil close to his intentions for the film, since pre-Avatar conception and actually stems from his fascination with Geography and its multifaceted role in the discovery of our world.

When asked by The National Geographic Society how he defined Geography, he stated:

"I thought it was just 'what was where.'

"Now I realise geography has a big cultural component to it - what people live, where, what do they think, and what kind of language do they speak, and how does the place that they live in affect who they are. Are they mountain people, are they desert people, are they ocean people?"

*"Our world is very rich and complex. You can study this stuff your entire life and still only know a tiny part of it."*¹³

Though from an outer perspective it can seem like Cameron takes advantage of his white heritage and masks it with directorial choice, I would disagree.

What we can extract from this case study as well as the language Cameron uses in the indicated extract, is that he does not view himself superior to Native groups and nor does his work try to reflect this. Rather, *Avatar* tries to convey how a man ignorant to the struggle of a marginalised race begins to "see" the truth. This is something I believe reflects Cameron's own journey as an Environmentalist and someone whose support for indigenous communities stretches beyond his work as a filmmaker, as we can see from this case study.

Claiming he visited Brazil merely for a sense of clout would serve injustice to the support he showed - "We've got a bit of a spotlight on us right now to raise awareness in certain key areas... and I think that is important,"¹⁴ he expressed, so, whether or not his impact was heard and considered by the Brazilian government, it goes to show that despite criticism the position of privilege Cameron occupies is acknowledged, which underpins *Avatar's* plot. His

¹² Whitten, S. (2022) 'avatar: The way of water' opens to \$134 million, just missing box office expectations, CNBC. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/12/18/avatar-the-way-of-water-opens-to-134-million-just-missing-expectations.html> (Accessed: 06 August 2023).

¹³ "Filmmaker, inventor, and explorer: James Cameron" (2022) National Geographic, Education. Available at: <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/real-world-geography-james-cameron/> (Accessed: 2023).

¹⁴ Philips, T. (2010) *Avatar director James Cameron joins Amazon Tribe's fight to halt Giant Dam*, The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/apr/18/avatar-james-cameron-brazil-dam> (Accessed: 07 March 2023).

involvement to fight Brazilian governmental bodies alongside a native community, one with little power over the Dam's outcomes, is one that presents the importance of activism in the face of injustice and rather tries to bridge the gap between Other and Indigenous rather than extorting it.

Vicky Tauli-Corpuz, an activist with the Kankanaey Igorot people of the Philippines, who have struggled for decades to protect their ancestral lands from logging and mining interests, had a mixed reaction to the film (Philips, 2010)¹⁵ but even she has expressed how its message resonates with such audiences, and her statement is one that can be used to prove that the legacy of *Avatar* is a lasting one despite its critique as a film glorifying the White Saviour trope.

She said:

"I thought the movie was really very good. It really represents the reality that many indigenous peoples face, and, of course, the reality of how indigenous peoples relate with nature," says Pauli-Corpuz. "What I didn't like was the white man being the messiah. But he [Cameron] explained that because he is a white man, he is the one making the film, he would like to show it as a way for the white man to really make the amends for what they have done to indigenous peoples."

'A Message From Pandora' in my evaluated opinion, is a documentary that aims to fall on the ears of those in the *Avatar* fandom whose interest in the movie go beyond its visual appeal and really care about the heart of the film, which is the brutality taken from history and portrayed on the big screen, exaggerated flamboyantly to attract a wider audience so that people if not act on the issues, can acknowledge them and draw comparisons to society's hypocrisy. *Avatar* is a movie that aims to portray the real life Indigenous power gained through the grit of struggle, an ode to tribes like the Xingu tribe which "urbanised eyes" (Cameron, 2010) would have never seen, and maybe never get the opportunity to. Utilising the platform that *Avatar* materialises to be, whether or not the means through which Cameron does it is subjectively right, ultimately the historical message is one that Cameron "has always been open about" and doesn't deny.

There is a saying in the Na'vi language, which by concept is similar to Tolkien's Elvish, in the sense that it is a fictional language created purely for the race in the story, and portrays their

¹⁵ Phillips, A. (2010) *Native peoples see themselves in 'avatar'*, VOA. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/native-peoples-see-themselves-in-the-film-avatar-92107984/161870.html> (Accessed: 03 October 2023).

colloquialisms - *Oel Ngati Kameie*, translating to “I see you” in English.

This saying holds a particular strength to it, and echoes throughout the movie as a motif urging one to open their inner eye to the truths and revelations they would otherwise be ignorant to.

Neytiri’s mother, Mo’at amplifies this message and says to Jake herself, “It is hard to fill a cup that is already full,” to which he brazenly responds “My cup is empty.”

This case study of James Cameron’s involvement in the licensing proposal for the Belo Monte Dam is one that greatly parallels and embodies this metaphor- it highlights the ‘Otherly’ man, which is Cameron in this case, learning from the indigenous for a greater understanding of humanity’s kaleidoscope of groups.

This, I believe, truly shows the importance of the historical context in which *Avatar* was made and how the historical influence still bleeds into modern society, which is why the movie remains a relevant form. Cameron as the director is filling the empty cups of his audience with a film that transforms the historical context of the film into an artistic narrative and quite simplistically, this is built upon by the film’s visuals, which is what will be explored in the next section.

The Visual Appeal: *How a stunning spectacle of cinema was created to iconise the film as we know it today.*

The aim of this essay is to unpick whether or not the visual appeal deviates from the historical and social significance of *Avatar*. With the amount of research, technological innovation and engineering that went into creating the unique form in *Avatar*, that broke records and still holds the No. 1 spot as the world’s highest grossing movie, with \$2.923 billion (Entertainment Weekly, 2023) , won three Oscars for Best Cinematography, Best Production Design and Best Visual Effects at the 2010 Oscars, it is understandable why some would argue that Cameron’s *Avatar* prioritises style over substance. Undertaking a thorough analysis of the development that actually went into the worldbuilding and character design, I aim to evaluate whether the research that went into the visual aspects of the movie, is research that lacks in the complexity of *Avatar*’s storyline itself, ergo concluding whether this overshadows the historical and social significance the film has to it.

Worldbuilding

‘*Cinematic realism*’, is a concept that simultaneously defines the approach to much of *Avatar*’s design choices, but doesn’t quite capture the unique style Cameron has achieved. *Avatar* has

been studied more for its ode to cinematic escapism, due to its futuristic aesthetic combined with a rich, otherworldly biological environment. Its realist appeal is more nuanced, in the sense that the special effects, which are incredibly photoreal, and have used computer animation to achieve its prevailing aesthetic, which experts have said bears more likeness towards high end game graphics and is not traditionally used for Hollywood projects.

James Cameron presents this world with unmatched attention-to-detail.

In interviews, he has said that he's thought about every minor detail; from handles on boxes (they need to fold in to get through narrow doorways on spaceships) to how the six-legged horses would breathe (through airholes in their necks)¹⁶. Pandora and the human military base aren't just vaguely sketched-in concept art that we view in backgrounds - they have been realistically portrayed on screen in intricate landscapes.

Visual effects (VFX) are pivotal to the building of Pandora's biosphere, as they completed Cameron's vision for 'Avatar' seen in how he even held off on production for a decade after drafting his first treatment of the script in 1995, because he decided the technology to create the film wasn't readily available¹⁷. Various tidbits of Cameron's process, ranging from excerpts in the script, to concept sketches drafted by entire teams show the thorough process of creating an environment was on par with the significance of the storyline. Take, for instance this line in the screenplay:

"The jungle has come alive with BIOLUMINESCENCE -- spots and patterns, ghosts and galaxies of blue-green light."

The directions itself indicate the fantasy-like aspect of this Science-Fiction story. Though falling under the Sci-Fi genre of film, its worldbuilding is a serious aspect that defines the renowned style of the movie and as mentioned before, alike to J.R.R Tolkien's in his trilogy novels the Lord Of The Rings.

Pandora's design and rich tropical ecosystems draw inspiration from Earth's beauty. For example, the Hallelujah Mountains in which the *Ikrân*, (airborne 'banshees' and animals inhabiting the planet), reside in, are based off of the Zhangjiajie National Forest Park located in China. Concept artists who worked on the film, including Dylan Cole whose specialty was

¹⁶ Newitz, A. (2010) *Is Avatar (2009) too realistic for its own good?*, Gizmodo. Available at: <https://gizmodo.com/is-avatar-too-realistic-for-its-own-good-5454186> (Accessed: 06 November 2023).

¹⁷ Acuna, K. (2012) *James Cameron swears he didn't rip off the idea for 'Avatar'*, Business Insider. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/james-camerons-45-page-declaration-proving-avatar-was-his-idea-2012-12?r=US&IR=T> (Accessed: 07 April 2023).

focused on ‘the creatures and living fragments of the newfound geography’¹⁸, actually had teams who visited the place to take reference shots of the dense forest, deep ravines, canyons, caves, and strange pillar-like rock formations unique to China and formed by erosion. From his portfolio website, I found that he oversees design for the entire Avatar franchise, specifically for the moon of Pandora, including all its environments, creatures, characters and cultures.¹⁹



Figure 3 - Zhangjiajie National Forest Park, the famous “floating” mountains of China

¹⁸ Ahuja, A. (2023) Dylan Cole and Ben Procter on designing the world of ‘Avatar: The Way of Water’, STIRworld. Available at: <https://www.stirworld.com/think-books-and-movies-dylan-cole-and-ben-procter-on-designing-the-world-of-avatar-the-way-of-water> (Accessed: 05 August 2023).

¹⁹ Cole, D. (2018) Dylan Cole Studio - ‘About’, Dylan Cole Studio. Available at: <https://dylancolestudio.com/about> (Accessed: 05 August 2023).



Figure 4 - official concept art depicting *The Hallelujah Mountains of Pandora*, Dylan Cole, 2007
Lightstorm Entertainment

The immense detail and heavy research that has been commissioned into conceiving the unique aesthetic, renders Cameron and his concept artists intense “Worldbuilders” who are in the business of “deception, of creating an illusion so compelling that the audience gladly relinquishes disbelief and attention for the privilege of experiencing that illusion.”²⁰

Character Design

Equal attention was put into the idea and conceptualisation of the Na’vi, with Cameron having concept pieces dating back to around 1976, when he painted a blue woman for his short film *Xenogenesis*, an early idea that contributed to the holistic vision of *Avatar*. In an interview, Cameron states “Her name wasn't Neytiri and it was in a completely different context, but I was already thinking about it then.”

²⁰ Brierly, N.T. (2016) *Worldbuilding design patterns in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, signumuniversity.org. Available at:

<https://signumuniversity.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Mythmoot-III-Brierly-N-Trevor-Worldbuilding-Design-Patterns-in-Tolkien.pdf> (Accessed: 14 June 2023).



Figure 5 - A 1976 work of Cameron's depicting a muscular blue woman, a drawing which Cameron would reference almost twenty years later when coming up with the idea for Neytiri.

James Cameron, 1976, Xenogenesis

Upon brainstorming both the biological aspects of the Na'vi, crafting their race bearing both the Sci-Fi factor and historical significance of the movie, Cameron devised the first look at Neytiri, which studies have observed considers the concept of 'Anthropomorphism' which is when we attribute human qualities to non-human things - such as objects, animals or phenomena.²¹ In the words of Galen Wilson's research article on cinematic realism and representation [in David Simon's 'The Wire'], "The Bigger the Lie, the More They'-- the audience, "Believe"²².

²¹Barkley, S. (2022) *What is anthropomorphizing? psychology, benefits, and downsides*, Psych Central. Available at: <https://psychcentral.com/health/why-do-we-anthropomorphize> (Accessed: 06 August 2023).

²² Wilson, G. (2014) *"The bigger the lie, the more they believe": Cinematic realism and the anxiety of representation in David Simon's the Wire*, South Central Review, 31(2), pp. 59-79. doi:10.1353/scr.2014.0015.



Figure 6 - A spread from the book *Tech Noir: The Art of James Cameron*, featuring early illustrations of the Na'vi from *Avatar* (2009). Courtesy of Insight Editions.

Details like the markings of the Na'vi, and their blue colour, though Cameron has claimed he just liked the appearance, bear a striking similarity to Hindu deities, which he has in passing acknowledged. Their design perhaps emphasises their symbolic significance as emblems of our society and its rich cultural heritage, as well as the spirituality interwoven within their identity.

Technological Development: 3D cameras in effect

Cameron's vision was almost impossible to achieve had he lacked access to the sophisticated tools to engineer technology that would conceive the motion capture performance the film is renowned for, as it revolutionised the Hollywood norms of filmmaking.

Motion capture is a category of filmmaking, also known as high fidelity facial motion capture, which is the next generation of fidelity and is utilised to record the more complex movements in a human face in order to capture higher degrees of emotion.²³ Facial cameras,

²³ 'The Evolution of Animation to CGI (Computer-Generated Imagery) and the Impact of James Cameron's *Avatar*' (2016) wordpress.com. FILM STUDIES 2270 INTRODUCTION TO FILM STUDIES A

one type of three cameras (that of which were: performance capture, live action cameras and hybrid shooting ones) that the director engineered with his team specifically for the film - watched the actors' movements, hence why Avatar created a new style of "Performance capture" as opposed to just "Motion". The idea was that twenty cameras would be used to watch their movements and the aim was to portray them as naturalistic as possible, once again linking to the previously mentioned use of anthropomorphism, as well as the concept of Cinematic Realism.

All motion-capture scenes were filmed first, while realistic sets were being built, including those that were a part of scenes at the RDA's terraformed bases, highlighting the importance of this development in technology. Breaking the boundaries of what was normally expected of Hollywood opened a doorway for many other films post-Avatar legacy, including more recent Marvel movies like 'Avengers: Endgame' (2019) and 'Spider-Man: No Way Home' (2021). James Cameron evolved motion capture to fit his vision and it is due to his work that others have been able to remodel it and one of the reasons why it has become so popularised in cinema.



Figure 7 - Zoe Saldana's performance as Neytiri, a side-by-side comparison of the final computer generated imagery with the original footage.

Behind the Scenes Look at the Motion Capture Technology Used in AVATAR

By AVATAR BLOG, May 20, 2010

Additionally, Cameron developed 3D cameras after a rigorous process of engineering and work in progress. In the end, though barely noticeable to the traditional eye, these 3D cameras mimic the human eye, to perceive depth and focus in a way that is naturalistic and in-line with human vision. Even though the vast majority of the film was filmed in a warehouse and in quite a paradoxical way in the sense that the actors almost navigated their performance like avatars themselves, with their Mo-Cap suits, this shows the lengths and just how large the breadth of research was that went into creating the striking visual appeal that we see on the IMAX screen.

This brings me to my conclusion - to what extent does Avatar's visual appeal actually deviate from its Social and Historical significance?

Deviation from Historical Context and Social Significance: *Evaluating the findings of this report.*

After a comprehensive look at *Avatar* as a piece of cinema from multiple angles, my conclusion summarises that despite its critique as a 'substanceless' movie, it is quite the opposite; the historical and social messages of the film alongside its remarkably unique visual appeal cohesively work together to form what is a spectacle deserving of its multiple titles and critical acclaims. The narrative is linear, but its *simplicity* is what this essay finds to be overshadowed by *authenticity* - *Avatar* is timeless because it is one that any audience cannot rebuke, because of its alarming ability to hit close to home.

The visual appeal has been constructed as a means of executing the Sci-Fi element of Cameron's form, and is not intended to distract its audience from the plot which is a social commentary of values Cameron holds to himself. It is notably clear that Cameron and his teams averted attention to multiple aspects of the film; from minor design details, immersive environments, and creatures that very much mirror our own, alongside stark historical comparisons. Various creative components have been intertwined with the storyline's accuracy, almost like a puzzle; without the other, the bigger picture cannot be created.

Thus, I conclude that the visual appeal of *Avatar* is not a barter for its social and historical significance, nor does it deviate from it. Though the film has received mixed reviews, my research is best summed up by this quote from James Baldwin:

"The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been concealed by the answers."

Avatar's narrative lays out a storyline attested by history and patterns in our society, in a bold way to connect deeply with audiences. By immersing his audience in the world of Pandora, one gains a deeper sympathy for its people because of the escapism the movie is able to provide us. Where in our own world it is easy to turn a blind eye to such issues and forget the course of our history, *Avatar* provides us with that chance to reflect, seeing it from a different perspective. A different environment, that is hauntingly a foil of our Earth and our human errors.

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Figures

Figure 1 - Ghost Dance of the Sioux, print from a wood engraving, 1891. *Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Digital file no. cph 3a51166)* Depicts the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Wichita, Caddo, and Apache tribes, gathered on the South Canadian River that danced every night for two weeks (Young, A. Gloria, 2009)

Figure 2 - The Na'vi forest tribe gather around the Tree of Souls as Jake transfers his conscience through Eywa into his Avatar body. A rebirth, the final step of becoming one of 'The People' *Lightstorm Entertainment, 2009*

Figure 3 - Zhangjiajie National Forest Park, the famous "floating" mountains of China, *Science Wanders, 2019*

Figure 4 - official concept art depicting The Hallelujah Mountains of Pandora, Dylan Cole, 2007 *Lightstorm Entertainment*

Figure 5 - A 1976 work of Cameron's depicting a muscular blue woman, a drawing which Cameron would reference almost twenty years later when coming up with the idea for Neytiri. *James Cameron, 1976, Xenogenesis*

Figure 6 - A spread from the book *Tech Noir: The Art of James Cameron*, featuring early illustrations of the Na'vi from *Avatar* (2009). *Courtesy of Insight Editions.*

Figure 7 - Zoe Saldana's performance as Neytiri, a side-by-side comparison of the final computer generated imagery with the original footage. *Behind the Scenes Look at the Motion Capture Technology Used in AVATAR By AVATAR BLOG, May 20, 2010*