

Avatar is a 2009 American science fiction epic film written and directed by James Cameron and starring Sam Worthington, Zoe Saldana, Sigourney Weaver, Michelle Rodriguez and Stephen Lang. The film is set in the year 2154, when humans are mining a precious mineral called unobtainium on the lush moon Pandora in the Alpha Centauri star system. The colonists' expansion threatens the continued existence of the Na'vi—a race ... who are indigenous to Pandora—as well as the moon's ecosystem. The film's title refers to the genetically engineered Na'vi bodies used by several human characters to interact with the natives of Pandora.



ST PETERS LUTHERAN COLLEGE

YEAR 10 CHRISTIAN STUDIES – SPIRITUALITY & RITUAL

AVATAR

At Comic Con 2009, Cameron told attendees that he wanted to make "something that has this spoonful of sugar of all the action and the adventure and all that". He wanted this to thrill him "as a fan" but also have a conscience "that maybe in the enjoying of it makes you think a little bit about the way you interact with nature and your fellow man". He added that "the Na'vi represent something that is our higher selves, or our aspirational selves, what we would like to think we are" and that even though there are good humans within the film, the humans "represent what we know to be the parts of ourselves that are trashing our world and maybe condemning ourselves to a grim future".

Some of these things you can't raise without being called unpatriotic, but I think it's very patriotic to question a system that needs to be corralled, or it becomes Rome.

—James Cameron^[70]

Cameron acknowledges that Avatar implicitly criticizes America's role in the War in Iraq and the impersonal nature of mechanized warfare in general. In reference to the use of the term shock and awe in the film, Cameron said, "We know what it feels like to launch the missiles. We don't know what it feels like for them to land on our home soil, not in America." He said in a later interview, "The film is definitely not anti-American." A scene in the film portrays the violent destruction of the towering Na'vi Hometree, which collapses in flames after a missile attack, coating the landscape with ash and floating embers. Asked about the scene's resemblance to the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, Cameron said he had been "surprised at how much it did look like September 11"

Cast and characters

Humans

- Sam Worthington as **Corporal Jake Sully**, the film's protagonist, is a disabled former Marine who becomes part of the Avatar Program. His military background helps the Na'vi warriors relate to him. Cameron cast the Australian actor after a worldwide search for promising young actors, preferring relative unknowns to keep the budget down. Worthington, who was living in his car at the time, auditioned twice early in development, and he has signed on for possible sequels. Cameron felt that because Worthington had not done a major film, he was "game for anything", giving the character "a quality that is really real. He has that quality of being a guy you'd want to have a beer with, and he ultimately becomes a leader who transforms the world".
- Sigourney Weaver as **Dr. Grace Augustine**, an exobiologist and head of the Avatar Program. She mentors Jake Sully, and was an advocate of peaceful relations with the Na'vi, setting up a school to teach them English. Weaver dyed her hair red for the part. The character was named "Shipley" at one point, a reference to the character she played in *Aliens* which was directed by Cameron. Weaver said that Augustine reminded her of Cameron, being "very driven and very idealistic".
- Michelle Rodriguez as **Trudy Chacón**, a Marine combat pilot assigned to support the Avatar Program. Cameron had wanted to work with Rodriguez since seeing her in *Girlfight*.¹
- Giovanni Ribisi as **Parker Selfridge**, the corporate administrator for the RDA mining operation and one of the film's primary antagonists.
- Joel David Moore as **Norm Spellman**, an anthropologist who studies plant and nature life as part of the Avatar Program. He arrives on Pandora at the same time as Jake Sully and operates an avatar. Although he is expected to lead the diplomatic contact with the Na'vi, it turns out that Jake has the personality more calculated to win the natives' respect.
- Stephen Lang as **Colonel Miles Quaritch**, the head of the mining operation's security detail. Fiercely loyal to his cause, he has a profound disregard for Pandora's inhabitants, and serves as the film's primary antagonist. Lang had unsuccessfully auditioned for a role in Cameron's *Aliens* (1986), but the director remembered Lang and sought him for *Avatar*. Michael Biehn, who *was* in *Aliens*, read the script and watched some of the 3D footage with Cameron, but was ultimately not cast in the role.
- Dileep Rao as **Dr. Max Patel**, a scientist who works in the Avatar Program.

Na'vi

- Zoe Saldana as **Neytiri**, the film's female Na'vi protagonist, princess of the Omaticaya, the Na'vi clan central to the story, who is attracted to Jake because of his bravery. The character, like all the Na'vi, was created using performance capture, and its visual aspect is entirely computer generated.^[39] Saldana has also signed on for potential sequels.
- C. C. H. Pounder as **Mo'at**, the Omaticaya's spiritual leader, Neytiri's mother, and consort to clan leader Eytukan.
- Laz Alonso as **Tsu'tey**, heir to the chieftainship of the tribe, and Neytiri's formerly betrothed, prior to the events of the film.
- Wes Studi as **Eytukan**, the Omaticaya's clan leader, Neytiri's father and Mo'at's mate.

One of us

Author: Sophie Lister

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Film title: Avatar

Director: James Cameron

Screenplay: James Cameron

Starring: Sam Worthington, Zoë Saldana, Stephen Lang, Michelle Rodriguez

Distributor: Twentieth Century Fox

Cinema Release Date: 17 December 2009 (UK); 18 December 2009 (USA)

Certificate: PG-13 (USA); 12A (UK) Contains moderate violence and intense battle scenes



The statistics are every bit as mind-boggling as the spectacle. A reported budget of \$280,000,000 makes James Cameron's *Avatar* one of the most expensive films ever made. In just a record-breaking 17 days, the film reached the \$1 billion mark in its takings worldwide. It was reportedly over fourteen years in the making. Touted as a work that would break new ground for CGI technology and so change the face of cinema, *Avatar* certainly made a noise when it arrived in cinemas back in December. But the question is, beneath the hype, does the film really have anything to say?

In a future where the human race has set off into space in search of new worlds to plunder, a paraplegic marine called Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) is given an unusual mission. Human mining activity on the moon Pandora is being disrupted by the Na'vi, alien natives who refuse to co-operate. With his mind inhabiting an artificially-grown alien body, or 'Avatar', Jake must go among these blue-skinned rainforest-dwellers and win their trust. He is ordered to manipulate the Na'vi into leaving their beloved home. However, it isn't long

before he falls in love both with their peaceful way of life and with Neytiri (Zoë Saldana), and he begins to question where his loyalties lie.

The film is undeniably jaw-dropping to look at, and, particularly when seen in 3-D, an utterly immersive experience. The technical wizardry involved in creating the lush, exquisitely detailed rainforest environment and the beautifully organic, expressive Na'vi is certainly to be applauded. In this respect the film far surpasses anything that has gone before it. It seems almost petty to wish, when confronted with such dazzling visual riches, that as much creativity had been expended on the script as on the special effects. But sadly, as a political parable about colonial intervention and our abuse of the environment, *Avatar* is overly simplistic. Both are complex and pressing issues, but by drawing both its villains and its conclusions with extremely broad brush-strokes *Avatar* fails to really add much to the debate. It also fails to be as liberal and outspoken in its causes as it clearly believes itself to be – the film is plagued, in fact, by that old Hollywood assumption that the only worthwhile story to be told about native peoples is the tale of a white man who 'goes native'.

Avatar's most (literally) three-dimensional and compelling character is the incandescent Pandora jungle itself. Where stilted dialogue fails, the alluring setting speaks eloquent volumes. Man's longing for some kind of Edenic paradise is writ large in its every lush detail, even as his baffling innate compulsion to destroy this paradise is made equally plain. We dream magnificent dreams and yet we are in so many ways consumed by greed and selfishness. Despite its flaws, *Avatar* succeeds in achieving occasional moments of mythic grandeur precisely because these two truths are pushed to the fore, and they resonate with us. The Bible explains this tension as a result of the fact that, though we have rebelled against God and wrought havoc with our world as a result, we were made in his image and so have a deep longing for somewhere better, somewhere unspoiled, where our relationships with each other and with the natural world are restored. Perhaps the appeal of the pantheistic spirituality practiced by the Na'vi is its apparent promise to return us to such a home. But the biblical view is that our damaged relationship with nature is not the heart of the problem but rather a symptom. God is not nature but the creator of nature, and our true 'home' is in relationship with him.

The film also echoes biblical themes in the fascinating concept at its heart. What would it be

like, the film asks, to experience life in a new body? Jake's progression from his weak and paralysed human form to the liberating strength of his Avatar self echoes the Bible's teaching that Christians will have new, everlasting bodies in the life to come: 'Our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will be raised in strength.' ([1 Corinthians 15:43](#))[1]. The Christian life is often described by the Bible as a struggle between two 'selves' – the weak earthly self or 'flesh', and the stronger, real self or 'spirit'. It is when we live as this 'spirit' prompts us to that we experience true freedom to be ourselves, just as Jake finds that he is actually more 'himself' as an Avatar than as a human. Eventually he chooses to make the full transition of his consciousness into his Avatar self, an event which he refers to as his 'birthday'. Christians look forward to their own new birth in the life to come, the end of the struggle between their earthly and spiritual selves when old bodies are left behind.

Chief scientist Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver) and her team determine that the only way to truly reach an understanding with the Na'vi is to experience life within their skin, and to reach out to them *as* one of them. In Hindu understanding, an Avatar is a deity who has chosen to come from heaven to earth in a representative form. The Bible teaches that Jesus was fully God, more than just a representation, but nevertheless *Avatar* gives us a useful picture of what it really might have meant for him to experience life as a human. Unlike the paralysed Jake, whose Avatar body allows him to rediscover the freedom he had lost, Jesus relinquished freedoms in order to become a man. Though he was the omnipotent and eternal one who 'gave life to everything that was created' ([John 1:4](#)), he chose to limit himself to human form. In staggering humility he 'gave up his divine privileges' ([Philippians 2:7](#)) in order to win us over, not for his own selfish ends, but for our sake.

There is a unique kind of empathy that comes from not merely 'knowing' what it is like to be in another's shoes but truly *experiencing* it. Jesus is fully able to sympathise with our weaknesses because he 'faced all the same testings we do' ([Hebrews 4:15](#)). The extraordinary message of Christianity is that God the almighty creator expressed his desire to be close to his creation by actually stepping down into it, walking in our world and becoming one of us.

[1] Todd Hertz, 'Human Frailty in Avatar' *Christianity Today*, January 2010

TASKS

1. Describe the Na'vi attitude towards nature. Give evidence from the scene where Jake (Sam Worthington) first encounters Neytiri (Zoe Santana).
2. Write about an experience you have had of nature. You may wish to compare and contrast with nature as it is on Pandora.

3. Rituals contain the elements of purpose, structure, place, participants, objects/symbols. Identify one Na'vi ritual and describe these elements.

purpose

structure

place

participants

objects/symbols

4. Try to compare and contrast Christian beliefs about God and nature with the Na'vi beliefs.

<p><i>all life begins with an ever-living, sustaining creator gives meaning and purpose to the Christian life. The majesty, complexity and goodness of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – are revealed in the created order and through his specific revelation. People are dependent on God and creation to survive and are called by God to value and treat his creation responsibly.</i></p> <p>The nature of God -- the action of the trinity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☐owner, creator and sustainer of the universe ☐creator of human life in his image, source of a person's identity, security and meaning ☐complex, intelligent, powerful being as shown in the intricacies and beauty of creation ☐participation of Jesus in creation ☐Holy Spirit is the Lord and giver of life, calls and guides people to see the nature and power of God <p>The nature of creation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☐rhythm and order of God reflected in life ☐everything God creates is good, self-generating, with specific functions and purpose for life ☐God uses the built creation as well as the natural creation for good ☐interdependence of all life forms – nature ☐interconnectedness in the created order – human community ☐all human life is a gift 	

5. Make a list of objects in Pandora which represent or show the spirituality of the Na'vi people.
6. Worship and prayer are key aspects of many spiritualities. For what reasons do the Na'vi pray or worship?
7. What similarities can you see between Christian prayer & worship and Na'vi prayer & worship?
8. To what extent is Jake's attraction to the Na'vi world related to their spirituality? (remember spirituality has to do with meaning & direction, connectedness, transcendence and identity)
9. How does the Na'vi spirituality affect their attitude towards the desire of humans to mine for unobtainium?
10. What does Miles Quaritch value? Why?

11. 'All I ever wanted was a single thing worth fighting for.' - Jake
What motivates Jake to accept the posting on Pandora? What is it about his character and his situation that makes it attractive to him initially? What are his reservations?
12. How does the director convey the change that begins to occur in Jake as he assimilates into Na'vi culture? Which moments are particularly significant as he begins to change his mind about his mission?
13. How do Jake's values change as the film progresses? Why?
14. How would you describe the culture of the Na'vi? What aspects of their beliefs and practises might seem attractive to us? Which real people in our world might they represent?
15. The film clearly has a strong environmental message. Do you think it helps us to engage with the problem of corporate greed and its impact on the natural world?
16. Does the film offer us any solutions? How should we be challenged as individuals?

17. 'This is our land!' – Jake

How does the film deal with the concepts of home and belonging? Do you think that we engage with stories about people like the Na'vi because we long for the kind of spiritual 'home' they enjoy? Why/why not?

18. Pagan spirituality seems to offer a return to such a 'home' through an engagement with nature. The Bible, on the other hand, states that we need peace with the creator and not just the creation. Why might nature-worship appear more attractive than a personal God?

19. What might Jesus offer that nature-worship cannot?

20. How can the concept of an 'Avatar' help us to understand ideas of empathy and engagement with others who are different from ourselves?

21. What does it cost Jake to fully identify with the Na'vi?

22. Jesus, in coming to earth as a human being, 'gave up his divine privileges, taking the humble position of a slave' (Philippians 2:7). What similarities are there between Jesus' human incarnation and Jake's Avatar? What differences are there? What did it cost Jesus to fully identify with the human race?

23. Jesus's personal experience of being human enables him to sympathise with us in our weaknesses (Hebrews 4:15). How does this challenge your perception of what God is like? What difference might it make in your life if you could be sure that God had walked in your shoes and understood what you were going through?

Challenge Questions

The scientist leading the Avatar project is called Grace Augustine. Augustine of Hippo was a highly influential first-century Christian thinker who emphasised the importance of Christ's grace. He also developed a theory of 'just war'. What might be the significance of her name, given the nature of Grace's project? What is her approach to her work and to the world, and how does this change throughout the film?

Avatar has earned both praise and criticism for its portrayal of native peoples. The Na'vi are undoubtedly the film's heroes, but on the other hand they must be led into battle by a 'white Messiah'.^[2] Do you feel that Avatar's racial message is positive, or are there underlying problems?

'When people have shit that you want, you make them your enemy.' – Colonel Quaritch
How are the film's villains presented? What comments do you think the director might be making about colonialism and military intervention? To what extent did you find his exploration of the issues satisfactory?

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_\(2009_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_(2009_film))

<http://www.damaris.org/content/content.php?type=5&id=926>

<http://www.damaris.org/content/content.php?type=1&id=452>