

# James cameron's avatar (2009)

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Having won over 80 awards, James Cameron's Avatar (2009) is the highest-grossing film of all time (Birkin 30). It tells the story of the blue-skinned Na'vi, inhabitants of an alien planet called Pandora, who are attacked by a group of humans from Earth. Eventually, the human protagonist Jake Sully turns against his own people and helps the natives defeat the invaders.

While it seems that Avatar is designed to evoke sympathy and understanding for indigenous people, this paper aims to show that the movie counteracts this purpose. By looking at the movie from a meta level, it is argued that it promotes a stereotypical representation of race by depicting Whites as superior to other races.

The idea of a white supremacy is especially conveyed in Avatar through the white protagonist Jake Sully. At the beginning of the movie, Neytiri, who is the Na'vi tribe leader's daughter, introduces Jake to the rest of her people, explaining that she did not kill him due to a sign by their God Eywa (Avatar, 00: 45: 45). Thus, the viewer is left with a feeling that Jake must be special for some reason, which is further supported due to his immediate integration into the tribe.

Although Jake is supposed to be the alien, who only just landed on Pandora, he makes fast progress and is soon able to climb and hunt like the natives. He learns their language and is eventually considered one of them.

Meanwhile, Jake falls in love with Neytiri, and the two of them engage in a relationship (Avatar, 01: 24: 50), even though she was originally promised to a Na'vi man. In addition, Jake is the only one who can ride the dragon-like bird Toruk (Avatar, 01: 53: 32), a performance that only five people managed

to do before him (Avatar, 01: 18: 26). In summary, Jake is portrayed as superior to the indigenous people since he is easily able to outdo the Na'vi in all areas of life.

Despite the movie being fictional, the Na'vi resemble stereotypical images of real ethnic groups. Susana Loza observes that "[t]heir [...] nearly naked blue bodies are [...] decorated with Maori tattoos and Maasai-style necklaces and beaded jewelry. Their long, dark hair is adorned with feathers and either worn in mohawks or dreadlocked" (54-55). Thereby, Loza suggests that the Na'vi combine different elements of minority cultures in their appearance.

One example is Neytiri who wears a stretched ear piercing, which is common in many African cultures. Likewise, David Brooks notes that "[t]he peace-loving natives – compiled from a mélange of Native American, African, Vietnamese, Iraqi and other cultural fragments – are like the peace-loving natives you've seen in a hundred other movies". His point is that indigenous tribes are often portrayed in stereotypical ways and that this stereotypical representation also applies to the Na'vi, who are depicted as illiterate savages living in close touch with nature.

For instance, they frequently use animal-like noises or hissing sounds, making them appear rather primitive. Moreover, it is noticeable that the actors who play the main Na'vi characters are all people of color (Birkin 31). All of this contributes to the impression that the Na'vi are not a completely fictional tribe, but they are indeed a composition of existing minority cultures.

Even more important is that Avatar draws on the genre of a white savior film. "The 'white savior' film [...] centers on a white protagonist whose main role [...] is to rescue peoples of color from outside invaders, from inside threats, and from themselves" (Bausch 914). In Avatar, the Na'vi need Jake to save them from the attack of the other humans. Without his assistance, the tribe is completely helpless and naïve.

For example, the Na'vi try using bows and arrows to fight against flying tanks (Avatar, 01: 38: 55), or they sing and pray instead of creating a plan to defeat the enemy (Avatar, 01: 53: 00). Only when Jake joins their army and provides them with mechanical weapons and a strategy are they finally able to defend themselves. Hence, Jake is portrayed as the white savior of non-white people who are apparently incapable of handling problems themselves, which is an idea that is clearly offensive towards indigenous people.

All in all, Avatar reinforces the common notion of Whites being superior to other ethnic groups by producing stereotypical impressions about race. However, Avatar is no exception since the topic of the white savior comes up in several movies (cf. Bausch 914-918). These kinds of movies provide white viewers with the chance to identify with the (apparently) good-hearted white people, while being able to distance themselves from the violent doings of their American ancestors.

Although people commonly consider themselves to be tolerant and open-minded, Avatar serves as an example which suggests that we must still be

careful with hidden racism in 'white savior' movies. In respect of the ideas that the movie conveys, its success should certainly be regarded critically.