

## Film Review

# AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER (James Cameron, US 2022)

For more than 10 years, fans and critics waited for the sequel to AVATAR (James Cameron, US 2009) to be released. In 2009 James Cameron had produced the most successful film of all time, not least thanks to his use of the latest 3D technology and special effects.<sup>1</sup> The sequel, AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER (James Cameron, US 2022), was awaited with great excitement, but also with some apprehension.

The second part of the series begins 10 years after the events of AVATAR. Jack Sully, who was transformed from a human into a Pandora inhabitant after the first film, lives as a leader of the indigenous tribe of the Omatikaya in the forests of Pandora, a moon in the Alpha Centauri system. Sully raises a family with his wife, Neytiri, and lives according to Na'vi ideas and customs in a peaceful and harmonious coexistence with the animals and plants of the ecosystem on Pandora.

The film presents an idealised view of family embedded in a world view that is characterised by the symbiotic coexistence of bluish humanoids and their environment. The cinematic dramaturgy begins with the return of humans to Pandora. They intend to colonise the moon with settlers from earth, but merely their arrival causes devastation and destruction of flora and fauna. Sully becomes the leader of the resistance against the human colonial powers until his own family is targeted by the occupiers. Driven by a desire for revenge on Sully and his family, the deceased mercenary Miles Quaritch returns to Pandora with his team as a transformed Avatar. Unlike in the first film in the Avatar series, the digitised human consciousness is transferred to the avatar body rather than linking the human body to the avatar. Sully and his family leave their friends and family and flee to the seashores of Pandora. There they find protection with the Metkayinaers,

1 Kirsner 2012, 169–179.

another tribe of the Na'vi, who have adapted to the conditions of the sea and live in symbiosis with the animals and plants there. The Sully family must now adjust to the local living conditions and traditions. The film represents a differentiated confrontation between Sully's children and the young Metkayinaers, in which social roles are negotiated. As newcomers to the peer group, the Sully children must establish their position among the humanoid sea creatures. The vengeful Quaritch finds the Sully family in the remote settlements on the beaches of Pandora. The climax of the film is the battle between Jack Sully and Quaritch on a ship used to hunt Pandora's whales.

The main narrative of the film is a classic showdown between good and evil, between Jack Sully as the now-indigenous resident of Pandora and Quaritch as the diabolical representative of humanity. The motif of this dualistic struggle frames the various narratives and developments for the individual actors in the Sully family. A tense relationship is staged between Jack Sully and his two sons. In essence, one's role in one's own family and peer group is portrayed as a negotiation of identity that is characterised by concurrent closeness and distance to family members. This transitory process entails loneliness and loss, first romantic attractions and the children's longing for unconditional recognition by their father. These patterns are experienced by Sully's adopted children, Spider and Kiri. The human orphan Spider is confronted with the transformed father figure Quaritch and experiences the enmity between his two father figures as an emotional conflict. Kiri, the virgin-born daughter of the avatar of Dr Grace Augustine experiences herself as abnormal because of her special connection to Eywa, Pandora's neural consciousness. Her perception of Eywa and the associated abilities are pathologised as an illness within the film. Kiri feels alien in the Na'vi community and becomes an outsider. She is also the protector of Jack Sully's youngest daughter. At the climax of the film, her special bond with Eywa saves her parents, while the family's eldest son is mortally wounded.

AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER reiterates classic motifs from science fiction. The figure of Quaritch, transformed and returned as an avatar, can be understood as a reference to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein motif, modified here with the digitising of human consciousness and its transfer into a new body.<sup>2</sup> The depiction of the water world in AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER is

2 For this motif see, for example, TRANSCENDENCE (Wally Pfister, US 2014).

clearly reminiscent of Jules Verne's novel *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* (1871).<sup>3</sup> Scientific and technical explanations, a typical stylistic device, are also used in the interpretation of Kiri's conscious experiences and discussed as part of a deterministic perspective. Another motif from science fiction can be found in the utopian city of the future, which in *AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER* represents the starting point for the colonisation of Pandora.<sup>4</sup> Also typical of science fiction is the positive humanisation of the extraterrestrial actors, while humanity itself is staged as a capitalist destroyer.

The adaption of religious symbols in *AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER* is interesting. As in Cameron's first *Avatar* film, the central element in the second *Avatar* movie is the connection between the indigenous inhabitants of Pandora and Eywa, the divine pantheistic consciousness of the moon. The physical connection with the consciousness of the plants and animals of Pandora is diegetically embedded in rituals and traditions in the film. The birth and death of the Na'vi in particular are staged through prayers and specific practices. In the encounter of the Sullys with the sea people of the Na'vi, cultural characteristics of these practices become apparent. *AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER* specifically stages culturally distinctive religious practices. It is intriguing that these practices are associated with the visible potency and connection with Eywa. Here the film establishes a broad spectrum of theological reflection on the relationship between rituals, tradition and the visibility of divine work.

On the narrative level, *AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER* adapts concepts from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The relationship between Jake Sully and his sons contains references to the story of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis. The brothers' struggle for recognition by their father alludes to the story of Jacob and Esau and at the same time resembles the parable of the prodigal son from the Gospel of Luke in the Christian Bible. Most striking is the messianic staging of Kiri. The virgin birth and the connection to Eywa allude to biblical stories about the figure of Jesus. On the visual level, Kiri's special connection with all creatures of Pandora is emphasised. Unsurprisingly, Kiri ends up being the saviour of her parents and siblings, and she seems very likely to play a key role in the planned sequels.

*AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER* reflects on contemporary issues associated with the climate crisis. From a political perspective, the film criticises the

3 For a historical classification of the motifs and forms of staging of science fiction see Spiegel 2007, 71–100.

4 See *METROPOLIS* (Fritz Lang, DE 1925/26).

social dominance of capitalist systems and attitudes. With few exceptions, humanity is portrayed as a colonising and destructive species, while the inhabitants of Pandora have the protection of life and preservation of nature in mind. The Na'vi's visual appearance resembles demons, while their actions are marked by empathy and compassion for all living beings. The "heavenly people" appear technically more advanced but actually represent, through their will to destroy, a morally decayed society. From this perspective, the collision of ethical ideas in dealing with Pandora's creation is staged as referencing current debates about the climate crisis.

The use of the latest special effects and staging techniques makes AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER aesthetically convincing. Even if the film has a complex interweaving of different storylines, these often reiterate stereotypical images of family and simplified depictions of a dualistic conflict between good and evil. Even if AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER suggests a strong identification with the Na'vi as the real human actors, it romanticizes indigenous society. This romanticization recapitulates a problematic colonialist view that is closely linked to the history of science fiction.<sup>5</sup> The intellectual challenge of the film lies less in its fundamental understanding than in keeping a reflective distance from its greatly simplified images. And so we are curious to see how the story continues in the third film in the series, which has already been announced.

## Bibliography

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## Filmography

- AVATAR (James Cameron, US 2009).
- AVATAR – THE WAY OF WATER (James Cameron, US 2022).
- METROPOLIS (Fritz Lang, DE 1925/26).
- TRANSCENDENCE (Wally Pfister, US 2014).

5 See Rieder 2008.