

NEWS



The war-painted, dragon-riding Smurfs vs. the Indians

Michael Thompson • January 20, 2010

I was barely a half-hour into watching “Avatar” in 3-D at our local theater when I realized that a great many people who see it will almost certainly read various bent messages about American Indians into James Cameron’s by-the-numbers storytelling, which has unmistakable parallels to Native history. Sure enough, by the time I got online the next day, the blogs and reviews were already rife with commentary.

I want to make it clear. I liked the movie – a lot. Cameron is a technologically creative genius and deserves every bit of the success he will unquestionably achieve.

And what the hell, I recognized Wes Studi’s voice as soon as Eytukan opened his mouth. Moreover, my gut tells me that a lot of seriously Indian people are going to walk out of “Avatar” with a real cinematic rush of Native pride.

But let me be very, very clear – I do not consider “Avatar” a Native story in any meaningful way. Not in the slightest.

The last time I checked, the Native women I know were not 10 feet tall or blue with sexy, twitching cat tails, and I have never seen a Native woman crouch and hiss protectively over the prone body of her fallen man, something Neytiri seems to do on a fairly regular basis.

The Natives I know do not live on a mammal-free/bird-free planet, sleep in black-light illuminated tree boughs, “bond” with repto-horses via neuro-synaptic braids, ride flying dragons, or gather in tribal masses to chant non-Native allies back to life via some symbiotic connection with magical earth forces.

Yeah, I know the Na’vi wear feathers, but so did old-time burlesque dancers. I’ve been around long enough to know that it takes more than feathers to make an Indian. You do too.

“Avatar” is fantasy.

It’s an interesting fantasy – part anti-military imperialism, part pro-science ecology, part colonizing cultural metaphor, part supra-technology gaming wet dream. But it is not any kind of thoughtful commentary on real Native America, and we had better all be sure we are clear about that.

I have always loved movies – from indies to blockbusters – but I have at least always tried to keep my understanding of fiction in film separated from my understanding of everyday life.

As a Native person, I have admittedly had a hard time on occasion with films like “Dances with Wolves” that, for better or worse, chose American Indian history as the well-spring for their ideas but still felt compelled to center their stories around some variation of the “Great White Hope.” Somehow “Avatar” reinforces the illusion that it contains some kind of truth about Native Americans precisely because it tells its story through a white protagonist.

When it comes right down to it, I have to side with David Treuer. We really do need to recognize that modern fiction, even Native fiction, first and foremost is literary make-believe, not cultural truth-making.

That means we ought to hold in check any impulse to confuse the destruction of an alien species’ cultural homeland in a 3-D mega-movie event with the many horrific actual massacres that have taken place in our own national history.

Sure, I get the movie’s pop culture-coated messages about the dangers of over-the-top militarism, the mindless exploitation of our natural resources, the virtues of ethical science, the need for cross-cultural respect. These are not insignificant ideas considering the general mindlessness of most mass entertainment today. But there are no truths here that will enlighten anyone in any meaningful way about real Native Americans or our history.

In some ways, the story’s use of the avatar itself is troubling too. Frankly, in this story, it’s just too easy for a non-Native to cross over.

In the brave new Wii world we inhabit – with our seemingly endless supply of little tennis-playing, snow-boarding avatars of our own – it is not that difficult to get sucked into the delusion that all this simulated adventure is somehow nearly as useful as the real thing. But the notion of one’s actual identity is diminished by all of this frantic body-swapping.

Real Indians know that being Indian takes plenty of time; that cultural traditions don’t come via simulation modules. That being Indian is less genetic engineering, and more simply seeing, simply hearing, and simply being. That a culturally rich Native life is, in fact, a fairly messy, fairly difficult proposition at best, but that it has almost limitless rewards where family, community, and connection to place are concerned.

I wish “Avatar” success. It is amazing science fiction. Just don’t try to tell me it’s an Indian story.



Comments

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