

FILM REVIEW

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS



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The best place to find your true self is sometimes in an alternative reality where you have to start learning from scratch

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STAFF REPORTER



The release of *Avatar* puts James Cameron right back at the forefront as a heavy hitter in big-budget movie making. At a time when 3D movies have become almost a dime a dozen, *Avatar* takes cinematic immersion to a whole new level. This is not only a tribute to the film's technical skill, but to Cameron's ability to spin a good yarn and fuse technology into his extravagant storytelling style.

It has been more than 10 years since Cameron's last outing as a director, when *Titanic* (1997) became the most expensive and highest-grossing film of the time, and it is hard to believe that classics like *The Terminator* (1984), *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and *Aliens* (1986), which have become milestones of cinema history for scores of movie-lovers, were released so many years ago.

Cameron shows that his passion for big ideas (revolving around the interaction of mother nature with human nature and its love of technology), big emotions and big explosions has not faded, and he now has production methods that enhance them still further.

With *Avatar*, he has created a massive movie that seems to have something for everyone, tapping into contemporary issues while telling a story that possesses all the classic elements of loss, love, initiation, challenge, self-searching and redemption which characterize the mythologies of the human race.

More than just a bold enterprise, *Avatar* is audacious; and like much that is audacious, it is occasionally ridiculous. Is Cameron trying to encompass too much? You ask yourself this during the flabby midsection of the movie. Fortunately, Cameron's emotional investment in his characters and in the 3D CGI artistry of Pandora, the film's lush planet, generates such momentum that he is able to carry the audience through some of the film's minor infelicities.

The very name Pandora underlines Cameron's mythological aspirations. This isn't just a big action flick, he seems to be saying, but a story that looks at man's loss of innocence, his evil and his greed, and also his ability to embrace, in the face of all adversity, hope for a better future. When you can't take the sermon anymore, you only have to turn your attention to the visuals, which provide more than enough interest to keep you watching.

The central character of *Avatar* is Jake Scully, a paraplegic ex-Marine who finds himself on the mission to Pandora, where a huge military-industrial station is located to extract a mineral called unobtainium. A little heavy-handed in the allegory department there, but the name itself is unimportant, and what Cameron is tackling is the exploitation of the natural world and first world contempt for the wisdom of indigenous people. Post-colonialist dogma gets a thorough workout.

All that is good in a life is embodied in Neytiri, a member of the indigenous Navi people, who is played, through the agency of elaborate motion capture technology, by Zoe Saldana.

Scully meets Neytiri through his avatar, a genetically linked body which he controls while lying in a semi-coma back at base. Scully takes to his avatar with an exuberance born of his desperation to overcome his disability.

Fortunately, the tall blue-skinned Navi manage to overcome the Ja Ja Binks phenomenon and emerge as real, if rather simplistic characters with whom it is possible to sympathize. Through his Navi avatar, Scully takes delight in a physical life of hunting and exploring a phantasmagoric forest full of dangers and inexpressible beauty. The idea of a computer transposing us to another life is hardly new, but *Avatar* puts a less geeky spin on it and fiddles with the notion in a more sentimental fashion.

Although Scully's mission is to understand the natives so his superiors can relocate them away from a sacred site they wish to exploit for its mineral wealth, he soon falls in love with a new way of life and inevitably with Neytiri. The rest is rather predictable. There are powerful echoes of Roland Joffe's *The Mission* (1986), with Scully as Robert De Niro's warrior-convert Rodrigo Mendoza. Cameron's flirtation with a rather New Age spiritualism and nature worship might be a trifle over the top, and the reading of the conflict between man and nature is annoyingly superficial, but then, this is an action adventure after all, and whatever one might think about the tree-hugging proselytizing, Cameron certainly manages to keep the audience entertained in other ways.

While much of the hardware of the military mission on Pandora looks like it came from a garage sale of *Aliens* props, the forest world of Pandora is where the 3D Imax really comes into its own, creating a fantasy artist's dream of vertiginous perspectives and deep panoramas that extend far out into space. Unlike many 3D action or horror films, Cameron does not use his 3D effects to shock with every conceivable thing jumping out off the screen. Rather, he uses it as an artistic medium, drawing his audience into the world his artists have so painstakingly created. When Scully's avatar runs, leaps and flies through the forests of Pandora, the excitement of the paraplegic freed from the bonds of his body is palpable. As the audience, we too are released into a new and liberating space.

Avatar is a great big Christmas hamper of a picture, and audiences can pick and choose from the huge range of goodies available. Whether it's some chocolate-coated environmental awareness, mean-looking gunships blasting away at magnificent flying dragons, or just a some old-fashioned romance, *Avatar* is almost enough fun to make you forget about those uncomfortable 3D shades.

Bonjour Paris festival

The Changchun theater in Taipei is hosting this French film festival until New Year's Eve. The theme is "When love meets literature," which sounds like 90 percent of the French film industry's output, but why carp? Toplining is biopic *Sagan* starring Sylvie Testud (*La Vie en Rose, Vengeance*) as the turbulent French writer; the film is also opening the French-themed Taipei book festival early next year. The rest is a mixture of titles that (unfortunately) have already had theatrical releases here, including *Clara and I*, Eric Rohmer's *Le Rayon Vert*, *The Ring Finger*, *Little Lili* from 2003 and Louis Malle's *Damage*, among others.



Park Benches

If you've seen all these French titles already, there's another Gallic offering unconnected to the Changchun festival. It's got as many celebrity actors as the festival's offerings put together, but that didn't stop some critics from wondering what all the fuss is about. A well-to-do neighborhood is the setting for a series of tales of quirky and unsettled characters that start then finish all too quickly. Jacques Tati it ain't — though there is some comedy.



Bombay Summer

An Indian couple living comfortably in Bombay run into an artist/drug dealer who changes their lives — and his own — and not necessarily for the better. Winner of the Best Film, Best Director (Joseph Mathew-Varghese) and Best Actress (Tannishtha Chatterjee) gongs at last month's MIAAC Film Festival, a New York event for Indian-themed films, it's something of a miracle that this non-musical is getting a Taiwan release, so those not enchanted at the thought of donning 3D glasses for nearly three hours watching *Avatar* might consider this adult-friendly trip instead.



Give Me Your Hand

Weird release of the week makes *Avatar* look like formula. Eurotwin brothers make their way across Europe to attend a family funeral, along the way pouting a lot, finding lust among the locals and getting into wrestling matches over long-dormant rivalries. Pretty as a picture, but narrative meandering and copulation time-outs will remind the viewer why it's being screened at the Baixue greenhouse in Ximending. Original title: *Donne-Moi la Main*.



Film Notes

AVATAR

DIRECTED BY: JAMES CAMERON

STARRING: SAM WORTHINGTON (JAKE SULLY), ZOE SALDANA (NEYTIRI), SIGOURNEY WEAVER (DR GRACE AUGUSTINE), STEPHEN LANG (COLONEL MILES QUARITCH), MICHELLE RODRIGUEZ (TRUDY CHACON), GIOVANNI RIBISI (PARKER SELFLEDGE), JOEL MOORE (NORM SPELLMAN)

RUNNING TIME: 162 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: CURRENTLY SHOWING

FILM REVIEW

When Zola meets vampirism

'Thirst,' which shared a Jury Prize at Cannes this year, is South Korean director Park Chan-wook's nutty take on the Western vampire genre

After his immensely popular *Vengeance Trilogy* and the commercial misstep *I'm a Cyborg, But That's OK* (2006), South Korean auteur Park Chan-wook returns with his technically brilliant, visually luscious vampire movie *Thirst*. The story combines sex, violence and perverse dark humor with dose of melodramatic tragedy inspired by Emile Zola's 1867 novel *Therese Raquin*, the latter about a young woman entering into a feverish affair to escape from a cheerless marriage. The story opens with Sang-hyun (Song Kang-ho), a devout Catholic priest, who wants to save the world through his own suffering. He offers himself for a vaccine trial in the hope that it will help discover a cure for a deadly African virus. The trial proves lethal, but Sang-hyun rebounds from death after a

blood transfusion, a miracle that prompts a cult following that reveres him as a savior with healing powers. The modest man of the cloth soon realizes that the vim and vigor his followers take for divine signs are in fact a side effect he picked up from the experiment — vampirism. Unlike conventional vampires who crave only blood, Sang-hyun finds himself driven by carnal desire. He locks eyes with Tae-ju (Kim Ok-vin), the wife of his childhood friend Kang-woo (Shin Ha-kyun). The sullen young woman lives with her sickly, infantile husband and tyrant mother-in-law (Kim Hae-sook) in a state of servitude. She is bored, dissatisfied and wants Sang-hyun to get her out of the torturous marriage. This is where the film taps into Zola's story, but turns it into a wacky drama of gore, mass murder and all-consuming love. In taking on the vampire



Film Notes

THIRST

DIRECTED BY: PARK CHAN-WOOK

STARRING: SONG KANG-HO (SANG-HYUN), KIM OK-VIN (TAE-JU), SHIN HA-KYUN (KANG-WOO), KIM HAE-SOOK (LADY RA)

RUNNING TIME: 133 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: IN KOREAN, ENGLISH AND FRENCH WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY



PHOTOS COURTESY OF IFLM

genre, Park has done away with wooden stakes, garlic cloves, Transylvanian mystique and the seductive sophistication of Dracula. The film is full of drab, stifling domestic spaces and the nocturnal predator is played by an infected man of God with a hard-on he can't flagellate away. The dilemma of a vampire priest

provides a promising setup for Park's characters, who tend to be trapped in extreme circumstances

not of their own making and are forced to make difficult moral choices as a result. However, when compared with the director's previous films, such as Cannes-winning *Oldboy* (2003) and *Lady Vengeance* (2005), *Thirst* is significantly less shocking and perverse, with the protagonist often portrayed as more comic than tragic.

Thirst goes nuts as it proceeds to become a melodrama obsessed with pain, ecstasy, and bodily fluids that carry guilty pleasures and deadly viruses. The explicit sex scenes go far beyond tame throat-sucking and extend the mutual oral euphoria to armpits and toes. Erratic in style and mood, the movie drags in the middle, and the

focus on the pair's all-consuming relationship significantly weakens the iconoclastic momentum promised by the transgressive storyline. A scene in which Sang-hyun rapes a female adherent amid a crowd of his followers toward the end of the film feels like a feeble reminder of Park's anti-clerical agenda. The story would suffer greatly without the fine performance of South Korean thespian Song Kang-ho, who carries the film's themes of guilt and conscience. However, it is the 22-year-old Kim Ok-vin, also known as Kim Ok-bin, who is the eye-catching surprise in *Thirst*. The young actress, at first a creature of docility, evolves from a downtrodden housewife to femme fatale to blood-guzzling demon. She is the answer to the male fantasy that a sexually awakened woman is simultaneously irresistibly voluptuous and utterly destructive.