

Avatar

Much hyped—certainly over hyped—is James Cameron’s “Avatar,” a mastadonic sci-fi/action flick/fantasy which supposedly launches filmmaking into a new dimension. Made almost entirely in state-of-the-art CGI effects and shot in crystal clean 3-D, this whole elaborate enterprise ends up recounting a rather basic, and very derivative, story. It’s one of vulgar, militaristic earthlings of the future voyaging to another planet to search for a precious substance, and in the search, to eliminate, if necessary, a benign alien race living in sweet harmony with nature.

The one distinctive angle to the narrative is that the humans have developed a technology (something to do with DNA) to literally change themselves into versions of the aliens—to become their “avatars.” A few of the human avatars come to identify with the aliens, called the Na’vi, and eventually stand with them in a final fight for survival.

Let’s face it, the plot is a hoary mix of funky fairy tale, “Star Wars” rip-offs, “Transformer” redoes, shrill war flicks, even politically correct cowboys-and-Indians movies. And it goes on far too long—way over two hours. It’s rated PG-13, which is right on, because its appeal will be principally to 14-year olds (and their avatars) who will find many of the strained-for effects “neat” or “cool.”

Yes, some of those special effects definitely are cool, especially, for this writer, the sequences on the alien planet (called Pandora) which involve the Na’vi swirling around their super-lush world on gigantic pterodactyl-type birds. Maybe, also, the Na’vi’s magical Tree of Life which glimmers and glows under a 3-D canopy that you want to reach out and touch.

But some kind of breakthrough? Maybe in budget terms but not in story terms, though Cameron himself insists that “Avatar,” to be successful, must stand on its story above all else. This is not a movie to believe in, but one in which to be washed away—if you must—in your favorite luxuriant (preferably blue-tinged) imagery.

(Runs 162 minutes; rated PG-13 for bombastic battle sequences)

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