Avatar

reviewed by John Petrakis in the March 23, 2010 issue

By the time you read this, *Avatar* will have grossed enough to pay down the national debt, bail out a few more banks and provide top-shelf health care to everyone west of the Mississippi.

Unless you are living somewhere east of Pandora, you know the basic story line of this monster hit. A team of space travelers—including a paraplegic Marine, an altruistic but tough-talking scientist, a greedy corporate schemer and a cigar-chomping military man—are sent to a faraway moon to explore and exploit. The scientists want to play nice with the natives, but everyone else wants to mine the land for its valuable resources, leaving its back-to-nature inhabitants in its charred wake.

Of course, the extravaganza's key selling point isn't its dollar-store script but its state-of-the-art computer technology, which is allowed to shine in 2-D, 3-D, Real D 3-D or IMAX Experience 3-D. (Purchasing a ticket is sort of like buying gas.) It grabs you from the very beginning, with sweeping aerial shots and heavy use of montage, and doesn't let go until its message has been pounded into you with the subtlety of a pile driver.

Of course, what that message is depends how many Kevin Costner movies you've seen and how many Al Gore books you've read. The possibilities are several:

• a paternalistic tale of the lone white man who saves the noble savages from disaster because they are incapable of helping themselves

• an anti-American screed that attacks our military for needlessly slaughtering innocents for our own financial gain

• an environmental slideshow that celebrates the possibilities of humans bonding with nature while expressing serious doubts about their relationships with each other

• all of the above

While I can appreciate how much Cameron was able to accomplish technically with a measly $250 million budget, I was thoroughly bored from the get-go. There were elements that showed promise early on, most notably the spiritual idea that a paraplegic, through use of a bioengineered avatar, is able to walk again. But this concept and others quickly deteriorated into a series of set pieces that have been around since the days of *King Kong vs*. *Godzilla*.

It isn't just that the screenplay is simplistic and uninteresting, leaving audiences at least 15 minutes ahead no matter where it goes. That's a common enough problem. A larger concern is that so many people seem willing to excuse the fact that the script is crummy just because everything looks so cool. Why are we so forgiving, and what does that say about our artistic demands as a culture? Would we excuse a bad meal at an expensive restaurant because it has beautiful decor? Would we accept bad paintings at an art museum because the frames are hung so nicely? Would we tolerate an ugly sermon by a bitter preacher because the stained glass in the church is so pretty?

If not, why are we willing not only to accept but even embrace the paint-by-numbers story line and dialogue of *Avatar* instead of feeling insulted that we are having our pockets picked artistically?

Some people claim that sci-fi always lends itself to overt screenwriting because it is not supposed to reflect reality. But we need only look at one of the other Oscar nominees for best picture to prove this contention false. *District 9*, whose production budget was a small fraction of *Avatar's*, has one of the most challenging sci-fi scripts since *2001*: *A Space Odyssey*. Not only is it smart and funny, with a collection of beautifully written characters, but its message of redemption—which plays out

through a tale of reconciliation over the sins of apartheid—is both moving and profound.

Avatar may seem harmless enough, with its spunky blue aliens and its one-size-fits-all lesson plan, but its success bodes ill for ambitious filmmakers who are looking to make intelligent blockbusters. If the public will close its eyes, hold its nose and swallow this pabulum again and again, why should the studios take a chance on alienating part of its audience by actually making them think?