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ABSTRACT

This paper examines critical responses to James Cameron’s most recent film, Avatar, to suggest that the ways in which critics have ignored its content because of Cameron’s innovative use of 3-D technology and effects or praised its content for offering a multicultural paradise are misguided at best and misleading at worst. Instead, what follows is an investigation into Avatar’s content, specifically its plot, hero and, ultimately, its indivisible relationships to the Western genre and what I call the New Western genre—Kevin Costner’s Dances with Wolves (1990) will be representative of the larger genre which has continued to emerge in more recent films like Edward Zwick’s The Last Samurai (2003). These relationships between, and crossovers within, genres prevent cross-cultural relationships based upon democratic forms of equality, what Costner is moving toward and what Cameron makes a claim for, from coming to fruition. As biological (colonial) and social/historical (imperial) notions of racial superiority and inferiority move across and arise within genres, the brief moments of cross-cultural cooperation and mutual respect within these films are subverted. In fact, Cameron’s film very clearly demonstrates how politics can be mobilized, despite a filmmaker’s unawareness, through big-budget blockbusters to advocate concrete and damaging political projects—in this case, America’s imperial projects around the globe. This paper attempts to do two main things: show how Cameron fails to notice what is a very clear advocacy for American imperialism in his film and display the ways in which a lasting egalitarian model of cross-cultural social organization is never established as a result of this failure.
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