

How James Cameron's Avatar Incorporates both the Cinema and the Videogame

I decided to take the plunge and re-watch James Cameron's Avatar again. I haven't seen it since I saw it in 3D in the Imax Theater in 2009 and I wasn't too eager in wanting to revisit it anytime soon. It seems people either love this film or hate this film and I'm curious on why opinions are so divided. Is it the obvious political metaphors? Is it because people who've seen it have all agreed on one thing: Avatar was something they've NEVER seen before and it was something they've ALL seen before? My feelings on the film are more in the middle. I liked it but it isn't anything special. Now when re-watching the film again I couldn't believe just how parallel many of the themes and ideas were to Kevin Costner's 1990 western Dances with Wolves. I mean...REALLY parallel. But Dances with Wolves moved me. Avatar...not so much.

After finishing Avatar I did the reading The Impact of Digital Technologies of Film Aesthetics by Michael Allen and I immediately thought of what one of my film professor's stated last semester. She told us that recently because of the rise of social networking and technological advances in the world of media, the Film Studies department has slowly began to broaden the major crossing over into the world of television and videogames which is called The Department

of Film and Media Studies. This led me to think differently when observing Avatar again and I made a new discovery: Avatar is very parallel to the aesthetics of a videogame!

Ever since The Matrix in 1999 films have pondered the idea on spectators getting 'the technological experience' of being plugged into another world (in this case the 3D movies) and of different layers of reality and fantasy, and this idea continued to be more deeply explored with Avatar and Inception. While watching Avatar the character of Jake Sully goes through a sort of tutorial to learn how to move and interact within the body of the Avatar which feels greatly similar to the tutorial in the beginning of a videogame. You learn how to use the body of your character while at the same time learning the history of this world and of the other characters that the world inhabits. Films like Avatar, Matrix and Inception also give lengthy exposition on the plot of the story while learning the dilemma of the situation. I wouldn't be surprised if many of the technology and CGI special effects designers who create the fantastical worlds for these films are also the very same designers who work on the cut-scenes in a videogame. I'm not stating this as a criticism but merely an observation. I've just never realized how much videogames, technology and movies have crossed over into one medium during the last ten years or so. Is this a good thing?

Another thing I noticed while watching Avatar was that I was never completely convinced that what I was looking at was 'real' or I should say 'really there.' The special effects looked exceptional and realistic but there was always a feeling of emotional detachment because I knew that the image I was seeing on the screen was fabricated entirely on a computer and was not a real object or person captured on camera. I think this emotional feeling is a huge part on how I take in the entire experience of a movie and how I ultimately feel after it is done. After the movie I came away and immediately those images vanished from my memory (which was what

happened the first time seeing it.) This is less to do with how realistic the images looked and more me subconsciously knowing these images were not 'really' there. This is why movies based purely on digital CGI will never move me as much as a movie that uses practical effects or real objects that are filmed right in front of a movie screen. Maybe the medium of cinema has finally made a full circle and arrived back at the starting point of why movies were invented in the first place; Technology and special effects. Like many of the early pioneers of 'Actualities' and 'The Cinema of Attractions' many early filmmakers like Georges Melies were more special effects magicians who created movies purely for spectacle and escapism. Movies were more about the fictional theatrical experience (like carnival rides) and maybe movies today with their digital effects and 3D theaters are simply a new step in that very process of technological movie making. Which is purely for spectacle.