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# The Funnel and the Horn: On Reinventing James Cameron's "Avatar"

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*J. D. Connor*

J. D. Connor is an associate professor of cinema and media studies at the University of Southern California. He is the author of *Hollywood Math and Aftermath: The Economic Image and the Digital Recession* (2018) and *The Studios After the Studios* (2015).

**LARB CONTRIBUTOR**



I SAW MY FIRST box of Pandora Flakes at Target this December. Tony the Tiger stood against a background from another planet and sported a purple cravat that made his nose look even more cobalt, with Frosted Flakes that were now dotted with blueberry-flavored “Hometree

Berries,” according to [Target’s product page](#). The unparalleled Disney marketing machine had been engaged, ready to make the whole world Na’vi blue in a full-court-press franchising effort for James Cameron’s *Avatar: The Way of Water*, out in theaters today.

By now, *Avatar*’s lack of cultural footprint is a given of pop-cultural criticism — a fact so basic that any commentator may be expected to offer a take on its strange absence. Its forgotten status is so taken for granted that *The Times* can rely on it as a news peg, or that actually knowing one’s way about the *Avatar* plot constitutes a kind of alt approach, as Patrick Monahan demonstrated in [this roundup in GQ](#).

Our critical interest *in* that forgetting hinges on the unexpected mismatch between money and culture

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— how on Pandora is it possible that the most successful movie of all time, the movie that crushed all prior box-office champs on its way to making nearly \$3 billion, is, kinda sorta, culturally invisible? We paid for it, so why don't we care about it?

Let's go big: *Avatar* disappeared because it almost immediately slipped out of sync with the globally dominant relationship between money and movies. In 2008, as Jamie Lauren Keiles put it, *Avatar* "promised one future for film — original world building, envelope-pushing effects, the theater as the site of cinematic innovation — [while] Marvel, and other endeavors that would follow, went on to develop a very different one." We'll get to the world-building, but the sense that this was the moment the shift occurred seems undeniable. Something shifted with *Avatar*. But what, exactly? Hollywood is certainly more franchise-dominated than ever, but there had been powerful, even dominant, franchises before — Star Wars, Indiana Jones, Batman, Friday the 13th. What changed was not the invention of franchises but the rise of *these sorts* of franchises. And if we look closely at how *Avatar* worked, while *also* looking at the political and economic world that produced it, we will have a better sense of why it all but disappeared despite its unprecedented market supremacy.

There are many facets to the relationship between movies and money — production, distribution, exhibition, reception, representation — and they can change relatively independently of one another, at different

Andrea Pallaoro's film  
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speeds, and with different intensities. Cultural shifts, when they happen, are never just about marketing. For them to take hold, a precise configuration of technology, consumption, and capital deployment must come together to make the artifacts that mark those shifts possible. At the same time, those artifacts — the hometree berries of the now — have to provide the feedback necessary to reckon with the still-congealing world they epitomize. The renegotiation in the balance between cinema-event and cinema-authorship, a renegotiation that was decades in the making, sped up and gathered force at exactly the right moment to make *Avatar* possible. Then that balance shifted so completely that it made *Avatar* all but erasable.

There are three important aspects to this transformation. First, *Avatar* disappeared because it constitutes the endpoint of what I call conflictual studio auteurism. Studios had long had in-house auteurs such as Ernst Lubitsch and John Ford. They knew how to make the system work for them. But in the New Hollywood of the 1960s and '70s, some of those directors led an artistic revolt against the studio system. Some studios then cannily marketed that revolt. Even after the studios reasserted their dominance in the 1980s, the cult of the auteur had plenty of steam. There are fragments of it still. But in the current industrial configuration, centered on Marvel tentpoles and Disney live-action remakes, directors who wanted the studio off their backs have given way to directors who were “always big fans” of whatever IP is being rebooted.

## the Dragon”

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Second, the change in the industry rearticulated and was inflected by changes in both spectatorship and storytelling. Audiences were being enlisted as participants in a regime of IP surveillance. Fans policed and disciplined the franchises they loved; they produced content to fill the stretches between serial episodes in a differently financialized Hollywood. At the same time, the hyperattention of these 24/7 sentinels synchronized with the always-on technological assemblages of the Global War on Terrorism. The narrative mode best suited to this kind of viewership — most rewarding to it, most likely to foster it — entices speculative participation. It has gaps, holes, and figures in the background. It has ambiguities to theorize.

We might figure this transformation of narrative as an opposition between the funnel and the horn. In funnel narratives, galaxies of reference are pumped into a story-form sturdy enough to contain them. Setting aside the resulting coherence or our experience of it, once distribution changes so that nearly every Hollywood movie is available at will for endless repeat viewing, this reference-larding fosters interpretive attention that amounts to running the movie's creation process in reverse. Viewers repeat the author's steps, hunting down the origins of this design element or that line of dialogue. (Noël Carroll discusses some reasons for this in "[The Future of Allusion](#).") Such reading undoes the auteurs' processes, but it cements their status, driving attention to the auteur.

In horn narratives, that same sturdy story-form blasts outward, opening onto an expanding universe of possible futures. Some of those possibilities will be filled by the franchise, or by one of its continuities, or by fanfic or other forms of participation. Form and authorship don't always line up neatly: auteurs can spin tales out of their own obsessions, not out of the building blocks of cinema history; conversely, *Batman and Robin* doesn't imply a cornucopia of other narrative possibilities lurking in the penumbra of its narrative world. But when the culture traded *Avatar* (2009) for *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), it swapped the funnel for the horn.

An aside: Thus is the enormity of the Star Wars franchise's funnel plus horn achievement cast into relief — a stunningly participatory and open narrative universe conjured out of the most embittered, antistudio, technophilic auteurism imaginable. Star Wars held both possibilities in balance for decades: funneling attention to George Lucas and Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey" while opening out onto the enormities of the Expanded Universe. The fitful success of its recent Disney era testifies to the difficulty of casting off its infundibuliform legacy. I've written about aspects of that history [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

In an industry driven by analogy and increment, the "standard-bearer" film is a crucial tool for directing executive attention, craft labor, and marketing. For the industry to shift from funnels to horns, from auteurs to IP, the movie upheld as

Hollywood's standard-bearer also had to be — somehow — the sort of movie that *could* be forgotten. This is the third aspect of the above-mentioned transformation. Earlier box office champs such as *Gone with the Wind*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Jaws* are still landmark cultural moments, however distant their industrial configurations. In contrast, *Avatar* was a movie that signaled a shift towards standard-bearers as slightly more forgettable events. And it was vulnerable to this because it is a signal instance of the technogigantism I call megacinema. Megacinematic endeavors are the Cheshire Cats of cinema history, events that disappear leaving little more than their event status behind.

Megacinema is a loose conception that takes in a range of extremes — large formats, large film gauges, third and fourth dimensions, epic runtimes, purpose-built immersive environments, novel or bespoke expanded cinema technologies that you might find at a world's fair or a theme park. In its more familiar guise, the epic movie-event goes back more than a century to include *Birth of a Nation*, *Intolerance*, *Napoleon*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Fantasia*. And while they could be huge hits — *Birth* and *GWTW* were — they could be huge misses, too — *Fantasia* nearly bankrupted Disney. With that legacy, we might believe that such enormous investments entail concomitant risks, but contemporary Hollywood's consolidation around blockbusters has, perhaps paradoxically, drastically reduced the riskiness of big movies by making a machine of "eventizing" them.

Today's purest megacinema is less the latest Marvel installment than the 40-minute IMAX documentary, a mode that is nearly always narratively anodyne and pitched to a middlebrow audience in an educationally receptive mode — a class trip to a science museum; a vacation to a national park. Unsurprisingly, Cameron has a strong presence in the format. But for *Avatar*, the most apposite analogue may be *This Is Cinerama* (1952).

Playing in only a handful of specially equipped theaters and, like IMAX documentaries, running for years, *This Is Cinerama* finished near the top of the box office in 1953. Its creators believed it heralded “an entirely new medium,” much as *Avatar* cemented a new era of 3D. Boomers and their parents made special pilgrimages to see it. They grabbed their souvenir programs and took their (assigned!) seats. It was an experience. But ask a *This Is Cinerama* viewer what the movie actually *was*, and things get hazy. Everyone would remember the opening rollercoaster ride — when the curtains pulled back, the multichannel sound kicked in, and their stomachs flipped. Folks might remember the transcontinental flyover at the end. But almost no one would recall the intervening material.

Why should they? The movie was always pitched as both *itself* and a *demonstration of itself*. As Philip Sandifer noted in *Cinema Journal* about the first wave of 3D — Cinerama's megacinematic twin in 1953 — that split spectatorship makes it hard for the immersion to take



hold. The contradiction between experiencing and registering your experiencing makes the passage from “demo” to “mode” difficult. The medium gets stuck at the edge of gimmickry.

What’s more, in its default demo configuration, *This Is Cinerama’s* travelogue is episodic, unified only by its incessant scale and, uncoincidentally, its fascination with the historical roots of white supremacy. Its global tour takes in the dance of the Moorish slaves from *Aida* at La Scala, the gathering of the Scottish clans in Edinburgh, and an extended visit to Cypress Gardens in Florida, where ersatz Southern belles pose in hoop skirts by a lazy river before running to join the aquacade, waterskiing their hearts out, and then running back to resume their decorative poses. In a pre-*Brown v. Board* United States, it is small wonder that this EuroAmerican dominance was taken as the default model for cultural heritage, leisure, and military conquest — all balled up into innovative techno-entertainment.

Like *This Is Cinerama*, the gee-whiz experience of *Avatar’s* digital 3D could not be replicated at home. In its flat afterlife, Matt Singer from *ScreenCrush* [contended](#), “you feel the repetitiveness of the many (*many*) flying scenes — mostly because you *can’t* feel the visceral height and speed of those flying scenes without 3D.” Within five years, *Avatar* seemed to have exhausted itself.

As megacinema, *Avatar’s* potential hold on culture required extensive narrative support, support its retread

white saviorism could not provide. For those who do not remember, Jake Sully (played by Sam Worthington) and a multiracial coalition of anthropologist types and disgruntled soldiers join with the Na'vi — whose leaders are played by actors of Cherokee, Guyanese, Afro-Cuban, and Puerto Rican/Dominican descent — and, ultimately, all the creatures of the planet to battle against the golfing, mech-suit-wearing forces of extractive racial capitalism.

Yet if that dynamic was familiar, albeit made modern through some interesting casting choices, another aspect of *Avatar's* story could have given it more staying power, beyond its "*Dances with Wolves/Last Samurai* in Space" baseline. For within this gone-native parable is an inverted account of the attacks on the World Trade Center. While his allegiances are still in flux, Jake sells out the Na'vi and gives his military supervisors a detailed structural analysis of Hometree's multicolumnar trunk (no word on its berries, blue or otherwise). Their attack on the tree allows us to see the Na'vi — and ourselves — as 9/11 victims, now marked as Indigenous rather than cosmopolitan. Yet at the same time, the mercenary army's genocidal rapacity reads as a critique of the US backlash to the 9/11 attacks. That critique was consistent with Cameron's long-standing opposition to US military imperialism. It was also tacit enough to largely escape notice.

Contemporary movies that attempted any sustained critique of the "forever wars" — movies such as *Stop-Loss* (2008) — regularly flopped at the box office. The central,

salable media lesson of Global War on Terrorism was the experience of constant, heightened monitoring. This was life inside the *Hurt Locker*. One victim of that pivot to was the model of the movie as auteurist funnel.

Like Singer, Scott Mendelson, now at *TheWrap*, [tried to argue](#) for *Forbes* that, whatever its forgettability, *Avatar* was at least an original piece of content “being delivered by an auteur at the top of his game.” “Original” yet still somehow “built out of other movies,” as Singer put it — a classic funnel film. Cameron has described writing *Avatar* as the bursting of a dam: “The reservoir behind that dam had been filling since I was a child, with images from a thousand science-fiction novels and hundreds of movies. Every piece of fantasy art ever created, every *Analog* and *Eerie* magazine cover, all fed into that reservoir.” The results of that world-assemblage, though, were channeled only into the movie’s narrative and then (to extend the metaphor) allowed to follow (ahem) the way of water out to sea.

Singer lauded the fact that the movie “hasn’t been exploited [within] an inch of its life,” but as Dani Di Placido, another critic at *Forbes*, noted, that went hand in hand with the absence of “lore,” which he describes as “fuel for the dedicated fanbase [...] real estate for the imagination to roam.” In 2019, there were fewer than 200 pieces of *Avatar* fanfic at Archive of Our Own; there were more than 160,000 pieces built on the Avengers. (This is reason enough to think Keiles is off track about the idea that original world-

building played a defining role for *Avatar*.)

Without further entries in the series, and without a semi-speculative space for its fans to occupy as the story propelled ever onward, the movie could only remain a metaphor for itself. In the *GQ* roundup, comedian Josh Gondelman translated the plot this way: “[P]eople are looking for some substance called ‘unobtanium,’ so I think the movie was about the struggle to see how on-the-nose an allegory can get before people walk out in the middle.” And as *Vice* [noted](#), if people didn’t walk out — they didn’t! — that was because the movie was also a “big, self-satisfied metaphor for the immersion of watching a 3D movie. Jake can experience a realistic interaction with a fantasy world while motionless in a dark pod.” The movie is both itself and a demonstration of itself.

This final image of stasis allows us to locate precisely where the dynamism of the Hollywood system lay in 2009: if New Hollywood auteurism was the cinematic logic of the long downturn (or the decline in US hegemony) since 1973, the construction of IP-surveillant universes was the strategy of choice for Great Recession cultural reflation, a public bootstrapping of asset values. The value of the movies and everything else would be underwritten by the movies and everything else. When Francis Ford Coppola ran over budget, he had to pledge his Northern California home as collateral. It was real real estate, valued largely outside the motion picture marketplace. When Marvel secured the crucial line of credit in 2004 that allowed them to launch the MCU, it

pledged only its IP, its “real estate for the imagination to roam.” If that real estate was an Afghan battlefield littered with Stark-branded cluster bombs, all the more appropriate for a financial model where the movies were the collateral for themselves.

In the 2000s, Marvel’s new model was in a certain way a very old model: the profits from one movie would be plowed into the production of the next. What changed was the immediate narrativization of that linkage. The teasers at the end of each installment would open the window to the next. Every movie would anticipate its sequel. The result was, in part, a new managerial spectatorship. Just as fantasy sports aligned fandom with managerial rather than athletic emulation, so too IP surveillance aligns spectatorship with franchise and continuity management. You *argue* with Cameron; you *play along* with Marvel superproducer Kevin Feige. If those were niche practices in the past, they became conglomerate strategy in the 21st century.

But of course, our interest in *Avatar* is piqued at this moment not because it remains forgotten but because it is in the process of being massively, conglomerately, frostedly remembered. The construction of Pandora – The World of *Avatar* at Walt Disney World in Florida constituted an important break in its erasure. Begun in 2011, it finally opened in 2017, at the nadir of *Avatar*’s notoriety. It offered another route to the experience beyond the cinema. Additionally, Disney’s imagineered rides always add incrementally to the lore of

a franchise even as they reinforce its experiential weight. The two *Avatar* rides do precisely that: in [Flight of Passage](#), you take a VR ride on a banshee as part of a biological investigation (an institutional enterprise that does not exist in the movie); in the [Na'vi River Journey](#), you slowly meander through a faux bioluminescent landscape to meet the animatronic Shaman of Songs (a character who plays no role in the movie).

That shaman — voiced by Sandra Benton — may sing of Pandora's past, ancient and recent, but she is enfolded in the ongoing tale of encounter. The "world" of *Avatar* was, at that moment, officially opened up; its Indigenous inhabitants were given a mythic past that you accessed not through psychedelics, but through song (or, in 2015, through [Cirque du Soleil](#)). Cameron had long promised a fluctuating number of sequels. They had been delayed by his unrelenting technological demands and general perfectionism, we were told. They are now finally upon us. The original has returned to theaters upscaled to 4K, and the release of the second and third *Avatar* will test whether his world can pivot from the funnel to the horn.



Pandora Flakes, 2022. Photo: J. D. Connor.

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## CONTACT

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[info@lareviewofbooks.org](mailto:info@lareviewofbooks.org)

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[membership@lareviewofbooks.org](mailto:membership@lareviewofbooks.org)

### EDITORIAL INQUIRIES

[editorial@lareviewofbooks.org](mailto:editorial@lareviewofbooks.org)

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