

Drug Squad and major drug dealers was central to the gangland killings. Eight former Victoria Police Drug Squad members have been imprisoned for corrupt activities. Somewhere along the line the squad, now disbanded, moved on from simply 'taking a drink' to trading drugs. Police officer Malcolm Rosenes, present when Graeme Jensen was killed by the ARS, tried to cut a deal when his on the job drug trafficking was exposed. He became a Crown witness and gave a statement alleging that the gun found in Jensen's car was planted by the ARS, after he was shot. The official line is that his evidence is not credible and the Jensen case remains closed.

JUDE McCULLOCH is in Criminology at Monash University. She is the author of *Blue Army: Paramilitary Policing in Australia* (MUP, 2001)

REFERENCES

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AVATAR

Written and directed by James Cameron; starring Sam Worthington, Zoe Saldana, Sigourney Weaver; 2009; 162 mins.

As I was watching the film *Avatar* and the cinemagoers around me were cheering on the Na'vi heroes in their fight against human invaders, I couldn't help but wonder how many of us would actually want to live alongside such an uncompromising society. Why is the audience intended to admire the Na'vi's complete self-satisfaction and unwillingness to deal with humans despite the fact that it is Na'vi isolationism and idealism as much as human avarice which drive the two groups into conflict.

Thinking about it I realised it is hardly an isolated case. In our stories we love idealistic heroes to fight for what they believe in against all odds. But if we were to encounter such uncompromising characters in our families or offices they would strike us as unreasonable lunatics. I am reminded of what Alan Moore, creator of *Watchmen*, was reported to have thought we would call an archetypal,

vengeance-fuelled vigilante like Batman in the real world: 'in short, a nutcase'.

Why is it that rather than celebrate the values of conflict resolution, tolerance and deal-making, which make our advanced societies function so effectively, our favourite stories continue to be about zero-sum conflicts that are impossible to resolve peaceably? From afar, the kind of conflict found in *Avatar* seems noble.

We can easily imagine one side to be all good and the other all bad. There is no need to dwell on the suffering of those extras who die in battle or the problems that go unsolved back on Earth for want of 'unobtainium'. A quick cut to the next scene is always just seconds away! But in real life, conflict is painful and messy and something we work hard to avoid.

In fact we are so used to finding compromises in our everyday lives that to make his conflict story hang together, writer and director James Cameron is forced to pile absurdity upon absurdity: an intelligent species totally disinterested in trade with aliens and the magical technology they bring; a business that sees fighting interstellar war as a cheaper way to access 'unobtainium' than a peace treaty; a race of people willing to reveal all their secrets to conspicuous spies, but unwilling to negotiate or make concessions to humans even in the face of a catastrophic defeat. The crazy plot twists used to make compromise impossible result in a world unlike anything on Earth and as a result the movie is unable to teach us anything useful about how we ought to live.

Finally, we are led to a *deus ex machine* moment in which the megafauna of Pandora rise up to repel the human colonisers. To my knowledge, a revolt of Gaia is beyond the powers of the hunter gatherer tribes today struggling to coexist with industrial society, so I'm not sure what they can hope to take away from *Avatar*. The apparent moral of *Avatar*, 'fight hard if you're in the right and Gaia will provide', is one only someone very isolated from the real challenges of hunter gatherers could put forward.

Why does popular fiction so often favour staunch idealism over the central wisdom

embodied in modern political systems and their laws: 'dealism'? We could tell stories of the countless political compromises reached through well-functioning democratic institutions. We could tell the stories of all the terrible wars that never happened because of careful diplomacy. We could tell the story of the merchant who buys low and sells high, leaving everyone they deal with a little better off.

These are the everyday tales which make modern society so great to live in. But will any such movie gross a billion dollars in the near future? I suspect not.

An Australian movie with a very similar plot to *Avatar* is *The Castle*, in which the Kerrigan family fights the compulsory acquisition of their home for the expansion of Melbourne Airport. Audiences were predictably united in their support for the charming Kerrigan family in their struggle against big business. In real life, I suspect the public would be strongly divided on the fairness of the acquisition, especially if sticking up for the Kerrigan family meant airport delays and fewer discount airlines. We would want to find a deal which left both the Kerrigans better off and allowed for a larger airport by offering them more and more compensation until they voluntarily moved.

Why split our values like this, some for our stories and others for our own lives? I suspect the answer lies in what we subconsciously want our taste in fiction to say about us. Celebrating the Na'vi allows us to signal how much we value loyalty and justice. Denigrating Melbourne Airport allows us to show our suspicion of greedy and powerful people. In real life, when defending our stated values requires that we make serious sacrifices whether or not we are likely to win, we sensibly value the opportunity to compromise. But when a fictional character will do all the fighting for you, why compromise on anything?

Though popular fiction will never say it, we know the best fight is not that won by the righteous but the one nobody needed fight in the first place.

ROBERT WIBLIN is a BSc/Econ graduate of the Australian National University.