

The Future is Fixable: Convention and Ableism in Science Fiction

Susan Flynn, University of the Arts,
London

Abstract: Science fiction blockbusters engage a vast audience, while their treatment of disability contributes to the social construction of disability. Hollywood acts as a global transmitter of cultural pedagogy, a purveyor of images and messages, which are not necessarily in the interests of diverse, marginalized, and exploited groups across the world (Frymer, Kashani, Nocella & Van Heertum 2010, p.1). A decade after its release, *Avatar* (2009) remains iconic in its science fiction treatment of disability, as it literally subjugates the disabled body with technology, in the project of creating a new, more vibrant world. By celebrating technological advances and reifying science, both in the diegetic world of the film and the film experience for audiences, *Avatar* draws the audience into complicity with the project of “fixing” disability. Biotechnology’s conspicuous largesse proposes a simplistic and unrealistic “solution”; one that negates the agenda of the disability rights movement by undermining Social Model ideologies.

Keywords: Science fiction, disability, biotechnology, *Avatar*, Social Model of disability.

Introduction

In this age of organ transplants, stem cell research, artificial organs and cloning, fantasies of changing the body, modifying its abilities, dimensions, and appearance emerge with increasing frequency in the media vessels which drive and are driven by consumer tastes. Cultural vehicles such as film are increasingly seizing the disabled body as a narrative device for exploring the advent of biotechnology and on occasion, its relation to the military-industrial complex, e.g. *AI Rising* (2018); *Replicas* (2018); *Maze Runner: Death Cure* (2018); *Elysium* (2013); *Source Code* (2011); and *Iron Man 3* (2013). The commodification of organs, mechanical intervention, and computerized diagnostics ensure that medicine, health, and materiality are influenced by capitalist commodification. Illness, health, ability, and disability have become fields for corporate activity (Rose, 2007, p.11). It is this state of humanity and its frontiers that finds articulation in science fiction narratives. However, the persistent appropriation of the disabled body as a site of potential “repair” is troubling in an age where the disability movement is working toward creating a society in which all forms of bodies are treated equally. The central question that this paper asks is whether the use of biotechnology and disability in science fic-

tion films undermine the Social Model of disability. Using *Avatar* (2009) as a case study, this essay illustrates how it is possible to excavate instances of ableism in the narrative, the conventions and the inherent ideological underpinnings of science fiction film.

Disability as a social construct

Although disabled people are a heterogeneous group, they share a common experience of oppression generated by ableist social structures (Shakespeare, 1998; Barnes and Mercer, 2003; Baker et al, 2009). For the purpose of this essay, “ableism” refers to:

A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and [is] therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human. (Campbell, 2001, p. 44)

Because ableism does not focus on the construction of disability or impairment per se but draws attention to the production of a supposed ideal self and body (Campbell, 2009), it emphasizes that disability is socially produced. The social model of dis-

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ability aims to avoid the risk of pathologizing disabled people, interrogating the status quo by seeking the “inclusion” of disabled people within extant social structures. But it also calls for an examination of how (unearned) privilege attaches to those who can conform to the supposed norm.

In examining such cultural systems, this paper draws on scholarship from the field of disability studies. Both materialists and poststructuralists working within that field have highlighted the roles played by culture and the media in constituting and re-constituting the exclusion of those defined as “other.” Riddell and Watson have pointed out that “the oppression of disabled people has rested, in large part, on the imposition of negative and stigmatizing cultural identities” (2003, p.15). The cultural system is thus responsible for the creation and legitimation of ideas and beliefs which are implicated in many of the inequalities experienced by disabled people. Early disability/media critique, such as that by Colin Barnes, established connections between portrayal and ideology:

Disabling stereotypes which medicalize, patronize, criminalize and dehumanize disabled people abound in books, films, on television and in the press. They form the bedrock on which the attitudes towards, assumptions about, and expectations of disabled people are based. They are fundamental to the discrimination and exploitation which disabled people encounter daily, and contribute significantly to their systematic exclusion from mainstream community life. (Barnes, 1992a, p.39)

The UK disability rights movement, within and beyond the academy, developed the Social Model of disability as a means of countering and displacing the ideologies embedded in the Medical Model (Barnes, 2007). The latter positioned people with impairments as individual “victims,” who needed to be subjected to the professional “gaze” in order to be assessed, categorized, and treated. For Social Model theorists, disability is a trope, which is “wrapped around and over impairment” (ibid).

Avatar (2009)

Avatar is not only one of the largest-scale science fiction blockbusters that deals with disability, but is also one of the most financially successful films of all time (Dirks, 2014). Often blockbusters either elicit an elitist response or are omitted from critical discourse. “Their glibness and polish, their ability to excite the most accessible emotions seem to force them into a position that defies serious analysis” (Kolker, 1988, p. 237). Blockbusters are generally considered to be produced by and for “mass culture,” which is diametrically opposed to art. Frederic Jameson, writing on postmodernism, attended to this tension when he wrote that:

The erosion of the older distinction between high-culture and so-called mass or popular culture is perhaps the most distressing development of all from an academic standpoint, which has traditionally had a vested interest in preserving a realm of high or elite culture against the surrounding environment of philistinism, of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader’s Digest culture... (Jameson, 1998, p.2)

Avatar is the most financially successful film of all time but inhabits the curious position of “mass culture’s ‘cheap’ and ‘easy’ pleasures which consume, incorporate, and trivialize everything” (Petro, 2000 p.,584). However, the influence of a globally successful film, such as *Avatar*, with billions of viewers worldwide, must contribute in some ways to audiences’ perceptions of the world, themselves, and others. This particular film is hugely relevant to disability research, having massive global reach while addressing the “fixing” of disability with the help of biotechnology. It has also made history with its innovative usage of CGI technology and as some critics would suggest, has taken 3D technology to its most effective level, now virtually swallowing the audience in its effects. It has also so far spawned three sequels, currently in production.

Avatar’s narrative

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For David Bordwell (1986), narrative has three possible aspects. It may be considered a representation; how it signifies a world of ideas. It may be a structure through which its components create a whole. Or narrative can be seen as a dynamic process of presenting a story, including the aspects of presentation and effect. This essay examines *Avatar*'s “world of ideas,” its narrative structure, and its consequent effect(s). *Avatar*, like classic Hollywood narratives, presents psychologically defined characters who act in accordance with the audiences' perceived expectations. The ideological and cultural expectations of the disabled character are based on the able-bodied viewpoint: the American Ideal occupies a normative position informed by four ideological principles: self-government, self-determination, autonomy, and progress (Garland-Thomson, 1997). The traditional or classical Hollywood narrative arc is based on a set of assumptions:

The classical Hollywood film presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals. In the course of this struggle, the character enters into conflict with others or with external circumstances. The story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or nonachievement of the goals. The principal causal agency is thus the character, a distinctive individual endowed with an evident, consistent batch of traits, qualities and behaviors. (Bordwell, 1986, p.18)

The disabled character is, thus, imbued with a set of traits which lead the audience to a certain set of expectations regarding character development and plot. Set against a background of able-bodied characters with “normal” bodies, the disabled body is thus made “peculiar”:

The disabled body, in contrast, is conceived of as requiring explanation—what went wrong, how can it be fixed and brought back to normalcy? Yet the ques-

tions “what went wrong and what should be done?” are based on the reproduction of the frame [constituting] disability as a problem' and leave this frame completely unexamined. (Titchkosky and Michalko, 2012, p.127)

The audience's expectation of the narrative, therefore, is preconceived, based on ideologically formed suppositions about the needs and desires of disabled people. Disability comes to us “already framed,” mired in assumptions, and disability consciousness entails seeing disability as inherently an already-formed problem, located in individuals (ibid. p.128). The narrative of *Avatar* operates within the ideology of disability and, simultaneously, reconstitutes it. From the opening words of the film, the narrative identifies the disabled protagonist, Sully, as a character in need of explanation and “cure,” one who, by his own admission, dreams of ability and agility.

Sully declares that his spine is “fixable” but not on his vet benefits. He makes a deal with “the corporation” to replace his dead brother on a mission in return for having his legs “fixed.” The opportunity is not attributed to his own skills, but rather to shared DNA. The corporation is attempting to colonize a neighbouring planet, Pandora, whose indigenous population, the Na'vi inhabits an area rich in a mineral, “unobtainium,” of huge financial value to the corporation. The financial cost of the project is continually highlighted, just as the cost of Sully's “repair” is repeated as his main motivation. The avatar program seeks to “get into the hearts and minds of the natives,” thus the relationship between spending and acquiring is foregrounded. The new technologies of late capitalism propose a solution to Sully's “problem,” offering him the chance to replace his dead twin, a trained scientist, in a project which involves his use of an avatar.

The corporation's mission is to populate the planet of Pandora with avatars; in sync with the human nervous system and grown from a mixture of human and indigenous DNA, the avatar provides Sully with

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a new body and the chance to experience walking again. The intersection of physiology and technology is apparently seamless; we are subsumed into believing that it is possible and even easy, the incarnation of a new flesh being a normal scientific process. That the body is subjugated and effectively remade, that it is a site of the most intimate interference, being that of our thoughts and feelings, is made to appear a natural function of scientific advancement.

Propositioned by two “suits” who recruit him to replace his brother, the apparent indolence of the disabled Sully is manifested in his despondent slouch and casual “hoodie.” The disabled twin is thus ‘saved’ from a life that, we are led to believe, would be without autonomy, self-determination and economic independence. The suggestion that the disabled twin is inherently lacking is related to American ideologies of the able body. Garland-Thomson refers to this ideal of the American worker in her critique of normalization:

Nowhere is the disabled figure more troubling to American ideology and history than in relation to the concept of work: the system of production and distribution of economic resources in which the abstract principles of self-government, self-determination, autonomy, and progress are manifest most completely. Labor (...) equates productive work with moral worth, idleness with depravity... American individualism is most clearly manifest in the conviction that economic autonomy results from hard work and virtue. (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p 46)

Sully’s disability is, in this way, a totalizing identity that defines and harnesses him. Wounded in action, he is apparently extraneous to military life. In contrast to the vigor of an active marine, his life has become a nightmare of immobility. From the very first comments, “Last night I dreamed I was flying,” the audience is positioned to assume that the disabled Sully dreams of mobility and its attendant masculinity and virility. This is corroborated by the roman-

tic love which Sully only finds as a walking avatar. Biotechnology allows Sully the traditional role of “super-crip,” providing the means by which he can overcome the difficulties of disabled life. In a classic and predictable fashion, the super-crip status is bound up with citizenship; Sully becomes a good American when he takes the job on Pandora that simultaneously allows him to become “able.” *Avatar* in this way displays a distinct neoliberal agenda, played out in the film’s portrayal of biotechnology’s conspicuous largesse. Crucially, the emphasis on Sully’s duty to “overcome” supersedes any structural or cultural changes that would allow him to have an active and meaningful career. Sully’s life as a (disabled) human is never depicted as appealing; he is apparently unemployable, alone and despondent.

Sully is first seen in the film emerging from cryosleep, encased in a capsule, and then struggling to control himself in zero gravity; he is immediately a pawn, manipulated and maneuvered in the service of the narrative. Effectively paralyzed in their capsules before they can remotely inhabit their avatars, the human avatar-drivers are essentially disabled before the dreams begin. This disability or paralysis is equated with death as the coffin-like pods evoke the iconography of early horror films, with the nightmarish specter of the lid slamming shut. The interruption of bodily integrity, where the person is “transferred” to another being, raises ethical and ontological questions of intercorporeality. At the mercy of the control panel, the avatar drivers have the ability to operate their avatars, only as long as the corporation allows. The body in *Avatar* is effectively colonized by big-business interests, just as in *Iron Man* (2008) and *Repo Men* (2010); in these blockbusters the body is a site of radical control and transformation. The Corporation has a use for the disabled body only in so far as it has useful DNA or critical body matter that suits the corporate needs of the enterprise. Critically, the body is a site which rejects disability in favor of ability, even at the cost of autonomy and self-reliance.

Sully shares the same DNA as his dead identical

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twin but not his scientific expertise, a point which aggravates the chief scientist Grace. The narrative follows Sully’s acceptance into Na’vi society and his eventual espousal of their values and lifestyle. By mating with their princess and taming the “baddest cat in the sky,” Toruk, a dragon-like creature, Sully ultimately “goes native,” turning against the regime which provided his avatar. The American hero has thus transformed the natives into servile beings, and through the implementation of his military skills, Sully leads the indigenous population into a counter-attack, ultimately resulting in a one-on-one battle between him and the colonel, Quarrritch, who leads the attack. In this battle Quarrritch is seen to represent not just military might but also technological advancement; he fights in a huge mechanical armored suit complete with missile launchers and advanced weaponry, whereas Sully represents the natural: vulnerable, in tune with his surroundings and reliant on the help of his loved ones. Sully is saved by his Na’vi wife, Neytiri, and decides to abandon his human disabled form altogether, choosing to become a full Na’vi and stay on Pandora.

The film’s critique of scientific progress is conservative; on the one hand, it celebrates the possibilities of scientific progress, while it espouses the traditional values of family, community spirit, and morals. Unfortunately, the film’s version of old-time values, natural harmony, and respect for nature does not seem to have room for disabled bodies; only as a fully functioning Na’vi does Sully find contentment, love, and acceptance. The traditional value system apparently espouses the American ideology of individualism; the hero is expected to make the best of his personal situation through hard work. Troublingly, in *Avatar*, this hard work is available to the disabled Sully only by the fluke death of his twin. Supposedly then, without such a mishap, the disabled Sully would have been denied the opportunity to fit into this American ideology.

Avatar and the science fiction genre

Avatar is firmly rooted in the science fiction genre.¹ Science fiction seeks to produce imaginary futures

where the breakdown of society is alarming and the gap between the powerful and the powerless is a vast and ever-stretching chasm. The intersection of the body and technology is a recurrent trope; the body is remade (*Robocop*, 1987), remodeled (*Iron Man*, 2008) and transmogrified (*The Fly*, 1986). “As medical technology and genetic engineering have developed, so have the futuristic ideas of a society where “disability” is eradicated by the intervention of technology to cure and treat impairment” (Reeve, 2012, p.100).

Science fiction can be seen as a warning of what might happen when science goes too far. Biotechnological cures for disabilities can result in horrifying mutations (*The Amazing Spiderman*, 2012), Cyborgs can revolt (*I, Robot*, 2004), clones can overthrow the system (*The Island*, 2005) and economics can determine whether a person lives or dies (*Repo Men*, 2010). Science fiction always sees trouble with biotechnology: it is never a perfect advancement for humanity but always a precarious and dangerous relationship, which threatens to go wrong at every turn and disrupt the balance of power between human and machine. Machines have now made ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body. “Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (Haraway, 1989, p.176). The scope of biotechnology is so great that it invokes both fear and awe, seen in fictional representations as massive bodies that overpower humans (Springer, 1991). Scientific advances such as organ transplantation, stem cell science, and even blood donation require and create new sets of social relations as well as generating new ideas about what constitutes life (Rose, 2007). Science fiction blockbusters, designed to appeal to the masses and attend to their concerns, have much scope with the growing array of scientifically plausible futures: “Popular science, media representations, pundits, and futurologists all portray our own moment in history as one of maximal turbulence, on the cusp of an epochal change, on a verge between the security of a past now fading and the insecurity of a future we can only dimly dis-

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-cern” (Rose, 2007, p.5).

The constant drive toward the optimization of the body, replacement body parts, assisted conception, gene therapy, and assorted other “procedures” are now so commonplace that science and technology are an everyday part of life and the aging process. So much of social interaction, education, employment, even leisure, depends on the categorization of people (healthy/unhealthy, able-bodied/disabled, old/young, fit/unfit) that the scientific intervention that is available or unavailable to us is more and more relevant (ibid). These concerns find articulation in the mass market media, in particular blockbusters that attend to the concerns of the masses. The science fiction genre repeatedly features disabled characters who are ‘fixed’ by technology: Robocop is remade, Anakin Skywalker gains an exoskeleton, the Six Million Dollar Man is engineered to have super-ability, Iron Man forges a heart replacement. The reification of science and technology combined with the disability of the hero place *Avatar* in the service of an ableist agenda; scientific progress is thus shown as engaged in the modification and “repair” of human beings. The supposed rationality of science is verified by the laboratory scenes. The wheelchair-bound Sully is given an “opportunity”, and as he begins his new job he declares, “One life ends, another begins” (Scene 1). This is a reference to his dead twin and the life he will leave behind on Earth. In the futuristic world of science fiction, the alternative or “abnormal” bodies are excluded from the realm of the active subject; though their bodies may be “fixable,” society still projects certain stigmas and expectations onto them. Thus, though the future may provide “cures,” disability as a social construct still exists (Cheu, 2002).

Avatar’s interest in the danger of biotechnology is therefore a generic necessity. The ambiguities of what it means to be human in an inhumane world or, to be inhumane in a humane world, are played out through the contentious relationship between human and Na’vi. The radicalization of human/alien identity forces the audience to question what it

means to be human and to ask “what is a humane society?” A binary opposition is created between corporate “civilized” behavior and “natural” behavior, with the corporation ultimately exposed as an evil enterprise. In *Avatar*, the human body itself is colonized by the corporation, and science fiction’s fascination with the future of surveillance reaches a pinnacle; the human is watched from the inside. Power structures thus become flesh as surveillance is internalized. Surveillance of the Na’vi, of their planet Pandora and of the avatars is heightened in the clinical environment of the corporate headquarters. Computer screens and electronic imaging are everywhere, the cold sterile world of futuristic science seeming highly controlled and managed by “lab coats.”

Science fiction narratives regularly feature a tussle for power and showcase internal conflict for the characters. The characters’ need to self-regulate, and as such be effective members of the population enacts the “bio-power” which Foucault spoke of in his Lectures at the College de France. As Foucault views the body as a highly politicized space, his analyses of the body are highly relevant to science fiction, where issues of power and control are frequently narrated. Science fiction lends itself to Foucault’s institutions of “bio-power” (2003); science fiction narratives frequently involve a futuristic world where surveillance is endorsed by the powerful elite as a method of control and regulation. The surveillance of the Na’vi casts them in the role of the oppressed, the criminalized or the pathologized, just as Sully is literally subjected to internal surveillance. The link between the disabled man and the (pathological) native tribe is as such based on their lack of “normalcy.”

Science Fiction, Biotechnology and Cyborgs

Science fiction is a means through which popular culture can grapple with scientific advances and work through the underlying fears about its potential power and imagined futures, replete with all that science has to offer and which we imagine it will one day offer. In science fiction films, medical tech-

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-nology and scientific advances offer “perfect” bodies. *Avatar* explores the possibility of a radicalization of the mind/body binary, where the mind may be transferred to another body. Information technology has now been appropriated by biology, and biology, through molecular science, now breaks down the human into their elementary components. This molecularization of man is illustrated in the science fictions that break down and remake humans. In contemporary Western culture, humans have come to see themselves as “fixable” at the molecular level (Rose, 2007) and so films which work through these suggestions are highly relevant. The suggestion that science now has the power to “fix” various disabilities not only denies disabled persons their own subjectivity (they may not wish to be in any way altered) but also proposes that a homogeneous human race is the ideal. In the imagined future of *Avatar*, disabilities still exist but are “fixable” if a person can afford it: “They can fix a spine if you’ve got the money, but not on Vet benefits, not in this economy” (scene 1). This interplay of economics with science illustrates science fiction’s continued concern with the power structures of the future. The wonders of scientific advances are always in the hands of powerful elite in the imagined future.

The avatars themselves are grown from human DNA mixed with indigenous DNA and are linked to the human nervous system. As such they are remotely-controlled human-made men and women: a peculiar type of cyborg. Haraway defines a cyborg as a “cybernetic organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (1991, p.149). The blurring of human and non-human boundaries provides narrative material that at once captivates and intrigues audiences, not least because of the social ramifications and the ontological intrigue they create, but also because the discourses of ability and disability are infinitely complicated by biotechnology’s capabilities. When biotechnology restores functionality to Sully’s legs, albeit remotely, there is no consideration of the cultural or social implications of this transition; therefore, society is effectively “let off the hook” in a typical Medical Model way.

The notion of cure or normalization goes unquestioned; it is apparently assumed that a disabled person would do anything to restore full functionality to the body.

At the concluding scenes of *Avatar* we see a type of cyborg-human: Quarritch in his cybernetic exoskeleton. This is a familiar trope in science fiction; a cyborg, out of control and acting outside its remit, suggests a residual fear of technology. Technology’s capabilities are awe-inspiring, in film this awe translates into huge bodies that overpower humans (Springer, 1991).

Reeve (2012) suggests that impaired people using assistive technologies are in some ways already cyborg due to their intimate associations with technology. Such technologies, coming with some new problems, are not equally available to all disabled people and therefore do not provide the universal panacea that science fiction films often propose. However, as Reeve points out, the relationships of impaired people and technology unsettle the everyday understandings of “normal” as technology has the potential to destabilize the categories of “disabled” and “non-disabled” (p.103). *Avatar* suggests that a life modified by technology is the preferred option for a disabled person. It also purports that technology can bring physical enhancement to the level of super-ability, rather than provide narrative closure by suggesting any cultural or structural changes that would resolve or alleviate Sully’s apparent apathy.

Conventions

Avatar conforms not just to the generic conventions of the science fiction film but also to the larger filmic conventions of Hollywood, which form recognizable patterns and motifs. These conventions, through which we understand our place in the world and our purpose in it, constitute a sort of cultural mapping. They both reside in and are components of dominant ideologies. The familiar tropes of the lone hero and the country idyll, of masculinity and war, women and tradition, and of civilized society’s attempted

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appropriation of uncivilized lands are recognizable themes. In this way, films are replete with references to other films and reinforce dominant ideologies. The ideologies at play in *Avatar* rest on the idealization of science and the assumption that disabled people seek to be “cured.” Idealizing science and technology’s powers to “fix” disability presupposes the wishes of disabled people. The negative portrayal of disability and the use of the disabled body as a site of supposed improvement contribute to a cultural inequality: *Avatar* uses a disabled body to be permanently changed into a foreign “able” body; an escapist fantasy is thus created where a disabled body can be replaced. Viewed in this way, the film’s use of Sully’s body is a disturbing commentary on perceptions of disabled persons’ lives.

Rebirth, Sleep and Paralysis

Avatar opens with the oneiric flight of the hero over the lush vegetation of Pandora, a visceral 3D experience which barely conceals a latent ableism; the disability disappears in the perfect state of dream as Sully speaks: “When I was lying there in the VA hospital, with a big hole blown through the middle of my life, I started having these dreams of flying, I was free. Sooner or later though, you always have to wake up” (Scene 1). The dream of release from the constraints of the body is all the more alluring when the body is disabled; such bodies have historically served as a device upon which artistic discourses have leaned (Norden, 1994; Shakespeare, 1994; Longmore, 1987; Darke, 1998; Chivers and Markotic, 2010). The film convention of the dream is employed to subtly illustrate that the aspiration of the disabled character is to have greater mobility and consequently, greater freedom. 3D technology effaces the space between audience and screen, virtually swallowing the audience in the technological dream. As Ross (2012) discusses the use of positive parallax (the illusion of space behind the screen plane) as it spectacularly depicts the exhilaration of flight: “Soaring through space... has historically been associated with progress and mastery, both literally and metaphorically, and thus can be used

to structure the overall journey of a heroic protagonist” (Ross, 2012, p.211).

However, in *Avatar*, the exhilarated flight is tethered to an explicit wish for mobility, agency and able-bodiedness. Sully eventually learns to fly his own “ikran,” only when he learns to trust his instincts and it is those instincts which are apparently unavailable to his disabled self. With the effects coming out to meet us, we are allowed to experience the dream-flight, and feel the rapid movement and autonomy of the highly agile. The audience participates in a technologically mediated sensation through their use of 3D glasses that brings them into the film-world, just as Sully participates in Na’vi life through the use of his sarcophageal control interface and the Na’vi connect to their world through their neural queues (Seegert, 2010).

The dialogue of the opening dream sequence speaks of a character between two worlds: not the physical worlds of Earth and Pandora that feature in the film, but the states of existence which are ability and disability. Sully begins the film by looking back to the time he spent in the VA hospital, caught between the two states. Lying in the hospital, a “big hole blown through the middle of (his) life,” disability was as such a personal tragedy inflicted upon him. Subjected to the medical gaze in this way, Sully’s loss of autonomy, movement and potency as a serving military man led him to dream about freedom. In Foucauldian terms he was subjected to “dividing practices” (1982, p. 208). Following Foucault’s theory, during the process of rehabilitation, the body of the paralyzed person becomes objectivized as paralyzed and the individual subjectivized as paraplegic, the paralyzed body becoming part of medical discourse. Rehabilitation thus is a form of power, categorizing the individual and compelling him and others to accept that categorization. The individual is, however, “divided inside himself,” (1982, p.208) resisting the imposition of a totalizing identity (Sullivan, 2005, p.31). The opening sequence thus illustrates the Foucauldian power systems at play and the individual’s struggle to accept the paralyzed

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identity versus his previous able-bodied one.

The body in *Avatar* is used by big-business interests; it is a site of radical control and transformation. The Corporation has a use for the disabled body only in so far as it has useful DNA or critical body matter, as in other films such as *Robocop* (1987), *Gataca* (1997), and *Source Code* (2011). Social control is thus within and around the body itself. Sully’s paralysis makes him the ultimate candidate for a new awakening—the transition from immobile to agile is not just physical but also existential; his awakening is an epiphany of sorts, which allows him to really “see”. As we are told, in Na’vi language, to “see” is to know on a deep level and the phrase “I see you” means that “I love you.” Having had the chance to “walk as one of the people,” thanks to science, Sully is thus given new life. It is this new life which he ultimately chooses over life as a disabled human. The closing voiceover marks Sully’s final choice to live on as an avatar; as he leaves the laboratory behind for the last time to become a full member of the Na’vi, he says, “It’s my birthday after all. This is Jake Sully, signing off.” The narrative journey from disability to reclaimed ability through the avatar body itself relies heavily on narrative conventions through which resolution is created.

The Country Idyll and the Sterile Indoors

Avatar employs the convention of the country idyll, casting Pandora as a pastoral haven where life is seemingly simpler, reminiscent of the North American frontier tradition. The countryside, in this case Pandora, conventionally represents natural law, as opposed to the civil law of civilization. In scene one, the military complex is framed by the lush vegetation of Pandora, its colors and textures at odds with the stark industrial Headquarters. Quaritch refers to the indigenous population as an “aboriginal hoard,” showing the dichotomy between inside and outside, the civilized space and the uncivilized space. As the narrative progresses, it becomes apparent that the natural space of the countryside is more conducive to relationships, extended families and community spirit. In this way, science proposes

a new, more connected world: the myth of connectivity which digital life proffers.



The country idyll’s propensity for encouraging sexual relationships is seen in the mating of Sully and Neytiri beneath the Tree of Life (scene 19).

The occasions of physical touch between the Na’vi is far greater than those among the humans in “civilized society”; the natural relationships among the Na’vi are contrasted with the unnatural civilized relationships between the humans. Below is a shot of the Na’vi as they join together in an embrace, creating a web of touch which suggests an interconnectivity and symbiosis. Their propensity to touch each other is at odds with the human value placed on “personal space” and propriety. This is complicated further by the issue of disability; the disabled character does not reside in the “natural”



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sphere and so is placed in a position that is not conducive to touch.

The latter shot is constructed to convey a physical and psychic bond between the Na’vi, alluding to the connectedness between the tribe and nature itself.

While the human touch in the film is most often a handshake or hand on the shoulder, the avatar experiences not just sensual touch in the romantic sense but also touch from the entire connected community. The cliché of the untouchable, isolated disabled character, somewhat removed from normal human relationships, is therefore reconstituted and the contrast between the social relationships of the disabled character and the able-bodied character is acute. The issue of touch further suggests the sexual agency which is apparently denied to disabled Sully, but is open to his able-bodied alter-ego. The stereotype of the disabled person does not include an active sex life and in this way cultural attitudes diminish sexual agency for disabled people. As Wilkerson (2002, p.35) states, a group’s sexual status reflects its broader social status. Sexual agency is not just the ability to make one’s own choices about engaging in sex acts but it is also “a more profound good which is in many ways socially based, involving not only oneself as a sexual being, but also a larger social dimension in which others recognize and respect one’s identity” (ibid).

Crucially, such a narrative closure is denied the disabled Sully; he effectively chooses the death of his human disabled self. In choosing (human) death, Sully abandons his (disabled) body. In Foucauldian terms, it is Sully’s revolt against the bio-power that would subjectivize his personhood as “paralyzed”: “[D]eath now becomes the moment when the individual escapes all power, falls back on himself and retreat, so to speak, into his own privacy. Power no longer recognizes death” (Foucault, 2003).

Sully recognizes that death will allow him to escape the totalizing subject position, believing perhaps that remaining in the country idyll of Pandora, he will have greater freedom from the bio-power that

casts him as paralyzed. The country idyll does not accommodate a wheelchair, or any mobility aids which suggest mechanical intervention. The idyll thus accentuates the (able-bodied) material body which is part of nature and as such we see the dead Na’vi buried, covered in flowers and returned to the ground in a very simplistic ritual. There are no disabled Na’vi; the tribe is essentially one with nature, functioning as part of a network with all living vegetation on the planet. The suggestion is that the country idyll is so in tune with nature and that all creatures function perfectly in their given roles. This idealizing of a “natural” society suggests that the urban or “unnatural” society creates disabilities perhaps as a result of an unhealthy environment or ethos. The ultra-homogenous Na’vi is agile, fit, and mobile, apparently connected to a life-force that produces no impairments. The disenfranchised Sully is restored to the realm of the active subject when he “returns” to nature as an able-bodied person; the dystopian world is left behind as he embraces “natural” life on Pandora. It is there that he gains the power and the will to fight the political/military forces; it is there that order is eventually restored.

The film repeatedly uses the phrase “I see you” to express love. The use of this phrase epitomizes the narrative’s involvement in active subject positions. The uncultured Neytiri “sees” Sully, but he is only able to say “I see you” after he returns to nature, experiences his epiphany and accepts his (able-bodied) new life. Not only does it ground the active subject position (the seeing character and also the audience) in a sighted position, it also assumes the position of able-bodiedness—the fully functioning, active position. Therefore, according to the narrative, “love” is only within the remit of able-bodied individuals.

The country idyll is represented simultaneously as a “natural” environment and as a savage untamed land, in a colonialist manner, with all the attendant meanings that brings. Pandora is reached by spacecraft, which is seen juxtaposed with the planet in an outer-space shot, a typical shot which re-

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places the motif of the map in older (non-science-fiction) films. Colonial narratives such as *A Passage to India* (1984), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) *The Jewel of the Nile* (1985) typically legitimize colonialism and its attendant stripping of national treasures by lending an aura of scientific progress, using images of maps and globes (Shohat, 2000). By using maps and later images of spacecraft and solar systems, some science fiction films suggest a geographical, scientific and hence respectable rationale for such plundering. The glorification of science and technology along with the supposed rationality of the civilized Americans is set in contrast to the lush tropical and seemingly untamed landscape of Pandora. American exceptionalism un masks itself in the process; the American corporation is seen as bringing civilization to Pandora, “taming” the wild land.

The narrative critiques the industrial corporate society which invades lands for monetary gain while it provides individualized solutions for disabled people. The complexity of the ideological stance of the film is read by Rieder (2011) as highly contentious:

The aspects of the capitalist world system and the US’s dominance within it that *Avatar* repudiates—ecologically damaging resource extraction and arrogant militarism—are effectively erased, rather than criticized, reconceptualized or reformed, by the protagonist’s whole body assimilation into the Na’vi, because this transformation is cast as a return to pre-industrial harmony with nature. (Rieder, 2011, p.48)

Resource stripping is shown to be inherently disrespectful and damaging; this is achieved by the creation of pathos for the “natural” Na’vi and their lifestyle. The technology of the invading humans is set in contrast to the natural Na’vi, yet in neither culture is there room or respect for alternate or disabled people. The Na’vi, however, serve to remind us of a romantic pastoral past, the imagined pre-in-

dustrial past where values supposedly held greater importance. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin wrote in 1989, “The dominant discourse constructs Otherness in such a way that it always contains a trace of ambivalence or anxiety about its own authority. In order to maintain authority over the Other in a colonial situation, imperial discourse strives to delineate the other as radically different from the self.” (1989, p.103) The Na’vi culture thus serves to remind the audience of a romantic past, of an innate “humanity” that is more sensitive, thoughtful, nurturing and in tune with nature.

In contrast to the idyll outside, science and technology are placed in a very particular and uniform setting to reinforce the methodical and highly complex processes involved in the “fixing” of or “creating” of an individual. The authority of “medicalization” is reinforced by the laboratory setting where the avatars are “reborn” and scientific knowledge effectively allows the rebirth of (able-bodied) individuals. Anders (2013) acknowledges that “medical disciplines and institutions both configure material and social contexts for the actions of individuals, but also discursively shape the identity of disabled people through the authority of scientific knowledge” (2013, p. 12). The medicalized setting therefore indicates an encoded meaning; the disabled character is in need of medical intervention or cure. Medical expertise has the power to intervene in the very personhood of the individual when medicine reinvents itself as the rational repository of truth. “Insofar as disabled people have become an object of disciplinary power, they have also become the subject matter of professional groups, whose discourses of expertise have defined and redefined that subject matter” (Hughes, 2005, p.83).

These practices’ end result is a loss of agency for disabled people, and the cinematic re-telling of these procedures contributes to the perpetuation of this perception. The telling of disability in this familiar “professional” setting is part of the “encoded” message delivered by the director in his editorial choices. The audience recognizes the

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supposed “universal truth” of this ideology of disability; we recognize disabled people in these types of settings as it is part of the ideological imaginary surrounding disabled people:

One can begin to appreciate how, throughout modernity, disabled people’s lives have been blighted and demeaned by a degree of supervision that is probably without historical parallel. Pathologized by medicine, imprisoned by disciplinary power in “special” spaces, normalized by strategies of rehabilitation: this is the modern history of disability in a chilling nutshell (Ibid).

This setting is thus necessarily at odds with the random and natural environment of the outside. The random acts of society or nature which result in disability are therefore precluded in the scientific setting. The setting thus corroborates the association of able as orderly, rational, and technically correct and disabled as disorderly, unruly, and chaotic. The “natural” setting of Pandora is in marked contrast to the grim enclosed of Headquarters. Nature is here used to suggest an idealized space with an almost mythological harmony, a nostalgic place with untapped potential.

Repeated shots of Sully in his sarcophageal control unit evoke the iconography of coffins and nightmarish horror films. Paralyzed within these units, the avatar drivers are “docile” bodies upon which power is exerted. These Foucauldian docile bodies are “policed” by a great many distinct regimes (Foucault, 1977, p. 153). Of all the avatar drivers, Sully is the most often seen in this setting; his paralysis doubled, he is a pawn of the power structures. The theme of containment is a unifying theme of disability-related films. Traditionally, in films featuring disabled characters, the disabled person is mostly confined to an indoor existence. In *Avatar*, the disabled Sully is seen outside just once, on his arrival at Pandora’s headquarters (scene 1). Confined, as such, Sully suffers isolation from any disabled peers,

while also being isolated and “othered” by his colleagues at headquarters. The confined indoor environment in which Sully exists is grey, sterile and medical. At the opening voiceover, when he speaks of his dreams of flying, he invokes the common theme in disability related films where the character associates outdoor open spaces with the freedom of movement which he lacks.

Military Masculinity and Repair

There is no such thing as an ex-marine, you may be out but you never lose the attitude.
(Scene 1)

Though he has been injured and now uses a wheelchair, Sully’s self-definition is that of a marine. Apparently excused from active service at the beginning of the narrative, Sully is an “impotent” marine. His motivation for participating in the *Avatar* program is the “repair” of his disability, but this is tied up with his wish to be an “active” marine and by association, actively masculine. Indeed, when he becomes the “able” Na’vi he becomes a warrior and he begins a romantic relationship. This has the effect of subtly emasculating the disabled character, reconstituting the notion that disability desexualizes the person. At a first glance, *Avatar* may seem to offer an interrogative viewpoint on America’s military might. However, further investigation reveals that it proposes America as the guardian of the free world, and indeed the universe, providing trained personnel who will overcome the threat of evil, even if it comes from within the establishment itself. The language of war which is utilized in the film to foster realism concurs with the view of American military leadership as altruistic; the “shock and awe” tactics of a “pre-emptive war,” “fighting terror with terror,” tether the military to the real world Bush administration (Alford, 2010). Popular media necessarily reference the times we live in and so blockbusters are replete with the concerns of war. The language of the military aggressors in the film clearly reference the Bush administration with phrases like “shock and awe,” “daisy cutters,” “pre-emptive war” and “fighting terror with terror.” While adding to the

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sense of reality in the film, such phraseology also serves to underline the modern image of the military man, whose robust aggression apparently calls for a robust physique. During wartime popular media glorifies tough, aggressive and robustly masculine soldiers (Myrntinen, 2004). Movies reflect and reinforce our ideas about ourselves and the conflicts we engage in. Militarized hypermasculinity helps to reproduce neocolonialism and gendered hierarchies in the nation state (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997) and similarly, it is a filmic convention that highly masculine men people the military and reproduce its highly contentious agenda.

You are not in Kansas anymore! (Scene 2)

Quarritch, who favors a pre-emptive strike to defeat the natives, alludes to the dream-world of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) to suggest that the world of war is no place for dreaming but rather the cold world of survival tactics.

If you wish to survive, you have got to cultivate a strong mental attitude. (Scene 2)

Quarritch's utterance names strength, whether physical or mental, as the number one necessity for survival, the assumption being that he has no respect for weakness. His scarred face, heavy boots, and military fatigues suggest a tough, experienced soldier. Sully is an outsider in this military regime, lacking strength and agility, and as such produces intrigue as to his true value in a system that reveres such things. The biotechnology which is offered to Sully (thanks to science fiction's fantastic opportunities) is a conspicuous offer, as Anders writes:

For disabled people, insofar as they are deemed to lack capacity, they are less available to a power that operates primarily on capacities. In this sense, incapacity would seem to simultaneously shield the individual from power and yet leave them outside the care of society—hardly a bargain. (Anders, 2013, p.10)

While on Pandora the military presence is made up of “hired guns,” back home, Sully tells us, the marines are “fighting for freedom.” Ultimately, even though the mercenaries are on Pandora to make money, Sully becomes the hero when he helps to save the Na'vi. The military presence on Pandora, though the military there is made up of mercenaries (scene 1), is hyper masculine. In the film convention, marines are highly masculine, traditional characters. The marine has taken his place in modern American mythography, and become a shibboleth that even in films, is replete with recognizable characteristics of loyalty, agility and perseverance, *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), *Jarhead* (2005). Here again, movies reinforce ideologies of America. The image of the marine as a soldier who works for the common good is pervasive. Sully is a marine like so many of the other “hired guns.” The marine is proposed in the media, particularly in film, to be the American working-class hero: loyal, vigilant, and highly agile. The marine is usually portrayed as a team player, who nevertheless, has such a strong moral code that his ethics are above reproach and so the audience recognizes that when he acts alone, outside the law, it is for the common good.

Sully alludes to the contradiction when he says, “I was a warrior who wanted to bring peace” (scene 23). The masculinity which is proposed to be the mantle of the military is denied to the disabled Sully, even though he sees himself as a marine. In this way, society imbues his body with meanings. The marine's stereotypical image as hyper masculine is represented in the comments by soldiers policing the exterior of Headquarters when Sully arrives by plane and wheels out onto the runway in his wheelchair:

“Check this out, man, meals on wheels.”

“Oh man, that is just wrong.” (Scene 1)

Sully's presence as a disabled marine clearly makes the other military personnel uncomfortable, as his disability does not fit in with their sense of identity. In scene 2, Colonel Quarritch tells the

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military personnel, “If you want to survive, you have got to cultivate a strong mental attitude” (scene 2). The military’s insistence on a strong mind and a strong body illustrates an ableist agenda. The disabled Sully clearly does not fit with the military’s idea of itself.

Conclusion

Almost every culture sees disability as a problem in need of a solution (Mitchell, 2002). The generic opportunities of science fiction offer fantastic scenarios where disability can be “cured,” a futuristic vision of humanity which is inherently malleable and controllable. Disability, in this scenario, is a context that a character must overcome: a deeply ableist approach. The textual analysis of *Avatar* illustrates that the film is involved in perpetuating ableist ideologies, through the (science fiction) possibility of eradicating disabilities. In its use of familiar conventions such as the country idyll, and military masculinity, *Avatar* relentlessly suggests that the disabled character’s repair is the ideal scenario, which will bring romance, community and closure. The country idyll, community, masculinity, and romance are realms from which the disabled Sully is apparently precluded.

As this essay has shown, the film’s narrative concerns disability vis-à-vis the technologies of the new millennium which seek to optimize life and transform those humans whose bodies differ into a manageable and productive body politic; the “normate” ableist assumption. This treatment of disability, with all its incumbent issues around ontology and biotechnology, has consequences for the social creation of disability, affecting how disabled people are viewed while simultaneously buttressing the hegemony of normalcy. Ableism is manifest in the familiar conventions used in *Avatar* and the lure of repair which will accommodate the disabled protagonist’s re-entry into society and community. Engulfed in this spectacular and unquestioned drive toward repair, the audience and society at large are discharged from any responsibility. The science fiction body is suggested as an offering of the fu-

ture, where the awesome potential of repair will be available to those worthy of the transformation and where society will be alleviated of any requirement to accommodate otherness. Science fiction, in this way, can itself be viewed as a tool of ableism.

Notes

¹ Some critics have placed *Avatar* with the genre of fantasy fiction, but in my opinion the themes and tropes of the film place it firmly within science fiction. Science fiction differs from fantasy fiction in that the imaginary elements are largely possible within scientifically established laws of nature. Fantasy fiction involves magic and other unscientifically proven elements and has become largely associated with medieval era allegorical tales such as *The Lord of the Rings*.

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