The Cinematic Topos of Disability and the Example of *Avatar:* A Rhetorical Critique

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Six years after its release, filmgoers likely still remember seeing James Cameron's explosive and explosively profitable science fiction epic *Avatar* (2009) in theaters. They likely recall a spectacular narrative—a mesmerizing, deeply *cinematic* experience—centering on the struggle between the noble Na'vi, a race of blue-skinned humanoids who live with nature, and the avaricious humans who covet the mineral ore below these natives' home. B-list lead Sam Worthington plays one such human, a paraplegic marine named Jake Sully, whose consciousness human scientists transport into a Na'vi "avatar." The character's disability is easily forgotten once he enters his muscular Na'vi body. He sets off into the immersive computer-rendered jungle of the planet Pandora; he works initially for the humans before he learns the natives' ways, falls in love with a Na'vi woman, and eventually, in fiery and violent climax, helps the Na'vi drive the humans' fearsome, iron-plated fleet of war machinery from Pandora. If asked what *Avatar* is about, a viewer might respond, "Well, it's about a lot of things […]" It is about environmentalism and the limits of technology; thanks to its unrivaled CGI jungle vistas, it is very much about the beauty and majesty of nature; it is about all those character qualities—courage, faith, determination, and so on—that Hollywood narratives eulogize; it is about love; and it rather frankly cautions against a dystopian future where humankind has lived beyond its means for too long and realized the fact too late.[1] More cynical viewers might say it is just about spectacle. Few,

1. In the introduction to her book on *Avatar*, Grabiner notes, "Cameron's masterpiece has been labeled sexist, anti-imperialist, anti-militaristic, racist, anti-capitalistic, leftist, reactionary, and pro-environment" (1). I believe each label is true enough in its own right, and one point I stress in this essay is the importance of examining the rhetorical entanglements of such often incongruent qualities in the course of a single text. As Burke terms the problem, multiple "essences" actually exist in a given text among which the interpreter must "select" (*Attitudes* 252-54).

though, would be unlikely to answer, "*Avatar* is a film about disability."

But to an extent it is. *Avatar* is about disability insofar as Sully's paraplegia represents a primary cog in the movie's narrative mechanics. As Worthington rolls his wheelchair onto the screen, he sets the narrative rolling as well. Through the image of Sully's disabled form, *Avatar* invents the scenario wherein a human would want to become Na'vi. And in contradistinction to his disabled form the movie invents the athleticism and physical beauty of its lithe, iconographic aliens. Disability in *Avatar* is important, but quickly inundated by the larger narrative and array of Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) spectacle.

This essay contends that narrative constructions like *Avatar*'s warrant a rhetorical perspective on the circulation of images of disability in Hollywood film—a perspective that asks not only if a given movie "argues" for favorable or unfavorable treatment of marginalized groups like the disabled, but one that also asks how and to what ends disability images function within larger arguments and ideologies.[2] Film scholar Robert B. Ray, for example, asserts that "[i]deology is not a thing that dictates such formations as the cinema, but rather a set of social relationships fought out in different arenas of which film is among the most prominent" (9). Rhetorical critics ought to find Hollywood's *use* of disability as a device within the "fighting out" of ideology just as interesting as what the movies have to say directly *about* disability.

Put another way, the filmic image of disability represents a sort of argumentative topos as well as a subject of representation. When critics speak of cinematic *representations* of disability, they invoke a system that maps the subject of disability onto one corner of a rhetorical triangle. Inquiry typically follows: What does this movie (corner A—the "speaker") attempt to convince its viewers (corner B—the audience) about the subject of disability and disabled people (corner C—the subject)? When cinematic images are regarded as topoi—replicable devices used in the construction of arguments about *other* subjects—the threads, however strong or tenuous, that connect points A, B, and C become just as important as the nodes themselves, and questions of *how* a movie persuades come into focus. One heuristic is not better than the other. Rather, the two are complementary and irrevocably linked: representations of disability enable or inhibit different topical uses of disability images, and those same uses can, both explicitly and tacitly, reinforce or disrupt prevailing representations of disability. Questions of representation

2. I have in mind, here, Crowley's understanding of ideology as "any system within which beliefs, symbols, and images are articulated in such a way that they assemble a more or less coherent depiction of reality and/or establish a hierarchy of values" (65). As such, ideology provides the parameters for rhetorical movement.

itself, however, tend to dominate academic discussions of marginalized groups. A truly rhetorical perspective—one concerned with the *how* of persuasion—should be more holistic.

This essay, then, foregrounds disability as a topos but does not exclude disability as a subject of argument and representation. The sections that follow theorize the idea of a cinematic topos in further detail, examine the topos of disability specifically through Foucault's coinage of the "clinical gaze," and comment particularly on *Avatar*'s use of disability images. Finally, I offer a few thoughts toward the possibility of dialogic resistance to the hegemonically prescribed meanings of disability topoi, stressing the active and resistant potential of film spectatorship.

First, however, it is important to note what a rhetorical perspective can add to the conversation on film and disability. Heretofore, the topic of disability has received strong attention in both rhetoric and film studies, speaking to the inherent interdisciplinarity of disability studies as a field (Lewiecki-Wilson 871-76).[3] Film has emerged as a major locus of inquiry for disability scholars.[4] Some critics have singled out specific films like the 1932 classic *Freaks*, David Lynch's adaptation of *The Elephant Man*, and more recent entries like *Million Dollar Baby* and the documentary *Murderball* (McRuer, "Neoliberal"; Marcotic and McRuer; see also entries in Enns and Snit), while others have sought out macroscopic theoretical perspectives. During the nascency of disability studies, Paul Longmore's landmark 1985 article, "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People," offered a foundational taxonomy of disabled characters in film: the criminal and monstrous, those who must individually "adjust" to or overcome their disability, and objects of pity.[5] Martin F. Norden, in T*he Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*, posits a complementary thesis: "most movies have tended to isolate disabled characters from their able-bodied peers as well as from each other," thus "pandering to the needs of the able-bodied majority [while] contribut[ing] to a sense of isolation and self-loathing among audience members with disabilities" (1). Longmore and Norden view the Hollywood cinema as something of an oppressive machine that rarely deviates from its stereotypical and harmful representations of disability. Norden especially, in a historical survey dating back to 1898, assembles a persuasive indictment of Hollywood's insensitivity.

3. For more on disability and rhetoric in general, see Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson; Duffy and Yergeau; Domage.

4. See especially Enns and Smit; Chivers and Marcotic; Mitchell and Snyder; Norden.

5. See also Dolmage's "Archive and Anatomy of Disability Myths" (31-61), a sort of revision and expansion of Longmore's taxonomy.

Thomas B. Hoeksema and Chritopher R. Smit, however, offer a counterpoint, suggesting that too many critiques of disability in film "assume a disability activist posture" without paying due attention to the importance of film aesthetics and genre theory (34). Against critics who censure saccharine representations of disability meant to arouse pity, Hoeksema and Smit argue that, for instance, the sentimentality implicit in *Mask*, a movie whose facially disfigured protagonist struggles for acceptance and dies prematurely, is "an element of *all* melodramas" (39). For these scholars, *Mask* is an effective film insofar as it exploits the conventions of the melodrama genre in order to "move the audience's emotions surrounding the issues of human experience" (39).

The disagreement here presents an opportune moment for rhetoricians. I cannot oppose Longmore and Norden's critiques: academic criticism certainly ought to expose mainstream media's disenfranchisement of minority groups—among whom the disabled receive some of the poorest and most condescending treatment. There can, however, be something in the "disability activist posture"—or any activist posture that separates politics from generic form—that fails to account for the specific intricacies of film as a medium. Hoeksema and Smit err, though, in assuming the successful manipulation of melodrama conventions to be an unassailable end in itself. They appear, that is, to presuppose the ideological neutrality of the genre when, in fact, the emotional responses a film seeks to elicit ramify through ideology. The feelings of pity melodramas arouse are complicit in producing and reproducing the ideology that objectifies and condescends to marginalized groups like the disabled. This is not to say that all melodramas are inherently regressive or "bad"—but neither are they, nor any other film genre, rhetorically or ideologically inert. A genre, as Raymond Williams argues, is not an autonomous, self-justified construction, but rather a fluid, amorphous combination of "formal composition" and "appropriate subject matter" that exists in dialectical juxtaposition to "different forms of social material process" (183-84, 185). To shift the terms back to rhetoric, a film genre can be seen as a system comprising specific sets of rhetorical appeals designed to root viewers in familiar ideological (re)visions of quotidian reality. Images of disability that circulate through generic form can function powerfully within such appeals.

The sort of criticism I advocate, then, understands textual fragments like the disability image as rhetorical devices that circulate with a certain consistency of form but also a certain connotative malleability that depends on textual, intertexual, and social variables, as well as the meaning spectators dialogically project back onto a movie while viewing. For reasons highlighted below, the image of disability functions within Hollywood cinema as a

particularly potent topos, a productive device conveying ideological assumptions and rhetorical energy.

The Cinematic Topos

> "They are these floating images, these anonymous clichés, which circulate in the external world, but which also penetrate each one of us and constitute his internal world, so that everyone possesses the only psychic clichés by which he thinks and feels, is thought and felt, being himself a cliché among the others in the world which surrounds him."
>
> – Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (208)

Because the term topos and its variants have been applied to different ends by numerous rhetorical and literary theorists, I want to be clear about my own use of the term and the tradition from which I draw. Aristotle, in the *Rhetoric*, posits topoi as argumentative tools used to build enthymematic proofs about what is good, desirable, or advantageous to the public, and suggests that there exist both general topoi (e.g. comparison and contrast, more and less) for assembling arguments about any manner of subject and discipline-specific sets of "special" topoi that apply in particular cases.[6] Cicero, the patriarch of Roman rhetoric, notably reconfigures Aristotle's system of topical invention, foregrounding the rhetorical "commonplace" as a popular opinion or sentiment used to "amplify" an argument through the rhetorical acoustics of shared cultural knowledge (*De inventione* 2.48-51). I am not the first to suggest the utility of such devices within narrative texts. Ernst Robert Curtius, for instance, in his panoramic synthesis of Medieval Latin rhetoric and poetics, aligns topoi with literary archetypes, suggesting that stock characters and images convey a certain persuasive energy born of their very familiarity (79-105, 159-62). When Northrop Frye remarks that "*topoi* [. . .] are so dull when stated as propositions, and so rich and variegated when they are used as structural principles in literature" (103), he seems to reassert the importance of such narrative context in the use of topoi, the most effective of which will often "blend in" among the larger narrative apparatus.

Theories of the topos have recently evolved to suit the expanding purview of rhetorical studies. Though neither account specifically for film, the work of rhetoricians Sharon Crowley and Ralph Cintron proves instructive in stretching the idea of the topos to account for filmic rhetoric. Crowley and Debra Hawhee make a

6. For Aristotle's introduction to the rhetorical topoi, see *Rhetoric* 1.2.21.1358a. See 1.4-15 for his enumeration of "special" topoi and 2.23 for his discussion of "common" topoi.

practical distinction between the Aristotelian common topos and the Roman commonplace in order to articulate two separate but intertwined rhetorical ideas: "We adopt the term [*topos*] to refer to any specific procedure that generates arguments, such as definition and division or comparison and contrast. We use the term *commonplace* to refer to statements that circulate within ideologies" (96). Crowley, further, coins the term *ideologic* to "name [. . .] connections made between moments (positions) that occur or are taken up within ideology" (*Toward* 60). Following Crowley, we can think of topoi as the devices used in advancing ideologic by forging connections between different commonplaces—here, the assumptions, warrants, and beliefs that circulate within ideologies. This is the sense of "commonplace" to which Kenneth Burke refers when he characterizes commonplaces as a "survey of 'opinion'" (*Rhetoric* 56).

Cintron, meanwhile, defines topoi as "storehouses of social energy," supplying a brief list of theses for their productive reconsideration in modern rhetoric (100, 101-02). Among Cintron's points are two worth raising here: (1) "Topoi are not narratives but the bits and pieces from which narratives are made," and (2) "Topoi can be both verbal and nonverbal"—that is, they can also be visual (101). When I suggest that the image of disability in Hollywood cinema circulates as a topos, then, I mean that images of disability contain the affective power, or energy as Cintron terms it, necessary to evoke emotional responses and advance ideologic such that viewers make connections between the commonplaces they infer from images of disability. Longmore's article, for example, in highlighting the association of disability images with criminality, individual struggle to achieve "normal" standards, and pity, suggests the circulation of three commonplaces that might read something like: "The disabled (and the unattractive in general) are untrustworthy"; "the disabled that do so deserve admiration for assimilating into society"; and "the disabled are unfortunate and deserve our pity." The image of a disabled person, of course, does not exactly *equal* any of these statements, but disability images working in narrative frameworks often evoke and connote such statements. Topoi, especially visual topoi, often bring commonplaces into play clandestinely. Few filmgoers, for example, would flatly admit that they distrust people with disabilities, but the feelings of fear and mistrust evoked through disability images in film reflect real, if tacit, assumptions held by audiences. As Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell observe, "[i]n horror films the terror of an unexpected meeting with a villain (often disabled), and anxiety over potential or actual violence, produce an accord of sensations between characters and members of a viewing audience" (183). In such cases, where the villain is disabled, movies use the topos of

disability to spur audience identification with other (non-disabled) characters. Here we see, as Cintron theorizes, topoi piecing narratives together by instigating the necessary connections. Movies use the topos of disability to connect commonplace fears about disabled bodies to identification with movies' protagonists.

With Longmore's example in mind, I want to consider two more general points about cinematic topoi. The first is that the commonplaces evoked or encased by the topoi in movies are born elsewhere and circulate socially outside of the movies. Here, one might note Gilles Deleuze's use of the term "cliché" in discussing American cinema, a word whose connotations highlight the necessary preexistence of both the visual topos invoked and the corresponding commonplace it evokes. Deleuze, in the first of his two books on cinema, perceives American cinema and its spectators as under "the reign of clichés internally as well as externally" (209). This "reign of clichés" is external because it is the visible filmic deployment and redeployment of disability images that evoke responses like fear, admiration of individual achievement, and pity. It is internal because the topos of disability takes effect only by linking to beliefs already held by the spectators: networks of ideologic must anchor themselves in audiences' predetermined value systems.

This second revelation brings me to my next point: The meanings attached to topoi are not fixed. When spectators view an anachronistic topos from the cinema of a bygone decade, they will often infer meanings unintended by the original filmmakers. Film scholar David Bordwell, for instance, raises the example of a critical essay on the 1946 film *Humoresque*: "One critic claims that the ending of *Humoresque* creates a 'disturbance of codification' when radio music wells up unrealistically as the heroine walks to her death; but such a move from diegetic to nondiegetic music is quite permissible in the classical Hollywood cinema" (268). The inferred "disturbance in codification," then, stems from the critic's attempt to map an established topos from latter-day film (the reflexive use of music for emphasis) onto the corpus of a classical Hollywood film constructed from different formal conventions. The crescendo of initially diegetic music would not have signaled a rift in orthodox narrative structure to audiences in the '40s; rather, it would have signified that the movie is concluding. More importantly, even when present-day spectators view recent films, the individuals' biases and experiences will color the meaning they make from different topoi. In a thorough study of this point, Martin Flanagan's *Bakhtin and the Movies* deploys Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism to argue that "[i]t is possible to speak of film as a kind of utterance because […] it is not only the producer of meaning but also the site and recipient of meanings projected back onto it by its

dialogic communicant and adversary, the spectator" (21).[7] The disability topos, in particular, guarantees no stability because images will elicit diverse reactions, many of them very powerful. This point, taken together with the former about historical context, ought to make us wonder how audiences fifty or a hundred years from now will react to the topoi of disability that circulate in our current cinema. It seems possible, even likely, that stereotypes of disability in movies like *Avatar* will someday elicit disgust comparable to that present-day audiences feel toward the use of blackface in American cinema of the 1930s.

The Clinical Gaze and the Topos of Disability

> "The case is [. . .] the individual as he may be described, judged, measured, compared with others in his very individuality; and it is also the individual who has to be trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded..."
>
> – Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (191)

It is time to look more closely at the use of disabled bodies in movies. This inquiry should advance the concerns of both disability studies and rhetorical studies; as James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson argue, studies in disability and rhetoric should examine how "the language of institutional discourse systems determines material practices in ways that can work to the advantage—and disadvantage—of the disabled person" (11). Toward this end—and assuming Hollywood cinema to form its own sort of influential "institutional discourse system"—I want to juxtapose my own assessment of cinematic topoi with Foucault's theory of the "clinical gaze" developed in *The Birth of the Clinic*. Foucault's thesis is that the clinical gaze effectively strips the human body of interiority, transforming it into a set of scientifically observable characteristics that together compose clinical "truth":

> Over all [the] endeavours on the part of clinical thought to define its methods and scientific norms hovers the great myth of a pure Gaze that would be pure Language: a speaking eye. It would scan the entire hospital field, taking in and gathering together each of the singular events that occurred within it; and as it saw, as it saw more and more clearly, it would be turned into speech that states and teaches; the truth, which

7. The *utterance*, for Bakhtin, is the basic unit of communication, defined by a change in discursive subjects and addressivity toward an audience. One characteristic of the utterance is its position within a larger chain of dialogic communication; utterances' meanings, thus, depend on the interpretive schemas of their readers and listeners. See Bakhtin, *Speech Genres* 67-100.

> events, in the repetition and convergence, would outline under its gaze, would, by this same gaze and in the same order, be reserved, in the form of teaching, to those who do not know and have not yet seen. This speaking eye would be the servant of things and the master of truth. (114)

Foucault's "speaking eye," then, transforms the clinic's many ostensibly ill-afflicted individuals and their maladies into a comparative discourse: "composed as they are of [discourse]," Foucault writes, these "diseases have no other reality than the order of their composition" (118).

Given their common reliance on the superficially visual, Foucault's speaking eye relates directly to the cinematic topos of disability. In comparing the two concepts, three points bear emphasis. The first is that disability images typically erase human interiority. In Foucault's clinic, the gaze records truth through purely visual criteria bereft of patients' own commentary, passing over any information unavailable as self-apparent medical data. Film often exploits its own ability, as a medium, to reproduce the clinical gaze vis-à-vis its disabled characters. The camera-eye directs vision toward disabled bodies, and because these characters' extrinsic qualities (their perceived ugliness or deformity) precede their intrinsic qualities, viewers tend to construct such characters' identities based, at least initially, on those physical attributes alone. Here, again, Deleuze's "cliché" applies: If one thinks of a cliché as a shopworn, shorthand method (a topos) to signify an equally prefabricated nugget of meaning (a commonplace), the clinical gaze enacted though film creates clichés of its disabled characters.

Second, the clinical speaking eye suggests that disability constitutes abnormality. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes of the panoptic power to "create a constant division between the normal and the abnormal, to which every individual is subjected" (199). Through the panoptic gaze, which poses the ceaseless threat of individual surveillance, "[t]he crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individualities" (201). Ironically, of course, the recognition of individuality is what disability activists seek for disabled people. But Foucault's sense of skin-deep individuality brings individuals into relief through their deviation from an ideologically predetermined norm, which film generally represents as attractive able-bodiedness. "Visibility is a trap," writes Foucault (*Discipline* 200), insofar as it isolates visibly deviant individuals and defines their individuality against "normal" individuals who can blend into a crowd. The resulting binary classification system equates individuality with abnormality (thus, again, corroding or erasing the interior) and normality with social uniformity; it reinforces what Robert McRuer calls

"compulsory able-bodiedness" (see *Crip* 1-32). Anyone outside the "compulsory" array of normality is defined by her exterior qualities; anyone inside has more room for interior self-definition.[8]

I may be speaking here of reality and film as if they were one in the same. They are not, of course, but there is much in common between the cinematic camera-eye and Foucault's panoptic gaze, both of which cover expanses of visual detail and zero in on the deviant. Both, that is, are informed by ideological assumptions about what constitutes normality, and both help reproduce those assumptions through their selective vision. My third, consequent point is this: In enacting a panoptic role the camera-eye can discursively disrupt or reproduce (usually the latter) ideological assumptions about disabled people. A Hollywood film comprises a world of shorthand images, topoi used to harness audience familiarity and move narratives along at a brisk pace. In consigning disabled characters to their standard roles (objects of mistrust, individual assimilation, or pity), films simultaneously reinforce stereotypes about disability and advance their narratives in such a way that most filmgoers find familiar and accept. The larger point is that, while the world of a film likely mismatches the world of material reality, the world of a film is necessarily built from topoi and commonplaces extant in ideologies operating in material reality.

A Foucauldian reading of disability in the movies, then, raises questions of which characters are defined principally by their exteriors and which (if possible) by their interiors. I will rephrase the question in terms of rhetoric: When is a character "really" a character, and when is she only a topos? A caveat: Certainly, all fictional characters resemble topoi to one degree or another. Movies replicate certain appearances, manners of speaking, and social roles for their characters, all tailored for the ideologically predetermined narrative arcs these movies follow. Most character types have recurring rhetorical *uses*. Put another way, characters are to some extent conventional, but those character types whose uses are most rigidly predetermined (say, the butler, the anonymous henchman, or any of Longmore's three disabled character types) can be described by Williams's oxymoronic epithet, "radically conventional" (174). Conventions, as Williams explains it, are not purely matters of form, but also what has become "naturalized within a particular cultural tradition" (174). He draws particular attention to conventions of class in the presentation and use of literary characters:

> In modern class societies the selection of characters almost always indicates an assumed or conscious class position. The conventions of selection are more intricate when hierarchy is less formal. Without formal ratification, all other persons may be conventionally presented as instrumental (servants, drivers, waiters),

8. I am not the first to link McRuer's ideas to *Avatar*. See Palmer; Grabiner 167-68.

> as merely environmental (other people in the street), or indeed as essentially absent (not seen, not relevant). Any such presentation depends on the acceptance of its convention, but it is also more than a "literary" or "aesthetic" decision. The social hierarchy or social norms that are assumed or invoked are substantial terms of relationship which the conventions are intended (often, in the confidence of a form, not consciously) to carry. (175)

Like Williams's servants, drivers, and waiters, disabled characters in American film typically fulfill an "instrumental" purpose tethered to class assumptions about disabled people. The majority of disabled characters are poor, often homeless, objects of pity who allow other, able-bodied, characters to demonstrate magnanimity or achieve new understanding. Upper-class disabled characters are often old curmudgeons and crones who illustrate the vice of greed and the thesis that money cannot buy everything. Typically, such characters functionally mobilize narratives at the expensive of their own interiorities.

One critical term that might guide this distinction between characters and topoi is that of *polyphony*, which Bakhtin explores in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Bakhtin argues that polyphony, a term meaning "[a] plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (6), most fully manifests itself in the novels of Dostoevsky because, there,

> the character is treated as ideologically authoritative and independent; he is perceived as the author of a fully weighted ideological conception of his own, and not as the object of Dostoevsky's finalizing vision. In the consciousness of the critics, the direct and fully weighted signifying power of the characters' words destroy the monologic plane of the novel and calls forth an unmediated response—as if the character were not an object of authorial discourse, but rather a fully valid, autonomous carrier of his own authorial word. (5)

Without conducting a scrupulous comparison of novelistic and filmic discourse, or delving into the troublesome concept of film authorship, I do want to suggest that polyphony as Bakhtin describes it has its analogue in film. Flanagan raises the same point, undertaking a case study of David Mamet's *House of Games* to illustrate how a film can grant its characters polyphonic independence: "The characters are given an amount of [. . .] freedom with which to address themselves to us. We are never given an authorial opinion on either main character definite enough to prevent us from having our doubts about them long after the film is finished" (153-54). Flanagan sees polyphony at play in *House of Games*, then, because the "author," or ideological center, of the movie refrains from subordinating

the wills and consciousnesses of the characters to its own. They are not mere cogs in a larger machine—not easily classifiable as good guys and bad guys, as heroes and villains and expendable bystanders.

Of course, though, neither main character from *House of Games* is disabled. The point is relevant because film faces one hurdle in achieving polyphony that novels do not: spectators' proclivity to judge hastily based on appearances. A novelist can plunge into the thoughts of a paraplegic character or showcase her dialogue at will, elevating such thoughts over the character's physicality. A filmmaker enjoys no such ease. Foucault's clinical gaze, that is, comes into play whether filmmakers want it to or not, and tends to reinforce certain roles of disability—roles that deter disabled characters from establishing their interiority. And to become a "valid, autonomous carrier of his [or her] own authorial word," I would argue, a character's interiority has to reach his or her audience.

Toward establishing interiority cinematically, McRuer poses the example of "the epiphanic moment," a cinematic device designed to suggest "unparalleled subjectivity": "As the music swells and the light shifts, the moment marks for the character a temporary consolidation of past, present, and future, and the clarity that describes that consolidation allows the protagonist to carry, to the close of the narrative, a sense of subjective wholeness that he or she lacked previously" (*Crip* 16). The epiphanic moment, of course, is itself a cliché, a topos, but unlike the disability image, its express purpose is to convey subjective interiority. McRuer continues,

> First, the bodies experiencing the epiphany must be flexible enough to make it through a moment of crisis. *Flexible*, in this first sense, is virtually synonymous with both *heterosexual* and *able-bodied*: the bodies in question are often narratively placed in an inevitable heterosexual relationship and visually represented as able. Second, and more important, other bodies must function flexibly and objectively as the sites on which the epiphanic moment can be staged. The bodies, in the second sense, are invariably queer and disabled—and they, too, are visually represented as such. (16)

A character's appearance, then, figures heavily into her ability to express interiority. McRuer reinforces my earlier point that "marked" characters (here, the visibly disabled or homosexual) are denied the cinematic-narrative space to grow into the autonomous ideological subject Bakhtin describes. The topoi of disability and the "epiphanic moment" are linked, however, insofar as the former often catalyzes the latter. Epiphanies marked by a will to tolerance often require, in Hollywood ideologic, static disabled or queer bodies as the objects of their newfound tolerance and understanding. In summary, here we have one example of Hollywood's *use* of the disability topos. It has other uses, to be sure, but most are accelerated by the individualizing and exteriorizing effect of Foucault's

clinical gaze. This effect reifies images of disability more than other cinematic topoi—though, again, one should keep in mind that topoi only function when audience members project meaning back onto them. Their meanings are unfixed, but dominant interpretations remain powerful.

Disability in "Avatar"

> "When I was lying in the V.A. hospital with a big hole blown through the middle of my life, I started having these dreams of flying. I was free. But sooner or later, you always have to wake up."
>
> – Jake Sully

I single out *Avatar* because few films in recent years have gained such rapid cultural traction and so fully revitalized the movie theater as a locus of enculturation. It is a movie that requires little introduction. James Cameron's two-hour-and-forty-minute epic has upped the ante on CGI splendor, stirred discussion about the environment and race, and shattered both domestic and worldwide box-office records ("Avatar"). In the late Roger Ebert's words, *Avatar* "is an Event, one of those films you must see to keep up with the conversation." And people have seen it—in droves—theatrically and again on DVD. People have seen it, and enjoyed it.

As I mentioned above, however, the image of *Avatar*'s paraplegic hero is hardly the movie's selling point. Jake Sully's human form is easily subsumed within the CGI spectacle and explosive action sequences that occur once he *departs* from his disabled body and enters his Na'vi avatar—an athletic, superhuman vessel. Nobody, to reiterate, describes *Avatar* to her friends as "a great movie about disability." But Sully's opening narration, quoted above, does begin to reveal the movie's attitudes toward disability and use of disability as a topos. The "hole" Sully mentions maims not only his body but his *life*. *Avatar* presents, at the outset, disability as a condition that devalues one's very being, and, as Sully's voiceover goes on to imply, impedes the freedom of the disabled individual. While in his wheelchair, Sully expresses nothing but the desire to get back in a body with working, running legs. This leads him, of course, to his Na'vi avatar. Sully's desire for physical "freedom" propels the narrative.

My concern is not only with the disability topos in isolation, but also how that topos works among other interconnected topoi within larger arguments and ideologies. *Avatar*, taken as a whole, suggests severe ideological dissonance—an internal confusion born of sets of assumptions that rather flatly contradict each other. The first, compiled largely from hackneyed, Westernized revisions of tenets found in Eastern and Native American

philosophy, espouses peace, life, wholeness, and harmony with nature—and abhors violence. The movie inscribes this ideology into the culture of the Na'vi, who want only to retain their home on Pandora and would rather not war with the humans or any other living things. The blue-skinned Na'vi derive their appearance, belief system, and even manner of speech from familiar Hollywood topoi used to represent Native American cultures in movies like *Dances with Wolves* and *Last of the Mohicans*. After Neytiri, Sully's eventual Na'vi love interest, saves the protagonist by slaying a lupine monster in the Pandoran jungle, she reproaches him: "Don't thank. You don't thank for this! This is sad. Very sad only [. . .] All this is your fault. They did not need to die." Killing, she implies, may sometimes amount to evil necessity, but never something to celebrate. Sully comes to appreciate this manner of understanding and valuing the world through a series of epiphanic moments, to again borrow McRuer's term. These moments occur, of course, only *after* Sully has exited his disabled body and entered his more *flexible* Na'vi form. Only then does Sully become an internally dynamic character.

The second ideology implicit in *Avatar* values courage, can-do masculinity, and armed warfare as a valid method of conflict resolution. In stark contrast to the quasi-Native-American ontology the Na'vi first come to represent, the movie descends, in its final act, into a battle royal between the Na'vi (with Sully, in his avatar body, on their side) and the rampaging humans. Here, the movie validates and glorifies violence in a fiery crescendo of feel-good, explosive, Hollywood-brand ass-kicking. In the climax, Sully squares off against his former commanding officer, the cruel, single-minded Colonel Quaritch. Before doing battle, they verbally spar:

Sully: "It's over"

Quaritch: "Nothing's over while I'm still breathing."

Sully: "I was kind of hoping you'd say that."

The implication is that Sully, contrary to the supposed teachings of the Na'vi, *wants* to kill Quaritch. And the movie rewards his bloodlust: Quaritch receives his fatal comeuppance, and Sully, who keeps both his Na'vi body and the love of Neytiri, receives his happy ending. Some iteration of this scenario, of course, describes the requisite conclusion of any generic action movie—an equation that illustrates why the "creation and gratification of needs" required for a "correct" form, as Burke puts it, are bound up in ideology (*Counter-Statement* 138). It bears emphasis that, in this sense, not all movie genres are ideologically equal because they intersect differently with the set of available topoi and the "correct" emotional responses these devices seek to elicit. Action movies like *Avatar*—or at least the final act of *Avatar*—create the need for violent conflict resolution through individual heroism, a need

contingent on belief systems that value armed conflict and individuality. Jake Sully's Na'vi body adapts to fit the action hero topos.

Thus, while *Avatar* represents a self-confounding disorder of values, both of its contradictory ideologies make use of the disability topos. There seems little question that, in Longmore's terms, Sully embodies the heroic, individualist stereotype of disability; he is determined to *adjust*, despite his condition. His adjustment occurs through metamorphosis into a Na'vi, an able-bodied state that allows him to both experience a series of epiphanies about the virtue of the peaceful and harmonious Na'vi way of life and, paradoxically, act as the movie's gung-ho action star. Sully could presumably undertake neither of these tasks in his disabled body, but his disability provides the impetus to become Na'vi in the first place: disability sets the narrative rolling, and provides the image of morbid abnormality against which his capable, flexible Na'vi form is defined. Ironically, that is, the bodies of the blue quasi-feline humanoids in *Avatar*—a group of *extraterrestrials*—receive less scrutiny from Foucault's clinical gaze than a handsome white man in a wheelchair.

Avatar uses the disability topos to get where it is going both narratively and ideologically. Sully's disabled body is meant to harness the potential energy needed, once activated, to advance the movie's ideologic and propel the narrative into the kinetic world of Pandora's jungles. Sully's transformation and entry into this world is both physical and emotional, leaving behind the paralyzing shell of his disabled form. The disability topos in *Avatar* is meant, then, to connote a commonplace something like this: "The crippled are the thralls of their wheelchairs, piteous, inert, and perhaps even subhuman." Few say to their friends, "*Avatar* is a movie about disability," because, in the end, the movie uses the disability topos to move toward action, panoramic beauty, and superhuman achievement—everything the movie conceives as antithetical to disability.

Dialogic Resistance

I stress above that the meanings of cinematic topoi are unfixed and contingent on the meanings viewers project back upon them—and yet, my discussion of *Avatar* paints a dire portrait of Hollywood's use of disability. Regrettably, I do think *Avatar*'s success suggests that many American filmgoers have uncritically bought into the movie's ideologic and its use of the disability topos. One can, though, assert that James Cameron and his fellow filmmakers have skillfully manipulated the conventions and topoi (disability images among them) of science fiction and action film to stir audiences' emotions without condemning the filmmakers as cruel people who despise the

disabled. The topoi they invoke preexist in the tradition of Hollywood film and in American society at large. One can invoke these regressive topoi while maintaining good intentions.[9]

I will admit, moreover, to having seen *Avatar* in theaters and enjoying myself a great deal. Even as I balked at the movie's use of disability and violence, I found the immersive computer-generated world the movie creates captivating. Despite its clichés, it *is* a mesmerizing film—and a fun one. The point, though, is that while I enjoyed much of *Avatar*, I do not quite see myself as the dupe of Hollywood's rhetorical machinery. I do not generally regard filmgoers as Hollywood's dupes because I recognize what Flanagan, invoking Bakhtin, calls dialogic spectatorship. Flanagan views film as form of Bakhtinian utterance because viewers "project meanings back" onto films as they watch, creating a bidirectional circuit of collaborative meaning-making. This is not to deny the power instilled in established cinematic topoi, but it is to deny the fixity and absolutism of any such power.

In the case of *Avatar*, one might consider the response of videoblogger Alexis Jewell, a quadriplegic woman who displays her disability to the camera as she critiques *Avatar*'s use of its disabled main character. Jewell poses a trenchant query to *Avatar*'s creators:

> Here's my question, Mr. James Cameron: If you can build all these things […] *why* is Jake's chair basically a slightly updated version of the same chair I had thirteen years ago? […] I just wish that, [after] all the stuff James Cameron has done with his career, […] he'd tried a little bit harder to make the disability aspect of the movie and the characters a little more realistic.

Jewell not only debunks *Avatar*'s use of the disability topos—why indeed, in a future so technologically advanced, have not the means of treating disability advanced proportionally?—but she also, through her self-presentation, undermines the dominant use of disability topoi as they circulate in Hollywood. She deliberately expresses comfort in her own skin, and, through her incisive critique, displays profound *interiority* capable of breaking though the clinical gaze.

I am sure many disabled filmgoers, and those living closely with disabled friends and family members, are still able to enjoy *Avatar*. And they should—I am not advocating a wholesale rejection of any film that invokes a questionable topos. At the same time, I agree with Flanagan's assertion that "what must be avoided, as ever, is

9. I have in mind Burke's notion of intention as a process of "abstraction" by which one compiles "significant" aspects of past experience, often glossing over the details of how such significance is achieved (*Permanence* 104-07). It seems quite likely that *Avatar*'s filmmakers never perceived Sully's disability as a "significant" component of the film, but rather as an essentially instrumental device used to mobilize their "real" intentions of CGI splendor, environmentalism, box-office success, and so forth.

an opportunistic promotion of dialogism as a corrective for all the ideological inadequacies of Hollywood film" (38). I would argue, further, that dialogism can help expose such ideological inadequacies, since many viewers, in projecting their personal biases and experiences back onto Hollywood films, will sense something dubious or amiss in the way many films advance their ideologic. Filmgoers with disabled family members, for instance—though they may not have given intense thought to the use of disability images in film—might feel a certain unease with *Avatar*. The movie's use of Sully's disabled form might, at the very least, hoist a red flag in the subconscious. I suspect, moreover, that as disability rights movements gain momentum, both conscious and subconscious resistance to Hollywood's uses of the disability topos will intensify. This is why I suggest above that present-day topoi of disability might one day yield the disgust associated with the topos of blackface from American cinema of the 1930s—or the discomfort associated with the "mammy" character topos seen in movies like *Gone with the Wind*. That film, of course, remains a "classic" by the estimation of many critics and movie buffs, and *Avatar* might go down as a classic, too. But even classics can be examined as cultural artifacts complete with their historical markers of ideological backwardness. And many do: think of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*.

Present unease with the past's semiotics of bigotry is a good thing. Rhetorical criticism is inherently optimistic insofar as the study of rhetoric implies the possibility of change—however frustratingly gradual and sluggish (Condit 253-55). In one of his most optimistic moments, Foucault once opined that "the real political task in a society like ours is to criticize the workings of institutions, which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize and attack in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so we can fight against them" (Chomsky and Foucault 41). Foucault's crosshairs here find the usual targets—the institutions of psychiatry, medicine, justice, and so forth—but Hollywood cinema ought to be added to the mix. In a literal sense, the movies constitute yet another Foucauldian institution capable of real political violence. Rhetoricians are well-equipped to debunk the usual defenses of commercial cinema—"It's only a movie," or "They're just telling a story"—by analyzing how the rhetorical machinery built into films like *Avatar* intersects with public discourse, how it reinforces and reifies certain preconceptions of groups like the disabled. The problem, of course, is that reified beliefs and assumptions die hard, and ideology drifts slowly. To the extent it can, rhetorical criticism should enable and expedite that drift.

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