

Cheering American Casualties? *Avatar* and the Global War on Terror

Sean Heuston¹

Abstract

This essay explains the surprising ways in which *Avatar* (the top-grossing film of all time in the U.S. and worldwide) shows the pervasive influence of the so-called Global War on Terror; rearranges prevailing American assumptions about good guys and bad guys; positions an American military-industrial complex as the film's source of malefactors; uses post-9/11 visual rhetoric to indicate that the film's American military personnel are themselves effectively terrorists; and prompts audience members to cheer when American military personnel are killed in the film (a remarkable feat for a major American film released and re-released while real U.S. military personnel were dying in real wars). Although *Avatar* features private military contractors rather than active-duty U.S. military personnel, the film's use of military jargon, rank structure, uniforms, and materiel encourages audiences to disregard the distinction, as do frequent references to protagonist Jake Sully as a U.S. Marine when in fact he is a paraplegic former Marine. This essay also analyzes important shots in *Avatar* to explain their powerful post-9/11 visual rhetoric; explains how such images relate directly to famous images from the real 9/11 terrorist attacks; and thus situates *Avatar* within a larger field of action films that employ post-9/11 visual rhetoric.

Keywords: Avatar, Global War on Terror, terrorism, 9/11, film, James Cameron

People tend to react with surprise to claims that James Cameron's 2009 film *Avatar* (still the top-grossing film of all time in the U.S. and worldwide) shows the pervasive influence of the ongoing so-called Global War on Terror. In fact, some commentators have complained that *Avatar* exemplifies a new strain of American blockbuster film: targeted largely toward international markets, primarily concerned with CGI-heavy visual spectacle, and mostly uninterested in complex real-world issues related to American culture.

¹PhD, Professor of English and Film Studies, The Citadel, 171 Moultrie Street, Charleston, SC 29409, USA. Phone: (843) 953-5068, Fax: (843) 953-1881, E-mail: sean.heuston@citadel.edu

In an essay called “*Avatar* and the Flight from Reality” James Bowman makes the sweeping claim that “if there is no longer any attempt at imitation of reality but only the aptly-described ‘magic’ of the movies making new realities, then there is no longer any such thing as art as it has been understood for the last three thousand years in the West” (83).

What is far more surprising, however, is that *Avatar* not only frequently gestures toward post-9/11 American culture(s); it also rearranges prevailing American assumptions about so-called good guys and bad guys; positions an American military-industrial complex as the film’s source of malefactors; suggests that the film’s American military personnel are themselves effectively terrorists; and repeatedly encourages audience members to cheer when American military personnel are killed in the film (a remarkable feat for a major American film released and re-released while real U.S. military personnel were dying in real wars as part of the multi-front Global War on Terror).

The influence of the Global War on Terror is evident from the first words of *Avatar*, spoken in voice-over by actor Sam Worthington, who plays protagonist Jake Sully: “When I was lying there in the V.A. hospital, with a big hole blown in 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.” Every time the film reminds viewers that Sully is a disabled veteran, this presumably plays on American audience members’ feelings about the Global War on Terror (including audience members’ feelings about news coverage of the manifold problems veterans have faced in dealing with V.A. hospitals and other aspects of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs). It is also significant that Sully is the narrator and the audience’s de facto guide, more than a bit like Martin Sheen’s Captain Willard in *Apocalypse Now* (another military-related film remarkable for its anti-military elements).

Although *Avatar* features private military contractors rather than active-duty U.S. military personnel, this is a distinction that a great many viewers would be unlikely to focus on, in part because the film frequently obscures it. *Avatar*’s use of military jargon, rank structure, uniforms, and materiel encourages audiences to disregard the distinction, as do frequent references to protagonist Sully as a Marine when in fact he is a paraplegic former U.S. Marine disabled by a combat wound (in a war that was, as this essay will explain, apparently motivated at least partly by America’s need for oil and thus, some would argue, similar to the Global War on Terror).

Sully himself obscures the differences between active-duty military personnel and private military contractors by saying of himself in voice-over early in the film, “Me, I’m just another dumb grunt going somewhere he’s gonna regret” (“grunt” being common military slang for infantry personnel). Sully continues this conflation and again contributes to the film’s pattern of oblique references or near-references to the Global War on Terror by saying a few minutes later, “There’s no such thing as an ex-Marine. You may be out, but you never lose the attitude. I told myself I could pass any test a man could pass. They can fix a spinal, if you’ve got the money. But not on vet benefits, not in this economy” (this in voice-over as the film shows Sully hauling himself into a wheelchair and hefting a large duffel bag as his unit arrives on the planet Pandora).

The “no such thing as an ex-Marine” line (a well-known military commonplace) indicates that audience members are still supposed to see Sully as a Marine, as someone for whom a military ethos is still the basic operating system he uses to relate to the world. Sully’s civilian supervisor Dr. Grace Augustine (played by Sigourney Weaver) often addresses Sully as “Marine”; Sully has the distinctive Marine-style “high and tight” haircut; and he wears a U.S. Marine Corps globe-and-anchor-emblem t-shirt. Miles Quaritch, the retired Marine Colonel who commands the film’s private military contractor force and is addressed by his military rank throughout the film, addresses Sully as “Corporal” early in the film and as “Marine” multiple times. As is the case with the real Global War on Terror, the film blurs the lines between military personnel and private contractors.

In part because of this apparently intentional blurring and in part because the vast majority of civilians no longer have much familiarity with military culture, even some critics who offer otherwise incisive readings of *Avatar* overlook or fail to understand the distinction between private military contractors and active-duty U.S. military personnel (a distinction the film minimizes to significant effect). In *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy*, Matthew Alford fails to account for *Avatar*’s distinction between the RDA corporation and the U.S. government or the distinction between civilian military contractors and actual active-duty U.S. military personnel (thus demonstrating that *Avatar* makes it easy to overlook these distinctions) and claims that, “key characters amongst the US invasion force are the leading figures in saving the day for the sake of the Na’vi . . . Likewise, even though we are invited to

respect the Na'vi, we are not required to identify with them: our heroes remain the humans, and US Marines at that" (120).

In *Contemporary Action Cinema*, Lisa Purse insightfully notes that, "Jake's battle injury, which landed him in VA hospital and left him paralysed from the waist down, is the initial trauma that drives him forward, landing him on the planet and spurring his enthusiasm for his Na'vi body and Na'vi life in the Pandoran jungles" (34). Despite this, Purse only briefly mentions the military/VA-hospital aspects of the film, conflates active-duty personnel with private military contractors, and overlooks the ways in which the film employs a frame of reference established largely by the real Global War on Terror. (In fairness, I should mention that both Purse and Alford are British academics, but the distinction between private military contractors and active-duty military personnel is no less widely known in the U.K. than it is in the U.S.)

The use of military jargon throughout the film further blurs the distinctions (at least for the majority of viewers unfamiliar with the military) between civilian military contractors and active-duty military personnel. The phrase "shavetail Louie" (which Quaritch uses when he explains being attacked by a large animal shortly after arriving on Pandora) refers to the 19th-century US Army Cavalry practice of assigning newly-commissioned junior officers (Lieutenants) to horses with shaved or clipped tails so other riders would be aware that the shavetail riders (the equine equivalents of today's student drivers) were inexperienced and would give them a wide berth, and to the related practice of shaving the tails of newer and hence relatively untrained Army mules as a warning to avoid approaching them from the rear, although many contemporary military users of the term are apparently unaware of this etymology and take the term simply to mean a Second Lieutenant who is so newly commissioned that his or her military-standard haircut is at least figuratively still fresh (a usage that, as shown by a 1941 *Time* magazine story titled "Shavetails in Eritrea" and a four-sentence 1943 *Saturday Evening Post* item titled "WAAC Shavetail" about a *Post* author recently commissioned as a Lieutenant in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, dates back as least as far as World War Two).

In an unrelated usage of military terminology, Sully says that learning the Na'vi language is "like field-stripping a weapon. Just repetition, repetition." Field-stripping means disassembling a firearm to the point where one can clean and oil its parts (a process that some military units have practiced while blindfolded or in the dark in order to force reliance on memory and/or muscle memory).

The most obtrusive military term used in *Avatar* is the U.S. Marines' multi-purpose utterance "Oorah," which can function as an acknowledgement or affirmative reply, a battle cry, or a general sound indicating a high level of motivation. About halfway through *Avatar*, Sully talks about riding a Banshee (a sort of flying dragon native to Pandora) as a test every young Na'vi hunter must pass, and he says that to do so "you gotta go where the Banshees are. Oorah!" in a typically military (and specifically U.S. Marine-style) idiomatic expression of enthusiasm. A minute or so later, "Outstanding" is Jake's reply when Neytiri tells him, "He [the Banshee that chooses you as its rider] will try to kill you." "Outstanding" (often delivered sarcastically or ironically, as is the case in this instance) is another ubiquitous term in American military culture, and hence contributes to *Avatar's* overall pattern of using military terminology to evoke a militaristic culture that for a great many viewers seems all but indistinguishable from that of the actual U.S. military.

Just before the film's climactic battle, "Oorah" makes a surprising final appearance: Sully tells the Na'vi tribe that a corporate/military-contractor airstrike is coming and tells them that he was sent to infiltrate their society. A few seconds later, Neytiri's father (the society's leader) tells the Na'vi to tie up Sully (in Sully's avatar form) and gives a battle cry that is joined by the entire tribe. Among the cries there is a very clear "Oorah!" from one voice. Because Jake is at that moment being bound, and since he has been urging the Na'vi not to fight the humans because of the humans' superior firepower, one must conclude (with a degree of amusement) that the U.S. Marines' "Oorah" has made its way into use among the Na'vi. Incidentally, "Ooh-rah" [sic] appears only once in Cameron's 2007 screenplay for *Avatar* (posted online by 20th Century Fox for free download) in a planned voice-over by Sully as the Na'vi prepare for the final battle: "I was a warrior who dreamed he could bring peace. But there was only one thing I was ever really good at. Ooh-rah" (127).

Although more difficult to describe in print than terminology is, *Avatar's* judicious usage of distinctly military-sounding rhetoric and tone of voice is also worth consideration insofar as it contributes immeasurably to the militaristic tone of the film. The type of loud, declamatory tone that Quaritch uses in his safety brief (his lecture to new arrivals at Hell's Gate, which is essentially a large Global War on Terror-style FOB or Forward Operating Base) and that the Crew Chief uses in his instructions to disembarking new arrivals just after their shuttle lands at Hell's Gate is a recognizably military way of speaking and is in fact almost part of standard

procedure for speaking to large groups of subordinates in the U.S. military. In the Crew Chief's commands *Avatar* even accurately includes the type of dry, understated humor that often accompanies the standard-issue declamatory tone in such military contexts: "Remember, people, you lose your mask you're unconscious in twenty seconds and you're dead in four minutes. Let's nobody be dead today. Looks *very* bad on my report."

Despite some moments of characteristically-militaristic humor and what numerous critics have identified as its escapist elements, *Avatar* often focuses on the human costs of military action, both in terms of its potential toll on innocent noncombatants and in terms of its physical and emotional toll on combatants (including the serious problem of what some veterans' groups and mental health professionals now refer to as "moral injury"). The film also repeatedly draws attention to issues of corporate power and to social-class issues in ways that resonate with the Global War on Terror and related controversies. Quaritch gets "corporate approval" to get Sully's spinal cord repaired when Sully rotates back to Earth (meaning Sully would regain the use of his legs), another sidelong Global War on Terror-era reminder of the limits of U.S. veterans' benefits and the lifelong physical and mental damage incurred by many real American veterans. *Avatar* makes it clear that combat wounds suffered during active-duty military service will not be adequately treated by the film's V.A. medical system even though in the movie paraplegia is a curable condition. This serves as a reminder of real American veterans getting substandard care at various real V.A. hospitals, and of subsequent media coverage and scandals. It also seems an oblique comment on corporate power, particularly the disproportionate power of corporations relative to other segments of society.

Avatar extends its presentation of a disturbing element of corporate control by making it clear that the Resources Development Administration (a for-profit entity with a public-sounding name), the corporation that finances the film's entire operation on Pandora, controls a fully-operational military force of private contractors. This also seems a Global War on Terror-era concern that will resonate with viewers who remember scandals related to private military contractor forces such as those fielded by Blackwater (later renamed Xe and then re-renamed Academi, with an "i" at the end and a stated connection to the ideals of Plato's Akademia according to the company's website) and other private military contractor organizations in the early years of the Iraq War, as well as those viewers who remember complaints and questions from some quarters about whether American corporations such as

Halliburton and its former subsidiary Kellogg Brown & Root (renamed KBR) improperly profited from U.S. war efforts (not to mention conspiracy theories suggesting that the Iraq War was primarily an excuse to seize Iraq's oil, or to allow U.S. corporations to do so).

On a related note, early in the film Quaritch mentions Sully's Marine combat experience in South America, saying, "I pulled your record, Corporal. Venezuela, that was some mean bush." Moments later, Quaritch mentions his own combat experience: three tours of duty in Nigeria with the 1st Recon Marine Battalion. Time and date stamps on Sully's video logs in later scenes indicate that the film is set in the year 2154, and such references to U.S. combat operations in Venezuela and Nigeria suggest that the U.S. military was involved in those places because of oil. (Both are oil-rich third-world nations that would otherwise be of little apparent strategic interest to the U.S.) One line from Sully seemingly refers to this idea and refers indirectly to Global War on Terror-era anti-war slogans such as "No blood for oil." When Parker Selfridge (the highest-ranking Pandora-based executive of the Resources Development Administration, which has established a literal military-industrial complex on Pandora) is about to order a massive aerial assault on the Na'vi residential area, Augustine says, "They have families in there! Their children! Babies! Are you gonna kill children?" Sully chimes in and tells Selfridge, "You don't want that kind of blood on your hands, believe me." This reference to killing women and children makes it sound as if Sully has killed innocent people, including women and children, presumably when he was a U.S. Marine. This exchange functions in part as a reminder of aforementioned Global War on Terror-era conspiracy theories that claimed American troops were deployed in order to kill foreign civilians and take control of energy resources (particularly in Iraq).

Avatar further evokes Global War on Terror conspiracy theories by making it clear that the justification for the humans' willingness to go to war against the humanoid Na'vi natives of Pandora is largely an excuse to get access to the energy resources in Na'vi territory. Augustine (who, in addition to being Sully's immediate supervisor is apparently both a social scientist and a physical scientist) states this clearly, saying, "They're just fabricating this war to get what they want." Sully reinforces this idea later by complaining, "This is how it's done. When people are sitting on shit you want, you make them your enemy, then you justify it and take it." Viewers should note that Sully states this as a regrettable general principle, and that all

the human characters in the film are evidently Americans (although at times Worthington's native Australian accent is briefly noticeable in his performance as Sully).

Even Sully's stated reason for coming to the extremely dangerous environment of Pandora resonates with the Global War on Terror: "Maybe I was tired of doctors telling me what I couldn't do." This explanation plays on the type of wounded-warrior-empowerment rhetoric that, as Stacy Takacs has explained in detail, has become common in American media as large numbers of badly-wounded Global War on Terror veterans try to recuperate from their wounds and rebuild their lives (86). In this and in the film's aforementioned gestures toward well-known Global War on Terror-era conspiracy theories, *Avatar* does not explicitly tie the resource-driven conflict on Pandora to the Global War on Terror so much as it strongly suggests the connection without suggesting any alternatives. Cameron indicated as much when he said of the film's political relevance, "*Avatar* doesn't teach you facts . . . but it does create a sense of emotional outrage" (qtd. in Mulrooney, 201).

Rather than consistently referring to emotional outrage or any sort of arguably counter-cultural political elements, Cameron adroitly crafted his public remarks about the film to appeal to different audiences. Cameron's remarks about *Avatar* in a December 17, 2009 talk-show interview with Tavis Smiley indicate the film's engagement with environmental issues and issues of U.S. hegemony: "There are obviously references to Vietnam, references to Iraq, there are references to the American colonial period, and we've got a history—and not just America, obviously; we're talking about the French, the Spanish, the English, the Portugese—of just kind of invading and taking what we need and forcing out and marginalizing indigenous cultures, and sometimes wiping them out completely, to the point that we don't have that many truly indigenous cultures left in this world . . . So we have a terrible history with this, and I sort of extrapolated even farther, to this idea of entitlement. We do the same thing with nature—we take what we need and we don't give back, and we've got to start giving back. We've got to start seriously and aggressively accepting our responsibility for stewardship of this planet" (qtd. in Alford, 192).

As Alford points out, Cameron struck a very different tone in a December 18, 2009 Fox News interview: Several minutes into the interview, the Fox anchor asked the question, "There's a little controversy about the storyline, whether it has anti-

Americanism . . . did politics enter into your head at all when developing this storyline or are people just reading into it?”

Cameron: I think they're reading into it and some people are taking away the right message and some people are taking away the wrong message. I just wanna go on the record as saying that I'm very pro-America. I'm pro-military. I believe in a strong defence [sic]. My brother is a former Marine who fought in Desert Storm and we got a lot of friends who are Marines. So I made my main character in this movie a former Marine [note that Cameron apparently knows not to say “ex-Marine”] and he embodies the spirit of the Marine Corps and all that and it's what makes him a warrior even though he's in a wheelchair. He's disabled, but he's still a warrior and he takes on every challenge head on as a Marine would.

Fox anchor: Well, you're talking to the father of a Marine so I'm glad to hear you're with the Marine Corps on this.

Cameron: Yeah, exactly . . . (121-2)

This is a remarkable bit of spin and an example of the when-in-Rome approach to interviews, particularly given the extent to which *Avatar* paints all military-related personnel other than Sully and Trudy (the rogue pilot who refuses to take part in the air attack on the Na'vi settlement called Home Tree) in a negative light. The fact that Cameron participated in the two interviews just one day apart makes the different points of emphasis and the vastly different tones all the more remarkable. Instead of emphasizing environmental issues or anything that might sound less than strongly patriotic and pro-military, Cameron carefully gave Fox News (the parent company of which distributed *Avatar* and financed much of the film) what its viewers would likely want to hear: a sound bite that would chime with Fox News' brand of coverage of the U.S. military and the Global War on Terror.

In addition to evoking aspects of the Global War on Terror throughout the film, at some crucial moments *Avatar* makes use of what I will call post-9/11 visual rhetoric. This type of visual rhetoric (by which I mean strong visual reminders of well-known images related to the Global War on Terror) is evident in the humans' massive aerial attack on Home Tree and the subsequent collapse of Home Tree. Home Tree is

literally an immense tree, but it looks like and serves as a sort of skyscraper, and it is full of innocent civilians.

Because of these similarities and because of several shots that strongly resemble well-known television news shots from 9/11, *Avatar* all but explicitly compares the attack on Home Tree to the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center: The scene shows people (technically Na'vi rather than humans, but referring to them as people seems appropriate, in part because they refer to themselves collectively as “the people”) falling and/or jumping from the skyscraper-like tree; people being crushed to death as Home Tree collapses; and dazed, bloodied survivors staggering away through smoke and drifting ash and embers; and of course this all happens because of an unprovoked attack by aircraft against a very tall civilian structure. There are even interior shots of terrified Na'vi fleeing the flames in the central stairwell of Home Tree—images that conjure up thoughts of what real people in the World Trade Center must have gone through on September 11, 2001—followed by long shots of shocked survivors trudging away from the smoking, burning ruins of Home Tree.

Here is the most surprising part of it all: *Avatar* positions the film's American military personnel as the functional equivalent of terrorists in this 9/11-like scene. It is the American military contractors who launch an unprovoked air attack on a densely-populated civilian target, killing large numbers of non-combatants and bringing about the series of images so strongly reminiscent of 9/11. All the visual rhetoric subverts the usual American assumptions about good guys and bad guys, and thus prepares audiences (including American audiences) to cheer when American military personnel are killed onscreen. Again, these are private military contractors rather than active-duty U.S. military personnel, but because the film continually minimizes this distinction many—if not most—audience members would certainly either overlook it or fail to understand it altogether.

Late in the film, Sully indicates his distance from his former American military ethos by saying in a video log, “It's hard to believe it's only been three months. I hardly remember my old life. I don't even know who I am anymore.” This scene comes shortly before he is initiated (albeit in his avatar Na'vi body) into the Na'vi tribe, thereby becoming officially accepted into Na'vi culture, and after he has mated for life with Neytiri, the Na'vi female who has been tutoring him in various aspects of Na'vi life. After the initiation ceremony and the mating scene, Sully refers to the

American military force as “the enemy,” and thus the film implicitly indicates that the audience’s sympathies should also have shifted accordingly.

The film’s climatic battle scene both manifests and tests this complete disidentification with the film’s American military personnel and, by extension, with humans more generally (although a few good humans are identified by their support of Sully and the Na’vi). Just as it seems as if the superior firepower of the private military contractor force will prove decisive, thousands of the animals of Pandora (accompanied by triumphant music that contrasts with the somber music that accompanies the previous part of the scene in which the military contractors are clearly winning) suddenly join the battle on the side of the Na’vi.

This turns the tide of the battle, and for the remainder of the scene the triumphant score music prompts audiences to respond to what function as the cinematic equivalent of applause lines: shots of uniformed American military personnel (private military contractors who look and dress and act and talk like active-duty American military personnel) being attacked by flying dragons and other sharp-toothed predators, flung to certain death from aircraft, incinerated in fiery explosions, and impaled on spear-sized arrows fired by Na’vi warriors.

Again and again, the overall tone of the film and the specific tone of the battle scene (including the emotionally-directive music) make it clear that the audience is expected to cheer American casualties, including the combat deaths of uniformed Americans. This is most remarkable given the fact that *Avatar* was released and re-released in theaters and released and re-released in various DVD editions while real active-duty American military personnel were fighting and dying in the real Global War on Terror. Despite the economic sensibility of portraying American military personnel as bad guys (because much of the world is quite willing to accept that premise and because of the increasing emphasis on global marketing in the American film industry), *Avatar*’s structural attempts to make even American audiences cheer when uniformed Americans die in combat remain singularly surprising when considered as such.

Here is a suitably strange coda: A former student of mine told me that he first saw *Avatar*, which was then a fairly new release, during a packed flight on a civilian airliner that was transporting his U.S. Army Reserve unit to Iraq for a combat

deployment. Yes, *Avatar* was the in-flight movie they all watched together on their way to war.¹

Notes

¹My thanks to Beau Quarles for this information.

References

- Alford, M. (2010). *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy*. London: Pluto Press.
- Bowman, J. (2010). "Avatar and the Flight from Reality." *The New Atlantis*, Spring 2010, pp. 77-84. <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/avatar-and-the-flight-from-reality> .
- Cameron, J. (2010). *Avatar* (screenplay). <http://www.foxscreenings.com/media/pdf/JamesCameronAVATAR.pdf> .
- Murray, C. (2012). "The Pleasures of Persuasion in Captain America." In M. J. Smith & R. Duncan (Eds.), *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*. New York: Routledge.
- Mulrooney, J. (2011). "The Sadness of Avatar." *The Wordsworth Circle* 42.3 (Summer 2011): 201-4. Retrieved from <http://www.bu.edu/editinst/about/the-wordsworth-circle/> .
- Purse, L. (2011). *Contemporary Action Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Takacs, S. (2009). "The body of war and the management of imperial anxiety on US television." *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, 3.1, 1 May 2009, pp. 85-105. Retrieved from <http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-journal,id=144/> .
- "Shavetails in Eritrea." *Time*, February 3, 1941, Vol. 37, Issue 5. P. 27. Retrieved from <http://time.com/>.
- "WAAC Shavetail." *Saturday Evening Post*, March 13, 1943, Vol. 215, Issue 37, p. 4. Retrieved from <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/18991185/waac-shavetail> .