

***Avatar's* Dream: the undoing of disability.**

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Abstract- “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” (Opening voiceover, scene 1).

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. Wounded in action, Sully is apparently extraneous to military life; approached by a pair of ‘suits’ with a job offer on Pandora, his despondent slouch and casual ‘hoodie’ attire accentuate his lack of focus. In contrast to the vigor of an active marine, his life has become a nightmare of immobility. From the very first comments the audience is positioned to assume that the disabled Sully dreams of mobility and its attendant masculinity and virility. This is corroborated by the romantic love which Sully finds, only as a walking avatar.

Sleep has a conspicuous presence throughout the narrative and a number of associations. The gestational sleep of the newly grown avatar (scene 3) suggests a link between sleep and rebirth. The shot of the new avatar floating in a fluid filled tank, while connected by a cord to a source of nutrition is highly suggestive of the embryonic state. The cryo-sleep on the journey to Pandora is also sleep that comes before a new life. Sully is a true ‘dream walker’, who dreams of walking and walks in his dreams. Effectively paralyzed in their capsules before they can remotely inhabit their avatars, the human bodies are dis-abled before the dreams begin. Disability and paralysis are equated with a sort of death as the coffin-like capsules evoke the iconography of early horror films with the nightmarish specter of the lid slamming shut.

Avatar may be read as a celebration of spectator passivity; the sleep and immobility of the avatar drivers in their capsules are likened to the film audience, surrounded by 3D effects and immersed in the action only as passive viewers. In this way, both Sully and the audience are engaging with life on Pandora in a strictly oneiric manner.

“The Na’vi say that every person is born twice. The second time is when you earn your place among the people, forever” (Scene 19; 1.17.20). 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 in other Hollywood blockbusters (*Surrogates*, *Repo Men*, *The Matrix*) the dream-state conjures up an ontological crisis, questioning the location of reality. The dream-state allows a binary to exist in which one existence is able-bodied, the other disabled. Critically, in *Avatar*, as in the other films, the desired self is a highly agile and attractive one, a being that has no room for any disabilities.