Military Science Fiction Film

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By way of opening, I want to reveal a little of my own family history. A few weeks before the end of World War II, my grandfather was drafted into the German 'Volkssturm', a last-ditch attempt to have children and old men turn the war around in Germany's favor. He ignored the draft notice, at great danger to his own life, and lived out the rest of the war in hiding as a deserter. My father, meanwhile, had been drafted into the Hitler Youth, but hated it – the marching, the singing, the war games – and thus "stopped going," as he himself put it. I myself, when I received my own draft notice – this took place in a Germany very different from the one in which my grandfather and father had had their encounter with the military – filed for status as a conscientious objector and ended up doing community service instead of military service. I've come to embrace this family history as a matter of pride: three generations of men in my family who've never worn a uniform. Obviously, this is a background that informs my argument.[1]

Of course, I also did grow up playing with war toys. But by the time I became a reader, which was the time when I discovered the pleasures of science fiction, I didn't appreciate science fiction as a vehicle for war stories (although I knew that it could be that, too). Instead, I came to appreciate the variety and flexibility of science fiction as a genre. As a reader of science fiction novels and short stories, I always found that there is nothing that science fiction cannot talk about: race, class and gender, politics, or history. There's also the wide variety of typical characters in science fiction that I found appealing: heroes and adventurers (in swashbuckling early science fiction), space explorers and alien creatures and artificial life forms (in pretty much all of science fiction). As I grew older and abandoned my hopes of ever turning into a swashbuckling adventurer myself, I discovered fiction, like that of Philip K. Dick, populated by suburban housewives and traveling salesmen. Politically, science fiction writers run the gamut from right wing (e.g. Robert Heinlein) to left wing (Samuel Delaney), an argument that might extend to gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. In short, while certain

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moments in history or social conditions might push this or that brand or type of science fiction to the forefront of cultural attention, the field itself is impossible to pinpoint in terms of its dominant thematic preoccupations or its politics.

Now, let me move on to a few observations I made while following some of the recent science fiction films that left a mark on popular culture. Let me begin with Jonathan Liebesman's *Battle Los Angeles* (US 2011), a massive movie in which a group of heroic marines, lead by a staff sergeant on the day of his retirement, fights off an alien invasion against the backdrop of, as the movie title tells us, the city of Los Angeles. The film's origins in terms of Hollywood genres are pretty obvious – one can almost hear Liebesman's pitch to the bosses over at Columbia Studios: imagine the first twenty minutes of *Saving Private Ryan* (US 1998, Dir. Steven Spielberg) coupled with that most recent adaptation of *War of the Worlds* (US 2005, Dir. Steven Spielberg). Replace the civilian characters in *War of the Worlds* with soldiers, and make the story one long action-fueled battle scene that'll make the audience's heads spin and ears ring, and you might be able to outgross Spielberg himself! Historically speaking, the origins of the film also seemed fairly easy to make out: around the ten-year anniversary of the war in Afghanistan and the eight-year anniversary of the war in Iraq, here was a film that translated a decade worth of evening news images of American troops immersed in a tough and largely losing fight into the genre of science fiction. The aliens may have invaded Los Angeles, but the urban warfare in the film makes Los Angeles look a lot like Baghdad: dry, sunny, streets lined with palm trees.

Though *Battle Los Angeles* underperformed at the box office (its title suggests a hope on the part of the studio that a franchise may have been in the making), then the next film that struck me as interesting in this context is one that *all of you* have seen: James Cameron's massive commercial hit *Avatar* (US 2009). While most of the discussion surrounding the film was geared toward its ground-breaking 3-D technology (and not its risibly flat story and characters, its visual design reminiscent of Roger Dean's 1970s art work for album covers by progressive rock band Yes, or Cameron's cannibalization of his earlier films going back to *Terminator* and *Aliens*), the film's story seemed to allow only focus on either its interplanetary love story or its thinly veiled (post-)colonial fable of greedy corporate imperialists versus mystical and poetic natives in which, this time around, the Indians get to win. To me, however, the essence of the film lies crucially in the fact that it imagined the post-colonial conflict in terms of military adventure. Much of the film revels in futuristic military hardware, revolves around characters (including the central characters) who are professional soldiers or warriors, and celebrates a warrior ethos that stands aside from industrial mass murder by way of its spirituality, no matter which side you happen to be fighting

on. Just as in *Battle Los Angeles*, the war has neither been desired nor started by the good guys, and yet it is a good and just and necessary war.

Given the massive profits *Avatar* earned for James Cameron, I would assume that most of those who went to see the film probably liked it and maybe even went back more than once. I was disappointed when I realized that much of the film reminded me of another James Cameron film in which a group of space marines get their butt kicked by a different kind of space creature, *Aliens* (US 1986). At the time, Cameron had taken over what was to become a massively successful film franchise started originally by Ridley Scott with the first *Alien* film in 1979, and had 'militarized' the story for the sequel (one of the film posters advertising the film literally reads "This time it's war!"), adding elements that connected the film clearly with the American experience in the Vietnam War. Cameron's sequel, so far, stands out as the one single film in the entire *Alien* franchise of five films, including Ridley Scott's prequel *Prometheus* (US 2012), that was focused on the military and the one film of the franchise that made the most money – a lesson Cameron obviously applied to the conception of *Avatar* twenty-odd years later when the Vietnam War seemed to make a comeback as a rather unpopular and unmentionable analogy to the two wars the US was involved in post-9/11.

Money and profits started me thinking about what one might call the 'mainstream visibility' of science fiction in general – both *Aliens* and *Avatar* had been commercially so successful that audience must have gone to see them who ordinarily had no preference for, or even interest in, science fiction. Films of such commercial magnitude are not made into a success by nerds or fans alone. Taking this argument one step further, I began to wonder which science fiction text – literary or cinematic – might occupy the number one spot in a poll of random mass audiences asked what comes to mind first when they think of science fiction. At first, there was a little bit of hesitation since I myself am a fan of *Star Trek* in its many incarnations – and this franchise has certainly reached a huge audience. Ultimately, however, I changed my mind and arrived at what I believe to be the single text synonymous with science fiction for most people: George Lucas' *Star Wars* (US 1977)[2].

Aside from the word 'star' in the title, which *Star Wars* shares with *Star Trek*, the keyword I'm interested in when it comes to George Lucas' massive media empire is of course the word 'wars.' As with James Cameron's approach to blockbuster filmmaking, Lucas' example seems to confirm that war is at the

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2   The Google entry on "Star Wars" generated 634.000.000 results, whereas "Star Trek" only generated 294.000.000 entries (last date checked: Jan 10, 2013).

heart of science fiction at its most massively popular. It may not represent all science fiction thematically, but it certainly represents it best quantitatively – in terms of profits, audience figures, and penetration of, and circulation throughout, popular culture. Hence, one might argue that science fiction for people who are not interested in science fiction per se is military science fiction: adventure stories about war, military hardware, be it weapons of mass destruction (like the Death Star) or weaponry confirming a spiritual ethos of the skilled warrior predating modern warfare (like the light saber) and characters gallantly fighting or tragically dying in war.

The detour via *Star Wars* also took me back to my own beloved *Star Trek*: there is no 'war' in the title of that franchise, and war is certainly not the main topic in *Star Trek*, and yet isn't the starship Enterprise, as it boldly goes where no man has gone before, also armed to the teeth? What are its phaser cannons and photon torpedoes for? Why is its crew organized like that of a war ship? If its universe is populated with hostile races – the Klingons, the Borg, the Romulans – does it come as a surprise that its most memorable moments always seem to involve warfare of one type or another: that *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (US 1982, Dir. Nicholas Meyer) with its intense battle scenes was universally believed to be a better movie than *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (US 1979, Dir. Robert Wise)?

Perhaps there was a second category here of what I was trying to grasp as "military science fiction" other than the one represented by *Star Wars* in which war was the central topic – a type of science fiction in which war and the military constitute a representational default position: in which characters are inevitably in the army or have a military background; in which military force inevitably provides the solution to dramatic conflicts; in which military structures of authority are assumed to be universal throughout all other social institutions (the police, the educational system, the prison system, etc. – as Michel Foucault would argue, all these institutions are part of a larger overarching structure); in which military speech and fashion and demeanor are assumed to be the norm?

Looking at science fiction at its most popular, I also realized that I needed to add in support of my hypothesis – that science fiction at its most popular tended strongly toward military themes – examples from other media: from television (*Space: Above and Beyond* [1995-96, Creat. Glen Morgan, James Wong], *Battlestar Galactica* [1978-79, Creat. Glen A. Larson/2004-09, Creat. Ronald D. Moore]) and games (*Doom* [1993, id Software], *Quake* [1996, id Software], *Halo* [2001, Bungie]) to synergistic products merging games and movies (Hasbro's *G.I. Joe*, *Transformers*, and *Battleship* toys and their transformation into blockbuster films and video games).

At this point, the argument I would like to propose—blunt, and polemic, and overly general as it may be – reaches this preliminary conclusion: if American science fiction tends toward the prominence of military themes, and if American science fiction is a product and a reflection of American culture, then it suggests that American society itself must be strongly militarized. And there is ample evidence to support the basis of this argument: all available statistical information points to the fact that the US is outspending the rest of the world in military expenses by a vast margin; US military spending outranks any other expense within the national budget; and military spending has seen a steady increase over the past decade (with recent policy changes making the first dent in that rising curve in a long time; cf. Shah, n.pag.).

Before I continue with this thesis, let me qualify it briefly: my previous comment made it sound as if science fiction is *merely* but *accurately* a reflection of American society; that, in other words, social reality leads and science fiction follows. Obviously, this is too simple. Science fiction can be the expression of a single author's point of view; it can be an expression of how things *should* be (rather than a reflection of how they are), etc. However complicated this relationship between social reality and science fiction may be – and however much it may change from one historical moment to another – what's important to my argument is that science fiction does not speak in isolation from the culture that produces it. This correlation (a better concept than one that assumes a cause-and-effect) is what I would like to go on to explore. The question is: what *does* the US look like when it comes to war and the military?

Beyond the straightforward statistics, it is difficult to argue the relative degree of a society's militarization in the absence of strict and consistent standards. One might note the absence, by and large, of school uniforms in the US educational system (compared to, e.g., Japan or Korea), yet the omnipresence of ROTC program in American universities – how is one to assess these factors comparatively? Anecdotally speaking, what strikes me as unique to the militarization of the US is that America is constantly at war; that since the Civil War, American wars have never been fought on American soil; that the US abolished the draft after the Vietnam War (1973) and thus relies increasingly on a professional army, leaving a large part of the population untouched by war; that military service is considered a bonus for a political career (Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, John McCain, etc.); that the US doesn't ever seem to declare war officially any more; and that, ever since President Eisenhower pointed out in his farewell address to the nation in 1961 that the interlinking of military-industrial power with politics poses a danger to democracy, no other nation has achieved an interlinking of military-industrial power with politics as intense as the US (cf. PBS, n.pag.).

If we take this to be a, relatively speaking, high degree of militarization, then it would certainly explain a number of phenomena which all appear to converge upon the type of military science fiction I have been describing: for example, a lively culture of military science fiction in literature with such classics of the genre as Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* (1959) or Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* (1974) and such publishing ventures as Baen Books specializing in military science fiction by a variety of authors. It would also, more generally, explain the genre of the war literature and of the war film itself, a thriving Hollywood tradition from its beginnings (the first academy award was given to William Wellman's film *Wings* in 1927) to the present day (from Spielberg's groundbreaking *Saving Private Ryan* to director Kathryn Bigelow's Academy Award winning *The Hurt Locker* [US 2008]).

However, there is a difference between Hollywood war films and military science fiction *literature* on the one hand, and the type of military science fiction in the cultural mainstream I have been describing. Like the literature from which it is often adapted, the Hollywood war film features among its most prominent works a number of films that are explicitly critical of war and the military: John DosPassos' *Three Soldiers* (1920), Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (1938), etc. Often, they deal with subjects like desertion and military justice, bodily harm and its aftermath, and the insanity of war and the military as an institution. Similarly, literary science fiction has addressed a vast variety of themes associated with war: the ecological and anthropological devastation of war (Ursula LeGuin's *The Word for World is Forest* [1976], Elizabeth Ann Scarborough's *The Healer's War* [1988]), the drug culture surrounding war and the psychological and cultural disintegration of the soldier (Lucius Shepard's *Life During Wartime* [1987]). Both literary science fiction and the war film have space to accommodate a variety of attitudes and political positions regarding war and the military – from the affirmative to the critical – as well as space to represent something other than combat itself. Science fiction, is, as I said before, an immensely flexible genre open to a wide variety of topics and opinions.

Looking at the examples of science fiction in the mainstream (better represented in visual culture than literary), however, the lack of such variety becomes immediately obvious. First, military science fiction prevails, if not in quantity, then clearly in terms of its prominence in the field. And, even more specifically, mainstream science fiction likes the battlefield, the rush of combat, the spectacle of guns, explosions, running, jumping, shooting, dying – to the exclusion of much else that might be relevant to the topic. From *Star Wars* to *Avatar*, it is thematically far more single-minded than its cousins in literature and the war films.

Second, military science fiction in the mainstream seems to have a far more narrow range of opinions available when it comes to how we should think about war and the military. True, *Avatar* features a paraplegic as its main character, but the film seems to posit his condition merely as a precondition to offering us instead the liberated substitute body, buff and blue, as an icon of physical integrity and agency. True, *Avatar* has an ecological theme, but aside from a series of ready-made clichés about animated trees and alien horse whispering, its main interest is clearly in the potential of the alien forest as a battlefield and the destruction of the ecosphere as a narrative rationale for violent conflict. As compelling as its ecological or romantic themes are, shots must be fired in anger for the story's climax.

All of this may sound like I am advancing a conspiracy theory of American culture in the hands of a vast military industrial complex, which uses science fiction not as a form of harmless entertainment but as propaganda for the incessant wars the nation is fighting on behalf of this machine's interest. There is, again, anecdotal evidence to strengthen this hypothesis: US Air Force recruiters set of booths in front of American multiplexes where *Top Gun* (US 1986, Dir. Tony Scott) was playing, a film produced with massive support by – who else? – the US Air Force. In fact, the Pentagon has always been interested in its public image and has supported – or denied support – of Hollywood films that portray it in a positive – or not so positive – light. During World War II, collaboration between Hollywood and the US military included famous directors like Frank Capra or John Huston making propaganda films explaining to Americans their involvement in the war, and famous movie stars like James Stewart serving very publicly in the armed forces.

Examples like these, however, do not add up to a coherent, overarching strategy of collaboration. And, most importantly, science fiction films had to do, by and large, without the support of the Pentagon, no matter if they were complimentary of the military, like *Tarantula* (US 1955, Dir. Jack Arnold) or *Earth versus the Flying Saucers* (US 1956, Dir. Fred Sears), or critical of it, like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (US 1951, Dir. Robert Wise). Science fiction, the Pentagon obviously had decided, was beneath the level of seriousness required for support – at least it did so throughout most of the postwar period. Science fiction films during the 1950s and 1960s had to make do with actors and props, or with stock footage of military action abundantly available in the public domain after WWII. But, despite lacking support from the Pentagon, however, it is 1950s science fiction films in which the military begins to emerge as a ubiquitous, as a virtually indispensable part of science fiction—right at the beginning of the "American Century."

Although there has been sporadic direct collaboration between Hollywood and the Pentagon, there is another explanation for the strong prevalence of military themes in the most mainstream science fiction. This explanation goes back to the spectacle of it all – soldiers running and shooting, space ships twirling around and trying to blow each other up – and the central importance of George Lucas' *Star Wars*. If *Star Wars* had been a throwback in terms of storytelling, it certainly was a big leap forward in terms of special effects – Industrial Light and Magic, a special effects company created by Lucas for the making of the film, has since become a strong autonomous player in the film industry. It set into motion a process by which special effects were to become increasingly sophisticated, bridging the gap between 1950s attempts at making the film going experience more immersive and the sophistication of special effects in James Cameron's *Avatar*.

Film critics have pointed out that total immersion of the audience in the kinetic spectacle of action is a cinematic experience that has no political content in its own right. Immediate affect and bodily experience is more important than what one might call 'content'; this is why blockbuster cinema doesn't have a clear genre preference – it runs the gamut from disaster films to historical epic to science fiction to teenage wizards at an English boarding school. Regardless of genre affiliation, kinetic spectacle is the language of the blockbuster film, and it has, therefore, become the language of the military science fiction film as well – from *Star Wars* to *Avatar*. However, the sheer excitement of the action, aided by the most sophisticated cinematic technologies available, overrides whatever criticism a film might have to offer about the agents, the purpose, or the expense of this spectacle. When it comes to blockbuster cinema, this means that, by way of emptying out the political content of the narrative in favor of the kinetic bodily experience of the technological spectacle, whatever action is presented is experienced as pleasurable and exciting. This is related in a complicated manner to pro-war propaganda but it is not the same as pro-war propaganda. One might call it a way of representing war as an exciting and visually pleasurable spectacle not essentially different from many other things that generate the same affective response. From this, one might conclude that – at the current junction of special effects, action film aesthetics, and blockbuster marketing – it is virtually impossible for Hollywood to make a truly pro-war film: Hollywood, in other words, is not in the business of war propaganda. However, neither is it possible, following an affective aesthetics that jettisons clear-cut politics together with conventional storytelling, to make a film that is truly anti-war either.

Where does this leave us at the present moment? What can we expect from Hollywood in these post-*Avatar* times when science fiction seems to have become virtually synonymous with military action and adventure?

I want to approach this final segment of my paper – what I call the "state of current affairs" segment– by citing military historian Andrew Bacevich. In his book *The New American Militarism*, Bacevich diagnoses the status of the US military specifically in the period initiated by the administration of George W. Bush and overseen by the neoconservative agenda known under the name "Project for the New American Century" – announcing an extension of post-WWII American imperialism that had begun when Henry Luce in 1941 had branded the postwar era as the "American Century." The conclusion Bacevich comes to is sobering. "To state the matter bluntly," he argues, "Americans in our own time have fallen prey to militarism, manifesting itself in a romanticized view of soldiers, a tendency to see military power as the truest measure of national greatness, and outsized expectations regarding the efficacy of force" (2). The increase in these attitudes might have been overseen by the Bush administration, but four years of the Obama administration have given no indication that there has been a break in this tendency (drone strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan, military engagement in Libya, continued occupation of Iraq, public debates about military action against Iran).

This is bad news for science fiction in the cultural mainstream: things are not likely to change; in fact, they might be getting worse. What Bacevich calls the "new militarism" has embedded itself in a cinematic landscape that increasingly blurs the boundaries between genres. I have been discussing science fiction so far as if it is a clearly circumscribed entity, but a brief overview of recent blockbuster films makes it clear that war is everywhere and genre boundaries are increasingly porous: the classic war film as WWII propaganda (e.g. George Lucas' *Red Tails* [US 2012]), the historical epic with overtones of fantasy (Zack Snyder's *300* [US 2006]), the postmodern fantasy as military spectacle (Zack Snyder's *Sucker Punch* [US 2011]), and of course heroic fantasy (Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy [NZ/US 2001-03]) providing a legitimizing narrative for George W. Bush's presidency and its wars. To the extent that the blockbuster breaks down traditional genre boundaries, and to the extent that the blockbuster is fundamentally politically indifferent to its actual subject matter, the militarization of popular culture is so pervasive – so ubiquitous and yet so selectively visible and personally experienced – that it has become as normal as America's constant state of war itself.

Despite this dire prediction about a fully militarized American cinema that has made the leap from Eisenhower's "military industrial complex" to what one might call the "military industrial entertainment complex," I do want to end on a

hopeful note. First another downer, though: even though I am sure we have more military science fiction waiting for us at the movie theaters this year and most likely in years to come, I don't expect small independent filmmaking to provide the necessary counterbalance. While independent filmmaking has produced some truly remarkable science fiction films in the past (think of the clever time travel film *Primer* [US 2004, Dir. Shane Carruth]), it seems incapable to escape from the gravitational pull of that nexus of forces I've been describing – special effects, plus blockbuster marketing, plus military adventure – and thus seems to avoid the topic of war altogether. While I could see great *science fiction films* coming from this corner of the market, I don't really expect to see great *military science fiction* with a strong pacifist, anti-war and/or anti-military agenda emerge from the arthouse.

What we are left with – for better or worse – is literary science fiction, which may provide the counterbalance that's missing from cinema. For example, during the past decade or so, critics have noted a renewed interest in the classic space opera, a form of science fiction dealing with vast galactic empires and their political changes. Though, in the past, this branch of science fiction has been in the hands of fairly conservative writers, the new space opera is often written by younger authors with far more varied political backgrounds; discussing global politics, with the US as a central player, in terms of 'empire' alone could be seen as an acknowledgement of imperial intensions most Americans would still fervently reject.

Though the explanation I have given for the militarization of science fiction pretty much precludes any hopes that mainstream cinema might change its political orientation and pacifism might suddenly rain down from Cineplex screens, I am hopeful that the larger field of science fiction will show an ability to self-correct and counterbalance against the technocratic and economic pull of the mainstream. In order to underscore this hope, I would like to end with two visions of military science fiction that represent a counter-balance to the main-stream at its pacifist best. This is my way of bringing things around to the beginning when I told you about my family history of both my father's and my grandfather's aversion to all things military. I have already mentioned these two works before, but I want to quote each one of them to let the words of their respective authors stand as my own final statement.

The first one comes from Joe Haldeman, who was himself a veteran of the Vietnam War when he wrote *The Forever War*. The novel ends with its pro-tagonist, a veteran of a sheer endless war humanity has been waging against an alien enemy, finally retiring from the military. The place he retires to is called Middle Finger – a name that expresses an attitude toward war and the military that I don't think I need to explain any further.

The second author I would like to quote is Ursula LeGuin. It comes from her novel *The Left Hand of Darkeness* and it is the description of an alien culture on an alien planet, written by a human anthropologist who is somewhat puzzled and perhaps even a little angry at these aliens. On this strange planet, he writes,

> nothing led to war. Quarrels, murders, feuds, forays, vendettas, assassinations, tortures and abominations, all these were in their repertory of human accomplishments; but they did not go to war. They lacked, it seemed, the capacity to *mobilize*. They behaved like animals, in that respect; or like women. They did not behave like men, or ants. (48-9)

A culture that does not have the ability to go to war – now that's a science fiction adventure you might find at your local book store. But don't look for it at the Cineplex!

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