

From the Kitchen

20 January 2010

Every now and then we are treated to a thoroughly entertaining film that also carries important messages. *Avatar* is such a film.

Most discussion I've heard and read has been about the spectacular computer graphics, the amazing scenery, the fast-paced action and the violence. Only a few people have mentioned the powerful underlying issues the film deals with: corporate greed; corporate-military collaboration; the treatment of 'people not like us' as inferior to us; the possibility of a strong connection of a people with their environment; the possibility of a planetary intelligence; connection with a numinous presence.



Maybe it's that the film is a 3-D production – the visual feast blinds us to the deeper layers. And a visual feast it truly is. The interface between 'flesh and blood' reality and computer-generated reality is seamless and the scenery is breathtaking.

My wife pointed out to me how much the graphic elements of the film borrow from earlier designs: *Lord of the Rings*; *Laputa*, *Castle in the Sky*; and, of course, Roger Dean's cover art for the *Yessongs* album by the group 'Yes'. But it has always been so and this is probably a good thing, as it gives viewers a number of familiar reference points. Also, it is likely that in 2154 technology will have moved way past, for instance, the computer screens depicted in the film, but the familiar has us feel comfortable. Such familiarity allows the artist/designer to move along, developing themes, stretching what people will go along with before they are pulled into something they cannot accept as plausible.

What I find sobering and sad, is that more than a hundred years into the future humans are depicted as still not having given up their greed and violence. Maybe they never will. There are people who believe that there will always be such humans, along with ones who abhor them and will do whatever they can to thwart them. Maybe there will always be an ebb and flow of violence and peace; the undulations happening in both time and space.

Those of us who are on the side of peace and cooperation and 'doing unto others as we would have them do unto us', are very precious about our stance because, naturally, we are correct in this. But what if those who would have their way with violence and terror are (also) right? What if greed *is* the better motivator for human development?

We, the pacifists, talk of love and karma and being one with everything and, I declare, we are right in living out these beliefs. However, I have seen many peace-loving warriors hit the greedy and violent over the head with their rightness – literally and figuratively. Intolerance is ugly, whatever it is promoting.

Avatar depicts the violence perpetrated when those who want to get their hands on something they consider precious will do so at any cost. Usually at someone else's cost. The precious commodity can be oil or gold or farming land or forest resources. In our time it is also likely to be clean water. (In the film, it is the wryly named 'unobtanium'.) There is an irony in this: those who 'own' what is being coveted often don't regard it as precious in the sense of having a price on it. It is, however, often a valued, even central, element of their culture. It is not a tradable commodity to them, as it is to the outsider. Its removal, however, can cause the destruction of their society.

Some invaders have recognised that in the society they want to destroy, there may be something the removal of which will take the 'soul' out of that society. The film clearly recognises this and shows how cynical the invaders can be about it. It is the invaders cynicism that marks them as truly inferior to those they seek to vanquish.

What *Avatar* also strongly portrays is that, if you take the time and trouble to really get to know another people or another group, you start to be able to see the universe as *they* do. Hurting them then becomes much more difficult, if not impossible. By depicting others as less than human, even as no more than animals, you give yourself permission to mistreat them, although this begs the questions of whether animals should ever be mistreated. *Avatar* also accurately depicts what can happen when a group that covets what another group has, sends in a spy to learn that other group's weaknesses. The spy can start to identify with the others and even become their champion. The way the greedy group deals with this is to depict the spy as having become less than human by his or her identification with the others. Any wisdom and insight that the spy brings back can thus be easily dismissed. This has often been the case where a member of an invading 'white' culture has gone 'native' and then stood up for the indigenes, only to find that his or her testimony is ignored because it does not suit the invaders.

The wonderful device used in *Avatar* is to actually get in to another's skin. If we could all do that ...