

THE AVATAR EFFECT

Chris Johnstone reviews James Cameron's epic from a permaculture perspective

©20th Century Fox

A MASTERPIECE OF PERMACULTURE DESIGN?

"Can we take some of this tree-hugging crap out?" asked Fox executives, after reading the script for *Avatar* the movie. "No", said James Cameron, the director, "that's why I'm making the film". His vision was to take audiences into a different world, to show a different set of possibilities. "*Avatar* asks us" he said, "to see that everything is connected, all human beings to each other, and us to the Earth." With its huge budget and groundbreaking 3D effects, this film has already made more money than any other movie in history. Could it also be regarded as a masterpiece of permaculture design?

SYNOPSIS

The story is set in a fictional future on a faraway world. The plot acts like a mirror, reflecting back to us events unfolding on our planet now.

Beautiful forests are being torn down to make way for open-cast mines; a large corporation employs its own private army to crush opposition

from the local population. The world of *Avatar* is a large, life-rich moon called Pandora. The indigenous people are the Na'vi: tall, blue-skinned and living with a deep spiritual connection to the forest-world they are part of.

Cameron explains his intention: "the Na'vi represent that sort of aspirational part of ourselves that wants to be better, that wants to respect nature". They have developed such a richly satisfying life of connectedness that they can't be bought off; preserving the beauty and vitality of their world is more important to them than anything a materialistic society can offer.

"Can we take some of this tree-hugging crap out?" asked Fox executives, after reading the script for *Avatar* the movie. "No", said James Cameron, the director, "that's why I'm making the film"

TOUCHING THE HEART

Even more striking than its special effects are the film's emotional effects. When I've asked people about their experience of *Avatar*, many tell me they've felt deeply touched. Some report a strengthening of purpose, with a greater willingness to play their part in the protection of life on earth. Others have described loving the film, but feeling a deep sadness afterwards; a brief search on the internet suggests this is not uncommon. There's even a diagnostic term to describe it: 'Post Avatar Depression'.

Anna, a young woman who cried for an hour after watching the film, told me about her experience: "The feeling I had was one of mourning: mourning our loss, as a species, of our connection to the basic sustenance of life". Anna added that she had felt silly at responding to a film in this way. Yet, for her, it was so much more than just a film; it was a

profound wake up call to what is happening in our world.

Anna described the effect this had: "Avatar has contributed to a growing ecological consideration within

me; I am finding it increasingly difficult to assume the position of a lack of personal responsibility by the 'burying-my-head-in-the-sand' method".

So what's this got to do with permaculture?

ZONE ZERO ZERO

Permaculture involves conscious design to support sustainability; as this approach has developed, its focus has widened. David Holmgren describes this shift when he writes: 'the permaculture vision of permanent (sustainable) agriculture has evolved into one of permanent (sustainable) culture'.

Permaculture concepts, like zoning, have sprouted new branches, with 'Zone Zero Zero' referring to the inner landscape. This is the 'place' of mind and heart where thoughts, feelings and imagination grow. But is it possible to apply design principles here?

A good starting point is the principle of 'observe and interact'. By paying attention to what's going on inside ourselves, we come to know the terrain we are working with. However, awareness is only the beginning; design is guided by intention and intention is really about choice. If your inner landscape were like a garden, what would you choose to grow there?

What kind of thinking and emotional states might help you maintain your energy, be productive in your life, enjoy it more and contribute to our world? As an example of how inner design can work, I'd like to look at the project of growing more motivation.

A CROP OF INSPIRATION

For many years I worked as an addictions specialist in the health service. A key insight I gained is that motivation isn't just something some people have and others don't. It can be consciously cultivated. Just as plants need nourishment and protection from pests, there are influences that feed motivation and others that block it. The kind of mourning that Anna felt after *Avatar*, for example, fed her motivation. A potent blocker of motivated states is the idea that 'negative' thoughts and feelings are always bad things and so are best suppressed, denied or avoided.

Joanna Macy, whose powerful empowerment approach takes a different view of pain for the world, writes: 'pain has a purpose: it is a warning signal designed to trigger remedial action'.

Stories like these are the seeds from which our motivation grows. And the place they get planted is between our ears, in Zone Zero Zero

The insight that painful feelings can activate motivation leads to an inner design strategy we can use: to honour our disturbance when encountering information we find disturbing. 'Honouring' is about making room for, and allowing ourselves to hear, the emotional signals that tell us our world is dangerously off course. Like Pandora, Earth is under attack. And we are the attackers. Yet does it have to be like this?

When interviewing people about past events that inspired them, Sarah, a permaculture teacher, told me about a slideshow she'd seen. In this, a barren landscape became transformed into a lush, green forest. As care, attention

and permaculture principles were applied to restoring the land, it developed into a rich terrain productive of fruit, wood and other

resources to support local people. This slideshow transmitted a story of healing, rather than harming, our world. In *Avatar*, the Na'vi model a similar principle in their way of life. Stories like these are the seeds from which our motivation grows. And the place they get planted is between our ears, in Zone Zero Zero 🌍

Avatar in cinemas now. Available on DVD and Blu-ray from 20th Century Fox, late April 2010. www.fox.co.uk

Chris Johnstone is author of Find Your Power – A Toolkit for Resilience and Positive Change, price £12.95, new revised and expanded edition due to be published by Permanent Publications on 18th May 2010 and is available from www.green-shopping.co.uk. He edits The Great Turning Times, www.GreatTurningTimes.org, and on 18th May, presents the annual Bristol Happiness Lectures – see advertisement on facing page. See: www.chrisjohnstone.info

©20th Century Fox

