I first saw Avatar shortly after its release in December 2009. Like most viewers, I found the bioluminescent landscape of Pandora stunningly beautiful. I was also moved by the storylines: the against-all-odds resistance by the native inhabitants of Pandora against violent, imperial invaders; the turncoats from the invading forces who join the resistance; and the love stories. Sure, there is the formulaic story—male and female find love, lose love, and find it again—but there is also the love of a people for their home and their wild flora and fauna, a contagious love that subverts the ecological and spiritual understandings of some invaders, leading them to take a stand with those they have come to exploit.

The film’s producer, writer, and director, James Cameron, is adept at evoking emotional responses from his audiences and making huge sums of money along the way. Indeed, no one’s films exemplify the blockbuster, money-making film genre better than Cameron’s Terminator, Aliens, Titanic, and now Avatar, which banked $2.8 billion within the first two years after its release, 73 per cent of which came from outside the United States.1 The figure would have been significantly higher had not the Chinese government cut short the film’s run, reportedly out of fear that it might encourage resistance to development projects and the government’s resettlement schemes (Stanton 2010). The film also gained wide recognition for its many technical innovations and won many awards, including best film drama and best director at the Golden Globe Awards (which is decided by

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Prologue:
Avatar as Rorschach

Bron Taylor

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the Hollywood Foreign Press Association) and three of the nine Oscars for which it was nominated (although not for best picture or director). The attendance records and professional accolades provide one marker of the film’s appeal. But is there more to the film than tried-and-true narratives of injustice being overcome and romantic dreams fulfilled? Is it significant in some way other than for its technical achievements and profit making?

When I first saw the film, I certainly thought this might be the case. For more than twenty years, I had been tracking the development and increasing global cultural traction of nature-based spiritualities, paying special attention to how such spiritualities contribute to environmental activism. My book documenting these trends, *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (2010), came out shortly before the release of *Avatar*. In it, I argued that spiritualities that stress ecological interdependence and mutual dependence, involve deep feelings of belonging and connection to nature, and express beliefs that the biosphere is a sacred, Gaia-like superorganism, were taking new forms and exercising increasing social and political influence. These sorts of nature-based spiritualities generally cohere with and draw on an evolutionary and ecological worldview, and therefore stress continuity and even kinship among all organisms. They also often have animistic dimensions, in which communication (if not also communion) with non-human organisms is thought possible. Consequently, these “otherkind” are considered to have intrinsic value (regardless of whether they are useful in some way to our own species) and should be accorded respect, if not reverence. Uniting these Gaian and animistic perceptions, I argued, is generally a deep sense of humility about the human place in the universe in contrast to anthropocentric conceits, wherein human beings consider themselves to be superior to other living things and the only ones whose interests count morally.

In *Dark Green Religion*, I examined a wide range of social phenomena that expressed and promoted such spiritualities. Recognizing that the evolutionary-ecological worldview that fuels dark green spirituality has had only a century and a half to incubate and spread, and noting that despite this, the trends I had identified were rapidly gathering adherents and momentum, I speculated that we could be witnessing the nascent stages of a new global nature religion. Such a religion would have affinities with some aspects of the world’s long-standing and predominant religious and philosophical traditions, and it would, in some cases, fuse with them, I suggested. Moreover, such dark green spiritualities could also *coexist* (rather than fuse) with the environmentally progressive forms of the world’s long-standing religious traditions, uniting in common action to protect the biosphere, even if profound differences remained about the
sources of existence. I also suggested that dark green religious forms might increasingly supplant older meaning and action systems, because the dark green forms more easily cohere with modern scientific understandings than religious worldviews involving one or more invisible divine beings. Consequently, the dark green forms could more easily adapt than most long-standing religions to new and deeper scientific understandings, especially when compared to religions that reify their “ultimate sacred postulates” by chiselling them, physically or metaphorically, into inviolable sacred texts.3

These were the possibilities running through my mind when I first saw *Avatar*. I had already spent considerable time looking at artistic productions, including documentaries and theatrical films that exemplified dark green spirituality; after seeing *Avatar*, I immediately thought it was another exemplar of such green religion. Moreover, as it broke box office records, I could not help but wonder if the film was evidence that global, cultural receptivity to the ideas prevalent in dark green religion was even more profound than I had previously thought. I also wondered if *Avatar* would prove to be the most effective “dark green” propaganda yet produced. In short, I thought, there might well be something exceptionally significant about the film, even if the ideas expressed in it were nothing new and even though some would conclude that the film was not great art. I suspected not only that *Avatar* was a reflection of the global emergence of dark green religion but that it might even effectively advance such spirituality and ethics.

In his public statements about the film, Cameron has expressed a clear intention to promote themes that are central to what I have called dark green religion. When accepting his Golden Globe Award for best picture, for example, he said: “*Avatar* asks us to see that everything is connected, all human beings to each other, and us to the Earth. And if you have to go four and a half light years to another, made-up planet to appreciate this miracle of the world that we have right here, well, you know what, that’s the wonder of cinema right there, that’s the magic” (Associated Press 2010). Soon after, in an Oprah Winfrey television special that was broadcast shortly before the Academy Awards ceremony, Cameron repeated this theme, adding, with delight, that at the climax of the film the audience had come to take the side of nature in its battle against the destructive forces of an expansionist human civilization. Here, without using the terminology of contemporary environmental ethics, Cameron expressed an affinity for deep ecological or biocentric theories, in which nature is considered to have intrinsic value. Indeed, according to an exchange during an *Entertainment Weekly* interview, it appears that Cameron was even on the radical side of biocentric ethics. When an interviewer asserted, “*Avatar* is the perfect
ecoterrorism recruiting tool,” Cameron answered in an equally provocative way, “Good, good, I like that one. I consider that a positive review. I believe in ecoterrorism” (Moorhead 2010).  

In the light of such statements, it seems clear that dark green themes and activist motivations underlay the film’s production. Furthermore, the negative reaction to the film by most conservative commentators, whether political or religious, revealed significant concern that such views and imperatives might be gaining more adherents and cultural appeal. But while pundits and scholars speculated about the possible significance and influence of the film, they usually supplied little evidence to support their assertions. So I began to gather such evidence, establishing a website domain to track relevant information as it unfolded. I knew that a more concerted inquiry was needed.

**Avatar as Rorschach**

Given my own response to the film and informed by the sociology of knowledge, I knew that generating a truly critical inquiry would be difficult. I was keenly aware, for example, of my own tendency to view the film through pre-existing prisms. I therefore anticipated that many others would simply interpret the film through their own intellectual and cultural lenses, including scholarly perspectives grounded in postmodern philosophies, post-colonial critical theory, cultural anthropology, evolutionary biology, environmental ethics, and film studies, as well as perspectives rooted in ethnic and religious identities and other subcultures and enclaves, whether political, ideological, economic, tribal, or military.

The spiritual, moral, and political dimensions of the film have elicited wildly diverse reactions, nowhere more apparent than in the popular press and in cyberspace. The filmmaker and the film have been labelled pro-civilization and anti-civilization, pro-science and anti-science, un-American and too American, anti-Marine and pro-Marine, racist and anti-racist, anti-indigenous and pro-indigenous, woman-respecting and misogynistic, leftist and neo-conservative, progressive and reactionary, activist and self-absorbed. And, of course, there have been religious labels: pagan, atheistic, theistic, pantheistic, panentheistic, and animistic. More about all of these perspectives are provided in the following essays.

Observing the stunningly diverse and highly contested cognitive and emotional responses to *Avatar* reminded me of the famous Rorschach psychological test, in which individual reactions to ink blots shown on cards vary widely, presumably because of differences in the psychological constitution and cultural context of the test takers. While, as readers of this volume will find, there have been some surprising reactions to the film, it is also
the case that if one were to know the cultural context and cognitive frames of the observers, it would usually be possible to anticipate their responses.

That different individuals and groups tend to perceive things differently is, on the one hand, a dynamic to be welcomed, because differently situated people may have insights that people placed elsewhere may not. On the other hand, it is a problematic tendency, for it is also possible for our cognitive frames to create a field of view in which other perspectives, as well as information that might disconfirm our expectations, remain out of focus. So it worried me when I thought about what insights might gleaned, or missed, when considering the film, given the strong human tendency to see what one expects, especially when we often remain insular, segregated in our own cultural enclaves, including supposedly enlightened, academic ones.

On a personal level, although the film seemed to exemplify what I had found in my previous research, I did not want to conclude too hastily that Avatar provided more evidence for my dark green theses. So, with regard to initial perceptions about the film’s dark green themes and cultural significance, I thought I should suspend judgment, pay close attention to responses and interpretations of the film at variance with my own first impressions, and seek further information. I was concerned, however, about more than whether I might misperceive the meanings and significance of the film. In the initial months after its release, I noticed that in academic circles, there was little cross-disciplinary debate about it. Moreover, many of the scholarly views that were expressed struck me as “ivory towerish” in nature, disregarding the ways in which those not embedded in scholarly subcultures were responding to and often embracing the film—even seeing their own feelings and predicaments reflected in it. The tendency toward Rorschach-style, quick-reaction analyses seemed to me methodologically flawed. Last but not least, even though the film was replete with religious themes, in the first few months after the film was released, despite a great deal of public discussion and debate about the film, I could not find nuanced discussion of its religious dimensions.

For all these reasons, I thought a more judicious and interdisciplinary approach to the film and its reception was in order. Hoping to precipitate such an enquiry, in the spring of 2010, I issued a call for papers focusing on the spirituality and politics of Avatar. I eventually received more than thirty submissions. Several were published in the Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture, which I edit; a wider array appear in this volume.7

The authors in the following pages express many points of view, sometimes, but not always, finding points of agreement. Each of them offers fascinating and important insights into the film and its putative significance. As I argue in my concluding reflections, despite my cautious approach, I
think many of the essays provide further evidence of my argument in *Dark Green Religion* and my related initial impression about the film and its reception: *Avatar* reflects and dramatically presents dark green religious and ethical themes, and its commercial success is due in part to the profound, recently unfolding, and increasingly global changes in worldview that provide fertile cultural ground for dark green artistic productions. In short, the essays in this volume demonstrate that it is “good to think” about *Avatar*, as well as about the cultural trends that gave rise to it and the diverse and contested reaction to it.⁸ These thoughts might even be of the kind that precipitate action, not on Pandora but right here on Earth.

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Notes
2 In 1991, I began publishing a series of articles about such phenomena (see Taylor 1991 to 2008) and orchestrated collaborative research leading to the book (Taylor 1995a).
3 The term “ultimate sacred postulates” is from anthropologist Roy Rappaport (1999), who argues that oral traditions are more likely to be environmentally adaptive than those based on writing because they are more flexible than those that put their religious guidelines down in inviolable, written, sacred texts.
4 For more on Cameron’s long-standing environmental radicalism, see Renzetti (2009).
5 Shortly after seeing the film, for example, and hoping to track its reception and influence, I created an online venue to provide further information about the film; see “Avatar and Dark Green Religion” at http://www.brontaylor.com/environmental_books/dgr/avatar_nature_religion.html.
6 For the classic statements regarding the social construction of reality, the latter focusing on religion, see Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Berger (1969).
8 That species are not only “good to eat” but “good to think” was famously asserted by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss ([1963] 1969, 89), who was expressing the idea that they are culturally and religiously significant in a number of ways. This is what I intend to suggest by borrowing the phrase here.

References