Editor’s Introduction:  
Avatar as Rorschach

I first saw Avatar shortly after its release in December 2009. The film was released right about the same time as my book, Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future, was published. This work included extensive analysis of how documentaries and film (among artistic forms) exemplified the spiritualities of belonging and connection to nature that, I contended, are becoming increasingly influential around the world. After seeing the film and considering its phenomenal reception, I naturally wondered if the nature spirituality expressed in the film, and that I discussed in my book, resonated even more deeply and widely than I had already concluded.

Unsurprisingly, like everyone who had experienced the film, I viewed it through my own prism. Moreover, as I fully expected, others would be, as quickly as I, viewing the film through their own intellectual and cultural lenses. Soon, I thought, there would be analyses from diverse perspectives, including those grounded in postmodern thought, critical theory, cultural anthropology, historical studies, evolutionary biology, environmental ethics, and film studies. There would also be, of course, reactions from people of diverse religious and political backgrounds, assessing the extent to which the spirituality presented in the film, or the political views expressed in it, cohered with their own, or were deviant, or even dangerous. Indeed, a tidal wave of reaction did follow, especially in the popular press and in cyberspace, among friends and coworkers, and it was truly global in nature.

This made me think of the famous Rorschach test, in which individual reactions to ink blots shown on cards vary widely (presumably due to differences in the psychological constitution of the test takers). Like those who take this test, the cognitive and emotional responses to Avatar have been stunningly diverse, and the reactions seemed to me to flow as naturally within the schools of thought with which scholars already identified, as water does downhill.

This worried me.

On a personal level, while the film seemed to exemplify what I had been finding in my own fieldwork, I did not want to jump to a hasty
conclusion that Avatar provided more evidence for my ‘dark green’ thesis. So, I thought, before making conclusions, I should gather data.

More broadly, I was concerned because it seemed as though most of the reactions to the film were facile expressions of a priori views, and I could find little cross-disciplinary engagement and debate about the film. Moreover, much of the discussion was ‘ivory tower’ in nature, in other words, it was taking place without regard to the ways in which people around the world were engaging, and often embracing, the film, even seeing their own feelings and predicaments reflected in it. The tendency toward what seemed like a Rorschach-style, quick-reaction analysis seemed methodologically flawed. I wanted a more judicious approach that would broaden the discussion about the film.

I am keenly interested, of course, in the insights that flow from scholarly schools and disciplines. This is the central rationale undergirding this interdisciplinary and international journal. I certainly want to know what historians and film critics can tell us about the film’s cultural and historical tributaries. I also wanted to hear from colleagues from disciplines other than my own as to why they think Avatar so quickly became the most commercially successful film in history. I knew that the film would be considered problematic from perspectives variously concerned with the depiction and rights of indigenous peoples and those engaged in postcolonial studies. But I was also interested in the ways in which non-academics have perceived the film. If we are to realize the full potential of interdisciplinary analysis, I have long thought, then we will also need robust research that engages non-academics in their own worlds.

Hoping to precipitate an enquiry into the significance of the film that would be as diverse as possible, I issued a call for papers on ‘Avatar & Nature Spirituality’ in the Spring of 2010. After receiving and commenting on over 50 proposals, by September 2010, I had received and read over twenty submissions. Some of the first to make it through the review process appear in this special issue of the JSRNC. I am delighted to report that we have an excellent mix of studies, and that more will be published later, mostly likely in volume 5 (2011).

In this, our initial issue of the JSRNC devoted to Avatar, we begin our enquiry with a brief primer on the film and an overview of some of the many contentious issues that have arisen since its release. This article I have written with Adrian Ivakhiv, an executive editor of the JSRNC, who also undertook an unusual amount of editing for this special issue, a labor for which I am very grateful. I am also happy to report that Dr.

Ivakhiv is nearing completion of his own manuscript on the ecologies of cinema, which I am confident will be an important contribution to understanding religion, nature, and the arts.

After this we travel to (cyber) space for two studies of Internet fandom devoted to *Avatar*, by Britt Istoft and Matthew Holtmeier, respectively. This is followed by a sophisticated mixed methods study of reactions to the film among inhabitants of Hawaii, led by Rachelle Gould. What this and other studies that I expect to publish in future issues remind me is of what I often find in my own fieldwork, namely, how thoughtful and nuanced non-academicians often are, and sometimes in ways that ivory tower researchers would not expect.

The last two articles, by Lisa Sideris and David Barnhill, provide an excellent way to wrap up this special issue. Sideris looks at the role of empathy in inter-species ethical concern and the way *Avatar* puts it in play, and Barnhill demonstrates the many affinities between *Avatar* and the work of the novelist Ursula Le Guin, among others writers, concluding with a nuanced discussion of utopian themes in environmental arts.

Those who do not see their own curiosities or perspectives addressed in this issue may find them addressed in a subsequent one. There is much more to consider than we have been able to here. I also welcome enquiries from scholars who would be interested in submitting their own analyses of the film and its cultural and religious significance. I remain especially interested in studies of audience reactions to the film in thus-far unexplored geographic and cultural places. In a future issue, if not also in an edited book, I will do my best to bring forward the most diverse array of *Avatar* analyses possible.

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The fourth issue in each volume is where we customarily list those who have served as peer reviewers since the last such listing, and where I struggle to find words adequate to express my gratitude for this service. Every year, I see how their labors significantly improve nearly every article submitted that we eventually publish. Along with the exceptional team of graduate students from the University of Florida who labor on the journal and the editorial board (whose names appear on the masthead), our reviewers are the guardians of the journal’s quality. To one and all, as always, I am deeply grateful.

*Bron Taylor*
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