



# Popular Culture, Religion, & the Anthropocene

**3-6 August 2016**

**Block AS5,  
Faculty of Arts &  
Social Sciences,  
NUS Kent Ridge  
Campus**

**All are welcome.  
RSVP with the title  
"ANTHROPOCENE" to  
fassreligion@nus.edu.sg**

Now that the effects of the Industrial Revolution are widely believed to have caused a rapid form of climate change that will have disastrous effects on plant, animal, and human life, the gifts of modern technology strike some as a Faustian bargain. Marvelous capacities gained over the last several centuries threaten the future of many species and may well multiply the scale of problems that we can barely cope with at present. The term "anthropocene" is used with increasing frequency in scientific literature, and it has gained wide purchase within the popular imagination.

How do we cope? Looking at museum shows, films, and literature as reflections of our yearnings and strategies, "Popular Culture, Religion, and the Anthropocene" will examine relationships between this daunting challenge and the religious imagination. What do we think will happen? How does the fear of a looming environmental disaster relate to millenarian hopes and dreams? Is religion seen primarily as a strategy of avoidance, or one of engagement? At what point does the benevolent wish to offer hope tilt into a form of denial? This workshop brings together experts in environmental humanities and religious studies to examine the nature of these interactions.

*A Workshop Co-Sponsored by the FASS Religion Cluster, the Department of English Language and Literature (National University of Singapore), and MOE Grant for Material Religion and Popular Culture in Asia.*



# POPULAR CULTURE, RELIGION, & THE ANTHROPOCENE

## 3 AUG / DISCUSSION MEETING I

**VENUE: AS5 / 05-09 (Graduate Reading Room)**

14:00 – 15:30	<p>An informal discussion will be held on <b>“Interdisciplinarity: The Example of Green Religious Studies.”</b></p> <p>In this discussion, graduate students and faculty researching any aspect of religion or ecology are invited to present their projects to the guests, who will also talk about their own research interests. Guests will include S. Brent Plate of Hamilton College &amp; editor of <i>Material Religion</i> (Religious Studies); Luis Vivanco of University of Vermont, Adrian Ivakhiv of University of Vermont (Environmental Studies); and Lisa Sideris of Indiana University at Bloomington (Religious Studies). From the home team there will be John Whalen-Bridge and Rebecca Raglon of ELL.</p>
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## 4 AUG / DAY ONE PROGRAMME

**VENUE: AS5 / 02-05**

09:30 – 10:00	<b>REGISTRATION &amp; TEA</b>	
10:00 – 10:30	<b>WELCOME &amp; OPENING REMARKS</b> John Whalen-Bridge (National University of Singapore)	
10:30 – 11:30	From God's Gardeners to Gardens by the Bay: Teasing out the Contradictions of the Anthropocene	Rebecca Raglon, National University of Singapore
11:30 – 13:00	<b>LUNCH</b>	
13:00 – 14:00	Adaptation in the Anthropocene: Climate Change and Creativity at The Hall of Human Origins	Lisa Sideris, Indiana University Bloomington
14:00 – 15:00	Imag(in)ing the Anthropocene: Nature Films and/as Creation Stories	Luis Vivanco, University of Vermont
15:00 – 15:30	<b>Q &amp; A / Discussion &amp; TEA</b>	

## 5 AUG / DAY TWO PROGRAMME

**VENUE: AS5 / 02-05**

10:00 – 10:30	<b>REGISTRATION &amp; TEA</b>	
10:30 – 11:30	Navigating the Zone of Alienation: Chernobyl and the Anthropocenic Sublime	Adrian Ivakhiv, University of Vermont
11:30 – 13:00	<b>LUNCH</b>	
13:00 – 14:00	What Zombie Entertainment Can Tell Us about Art, Religion, and the Anthropocene: Compassion as an Endangered Sentiment in the Ecology of Mind	John Whalen-Bridge, National University of Singapore
14:00 – 15:00	Do Androids Conduct Electric Rituals? Sensuous Religion and the Post-Human	S Brent Plate, Hamilton College
15:00 – 15:30	<b>Q &amp; A / Discussion &amp; TEA</b>	



# POPULAR CULTURE, RELIGION, & THE ANTHROPOCENE

## 6 AUG / DISCUSSION MEETING II

**VENUE: AS5 / 05-09 (Graduate Reading Room)**

10:30 – 12:00

The conversation will be on **“Research and Publication in Environmental Humanities: Where is the Discussion Going?”**

The exchange of ideas between the graduate students, faculty, and the guests continue from the 3<sup>rd</sup>. It's an opportunity for the graduate students to get valuable feedback on their research and publication related issues. The attempt is for broader appeal with the discussion of Interdisciplinarity on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and publication & working with cutting edge issues on the 6<sup>th</sup>. Guests will include S. Brent Plate of Hamilton College & editor of *Material Religion* (Religious Studies); Luis Vivanco of University of Vermont, Adrian Ivakhiv of University of Vermont (Environmental Studies); and Lisa Sideris of Indiana University at Bloomington (Religious Studies). From the home team there will be John Whalen-Bridge and Rebecca Raglon of ELL.

## POPULAR CULTURE, RELIGION, & THE ANTHROPOCENE

### **From God's Gardeners to Gardens by the Bay: Teasing out the Contradictions of the Anthropocene**

*Rebecca RAGLON*

Visiting Fellow, National University of Singapore

Timothy Clark in "Ecocriticism on the Edge" argues that the term, the Anthropocene, while emerging from science, has been adopted by the humanities as a kind of shorthand for new global environmental concerns such as ocean acidification or climate change. Speculative fiction, such as Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy, reflects this. The Trilogy imagines a newly configured nature where genetically modified animals and humans attempt to adapt to a disrupted natural order. Part of this adaptation to the Anthropocene, as Atwood imagines it, is deeply spiritual, and the author creates a new religious order, *God's Gardeners*, complete with hymns, a liturgy, and a pantheon of saints (that includes Rachel Carson and Euell Gibbons). In Atwood's work, this is a necessary part of helping humans learn the earth wisdom that can help them survive even in radically changed circumstances. In other words, Atwood cleverly reconfigures old terms and concepts for a new era. Other writers dealing with the Anthropocene, however, suggest that existing concepts of nature and the natural, have no role to play in the new era, and in their analysis humans must increasingly sever themselves from old concepts and embrace new understandings and solutions to global environmental problems. Nature itself must be made anew: reconfigured, engineered, and terraformed. Aspects of these contradictory viewpoints can be seen manifesting themselves in reactions by writers to projects like Singapore's *Gardens by the Bay* or to *Marina Barrage*. For example, Singaporean poet Lee Tzu Pheng confronts the barrage and finds that it can only be seen as a "treasure of contradictions" --yet one that still invites us to "discern, forgive, resolve, repair, rebuild."

# POPULAR CULTURE, RELIGION, & THE ANTHROPOCENE

## **Adaptation in the Anthropocene: Climate Change and Creativity at The Hall of Human Origins**

*Lisa SIDERIS*

Associate Professor, Indiana University Bloomington

Deep time perspectives of human evolutionary history can inspire responses to pressing issues such as climate change, but also complacency or undue optimism about the challenges facing us. My essay takes a behind-the-scenes look at the Smithsonian's Hall of Human Origins, funded by climate-denial financier David H. Koch and inspired by a peculiar form of evolutionary spirituality. Delving beneath the exhibit's problematic presentation of climate change and human adaptation, one finds a fascinating and troubling blend of spirituality and evolutionary ideology at work. Key figures in the exhibit's creation and promotion—including religionists appointed as advisors to the Smithsonian--adhere to a progressivist evolutionary philosophy and cosmology inspired by the Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. According to this philosophy, humans can act as wise planetary managers by steering evolutionary processes toward an "Omega Point" of global consciousness, species solidarity and social cooperation. Also implicit in this worldview is the idea that the complexity of the human brain and the uniqueness of human forms of consciousness equip us to adapt to and even manage major planetary forces. Teilhard's philosophy refers to this phenomenon as the 'noosphere' or the emergence of the sphere of human mind as itself a geological or cosmic force. Today we might call it the Anthropocene. The Smithsonian visualizes noospheric emergence through repeated displays of human brain size increase, or technological breakthroughs that correlate neatly with fluctuating climates, for example. The optimistic, overarching message is that humans possess spiritual and mental tools for adapting to climate change; we can redirect evolutionary and planetary processes in ways beneficial to ourselves. At the same time, this story of human evolution downplays our current climate crisis by treating it as one of many challenges that humans have successfully met over the course of deep time. It also neglects to address the impacts of climate change of myriad other lifeforms whose mental complexity is, presumably, less impressive. In this way, an evolutionary spirituality of the Anthropocene finds common cause with the climate complacency and denialism of David H. Koch.

# POPULAR CULTURE, RELIGION, & THE ANTHROPOCENE

## **Imag(in)ing the Anthropocene: Nature Films and/as Creation Stories**

*Luis VIVANCO*

Professor, University of Vermont

For much of the twentieth century, acts of producing and consuming nature films were couched ideologically in terms of the fundamental separation between humans and the natural world, and the transparency of the camera's lens and the scientific objectivity of the filmmaker. This framework expanded human vision into remote worlds, rendering visible the lifeways of diverse non-human creatures for the education and entertainment of mass audiences. As a largely secular and objectivistic genre, however, questions of creation—both in the sense of the origins of the earth, and the hand of people in creatively making representations about nature—were largely muted. But in recent years, a number of trends have converged to produce shifting meanings and contexts for nature film, blurring certain kinds of boundaries once taken for granted and producing new kinds of representational possibilities. From revelations of animal staging and fakery and the rise of spectacle-producing media giants such as Discovery Channel who rely more and more on computer generated imagery, to the emergence of Christian nature films emphasizing themes of Intelligent Design and the widespread circulation of environmentally-committed documentary films, nature films now more than ever reveal themselves as a powerful contexts to examine questions of creation, creators, and the hand of humans in shaping, both conceptually and physically, the natural world. Drawing on ongoing work on the cultural history of nature films, this paper asks the question, in what ways do the kinds of stories about creation constructed in contemporary nature films help us understand and grapple with pressing concerns of the Anthropocene, such as human responsibility for habitat destruction, climate change, and biodiversity.

# POPULAR CULTURE, RELIGION, & THE ANTHROPOCENE

## **Do Androids Conduct Electric Rituals? Sensuous Religion and the Post-Human**

*S. Brent PLATE*

Visiting Professor, Hamilton College

With the film *Ex Machina* (Garland 2015) as a starting point, this presentation queries the limits of artificial intelligence by questioning the lack of sense perception in futuristic visions of the post-human. Many science fiction authors and computer scientists alike seem to believe that consciousness, and thus humanity, is downloadable information. Seldom is there a place for a sensate being that breathes and smells and touches, and thus also practices religion (Cylons excepted). Woven into this analysis is a question about the post-human relation to nature, and the religious mediation of that relation, brought out in works like David Abram's *Spell of the Sensuous*. If the post-human is nothing but a vat in a jar, then what can be left of ritual? and what of nature? This is not a romantic look backward, or a work of anti-technology, but a forward looking enquiry about the future connections between artificial intelligence, the place of religious performance, and what is increasingly difficult to name the "natural world."

# POPULAR CULTURE, RELIGION, & THE ANTHROPOCENE

## **What Zombie Entertainment Can Tell Us about Art, Religion, and the Anthropocene: Compassion as an Endangered Sentiment in the Ecology of Mind**

*John WHALEN-BRIDGE*

Associate Professor, National University of Singapore

Pope Francis' *Laudato Si* and statements by Buddhist religious leaders will be compared to work out set of "endangered sentiments" in which the virtue of (and religious practice of cultivating) compassion is considered in relation to the anthropocene. These leaders have also made statements about compassion in relation to the waves of migration, usually seen as flights from economic stagnation and political oppression, but the problem of maintaining compassion has not been directly related to the problems of the anthropocene. Climate disaster, many believe, will multiply the problem of refugee flight by tens, hundreds, or thousands in the course of the next century, and zombie culture, a formulaic discounting of a set of beings who are construed as non-sentient and best served by a head-shot killing, may be prophetic of the degree to which refugee resentment and hatred may increase as the climate-change induced waves of migration increase. After considering the analogues between zombie fantasy and migrant fears, I will look back at the multiple motivations between the Pope, the Dalai Lama, and other religious leaders' statements about compassion in relation to what may be a coming refugee crisis to determine the degree to which their responses to present circumstances foresee future difficulties.



# POPULAR CULTURE, RELIGION, & THE ANTHROPOCENE

## **Navigating the Zone of Alienation: Chernobyl and the Anthropocenic Sublime**

*Adrian IVAKHIV*

Professor, University of Vermont

This two-part talk will interpret the Chernobyl nuclear accident and its “Zone of Alienation” as a microcosm of the explosive tensions held together within the nucleus of the Anthropocene. Its first part will situate the 1986 nuclear accident within a series of overlapping and nested geo-temporal reference frames, including Western and Soviet “industrial sublimes”; Cold War militarism and the post-Soviet resurgence of Westphalian nationalism; cinematic and science-fictional “zones” associated with zombies, stalkers, and posthuman futures (with special reference to Andrei Tarkovsky’s film *Stalker* and its uptake within popular and video gaming cultures); and the deep time of the Anthropocene. The second part of the talk will apply Peircian semiotics and Whiteheadian and Buddhist philosophy toward understanding the Anthropocene as a challenge calling for a new mediation of the relationship between carbon-capitalist industrialism and a dynamic Earth. It will focus on the role of the arts, particularly the “arts of place” and of environmental and climate justice, in the development of narratives adequate to navigating the rapids of the Anthropocene and its “beyond.”

# POPULAR CULTURE, RELIGION, & THE ANTHROPOCENE

## Speakers' Biographies

**Luis VIVANCO** is Professor of Anthropology and Co-Director of the Humanities Center at the University of Vermont. He holds an A.B. in Religion from Dartmouth College and M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Cultural Anthropology from Princeton University. An author or editor of eight books and recipient of two Fulbright Scholar awards, his scholarship focuses on understanding the intertwined cultural, representational, and political dimensions of environmental change and efforts to “save nature” through sustainability discourse and environmentalist social movements. Mostly Latin American in geographic orientation, the ethnographic settings for his research have ranged from community-level conservation projects and international ecotourism politics to urban bicycle movements. He has also conducted interdisciplinary research on nature films and ecocinema, documenting and theorizing how media producers isolate and visualize individual species and ecological systems, communicate the (human-driven) problems confronting them, and perform, persuade, and/or obfuscate possibilities for socio-environmental action.

**Lisa H. SIDERIS** an associate professor of religious studies at Indiana University with research interests in environmental ethics and narratives at the intersection of science and religion. She is author of *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection* (Columbia University Press, 2003) and co-editor of a collection of essays on the life and work of Rachel Carson, *Rachel Carson: Legacy and Challenge* (SUNY, 2008). Her recent work focuses on the role of wonder in environmental and science-religion discourse, and particularly on efforts to recast scientific narratives (including those of the Anthropocene) as sacred, shared stories for humanity. Her current project, *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World*, will be published by University of California Press. Sideris has been a fellow at the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University and the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich. She serves as associate editor for the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture*.

**Adrian IVAKHIV** is a Professor of Environmental Thought and Culture at the University of Vermont's Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources. His research focuses at the intersections of ecology, culture, identity, religion, media, philosophy, and the creative arts. He is the author of *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), *Claiming Sacred Ground: Pilgrims and Politics at Glastonbury and Sedona* (Indiana University Press, 2001), and the forthcoming *Against Objects: Philosophical Engagements in the Shadow of the Anthropocene*, an executive editor of the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), and a former president of the Environmental Studies Association of Canada. He blogs at [Immanence: EcoCulture, GeoPhilosophy, MediaPolitics](#).

## POPULAR CULTURE, RELIGION, & THE ANTHROPOCENE

**S. Brent RODRIGUEZ-PLATE**'s teachings and writings explore relations between sensual life and spiritual life. He is a writer, editor, public speaker, and visiting associate professor of religious studies at Hamilton College. He has authored/edited twelve books, and written for *The Christian Century*, *The Islamic Monthly*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Huffington Post*, *Religion Dispatches*, and other sites. He is co-founder and managing editor of *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art, and Belief*; president of CrossCurrents/ The Association of Religion and Intellectual Life; and is a board member of the Interfaith Coalition of Greater Utica, NY. His most recent book is *A History of Religion in 5½ Objects: Bringing the Spiritual to its Senses*.

**Rebecca RAGLON** teaches at UBC and for the past three years has been a Visiting Scholar at NUS. She has published both scholarly work and fiction, is a founding member of *ASLE*, and edits the *Journal of Ecocriticism*. In English Language and Literature, she has been teaching course on ecocriticism and environmental literature and has been advising graduate students interested in these areas. Other areas of interest include the representation of animals, women and the environment, wilderness and re-wilding, and the age of the anthropocene. She has published in journals such as *ISLE*, *Environmental History Review*, and *Women's Studies*.

**John WHALEN-BRIDGE** is Associate Professor of English at the National University of Singapore. Author of *Political Fiction and the American Self* (1998), he has co-edited (with Gary Storhoff) the SUNY series, "Buddhism and American Culture." This series includes *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* (2009), *American Buddhism as a Way of Life* (2010), *Writing as Enlightenment* (2010), and *Buddhism and American Cinema* (2015). "What is a Buddhist Movie?" (*Contemporary Buddhism*) and "Multiple Modernities and the Tibetan Diaspora" (*South Asian Diaspora*) explore Tibetan expression and representation, and *Tibet on Fire: Buddhism, Rhetoric, and Self-Immolation* (Palgrave, 2015) approaches Tibetan responses to censorship through the lens of Kenneth Burke's notion of dramatism. "Dharma Bums Progress: the Adolescent Phase of Beat Buddhism" will appear in *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats*, and JWB is also working on a book about engaged Buddhism and American Beat and post-Beat writers.