

**Through a Glass Darkly Joint Symposium on Apocalyptic IX (2024):
"Alternative Endings" – An Eco-Workshop**

Tuesday, 8 October 2024

Senior Common Room, Birks Building, McGill University

3520 rue University, Montréal

Lorenzo DiTommaso, Concordia University Montréal

Gerbern Oegema, McGill University

Colin McAllister, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, and Founding Director of TAGD

Human activity is responsible for the current environmental crisis. But what is implied or lost by calling it an environmental *apocalypse*, a label that is ubiquitous in both popular culture and the academy? Construing a modern scientific problem and social issue in terms of an ancient theological worldview freights assumptions that inhibit realistic solutions. For example, the worldview's radical alterity casts the Earth as the ultimate Other, something of no true value that is destined to be destroyed with the new creation. Likewise, the eschatological horizon of the worldview presumes that history is finite and the future is unchangeable, while the expectation for supernatural salvation limits the ability of humans to solve problems for themselves.

It is time to autopsy the toxic influence of apocalyptic thinking on crisis modelling and to explore alternative concepts of ends and endings (e.g., non-Abrahamic religions, indigenous spiritualities, and non-religious systems). This preliminary workshop offers an informal and open-ended discussion on methods, approaches, and ideas, in aid of larger and more structured events in the future. Colin McAllister, a mediaevalist and general editor of the Cambridge Companion to Apocalyptic Literature, will deliver a keynote lecture that revisits Lynn White's landmark article. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" (1967).

Workshop Program

- **08:30-09:00 Informal Welcome**, with coffee etc. on hand all morning
- **09:00-09:10 Formal Welcome:** Gerbern Oegema, School of Religion, McGill University
- **09:10-10:00 Keynote:** Colin McAllister, Director of Humanities, University of Colorado Colorado Springs (Moderator: Lorenzo DiTommaso)

Framing the current ecological crisis as an apocalypse—a widely-overused term best suited to describe a literary genre—is problematic. Exploring alternative concepts of endings is the thrust of this Eco-Workshop. As a stepping off point for further discussion, I will revisit “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” a lecture given by historian Lynn White in 1966 and published the following year in the journal *Science*. Widely cited and debated, this brief article has loomed over the discussion about environmental ethics for over fifty years. White’s essay—a touchstone for multiple disciplines—blames Western Christianity’s foundational humankind/nature dualism and voluntarist theological development for the current ecological crisis. In this lecture, I will briefly interrogate White’s thesis and touch on its reception history before exploring topics including the Anthropocene, Antichrist and the katechon, ecotheology and ecological hermeneutics, and the apocalyptic ‘Other.’ (30 mins.)

General Discussion (20 mins.)

- **10:00-10:55 Session 1:** Apocalyptic and Its Alternatives (Moderator: Gerbern Oegema)

Sarina Odden Meyer, Department of Religions & Cultures, Concordia University

“Decolonizing Gen 1:28 with Indigenous Stewardship Ideologies” (20 mins.)

In order to have an alternative ending to our ecological crisis that empowers humans to act in ways that will heal the earth, we have to formulate an alternative beginning. First, we must decolonize the interpretation of Genesis 1:28. The words “dominion” and “subdue” have been interpreted to justify conquering the wilderness and extracting its resources. However, they

actually refer to the responsibility to manage the self-sustaining eco-systems mentioned earlier in the passage (vs.11ff, 20ff, 24ff). Uncovering a practical example of this type of management requires a second decolonization, namely, of our understanding of Indigenous people before European colonisation. Indigenous peoples did not neglect a vast untouched wilderness, but rather humanized the entirety of Turtle Island through agricultural engineering. The ecosystems they created and maintained produced abundant life for animals and humans, as well as climate control. Indigenous stewardship practices create a foundation for a hopeful alternative ending.

William Aylward, Department of Religions & Cultures, Concordia University

“Terence McKenna and ‘Timewave Zero’: Reflections on the Apocalyptic Imagination” (20 mins.)

This talk will explore Terence McKenna’s apocalyptic ‘Timewave Zero’ theory and its criticisms by his brother Dennis McKenna. Dennis claims the “theory” is at best a pseudoscientific “speculation, interesting idea, hallucination, or fantasy—but not a theory”, and a symptom of Terence’s “acute longing for an escape from history, an escape from death” (The Brotherhood of The Screaming Abyss, 2023). The goal of exploring this topic will be to reflect on and openly discuss the apocalyptic imagination. To what extent is the apocalyptic imagination rooted in existential crisis? How can the apocalyptic imagination or crisis-positing imagination be changed/trans-mutated into a crisis-solving imagination?

General Discussion (15 mins.)

● **10:55-12:00 Session 2:** Christian Eschatology and Contemporary Ecology (Moderator: Lorenzo DiTommaso)

Sébastien Doane, Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses, Université Laval

“Patient Farming (James 5:7-11) as Eschatological/Ecological Posture” (25 mins.)

In this presentation, I turn to the complex relationship between time and ecology in environmental humanities to open biblical eschatology to an interdisciplinary dialogue. We will see that Christian eschatology has had negative effects on the Christian response to climate change. I will turn the letter of James and its image of the patient farmer to examine if it could be an ecologically sound eschatological posture. This image will be read as a “minimalist utopia”

(Nersessian 2017); waiting for eschatological judgment in an enduring resistance that is marked by a reduction of consumption, and faith in God. The letter of James brings an impetus to critique economic models as well as a critique of faith without praxis.

Jonathan Widell, School of Religion, McGill University

“Revelations on Reel: Cinema, Scripture, and the Eco-Apocalyptic Imagination” (20 mins.)

This paper explores how modern cinema has reshaped our understanding of apocalypse, blending biblical prophecy with ecological concerns to create a new apocalyptic imaginary. From "Apocalypse Now" to "Megalopolis," we argue that film has not only brought dystopian literature to life but has also created a cinematic lens through which we view both future and past. This media-driven apocalypse risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, particularly in ecological contexts. However, by revisiting works like More's "Utopia" and reexamining biblical texts through the prism of modern film, we can challenge deterministic views of technology and nature. Drawing on theological concepts and contemporary cinema, we propose a synergistic approach to ecological stewardship that reframes apocalyptic visions not as doom prophecies, but as calls for human-divine collaboration. This perspective aims to instill utopian elements into our eco-apocalyptic imagination, fostering a more constructive approach to environmental challenges and offering cinema as both a warning system and a tool for envisioning positive futures.

Lorenzo DiTommaso, Department of Religions & Cultures, Concordia University

Brief Response and General Discussion (20 mins)

● **12:00-13:00 Lunch**

● **13:00-14:30 Session 3: Activists, Authors, and Audiences** (Moderator: Gerbern Oegema)

Brooke Bastien, Department of English, Concordia University

“Attempting Activism: Rethinking Relations in Literary Criticism during the Apocalypse” (20 mins.)

This workshop critically examines how apocalyptic narratives shape our approaches to the environmental crisis in the humanities. Framing this crisis as an inevitable, oncoming end often

hinders proactive solutions, embedding assumptions rooted in theology and colonialism. Drawing from Indigenous concepts like Vanessa Watts' "Place-Thought" and the critiques of extractivist ecocriticism by Imre Szeman and Jennifer Wenzel, I will explore alternative frameworks that honour the agency of both human and non-human actors. By rethinking how we relate to the Earth, the workshop seeks to engage attendees in re-imagining our environmental future without succumbing to the fatalism of apocalypse, as well as the role of literary criticism in what can often feel like the end times.

Jamaica Ernst, Department of Religions & Cultures, Concordia University

"Six Key Perspectives on the Role of Religion and Culture in the Current Ecological Regime" (20 mins.)

With both eyes on the climate crisis, this work begins with a critique of the term 'Anthropocene' as presented by Bruce Erickson in "Anthropocene futures: Linking colonialism and environmentalism in an age of crisis" (2020). In an effort to identify what exactly it is about colonialism that has led to this age of environmental crisis, the works of six prominent authors will be briefly presented. These are Lynn White and Rachel Carson (both of whom broke ground in the field of ecology), Arne Naess (deep ecology), Murray Bookchin (social ecology), Carolyn Merchant (ecofeminist history), and Melissa K. Nelson (Indigenous sustainability). This preliminary work has the ultimate goal of arguing for decolonizing environmentalism.

Elliot Mason, Department of Religions & Cultures, Concordia University

"Title: The Eco-Conscious Apocalyptic: Interconnectedness and Intercession Across Science-Fictional Apocalyptic Landscapes (20 mins.)

In *Childhood's End*, Arthur C. Clarke envisions a fractured Earth whose apocalyptic end(s) are averted through the intercession of extra-terrestrial beings. This science-fictional approach to apocalyptic (one that imagines intervention into human affairs from outside) is arguably not so dissimilar from a Christian apocalyptic worldview in which human beings are absolved from the task of enacting meaningful environmental change because of the promise of angelic or divine intervention. Nonetheless, contemporary fantasy and science fiction that has further developed this theme often uses intercession or intervention as a means through which to challenge

homocentric ways of thinking that continue to negatively impact our world and environment. Adrian Tchaikovsky's *Children of Time*, for example, uses alien consciousness as embodied in a species of interstellar arachnids to talk about the importance of valuing non-human life and non-human intelligence, while myriad fungal apocalyptic works (e.g. *The Girl with All the Gifts*, *Sorrowland*, *The Beauty*) often pivot on the theme of a recognition of ecosystemic interconnectedness as being essential to flourishing in a world facing apocalypse. This talk examines what ideas can be thought and talked about based on these fictional approaches and whether there is value in artistic and scientific cross-pollination when it comes to motivating change.

Tara Wood, Department of Religions & Cultures, Concordia University

“Public Knowledge of Climate Change in Canada – A Study of Canadian Climate Academics’ and Science Communicators’ Perspectives” (20 mins.)

This study explores the perspectives of Canadian climate academics and science communicators on the state of climate science communication. Findings from surveys and interviews revealed consensus on the urgency of addressing climate change, alongside concerns over communication strategies regarding public understanding impeded by political beliefs, mistrust in science, and misinformation. Contrary to literature that emphasized religious and cultural barriers, participants considered these factors as less impactful. This highlights the need for more interdisciplinary and community-centered approaches to climate communication, which prioritizes religious and cultural contexts. This is essential for tailoring communication strategies to the lived experiences shaping climate science acceptance.

Discussion (10 mins.)

Note: screen, projector, and laptop for both power point and zoom onsite.

Interested in Attending? Please contact:

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