

# How To Prevent The Apocalypse With Performance Art

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## 1. Two Scenarios

Aliens are observing the Earth from afar. What they see: war, violence, torture. They decide to bring an end to all this and annihilate the human race. But just in the nick of time humanity is saved – because the aliens witness an act of love or compassion or self-sacrifice, and decide that there is still hope for humans after all. The apocalypse is adjourned.

A variation of this sci-fi topos:

Aliens are observing the Earth. What they see: capitalism, violence, a rerun of the popular TV series *24*. They decide to bring an end to all this and annihilate the human race. But just in the nick of time humanity is saved – because the aliens witness a performance piece, and decide that there is still hope for humans after all. The aliens become performance artists, and give up their questionable pedagogical practice of threatening other civilisations with extermination if they deem them morally inferior.

## 2. 2012 and beyond

Last year, once more, the world was supposed to end. And once more, it didn't.

Last year, once more, the world was supposed to end. How come that in 2012 not many people seemed too worried about the pending apocalypse? Unlike other prognoses, the prediction of the apocalypse seems to be of little consequence.

Maybe because predicting the apocalypse has been in the repertoire of prophets for millennia, and we've gotten used to it by now. Or we suspect that there's a hidden agenda behind that prediction, for instance that we should believe in this or that religion or buy canned food in bulk. Or maybe we were all just too busy to get through our list of the 100 things we wanted to do before we die. Or maybe we just all remembered that the last time the world was supposed to end 12 years before, nothing much happened. Or it's just too big a prediction to react to: If we can change the future, there's no way of predicting it. If we can't change it, what's the point of knowing?

We have all rehearsed the apocalypse. We have watched countless films, read countless books, and we know that "duck and cover" won't work. However, unlike previous generations for whom it seemed a real threat that, as Sun Ra put it, "if they push that button, your ass gotta go, and watcha gonna do without your ass?", today the idea of a nuclear war is just one of many apocalyptic scenarios in circulation, alongside, for instance, alien invasions. In short, it belongs to the world of fiction.[1]

This is not to say that some people aren't preparing for some kind of end of the world, and if it's only the end of the world as we know it. In 2012, we read about self-sustaining communities being set up in Brazil by people who believed that the Mayan prophecies actually referred to the collapse of the financial system. And a friend recently told us about something similar happening somewhere in Africa, where a corporation is buying large portions of land and constructing self-sustaining villas in the jungle so that rich people will have a place to go to after the economy will have finally collapsed. And according to 2008's Global Catastrophic Risk Conference, there is a 19% chance of human extinction over the next century. But since the scenarios for human extinction, beyond the well-known ones such as meteorite impacts, nuclear wars or global pandemics, also have to consider the possibility of what is scientifically termed an "unforeseen event", we wonder how scientists arrive at such exact percentages. After all, how should one determine the likelihood of an unforeseen event? In the end, a likelihood of 19% of human extinction seems to be reason enough to allocate more funding to do more research. It's better to be prepared.

"We were warned" was the tagline for the 2009 blockbuster *2012* by director Roland Emmerich. There are of course many other films depicting some kind of apocalypse, but we have chosen to talk about this one because it is the only one that we know of that asks the question: How are artists equipped to face the apocalypse?

The main character in the film, played by John Cusack, is a struggling writer called Jackson Curtis, who has to work as a chauffeur to make a living. Curtis has written an unsuccessful novel, *Farewell Atlantis*, which proposes that in a time of crisis, people will cope by pulling together. In a fictional blurb on a website that Sony Pictures launched as “part of the 2012 movie experience”, the book is advertised as “a bold exploration of the human spirit”. Yet, in the fictional realm of the movie, not many people have read it - with the exception of another main character in the film, Dr. Adrian Helmsley, a geologist and scientific advisor to the US President, who is revealed to be an admirer of the book.

That an artist is placed at the centre of an apocalyptic sci-fi blockbuster is somewhat surprising. You would expect the main character to be a fighter pilot or a US president, or a US president who used to be a fighter pilot, or a deep-sea oil driller, or maybe just an ordinary guy, but definitely an ordinary guy with a military background. Maybe even a scientist (an adventurous explorer type). Jackson Curtis at least knows how to drive a limousine. And he has a family to struggle for. And maybe surprisingly, given his lack of a military background, he succeeds in saving his life and that of his family. There is a German saying, “wer schreibt, bleibt”, “who writes, remains”, or “who writes, survives”. We have characterised Jackson Curtis as a struggling writer, and that characterisation is taken from the Wikipedia article about the movie. So, besides the struggle for survival, there is also Curtis’ struggle to reconnect with his family, as well as the struggle of the artist. And that one, too, is successful. Sometimes, it only seems to take an apocalypse to experience recognition as an artist. There’s little doubt at the end of the movie that Curtis’ *Farewell Atlantis* will finally be a success. Indeed, there is an alternate ending in which it is very explicit that this might have been the point of, respectively, the whole film or even the apocalypse: Helmsley has given a copy of the book to the President’s daughter, with whom he has become romantically involved. After she has read the book, the couple joins the reunited Curtis family on the deck of one of the “arks” that have survived the apocalypse, and the President’s daughter compliments Curtis on the novel (“It was inspiring”), prompting Noah Curtis, the author’s son, to remark that this was the first good review his dad ever got. A copy of the book has been saved, people are reading it, it hasn’t all been for nothing. The saved book (which in retrospect itself has become a prediction) is presented as a sign of a new beginning.

However, different from writing, performance has famously been linked to disappearance. Performance art has, from the outset, claimed ephemerality and eventhood as its main characteristics, and attached to this claim was a political agenda: Not to produce objects, not to participate in the capitalist art market. While this agenda is of course somewhat simplistic in a society in which events are constantly produced, marketed and sold, it does explain to some extent why, for instance, in a post-apocalyptic scenario where people are living off the remnants of capitalist society, performance art is nowhere to be found. Had Curtis been a performance artist, he would have been left with nothing. From the perspective of a lot of dystopian science fiction, art only appears as something that needs to be preserved. It belongs to a world that is gone, to our world. It comes in the form of old media, books, paintings, that bare the traces of their age. The approach to art is archaeological: Art appears as objects from the past that need to be collected and saved – the implication being that from them society can be re-built. But what kind of society would that be?

In another movie, *The Book of Eli*, Eli, played by Denzel Washington, travels through the post-apocalyptic Mad-Max-style landscape of the US West Coast 30 years after a nuclear apocalypse, trying to save the last remaining copy of the bible. In the end, wounded and almost dead, he arrives at Alcatraz, where a group of survivors has set up an archive. This archive is run by a character called Lombardi, played by Malcolm McDowell, who is also referred to as “the curator”. The “curator” explains the purpose of the archive:

“This is where we are going to start again. We’ve got a printing press ready to go quite soon. We are going to tell people about the world they’ve lost ... help them start rebuild it. Look! Shakespeare, Britannica, only missing a few volumes. There’s a beautiful series of Mozart and Wagner records, still in pristine condition.”

Eli is revealed to be blind, but he dictates the bible before he dies, and new copies of it are being printed. Finally, we see how a copy of it is placed on a bookshelf next to other holy books and to the works of William Shakespeare. However, what we asked ourselves as we watched this was: what happened to Eli’s iPod? Quite early on in the film, there is a particularly eccentric instance of product placement: Eli is listening to an Al Green song (a version of the Bee Gee’s *How can you mend a broken heart*) on an iPod that has survived the catastrophe.[2] Does Al Green have a place in the Alcatraz archive, or only Mozart and Wagner? Where does the “curator” draw the line? What works of art do you pick to start rebuilding the world? What works do you have to pick for it to become a better world? What selection of artefacts would result in what kind of society? What kind of world would you build from the knowledge of Shakespeare and the bible, and what kind of

world from the knowledge of Al Green and the Bee Gees? And what could the value of performance art be in such a post-apocalyptic scenario? Could it provide an alternative to this archaeological model? What kind of work should a performance artist make after the apocalypse? What kind of work should a performance artist make after the apocalypse, so as to not only rebuild the world? That is, if we accept the premise that it is art that will help us “start again”.[3]

Back to the future, back to the present: In a recent book, Slavoj Žižek proposes that we should assume the apocalypse will happen, and then trace back our steps from that future catastrophe to see where things could have gone differently. As performance artists, this would leave us with one question: How does a performance prevent the apocalypse?

## 2. 2012 and beyond

In 2010, random people (the authors of this text and Gareth Llŷr) launched the 10-year project *2020*. Every year, we get together to look into the future until, in 2020, this future will have caught up with us. Every year, we ask people to share their ideas about the future with us. Every year, we try out a new forecasting method. In 2012, at the Performance Studies international Conference #18 in Leeds, we invited people to join us for a three-hour workshop. Thematically, we focused on the apocalypse; methodologically, we adapted the so-called Delphi method, based on the respective Wikipedia article and some YouTube-tutorials.

The Delphi method: A forecasting technique that engages anonymous participants in a collective process of predicting the future by writing down responses to a set of questions. After sharing the results amongst each other, participants are asked to revise their previous statements. By limiting the communication process to writing anonymously, it is hoped that the negotiation between the participants will be less hierarchical and that nobody will dominate the discussion. The method was initially developed in the Cold War to predict how technological developments would affect warfare. Wikipedia reports that the creators of the method were unhappy with the name it was given because it suggested that it was “something oracular, something smacking a little of the occult”.

Reason enough for us to introduce one more expert to the group, namely the “Delphi Bean Oracle”. It is reported that people not rich enough to get a proper prediction from the Pythia were instead allowed to ask yes-or-no-questions, which were then decided by the tossing or drawing of coloured beans, one colour signifying “yes”, the other “no”. In the final decision process in the workshop, the Delphi Bean Oracle was introduced as one more voice, as one more vote, and in the end actually tipped the scale towards a prediction that would have otherwise not been considered as likely.

In the following, we will present predictions that were made using the Delphi method. Those predictions that were revised in the process are crossed out.

**BEFORE YOU GO ON READING:** Prepare a bowl of black and white beans. Compare the results of the “Delphi Bean Oracle” with your own estimation of the likelihood of the predicted events.

1 What is the most likely scenario for an apocalyptic event or series of events happening before 2020?

The financial system will collapse because people will withdraw all their money from their bank accounts. General strike, barricades, riots. Gangs of ex-military will take over small territories; basic infrastructures will no longer be maintained. Fights over water, oil, food, medical supplies. Governments and infrastructure will break down. Drastic change in weather patterns / systems leading to socio-economic collapse; scarcity of resources (water / oil / etc.) leads to mass migration. ~~Economic collapse, leading to social + civil unrest, leading to destabilized governments, leading to governments abdicating their duties and the destabilization of government agencies, military / environment etc., infrastructure will collapse, people will starve, limited healthcare, limited possibility of disseminating information. Things will fall apart slowly and painfully.~~ Peak oil → rising prices of commodities; people will revolt etc., leading to the scenario described above. Even if we overcome the current crisis in capitalism or find alternative methods running out of oil will still get us. Oil shock - oil supplies found to be radically short, supplies running out ahead - transportation of goods & food (& people) becomes sharply limited - global crisis due to shortages of food and medical supplies → Real resource shortages crash into artificial scarcities of the market → eco. collapse driven / accelerated by econ. collapse. Series of events: running out of energy. 2014: lights off. The world goes blind. We rely on sound / voice for orientation / meaning making. 2016: sound off. We have just adapted to our new oral culture. A

virus that feeds on sound switches off all digital sound devices.

## 2 How can this event best be prevented?

~~Erasing all debts. But also, it could just go the other way. Financial breakdown. People realise they don't have to work that much to keep everything running.~~ Resources are scarce, so people find out what they actually need. Producing this does not take up all of everybody's time, so people will have time to organise the rest of the time freely. Even if the mildest worst-case scenario comes to pass the 'event' will be unavoidable. ~~We will kill the rich people first. Revolution! We stop voting against our own interests.~~ ~~Compassion, generosity. Be nicer. Prioritising environmental + social interests above economic ones.~~ Erase all debt. Get rid of money – destroy the notion of monetary value. Everything is free – nothing is desirable. End to vast subsidies of oil & fossil fuel industries; same subsidies poured into alt. energy research - schools & universities all teach basic eco skills (how to grow own vegetables, how to build a water filter). Regulation (to the point of near extinction) of financial futures market to better control fuel & power prices → Crowd-sourced regulation of markets & enviro standards - corporations held stringently accountable by world courts (e.g. for Bhopal disaster). By switching off the lights & sound, controlled in order to prepare.

1. Practising the fallout. People rehearse regularly in series of artificial apocalypses (with real deaths) in order to develop a routine for the apocalypse.
2. Develop millions of sound machines (so it takes longer for the virus to infect all). Develop “the light” and “the sound” machine that can survive the big fallout.
3. By replacing the apocalypse with another one. Because the world has to end anyway, soon.

## 3 What role can performance art play in preventing the apocalypse?

~~It could be something that people decide to do with their time rather than looting. They realise that, apart from keeping everything going, they have a lot of time to commit to performance art. People will set up spontaneous performance events on the barricades when they realise that nobody has come to fight them.~~ On the verge of crisis, people will rehearse the apocalypse in performances. There, they will realise that this is actually a valuable use of their time. They will stop working except for what is really needed and instead put on performance festivals. If prevention is not an option, the focus should be on mitigating its [the event's] effects. Performance art should thus concentrate on helping us through this radical and violent process of change. ~~Allows for collaboration, exchange, formulation of alternative proposals. Allows for the dissemination + enactment of alternative proposals. Exposes structures that can be challenged.~~ ~~The immediacy of performance demands attention. It will make things look nicer.~~ Carbon-neutral hyper-local performance. All performance art to be carbon-negative and provide surplus power & goods, art to the rescue of artificial scarcities! No touring (though I guess passing on ideas is okay) & all performance to be hyper-local. Also: New hybrid practices e.g. artist-engineers, nurse-architects, sculptor-doctors. New units & systems of exchange which frustrate “value” e.g. experiential delight, procedural whimsy. Assist in rehearsing by helping people not to take the consequences of the rehearsal process (deaths, dislocation, transformation, loss) too seriously. Assist in taking the ‘moment to be the real and only thing’. ‘And death shall have no dominion’. ‘Performance cannot be documented’ so there is no reason to remember. We will all learn the feeling of ‘happy (self-)disintegration’. Life is / will be sweet. We will forget ourselves and others again and again. And there will be no bloody machine to remind us of something we were / lost. Happy inner exile from the self forever!

### Notes

[1] To dismiss this scenario as fictitious might seem careless or premature, but it is nevertheless an appropriate characterisation: all prognoses are fictions until they become reality. Sociologist Elena Esposito has shown that, historically, the modern novel and the science of probability have emerged alongside each other. She argues that this is no coincidence, but that it has to do with a changed perception of the future in the 17th century: the future was no longer perceived as predetermined, and the reaction to this new experience of a radical openness and uncertainty of the future can be described as a doubling of reality that can be found in fiction as well as in the calculations of probabilities of different future scenarios.

[2] In the alternate ending to 2012, Curtis hands his son his Smartphone that he has managed to repair. “It still has all my music”, the son exclaims.

[3] How do these works from the past actually speak to the post-apocalyptic present? How do they speak to the context in which they are being encountered? This context of course is one where there are other things at stake than art – for instance, bare survival, or not to be eaten by cannibals. People are roaming the land looking for food. When the resources are scarce, do we share them, or do we start eating each other? It is such very basic questions about the “human spirit” (remember *Farewell Atlantis*) that are asked in post-apocalyptic science fiction. As an allegory for capitalism, the post-apocalyptic falls short. The problem: there is no way out, because in post-apocalyptic science fiction, unlike in capitalism, the resources are usually really scarce, and not made scarce for profit.