HNRS – 300
Persuasive Essay
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Apocalypse Now?

"I sat in the dark and thought: There's no big apocalypse. Just an endless procession of little ones."
- Neil Gaiman, *Signal to Noise*

"It happened that a fire broke out backstage in a theater. The clown came out to inform the public. They thought it was a jest and applauded. He repeated his warning. They shouted even louder. So I think the world will come to an end amid the general applause from all the wits who believe that it is a joke."
- Søren Kierkegaard

2012. It should be just like any other year, right? Google it. The search engine took 0.16 seconds, according to its count. The breakdown of the top ten results might make you nervous about the state of the Internet and, by extension, society. The first result displayed is the Wikipedia site for the year itself – including the year expressed in roman numerals, the fact that it is a leap year, as well as the fact that the year started on a Sunday in the Gregorian calendar. The 2009 disaster movie *2012* takes up two more of the results – one link takes you to the movie's Internet Movie Database page, while the other connects to Sony Pictures' official movie site. The other seven results? Apocalypse. That's right: seven out of the top ten Google search results for "2012" center around the impending doom that is supposedly rushing to meet us on December 21, 2012. Google lists a countdown, an "official website," a NASA page debunking the myths, and even a website called survive2012.com.

The Apocalypse is everywhere these days. According to Wikipedia, the entertainment industry has cranked out around sixty-eight apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic movies; fourteen of those movies were produced in the past two years *alone*. The theme works great for the

movie business – *2012* (which, coincidentally, was named well after production began in an attempt to capitalize on the apocalyptic predictions surrounding the year) raked in a staggering $225 million US. Other sources like the History Channel and even the nightly news have joined the fray, contributing to the furor.

Apocalyptic predictions are not new. Prophets have pointed to the end of the world for centuries. Anyone with basic knowledge about the life of a star knows that eventually our sun will morph into a red giant and incinerate our little planet. But with the astronomical destruction of the Earth taking place a few billion years after we're all long dead, why are we so worried about the Apocalypse occurring in our lifetimes? Does another truth exist that knows the affairs of the cosmos better than science? And where do we get the idea that the End of Days will arrive this coming December?

The current craze originated with the Maya of Mesoamerica. The Maya developed one of the most complex and accurate calendars in the history of the world – a calendar that could accurately predict lunar and solar eclipses hundreds of years after the Maya themselves disappeared. The crux of the story is that the Mayan calendar ends on December 21, 2012, and this fact – the physical termination of carved stone – has spawned countless apocalyptic theories. Theories that – while they seem to revolve around the same date – vary wildly in the destruction they propose. It is this huge variety that scholars of eschatology (from the Greek – literally, "the study of the last") consider to be one of the most fascinating aspects of the current Apocalypse craze (Barkun 11).

While we can probably discount the movie versions of zombies and aliens, there still remain enough possibilities floating around the Internet to inspire any science fiction novelist for decades. Global warming will cause the icebergs and glaciers to melt, raising sea levels and sending whole countries like Indonesia beneath the surface of the ocean. Mad scientists will

create new plagues and diseases with no cure, and terrorists will weaponize them to create pandemics to bring the world to its knees. The sun, entering peak solar activity, will send flares into orbit that are so powerful, they will set the plains of the Serengeti alight. The Earth's crust will shift one-hundred-eighty degrees in only a few hours, sending earthquakes rippling through the planet's surface and toppling skyscrapers and civilizations. The hidden planet Nibiru will careen through the solar system into our orbit, affecting the gravitational pull of all the planets and forever changing the Earth's ability to sustain life. The planets will align with the center of the Milky Way, exposing us to a powerful black hole in the middle of the galaxy. A star will explode violently, sending radiation and galactic beams through the Earth. The list seems as infinite as human imagination. Is there any truth to these accusations?

If all this talk of the End of Days is starting to make you nervous, you can rest easy: there is no science – *none* – to back up any apocalyptic theory about 2012. Our doom is based on a combination of distorted facts and pure science fiction. A supernova near the Earth would be a tragedy, but there are no stars that fit the bill even remotely close enough to our planet to do any damage. Polar shift – the idea that the Earth's crust will rotate 180 degrees within the span of a few hours – is both ludicrous and physically impossible. Planet Nibiru simply doesn't exist – if a planet that size spent the past few decades of its orbit rocketing towards Earth, astronomers would have seen it and tracked its progress. Planetary alignment has happened before and is an astronomical curiosity, but nothing catastrophic has ever come of it – not to mention the fact that the Earth and the Sun roughly align with the Milky Way's center every single year on the winter solstice – December 21 (Townsend).

But most importantly considering the current paranoia: the Maya did not predict the Apocalypse. Yes, the physical calendar ends at the close of this year. But do you freak out when your *The Far Side* calendar reaches December 31? No, because you are aware that time exists

beyond the methods we use to measure it. As snarky YouTube debunker C.G.P. Grey quips, “After all, the amount of time in the universe is infinite and the amount of stone is limited. So, at some point, the Maya had to stop carving calendars” (Grey 2012). This is, perhaps, the largest hole in the Mayan Apocalypse theory. Why did the Maya stop carving their calendars? We’ll never know for sure. But it seems more likely that they stopped making calendars when the conquistadors crossed the Atlantic and put an end to the entire civilization, as opposed to following some secret knowledge about the machinations of the universe.

The Maya created three calendars: the solar calendar, the ceremonial calendar, and what is known as the Long Count calendar, and it is this calendar which has excited all our current doomsayers. The Long Count calendar measured vast swaths of time that far outlasted the Maya who created it. In this calendar, the Maya called a day a k’in, twenty k’in a winal, eighteen winals (360 days) a tun, twenty tuns (about 20 years) a k’atun, and twenty k’atuns a b’ak’tun, about 144,000 days or just over 394 years (Green Feb. 9 2012).

Similar to how the Christian Gregorian calendar that we currently rely on counts forward (and backward) from the birth of Jesus Christ, the Maya Long Count calendar counts forward from the date of the last creation. The Maya believed that we are currently in the fourth creation, after the gods decided the previous three failed. The calendar is so precise that scholars have actually calculated backwards to the specific date of the last creation: August 11, 3114 B.C. To mark time from that date, the Maya started with the number of b’ak’tuns, followed by k’atuns, tuns, winals, and finally k’in until they reached the specific day (Green Feb. 9 2012). For example, the Long Count form of my birthday – February 26, 1992 – is 12.18.18.15.16. Independence Day for the United States is 12.8.0.1.13 (Hartley).

On December 21, 2012, the Mayan Long Count calendar completes the thirteenth b’ak’tun. Like the recent entrance into the new millennium, when 1999 turned into 2000, the

Long Count calendar goes from 12.19.19.17.19 to 13.0.0.0.0. That's it. Part of the paranoia, beyond the physical lack of more calendar, stems from the Mayan belief that the previous creation lasted for exactly thirteen b'ak'tun; however, there is nothing in Mayan lore about the world ending with the close of this current b'ak'tun (Green Feb. 9 2012). In fact, evidence against this fear abounds.

First and foremost, the Long Count calendar doesn't end with b'ak'tun – there is yet another grouping of time, this one the length of twenty b'ak'tuns (2,880,000 days) called a pictun. Something tells me that an ancient civilization with (perhaps) the power to predict the Apocalypse would not create an additional unit of time that goes beyond the life cycle of the Earth. Additionally, there are Maya Long Count texts that refer to dates well beyond the coming winter solstice. For example, an inscription from the seventh century A.D. by King Pacal of Palenque predicts that a celebration of the anniversary of his accession to the throne would occur on October 15, 4772 (Krupp).

So the apocalypse craze is limited to a few crackpots, right? Well, not really, no. First of all, the sheer number of hits online makes it seem very likely that these apocalyptic predictions reach a very wide audience. So many anxious Americans have emailed questions to NASA that the organization took time out of its busy schedule to compile dozens of web pages with answers to anything and everything pertaining to Doomsday 2012. NASA's "Ask an Astrobiologist" has received thousands of questions about 2012, and posted more than five hundred answers in response. The demand is so large that "Ask an Astrobiologist" compiled a list of the top twenty frequently asked questions with detailed answers (Morrison).

Additionally, almost all of the people submitting questions to NASA aren't crazies who lost touch with reality years ago. Historically, people who believe in eschatological prophecies comprise all demographics, socioeconomic groups, and levels of education (O'Leary 9). The

evidence is all around you – a huge amount of regular, ordinary people both know about the apocalyptic predictions of 2012 and have formed opinions on them. The Apocalypse has also figured prominently in movies, television series, and even the nightly news. The History Channel, once a paragon of educational television, has cranked out multiple "documentaries" on the Apocalypse of 2012 (not to mention films like "Nazi Prophecies" or programs on the existence of aliens, but the downward spiral of the History Channel is material for a different essay).

In one of these doomsday documentaries, *Decoding the Past: Doomsday 2012*, the History Channel brings in a slew of "experts" – astrologists, historians, archaeologists – to discuss the imminent apocalypse. They examine prophecies from across both the world and time: the Oracle of Delphi, the Roman Sibyll, the Book of Revelations, the Chinese I Ching, the Maya, the British Mother Shipton, the Lakota Sioux shaman Black Elk, the wizard/prophet Merlin, and even an artificial intelligence on the internet. While the apparent convergence of all these disparate prophecies is certainly interesting, the documentary goes out of its way to treat the assertions as fact. While the History Channel does bring in scholars to act as "naysayers" and argue against the documentary's assertions, the film's narrator immediately dismisses those voices of reason as nothing more than skeptics (*Decoding the Past*).

It's obvious that the Apocalypse sells. But why? Why does our society – our species, even – expend so much energy worrying about the end? In his seminal study *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*, Stephen O'Leary looks at the Apocalypse and apocalyptic discourse through the lens of a rhetor in an attempt to create a unified theory of the nature and success of apocalyptic traditions. "The story of the apocalyptic tradition," O'Leary writes, "is one of community building, in which human individuals and collectives constitute their identities through shared mythic narratives that confront the problem of evil in time and history"

(O'Leary 6). Time and evil represent two connected aspects of apocalyptic prophecies that are crucial to their success and durability.

Almost every culture has both a creation story and an apocalypse story – an ultimate beginning followed by an ultimate ending, to draw from Kenneth Burke (O'Leary 25). There is a natural correlation here to the beginning, middle, and end of a human's life. As humans, we live every day with the knowledge that our days are numbered, our time limited. We come to terms with our own mortality, and then we simply extrapolate – and it's not a huge mental leap. If those who came before me died, and I am going to die, then the people I know will also die. The people who come after me will die. My society and my culture will probably eventually die. Other species have gone extinct, why not *Homo sapiens*? If species can die, why not the world? Why not time itself?

We are already well aware of our own mortality. We obsess about it. Worrying about the mortality of the world seems like a natural progression. The idea of a cosmic timeline places us in a much larger context. I would suggest that worrying about our mortality through the much scarier lens of the end of the world distracts us from our own unknown expiration dates.

This is where O'Leary's idea of the importance of evil in apocalyptic traditions comes into play. It's easy to extrapolate from our personal mortality to the death of our culture and society, but it's much harder to remain rational about the concept. The symbolism of evil becomes an easy tool for thinking about the death of our culture, because the negation of our very way of life usually arises from either an external attack, a "demonic Other," or through the moral and ethical failure of the community itself (O'Leary 32). If evil exists in the world, then good probably does too. If evil will attempt to bring about the Apocalypse, then good will attempt to save us all. This lends a moral framework to our lives – a way of living that we can emulate. If we strive for good, perhaps we have something worth living for.

The concept of evil is not alien or even fantastical, and unfortunately it is something that many people have to face on a daily basis. Apocalyptic traditions and conspiracy theories concern themselves with helping us understand our history and the almost mythic struggle between good and evil. They develop “symbolic resources” that help us to define and deal with the idea of evil (O’Leary 5-6). As with time, apocalyptic discourse places small, local occurrences of evil within a larger context. If there is evil here, surely there is some great evil out in the universe.

If discourse about an ultimate beginning and end is accepted by large numbers of people, it enters into the larger social context as strategies or coping mechanisms for daily lives (O’Leary 26). Just think about religion. It’s common practice in the United States, especially among Christians or at least the religious, to console someone with a phrase like “everything happens for a reason” or “the world/God works in mysterious ways.” Ideas of an apocalypse are not limited to the paranoid – apocalyptic discourse comprises an important part of our social rhetoric and the way we live our day-to-day lives.

These underlying themes are what make ideas of the Apocalypse so powerful. In the article *Angels & Engines: The Culture of Apocalypse*, Marina Warner argues that although most apocalyptic discourse is filled with inconsistencies, believers still maintain their faith due to those underlying themes of time and evil. It doesn’t even matter if a prophecy fails to occur – believers will simply go back to the text to divine the next secret message, one that they will hopefully interpret correctly this time around (Warner 24).

The ambiguity of prophecies means that it is the interpretation of the prophecy that was wrong, not the prophecy itself. That is why the believers in Apocalypse-by-Nibiru refused to abandon their prediction when the prophecy failed to come to fruition on its original date in 2003. Their interpretation of the Sumerian account must have been wrong, but the account itself

was true. They simply moved the date of their apocalypse to the next best thing: December 21, 2012, the date other ancient civilizations pointed to. Two civilizations that practiced human sacrifice have to be better than one, right? The importance of apocalyptic predictions does not lie in their validity – there are too many incongruencies and too little evidence for that.

Rather, their importance lies in "what people actually do believe (however arbitrarily) and what use they make of these beliefs" (O'Leary 27). The question is not who believes in the Apocalypse, but in what Apocalypse they believe. Every single person subscribes to some account of the end of the world, and the prevailing account says a lot about our society. Our culture believes in an Apocalypse – a scientific one. Astronomy says that one day, billions of years from now, the sun will expand into a red giant and its girth will engulf the Earth. How's that for fire and brimstone?

This says a lot about us. We see time as an infinite continuum. It existed long before us, and it will continue long after the Earth's destruction. Cosmic evil does not exist in the realm of pure science. Instead of evil, I would argue that we fear our own powerlessness. We are man! We are the top of the food chain. We changed the very nature of the planet we call home. Our atoms came from the stars that pepper the night sky. We have travelled from the depths of the oceans to the empty expanse of outer space. But all this means nothing in the face of the universe. Our own sun will eventually destroy us, and we can do nothing to stop it. Our Apocalypse is not an epic clash of good and evil; rather, it is the universe's inevitable response to our own hubris.

This scientific Apocalypse removes evil from the discourse and, by extrapolation, removes good from the discourse as well. Science does not necessarily offer a moral framework or a reason for living, besides the pursuit of knowledge. This does not work for some people.

We see good and evil every day – surely there is more to life than fact-finding. What have we lost by praying on the altar of science? To what truths, if any, does science blind us?

What do people do when the prevailing culture does not supply the answers they are looking for about the nature of the cosmos? They import theories. Enter the Maya from stage left. The Maya: a stone-age civilization steeped in ancient wisdom, untainted by modern science. Their astronomy reflected a greater truth, tracking the motions of the universe. What did they see in the heavens that we cannot? What secrets have we missed without the ancient magic that disappeared in the face of scientific advancement?

How can anyone convince these people that we have nothing to worry about in December? The argument against Doomsday 2012 is a scientific one – but the people who subscribe to theories like the Mayan Apocalypse prediction have specifically turned away from science in their quest for answers. No amount of scientists or experts will be able to cow the onslaught of apocalypse paranoia.

Whether or not we need to convince the Apocalypse-mongerers that they're wrong is a moot point – it's already too late. All of the current predictions are factually wrong – some egregiously so – but that hasn't stopped those same predictions from permanently shaping our social consciousness. Over the past few years, the Maya have been transformed from a fascinating Mesoamerican civilization to Omnipotent and Omnipresent Prophets of Doom and Destruction More Advanced than Modern Scientists. Even after we survive the winter solstice of 2012, I predict that the shift in perception will stick around for a long time.

And who knows? Maybe the most strident Maya believers will take a rain check for the civilization's predictions of the end of the world. The prophet Nostradamus – who, miraculously, has remained relatively removed from the 2012 apocalypse predictions – will undoubtedly come back with another rediscovered quatrain that predicts the next catastrophe. Of course, St.

Malachy's prophetic description of 112 popes will elicit quite a stir soon, as it ends in apocalyptic glory with "Peter the Roman," supposed successor to the current Pope Benedict XVI. Perhaps one of the other Latin American civilizations, the Aztecs and the Inca among them, will join the fray in an effort to benefit from all the publicity like their brethren the Maya.

But that's a worry for another day, another year. For now, just enjoy the slew of disaster movies that Hollywood cranks out. Maybe chuckle at the man wandering around in a tin foil hat. But the next time the thought of Oblivion keeps you up at night, consider the imagery that comes to mind. The truths hidden inside those fears might surprise you.

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