

Imagining the Apocalypse (London, 12 Oct 19)

The Courtauld Institute of Art, Oct 12, 2019

Deadline: Jan 14, 2019

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Shaped by different religious traditions, the apocalypse has been called upon throughout history to articulate collective anxieties, act as a warning, or a yearned-for spiritual salvation. These contradictory and competing aims behind imagining the end of the world in specific cultural moments make it a fertile ground for analysis. This conference will ask: what are the politics of picturing annihilation, from the early Christian Church to climate change today? This call for papers welcomes submissions from all historical periods and geographic regions. From medieval mosaics to Hieronymus Bosch, Albrecht Dürer's woodcut *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1498) to Keith Piper's critique of Thatcherite-era racism, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1984) – culture has played a crucial role in imagining the apocalypse.

Claiming the end is nigh has always been political. The Democratic Unionist Party's 1970s 'Save Ulster from Sodomy' campaign, for example, invoked the threat of Biblical floods: "The legalising of homosexuality would open the floodgates of immorality ... The consequences of such a deluge would be grim". What does this nightmarish vision tell us about the way we direct violence at others when fearing for our own survival? Rather than call for a saviour and salvation, could there also be an opportunity to contemplate and perhaps even come to terms with feelings of powerlessness in the face of our own annihilation? If the apocalypse is employed as a metaphor – a framework for conceiving reality, rather than a faithful portrait of it – it is regularly used to describe situations that are not literally the end of the world.

If we scratch under the surface, doomsday is often evoked time and time again to articulate a worldview of 'us' versus 'them': the desire to re-establish a sense of mastery over those perceived to be threatening. In 2017 *The Sun* claimed Jeremy Corbyn "would be a disaster in No10" – printing 1970s photographs of warehouses filled with coffins and rubbish piled high in the streets; while *The Guardian* wondered "How soon will the 'ice apocalypse' come?" and "are we sleepwalking towards a technological apocalypse?" – telling readers to look out for "Seven signs of the neoliberal apocalypse". In January, online blogs asked "Is the fatberg apocalypse upon us?" – and in June *The Sunday Times* reported a UK government "Doomsday" plan for Brexit. By August, *The Times* reeled in horror at the "End of days feel in Westminster".

Twenty-four hours later, historian David Olusoga warned: "Just as today's historians are struck by the parties and general joviality that characterised the long hot summer of 1914, future scholars might wonder how we remained so calm as we approached the edge of the cliff". The fear that underscores these catastrophic accounts may be sincere, but if we take a step back from the immediate sense of dread they provoke – how can we unpack the politics and psychoanalytic

stakes at play? Can we look across time and space to make sense of how such anxieties are intimately bound up with their specific historical moments, and that considering them comparatively can throw into relief how power and violence often fuel these fantasies of disaster? This interdisciplinary conference welcomes proposals that consider imaginative representations of the end of the world from antiquity to the present day.

Potential topics might include (but are not limited to):

- Gender studies, LGBTQ+ politics, heterosexuality
- Migration, racism, empire, whiteness
- Industrial Revolution, fossil fuels, nuclear meltdown/war, climate change
- Food, eating, starvation, stockpiling
- Financial crisis and disaster capitalism
- Religious art
- Technological change (e.g. the invention of telecommunication/artificial intelligence)
- The Gothic, nightmares, monsters, magic, zombies, contagion, disease, the occult, spiritualism
- Nationalism, conflict, civil war, group identity and collective violence, terrorism, anti-war activism
- Generational change and inter-generational conflict
- Visions of the future and science fiction
- Moral panics, addition as metaphor, fears of societal collapse
- Dark tourism and the entertainment industry

Please send a short bio with proposals of no more than 300 words for 20-minute papers to edwin.coomasaru@courtauld.ac.uk by 14th January 2019. The conference will take place at The Courtauld Institute of Art (University of London) on Saturday 12 October 2019.

Reference:

CFP: Imagining the Apocalypse (London, 12 Oct 19). In: ArtHist.net, Sep 16, 2018 (accessed Jul 12, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/18887>>.