

Book Reviews

2012: Decoding the Countercultural Apocalypse. Edited by Joseph Gelfer (2011). Sheffield, UK: Equinox. 203 pages. ISBN: 978-1-84553-639-8 (hb). AUD\$60.00.

The very fact that you are reading this review indicates that the world, or at least civilisation as we know it, did not end, according to the Maya ‘claim’, on December 21, 2012.¹ I make this declaration because Joseph Gelfer’s anthology, *2012: Decoding the Countercultural Apocalypse*, is a collection of essays by noted scholars on the topic of apocalyptic ideologies (especially ‘Mayanism’) and the proposed end of the world in 2012; not that the book makes any claims supporting this end-date. This timely book was actually published in 2011, but I have stalled publication of my review until 2013 where I would be in a better position to put paid to the idea that the chiliastic and millenarian obsessions critiqued in *2012* are anything more than that. Not that I am capitalizing on hind-sight which is always 20/20—I say this because, time and time again, when it comes to end-times and doomsdays, the prophets and the devices of prophets are never right.

There is, of course, much more to say on the matter than simply debugging and discounting predictions of global catastrophe, and this is where Gelfer’s book *2012* is key. Some casually-minded aficionados, who feel they don’t need a book like *2012* because they believe they have always had the truth in their pockets, would boldly (if not insolently) declare that ancient civilisations are inherently driven by superstition, and the religious musings of these civilisations are primarily concocted as a means of social control—after all, there is nothing more disarming to a people than to be told that bad behaviour incurs wrathful vengeance from jealous and fickle gods. While that position is sometimes tenable, such scepticism could not be more in error in this instance—as Coe, in his Preface to *2012*, states: “Maya Classic Period monuments record calculations of dates millions of years into the future” (p. ix), so it is likely that the last thing *2012* suggests to in-the-know Maya is the end of the world (same goes for anyone in the West who bothered to seek out this fact).

¹ Alternatively, and less dramatically, one might wonder whether the human race, post-2012, is now able to boast a measurable change in consciousness, since December 21, 2012 was also said by some ‘New-Agers’ to mark just such a transformation.

So, what was this day in late-December 2012 all about? The contributors of *2012* attempt to answer that question, but a number of them also discuss the social ramifications and influences of the doomsday motif on western culture—this is where *2012* is most interesting. If it is not apparent to readers by now, I should mention the fact that I chose to review *2012* because its main theme, prophecy, is closely related to that most intriguing of parapsychological topics, precognition. Ironically, *2012* is not a book with contributions from parapsychologists or, in fact, from psychologists (possibly a welcome relief for some readers). Although the disciplines of Anthropology, English, Politics, Art History, Linguistics, Physics, Astronomy, and a few minor sub-disciplines, are represented in *2012*, I personally find the absence of Psychology and Parapsychology to be an oversight, and the exclusion is never explained. Many times I felt that this anthropologist, or that physicist, might have benefited from the occasional insights of a psychologist or parapsychologist and, from my review, the reader will detect these omissions on occasion.

2012 starts with a brief introduction to the topic by the editor Joseph Gelfer; the chapter also includes a brief chapter-by-chapter outline. Chapter 2 is “The 2012 Phenomenon” by Robert K. Sitler. He argues that we have no certainty about Maya’s selection of end dates, or whether the Maya believed anything significant would happen. Some individuals highly regarded in various cultures around the world believe the closing days of 2012 merely pinpoint a “new stage in human consciousness” (p. 21), or transformation of sorts. Sitler concludes that the validity of the date is irrelevant as it is the believer who self-validates his/her own ideas, but he nevertheless concedes that the date in question, and what happens at and around that time, will be the ultimate test.

In Chapter 3 (“Maya Prophecies, 2012, and the Problematic Nature of Truth”), the concept of transformation in cosmos and/or consciousness is again highlighted. Like Sitler, Mark Van Stone also indicates that the Maya did not associate the 2012 date with destruction or even change. The Maya were “obsessed” with a kind of “Grand Unified Theory of Everything” (p. 26): Time/space/colours/nature/heaven/earth, etc., were all inter-related meaningfully, but attention is drawn to a similar prejudice in the West. Stone looks at some Mesoamerican mythologies and finds hints (“whispers”) that the gods themselves were explicitly involved in the meting out of justice (punishment) for various intransigencies, and some dates are specified, although the various end-time prophecies from the various cultures do not necessarily correlate chronologically.

Chapter 4, “Mayanism Comes of (New) Age”, sees John W. Hoopes concur with Sitler that the “2012 phenomenon is a New Age appropriation of an ancient Maya calendar” (p. 39), and Hoopes compares it to Noah’s Ark and the Great Flood to invoke a moral lesson as well as sundry New

Age beliefs. Hoopes describes the aims of New Age groups whose intentions are to draw attention to either impending *physical* disasters (global warming, pole shift, solar flares, earthquakes, etc.) or *metaphysical* shifts (i.e., transformations of consciousness), just as Sitler pointed out in the preceding chapter. Either way, the world is meant to be renewed. Interestingly, Hoopes finds that Mayanism (i.e., “the attribution of non-Maya beliefs to the ancient Maya”, p. 45), dates back to the time of Columbus who tried to prove that his discovery was foretold in ancient prophecies—the wealth from the New World was meant to fund a reconquest of Jerusalem by Ferdinand and Isabella! From there, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ would eventuate, only Columbus believed it would happen in 1700. Hoopes concluded that we will not see the end of the use of the Maya calendar for purposes of “self-aggrandisement” (p. 56).

In Pete Lentini’s “The 2012 Milieu: Hybridity, Diversity, and Stigmatised Knowledge” (Chapter 5), “stigmatised knowledge” is defined as “claims to truth” that are “verified” by subaltern groups (e.g., New-Agers), yet which “institutions” (i.e., mainstream/university scientists) regard as “error” (p. 60). This knowledge can be “*forgotten*” (e.g., what the Atlanteans knew), “*superseded*” (astrology, presumably in the case of Sun-Signs), “*ignored*” (like folk medicine), “*rejected*” (as with UFO abductions), or “*suppressed*” (e.g., cancer cures). To demonstrate “stigmatised knowledge” in use by subaltern groups, Lentini tries to tap into the mind-set of YouTube posters who upload videos on 2012 phenomena such as droughts, floods, and hurricanes. This dramatically illustrative material is used to indicate that the worst is (was?) yet to come—deadline date being 21 December 2012. Apart from their above-average “pessimistic” tone, these videos appear to present messages that take us in “different directions from their original authors’ [e.g., History Channel’s] intention” (p. 78). Lentini’s point is that deviant forms of knowledge can have an original source that is stigmatised itself, but holds a more acceptable place, culturally speaking. What is not emphasized in this chapter is how “institutions” can be wrong for very long periods of time, so that examples of what they would call “stigmatised knowledge” are in fact *not* “errors”—this knowledge *too* can be “*forgotten*” (e.g., treating scurvy [Bown, 2004]), “*superseded*” (e.g., astrology in the case of Gauquelin’s [1983] Mars Effect), “*ignored*” (e.g., Da Vinci’s discovery of cholesterol [Boon, 2009]), “*rejected*” (e.g., continental drift [Wegener, 1929/1966]), or “*suppressed*” (e.g., JFK’s assassination conspiracy [Lane, 1966]).

Chapter 6 (“Chichén Itsá and Chicken Little”) follows conveniently from Chapter 5 on this issue of how knowledge is established, and who has the mandate on that process. Kristine Larsen starts by defining ‘pseudoscience’ (which, ironically, describes much of science generally), and she covers the proposed 2012 cataclysmic event, although she stresses

that this hypothesized event was taken seriously by many scientists who couched the event in scientifically acceptable terms such as change in the Earth's magnetic field, continental shifts, planetary alignments, etc. Each of these is investigated as possible 2012 threats to the planet, but our fears are allayed. Larsen concludes that we must avert ourselves from unjustified *cosmophobia* (fear of a devouring cosmos).

Andrea Austin reviews Roland Emmerich's film *2012* in Chapter 7, calling it a 'simple truth' (p. 108), relating the film's message to a kind of "folk wisdom" (p. 109). Like Hoopes in Chapter 4, Austin brings in Noah's Ark and mentions modern archetypal equivalents that recur throughout the film. So-called "vessels of escape" include cars and aircraft in the modern era. To me, vessels of escape must be seen as more than plot devices deemed necessary merely because survival, and therefore the course of the film, is compromised without them. Taking the archetypes literally (and only literally) is more than damaging to the 'higher' message of *2012*, for it lets weakness and vulnerability of human flesh trump our strength and indestructibility. However, when a symbolic perspective is adopted, the vessel can be interpreted *as* us; rather than what *carries* us. Without that perspective, all Austin can offer is to 'keep it real', reminding us (as if that were necessary) that destruction is not ultimate for everyone, and there will be survivors, while the 'problem of evil' (i.e., who deserves to be saved, who should perish, and who decides) must remain unresolved and unresolvable. This pessimistic denouement is emphasized by the sorry assumption that there usually is no globally effective means of intervening in such worldwide catastrophes, other than ride them out—as Austin concludes, *2012*'s message is age-old folk wisdom: "live every day as if it were your last; take every chance" (p. 121). Such hedonistic advice is ultimately not helpful or inspiring—indeed it does not ask or task the individual to soul-search, aspire to personal betterment, and aim for psychological enrichment, but only encourages egotistical self-serving philosophies and behaviour that may ultimately be destructive to self and others. The individual's personal (internal) journey must trump any external journey, or there really is no point to an existence defined *exclusively* by rules that turn the world into a kind of casino.

In Chapter 8 ("2012, Visionary Arts, and Psytrance Culture"), Graham St John takes the reader into the domain of *psystance* (i.e., psychedelic trance). The possibility of a "deep millenarian sensibility" (p. 125) is inherent in psytrance which can, for example, involve electronic dance music to raise "consciousness and ecological awareness" (p. 125). The so-called "transitional mood" is the key to mind expansion and positive change, stimulated by *psychoactives* (LSD, DMT, ayahuasca, etc.), 'indigenes' (i.e., native culture and wisdom), and technology (i.e., machine transcendence). Psychoactivity (my word) is culture meeting counter-

culture, incorporating elements of western high-tech culture and indigenous culture (lore, prophecies, practice), from which might spring a ‘delivered’ or ‘realized’ self with a promising future. St John is sceptical about a movement that merely appropriates but gives no clear reason, map, or guidelines that comprehensively explain the purpose behind the appropriation. I can only agree—while St John concedes that criticism itself cannot falsify the possibility that “something funky’s coming in the future” (p. 140), the *psychoactivated leaders* (my term) of the 2012 movement are, in a sense, dulled in their heightened states to the degree that the future as a ‘promised land’, insofar as they tell it, actually lacks a *physical* purpose as much as, I would say, the Old Testament Promised Land, both of which are (or were) probably never more than desired and desirable psychological end states. I nevertheless do profess a liking for the genuine ‘shamanistic’ philosophy of Terence McKenna who does seem to offer something more palpable than, say, Timothy Leary ever did with his dubious smatterings.

Joseph Gelfer’s Chapter “In a Prophetic Voice” (subtitled “Australasia 2012”), demonstrates further this ‘appropriation’ of 2012 motifs that St John and others discuss, and shows that it is indeed worldwide, giving examples throughout Australasian countries. Gelfer, borrowing from Brunk and Young (2009, cited in Gelfer’s chapter), points out that this borrowing of cultural elements is offensive because it threatens the culture being plundered. These accusations are challenged by those who feel that there is no intention to steal from other cultures (how is that even possible?) because spiritual beliefs “inhabit a complex space between indigenous and non-indigenous cultures” anyway (p. 157). In fact, there is at least one example, in the person of Nick Armstrong (a conspiracy theorist), who I did not feel borrowed, (mis)appropriated, or stole anything remotely indigenous—he merely sees 2012 as a point in time where the aims of those behind the so-called New World Order might coalesce. But Gelfer’s closing words are worth repeating—perhaps “the transition to a new form of consciousness will slowly begin”, but only unless and not until ‘2012 advocates’ “contemplate the fundamental political nature of *be the change you wish to be*” (p. 159, my italics).

In Chapter 10 (“Approaching 2012: Modern Misconceptions Versus Reconstructing Ancient Maya Perspectives”), Gelfer has saved the best till last. I wish to use up a little more space than usual on this final chapter by John Major Jenkins, because I feel he deserves the last word. Without flinching, Jenkins gets to the heart of where the 2012 myth comes from—it’s a “talking point for a dumbed-down mass media that thrives on sensationalism” (p. 163). For 20 years Jenkins has been trying to point out that there is “no evidence” for the myth being an actual prediction of an end of the world in 2012. Jenkins wants to set the record straight by choosing mainly to reconstruct an authentic Maya belief. It is evident that some

popular writers and their New Age models are misinformed by miscalculations of end-dates or other “factual errors”. The list of transgressors is sobering, but Jenkins achieves the most important objective of any researcher by informing us without bias or prejudice, which is far from the aims of those who wish “to carve out a market share of the burgeoning 2012 cottage industry” (p. 165). Most importantly, Jenkins debunks the idea that the 2012 end-date is only a New Age myth. He proposes, by considerable weight of good science, a (to use his words) “rare astronomical alignment that occurs within the cycle of the precession of the equinoxes, which culminates on December solstices in the years around 2012” (p. 169). These culminations involve our Milky Way galaxy. In short, December 21, 2012, is no myth, Maya or otherwise.

It is unfortunate that Jenkins has been unable to win support from academia—worse still, that his theory and observations have been met with hostility. I must ask, Are we not witnessing academia in the act of constructing “stigmatized knowledge” (p. 60), whether we call it “*ignored*”, “*rejected*”, or “*suppressed*” (p. 60)? It pains me to say that the upshot here is that it’s not just Jenkins, but ancient astronomers too who are portrayed as inept and unknowing (for a case in point, see Larsen’s Chapter 6, p. 99). Jenkins spends most of his chapter defending his theory against the fallacious arguments of his detractors. Making a crucial link to the theme of the book (and in agreement with many of the above contributors to *2012*), Jenkins does not make any claims as to what the special date ‘causes’—not “pole flips, solar flares, or *anything* necessarily” (p. 179), or even “the end of time, the end of [the Maya] calendar, or the end of the world” (p. 179). So, what does December 21, 2012 signify? The date seems to have been

conceived as a cosmological renewal, a calendrical and mythological creation event inextricably interwoven with the recognition by the ancient Maya that . . . that future day the sun would align with the crossroads of the Milky Way and the ecliptic at the southern terminus of the dark rift in the Milky Way. (p. 179)

I don’t believe readers need to be astronomically inclined to make sense of Jenkins’s thesis (NB: readers should nevertheless revisit Larsen’s Chapter 6; particularly, pp. 98-99), and it certainly draws a clear distinction between the popular nonsense and media hype that Jenkins criticises. But in a broader sense, and necessary abandonment of the catastrophe motif, Jenkins is not so far removed in principle from what the New Agers were trying to tell us all along—that it’s as good a time as any for us, the people of Earth, to put on our thinking caps and revision our world for the better. However, no astrologically or astronomically causal relationships are demonstrated between these galactic/planetary events and the human events on Earth, and

this is true of all the theories presented in 2012. This issue is perhaps one of the omissions I referred to above, but it would have taken an unbiased academic of Gauquelin's stature to cover it honestly.

In closing, I draw from Hoopes' Chapter 4: From the archaeological evidence, Hoopes states the fact that the Maya had quite a negative impact on their environment, and they were warlike and certainly not united in their beliefs. These findings suggest to Hoopes that the Maya should be seen as *never* holding an idea of a post-2012 Utopia, whereas he claims the idea of a post-2012 Utopia is unique to later belief systems, including those New-Age movements, proponents of which believe that only they can rightfully appropriate the Maya prophecy. However, I fail to see a difference between the Maya then, and our society now—our optimism for a New Age, with a view to physical and metaphysical transformations, may very well parallel the hopes of a sub-group in Maya society who appealed to the gods for salvation; those hopes clearly wrestling with the destructive impulses by which all societies live and die. After all, did not Eisenhower speak to, and target, his Chiefs of Staff and the Captains of Industry when he warned the people of the United States (indeed the world) about the perils of the military-industrial complex? Who listened, and what has changed? A positive vision is only made meaningful because, and not in spite, of the negativity that abounds in a given society.

Even with the few oversights I have pointed out, in addition to the fact that most of the contributors echo each others' ideas and conclusions, readers should not be discouraged from reading Gelfer's multi-disciplinary compilation. As I have tried to show, 2012 is a cornucopia of ideas that will give readers much to think about for a very long time; or at least until the next time the world comes to an end.

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Shamanism and Psi: Imagery Cultivation as an Alternative to the Ganzfeld Protocol. Lance Storm and Adam, J. Rock (Eds.). (2011). Sydney: AIPR, Inc. ISBN-13: 978-0-9870772-0-2 (pb). AUD\$25.00.

Lance Storm and Adam Rock make many useful and important points in this first of the AIPR Monographs. They indicate several possible limitations in the usually accepted claims that the Ganzfeld procedure is truly psi-favorable; they point to the general absence of active cognitive approaches in psi retrieval studies (with the exception of remote viewing studies); they summarize briefly but well the major findings and issues in several areas usually considered psi-favorable (i.e., relaxation, dreams, hypnosis, meditation); they present issues in the 'noise-reduction' approach to psi retrieval, and they present a shamanic-like journeying protocol as a promising new method for enhancing psi retrieval. All these suggestions will prove useful to researchers engaged in studying psi in the laboratory. The authors also present the results of the first run of their new experimental protocol which tests some of the views presented in this monograph. *William Braud, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA, USA.*

