

# Apocalyptic Process

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## Abstract

Joanna Demers speaks of apocalypse as an “unveiling” – in the real world, we are only just finding out what an “apocalypse” might look like, and how it affects creative practice. I propose that as a composer/improviser, I am actively engaged in seeking out apocalypse. This article examines what I see as the inherently “apocalyptic” nature of the creative process, and situates it in the context of the pandemic through my own experience of its effects on my work. While living through the pandemic has had a debilitating effect on my ability to produce work, the apocalypse-seeking composer in me has always had an eye on channelling this bleakness into new ways of working, as I find myself slowly rediscovering my relationship with my practice.

**Keywords:** apocalypse, composition, process, improvisation, creative practice, drone

## Biography

Varun Kishore is a composer from Kolkata, India. His work explores interdisciplinary approaches to music technology, literature, and the audiovisual, with a focus on designing frameworks for composition and improvisation to investigate what he sees as the “apocalyptic” nature of creative practice. His current areas of interest include drone music, digital instrument and interface design, alternative notation, and video. Varun is a graduate of the London College Of Music (BMus Popular Music Performance, 2012) and Goldsmiths, University Of London (MMus Creative Practice, 2019). He built and ran a studio (Seagull Sound) at the Seagull Foundation for the Arts in Kolkata from 2014-2017. He is currently a PhD candidate in the Composition and Computer Technologies program at the University of Virginia. [website](#)

## Apocalyptic Process

I want to stay with the trouble, and the only way I know to do that is in generative joy, terror, and collective thinking [Haraway 2016, 31].

For a large part of 2020, mired as I was in pandemic-induced despair and inaction, unable to create – or indeed, to *think* of creating – I would have given anything to flip a switch and enter a frame of mind where that was possible. As the months wore on, I began to realize that not only was there no easy way out, this cloud had become such a large part of my life that I wasn't sure whether exorcising it was even possible. I began to wonder whether, rather than thinking about it as something to be ashamed of, guilty about; something that needed to be “overcome,” something that didn't “contribute” – *was there a way to embrace it, to use it?* To accept its crippling impact on my process and take it into account when (and if) I was once again able to create work in the future? To “stay with the trouble”, as Donna Haraway puts it, eschewing fanciful ideals of “restoration” – which are unlikely to manifest – in favour of “the more modest possibilities of partial recuperation and getting on together” [2016, 10]. This idea of “getting on together” to me applies equally well to “getting on” with *myself*, in particular the sense of dread that has pervaded my life this year.

Before the pandemic arrived, I had been exploring the “apocalyptic” nature of the compositional process. Joanna Demers sees writing as “an exercise in holding off death” [2015, 50]. I argue that this applies to composition as well; the “deaths” we are trying to stave off might include the death of creativity, the death of an idea, the death of motivation; but perhaps most significantly – and especially now, in the middle of a pandemic – the death of process as a whole. The end of the compositional process is, in one way or another, inevitable. I propose that as a composer and improviser, I am actively engaged in seeking out apocalypse. To me, composition involves designing frameworks that enable improvisation, and then embracing the resulting uncertainty. When the end of a piece finally arrives, it is a “revelation.” This framing led me to think of composition as an *apocalyptic* process – despite its cataclysmic associations, “apocalypse” literally means “revelation.” The simultaneous inevitability and unknowability of apocalyptic occurrences presents a capacity for *surprise* that is closely mirrored in my compositional approach. There is also a certain futility to this process, since no amount of painstaking replication will produce the same result twice; it is also conceivable that a “planned” ending may be thwarted.

In the real world, we are only just discovering what apocalypse truly entails. Far from being an *event*, it has revealed itself to be a slow-burning presence seeping into every aspect of our daily lives. Every interaction fraught with risk; streets deserted; pleasures great and small, once taken for granted, now indefinitely postponed “until this passes.” Are we, as a species, hard-wired to be optimistic, or is this simply a defence mechanism in the face of a crisis whose scale we cannot imagine? Toby Ord writes that if humanity faces a truly existential catastrophe, we “will not just fail to fulfil our potential, but this very potential itself will be permanently lost” [2020, 70]. Whilst this pandemic will not result in the complete and irrevocable destruction of human civilization and potential, Ord's words resonate strongly with overwhelming *individual* fears – there have been times this year where I feared my creative paralysis was inescapable, rendering all potential for

future composition lost. Our inability to fathom the true scale of the apocalypse terrifies us because apocalypse is “the collision of potential and kinetic energies, the force it takes to destroy coupled with the force that will never have the chance to be expended” [Demers 2015, 9-10]. The same holds true, in my opinion, of the compositional process. It can indeed be a terrifying prospect, a journey beset by all manner of complications. Many potential outcomes will be lost along the way, yet the revelation at its end remains desirable.

While designed to create, the processes of composition and improvisation are inherently self-destructive, reminiscent of Derrida’s conception of the autoimmune, containing “a *double bind* of threat and chance, not alternatively or by turns promise and/or threat but threat in the promise itself” [2005, 82]. If composition is the “promise” of the composer/improviser, the *process* of composing/improvising threatens the fulfilment of that promise. Demers speaks of apocalypse as a “threat or hope of a revelation,” literally an “unveiling” [2015, 7]. I argue that an improvisational compositional process is, by its very nature, precarious – it walks the line between anticipation and resolution until the “unveiling” of its end. To quote Frederic Rezewski’s thoughts on improvisation:

The basic subject matter of improvisation is the precariousness of existence, in which anything . . . could interrupt the continuity of life at any time. The attitude of the improviser could, in this respect, be said to be tragic [Rezewski 2017, 383].

What could be more tragic, in this sense, than the knowledge that at any time, everything might come to an end? In other words, is improvising anything other than apocalyptic, rife with the danger of interruption, destruction, the fear of failure? In 2020, this precarity, dread, and uncertainty have been brought to the surface of our lived existence. As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing writes:

Precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others. Unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves. Unable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others. We can’t rely on the status quo; everything is in flux, including our ability to survive. Thinking through precarity changes social analysis. A precarious world is a world without teleology. Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening, but thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible [Tsing 2015, 21].

In my case, pandemic-necessitated isolation from the rest of humanity exacerbated feelings of anxiety and depression, cutting me off from the part of myself that remembered the excitement of the creative process. I seemed incapable of making the connections I had always relied upon to form new ideas – a death of imagination I was unsure I would recover from. I realized I had come to associate uncertainty – once a hallmark of my creative process – with unending despair and stagnation (and the ever-present threat of COVID-19). Tsing’s view of indeterminacy as a creative, life-giving force underpins my concept of “apocalyptic” process, and I believe that re-training myself to see this link between my creative and lived existences ultimately enabled me to begin making music again.

This realization led to an ongoing process of reconnection, navigating out of debilitating pandemic-induced stasis and rediscovering moments of joy in the creative process while re-forging my relationship with my primary instrument – electric guitar. The result: *The Way Back*, a drone metal composition. This piece was not designed to embody or represent my emotional state, in the way one might compose a song that was apocalypse-themed, or explicitly dealing with the subject of depression, for example. Rather, it is an artefact that allows the hallmarks of apocalyptic *process* – precarity, threat, chance – to come to the surface. Drone as form lends itself well to apocalyptic exploration; it “aestheticizes doom, opening a door onto once and future catastrophes, those that are imminent and those that, once believed to be imminent, are now detours in a past that turned out otherwise” [Demers 2015, 7]. Sonically, the piece consists of layered electric guitar, distortion, and pitch shifting effects. The final composition is assembled from a series of one-take improvised performances focusing on trajectory and texture rather than specific riffs or phrases. As a result, moments emerge that subvert a listener’s desire for repetition and resolution (a melodic phrase that doesn’t repeat itself, or an element of ornamentation that is just a little too quiet, for instance) – reflecting an instinct to (often unsuccessfully) hold on to fleeting moments of calm or happiness when surrounded by chaos and despair. The most remarkable thing about these moments is that they are entirely *unplanned*. They evolve out of the interactions between the discrete performances that constitute the piece – these moments, I argue, are the revelations born of an improvisatory apocalyptic process that embraces uncertainty and precarity. This echoes both the futility in trying to force specific results from apocalyptic composition, as well as Rezewski’s “precariousness of existence,” and enables us to confront our desire for stability.

Donna Haraway sees grief as a “path to understanding entangled shared living and dying” [2016, 39]. As a community, art practitioners across the globe – already existing precariously – have faced tremendous loss, both professional (livelihood, audiences, finances) and personal (illness, bereavement, mental health). We yearn for a “return to normal”, yet simply putting this behind us will not show the way forward. As Haraway points out, “without sustained remembrance, we cannot learn to live with ghosts and so cannot think” [2016, 39]. I would argue that beyond grieving for what we have lost, we must do the work of getting to know – and “getting on” with – who we have become. By adopting an apocalyptic creative process, I have been able to once again conceive of a future where making art is not only possible, but joyful.

## References

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