communication +1

Volume 9
Issue 2 *A Decade of Futures (of Communication)*

Article 8

December 2022

Demo at the End of the World: Apocalypse Media and the Limits of Techno-futurist Performance

Li Cornfeld
Mount Holyoke College, lcornfeld@mtholyoke.edu

At the end of 2021, as the COVID-19 crisis continued to upend life around the world and as the rise of the deadly omicron variant quashed hopes that the new year would bring with it a return to normalcy, Hollywood released two narratives of apocalyptic futures. In one, a myopic public fails to take seriously a comet's impending collision with planet Earth; in the other, a sudden flu outbreak decimates the global population, wiping out the social and material infrastructures of the twenty-first century.[1] Both projects began production well before "COVID" and "coronavirus" became part of the popular lexicon. The beleaguered scientists and self-dealing politicians of *Don't Look Up* allegorize the climate crisis. And yet, the film's bleak send-up of science denialism took on new resonances in an American political moment characterized by vaccine skepticism and anti-mask legislation. The havoc wreaked by the flu on the unsuspecting heroes of the *Station Eleven* television series likewise call to mind the current pandemic, of course.

Have the last years ruptured our collective sense of stability and continuity, vast intersectional differences in social experience notwithstanding? They have mine, I think, revealing stores of faith in a vague but dependable future that I was embarrassed to discover I held. Streaming last winter's timely apocalyptic fare, I thought of the playwright Tony Kushner's response to admirers who marveled at his prescience when the Taliban-themed *Homebody/Kabul* premiered shortly after the events of 9/11: "the broad outline of serious trouble ahead was so abundant…even a playwright could avail himself of it."[2] Because the current global pandemic is rooted in systemic social failures to control and contain the virus's spread, even Hollywood could mine the power structures that enabled the crises for popular drama.

But the canny link between *Don't Look Up* and *Station Eleven*, as well as other recent cinematic dystopias, exceeds their anticipation of proliferating catastrophes. After all, apocalyptic storytelling traditions are perhaps as old as the human condition, and cinematic representations of both the Earth and its destruction date nearly to the beginnings of the medium.[3] In a striking, hundred-year history, rooted in film's co-emergence with techno-scientific breakthroughs by Edwin Hubble and Albert Einstein, Hannah Goodwin identifies the remarkable endurance of a "cosmocinematic gaze," which aims to reveal and surpass the universe's finitude.[4] The latest slate of world-ending imaginaries follows in this expansive tradition, while presaging disaster through the subversion of a more recent presentational practice.

[1] McKay, *Don't Look Up*; *Station Eleven*, season 1, episode 3, "Hurricane."
[2] Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul*, 144.
[3] Fay, *Inhospitable World*, 3–4.
[4] Goodwin, *Stardust*.

To illustrate the vapid inadequacy of prevailing designs for the future, they depict tech industry demos, staged on the brink of apocalypse.

Watching the apocalyptic demo scenes made me nervous. I was supposed to be finishing a book about tech demos. Before the pandemic, I had attended dozens of tech expos and conventions, where emerging technologies debuted through elaborate spectacles.[5] Communication Studies, with sensitivities to the conditions of media's emergence and the politics of cultural production, proved valuable training in analyzing how these events utilized live spectacle as a means of cultivating shared visions for the futures of technology among diffuse media and tech verticals. Indeed, across the last decade, as the field of Communication has developed and expanded in tension with emerging communication technologies, the tech industry's own rhetorical practices coalesced around live presentations staged for assembled audiences. But what were the implications of a world with no such events, in the tech industry or elsewhere, and what would happen to appraisals of liveness once they resumed? I didn't know. Then I turned on the TV set, where tech demo after tech demo preceded images of global cataclysm, and began to suspect that appreciation of the demo form was shifting, too.[6]

The Performance Art of Late Stage Capitalism

Tech demos are the performance art of late-stage capitalism. Typically led by an entrepreneur, or a scientist, or an entrepreneurial scientist, these presentations construct visions of potential futures, made possible by technological advancement. More than a functional illustration of a technological product, prototype, or process, the tech demo cajoles audiences to adopt the speaker's vision of how their tech will change the world for the better. As a communicative form, the demo works by cultivating a sense of audience inclusion in an act of momentous revelation, unfolding in real time. The outlook of the tech demo is utopian, even if its implications seldom are, which makes it a neat device with which to illustrate the dramatic ironies of impending doom.

Consider the ironic demo scenes of last December. In *Don't Look Up*, an eccentric CEO introduces a new AI device that promises users newfound ease and tranquility, then steps offstage and learns that the Earth will soon be struck by a comet. Similarly, in *Station Eleven*, American entrepreneurs arrive at a logistics expo in Malaysia, where they plan to pitch international transit technologies; when the

[5] Cornfeld, "Babes in Tech Land"; Cornfeld, "Videotape and Vibrators."
[6] See Scannell, *Television and the Meaning of* Live, 67.

world is overcome by flu, they are unable to leave.[7] These scenes are not the only cinematic depictions of dystopian demos—nor are they even the most recent. The trend continued in early April of this year, when Apple TV concluded the first season of the office drama *Severance*.[8] A riff on non-disclosure agreements, the series revolves around a sinister corporation that splits the psyches of its employees, who consent to forgo knowledge of their workplace selves and the conditions in which they labor. In the final minutes of the season, tormented employees derail a demo meant to extoll the psychosurgical technique's harmonious results. Two weeks after that, Showtime aired the first episode of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, a series that opens on a variation of the scene where *Severance* leaves off: a celebratory corporate demo.[9] On Showtime, the scene serves as a frame story for the rest of the series, which dramatizes the urgency of climate change and the horrors of refugee crises by following the protagonist's journey from space alien trying to save the planet to tech visionary poised to do it. The season finale, broadcast in July, returns to the scene of the demo, the unveiling of an innovative energy source, moments before M5 and the CIA rush the stage to confiscate the planet-saving device.[10]

The proliferation of dystopian demos on prestige TV is unlikely to signify the end of the demo's cultural dominance. But their coalescence across the last year invites consideration of how the tech demo gained sufficient stature that its industry aesthetics and futuristic outlook have become a televisual device in the service of something other than its own ends. Importantly, what Andrew Wernick argues of the rise of promotional culture under late capitalism also applies to the demo as a promotional form: its rise to prominence has taken place through a "cumulative tendency," one without singular origins or easily anticipated endpoints.[11] Read with broad historical attention, the twenty-first century tech demo iterates Restoration-era practices of establishing scientific trustworthiness through spectacle.[12] Flashing forward some 300 years reveals more recent roots in twentieth century corporate communication. Readers of *Fortune* magazine in 1950 encountered a profile of the Du Pont corporation that praised the organization's innovative "Chart Room," a meeting space rigged with an elaborate visual presentational infrastructure, so that the company's executive committee could assess, as a collective body, the state of the

---

[7] *Station Eleven*, season 1, episode 3, "Hurricane."
[8] *Severance*, season 1, episode 9, "The We We Are."
[9] *The Man Who Fell to Earth,* season 1, episode 1, "Hallo Spaceboy."
[10] *The Man Who Fell to Earth,* season 1, episode 10, "The Man Who Sold the World."
[11] Wernick, *Promotional Culture*, 185–86.
[12] Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*.

company and determine its future directions.[13] By the 1980s, digital software promised to obviate the need for Du Pont's industrial-grade ceiling tracking, bringing the corporate presentational form beyond the executive suite. In a wonderful study of the development and diffusion of PowerPoint software, Erica Robles-Anderson and Patrick Svensson show how the ubiquity of PowerPoint extends corporate communication practice to sites as varied as elementary school classrooms, military briefing rooms, church sanctuaries, scientific laboratories, and social events of all kinds. "What were once distinct occasions," they surmise, "have now become formatted in the genre of the commercial demonstration."[14]

What, then, has happened to commercial demonstration? Even as the form and aesthetic of the practice has been exported across all manner of social institutions, commercial demonstration has itself transformed into public spectacle. Rather than presentations staged specially for live audiences of corporate executives or prospective consumers, these acts are staged for mass, intersecting audiences. Put a different way, if slideware provided the technical infrastructure for this transformation, the rise of the demo as a media spectacle offered mass audiences theatrical exemplars ripe for emulation. Think, for instance, of the *Dragons' Den/Shark Tank* reality television franchise, which invites home viewers to watch entrepreneurs pitch ventures to panels of high-powered investors, or of livestreamed product launches, which offer tech enthusiasts opportunities to see CEOs unveil new products at industry events. The public-ization of these presentations allows leaders of industry to promote themselves to the insiders in attendance as well as popular audiences who may become users and consumers of the company's products. At the same time, these acts invite audiences to identify with both the presenters' efforts to promote themselves and the managerial task of evaluating the presentations.

Across the last ten or so years, the demo's rise to cultural prominence has intensified. The corporate product launch and the entrepreneurial pitch, exemplars of the twenty-first century demo, were popularized more or less concurrently, and in tandem. Each emerged around the first dot com boom at the turn of the last century, and then gained traction over roughly the subsequent two decades. Much of this took place on a global scale. What would become the *Dragons' Den/Shark Tank* franchise first aired in 2001 in Japan, with spin-offs debuting in 2005 in the United Kingdom, 2006 in Canada, and 2009 in the United States.[15] Across the next decade, the global

---

[13] Lessing, "The World of Du Pont," 92; see Joanne Yates, *Control Through Communication*, 265-269, for a historical study of Du Pont charts as media of managerial power.

[14] Robles-Anderson and Svensson, "'One Damn Slide After Another.'"

[15] See Horowitz, *Entertaining Entrepreneurs*, 15–16, for analysis of how the American version of the program capitalized on the 2008 recession.

popularity of the franchise increased, with iterations produced in more than twenty countries by 2020. And at the same time, the contemporary product launch takes its cues from Steve Jobs, whose 1997 MacWorld keynote address inaugurated Apple's practice of introducing new products live onstage in advance of their ship dates. Across the 2010s, attention to these events became staples of industry discourse, popular conversation, and national and international news coverage. In 2012, the same year that this journal launched its inaugural issue on communication and the future, Apple began livestreaming product unveilings.

Fanfare-filled product launches led by the leaders of tech are far from the industry's only events that embrace demos as acts of public celebration and scrutiny. The aftermath of the dot com bubble also saw the rise of startup incubators whose curricula culminate in "Demo Days." There, new graduates of programs designed to provide aspiring entrepreneurs with business development guidance present their products to audiences of venture capitalists, a model pioneered by Y Combinator (founded 2005), Techstars (founded 2006), and Seedcamp (founded 2007). Or consider the recent history of The Consumer Electronics Show (CES), by some measures the most massive expo anywhere in the world. Long a go-to destination for major corporations to announce new products and initiatives, in 2000 the expo introduced an annual event called "The Last Gadget Standing," where scrappier startups demonstrate products live onstage, with a winner selected by audience applause. In 2013, CES introduced LaunchIt, a startup pitch event with more formalized judging protocols, and in 2014 the conference introduced a special hardware-themed demo contest, sponsored by the tech blog TechCrunch, whose own pitch conference also rose to prominence during this period. These demo-focused startup practices are linked: winners of a pitch competition that I attended at CES 2017 considered the pitch training they had received through a startup incubator curriculum the biggest benefit of the program. While the publicness of these presentations perhaps inclines incubators to place special importance on the pitch, the training that participants receive is intended to prepare them to deliver conference-ready pitches whether standing onstage at a demo day or meeting privately with investors in conference rooms. As a result, these practices re-encode business meetings with ever more codified aesthetics of demonstration.

During this period, the demo's rise as a media spectacle also moved outside the immediate realms of commerce. Perhaps most prominently, what took off as an industry conference focused on "Technology, Entertainment, and Design" in the 1990s relaunched as a nonprofit organization in 2001. In 2007, TED began hosting recordings of lectures, originally delivered live onstage at TED events, on a public-facing website. By 2012, TED's streamed recordings averaged a million views per day. Importantly,

these dates, as with those listed above, signal not singular cultural embraces of these spectacles, but moments that contributed to their rise as cultural mainstays. (Again, the "cumulative tendency" of promotional culture is key.) Thematically, TED conferences broadened their focus to "almost all topics—from science to business to global issues." But in structure and aesthetic, TED Talks retain the organization's tech conference roots. That a popular form of public intellectualism follows the idiom of the pitch and the product launch points to some of the more abstract ends of the demo's rise to prominence as a promotional form, where the selling point is not a commercial product or prototype but, ostensibly, an inspired insight or original idea.

Given Communication Studies' concerns with modes of discourse and their relation to broad cultural conditions, the aesthetic and discursive elisions between demonstrating products and advancing ideas demands critical scrutiny. The contemporaneous popularization of the pitch, the product launch, and the popular lecture helped to standardize the demo as a mode of public address—and normalize visionary agendas as the purview of industry. As the apocalyptic demos warn, we accept industry visions of what the future requires at our peril.

From Industry Ritual to Prestige TV

The CEO on a theatrical stage with a smartphone in his outstretched arm, satirized early in *Don't Look Up*, follows the iconic image of Steve Jobs, whose 2007 iPhone unveiling epitomizes what one biographer would praise as his ability to frame a product launch as "an epochal moment in world history."[16] *Don't Look Up* and *The Man Who Fell to Earth* both literalize this pretense, building to CEO-led demos of world-changing energy sources that promise to stave off planetary annihilation. Somewhat similarly, *MADtv*, probably the first television program to satirize the Steve Jobs demo model, recast its epochal frame in geopolitical rather than geotemporal terms.[17] A week after the debut of the iPhone, the network comedy show responded with a sketch in which Apple unveils an ill-conceived "iRack." A stand-in for the U.S.-led war then underway in the Middle East, the iRack inadvertently goes up in flames mid-demo. On the one hand, the self-serious spectacles cultivated by Apple product unveilings and the breathless media attention heaped on them undoubtedly helped transform the demo into a portable form of public presentation.[18] At the same time, the *MADtv* sketch underscores how the iPhone introduction also made tech demo aesthetics

[16] Isaacson, *Steve Jobs*, 167.
[17] *MADtv*, season 12, episode 11.
[18] See the full title of Gallo, *The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs: How to be Insanely Great in Front of Any Audience.*

immediately available as a source of satire and a form on which to map political critique.

In this context, the demo staged in *Station Eleven* merits special consideration for its attention to a demo iteration common within industry circles but less visible in popular culture. It is the only such scene not staged by a fictionalized powerful corporation, and the only one not to take place before a public audience. The "packed house" that Miranda Carroll (Danielle Deadwyler) and her business partner Jim (Timothy Simons) have been promised, at a logistics expo in Malaysia, turns out to be a scant six people seated around a long table. She greets them in Cantonese ("thank you for letting us bend your ears today," read the English subtitles, "about a new hybrid supply chain and drone concepts.") There is ample space behind the table, but the chairs have all been cleared; some are stacked in a corner where a lone spectator takes notes. No one at the table appears to be listening. She switches to English, acknowledging that everyone in the room has learned of the world's imminent collapse. The executives at the table raise their heads.

The novel on which the TV series is based also sends Miranda to Malaysia on business when the outbreak hits; however, in an indication of the visual and temporal theatricality of the demo form, the expo pitch session is original to the adaptation.[19] At the same time, the scene-stealing demo variation that Miranda delivers shifts the dramatic tension of the more familiar CEO-led corporate demo. In real life, as in the fictional dystopias, these much-hyped acts by leading tech companies are simultaneous displays of power and displays of need. *The Man Who Fell to Earth* is particularly adept at drawing suspense from this dynamic. The protagonist needs to showcase an actual power source in a manner so compelling that the public will not stand for its confiscation by militaristic governments seeking to maintain the current world order. The terms are more fanciful and more fun than, say, a billionaire CEO's appeal for enthusiasm from industry analysts, government regulators, prospective consumers, and the press, but in the theater of the unveiling and across digital screens throughout the world, tensions between capital and desire radiate along similar axes. By contrast, the demo staged by *Station Eleven* is a display of need and *powerlessness*.

On the brink of a deadly pandemic from which there is no escape, *Station Eleven* apprehends the demo not as an act of revelation but as a plea of desperation. It's unclear exactly what kind of demo Miranda and Jim's pitch is meant to entail because the miniseries deploys the form to different ends. "Your company is falling into the sea," says Miranda, in lieu of the lines she's rehearsed, "so I have to ask—" and then she pauses, unable to speak. When she regains her voice, she asks them questions

[19] Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 216.

about her own heartbreak and regret, questions to which they cannot possibly have answers. Wholly faithful to the form of the commercial demonstration—she implores a group of businesspeople to give her what she wants—the apocalypse drama swaps in alternate dialogue that puts into relief the emptiness of entrepreneurialism.

If COVID-era apocalyptic TV participates in a century-long cinematic tradition of visualizing the universe and its ends, it also lays bare the limitations of the demo as an ascendant expressive form. In the demo staged at the fictional expo on the brink of a too-familiar-feeling pandemic, when Miranda concludes her remarks, her colleague chimes in on cue. *When mankind first looked up to the stars*—a rhetorical attempt at Goodwin's cosmocinematic gaze!—*mankind thought, nonlinear delivery options, what are those things?*

Bibliography

Cornfeld, Li. "Babes in Tech Land: Expo Labor as Capitalist Technology's Erotic Body." *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 2 (2018): 205–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1298146.

———. "Videotape and Vibrators: An Industry History of Techno-Sexuality." *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 4 (Fall 2020): 94–120. https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2020.6.4.94.

Fay, Jennifer. *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190696771.001.0001.

Gallo, Carmine. *The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs: How to Be Insanely Great in Front of Any Audience*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009.

Goodwin, Hannah. *Stardust: Cinematic Archives at the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming.

Horowitz, Daniel. *Entertaining Entrepreneurs: Reality TV's* Shark Tank *and the American Dream in Uncertain Times*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020.

Isaacson, Walter. *Steve Jobs*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011.

Kushner, Tony. *Homebody/Kabul*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2002.

Lessing, Lawrence P. "The World of Du Pont." *Fortune*, October 1950.

MADtv. Season 12, episode 11. Directed by Bruce Leddy. Aired January 20, 2007, on Fox.

Mandel, Emily St. John. *Station Eleven*. New York: Vintage Books, 2014.

McKay, Adam, dir. *Don't Look Up*. Netflix, 2021. https://www.netflix.com/title/81252357.

Robles-Anderson, Erica, and Patrik Svensson. "'One Damn Slide after Another': PowerPoint at Every Occasion for Speech." *Computational Culture* 5 (January 15, 2016). http://computationalculture.net/one-damn-slide-after-another-powerpoint-at-every-occasion-for-speech/.

Scannell, Paddy. *Television and the Meaning of* Live*: An Enquiry into the Human Situation*. Cambridge: Polity, 2014.

Severance. Season 1, episode 9, "The We We Are." Directed by Ben Stiller. Aired April 8, 2022, on Apple TV. https://tv.apple.com/us/episode/the-we-we-are/umc.cmc.5d8khnxea17tjwmoyxhyw1sof?action=play.

Shapin, Steven, and Simon Schaffer. *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.

Station Eleven. Season 1, episode 3, "Hurricane." Directed by Hiro Murai. Aired December 16, 2021, on HBO. https://play.hbomax.com/page/urn:hbo:page:GYbKRhQv46IHDwwEAAADu:type:episode.

The Man Who Fell to Earth. Season 1, episode 1, "Hallo Spaceboy." Directed by Alex Kurtzman. Aired April 24, 2022, on Showtime. https://www.sho.com/the-man-who-fell-to-earth/season/1/episode/1/hallo-spaceboy.

———. Season 1, episode 10, "The Man Who Sold the World." Directed by Olatunde Osunsanmi. Aired July 3, 2022, on Showtime. https://www.sho.com/the-man-who-fell-to-earth/season/1/episode/10/the-man-who-sold-the-world.

Wernick, Andrew. *Promotional Culture: Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression*. London: Sage, 1991.

Yates, JoAnne. *Control through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.