

Excursions

Volume 10, Issue 2 (2020) | Reflections



Cover photo: Cover Image © Photo by [Erik Eastman](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Reflecting About States of Emergence, States of Emergency

www.excursions-journal.org.uk

Still Crazy After All these Years: a Response to “Precarious Planet: Ecological Violence in *The Age of Stupid*” (Issue 3.1, *States of Emergence, States of Emergency*, 2012)

Catherine Lord

Author

“An alteration of the relation to the world”: this is the scholarly term for madness (Latour, 2017, p. 10).

To write a response to my original article during our current states of emergency is to realise that these “states” are plural and entangled.¹ A *National Geographic* headline ran: “Carbon emission are falling sharply because of Coronavirus. But not for long” (Stone, 2020).² Since 2012 and Franny Armstrong’s speculative, ficto-documentary film from 2009, *The Age of Stupid*, flooding, hurricanes, mass species extinction and devastating

¹ Daily, the press draws excited attention towards the ameliorating effects of humans staying at home. *The Guardian*’s report that Llandudno has had “marauders” in the form of “goats running riot” (2020). *The Independent* noted the unusual sighting of a dolphin in a Sardinian port (Ng, 2020). After decades, the Himalayas are once again visible due to the drop in air pollution (King, 2020). The recent *UN Report* on species extinction reminded us that one million species are about to become extinct within decades (2019). One wonders at the scale of the dent COVID-19 is in fact causing to global CO₂ emissions; it might be wishful thinking to hope that at-risk species might enjoy some reprieve. Using data from the John Hopkins data repository, CNN reported on 8 April that since this global pandemic began, we have lost 87, 000 humans with 1.5 million infected (2020). Avoiding issues of scale, qualitatively speaking, we too are tangled up within this sixth mass extinction.

² This reported reduction of CO₂ emissions by eighteen per cent in China is also accompanied by a nine per cent down-turn towards the required target in the European Union. But what about the EU’s other 91 per cent of required CO₂ reductions?

forest fires are a regular feature of daily life. It is ten years since the film's *premiere* and it has taken almost that for the UN and a number of world governments to declare a climate emergency.³ Greta Thunberg is one of many voices reminding us that our home is “on fire” (2019).⁴ It still is.

We live in double if not multiple states of emergency within a precarious Gaia as “she” continually faces our human, serial acts of ecological violence. I read Armstrong's film through an engagement with two of Walter Benjamin's related concepts, “mythic” and “divine” violence. I brought both into dialogue with James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, which since then, Bruno Latour has written about prolifically. My goal is to revisit my essay through the critical lens of Latour's “First Lecture” from *Facing Gaia* (2017), which examines the current ecological state of emergency; this is Gaia right now. Benjamin's essay is about violent political action and how “divine” violence can overturn its mythic counterpart to produce new, political organisations. To accomplish these, divine violence must not punish vengefully; rather, it must create laws which are expiatory. COVID-19 is offering a forced pause in the machinery of neoliberal capitalism. If I treat Gaia as a mythical character, I could say that she is encouraging us to think again about our ecological habits and how we organise our societies.⁵

To recall Armstrong's film, Alvin DuVernay, a survivor of Hurricane Katrina, speaks about Nature as a mythological and vengeful goddess. Lovelock and Latour have addressed a “she” which remains an elusive

³ The UN Secretary General, António Guterres declared climate change an “emergency” (Hertsgaard, 2019). The EU declared its climate change emergency in November of 2019.

⁴ “Our House is on Fire” is the heading of Thunberg's chapter in her 2019 book.

⁵ An intelligent example of such thinking is expressed by the novelist and teacher of shamanic dreaming, Manda Scott in her podcast *Accidental Gods* (2019-). This integrates studies in neurology, spirituality, shamanism and activism. Her overall thesis is that the human species must “evolve” or find itself extinct. In many of her talks and interviews, she characterises COVID-19 as a pandemic which has caused us to stop and self-reflect on the our fossil fuel and neoliberal life-styles which are threatening our eco-system with destruction.

imbrication of scientific knowledge, mythology and a living, breathing metaphor for our planet. Armstrong's film declared: "take action now or we will die!" But as Latour points out, the way in which we have already caused an unstoppable alteration in ecology has radically changed any available options. In *The Age of Stupid*, these were explored through a cast of heroes and villains, from Lisa and Piers Guy with their wind-farm business to the mountaineer and educator Fernand Pareau, whose sanity was to "think" like the glaciers and mountains. We also meet the climate-denying Jehangir Wadia, who crazily started up an airline. Those heroes acting to prevent climate damage are constructive in their efforts. Even Pete Postlethwaite's fictional archivist at the end of the world (2055) responds in pragmatic and non-crazy ways to the devastated and utterly mutated Earth.

According to Latour, the "mutation" in our ecology has produced "Four Ways to be Driven Crazy by Ecology," and these he lists in groups (pp. 10-14). The first group comprises the climate deniers who regard the climate emergency as a hoax. The second includes the climate "quietist" living in that "parallel universe" in which all the alarms have been "disconnected" (p. 11). Latour regards the third group as the craziest of all, because they falsely imagine that the entire problem can be solved through geo-engineering (p. 11). The fourth: "artists, hermits, gardeners... activists" are working in "isolation" and seek creative and wild means of "escaping anguish" (p. 13). The one character from Armstrong's film who has some affinity to this fourth group is Alvin DuVernay, who rescued many citizens from their flooded homes. He lives in isolation and poetically traverses the water-ways of his New Orleans wilderness in all its broken, bucolic beauty. Yet, he has surrendered to anguish. Latour counsels that the only way to avoid being crazy is to do exactly this: surrender to anguish. Ecology is now already an

“alteration *of the alteration*” (Latour’s emphasis, p. 13). Pete Postlethwaite’s archivist knows this in his requiem-style cadences. But we are not yet at the terminus reached by this solitary archivist. Nor can we say “this too will pass;” it won’t. So as Latour suggests, the practice of choice should be that of “dis-hoping” (p.13).

Latour’s dis-hopers bear a permanent “*response-ability*” (his emphasis, p. 29). Dis-hoping would make us human creatures accountable for the violence we inflict on the planet. If mythical violence suggests that COVID-19 has put us on the “naughty step”, then the divine violence of law-breaking and law re-making would inevitably force us to change our fossil fuel and animal farming habits. Keeping everyone away from forests to limit the risk of forest fires might require a type of martial law with its freight of violent authoritarianism. If activism towards protecting the planet yielded action from governments, there might be huge resistance from populations; this might be accompanied by a violent authoritarianism to enforce the new laws. One wonders if there is a middle way between violence on behalf of the planet as opposed to the violence of civil breakdown caused by planetary overheating. In *The Age of Stupid*, there are those scenes of final destruction: a vulture finishes off a human corpse outside the Taj Mahal; London’s famous monuments are half-drowned; somewhere in Norway, anyone who is left is a bedraggled refugee eking out an existence in a broken eco-system. Oddly, this is where *The Age of Stupid* does offer narrative closure. Perhaps this is a narrative technique for fending off craziness.

Lovelock has made a consistent case for humanity remembering it is intelligent and that it can survive with a changing planet or it will destroy the planet and itself (2006; 2009). This would mean that legal systems of some kind and what I explored in 2012 as the operations of mythic and divine violence, would still be active. For Lovelock, this is how we change *with* Gaia (2009). In contrast, Latour is consistent in his dis-hoping. Poetically, he

envisages a “no future” on a distant shore (p. 40). He speculates that we cannot even imagine what that future will look like. We would need spectators who will probably no longer exist. Suspended between hopelessness and dis-hope, with no choice but to stay calm and carry on being responsible, even when the terms of mythic and divine violence can no longer function, we will be facing Gaia at her most elusive. Latour suggests that by so doing, we “won’t be driven crazy for real” (p. 40). If only.

London, Easter Sunday, 2020.

Catherine Lord is a Lecturer in Film, Literature and Creative Practices at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

References

- Benjamin, W. (1978) ‘Critique of violence’, in Benjamin, W. *Reflections: essays, aphorism, autobiography*. New York: Schocken Books, pp. 277-300
- Boyle, L. (2020) ‘Himalayas seen for the first time in decades from 125 miles away after pollution drop’, *The Independent*. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/himalayas-mountain-range-asia-india-pollution-coronavirus-lockdown-a9456446.html> (Accessed: 8 April 2020).
- Hertsgaard, M. (2019) ‘We’re losing the race: the UN Secretary General calls climate change an ‘Emergency’’, *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/18/un-secretary-general-climate-crisis-trump> (Accessed: 31 March 2020).
- Latour, B. (2017) *Facing Gaia: eight lectures on the New Climate Regime*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Lovelock, J. (2006) *The revenge of Gaia: how the Earth is fighting back and how we can still save humanity*. London: Penguin
- Lovelock, J. (2009) *The vanishing face of Gaia: a final warning*. New York: Basic Books.

- Stone, M. (2020). 'Carbon emissions are falling sharply due to Coronavirus. But not for long', *National Geographic*. Available at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/environment-and-conservation/2020/04/carbon-emissions-are-falling-sharply-due-coronavirus-not-long> (Accessed 6 April 2020).
- Ng, K. (2020) 'Coronavirus: Venice canals clear up as pandemic shuts down tourism', *Independent*. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/coronavirus-pandemic-venice-canals-clear-water-tourism-shuts-a9407186.html> (Accessed: 18 March 2020).
- Pass Notes. (2020) 'Llandudno Marauders: the herd of goats running riot through a Welsh town', *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2020/mar/31/llandudno-goats-herd-running-riot-coronavirus-lockdown> (Accessed: 31 March 2020).
- Scott, M. (2020) 'Clarity, courage & connection in the time of Corona Virus', *Accidental Gods*. Available at: <https://accidentalgods.life/inner-resilience-during-coronavirus/> (Accessed: 12 April 2020).
- The Age of Stupid* (2009) Directed by Fanny Armstrong [Feature Film]. UK: Spanner Films.
- Thunberg, G. (2019) *No one is too small to make a difference*. London: Penguin.

Precarious Planet: Ecological Violence in The Age of Stupid

As published in Issue 3.1, States of Emergence, States of Emergency, 2012

Catherine Lord

Introduction: Eco-Emergency

Franny Armstrong's uncompromising documentary film *The Age of Stupid* (2009), presents us with the possibility that by 2055, global warming will have caused an ecological catastrophe which will affect the entire planet and its inhabitants. The late and formidable Pete Postlethwaite plays the world's last archivist. This fictional character is confined in a tower surrounded by the melted Arctic. Under his care are the world's collections of art, film, music, literature and almost every work of science. He prepares to send a satellite message into space in the form of a mosaic film⁶. Not having made the films, he selects them from the UN media archive (1950-2008), editing them together in an attempt to understand what he regards as having been our suicidal ecological habits. His edit comprises six contemporary documentaries, two animation works and footage from nature programmes and news items. The archivist declares his mission to provide a 'cautionary tale' about climate change for any putative aliens. The film's beginning and end include scenes that show the ultimate state of emergency, 2055, to be

⁶ A mosaic film comprises several sub-stories without these producing an overarching narrative. The stories are intercut. The following are established examples: *Magnolia* (1999, Paul Thomas Anderson, New Line Cinema). *Traffic* (2000, Stephen Soderbergh, Bedford Falls Production).

the collapse of the entire eco-system. One shot reveals a crumbling Taj Mahal; in the foreground a vulture finishes off a human corpse. London is submerged in a sea devoid of blue. In the milder climate of the Arctic, a bedraggled group of refugees eke out an existence. The film aims to urge not just all governments, but all humans to declare a state of emergency. Through the archivist's physical and "voice-over" presence, Armstrong investigates how runaway capitalism maintains as normative what it denies: an ecological violence that becomes a means with only catastrophic ends.

I will analyse how *The Age of Stupid* dissects and dramatizes the problems of means and ends. Human consumption may well lead to an irrevocably damaged eco-system. Implicitly, the film follows James Lovelock's theory that the Earth is a living system which is capable of dying. The "Gaia" hypothesis theorises that the planet and its entire biosphere is the larger organism inside which we live. This planetary structure is being put under great strain due to our human activity which is systematically degrading our life-support systems and over-heating them⁷. To follow how the film tracks human consumption (means) through ecological violence and still further disastrous ends, I will take Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940; 1969) as a point of departure. In the crucial paragraph VIII, Benjamin recommends declaring a "real state of emergency" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 257). His response was towards fascism. Differently, the call to recognition in *The Age of Stupid* responds to consumer, capitalist systems that continue to implement policies for non-sustainable growth in spite of compelling evidence that the resulting changes in global temperature

⁷ See James Lovelock, *The Vanishing face of Gaia: a final warning* (New York: Basic Books, 2009). Throughout, Lovelock links increased global temperatures to the emergencies resulting from food and water shortages, and arable farm land being submerged due to rising sea levels. The Gaia hypothesis is regarded to be Lovelock's life work. For an earlier book in which he issues a clear warning about the consequences of global warming, see *The revenge of Gaia: Earth's climate crisis and the future of humanity* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

threaten human and nonhuman lives. The means to ecologically degrading ends involves continued violence towards the environment.

My theorising of ecological violence will trace the contrast between Benjamin's concepts of "mythical" and "divine" violence as they are interwoven and separated in his essay "A Critique of Violence" (1921; 1978). Benjamin explains how mythic violence strikes to punish; violence its means, justice its ends. From the violence rendered, a law is constructed. Benjamin's recourse to the myth of Niobe being punished for her arrogance and finding herself the object of fate (not law) underscores the status of mythic violence as power (Benjamin, 1978). To make law is to assert power, to set limits and to involve all bodies concerned in the resulting constraints. For Benjamin (1978, p. 294), mythic law is a manifestation of the gods, not as "will" but as existence. In contrast, the violence that is associated with the Judaic tradition of punishment and law, the "divine power" is modern, "expiatory" and "educative" (Benjamin, 1978, p. 297)⁸.

As I will argue, *The Age of Stupid* invites a de-mythologizing approach to understanding extreme weather: it is not purely arbitrary and hurricanes are not acts of mythical violence. Nor are our 'consumerist' sins being punished by God or a deity. Human violence against the biosphere could be considered as human fantasy exercising its mythic power over Nature. But the task here is to expose any lurking fantasies by using theories of violence as a searchlight. Importantly, throughout "A Critique", Benjamin does refuse easy separations between mythic and divine violence. That is because in both cases, violence produces power which, in turn, can enforce

⁸ I used a capital 'G' for God when referring to a monotheistic deity (in line with Benjamin's Judaic God of divine justice) and small 'g' for the gods of polytheism to highlight Benjamin's references to gods of mythic power and violence.

further acts of violence. The implications in Benjamin's analysis are this: mythic violence is a means to justify power as hierarchy. Divine violence can level this very hierarchy in the hope that what replaces it offers an improved system of justice.

My analysis of Benjamin's concepts of violence brought into dialogue with *The Age of Stupid*, also engages with Jacques Derrida's critique of Benjamin's essay. In "The Force of Law" (1992; 2002), Derrida highlights the gap between Benjamin's two apparently contrasting concepts of violence. For Derrida, this gap between mythic power and its possible take-over by its divine counterpart carries dangerous potential. When one power takes over from another, there is a "founding" or "revolutionary moment" (Derrida, 2002, p. 270). As Derrida eerily suggests, this moment occurs when the "foundation of law remains suspended in the void or even the abyss" (p. 270). It is in such moments, unprotected by any system, that human life becomes vulnerable. Ergo, the idea of human intervention as somehow sovereign is called into question. Therefore, my dialogue with Benjamin and Derrida also invites a third interlocutor in the form of Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life" (1998). For Agamben, when *zoe/bios* enters into the realm of *polis* a tension is produced between bare life and the politicisation of that life. In this regard, Agamben (1998, p. 8) suggests that the "fundamental categorical pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence". This emerges when Agamben (1998, p. 11) deploys two terms, "*zoe*" (biological matter) and the "*bios*" of life itself, the organism (human and non-human) in patterns of lived life. The notion of "protection" implies a self-protection which envisages human subjects not as sovereigns over the eco-system but as embedded within it. *The Age of Stupid* stages Hurricane Katrina as a drama in which a gap emerges between the daily order of things and a state of non-protection from the elements. Before the armed forces made an entrance, the rule of law was entirely suspended,

causing chaos and anarchy. The bare life of humans is dramatized in images of countless people wading through water or holding onto driftwood. Physical survival (*zoe/bios*) confronts the extremes of the weather and flooding and the suspension of the force of law⁹.

Violence against the planet can result in a ‘return’ violence, not as Earth’s vengeance, but as a symptom of the ecologies of earth reacting against the human misuse of its resources¹⁰. Global warming is far from recent. It has been breeding eco-emergencies for over a century¹¹. Flooding, hurricanes, overpopulation, deforestation and drought are but some factors that can re-produce further environmental destruction and the breakdown of infrastructures. The archivist of the future (2055) admits that his own children had little time to blame him, his generation or their great-grandparents for wrecking the environment. The archivist’s offspring were too busy coping with daily food riots. As for his grandchildren, they did not even survive. When the binding norms of political life disintegrate, so do bare lives.

The Age of Stupid traces many forms of bare life. These lives may be wealthy or poor, but neither group can escape the fact that what sustains life

⁹ Edited into *The Age of Stupid* is a news interview with Sir David King, scientific advisor to the government, who suggests that global warming cannot be discounted as a factor in increasing both the incidence and severity of hurricanes.

¹⁰ Lovelock, *The vanishing face of Gaia: a final warning*, (New York: Basic Books, 2009) offers a consolidated and comprehensive variation on the theme of his work to date. He emphasises throughout that the planet is a “system” and “she” – this is how he genders the planet throughout – is “intelligent”. She knows how to self-regulate her life-activities and temperature. Global “heating” is the term that Lovelock often chooses. He emphasises that our collective production of green house gases could cause the death of the Gaia system, without whom (which?) we cannot survive. “Our error is to take more than the earth renews” (p. 247).

¹¹ For a history of global warming see Spencer E. Weart, *The discovery of global warming: revised and expanded edition* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

itself requires having enough land for arable farming. If sea levels do rise to critical levels there will be an unstoppable state of emergency that features eco-refugees and insufficient living space. Yet such emergencies have already broken out, whether this was Katrina (2005) or the devastating floods in Bangladesh (2004). Contemporary bare life is constantly in a state of emergency only half acknowledged and half denied. Sustainability and contemporary capitalism relate to each other agonistically. In the “Critique”, Benjamin refers to the “mythic manifestation of immediate violence” which “shows itself fundamentally identical with all legal violence” (Benjamin, 1978, p. 296). Here, Benjamin aligns the violence of the State with the violence rendered by the gods. Benjamin’s concept of “legal” or State violence means grappling with his concept of mythical violence.

There will be Blood

The contrast between mythic and divine violence can be harnessed to Agamben’s concepts of bios and zoe. Benjamin implicitly brings bios into his critique when he argues that “Mythical violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake, divine violence pure power over all life for the sake of the living” (Benjamin, 1978, p. 297). This statement offers a modulation of his previous distinctions between the vengeful aspects of mythical violence and the expiatory aspects of divine violence¹². This is not the case with mythical violence, where blood will be let heedless of any exceptions. In such a process, bare life is brought to the fore and treated ruthlessly.

The Age of Stupid is subtle in its narrative innuendo that human violence against the planet can provoke a mode of “fate” which is ruthless in

¹² Killing that is based on blood for blood falls into this mythical caveat. Consider too the recurring criticism that the US death penalty is based on revenge. The “payment” is delivered in blood (however much the “legalised” lethal injection attempts to sanitise this fact). In contrast, divine violence supports law by ensuring that the sanction against murder has negotiable constraints. Following laws established by divine law means coping not with sanctions alone, but with guidelines that must stretch to specifics.

its consequential treatment of bare life, be it human or nonhuman species. After all, all the predictions about the planet's responses to our irrepressible quest for resources are clarified in the film's opening credits. The reassurance is that they are based on official scientific evidence. These abstract "laws" of nature predict the consequences of the conflict between the human pursuits of happiness, security and freedom as these are pitted against what dangerously burdens the planetary eco-system. Alvin DurVenay's happiness and security were overturned by Hurricane Katrina. He makes clear that he underwent the unfathomable loss of his home. Alvin is far from insensitive to the problems of ecology. Indeed, Armstrong's visual storytelling imbricates nature throughout his story. There is a consistent sequence of shots displaying Alvin on his boat, with his dog, deep in his environment as organic *bios*. He loves water environments, as is clear from his love of boating. But water almost killed him. There are photographic stills of Katrina's state of emergency: the elderly hanging from buildings, people and animals surviving in boats. Alvin comes to their rescue; he saves children, dogs and a six-week old baby. He does not "blame" nature but does refer to "her" in semi-mystical terms. "Mother Nature", as he hails her, is most of the time "benign", but sometimes she will provoke and say bring on "your best technology" and "let's dance". In this personification, the "she" wreaked vengeance on the strong and weak alike. Technology was routed in its alleged gesture of hubris. But forces of nature do not pursue vengeance. Alvin's mythical and symbolic turn of thought carries a cultural valence. What strikes me in Alvin's personification is the "let's dance" motif that is typical of a highly competitive society; as a phrase, it is a popular cliché that heralds the Hollywood fight scene between protagonist and antagonist.

The mythical power of violence is configured through the signifiers of human ambition and the desire for mastery. There is a desire to fight the Goddess Earth even though she can be overwhelming. Yet unlike the Greek gods and goddesses, who cannot be an object of human violence, Mother Nature can. In the realms of contemporary ecology, mythical violence can work in two directions. Humans can be at the receiving end of hurricanes and water shortages; yet human activity consistently becomes the ‘fate’ (without a logically considered ‘ends’) which does horrendous damage to the external *zoe* (Nature) and its symbolic/*bios* (the eco-system). Thus, post-human *bios/zoe* becomes trafficked into the network which underpins global capitalism.

Benjamin does make a connection between regimes of power based on mythical violence with those in which the gods appear absent because they have found modern substitutes. In *Critique* (1978) he equates the ‘manifestations’ of mythical violence with those of legal violence, or that which is state endorsed. In contemporary terms, the system of global capitalism maintains its power through regimes of violence which are made more manifest in third world countries. Armstrong’s film targets global capitalism and blind consumerism as forces of an invisible and coercive state power. In the film’s Nigerian documentary, *Layefa Malin*, the young woman who narrates most of this thread-story, accompanies witnesses to a site that is alleged to be a scene of slaughter. She guides a narrative relating claims that Nigerian paramilitary forces submitted a group of villagers to rape, torture and extermination because they refused to put up with another Shell initiative to drill their environment away.

This scene of “there will be blood” oil sovereignty construes State violence as working on behalf of global oil markets. Here, the mythical aspects of violence are shrouded. The power-maker is the Oil Industry which like a Greek god can give sustenance or take away that sustenance. Alvin has

already referred to oil as that “magical substance”. He lists the innumerable numbers of products oil becomes a part of, from CDs to carpets, cell phones and medicine. Without oil, the entire ‘order of things’ (to echo Foucault) would simply collapse. At the moment, oil is running out. There is a state of emergency in terms of the global system’s major resource, the absence of which would see an emerging catastrophe. Oil is literally the *zoe* from the sun’s energy trapped in fossils; yet equally well it is the *bios* of life lived in security and comfort. For oil to run out would not be fate, but the logical result of cause and effect. Yet the ensuing violence could be mystically characterised as the “revenge of Gaia”, a phrase which repeats James Lovelock’s book of that title¹³. Yet even in Lovelock’s theory of Gaia, however personifying are his terms, he avoids theorising the self-regulating operation of the eco-system as a force capable of choosing “her” victims¹⁴. Still, the very notion of using the name of the Earth Goddess as a symbol for the planet itself re-introduces the mythical into the scientific. *The Age of Stupid* does not cite the Gaia hypothesis as the founding thesis of its argument. However, Armstrong’s film reveals that oil and people, be they affluent or the exploited third-world, cannot escape the interdependence between the carbon resource and its consumers. This magical elixir, this bios of fossil stuff replete with trapped sunlight (as Alvin explains), is the bearer of infrastructures both violent and dependent.

¹³ See Lovelock, *The revenge of Gaia: Earth’s climate crisis and the future of humanity*. Here, Lovelock takes the view that human activity has now taken the planet too far: “the great party of the twentieth century is coming to an end” and that the best course of action is to prepare a “survival kit” (xiv). His thesis, which he compares to being the “bearer of seriously bad news” (i) is in fact a serious argument for regarding the “revenge” as already in place.

¹⁴ Lovelock has also argued that it is too late to reverse the planet’s overheating, but that we can find a way of surviving on reduced landmasses. See *The vanishing face of Gaia*, pp. 35–69.

Life in Life, Life against Life

Alvin's mythologizing of the "magical oil" and his pagan respect for Mother Nature indicates a mystical contamination of discourse. Nature and her resources have a partly mythical status. Curiously, Agamben's work focuses on the "bare" life of animals and humans not the eco-system as a whole. An important question is to what degree the entire eco-system itself, precarious as it is, dovetails into the precariousness and 'bare' life of human subjectivity. *The Age of Stupid* is consistent in its deployment of a *mise-en-scene* which stages the human participants and their environment as occupying an indeterminate zone.

Fernand Pareu, still a professional mountaineer and guide even in his eighties, takes a British family across the depleted mountain glacier of Mont Blanc. He has spent decades watching it recede. He is in love with the sublime of the mountain but he does not engage in mythical comparisons. He is far more grounded. When he was a boy, everyone in his community went to fetch water. That is how he learned the value of the resource. Is it an act of legalised violence against a glacier to waste water throughout systems of taps and our continued use of air travel? Such a complex question might be treated naively and judgementally by looking again at the "stupid" in the film's title. But *The Age of Stupid* deconstructs its own allegedly activist simplicity. It does so by enabling a sense of emergency to emerge from scenes of calm and repose. The strategy is cunning and complex, and can be dissected with the aid of Derrida's critique as it teases out from Benjamin's concept of mythic (as opposed to divine) violence the beginning of a theory of "life" itself.

For Derrida, the point of departure comes down to the gods and their propensity for shedding blood. This contrasts with divine violence, which respects the preservation of life:

[T]he mythological violence of law is satisfied in itself by sacrificing the living, whereas divine violence sacrifices life to save the living, for the sake of the living. In both cases there is a sacrifice, but in the case where blood is exacted, the living are not respected (Derrida, 2002, p. 288).

It is important to recall that for Benjamin, what the State fears is *founding* violence, or that which could put new laws into place. But given that some form of violence cannot be avoided, it is a matter of considering the status of life as destroyed or preserved. Ostensibly, from Derrida's suggestion, divine violence might offer a better guide for supporting all forms of life. At the behest of divine violence, there may be less conflict between competing concepts of life. But then even this more life-preserving action produces further contradictions. In reading Benjamin's "critique of vitalism and biologism", Derrida underlines how

the value of the life that is worth more than life (pure and simple, if such exist and that one could call natural and biological), but that is worth more than life because it is life itself, in so far as life prefers itself. It is life beyond life, life against life, but always in life and for life (Derrida, 2002, p. 289).

What Agamben would refer to here as the *bios* is not as important as the *zoe* of the configuration. But given Benjamin's emphasis on justice (which Derrida never overlooks), this "life" that "prefers itself" is inseparable from the "justice of this life" (Derrida, 2002, p. 24). This means that the justice of the *polis* cannot be disentangled from a life which is burdened by paradox. My aim is not to use Agamben to smooth over the edges of Derrida's deconstructive reading of Benjamin. All three theoretical threads – from Benjamin, Derrida, and Agamben – contribute to the same theoretical knots.

The conundrum leaves a problematic space in which the bare life of political existence can threaten the bare life of biology and ecology. Derrida's play with 'life beyond life, life against life, but always in life and for life' orbits around a contradiction and its resolution. Biodiversity is threatened through human encroachment (life against life). Post-human ecologies of media are another life "beyond" trees and glaciers. But without photosynthesising trees and water the media ecologies themselves would fall out of the cycle of sustenance. Ergo, it is impossible for human subjects to exit the construction "in life for life".

Concepts of mythical and divine violence are helpful, yet they require re-improvisation. The documentary centring on Fernand and glaciers of *Mont Blanc* might offer the beginnings of such an improvisation. Armstrong frames Fernand gathering wood with his grandson, while his voice-over melancholically reflects on how children "these days" want everything all at once. Instant gratification is part of the ecological problem. Yet Fernand and his apparently more consumerist grandson gather wood in a scene of bucolic bliss. What is brilliantly revealed is a tension between a non-violent and ostensibly sustainable interaction with nature in Fernand's rustic scene, as opposed to what will increasingly pollute this, namely, violence to the global eco-system. The overall effect is that the vitalistic and biological, the very elements which, according to Derrida, Benjamin would hold in lesser esteem than the workings of justice, are in fact crucial to that justice. If political existence is the source of the emergency, perhaps one mode of resistance requires being immersed in nature, seeing it face-to-face, and taking the risk to elevate *bios/zoe* to a radically new and emergent level of political existence. Indeed, to consciously co-opt Derrida's terms, the "life beyond life" should take vitalism and biology to new limits. Respecting the precariousness of bare life yet elevating this bareness to the level of a new sociality would produce a new state of emergency. To return to my rhetorical

question about “our” damage to glaciers, perhaps these icy giants could be given legal protection. Such a move would demand impossible responses such as radically reducing industrial activity, air travel and the burning of fossil fuels. If governments were to implement this, they would need military powers and marshal law; thus the protection of glaciers would indeed deliver a major state of emergency. Armstrong’s film does not make such recommendations. My experiment in considering a radical solution spotlights how violent the means would need to be.

Perhaps one approach to precipitating a more radical manoeuvre involves deepening the human sense of precariousness and vulnerability. One of Armstrong’s documentaries reveals the painfully comic narrative of a world that does quite the opposite. Jeh Wadia is a young Indian entrepreneur, who, in 2005, set up India’s third cheapest airline business. He often faces the camera in a pose of smiling and infectious optimism. This disappears entirely when he browbeats his employees with the full reign of his autocracy. His noble ambition is to help poorer Indians enjoy the civilised benefits of flying. The majority of his employees have never stepped onto an aircraft. The interviews with trainees reveal how they aspire to live the American lifestyle, regardless of the cost. The faces of his employees also share Jeh’s constant optimism and faith in profit margins and material aspiration. Moreover, their consistent smiling defaces any sense of vulnerability. In these sequences, dramatic irony abounds. In one scene, the trainee crews laugh their way down escape hatches and plunge themselves into swimming pools, testing out their life jackets. They all have tremendous fun. Will they and their families one day be overwhelmed by sea-level rises? Will their lifejackets bring back their homes? There appears to be nothing

obviously violent in their naïve enthusiasm for business. Yet the dramatic irony underscores their hubris.

It is precisely this hubris for never-ending growth that exacerbates climate-change. Tim Jackson's influential *Prosperity without growth: economics for a finite planet* (2009) set out how the economic paradigm of seeking unstoppable growth will lead to environmental catastrophe. The facts make queasy reading. If growth were to continue at the present rates, by 2100 the global economy would be 80 times greater than it is now. Even by 2050, the unavoidable build-up of CO₂ would have caused irreversible damage to the biosphere. Put plainly, if consumption carries on at the present rates, the climax to *The Age of Stupid*, its montage of news reel voices running along the digital time chart, 2020, 2025, 2035, 2040 and so forth, however fictional, would offer a plausible future scenario. This horrifying montage is formed from images of the digital system of dates moving forward with the familiar voices of news presenters. We hear that "New Orleans will not be rebuilt for a third time". There is a reference to President Chelsey Clinton unable to take in any more refugees. By 2040 the suicide rate has increased by 800 per cent; there is a final burning of the Amazon forest, a nuclear bomb goes off in Pakistan and the sea is sending huge areas of the planet underwater. Poignantly, one image of a burning forest shows its monkeys entirely trapped. All these atrocities crescendo towards 2055, when the last news announcement is that the entire eco- system has collapsed. Logically, this would mean no one could grow food at all. Humans can only survive for a limited time within a dead planetary body, rather like the bacteria that thrive for a period of time within a corpse. The archivist spoke plainly when he used the word "suicide". The film invites us to consider the extraordinary emergency of the future in an attempt to shake us up into a vitalising sense of emergency for right now.

If there are always forms of mythical and divine violence in action, then perhaps it is a question of identifying who are the divine or mythical agents. In global capitalism, the endless dream machine manufactures god-like images for the pantheon of consumer desires. Perhaps there is a need for the return to some mode of the “sacred” in ecology without involving a regression to the projections of unclaimed mythologies. The old gods had fled and the residue of the Judaic God to which Benjamin refers might have been displaced by a golden calf. This mythical creature is materially present and feeds insatiably on financial markets, their derivatives and “futures”. The fall-out from what I would term an economic monotheism infects out emotional lives. Perhaps it is in the psyche that a state of emergency should be declared.

Conclusion: Bare Planet

The Age of Stupid produces narratives and fragments of factual documentaries that furnish the spectator with all the facts required to provoke a needful state of emergency. Protest is called for and it could work. But Armstrong’s film attests to the fact that if God and gods do still have a place, it is in the very thing which the film cannot shun: the imponderable difficulty of linking the means and their ends. Benjamin’s “Critique” grapples with mythical violence as channelled by means rather than ends; divine violence considers the exigencies of ends, that is, the law. For Agamben, the bare life of political existence cannot separate itself from earlier configurations of classical democracy and, its precursor, sovereign rule. The state of emergency emerges from pasts that can offer clues to how an emergent future could be released.

Historical precedent has its consequences. Benjamin's famous angel catches debris in its wings because it is always looking back to the future. The opening sequence of *The Age of Stupid* shows the digital clock that rolls from the beginning of time itself, accompanied by suitably compelling music. An impressive montage begins with the Big Bang, taking us all the way to the formation of Earth and the development of its eco-system, with the emergence of volcanoes, the first continents, bacteriological life forms, mammals and then us. The montage is aesthetically rousing. The spectator sees in shortened version, the 3.5 billion years it took to enable human life at all. The means have been unfathomable and as the archivist wonders: "After so much effort, why is the final act of our lives suicide?" Perhaps the very logic that underpins Benjamin's work on violence, and Derrida's reading of it, over-estimates the ability of the human *zoe/polis* to organise meaningful interactions between means and ends.

When James Lovelock entitled his last publication, *The vanishing face of Gaia: a final warning* (2009), he referred to that blue and healthy colour that is still the complexion of our biosphere as something which will fade¹⁵. At the end of *The Age of Stupid*, the tracking shot that travels away from the Earth reveals not just its off-blue tone but a three dimensional gauze of space clutter. This includes the satellites that once enabled homo sapiens to conduct trillions of dollars worth of business. Satellites allowed astonishingly powerful speeds of communication, navigation and the internet, or what are some of humanity's most impressive inventions. Spectacular achievements of human creativity may be as much the problem

¹⁵ See also the Video of James Lovelock's acceptance speech for the Observer Ethical Awards 2011 from The Guardian, 10th June, 2011: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/video/2011/jun/09/winner-lifetime-achievement-2011?INTCMP=SRCH> (Accessed: 9 January 2012). Here, Lovelock says that his hope is that we, as a species will "one day be intelligent enough to be able to deal with the problems of the planet and then we will in effect become a part of what is in effect an intelligent planet".

as the solution. When academics refer to the “Anthropocene”, they specify a period in which human activity has ruled. It would do little good to re-instate some notion that Gaia will wreak ‘her’ mythical violence upon us as punishment. However, it would be prudent to continue outing ourselves from the closet in terms of our own mythical status as beings who can control outcomes. Armstrong’s opening sequence of the makings of the Universe and our own fragile globe suggests that there is a mystery which cannot be reduced to myth. Perhaps this realisation would guarantee the first steps of global intelligence over global stupidity.

Catherine Lord is a Lecturer in Film, Literature and Creative Practices at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

References

- Agamben, G. (1998) *Homo sacer: sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1978) ‘Critique of violence’, in Benjamin, W. *Reflections: essays, aphorism, autobiography*. New York: Schocken Books, pp. 277-300.
- Benjamin, W. (1969) ‘Theses on the philosophy of history’, in Arendt, H. *Illumination: essays and reflections*. New York: Schocken Books, pp. 253-264.
- Derrida, J. (2002) ‘Force of law’, in Anidjar, G. *Acts of religion*. New York: Routledge, pp. 230-280.
- Jackson, T. (2009) *Prosperity without growth: economics for a finite planet*. London: Earthscan Books.
- Magnolia* (1999) Directed by Paul Thomas Anderson [Feature Film]. USA: New Line Cinema.
- Lovelock, J. (2011) *The Guardian*. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/video/2011/jun/09/winner-lifetime-achievement-2011?INTCMP=SRCH> (Accessed: 9 January 2012).
- Lovelock, J. (2009) *The vanishing face of Gaia: a final warning*. New York: Basic Books.

Lovelock, J. (2006). *The revenge of Gaia: Earth's climate crisis and the future of humanity*. New York: Basic Books.

The Age of Stupid (2009). Directed by Fanny Armstrong [Feature Film]. UK: Spanner Films.

Traffic (2000). Directed by Stephen Soderbergh [Feature Film]. USA: Bedford Falls Production.

Weart, S. E. (2003) *The discovery of global warming: revised and expanded edition*. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press.