

JONAS STAAL'S: 'CLIMATE PROPAGANDAS' by Johnny Rodger

TheDrouth

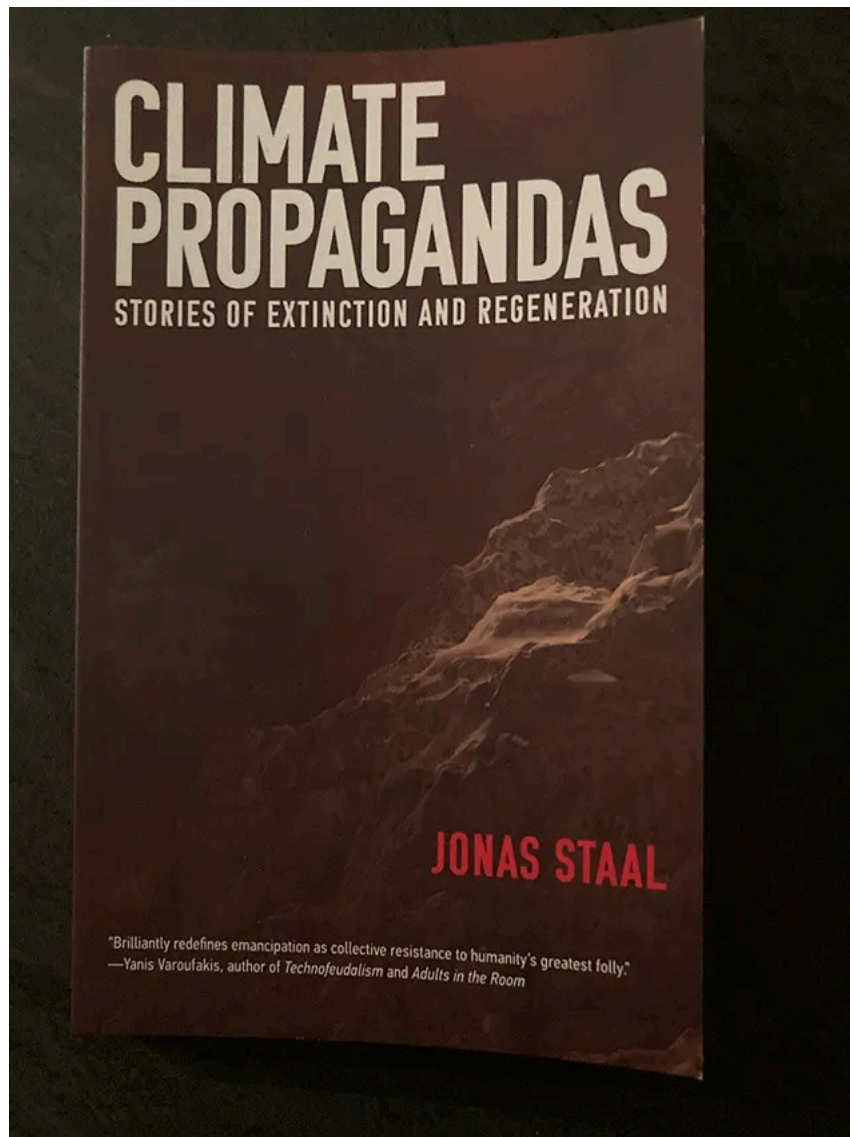


Dutch artist Jonas Staal's new book on the pending Climate Catastrophe continues his concerns about propaganda – the good and the bad of it; reveals who are the culprits planning to exploit and profit from it and what the rest of us can do about it. *Johnny Rodger* reviews and puts it in the context of Staal's broad politically-committed artistic oeuvre.

Climate Propagandas: Stories of Extinction and Regeneration (MIT 2024) by Jonas Staal

Typically, the blurb on artist Jonas Staal's previously published books – and there have been quite a few volumes – describe his work as dealing with relations between art, democracy, propaganda and architecture. That's quite a range, and, on the face of it, proposes a not entirely obvious set of interlinkages for the new reader. Half Staal's task then, would appear to lie in the preparation of the ground on which this apparently disparate set of interests and concerns can be balanced and of the horizons within which they interact. Inevitably, this might lead some potential readers to wonder if he read himself a bit thin across all these substantial and independent disciplines and arts?






And yet, thoroughness and a wholeheartedly creative and political engagement in the scope of each field; in the place, and above all, the social, culture and political life of the people, of each project is a trademark of Staal's work. As documented in those books, his work is global in both its reach and bedding in; forensic in its detailed and often legalistic challenges; emancipatory in its political vision; humane in its personal and social involvements; and considered and deliberate in its theoretical bases. Projects include the following:

An early work by Staal, carried out in a six month stay in the city of Brasilia, exposed through drawing the evangelical and colonial roots of the modernist design of that capital city of Brazil.

Together with other Dutch artists, Staal set up the *New World Academy*, which brought together and engaged with the struggles of stateless peoples (e.g. in Kurdistan, Basque Country, Palestine, Baluchistan and Azawad, South Sudan and the Sahel), refugees in Europe without official documents, and underground movements for democracy across the world (eg in the Philippines and Indonesia). As part of this work Staal undertook a study of the propaganda art in the autonomous Kurdish region of Rojava in its relation to the grassroots, Bookchin-style anarchist structure there, and himself designed and built in their artistic style a parliament /assembly pavilion for the region.

In his work to expose and fight the current-day rise of fascism in the Netherlands, he designed a commemorative shrine to the passing away of (the still living) extreme right-wing politician Geert Wilders. Wilders perceived this shrine as a death threat and took Staal to court. Staal consequently declared – and carried out – his defence in court as a piece of political performance art.

In terms of education, and together with the dramaturg Florian Malzahn, Staal set up *Training for the Future*, an annual training camp for artists and creatives, where various workshop type activities led by other invited artists, practised methods and  for countering, avoiding, or otherwise fighting back against the all-powerful and pervasive propaganda of neo-liberal big corporations (e.g. Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft etc)

Staal set up a project installation called the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes (CICC)* with lawyer and activist Radha D'Souza, which holds hearings and prosecutes states and corporations for complicity in climate crimes, past present and future.

(Unilever, ING, Airbus and the Dutch State have already been tried there).



It is evident then, from the presentation of even this small cross-section of his curriculum, that Staal can be considered not just as an artist-activist, but as some type of organic artist of the global community. Never was that neo-Kantian eco-motto 'Think globally, act locally' more apt, than in description of his operation. Gramsci's definition of an 'organic intellectual' as characterised by their emergence from a specific social class (i.e. not one of an elite background) may seem tenuous in application to Staal because of the global initiatives involved. Nonetheless, there is no doubting his personable commitment to each local struggle, and his mode of assembling, collaborating and consolidating communities in achievement of a project constitutes an approximation to what Gramsci called an elaboration of that class's productive activity as a set of general principles. And it is precisely this organic level of engagement with communities, community art and architecture projects and community democracy that underlies Staal's interest in, and investigation and promotion of art as emancipatory propaganda. At the level of community, that is to say, neutrality is neither interesting nor productive. As he writes in his previous MIT-published book, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*,

Today we define art as that which is ambiguous, that which asks questions and holds up mirrors to the world. Art can challenge everything and break all taboos, except one: it cannot take an actual political position in the world with the aim of changing it, in that case, we declare the artwork dogmatic, one-dimensional, and pamphletic. We deem it propaganda. By this reasoning, propaganda is all that art is not. The artist is ordered to 'shut up and be beautiful', to question the world but to leave world-making to unknown others.

Of course, this doctrine of artistic neutrality is itself a form of propaganda.

His latest book *Climate Propaganda: Stories of Extinction and Regeneration* is an exemplary application of his propaganda art theories to an all-too-real situation. *Climate Propaganda* could indeed be said to be his first fully written case-study in the field of propaganda art, were it not for the drastic reality that it concerns no distinct and discrete case, but the ultimate and overwhelmingly fatal disaster facing humanity: namely, the upcoming mass extinction event. This book should be read and can, of course be read on its own, although, as I have found, the reading benefits enormously from a preparation via acquaintance with Staal's propaganda theories as set out in *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*. Basically, Staal's position is that it is precisely because we are in denial about the very existence of propaganda today that the subtle, ubiquitous and insistent use of it by powerful institutions, states and corporations is so successful. He writes of the association of propaganda with the 20th century regimes like the Nazis and the Soviets, and that after the fall of those regimes, 'the notion of propaganda and propaganda art was sealed in a time capsule labelled 'totalitarianism.' It is in this form as obsolete, and morally inappropriate and inept for our age that our denial persists and 'we believe we are day' to its power. Staal goes on to say that,



For contemporary liberal and capitalist democracies, the 'myth of neutrality' is a perfect vehicle for shaping attitudes and belief, because it is precisely when we think we are free of propaganda that we are most susceptible to it.

In her rather brilliant critique on Staal's *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*, published here (<https://www.thedrouth.org/propaganda-art-in-the-21st-century/>) a few years back, Hailey Maxwell takes a sideswipe at the notion that propaganda is lurking ignored in assumed obsolescence, and references some great contemporary work by scholars on the 'instrumentalisation of art as an ideological weapon.' The point is well made as a critique of any putative claim to sound scholarly basis, but does such scholarly work penetrate to the everyday awareness of the population at large? With Staal's new book there is, furthermore, a clear urgency to the case for promoting an immediate and general understanding of, and proficiency in climate propaganda. Thus, Staal proposes that propaganda art be revived and reactivated as an emancipatory art to counter the subtle ideologies propagated by powerful interests everywhere from entertainment in film and TV, by the press, through advertising and commercial promotion. This is necessary in order to reveal how our realities are constructed and concern us all, and Staal further proposes that schools and art departments should research, analyse and educate in the operations of propaganda art. Indeed, various of his initiatives – including *Training for the Future*, and *CICC* are organised specifically to undertake such work.



Staal's period working in Scotland is not discussed in either book but it throws up some interesting questions. I worked together with Staal 2016-19 as we created *The Scottish European Parliament* at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Glasgow. Like the *CICC* this was a large-scale installation constructed in the main gallery, designed as a model assembly space retrofitted onto a decommissioned North Sea oil rig (Kittiwake). Designed in the aftermath of the Brexit and Independence referenda of those years, it was intended as a discussion space to fill the democratic void given the lack of other fora and the tame obsequious-to-outside-authority nature of Scottish mainstream press. (Debates on the Syrian War, the Brazilian elections, the role of the UN, the positionality of the left, art education in Scotland and many other topics were held by numerous groups and parties)



The opening of the Scottish European Parliament

This was all carried out as part of Staal's work on stateless peoples. Clearly, Scotland, as a modern European nation which plays a part in a multinational state but which has no full unique state of its own, is not in the same stateless dilemma as the likes of Kurdistan or Azawad. Staal was aware of this, and his interest appeared to lie in covering the full spectrum of the phenomenon of statelessness as it exists for those who experience it. He remarked to me once, that although most Scottish artists he met during his researches here had been supporters of independence, it seemed that very few had stuck their heads above the parapet, as it were, and become involved in any type of propaganda art for the cause. He found this curious compared with his experiences elsewhere (in particular Kurdistan), and told me that the explanation given to him was that the artists were afraid because of the power wielded by gallerists and curators, who largely did not share their views. Perhaps it is because of the private nature of beliefs, relationships, confidences and practices involved here, that it is difficult to assess the extent to which that fear might have been spread through the artistic community. Could there, however, be other deeper structural factors in the Scottish polity, and indeed, psyche, to account for the apparent abundance of debate, speechifying and script and resort to the word rather than visual or performance art in the frenetic working out of the nation's position in those pre-referendum years? Would it be merely fanciful to see that whole wordy argument as a symptom of the profound effect that an austere and iconoclastic Calvinist heritage still has on the population and its operations? And in that fanciful regard, perhaps one can't help but retrospectively reframe Salmond, Brown, Murphy et al as the streetpreachers of the Calvinist tradition?

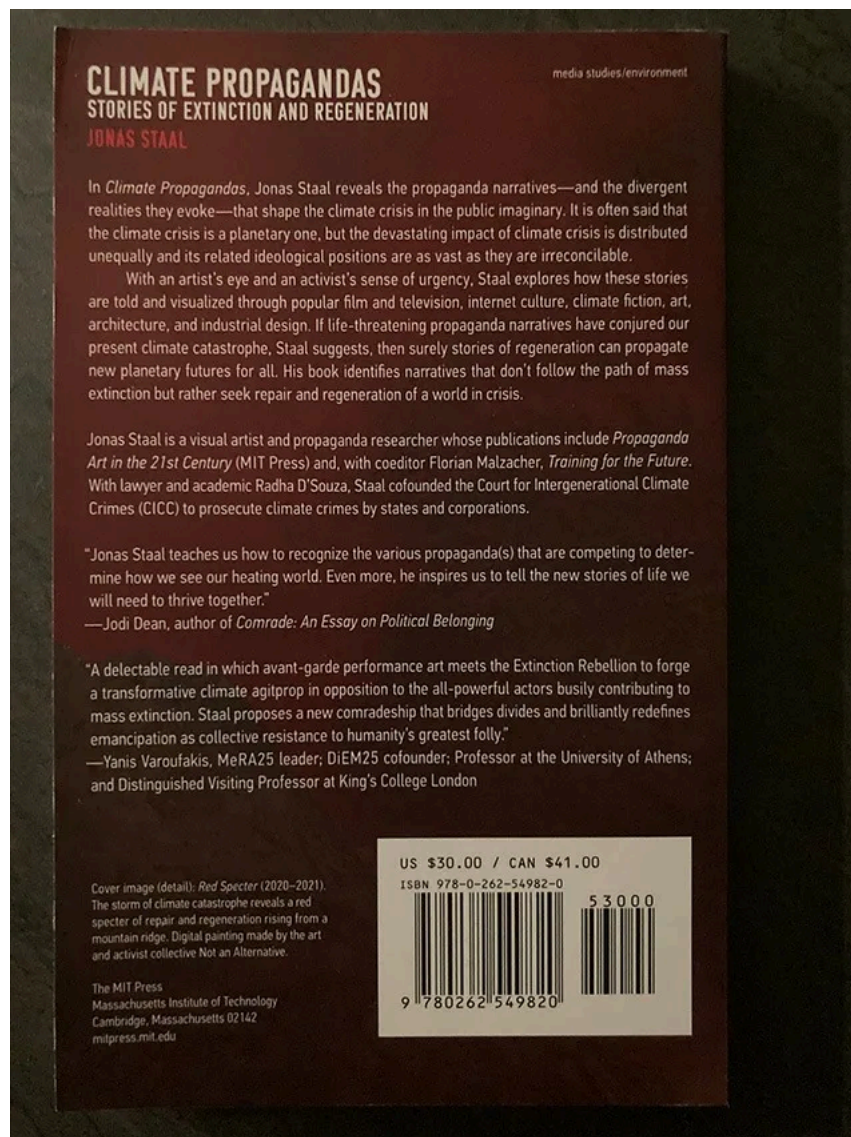


WELCOME TO THE POST-TRUTH WORLD

Staal, as a Dutch artist, will be well aware of a Calvinist heritage and history in his own country. Yet he appears to take little or no account of such collective historical affects in his discussion of exploitation and reception of propaganda art. Could it be that he has rather dismissed the possibility of any long deep influence of particular traditional belief systems or religious heritage? Or is it just that the Netherlands as a modern secular and successful European nation has outgrown any such collective neuroses and can be seen as an example of a modern liberated norm in a globalised world?

No doubt other interpretations of the relation of propaganda production and reception to particular cultural backgrounds are possible, but Staal certainly doesn't take them or any others up in his new book *Climate Propaganda*. In the face of the impending disaster of the mass extinction event brought on by climate change the niceties of differing historical cultural traditions aren't going to make any difference to the outcome. Though having said that, and as Staal points out, any view that the planetary threat is equal for everyone is a fiction. The same pattern of inequalities, rich world/poor world, as we have seen, and still see in the colonialist extractive system are already emerging as various propagandas struggle over control of the remains of our future. Human worlds will not come to an end in one day, writes Staal, though soon enough, and not without much displacement, suffering and horror. That is why he calls for a 'redistribution of extinction', and the establishment of collective popular resistance via production of a propaganda for emancipation from the unsustainable illusions of the extractive system.





Given his acceptance of those truths and those aims, it gives the reader pause that Staal's book should have four chapters dealing with the propaganda of various competitive and extractive elites, who far from denying climate change, seek to exploit the disaster to their own ends; and only one chapter on those successful instances of resistance and transformative propaganda by groups dedicated to care and repair of the planet and not to extraction and domination. The review of each of those elites, that is to say, is carried out separately, singly and in extensive detail (the *liberals* who ignore the work of big corporations and encourage self-blame by individuals who forget to use bottle banks; the *libertarians*, like Musk and Bezos, whose exorbitant plans for space colonisation and terraforming escapades will save only themselves and a few hundred sycophantic chums from the universal conflagration; the *conspiracists* who would claim the climate crisis has been engineered by a global elite and who easily radicalise further into the *ecofascists* who blame the Untermensch of the less developed world and are tooling up to make sure these lesser beings do not get access to precious resources.) The groups seeking to transform the world and rejecting the extractive colonial system are all lumped together in one final chapter. Staal acknowledges this apparent imbalance (the 'four chapters bad: one chapter good' proportionality of his analysis of climate propaganda) but points out that these latter groups have a 'coalitional stance' rather than a competitive one, and that they are perceived as a broad popular front. That rationale does not, however, read as entirely convincing. The point is that he seems to enjoy relating the details and analysing the relative successes (if we can call them that) of the climate crisis exploiters. In a sense that is a good thing, for is the likelihood not that the transformative climate propaganda will have to take several leaves from the evil propaganda gospel precisely to provoke the giant strides in consciousness, awareness and action needed now?

Staal asserts, for example, that it is not enough to be able to dis/prove, logically approve/counter or even just understand the facts in propaganda, for it is effective via affect. Its power is in how it affects our feelings, emotions and our imagination, and hence the creation of the narrative is vital to propaganda. He demonstrates this effectively through discussion of recent films like *Don't Look Up* and *The Message from the Future*, and also by a neat retelling of a climate disaster Englishman/Irishman/Scotsman type (bad) joke.



liberal, a libertarian capitalist, a conspiracist, an eco-fascist and a socialist are watching a tsunami come rolling in -each of different thing:

The liberal sees the tsunami as a result of the individual consumer behaviour that fuels climate change. The libertarian capitalist considers the tsunami a market opportunity for geo-engineering the environment back to stability. The conspiracist will argue that the

tsunami is just a scare tactic by the globalist elite: The world is not even round to begin with, how could the climate catastrophe be real? The ecofascist seizes the catastrophe as a chance to argue about who has the racial right to survive the tsunami and who does not. Finally, the socialist points out the unequal origins and social impact of the tsunami on our communities. In other words: "we" don't live in the same world, precisely because we do not see or experience the same climate crisis

A potentially disappointing aspect about the last 'propaganda good' chapter lies not simply in its cramming together of various case studies, nor its proportionally lesser extent than the discussion of the 'propaganda bad' chapters, but in the tone of the particular cases chosen, and – given the understanding of propaganda as story, and the importance of 'affect' for effect – in the restricted political and social range of those cases. Staal seems to be especially critical of more mainstream groups and events like Occasio-Cortes's *New Green Deal*, and to depend heavily on the work of subcultural groups like ZAD, an autonomous anarchic community of climate activists and defenders in France, and *Night Raiders*, a cult apocalyptic dystopian American film, whose actual, real effect not just on mainstream press and media but also on the population at large, seems to be limited. Indeed, it is arguable that these groups and events do not have as broad an appeal, engagement or significance as many of other groups Staal has been involved in over the years, like *CICC*, in Rojava, and with the *Scottish European Parliament*. Staal also dismisses the relatively successful – ie well-known and acknowledged – public initiatives of the Extinction Rebellion group, as too white, and too middle class. That may well be true -but is the fundamental task not to create *broadly* affective stories? Is it enough -in the face of mass extinction – to say this is the abovementioned organic principal at work; that here in those subcultures is exactly where we see the acting locally which partners the global conceptions? Staal defends the presentation of relatively obscure material by stating that 'we should not mistake the intimate for the marginal'. That's a fair enough principle, and, of course, his bringing of new material to the discussion opens us to a questioning of what is allowed to be mainstream and by whom is it allowed? This line comes well within the scope of his analysis of propaganda at large, and the notion of the mainstream itself as a construction -as in the quoted Chomsky tag of 'manufactured consent'. In the end, and despite that good/bad weighting of chapters and material, Staal opens a up a cross section of the engagements across the board of climate propaganda and allows us to see how the debate has been framed, hence allowing for the possibility of it being reframed. And that must be done now. This is an important book, it is a logical, compassionate and necessary expansion of his already long-established global concerns: unlike most books it doesn't just relay a message; it urgently transmits a vital impulse.



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The Drouth ('The Thirst') is a website and magazine published in Glasgow, Scotland. Founded in 2001 by Mitch Miller and Johnny Rodger, we continue to pursue our original remit, to give space to writers and artists to stimulate debate on literature, film, politics, reportage, visual culture, music, and architecture.

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