



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

The Flowers of Extinction: An Ecocritical Flâneur in London, April 2019 to April 2020

Lord, C.

DOI

[10.1080/14688417.2023.2202193](https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2023.2202193)

Publication date

2022

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Green Letters

License

CC BY-NC-ND

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Lord, C. (2022). The Flowers of Extinction: An Ecocritical *Flâneur* in London, April 2019 to April 2020. *Green Letters*, 26(4), 367–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2023.2202193>

General rights


It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

The Flowers of Extinction: An Ecocritical *Flâneur* in London, April 2019 to April 2020

Catherine Lord 

Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis (Research School) Literature and Cultural Analysis, Media and Culture University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

How does one do ‘ecocritical Walter Benjamin’ in the city of London? As a professional flâneur between April 2019 and April 2020, I enlisted the support of Benjamin’s 1940 writings ‘Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ and ‘On the Concept of History’, and four poems from Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*. These lyrics explore entangled spaces between the human and nonhuman world. Benjamin developed two concepts – ‘shock’ and ‘shock experience’ (Chockerlebnis), the latter through his engagement with Baudelaire’s work. Therefore, ecopoetic analyses of Baudelaire’s ‘Correspondances’, ‘Obsession’ (1857), ‘Le Soleil’ and ‘Le Squelette Laboureur’ (1861) aided my analysis of four London sites: Lewisham’s train tracks, Sky Garden, Oxford Circus, and the Charterhouse Museum. Reading the four sites with the aid of Baudelaire’s lyrics allowed an unearthing and creation of dialectical images as they relate to the climate emergency.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 May 2021
Accepted 3 April 2023

KEYWORDS

Capitalism; climate crisis; dialectical image; *flâneur*; pandemic; shock experience

Introduction: sites for a London *Flâneur*

Inflected with the style of a professional stroller, this essay does ‘ecocritical Walter Benjamin’ through four London sites. In July 2019, my itinerary spanned an overland train journey from Lewisham to London Bridge. From there I walked to the arcade-like Sky Garden in Fenchurch Street. In April that year I followed the Extinction Rebellion (XR) uprising in Oxford Circus. Just before the first UK lockdown in March 2020, I visited the Charterhouse at Smithfield, which is built over a mound of skeletons from that other global pandemic, the 1338–9 Great Plague. During the lockdown of April 2020, circling the outside of the Charterhouse while experiencing the City of London emptied by the pandemic, I was probably walking above skeletons that slept in the ground below. None of these four sites offer a single or analogic space, as was the case in *The Arcades Project* (Benjamin 2002a). As Susan Buck-Morss points out, one of Benjamin’s original inspirations was the ‘*Paris Passagen*’, or the city’s ‘commercial arcade’ (Buck-Morss 1989, 3). But over time, his project grew. As she explains, Benjamin gradually enlarged the scope of his investigations, so that ‘ultimately all of Paris was drawn in [...] from the heights of the Eiffel Tower to its

CONTACT Catherine Lord  c.m.lord@uva.nl  Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis (Research School) Literature and Cultural Analysis, Media and Culture University of Amsterdam, Turfdraggsterpad 9, Amsterdam, GN 1090, The Netherlands

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

nether world of catacombs and the metro' (Buck-Morss 1989, 5). My choice of sites extended from the arcades of Sky Garden to Lewisham's overland trains, and then to the make-shift catacombs of skeletons from the early fourteenth century, some having been exhumed by Crossrail engineers.

While drawing in all of London was not my aim, my strolling between and through each of the London sites offered premonitions of mass death caused by the climate crisis. The XR rebellion is a warning about species extinction and our possible demise as humans. Such dystopian thoughts shadow Sky Garden's panoramic views of banks and corporations, many of which continue to invest in fossil fuels (Harvey 2023). The Charterhouse reminds the visitor of that distant pandemic, the Great Plague. This catastrophic event, which left medieval streets de-populated, was echoed in scenes of empty London streets during the first lockdown of March 2020. The virologist David Quammen has written about the phenomenon of 'spillover' in which the viral and bacterial overflows produced by climate heating, deforestation and factory farming are the volatile risk factors for pandemics (Quammen 2012). Haunting different time zones, figures of death from the past and the present point their skeletal fingers into the possible futures of climate breakdown.

My eco-auto-theoretical *flâneurie* through London engages two key Benjamin texts: 'On the Concept of History' [1940] and 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire' [1940], both of which offer two different concepts of 'shock'.¹ Thesis XVII focuses on the practice of 'historical materialism', or that which subverts the idea of historical 'progress' ('On the Concept of History', 2003a, 396). Benjamin describes the materialist thinker as someone who 'blasts a specific life out of the era, a specific work out of a life work' (396). The lives, the images or 'objects' so blasted out offer the fragments for building a more complex image. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin argues that 'the object constructed in the materialist presentation of history is itself the dialectical image' (Benjamin 2002a; Quammen 2012, 475). Susan Buck-Morss, referring to Benjamin's thinking about the 'allegorical mode', explains that he aimed to 'make visibly palpable the experience of a world in fragments, in which the passing of time means not progress but disintegration' (Buck-Morss 1989; Quammen 2012, 18). Fragments comprise a range of objects, from the fetish objects of fashion and architecture (2002, 910) to images such as the 'Fire Alarm' (2016, 61), and of equal importance, artistic work. The dialectical image is formed from fragments exploded from their time-zone. These then recombine in such a way, that the viewer is confronted with time's disintegration rather than its myths of progress. Media scholar Uros Cvorovic aptly paraphrases Benjamin's project as the practice of juxtaposing 'disparate fragments of historical experience' so as to 'freeze them in a suspended historical constellation that he called a *dialectical image*' (Cvorovic 2008; Quammen 2012, 89, author's emphasis). Shocks allow a re-organisation of historical materials that allow a dialectical image to be crystallised.

The dialectical image gains yet more layers when the *flâneur* is subjected to another mode of shock, namely, 'shock experience', or *Chockerlebnis*. This complex concept is set out in Benjamin's 1940 essay 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire' (Benjamin 2003b; Quammen 2012, 318–319). Benjamin is faithful to what his title promises: Baudelaire's poetry is made central to Benjamin's concerns. As the essay develops, it becomes clear that this 'concern' is to harness connections between Baudelaire's poetry and a theory of shock experience. Therefore, Baudelaire's poems became vital in my ecological explorations through the city.

As specific works to be blasted out of their historical context, and to be read ecocritically, I chose four poems from *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Baudelaire 1998).² These comprised two from the

Spleen et Idéal collection - 'Correspondances' and 'Obsession', and two from *Tableaux Parisiens* - 'Le Soleil' and 'Le Squelette Laboureur'. When 'Obsession' and 'Correspondances' are read together, the former dismantles the sylvan composure of the latter, in which the nonhuman world seems to be protected from shocks. In 'Obsession', the nonhuman roars and threatens. As Daniel Finch-Race has suggested, Baudelaire's versification embodies 'the strained relationship between humanity and nature in the anthropocene' (Finch-Race 2015, 174).³ In 'Le Soleil', the poetic speaker is in the throes of an adversarial relationship with the natural/rural world and the street. I read 'Le Soleil' during the July 2019 heatwave, which gave me a sense of being in combat with the elements, from dust and noise to the heat events which steal lives. Death-in-life features strongly in 'Le Squelette Laboureur', with its Baroque allegory of enslaved skeletons trapped by capitalism. In line 11 (1998), the skeletons are staged as '*Bêchant comme des laboureurs*' (Like field hands working wearily, 190; 191) and as being caught in a cycle of endless exploitation. Just as Baudelaire's lyrics enmesh the nonhuman and human in ways which allow shocks and death, so too does reading the London sites alongside Baudelaire's poems spotlight capitalism's role in causing the climate crisis.

Benjamin was more than aware of capitalism as a driver of ecological threat. In *One Way Street* he states: If society has so denatured itself through necessity and greed that it can now only receive the gifts rapaciously [...] the earth will be impoverished and the land will yield bad harvests Benjamin (2016, 44).

Capital is deadly for soil. Benjamin scholar Michael Löwy – to whom I will return – explains that Benjamin called for 'l'interruption d'une évolution historique conduisant à la catastrophe' ('the interruption of a historical evolution leading to catastrophe', 2019, 152, author's emphasis).⁴ Dialectical images can shed light on how this interruption might take place. Jason W. Moore (2016) argues that it is crucial to address the climate emergency as enmeshed in the 'Capitalocene'. He proposes undoing the false idea that there is a 'Society without "Nature"' or 'Nature without humans' (2). He insists that the unthinking pursuit of these aforementioned binaries is 'part of the problem, both intellectually and politically' (2). Society, culture, capital, fossil fuels, humans and nonhumans live together, and are all enmeshed in the climate breakdown we are currently experiencing. Baudelaire's poems offer lyrics of entanglement between culture, capital, the human and nonhuman, doing so along fault lines of shocks in the city.

My own scholarly and creative wanderings combined eco-poetic readings of London sites together with the four Baudelaire poems as a means of discovering and making dialectical images. In what follows, I demonstrate how these all spotlight the ways in which overconsumption and late capitalism, with its freight of fossil fuels, are worsening climate breakdown. At stake is an examination of how dialectical images, formed between different time zones, relate to the current climate emergency.

Keeping it dialectical: Benjamin, Baudelaire, and the 'brakes'

To stroll is to think. In thesis XVII, Benjamin explains that Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation of tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized into a monad (Benjamin 2003a, 396).

While wandering around the Charterhouse in the first lockdown of March 2020, I felt disturbed, and walked erratically. In my mind's eye, I was flooded with images of skeletons from the pandemic of 1338–39 (Sparrow 2020). Then I felt lost, and could not orient myself on Google maps, overwhelmed by thoughts (and therefore images) of COVID-19 patients on ventilators and then in body bags.⁵ I had to stop to gather these thought-images, then to crystallise them. Sitting on a wall outside the Charterhouse garden, Baudelaire's '*Le Squelette Laboureur*' came to mind. With its allegorical figures of skeletons, the poem's theme adds to the 'configuration' in the 'monad': relentless capitalism exploits human labour, drives fossil fuel consumption and produces new pandemics. The dialectical image which emerges brings together the skeletons of the Great Plague, people dying on ventilators, and those emblems of capitalist exploitation – Baudelaire's skeletons.

In my Charterhouse experience, the dialectical image formed between three different time periods – the fourteenth, nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. As this dialectical image, or monad, crystallised, I was reminded of Benjamin's two concepts of 'shock'. Thesis XVII describes what happens when thinking comes to a necessary stop. When thinking 'comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions', it produces a 'shock' (Benjamin 2003a, 396). In the German text, Benjamin specifies '*einen Chock*' (Benjamin 2020, 20). The implication is that the intellectual act of suspending the movement of thoughts in their 'constellation saturated with tensions' leads to a single shock which, in turn, explodes fragments of thought from their different time zones; these fragments then settle and are re-organised, 'by which thinking is crystallised into a monad' (Benjamin 2003a, 396). Thus new structures of thought come into being.

Such an intellectual intervention is different from 'shock experience', or *Chockerlebnis*. This can be described as a moment of being thrown, shaken, and disorientated (Benjamin 2003b, 318–319; 329). Such incidental shocks can be absorbed and their trajectory slowed down. During my wanderings around the Charterhouse, I was thrown by the shock experiences of being lost and disorientated outside the building. This caused me to make a stop in my thinking, and this allowed me to re-organise fragments of thoughts and images from different historical times, accessed from the following sources: Baudelaire's poems, historical images of Great Plague, and photographs of those having died from COVID-19 (Nature 2020). In other words, in my auto-theoretical strolling, the intellectual intervention of '*einen Chock*' and '*Chockerlebnis*' were both working together, helping me to crystallise a new organisation of fragments, or what Benjamin termed the dialectical image.

Benjamin further enriched an understanding of how the dialectical image comes into being by adding the term '*Chockerfahrung*' (Benjamin 2003b, 319) to that of *Chockerlebnis* (318; 329). Benjamin states that 'Baudelaire placed shock experience [*Chockerfahrung*] at the very centre of his art' (319). *Chockerlebnis* means the shock experience to which the *flâneur* is subjected as they stroll through streets and sites (318; 329). *Chockerfahrung* defines shock experience as the process in which the disorientating shocks of the street are integrated into creative practice (319). *Chockerfahrung* is dependent on *Chockerlebnis*. One example is '*Le Soleil*' [1861]. Benjamin argues that this is the only one of Baudelaire's poems which 'shows the poet at work' (Benjamin 2003b, 319). The poem stages a fencing match

which, occurring on the street, bleeds into the poet-fencer's affectively charged struggle with words, described in line 5 as '*fantasque escrime*' ('fantastical fencing', 319; 320, Jephcott translation). Benjamin emphasises that this figure of fantastical fencing is the poet's metaphor for how to parry shock experience and integrate it into literary art (319–320).

My moments of parrying the elements of London's pollution and heat took inspiration from Baudelaire's four poems, all of which I read through an ecocritical lens. '*Correspondances*' and '*Obsession*' both present images of the nonhuman world in ways which coalesce with, yet overwhelm and fracture those of the human world. Paul de Man has characterised both poems in terms of their 'reverted symmetries' (De Man 1984, 252). '*Correspondances*' takes 'Nature' as a 'Temple' while the poetic speaker of '*Obsession*' finds forests and seas which terrify. Benjamin refers to 'the realm of ritual' in '*Correspondances*', with poetic representations of the nonhuman world which soothe the reader (Benjamin 2003b, 333). In '*Obsession*', the nonhuman world is represented as terrifying and overwhelming. While both poems present the natural world as prehistorical, in '*Obsession*', those forces that predate anthropogenic interference will disorientate the reader. As Michael Löwy explains, Benjamin saw the archaic as a force for revolution (Löwy 2019, 154). He draws attention to Benjamin's 1935 essay 'Johan Jakob Bachofen' and the reference to 'primal images' [*Urbilder*] (Benjamin 2002b, 19).⁶ As Löwy explains, Benjamin is interested in Bachofen's account of archaic and matriarchal societies as the grounds for a classless society (Benjamin 2019, 154; Bachofen 1967, 69–120). For Benjamin, it is not a question of going back in time, but rather of allowing a collision between the archaic past and the present moment, so as to liberate a utopian vision and an inspiration for revolution. As Löwy reminds the reader, it is revolutions which demand that we pull the emergency brakes on capitalism (Benjamin 2019, 157). This is the only way to prevent further ecological catastrophes.

In the heat of the day: poet-fencers and bees

A supremely hot day in London might not be taken for a catastrophe. On 25 July 2019, the recorded temperature was 38.7 degrees centigrade: at the time this marked a new British temperature record (Page le 2019). This then hottest July month on global records, the Arctic experienced its worst wildfires (Helmore 2019). Yet this may have been far from the minds of commuters. The city is not the Arctic. Nor is it a rural landscape. Yet the climate crisis produces both forest fires and London's extreme weather conditions.

Baudelaire's '*Le Soleil*' may not be about heat events, but in terms of Benjamin's dialectical method of producing fragments, and in this case, to blast a 'specific work out of a life work', the poem can give the wandering scholar an eco-shock (Benjamin 2003a, 396). The poem's famous fencing figure offers a dialectical image of its own, offering a layer to the larger dialectical image I was forming. This was inspired by the fencer who encompasses the divide between archaic and modern temporalities. In line 3 the poem stages the *flâneur*-poet as a warrior who confronts the '*traits redoublés*' ('doubled heat') of the rural-urban environment:

*Quand le soleil cruel frappe à traits redoublés
 Sure la ville et les champs, sur les toits et les blés,
 Je vais m'exercer suel à ma fantasque escrime,
 Flairant dans tous les coins les hasards de la rime,
 Trébuchant sur les mots comme sur les pavés,
 Heurtant parfois des vers depuis longtemps rêvés*

(1998, 168). When shafts of sunlight strike with doubled heat
 On a towns and fields, on rooftops, on the wheat,
 I practice my quaint swordsmanship alone,
 Stumbling over words as over paving stones,
 Sniffing in corners, all the risks of rhyme,
 To find a verse I dreamt of a long time (1998, 169).

In McGowan's translation, shock experience is undergone through the hits and parries of 'quaint fencing' (Baudelaire 1998). The fencer cuts the figure of someone charmingly old-fashioned, or archaic. In Benjamin's essay on Baudelaire – the phrase 'fantastic fencer' (Jephcott translation) – heightens a sense of imaginative intensity (Benjamin 2003b, 320). In the McGowan translation, the duel with 'verses I dreamt a long time' depicts an imagined past which offers fragments to the present (Baudelaire 1998, 169). The poetic speaker-fencer appears to be in two places at once – the past and the present; both sites are impossible to occupy, yet to occupy them is exhilarating.

Impossible tensions also occur between the human ambitions of the poet-fencer and the power of that '*père nourricier*' the Sun (line 9). Maria Scott has translated this as the 'providing father' (Scott 2013, 87). Taking the poem's final line, '*tous les palais*' ('the palace ground', 1998, 168; 169), Ross Chambers connects the Sun with the King (2015, loc. 67). It is noteworthy that this Father 'provides' or, as is the case in McGowan's translation, this Father is translated as a 'foster-father' (Baudelaire 1998, 169). Have the human and nonhuman worlds been adopted? Is the Sun not a blood relation? This aspect of a destabilising or, one might say, possibly arbitrary or provisional relationship between the Sun and what it nourishes produces a sense of uncertainty in the poem's world. The relationship between the nonhuman and the human, and even between different parts of the nonhuman world is far from pre-determined or secure. Moreover, both the poet and the parent confront the polluting aspects of the urban space. In his analysis of the poem's 'atmospheric' elements, Ross Chambers argues that both the poet and the Sun confront urban contingencies such as noise. Citing line 7, Chambers suggests that the fantastical fencing 'can only be fought on the plane of rhyme, both against words and the things they refer to: recalcitrant words like *pavé*' (Chambers 2015, loc 63). *Pavé* means both rhyme and paving stone. Scott highlights yet another important word play in line 10, which refers to the Sun. She translates '*Éveille dans les champs les vers comme les roses*' as the Sun which 'wakens worms as well as roses in the fields' (Scott 2013, 87). As Scott explains, '*les vers*' means both verses and worms (88). Poetic ambitions may be grounded in the soil and entangled with slimy elements. There is more dirt to come. Chambers suggests that the poetic speaker has two difficult tasks, 'to acknowledge the noisy, material, sorry reality of the urban' with 'all its barely concealed depravity' while, at the same time, elevating such vile atmospheres into a poetics of beauty (Chambers 2015,

loc. 64). One might add that in line 9, Baudelaire's fostering Sun has to confront the effects of environmental degradation: '*Ce père mourricier, ennemi des chloroses*' ('The providing father, enemy of anaemias', 87, Scott's translation). McGowan's translation of '*chloroses*' is 'chlorosis' (Baudelaire 1998, 169). In the notes to his translation he defines 'chlorosis' as a 'type of anaemia' (Baudelaire 1998, 369). Scott also uses the term 'anaemia' (88). In a healthy ecosystem, the Sun might protect plants from anaemia, or the sickness which causes leaves to yellow. In our polluted and over-heated environments, the yellowing of plants is becoming a common problem. Plant science teaches how trees, plants and crops go yellow due to the pollution caused by global heating (Kozłowski 2010). Both the contemporary fencer and Sun are fighting a common enemy, one which comprises the contingencies of worsening heat, atmospheric degradation, and environmental threats.

Taking '*Le Soleil*' as a fragment, allowing it to shock my journey through the heat of the day, opened the route to the complexities of a larger dialectical image. Travelling through London in a heatwave can be compared to fencing with environmental elements, particularly given dehydration, headaches and collisions with city commuters. To reach Sky Garden means taking the 202 bus to Blackheath village and then the overland train to London Bridge. In July 2019, the sun had a 'doubled' force. From Blackheath the train stops and starts all the way to Lewisham. Here I am taken aback, indeed shocked by an image through the train window: bees. They glide over purple heather. The spots of purple reach out from disused, rusty, train tracks. It is tempting to read the bees romantically, as though they are a miracle of resilience, creatures duelling with pollution as they glide between the rust and the heather.

Reflecting on Benjamin and the bees recalls Charles Fourier's *The Theory of Four Movements* [1808] (Fourier 1996), in which Fourier deploys the figure of bees allegorically to represent social relations between the proletariat and the state. The bees represent a utopian potential for equality and sustainability. Late capitalism exacerbates inequality and is threatening the bee population with extinction. The bee 'fencers' are losing their duel with climate breakdown, their numbers depleting globally (Shah 2021). Fossil fuels cause the Sun's heat to be dangerously amplified, impeding the Sun from nourishing its adopted 'kin'. The dialectical image formed between a reading of Baudelaire's '*Le Soleil*', the ferocious July Sun of 2019 and the industrial rail tracks with their worker bees, suggests that to protect social equality requires putting the brakes on pollution and environmental degradation.

Being ritual, being dialectical

My strolling took me from the unbearable heat of the street into Sky Garden, with its arboreal designs of exotic trees. Buck-Morss explains that Benjamin wrote about nineteenth-century Paris as an arcade of architecture, designed gardens, mechanical contraptions and artistic works; he read these as commodities, or fetish objects (Buck-Morss 1989, 111). These incorporate archaic and primaeval natural elements; they produce the sense that they are untouched by the ruins of capitalism (114). The trees are designed for consumer pleasure. One might expect that to sit under the trees and hide from the ruins of capitalism, would mean that for a short period one might rest free of shock experience.

In this temporary calm I re-read Baudelaire's '*Correspondances*' together with '*Obsession*'. Benjamin suggests that 'what Baudelaire meant by *correspondances* can be described as an experience which attempts to establish itself in crisis-proof form' (Benjamin 2003b, 333).

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers

Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;

L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles

Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers (Baudelaire 1998, 18).

Nature is a temple, where the living

Columns sometimes breathe confusing speech;

Man walks these groves of symbols, each

Of which regards him as a kindred thing (Baudelaire 1998, 19).

The scene is one of idyllic 'Nature'. 'Confuses paroles' implies that Nature's messages will be unclear. '*Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles*' ('Columns sometimes breathe confusing speech') contains both alliteration (p) and assonance in 'pa', with the plosive effect of the 'p' and the fricative in the 'fu', altogether constituting an onomatopoeia which suggests effort is needed for human pronunciation. In other words, even in this archaic world, the nonhuman struggles with the task of human enunciation. Yet there is a wealth of signifiers. The speaker refers to 'Man' confronting a '*forêt de symboles*' ('groves of symbols'); these consider humankind a 'kindred thing'. Indeed, the entanglements between signifiers and kindred nonhuman intelligences bespeak a natural environment ('Nature') which is dominated by human words. As de Man notes, 'perhaps we are not in the country at all but never left the city' (De Man 1984, 246). I would add that the tensions between the nonhuman, that is, the web which entangles the anthropogenic with the natural world, are all maintained to a point which becomes unbearable. De Man underlines how the poem's implied layers of signification raise 'each other to a higher arithmetic power' (247). An ecopoetic reading of de Man reading Baudelaire can go further: the nonhuman world is a source of the infinite, and this is also true when the human world is enmeshed within it. However, this apparently blissful infinite is vulnerable to shock experience.

In '*Correspondances*', the shocks of modernity are not soothed when read by '*Obsession*', particularly when the latter acts as a theoretical interlocuter which can disturb any 'calmer' reading of its predecessor. The first two lines of '*Obsession*' erupt in fear.

Grand bois, vous m'effrayez comme des cathédrales;

Vous hurlez comme l'orgue (Baudelaire 1998, 150.)

You scare me forests, as cathedrals do;

You howl like organs (Baudelaire 1998, 151).

There is more at stake than the nonhuman world being figured through ferocious images. To anthropomorphise is to centre the figure of the human. Baudelaire's two poems displace this centrality by establishing the anthropomorphising mode while dismantling and negating it. For de Man, the key to interpreting both poems is to have '*Obsession*' negate the 'sensory wealth' of '*Correspondances*', or one might say, the vanity of human sensory wishes. The first line of the third stanza in '*Obsession*' spells out a longing: '*Comme tu me plairais, ô nuit! Sans ces étoiles*' ('But how you'd please me, night! without those stars', Baudelaire 1998, 150), one which calls for a destruction of that sublime aspect of the nonhuman, stars. The poetic speaker hates the nonhuman world and longs for its annihilation. One wonders whether capitalism has so alienated the poetic speaker that they would kill the thing they love.

With such disorienting thoughts in mind, I came upon the stairwells made from marble steps. Each level offers the visitor a marble bench on which to repose and consume the artificial calm of fetishised nature. The landscape designers, Gillespies, have set 'ancient cycads' next to what they describe as a 'diversity' of plants, all flourishing in a brilliantly designed 'microclimate' (Gillespies 2023).⁷ The plant range boasts the 'African lily' and the 'Bird of Paradise', both originally from Africa (*The Joy of Plants* 2023). One wonders whether visitors will consider that these species have been imported from the global South, where the impact of climate change continues to worsen (Klein 2019, 149–168). The microclimate of tiny forests in the Sky Garden contains a biodiversity which is intact and flowing with water. This could delude the unsuspecting passer-by into thinking that Africa is drought-free. But droughts and heat events have spread north, as was so apparent in Europe in 2022. Given certain weather events, the electricity grid could collapse, the air conditioning fail, and so Sky Garden's horticulture could catch fire. The architecture of Sky Garden initially fools the visitor into thinking all is safe. Its resplendent glass dome, the panorama, the neatly organised garden design, as well as the breathtaking views of London, are superbly framed and immediately available on the first click of the website (<https://skygarden.london>). There is a shop-window effect which displays wealth in the form of real estate as well as heritage buildings: a glorious vista of the Tower of London, Saint Pauls, the Shard, the Gherkin, HSBC, and the other financial centres at Canary Wharf (<https://skygarden.london>). In 2021, HSBC's shareholders asked the bank to address the problem of its fossil fuel investments (Makortoff 2021). Images of banks which support carbon investments provoke the dialectical image of a dystopian future of food and water shortages.

The dialectical image with its fragments of eco-poetic readings of Baudelaire's two poems and a reading of Sky Garden, all invited one more fragment, and this was the terrifying fire at Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, which struck in April 2019 (B.B.C News 2019). This catastrophic fire recalled more thoughts of Baudelaire's '*Obsession*', with images of cathedrals, terrifying forests, and in line 14 of the poem, its *dénouement* of '*Des être disparus aux regards familiers*' ('Those vanished beings whom I recognise', 1998, 150; 151). Indeed, intimations of 'vanished beings' prefigure the human and nonhuman beings who will disappear in the wake of possible climate collapse. Such apocalyptic images, blasted out of their continuum, became layered into that of the dialectical image comprising the garden's microclimate and the Arctic fires.

Extinction Rebellion and skeletons

The imagination conjures dystopian images of flames, corpses and skeletons floating up from ancient burial mounds. In April 2019, the celebrated pink boat was at the centre of the ongoing Extinction Rebellion protest. This provided a space for incidental and exhilarating shock experience. I found myself colliding with rebels bearing children on their shoulders. Whole families waved flags emblazoned with XR skulls and the movement's standard-bearing hour glass. I walked around a circle of police officers in their yellow vests. They were protecting the pink boat. Lola Perrin's high-angle, total shot of Oxford circus, courtesy of XR, reveals an image which can be read as both aesthetic and ecological ([Figure 1](#)). The two circles of yellow-vested police resemble the petalled layers of a flower protecting the pink stamen or pistil inside, that is, the boat around which the police stood in an elegant and protective circle. This 'police-petal-pink boat' flower of XR's resistance settles the *Chockerlebnis* of the street experience into its *Chockerfahrung* of collated fragments.

Buck-Morss's phrase that dialectical images 'make visibly palpable the experience of the world in fragments' (1989, 18) aptly describes the political contradictions which are captured in the moment of Perrin's photography. Paradoxically, an activist artwork which challenges authority is protected by the authority of the police. This suspended moment, exploded out of its historical continuum, suggests that perhaps even the Metropolitan Police might support, or at least, tolerate XR. But the reality was that within the first eight days of the April rebellion, over 1,000 arrests were made ([Perraudin 2019](#)). Two years later, the dialectical image gathers yet more layers. After a series of rebellions, the UK's then Home Secretary Priti Patel launched the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill which passed its second reading in Parliament on 16 March 2021 ([B.B.C News 2020](#)). If written into law, the Bill would give the police and the Home Secretary far greater powers to ban

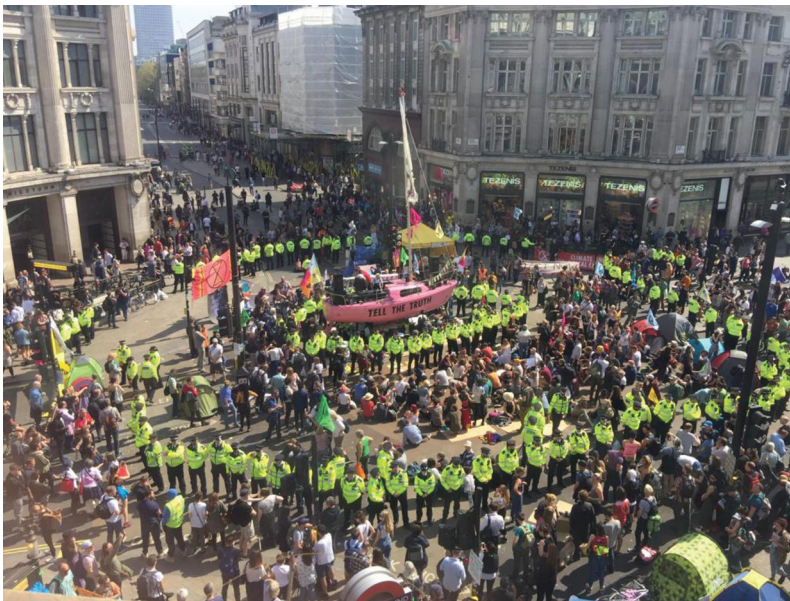


Figure 1. 'Lola Perrin's photograph: April 2019 Uprising'. Permission granted by Extinction Rebellion.

demonstrations simply on the basis of noise nuisance and inconvenience (Specia 2021). Imagine the pink boat, now appearing illegally, no longer protected by police, but by those protestors who may be held down, handcuffed, arrested, and facing a possible ten years maximum sentence in jail (Specia 2021).

A new dialectical image emerges, formed from an image of handcuffed protestors and aggressive police framed by Oxford Circus's shop windows. During the XR's April uprising, the pink boat bearing its 'Tell the Truth' banner looked fragile. With sea level rises, it would hardly survive the waves of a sinking London. The pink boat can be read as a miniature Noah's Ark, bearing a freight of Biblical and apocalyptic significations. A speculative after-history would dramatise the journey of the boat as it rescues survivors around a futuristic clock face of Big Ben barely visible above the waves. Attached to any past or future apocalyptic image, one might see dead bodies floating in the waters, rotting or skeletal.

Buck-Morss clarifies her paraphrase of Benjamin's approach by citing the seventeenth-century illustrator Florentius Schoonhovius and his 1618 illustrations of skeletons which are positioned next to burial mounds; in one, the skeleton carries a crown and sceptre Buck-Morss (1989, 162–163). The skull can be read as 'petrified spirit' but also nature in decay (161). The corpse becomes the skeleton and this will become dust if emblematic of that which is in the process of being ruined (Buck-Morss 161). In closely reading Benjamin, she points out that throughout *The Arcades Project*, he treated the city emblematically, identifying the petrified, ruined and decaying aspects of capitalist culture as fragile and destructive (164). XR's skull emblems, both on their flags and handbook, are a reminder that capitalism is at war with life on earth, and that this life is decaying.

This civilly disobedient skull image offers a layer for the allegorical mode of the dialectical image which now turns to fragments from the Charterhouse's images of skeletons. Twenty-three years after the Great Plague ended, a Carthusian order of monks was tasked with a primary goal: to pray for the souls of the plague victims (The Governors of the Charterhouse 2016, 39). In the area surrounding the Charterhouse, Crossrail's engineers discovered subterranean burial grounds with twenty skeletons, all containing fossilised bubonic plague (Morgan 2014). In the innermost part of the museum, in open view, an unnamed skeleton is encased on three sides with shelves of candles, ceremoniously bathed in orange (Figure 2).⁸ The museum's monastic atmosphere allows the visitor a solemn if not ritualistic experience.

In a comparable but different vein, the orange-lit skeleton calms the visitor. The surround of candles induces a meditative state. Yet contemplating the skeleton as a human being who went through the nightmare of slow death by bubonic plague, with no medical help whatsoever, left me shaken. My calm is further disturbed when this latter image is montaged with another one from Crossrail's official portfolio.⁹ According to *The Charterhouse: A Guide Book*, the skeletons discovered in archaeological mounds consisted of whole families (2016, 41). One photograph reveals an archaeologist measuring the skeleton of a child (Figure 3). The victims of bubonic plague would have suffered severe vomiting, swelling and fever (Porter 2018). All these images can be blasted from their continuum. The skeleton bathed in orange light and the pile-up of medieval skeletons unearthed by train engineers suggest a precarious calm that leaves nothing in a state of being crisis-proof.

Benjamin reflects on Baudelaire's use of Baroque emblems as what 'may be conceived as half-finished products which, from the phases of the production process have been



Figure 2. 'Skeleton from the charter house museum'. Permission granted by the Charterhouse, as this image is available for the public.



Figure 3. 'The measure of a child'. From Crossrail portfolio: available for public circulation.

converted into monuments to the process of destruction' (2002, 366). Global capital needs exports from sea ports. The poem's first verse places its corpses (as books) on the quays of the port.

*Dans les plaches d'anatomie
Qui traînent sur es quais poudreux
Où main livre cadavéreux*

Dort comme une antique momie (Baudelaire 1998, 188)

In anatomical designs
That hang about these dusty quays
Where books' cadavers lie and sleep
Like mummies of the ancient times (Baudelaire 1998, 189).

Disturbingly, the skeletons are far from petrified items of nature. In fact, they are 'Some skeletons and skinless men' (191). In this hellish underworld, nothing can be finished, and so the skeletons are not free to decompose. The poem's first section takes a quatrain pattern with a rhyming scheme of ABBA, BCCB. This is continued throughout the poem's quatrains. The net effect is a predictable if not imprisoning rhythmical structure which mimics endless digging. It is then disturbed by caesuras from line 26:

Que tout, même la Mort, nous ment

Et que sempiternellement

That even death can tell a lie

And that, Alas!, eternally (190; 191).

The deathly routine might be temporarily suspended by the long polysyllabic noun '*sempiternellement*' ('eternally'), but only as a reminder that this hell might go on forever. In the fourth quatrain the poetic speaker asks uncomfortable questions. What is the 'strange harvest' they farm? (191). The 'stubborn land' is 'flayed/By pushing the reluctant space/Under our bare and bleeding foot?' (191) The 'our' places the reader in the space of enslavement, which damages the diggers, the land and the harvests.

Baudelaire's trafficked skeletons point forwards to planetary catastrophes of food shortages as well as forced labour. Once exploded from its orange-lit peace, the Charterhouse's skeleton can 'join' its skeletal comrades; together they might become emblems to join those of XR. The digging skeletons might taunt those banks and corporations that will not divest. If runaway climate change is not prevented, many actual skeletons and other corpses could sink into the waves of melted Arctic ice.

Conclusion: still on fire

My *flâneur's* journey pursued a fieldwork of strolling, reading, and shocks to discover and create dialectical images which can shake the reader into a new awareness of the dangers of climate collapse. Rapid alterations in ecosystems call out for radical experiments with poetic and scholarly forms. Benjamin's thesis XVII provides an object lesson in how to think through the practice of strolling. 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire' provides a guide – inspired by Benjamin's recourse to Baudelaire's poetry – on how to turn shock experience into an aid for that other practice of shock 'making', namely the intellectual act of blasting fragments from their historical continuum, exploding individual poems out of the life work, and forging them into new monads, that is, dialectical images. Perhaps these could now be termed 'eco-dialectical images'. These provoke those flashes of insight which translate into small but telling revolutions, both in intellectual forms and forms of living.

Benjamin wanted to change the world. He died attempting to escape fascism. Global climate breakdown cannot be escaped, but only responded to through activism, infrastructure adaptation, developing new paradigms in all fields, and a commitment to finding imaginative solutions. Post-Benjamin, post-Baudelaire, my *flâneur's* journey through the city can no longer be separated from the shocks of regular forest fires and the call to revolutionise the practices of everyday, ecological life. To re-echo Löwy somewhat more blatantly, when it comes to fossil fuel consumption, perhaps we should do more than slam down the brakes. Perhaps we should dismantle the very metaphors which aid a culture of cars, trains and planes, unless they are entirely electric, and solar powered. The bees that struggle on the tracks are, like us, vulnerable. Facing multiple threats of extinction, what could emerge from the skeletons and the soil are the flowers of revolution.

Notes

1. 'On the Concept of History' also has the title 'Theses on a Philosophy of History', as it is titled in Hannah Arendt's edition and Zohar's translation of *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (Benjamin 2019). However, the text I cite is from *Selected Writings*, the Jephcott and Eiland translation, and in this compilation, Benjamin's piece is titled 'On the Concept of History' (Benjamin 2003a, 389–400).
2. James McGowan's 1998 translation of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, combines both the 1857 and 1861 compilations. All readings of 'Correspondances', 'Obsession', 'Le Soleil' and 'Le Squelette Laboureur' refer to this edition. 'Le Soleil' and 'Le Squelette Laboureur' both became part of the 1861 edition. See McGowan, 1998.
3. Focusing on Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, Finch-Race's research on Baudelaire emphasises how the poet's use of poetic forms is expressive of the poems as environments which are constructed as simultaneously ecological and urban.
4. My translation.
5. For images, see *Nature*, 'Coronavirus: the first three months as it happened'.
6. The term 'Urbilder' is from a publication by Ludwig Klages (1872–1956); see *On Cosmogenic Eros* [1922] 2018.
7. See Gillespies, 'the Sky Garden at Fenchurch Street' for photographs.
8. Permission granted by the Charterhouse.
9. All the selected images are from Crossrail's public portfolio and are available for circulation, providing they are appropriately credited.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis and Media studies for their sabbatical support between February and August, 2021. This involved no bursary or funding for this essay. The sabbatical is awarded every five years.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Catherine Lord is a scholar and lecturer at the University of Amsterdam. She teaches in Literature and Cultural Analysis, as well as Media and Culture. Her research explores the interdisciplinary field between environmental humanities, psychoanalysis and feminism. In literary studies she has

published on the writings of Walter Benjamin, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Jeannette Winterson, and in eco-cinema, the films of Werner Herzog, Franny Armstrong, Terrence Malick, and Lars von Trier. She is also a performance-based researcher in art film and theatre.

ORCID

Catherine Lord  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2085-5378>

The Flowers of Extinction

An Ecocritical *Flâneur* in London, April 2019 to April 2020

References

- Bachofen, J. J. 1967. *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J. J. Bachofen*. Translated by R. Manheim. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Baudelaire, C. 1998. *The Flowers of Evil*. Translated by J. McGowan. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BBC News, 2019. "Notre-Dame Fire: The Moment the Spire Collapses," April 15. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-47941113/notre-dame-fire-the-moment-the-spire-collapses>.
- BBC News, 2020. "Extinction Rebellion Supporters Block Newspaper Printing Presses," September 5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-54038591>.
- Benjamin, W. 2002a. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, W. 2002b [1935]. "Johan Jakob Bachofen." In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*. Vol. 3. translated by E. Jephcott and H. Eiland, and others; edited by H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings. 1935-1938. 11–25. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, W. 2003a. [1940]. "On the Concept of History." In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 4. Translated by E. Jephcott, H. Eiland, and others; edited by H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings. 1938-1940. 389–400. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, W. 2003b. [1940]. "Some Motifs in Baudelaire." In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 4. Translated by E. Jephcott, H. Eiland, and others; edited by H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings. 1938-1940. 313–355. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, W. 2016. *One Way Street*. Translated by E. Jephcott. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. Google Play Books.
- Benjamin, W. 2019. "Theses on a Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by H. Arendt and H. Zohar, 196–209. New York: Mariner Books.
- Benjamin, W. 2020. *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*. [1940]. Norderstedt: Herstellung und Verlag. Kindle.
- Buck-Morss, S. 1989. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Chambers, R. 2015. *An Atmospherics of the City: Baudelaire and the Poetics of Noise*. New York: Fordham University Press. Google Play Books.
- Nature, 2020. "Coronavirus: The First Three Months as It Happened." <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-00154-w>
- Cvoro, U. 2008. "Dialectical Image Today." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 22 (1): 89–98. doi:10.1080/10304310701713542.
- De Man, P. 1984. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Finch-Race, D. A. 2015. "Ecopoetic Ruminations in Baudelaire's 'Je n'ai pas oublié' and 'Le Servante au Grand Coeur'." *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 19 (2): 170–184. doi:10.1080/14688417.2014.993676.
- Fourier, C. 1996. *The Theory of the Four Movements*. Edited by translated by G. Steadman Jones and I. Patterson; I. Patterson, [1808]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Gillespies, 2023. "The Sky Garden at Fenchurch Street." <https://www.gillespies.co.uk/projects/the-sky-garden-at-20-fenchurch-street>
- The Governors of the Charterhouse. 2016. *The Charterhouse: The Guidebook*. London: D Giles Ltd.
- Harvey, J. 2023. "Banks Still Investing Heavily in Fossil Fuels Despite Net Zero Pledges – Study." *The Guardian*, January 17. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jan/17/banks-still-investing-heavily-in-fossil-fuels-despite-net-zero-pledges-study>
- Helmore, E. 2019. "Unprecedented: More Than a 100 Arctic Wildfires Burn in Worst Ever Season." *The Guardian*, July 26. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/26/unprecedented-more-than-100-wildfires-burning-in-the-arctic-in-worst-ever-season>
- The Joy of Plants*. 2023. "Introducing Sky Garden at 20 Fenchurch Street," *the Joy of Plants*. <https://www.thejoyofplants.co.uk/introducing-sky-garden-20-fenchurch-stree>
- Klein, N. 2019. *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal*. Canada: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Kozłowski, T. T. 2010. "Responses of Woody Plants to Human-Induced Environmental Stress: Issues, Problems, and Strategies for Alleviating Stress." *Critical Reviews in Plant Sciences* 19 (2): 91–170. doi:10.1080/07352680091139196.
- Löwy, M. 2019. "La révolution est le frein d'urgence: Actualité politico-écologique." In *La révolution est le frein d'urgence: Essais sur Walter Benjamin, 151–160*. Paris: collection 'Philosophie Imaginaire'.
- Makortoff, K. 2021. "Shareholders Push HSBC to Cut Exposure to Fossil Fuels." *The Guardian*, January 10. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jan/10/shareholders-push-hsbc-to-cut-exposure-to-fossil-fuels>.
- Moore, J. W. 2016. "Introduction: Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism." In *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by J. W. Moore, 1–13. San Francisco: Binghamton's PM Press.
- Morgan, J. 2014. "Black Death Skeletons Unearthed by Crossrail Project." *BBC News*, March 30. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-26770334>.
- Page le, M. 2019. "Met Office Confirms Highest Temperature Ever Recorded in the UK." *New Scientist*. July 30. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2211744-met-office-confirms-highest-temperature-ever-recorded-in-the-uk>
- Perraudin, F. 2019. "Extinction Rebellion Arrests 1,000 on the Eighth Day of Protests." *The Guardian*, April 22. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/22/people-arrested-at-london-climate-protests>
- Porter, S. 2018. *Black Death: A New History of the Bubonic Plagues of London*. Stroud: Amberley.
- Quammen, D. 2012. *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*. London: Penguin.
- Scott, M. 2013. "Circulation in Baudelaire's Paris." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Paris*, edited by A. Louise-Milne, 85–102. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shah, K. 2021. "A Quarter of All Known Bee Species Haven't Been Seen Since the 1990s." *New Scientist*, January 22. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2265680-a-quarter-of-all-known-bee-species-havent-been-seen-since-the-1990s/>
- Sparrow, A. 2020. "UK Coronavirus: Boris Johnson Announces Strict Lockdown Across Country – as It Happened." *The Guardian*, March 24. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2020/mar/23/uk-coronavirus-live-news-latest-boris-johnson-minister-condemns-people-ignoring-two-metre-distance-rule-in-parks-as-very-selfish>
- Specia, M. 2021. "What are the 'Kill the Bill' Protests in Britain All About?" *The New York Times*, March 24. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/23/world/europe/kill-the-bill-protests-uk.html>