

W.J.T. MITCHELL

Seeing Through Madness: A Roman Holiday



Anthony Gormley, “Float,” 1992. Author’s collection. With kind permission from the author and artist.

THIS ESSAY WAS written in Rome on the eve of what may be a turning point in the fortunes of democracy, the political system that Plato called a “ship of fools” for its tendency to elect incompetent captains on the basis of their popularity. On November 8, the United States will conduct a kind of national referendum that could determine the future of the oldest and most powerful democracy in the world.

The very idea of free and fair elections and the peaceful transfer of power is at stake, though the question appears nowhere on the ballot. Scores of candidates are running for office on the explicit commitment to the Big Lie—that the presidential election of 2020 was stolen from Donald Trump, who lost by seven million votes. The

Big Lie is accompanied by a mass popular delusion, namely that “a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media.”¹ This basic doctrine of the QAnon Movement, an extreme outgrowth of a long-standing strain of political insanity in American culture, has now been publicly embraced by a former President of the United States.

His incitement and planning of the violent insurrection of January 6, 2021 is now understood to be a dress rehearsal for the real thing: an epidemic of disinformation combined with arming fascist militias and electing corrupt officials who will make sure that elections come out the way he likes. His hand-picked Supreme Court is busy overturning the basic principles of liberal democracy, and efforts to hold him accountable for his innumerable violations of civil and criminal law are stymied by the corrupt judges he has installed throughout the federal judiciary. Recently he has been quoting, approvingly, claims that he is the reincarnation of Jesus.

The demented combination of lies, hatred, and paranoid delusions that makes up the pathological psychology of fascism has now become the operant ideology of a major American political party. In short, a psychopathic ex-President and his psychotic cult followers—the so-called “base” of a major American political party—are united in a toxic psychopolitical complex. The psychopath, typically lacking in empathy or moral inhibitions, but capable of being charming, clever, and charismatic, finds his perfect counterpart in a psychotic mass movement that is looking for a messiah who appeals to their delusions and fantasies of persecution. The transformation of legitimate criminal investigations into witch hunts and crucifixions is the predictable countermove to all attempts to bring him to justice.

I hope by now that I don’t have to explain why our time, the time of this writing, is deep into what Nietzsche called an “epoch” of insanity, when madness becomes the rule, not the exception, and is embodied in a ruler and his followers, and in the normalization of the destruction of norms. Everyone knows that this has been an epoch of both individual and collective insanity; the question is, when and how does it end? Or might it not? Might it go on indefinitely, into a period of American political violence that could quickly be upstaged by a “nuclear exchange” with the mad tyrant of Russia? Shades of M.A.D. (Mutually Assured Destruction) hover over our time, distracting attention from the unfolding catastrophe of climate change.



Badge-MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction), circa 1980-1986.
With kind permissions from the Museums Victoria Collection.

So what is the answer? What can a humanist, who has been studying madness as an individual and social phenomenon, contribute to the understanding of this moment?

My answer: take a brief sabbatical, a couple of months to experience the present moment within the framework of its place in the mad epoch. If things go really badly, this essay could wind up as a message in a bottle from a time before the resurgence of twenty-first-century fascism as a global threat. I am writing on the sixtieth anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis. As a child of the Cold War, someone who hid under his desk for A-Bomb drills and watched the Yucca Flats nuclear tests rising like a solar disk over the Nevada horizon, the images of cities in ruin are all too real. I remember vividly the cover of a sci-fi comic—I believe it was *Amazing Stories*—that showed two aliens standing by their flying saucer looking to the horizon, where the skyline of New York City is seen intact under a transparent glass dome—a “force field” created by a long dead scientist to protect the city from nuclear attack. The rest of the planet has been reduced to trackless desert marked only by craters. “We will keep this as a monument to this very interesting species,” is the comment of the alien.

Is it the goddess Fortuna, or just Dumb Luck, then, that I am writing this at the American Academy in Rome, which has kindly given me a few months to work? Either way, I cannot repress the conviction that Rome is the ideal place to conclude my story of madness. For Rome is the proverbial “Eternal City” preserved under a dome, a force field of preservation that holds it intact, frozen in time, while

still living in the present. It is a monumentalized scene of a destroyed empire and a civilization, one in which individual and political madness are central to its blend of history and legend. Within weeks of my arrival, Giorgia Meloni, a neo-fascist politician spouting the usual slogans about immigration, took power as head of government, and helped to make us Americans feel right at home.²

Yet there is a sense in which Rome always already feels familiar to Americans. Hollywood spectacle has made it a kind of antique mirror of its own obsession with “screen idols” and mass culture spectacle. American football provides us with gladiators and a steady parade of injured bodies; American gangster films offer a regular diet of dynastic struggle among Italian-America godfathers; seductively fatal women, mad tyrants, chariot races, and orgies are supplied by the whole genre of “sword and sandal” films. As the political center of American empire, Washington DC, with its array of monumental classical architecture, is the contemporary structural equivalent to imperial Rome—the most powerful nation on the planet, complete with a fantasized past in which it was a republic, if not a democracy. Perhaps this is why the innumerable images of the January 6th insurrection resonate so powerfully against this Roman screen or scrim. The classical architecture of the US Capitol, under assault by a mob guided (as we now know) by trained fascist militias,³ cannot but remind one of Greece and Rome as the scene of “barbarian invasions.” The framing of this spectacle, inside a hangman’s noose with the chorus calling to hang the Vice President, makes resonance with Rome’s murderous transfers of power and its final “decline and fall” unavoidable.

Rome is mediated for us by more than Hollywood. Shakespeare portrayed its tragic heroes in the Roman plays; the “Augustan” literature of eighteenth-century England used the Roman poets and historians as models that would bring ancient wisdom into dialogue with modern Enlightenment; J.M.W. Turner travelled to Rome and painted his atmospheric views of the Forum when it was a living ruin, populated by bandits, homeless people, and a few animals, not a safely museified monument.

Seen at sunset from the roof of the American Academy, Rome resembles that city under a protective dome that lingers in my memory. The protective shield was erected over a hundred years ago, when it was decided to prohibit tall buildings, and to preserve Rome as a museum of its own history. In contrast to a city like Chicago, progress

meant preservation, not demolition.

The first thing revealed by the view from the American Academy is that modern, vertical steel and glass architecture, the towering monuments of modernity, are completely absent. No office towers or skyscrapers disfigure the cityscape the way the Eiffel Tower and Montparnasse station do Paris. The highest, most visible monument is the Vittorio Emmanuele memorial, a subject of routine disrespect. Otherwise the city is a chaotic montage of past and present, a palimpsest of history fusing (at least) four periods: ancient and imperial Rome; Christian Rome; and the modern (nineteenth-century) Rome of the Risorgimento, all overlaid with an aura of Mussolini's fascism.

Henry James thought the city was ugly, with relatively mediocre architecture.⁴ My feeling is less about taste and more about a depressing sense of excessive pastness and "museal space,"⁵ a chaos of three thousand years of fragments that overwhelms the passing tourist and is readable only by archeologists, historians, and the ubiquitous professional guides, each finding a surplus of material for endless interpretation. One can feel the "apophenia"—the insatiable desire to find the pattern in a chaos of elements—suffered by art historians like Aby Warburg, who spent so much time in Rome assembling his *Bilderatlas* of passions or pathos-formulae, found in the city's paintings, manuscripts, sculptures, and architectures. In doing so, Warburg was also collecting images of the collusion between the Roman Catholic Church and the fascists in the Lateran Pacts of 1929.⁶ As Henry James, resisting the irritating vulgarity of Risorgimento modernization, put it: "the old enchantment of Rome . . . steals over you and possesses you, until it becomes really almost a nuisance and an importunity."

Rome, as the Eternal City, and the emblem of ancient dreams of world domination, has a central importance for any attempt to see contemporary forms of political madness centered in the resurgence of fascism. And this is especially the case with the most famous period of Roman madness, the period of the "Twelve Caesars," inaugurated by Augustus and punctuated by the regimes of Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero, the principal examples of "sovereign madness," a megalomania that grips men who are endowed with absolute power over vast military and financial resources, elevated above the law, and even deified as the icons of religious cults.

Caligula, as described by Suetonius, was an object of mass fantasy: "he seemed to the Roman people—one might also say, to the whole

world—like a dream come true.” He demanded deification from the first, and regarded himself as the new Jupiter, beheading statues of Jove and replacing them with his own likeness.⁷ A certain U.S. President famously speculated that he would join Lincoln and Washington among the faces on Mount Rushmore.⁸ Augustus’s notoriously evil and cruel wife, Livia, demanded to be deified so that she could avoid going to hell for her numerous crimes. Unlike humans, who are punished for their crimes, the Gods are above all human law, immortal and eternally innocent. For an American, these tales are echoed in the cult status of a recent American president whose public criminality and scandalous mendacity remain to this day invulnerable to any legal or political consequences. “My voters are so smart,” claimed Trump, “that I could stand on Fifth Avenue and shoot someone and I wouldn’t lose any voters.” Little surprise that deification is on the agenda for a man who claims himself “second only to Jesus.”

The Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius tracked the legendary careers of the mad emperors in exquisite detail, down to their incestuous and adulterous relationships, murders of rivals and relatives, conspiratorial betrayals of friendship, public orgies, and grandiose architectural and performative spectacles meant to dazzle the populace and establish cults of political idolatry. All this was condensed for a modern British audience in the 1976 BBC television series, *I, Claudius*, which put on screen Robert Graves’s magnificent 1937 novel.

The 1976 release date of the TV series may have been less than ideal timing. That year was the Bicentennial of the 1776 founding, marked by the erasure of inconvenient American histories (slavery, the Civil War, Hiroshima, the Vietnam War) in favor of idealized spectacles of American triumphalism. With the election of a modest, sensible, and uncharismatic president like Jimmy Carter (the peanut farmer from Plains, Georgia), 1976 is widely regarded as the end of the crazy epoch of the Sixties, along with the Civil Rights and anti-war movements. Graves wrote *I, Claudius* in the days of fascist ascendancy in Spain, the triumph of National Socialism in Germany, and the regime of Mussolini in Italy. He made the brilliant decision to frame Rome’s epoch of madness within the first-person perspective of the Emperor Claudius, whose fourteen-year reign from 41 to 54 CE is generally regarded as a period of “temporary sanity” sandwiched between Caligula and Nero. This despite the fact that Claudius was famously stigmatized as a limping cripple and stuttering moron. In a very literal sense, Claudius

narrates his epoch as “a tale told by an idiot,” or at least in a clever performance of idiocy that allowed him to survive the poisonings and suicides that plagued Roman dynasties. Graves also employs the narrative conceit of a buried “message in a bottle”: Claudius’s literary voice remains unknown until it surfaces 1900 years later and brings all the ghosts of Roman madness back to life, just in time to confront Italian fascism. His extensive writings, his histories of the Roman Civil Wars and the “Punic Curse” of the destruction of Carthage were all destroyed, Graves tells us, by Nero and his mother. But they missed his legendary autobiography, of which he made a copy to be safely buried and discovered two millennia later—by Robert Graves.

My own sabbatical in Rome in the fateful year 2022 is haunted by Claudius’ story, if only because I spent my own childhood plagued by a terrible stuttering, and my Roman sojourn is constantly disrupted by my inarticulacy in Italian, which I manage only with the help of a translator app on my cell phone. Even more important is the sense that we need to disinter Claudius’s buried story once again to illuminate our own epoch of political madness. *I, Claudius* is even more timely in 2022 than it was in 1976.

History does not repeat itself, of course, but we should attend to its rhymes. The contrasts are as important as the similarities. Claudius wrote from within a long period of mad tyranny and accession to power by assassination; in his time, the Roman Republic and its tentative glimpses of, if not democracy, at least peaceful continuities of self-governance were a distant memory. Our time would more properly be seen as an era of fragile democracies teetering on the edge of destruction, with frankly authoritarian regimes in Brazil, Turkey, Hungary, Afghanistan, Iran, and Cuba, not to mention the great powers of Russia and China. Roman memories of the peaceful transfer of power were personified by long-dead dictators whose rule was limited to six months.

If the American Constitution was understood by the Founders as a model of political sanity, balancing the powers of faculty psychology in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, the Roman Republic was a nostalgic memory of a time of political sanity that probably never existed. It operated, just the same, as a kind of collective fantasy for the notoriously paralyzed and ineffective Roman Senate, whose power had been dwindling since the advent of Caesar. The U.S. Senate, by contrast, has not needed an imperial

president to limit its powers; instead, it has emasculated itself with a non-constitutional filibuster rule that prevents it from checking presidential criminality, much less doing its job as a legislative body. It is a deeply undemocratic institution, populated mainly by rich white men who answer to the American oligarchy, and designed to over-represent reactionary rural minorities. Its main similarity with the Roman Senate is the perceived decline in the art of oratory, which provokes a nostalgia for the good old days of racist Southern senators using big words like “eleemosynary” to pillory the corruption of CREEP, Nixon’s “Committee to Re-Elect the President.”⁹

It would be tempting, indeed, to deploy Marx’s famous remark about historical repetition, that yes, history does repeat itself, but the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. The notorious sexual excesses of Rome evidently had a firm basis in reality, but they now appear mainly as the fantasies of Puritanical projection onto liberals, who are portrayed as blood-sucking child abusers who are “grooming” school children for homosexual and transgender identities. The Roman control of reproduction, mandating marriage and encouraging multiple children, is dimly echoed by the U.S. Supreme Court’s effort to control women’s bodies and ban abortion. The scheming conspiracies of a Livia, who used her position as the wife of Augustus to compile an unrivalled record of political assassinations and poisonings, is hardly matched by Virginia Thomas, though her position as the spouse of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas does enable her role as the malignant spider at the center of a web of text messages among conspirators trying to overturn a legitimate presidential election.

Other forms of repetition seem more precise. The prevalence of magical thinking and superstition, mass disinformation and ideological gaslighting; the reduction of political discussion to simplistic slogans and images; the corruption of what Suetonius called the “money madness” of Roman imperialism and our own system of predatory global capitalism; the threat of a war that would leave, not just the Mediterranean and European world in a state of chaos, but the planet itself. Rome survived its epoch of madness, and then went into a long period of “decline and fall” that evolved into a Holy version of Empire, while the city of Rome fell into ruins. If it stumbles into nuclear war, our world may not be so lucky. A new dark ages is on our horizon, much darker than the one that followed the fall of Rome. On the day

I wrote these words, the crazed tyrant Putin illegally “annexed” one-seventh of Ukraine, vowing to make Russia Great Again, and accusing “the West” of waging a war of colonial oppression coupled with an immoral crusade to undermine traditional gender roles and sexual practices. Putin’s declaration raised the stakes of his war on Ukraine, ruled out negotiations, and brought the world one step closer to the nuclear nightmare.

What use today is the language of psychology and psychiatry, the disciplines that are supposed to understand and cure madness? Taken as polemical and accusatory labels, they seem completely powerless. Trump and Putin may be accurately described as suffering from “psychopathic personality disorders” with “sociopathic tendencies,” but in a sense these are the job descriptions that fascist dictators have exemplified from the mad Roman emperors to the present time. Moreover, they don’t really “suffer” from these syndromes; they enjoy the feelings of omnipotence, while others suffer. The other people who enjoy their pathologies are the deluded, psychotic crowds who gather to revel in adoration of their living gods.¹⁰ There is no medical cure for these conditions. The treatment can only be political, governmental, and constitutional.

The same might be said of the current plague of individual mental disorders in the United States at the present time. Accelerated by the pandemic, the incidence of depression, anxiety, panic, addiction, trauma, and other illnesses looks like a medical emergency. In 2021, *The Lancet* “estimated that the pandemic had caused an additional 53.2 million cases of major depressive disorder and 76.2 million cases of anxiety disorder globally.” But is this really a medical emergency? Certainly the pharmaceutical industry would like us to think so. They are making a bundle off a rapidly increasing range of psychoactive medications that claim to treat emotional and cognitive disorders, often with side effects that require supplementary medications. A few days after I arrived in Rome, a *New York Times* article by Danielle Carr, an assistant professor at UCLA, drew thousands of responses with its argument that “Mental Health Is Political.”¹¹ The rise in distress, unhappiness, and depression among many global populations is not, Carr argues, really a medical problem with a therapeutic solution. It is rather a normal response to bad systems and structures, failing institutions, environmental degradation, poor health care, job insecurity, bad housing, and dead-end occupations.

Carr makes a strong case that much of what we call “mental illness” is really caused by stress, and the stress in turn is caused by conditions that can only be called political. But then, what is the political? And why are the political and socioeconomic systems that dominate the world at the present time not merely ineffective, but positively dangerous to the health and long-term prospects for the survival of the human species? How has it come to pass that, as a species, we now qualify for the legal (as opposed to medical) definition of insanity, namely that we are a danger to ourselves and others?

The possibility that human beings are on the same list of endangered species that they add others to daily provides the basis for a traditional science fiction narrative, where wise aliens come to earth to rescue us from ourselves.¹² *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) is perhaps the best of this genre. The alien, played by the laconic Michael Rennie, informs the US President that the entire world is endangered by the invention of nuclear weapons, and he has come to offer membership in an interplanetary world order that would involve disarmament. This peace is to be enforced by a machine, the formidable robot Gort, who is capable of incinerating the entire planet if the world’s leaders refuse to cooperate. When the alien is killed by trigger happy soldiers, Gort takes his body home, leaving behind a message that time is running out for the planet Earth.

This film, directed by the same Herbert Wise who later directed *I, Claudius*, delivers a message from the future just as urgent as the one that Claudius delivers from the past. One of the earliest assessments of *I, Claudius* noted its departure from the old formulas of cinematic Roman epics: the emphasis on interiors, interiority, and the psychology of complex characters conveyed by skilled actors. One reviewer noted that the clue to the success of the show was its ability to suggest that “human psychology does not change that much.” The crazy world of the Roman emperors comes alive and contemporary, despite the togas, marble pillars, and ancient furniture. The series produced a revolution in television, leading the way for such long-form series as *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, not to mention the melodramas of Masterpiece Theater. Robert Graves clearly hoped that his novelistic resurrection of Claudius might have a message for the rise of European fascism in the late ‘30s, and my hope is that he offers something similar today.

If mental health and the human tendency to fall into madness are

at bottom political, that does not mean that the political has nothing to do with psychology and the analysis of mental disorders. We seem to be in a vicious circle of psycho-politics, in which individual mental health is endangered by stressful political realities, and those political realities are driven by toxic interactions between psychopathic politicians and their psychotic followers—what might be called the “feedback loop” of fascism.

The psychopathic disorders of powerful leaders, from the Romans right down to Hitler, Mussolini, Trump, and Putin, are not treatable by psychological therapies. Psychopaths are notoriously immune to the mental health system. They tend to shuttle between prisons and mental hospitals, because, on the one hand, their behavior seems crazy and irrational, while, on the other, they also tend to be clever and calculating enough to bamboozle any psychologist. “I really feel that you have cured me, doc.”

One need only consider the tangled question of “conscious intention” in the effort to hold Donald Trump responsible for inciting a violent insurrection against the government. If this question is posed as a matter of psychology—i.e., “what was in his mind?”—a bottomless pit of uncertainty opens up. How can one prove definitively that he knew he was committing a crime, knew that he lost the election, knew that he was committing a treasonous act? The psychopathic Trump can plead his innocence and the sincerity of his false beliefs, and then be declared innocent by reason of insanity. Or he can plead what philosopher Harry Frankfurt called the “bullshit” alibi (a term that is frequently associated with the legal legerdemain practiced by Trump’s lawyers). Or he could invoke Mark Twain’s classic defense of lying in a good cause.¹³ As a last resort, well, he was just kidding, wasn’t he? He was being ironic. He couldn’t possibly be held responsible for the psychotic actions of his deluded followers.

Speaking of those legions: they may not be curable, but their condition may be more manageable, and surely some version of the talking cure is preferable to medication. Their absorption in political cults and charismatic leaders may be quite compatible with perfectly normal behavior at the level of personal relationships. One of the most sinister features of the QAnon movement (now publicly embraced by Trump) is the way it divides families. Adam Kinzinger, one of the few Republicans who voted to impeach Trump, has been expelled from his own family as an evil, unforgiveable outcast. As Adorno noted in *The*

Authoritarian Personality, the cult often operates as a substitute family, a more authentic home than the original, which was likely dysfunctional itself in a time of economic stress. In this case, the original and the cult family have merged.¹⁴

I wish I could believe in democratic anarchism, equality at all levels, and the freedom to go with it. The problem is above my pay grade, since it would involve scaling up such measures across the entire planet. The idea of a constitution, however, and the ideal of self-governance with peaceful transfers of power and a government—and yes, a bureaucracy—that looks after the welfare of all peoples: perhaps this the best we can do to keep Spaceship Earth afloat. The invention of a political system that—like the founding vision for this country—is built on a model of collective mental health: is that beyond the capacities of the human imagination, aided by artificial intelligence?

Perhaps the final limit of madness is the crazy idea that the human species could evolve sufficiently to avoid the precipice toward which it is heading. Yet isn't this the goal of what we have called "the humanities" and the arts? Meanwhile, Claudius's nostalgia for the Republic and the alien's message from the future will resound for me as the present moment of political decision unfolds. To be continued.



Anthony Gormley, *Another Place*, medium, size, year.
With kind permission from the artist.

W.J.T. MITCHELL is the Gaylord Donnelley Distinguished Service Professor in the departments of English and Art History at the University of Chicago.

Notes

¹Kevin Roose, “What Is QAnon, The Viral Pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory,” *The New York Times*, September 3, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-qanon.html>

²For a summary of Giorgia Meloni’s fascist bonafides, see Ruth Ben Ghiat’s article: <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/giorgia-meloni-s-win-italy-will-make-her-new-gop-n1299099>.

³The January 6th Hearings of the House of Representatives Select Committee have made it clear that the apparent spontaneity and chaos of the insurrection concealed a deliberate plan to create a crisis in which Trump could have declared a state of emergency, militarized the situation, and seized the “corrupt” voting machines.

⁴Henry James, “Very Modern Rome,” unpublished essay. *Harvard Library Bulletin* VIII [2], Spring 1954: 124-140. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42671450>

⁵And not just mine. Cf. the opening lines of Bob Dylan’s “When I Paint My Masterpiece”: “the streets of Rome are filled with rubble / Ancient footprints are everywhere.”

⁶Francesco Gori has alerted me to this connection. Plates 78 and 79 of Warburg’s *Bilderatlas* are devoted to the Lateran Pacts.

⁷Suetonius, *About the Life of the Caesars*. Trans. by Robert Hughes as *The Twelve Caesars* (1957: Rosetta Books: Electronic Edition 2014), pp. 157, 162.

⁸Cheryl Tab, *Insider*, June 7, 2022. <https://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-mount-rushmore-repost-2022-6>.

⁹The word means “charitable,” and it dazzled the journalists covering the oratorical flourishes in the Senate Watergate hearings.

¹⁰Cf. Georges Bataille, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism.” Trans. Carl R. Lovitt. *New German Critique*, no. 16 (Winter, 1979), pp. 64-87. <https://doi.org/10.2307/487877>.

¹¹Danielle Carr, “Mental Health Is Political,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/20/opinion/us-mental-health-politics.html?searchResultPosition=1>

¹²Noam Chomsky’s essay “Prospects for Survival” (*Massachusetts Review* 58.4, pp. 621-34) begins by citing a thesis of the biologist Ernst Mayr—that “what we call intelligence may be a lethal mutation.” Chomsky concludes that, so far, the evidence isn’t conclusive, but that it will be, very soon.

¹³Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*. Princeton UP, 2005. See also Mark Twain, “On the Decay of the Art of Lying” in *The Stolen White Elephant, Etc.* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1882), 217-225, and Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying: An Observation,” in *Intentions* (New York: Brentano’s, 1905), 1-55.

¹⁴See William Mazzarella on charisma in the times of Trump. <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/492472/charisma-in-the-age-of-trumpism>