

film

It's the climate, stupid

▶ Three years in the making, *The Age of Stupid* is a new climate change epic. **LENA DE CASPARIS** spoke to **FRANNY ARMSTRONG** and **LIZZY GILLETT**, the film's director and producer respectively

It is cold in the Camden office of filmmakers Franny Armstrong and Lizzy Gillett. I'm here to interview them about their new film, *The Age of Stupid*, a feature-length documentary about climate change. As we talk, shocking shots of a flooded London and a sandy alpine scene are playing in the background. It takes a while before they mention the temperature is intentional – as dedicated environmentalists, they try to use the heating as little as possible, and don't take personal flights or own a car either. These guys are as serious about climate change as they are about their films.

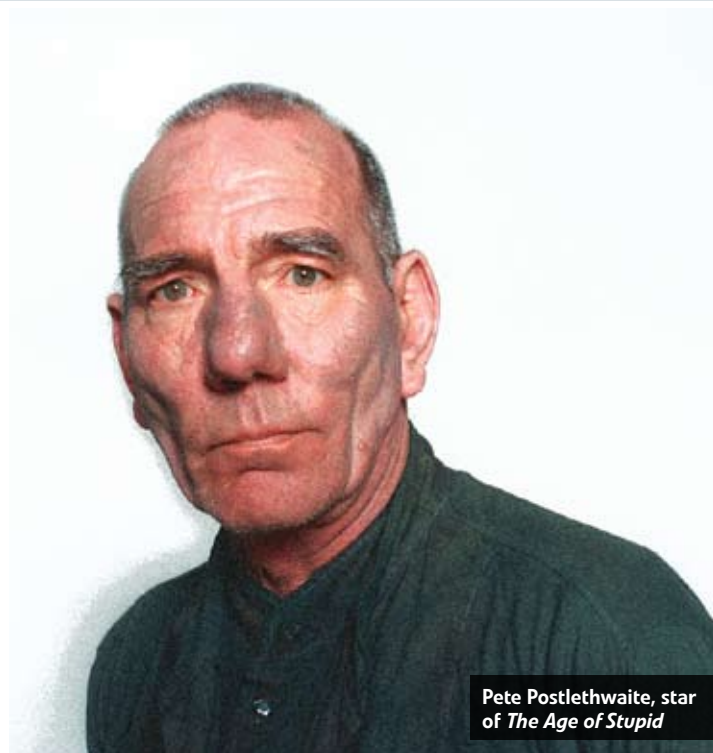
'Independent documentaries are now the best way of getting your message across to the largest amount of people,' says Armstrong, who hopes that *The Age of Stupid* will provoke a far-reaching response. 'We need to have a massive change in consciousness and the only way to do that is to have films, protest and the rest of it.'

Films for change

Armstrong's first documentary *McLibel* (1997) followed Helen Steel and David Morris, two London Greenpeace campaigners, in their successful court battle against libel action by McDonald's. The film became a success over time: it has now been watched by more than 35 million people and has helped to change fast-food laws. Re-released in a longer, feature-length version in 2005, it was recently chosen by the BFI as one of its Ten Documentaries That Shook the World. 'It was great – between *McLibel*, *Fast Food Nation*, *Super Size Me* and *Jamie's School Dinners* we changed the law on advertising to kids,' says Armstrong.

When it comes to altering perspectives on climate change, Armstrong appreciates that what she is asking her audiences to do isn't easy. 'This is a very hard documentary because it's saying that we are causing a problem that is going to kill everybody,' she says. 'It's not like *McLibel*, where if at the end you don't eat McDonalds, you would feel personally let off the hook. At the end of this, you have to change every part of your life.'

But Armstrong still holds a bit of optimism. 'When we started



Pete Postlethwaite, star of *The Age of Stupid*

McLibel in 1993, I thought we'd never change McDonald's and then they changed – and not just them, but the law. It was like "Bloody hell – we did that!" With climate change it is pretty bleak, there's basically not much chance we are going to do what we need to, but then that's what we thought with *McLibel*. So you can only hope.'

She is not alone in her efforts, with a growing number of climate change films finding their way to our screens. Is Armstrong worried her film will get lost in the crowd? 'How many films about love are there, about war, about men with guns?' she replies. 'Climate change is not just a big issue but something that will affect everybody.'

Mass appeal

Like Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth* and Leonardo DiCaprio's *The 11th Hour*, Armstrong hopes that *The Age of Stupid* will appeal to a mass audience. To this end she roped in John Battsek, the Oscar-winning producer of *One Day in September*, to help. He has already helped them secure one of Britain's finest actors, Pete Postlethwaite, to star as the only fictional character in the film. They were delighted to have him on board, 'He's my favourite actor anyway and then I googled him and he's completely into action on climate change.'

The film begins in 2055, with Pete Postlethwaite's character looking back from a destroyed world to 'archive' footage shot in 2007. 'Why didn't we stop climate change when we had the chance?' he asks.

In response, the film follows five life stories all connected in some way to the oil industry. Layefa, a Nigerian woman, wants to be a medical student and is trying to raise money for her studies, first by fishing but then by resorting to selling illegal oil. Jeh, the son of one of the richest families in India, is setting up a cheap airline company, as he thinks this will help to eradicate poverty in his country. Piers, the only Brit, is a wind farm developer fighting a local Nimby group who don't want the turbines to ruin their view. And Al, a Shell employee in New Orleans, became a hero after saving over a hundred of his neighbours in his boat after Hurricane Katrina hit.

These human stories are the main focus of the film, and the



Jamila and Adnan, refugees from Iraq who travelled to Jordan

Sabri Hakim / Spanner Films



Franny Armstrong, co-director of *The Age of Stupid*

Charlotte Kusthon/Spanner Films

search to come up with the right characters saw Armstrong and Gillett spend 18 months travelling to find their cast. The final piece of the jigsaw was intended to flag up the connection between war and oil. Armstrong says they wanted to head to Iraq 'but my dad banned us'. So they travelled to Jordan instead, where they found Jamila and Adnan, two child refugees from Iraq, who had crossed the border after their father was killed in the war.

The five distinct stories are then woven together to show all sides of the climate change problem. 'The original idea came from Stephan Soderbergh's *Traffic*,' says Armstrong. 'It then evolved from there into the idea of interweaving human stories, and them becoming greater than some of their parts.'

To help the film make sense, the clips are broken up with factual animations, analysis from George Monbiot, diagrams by Mark Lynas and news snippets. At early test screenings, people have already compared it to *The Corporation* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

From crowd to audience

Instead of getting a commission, like most documentaries, *The Age of Stupid* is independently funded ('crowd funding' as they call it). More than 220 people have bought shares or made donations to the project. Armstrong, used to working on small budget films, didn't want to lose the independence she'd had in the past. Many would think this would be an impossible task but she says it was 'actually much easier than if it was a commission. As soon as we wanted to start the film we could. And we've just been getting the money in as we go along.'

'The next year or so will be taken up with promoting the film, preferably without flying – apparently it takes 13 days to get to America by cargo ship'

She expresses delight that the investors have not only financed the film but have acted as a fantastic network during its making, and is sure they will continue to be of use during its distribution. It has not been a quick project, however. Armstrong, along with Gillett, her Kiwi producer, have been working on it together for over four years.

As for the future, 'The next year or so will be taken up with promoting the film, preferably without flying – apparently it takes 13 days to get to America by cargo ship.' They have just added up their carbon footprint for the film – it's more than a hundred tons. But Armstrong says, 'It's just maths – if people who watch the film change, then that will save far more than a hundred tons.'

They hope the film will premier at this year's Cannes festival. If not, Armstrong says they'll work to find a distributor elsewhere, and may also use NGOs and climate activists to help. They would even consider a Radiohead-style 'pay what you like' publicity release.

Armstrong says she is now done with making films, 'although they're a great way of getting your message across, they are just too much – you are manipulating people's reality to fit your own world. It's not very good for the soul.' She claims that 'carbon rationing is the way forward' and thinks she could help get that going in some way. As for Gillett, as all her family are miles away in New Zealand and as she won't take personal flights, she's planning to take the long train and boat journey home, stopping for screenings along the way.