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Climate and environmental emergency: a case for a humanities approach

Camille MANFREDI and Sylvie NAIL

- 1 Covid-19, climate change, flash floods, heat waves, wildfires: the present contribution originates at a moment in history when emergencies and their retinue of emergency measures proliferate, supersede and worsen (less often improve) each other, and when the side effects of one inform and transform our perceptions of the other. Between the environmental consequences of the current disease outbreak, its economic impacts on clean energy transition and the increased frequency of natural disasters, there is no doubt that we are living unprecedented¹ times of multiple emergencies, all of which call for equally unprecedented and multiple, preferably coordinated, responses.
- 2 If an emergency refers to a situation in which “the normal ways we manage society and the economy cannot adequately deal with the risk we face” (Gilding 5), action, “commensurate with both the scale and urgency of the risk” (Gilding 5), is expected first from governments. With the benefit of hindsight, writing at the beginning of 2021, we have just been witnesses to such action on a planetary scale, probably for the first time in peace time, in response to the Covid-19 crisis. To avoid massive contamination, common approaches have included recommendations on physical distancing and the restriction of all non-essential internal movement (lockdown) for a majority of the population worldwide in 2020. The governments have based their decisions on scientific expertise, the latter being used as justification in the face of criticisms. This crisis has made many people aware of the common destiny humans share in the face of such emergencies.
- 3 Experts in climate and biodiversity have been blowing the whistle for a while now concerning the dire state of our environment and the possibly catastrophic consequences of delaying action. Yet, although the scale and urgency of the threat seem to be consensual, scientists do not seem to have managed to spur coherent international action comparable to what we have seen for Covid-19. Scientists

themselves recognise that knowledge is not sufficient to induce action on climate change (Klein et.al. 911). Yet, the word “emergency” has recently pervaded political discourse in relation to climate change: for instance, in April 2019, the British Parliament approved a motion to declare an environment and climate emergency as a response to demands put to the government by environmental activist group Extinction Rebellion. This however did not prevent Conservative candidate Boris Johnson from not attending the first ever leaders’ debate on the climate crisis during the general election campaign in November 2019, one day after the publication of an article in *Nature* authored by renowned scientists which raised the alarm as to the evidence of a “state of planet emergency” (Lenton et al). And this absence did not prevent his party from gaining a comfortable majority in Parliament, making Boris Johnson Prime Minister. And the UK is not an isolated case.

- 4 Clearly, the science-governance-conscience trio which dominated the crisis management for Covid-19 does not seem to operate with regards to climate emergency. By October 2020, around 1,800 jurisdictions in 31 countries had declared a climate emergency, covering 90% of the British population, 75% of the New Zealand population and 36% of the Australian population (Climate Emergency Declaration). With what results? Does the new mantra of climate emergency amount to placating citizens by giving them the feeling they have been heard, while they internalise through repeated use the existence – and possibly the acceptability – of the crisis? Worse, it looks as though the Covid-19 crisis, far from providing a benchmark for action applicable to climate emergency, has slowed the momentum and may lead to dramatic consequences for progress on climate change: “there are reasons to fear that we will leap from the COVID frying pan into the climate fire” (Hepburn et al 4) unless “recovery packages [...] seek synergies between climate and economic goals” (Hepburn et al 17).
- 5 If indeed neither governments nor scientists can do everything, who can do the rest? In his foreword to David Spratt and Ian Dunlop’s 2018 report *What Lies Beneath*, professor of theoretical physics Hans Joachim Schellnuber promoted “non-mainstream” approaches to climate change and suggested that we now think outside “conventional means of analysis” and “conservative” – that is, restrained, rational – scientific models. The time has come, he argued, to “cry wolf”:

[...] climate change is now reaching the end-game, where very soon humanity must choose between taking unprecedented action, or accepting that it has been left too late and bear the consequences. Therefore it is all the more important to listen to non-mainstream voices who do understand the issues and are less hesitant to cry wolf. Unfortunately for us, the wolf may already be in the house. (Schellnuber 3)
- 6 Schellnuber’s incentive to think outside the science box is not new: in an article dated 2006 already, climate scientists Hans von Storch and Nico Stehr advocated more research into

the social and cultural processes of speaking about climate, of the formation and usage of lay knowledge, of the formation and social functioning of mental images, icons and popular explanations of climate and its interaction with people. We are in need of social and cultural sciences to map, understand and, as far as possible, predict the social and cultural construction of climate. [...] This type of knowledge is urgently needed to guide policy-makers and the public in developing and adopting rational policies for dealing with the very real prospect of significant future climate change. (von Storch & Stehr, 2006)
- 7 This special issue of *E-Rea* aims at doing just that: mapping and understanding the ways in which environmental emergency is tackled by political institutions, but also coped

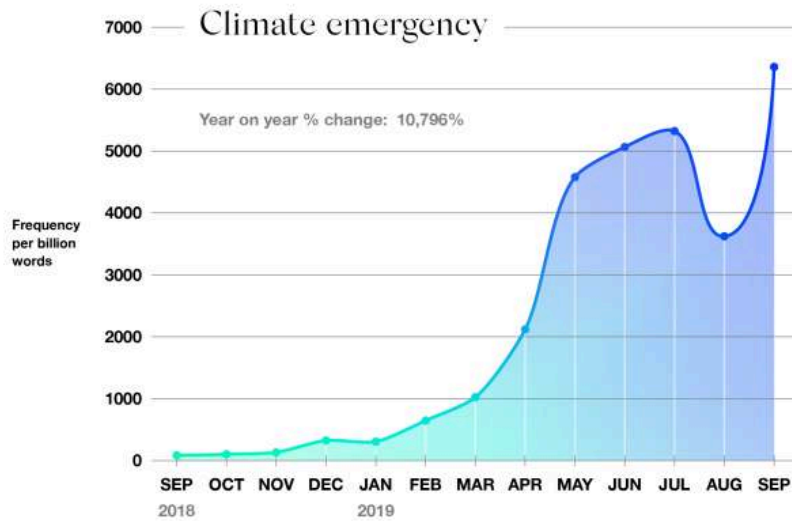
with by the people and addressed by the media, while taking into consideration the many different political, ideological and cultural contexts of the countries and regions of the Anglosphere that this issue focuses on. To the question “What can we, academics in the humanities, do?” the answer may be to create spaces for a comprehensive, cross-disciplinary analysis of the states, feelings, declarations and signs of an emergency that has come to inform not just our research topics but the very practical conditions we work under. The point is not to “cry wolf” for the sake of it, but to apply our scientific methods to the ways climate emergency has changed our perception of time, affected our civil rights and given rise to new forms of creative expression, to new modes of resistance, and to new responsibilities both individual and collective. Environmental history and, more recently, environmental humanities have been crucial in weaving together “human experience with the workings of nature into a fuller understanding of the past and how it affects human decisions and destinations” (Sörlin & Warde, 2009). It is now...well, *urgent* to make sense of the state of the global emergency that we find ourselves in and to scrutinise environmental emergency from the cross-pollinating perspectives of political science, history, literary criticism, discourse analysis, aesthetics and philosophy, in the hope of finding resonances conducive to an analysis of what characterises the understanding of, and reactions to, the environmental conundrum.

- 8 It is no coincidence that the project that has led to this publication originated just months before the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) held its 2020 virtual symposium aptly titled “Humanities on the Brink: Energy, Environment, Emergency”. Ahead of the event, the call for papers outlined a series of goals for a new field of study:

As we continue to examine the meaning of the humanities in a time of emergency, scholars must find ways to bridge academic critique and research with the work that non-academic communities are doing in response to the existential threats of what many have come to call the Anthropocene. [...] to create bridges rather than silos, [...] to take up questions of urgency and emergency in the context of the overlapping social and ecological crises that mark the present – to think within and against what we might call the “Emergency Humanities.”²²

- 9 Emergency or Sustainability Humanities will then pull from all disciplines and social sciences to examine and understand the many different ways climate emergency is decreed and declared, also who it is decreed and declared by, for what (political, social, cultural...) purpose, and in what circumstances. First, we must get back to the origin story of the term before we enquire into the political, institutional, educational, and social responses that climate and environmental emergency has elicited in the Anglosphere, our geographical area of interest.
- 10 Because climate emergency is a matter of scientific facts and therefore of their popularisation, it is also a matter of language use. The first occurrences of the word “emergency” in relation to climate change appeared in the aftermath of the publication of David Spratt and Philip Sutton’s *Climate Code Red: The Case for Emergency Action* in 2008. Barely eleven years later, the Oxford Dictionaries declared “climate emergency” – defined as “a situation in which urgent action is required to reduce or halt climate change and avoid potentially irreversible environmental damage resulting from it” – the word of the year for 2019. Analysis of language data revealed a hundred-fold increase in usage of the term in just one year, and “the rapid rise of climate emergency

from relative obscurity to becoming one of the most prominent – and prominently debated – terms of 2019”:



Source: <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2019/>

- 11 How did a phrase that was at first derided as catastrophist by some come to upend our everyday speech? It did so, perhaps, via the treatment of the concept of climate emergency by the media, pressure groups and political parties, and in the proliferation of expressions such as “it is now or never”, “there is no planet B”, “we have reached the endgame”, “mankind is on the brink of extinction”, “time is running out”, “final notice”, “code red”, “the fight against climate change is a race against time and the clock is ticking”... – the list could go on at length. All of these are meant to relay or amplify the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s reports and provoke people for *immediate* action. Environmental and climate emergency must thus also be approached as pertaining to cognitive processes and communicational apparatuses, whether these are verbal, iconic, euphemistic or dysphemistic. See for instance how environmental journalist Bill McKibben translated the emergency into a metaphor which will sound to the readers of 2021 like an uncanny prophesy in more ways than one: “The planet is running a hideous fever, and the antibodies – all those protesters – are finally kicking in. It’s a race, and we’re behind, and we better start catching up right now” (McKibben).
- 12 In May 2019, *The Guardian* updated its house style: “Instead of ‘climate change’ the preferred terms are ‘climate emergency, crisis or breakdown’ [...] People need reminding that the climate crisis is no longer a future problem – we need to tackle it now, and every day matters.” (Carrington; see also Zeldin O’Neill). In October of the same year, *Guardian* picture editor Fiona Shields announced a “changing narrative” in the visual communication of the newspaper in the matter of climate journalism. This meant publishing fewer images of polar bears and pandas and more of people directly impacted, with a view to driving the level of emotional engagement. Indeed, “there is mounting evidence that facts play only a partial role in shaping people’s judgment. Emotion is often far more important” (Crompton 8). Likewise, several researchers have

pointed the need for more effective communication, based on the intrinsic value of nature and, more generally, on the activation of values, rather than the objective services of nature to humans (Bekessy, Crompton). In 2020, *The Guardian* pledged to “keep raising the alarm” (Viner) as part of an increasing level of commitment in what is now known as climate emergency journalism. The rapid spread of environmental mediactivism in the course of the past two years led to the launch in 2019 of *Covering Climate Now*, a multiyear project involving the *Columbia Journalism Review*, *The Nation* and *The Guardian*, set on creating a “new playbook for journalism that is compatible with the 1.5-degree future that scientists say must be achieved” (Nisbet).

- 13 What are, then, the rhetoric and grammar of climate emergency? How – that is, with what narratives, words, icons and figures of speech, with what playbooks – do the media, governmental agencies, activists and whistle-blowers declare and *signify* the urgency to spring into action? One might think, for instance, of the now famous parable of the hummingbird, of French historian Jean-Paul Deléage’s 2002 “our house is on fire” metaphor and its re-use by environmental activist Greta Thunberg at the 2019 World Economic Forum in Davos:

I don't want your hope, I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic, I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act, I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house was on fire, because it is.

- 14 See also Extinction Rebellion’s equally sharp incentive to action: “The science is clear. It is understood that we are facing an unprecedented global emergency. We are in a life or death situation of our own making. We must act now”; or the arresting motto “Hope dies – action begins”. Interestingly enough, these codes (simple and assertive sentences in the simple present, insistent anaphora, recurrent use of the inclusionary pronoun “we” as opposed to “you”...) are common to XR activists as they occupy the streets of Paris and London, to Thunberg and George Monbiot when they ally on social media to urge us all to “Protect, Restore, Fund” (#naturenow), and to the young people who are at the forefront of environmental activism as part of a generational shift in attitudes and values (see Fridays for Future). Our task as commentators, then, is to develop critical – that is, reflective and independent – approaches to how people process and express the experience of climate and environmental emergency. We must do so by examining in what terms and to what ends whistle-blowers, movements of civil disobedience (Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, XR, school strikers, Sea Shepherd, Earth First!...), First Peoples (Standing Rock, Flint’s ‘water warriors’, People’s Summit 2019...), as well as governmental and non-governmental organisations sound the alarm.
- 15 Likewise, we must apply what might be termed emergency criticism to the many literary and artistic forms that help translate not just climate emergency, but also deep ecology, eco-anxiety, solastalgia (environmental grief) and anti-consumerism into fiction, drama and poetry, as well as into the nonverbal arts. How do these prompt, inform, feed or, conversely, constrain literary and artistic production? How do pressing environmental issues and public policies on environmental sustainability work their way into the literatures and visual arts of the Anglosphere? As we inquire into the forms, genres, colours and symbols (street artist ESP’s now famous hourglass comes to mind) of climate emergency, we must wonder what exactly is at stake, and what part, if any, the aestheticisation, artialisation and theatricalisation of the emergency can effectively play in the tackling of pressing environmental issues.

- 16 There again, the now global environmental movement Extinction Rebellion provides a good case in point. Ever since its inception in the United Kingdom in 2018, XR has used civil disobedience, nonviolent direct action, mass arrest *and art* to achieve its goals. The Rebellion identifies itself as a creative one and relies on a wide array of artistic practices and techniques with a view to garnering the attention of the media, social and otherwise. Public art, murals, street performance (Red Rebel Brigade), regenerative arts, music (XR Drummers) and dance, extinction marches...most XR public actions take place with the active support of the international community of artists rallying under the banners of “Culture Declares Emergency” and “Writers Rebel” – with the latter including A.L. Kennedy, Margaret Atwood, Robert McFarlane, Ali Smith, Simon Schama, Irenosen Okojie, Naomi Alderman, Liz Jensen, Stephen Fry, Chloe Aridjis, Helen Simpson, Susie Orbach, Paul Farley, Daljit Nagra, and many others.
- 17 At a time when the gloomiest dystopian projections and related existential threats now seem like a very real possibility, what exactly can we learn from the cross-pollination of fiction, art and activism? In January 2020, the Greenpeace Film Festival promised the viewers a selection “more intense than *Game of Thrones*”: as reality strikes back, could we be experiencing the opposite of what Jean Baudrillard denounced in the early 1980s, that is, the precession of the original over the simulacrum? If this is true, what does it entail in terms of the postmodern, now possibly outdated, distinction between reality and representation?
- 18 On these issues, the following papers offer historical as well as contemporary perspectives. They attempt to throw light on the many (re)interpretations and (re)definitions across time of the protean concept of environmental emergency, on the evolution of social and institutional responses to the said emergency, as well as on its representations in the media, literature and visual arts of the Anglosphere. The complexity and interconnectedness of the issues dictates an interdisciplinary, dialogic organisation of this issue according to different approaches to environmental emergency emanating from academic research and from artists’ perspective alike.
- 19 The way in which the natural world is framed at a given moment has bearing on the words used, the representations made and the policy responses that environmental disasters elicit. This is why the first group of contributions, gathered under the title “Naming, voicing”, focuses on the ways in which environmental emergency is understood and framed through words and bodies in different contexts.
- 20 In her contribution, entitled “What’s in a word? The (natural) world according to the United Nations”, Sylvie Nail shows how the environment has been construed in international politics since the 1970s, in particular through studies which have endeavoured to put words on the benefits that humans draw from nature. The advantages and limits of such categorisations are analysed, as well as their consequences on the framing of protective measures at the highest level of international politics. Lastly, the article explains not only why precise knowledge and high ambitions have not translated into sufficient concrete action, but also, paradoxically, how they have led to a certain rupture between humans and the natural world.
- 21 The second article, “Experiencing *Rupture*: affective art and becoming-with slow emergencies”, is a plea for the reconnection of humans to nature through an awareness of the palpable manifestations of eco-anxiety within the body. Through the presentation of their work *Rupture* and the performance they talk/take us through, the

authors, Australian artists Jessie Boylan, Virginia Barratt and Linda Dement, invite the readers to accept that symptoms of human disorder are nothing but “an appropriate response to personal traumas and global catastrophe”. Breathing and conjuring up a “body-in-the-world”, they argue, may help “reconfigure the traumas beneath the surface” and overcome the paralysis.

- 22 The last article of this section, entitled “Representing Environmental Emergency as Social Emergency: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 in Blues Songs from Louisiana and Mississippi”, also provides a connection between trauma and the use of words/body to account for and escape from environmental catastrophe. Here, the human voice is the medium used both to convey the unspeakable misery of humans faced with human-induced environmental disaster and to encourage African-American workers to move on. If understanding the functioning of natural elements to decrease the threat of disasters is a characteristic of our “risk-adverse” society (Beck), Stéphanie Denève shows that this has not always been a priority. Using the case of the greatest environmental disaster in US history, she shows how the industrial plantations demanded the subjection of natural and human resources alike. She analyses the representations of the river and of nature by black workers through the lyrics of blues songs related to the flood. This reveals, not only that the war against nature was not their war, but that they too were victims of the exploitation of the environment brought about by the white planters.
- 23 In line with the international framework defined in the first article, environmental issues have risen to prominence as a domain of public policies worldwide in the 1980s. They have been subject to institutional action based on the understanding of the threats. In this process, good intentions based on scientific evidence have often been counterbalanced by interpretations, ideologies and vested interests, which has contributed to limiting the scope of instruments developed to protect the natural world through “urgent” action. The second part of this issue, entitled “Taking (in)action” thus focuses on how the values attributed to the environment have been mainstreamed into decision making and how grassroots activism has responded to insufficient action.
- 24 First, a contribution by Alma-Pierre Bonnet on “The politicization of the climate emergency: the case of the 2019 United Kingdom general election” decodes the unexpected results of the latest general election. The author shows how the polarisation of British politics, which associated environmental issues more with the Labour Party, also anti-Brexit, than with the Conservatives, played against the former. Beyond party politics, identity politics accounts for British electors identifying more in terms of their Brexit position than any party affiliation. Moreover, Brexit was also seen as the opportunity to get rid of European “green tape”, which included environmental regulations, since most of them have come from European institutions. This explains why, in spite of extreme weather events, the Conservative party’s strategy of orienting all the electoral promises around “Getting Brexit done” paid off.
- 25 Illustrating Bonnet’s conclusion that “young people tend to identify with the climate emergency more easily than their elders” Sarah Pickard’s contribution, based on qualitative research, offers an in-depth portrait of this politically active cohort of young people. Her contribution, “You are stealing our future in front of our very eyes”: The representation of climate change, emotions and the mobilisation of young environmental activists in Britain”, analyses the relationships between co-existing

- youth movements, their effects on the political class and the wide range of emotional responses linked to this form of Do-It-Ourselves (DIO) politics.
- 26 In the United States, a consistent approach to environmental emergency over the last three decades has been informed by it being framed as a national security issue, as highlighted by Michael Stricof in his contribution “Representing Climate Change through the Lens of Environmental Security: Thirty Years of the Department of Defense Defining a Threat Multiplier and Military Resilience”. Through a discourse analysis approach, the author demonstrates how, more than a threat in itself, environmental emergency has been perceived as a “threat multiplier” potentially leading to greater “instability”. This unusual take has resulted in continuous, consistent action to increase the military’s resilience in terms of mitigation and adaptation to climate change, regardless of whether environmental issues fell out of favour with the country’s highest-level political leadership.
 - 27 However, seen from the perspective of young people, inertia and failure to address the climate crisis have dominated American administrations, especially under G.W. Bush and D. Trump. As in the United Kingdom, faced with an alternative between eco-anxiety/ depression and action, many young American people have turned to contentious politics, as shown by Mélanie Meunier in her contribution “Youth Climate Activism in the United States”. She analyses mobilisation strategies used by grassroots organisations, ranging from dutiful to more disruptive tactics, as well as recourse to courts and lobbying.
 - 28 Following up on the interpretation of the environmental emergency in the political arena as a justification for a wide range of discourse and mobilisations, and mostly insufficient action, the third section entitled “Narrating, representing” offers case studies of 21st-century Scottish, Irish and Australian works of non-fiction, poetry and fiction respectively with a view to examining how texts can interact with the reader to generate new objects which may, or may not, spur action in relation to climate and environmental crises.
 - 29 In “‘In the early Anthropocene’: Witnessing Environmental Emergency in Kathleen Jamie’s Essays”, Monika Szuba draws on environmental studies and theoretical work on the Anthropocene to give a context for a specific understanding of the textual strategies and philosophical approach of Jamie’s collection of essays *Surfacing* (2019). By focusing on Jamie’s approach to temporality, spectrality, language and the impact of the environmental crisis on cultural (dis)continuity, she discusses the ways in which the Scottish nature-writer, through her ethics of noticing, shuns solastalgic representations to aim instead for change, resilience and cultural regeneration.
 - 30 In “Beyond representation? A material-ecocritical reading of Derek Mahon’s ‘ecopoetry’”, Catherine Conan approaches Mahon’s collection *Against the Clock* (2018) through a theoretical framework inspired by flat ontologies, notably agential realism and object-oriented ontology (OOO). Her contribution questions the idea that ecopoetry is endowed with actual effectiveness in the material world and contends that the ontological vision of an autonomous subject uttering words which function as reflections of the world “out there” may be the greatest obstacle to actual environmental change as well as to the uncovering of poetry’s real ecological value. By highlighting the need to move beyond representationalism, Catherine Conan offers a critical analysis of Mahon’s poetry that fosters sensory engagement with the material

reality, one that does not isolate the representing mind from the represented endangered world.

- 31 This section ends with Anne Le Guellec's contribution entitled "From *Carpentaria* to *The Swan Book*: finding a voice to narrate and resist the threat of extinction in Alexis Wright's latest work." There, the author analyses the Australian writer and activist's positioning regarding "end times" and extinction in a context of climate change. Her contribution examines the wide array of European and non-Western intertextual references that Wright relies on, at the same time as it assesses the specificity of indigenous perspectives about climate change. It argues that, by resisting essentialising Aboriginal identity, Wright gives voice to her people's way of seeing the world as a way to campaign for the recognition of the land's legal rights as a living ecological entity.
- 32 Faced with the uncomfortable truth that reporting insufficient actions is clearly not enough to prevent irreversible climate change, the authors of the last group of contributions gathered under the heading "Appropriating" reflect on the ways in which artists and researchers alike revisit and reinterpret their sources or practices.
- 33 Taking up Marsha Lederman's suggestion that "the arts can be the planet's white knight", Mary Ann Steggle explores the work of four North American artists in her contribution entitled "Imaging the Climate Crisis. The Ceramic Art of Horie, Galloway, Snider, and Rhymer-Zwierciadlowska". Creating "conversation starter porcelain cups" representing controversial projects to generate discussion and create "slow activism" over a cup of coffee, making porcelain-covered jars in the form of funeral urns with animals at risk of extinction painted on them or capturing the loss of glacier ice through the delicacy of an unfinished cup. Those are examples of these artists' mobilisation to confront viewers with various issues linked to climate change and bring about a change of attitude.
- 34 Also reflecting on the forcefulness of images that represent the urgency of environmental action, Xavier Lachazette focuses on Daphne Du Maurier's allegorical novella "The Birds". Although Du Maurier did not write it in the context of climate change, Xavier Lachazette, in his contribution entitled "Using Animal Retribution Fiction for the Promotion of Environmental Awareness: the Case for a Reinterpretation of Daphne Du Maurier's "The Birds"", puts the novella in a wider literary context that shows the use of popular culture to "imaginatively recreate a form of proximity to nature". There is a case, he argues, for reading "The Birds" today as a "commanding metaphor" for the environmental emergency that the world currently faces, as a wake-up call to urge humanity to implement the changes that will make its survival possible.
- 35 Emilie Dardenne's contribution closes the last section and the volume with a contribution entitled "The Tipping Point? The Covid-19 Crisis, Critical Animal Studies and Academic Responsibility", in which she questions the role of academia and, more specifically, the forms taken by the interplay between academic work and normativity. Taking Covid-19 as a starting-point on human-nonhuman relationships and extending the reflection to animal studies, the author wonders whether, for the sake of objectivity in the production of academic knowledge, scholars can afford to avoid having in their institutions the type of debates that are occurring in society at large. She concludes that at such a time of crisis, the role of academia is vital and scholactivism with regards to animal studies is unavoidable.

- 36 “In an emergency, business-as-usual is suspended and an abnormal level of intensity is focused on managing the threat” (Gilding 25). This issue of E-Rea is not business as usual: we are crying wolf: “From this moment, despair ends and tactics begin”³.

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NOTES

1. According to *BBC News* on 6 April 2020, "Even the frequency of use of the word "unprecedented" is unprecedented at the moment. According to Google Trends it's been used three times more over the last two weeks than the highest point recorded previously". <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52103747>

2. <https://www.asle.org/stay-informed/asle-news/humanities-on-the-brink-energy-environment-emergency-asle-2020-virtual-symposium/> The presentations made during the symposium can be found online at http://ehc.english.ucsb.edu/?page_id=20002. Last accessed 2 November 2020.

3. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/has-banksy-joined-the-extinction-rebellion-protest#:~:text=The%20group%20says%3A%20%E2%80%9CNew%20%23,of%20Everyday%20Life%2C%201967.%E2%80%9D>

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