

Wake Up; Look Around; Get Involved

Daniel Larlham



We can't go on like this. That much is clear. Human beings have overtaken so much of the earth's land surface that only a quarter remains wild and as little as 2% may be left ecologically intact. Emissions of greenhouse gases from our industrial production, transport, and other activities are driving global warming and climate change. Ice sheets are melting; sea levels are rising; the oceans are acidifying; extreme weather events like fires, floods, and storms are becoming more frequent and intense; ocean and air currents threaten to destabilize. We are witnesses to staggering biodiversity loss, a cascading death of species that qualifies as Earth's sixth mass extinction event—the first since the disappearance of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. Individually, released from the constraints of consensus and professional jargon, members of the climate science community worry that we may have as little as three to four years to change course—that is, to begin ramping down carbon emissions drastically enough to avoid a point of no return, beyond which climate chaos becomes inevitable.¹

1. This “three to four year” assessment was given by climate scientist and former adviser to the UK government Sir David King at the National Climate Emergency Summit in Melbourne, Australia, in February 2021 (Silvester 2021).

Three to four years. In light of this timeframe, the most radical proposals seem the sanest. Some in the environmental movement have suggested that the wisest course, though a seeming impossibility given the state of the international order and widespread domestic dysfunction, would be a civilizational power-down: energy use, consumption, and travel would be curtailed worldwide for a transitional period of a decade or so, or however long needed, in order to build up global capacity to produce renewable energy.² My grandparents in Britain turned out their lights after curfew to thwart Nazi bombers and accepted strict rationing, but, these days, right-wing pundits (and even crankily centrist media personalities) often accuse climate activists of perverse asceticism, as if their demands for emissions reductions were a Machiavellian ruse to deprive us all of our laptops, SUVs, and plastic straws and make us live in caves. Are we so attached to our comforts? Are we so unwilling to look at where they come from, and at what cost? What will it take for us to muster our collective will, summon our creativity, and embrace the sacrifices necessary to secure a future for life on Earth?

My journey of personal awakening to the direness of the ecological crisis began only a handful of years ago. Until then, preoccupied with my own life-dramas, I side-stepped educating myself on the science of climate change and frequently indulged the avoidant thought: “Maybe things won’t get too bad within my lifetime.” As wrapped up as I was in my personal projects and struggles, I believe that my psyche was indeed registering the growing ecological crisis, but in a largely unconscious fashion, as depression, restlessness, dissonance, nostalgic yearning, a deficit of meaning and purpose, and a feeling of pervasive belatedness.

This psychosomatic homeostasis was punctured by a confluence of events in the years 2017 to 2019: the Tubbs Fire in Northern California, which burned over 35,000 acres and forced a close friend and his family in Santa Rosa to evacuate their home; the emergence of Swedish youth climate activist Greta Thunberg as a public figure; and mass acts of nonviolent civil disobedience by the group Extinction Rebellion UK (XR UK) in London during October 2018 and April 2019. My psychological “tipping point” came during the summer of 2019, while reading XR UK’s flagship publication *This Is Not a Drill* (Extinction Rebellion UK 2019a) and watching a series of brutally frank YouTube videos featuring two of the group’s cofounders, Gail Bradbrook and Roger Hallam (see Extinction Rebellion UK 2018, 2019b). Their message: there would be no quiet life in the hills for any of us. My psyche shaken, I oscillated between panic and despair. I found myself longing for the false sense of existential security I’d known before I knew “too much.” I later read accounts of environmental activists having versions of this kind of shattering recognition experience—the realization that, as Joanna Macy puts it, “Yes—we can do it now, we can destroy our world” (2020:73)—as early as the 1960s and 1970s. How humbled, how ignorant, how horribly “behind the curve” I felt.

Motivated by a desperate feeling of urgency and a need to be part of something larger than myself in order to face what I’d begun to confront, I joined my local chapter of Extinction Rebellion in the San Francisco Bay Area. In brief summary, XR UK’s three demands of the British Parliament are: 1) to share with the public the full truth about the extent and dangers of the climate crisis; 2) to

Figure 1. (previous page) The Extinction Rebellion SF Bay Street Theater Group’s “Xtractors” at the head of a march along the Embarcadero, San Francisco, 11 November 2021. (Photo by Leon Kunstenaar)

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2. See, for example, Richard Heinberg’s *Powerdown: Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World* (2004).

act immediately to halt biodiversity loss and bring about net zero carbon emissions by 2025; and 3) to convene a Citizens' Assembly, a representative body of everyday citizens selected by sortition to make binding decisions about measures to counter climate change (Extinction Rebellion UK 2022). XR groups in the United States have added a fourth demand: a "just transition" to a sustainable economy that would prioritize the voices and needs of indigenous groups and the most vulnerable populations within society (Extinction Rebellion US 2022).

XR UK's chief tactic is disruption through nonviolent civil disobedience, often known as "non-violent direct action" (NVDA) in the United States. During October and November 2018 and April 2019, XR UK occupied major bridges, intersections, and public spaces throughout central London, halting traffic, broadcasting their demands, and deploying eye-catching art and performance elements. Though the UK government responded with only token gestures,³ the October 2018 and April 2019 rebellions undoubtedly opened up a space for much broader awareness and more sophisticated public discourse about the climate crisis in the United Kingdom.

Inspired by XR UK's message, demands, and formula for change, chapters of XR began springing up in the United States and around the world during the summer of 2019. I joined XR SF Bay shortly after its formation. Over the past three years, the chapter has organized protests, marches, rallies, "die-ins," banner-drops, and blockades of streets, oil refineries, and entrances to banks and government buildings, more often than not in allyship with other groups within the Bay Area's diverse climate justice community. Major actions within the past year have included marches and rallies outside the offices of BlackRock, Wells Fargo, and the Army Corps of Engineers in April 2021 as part of the Defund Line 3 pipeline campaign; a massive blockade of streets in downtown San Francisco on 29 October 2021 (a global day of action coinciding with the beginning of the COP26 climate conference); and a takeover of the ground floor of Wells Fargo's corporate headquarters on 25 April 2022, during which protestors chained themselves to an antique stagecoach and forced the bank to defend its fossil fuel investment policy in mainstream news media.

My main contribution to XR SF Bay's activities has been devising and staging street theatre and spectacle. The chapter's Street Theater Group has developed a set of archetypal characters intended to embody various forces at play in humanity's response to the climate crisis. Our "Xtractor" characters represent the routinized rapacity of extractive capitalism. They wear respirator masks and hazmat suits and march robotically through the streets with flags bearing the logo of a skull—with dollar signs in its eyes—being fracked. Their motto and mantra is "Extract, Consume, Deny." The Xtractors are sometimes joined by the "Glammonites," materialistic magpies in flashy-trashy outfits who accompany the Xtractors like remoras on a shark, along for the ride—not knowing or caring where the ecocidal juggernaut upon which they are piggybacked is headed.

XR SF Bay's "Lamentor" characters are inspired by burlap-clad figures named "The Penitents" who appeared at a series of XR UK actions in Cornwall (and YouTube footage thereof) during the summer of 2019 (see Extinction Rebellion UK 2019c). Moving slowly and somberly in loose formation, the Lamentors externalize our culture's hidden collective grief and lend a sense of gravity and sobriety to actions and protests. Groups of Lamentors have made impactful appearances at a meeting of the board of the California Public Employees' Retirement System (in November 2021, to advocate for divestment from fossil fuels) and at a June 2022 hearing on the California Air Resources Board's draft Scoping Plan, to support calls from the environmental justice community for a more ambitious timeline for the state to phase out fossil fuels. XR SF Bay's "Turquoise Rebels" are our chapter's take

3. The UK government declared a climate emergency in May 2019 and six select committees in the House of Commons commissioned Climate Assembly UK in June 2019. This body, which delivered its final report in September 2020, was deemed "inadequate" by XR UK because it was convened under the presupposition that a 2050 net-zero target date would be sufficient to stave off the worst effects of climate change, because its proceedings were not shared with the general public, and because there was no requirement that the government take action on the assembly's recommendations (Extinction Rebellion UK 2020).



Figure 2. The Extinction Rebellion SF Bay Street Theater Group's "Lamentor" characters outside the Phillip Burton Federal Building in San Francisco, 15 October 2021. (Photo by Leon Kunstenaar)

on XR UK's iconic Red Rebel Brigade, the brainchild of Doug Francisco and Justine Squire of the Bristol-based performance collective Invisible Circus. Moving in elegant slow motion, our Turquoise Rebels open up a portal into mythic space-time and transfix passersby with their fierce, wounded dignity.

Over the past three years, XR SF Bay's street theatre characters have marched along the Embarcadero, roved among picnickers in Dolores Park, processed between lines of cars stopped in rush-hour traffic on Folsom Street, and paid several visits to Wells Fargo's corporate headquarters in San Francisco's Financial District. Our archetypal characters have caught the interest of bystanders and have proved an effective outreach tool when partnered with other members of the chapter handing out flyers; supplied dynamic imagery for social media; and provided in-group entertainment for those involved in other aspects of a given action (holding banners, blocking traffic, painting street murals, etc.). In addition, performers in the Lamentor and Turquoise Rebel roles have served as a de-escalating influence, subtly disrupting habituated, adversarial dynamics between police and security guards and activists by the mere fact of their presence.

My experiences with the Street Theater Group have shown me that people with a background in drama, theatre, and performance have all kinds of useful skills and abilities to offer the climate justice movement. We can scout locations and assess the lay of the land for sightlines, exits and entrances, and pedestrian traffic patterns. We have an ear for language and rhetoric. We can memorize and deliver text effectively. We have instincts about what should come first and what should happen last. We know how to rehearse. (The skills of a director or acting coach can easily be applied to nonviolent direct-action training, for example, or prepping a spokesperson for a big interview.) We know how to steer clear of tired tropes of protest performance and how to aim

at images that are more genuinely resonant with and diagnostic of our present situation. We can even help with action design and campaign strategy, which are, essentially, forms of creative brainstorming. Most importantly, artists can help activists connect with the hearts and imaginations as well as the rational impulses and moral convictions of their audiences, so that action in response to the climate crisis can be presented to the public not as a “game of numbers” (Jakovljević and Looser 2021:3) played out in degrees Celsius and parts per million, but as an unignorable story about what it is to be human at this moment in history—a drama so existentially crucial that, if we find our place within it, we cannot help but discover our sense of meaning and purpose in life renewed and evolved.

The Covid-19 pandemic has cut into XR SF Bay’s membership numbers significantly. My sense from afar is that XR UK is also struggling to recapture momentum after an enforced shift of gears during the pandemic. Some commentators argue that XR’s radical approach is stalling after going as far as it can go, while representatives of XR UK itself, citing organizer and social change theorist Bill Moyer’s Movement Action Plan, have expressed their belief that they are now on the very threshold of winning the support of the majority of the public, even as a perception of “activist failure” takes hold.⁴

I am agnostic. I believe that the analysis of XR’s doubters is credible and that a major reason why the movement hasn’t been able to catch fire again is growing resignation, the perception that the time we have left to avert disaster is very short indeed and that the forces arrayed on the side of business as usual are vast, ruthless, and deep-pocketed. My personal position boils down to the following: I don’t know if Extinction Rebellion’s formula for social change will work, but at least they have a plan, and they’re out there in the streets putting it to the test. If I come to see things differently and decide that I can be more useful elsewhere, I will redirect my energies, but for now, I will carry on making theatre in the streets with XR, focused on the questions: What has not been done before? What has never been seen? How far are we willing to go to cut through the apathy? I hold to a stubborn faith that if an artistic statement genuinely punctures a paradigm, breaking through into new aesthetic-symbolic-emotional-spiritual territory, people will sit up and take notice. They will even look up from their cell phones.

We in the fields of theatre and performance have come nowhere near unleashing the full extent of our creativity on this issue, for this cause. Let’s find out what we’re capable of in the years ahead. If we do, will it be “enough”? Who can say? And is that even a useful question? As the Zen Buddhist nun Sister True Dedication writes: “The stark truth is that the planet doesn’t need to be saved only once; it needs to be saved countless times, for eons to come” (in Nhat Hanh 2021:36). If we are indeed on our way out as a species—if we have entered into a chapter that might be titled “Endgame Earth” (Schechner 2020)—then we can choose to face our end with nobility and determination, trying to make a difference, doing our utmost to keep waking ourselves up and extending a hand to those in need for as long as we are able. Even if it’s already “too late” to avert climate breakdown, ongoing mitigation over the coming decades—which will buy us time to build material and psychological resilience—will be a serious achievement.

XR UK titled its 2022 campaign “The Impossible Rebellion,” and its latest crop of slogans includes “Act now, because it’s too late!” and “Post-hope, post-doom.” Such slogans, being slogans, might strike us as too glib, too easily proclaimed, but they point in the right direction: toward an ideal of unconditional commitment, an unshakeable resolve to show up, relentlessly, day after day, in defense of a future for all life, human and other-than-human, regardless of the latest headlines, the apocalyptic stories in one’s head, or one’s mood of the moment. In trying to live up to this

4. This perspective was shared with participants in a Zoom call announcing XR UK’s 2022 strategy on 24 January 2022. A diagram of Moyer’s “Movement Action Plan” can be found at <https://commonslibrary.org/resource-bill-moyers-movement-action-plan/>.

ideal, however imperfectly, we might at last enter into our adulthood as a culture, taking responsibility for who we are, who we have been, and what we have done to the Earth.⁵

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5. I've used the words "we" and "our" loosely in this essay, and I bear in mind cautions against constructing a "universal anthropos" (Jakovljević and Looser 2021:7) responsible for the climate crisis, given the massively disproportionate emissions produced by the industrialized nations of the Global North, not to mention these nations' histories of colonization and the exploitation of nature. I anticipate that my use of the first-person plural will resonate most with those who feel simultaneously entangled in, identified with, and appalled by the materialist, individualist, life-denying culture sustained by extractive capitalism. I recognize that it will apply least of all to the indigenous peoples around the globe who have not lost their bearings, morally and spiritually, in the way that the peoples benefitting most from industrial capitalism have done.