

Slow Dramaturgies

Thinking with Freud on Pleasure, Grief, and Epochal Shifts

Sariel Golomb



In Madeline Hollander's 2019 film installation for the Whitney, *Flatwing*, the choreographer documents her mission to find a mysterious evolutionary aberration: a Hawaiian cricket that lacks the wing ridges needed for the friction of chirping. This cricket's silence may allow it to avoid the impending extinction of its chirping counterpart, whose sounds have proven the fatal giveaway to a parasitic fly; but it also obscures the silent cricket from potential mates. Hollander has a theory: perhaps the mimetic act of silent wing-rubbing might evolve into a new sort of mating dance, a "choreography of survival" (Whitney 2021). Night after night, she searches the grasses of Kaua'i with an infrared camera, turning up frogs, other insects, and lots of chickens—but she never finds the crickets.

Meanwhile, we listen to her phone interview with evolutionary biologist Marlene Zuk, who refutes Hollander's poetic theory with comical resoluteness, particularly the suggestion that a cricket might be able to revise upon its behavioral mistakes. This is just one of a number of illegibilities, disappointments, and refusals-to-comply in *Flatwing*, which I read as a work of environmental theatre. What began as an effort to document the cricket becomes confused as the artist projects her own desire for

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a choreography of survival onto the cricket. Nature proves mirthfully unwilling to be neatly captured in a moment of climactic discovery as if by a colonial explorer in the days of yore. And the cricket refuses to be interpellated into an anthropomorphized narrative of survival. The promise of futurity is bested, ultimately, by absence and anticlimax.

With 13 years remaining until what has been identified as the climate change “point of no return,” this single most important catastrophe of our time has perpetually failed to generate the individual- and systemic-level response necessary to reverse its course. From the winnowed-down climate expenditures in the August 2022 US Inflation Reduction Act, to the mere lip service that airlines and direct-to-consumer companies pay towards sustainability and carbon-offsetting: as each new year advances towards this promised future of calamity, we fail to hold responsible those industries and leaders that most significantly exacerbate planetary deterioration. It is fitting, then, that the climate crisis has also evaded clear-cut theatrical legibility, as both ultimately come down to questions of representation. While climate change eludes representation, it always already appears *in* representation—a paradox that demands new dramaturgies capable of capturing the ambivalence of *being* within slow and inapprehensible catastrophe.

Indeed, what has made the climate crisis so challenging to depict mimetically is that the very idea of “crisis” contains an internal dramaturgy that does not resemble the lived experience of the long *durée* and “the long dyings” of climate change (Nixon 2011:2). “Crisis” entails an accompanying temporality, affect, and resolution. It invokes a diffused sense of responsibility and simultaneously a shirking of human complicity—and it prioritizes human experience. So, what *are* aesthetics and dramaturgies that represent planetary deterioration? Alternatively, might we have arrived at a point in “catastrophic” history when we can effectively regard planetary deterioration as an aspect of contemporary biopolitics, and thus approach theatre of climate change as a space to explore what it is to be and have a body during the close of an epoch?

In considering this TDR Stanford Consortium issue’s provocations about what performance can offer to climate action and organizing, my response would be to reframe the question; to consider what performance can offer to how we *process* climate change, articulating it as a lived, biopolitical phenomenon, towards a *poetics of planetary grieving*. I’m interested in thinking through what it means to account for and represent difference as it is brought into being under climate change. There is a world of difference in what the prospect of climate change means existentially to different people, but this is to say nothing of how it is experienced materially. For one way that global demographic stratification rears its head is in the difference between those most complicit in environmental destruction and those who bear its consequences daily—the politics of living and dying under climate change. Could theatre, in its attention to embodiment, put pressure on the very meanings and cruelties hidden in the idea of collective responsibility? Can a response to climate crisis then be one that articulates speed, affect, and associations for the sake of their own documentation, visualization, and contemplation—and for what else they raise about the ontology of an epochal shift, and what it is to be a body during it?

Figure 1. (previous page) Installation view of Madeline Hollander: Flatwing, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 25 March–8 August 2021. Madeline Hollander, Flatwing, 2019. (Photo by Madeline Hollander; courtesy of Bortolami Gallery)

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Exploring this ontology of slow change has led me to an underutilized source for ecocriticism: Sigmund Freud's enigmatic text, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920).¹ Readers might be familiar with its influential concept of the death drive, but perhaps less so with how Freud arrives at this concept: he is trying to understand the human compulsion to repeat traumatic scenarios in play, memories, and dreams. Un-pleasure, he says, is caused by excitation in the brain, so experiencing pleasure requires the quieting of the brain. But why, then, is this pleasure principle so constantly overridden? He reasons that there must be an instinct even more primordial than pleasure/libido/life that always wins out. In search of this primordial instinct, he turns to nature itself—indeed, looking forward to the arrival of amoeboid life on earth:

[W]e shall be compelled to say that “*the aim of all life is death*” and, looking backwards, that “*inanimate things existed before living ones.*” [...] For a long time, perhaps, living substance was [...] being constantly created afresh and easily dying, till decisive external influences altered in such a way as to oblige the still surviving substance to diverge ever more widely from its original course of life and to make ever more complicated *detours* before reaching its aim of death. These circuitous paths to death, faithfully kept to by the conservative instincts, would thus present us to-day with the picture of the phenomena of life. ([1920] 1989:46)

Life, here, is itself an aberration: a temporary interruption from the inanimacy it is compelled towards. Evolution is an elaboration of this originary aberration, one that takes the complex life form on an increasingly convoluted path back to its ultimate slowing. Thus, it entails an enlivening of the subject away from the simplistic nonsentient creature that is closer to death. But it is worth reiterating: the drive (toward death) is the same in all bodies, never growing more complex—only the route is.

Needless to say, the science of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is rather outlandish; as Gregory Zilboorg wrote in his introduction, first published in the 1959 edition, “Perhaps Freud was right, even though neither the biologist nor the theologian would find it possible to agree with him” ([1959] 1975:xv). The concept of a “death drive” has also developed a life of its own apart from the text, often for theorizing masochism, which would certainly be a useful analytic for climate impassivity. But what interests me in Freud's theory is less so an explanation for human folly as it hurdles towards demise, just as Hollander's flat-winged cricket proved unwilling to metaphorize human survival. Rather, I'm drawn to this text as an aesthetic and *dramaturgical* model that answers to environmental deterioration through the question of cosmic slowing as a relation to approaching death. Freud chooses to atomize the body to the cellular level in order to understand a relation between death, repetition, and speed.

What I marvel at in Freud's death drive is that it decenters human exceptionalism by suggesting that all creatures share in this life–death continuum: the true measure of difference is the distance towards terminality. This itself is worth examining because of what it raises about the absolute disparity among conditions for even *human* embodiment under climate change, and thus questions the utility of “the human” as a unifying device at all. Mel Chen makes this key point in her text *Animacies* (2012), in which she argues that the great chain of being and its dangerous crossover into historical racialized hierarchies of animacy are in fact substantiated by relationships of proximity to life and death under biopolitics. Thinking about the varied nature of proximities to death is a way of putting pressure on discourses of collective response, too, in that climate change rather heightens the stakes of stratification by race and class in terms of exposure to environmental precarity and slow death. This should encourage us to think more concertedly about how, even in its epochal nature, even as it grows more urgent, climate change will exacerbate social difference through exposure to precarity.

1. Within ecocriticism, Robert Azzarello's “Desiring Species with Darwin and Freud” also takes up *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* for its cross-species reading of pleasure and desire, in order to argue for an “affectively grounded ecocriticism” that is critical of figurations of desire as human-specific (2018:198, 172).

What does all this mean for theatrical contexts? As a circuitous answer, we might look to the environmental dramaturgy of climate change itself, which is so varied that it alludes circumscribed representation, as every day it reveals new, insidious manifestations, new poetics to its global unfolding. It ranges from incremental to climactic and world altering: changing topographies and weather patterns; food scarcity, air toxicity, and epidemic exacerbation; shifts in species ontology (extinction, new hybridities and morphologies); decreased earthshine; changing river colors; gravity itself altered (see Fears 2013; ESA 2014; McGill 2017; Goode et al. 2021; Gardner et al. 2021). In the US alone, shorelines recede in Florida, and recent trauma gives way to looming precarity in New Orleans and other hurricane pathways; in Texas in 2022 a series of unprecedented winter storms caused power outages that incapacitated the infrastructure of the entire state. In California, where I live, there is a veritable fire season from late summer throughout the fall, when skies turn an otherworldly orange and trees are scorched to skeletons. And throughout it all, discussions circulate about where the most enviable locations will be in 30 years: places where it is imagined that these varied speeds of catastrophic encroachment will barely register, where “crisis” itself will always be at a theatrical vanishing point.

The vocabulary of “crisis” is insufficient to describe such a vast and varied dramaturgy of epochal shifts. Indeed, compulsions toward climate escapism might be explained by the fact that the very phrase “climate crisis” is overburdened by the immensity of what it’s meant to signify, as well as the discomfort and implications of its perpetual inexactness. “Climate crisis” is a unifying device that shifts the onus onto no one in particular and yet the pathos onto all. As Lauren Berlant points out, at its etymological basis, “crisis” refers to a “crisis in judgement, which is to say that at the heart of a crisis-claim is not the quality of the object in question but the condition of a spectatorial mind” (2007:7). “Climate crisis” foregrounds a unitary subject because it also does not capture the almost diametrically inverse relations of responsibility and burden. It suggests climate change is *a harm in and of itself* as opposed to a relationality between bodies, the planet, and other bodies. Climate change is neither created equally by all parties, nor experienced equally by all parties.

Indeed, Berlant raises another potential representational injustice surrounding the framework of crisis: it risks not registering actions of *maintenance* and *making-do*, the incremental or cyclical choreographies of being and doing under environmental deterioration, to the extent that we do climactic actions or choreographies that are meant to represent *planetary* shifts in grandiose ways (6). In doing this, one risks keeping the audience’s gaze steeled upon the idea of a gestalt crisis, the scale of the planetary and the species. They then bypass the challenge of registering the *pieces* of a whole: as Berlant writes, “a given population that lives it as a fact in ordinary time” (7).

The other problem is that “crisis” generates its own response, suggesting only singular high-octane outrage as the response to climate representation, which is unsustainable and also only one of a range of affects that could be elicited (from grief to fascination to ambivalence and apathy). And in that, it also belies an important fact, which is that *pleasure* occupies a unique and proscribed role in climate change: it is often framed as *the thing that must be sacrificed* to make change (or else *a thing that need not be sacrificed*). For both Berlant and Chen there are important facets of environmental and social deterioration in which pleasure exists in and alongside toxicity—eating, playing, resting, and loving in the midst of what is being decried as a crisis, even as one knows it to be such. Here, we might also remember that, for Freud, masochism and pleasure commingle in an existential push and pull, in that the life and death drive *coexist*; the death drive just eventually overpowers the life drive. In it we see reflected the mixed allegiances towards life and death in a civilizational apathy towards ontological demise.

Putting pressure on the idea of crisis also challenges us to consider how climate change does and does not register within the minds of our many audiences, entering and exiting from awareness, as they see it represented throughout a given day. Indeed, it is worth remembering that “climate change” is itself a hermeneutical device, and thus is only constituted through representation. What appears as a global gestalt is in fact a framework (not too long ago we simply referred to “global warming”) that intends to make rising temperatures, their cause, and all of their disparate dramaturgies legible as a unified phenomenon. Una Chaudhuri and Shonni Enelow write in *Research*

Theatre that the climate itself is never directly experienced, but instead must be *understood* through data and modeling. Even thusly represented, “climate change belongs to a mode of unfolding whose features are inherently resistant not only to representation but even to simple, everyday, embodied observation” (Chaudhuri and Enelow 2014:23–24). Indeed, no matter the representational form, climate change is always already redirected through the metaphoric or metonymic (a cartoon of a planet on fire) or the synecdochal (data and graphs of temperature, sea level, air quality index), and in that redirection, we fail to apprehend the magnitude of the message. In that sense, whether scientist, politician, or theatre-maker, the challenge one faces in representing climate change is an accompanying *epistemic crisis*, in that it is contingent upon and resistant to legibility, and we cannot apprehend it in its totality.

For Freud, the vehement Modernist whose domain was the deep entangled recesses of the human psyche, there is something perpetually odd about his materialist turn in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* towards the world of physics and cell division in search of answers about trauma. Maybe, then, this invites us more generally to broaden definitions and think circuitously about where to seek answers—and what constitutes theatrical representation—about climate change. Perhaps it is simply theatre responsive to our time. Perhaps it is an aesthetics of duration, unfinishedness, illegibility, slow violence, and precarity that does not obscure human culpability at the vanishing point.

Between the first and reworked versions of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud experienced the death of his daughter Sophie. Anticipating the public’s overreading, he insisted that the death had no influence on the text’s contents, and even sought corroboration from colleagues that he had written half of it before the death (Gay [1998] 2006:703). Without falling into this very trap of sympathetic reading, I wonder if we might read within the experiential melancholy of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* a poetics of planetary grieving. *A once-still entity seeks to return to stillness*. In saying so, my intention is not to renounce personal or theatrical responsibility nor encourage a sensibility of cynical resignation. Rather, I suggest we consider climate representation on its many stages (whether black box theatre or UN podium) in *light* of its almost dumbfounding historic illegibility—and failure to register on the level of action that its many dramaturgs desire—and perhaps even articulate that very illegibility. In addition to theatre that simplifies, reacts, outrages, inspires, and activates to the quick of the trauma, there should be room for theatre that explores, questions, complicates, grieves, *slows*, searches the grass in vain, and turns up nothing.

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