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# Chronesthesia, Biosemiotics, and Immutable Mobiles: Early Signs of Climate Change in James Herbert's Portent

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**Abstract**
Climate change is extensively studied across both scientific and cultural paradigms. In each historical timeline, the climate change and environmental crisis are often registered indirectly as signs, anomalies, and narratives. The early proto–climate fiction did not rely on climatological data or predictive models; instead, it encoded ecological anxiety through signs and symbolic events. James Herbert's Portent (1992) exemplifies this mode of early climate consciousness through its striking use of a real newspaper cutting as the novel's opening device. This study analyses the newspaper cutting in the opening section of James Herbert's early proto–climate fiction Portent (1992). The central objective of the paper is to examine how Herbert's use of an authentic newspaper article, making it function as an immutable mobile, documents the global planetary crisis across temporal, spatial, and epistemic boundaries. The findings of the study are threefold. Firstly, the penguin stampede operates as a sign-event that communicates ecological distress. Secondly, through Chronesthesia, the newspaper cutting activates a temporal awareness to interpret and record the present anomalies in the news as signals of an impending global planetary crisis during the early 1990s. Thirdly, the study situates Portent within the genealogy of climate fiction by mobilising biosemiotic signs and anticipatory temporality rather than explicit climate science. By positioning factual data before the fictional narrative begins, Herbert blurs the boundary between reality and fiction, thereby presenting literature as an early warning system capable of sensing environmental stress.

**Keywords:** Climate Change, Penguin Stampede, Chronesthesia, Immutable Mobiles, Signs, Biosemiotics and Literature.

## Introduction

James Herbert (1943–2013) was one of the United Kingdom's most widely read and commercially successful writers of horror and speculative fiction. His twenty-three novels have sold more than fifty-four million copies worldwide and have been translated into twenty-four languages. Herbert is considered a British master of popular horror. His fiction combines raw immediacy with fast-paced narrative. Although the horror and supernatural elements of his works have attracted critical attention, the environment has received limited focus. This paper focuses on the opening newspaper preface in James Herbert's Portent (1992) and examines it as a biosemiotic, chronesthetic mechanism and the concept of immutable mobiles that signal environmental crisis through transnational and temporal circulation. The

novel opens with a newspaper cutting which documents the unexplained stampede and death of thousands of penguins on sub-Antarctic Macquarie Island. The positioning of the factual account before the narrative begins destabilises the distinction between journalism and fiction, enabling the readers to confront environmental issues as a real and immediate concern rather than as speculative imagination.

This study argues that Herbert's use of a real newspaper report on the fiction transforms an isolated ecological incident into a warning of planetary crisis. The penguin stampede functions as a non-human sign of environmental distress, and the newspaper cutting enables the circulation of this sign across spatial, temporal, and epistemic boundaries. In doing so, Portent illustrates how popular fiction can operate as an early cultural sensor which registers environmental stress through signs, narrative and temporality long before climate change becomes a dominant literary and scientific concern.

**Conceptual Framework**

This study integrates biosemiotics, chronesthesia, and immutable mobiles to examine early environmental signification in James Herbert's Portent (1992). Together, these frameworks enable an analysis of how ecological crises are registered through signs, temporality, and material inscriptions prior to the dominance of climate science in cultural discourse.

Biosemiotics provides the primary interpretive lens. According to Jesper Hoffmeyer and Peircean semiotics, biosemiotics interprets semiosis as a defining characteristic of life rather than a uniquely human faculty. The meaning emerges through sign processes that operate across human and non-human life forms, where organisms interpret and respond to environmental stress (244–45). In this context, animal behaviour functions as a semiotic response to environmental stress. This implies that the penguin stampede in the text Portent can be read as a sign-event, an embodied non-linguistic expression of environmental disturbance.

Endel Tulving introduces chronesthesia, a temporal dimension to sign interpretation. Chronesthesia refers to the temporal awareness of the future through which individuals interpret present events as signals of what is yet to come (Tulving 311). In Portent, the unexplained environmental incident activates chronesthesia to interpret the present anomaly as a warning of contemporary and future planetary crises.

In addition, Bruno Latour's concept of immutable mobiles explains the material circulation of ecological knowledge through inscriptions—such as maps, reports, and printed texts—that retain their form while travelling across contexts (Latour 6–7). The newspaper cutting in Portent functions as an inscription, mobilising a distant ecological event across spatial, temporal, and epistemic boundaries. These theories guide the interpretation of the novel's opening image, and are read as site of ecological meaning, temporal anticipation, and material knowledge.

**Research Methodology**

This study employs qualitative textual analysis methods. It specifically examines the newspaper cutting in Portent and excludes a reading of the narrative. This limited focus enables close, concept-driven analysis of how early climate consciousness is encoded through material inscription. This study examines the newspaper cutting, focusing on its placement and factual data, and on how it blurs the line between fiction and reality. The penguin stampede in the cutting is analysed through biosemiotic close reading, considering the animal behaviour as a meaningful sign-process that indicates the environmental stress. The chronesthesia concept is applied to examine how the present disturbance is projected as an anticipatory warning of an environmental crisis. Subsequently, Latour's concept of immutable mobiles is

used to understand how the newspaper cutting functions as a stable mobile inscription enabling the circulation of environmental signs. The scientific studies on penguin population decline are referenced selectively for contextualization, illustrating how literary semiosis anticipates later scientific knowledge. These approaches position literature as an early cultural sensor of environmental crisis.

**The Penguin Stampede, Biosemiotics and Relational Ontology**

Biosemiotics views life as a network of meaning-making processes that enable scholars to comprehend the connections among life, culture, and nature through a relational ontology (Maran 113). Timo Maran, in his book review of Wendy Wheeler's Expecting the Earth: Life, Culture, Biosemiotics (2017), situates this biosemiotics within intellectual, cultural, and environmental histories. Relational ontology in biosemiotics rejects the idea that meaning is produced exclusively by human language or consciousness. The semiosis is the production and interpretation of signs that are foundational characteristics of life. The meaning emerges from relationships among organisms, environments, and semiotic processes. Thus, organisms are not passive to environmental stimuli but active interpreters of signs in their surroundings.

In early cultural representations, climate change rarely appears as a fully articulated story in novels. It appears indirectly through anomalies, disruptions, and symbolic events. Biosemiotics allows such narrative disturbances to be read not as incidental plot devices but as meaningful environmental signs. In this sense, early proto–climate fiction functions as a cultural site where ecological distress is registered semiotically in the narrative.

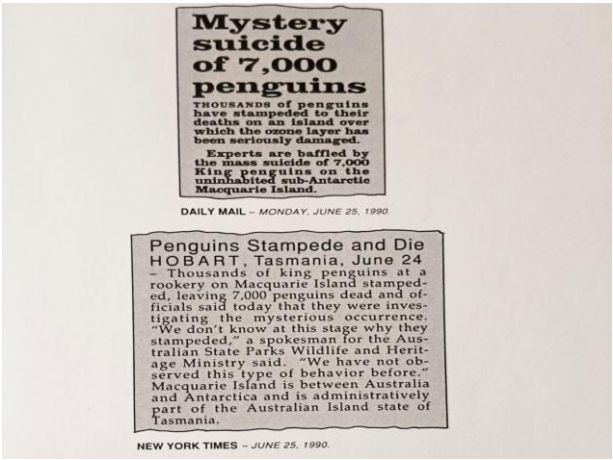
James Herbert's Portent exemplifies this mode of early environmental semiosis; it displays a real ecological incident at the threshold of the novel where non-human life communicates distress through behaviour rather than through language. The opening episode thus aligns with Maran and Wheeler's insistence that culture and life are inseparable semiotic processes, bound together through shared systems of meaning (Maran 113).

In biosemiotics, signs are not limited to linguistic symbols, and animal behaviour functions as a semiotic process. In this context, the event of penguins' mass stampede can be read as a sign of a meaningful response to environmental cues that are imperceptible to humans. The behaviour can be interpreted as penguins responding to an environmental stress that can be associated with the atmospheric changes, such as ozone depletion or early climate change.

Jesper Hoffmeyer argues that life itself is grounded in semiosis, asserting that cognition emerges from sign processes rather than from abstract rationality alone (244). The penguins interpret changes in temperature, magnetic fields, or atmospheric conditions and respond through collective movement, where the semiotic cues that once ensured survival no longer function in the same way.

**The Newspaper Cutting as an Immutable Mobile**

The novel opens with a newspaper report from The New York Times and the Daily Mail dated 25 June 1990, describing the mysterious stampede and death of approximately 7,000 king penguins on sub-Antarctic Macquarie Island (Herbert 7). Significantly, this report appears before any fictional framing, mediating between the real world and the fictional narrative.



**Mystery suicide of 7,000 penguins**

THOUSANDS of penguins have stampeded to their deaths on an island over which the ozone layer has been seriously damaged.

Experts are baffled by the mass suicide of 7,000 King penguins on the uninhabited sub-Antarctic Macquarie Island.

DAILY MAIL – MONDAY, JUNE 25, 1990.

**Penguins Stampede and Die**

HOBART, Tasmania, June 24 – Thousands of king penguins at a rookery on Macquarie Island stampeded, leaving 7,000 penguins dead and officials said today that they were investigating the mysterious occurrence. "We don't know at this stage why they stampeded," a spokesman for the Australian State Parks Wildlife and Heritage Ministry said. "We have not observed this type of behavior before." Macquarie Island is between Australia and Antarctica and is administratively part of the Australian Island state of Tasmania.

NEW YORK TIMES – JUNE 25, 1990.

**Figure 1. Newspaper cutting reproduced in James Herbert's Portent, reports published in The New York Times and the Daily Mail in June 1990**

**Mystery suicide of 7,000 penguins**. THOUSANDS of penguins have stampeded to their deaths on an island over which the ozone layer has been seriously damaged. Experts are baffled by the mass suicide of 7,000 King penguins on the uninhabited sub-Antarctic Macquarie Island" (Herbert 7).

**Penguins Stampede and Die HOBART, Tasmania, June 24** - "Thousands of king penguins at a rookery on Macquarie Island stampeded, leaving 7,000 penguins dead, and officials said today that they were investigating the mysterious occurrence, "We don't know at this stage why they stampeded," a spokesman for the Australian State Parks, Wildlife and Heritage Ministry said. "We have not observed this type of behaviour before." Macquarie Island is between Australia and Antarctica and is administratively part of the Australian Island state of Tasmania (Herbert 7).

The penguin stampede event occurs in a geographically remote area but functions as a powerful inscription and an immutable mobile that can travel across spatial and temporal scales (Latour 6). Maps, diagrams, printed texts, and scientific reports are classic examples of such inscriptions (Latour 6–7). Latour asserts that these inscriptions can be visual or textual and that they enable mobilisation (Latour 5–6). The author mobilises journalism, science, and literature into a single connected semiotic network. The use of the image lends credibility to the fictional story and becomes part of environmental discourse. The data in the newspaper cutting moves from journalism to fiction, from Antarctica to the reader's mind, and from scientific uncertainty to speculation. This circulation demonstrates how immutable mobiles can be displaced without distortion, allowing distant phenomena to be made present in a meaningful way (Latour 7).

## Chronesthesia and Anticipatory Temporality

This newspaper cutting also activates chronesthesia. Endel Tulving defines chronesthesia as the capacity to mentally project oneself into the future (311). This report can be interpreted as an early warning of future environmental stress. The mysterious nature of the penguin deaths generates a temporal tension in which the future intrudes upon the present. The event signals toward long-term ecological consequences that were not fully understood in 1990 but have since become tragically familiar. Chronesthesia operates here as a literary mechanism that transforms a localised incident into a planetary warning. Portent does not predict climate change through scientific extrapolation; instead, it senses climate futures through signs,

anomalies, and narrative framing. This anticipatory temporality is central to proto–climate fiction. The newspaper cutting functions as a temporal bridge, linking an isolated ecological event to a global future.

**Conclusion**

This study highlights how an early environmental consciousness is articulated in the opening newspaper cutting in James Herbert's Portent (1992). Inserting a real-world report of the unexplained death of thousands of penguins before the fictional narrative begins, the author blurs the line between fact and fiction. In Herbert's novel, environmental crises are first encountered as disturbances in sign systems—felt, sensed, and narrated—before they are named, measured, and theorised. The penguin stampede functions as a sign-event rather than a random ecological anomaly. Living organisms participate in meaning-making systems, and the penguins' collective death signifies how environmental disturbances disrupt non-human sign systems. This study highlights this semiotic disturbance and emphasises that the ecological crisis is first encountered as a failure of semiosis. The newspaper cutting operates as an immutable mobile, enabling a distant ecological incident to circulate across spatial and epistemic boundaries without losing its factual authority. In fiction, it activates chronesthesia in readers' minds to interpret a present anomaly as a warning sign. By limiting its analysis to this opening device, this study argues that Portent participates in proto–climate fiction by mobilising signs, temporal awareness, and transnational ecological anxiety long before climate change became a dominant literary theme.

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