

Climate Anxiety and the Planetary

Andrew Baldwin
Durham University
w.a.baldwin@durham.ac.uk

Key words: anxiety, metaphor, Lacan

Climate anxiety is a psychological condition in which the real and imagined geophysical impacts of climate change are said to undermine peoples' mental health, including their ability to plan, work and find meaning in their lives. Climate anxiety thus appears to be a unique psychosocial event in the history of human consciousness. It is often conceptualised as an individualised concern for the detrimental outcomes of climate change, for example, violent conflict, injustice or ecosystem collapse. As such, climate anxiety comes to be associated with different forms of loss, for example, the loss of peace, security, well-being, life, stability, even the loss of meaning. Pace this standard reading, the paper develops a different account of climate anxiety, reading it through Jacques Lacan's conception of anxiety alongside scholarship about 'the planetary'. It argues that the psychosocial event of climate anxiety is not an individualised pathology but an historical event whose significance cannot be decoupled from the knowledge regimes that render planet Earth meaningful. Anxiety is, for Lacan, not about loss or the fear of negative outcomes but the opposite. It is, as Lacan might describe it, an affect brought about by the overbearing presence of the object, as opposed to its absence or lack. For Lacan, this object is primarily the maternal figure. The paper adapts Lacan's notion of anxiety in a manner that allows 'climate anxiety' to be understood not as loss but as an affect that results from the inescapable presence of the planetary, whose maternal expression is none other than Mother Earth. Thus, the paper reconceptualises climate anxiety in terms of an overbearing planetary Mother Earth, rendering the material and maternal presence of planet Earth a fundamental dimension of the world-historical event of 'climate anxiety'. It then uses this insight to ask what role the unconscious might be understood to play in the psychosocial discourse of 'climate anxiety'.