



# Signs and Semiosis of the Triple Planetary Crisis in James Herbert's *Portent* (1992)

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**Abstract:** This paper examines James Herbert's *Portent* (1992) through the lens of biosemiotics to explore how the novel represents the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution as an interconnected ecological and semiotic emergency. Biosemiotics understands living organisms and ecosystems as sign-producing and sign-interpreting entities that communicate environmental change through altered behaviour, movement, disease, and ecological disturbance. Drawing on biosemiotic criticism and Ivar Puura's concept of 'semicide', this study argues that *Portent* transforms environmental disruption into a network of readable signs through which the nonhuman world communicates planetary imbalance. In the *Portent*, the author used abnormal plankton behaviour, rising carbon dioxide levels, warming oceans, marine epidemics, and species decline as descriptive details of the triple planetary crisis and function as signs that reveal the breakdown of environmental relations under anthropogenic pressure. The oceanic space registers altered climatic conditions; meanwhile, diseased and dying marine bodies mediate the hidden erasure under pollution. The paper contends that Herbert's environmental imagination exceeds the conventions of disaster fiction by presenting the triple planetary crisis as a crisis of semiosis in which damaged ecosystems struggle to communicate distress. Therefore, the study demonstrates how literary texts can render visible the signs of planetary crisis in the Anthropocene.

**Keywords:** Biosemiotics, triple planetary crisis, James Herbert, *Portent*; semicide; climate fiction, signs and semiosis.

## I. INTRODUCTION

James Herbert, generally known as James John Herbert (1943-2013), is an English writer of horror, suspense, and apocalyptic fiction in London, England. His novel, *Portent* (1992), consists of a sequence of geological disturbances, uncanny warnings, atmospheric events, and impending catastrophe. *Portent* (1992) is widely regarded as an eco-horror novel, but it also illustrates the early triple planetary crisis. According to Timo Maran, human culture is surrounded by the signs of other life forms. This paper analyses *Portent* (1992) through a biosemiotic lens in which nonhuman life and disasters function as signs of the triple planetary crisis in the early twentieth century. The study puts forth the abnormal plankton behaviour signals oceanic and atmospheric disequilibrium; warming seas and rising carbon

dioxide levels signal climate change and global warming; diseased seals and dolphins reveal the hidden violence of pollution; and species decline marks a loss of biodiversity.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Biosemiotics proposes that all living systems are engaged in sign relations through perception, response, adaptation, communication, or co-regulation. In ecological terms, organisms interpret and respond to it with meaningful cues. Unusual migration, altered reproductive behaviour, disease spread, or mass death are biological events and semiotic expressions of ecological change. They can be analysed as textual mediations of environmental semiosis.

A second key concept is 'semiocide', developed by Ivar Puura, which refers to the destruction of meaningful sign systems and the erasure of the sign relations. Puura's concept is especially relevant for environmental criticism because of ecological destruction. Later discussions of Puura's work describe 'semiocide' as the destruction of signs and stories significant to living beings, whether through deliberate violence or careless negligence. *Portent* (1992) often presents environmental signs through a combination of scientific explanation and catastrophic description.

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis of James Herbert's *Portent* (1992) using a biosemiotic critical framework. The paper is interpretive in orientation, and the study reads them as sign processes through which nonhuman life and ecological systems communicate imbalance, damage, and crisis. In the textual analysis of Herbert's *Portent* (1992), the textual excerpts are subjected to close reading.

The close-reading approach, therefore, makes it possible to trace how Herbert narrativises the triple planetary crisis through a sequence of sign-bearing events. The analysis proceeds through five interrelated clusters of signs: plankton as an ecological sign, warming oceans and carbon imbalance, marine disease as a sign of pollution and ecological stress, species decline and 'semiocide', and the ocean as a planetary warning system. These clusters correspond to the novel's broader representation of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution as interconnected dimensions of environmental collapse.

## IV. NATURE AS A SYSTEM OF SIGNS

Biosemiotics views all living organisms as producers and interpreters of signs. Biosemiotics examines how living systems communicate through signs. In the novel *Portent* (1992), environmental phenomena are not merely background events; they function as signs through which nature communicates ecological imbalance and impending catastrophe. In *Portent* (1992), plankton, oceans, earthquakes, and atmospheric disturbances become sign-bearing agents that communicate changes in the Earth's ecological system.

The significant sign appears in microscopic life in the ocean: "the oceans' plankton were behaving strangely" (Herbert 82). Plankton normally regulate atmospheric carbon through natural cycles; their abnormal behaviour signals environmental disruption. The text further emphasises this disturbance through scientific explanation, "the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> had increased alarmingly, and the oceans' plankton were behaving strangely" (Herbert 82).

The juxtaposition of rising carbon dioxide levels and abnormal plankton activity creates a causal relationship in which biological changes become signs of planetary crisis. From a biosemiotic

perspective, plankton communicate ecological stress through their altered behaviour. The author highlights, “the billions of tiny plankton floating on the ocean’s surface... they formed an abnormal coating over the rough water” (Herbert 264). In biosemiotic terms, the mass migration of plankton functions as a global ecological message. The abnormal concentration and surfacing behaviour indicate environmental stress. Humans interpret these biological signs as warnings of an approaching planetary crisis.

The Earth's crust, ocean currents, and marine life interact as interconnected sign systems. The most powerful biosemiotic signs emerge in the Mariana Trench, where scientists observe extraordinary plankton behaviour: “The billions of tiny plankton floating on the ocean's surface; individually, most were microscopic, virtually invisible, but en masse together like this they formed an abnormal coating over the rough water” (Herbert 264).

The word “abnormal” explicitly marks the plankton bloom as a sign requiring interpretation. What is ordinarily invisible becomes visible, forcing human observers to recognise an ecological warning. Similarly, the narrator describes, “there was almost a solid wall of minute aquatic animal and plant life rising past the observation window” (Herbert 267).

The image of a “solid wall” suggests a collective biological response. The plankton are no longer passive organisms but agents communicating a global environmental shift. The significance of this phenomenon becomes clear when the observation is expanded worldwide: “Plankton's rising to the surface of other oceans and seas like this around the globe, it seems” (Herbert 267). The global repetition of the event transforms it into a planetary sign system. The oceans collectively communicate that ecological conditions have reached a critical threshold.

Herbert presents a powerful eco-critical and biosemiotic representation of ecological collapse, species displacement, and the breakdown of environmental semiosis under the pressures of climate change and anthropogenic pollution. The text does not merely describe ecological destruction; it mediates climate change as a material and semiotic crisis through the depiction of diseased marine animals, mass penguin deaths, and the relocation of endangered species in the context of the triple planetary crisis. From a biosemiotic perspective, the infected seals and dolphins function as ecological signs communicating the deteriorating condition of marine ecosystems. The “deadly morbilli virus” becomes more than a biological phenomenon; it operates as a symptom of disrupted environmental semiosis caused by anthropogenic interference. The corpses of sea mammals washed onto beaches mediate distress in the oceanic spaces due to anthropogenic pollution to human observers, as readable signs of the planetary crisis.

The climatologist read of the deadly morbilli virus that had spread throughout the Mediterranean and even to the coastal shores of England, attacking the brain and nervous systems of the seal and dolphin, so that their corpses drifted in packs on the seas, finally to be washed up on the beaches and rocks. Scientific opinion differed on whether manmade pollution had caused the sickness or had merely weakened the creatures’ immune systems to such an extent that they were susceptible to it. One thing was certain, however: the warming of the seas and oceans had enabled the epidemic to spread more easily. One thing was certain, however: the warming of the seas and oceans had enabled the epidemic to spread more easily. Species like the blue whale, the right whale, and the humpback were now down to between one to two per cent of their previous population despite the grave warnings of conservationists in the late ‘80s, and all sea mammals and sea birds, even those in Arctic and Antarctic regions where men rarely set foot, had accumulated large doses of pesticides, mercury and other polluting elements in their system. (Herbert 76)

The passage strongly reflects Ivar Puura's concept of 'semiocide', the destruction of meaningful ecological sign systems. Marine mammals and seabirds are not represented solely as biological entities but as participants in communicative ecological networks. Their deaths symbolise the collapse of these networks and the silencing of nonhuman forms of meaning-making. The extinction and contamination of species, therefore, constitute both material destruction and semiotic erasure. The statement that "the warming of the seas and oceans had enabled the epidemic to spread more easily" (Herbert 76). Climate change alters the biological interactions among viruses, animals, and ecosystems.

## V. CONCLUSION

In *Portent* (1992), James Herbert presents nature as a warning sign of the triple planetary crisis in the twentieth century. Abnormal coating of mass plankton, rise in ocean temperature, widespread infectious disease and species decline are the environmental details that function as a sign of ecological imbalance. Thus, *Portent* (1992) portrays the triple planetary crisis as environmental destruction and breakdown of ecological communication, where the distress of the natural world is expressed through altered biological signs.

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