Pathways to Kairos - Exploring the Ontological, Pedagogical, and Ecological Implications of Escaping the Clutches of Chronos

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Abstract

This article examines how clock-time, or the time of *chronos*, not only dominates proceedings in mainstream classrooms of industrialised societies but also contrives to help sever children from the more-than-human world. It is argued that a strict conformity and compliance to the ways of chronos demands a narrow way of being whilst also suppressing ways of knowing that can be experienced through the perspective of *kairos*. Kairos is a time when intuitive, sensory, emotional, spiritual, holistic and contemplative ways of knowing are valued in contrast to the rational-logical ways of knowing that dominate in the factory-model of schooling. Drawing on Smith (2020), Jardine (2012; 2013), Keller (2004; 2021) and Abram (2012; 2021), this article explores how our current ecological and spiritual malaise could be countered by an "apocalyptic mindfulness" (Keller, 2021). This is examined through an analysis of an artist-in-residence project from an interview with the artist, Sean Harris. The analysis investigates how Sean's work involves animations of extinct and extant animals, so that we are confronted with choices that have been made and choices that are yet to be made. The contemplation that is required to fully engage with the animations involves a much-needed ontological turn, if we are to retreat from the global existential crisis towards which we are hurtling on our current trajectory.

Keywords: Time; ontological; being; ecological; animals

Introduction: In the Clutches of Chronos

Time and the Extinction World – What We Lost
(Animation still from a flipbook-box © Sean Harris, 2020)

There is an ontological crisis in education that is being denied and is *being* denied. Not only does the world of mainstream education pretend that the state of being it demands is neutral and natural for human beings, but it also denies that a state of being is demanded. Our attention is fooled (or schooled) twice. It is diverted away from what matters and is then trained to focus on the future so that pupils may achieve pre-determined goals that align with the stasis of the dominant culture (Jardine, 2012). Education becomes about preparing children for employment in a neoliberal economy and about teachers delivering lessons that have a proven success rate in getting children to achieve quantifiable targets. Consequently, pedagogy is reduced to the technique of delivering programs that have been *proved to (and for) work.* As Smith (2020) explains, it is as if all pedagogical problems "were simply problems of implementation rather than, say, events characteristic of a deep contradictedness inherent in human experience itself" (p. 118). Drawing on Smith (2020), Jardine (2012; 2013), Keller (2004; 2021) and Abram (2012; 2021), this paper analyses how this ontological experience is maintained in schools through a

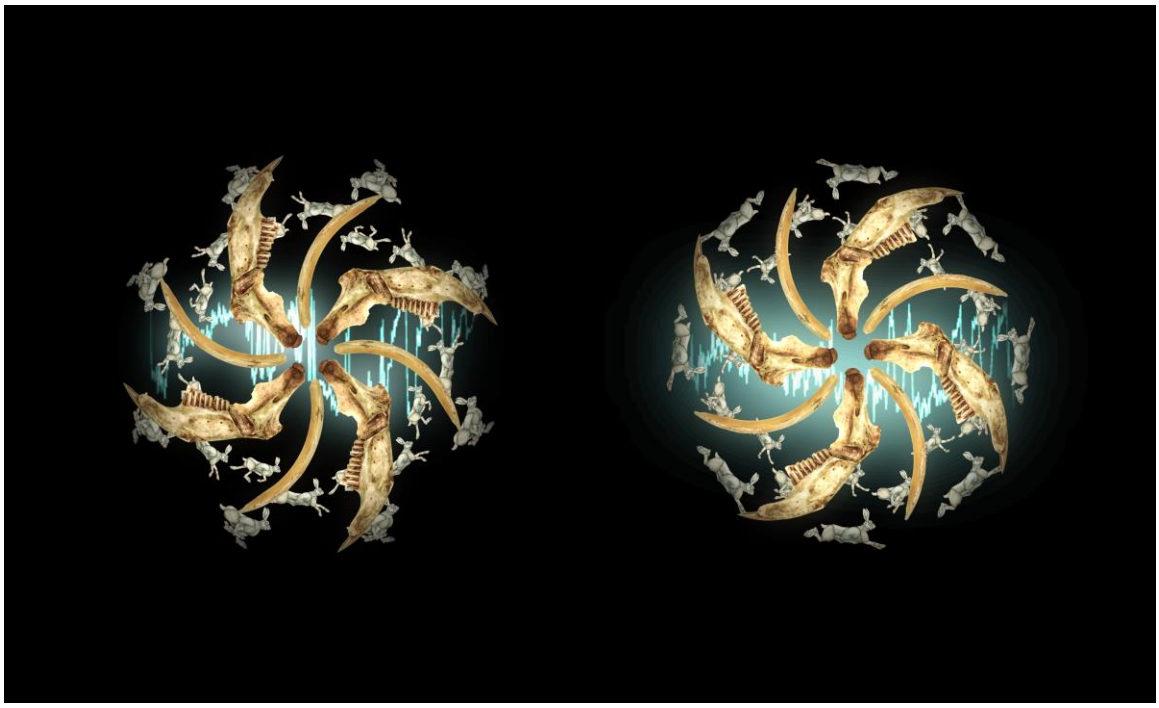
strict adherence to clock-time and results in a dangerous ecological malaise. The second part of the paper presents an interview with the artist, Sean Harris, presenting pedagogical imperatives that resonate with ecocentric stances as an alternative to the pedagogies usually offered in mainstream schooling. Sean's work demonstrates that there is hope we can chart a course away from the apocalyptic abyss towards which we are currently heading.

"Their annual return is the clicking of the evolutionary clock" (Leopold, 2020, p. 72).
(Two animation stills from a flip-book box © Sean Harris, 2018)

Mainstream education in so-called "industrial growth societies" (Macy and Brown, 2014) occurs under the dictatorship of *chronos* – the concept of chronometric time or clock-time (Griffiths, 1999). The time of chronos can be quantifiably measured and is used in schools for scheduling, planning, goal setting and assessing. Smith (2020) pertinently points out that time in schools is "experienced through an instrument called, tellingly, a 'watch'" (p. 364) as this is the temporality that fits and perpetuates the factory-model of mainstream schooling (Jardine, 2013). Taylor's (1911) 'Principles of Scientific Management' are still applied (knowingly or not) to pedagogical practice in schools as teaching is broken down into separate tasks and schools are designed along these factory models (Jardine, 2013). Bells signify the end of time given for tasks and efficient keeping to the time of the clock is highly valued. Thus, displaying 'time on task', is the aim, and efficiency, in fulfilling the criteria of the broken-down tasks, becomes the measure of success (Jardine, 2013). The resulting dictatorship of clock time produces an allegiance to a concept of "empty time" (Gadamer, 1970) that must be filled. Jardine (2013) shows that this is not just a "chronological deferral" but becomes "the 'real world' reality of things" (p. 9). Dreaming, wondering, enquiring, dwelling in uncertainty, these liminal states are seen as indulgent frills, enemies of efficiency and therefore states of being that are to be avoided, and abandoned, in the shortest possible time.

Pathways to Kairos

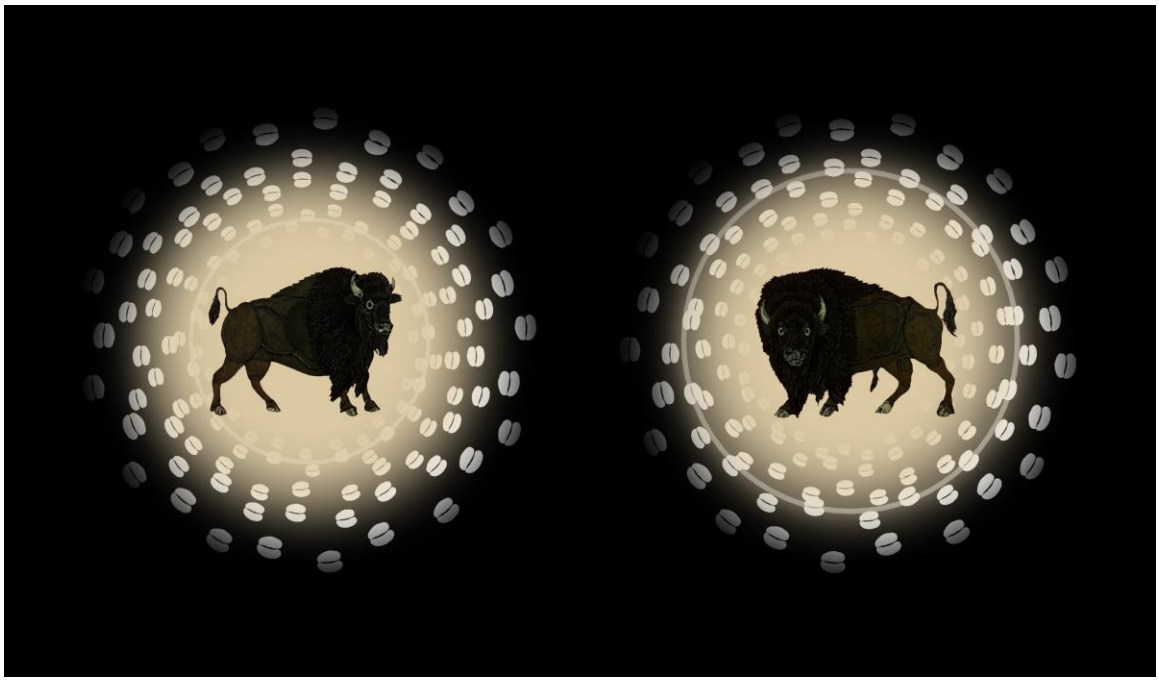
These opposing liminal, divergent states of being exist in the time of *kairos,* the Greek concept of time that occurs when clock-time appears to stand still. Kairos is the spirit of play and has a "quality of transcendence of escaping the ordinary" (Griffiths, 1999, p. 277). Kairotic time is the time of the imagination and the arts, the time of meditation, and of sudden artistic inspiration. A time when intuitive, sensory, emotional, spiritual and holistic ways of knowing are valued (Griffith, 1999). Interrupting the time of chronos, the time of kairos is "a qualitative and deconstructive timing" a meditative time of deep engagement that untangles us "from the strangling timeline of chronos" (Seidel, 2014, p. 146). The dictatorship of clock-time therefore not only measures and quantifies but is also used to ensure that kairos time is suppressed and rational ways of knowing dominate (Jardine, 2013; Smith, 2020). Mathematical, logical knowledge can be broken down into linear steps and is measured and mirrored by clock-time. Contemplative ways of knowing and engaging – deep inquiry, meditative states – cannot be captured by the clutches of the clock and are therefore anomalies to the factory-school system. Rational cognition becomes not only the dominant way of knowing but the only epistemic judgement that is trusted as it is able to align neatly with the linearity of clock time. Conforming to clock-time promotes this singular epistemology as it is used to demonstrate "the unidirectionality of processes of cause and effect", linear logic and the "cumulative nature of knowledge" (Adam, 1995, p. 66). Thinking in this way is characterized as pure common sense, "the basics" that need to be mastered (Jardine, 2017).



(Two animation stills from a flipbook-box © Sean Harris, 2017)

The consequent suppression of the time of kairos in schools has an ontological as well as epistemological impact as it affects students' states of being as well as their ways of knowing. Rational ways of knowing involve abstraction and a subject-object duality that demand an imagined separation from the more-than-human world. Moreover, students' emotions, intuitions and sensory knowings must not be trusted lest they cloud the laboratory-like purity of rational logical cognition. Rational thought is thus severed from students' animal embeddedness in and with the more-than-human world (Jardine, 2012). Existing continually under this "ontological delusion" (Jardine, 2012, p. 12) has deep and damaging ecological significance as we deny "the risky venture of experiencing and understanding our convivial being in the world" (Jardine, 2012, p. 12). Jardine (2012) analyses how once the world is "thought apart" we forget "how to think the world together" (p. 7) and lose any sense of its wholeness. This 'reality' becomes all-consuming and has disastrous and apocalyptic ecological consequences (Jardine, 2012).

Keller calls for a "counter-apocalyptic time" (2004, p. 131) to resist the dominant way of being in industrialised cultures. She implores us to be wary of feeding the apocalyptic clock-time that dominates Western societies. Keller (2004) calls on us to insert our bodies into time, thus allowing us to sense the fullness of time. Sensing the fullness of time with our bodily knowings allows us to feel our constant reciprocity with the more-than-human world. If we consider being *in* time rather than being *on* time, then we can "sense time" and "attend to the ambiguity at the edge, the permeable border between now and then" (Keller, 2004, p. 133). This kairotic time is attuned to the rhythms and relations of the more-than-human world, as opposed to the constructed, predictable regularity of clock-time. This "temporality of relatedness" is the time of nature experienced as "an endless flow of connectedness" (Chopp, 1991, p. 48). It involves paying heed to the way we are affected by tides, sun, moon, stars and seasons. The liminal sensory time of kairos can therefore lead to ontological experiences that involve students understanding themselves as part of the more-than-human world. In contrast, being blind to our entwinement with the more-than-human world leads us to retreat to "indoorism" (McDaniel, 2009, p. 196) and be deprived of the vitality of otherness. Rather than embrace "our carnal embedment in a world ultimately beyond our control" we learn to fear "the very wildness that nourishes and sustains us" (Abram, 2011, p. 69).



Hope is a Bison
(Two animation stills from a flipbook-box © Sean Harris, 2020)

Abram (2021) argues that what is needed is a "wild ethics" where we are attentive to the "inexhaustible otherness of the manifold beings that compose this earthly world" (p. 50). This entails a "simple humility", as in "the absence of intervening technologies" our human senses naturally "encounter the world as a tangle of animate expressive beings" (Abram, 2021, p. 51). When we surrender to "the depth of the present moment" (Abram, 2021, p. 53), and abandon abstract knowings and instrumentalist dispositions, we become empathetically and ethically attuned with our surroundings. This perspective echoes Leopold's (1949) "land ethic", the "wild pedagogies" of Jickling et al. (2018) and the philosophies of ancient indigenous cultures from around the world (Cajete, 1994). Abram (1996) expresses how modern societies suffer from a lack of sensory sophistication in comparison to indigenous cultures, as we have lost the habit of "direct, pre-reflective perception" (p. 130) when immersed in the wilderness. This requires a practised "patient receptivity" and "auditory awareness" that recognises "the things and elements that surround us not as inert objects but as expressive subjects" (Abram, 1996, p. 130). This animistic perspective, so revered in ancient cultures, has been replaced in industrial societies by a subject-object dualism that treats nature as resource rather than a participatory community of fellow beings and relations (Abram, 1996).

Echoing Abram's (1996) call for a "renewed attentiveness" and a "rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land" (p. 69), Keller (2021) proposes that we adopt an "apocalyptic mindfulness" (p. 56) so that we may be alive to our interrelatedness with our more-than-human relations and confront the ecological catastrophe that faces us. She explains that such a stance will not recover what has been lost but will enable us to "move out of isolating paralysis and into healing action" (Keller, 2021, p. 56). Keller (2021) uses the example of the

American bald eagle, which thanks to persistent human ecological effort "soared back from the brink of extinction" (pp. 53-54), to show what can be achieved when our apocalyptic awareness is focused. She references Rossing's (2002) analysis of Revelation from the Bible to emphasise the need for a change in attitude and attention. In her analysis, Rossing (2002) translates the words "woe to Earth", to "Alas for Earth" (p. 181). Rossing argues this allows the verse to become "God's cry of mourning or lamentation over Earth" (2002, p. 181). The word 'woe' has come from the Greek word, 'ouai' a cry or sound "to express lamentation or mourning" (Rossing, 2002, p. 182). When interpreted in this way, "God can be understood as sympathizing in mourning and lament over Earth's pain" (Rossing, 2002, p. 183). Keller (2021) applies Rossing's (2002) analysis to the near extinction of the American bald eagle and highlights how the onomatopoeia of 'ouai' can be related to the eagle's cry, conveying "wails of sorrow" (Keller, 2021, p. 52). She asks what could be achieved if the attentiveness towards the wails of sorrow of the American bald eagle "had brought with it such feeling for all earth-dwellers" (p. 53). She argues adopting an apocalyptic mindfulness can "pause the ominous feedback loops of animal extinctions" (Keller, 2021, p. 59), just as it did with the American bald eagle. There is therefore hope if we face, rather than surrender to, our fears (Keller, 2021).

Sean Harris is an artist whose work attends to an apocalyptic mindfulness and an ecocentric pedagogical approach. Part of his work focuses on animating extinct animals, or animals that are still alive, but near to extinction. He works with primary schools throughout Wales on various projects as an artist in residence bringing prehistoric animals to life through flip-book animation boxes that convey the *anima*, "what we now term, the soul" (Abram, 1996, p. 238) or *life force* of these extinct animals. Sean carefully chooses wilderness sites across Wales and works with local schools by facilitating site visits so that children may become familiar with the landscape. He demonstrates to the children how to animate these totem prehistoric beasts that once roamed the landscapes. As part of the projects, Sean facilitates various creative workshops that emphasise contemplative approaches with the children both in the landscape and in their schools. Recently, I have been working with Sean on a project with a primary school in north Wales that centres on the curlew as one of the totem animals to be animated. The curlew is a species threatened with extinction in Wales and the call of the curlew has the haunting quality of a warning.

Cri'r Gylfinir/The Call of the Curlew: The Curlew will be gone from the wild spaces of Wales by 2032 without immediate action from all society.
(Animation still using collagraph print paper cut-out artwork © Sean Harris, 2023)

Extracts from the Interview

In the following interview, I asked Sean a series of questions over email about his work. The following extracts from the interview have been selected for this paper.

Why is the wild and wilderness an important part of your work with children?

For me wilderness is not a physical space or environment; rather a state of mind – and, like so many enduring constructs, also a shifting idea shaped by the mores of the era. However, currently, in the collective conscious, it seems most immediately an entity of sweeping 'empty' landscapes that resides in and is viewed through the lens of the TV screen, voiced by the undulating and melodic delivery of Sir David Attenborough (or 'Big Dai' as we call him in our house)…

Perhaps more simply, wilderness, for me, is a headspace I escape to most often in the studio. It's here, through process, that my thinking runs its own course, becoming subconscious meditation which leads to clarity of vision and (often short-lived) truth. It's where I find solutions and come closest to resolving stuff (albeit impermanently). Jesus entered the wilderness for forty days; I do so maybe not for long, but the whole experience allows me to escape the tyranny of time

which again is absolutely central to what I feel wilderness is. This process is integral to my well-being and creative practice – and therefore my livelihood. I've been fortunate to have been able to consider this with a number of scientists, amongst them some heavyweight physicists who have spoken similarly in relation to the writing of massive equations which, seemingly, come to function almost as a chanted incantation.

As a society we are ruled by time and, whilst I recognise a degree of need for this, this regime does, in corralling us, suppress creative thought. This is no good because we really do need creativity to keep society going; to adapt in order to survive – especially as we stand at the dawn of the age of the robot drone which will increasingly render human function within mechanical tasks redundant.

Education, it strikes me, perhaps because of the age profile of its professional workforce, has been slow to recognise this truth – certainly in the UK. Whilst it's possible to see the fluttering of the wind of change, the school day still seems to me to be overly punctuated by bells that ring at regular intervals, precipitating jarring clunks and wrenches in the minds of all who are in thrall to them. Whilst I recognise the need for a degree of structure, I don't see this as creating a fertile learning environment. When I work in schools it's invariably for a full day with one group. Towards mid-morning, someone will always ask "are we with you all day?" and when I say "yes" you can see them visibly relax. This, I think, is because the whole timetable thing imparts a degree of anxiety stemming from abrupt curtailment. When the conversation transcends all this, the children are granted license to immersive themselves in the 'orb' of the moment, engaging in collective 'group-think'. In this, I've ceased to be surprised at what they work out for themselves and the complexity of the philosophical notions that they're willing to kick around. Thus, the classroom becomes a wilderness as much as any landscape and (surely?!) unlike Jesus' desert it becomes a place in which you can see the blooms emerging.

Why did you choose the curlew to focus on in your recent work with children?

I live in the uplands of Wales and the continuity of its inhabitants, both human and 'more-than-human', is of deep importance to me. The curlew has, in recent times, become avatar for this critically important landscape. It's important not just for itself but because if its ecosystems are allowed to crumble or become further degraded then the impacts on more densely populated urban Wales will be catastrophic. Whilst the 'backyards' of any nation are by and large overlooked by policy makers and city dwellers, they are always of pivotal importance in terms of providing the 'resources' on which the urban majority are utterly dependent. This was driven home for me in the USA where I experienced in quick succession the profligacy of appliance-dependent day-to-day life in Washington DC and then fracking in North Dakota – the latter fueling all the switch-flicking in the distant and blissfully removed metropolis. Every switch flicked however comes at a cost – and we still erroneously assume that such 'resources' are infinite. The tragic demise of the Great Auk – on whose narrative I am drawing in tandem with that of the curlew – provides powerful testimony to the perils of such assumption.

The curlew, in effect, represents a question mark. We have it in our power to obliterate it (as we did the great auk) on a path to our own destruction or – possibly – to save it, though it may well be that we're already too late and the tipping point at which this culturally resonant species becomes unviable has already been passed.

For older generations of farmers where I live, the curlew has always been synonymous with spring – and therefore renewal, continuity and hope. Sadly – and alarmingly – such conversations about this charismatic bird are now always suffixed with "haven't heard one for a long time" or "you don't hear them anymore". Thus, the curlew – and particularly its melodiously trilling and soul-piercing call – has become the upland embodiment of Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring' yet an absence of which distant city dwellers are by and largely blissfully ignorant, despite what it portends for them. In the uplands, the younger generations have never heard something that was a lynchpin in the annual round of their immediate forebears. Thus, it is an immediate and powerful indicator of 'shifting baseline syndrome'.

Interestingly, if we go back a little further, the curlew was a harbinger not of spring and renewal – but of doom. This illustrates the shifting nature of such cultural associations; animals – as mirrors – are most often what we want or need them to be in a relatively fleeting moment rather than anything permanent. But the duality of the curlew is deeply pertinent; it represents the fork in the path at which we now stand. Which route will we take?

What is the significance of working with extinct animals in your work? Why is this important when working with children?

We cannot sugarcoat the position we find ourselves in with regard to the catastrophic impact on biodiversity (and therefore, correspondingly – and is maybe practically necessary with an anthropocentric bias – on ourselves) of our actions. Thus, my current work – both my own as artist and that which I'm undertaking in collaboration with a primary school in northeast Wales – focuses on both the great auk and the curlew, the former as tragic example of the far-reaching consequences of over-consumption and the latter as 'question mark'; will we choose a linear path to oblivion or one to continuity based on an ethos of circularity or reciprocity?

On 3rd July 1844, the last confirmed pair of great auks were strangled on the island of Eldey by Icelandic fishermen in pursuit of the collector's coin. The men also stamped on the pair's egg. The birds were the 'endlings' of the first species that we knowingly exterminated. It's important to acknowledge that just a few decades before, extinction was not recognised or understood as a mechanism. But by the time of the great auk's demise there was a full awareness of what was happening.

In 1858, Alfred Newton and John Wolley, researchers fascinated with the mechanics of extinction, travelled to Iceland to interview the fishermen who had extinguished the anima or life force of the species. They gathered a vivid account of their actions on the fateful day, which is now held in memory in Wolley's handwritten notes which are held in the archive at Cambridge University Library.

Great Auk
(Animation still using collagraph paper cut-outs © Sean Harris, 2023)

This dark episode provides a powerful and truthful means by which to consider the finality of extinction through the lens of a demonstrably charismatic and culturally resonant species – and therefore creates an informed context in which to contemplate future extinctions.

If we maintain memory of the great auk through the propagation of emotional connection (which the arts, rather than science, are powerfully equipped to do) through something other than the passively detached medium of television, perhaps this memory will provide us with the enduring determination to make the behavioural changes that are now urgently required of us all. We're very good at finding day-to-day justifications for excusing ourselves from such actions – myself included. But this is now, it and our moment demands honesty, for it has become clear that myriad species – including the curlew – are on an identical trajectory to the great auk; the enduring and tragic monument to the consequences of profligate over-consumption and greed.

Reflections on the Alternatives to Conventional Schooling

By perceiving wilderness as a state of mind, Sean emphasises the ontological turn that is required in education if we are to retreat from the existential crisis towards which we are currently heading. Sean's work presents a concept of wilderness as an opportunity to be immersed in "the orb of the moment" and "escape the tyranny of time". This concept chimes with the kairological time

outlined by Griffiths (1999) and Keller (2021) – the natural time of the child, "the ocean of time itself, in an everlasting now" (Griffiths, 1999, p. 20). By positioning wilderness as an alternative state of being to that which is currently prioritised in conventional schooling, Sean also resonates with Abram's (2021) call for a "wild ethics", an "attentive openness" toward the "inexhaustible otherness" (p. 50) of the more-than-human world. The stories of the curlew and the great auk are offered as powerful allegorical tales that remind us of the choice that we have in education and in wider society. Are we going to carry on treating nature as a resource, keep up with our "ontological delusion" (Jardine, 2012) and relentlessly consume and destroy the more-than-human world? Or are we going to take on a vigilant apocalyptic mindfulness, an "empathic attunement to our surroundings and a compassionate intention to do least harm" (Abram, 2021, p. 53)?

Wilderness re-animated; flipbook-box in the landscape. Turn the handle on the side and the beast within springs to life…
(Photograph © Sean Harris, 2020)

Conclusion

This article began by examining how the dominance of clock-time in mainstream schooling maintains a limited ontological experience, or state of being. This state of being reflects the factory-model of education whilst marginalising alternative states of being that allow for ways of knowing that are counter to the dominant culture in schools. The time of kairos is discouraged and playful, intuitive, bodily, contemplative, and artistic ways of knowing are suppressed. The reification and dictatorship of rationality in schools serves to sever children from the more-than-human world with devastating future ecological consequences. It is argued that what is needed is a "renewed attentiveness" (Abram, 1996, p. 69), an "apocalyptic mindfulness" (Keller, 2021, p. 56), so that children may experience a "counter-apocalyptic time" (Keller, 2004, p. 131) and realise their interrelatedness with the more-than-human world. An exploration of Sean's artist-in-residence project in primary schools in north Wales has shown how animations of extinct and extant animals are used to engage children in contemplative activities that involve a "renewed attentiveness" (Abram, 1996, p. 69) and an "apocalyptic mindfulness" (Keller, 2021, p. 56) that cultivates an enhanced ethical sense of relationship with the more-than-human world. In the interview, Sean provides a conceptualisation of wilderness as being a state of mind and that this state of mind can be cultivated through artistic practices. In addition, he explains how the tales of the curlew and the great auk have been specifically chosen and deliberately portrayed as signposts for past and future generations. Sean, in his own words, presents "the finality of extinction through the lens of a demonstrably charismatic and culturally resonant species – and therefore creates an informed context in which to contemplate future extinctions". Just as the onomatopoeia of 'ouai' (woe) can be related to the bald eagle's cry, the cry of the curlew can also be heard as conveying "wails of sorrow" (Keller, 2021, p. 52). Yet despite the serious level of threat that exists to the curlew (and others, including humanity), just as the bald eagle was saved, hope remains if we can change our attentiveness and engender states of being, ways of knowing and ethical understandings that are alternative to the ones currently demanded by the priorities of mainstream schooling.

Reflections on the Role of the Pandemic

We are currently living through times of crises and change. These crises arose before the COVID-19 pandemic as it is claimed that "humans have come out of balance with each other and with the non-human" (Keller, 2021, p. x). The COVID-19 pandemic did not cause this imbalance, but it seems to have contributed to our awareness of it (Patel et al., 2021). Combined with the crises humans were already facing, it is as if we are being given a warning, or an *apokalypsis*, a revelation (Keller, 2021). The concepts of humanism and what it means to be human, that have dominated the Western world for hundreds of years, are being revealed as not only inadequate but oppressive (Braidotti, 2021). The sixth mass extinction (Raup & Sepkoski, 1982; Morton, 2018) is well underway and is a real threat to all human life on our planet (Kolbert, 2014). Confronted with the additional reality of the fourth industrial revolution, education is standing at the edge of a precipice (Doucet et al., 2018), yet the overall organisation and curricula of mainstream schooling in the industrialised world have continued to rumble on regardless, unchanged (Seldon & Abidoye, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic seemed to have caused many to have a liminal experience where it was felt that despite the awful devastation caused by the disease there was hope that lessons could be learned, and the crisis could be the start of a much-needed turning point (Adams & Gray, 2023). However, it remains to be seen whether the lessons have been learned and whether any significant changes will be implemented.

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