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ENACTING THE FUTURE: ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM WORLDWIDE

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NICOLE DOERR, MARÍA FLORENCIA LANGA

Images of Nature in Online Climate Activism in Germany and Argentina: Science, Affect and Non-Human ‘Everybody’s’

ABSTRACT *This paper analyses the digital images of nature shared by climate activists in Germany and Argentina, with a focus on affective nature representations. We show that activist communities in Argentina represent nature in diverse, affective ways while their counterparts in Germany visually present nature less often, while highlighting a scientifically mediated, fact-based representation of global climate change. Our comparative study shows how varying national political and cultural contexts and populist media debates shape the visual representation of human-nature relationships online. We discuss climate activists’ social media constructions of imaginaries for the future of ecological transitioning and North-South solidarity bridging narratives of science, affect, and non-human subjects characters in digital storytelling.*

KEYWORDS *climate activism, visual representation, social media, Germany, Argentina*

1. Introduction

Greta Thunberg and Fridays for Future’s climate activism energised the environmental movement on a global level, and inspired international solidarity (de Moor et al. 2020). However, despite the movement’s growth and focus on climate justice towards the Global South, studies have largely been conducted in the Global North. Furthermore, the movement’s relation to nature and nature’s role in activists’ political claims remains understudied. The importance of material relations to and understandings of

nature in environmental politics has long been established in research on environmental issues, be it the ways in which ideals of pristine nature in the conservation movement lead to the displacement of indigenous communities around the world (Duffy 2010; Neumann 1998), or how different relations to nature are at the root of environmental conflict (Farrell 2015). Recent studies covering the new environmental movement show how ideas of nature play a role in activists' constructions of and ways of coping with the present climate crises, as well as in devising possible futures (Cassegård 2023; Cassegård/Thorn 2022; Harms 2022). We seek to contribute to these studies to further our understanding of the role of nature and human-nature relations in the new climate movement by considering how and if activist groups represent nature in their visual communication on social media. To this end, we draw on the interrelated literatures on visual communication, digital storytelling, and transnational solidarity in social movements.

In this piece, we hope to contribute to studies on the role of visual social media (Mattoni/Doerr 2007) and visual, digital political storytelling that forge cognitive and emotional affective connections, both locally and transnationally (ibid; Flam/Doerr 2015; Doerr 2017; Freistein et al. 2022; Milman/Doerr 2023; Neumayer/Rossi 2018; Uba et al. 2023). Sociologists studying radical climate activists' public performances in European countries have highlighted the importance of studying visual content online rather than solely offline (Luhtakallio/Meriluoto 2022). Considering that global inequalities are often reproduced in the capitalist production logics of commercialised digital media, we assume here that online images are a strategically relevant alternative medium of protest (Mattoni/Doerr 2007), often designed by activists in ways to stimulate 'connective action' (Bennett/Segerberg 2012) across social, linguistic and national political boundaries. Some new studies in visual sociology have also highlighted the importance of the body, embodiment (Luhtakallio/Meriluoto 2022) and democratic re-enactment through embodied performances of protest (Doerr/Schober 2024; Milman/Doerr 2023). Cultural sociologists note the importance of digital media ecologies in the making of heroines of climate protest, such as the young Swedish woman Greta Thunberg, who has become a global icon of climate justice (Olesen 2022). Given the need for more research on digital media with a transnational comparative perspec-

tive on movements in the Global North and Global South (Baker 2016; Olesen 2018), one central empirical contribution of our case study is a focus on visual content, and the embodiment of protest through civic ‘everybody’ hero-figures (Schober 2020) as symbols of a joint, transnationally connected movement community emerging in images circulated through social media (Doerr/Mattoni 2014).

In this vein, the present paper contributes to research on visual digital mobilisation by climate protesters in different regions by studying the visual representation of nature in climate activists’ digital communication in Germany and Argentina. We analysed a corpus of over 8,000 images and corresponding texts posted online by climate activist groups in Germany and Argentina. The data from Germany was collected using computational methods from national and local Twitter accounts listed on the Fridays for Future official website and included all posts between January 2020 and January 2023. The Argentinian data was collected manually by systematically taking screen captures of Instagram content posted between January 2020 and June 2023 by the Fridays for Future and Youth for Climate national accounts, as well as from an account representing the wetlands protection movement (Multisectorial Humedales, i.e. Wetlands Coalition). First, we identified images of nature in the samples. Then we analysed them using a multimodal method, combining insights from research on social movements, media studies and multimodal perspectives of critical visual and discourse analysis (Doerr/Milman 2014; Forchtner/Kølvraa 2017; Zhukova 2023).

Our analysis shows that activists in Argentina create more explicitly affective and diverse visual representations of nature and nature-human relations than their counterparts in Germany. Images of nature in the German case are not only less prominent and diverse, but they are also often mediated by scientific discourse. Our theoretical framework for this analysis draws from the literature on visual storytelling in transnational political mobilisation (Doerr/Gardner 2021; Freistein et al. 2022; Milman/Doerr 2023; Neumayer/Rossi 2018; Zhukova 2023), with an emphasis on the role of emotions and attachments to nature in relation to online political communication. We introduce the concept of ‘everybodies’ (Schober 2020) to theorise the affective connection with non-human heroes in the visual narratives we found in some of our data. We argue that the above

suggests two main findings: i) nature appears to play a more central and affective role in the digital communication of activists from Argentina and South America, going as far as to consistently include non-humans in the ‘we’ narrative of the movement, while nature for Northern European climate activists is largely represented as an object of scientific knowledge. Moreover ii) local groups in both countries appear to share more images of nature and represent more affective human-nature relationships compared to national-level channels. We conclude with a discussion interpreting the meaning of our findings for the movements’ imaginaries of the future and their implication for research on the climate movement.

2. Theoretical framework: affective images, nature and the ‘everybodies’ of protest

The concept of affect is increasingly used in scholarship on social movements to designate the role of feelings and emotions in political expression online and its role in mobilising support (Bennett/Seegerberg 2013; Flam/Doerr 2015). It encompasses both embodied feelings and socialised emotions (Hochschild 2012), thus speaking to the relationship between affect and images. Affective images and videos have been shown to be relevant for understanding digital political communication and mobilisation (Flam/Doerr 2015), especially in transnational activism, which requires processes of political translation across cultural and linguistic contexts (Doerr 2017). We combine this perspective with research highlighting the importance of understanding moral, affective constructions of nature for shaping environmental movements (Bargheer 2018; Sepúlveda-Luque 2018), despite the turn towards science in environmentalism during the last 50 years (Farrell 2011).

In this piece, we draw on visual studies literature, assuming that visual content is particularly relevant for the political mobilisation of climate protests in the context of transnationally connected, networked social movements organised through digital media (Bennett/Seegerberg 2012). Rather than focusing on visual political mobilisation as such, we focus on online images as one distinct type of visual social media (Luhtakallio/Meriluoto 2022).

We conceptualise digital and online images as visual forms of communication assuming that climate protesters need to consider the affordances of networked digital media embedded in a complex environment of various types of commercial media, online platforms and algorithmic commercial logics (Milan//Treré 2019). Our study contributes to the emerging literature on the creative use of online visual content by climate protestors (Luhtakallio/Meriluoto 2022; Nordenstam/Wictorin 2023; Doerr 2024), and applies a multimodal method that combines critical visual narrative and discursive analysis (Doerr/Milman 2014; Forchtner/Kølvraa 2017; Zhukova 2023).

The climate movement is publicly focused on scientific claims, yet it has been characterised by displays of strong emotions (Cassegård/Thörn 2018), and European climate activists do engage with affective connections to nature in ways that are important for their sustained participation (Harms 2022). Analysing the emotional and affective political claims in online visual communication, as we do in this paper, allows us to understand better how the movement represents nature when engaging in public political discourse and calling for participation. As a disclaimer, we do not aim to draw general lessons on ‘North-South’ differences from our situated case studies in two national political contexts. Moreover, a comparative North-South perspective introduces nuances in our understanding of the transnationally connected climate movement, allowing us to make visible alternative narratives from the South.

The discussion of whose images matter for the international climate movement is brought into relief by a critical postcolonial perspective (Zhukova 2022). Thus, this paper uses the concept of ‘everybodies’ to theorise the visual construction of a political ‘we’ through images that invite affective engagement with figures representing the movement. The concept of ‘everybodies’ refers to pictorial figures that become politicised in public space by representing imaginaries of “the people” (Schober 2020). ‘Everybodies’ can reproduce hegemonic normative traits but can also challenge them and become political figures of change: “[E]verybodies are therefore also becoming ‘more or less utopia-led ‘new people’, with whose help social groups challenge existing world views and make new ones available” (Schober 2020: 13). Applied to social movements, the concept speaks to the question of whose images are used to represent a movement, which figures

activists use to invite others to participate and to build feelings of solidarity, and who is a valid political actor in the movement.

3. Methodology: case selection, data collection and multimodal visual iconography

We selected case studies in Argentina and Germany, due to the recent wave of climate protests in these countries. In Argentina, climate activists are part of the movement to protect the country's wetlands, which act as carbon sinks of global impact (Ramsar Convention on Wetlands 2021) and which are being burned to give way to the purposes of real estate and agricultural development. In Germany, FFF groups have engaged in large-scale protest events against extractivism. Protests in Germany featured the presence of climate justice activists from the South, such as in the 2023 Lützerath protests to stop the expansion of coal-mining and the construction of highways. These protests enhance the variety of the typical digital communications of the movement by anchoring some of them on particular landscapes as sites of contention.

For the German case study, we draw on 5,359 randomly selected Twitter images collected between June 2021 and April 2023 from among 155 FFF national and local channels. The accounts include all national, regional and local level accounts listed on FFF Germany's official website. The sample reflects the decentralised and loose network of FFF in Germany. Additionally, we manually coded 500 images from FFF Germany's Telegram channels.

For the Argentinian case, we analysed the national FFF (Fridays for Future Argentina, FFFA @fridaysforfuture.arg, 18.3K) and Jóvenes por el Clima (Youth for Climate, YFC: @jovenesporclimarg, 174K) Instagram accounts, as well as that of the coalition for wetland protection Multisectorial Humedales (Coalition Wetlands, CW: @multisectorial-humedales 35.9K) and of FFF Latin America (@ffflatam, 1,785 followers). These accounts were found through a digital ethnographic exploration of the climate movement in Latin America. The data is comprised of over 4,000 images collected manually. All images from the FFF Latin America account were collected in February 2023, while the FFF Argen-

tina, YFC and CW data comprise posts published between June 2020 and January 2023.

The researcher took field notes, allowing for a thorough exploration of the data during collection and the identification of material for contextualisation, such as news articles and press releases. The explorative methods applied in this study were non-participatory and did not aim to capture interactional or otherwise behavioural data of actors online, but rather utilised digital ethnographic methods to find relevant platforms, digital venues and sources of information (Pink 2016). The aim was to capture the immediate socio-cultural context of the data, in particular the diffuse events that turned a non-human character into a viral representative of climate advocacy (see section 4.2.1). To this end, one of the authors used targeted searches for hashtags in the accounts in our dataset described above on Twitter, Instagram and Google. The search was also used for accessible news articles and government documents that informed the process of the growth of the wetlands protection movement in 2019-2020. Much of this data is contextual and was collected while analysing the account data by following up on threads of information, such as hashtags and relevant links, in order to better understand their content. The data found through these searches was mostly used as sources to contextualise the use of a non-human character in the accounts analysed in the study. In the analysis we note the specific source of the data as originating from Instagram accounts or to other sources found through this ethnographic exploration of internet sources.

We analysed this corpus using a multimodal approach to visual political mobilisation, combining insights from research on social movements, media studies, and multimodal perspectives of critical visual and discourse analysis (Doerr/Mattoni 2014; Doerr et al. 2013; Doerr/Milman 2014; Flam/Doerr 2015; Forchtner/Kølvraa 2017; Milman/Doerr 2023; Zhukova 2023). Inspired by the Discourse Historical Approach in Critical Discourse Studies (DHA), we seek to contribute to a critical visual literacy of climate justice. To achieve this, we relied on Doerr's and Milman's interdisciplinary multimodal visual methodology, which includes the following three types of analysis: First, visual content-based analysis, second, art-historical iconographic interpretation, and third critical historical discursive analysis (Doerr/Milman 2014; Milman/Doerr 2022). In our first step of analysis,

we analysed the content of images, identifying the presence or absence of common signifiers of nature (plants, landscapes, animals, etc.), as well as normative symbolic representations. We also considered whether humans were portrayed as interacting with nature and different types of representation of nature. For example, we coded a picture of a capybara in the wild as “picturesque,” while a capybara edited to hold a protest sign or wear a superhero cape was coded as a “non-human everybody.”

For the second step, we applied a “visual iconographic interpretation” (Doerr/Milman 2014, following Müller/Özcan 2007) to analyse an image’s resonance with visual symbols and icons of the climate movement and their place within the historical context of visual traditions (Doerr/Milman 2014). As a third analytical step, we contextualised the data by comparing the visual and text-based rhetoric in the posts, as embedded in their particular contexts, and providing an interpretative backdrop for the visual and textual data (Milman/Doerr 2023). We selected theoretically relevant images for this article that represent the themes we found in our data. All translations of text from images or posts were made by the authors from German and Spanish to English.

A shortcoming of our data was the differences between Twitter and Telegram (for Germany) and Instagram (for Argentina). We addressed various data sources and their impact on the coding in a pre-analysis of FFF, showing overlapping image posts on Twitter and Instagram. However, evident differences between these media restricted the potential for comparison. Our particular data set included images from different platforms, including Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram, capturing the dynamic ways in which actors use visuals on different platforms (Thorsen/Astrupgaard 2021) and their crucial embeddedness in networks (see Niederer/Colombo 2019). Warren et al (2020) have proposed new methodologies such as visual cross-platform analysis (VCPA), and Pearce et al. (2020) found that Twitter and Facebook images make more use of the multimodal affordances of the platforms and thus have more integrated text, while Instagram images tend towards what they call “stylish” photography (see: 173). Doerr (2024) found that Telegram allows for affective, dialogical interactions inspired by visual image posts. These findings based on previous studies appear to be relevant for our findings, given that accounts collected from Instagram

in the Argentinian case shared more images of social activities and more aesthetically styled images of pure nature than did the German data set of images collected on Twitter. Moreover, Pearce et al. argue that “[o]ne thing that these composite images make clear is that aesthetic visual communication takes place not only on Instagram, but across a range of social media platforms” (2020: 173), which bridges the types of images found on the two platforms, despite some tendencies stemming from their specific affordances.

It is important to highlight, however, that these valuable approaches to cross-platform digital visual content are largely based on big data computational analyses. Our case study is distinct from previous work given that we collected our data from a small number of purposely selected accounts representing groups with a level of collective organising. Their own graphic profiles thus can be expected to actively work towards a coherent aesthetic across platforms in favour of brand recognition as well as practicality. Thus, the findings listed above about the visual vernaculars of these platforms (see Pearce et al. 2020) are relevant for our case as they provide a general visual aesthetic that contextualises the images we analysed. Furthermore, combining ethnographic methods to capture the networks of actors and meanings helped us to connect the images with networks and the context they were embedded in. In summary, the socio-technical differences between platforms that create problems for comparative analysis were weighed against the platform’s relevance for each case. We applied sensitivity to these differences, in particular the emphasis on “stylish” images for Instagram, the interactivity of Telegram, and the text-heavy platform and retweet function of Twitter, which means more images on Twitter accounts are likely shared than those independently created by social media managers.

In ethical terms, our starting point is the protection of the dignity of people and groups whose digital content we use for this research. All accounts analysed are fully public, but we protect the identity of individuals by restricting information about them and securing data transfers and storage. Furthermore, we situate our analysis as part of a Critical Visual Literacy perspective in the interpretive tradition of Critical Multimodal Discourse and Narrative Analysis (Forchtner/Lubarda 2023), Visual

Culture, and Decolonial Narrative and Translation studies (Baker 2016). Mona Baker's decolonial approach to activists' online political storytelling highlights the importance for researchers studying emancipatory political imaginaries emerging in countries of the Global South to critically question hegemonic representations of developing countries on digital media (Baker 2016). In following Baker's suggestion, we adapt a feminist perspective on citizenship media, admitting our situated positionality as white, socially privileged, female-identifying researchers, and the limits and power asymmetries in our own engrained position as academics (Zhukova 2022).

In the context of the drastic increase in big data collection by large media corporations, scholars in media studies have discussed how the use of such data can increase the marginalisation of actors (Milan/Treré 2019). It is important to note, however, that digital data offers the potential for researchers to access the work of marginalised people and to enhance rather than flatten the diversity of the Global South (Charitsis/Lehtiniemi 2023). Our study seeks to minimise the invisibilising effects of these processes by using purposeful sampling of accounts in both our manual and computational data collection, which was done with sensitivity to the inclusion of marginalised voices. In the case of Germany, for example, we included FFF accounts dedicated to the voices of people in regions of the Global South affected most dramatically by climate change, and in the case of Argentina we purposely included the wetlands protection movement, which represents communities at the frontlines of environmental struggles and is not subsumed under banners such as XR and FFF, which emerged in the Global North. The latter allowed us to include data that walk the path suggested by D'Ignazio and Klein (2020) in breaking the hierarchical human/non-human binary. Nonetheless, some of these ethical issues are insurmountable and the dynamics of visibility and invisibility of diverse voices are still at play in our data. FFF activists, are in the majority, white urban youth (de Moor/Wahlström 2022), even in the Global South. Indigenous communities are part of the wetlands protection movement in Argentina and feature prominently in the content we analysed, yet internal power dynamics of the group unknown to us may still invisibilise part of their perspective in our data and we have not as yet come into contact with informants explicitly identifying themselves as part of these communities.

4. Findings

This section presents the findings of our study, analysing our cases separately and then comparatively in our discussion section. In studying digital media activism by FFF groups in Germany, we found that representations of nature are infrequent and mediated by scientific discourse centred on human agency. Climate activists in Argentina incorporate more varied and affective depictions of human-nature relations, depictions which were absent in the German case. The findings suggest two different modes of affective engagement with nature: one that constructs objectivity and tends to remove emotion, and another, where affective connections between humans and nature are not rendered invisible. However, as the analysis will show, there are nuances in this distinction across channels and in national versus local levels.

4.1 Scientific instrumental relations to nature and human 'everybodies'

For accounts by FFF activists in Germany, our findings show a largely objectivist and rationalist relationship between humans and nature. Humans from the Global North are the second most frequently represented image category in the data set, featuring in 2,236 images in total (41 percent) of all images, while 2,790 (52 percent) of the images feature text-only visual posters and calls for action. Less than five percent of the data set (266 images in total) include visual representations of nature (most frequently graphic symbols of the planet), as well as a wide range of nature photographs or representations of animals and plants, photographs of endangered nature sites, images of flood catastrophes, wildfires, and nature sites destroyed by extractivist activities.

Among images of humans, 90% of posts on national-level FFF accounts depict images of youthful FFF protesters without representations of nature, most of them in demonstrations or shots of group pictures of protesters holding banners, frequently in urban street protest contexts. As an exception, some of the national level FFF accounts that explicitly target activist communities interested in forging connections to the Global South posted group photographs and images of non-white activists, as well as photographs of flood catastrophes located in the Global

South (57 images in total). At the level of local FFF groups, a minority of pictures in our sample included images of ‘humans in nature’ (in total 57 images, 49 of which showing FFF activists in forests). The latter category is concentrated in smaller, local accounts and show a more affective connection towards representing humans in nature. These findings indicate that the most frequent visual representation of climate activism among official FFF channels with the broadest outreach across Germany is a predominantly urban image centred around humans as agents of climate protest. Furthermore, most images that include the non-human world depict a relationship to nature that is emotionally detached and scientifically mediated, as in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1 is relevant, as it represents a ‘typical’ example of group pictures on FFF channels, which are used to mobilise support by constructing icons of climate justice. This picture, as with most other group pictures, centres on a group of youthful, German, human actors, here posing as a ‘we’ group of generalised ordinary youthful citizens in front of parliament, thus appealing to viewers and stimulating attachment, as well as support for the message, through identification with this generalised representation as figures of *everybody* –visually depicting the we-identity of the movement (Schober 2020).

The picture in Fig. 1 resonates with the iconography of previous protest movements in the German context featuring a shot in front of the German Parliament in Berlin. From a broader, transnational, iconographic perspective, the picture appears to be ‘mainstream’, as it resembles the majority of globally available digital representations of climate activism on Twitter and Instagram, which predominantly show representations of climate protesters from the Global North, often in urban settings rather than in natural environments (Thorsen/Astrupgaard 2021). Fig. 1 is also relevant for a Global North and Global South comparison, as it differs from the photograph in Fig. 4, which portrays a protest targeting the Argentinian Congress, and shows non-human beings amidst the crowd of protesters, including animals, a river, and humans together ‘taking over’ Congress.

In terms of visual rhetoric, the colourful, hand-painted slogan “What We Stand For Is What We Stand On”, next to the painted symbol of a globe on the poster, construct nature as an affective trigger to support a



Figure 1: Students for Future

Source: FFF national information channel on Telegram

scientifically mediated story of human agency and urgency. This action-oriented story here visually represents the Earth as a globe. The visual rhetoric in the subtitle, together with this slogan and the globe symbol, implies that an action-oriented focus on controlling climate change. Thus, this image both visually and iconographically repeats and resonates with a modernist and rational science-based narrative of climate change and human-centred agency in European climate politics. Fig. 1 is ‘typical’ of our German data set, in which the globe was the most frequently used visual representation of nature (in both pictures and visuals).

At the level of affect and emotion embedded in the text and visual elements, the official group picture in Fig. 1 on FFF’s info channel combined a call for protest with an affective visual story of nature / the Earth under threat, and the task for protesters to make national government actors in Germany responsible, in order to provoke policy action. Due to its colourful, visually styled slogan and call to action, Fig. 1 implies threat, fear and hope, which was typical for the majority of visuals posted by the FFF official Germany-wide info channel.

4.1.1 Contesting official images among FFF channels through the use of affective images of nature and forest

The official self-representation of FFF Germany as a group of politically aware young citizens, most frequently displayed in urban settings, was contested. A few FFF channels specialised in posting images of non-white climate activists in regions of the Global South as agents of climate activism, often posing in nature settings endangered by environmental catastrophes or extractivism. Historicising these iconographic choices and variations in the visual design of posts, the increasing wish by some German FFF online activists to diversify the FFF we-group representation of ‘everybody in the movement’ reflects the most recent history of anti-racist protests in Germany (Milman/Doerr 2022) as well as deep, internal processes of dialogue and self-reflection among FFF Germany activists to include both local anti-racist activism and global solidarity perspectives within a pluralist, transnational movement.

Previous research on the recent history of the climate movement and environmental social movements in Germany has highlighted the importance to protesters of including nature sites for spectacular protest actions aimed at gaining public visibility in the mainstream media (Teune 2013). In this iconographic, historical perspective, one relevant finding is that the local, informal FFF channels (with notably fewer followers than official accounts) posted more images of humans in nature than the official national info channel (in total 57 pictures), many of them showing scenes of violent confrontation between police officers and climate activists engaged in protests against deforestation. Within this category of nature images, there are two types of images of forest: there is first of all a more abstract version of ten percent of images that show individual trees or forests in a more abstract way as a symbol of the movement, such as cartoon pictures of children embracing a tree, as well as photographs, memes or pictures of images of forests, including motifs of burning forests, cut trees, or apocalyptic landscapes of destroyed nature featuring forests that died after drought or extraction. As a whole category of (affective) images of nature, we interpret these images of forests as a moral symbol for nature – a representation of nature that deserves protection in the context of the looming threat of climate change.

These images of the forest constitute 90% of all nature images on local FFF channels. In these images, nature is depicted passively, as a victim of

human climate destruction, rather than a subject, as shown in the meme in image 2, for example.



Figure 2: Police officers and radical climate activists

Source: FFF local channel on Twitter

It is puzzling that the vast majority of nature images would show real forests with activists in the centre engaged in protest activities – compared to the national level FFF channels where we found no single image of a human protester next to a forest or tree. Human agents in the FFF local Twitter accounts, such as the example in Fig. 2, featured as part of a category of informal, affective nature-embedded photographs of climate activists engaged in various forms of collective action, most often shot in locations in forests, either during specific protest actions (such as in Fig. 2, in a confrontational setting) or engaging in other ways; for example, showing activists collecting garbage, building tree houses, sitting in circles, and sharing stories about their experiences as activists in the forest.

The picture of a felled tree as part of the meme in Image 2 is typical of a nature depiction in the sample of local German FFF channels. The forest serves as an illustration of political conflict between two groups of human actors – police officers and radical climate activists trying to prevent deforestation. Here, the forest (symbolised by a felled tree) assumes a (passive)

victim positionality that carries affect to the viewer. The picture on the upper part shows a (female) police officer in heavy riot gear engaged face-to-face with radical climate activists who, in the context of a non-violent direct action forest occupation in Hesse in 2020/21, attempted to stop state a highway construction project from deforesting an ancient forest and a large ground water reserve area.

As with many other images of trees shared by local FFF channels, this picture features police officers facing activists. Yet, unlike the majority of other images of police officers in riot gear, this picture shows a police officer with a self-reflective utterance concerning deforestation. The bubble (in German) reads: “Become a police officer, they said.... Then you can do good, they said”. The posting of a felled tree in the picture below creates a sarcastic contrast to the police officer’s statement, featuring a widespread slogan by local climate protesters at the time, which is that felling 80 hectares of healthy climate forest constituted a crime against humanity and against the future of the planet. Iconographically, and from a gender perspective, this Twitter picture is distinct from the majority of protest photographs of police officers on FFF Twitter, which largely show male police officers who do not make statements.

In terms of interpreting our findings in terms of the more recent discursive context, we understand that the high visibility of forests as the dominant nature image on local FFF channels is due to the time-specific political context of our data analysis in 2020-22, when Germany was experiencing a large wave of confrontational climate protest in the geographic centre of Germany, in the state of Hesse. FFF activists from across Germany participated in the large demonstrations in the autumn and winter of 2021, involving tens of thousands of protesters and 800 police officers. Figure 2 is a typical example of the majority of images of humans in the forest, which were missing on national FFF accounts. Why did more affective images of humans in rural sites connected to nature disappear in official visual storytelling on national FFF channels?

As part of our contextual analysis, we found that national FFF Telegram channels throughout the entire period of analysis avoided posting images of more ‘radical’, non-violent direct action protest events, such as Fig. 2. Instead of posting images of dramatic clashes between police officers and protesters that had occurred in different parts of Germany,

the FFF channels posted images of peaceful, smiling protesters in urban scenes or in close proximity to institutions, as in Fig. 1. Thus, FFF creators of national Telegram channels posted pictures in an increasingly polarised and hostile discursive and political context, where right-wing and populist politicians stigmatised climate activists as radicals (cf. Forchtner/Lubarda 2023). These contextual findings suggest that the particular visual style of communication in national level FFF accounts, including the emphasis of national monuments, as well as, the use of rationalist, scientifically mediated messages, as in Image 1, reflected a strategic adaptation of FFF Germany to a polarised and hostile political context where climate activists felt increasingly attacked by a strong, populist counter movement.

4.2 Glimpses of nature-human kinship: non-human ‘everybodies’ and affective relations to nature

Our Argentinian cases show deep connections to nature, depicted visually in the form of everyday attachments, spiritual connections and other implications of the recognition of nature’s value in interaction, often represented as an integral part of protest or even the ‘we’ of the movement. Images of people kayaking on the river or giving ceremonial offerings in the form of native plants and flowers, protestors wearing wetlands animal costumes, capybara memes, and art performances are some examples of how affective human-nature relations were portrayed visually. This type of nature image was more prominent in the CW account than in the national FFF and YFC ones. Section 4.2.1 below starts from CW’s account, describing the politicisation of nature and its cultural resonance in the national context. Section 4.2.1 shows how some of the visual affective nature content is also present in FFF, YFC and FFF Latin America accounts, especially images of non-human ‘everybodies’.

4.2.1 Nature as a political actor in the Argentine wetlands movement: nonhuman ‘everybodies’, capybara memes and affective connections with nature

The wetlands protection movement in Argentina has been working towards a national protection law for over 10 years, yet it gained momentum in 2019 when fires increased in the country’s North. Activists formed the Wetlands Coalition, representing over 300 organisations and

continued to mobilise through the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, they received national and international attention after what became humorously known as “Carpincho-Gate.” In August 2021, hundreds of capybaras decided to settle on the elegant waterfront properties of Nordelta—a gated community north of Buenos Aires. Reports about the capybara ‘invasion’ reached the internet and the reaction was strongly in favour of the capybaras, known locally as carpinchos. Soon, memes started depicting them as activists leading an eco-socialist revolution: capybaras reading Karl Marx’s *Capital*, waving communist flags or being interviewed about their Nordelta ‘protest.’ News of the capybara taking back their land spread on international news channels such as *The New York Post* (Sparks, 23.09.2021) and *The Guardian* (Goñi, 29.10.2021). The capybara performing as human historic figures, activists and, as we will show below, even climate refugees, constructs a human-non-human hybrid ‘everybody’—something between a mascot or shape-shifter, a political figure, a symbol, and a joke, but as an agent nonetheless who challenges exploitative nature-human relationships. While ambivalent, the capybara is the best, though not only, example of political actors representing nature neither as a victim nor an object of scientific discourse—like the images of a felled tree, or the earth represented as a globe in the German FFF accounts.

The explosion of ‘political capybaras’ online sparked public discussions about the wetlands and their protection, which was capitalised on by the wetlands movement (Horvat, 29.08.2021). Capybaras emerged as a political figure of ‘the people’ an ‘everybody’ representing the downtrodden that included not only the working class but also nature. By 2021, the animal was familiar to internet culture because of its ‘cute’ appearance (Know Your Meme, 01.07.2021). However, the capybaras’ features enable interpretations of them as having a serious facial expression, which can enable readings of the creature as expressing emotions associated with politics, such as a serious demeanor or anger. As the Argentine scholars Winckler and Garcén (2021) show, the iconography of the wave of carpincho memes drove a discussion where environmental and class politics intersected, by connecting climate change and the wetlands movement with a history of representation of political action by popular actors, through images like those of twentieth-century political leader Juan Perón and Soviet communist imagery.



Figure 3: Caepinchos recuperando el territorio de humedales

Source: Tweet shared by a private user on August 21 2021. Found on news articles as a viral meme (e.g. El País, August 25, 2021)

The events of Nordelta politicised the carpincho, turning it into an ‘everybody’ representing the oppressed as a political actor of change. Nature is represented as a subaltern, as part of the “we” of the oppressed. The images thus, though often humorously, extend political agency beyond the human. Climate activists participated in constructing this connection and joined the capybaras in protests at Nordelta wearing capybara masks. They called for people to ‘be like the capybara’ with the hashtag “#encarpinchate” and demanded the protection of the wetlands. Capybara masks became common in wetlands movement protests, emphasising the identification of these non-human creatures with activists.

Our data show that CW activists had already been using non-human ‘everybodies’ as figures of political action in their visual communication for at least a year. Images of protestors wearing animal masks and even full costumes of animals such as native birds, capybaras, foxes or alligators can be found in early protests. These masks turned protestors into uncanny half-human, half-animal creatures, bringing the wetlands to the streets. Activists also created life-like animal paintings that were not painted on signs but on large board cutouts in the animal’s shape. These cutouts were

carried by protestors and create the impression that the animals walked among them.



Figure 4: Humedales al congreso

Source: Protest flyer shared by CW account on August 13 2021. FFF Argentina and YFC Argentina on the same day

The image in Fig. 4 collects many of the ways in which CW visually expressed affective relations to nature and depicted it as a political actor. The image is a protest flyer that shows the Argentine Congress building in Buenos Aires against a sky obscured by sepia-colored clouds. The building is surrounded by water and people in kayaks. A stork perches on the left wing of the building and another flies towards it. A capybara is seen on the building's dome, climbing to its pinnacle. Above, in bright, neon-green letters, is the legend “Wetlands to Congress”, immediately followed by “We march from Plaza de Mayo.” The image also contains the date and time of the protest, as well as the movement’s lead hashtag, reading “wetlands protection law now”.

In terms of iconography, the image refers to other images shared by the movement: non-human protesters, activists in kayaks, the presence of the river as part of the protest. The capybara, a new icon of class-conscious

climate activism, is climbing to the top of the Congress building as a hero, the leader, or at least the vanguard for the protest. The political imaginary in this protest flyer appears to be doing what activists are unable to do – bring the wetlands to the streets as a powerful protestor. The sepia-colored clouds were familiar to anyone in Argentina watching the news during this period, since this is the colour of the sky clouded by wildfire smoke – an image that may conjure up recent pictures of New York City for international viewers (NBC New York, 08.06.2023). The building is depicted as standing alone and partially submerged; the fences and prominent steps that surround it have been swallowed by the river. In the context of climate activism and the imagery of rising sea levels and floods, the water can also be read as an ominous warning about the consequences of climate change. The legend “wetlands to Congress” followed by the verb “we march” highlights the theme already present in the image whereby the wetlands, in the form of animals, plants and the Paraná River, are part of the ‘we’ of the protest.

Fig. 4 is strongly rooted in the national context, in which capybaras are political figures and climate activists share imagery depicting affective and politicised connections with nature. However, the flyer evokes images of climate change with international resonance, such as wildfires, floods and rising sea levels. The three Argentinian accounts shared this image without edits, hinting at a context in which the image would be understood by the audience of both FFF and YFC. This type of depiction of nature as a political actor was mostly absent in the German case, despite the fact that climate activists were at the time engaged in struggles over specific landscapes under contention.

4.2.2 Non-human ‘everybodies’ in Fridays for Future Argentina and in Latin America

The political understanding of non-humans as political actors in climate protests can be found in multiple instances in the FFF-associated accounts analysed for this study. The account of the CW case above shows that protesters have gone beyond capybaras in their incorporation of non-humans into protests. FFF Argentina and YFC have a much more graphic profile, yet they still contain multiple instances of non-human ‘everybodies’.

For our transnational research focus, a good example of the spread of imaginaries of non-human ‘everybodies’ as visual social media to mobilise solidarity internationally, can be found in a flyer for a 2022 global climate strike shared by FFF Latin America. The image shows a diverse group of protestors raising fists and yelling or chanting. The protestors appear to be a fisherman, an indigenous woman, and a female service or domestic worker. Among these protesters, there are two sea birds, one seeming to be covered in oil. The legend at the top of the poster reads: “#LifeAgainst-Capital Global Strike for the Environment!” The birds are included in the figures representing the movement’s ‘we,’ the ‘everybodies’ of the movement. Just like the capybaras and other non-human ‘everybodies’ in the CW account, the figures are protestors onto which the viewer can project their own identity to see themselves participating. In this flyer, the protestors are victims of capital extraction. They are the oppressed, yet they are also actors of change, as are the two birds, who are not lying suffering but standing alongside the protesters.

In turn, YFC developed a campaign entitled “Capybara Life” (Vida de Carpincho) in collaboration with UNICEF. The campaign that capitalised on the figure of the capybara in a different way, revealing another mode in which the non-human ‘everybodies’ can be used to generate support. The campaign featured actors dressed in capybara costumes as climate refugees. The videos mimic news reports and show families of these human-capybaras arriving in Buenos Aires and being interviewed about their experience of being chased out of their habitat. The campaign returns nature to a victim status, but the non-human refugees do not only create empathy for the animals, but capitalise on the widespread attachment to capybaras in a way that extends this attachment to future climate refugees and to present communities displaced by the fires.

Another non-human ‘everybody’ that was shared by the FFF Latin America account and then ‘traveled’ independently to Europe as an alternative social media connecting activists and potentially stimulating new meanings, is the cartoon axolotl that appears among young protestors in a poster, as well as in a video shared by FFF Mexico. The axolotl, which has received many names, was relatively successful internationally as the mascot of the 2022 global climate strike, which the poster that features the axolotl promoted. According to Greta Thunberg’s Twitter post of

24.03.2022, the graphics were created by a Mexican activist. FFF International claimed to have adopted the axolotl in a tweet from 24.01.2022 requesting suggestions of names for it. In a TikTok Video from 30.01.2022, FFF Dublin calls it Hernando and states that he is in charge of the group's "emotional support". An FFF local account from Sweden also shared two cartoon axolotls in a discussion on attending the strike on 24.03.2022. As the case of the axolotl demonstrates, the door to cultural resonance is open to non-human 'everybodies' as political figures for climate change in the North. The axolotl is thus a social medium that can mean different things in different places (Doerr/Mattoni 2014), and yet it is also an image that in its travels from the Global South brings to the Global North an alternative visual culture of human-nature relations in public discourses of climate change.

5. Discussion and conclusion: nature and the construction of alternative future imaginaries for the climate movement

This paper has analysed the representation of nature in the visual communication of climate activists online in Germany and Argentina, as embedded in transnational connections between activists in the Global North and Global South. Central to our theoretical contribution is an innovative, trans-regional comparative approach to the growing body of research on global visual culture, climate activism, and cultural meaning-making, carried out through the transnational diffusion of visual forms of social media (Mattoni/Doerr 2007). Our empirical study has traced digital storytelling among climate justice activists who are attempting to bridge and geographically connect linguistically diverse transnational activist communities situated in countries of the Global South and Global North. Insights from our empirical case study document how German FFF online communities picture a comparatively rationalist, emotionally distant, and scientifically mediated relationship between human beings and nature. We suggest that official German FFF channels' use of rationalist, scientific messages reflected a strategic adaptation to increasingly polarised Europe-wide public debates shaped by far-right populist counter movements and media actors criticising climate activists and liberals (cf.

Lederer 2020; Forchtner/Lubarda 2023). Our data from South American accounts located in Argentina, especially the wetland movement, shared more affective and politicised images of non-humans. The alternative visibility of human-nature relations in the context of Argentina adds to the movement's imaginary of alternative futures by prefiguring non-instrumental relations between humanity and nature – and, indeed, we found traces of the transnational diffusion of non-human protest hero figures 'travelling' from Latin America to Northern Europe as instances of alternative visual social media. At the same time, the trans-regional comparative perspective of visual storytelling among climate justice activists located in Germany and Argentina reveals the continuing relevance of varying nationally shaped political imaginaries that reflect different discursive and political opportunities. The content shared by Argentinean activists gives room in political debates to humorous and creative representations of nature that depict alternative relationships between humans and nature.

Without claiming to generalise from these empirical findings on North-South differences of political imagination in online spaces, we suggest that our case studies show how globally connected digital media publics emerging in South America and Argentina remain an important creative source of inspiration for climate justice activists from the Global North – as we have shown in our case study of FFF in Germany and Argentina. Previous studies have highlighted how northern European climate justice activists draw on South American climate activists' conceptions and symbols to re-imagine transformative relationships between humans and nature. Our comparative study adds new evidence to support this research. Moreover, we argue that the depiction of nature as a political actor is relevant in understanding alternative visualities of climate justice beyond the Andropocene, since non-human 'everybodies' pictorially embody a possible "utopia-led 'new people'" (Schober 2020: 13). This imagery portrays nature as having the agency to fight for itself and implies that protestors can represent and feel represented, inspired and accompanied by non-humans. These images represent nature not only as an aesthetic, ecological or economic value, but as a subject with agency, who participates in the collective work of climate activism. Non-human 'everybodies' as political actors appear to have the potential to carry across

contexts into the international arena. The differences in our findings between the Global North and Global South cases open up new questions for studying climate activists' construction of human-nature relationships in their communication. It would be incorrect to say that the German case lacks affective nature connections to draw on, both culturally and in relation to specific landscapes within the movement. Germany, like any other place, has its own cultural traditions, values and affective connections to nature (e.g. Lekan 2007) on which climate activists could draw on for their communication. In fact, German right-wing counter movements and populist far-right parties communicate affective connections to the nation and identifications with nature's power of authority (Forchtner/Kølvraa 2017; Forchtner/Lubarda 2023). Moreover, the affective imagery of forests we found in local FFF accounts in Germany demonstrates this in our data. Not even the political non-human memes are something unique. The recent explosion of political memes of orcas is a case in point (see: Know Your Meme, 22.05.2023 and Pare, 18.05.2023; Esteban et al. 2022).

Our findings document, for both Argentina and Germany, differences in the online communication of local versus national level climate activist communities. Based on these findings, we suggest that future research could illuminate how contextual factors play a role in shaping visual digital storytelling in political communication. In the perspective of research on digital communication as a process of 'connective action' (Bennett/Segerberg 2012) that works through both affective images and visual persuasion, our findings also show how visual representations of nature are a relevant aspect of climate communication that popularises transformative ecological imaginaries of green transition futures appealing to broad, multigenerational public audiences (cf. Lederer 2020). The human-nature relationships depicted in images construct a vision of what kind of relations are to be fostered, transformed or valued, and thus, which human-nature relationships should be part of the better future the movement advocates for. These imaginaries are important to build and communicate hope in the face of the environmental crisis, an emotion shown to be important for mobilising climate activism (Cassegård et al. 2017; Kleres/Wettergren 2017). We argue that visual, connective images can mobilise existing attachments to nature as well as humour to construct alternative imaginaries of the future in climate politics online.

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ABSTRACT Dieser Artikel analysiert digitale, visuelle Mediennarrative zu Natur, Wissenschaft und transnationaler Solidarität, die von Klimagerechtigkeitsbewegungen in Deutschland und Argentinien auf Twitter, Telegram und Instagram geteilt werden. Wir zeigen, dass aktivistische Onlinemedien in Argentinien das Wesen der Natur oft auf vielfältigere und affektivere Weise repräsentieren als die untersuchten Onlinemedien deutscher Klimagerechtigkeitsbewegungen. So sehen Aktivist:innen in Südamerika die Natur affektiv als Teil der Zukunft von Klimagerechtigkeitsbewegungen, während Fridays for Future in Deutschland Natur als Opfer des von Menschen verursachten globalen Klimawandels deuten. Unsere Studie deutet diese Unterschiede im Nord-Süd-Vergleich als Ausdruck des Einflusses variierender Mediendebatten, Wissenschafts- und Diskurskulturen, sowie populistischer Gegenbewegungen.

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