

Tobias Gralke

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Tobias Gralke
Bonn/Potsdam

Another World is Depictable!

Imaginal Climate Justice and the Affective Rhetoric of Visible Futures

Abstract: This paper explores and analyses images of post-climate crisis futures that circulate in political web videos as part of the current Global Northern climate discourse. Starting from the observation that many of these images resemble each other, the main argument is that the analysed cases represent an *affective rhetoric of visible futures* that is used across different types of videos and actors to promote certain climate-related political strategies. This rhetoric is criticised from a climate justice communication perspective. The underlying assumption is that, while many activists use and fill out the (u)topos of alternative worlds, details are crucial: How does the promoted future look? How far or close is it? How do we get there? What or who is left behind? Who presents which future to whom? Does it differ from the present?

Tobias Gralke (M.A.), has been a research fellow at the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn (project: "Attention Strategies of Video Activism on the Social Web") and at the Filmuniversität Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF. He studied German Literature and Philosophy at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Cultural Studies at the Universität Hildesheim, Human Rights (School of Advanced Study) and Sustainable Development (SOAS) at the University of London, and has recently started a B.Sc. in Psychology at the International Psychoanalytic University Berlin. His research is focusing on protest, social movements, and political climate communication.

1. Introduction¹

On March 19th, 2021, as part of the seventh so-called “Global Climate Strike”, a group of activists around the German Fridays for Future section painted a giant slogan on the Oberbaum Bridge in Berlin-Kreuzberg: “Another world is possible”. Usually combined “We are unstoppable!”, the slogan (a core rallying scream of the Global Justice Movement since the 1990s²) had already been chanted at many of the new climate protests since 2018. Making it this strike’s central message, however, indicated not only a shift towards intersectional solidarity and transformative social change.³ What made the Oberbaum Bridge painting even further significant, is that the activists did not explicitly show *how* another world will look. They did not paint a fully coloured version of the future on the bridge, but rather flanked the slogan with symbols representing different dimensions of the claimed transformation: mobility, food, health, racial equality and decolonisation, global justice, energy and architecture, environmental protection, solidarity.⁴

This practice of claiming but not showing the future connects to the traditional question of whether and how alternative worlds and futures should be represented, which has long been discussed among emancipatory thinkers and activists. Approaching the current discourses on climate change, it is more than necessary to keep this question in mind, because *the future* has become the maybe most important but also inflationary slogan in climate politics. In climate communication, for instance, the idea of alternative, non-catastrophic, positive images is often promoted as a strategic tool for change.⁵ On the one hand, it is plausible that the need to imagine a liveable, post-climate crisis future has gained political, epistemic, and emotional relevance in societies increasingly shaken by disastrous events and apocalyptical scenarios, yet still paralysed by subjective perception barriers, systemic slowness and fossil fuel lobby influence. On the other hand, claiming the future always adheres to certain ideologies. The challenge is thus to explore depictions of the future not only from an instrumental perspective on how they affect the viewers, but also from a critical-political perspective on which interests they serve and whose viewpoints they emphasise.

In this paper, I will argue for such a critical-political perspective on viral climate future images that is shaped by both, the critical tradition of utopian thinking and

¹ I sincerely thank Catalin Brylla for his linguistic proofreading and the editors for their valuable comments!

² The slogan is commonly attributed to the Zapatista movement in Mexico. The term Global Justice Movement refers to transnational protest networks against capitalist globalisation, with the so-called ‘Battle of Seattle’ in the course of the WTO summit 1999 being one of its most prominent events. For the history of the Global Justice Movement cf. Della Porta et al. 2015.

³ The slogan has to be viewed in the context of a public debate around structural homogeneity in the German Fridays for Future movement. In July 2020, the Bangladeshi activist had publicly criticised the movement for its racist biases and caused an internal reflection process; cf. Noshwin 2020, Heinrich 2020. At the same time, the slogan is remarkably broader, more radical, and more in the tradition of climate justice than Fridays for Future’s earlier framing strategies; cf. Haunss/Sommer 2020: 237–52.

⁴ Cf. *#AlleFür1Komma5 Livestream* | *Fridays for Future*: 1:05:55.

⁵ Cf. Carlson et al. 2020.

the global fights towards transnational, intergenerational, redistributive, and other forms of climate justice. Connecting theory from climate justice communication and from Chiara Bottici's concept of the political imaginal,⁶ I will outline an approach that I propose to call *imaginal climate justice*. It will be applied to three climate political web videos: *IMAGINE THE FUTURE with Xiye Bastida* (2020), *How to Save Our Planet* (2019) and *A Message From The Future With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez* (2019). I will show how all three videos use images of a post-climate crisis future to convince their viewers that these futures are possible, already close, and quasi-inevitable. My main argument will thus be that the three videos use audio-visual images of a post-climate crisis future as parts of the same communicational strategy – the *affective rhetoric of visible futures* – which may serve as a concept to be elaborated on, as well as a starting point for further discussions about how to communicate climate change in ways that are effective, engaging and just.

2. Theoretical context

In a conversation with Ernst Bloch in 1965, Theodor Adorno discussed the problem of fully “colouring” [dt. “auspinseln”] utopia. Instead of promising an absolute, yet empty future, Adorno located utopian thinking in the determinate negation of the wrong present.⁷ What has often been received as “image ban”⁸ is still an important reference point for emancipatory actors in thinking about the role that images play in imagining societal futures. In light of the persistent hegemony of capitalist realism,⁹ for instance – represented by the infamous dictum that “there is no alternative”¹⁰ to austerity, privatisation, and inequality – more and more voices on the Left have explicitly been calling for utopian images of the future in order to promote and accomplish alternative societies. To quote the writer Bini Adamczak:

Instead of making excuses about the non-depictability of utopia, the Left is facing the challenge of stating how its images of the future differ from the well-known images of the past.¹¹

A complementary challenge, however, concerns the critique of viral future images in current climate discourses: How do emancipatory images of climate futures differ from those of the industry and the preservers of the destructive status quo? What are the power and risks of displaying climate futures in contemporary media ecologies? How can images of wrong futures be criticised from a climate justice perspective? And why should it be done?

⁶ Cf. Bottici 2014.

⁷ Cf. Adorno/Bloch: *Möglichkeiten der Utopie heute* (8th January 2018): 29:40–52:36.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of the different philosophical dimensions of Adorno's image ban cf. Truskolaski 2021.

⁹ Cf. Fisher 2009.

¹⁰ The quote was frequently used by the former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher to legitimise her policies. Under the acronym TINA, it has often been discussed as a core feature of neoliberal ideology; cf. Queiroz 2018: 227–246.

¹¹ Adamczak 2018: 25.

2.1. Climate images

Climate and its human-caused changes, as well as its social consequences and future developments, are not directly or fully perceivable for the human mind. Although disastrous phenomena, like forest fires, heat waves, floods, and melting glaciers, have led to an increased awareness of its impacts, it's not long ago that the climate crisis has been described as a "catastrophe without event"¹² as well as a "hyper object"¹³ that radically exceeds human imagination. Others have highlighted climate change's inherent psychological barriers like "distance, doom, dissonance, denial, and identity"¹⁴, thus arguing for specifically targeted, value-based communication of climate change, its consequences, and adaptation or mitigation measures. In general, communicating *positively* about climate change is often promoted and discussed as a strategy to counter the dominance of apocalyptic scenarios.¹⁵

Taken together with the relevance and power of visualisations in communicating climate change,¹⁶ perspectives like these suggest the importance of appealing and carefully crafted images in order to communicate climate change, as well as the significance of transformative solutions provided to different target groups and broader publics. After decades of climate change-related image production, however, the problem seems to be the quality of existing images, rather than their general lack. Climate images (especially climate future images) are everywhere and hard to miss: in science, in social movements, in the news, in popular culture and in advertising. And not only do they often resemble each other across very different actors with very different interests to the degree of being exchangeable.¹⁷ Climate images also often illustrate what communication scholar Lance Bennett has criticised as fragmentation of climate political communication, i.e. the tendency to focus on specific symptoms and solutions instead of addressing systemic roots.¹⁸

¹² Cf. Horn 2018: 55.

¹³ Cf. Morton 2013: 1.

¹⁴ Stoknes 2015: 83.

¹⁵ Cf. O'Neill/Nicholson-Cole 2009, Marshall 2015.

¹⁶ Cf. Schneider/Nocke 2014.

¹⁷ Figure 1, for instance, shows that recurring motifs such as windmills, people looking towards the horizon, and children in front of the sea are used both from fossil energy companies like RWE or Vattenfall and in activist videos like *IMAGINE THE FUTURE with Xiye Bastida* or *Strong Winds* by the Pacific Climate Warriors. In all videos, these images illustrate reflections on different climate futures. In light of this exchangeability, some have argued for a diversification of climate image production. Media ecologist Birgit Schneider, for instance, argues that, to move from knowing about climate change to acting, we need a) more images, that move beyond science and advertising, b) fewer images (i.e. less stereotypical depictions of global, falsely-equalising, big-picture stories), and c) other images by other actors; cf. Schneider 2018: 391–393.

¹⁸ Cf. Bennett 2020: 66–69.

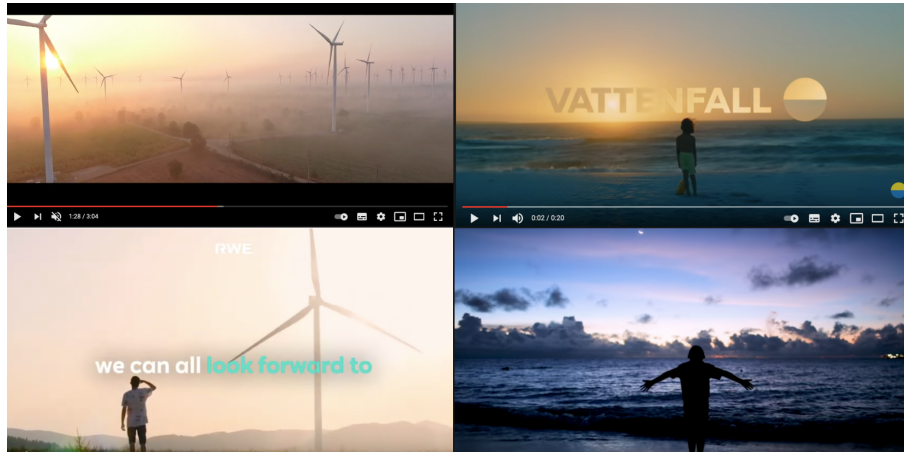


Figure 1: Screenshots from four different climate web videos: *IMAGINE THE FUTURE* with Xiye Bastida: 01:28; Hybrit – *Für ein fossilfreies Leben innerhalb einer Generation*: 00:02; RWE – *Rising Star* (long version): 00:13; *Matagi Mālohi: Strong Winds*: 02:21

2.2. The (climate) political imaginal

A critical approach to climate imagery must thus be concerned with the abundance of climate future images in general and with the notion of positivity in particular: How can it be that different climate images by different actors with different interests and policies resemble each other? And how can we criticise positive climate stories not only from an instrumental perspective (e.g. because they “may carry social cues that may repel others”¹⁹), but also from an ethical-political one?

A framework to develop such a perspective on climate future images is offered by the *political imaginal* as conceptualised by critical theorist Chiara Bottici. Bottici starts from the assumption that there is “a link between the indiscriminate proliferation of images and the crisis of political imagination understood as the radical capacity to start something new”²⁰. She describes the political imaginal as something that mediates between the individual capacity to imagine and theories of the social imaginary – social contexts that fundamentally shape and determine the individual – in the tradition of Cornelius Castoriadis. The political imaginal attempts to offer a middle path between those poles – individual freedom and social determination – by focusing on “that which is made of images and can therefore be the product both of an individual faculty and of the social context as well as of a complex interaction between the two”²¹.

In this concept, images are not meant to be understood as representations of something absent (be it real or unreal), but as “representations that are presences in themselves, independently of their being real or unreal, mental or extramental”²². This means that climate future images can be both, thought of as being influenced by dominant narratives and imaginaries, as well as equipped with the power to

¹⁹ Marshall 2015: 530.

²⁰ Bottici 2014: 3.

²¹ Ibid.: 5.

²² Bottici 2014: 58.

shape and change these ways a society thinks and acts about certain issues. Especially audio-visual images may do so by addressing their recipients emotionally on different levels as, for instance, the work of Jens Eder has shown.²³ Thus, by analysing how the future is depicted in climate communication media, we can better understand dominant social imaginaries as well as the strategic use of images in order to mobilise audiences for political action.

2.3. Imaginal climate justice and the affective rhetoric of visible futures

Analysing these images from a climate justice perspective, however, adds another dimension to the discussion. To quote media and communication scholars Anna Roosvall and Matthew Tegelberg:

Viewing climate change as an issue of justice means perceiving it as an issue of human rights, global equality, ethics, democratic accountability, possibilities of participation and historical responsibility [...]. Hence, climate justice communication is, by definition, more focused on humans than general climate change communication needs to be.²⁴

The global struggles for transnational, intergenerational and redistributive climate justice constitute a prism of interconnected fights, rather than a singular, coherent movement.²⁵ Communication researchers have therefore argued for pluralist understandings of climate justice respectively for analytical perspectives that include different levels and scales of climate justice.²⁶ Accordingly, to apply a climate justice perspective to the analysis of climate future images means confronting the depicted imaginal with several critical questions such as: Which future society is depicted? How does it relate to the (video's) overall framing? Under which conditions is it produced and distributed? Which relation does it establish with its recipients? What does the depicted future hide or disregard?

As I will show in the following analysis, current cases of political climate communication often use spectacular and realistic images of *visible societal futures*. I will argue

²³ Drawing from Eder 2018, we can call the specific constellation of a video's cues that are used to elicit viewers' affective responses a video's affective structure. By interacting "with the viewers' affective dispositions, the bodily and mental structures that make them react in typical ways to certain kinds of stimuli" (ibid.: 191), these structures evoke diverging affects on four interconnected levels: (1) forms (i.e. the "mostly preconscious perception of audiovisual signs (forms, colors, sounds or patterns, rhythms, movements) [that] triggers perceptual affects and moods even before any objects are recognized" (ibid.: 194)), (2) represented worlds (i.e. emotions that emerge when "viewers re-create a film's represented world by developing mental models of spaces, characters and events" (ibid.)), (3) meanings (i.e. 'thematic emotions related to the viewers' own worldviews' (ibid.)), (4) reflections (i.e. emotions regarding viewers' "own current communicative context when watching a film or video" (ibid.: 195)). Especially activist web videos rely on typical forms and strategies like witnessing, storytelling, reasoning, and symbolising to address their viewers' emotions, convey their message, and initiate affective dynamics of viral distribution or memefication; cf. Eder et al. 2020: 77–81.

²⁴ Roosvall/Tegelberg 2020a: 291.

²⁵ For the history and development of the climate justice movement cf. Newell et al. 2020, Schlosberg/Collins 2014.

²⁶ Cf. Yagodin 2020, respectively Roosvall/Tegelberg 2020b.

that these images of visible futures are part of an *affective rhetoric*. They are used to convince their viewers affectively that the depicted versions of the future are not only possible but utterly desirable, already close, and quasi-inevitable. Although the depicted futures are often quite similar, they are mostly used to support very different strategies of framing the climate crisis diagnostically (what is the problem?), prognostically (what can be done?), and motivationally (why should it be done?), as described by Robert Benford and David Snow.²⁷

From a critical and climate justice communication perspective, however, such a strategic way of referencing the future positively is fundamentally problematic, as long as it links to unjust policies. Images that suggest a better world, but only use them to promote strategies that foster injustices, need to be criticised: How does the promoted future look? How far or close is it? How do we get there? What or who is left behind? Does it actually differ from the present? Who and whose fights are shown, and whose are not? Who produces these images, whose images are appropriated? What is turned into kitsch or made invisible by making the future visible?

3. Case analyses

3.1. IMAGINE THE FUTURE with Xiye Bastida

“Anything we ever achieved started with someone imagining it first”²⁸, Xiye Bastida, a 19-years old Mexican-Chilean, indigenous climate activist and leading figure of the US American Fridays for Future movement, looks and speaks directly into the camera. Positioned in the middle of the picture, presented against a dark background, Bastida starts reciting a monologue that is at the core of a three-minute long web video called *IMAGINE THE FUTURE with Xiye Bastida*, produced and distributed by the international campaign Mission 2020.²⁹

The video’s concept is to invite its viewers to participate in a thought experiment and to imagine what a sustainable, post-climate crisis society will look like. Throughout the video, imagining the future is not only supposed to inspire viewers to pursue ways out of the climate crisis, but also to consider potential political conditions for change. Over a tense, yet soft, harp melody, accompanied by images of historic innovations, like the lightbulb, a DNA string, and the landing on the moon, Bastida emphatically argues:

If we can’t imagine a way out of the climate crisis, it just can’t happen. We know that the crisis is getting worse every day. And many of us are losing hope for the

²⁷ Cf. Benford/Snow 2000.

²⁸ *IMAGINE THE FUTURE with Xiye Bastida*: 00:00–00:06.

²⁹ Mission 2020 describes itself as a “a collaborative campaign to raise ambition and action across key sectors to bend the greenhouse-gas emissions curve downwards by 2020” (Figueres et al. 2017: 595), founded on the day after the Paris Agreement 2015 was announced. The campaign was endorsed by several international climate scientists, activists, and NGOs.

future. But despair is not an option. We must rise up and meet the greatest challenge of our life with stubborn optimism. And imagining is the first step. So, are you ready to imagine?³⁰



Figure 2: Screenshot from *IMAGINE THE FUTURE with Xiye Bastida*: 00:46

Throughout the rest of the video, imagining is equalled with seeing, which means that strong and realistic images of the future are presented: eco-friendly cities (as shown in figure 2), rewilded forests, solar panels and windmills, a high-speed train that is running through a green landscape, agriculture and blooming coral reefs. At some points the video uses digital visual effects to let this green future emerge from the present. Trees are growing in fast-motion on deserted areas, full streets fade to car-free zones, and abandoned parking lots turn into urban food farms. We see rapidly spreading nodes and edges of a renewable energy system that “lights every home, every clinic, every school”³¹, all projected on footage of a suburban city from above.

All of these images are put in context and emphatically narrated by Bastida’s voice-over, starting with the “biggest tree planting campaign in history”³², moving on to food grown on rooftops and in car parks “which by the way we don’t need anymore”³³, free and electric public electric transport, and ending with actions like restoring sea-life, using oceans as “limitless sources of protein-rich food”³⁴ in the ocean, and increasing cities’ resilience against rising sea levels. These images and Bastida’s narration are accompanied by a hopeful and peaceful, yet propulsive piano melody evolving from the more tense opening music. In addition, Bastida repeatedly asks the viewer to imagine the presented future as vividly as possible: “Are you picturing it? Really picturing it?”³⁵

³⁰ *IMAGINE THE FUTURE with Xiye Bastida* (2nd March 2020): 00:07–00:32.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 01:16–01:21.

³² *Ibid.*: 00:35–00:38.

³³ *Ibid.*: 00:56–00:58.

³⁴ *Ibid.*: 02:16–02:19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*: 01:34–01:37.

Nevertheless, in some sequences, the video plays on the absence of explicit visuals, instead addressing other human senses, like hearing and smell. This concept of displaying the future as visible and palpable, finds its parallel in the presented notion of what needs to be done. Everything displayed is *already there* as a possibility and *only needs to be realised*. At the end of the two-minute utopian run-through, Bastida tells the video's viewers that "these things we're imagining, they're all possible now. Just with technology that's available today"³⁶.

Accompanied by portrait images of young and older people and video-recorded climate protests, Bastida calls upon the viewers: "We are the last generation that can prevent catastrophic, runaway climate change."³⁷ In a final, media-reflexive call to action, she asks the viewers to "share this video – and help those around you have the courage to imagine it too"³⁸. On the one hand, humans are thus represented as agents of change. On the other hand, however, the only presented strategies are of technical nature. Especially in connection to the affective rhetoric of visible futures, the video is thus a good example of what communication scholar Lance Bennett has criticised as "magical thinking"³⁹. It remains tied to the neoliberal imaginary of techno-fixing the climate crisis, of treating and solving it as a fragmented issue, but offers no perspective on an economic or social transformation. It also stays within national boundaries. Apart from a short scene that evokes associations of a Third World school⁴⁰, the future seems to almost exclusively take place in US-American cities and suburbs. Other facets, such as the production conditions of green energy technology in the Global South, are not mentioned. The video thus involuntarily shows that the symbolic representation of people and areas most affected by climate change – here in the person of Xiye Bastida – is not equivalent to climate justice.

3.2. How to Save Our Planet

On 5th April 2019, the international, Swiss-based NGO World Wide Fund For Nature (WWF) released the web video *How to Save Our Planet*.⁴¹ With its elaborate style and, as of today, almost 2 million views, more than 6.000 comments, and over 100.000 likes, the video is a good example for wide-coverage NGO climate communication on the social web. The video's success may also be related to the narrator being none other than David Attenborough, one of the most popular documentary broadcasters, a long-time environmental activist and, according to YouGov, the „most admired male person“⁴² in the UK. The video was published at the same time and with explicit connection to the Netflix release of Attenborough's documentary *Our Planet*.

³⁶ Ibid.: 02:28–02:34.

³⁷ Ibid.: 02:34–02:41.

³⁸ Ibid.: 02:54–02:59.

³⁹ Bennett 2020: 27.

⁴⁰ *IMAGINE THE FUTURE with Xiye Bastida*: 01:20–01:21.

⁴¹ The WWF is a Swiss organisation that was founded under the name World Wildlife Fund in 1961. It is one of the largest and most prominent environmental NGOs in the world. The WWF has, however, history of questionable cooperation with lobbying and conservative actors; cf. Bennett 2020: 72–73.

⁴² YouGov (23rd September 2020).

Like *IMAGINE THE FUTURE*, the video uses strong, affective strategies to audio-visually depict a world after the climate crisis (as shown in Figure 3) and, especially, possible ways to get there. The chosen framing, however, is equally simple as problematic. In the 8,5-minutes-long video, David Attenborough, who is only present through his well-known voice, attempts to answer the self-imposed question: “How do we create a future in which both people and nature can thrive?”⁴³ After presenting humankind as the main cause for environmental destruction and climate change, *peak human*, a point where the worldwide population may “finally stop growing”⁴⁴, is presented as a turning-point, a chance to restore balance between humans and nature.



Figure 3: Screenshot from *How to Save our Planet*: 07:34

While there is no doubt about humankind’s responsibility for the climate crisis, the way the video presents this analysis is misleading: both diagnostically and prognostically, humankind is framed as inherently harmful, as a factor that needs to be controlled and managed to restore environmental balance and to establish a post-climate crisis society. Narrative-wise, humankind’s development from hunters and gatherers to today’s globalised world is narrated as a quasi-linear, necessarily harmful process to the environment: after having lived „in balance with nature“⁴⁵ centuries ago, humans had to develop strategies to gain sovereignty over nature in order to survive. According to Attenborough, the historic moment in which “we” as humankind began to use „our unique minds“⁴⁶ was the beginning of a historic shift towards humankind’s formative impact and dominance over the planet: “Welcome to the Anthropocene! [...] We now determine nature’s survival.”⁴⁷

In the video, this historic shift is introduced by a musical break: whereas the opening sequences are accompanied by a mixture of orchestral music and nature sounds, the shift into the Anthropocene is accompanied by tense electronic beats. From there on,

⁴³ *How to Save Our Planet* (5th April 2019): 00:05–00:10.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*: 04:55–04:56.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*: 00:49–00:50.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*: 01:07–01:08.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*: 01:40–01:53.

a direct line is drawn to developments like a growing world population, mass consumption, the unsustainable use of resources, environmental destruction and the climate crisis. Although corresponding images like industrial chimneys, garbage dumps, and factory farming are shown, the video does shy away from explicitly connecting environmental destruction to capitalism. Instead, by teleologically displaying human development as an unavoidable shift into the harmful Anthropocene, humankind itself is displayed as the problem, while systemic factors (as they are, for instance, reflected in the alternative concept of the *Capitalocene*⁴⁸) are left out.

This misanthropic impression is further supported and specified by the political strategies presented. The video's narration predominantly blames poor, less-educated, and procreating people for harming nature by being responsible for so-called *overpopulation*⁴⁹. The systemic roots of inequality, poverty and hunger, in contrast, are not addressed. It is further remarkable that almost the whole video does not actually show human beings. Apart from a few exceptions, the video relies on a spectacular, environmental documentary style with awe-inspiring wide shots of landscapes and close-ups of detailed animals. Even in the depicted green-utopian future, in which humankind and nature are supposed to co-exist peacefully, the focus lies on images of nature, while humankind is mostly represented through infrastructural elements. Furthermore, although Attenborough speaks of "several billion" people, "living long healthy lives on a stable planet"⁵⁰, the impression remains that the depicted future is first and foremost a tidier version of the present, implicitly suggesting that people of colour live separately in a dark, foggy, and crowded place and being on the move, whilst white people are enjoying a bright day in the café or the park.⁵¹

While peak human is thus presented as a potential condition for change, the actual strategy, as Attenborough tells the viewer, "is remarkably simple"⁵². The four key areas that are laid out by him (energy, food production, ocean management, rewilding) are not presented as effortful actions, but more as magical, invisible hand-type processes. Thus, while Attenborough's closing words may be read as the attempt to reframe human impact ("do something we humans are very good at: change the world"⁵³) there's no representation of human agency that would inspire people to actually build the depicted future. Instead, *How to Save Our Planet* remains tied to social imaginaries that are shaped by instrumental reason (and thereby paradoxically contradict the aim of establishing a new relationship with nature). It

⁴⁸ The *Capitalocene* concept is commonly attributed to the ecologist Andreas Malm, the sociologist Jason Moore, and the historian Donna Haraway who discussed and developed it partly separated from each other, partly together. The Capitalocene serves as a counter concept to the Anthropocene insofar as it attributes the destruction usually linked with the latter not to humanity itself, but to a specific pattern of using nature as a capitalist means of production; cf. Moore 2016.

⁴⁹ The myth of overpopulation in the tradition of Thomas Malthus has been repeatedly denounced as fostering eco-fascist ideas; cf. König 2021: 95–100 – an accusation that has also been made against David Attenborough's films; cf. Marshall 2020.

⁵⁰ *How to Save Our Planet*: 07:18–07:24.

⁵¹ See the short sequence from 07:18–07:21.

⁵² Ibid.: 05:28–05:29.

⁵³ Ibid.: 07:59–08:05.

also maintains a traditional nature/culture dualism that has frequently been deconstructed in ecological thinking.⁵⁴

3.3. A Message From The Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

On 5th December 2018, the US American investigative portal The Intercept published a web video that soon attracted wide-spread attention: *A Message From The Future*, written and spoken by Democratic congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and illustrated by the artist Molly Crabapple. The video has been promoted as a best-practice example for the collaboration between activism and arts.⁵⁵

On the one hand, *A Message From The Future* works similarly to the video with Xiye Bastida. The motif of envisioning the future is introduced as a potential condition for actually achieving it. On the other hand, it connects the motif of achieving the future through imagining it first with the importance of diversity in political representation. This comes along with a general emphasis on making change happen through established political processes and institutions like parties and elections.

However, while the other case studies relied on awe-inspiring images, music and rhetoric, *A Message From The Future* tells its story through sketched illustrations, rather than real-life images, yet it maintains a post-crisis composure. Narrative-wise, the presented future is something that has already been achieved, leaving the present's multiple crises behind. Throughout the 7,5 minutes of the video, Ocasio-Cortez, situated in the imaginary future, tells the viewer how we got there through a series of significant events and decisive developments. Starting with James Black, a scientist who in 1977 warned his employer, the oil company Exxon Mobile, against the dangers of human-made climate change, the video takes its viewer through decades of denial, cover-up, and damage by the fossil-fuel industry and complicit politicians. Then, after mass extinctions, a disastrous hurricane in Puerto Rico and final warnings from science, crucial change was made between the years 2018 and 2028. Starting with the Democratic Party winning back the US House of Representatives in 2018 (with AOC being elected), the "most diverse congress in history"⁵⁶, and the White House in 2020, the *Green New Deal* was implemented, transforming all areas of society and finally raising a new generation of young politicians who succeeded AOC in running for office.

What is remarkable in comparison to the other two examples, is that the video's detailed clarity in diagnostic and prognostic framing – "The only way to do it was to transform our economy, which we already knew was broken, since the vast majority of wealth was going to just a small handful of people and most folks were falling further and further behind"⁵⁷ – comes along with rather sketchy images. The challenge of displaying the future is met with a handmade artistic approach, water colour paintings and paper cut collages. Every narrative step is represented through a newly painted image, with only the artist's hands being visible, presented in fast

⁵⁴ For the history, impact and deconstruction of the nature/culture dualism cf. Glacken 1967, Hulme 2017, Koschorke 2009: 9–25, Latour 2017.

⁵⁵ Cf. Klein 2019: 307–315.

⁵⁶ *A Message From The Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez* (17th April 2019): 00:15–00:17.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 03:28–03:43.

motion, accompanied by a calm, playful and futuristic music, as well as sound effects, like a thunderstorm, a ticking clock and the paintbrush on paper. This marks a significant contrast to the overwhelming images of the other videos discussed in this paper. The only visual representation of the future is depicted for some seconds at the end: a wild-blooming park with people playing and making music and a train from which AOC is telling her story (shown in figure 4). The *affective rhetoric of visible futures* is here used in an obviously handmade and artistic way which makes the depicted future appear more original, but also less mandatory.



Figure 4: Screenshot from *A Message From The Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*: 07:15

Another difference is that in all images of the “Decade of the Green New Deal”⁵⁸, humans are shown as the driving force, respectively the centre of efforts. Taken together, this illustrated mixture of diverse and hands-on representations of human agency corresponds with the video’s motivational framing: the whole story is streaked with cues addressing action-related affects, including fear, courage, national solidarity, and historical patriotism. Looking back, AOC tells the viewer,

we knew that we had to save the planet and that we had all the technology to do it. But people were scared. [...] I think that’s because they just couldn’t picture it yet.⁵⁹

Invoking historical events like the New Deal era of the 1930’s, the 9/11 terrorist attacks whose number of casualties is compared to 2017’s “climate bomb”⁶⁰ in Puerto Rico, the video tries to give its viewers a sense of the efforts and sacrifices required to achieve the green future. From the future perspective, however, AOC tells the viewer that all these efforts were worth it, explicitly linking affective change with achieving the future through imagining it: “We stopped being so scared of the future. [...] The first big step was just closing our eyes and imagining it. We can be whatever we have the courage to see.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ibid.: 04:14–04:16.

⁵⁹ Ibid.: 00:38–00:53.

⁶⁰ Ibid.: 02:52–02:54.

⁶¹ Ibid.: 06:33–07:14.

Despite the video's activist attitude, however, the imagined future remains shaped by party politics within a national context. In the spirit of climate justice, this is not completely problematic, as there are, for instance, also ways to apply the climate justice communication framework intra-nationally. Still, it marks a decision to leave out the stories of other parts of the world that may not live in the green utopian future.

4. Conclusion

All three analysed videos use a strategy that I propose to call the *affective rhetoric of visible futures*. This means that they use audio-visual images of the future to promote different ways out of the climate crisis. The societies depicted are green, sustainable, tidy and prosperous. By displaying them as close, possible, or already there, the videos make them appear not only as desirable but furthermore as logical and necessary outcomes of the strategies presented. The videos' overarching message to Global Northern audiences is that everything will be alright, and that the future will be a better one – of course, only if the respective political programme will be pursued. To be precise, this is (in contrast to apocalyptic visions of climate futures) an affective rhetoric of visible positive futures.

I pointed towards this strategy to argue for the necessity of a critical-political perspective on virulent imaginal climate futures. As especially the WWF video shows, positive images of the future are not necessarily just. Instead, they often promote political strategies that are discriminatory, fragmented or otherwise misleading. The increasingly widespread idea of communicating positively about climate change, all too often leaves out aspects of justice or only applies them to certain isolated contexts. This does not mean that positive climate futures must not be depicted. Without pointing toward the possibility of abolishing poverty and inequality, without analysing power and ruling structures, utopian vision is meaningless.⁶²

Imaginal climate justice as an analytical perspective therefore criticises these positive images out of a sense of responsibility. As Roosvall and Tegelberg put it,

responsibility for climate justice must extend far, especially given how media and communication connect us socially across the world. Consequently, media and communication scholars must pay heed to this social extension of responsibility, which includes the responsibility of media when it comes to communicating climate justice.⁶³

This responsibility not only concerns the question if climate change is communicated effectively, but even more *how* it is depicted, and which emotions are addressed and elicited in order to promote political solutions. Climate change affects and emotions differ between Global South and Global North, particularly concerning their mobilisation potential.⁶⁴ In this regard, imaginal climate justice does not

⁶² Cf. Adorno / Bloch: *Möglichkeiten der Utopie heute* (8th January 2018): 37:20–41:01, Blakeley 2021: 349.

⁶³ Roosvall/Tegelberg 2020: 291.

⁶⁴ Cf. Kleres/Wettergren 2017: 507–519.

primarily evaluate political outcomes, but first and foremost the question of which perceptions are included in circulating climate images.

Imaginal climate justice thus finally also highlights the necessity of thinking about practices and conditions of climate image production, distribution, and reception. In fact, there are alternative images which all of us are asked to pay attention to. In the context of the recent Global Climate Strikes, for instance, thousands of images from all over the world have been shared on the social web, representing the climate crisis' as well as the climate justice movement's transnational character. This "biodiversity of stories"⁶⁵ most vehemently points out, right before our Global Northern eyes, that capitalism-induced climate change is the disastrous present for many, and that another world may be depictable, but that it is first and foremost important to amplify the voices of those who are fighting to survive in this one.

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Figures

- Figure 1: Screenshots from four different climate web videos: *Imagine The Future with Xiye Bastida*: 01:28; *Hybrit – Für ein fossilfreies Leben innerhalb einer Generation*: 00:02; *RWE – Rising Star (long version)*: 00:13; *Matagi Mālohi : Strong Winds*: 02:21.
- Figure 2: Screenshot from *Imagine The Future with Xiye Bastida*: 00:46.
- Figure 3: Screenshot from *How to Save our Planet*: 07:34.
- Figure 4: Screenshot from *A Message From The Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*: 07:15.