

# Stories Told to Hide the Truth

## Climate Disinformation, Animal Behaviour and the Nature of Narratives

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In her recent article *Overcoming Climate Breakdown Denial and Neglect through the Aesthetics of Nature* (2023), philosopher Marta Tafalla argues for the possibility that one can learn about global climate change (GCC) if one listens to animals and stories nature itself tells us. Contrary to Tafalla, I argue that her suggestion is overly optimistic. In my paper, I first demonstrate that Tafalla assumes the link between cause and consequence always corresponds to findings in environmental science, and that this assumption is unfounded. Second, I examine the strategies and narratives employed by anti-environmentalists and demonstrate that they utilise the same narrative structures as Tafalla when telling animal stories. Accordingly, I claim that one can learn about GCC from animals' stories if and only if one already acknowledges it. | *Keywords: Marta Tafalla, Narrative Structures, Global Climate Crisis, Environmental Aesthetics, Animal Stories*

### 1. Introduction

In view of the ongoing global climate crisis, ecosystem collapses, and the technological boom, including the expansion of Artificial Intelligence, scholars' interest in reconsidering what it means to be a human in the Anthropocene has been growing. There are visible trends in the humanities and social sciences that criticise the core principles of humanism, namely the superiority of humans over nonhumans and the essential specificity of human beings, as well as their unique or privileged position in the world. More and more scholars argue that humans are part of nature, and there is no reason to put them on a pedestal. Exploring the limits of humanism becomes even more critical in the context of technology. In 2013, Rosi Braidotti published her influential book, *The Posthuman*, laying the solid foundations for what would come to be known as posthumanism (Braidotti, 2013). Similarly, the philosopher Vinciane Despret systematically argued for abandoning human exceptionalism in favour of focusing on animals.

In her *Autobiographie d'un poulpe* (Autobiography of an Octopus), she adopts the point of view of this cephalopod while experimenting with the forms of academic and fiction writing (Despret, 2021).

There are, however, less radical attempts to abandon the anthropocentric perspective, or at least, to renounce the idea that humans should dominate nature. In 2023, Marta Tafalla published an article titled *Overcoming Climate Breakdown Denial and Neglect through the Aesthetics of Nature* (Tafalla, 2023), linking an ongoing climate crisis with aesthetics and one of its traditionally most significant topics, nature. Generally speaking, Tafalla is interested in how aesthetics, as a philosophical discipline and, in particular, the aesthetics of nature, can contribute to solving – or at least slowing down – climate change, which I believe is vital given the urgency of the matter. In my view, any scientific discipline, including the social sciences and humanities, should reconsider its role in relation to the global climate crisis (GCC). In this respect, I follow the call of scholars such as Jukka Mikkonen and Sanna Lehtinen, who urge aestheticians to reflect on GCC and environmental protection (see Mikkonen (2022), Mikkonen and Lehtinen (2022)). Tafalla's goal is, however, more ambitious: as the title of the paper suggests, she aims to show that aesthetics of nature can serve as a counterweight to voices denying and neglecting GCC, specifically, she argues that to become aware of GCC, one should abandon the traditional superficial view of nature, replace it with a profound aesthetic sensitivity based on less anthropocentric understanding of the nature. To do so, we should listen to the stories and narratives told by nature, particularly by animals.

Although I wish Tafalla were right and that the aesthetics of nature could persuade GCC deniers to change their minds, I am unfortunately quite sceptical of this possibility. In this paper, I focus on several shortcomings of Tafalla's study.<sup>1</sup> First, I reconstruct Tafalla's position regarding GCC, the aesthetics of nature, and her emphasis on a direct observation of animals and their experience. Second, I focus on Tafalla's understanding of narratives and stories and demonstrate that her account is insufficient to distinguish narratives informed by the natural sciences and ecology from counternarratives disseminated by climate sceptics. I argue that both of these kinds of narratives have the same structure, and that it is necessary to add some condition or criterion upon which it would be possible to tell them apart.

<sup>1</sup> It might be surprising that only a limited number of scholars in environmental aesthetics address GCC. Jukka Mikkonen, for instance, provocatively claims that "Environmental aesthetics within the analytic tradition is ironically one of the last places on Earth which human-induced global climate change has not yet significantly affected" (Mikkonen, 2022, pp. 1-2). Thus, given the state of the debate, Tafalla's article is pioneering in that it poses important questions and sheds light on GCC. For this reason, I believe Tafalla's article is worth attention despite its shortcomings.

## 2. GCC Denial and Superficial Aesthetics

Tafalla's paper is motivated by two central questions:

- 1) Why are people denying and neglecting climate breakdown?  
and  
2) How could we raise awareness of it?

For Tafalla, both questions are philosophical and should thus be answered through reflection, aided by selected philosophical notions and theories. The pronoun 'it' in the second question is ambiguous, as it can refer to GCC itself or to the denial of GCC. In the broader context of the article and as the argumentation unpacks, it appears clear that Tafalla has in mind the first option, that is, that we should raise awareness about GCC, however, I believe the second reading is essential too, and as I show later, the thoroughgoing assessment of GCC denial and its impact is missing in Tafalla's thoughts and it also weakens her arguments.

Tafalla is careful not to explicitly state that there is a connection between the two questions, for example, an overlap or continuity. To raise awareness of GCC, it is not necessary to understand why people deny this phenomenon, although it might be helpful; similarly, it is perfectly plausible to research GCC denial without considering how to raise awareness of global warming. In Tafalla's account, the two questions intersect in terms of the answers: people are denying GCC because they are trapped in superficial conception of nature that goes hand in hand with banal view of beauty; and it is essential to abandon and replace this superficial and old-fashioned approach with a deep aesthetics of nature that "could help foster our connections with environments and species and consequently promote a more adequate response to climate breakdown" (Tafalla, 2023).

Tafalla's understanding of the superficial conception of nature stems from two 20th-century philosophical currents: Critical Theory and environmental philosophy, especially Anglo-American environmental philosophy and aesthetics. To be more precise, Tafalla is inspired by criticisms of the dominant view of nature in 19th-century philosophy, penned by authors from these two currents. First, following Theodor W. Adorno's thoughts on human domination, Tafalla focuses on the systematic repression of the natural environment, a theme that can be found in 19th-century philosophy from Schelling onward, as well as in our everyday actions and treatment of natural phenomena as tools and resources. Tafalla's interpretation of Adorno is necessarily simplified, as it is challenging to present his complex views within the limited space. Instead, she argues that the idea of human superiority over nonhuman beings is still discernible in real life, and the harmful consequences of this mindset are becoming increasingly apparent, especially regarding GCC. Although Tafalla does not use the term posthumanism and does not explicitly adhere to this philosophical position, her criticism of human dominion over nature could be recast as a critique of humanism and its core principle, anthropocentrism.

Tafalla points out that the dominion-based mindset shapes our view of natural beauty, namely, our aesthetic engagement with natural environments and other natural phenomena. Following Adorno's criticism of tourism from *Aesthetic Theory*, which deforms the very essence of aesthetic experience, Tafalla considers not only over-tourism typical for our times, but also social media, particularly Instagram, which accelerates the consumerism approach to nature and encourages and forces us to reduce nature to an object of a good picture. This behaviour is a form of exploitation comparable to mining or deforestation, as it does not respect nature and reinforces the recently sketched narrative of human domination (Tafalla, 2023).

The deeply rooted conviction that humans are superior to every other species and that nature should serve their, that is, our, needs is responsible for our superficial view of nature, including its shallow aesthetics. For distinguishing superficial aesthetics of nature from deep aesthetics of the very same phenomenon, Tafalla adheres to environmental aesthetics, chiefly to the writings of architects of the discipline, Ronald Hepburn, Allen Carlson, and Arnold Berleant. Tafalla appreciates Hepburn's pioneering role in rehabilitating the aesthetics of nature as a distinctive and independent research field (Hepburn, 1966). For Tafalla, shallow appreciation "tends to reduce nature to an image that has a merely decorative function on the stage where people represent their lives. It gives the impression that nature is passive, like a decorative curtain, something that could easily be replaced by an artificial setting." (Tafalla, 2023) This characteristic echoes Allen Carlson's (1979) view of the landscape model of aesthetic appreciation of an environment that reduces the environment to a landscape in the sense of a painting or scenery.

Tafalla, however, takes a further step and reflects on the actual replacement of the natural environment by artificial settings, as well as the role of social media and picture culture in dominating our society. Tafalla warns against consuming or overexposing oneself to any media, including photos, pictures, and videos, especially those of wild animals. Although they can have educational value and serve as a relevant source of information about the way of life of a particular species, they also hurt our relationship to nature, specifically the nature surrounding us. Instead of caring about our neighbourhood, forests, lakes, rivers, and the animals living in our area, we have built a strong bond with koala bears because they appear on our mobile phone screens in our pockets. In other words, being exposed to videos of wild animals and pictures of different landscapes can harm our genuine relationship with nature; we may feel that our environment does not matter to us because we have not formed a strong bond with it.

Contrary to indulging in virtual experiences mediated by pictures and videos, Tafalla calls for focusing on our surroundings – natural environments that are literally in our proximity. Following Carlson's model of environmental aesthetics, presupposing that one has to experience natural environment as an environment that is natural, that is, not as an object or a landscape (Carlson, 1979), and further emphasising embodied experience and participation, Tafalla

urges that it is critical to experience the environment as a whole, in all its dimensions, and thus through all our senses. Accordingly, Tafalla's experience of the natural environment is multisensorial, aligning not only with Carlson but also with more contemporary approaches that stress bodily sensations and the roles of smell and touch, as found in Brady (2022) and Saito (2005). Further, Tafalla's position regarding environmental aesthetics is significantly influenced by scientific cognitivism. According to Carlson (1995), to appreciate nature fully and appropriately, one must consider the findings and key principles of the natural sciences, the more the better. However, there is a subtle yet significant shift in Tafalla's understanding of the aesthetic appreciation of nature compared to the views mentioned earlier. Let me consider the following passage from her article:

When we listen to the sounds of wind, rain, and storms, we feel the energy of nature and realise that she is not passive but powerfully active. This is even more clear when we attentively listen to the voices of animals, because then we realise that nature is not scenery designed for us, but is the home where all species live. Every individual animal is an agent who, while we walk through the forest, may be searching for food, exploring the territory, looking for a partner, building a nest, educating her young, or playing with her family. While engaged in these activities, many of them will emit different sounds. Listening to animal voices, trying to discover which species emits each sound and what it means is a revealing way to appreciate nature because we are focusing on active agents (Tafalla, 2023)

Although human beings are subjects experiencing the sound, the focus is on animals and their agency. Tafalla does not discuss how audible sensations affect our experience, nor their impact on the aesthetic appreciation of the site. Instead, she privileges the cognitive role of these sensations, that is, what we can learn about animals if we directly listen to the sounds they produce and interpret their action with respect to the broader way of their lives. Tafalla's emphasis on cognitivism becomes more apparent when we consider her other argument – that humans should listen to stories told by nature, particularly those told by animals. Before I proceed to outline the narrative dimension of Tafalla's environmental aesthetics, let me address the question of why animals.

Tafalla's call that we should go into nature and experience it directly, through all of our senses, has a general validity: only direct experience of nature can be considered a specimen of deep aesthetics of nature. In addition, the narrative dimension of the aesthetics of nature is critical for Tafalla in general, too. However, regarding GCC, she strongly recommends focusing on animals. This suggestion is motivated by two independent, albeit interwoven, aspects: the first concerns animals, the very fact that they are sentient beings who feel emotions and humans usually feel stronger connection with them rather than with, for instance, alga, fungi or rocks; the second aspect links the first one to GCC: given the animals feel emotions and suffer due to GCC, humans can become aware of the GCC while observing involuntary changes animals' behaviour and particularly their anguish caused by GCC. To summarise Tafalla's position, humans are expected to focus on animals, observe, watch,

and contemplate their conduct, and then somehow learn about GCC – or better, acknowledge it. However, how is it possible? Presumably, it is not enough to claim that animals have emotions and that humans feel a connection to them in this respect; there must be something more. In Tafalla's view, the critical point is that nature – and animals in particular – tell stories.

### 3. Animals, Stories, and Narratives

Of course, taken literally, Tafalla's suggestion is incorrect because animals are unable to tell stories, as they are not endowed with speech like human beings; however, they can – and do – communicate in different ways. Yet Tafalla does not focus on animal communication, nor on communication between species, but on stories – or narratives – told by nature itself. The idea that nature tells stories or that nature should be understood as a narrator seems deeply rooted in our cultural imagination. Yrjö Sepänmaa reconstructs this motif in his essay and disentangles it by arguing that when scholars – as well as writers and other artists – claim that nature tells stories, they can mean significantly different things, and by challenging the very idea that we should take nature as a narrator because nature's ability to 'tell' stories is necessarily limited and what we listen to rarely meets the requirements of a story as it is usually understood (Sepänmaa, 2004).

As already said, Tafalla adheres to a cognitivist position regarding the aesthetic appreciation of nature grounded in the natural sciences. However, as Tafalla puts it, this kind of cognitivism is not in conflict with narrativity: "I defend the idea that to have a deep aesthetic appreciation of nature we need naturalist knowledge; in many cases, this knowledge can be articulated through a story" (Tafalla, 2023). This claim does not seem problematic at all, especially when removed from the broader context: naturalist knowledge can be transmitted and shared in a form of story, as recalled by many documentaries, scientific books for specialists, but also books about nature for the general public, such as bestsellers by David Attenborough and Jane Goodall, books about animals for children, etc. Moreover, even scientific theories can be classified as narratives if we employ a conception of the narrative that is generous enough. Tafalla, however, has something slightly different in mind.

Her approach to narratives and stories aims to combine naturalist knowledge with direct observation of nature. This method does not diverge from Carlson's emphasis on scientific findings, since it is perfectly plausible – and even desirable – to observe animals and their way of life, and to interpret their behaviour in the light of the natural sciences, and *vice versa*; it is necessary to revise our theories in light of new observations. However, Tafalla widens the scope of her reflection, allowing for the inclusion of mythology, folklore, and indigenous wisdom (Tafalla, 2023). Tafalla's position is thus shaped by two views on the aesthetics of nature cognitivism – the scientific one, as defined by Carlson – and a more abstract, broader view introduced by Yuriko Saito. Referring to Saito's essay *Appreciating Nature on its Own Terms* (Saito, 2004),

Tafalla understands nature as a storyteller, that is, as an independent agent able to narrate about itself. Saito puts it in these words:

Listening to nature as nature, I believe, must involve recognising its own reality apart from us. It includes acknowledging that a natural object has its own unique history and function independent of the historical/cultural/literary significance given by humanity, as well as its specific perceptual features. Appreciating nature on its own terms, therefore, must be based upon listening to a story nature tells of itself through all its perceptual features; that is, a story concerning its origin, make-up, function, and working, independent of human presence or involvement. (Saito, 2004, pp. 145–146)

First, although Tafalla – at least explicitly – does not consider cultural, historical, or even literary (and other artistic) associations linked with particular natural environments that enter into our aesthetic appreciation, she concurs with Saito's conclusion that it is incorrect and misleading to impose human stories upon nature instead of listening to what nature is actually trying to communicate. Saito insists that these associations distort the genuine appreciation of the site, since they replaced stories told by nature itself. In Saito's view, it is essential to focus on perceptual features of the natural environment and interpret them independently of human actions, if possible. Saito does not claim that we should concentrate on pristine nature or that human actions should be forcibly removed from our scrutiny, or even that they have no impact on natural surroundings, but that we should switch the perspective, and instead of focusing on nature as a background setting to human activities, stories, and histories, we should grasp nature as an independent entity with its own stories to tell. Second, again following Saito, Tafalla stresses that we have a moral obligation to listen to nature because failing to do so and creating false stories contribute to Planetary destruction (Tafalla, 2023).

To evoke the role of stories in fostering a deep aesthetic appreciation of nature, Tafalla narrates the story of a fertile wetland teeming with migratory birds. The wetland is an extraordinary place due to the diverse bird species that are rarely found on one site or seldom seen there, as only a minimal number of areas are fertile enough to provide water, food, and convenient nesting opportunities for so many birds (and other animals). The imaginary site is exceptional not only from the point of view of birds and natural sciences, but also from the perspectives of birdwatchers and people living in the proximity of this site – so many birds, and birds of miscellaneous species, some of them with feathers in vibrant colours, other rather pale and colourless, the manner of their flight and so forth, is something spectacular. Some of the birds were ringed, allowing scientists to track their migration and determine whether they return to the site.

Tafalla suggests picturing the same place again, this time affected and damaged by GCC, namely, severe droughts. Water deficiency means not only that the birds have nothing to drink, but also a lack of vegetation and food; accordingly, the place becomes less welcoming, and birds are forced to look for other areas where they can survive and preserve their species. However, this

endeavour might be impossible because other sites are also affected by global warming and drought, which could result in the deaths of several birds or entire populations. In Tafalla's view, this story is critical not only from an environmental perspective but also for the aesthetic appreciation of the site in question. This piece of knowledge serves as a framework in which we interpret – or should interpret – what presents itself to our senses:

If we know the story of this dried wetland and the role it played in the lives of many animals, we may aesthetically judge this place as damaged, impoverished, sad, and ugly because it has lost its previous beauty. But a first-time visitor who has no idea of the story of the place will not miss the birds and may find that the color of the soil looks beautiful and the silence of the place is calming. We need *stories to connect causes and consequences* and to understand the damage we produce. If we know its story, the dried wetland without birds for us is the site of a tragedy. (Tafalla, 2023, italics mine)

In Tafalla's view, knowledge – or a story of a place – enters into our aesthetic experience of the place and (should) modify it. As the comparison between the first-time visitor and someone familiar with the place – a witness to its destructive metamorphosis – suggests, stories have transformative power: they enable us to change our minds and feel different emotions towards the place. Whereas the deserted area with withered flora might be fascinating and some people might think it beautiful, their judgment changes in light of information about animals suffering. Tafalla follows Saito again in this respect; this time, she addresses Saito's article *Consumer Aesthetics and Environmental Ethics: Problems and Possibilities* and one of its central claims that the knowledge of the production of a product makes a difference in our experience (Saito, 2018, p. 434). Saito is not, however, the only philosopher who believes non-perceptual, chiefly cognitive, information enters into our aesthetic appreciation of the environment. On the contrary, this view is relatively common among scholars working in environmental aesthetics. For instance, Cheryl Foster explores such situations under the heading of 'aesthetic disillusionment', emphasising also the role of ethical concerns regarding the aesthetics of the natural environment (Foster, 1992). Saito and Foster hold a strong position: that learning something ethically negative about the environment – for instance, that it has been significantly (and possibly irretrievably) damaged by human activities – negatively affects our appreciation of the site and makes our judgment of it negative as well. This conclusion has been challenged by María José Alcaraz León (2013, 2022), who persuasively demonstrates that this need not be the case—that is, that we sometimes appraise a damaged environment as aesthetically pleasing, even though we are aware of its moral flaws.

Tafalla is very convincing in telling the story of the dried-up wetland. Personally, I think her narration is moving, and I felt sorry for the endangered birds while reading it, even though I knew the story was fictional. The example also works if approached from the perspective of aesthetic appreciation of nature – although I side with León, I agree that background knowledge can modify our aesthetic experience; that is, contextual information might turn our initially positive evaluation into a negative one. In my opinion, the same

logic applies to our engagement with art. However, Tafalla's assumption is toothless regarding GCC and increasing the knowledge about it. As already said, Tafalla's story is cogent and clearly links GCC (cause) to its consequences: namely, drought (consequence one) and the death of the bird population (consequence two).

Nevertheless, such a story could be made if and only if the person listening to nature is already aware of GCC and acknowledges its ruinous power. In comparison, a person lacking such knowledge can link the suffering of birds to the drought at best, and a person openly denying GCC might not be able to make such a connection at all. Climate breakdown, neglect, and denial – if I borrow the expression from the title of Tafalla's article – are complex matters, and it is thus essential to pay more attention to this phenomenon and its facets.

#### 4. What is Climate Change Denial, and Why Does It Matter?

As already outlined, the GCC denial, neglect, and inaction cannot be treated as a homogeneous category. Inaction need not be motivated by the GCC denial; it may be for other reasons, such as fear of losing the lifestyle one is accustomed to. Accordingly, one might be aware of the ongoing climate collapse, admit that it is human-induced, yet be unwilling to take action or hesitant about the efficiency and cost of proposed measures that should mitigate global warming. In comparison, neglect, as the Oxford dictionary says, is characterised by the fact that we do not pay enough attention to the phenomenon. And finally, there are tendencies belonging to the category of denial – deniers do not trust that GCC is happening or that it is caused by human activities, to mention a few characteristics. Although climate sceptics often claim such things, my exposition so far has been too simple. In this article, the GCC denial or climate scepticism refers to a countermovement that emerged in response to the environmental movement and scientific consensus on global warming, aiming to cast doubt on climate science.

The countermovement has been scrutinised by researchers in political and social sciences, who have examined it from various perspectives. Scholars seek to reveal the strategies of climate sceptics, the historical roots of the movement, and the impact on society and the political organisation of respective countries. Most studies focus on the USA and American context, examining the role of fossil fuel lobbies and companies, such as ExxonMobil, and Donald Trump's rhetoric regarding GCC and the issue of 'alternative science' (McCright, 2016; Gwiazdon and Brown, 2023). However, surveys and research were also conducted in other parts of the world, for example, in Germany (Kaiser and Rhomberg, 2016) and in the Czech Republic (Pecka, 2023a).

Tafalla summarises the position of climate change deniers in one paragraph. Following the sociologist Aaron M. McCright, Tafalla points out that climate scepticism is not a homogeneous category either (Tafalla, 2023; for a more detailed explanation of the respective positions, see McCright, 2016). However, she surprisingly does not reflect on the *effects* of their campaigns, despite the

haunting question of whether these campaigns are truly successful and whether information spread by the GCC deniers impacts public opinion. Monika Taddicken and Laura Wolff's research shows that exposure to climate disinformation, misinformation, and fake news on social media influences participants' acceptance of GCC, and that this decline was observed in approximately one-third of the sample (Taddicken and Wolff, 2023, p. 727). Although the study's participant pool was relatively small, the findings are still disturbing, given the researchers' focus on exposure to attitude-opposing fake news; that is, participants were individuals who believed in GCC and acknowledged that humans induce it. The study thus indicates that exposure to the narratives of climate sceptics has a negative impact on the attitudes of people who would otherwise be (without this exposure) willing to act or support measures to mitigate GCC.

Tafalla's neglect of the impact of climate fake news is even more startling, given her criticism of social media and the consumption of videos and pictures of wild animals. The author is confident enough to say that consuming such videos harms our experience of nature, since it replaces direct appreciation of the surrounding environment with snapshots of wildlife. In contrast, she remains silent about the possible impact of consuming disinformation and misinformation about GCC. Her silence feels more understandable if we consider the other article by Tafalla, co-authored with Núria Almiron, namely *Rethinking the Ethical Challenge in the Climate Deadlock: Anthropocentrism, Ideological Denial and Animal Liberation* (Almiron and Tafalla 2019, p. 256), in which the authors claim: "After almost three decades of intensive research and discussion, we have failed to provide effective action to mitigate human-induced global warming. On the contrary, we have been wasting precious time on what in this paper we shall refer to as *ideological denial*." However radical this lamentation may feel, authors do not want to say that research on ideological denial is of no value, but rather that it proved not helpful in warding off GCC. Instead, the authors suggest focusing on something new: animal ethics, and in particular the animal liberation movement (Ibid.). Tafalla's approach in the analysed paper appears to follow a similar pattern. Instead of spending more time on treating climate disinformation and misinformation, she aims to provide a positive account grounded in animal ethics and deep aesthetics.

Accordingly, in place of reflection on the role of disinformation, Tafalla narrows the scope of her argument and focuses on a response that she believes is "more widespread than denial: a combination of indifference, neglect, and inaction" (Tafalla, 2023). I agree with the author that the latter response is more common and that people are unwilling to adjust their lifestyles; however, I do not believe it is possible to remove the former category simply because fewer people are actively denying GCC. More concretely, I argue that it is necessary to consider climate denial in itself and the strategies employed by climate sceptics, as they have much larger media power and also utilise narratives to influence public opinion. And these stories often connect causes and consequences, at least at a smaller scale. Moreover, these stories are

designed to provide the public with alternative explanations of what Earth is currently undergoing, what GCC is, and the role of human beings in the destruction of the Planet.

### 5. Climate Change and Alternative Narratives

In discussions of climate change deniers' communication strategies, the term 'narrative' is frequently used. It is well documented that the fossil fuel industry endeavours to deceive the public using a coordinated campaign arranged by specialists in public relations and media (Sassan, Mahat, Aronczyk, and Brulle, 2023; Pecka, 2023). Just consider these observations: "The climate change countermovement (CCCM) has worked to forestall pro-climate legislation by *spreading alternative narratives around climate change*" (Sassan, Mahat, Aronczyk, and Brulle, 2023, p. 795) or, similarly, "These principles – rooted in state responsibility for the common good, justice, and truth – provide states with a *counternarrative and language* to defend their indefensible inaction (or not enough action) on climate change." (Gwiazdon and Brown, 2023, p.198)

Surprisingly, Tafalla uses the word 'narrative' in connection with stories disseminated by climate change deniers, too. As she puts it:

Climate change denial narratives have been expanding all around the world and assure people that they need not care about what is presented as it is a fake problem. [...] These discourses have been developed mostly by a coalition of think tanks connected to right-wing movements, with the intention of spreading doubt and confusion in society; and the fact that there are different types of negationism increases that confusion further. (Tafalla, 2023).

The first sentence of this passage is critical to my argument, since it provides evidence that climate sceptics tell stories that should prevent us from taking action, or at least slow the establishment of measures to mitigate GCC. Regarding my argument, it is crucial to distinguish between stories and narratives told by nature and those told by GCC deniers, with an emphasis on Tafalla's understanding of 'story'.

The first issue with Tafalla's account of narrative and story is that it is relatively intuitive. The author does not define a story or a narrative; instead, she limits herself to examples. Of course, examples are usually valuable; sometimes they can be even more telling than definitions. Still, given the central argument of Tafalla's paper – that is, that a focus on stories told by animals turns the neglect of GCC into conscious care for the environment – the provided examples do not seem sufficient.

Tafalla insists that there are several types of stories we can listen to: "the story of a particular animal, or a group of them; one we follow over many years, or only for a short period of time" (Tafalla, 2023). This list, however, is by no means exhaustive. We can add other stories to it, for instance, stories of an entire species followed by biologists and other specialists in the field. Similarly, although Tafalla employs the verb 'follow' in the just-quoted passage, she does not mean we should only observe the behaviour of

an animal, that is, that we should rely solely on sensuous inputs, but she expects us to consider additional information, such as knowledge about the typical way of life of a given species. Only in the light of this background knowledge can we truly understand “the specific story of this particular individual” (Ibid.). Tafalla does not explicitly specify the link between the story of an individual and the ‘bigger picture’, but it seems she wants us to compare the former with the latter, to look for divergencies from the typical and so forth. In her view, this strategy is supposed to be helpful regarding the recognition of GCC: “this will help us understand that global warming may interrupt animal stories and bring about terrible endings. Imagine that some of the birds from the previous example starve in the dried wetland; that would be a very sad ending to the stories of their lives” (Ibid.).

I set aside the question of whether the strategy is truly effective for now; instead, I focus on the idea of interruption and what it can reveal about a story’s essence. First, Tafalla indicates that the interruption is external – an occurrence or other phenomenon that enters a story that is ‘naturally’ unfolding or disrupts it in some other way. Either way, this assumption is problematic because many factors (including external ones) enter into stories that become part of what is being followed. If I keep to Tafalla’s example of a dried-up wetland and her description of animals forced to look for another place to nest, their struggle – but also their capacity to react – becomes part of what we follow, and we do not consider interruption a phenomenon isolated from the main narrative. However, regarding the narrative’s character, it seems that Tafalla links it to a certain continuity. She probably has in mind that animals’ lives unfold in their environments heading towards their natural death, but this is not very helpful in reconstructing what she means by a story.

Second, there is only one explicitly stated characteristic of a story: that *stories connect causes and consequences*, or better, Tafalla claims, that we need such stories, which allows for a broader interpretation that there are more types of stories, but the ones appropriate for raising awareness and acknowledgement of GCC are those that link causes and consequences. However, there are also other stories capable of doing this job, namely stories based on climatic misinformation and disinformation, that can have – and sometimes do have – the very same structure as narratives privileged by Tafalla.

Let me proceed to narratives told by climate change sceptics. First, it is essential to bear in mind that climate change deniers employ sophisticated tactics of casting doubts in public. Already in 2004, Stefan Rahmstorf introduced a taxonomy of climate change denial, distinguishing three main types of sceptics: trend, attribution, and impact sceptics (Rahmstorf, 2004). Consider one argument that, according to Rahmstorf, is often used in favour of the idea that global warming must have some natural cause, namely, that scientists pointing out the industry’s essential responsibility and the key impact of CO<sub>2</sub> production are wrong. The alternative theory advocates that global warming is happening because of “changes in solar activity and/or cosmic rays (due to their effect on cloud formation)” (Rahmstorf, 2004, p. 78). This theory can be interpreted in terms of Tafalla’s conception of narrative,

since it also links causes and consequences. Suppose I revisit her example of the dried-up wetland. In that case, the alternative story unfolds as follows: there are two consequences, namely drought (consequence one) and the death of the bird population (consequence two), which are essential to link with a cause. Tafalla believes that GCC caused these occurrences so that the climate sceptics might admit. However, Tafalla, following the findings of climate science, believes that GCC is human-induced, whereas climate sceptics offer another explanation, namely that GCC occurs due to solar activity. Even though this explanation contradicts the scientific consensus, it meets the minimal condition of a narrative because it can connect consequences to a cause. This story may persuade people with limited knowledge of climate science and solar systems, as it provides a clear explanation. At the same time, they can genuinely feel pity for animals struggling due to the drought.

Moreover, this narrative is not an isolated one. Climate science is under constant fire of disinformation and misinformation, intending to weaken the public's trust in science. Apart from providing alternative stories, fossil fuel-funded groups cast doubt on climate science, claiming, for instance, that there is no consensus among climate and environmental scientists, or that predictive models are inaccurate or do not consider some 'significant' aspect. Consider, for example, this piece of news:

Dr. Clauser [winner of the 2022 Nobel Prize in Physics] has criticised the awarding of the 2021 Nobel Prize for work in the development of computer models predicting global warming and told President Biden that he disagreed with his climate policies. Dr. Clauser has developed a climate model that adds a new significant dominant process to existing models. The process involves the visible light reflected by cumulus clouds that cover, on average, half of the Earth. Existing models greatly underestimate this cloud feedback, which provides a very powerful, dominant thermostatic control of the Earth's temperature. (Nobel Laureate John Clauser, no date)

Such a commentary, pronounced by a recipient of the Nobel Prize, seems extremely alarming. The bare fact that someone has been awarded the Nobel Prize endows a person with indisputable authority, which is further emphasised by using the academic title in each mention of John Clauser. Without additional information about the CO2 Coalition, of which Clauser is a member, the public cannot help but doubt the current state of climate science. Only after further investigation can one learn about the business connection between the CO2 Coalition and the fossil fuel industry.<sup>2</sup> However, the number of people who fact-check the information and delve deeper into John Clauser's history is limited, and even if more people do this, the lingering doubt remains in the public space. Moreover, climate change deniers portray ecologists and climate activists as villains responsible for the lowering of living standards. For instance, Rachel Carson, the author of *Silent Spring* (1964), who significantly contributed to banning dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane, is called a 'mass murderer' because of changes in the labour market accompanied the regulations of DDT (Gwiazdon and Brown, 2023, pp. 207–208).

<sup>2</sup> In the Czech context, the story was revealed by Pecka (2023b).

In a public space saturated with information, disinformation, and fake news, it is challenging to distinguish between narratives that one should trust and those that are not reliable, and it has to be noted that Tafalla's suggestion to listen to animal stories enters into the field demarcated by both serious and fake and misleading information. Thus, it is, as I claim, necessary to offer at least some guidelines on how to differentiate between the two types of narratives.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have critically examined Marta Tafalla's suggestion that it is possible to overcome climate change denial and neglect by listening to stories told by nature, particularly those told by animals. I have shown that, although this idea seems appealing at first, it cannot be successful because Tafalla does not provide us with criteria upon which to distinguish between stories told by nature and those told by climate change deniers. Tafalla seems to have forgotten that we, human beings, are supposed to listen to those stories and that we are prone to being misled or confused. As demonstrated, we cannot infer that there is GCC and that it is human-induced solely from the observation of animal behaviour, including their struggle. We can do so only if we are already familiar with at least the basic premises of climate science.

My criticism might raise the question of whether there are other criteria besides reference to prior scientific knowledge on which one can rely in telling narratives informed by climate science, and those that are not. This need is natural and justified; however, in practice, it is very difficult to put forward such guidelines, especially if we want them to be intelligible to the broadest possible audience. In my view, there should be a criterion that links narratives to morality and ethics. Climate sceptics are familiar with the current state of climate science, but they decided to misrepresent it, and their conduct is highly unethical. Someone can tell that they tell lies, but I am hesitant to include 'truth' on the notional list, as I believe it is beneficial also to embrace artistic and other fictional narratives that cannot meet the truth standards narrowly construed. However, as I stated above, the media landscape is saturated with so much data that one is constantly at risk of becoming confused. Accordingly, whatever the criteria, the public is under extreme pressure to fact-check every piece of information. Philosophy and aesthetics can contribute to the debate by revising terms and notions, thereby increasing clarity, at least on the terminological level. It might not be sufficient, but we have to start somewhere.

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