

Retoryka nowych mediów/nowych wyzwań

Rhetoric of new media/new challenges

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Projecting a Future Present: Greta Thunberg's use of Presence at the United Nations Climate Action Summit 2019

Projektowanie przyszłości: Użycie kategorii terażniejszości przez Gretę Thunberg w przemówieniu na szczycie klimatycznym ONZ 2019

Abstract

Rhetoricians have long realized that crises are, in part, the product of audience perception and therefore rhetorical choice. In this article I will demonstrate that the speech that Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg gave at the 2019 United Nations Climate Action Summit employs presence to not only transcend her own person, but time itself, and presents climate catastrophe as a future present that should be avoided at all cost.

Badacze retoryki wskazują, że kryzysy w części zależą od percepcji audytorium, a zatem i wyborów retorycznych. Niniejszy artykuł pokazuje, jak w przemówieniu wygłoszonym na szczycie klimatycznym ONZ w 2019 r. Greta Thunberg wykorzystuje retoryczne koncepcje „teraźniejszości” i „obecności”, przedstawiając katastrofę klimatyczną jako przyszłą terażniejszość, która musi zostać powstrzymana za wszelką cenę już teraz.

Key words

presence, climate change, Greta Thunberg, Critical Future Studies

obecność, zmiana klimatyczna, Greta Thunberg, krytyczne studia przyszłości

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Projecting a Future Present: Greta Thunberg's use of Presence at the United Nations Climate Action Summit 2019

1. Introduction

In recent years global warming has evolved from an “inconvenient truth” to an existential crisis. A telling illustration of this is the decision by *The Guardian* to start referring to a “climate crisis.” In its “Environmental Pledge,” the editorial board writes that: “the escalating climate crisis is the defining issue of our lifetimes and [...] the planet is in the grip of an emergency.” The board promises to give the issue the priority that it is due, and to adjust its style accordingly. “We will use language that recognizes the severity of the crisis we’re in,” they pledge, and therefore terms like “climate change” and “global warming” that imply a gradual process are dropped in favor of the more dramatic “climate crisis,” “global heating,” and “environmental collapse” (*The Guardian’s Environmental Pledge 2019* 2019).

The Guardian’s pledge illustrates the close connection between crisis and perception. Climate change precedes 2019, of course, but by labelling it as “crisis,” *The Guardian* endows it with a new sense of urgency. Scholars of rhetoric have long recognized this process. As Richard Vatz pointed out over forty years ago, situations never present themselves to us as given, but are the product of rhetorical choices. Rhetors not only choose which aspects of the situation to present, Vatz explains, but also what meaning to attribute to them (Vatz 1973, 156-57). As a result, the same situation can be perceived as both an economic opportunity and a catastrophe at the same time. While there are certainly limits to the constructivist nature of crisis,¹ Vatz makes clear that our sense of crisis is, in important ways, shaped by the way we (choose to) talk about it.

1. As Kiewe points out, rhetoric can “create a crisis, react to a crisis created by others, or portray themselves as reacting to a crisis they have created in the first place,” (Kiewe 1994, xvii), see also (Dow 1989, 296).

Following Vatz, many scholars have explored how rhetoric shapes, creates, and responds to crises.² As the most daunting crisis that we face today, climate change has received ample attention (Schwarze 2007). In the case of climate change, it is important to ask why it took so long for a rhetoric of crisis to take root. As *The Guardian's* pledge demonstrates, the sense of urgency about this crisis has long been out of step with the situation on the ground. In recent years, wildfires, hurricanes, and droughts have made climate news reach the front page, but for decades the warnings of scientists and activists were hardly picked up by the media and politicians. While the reasons for this reluctant reckoning with the changing climate are many – including the fossil fuel companies' attempt to deny it – one important reason, as David Wallace-Wells points out, is time itself. “The worst outcomes,” he writes “arriv[e] so long from now that we reflexively discount their reality” (2019, 13). Simply put, climate change long lacked the urgency and proximity of a clear and present danger for many to be considered and spoken of as a crisis.

As a result of the world's inability to perceive of and respond to climate change as a crisis, its negative effects disproportionately hurt the poorest and the youngest. As Wallace-Wells writes: “Selfishly, we [the West] didn't mind destroying the planet for others living elsewhere on it or those not yet born who would inherit from us, outraged” (2019, 10). In the latter case, those that will be most severely affected are either too young or not even born to have a voice in the matter. Scholars Michael Godhe and Luke Goode raise this point in their essay on Critical Future Studies. “There is the vital question,” they point out, “of whether and how future generations, whose futures we are actively shaping now, but who cannot speak in a literal sense about their future, might nonetheless be granted some kind of ‘voice’ in the future-shaping discourses and practices of the present” (2018, 157). Discourse aimed at shaping the future should, in this view, not just seek to address those in the present, but give a voice to unborn generations as well. One of the aims of the Critical Future Studies project, they state, is to make sure that it is shaped by such an “intergenerational ethics” (Godhe and Goode 2018, 157).

In this article, I want to take a closer look at one way in which future generations are given a voice by analyzing Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg's speech at the United Nations Climate Action Summit on September 23, 2019. I will demonstrate how Chaïm Perelman's notion of “presence” can help understand how Thunberg attempts to make the future seem present. Richard Vatz already noted that rhetors rely on presence to give their preferred portrayal of a particular situation salience (1973, 157). In Thunberg's case, presence not only serves to frame climate change as an urgent crisis, but also to transcend temporality itself and thus enables her to

2. See for example Windt (1983), Cherwitz and Zagacki (1986) and more recently Neüff (2018).

claim to speak for – and even with the voice of – future generations. In what follows, I will first discuss the position of rhetoric in Future Studies and the way Perelman’s concept of presence works as a means of projecting a future in the present. Next, I will show how, in Thunberg’s speech, presence not just transcends her ethos of a 16-year-old “child,” but time itself. By assuming the voice of future generations, Thunberg’s message collapses the barriers of time and allows her audience to experience the future in the present. In doing so, the speech offers one way, though not necessarily a very effective one, in which an intergenerational dialogue about the future can take place.

2. Making Climate Change Present

The future is a growing object of study. The way humans interact with the future is broad and the field of Future Studies reflects this. Interdisciplinary by nature, Future Studies has adopted methods, theories, and insights from many fields and disciplines. Although they do not mention rhetoric explicitly in their overview of the field, Toni Ahlqvist and Martin Rhisiart hint at its central role in how we think of past, present, and future. Following Richard Slaughter, they point out that our understanding of the present is always the result of selection (Ahlqvist and Rhisiart 2015, 94). The same is obviously true for how we portray the future. The emerging field of Critical Future Studies is more explicit about its rhetorical underpinnings. In “Beyond Capitalist Realism: Why We Need Critical Future Studies,” Luke Goode and Michael Godhe explain that it complements “mainstream” Future Studies by its focus on social analysis of imaginaries as affective and cognitive processes (2017, 111-112). “Both present and future are best understood as shaped by contested and competing discourses,” they write, and Critical Future Studies asks “what kind of future is invoked” and what “the persuasive power of such a vision” is (Goode and Godhe 2017, 113, 121-122).

Scholars of rhetoric are well positioned to take on these questions. What the future will look like is literally an open debate, Godhe and Goode explain, since “there’s little that is inevitable or even predictable about the future” (Godhe and Goode 2018, 153). Despite its contingent nature, people have always invented ways of knowing the future either through mysticism, astronomy, or prophecy.³ In modern times, Ben Anderson writes, a number of practices for knowing the future have been invented. Anderson identifies three of them: calculating futures, imagining futures, and performing futures. Each of these practices tries to make present a future that is absent and may never happen, and the difference lies in how they attempt to make the future present (Anderson 2010, 783). Calculating futures

3. For an interesting overview, see Adam and Groves (2007), chapter 2 “The Future Told.”

tries to express them in numbers; imagining by using “creative fabulation,” i.e. narrative and visual fiction; and performing by drawing on acting, role-playing, and simulation (Anderson 2010, 784-787). It is worth noting that all of these rely, in their own way, on rhetoric to compete for attention and credibility.

One way rhetoricians attempt to persuade others of what the future will look like is by using “presence.” This concept is central to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s *New Rhetoric*, where all rhetoric is about selection, since what is included or excluded, what is fore- or backgrounded matters greatly for the message. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca explain: “By the very fact of selecting certain elements and presenting them to the audience, their importance and pertinency to the discussion are implied. Indeed, such a choice endows these elements with a *presence*, which is an essential factor in argumentation and one that is far too much neglected in rationalistic conceptions of reasoning” (1969, 116).

From this, however, we should not infer that presence and selection are the same, since the mere selection of a piece of data does not automatically make it *present*. “It is not enough that a thing should exist for a person to feel its presence,” Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca point out, since what is selected gains salience by the “verbal magic” of the speaker alone (1969, 117). Only when the rhetor succeeds in truly making something stand out to his or her audience, “filling [their] whole field of consciousness,” and isolating it from all other impressions they may receive, we can truly speak of presence. Thus, something only becomes present when it “acts directly on our sensibility” (Perelman 1982, 35).

The *New Rhetoric* distinguishes between two types of presence. The first aims to emphasize a piece of data that the speaker has already drawn the attention of his or her audience to. An interesting example of this used by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca is Marc Anthony’s display of Caesar’s bloody tunic to the Roman people to inform them of the crime committed by Brutus and his coconspirators. Here the tunic makes Caesar’s death present, they argue, since “the real thing is expected to induce an adherence that its mere description would be unable to secure” (1969, 117). Likewise, orators can rely on “verbal magic” to give presence to their message and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca suggest a number of techniques including repetition, amplification, and aggregation to achieve this (1969, 174-176).

The second form of presence is more interesting as well as more relevant to my argument and concerns making present what is in fact *absent*. As Perelman explains in his *Realm of Rhetoric*, presence is essential when the speaker wants to evoke “realities that are distant in time and space” (1982, 35), since this makes it possible for the audience to experience what they cannot see, feel, and hear in the here and now. When what is absent concerns the past or present, one could still conceive of speakers drawing on “the real” to make their case salient. Caesar’s

bloody tunic, after all, draws attention to what is missing – that is, Caesar himself – and is present somewhere else – the corpse – or once was present and is now past. When what is absent is still in the future, however, it becomes non-projectable in an immediate sense. Climate change fits this category and is more challenging to make present.

As a process, climate change is both omnipresent and absent at the same time. It is undeniably present as each year brings new heat temperature records and massive wildfires while droughts and declining insect populations are destroying the lives and livelihoods of plants, animals, and humans across the globe. But while rising temperatures, melting ice, and extreme weather conditions are all reported, a speaker cannot wield them in front of an audience like they can a bloody tunic. This is particularly true for the long-term effects of climate change, or what I propose we call climate collapse, which are still to be felt in the future and therefore still absent. The point here is not whether climate collapse will happen; it may very well be unavoidable and constitute what Adam and Groves call a “latent future” (quoted in Tutton 2017, 484). My point is simply that how exactly this will unfold in the future is uncertain. While it is clear that a future without the negative effects of carbon emissions is closed-off (Godhe and Goode 2018, 115), “perfect knowledge” about the many ways this will affect the future, to quote Ben Anderson, is “impossible” as it “exceeds present knowledge” (Anderson 2010, 780). The ontological status of the future events in the present is, Anderson points out, that it is “absent, in that they have not and may never happen” (2010, 783).

A speaker seeking to give presence to climate collapse needs to *project a future present* and this creates an important challenge. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca point out, presence relies for its effect on “proximity in time.” They paraphrase Campbell’s idea that rhetorical affect is conditional on temporal, geographical, and personal proximity to the event under consideration. In other words, for the audience to feel a sense of crisis, the crisis must be presented to them as being in the here, now, and theirs. For presence to work, i.e. to fill the whole field of consciousness of the audience, the authors of the *New Rhetoric* conclude: “such proximity [in time] is an essential ingredient” (1969, 118).

While climate change does not automatically lend itself well for this, this does not mean that it cannot be made to feel proximate; just that it is harder to do so. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca themselves point this out when they say that “one should not [...] want to reduce presence to certitude and treat events that are more remote from the present as less important because they are less probable” (1969, 118). Perelman himself discusses a strategy for this in the figure of style of enallage. Heinrich Plett defines enallage as “a figure of syntactic substitution that replaces a grammatical form (person, case, gender, number, tense) by a defiant

or ungrammatical one” (2001, 247). For my purposes, the substitution of tense is the most interesting. Plett notes that substitution of tense – in his case the past for the present tense, or *praesens historicum* – can achieve “a vivid representation (*enargeia*)” (2001, 247). The same goes for substituting the future with the present tense, which Perelman calls “enallage of time,” but I suggest is better called *projecting a future present* to distinguish it from other tense substitutions.⁴ The example that Perelman gives, “if you speak, you *are* dead,” is helpful as it makes the present conditional on future action and thus makes what is going to happen present in the here and now. This kind of transcendence of temporality is essential in the crisis rhetoric of climate activists hoping to convince their audience of the urgency to act before the catastrophic future they predict will become present.

Scholars of rhetoric have adopted the notion of presence as a valuable tool of analysis. Louise Karon, for example, notes how, by making ideas alive to the audience, presence forms “an essential ingredient of adherence” (1976, 98, 103-104). Alan Gross uses presence to analyze how selection and foregrounding allowed Austrian museum exhibitors to downplay the complicity of their country in the Holocaust (Gross 2005, 13-14). Despite continued academic interest since the publication of the *New Rhetoric*, however, presence has so far not been studied as a technique for combatting climate change. In the remainder of this article, I hope to demonstrate how presence serves to urge action on climate change in Greta Thunberg’s speech to the United Nations.

3. Greta Thunberg’s rhetoric of future present

The United Nations Climate Summit of 23 September 2019 brought together representatives of dozens of member countries, private businesses, and NGOs to discuss plans and announce initiatives to keep global temperatures from rising above the 1.5°C agreed to in the Paris Agreement of 2015. UN Secretary-General António Guterres called the summit in the hopes of drastically decreasing carbon emissions globally in the next decade and reaching zero emissions by 2050. More than 65 heads of state assembled in New York and close to 80 countries committed to the zero emissions ambition.⁵ However, the Chinese government’s refusal to increase its Paris Agreement commitments and the absence of the President of the United States Donald Trump, who only made a brief appearance but did not speak, limited the summit’s impact. The unwillingness of the world’s two largest economies to rise up to the climate challenge put the spotlight on those who were willing to speak up, in particular Greta Thunberg.

4. In the *New Rhetoric*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca also refer to this particular figure of substituting the present for the future as “enallage of tense” (1969, 177).

5. <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/77-countries-100-cities-commit-to-net-zero-carbon-emissions-by-2050-at-climate-summit/>

Thunberg's speech at the summit was highly anticipated. Her attempted carbon neutral crossing of the Atlantic had been widely reported – and, sometimes, ridiculed – by the media.⁶ More important, however, were the school strikes that drew an approximate 6 million participants in 150 countries.⁷ The large crowds of youthful activists were widely reported and *Time Magazine* called it “Greta Thunberg's biggest strike yet.”⁸ As the originator of the school strike tactic, Thunberg was looked to as a spokesperson for her generation. Though only 16 years old at the time, Thunberg was already an experienced public speaker. Prior to her speech at the Climate Summit, Thunberg had addressed the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2019, the European Parliament in Strasbourg in the same year, as well as an earlier UN climate change conference in Katowice, Poland, in 2018.⁹ While she often opened her earlier speeches – including that in Poland – by introducing herself, by the time she addressed the Climate Summit in New York, her fame as an activist was such that this was no longer needed.

Presence plays a prominent role in Thunberg's speech in a number of ways. First, Thunberg draws on her very own presence as a 16-year-old to emphasize the urgency of the crisis facing her audience. Second, she creates presence of the first form – giving salience to what is already present – by employing a number of figures that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) associate with presence to invoke feelings of anger, indignation, and shame in her audience. Third, Thunberg employs the second form of presence – making present what is absent – when she presents herself as the voice of future generations and, to a lesser extent, when she turns to the devastating effects of climate change itself.

Thunberg makes her very presence on stage an essential part of her message. Apart from her celebrity as school striker, she is the youngest participant on stage and clearly stands out in the crowd. Her credibility as a speaker in large part follows from her youth: she does not represent a government, NGO, business, media outlet, or other interest, but rather a generation. In the opening lines of the speech, Thunberg employs the second form of presence in an interesting inverse way by pointing out the extraordinary nature of her very presence on stage. “This is all wrong,” she says, “I should not be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean” (lines 2-3).¹⁰ These lines draw the audience's attention not to what is missing in the here and now, i.e. New York City, but across the Atlantic Ocean in Sweden. Her absence in class at a time when all her peers are at school is made salient here by Thunberg to stress the extraordinary circumstances that force

6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voyage_of_Greta_Thunberg

7. Taylor, Watts, and Bartlett (2019); Tollefson (2019, 325).

8. <https://time.com/5595365/global-climate-strikes-greta-thunberg/>

9. For a collection of Thunberg's speeches, including the ones cited, see Thunberg (2019).

10. The appendix contains a line-numbered version of Greta Thunberg's speech which is referenced here.

her to stand up at the UN, instead of sitting in class in her native Sweden. Making her absence present serves a number of goals. First, it makes Thunberg stand out even more among the dignitaries and representatives that make up the vast majority of the UN Summit. By pointing out that she is still – or rather, at that moment, is not – in school, Thunberg not only increases her credibility as an activist who feels that the fight for climate action outweighs that of educating herself, but also sets up a generational contrast of the schoolkid scolding the parent, which forms the backbone of her ethos throughout the speech as I will demonstrate below.

Second, it allows Thunberg to confer urgency and vividness to the climate crisis that she has come to combat. If only world governments had reduced emissions once they learned about climate change, Thunberg implies, she would not have to skip school to speak up. In fact, it would actually make sense to be in school, since there would be a future worth educating for. However, since adults failed to act, the situation now has become so dire that a 16-year-old has to skip school and travel across the ocean to make them realize that time for action is now.

Having connected her presence to the climate crisis, Thunberg loses no time identifying the culprit. In an extraordinarily angry and hostile style, Thunberg draws on the ethical and generational contrast that she sets up in the exordium to make her audience responsible for the current crisis in a series of deeply personal epistrophes – “how dare you!” – that culminate in the sweeping, antagonistic anaphora: “How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you’re doing enough when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight,” and “How dare you pretend that this can be solved with just business as usual and more technical solutions?” (lines 27-28). This confrontational rhetoric works, I will argue below, because Thunberg combines an ethos of moral superiority with the innocence that, at least since Rousseau and Romanticism, is often associated with being a child.¹¹

Thunberg starts by pointing out the hypocrisy of the sympathy that journalists, activists, and world leaders – including many present – have for the climate strikes across the world that Thunberg helped inspire. Rather than drawing on this sympathy for support, Thunberg aggressively challenges the sincerity behind it. “You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency,” Thunberg says, but she immediately calls this into question by noting the neglect of action, despite the “crystal clear” science that has been around for decades. You have put us into this mess, Thunberg tells her audience, “yet, you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you!” (lines 11, 8, 3). “You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words,” she declares, and even now “all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!” (lines 4, 6-7).

11. See: Baader (1996). This idea has since come under attack (Bernstein 2011).

What immediately stands out is the extraordinarily hostile and angry tone of this part of the speech. This emphasizes the generational divide that Thunberg tries to make present in the mind of the audience. Drawing on the inverse adult-child relation that she established in the opening lines of her speech, Thunberg now starts to lecture her adult audience on their misbehavior and, in the process, lumps everyone – from eco-activist to oil-advocate – together. The result is an ethos that allows her both to claim the moral high ground, but also endangers her benevolence.

The repetition of, in this case, “how dare you!” is a time-tested strategy to convey presence, as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) note.¹² In Thunberg’s case, it functions as an angry, indignant verdict on her audience’s conduct, or lack thereof. The posture that Thunberg takes here is completely unapologetic. She presents herself as owing nothing to the generation of leaders and adults that have created the crisis she faces, but instead blames them for the mess that the climate is in – “you have stolen my dreams and my childhood” (line 4). As such, Thunberg violates a cardinal rule of rhetoric – one that Kenneth Burke (1950) considers the key of all symbol use, namely to identify with her audience.¹³ Rather than seeking “consubstantiality,” Thunberg seems to want to isolate and alienate herself from her audience. The consistent contrasting of the personal pronouns “I/my” and “you/your,” about which I have more to say below, is a case in point: “they [plans for cutting emissions in the future] rely on *my* generation sucking hundreds of billions of tons of *your* CO² out of the air” (lines 20-21, my emphasis).

On one level, this isolation inoculates Thunberg from complicity to the climate crisis, in the same way that her young age does as well. This is a particular constraint for Thunberg, since her unapologetic style and claim to moral superiority make her quite vulnerable to reproaches of hypocrisy from those that disagree with her.¹⁴ The persuasive force of “how dare you!” only works if Thunberg’s own morality is out of the question, since it relies heavily on shame for its effect. As Aristotle already points out, shame is “imagination [*phantasia*] about a loss of reputation,” and “necessarily a person feels shame towards *those whose opinion he takes account of.*” People feel ashamed, in other words, in the presence of those they admire, who are beyond reproach because they are “not liable to the same charge” (Aristotle 2007, 1384a-1384b my emphasis). Since she is still legally a “child,” Thunberg is in a particularly good position to invoke shame in a culture that, since Romanticism, often portrays children as innocent. This again is where Thunberg’s inversion of the child/parent relationship makes itself felt. Parents, after all,

12. “The simplest figures for increasing the feeling of presence are those depending on repetition,” Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca note in the *New Rhetoric* (1969, 175).

13. See Burke’s *Rhetoric of Motives* for his notion of “identification” (Burke 1950, 55-59).

14. The controversy over her plan to travel to the UN in a CO² neutral yacht is a good illustration of this.

are supposed to tell children how to behave properly, and there is a particularly stinging shame, for a parent, in having to be told by one's child to start acting as an adult. By her very presence, again, Thunberg serves to bring across this point to her audience who, as she points out, are still in denial: "you are still not mature enough to tell it like it is" (lines 31-32).

Aristotle stresses the link between shame and proximity. Shame is felt most "before those who are going to be with them and those watching them, because in both cases they are 'in' their eyes" (Aristotle 2007, 1384b).¹⁵ Aristotle, however, does not reduce shame to direct proximity. His very definition of shame as "a sort of pain and agitation concerning the class of evils, *whether present or past, or future*, that seem to bring a person into disrespect," leaves open whether those in front of who people feel shame are actually present or not (2007, 1383b, my emphasis). For Aristotle, what counts is that the public is going to learn about the shameful deeds at some point. This means that the people one admires are "either seeing what is going on [...] or if such persons are nearby or are going to learn of it" (2007, 1385a).¹⁶ In her speech, Thunberg relies on both senses of proximity, immediate and future. Thunberg is, in this sense, literally 'in' the eyes of the audience: she watches on as they attempt to address the climate crisis.

Crucial to Thunberg's message, however, is that the speech offers the audience a way to redeem themselves. After pointing out her audience's hypocrisy of claiming to hear the youth while failing to act, Thunberg adds: "No matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act then you would be evil and that I refuse to believe" (lines 11-13). This part of the speech relies on a dissociation, in the Perelmanian sense, between a true and false understanding of the situation.¹⁷ Those, like the speaker, who truly grasp the urgency of the crisis would do anything to address it and therefore those refusing to act are either pure evil or not yet enlightened. The choice for the audience is what Maurice Charland would call "the illusion of freedom," namely to side with the forces of true evil or accept the new reality offered by Thunberg in which the climate is in crisis and the one sole priority of the world becomes bringing global warming to a halt (Charland 1987, 141). As I noted before, Perelman identifies this type of presence as "enallage of time," in which who we are in the present is conditional on our future actions. The speech clearly aims to urge the audience to reconsider in the present to prevent future

15. This is a reference to a contemporary saying that "shame is in the eyes," as Kennedy explains (Aristotle 2007, 1384a, especially note 46).

16. In the first instance, Aristotle refers to one Cydias of Cythnus who debated how to allot the lands that Athens had conquered in Samos, and tells the orator to imagine as if all the Greeks were present and standing in a circle around him or her (Aristotle 2007, 1385a).

17. See Part IV of the *New Rhetoric* "The Dissociation of Concepts," especially page 415 onwards. Also helpful is James Jasinski's explanation in his *Sourcebook on Rhetoric* (2001, 175-182).

catastrophe and offers it a way out of having to face the shameful reckoning with future generations by joining the speaker's efforts to prevent further global warming.

This is the other level on which the alienating rhetoric of the speech serves a purpose: to make present the absent future generations. Throughout the speech, Thunberg claims to speak not just for herself, but for a collective future "we." She literally opens her speech with this with "my message is that *we*'ll be watching you" (line 1, my emphasis). While most of the opening of the speech is in the first person, which is in line with her emphasis on making herself present, she increasingly gravitates towards the third person plural as the speech progresses. At first, she is still referring to her own generation (see line 20), but this changes in the peroratio. She starts out by saying that: "you are failing us, but the young people are starting to understand your betrayal," and then seamlessly moves to include all generations to come: "The eyes of all future generations are upon you and if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this" (lines 33-36). Here, Thunberg transitions from the "I" to the collective "we" to present herself as the voice of not just her own generation, but of all generations to come. Thunberg, in other words, presents herself as standing vigil on behalf of the future. As before, Thunberg contrasts this collective "we/us" with the "you" of the audience, as in "fifty percent may be acceptable to *you*, but [...] is simply not acceptable to us, we who have to live with the consequences" (lines 17, 22-23).

This brings me to my final point about Thunberg's presence: the attempt to transcend herself and assume the voice of future generations. Her ability to do this once again rests on the use of presence, as well as the ethos established early on in the speech. As the by far youngest delegate to the summit, Thunberg can claim a closer proximity to future generations than most other delegates, and from that the right to speak for them. Strictly speaking, though, she has no more right to assume the voice of the unborn than anyone else in the audience. In fact, by doing so Thunberg is more or less committing the same error of making assumptions about what future generations want and will do that she accuses the current generation of leaders of doing earlier on (see especially lines 20-21).¹⁸ In Thunberg's case, however, those future generations are not (yet) present, which allows her to assume their voice on stage.

Thunberg speaks for future generations by literally embodying and channeling their voice. The future generations, in other words, become present through her. This is clear from the line quoted earlier: "The eyes of all future generations are

18. It is important to point out an important difference here. Unlike what she accuses the current generation of leaders of doing, Thunberg is not shying away from the crisis of climate change and thus not committing the same error.

upon you,” she says, “and if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this” (lines 33-36). Here Thunberg makes present the absent generations to come that will stand in judgment of their elders and positions herself at their helm (“if you choose to fail *us*”). Crucially, she makes herself the linchpin between the present and the future. As I noted earlier, she effortlessly switches between the here in the present (“I say”) and there in the future (“we will”) and in doing so personifies at the same time what is and what is to come. This way, Thunberg’s speech collapses time, in that the future is already right here on our doorstep. Note for example how the future generations (the “we”) are already here when she says: “Right here, right now is where *we* draw the line” (line 36, my emphasis).¹⁹ Here again the speech employs presence as “enallage of time,” and transcends temporality by having a future actor intervene in the present. True to her antagonistic style, Thunberg does not present this as likely, but as inevitable. “The world is waking up and change is coming, whether you like it or not,” she states (lines 36-37). She does not specify exactly what change will happen, but simply portrays it as inescapable fate that her audience has no option but to accept. The only choice she leaves her audience is whether to side with the future and redeem themselves, or go down in history as those turning their back on it.

This embodying of future generations confers an additional credibility to Thunberg’s performance, which is crucial for her goal, since she lacks the legal, political, and social power to force the delegates to act. This becomes clear by looking at the threat that she issues in the name of the future, which is not just moral in nature (“we will never forgive you”), but legal as well (“we will not let you get away with this”). For the first, the speech relies once again on the audience’s sense of shame. This threat will ring hollow, of course, unless the audience cares about how the future generations, including that of Thunberg, will judge them. For the latter, however, she seems to imply a punishment for those who turn their back to the future. What form this punishment will take remains unclear here – let alone on what legal basis such a post-facto verdict could be determined – and Thunberg can only rely on her credibility as spokesperson for the future generations to give any real substance to it. In a way, she relies on the same notion of shame here, but then cast forward. As Aristotle notes, people are ashamed in the eyes of those who witness their shortcoming and fear that these will be made public. “Those inclined to tell tales [of the shameful behavior],” he writes, “are those who have been wronged, because they keep on the watch” (2007, 1384b). Thunberg embodies the watchful eyes of these future generations that the delegates of the Summit know

19. The same is true for the line before this in the speech, that I quote above: “the eyes of the future generations are upon you and if you choose to fail us, I say, we will never forget you” (lines 33-35). My argument here is that the “we” in the next sentences refers back to these future generations, rather than just Thunberg’s own.

they will face in the future and thus makes present the shame they will – or shall – feel when they fail to act to save the climate.

Her embodying of the future generations and voicing their supposed judgment of those living in the present serves Thunberg's cause since it employs presence to confer urgency and credibility to it. At the same time, as I noted earlier, it also creates a distance between her and the audience that undermines its ability to identify with her. Furthermore, it makes her message conditional on the unwillingness of her audience to call into question her right to claim to speak for those absent. With regard to distance, the presence used in the speech does not simply put Thunberg above the audience – i.e. as morally superior – but in fact positions her *outside* the audience; not as a part of them, but as sitting in judgment of them. As a “child,” she is not part of the decision-making process but a recipient – or, rather, a victim – of its consequences. In the end, Thunberg's reliance on the child-persona not only claims innocence for the current situation, but for future conduct as well. This requires her to mask her own attempt to affect the decision making at the summit, because her very speech, after all, is an attempt to influence the climate policies of those present. As a result, Thunberg puts all responsibility for how her audience responds to her message at their feet and positions herself as aloof from it. Her identification with the yet unborn who are unable to act allows her to dodge responsibility for the future, even though she is very much exerting agency at the same time. In this sense, Thunberg positions herself outside time even, since she is neither responsible for the cause of the problem (past), nor the solution (present), but a victim of its consequences (future).

4. Conclusion

This analysis of Greta Thunberg's speech seeks to demonstrate the potential of rhetoric for the field of Future Studies, as well as that of presence in the rhetoric of climate change activism. Her young age and lack of formal political power both allow and invite Thunberg to portray (herself as) the future present. The speech not only seeks to inverse the child-parent relationship by framing Thunberg's very presence on stage as a mockery, but presents her as the embodiment of future generations judging those present and spurring them to action. This rhetoric of making the future present allows her to transcend time itself and assume a position of moral superiority to stand in judgment of her audience. The speech's message relies on her audience's sense of shame of being called out by a child that speaks for future generations to act up and save them. Its effectiveness rests largely on Thunberg's ability to make the future present to those she speaks to, but, in doing so, she makes it hard for older generations in particular to identify with

her and her message. As a result, while the speech succeeds in giving a voice to unborn generations by its use of presence, it ultimately fails at creating the type of intergenerational dialogue envisaged by Goode and Godhe, as it juxtaposes, rather than connects, those living in the present and the future.

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Appendix: Greta Thunberg's speech at UN Climate Action Summit

My message is that we'll be watching you. (line 1)

This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet, you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! (lines 2-3)

You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words and yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you! (lines 4-7)

For more than 30 years, the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you're doing enough when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight. (lines 8-10)

You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency, but no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act then you would be evil and that I refuse to believe. (lines 11-13)

The popular idea of cutting our emissions in half in 10 years only gives us a 50 percent chance of staying below 1.5 degrees and the risk of setting off irreversible chain reactions beyond human control. (lines 14-16)

Fifty percent may be acceptable to you, but those numbers do not include tipping points, most feedback loops, additional warming hidden by toxic air pollution or the aspects of equity and climate justice. (lines 17-19)

They also rely on my generation sucking hundreds of billions of tons of your CO₂ out of the air with technologies that barely exist. (lines 20-21)

So a 50 percent risk is simply not acceptable to us, we who have to live with the consequences. (lines 22-23)

To have a 67% chance of staying below a 1.5 degrees of global temperature rise the best odds given by the IPCC the world had 420Gt of CO₂ left to emit back on January 1, 2018. Today that figure is already down to less than 350Gt. (lines 24-26)

How dare you pretend that this can be solved with just business as usual and some technical solutions? With today's emissions levels, that remaining CO₂ budget will be entirely gone within less than eight and a half years. (lines 27-29)

There will not be any solutions or plans presented in line with these figures here today, because these numbers are too uncomfortable and you are still not mature enough to tell it like it is. (lines 30-32)

You are failing us, but the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you and if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you. (lines 33-35)

We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up and change is coming, whether you like it or not. Thank you (lines 36-37)