

The Future is Now: Blending theory and the reconfiguration of the climate crisis

Caitlin Johnstone

University of British Columbia, cjohns99@student.ubc.ca

Keywords: Blending, Viewpoint, Climate change, Framing, Multimodality

I apply Fauconnier and Turner's blending theory (2002) to three artefacts: a meme (Fig . 1); a poem entitled Letter to Noah's Wife (Popa 2019); and a short film called A Message from the Future (Boekbinder and Batt 2019). All three pieces negotiate multiple viewpoints (Dancygier and Vandelanotte 2016) as they attempt to reconstrue the audience's conceptualization of the climate crisis. Effectively communicating about climate change involves addressing the problem of scale. Temporally distant events must be understood as immediately urgent, and contingent upon present day decisions. In each of these pieces, this problem is addressed using the mechanism of compression, which reduces the conceptual distance between the climate present and the climate future. Through this mechanism, imagined futures are used as a framework through which to conceptualize the climate crisis. This allows the viewer to reason backwards, inferring the creator's viewpoint of the present on the basis of their representation of the future. Through this, it is possible to circumvent the need to offer specifics about the causes that this imagined future is conditional upon, as this can be extrapolated on the basis of the future scenario that is proposed. My analysis demonstrates that this pattern of reasoning is employed to different effect across each of these three artefacts. This logic is essential to climate change communication, which is inherently steeped in uncertainty. By its nature, it is required to make claims about the future that do not have a certain grounding in the present.

To achieve this conceptual compression, it is necessary first to evoke representations of both the present and the future. In each of the artefacts, these input spaces appear within a distinct organizing frame (Fillmore 1976). For the meme (Fig. 1), the climate future and the climate present input spaces, evoked by the labels, are scaffolded by the image macro, which provides the organizing frame of the Ever Given Suez Canal shipping disaster. The image provides the scalar mismatch between problem and solution, which is interpreted as suggesting our current climate change mitigation efforts to be insufficient. The other artefacts, by contrast, employ radically different organizing frames. The poem draws on Noah's ark and the Biblical flood, underscoring the inevitability of the climate crisis whilst pointing to the potential for future renewal. The film draws instead on a utopic representation of a future in which we successfully address climate change, profiling the American political context.

Crucially, my analysis demonstrates that despite the differences in the organizing frames, and the genre-specific conventions of each artefact, the same pattern appears consistently; cause and effect are compressed, so that the specific reasons for the appearance of a particular climate future are obscured. Examining these artefacts therefore reveals a fundamental problem of climate change communication. By structuring the present in terms of an imagined future, we are obscuring the need to define the actions that we will take, or avoid taking, in order to bring this future about.



Fig. 1 Meme depicting the Ever Given stuck in the Suez Canal

References

- Boekbinder, Kim. and Batt, Jim. (Directors). 2019. *A Message from the Future With Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez*. [Film] The Intercept
- Dancygier, Barbara & Lieven Vandelanotte. 2016. Discourse viewpoint as network. In Barbara Dancygier, Lu Wei-Lun & Arie Verhagen (eds.), *Viewpoint and the fabric of meaning: Form and use of viewpoint tools across languages and modalities* (pp. 13–40). De Gruyter Mouton.
- Fauconnier, Gilles. and Turner, Mark. 2002. *The Way We Think: Conceptual blending and the mind's hidden complexities*. Basic Books.
- Fillmore, Charles J. 1976. Frame Semantics and the Nature of Language. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 280(1), 20-32
- Popa, Maya C. 2019. *Letter to Noah's Wife*. Poets.org. <https://poets.org/poem/letter-noahs-wife> (March 17, 2023.)