"COVID-19 is the Earth's vaccine":

Controversial metaphors in environmental discourse

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Abstract

This paper proposes a discussion of the controversial conceptualisation "Nature is healing. We are the virus". These depictions have been observed in Twitter threads during the peak of COVID-19 pandemic. The implications entail that solving the climate crisis would require humanity to be eliminated (like a VIRUS). I investigate the ways environmentalists have metaphorically depicted the causes and consequences of the health crisis. Indeed, it is acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change can be interrelated if one considers the role of humans' uncontrolled consumption in the spread of these two phenomena. Environmentalists have emphasised the consequences of pollution on health, they praised the drop of emissions documented during the lockdown, and they advertised a post-COVID-19 world where humans reduce pollution to avert a new health crisis. The paper thus asks to what extent (if at all) environmentalists relied on disputable depictions such as HUMANITY AS A VIRUS (FOR THE PLANET). The research relies on pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, and discourse analysis to study environmental texts published by major Non-Governmental Organisations. This analysis will lead me to question the relevance of the metaphorical conceptualisation HUMANITY AS A VIRUS (FOR THE PLANET) in environmental discourse. The results show that environmentalists effectively rely on metaphors to blame humanity for the present crises, but they adapt these metaphorical conceptualisations to show support to the communities suffering from the virus and to promote mitigation.*Keywords:* Nature is healing; Metaphor; Twitter; Greenpeace; Extinction Rebellion; Lockdown

"COVID-19 is the Earth's vaccine":

Controversial metaphors in environmental discourse

This paper draws on the controversy associating the COVID-19 pandemic and environmental issues. This controversy emerged from a metaphorical conceptualisation promoted by a number of environmental activists on Twitter. These activists created a thread using the hashtag (#) "Nature is healing. We are the virus" to praise the decrease of gas emissions induced by the lockdown.

The "Nature is healing" thread relies on a well-documented conceptualisation in environmental discourse which personifies Nature in order to depict pollution as a DISEASE, thus making it more concrete to "lay" people. For instance, one may consider the relevance of James Lovelock's Gaia theory (2007) in environmental sciences which explains how the ecosystem evolves as a living organism that can react to excessive pollution through environmental disruptions. From a spiritual viewpoint, the personification of Nature can also be perceived in the identification of "Mother Nature" (Augé, 2019a) who is represented as a figure of authority who needs to be respected by humanity. In the context of the pandemic, this personification has taken on an additional argumentative function in environmental discourse: while attention towards environmental issues decreased following global health concerns, environmentalists drew a link between people's experiences of COVID-19 and Nature's HEALTH CONDITIONS (Augé, 2021a; Sorce and Dumitrica, 2021). This led some activists to extend this metaphorical conceptualisation on Twitter through descriptions of humanity as a VIRUS for the planet. Scholars contested such descriptions at several levels (see Bosworth, 2021): first, these posts were illustrated with eulogistic pictures of natural elements "thriving" in a less polluted environment, e.g. pictures of Venice's clear blue sky, elephants having a bath in rivers, wild birds flying above cities. However, these pictures and associated captions were then contradicted by existing reports showing

the continuous degradation of the environment. Second, the characterisation of Nature as a HEALING BODY implies that climate change does not require long-term actions to be mitigated. These depictions were observed at an early stage of the pandemic, when emissions just started to decrease. The resulting enthusiasm from online activists thus led to misleading conceptions about the environmental threat. Third, the identification of humanity as a VIRUS is particularly concerning at a time when the population experiences major health concerns and high rates of hospitalisations. Such a conceptualisation implies that in order to solve the climate crisis, humanity needs to be eliminated like a VIRUS (Augé, forthcoming). Therefore, such a conceptual trend has been perceived as an instance of "bad environmentalism" or "environmental fascism" (Bosworth, 2021), relying on fake data and promoting human extinction.

The present research aims at testing the relevance of such a controversial metaphorical conceptualisation in environmental discourse. I here ask to what extent (if at all) environmentalists relied on disputable depictions such as HUMANITY IS A VIRUS (FOR THE PLANET)? Through a pragmatic, cognitive, and discourse analysis of the metaphors observed in environmental discourse, I demonstrate that environmentalists may, indeed, rely on metaphors to blame human behaviour. The analysis presented below shows that these metaphors convey particular arguments aiming at convincing recipients to stop polluting activities. I also demonstrate that metaphors can be used by environmentalists to depict the lockdown (and the decrease of gas emissions) as an opportunity to "build back better". While these metaphorical depictions – blaming humanity and praising lockdown – may resonate with existing controversial descriptions on Twitter, I show that environmentalists carefully avoided to endorse the images displayed by the statement "Nature is healing. We are the virus" through counter-narratives.

1 The role of metaphors in environmental discourse

Metaphors play an essential role in environmental discourse. Through the mapping of a complex target domain associated with the topic of cli-

mate change with a concrete, familiar source domain associated with an "alien" concept, metaphors can help "lay" people to understand highly complex, scientific findings (Lakoff, 1993). For example, the warmth produced by gases in the atmosphere is metaphorically identified as a "greenhouse effect" (Augé, 2022; Romaine, 1996). The popularisation of scientific observations is required to convince individuals to perform emission reduction and to be more cautious about domestic waste (Augé, 2021b). In the present research, I focus on two target domains associated with environmental issues: on the one hand, I analyse how humans' responsibilities have been metaphorically depicted by environmentalists. On the other hand, I focus on how the lockdown – and the drop of gas emissions – have been metaphorically praised. In addition, I discuss the reliance on metaphors using HEALTH as a source domain, with possible depictions such as HUMANITY AS A VIRUS, COVID-19 AS THE EARTH'S VACCINE, and NATURE AS A HEALING BODY.

Metaphor scholars who analysed metaphorical expressions in media discourse and in political discourse demonstrated that metaphors can also serve an ideological function. For instance, Musolff (2016) focuses on the metaphorical mapping NATION AS BODY as it has been used in European debates. His study establishes how different BODY-features have been attributed to the NATION to advertise different arguments regarding the place of Britain within Europe (e.g., with mentions of a "blood clot", "a rotten heart", "a limb"). These metaphorical expressions were effective in advancing political opinions, and these played a significant role in the debates, i.e. politicians could then adapt the metaphor NATION AS BODY to their own viewpoint (see also Musolff, 2004; 2020).

The ideological function of metaphors is also at play in environmental discourse. Indeed, while the identification of the phenomenon is grounded in a series of scientific models and experiments, the mitigation it involves may generate various debates opposing climate activists to sceptical communities (Augé, 2022). For example, some corpus-based studies reveal an association between RELIGION metaphors and scepticism regarding climate science. Nerlich (2010; see also Shaw

and Nerlich, 2015) studies metaphors used in media depictions of climate change. Her results show that RELIGION metaphors depict scientists as spreaders of fake news and science as "untrue". In political speeches, Lakoff (2010) suggests that the politicians who favour the enactment of climate policies do not show good mastery of argumentation through metaphors. However, U.S. Republicans use effective metaphors to communicate about such policies. Lakoff (2010, p.73) claims that this lack of metaphorical depictions to promote mitigation may be the reason behind the fact that not enough climate policies have been voted. In addition, politicians may promote certain metaphorical conceptualisations in order to advertise the environmentally friendly aspects involved (or not) in their decisions. These may also be used to reassure recipients and downplay the risks associated with climate change (Lakoff, 2004). For example, Lakoff (2004, p. 22) refers to the legislation named the "Clear Skies Act" whose outcome would increase pollution rates while the metaphor ("clear") suggests an absence of polluting gases (US green rhetoric is discussed in Bonnefille, 2008).

In environmental discourse, Doyle (2007) shows that metaphors form a significant part of the communication performed by Non-Governmental Organisations like Greenpeace. She establishes how this organisation has relied on metaphors – in verbals and in visuals – to warn recipients about the emergency to tackle climate change (e.g., climate change as a TIME BOMB). Notably, several studies establish the prevalent function of HEALTH metaphors in environmental discourse (i.e., the ECOSYSTEM HEALTH; Augé, 2021a; Ross et al., 1997). These metaphors illustrate the relationship between humans and the environment with HEALTH-related expressions, and they emphasise humans' dependence on nature. Metaphorical references to the SYMPTOMS, or TREATMENT of the environment can advertise suitable solutions to ecological problems (1997, p.123), e.g. "An ecological system is *healthy* and free *from distress syndrome* if it is stable and sustainable" (1997, p.119)

Such metaphors have gained additional functions in environmental discourse produced during the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Char-

teris-Black, 2021, p.110). Sorce and Dumitrica (2021) convincingly demonstrate how the environmental organisation Fridays For Future used metaphors in their communications in order to reframe the COVID-19 debates around environmental issues. Augé (2021a) focuses on the source domain HEALTH to analyse how NATURE'S HEALTH CONDITIONS may have developed during the pandemic: the communications released by the organisation Extinction Rebellion show that global health concerns led the Rebels to metaphorically insist on the link between humans' health and NATURE'S HEALTH (e.g., "Neither COVID nor climate pay attention to borders. The world is a small place, and we are all interconnected. This is the basis of *planetary health. Prevention is better than cure*"; Augé, 2021a, p. 11). Here, I ask to what extent these HEALTH-related metaphors have been used by environmentalists. Considering the controversy associated with the Twitter thread "Nature is healing", I analyse the metaphors used by environmentalists in descriptions of humans' responsibilities and descriptions of the environmental impacts of lockdown. This analysis will establish if HEALTH metaphors have indeed produced such controversial environmental statements or if other metaphors – not related to the source domain HEALTH – have been favoured. The following section provides information about the methodology at play in the data selection and the identification and analysis of metaphorical expressions.

2 Methodology

I here offer a corpus-based approach (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001) to the metaphors used in environmental discourse to 1) depict humans' responsibility for climate change and for the COVID-19 pandemic, and 2) depict the lockdown as an opportunity to "build back better"[1]. In other words, I focus on a limited set of metaphorical expressions used in a corpus composed of environmental texts in order to test the main hypothesis of the present research, i.e. environmentalists may have relied on controversial metaphorical conceptualisations such as "Nature is healing" to praise the effects of the lockdown. I do not aim at presenting

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1   https://www.buildbackbetter.org.uk/

an exhaustive account of the different metaphors that can be observed in environmental discourse produced during the pandemic. Instead, I highlight how metaphors have been used to discuss these two particular sub-topics.

The corpus composed for the present research includes texts retrieved from the official websites and archives of two major international Non-Governmental Organisations focusing on environmental issues: Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion. Other organisations have been of interest, like Fridays for Future, World Wild Fund, and Friends of the Earth, but these only offer limited metaphorical descriptions of the two main sub-topics: humans' responsibilities and decrease of emissions during the lockdown (i.e., two metaphorical statements have been observed in the Fridays for Future's website, two metaphorical statements have been observed in the World Wild Fund's website, and three metaphorical statements have been observed in the Friends of the Earth's website, sometimes relying on similar metaphorical conceptualisations across different publications). Hence, in order to offer an overview of the metaphors used by environmentalists to address the two topics, I focus on the variety of metaphorical statements observed in the communications produced by Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion. This focus will help me to demonstrate how possible controversial statements may interact with different (perhaps, less controversial?) metaphorical conceptualisations in the publications under study. For the purpose of the study, I delimited a particular timeframe: the corpus includes texts produced during the pandemic, i.e. from January 2020 to October 2021 (when the research started). In addition, a subsequent selection of texts has been performed with a focus on the scope through which the pandemic was described. I thus exclusively focused on publications which described humans' responsibility for the phenomena (climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic), the drop of gas emissions during lockdown, the association between COVID-19 and climate change, and the environmental opportunities appearing at the end of the lockdown (e.g., COVID-19 as a "wake-up call"). Even if the timeframe includes publications produced until October 2021, it is not surprising to observe that most of the metaphorical descriptions related to the (positive) impact of

the lockdown appear in earlier publications (produced in 2020). For this reason, most of the extracts discussed below originate in publications produced during the early stage of the pandemic. These have been selected in order to offer a comprehensive – but non-exhaustive – picture of the different arguments that have been promoted metaphorically in environmental discourse.

I performed a manual analysis of these different texts in order to identify the metaphorical expressions (unrestricted to HEALTH metaphors) relied on to address these topics. In order to determine the metaphorical meaning of an expression (as opposed to its literal meaning), I used the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIPVU; Steen et al., 2010). This procedure proposes three main steps to test the metaphoricity of an expression in discourse:

- read texts and identify an "alien" word,
- search for a more "basic" meaning of this word,
- if this "basic" meaning differs from the contextual meaning (the meaning of the word in the text), identify the metaphorical mapping (Steen et al., 2010).

These different methodological steps resulted in the identification of a plurality of metaphorical expressions unrestricted to the source domain HEALTH. The details of the corpus are provided in Table 1 below:

Organisations	Greenpeace	Extinction Rebellion
Sources	Greenpeace.org	Rebellion.earth
Number of texts about humans' responsibilities and effects of the lockdown	130	121
Metaphorical occurrences (responsibilities and lockdown)	13	36

Table 1: Details of the corpus

While the scope of the present research is not to compare these different organisations, Table 1 shows that – within the same time-frame – Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion significantly focused on the topics under study. However, it has been observed that other organisations like Fridays For Future only offer a limited number of texts and metaphorical occurrences addressing these issues. This might be due to the particularity of the latter organisation which focuses on school strikes and demonstrations (the movement emerged as a result of the impact of Greta Thunberg's school strike). The results discussed below illustrate how the metaphorical expressions observed in these different environmental texts from Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion have blamed humanity and promoted the opportunities resulting from the lockdown. I first discuss the HEALTH metaphors which have been used to depict these two topics, I then present the different metaphorical statements which address the positive impacts of the lockdown and human responsibilities: the CRIME and the CONTAINER metaphors. I study how the images of "Nature is healing" have been endorsed or disputed by the different environmental organisations.

3 "Nature is healing": HEALTH metaphors and counter-discourse

Environmentalists have described the COVID-19 pandemic, and in particular, the lockdown, as an opportunity to "build back better". These descriptions present the temporary end of (industrial) activities as an illustration showing that a different society can be built, i.e. a society in which humanity does not rely on industries to live. Therefore, the lockdown was used as an example of such a society, and environmentalists highlighted that this experience of lockdown could make the population realise that a more sustainable world is not only a utopia. They insisted on this aspect because they feared the end of the lockdown would mean a "return to normal". The descriptions of the lockdown in environmental discourse thus presents an optimistic view on post-lockdown society. This is exemplified in the extract presented below:

(1)This is the time to reimagine our streets. The increase in air

quality is tangible to all. We can't go back to the pollution we had before where *cars are king*. It's time to share space equitably; *putting people and the planet's health first*. Enabling our children to walk and cycle will make *our cities and towns thrive with life*."

<div align="right">(Extinction Rebellion, 15/05/2020)[2]</div>

In extract (1), from Extinction Rebellion, the pandemic is perceived through a PATH metaphor ("go back"). This description emphasises that pollution ("cars") represents a lack of PHYSICAL PROGRESSION. This extract re-interprets the environmental characteristics of the past to reveal the unpleasant aspects of such a society. For instance, the past is perceived as a KINGDOM. This conceptualisation comprises negative features because it metaphorically establishes how the population has attributed authoritarian powers to non-human entities, i.e. cars. This description of the past echoes the description of the lockdown period when "the air quality" has increased. In turn, this positive effect of the lockdown is emphasised in the end of the extract where the environmentalists focus on the health impact of pollution from cars ("health of the planet"; "thrive with life"). Hence, the metaphorical depiction aims at presenting a eulogistic image of the consequences of the lockdown in order to show to recipients the extent of the damages done by the unrestrained "authority" of cars in the past. Such a comparison thus argues that air quality can be improved in the long term, if cities and towns stop being "dominated" by cars. The personifications of cars ("king"), planet ("health"), and cities and towns ("thrive with life") establish a storyline which qualifies the past as a storied world dominated by an EVIL-MINDED AUTHORITY. This is opposed to the metaphorical depiction of the post-pandemic world, where living entities (planet and humanity) do not suffer from major health issues related to car pollution.

It should be noted that environmentalists have acknowledged the controversy associated with the metaphorical statement "Nature is healing. We are the virus" advertised on Twitter by individual activists (Bosworth, 2021). While these online activists may well be associated with

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2   The sources of the extracts presented here can be found in the Appendix.

one of the environmental organisations under study, the information provided in the Twitter thread does not explicitly associate such statements with any established organisations.

The environmentalists from Greenpeace posted publications questioning this conceptualisation, with emphasis on the partial endorsement related to humans' responsibilities and to the positive effects of the lockdown. However, these official statements deny the controversial implications. Environmentalists thus adapted the statement to fit their arguments while avoiding the extended identification of HUMANITY AS A VIRUS or COVID-19 AS THE EARTH'S VACCINE. Such exploitations can be perceived in the extract presented below:

> (2) Back at the beginning of the pandemic, *we saw posts everywhere saying that "nature was healing"* as animals strolled freely around cities, pollution levels dropped drastically, allowing people *to see what wasn't in their horizon before*. But this was framed wrong: we should not focus on *the healing, but on what had made nature sick* in the first place.
>
> (Greenpeace, 07/08/2020)

In extract (2), from Greenpeace, the environmentalists explicitly refer to the Twitter thread. We can see that this thread has been used to produce a different argument, allowing the metaphor users to avoid the controversial implications. While Greenpeace praised the environmental effect of the lockdown (through the use of the CONTAINER metaphor; see section 5), they here deny their endorsement to such eulogistic views of the pandemic. By not focusing on the HEALING, Greenpeace acknowledges the irreversible impact of polluting industries. Indeed, the environmentalists state that the thread started "at the beginning of the pandemic". However, extract (2) was selected from a text published in August 2020, when the (first) lockdown was over. At this time, the environmentalists already knew about and experienced the effects of the re-opening of industries. Therefore, this public denial is effective to on the one hand, dissociate the organisation from the controversies and, on the other hand, establish the responsibilities of industries for the

negative effects of pollution. The depiction of a SICK NATURE thus highlights that environmental optimism cannot prevail since the cause of SICKNESS has not disappeared. Yet, the questioning of the conceptualisation "Nature is healing" does not so much refer to the associated controversies: environmentalists even partially endorse this image to use the online activists' relief in order to promote a long-term relief which would involve the definitive drop of emissions. In addition, this partial endorsement (associated with an explicit denial "this was framed wrong") can be perceived in the use of the past perfect to describe nature' s SICKNESS, i.e. "what had made nature sick". The use of the past tense to describe NATURE'S SICKNESS implies that, according to Greenpeace, Nature had indeed HEALED. However, Greenpeace still questions the reality of the HEALING because they associate the SICKNESS with industrial pollution: this insists on the fact that the HEALING is only punctual and does not prevail any more at the time the publication was released.

Even in publications which do not explicitly refer to the controversial Twitter thread, some extracts show that environmentalists have relied on HEALTH metaphors to emphasise the link between human activities, climate change, and COVID-19. This is exemplified in the extract presented below:

> (3) We are at an *intersection* of global crises. Climate, COVID-19, racial injustice – all are *symptoms of a toxic system that is driving us to extinction*. We cannot carry on like this.
> (Extinction Rebellion, 01/09/2020)

In extract (3), from Extinction Rebellion, the environmentalists do not explicitly refer to the Twitter thread and its associated controversies. However, we can see that they similarly discuss the pandemic through the HEALTH metaphor ("symptoms"; see also Augé, 2021a). Here, the HEALTH metaphor does not mention any HEALING: instead, Extinction Rebellion focuses on the interrelation between different crises ("intersection"). The fact that the climate crisis and racial crisis have not been solved prevents the metaphor users from promoting a positive view

of the COVID-19 pandemic and its environmental effects. For instance, they exploit the HEALTH metaphor to emphasise that the pandemic is only a SYMPTOM. This limits the scope of the metaphorical depiction and argues that other precarious CRISES-SYMPTOMS prevail. Within this conceptualisation, Nature is still SICK since its SICKNESS is not restricted to the pandemic. According to Extinction Rebellion, Nature can only HEAL when its VIRUS – i.e., the "toxic system" – is being treated. While in extract (2), Greenpeace partially endorsed the conceptualisation "Nature is healing" to convince recipients that industrial pollution is a SICKNESS, Extinction Rebellion explicitly denies this conceptualisation to place the COVID-19 pandemic, racial injustice, and the climate crisis on the same scale and to identify the prevailing VIRUS which has not yet been treated: the toxic system.

In the next section, I discuss the use of particular metaphors related to the personification of the industrialised world as a CRIMINAL HARMING HUMANITY. Here, the pandemic and the climate crisis are not identified as HEALTH CONDITIONS, but as CRIMINAL ACTIONS performed in order to impact the planet.

4 "Normal is killing us": (SELF-INFLICTED) CRIME metaphors to identify the responsible sectors

During the pandemic, environmentalists produced texts emphasising humanity's responsibilities in the surge of the crises. They perceived the pandemic as an explicit, global manifestation of environmental disruptions. Metaphorical expressions have been used to criticise the various polluting activities which have led to such a global health crisis. These metaphors promote particular arguments aiming at emphasising the damaging features of these "past" activities, i.e. the activities that were performed before lockdown.

For instance, several occurrences from the corpus refer to humans' "normal" behaviour, which highlight the unprecedented and surprising aspects of the consequences of the pandemic. This "normal" behaviour

is defined by environmentalists as a lack of attention towards gas emissions, leading humanity to increase pollution regardless of the impacts on health and on the environment. These metaphorical depictions of "normality" can be observed in the extracts presented below:

(4) "We can't go back to normal when *'normal' is a toxic mix* of climate emergency, systemised oppression and inequality, and a dangerous political shift to the right, leading to a scary and unpredictable climax".

(Greenpeace. 16/09/2020)

(5) "We are at *a turning point* in human history. It's becoming clearer every day that the Government isn't capable of *getting us out of the coronavirus mess*, or preventing climate breakdown and animal suffering. They are more concerned with *getting us back to "normal"* as rapidly as possible. But *it's normal that is killing us.* So as the UK lockdown begins to ease, we stand at the *crossroads*: Bail out people and the planet OR bail out *the industries that are killing us*. We have a choice.

(Extinction Rebellion. 11/07/2020)

In extract (4), from Greenpeace, we see that the pandemic is perceived as a PROGRESSION ALONG A PATH ("go back to"). This PROGRESSION, in view of the impact of the pandemic, has allowed humanity to experience the consequences of their past mistakes (i.e., uncontrolled pollution, inequality, political choices). This experience has helped humans to "move past" the obstacle of "normality". In other words, in this extract, "normality" is implicitly conceptualised as a PATH THAT IS LIMITED BY AN OBSTACLE. Because the pandemic has forced the population to adopt an "abnormal" behaviour, this has produced a NEW PATH which is characterised by the absence of "climate emergency, systemised oppression and inequality, and dangerous political shift to the right". Yet, this NEW PATH is not the focus of the extract: instead, the environmentalists expressed their anxiety regarding the end of the pandemic which would, ultimately, allow people to "return to normality". Hence, another metaphorical conceptualisation appears in order

to convince recipients that "normal is not normal". Here, "normality" is perceived negatively but the extract implies that the population (or politicians and people working in the industries) has a positive image of this concept. Therefore, the environmentalists highlight the various aspects which contradict this positive image, through the metaphor NORMALITY AS A TOXIC MIX. This metaphor does not only deny the positive features of normality, it also questions the identification of the concept "normality". Indeed, "normality" is a highly complex concept which may be too subjective to define, but through the lens of environmentalism, "normality" is perceived in relation to dangerous social trends (like uncontrolled pollution) which endangers humans' health. Thus, the environmentalists rely on the conceptual association linking human life to the concept of "normality" and emphasise that human life trends eventually prevent the continuation of human life (as it has been demonstrated by the impacts of the pandemic, i.e. "toxic"). In turn, this endangerment of human life alters the concept "normality", and this alteration is at the heart of Greenpeace's arguments. The environmentalists conceptualise recipients' perception of "normality" as a TOXIC MIX in order to promote a "new normal" which would allow human life to continue and evolve according to different environmental trends. This implicitly produces an absurd image of humans' past behaviour: humanity is depicted as producing a TOXIC MIX to eventually KILL its individuals. Therefore, in this extract, Greenpeace uses the pandemic as an explicit illustration of the "abnormality" of past behaviour.

In extract (5), from Extinction Rebellion, the pandemic is similarly perceived as a PROGRESSION ALONG A PATH ("turning point"; "crossroads"). The conceptualisation slightly differs in this extract since the environmentalists do not describe a NEW PATH but a DIFFERENT DIRECTION made available following the impacts of the pandemic. In the beginning of the extract, the metaphor users explicitly blame the UK government for forcing the population to "remain" in the PATH-CONTAINER ("getting us out") that presents precarious characteristics associated with COVID-19. The interrelation of PATH and CONTAINER metaphors in the extract has a significant role in the argumentation performed by Extinction Rebellion. Indeed, the CONTAINER meta-

phor "getting us out" is followed by another PATH metaphor "getting us back": this interrelation implicitly establishes that the pandemic has allowed the population to "exit" the CONTAINER, but the government is preventing people from "escaping" to a different PATH. Thus, in this extract, "normality" is perceived as a FORCED CONTAINMENT – this conceptualisation aims at highlighting governmental responsibilities for the crises. In addition, the metaphor is extended in the end of the extract where "normality" becomes personified: it transforms into a KILLER, which echoes the lethal consequences of the climate and health crises. Such a conceptualisation is highly effective in the context of the pandemic, when people experience loss and precarious health conditions. The source domain KILLER is exploited further with an emphasis on the identification of "normality" as the "industrial world" ("industries are killing us"). This represents an indirect depiction of the government as a KILLER: because the government wants to protect industries, it puts the health of the population at risk. Metaphorically, this is represented by the images of the population TRAPPED IN A DEADLY CONTAINER (CONTAINING A KILLER) BY THE GOVERNMENT. The responsibility is put on politicians instead of humanity, but the stance of the extract aims at warning recipients that it is people's responsibilities not to listen to the government ("We have a choice"). Extinction Rebellion emphasises the extent of such a choice through metaphorical exploitations presenting the deadly characteristics of "normality".

In the next section, I focus on the metaphors used by environmentalists to describe the environmental optimism resulting from the lockdown. While this section focused on the metaphorical descriptions of humans' responsibilities, I now pay attention to the use of the CONTAINER metaphor to depict the opportunity to "build back better".

5 "The system is broken": the CONTAINER metaphor to describe new opportunities

Several metaphorical occurrences convey effective arguments which

depict a bad past that led to the pandemic. In the following extracts, we see that the "normality" of pollution is denied to focus on the unpleasant characteristics of the past which are highlighted by environmentalists in order to convince recipients about the benefits of a new society. This is exemplified in the extracts presented below:

> (6)"The Coronavirus pandemic has created *a rare crack in the system* – let's use it to create a better world. During the 2008 economic crisis, governments saved the banks. Politicians adopted relief packages that de facto favored the most polluting industries. This time it must be the planet that is 'too big to fail'. (...) When the corona crisis starts to subside, we can choose *to glue the cracks in our system together. We can also choose to look into them and catch a glimpse of a future* in which our economies are designed for the *wellbeing of both humans and the planet*."
>
> (Greenpeace. 16/04/2020).

> (7) Join our first *No Going Back* action this Thursday. Close down the biggest polluters, hang up posters over the doors of the most polluting businesses to make clear that they cannot reopen for business as usual, if *we want to rebuild a better world*. We can all feel it, *the wind is turning, change is on its way. Let's rise up on the winds of change. Let's reclaim our future.*
>
> (Extinction Rebellion, 14/04/2020)

In extract (6), Greenpeace's main argument is related to the unsuitable decisions taken by politicians. They rely on the metaphor POLITICAL SYSTEM AS A BROKEN CONTAINER to reveal politicians' responsibilities in the Coronavirus crisis. They refer to existing political decisions which have already endangered humanity, i.e. the 2008 economic crisis and the industrial bailouts. Indeed, we see the effective use of metonymies in this extract: instead of referring to the people working in banks and in industries, Greenpeace relies on the metonymy PLACE OF ACTIVITY FOR THE PEOPLE INVOLVED IN THIS ACTIVITY (see discussion of metonymies in environmental discourse in Augé,

2019b). This has an argumentative function which emphasises the negative aspects of governmental decisions: politicians have supported non-human entities instead of supporting the population. In addition, these bad decisions are associated with the COVID-19 pandemic which is presented as a consequence of such decisions. Metaphorically, this is represented as a CONTAINER that has been FRAGILISED by previous decisions which led it to BREAK following the pandemic. Yet, this image of a BROKEN CONTAINER is perceived positively by the environmentalists: unlike other CONTAINER metaphors (e.g., "greenhouse effect"; Augé, 2022), the environmentalists limit the characterisation of the CONTENT to politicians (and not humanity). Thus, the CRACK allows environmentalists to "see" the CONTENT. In this case, the impact of the pandemic is presented through a positive viewpoint: people "outside the CONTAINER" can now monitor politicians more easily. In the end of the extract, the representation of the political system as a simple object that humans can easily manipulate is exploited. The environmentalists attribute a role to the recipients by metaphorically referring to a simple action one can take to fix the problem: GLUE THE CRACKS. This highlights recipients' responsibilities to "strengthen" the system so that future pandemics and environmental issues can be averted. Therefore, the pandemic is perceived as a punctual event which BROKE THE FRAGILISED CONTAINER, and the idealised, post-pandemic politics is represented as a CONTAINER THAT HAS BEEN MENDED (i.e., the DANGEROUS CONTENT has been removed from the CONTAINER). In this extract, we can see that the post-pandemic world imagined by environmentalists is depicted through HEALTH metaphors ("well-being of the planet"). Environmentalists explicitly blame politicians for the present pandemic, and they metaphorically emphasise the causal relationship between the environmental crisis and the health crisis.

In extract (7), from Extinction Rebellion, environmentalists call readers for a passive, distanced protest. This extract was published during the peak of the epidemic, in April 2020. The beginning of the extract refers to the need to stop polluting activities – as previously discussed in section 4. Here, the pandemic is conceptualised as an event that DE-

STROYED the world, with a characterisation of the WORLD AS A (BUILT) CONTAINER. The environmentalists use this concrete image of a DESTROYED HUMAN CONTAINER to present environmental actions as necessary ("rebuild") and as simple steps that humans can take (i.e., building a container). The association with polluting industries implicitly establishes that these have a responsibility in the DESTRUCTION, but we can notice that the blame is not emphasised in the metaphorical exploitation. Indeed, in this extract, the environmentalists focus on the positive impacts of the DESTRUCTION, which forces humanity to REBUILD THEIR CONTAINER – implying that this RECONSTRUCTION will be safer for its CONTENT. This description of a BETTER RECONSTRUCTION as a forced, necessary measure is emphasised in the remainder of the extract: the environmentalists involve the recipients through the use of the pronoun "we" and insist on the fact that the need for a BETTER RECONSTRUCTION is self-evident, i.e. they refer to the recipients as a subject of an epistemic verb "feel" which shows that the change is so obvious that environmentalists can assert that everybody can "feel" it. The idiomatic reference to the WIND exemplifies this assertion: the responsibilities of polluting industries and the negative characteristics of the pre-COVID-19 world transform into a physiologically perceptible entity, the wind. This metaphorical exploitation is extended through a JOURNEY metaphor ("on its way"), personifying "change" and identifying it as an environmental SAVIOUR COMING TOWARDS HUMANITY. In the end of the extract, the perception of the DESTRUCTED world insists on the need for humanity to be saved: the perception of the pre-COVID-19 world is indirectly conceptualised as an IMPRISONMENT for environmentalists, who identify the prevalence of polluting industries as a DENIAL OF THEIR FUTURE. In other words, pollution prevents a future – which is not only impacting environmental activists but also the recipients.

Environmentalists significantly exploited the CONTAINER metaphor in order to describe COVID-19 as a possible EXIT from a polluted world to a more sustainable society. Yet, they also considered the impacts of polluting industries on society. In such cases, the CONTAINER metaphor is exploited to emphasise the risks to ENTER – or to let

pollution ENTER – a new, damaged world. This is exemplified in the extracts presented below:

> (8) We've all watched the last six months in disbelief, hoping that the Covid-19 crisis would at least provide *a doorway to a new and better world*. But instead, what we all feared has *unravelled before our eyes*: a return to an even worse version of 'business as usual'.
>
> <div align="right">(Greenpeace, 16/09/2020)</div>

> (9) We will be delivering an Open Letter to the UK Government, signed by scientists, NGOS, animal rights organisations and environmentalists, to demand that the UK Government urgently address the cause of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Government must heed this stark warning ~*the next global pandemic is on our doorsteps*, and on people's plates.
>
> <div align="right">(Extinction Rebellion, 08/09/2020)</div>

In extract (8), Greenpeace activists conceptualise the past (and present) polluted reality as an IMPRISONMENT. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic is identified as a DOORWAY, highlighting the environmentalists' perception of the past world as being deprived of such an EXIT. The image of an IMPRISONMENT is effective in reflecting the powerlessness of activists: this extract insists on the fact that past environmental actions – even if they were aimed at raising awareness – could not result in a "better world" because industrial pollution prevailed (there was no EXIT). Yet, the lack of industrial activities during the lockdown could have helped them to produce actions that would lead to sustainability. However, the "business as usual" strategy in place at the end of the lockdown "closed the door" to this possibility: pollution was not reduced, and this contradicts the reality of a greener society. In addition, this lack of reduction is here materialised, i.e. "unravelled before our eyes": this strengthens the environmentalists' arguments which, this time, depict uncontrolled pollution as a MISCHIEVOUS PERSON "moving towards" humanity and IMPRISONING them in a damaged, dangerous world.

In extract (9), from Extinction Rebellion, the environmentalists refer to the pollution induced by humans' food consumption ("people's plates"). Similarly, they describe the world as a CONTAINER. In this case, the CONTAINMENT is not perceived as an IMPRISONMENT. Here, the DOORWAY represents a danger which can let INTRUDERS in. Indeed, the continuous uncontrolled consumption is represented as an absurd behaviour from humanity who OPENS THE DOOR to the next global pandemic. The present COVID-19 pandemic was thus perceived as a "stark warning", inviting the population to CLOSE THE DOOR to such INTRUDERS. The argument can be related to the arguments discussed in extract (8): Extinction Rebellion and Greenpeace activists significantly criticise the "business as usual" post-pandemic strategy, and they rely on metaphors to on the one hand, illustrate the possibility of a more sustainable world, and on the other hand, depict the danger of past and present consumptions through more concrete features. This also emphasises the ease by which humanity can be impacted, since uncontrolled consumption facilitates the spread of viruses (or "let viruses enter").

Alternatively, environmentalists produced metaphorical descriptions of the lockdown in order to praise the environmental impact of the interruption of industrial activities. This is exemplified in the extract presented below:

> (10) With factories stopped, cars parked, and airplanes grounded, *the skies opened up for us and the waters cleared*. The drop in emissions has thus brought the issue of air pollution to the attention of many in a more tangible way.
>
> (Extinction Rebellion, 30/07/2020).

In extract (10), Extinction Rebellion relies on the CONTAINER metaphor. Yet, in this example, we see that the argument differs from the one presented in extract (9). Indeed, this extract refers to the increased air quality during the lockdown as an OPENING. This implies a conceptualisation of the past world as an IMPRISONMENT. In addition, this OPENING is associated with visible features ("brought to the atten-

tion"), which echoes the conceptual metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING (Lakoff and Johnson, 2002). Hence, the environmentalists rely on the dichotomy between a past polluted world where air was of low quality and where people were UNINFORMED and IMPRISONED, and a world under lockdown, where air is of higher quality and where people can SEE nature through the OPENING of the CONTAINER. Even if Extinction Rebellion does not explicitly argue in favour of reduction in this extract, we can still see an effective argument promoting the benefit of air quality.

In the next section, I will discuss the argumentative roles of the metaphors used by environmentalists to address the topics at play in the controversial statement "Nature is healing. We are the virus". I will also provide more details about the role of metaphors to attribute different responsibilities in environmental discourse.

6 Summary, Discussion, and Concluding Remarks

The present research has demonstrated that environmental organisations – Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion – partly endorsed the arguments implied by the thread "Nature is healing. We are the virus" (Bosworth, 2021). Indeed, they produced several official statements blaming humanity for the different crises (the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic), and praising the opportunities offered by the lockdown. However, we saw that HEALTH metaphors were used with caution. On the one hand, Greenpeace has indeed endorsed the image of "Nature is healing" but the environmentalists have been careful not to exploit the metaphorical conceptualisation. They even explicitly criticised the content of the thread, despite the fact that their statements still argue that NATURE HAD HEALED. On the other hand, Extinction Rebellion explicitly contradicts the arguments promoted by the thread. They draw a causal link between COVID-19, climate change, and racial injustice to emphasise that these are not VIRUSES but only SYMPTOMS of the SYSTEM-VIRUS. Such an interrelation between COVID-19 and climate change has indeed been previously noticed in

a study focusing on Extinction Rebellion's use of HEALTH metaphors during the COVID-19 pandemic (Augé, 2021a).

The paper also demonstrated that the environmental organisations metaphorically discussed the two (interrelated) target domains under study: humans' responsibilities and opportunities permitted by the lockdown. However, the present study finds that these organisations favoured different source domains to address these topics. It has been demonstrated that Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion significantly relied on CONTAINER and JOURNEY-PATH-MOVEMENT metaphors. They thus used ubiquitous metaphorical expressions (see Grady, 1997) which do not bear any controversial implications in the context of the pandemic (as opposed to HEALTH-related expressions). For instance, they pictured the end of polluting activities as a PROGRESSION ALONG A PATH or a DIFFERENT DIRECTION that is being BLOCKED by political decisions and industrial authority over society. Alternatively, they described the political system as a BROKEN CONTAINER while the lockdown offered humanity an EXIT so that the MISCHIEVOUS CONTENT can be REMOVED, and the CONTAINER can be FIXED. In different cases, the complex concept of (pre-COVID-19) "normality" has been depicted as a SELF-INFLICTED CRIMINAL ACTION. Environmentalists relied on this absurd image to mock humanity's past behaviour. In other extracts, the CRIME is COMMITTED by a particular sector: industries. This image insists on the necessity to prevent the "business as usual" scenario, which involves the complete re-opening of industries and the lack of control over industrial pollution.

Overall, these metaphorical depictions emphasise that humans' "normal" behaviour has been disrupted. These highlight the (un)surprising aspects of the pandemic and expose the "abnormality" of the pre-pandemic world. These arguments aim at convincing recipients to take responsibilities in the BUILDING of a better society.

In view of the existing criticism of the conceptualisation "Nature is healing. We are the virus" (Bosworth, 2021), the present research aimed at testing environmentalists' reliance on such a controversial metaphor-

ical statement. The HEALTH metaphor can indeed effectively convey environmental arguments, particularly in a social context impacted by a global pandemic (see Augé, 2021a; Charteris-Black, 2021; Sorce and Dumitrica, 2021). However, the characterisation of Nature as a HEALING BODY implies that climate change does not require long-term actions to be mitigated. This argument has notably been emphasised in the extracts discussed in this paper. Instead, environmentalists favour metaphorical descriptions which, on the one hand acknowledge the unprecedented consequences of the pandemic (e.g., a BROKEN CONTAINER) and on the other hand, take into account the supremacy of the industrialised world and of the political system (e.g., a DOORWAY BLOCKED by political decisions). The focus was thus on the damaging impacts of the decisions taken by political leaders, preventing sustainability.

A major conceptual difference exists between the metaphorical statements "Nature is healing" and "Build Back Better": the latter comprises the DESTRUCTION caused by non-environmentally friendly decisions and the concrete actions that every human-being can take to improve society (i.e., FIXING A BROKEN OBJECT). However, in the "Nature is healing" statement, the VIRUS or SICKNESS does not necessarily involve a new opportunity, and it does not necessarily involve a serious HEALTH CONDITION (i.e., the source domain VIRUS can be interpreted as a DEADLY VIRUS, but also as a simple FLUE). In addition, this controversial statement does not argue in favour of global mitigation: the metaphorical frame of MEDICINE implies that only a DOCTOR can CURE Nature. This conceptualisation thus excludes the possibilities for every human-being to perform individual actions to solve the climate crisis. Metaphorical references to the SYMPTOMS, or TREATMENT of the environment can still advertise suitable solutions (Augé, 2021a; Ross et al., 1997) as these emphasise humans' dependence on Nature: recipients can perceive environmental damages interpreted as BODY DAMAGES. Yet, these metaphors are mostly aimed at raising awareness through a concrete representation of the impact of pollution (Augé, 2021b). The controversies discussed by Bosworth (2021) are related to the role played by humanity within the mapping

NATURE AS A DISEASED BODY. For such a mapping to produce effective arguments, humanity needs to be included within the concept of NATURE – echoing James Lovelock's depiction of Gaia as a living organism (2007). Yet, humans should be excluded from the concept DISEASE, which may recall existing xenophobic statements produced during past periods (Musolff, 2010). In the context of the pandemic, the identification of humanity as a VIRUS is particularly concerning at a time when the population experiences major health concerns. Similar controversial metaphorical statements about the role of humanity during the COVID-19 pandemic have indeed yielded significant debates among linguists. They observed how the questionable exploitations of the WAR metaphor could result in the identification of sick people as ENEMIES (Augé, forthcoming; Charteris-Black, 2021).

This paper thus demonstrated that the use of metaphors to blame humanity should be carefully processed: the extracts discussed in this paper emphasised how Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion promoted humans' power to mitigate the crises through the use of metaphors. Metaphorical arguments blaming particular groups – like politicians – relied on source domains which represented actions that evil-minded individuals may perform (e.g., breaking an object or blocking a path) but, despite bearing negative features, cannot harm the population. Even if reducing pollution is a necessary mitigation that can be produced at the level of the individuals, the emphasis – through metaphors – on the damages done by humans' activities (i.e., "We are the virus") contradicts environmentalists' main argument, which is to present sustainability as an achievable, concrete goal to live in a better world.

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Appendix.

URLs of the extracts presented in the paper (Data available at: Greenpeace. org and Rebellion.earth)

1 - https://extinctionrebellion.uk/2020/05/15/16-17-may-extinction-rebellion-to-create-pop-up-bike-lanes-and-say-no-going-back-to-busy-polluted-streets-as-lockdown-eases/

2- https://www.greenpeace.org/international/story/44577/alice-bra-ga-food-commodities-deforestation/

3- https://extinctionrebellion.uk/event/we-want-to-live-summer-rebel-lion-east-of-england/

4 - https://www.greenpeace.org/international/story/45047/demand-cli-mate-justice-europe/

5 - https://extinctionrebellion.uk/event/blood-on-your-hands-global-action/

6 - https://www.greenpeace.org/international/story/30020/corona-virus-pandemic-covid-crack-system-economics-future-fairness-reco-very-climate/

7 - https://extinctionrebellion.uk/2020/04/29/uk-newsletter-14-no-going-back/

8 - https://www.greenpeace.org/international/story/45047/demand-cli-mate-justice-europe/

9 - https://extinctionrebellion.uk/event/letter-for-our-future/

10 - https://rebellion.global/blog/2020/07/30/lockdown-emissions/