

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **‘Images that liberate. Moral shock and strategic visual communication in activism for animal liberation’, by Laura Fernández**

UPF-Centre for Animal Ethics / UPF-CritiCC, 13 Diciembre 2021

#### **PUBLICATION**

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Doctoral thesis by compendium of publications: “Images that liberate. Moral shock and strategic visual communication in activism for animal liberation”

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Scientific publications within the thesis:

1. Fernández, Laura. 2020. “The Emotional Politics of Images: Moral Shock, Explicit Violence and Strategic Visual Communication in the Animal Liberation Movement.” *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 17, no. 4: 53–80. ISSN: 1933-8325,1948-352X. <http://journalforcriticalanimalstudies.org/jcas-volume-17-issue-4-july-2020/>
2. Fernández, Laura. 2019. “Using Images of Farmed Animals in Environmental Advocacy: An Antispeciesist, Strategic Visual Communication Proposal.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 63, no. 8: 1137–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764219830454>
3. Fernández, Laura. 2021. “Images That Liberate: Moral Shock and Strategic Visual Communication in Animal Liberation Activism.” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 45, no. 2: 138–158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859920932881>

#### **RESEARCH DATA**

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What has been done:

1) A literature review of the empirical studies in Spanish and English on the influence of images of violence towards nonhuman animals and the strategy of moral shock has been carried out. The most relevant studies on the effectiveness of the use of images to promote the abandonment of speciesist attitudes, that is, discriminatory towards nonhuman animals have been compiled.

2) A comparative literature review has been prepared considering strategic visual communication in animal advocacy and climate emergency activism. The common ground between both activisms have been exposed and it has been argued why the

strategy of moral shock that is used mainly in animal advocacy can also be an effective communication and persuasion tool for climate emergency activism.

3) 60 individual interviews with vegans and animal activists living in Sweden, Denmark and Spain have been conducted to:

- Find out what audio-visual content has been effective in the past to turn speciesist people into vegan activists.

- Evaluate the use of visuals by activists to spread antispeciesism and veganism.

4) A visual violence classification scale has been created for the case of images of violence towards farmed animals to find out if there are differences in the effectiveness of visual content according to the degree of explicit violence they present. The classification is based on two categories “images of explicit violence” and “images of less explicit violence”. This scale has been tested and evaluated quantitatively (through a survey on the level of violence of ten images selected by the researcher and previously analysed) and qualitatively during the interviews, and it has turned out to be a useful tool for the aims of this research.

## **MAIN RESULTS**

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### **1. Effectiveness of images of violence and moral shock to change speciesist attitudes (discriminatory attitudes towards nonhuman animals)**

1.1. Images and videos of violence towards animals and the experience of moral shock were effective in promoting the abandonment of speciesist attitudes among the vegan and antispeciesist activists interviewed.

1.2. In front of images of violence towards nonhuman animals, there is a tendency to have an emotional response that is identified as moral shock.

1.3. The main emotion that the images of violence towards nonhuman animals generated in the interviewed activists was sadness. Half considered feeling discouraged, helpless and frustrated in the face of images of violence. The next most present emotions were anger, rage, and outrage; moral disgust and repulsion (both groups of emotions most present in the first encounters with violent images); shame and guilt, not only individual but at the level of the human species in its relationship with nonhuman animals, and confusion and disbelief, which were present in almost a quarter of the testimonies. Other emotions present, but more minority, were anguish, anxiety, and a sense of urgency; despair; horror; hatred; fear and empathy.

1.4. Images of violence towards nonhuman animals were more influential in motivating the transition from vegetarianism to veganism and activism than solely for the adoption of vegetarianism among the people interviewed. The images and videos of the dairy and egg industries were very relevant to motivate the transition from vegetarianism to

veganism in the activists, especially the videos showing the separation between cows and their calves by the dairy industry, as well as the images of male chicks being grounded alive or suffocated in plastic bags by the egg industry. The activists also found the strategy of comparing farmed animals with companion animals effective. To sustain activism, moral shock and images of explicit violence were a necessary tool for some interviewees who found motivation and strength in the images. However, a minority of activists said they felt desperation and preferred to avoid seeing violent images to take care of themselves while continuing to advocate nonhuman animals.

1.5. Images of explicit violence and the experience of moral shock are considered slightly more effective by younger people or those who have adopted veganism and engaged in activism more recently. However, images of explicit violence and moral shock are effective in all genders, ages, nationalities and activist profiles, and no relevant differences have been found in terms of demographic profiles.

## 2. Visual violence scale

2.1. A classification of graphic visual violence has been developed based on a literature review on the subject. The classification has been tested during interviews both quantitatively and qualitatively and has proven to be valid and useful for the scientific purposes of this research. It is detailed below:

### **Level of violence in images representing farmed animals under exploitation.**

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A visual is considered to portray **explicit violence** when it depicts:

- Blood.
- Open wounds, mutilations, broken bones, visible infections, cannibalism.
- Weapons and/or other material for the killing or stunning of the animal, in active or passive use.
- The moment of the aggression or killing where the perpetrator appears in the image.
- The body of a dying animal or a killed animal with signs of explicit violence.

A visual is considered to portray **less explicit violence** when it depicts:

- Captivity, e.g. the presence of iron bars, cages, tanks or other instruments which limit corporal mobility.
  - Nonverbal language and facial expressions that show suffering.
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2.2. The empirical evaluation of explicit and less explicit violence suggests that images of explicit violence generate a stronger reaction in audiences, in particular the reaction of moral shock. However, images of less explicit violence tend to better reflect the individual emotions of the represented nonhuman animal, which is why most of the activists affirmed to feel emotionally affected by this type of image, and to be better able to connect emotionally with the individual depicted, especially when they were directing their gaze to the viewer. Likewise, photographs and videos of explicit and less explicit violence generate a greater emotional impact when they represent mammals than when they represent other animal species, such as birds, fishes, amphibians, reptiles, and invertebrates.

### **3. Use of images of violence and moral shock in animal liberation activism**

3.1. Visual communication is seen by most animal liberation activists as an essential tool to achieve the goals of animal advocacy.

3.2. The audio-visual is considered more effective for emotional awakening than static photographs, since audio and moving image have the possibility of expressing more complex ideas and giving the public the opportunity to see how nonhuman animals move and express, as well as directly seeing and hearing the oppressive architectures of animal industries (such as confinement and overcrowding). As a disadvantage, certain audiences (in this case, vegan activists who do not want to see graphic images) would more easily accept being exposed to a static image than to an audio-visual one, because they avoid them when they anticipate that it will affect them emotionally. Moral shock was considered a more effective strategy for those audiences less aware of speciesism and the exploitation of nonhuman animals, those audiences less connected to the animal liberation movement and its work. The activists considered that it is important to balance violent images with a direction towards specific actions that people can take and therefore help people more effectively to change their speciesist attitudes and avoid violent reactions. Less explicit violent images are preferred for situations where the activists can discuss personally with their audience for a time (such as in courses, workshops or conferences), and in printed or virtual materials that involve text and content on the topic of animal liberation (press, fanzines or book covers). Less explicit violent images are also preferred to address a younger audience (childhood). When addressing a message to an antispeciesist and activist audience (in a workshop, conference or event), non-violent and positive images are preferred (for example, photographs of animal sanctuaries and visual stories of specific individuals).

3.3. Activists who identify their own transformation experience as initiated or highly influenced by images of violence towards nonhuman animals tend to value the strategy of moral shock and violent images more, and to use it more frequently to transform the attitudes of those who do not belong to the movement. On the other hand, many activists who claim not to have initiated their changes in speciesist attitudes through images or through the experience of a moral shock, also decide to use this strategy with other people because they consider it effective and necessary.

3.4. Activists approach images not only strategically but also ethically and are highly aware of the risks and ethical issues involved in using visuals that include violent images. Vegan activists for animal liberation consider ethical problems regarding: a) a biased representation of nonhuman animals towards violence, such as objectification, commodification and victimization that hinder the recognition of individuality and the capacity for action and resistance of nonhumans, as well as their right to privacy and dignity; and b) with respect to human audiences, where they were concerned about desensitization, backlash or normalization of violence towards other animals. These dilemmas and considerations are consistent with previous research.

3.5. The activists interviewed not only highlighted the relevance of the images on exploitation and violence, but also suggested various visual strategies to combine with

them. Relevantly, they mentioned a) images of action, activism and a wide variety of theorists, influencers, and vegan and activist role models; b) positive images of animal sanctuaries or nonhuman animals living in the wild; c) images that emphasize the individuality, personality, agency and resistance of nonhuman animals; d) images that reflect the scale of the animal exploitation industries. The vegans and animal liberation activists interviewed frequently use environmental arguments and frameworks in their activism. The empirical results of this research (third article) confirm the hypothesis suggested in the second article about the potential efficacy of the moral shock strategy and the use of visual elements that include violent images to promote actions not only against speciesism but also against climate emergency. This evidence is useful not only for animal liberation activists and researchers in critical animal studies, but also for environmental and climate activists and researchers in the field of environmental communication.

## DISCUSSION

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- 1. Why are images of violence towards animals and moral shock effective in abandoning speciesist attitudes?**
- 2. How do antispeciesist activists use images of violence and moral shock to spread respect for animals?**
- 3. Why is the use of this strategy justified despite its ethical and strategic controversies?**

### **1. Why are images of violence towards animals and moral shock effective in abandoning speciesist attitudes?**

The images of explicit and less explicit violence towards nonhuman animals and the experience of moral shock are effective for abandoning speciesist attitudes because the emotional reaction they generate in those who are exposed to them has such an impact that it allows transforming how people see said event in moral terms (Jasper and Poulsen 1995)<sup>1</sup>. Social psychology points out that this emotional impact helps to moralize attitudes (Wisneski & Skitka 2017)<sup>2</sup>.

For an attitude change to occur after the experience of moral shock, emotional work (Hoschild 1979)<sup>3</sup> is a necessary process. Emotional work refers to the recognition and embracement of what one is feeling, and then the direction of these emotions towards action and change. In this research, an identification of animal advocates with the logical and rational arguments was perceived when explaining their process of

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<sup>1</sup> Jasper, James M. y Jane D. Poulsen. 1995. "Recruiting Strangers and Friends: Moral Shocks and Social Networks in Animal Rights and Anti-Nuclear Protests." *Social Problems* 42, no. 4: 493–512.

<sup>2</sup> Wisneski, Daniel C. y Linda J. Skitka. 2017. "Moralization Through Moral Shock: Exploring Emotional Antecedents to Moral Conviction." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 43, no. 2: 139–150.

<sup>3</sup> Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1979. "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure." *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 3: 551–575.

abandoning speciesist attitudes, however, when analysing their personal histories, the role of emotions in favouring the attitude-change is noteworthy, and these emotions are mainly present after the exposure to visual content of violence towards nonhuman animals. This rejection of emotional identification may be due to the androcentric bias with which they are perceived, the way in which stereotypes and external visions shape activist identities (Einwohner 2002)<sup>4</sup> and the lower credibility given to highly feminized people and social movements such as the nonhuman animal liberation movement (Gaarder 2011, McAllister Groves 2017)<sup>5</sup>.

Images of violence towards nonhuman animals reveal hidden realities in their rawness, and these images confront the learned speciesist social imaginaries. Images of violence towards nonhuman animals and the emotional experience of moral shock allow reactive reactions to derive into more stable and lasting attitudes and commitments, in line with the hypothesis presented by James Jasper in 1998<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, despite their emotional pain, these visual contents provide strength and motivation to most antispiesist activists to sustain their activism, although a minority decide to avoid them in order to continue advocating for nonhuman animals.

## 2. How do antispiesist activists use images of violence and moral shock to spread respect for animals?

Probably due to its effectiveness, the strategy of using explicit and less explicit images of violence and generating moral shocks has been and is widely used within animal liberation movements.

Activists use a higher level of visual violence when targeting audiences that are less aware of animal exploitation and prefer less explicit images of violence when they have the possibility to explain the content of the images to their audiences. A lower level of visual violence is also preferred to approach young audiences or people who are already aware of the issue. Moral shock and images of violence of farmed animals are also effective in promoting attitude-changes in relation to the climate crisis if done from a non-speciesist and non-anthropocentric perspective.

Activists use these representations of visual violence in combination with other perspectives and presentations of the human-nonhuman relationships, to promote a broader perspective and generate other types of emotions among their audiences. Among these perspectives, the following stand out: images about actions, activism and vegan and antispiesist role models; images of nonhuman animals rescued in sanctuaries or living in the wild; images that underline the individuality, personality and

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<sup>4</sup> Einwohner, Rachel L. 2002. "Bringing the Outsiders In: Opponents' Claims and the Construction of Animal Rights Activists' Identity." *Mobilization: An International Journal* 7, no.3: 253c268.

<sup>5</sup> Gaarder, Emily. 2011. *Women and the Animal Rights Movement*. New Brunswick, Nueva Jersey y Londres: Rutgers University Press.

McAllister Groves, Julian. 2001. "Animal Rights and the Politics of Emotion: Folk Constructions of Emotion in the Animal Rights Movement." En *Passionate Politics. Emotions and Social Movements* editado por Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper y Francesca Polletta, 212–232. Chicago y Londres: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>6</sup> Jasper, James M. 1998. "The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions In and Around Social Movements." *Sociological Forum*, 13, no. 3: 397–424.

resistance of particular nonhuman animals and images that represent the scale of the speciesist oppression.

### 3. Why is the use of this strategy justified despite its ethical and strategic controversies?

This type of visual representation involves certain ethical and strategic considerations; however, its use can be justified based on ethical and strategic arguments.

Regarding ethics, the representation of nonhuman animals in situations and contexts of violence can favour the objectification of their bodies, the commodification and even the lack of respect for their privacy in a situation of maximum vulnerability (Aaltola 2014)<sup>7</sup>. A continuous representation of nonhuman animals in contexts of violence could re-victimize them and eclipse their individuality, personality and resistance, important elements to consider in an antispeciesist ethics (Hribal 2010, Corman 2017, Zenker 2019)<sup>8</sup>.

Visuals that include violence and moral shock have also been questioned due to their potential to contribute to the normalization and promotion of violence in society (Klein 2007)<sup>9</sup> or even to create a spectacle of suffering where violence is integrated and even enjoyed through its aesthetics (Sontag 2002, Aaltola 2014)<sup>10</sup>. These risks, however, have been morally justified as part of the need to discursively destabilize the neoliberal society of the spectacle through “sociological warfare”, whose main objective is “to alter the public moral imagination regarding perceptions of the place of nonhuman animals within postindustrial societies” (Lowe 2008, 4)<sup>11</sup>. Under this paradigm, the use of visuals that include violent images aims to strategically disrupt violence through exposure and counter-narrative, rather than normalize it. Violent images are not in themselves the problem; the problem is the actual exercise of domination and violence that allow these images to exist in the first place.

Through the raw visibility of human-nonhuman speciesist power relations, the animal liberation movement opposes the complacent visual discourses on “happiness” and positive emotions that work as neoliberal domination and psychopolitical control (as state, among others, by Han 2014 and Ahmed 2019)<sup>12</sup>. While individual and non-suffering approaches are needed to “show the full picture” of human-nonhuman animal

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<sup>7</sup> Aaltola, Elisa. 2014. “Animal Suffering: Representations and the Act of Looking.” *Anthrozoös* 27, no. 1: 19–31.

<sup>8</sup> Hribal, Jason. 2010. *Fear of the Animal Planet: The Hidden History of Animal Resistance*. Chico, CA: AK Press.  
Corman, Lauren. 2017. “Ideological Monkey Wrenching: Nonhuman Animal Politics Beyond Suffering”. In: *Animal Oppression and Capitalism. Volume 2: The Oppressive and Destructive Role of Capitalism* edited by David A. Nibert, 252–269. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

Zenker, Friederike. 2019. “Singular Animals in Photography and Film: From Iconic Criticism to Caring Perception”. CAE Seminar, April 30th, Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

<sup>9</sup> Klein, Naomi. 2007. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Nueva York: Metropolitan Books.

<sup>10</sup> Sontag, Susan. 2003. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Aaltola, Elisa. 2014. “Animal Suffering: Representations and the Act of Looking.” *Anthrozoös* 27, no. 1: 19–31.

<sup>11</sup> Lowe, Brian. 2008. “Animal Rights Struggles to Dominate the Public Moral Imagination through Sociological Warfare.” *Theory in Action* 3, no. 1: 1–27.

<sup>12</sup> Han, Byung-Chul. 2014. *Psicopolítica*. Barcelona: Herder.

Ahmed, Sara. 2019. *La Promesa de la Felicidad*. Buenos Aires: Caja Negra.

relations and drive imagination towards a solidary horizon (Zenker 2019)<sup>13</sup>, images of violence will still be needed to present ideologically authentic communication strategies (Freeman 2014)<sup>14</sup> in a context where the iconography of oppression (Cronin & Kramer 2018)<sup>15</sup> is the norm, and where animal industries adopt welfarist, locavolist and pseudo-care approaches to represent themselves (Linné 2016, Cole 2016, Stanescu 2013, 2019, Canavan 2017, Zenker 2019)<sup>16</sup>.

Although making violence and oppression visible and forcing people to witness it do not directly bring about change, they are a precondition for it by creating a space for the inclusion of broader and more developed antispeciesist discourses, ideological articulations and calls to action.

Moral shocks generated by both explicit and less explicit visuals have been proved to be effective in producing attitude changes in current vegans and activists, which makes me suspect that the same may be true for large groups of people within Global North societies. These visual communication and persuasion strategies may not be a definite solution or answer to the problem of animal exploitation and speciesist physical, psychological, structural, and cultural violence. However, they are undoubtedly critical doors towards animal liberation; images that liberate nonhuman animals from their cages and human animals from our speciesist attitudes, privileges, and inaction.

**For more references and data, consult the thesis report “Imágenes que liberan. Shock moral y comunicación visual estratégica en el activismo por la liberación animal” or the published scientific articles.**

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<sup>13</sup> Zenker, Friederike. 2019. “Singular Animals in Photography and Film: From Iconic Criticism to Caring Perception”. CAE Seminar, April 30th, Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

<sup>14</sup> Freeman, Carrie P. 2014. *Framing Farming: Communication Strategies for Animal Rights*. New York: Rodopi.

<sup>15</sup> Cronin, J. Keri y Kramer, Lisa. A. 2018. “Challenging the Iconography of Oppression in Marketing: Confronting Speciesism through Art and Visual Culture.” *Journal of Animal Ethics*, 8, no. 1: 80–92.

<sup>16</sup> Linné, Tobias. 2016. “Cows on Facebook and Instagram: Interspecies Intimacy in the Social Media Spaces of the Swedish Dairy Industry.” *Television & New Media* 17, no. 8: 719–733.

Cole, Matthew. 2016. “Greening (Green) Beef: Anti-Vegan Rethoric and the Legitimizing of Eco-friendly Oppression.” In *Critical Animal and Media Studies: Communication for Nonhuman Animal Advocacy* edited by Núria Almiron, Matthew Cole and Carrie P. Freeman, 107–123. New York: Routledge.

Stanescu, Vasile. 2013. “Why ‘Loving’ Animals is Not Enough: A Response to Kathy Rudy, Locavorism, and the Marketing of ‘Humane’ Meat.” *The Journal of American Culture* 36, no. 2: 100–111.

Stanescu, Vasile. 2019. “Selling Eden: Environmentalism, Local Meat, and the Postcommodity Fetish.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 63, no. 8: 1120–1136.

Canavan, Jana. 2017. “‘Happy Cow’ Welfarist Ideology and the Swedish ‘Milk Crisis’: A Crisis of Romanticized Oppression.” En *Animal Oppression and Capitalism: Volume 1: The Oppression of Nonhuman Animals as Sources of Food*, edited by David A. Nibert, 34–55. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

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