

# A Politics of Shredding: The Far-Right's Ecocide Spectacle and the Battle against Fake Knowledge

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## 1. Shredding as a Meme

In November 2016, Marc Marano, a founding member of the U.S. non-profit organization called CFACT (Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow), disrupted a UN climate summit in Morocco by brandishing a life-size image of President-elect Donald Trump and waving a copy of the UN Paris climate agreement. He proceeded to ritually destroy the document using a shredder.<sup>1</sup> This shredder performance could be seen as another instance of (supposedly) funny cartoon logic, a concept that Sara Polak identifies in relation to Trump's distinct representational style in his tweets and memes.<sup>2</sup> Such a cartoon logic is at work, for instance, in that Trump's incoherent political maneuvers display similarities to cartoon characters recovering from fatal errors or simply reverting to their original narrative positions. In this context, Polak states: "Whereas the cartoonesque formerly aimed at making politicians ridiculous, now the ridiculous acquires serious political impact."<sup>3</sup> Such an impact also includes the non-seri-

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1 Rebel News, "Marc Morano censored for shredding Paris agreement in Marrakech," Rebel News, YouTube, November 16, 2016, 3:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afiUGWXDBPo>; Jean Chemnick, "U.N. evicts skeptics for shredding Paris Agreement," CLIMATEWIRE, November 17, 2016, <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/1060045887>.

2 Sara Polak, "Posting the Presidency: Cartoon Politics in a Social Media Landscape," *Media, Arts, and Law Review* 22, no. 4 (2019): 403–419; Sara Polak and Anne Zwetsloot, "And then I see the disinfectant where it knocks it out in a minute': Donald Trump as Patient Zero and Superspreader of Covid-19 Cartoon Logic," *European Journal of English Studies*, 26, no. 3 (2022): 377–398.

3 Polak, "Posting the Presidency," 16.

ous violence often depicted in cartoons. The shredder performance is paradigmatic in this context. While it might appear funny or even absurd on the surface, it also carries a serious undertone and, as we argue, implies a form of symbolic violence.

If the tearing apart of political documents symbolizes the dissolution of a contract, what does shredding climate policies into bits and pieces symbolize exactly? Our response to this question will be structured along four aspects. First, we establish the context and *implications* of the politics of shredding displayed through its memeification. Second, we focus on its aesthetic *appearance* and argue that it relies on the logic of the spectacle. By this we refer not only to the spectacular campaigning strategy of far-right politicians but also to the position of the passive spectator, as when Western audiences witness climate disaster events much like in science fiction films. Third, we analyze the often obscured underlying political and material *interests* that drive the spectacle and politics of shredding. Focusing on the far right's close ties to the fossil fuel industry and factory farming, we will juxtapose Trump's climate change denialism with the eco-antagonism of the new right-wing Dutch government. Last, in light of the dramatic loss of biodiversity stemming from an entrenched 'plantation-logic,' we discuss the consequences arising from the knowledge produced by a politics of shredding and the clash between competing knowledge paradigms. Here, shredding represents the violent destruction of agreements that contain shared knowledge on climate developments.

The significance of Morano's ritual act of shredding could have easily faded soon after its performance. However, it went viral and became a meme instead. This significantly influenced the campaign strategies of the populist Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), which used the shredder meme to underscore its rejection of climate policies. In February 2019, the party's sole member and leader, Geert Wilders, officially presented a motion in parliament:

[C]onsidering that climate folly, whether from the left or the right, will hit citizens full force in their wallet; considering that climate policy is unpayable and nonsensical; requests the government to pull the climate agreement through the shredder and proceeds with the order of the day.<sup>4</sup>

4 In the original: "overwegende dat de klimaatgekte, linksom of rechtsom, de burgers keihard in hun portemonnee zal raken; overwegende dat klimaatbeleid onbetaalbaar en onzinnig is, verzoekt de regering, het klimaatakkoord door de shredder te halen, en gaat over tot de orde van de dag" (translation by the authors if not otherwise indicated); Geert Wilders, "Motie van het lid Wilders over het door de shredder halen van

The motion lacked the formal conventions typical of parliament motions, but it was not meant to be taken seriously by the administration. Its informal and seemingly humorous wording was meant to appeal to PVV voters. Wilders' request to put the climate agreement through the "shredder," using the English word rather than the Dutch equivalent, was an unmistakable reference to the meme. His sentiment was reiterated in the party's program, which contributed to Wilders' success in the 2023 parliamentary elections that ultimately lead to coalition negotiations for the government that took office in June 2024: "The Climate law, the Climate agreement, and all other climate policies will immediately be put through the shredder."<sup>5</sup> Unsurprisingly, the PVV party program's title also included another direct reference: "The Dutch again on number 1," echoing Trump's "America First" slogan.

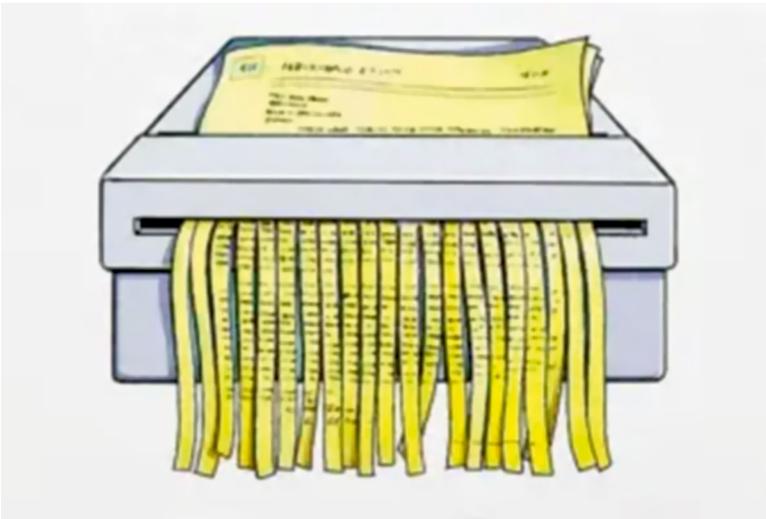


Figure 6: "The New Politics of the Shredder"<sup>6</sup>

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het klimaatakkoord," Tweede Kamer, <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/moties/detail?id=2019Do4724&did=2019Do4724>.

5 In the original: "De Klimaatwet, het Klimaat-akkoord en alle andere klimaatmaatregelen gaan direct door de shredder," PVV *Partijprogramma*, 2024, 22.

6 For the image, see Jan van Friesland, "De nieuwe politiek van de shredder," Climate Gate, <https://www.climategate.nl/2023/11/de-nieuwe-politiek-van-de-shredder/>.

The shredder meme and the slogans denote the end of solidarity and shared responsibilities in the face of climatological disaster. The act of shredding offers, first of all, relief from the shared responsibilities concerning the preservation of multiple lifeforms to which international parties have pledged themselves. Second, for Trump and Wilders, the act of shredding is never followed up on with a viable alternative to internationally agreed upon climate policies. Shredding does not inscribe itself in a political effort to mitigate the long-term consequences of humanity's war against natural environments. On the contrary, the act of shredding frees actors to do with nature whatever is deemed economically productive in terms of the nation's interest. Third, the shredder meme elevates the momentary to the absolute. In the act of shredding, only the present moment counts.

Tearing up contracts may refer to an annulment that could be undone. Yet the bits and pieces produced by the shredder cannot be reconstructed into a whole. During the first 2024 presidential debate, Biden's statement that "things were in chaos literally" after Trump left office and that Biden "had to put things back together again"<sup>7</sup> optimistically overlooked the fact that some of the shredded elements from Trump's tenure cannot easily be "put together again." Some destructive outcomes are irreversible in the domain of climate change. Others, like those in the realm of productive rights, are difficult to reverse. Here, the momentary nature of shredding constitutes the opposite of a temporality that demands long-term perspectives on future developments. At the same time, the momentary can have lasting consequences.

As for the future, the act of shredding symbolizes an automated solution, mechanically realized by machines. The shredder ostensibly connotes a technical 'solution' to a problem. Machines and mechanics without human interference, as the act of shredding suggests, can do all the necessary work. The far right's imagination of shredding inscribes itself in a retro-modernist glorification of what machines can make possible. It does so in a context that is defined, as we will argue, by the logic of the spectacle.

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7 The Wall Street Journal, "Full Debate: Biden and Trump in the First 2024 Presidential Debate," YouTube, June 28, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqG96G8YdcE>, 1:38:18.

## 2. Shredding and the Logic of the Spectacle

The symbolic force of the performance of shredding is not just an issue of ideologically informed rhetoric or representational tactics. The shredding of agreements suggests a farewell to politics proper and the dynamics of various parties confronting one another while being committed to the process of engaging with each other. The shredding of agreements is instead an aggressive expression of brutal power. However, to read this only in the light of narcissistic leaders who will shred anything they do not like is to miss the point. The specific agreements shredded, however weak, are still official documents that exert some sort of legal force. Shredding them opens up not so much a field of lawlessness but, instead, paves the way for a distribution of legal responsibility and irresponsibility. In the end, for Trump and his likes, legally underpinned corporate and private interests should reign paramount over any other interest, let alone environmental ones. If legal protections of the multiplicity of life still pose challenges for Trumpists, they overcome these challenges with the aggressive ritual of shredding.

The manual tearing apart of paper contracts belongs to the domain of everyday reality. By contrast, the shredder, although found among ordinary office equipment, has a quasi-magical or hyperreal force. Used in a public performance, the shredder easily becomes an instrument of spectacle. The French Situationist Guy Debord describes the contemporary spectacle as a political and cultural logic that manifests itself aesthetically through medialized images and tropes, by means of which market economies maintain passive approval and social dominance. The “society of the spectacle,” according to Debord, exhibits itself not only through memes and bewildering media images but also operates on the level of societal reification and the alienation from nature. Through the spectacle “c’est la vie la plus terrestre qui devient opaque et irrespirable” – “it is *life most earthly* that becomes opaque and unbreathable.”<sup>8</sup> The spectacle provides not so much an escape from the dull routine of everyday life. Rather, everyday reality is no longer critically scrutinized in terms of what makes contemporary life “unbreathable.” The spectacle puts its beholders into a passive but also a bewildering position, because of which they cannot be cer-

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8 Our emphasis. Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle*, infokiosques, n.d., [https://infokiosques.net/IMG/pdf/La\\_societe\\_du\\_spectacle-60p-A4-fil.pdf](https://infokiosques.net/IMG/pdf/La_societe_du_spectacle-60p-A4-fil.pdf), §20; see Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014).

tain whether what they witness is true or false. This logic finds its expression in the current phenomenon of fake news.

A mesmerizing transformation produced by a spectacular act of shredding was evident when Banksy's work "Girl with Balloon" was sold at Sotheby's in 2018. "Girl with Balloon" showcases a classical, framed image of a girl holding a balloon. Suddenly, at the moment the work was sold, half of the image was shredded, producing an artwork that was complete on the top half, and cut into pieces on the other. The act of shredding itself, however, was hidden from sight and paradoxically formed a gateway to the force of the spectacle. Some audience members were ignorant of what was happening because they were using mobile phones to report on the painting's estimated price, while others were mesmerized and in doubt about what was happening. With hindsight, what they were looking at was a work of art that had been created momentarily and as a result would gain in value as expressed in contemporary art market prices. Whereas the not-yet-shredded artwork sold in 2018 for £1.4 million, the shredded one was resold in October 2021 under the new and ironic title, "Love is in the Bin," for £18,582,000 – not a bad profit for a trashed work of art.<sup>9</sup> Seen in this light, the trope of the shredder is not only about irrevocable destruction but also concerns the economic and cultural production of value.

In the ecological context, the spectacular and mesmerizing capacity of the act of shredding can be traced in the imaginary creature of the Sandworm, or Shai-Hulud, in Frank Herbert's novel *Dune*: a fantastic animal with a mouth that is a circular version of a shredder, swallowing and shredding anything that crosses its path. It recently reappeared on the big screen as a powerful special effect in Denis Villeneuve's film adaptation of the novel. In the film's post-climate change setting, the Sandworm arises spectacularly out of the sand as a faceless creature that, in shredder-like centripetal motion, uproots and recreates the surface of the planet. In the story's political ecology, however, the Sandworm's larvae also produce a coveted raw material called "Spice," around which the planet Arrakis has built an extraction industry. The much-desired "Spice-Melange" is a "highly addictive" substance, used to navigate space and allowing for "safe interstellar travel."<sup>10</sup> In this light, *Dune* depicts a feudal capitalist

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9 Sotheby's, "Banksy Brings Down the House at the Contemporary Art Evening Auction," October 14, 2021, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/banksy-brings-down-the-house-at-the-contemporary-art-evening-auction?locale=en>.

10 *Dune*, dir. Denis Villeneuve (Warner Bros., 2021), 2:35:00.

and orientalist society that, even after catastrophic climate change, remains hooked on a fossil fuel-based economy.

Already in the 1980s, geochemist Wallace Broecker, who also coined the term “global warming,” warned against passive-aggressive political attitudes that consist in the refusal to seriously consider a transition from a fossil fuel addicted situation to fossil free infrastructure. He contended that “[t]he climate system is an angry beast, and we are poking it with sticks.”<sup>11</sup> Four decades later, humans have not stopped poking. In *Dune*, readers and viewers can reassuringly witness how the Sandworm has been domesticated. The creature can be summoned with a thumper, a device that produces a drumming sound on the sand, which sounds like falling raindrops. In the desert, this natural phenomenon must be artificially simulated. The desert people, called Fremen, use the thumper to call on the Sandworm when they want to ride it, assuming the position of the ruler over tamed nature. But what kind of nature is this? Humanity, or what is left of it, has installed itself as a master in a desert of nothingness. The black hole into which the shredded pieces disappear when swallowed by the Sandworm symbolize a post-apocalyptic void.

In this regard, environmental journalist Fred Pearce argued that what climate scientists call “tipping points” appear like special effects in science fiction films.<sup>12</sup> The tipping points mentioned by Pearce refer to the critical thresholds in the climate system where a small change can trigger irreversible environmental changes, leading to global warming, disappearing islands, rising sea levels, and mass extinction, thus forming an existential threat to the human species. As tipping points show, the temporality of climate change does not unfold gradually. Or, as Pearce puts it, crossing these tipping points thresholds can “awaken” violent and capricious “climate monsters.”<sup>13</sup>

The far-right politics of shredding, like the thumper in *Dune*, indeed summon such images of climate beasts. However, current scientific models also suggest that humans will not be able to domesticate these monsters or put them back to sleep. Already beyond scenes from futuristic disaster films, we can watch almost in real time how islands like Tuvalu are being swallowed up by the ocean because of rising sea levels, whilst each year an area of the size

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11 Quoted in Fred Pearce, *With Violence and Speed. Why Scientists Fear Tipping Points in Climate Change*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 15.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

of Poland is turned into a desert.<sup>14</sup> Given the current ecological collapse, if the far right gains power and if the politics of shredding becomes the norm, what we will witness will captivate audiences with the force of a spectacle and leave them either mesmerized or in a state of debilitating disbelief about whether what they are witnessing is real or not.

In the next sections, we focus on what the spectacle simultaneously reveals and masks, namely, the underlying political and economic interests that actively prevent the implementation of more environmentally sustainable policies. We attempt to explain why particular right-wing populists appeal to voters with eco-unfriendly proposals, and why they gain traction with these proposals, despite the uncontested scientific consensus that climate change constitutes the most imminent existential threat to humanity and life on this planet.

### 3. Trump's Politics of Shredding: America First!

Similar to the inhabitants of the desert Planet Arrakis in *Dune*, “our addiction to fossil fuels is pushing humanity to its brink. Either we stop it – or it stops us.”<sup>15</sup> This was the warning that UN Secretary-General António Guterres gave at the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference. As a result of the abandonment of international climate policies that has been provoked by the far right in Europe and the United States, the fear that the option may materialize of our being pushed to the brink is shockingly realistic. This is how Oliver Milman and Dharna Noor describe the scenario of Trump's potential reelection in *The Guardian*:

The United States's first major climate legislation dismantled, a crackdown on government scientists, a frenzy of oil and gas drilling, the Paris climate deal not only dead but buried. A blueprint is emerging for a second Donald

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14 The World Counts, “A third of the world's land surface is threatened by desertification,” n.d., <https://www.theworldcounts.com/challenges/planet-earth/forests-and-deserts/global-land-degradation>.

15 António Guterres, “Either we stop it – or it stops us; UN Chief at # COP26 / Climate Change,” United Nations, November 11, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=caGfZWpY6xM>, 9:42.

Trump term that is even more extreme for the environment than his first, according to interviews with multiple Trump allies and advisers.<sup>16</sup>

The article is entitled “‘In a word, horrific’: Trump’s extreme anti-environmental blueprint.” Indeed, in the event of a second term for Trump, there will be no cold-turkey withdrawal from fossil fuels. Meanwhile, Trumpism has already left its stamp on the current President’s most recent fact sheet. On May 14, 2024, the *White House* announced a new economic plan that includes heavy tariff barriers on renewable energy technology from China, with tariffs of up to 50% on solar cells and up to 100% on electric cars.<sup>17</sup> While Biden had previously criticized Trump’s protectionism and argued that tariff barriers would primarily harm U.S. American producers and consumers, the President’s new approach now echoes Trump’s campaign motto.<sup>18</sup>

Aimed at protecting “American Workers and Business against China’s Unfair Practices,” Biden’s plan is likely to deal another blow to the transition from a fossil fuel-based economy to a decarbonized one. Supposedly aimed at aiding the development of a competitive industry for renewable energy technology in the United States, Biden’s economic approach will above all else benefit the fossil fuel industry. Needless to say, if Trump wins the 2024 elections, the alliance between the fossil industry and the extreme right will grow even stronger. Trump was quite explicit about how he will support and promote the aggressive expansion of fossil fuel companies if they provide his election campaign with a gift of \$1 billion.<sup>19</sup>

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16 Oliver Milman and Dharna Noor, “‘In a word, horrific’: Trump’s extreme anti-environment blueprint,” *The Guardian*, February 6, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/feb/06/trump-climate-change-fossil-fuels-second-term>.

17 The White House, “FACT SHEET: President Biden Takes Action to Protect American Workers and Business from China’s Unfair Practices,” May 14, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/05/14/fact-sheet-president-biden-takes-action-to-protect-american-workers-and-businesses-from-chinas-unfair-trade-practices/>.

18 Jacob Pramuk, “Joe Biden slams Trump’s trade war even as he calls to ‘get though’ on China,” *CNBC*, July 11, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/11/joe-biden-slams-trump-china-trade-war-in-foreign-policy-speech.html>.

19 United States Senate Committee on the Budget, “Budget, Finance Committees Launch Joint Investigation into Donald Trump’s Quid Pro Quo Offer to Big Oil,” May 23, 2024, <https://www.budget.senate.gov/committee/newsroom/press/budget-finance-committees-launch-joint-investigation-into-donald-trumps-quid-pro-quo-offer-to-big-oil->

What appears to frighten political leaders like Trump is not so much the unleashing of climate monsters but rather the ‘visitation’ of the roaring beasts of foreign competitive industries, predominantly from China. International market competition, trade wars, and nationalism prevent the adherence to international agreements that seek solutions to global problems, such as climate warming, that can only be solved through supranational collaboration and solidarity. This nationalistic attitude, based on economic protectionism, echoes far-right economic approaches of the past. In this regard, we are convinced that it is no coincidence that Trump retweeted a quote from Mussolini, or that his current campaign team baptized Trump’s United States as “a unified *Reich*,” even if this reference was quickly deleted as a “mistake.”<sup>20</sup> Arguably, the “America First” campaign operates on the basis of the old fascist distinction between presumably parasitic, international capital, and productive, national capital.<sup>21</sup> For Trump, China represents the parasite that is to blame for everything that harms the United States’ market competitiveness: climate change, COVID-19, and unfair business practices.

Inspired by the ideological separation between ‘bad’ and ‘good’ markets, Trump pledged to support an independent U.S. American agricultural industry and restore employment to American coal miners. Trump perceived the Obama administration’s ‘free-market’ approach that was particularly evident in the TTIP negotiations with Europe as a severe detriment to U.S. American industry, which would, according to Trump, be brought to its knees by foreign regulations. Consequently, the 45<sup>th</sup> U.S. President solidified the alliance with the American multinational fossil industry despite renewable energy currently being cleaner and cheaper.<sup>22</sup> Yet even if supporting the expansion of fossil fuel extraction seems illogical from an economic and an environmental perspective, this is not necessarily the case considering it from the perspective of market competitiveness.

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20 See also Sara Polak’s arguments about how Trump plays with the conventions of social media in this volume. Chris Cameron, “Trump Posts, Then Takes Down, Video Online with Headlines about a ‘Unified Reich,’” *The New York Times*, May 22, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/20/us/donald-trump-reich-video.html>.

21 Gottfried Feder, *Das Manifest zur Brechung der Zinsherrschaft* (Dießen: Verlag Joseph Carl Huber, 1919).

22 Victoria Masterson, “Renewable energies were the world’s cheapest source of energy in 2020,” *World Economic Forum*, July 5, 2021, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/07/renewables-cheapest-energy-source/>.

Due to the current lack of storage technology and transmission lines for renewable energy, green sources of electricity cannot meet the demand for the constant availability of energy supply that heavy industry requires. The call for a decarbonized economy brings with it a significant slowing down of production in certain industries, thus making a country less attractive for foreign investment and decreasing its GDP. This is why the transition to renewable energy constitutes a serious risk to the mark-ups of large corporations and stakeholders; it destabilizes the domestic economic climate as an important business location.

In response to this peril, big entrepreneurs are turning to the far right to rescue their property and business interests, and not for the first time. Theories of “Bonapartism” that explain the rise of fascism in Europe during the 1920s and 30s are helpful to understand the turn to right-wing autocrats, who undermine liberal economic approaches.<sup>23</sup> According to this theoretical framework, whenever the economic elite feels threatened by revolutionary mobilizations – and climate mitigation demands a revolution –, they relinquish their political power to authoritarian leaders in order to safeguard their profits and property.<sup>24</sup> The turn to authoritarianism entails a partial suspension of democratic rights. We have witnessed such an abrogation with the judicial elimination of the right to abortion, Trump’s rejection of democratic elections results in 2020, and the ensuing Capitol riot on January 6, 2021, by the so-called “Trumpenproletariat.”<sup>25</sup>

In this context, the post-climate change dystopia depicted in *Dune*, which is no longer ruled by democracy but by feudal-capitalism, primitive extraction industries, and colonization, is more imminent than the latest Hollywood science fiction film might suggest. The nightmare of a world shredded into pieces and transformed into a desert will not take millennia to materialize. For considerable parts of our planet, this development has already transpired, and

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23 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 15.

24 August Thalheimer, “On Fascism,” Marxists Internet Archive, n.d., <https://www.marxists.org/archive/thalheimer/works/fascism.htm>.

25 Francis Levy, “The Final Solution: The Trumpenproletariat,” HUFFPOST, August 17, 2017, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-final-solution-the-trumpenproletariat\\_b\\_5995a670e4b055243ea1364f](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-final-solution-the-trumpenproletariat_b_5995a670e4b055243ea1364f). On the issue of the Lumpenproletariat in contemporary circumstances, see Bennett D. Carpenter, *Lumpen: Vagrancies of a Concept from Marx to Fanon* (PhD diss., Duke University, 2019).

2024 was the hottest year ever recorded globally, exceeding the predictions of scientific models.<sup>26</sup>

Next to the carbon emissions that contribute to global warming and desertification, agriculture constitutes the most unsustainable industry. Nitrogen and methane emissions, artificial fertilizers and pesticides, and cruel animal treatment, such as chick culling, only make the actual shredding of up to seven billion male chickens per annum a detail.<sup>27</sup> Under the rubric of market efficiency, natural cycles of production deliver ever more crops per acre as supplemented by ever-growing numbers of livestock.

Since the United States is the biggest exporter of agricultural products in the world, it does not come as a surprise that Trump promised to protect the interests of commodity farmers and big agricultural corporations against foreign competitors. However, Chinese tariffs on U.S. American agricultural products in response to Trump's trade war came down hard on commodity farmers and the big agricultural entrepreneurs, who had supported Trump in the 2016 elections. As a compensation, the former President pledged billions of dollars in bailout payments to the agrarian sector. Direct farm aid has grown by the year under Trump, rising from \$11.5 billion in 2017, to more than \$32 billion in 2020.<sup>28</sup> In 2019 and 2020, a staggering 40% of farm income came from federal subsidies. Needless to say, two thirds of the bailouts went to the largest farm corporations and agricultural producers.<sup>29</sup> Such measures benefit mostly unsustainable large-scale agriculture producers and have a disastrous effect on ecosystems.

Globally, unsustainable farming is indeed the most heavily subsidized sector – a circumstance that reveals two things. First, subsidies are legitimized on the basis of a supposed need to secure the national food supply. Trump hails

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- 26 Gavin Schmidt, "Climate models can't explain 2023's huge heat anomaly – we could be in uncharted territory," *Nature*, March 19, 2024, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-00816-z>, 467.
- 27 Jonathan Moehns and Undark, "Billions of Day-Old Chicks are Shredded, Gassed and Suffocated," *The Atlantic*, March 21, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2021/03/chick-culling-cruel-wasteful-and-tough-stop/618348/>.
- 28 Ryan McCrimmon, "Here is your check: Trump's massive payouts to farmers will be hard to pull back," *Politico*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/14/donald-trump-coronavirus-farmer-bailouts-359932>.
- 29 Lisa Held, "How four years of Trump reshaped food and farming," *Civil Eats*, November 2, 2020, <https://civileats.com/2020/11/02/how-four-years-of-trump-reshaped-food-and-farming/>.

“our farmers, our great farmers” as the hardworking caretakers of the nation’s land and values.<sup>30</sup> Because farmers are exposed to considerable financial risks due to unstable crop yields, volatile market prices, and tariffs, it seems logical to offer them subsidies to prevent their disappearance altogether. However, this pattern shows that for average farmers, agriculture is not a very lucrative or reliable business. Second, if a commercial industry requires subsidies in order to compete with export products on the world market, this also means that the sponsor – in this case the state – reserves the right to set the terms under which production is, or should be, sufficiently profitable. The U.S. American agrarian sector, which is the largest globally, receives subsidies for global exports more than for securing the national food supply.

Ecologically sustainable agriculture yields significantly fewer crops per acre due to smaller scale production and restrictions on aggressive biocides and fertilizers. Therefore, it challenges the lucrative business model of big agrarian corporations. For this reason, the magnates of agribusiness, like fossil fuel tycoons, turn to the far right to secure their profits, effectively embracing the shredding of environmental regulations that will eventually destroy their market dominance. Smaller farmers motivate their turn to the far right on the basis of similar arguments. Since state leaders often present “our great farmers” as essential producers to the nation, farmers wrongly assume that their governments maintain a particular sense of responsibility for their well-being.

What currently makes authoritarian figures so attractive to farmers is the far right’s unfiltered attack on the so-called political establishment and its accusations that a ‘globalist’ elite participates in a conspiracy against the U.S. American nation and its diligent farmers. Climate change is perceived either as a hoax, produced by foreign hostile competitors like China, or as a left-wing conspiracy against domestic farmers that uses climate policies as the primary instrument through which to increase left-leaning cosmopolitans’ global power. Such perceptions can swiftly turn into a repudiation of state legislation and jurisdiction. In Europe, farmer protests have resulted in violent highway blockades that showcase an arsenal of agricultural equipment. Tractors with fork carriers were resolutely steered towards EU government buildings

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30 Grady McGregor, “Trump claims at debate that China is paying for farm subsidies. In fact, U.S. taxpayers are footing the bill,” *Fortune*, October 23, 2020, <https://fortune.com/2020/10/23/trump-debate-china-farm-subsidies-pays/>.

and through police blockades, with their drivers demanding a relaxation of European environmental legislation.

#### 4. The Dutch Politics of Shredding: The Netherlands Second!

European farmer protests did not go unnoticed in the United States. Recently, Tucker Carlson conducted a short interview with Eva Vlaardingerbroek, who is well-known in the Netherlands for her anti-feminism and climate denialism, on Fox News.<sup>31</sup> In the interview, she comments on the Dutch farmers who protested the government's aim to reduce extremely high nitrogen emissions that result out of intense cattle farming. Proposed legislative measures include the reduction of the cattle stock by 50% and plans for farm buyouts. Explaining the situation to Fox's viewers, Vlaardingerbroek asserted that "hard-working," "god-fearing," and "self-sufficient" Dutch farmers were being brutalized by the government. She claimed that the administration had fabricated a nitrogen crisis to "steal our famers' lands," and added that the government needed these lands to accommodate new immigrants. In her view, "there is only one term that we can use for the things that our government under Mark Rutte is doing right now, and that is communism."<sup>32</sup> The monsters of communism, immigration, and climate activism were all called upon by Vlaardingerbroek to suggest that they had infiltrated Dutch government and had forged a conspiracy against Dutch farmers. Spectacular!

The fact that Vlaardingerbroek appeared on Fox News was no coincidence. After the United States, the Netherlands is the biggest global exporter of agricultural products. In this case, it is "America First" and "The Netherlands Second!" A comparison between the two countries demonstrates economic and ecological similarities. Both countries use about half of their land surface for agriculture: 54% in the Netherlands and 46% in the United States.<sup>33</sup> Comparing the Netherlands and the U.S. makes it possible to follow up on our analysis

31 Charles Kreitz, "'Green' governance is a new 'guise' for mercantilism, will lead to global instabilities: Heritage President," Fox News, July 25, 2022, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/environmental-stewardship-new-guise-mercantilism-lead-global-instability-heritage-president>.

32 Ibid.

33 M. Shahbandeh, "Total area of land in United States farms from 2000 to 2023 (in 100 acres)," Statista, May 24, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/196104/total-area-of-land-in-farms-in-the-us-since-2000/>. Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, "Hoe wordt

above and to explain the far right's international rise to power more systematically.

Alongside the anti-environmental stance of Dutch populists like Geert Wilders, a second political campaign against environmental protection was launched by a new party: the "Farmers Citizen Movement" (*Boeren Burger Beweging*, or BBB). Having won the provincial elections in all twelve provinces of the Netherlands in 2023, the BBB now has significant influence on Dutch agricultural legislation. The party claims to represent the interests of Dutch farmers by opposing all measures aimed at transitioning to more sustainable agrarian practices.

Before joining Wilders' coalition, BBB party leader Caroline van der Plas supported the farmer protests and pressured the former government to abandon plans to halve nitrogen emissions by 2030 in order to meet Paris Agreement targets. As a coalition partner in the new government, the BBB launched a crusade against EU climate policies, including the Natura 2000 legislation aimed at protecting biodiversity in European natural reserves<sup>34</sup> and the Nature Restoration Law.<sup>35</sup> On top of that, van der Plas has pledged to urge the EU to renew the exception that allows for a higher nitrate limit in the Netherlands. Dutch farms' above-average emissions result from a livestock population that is mostly fed with imported soy from Brazil, including 100 million chickens, 11.4 million pigs, 3.8 million cows, 480,000 goats, and 850,000 sheep.<sup>36</sup> The reduction of biodiversity is closely linked to the overproduction of manure by the meat industry. Its nitrogen emissions damage ecosystems and transform them

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de Nederlandse bodem gebruikt?" Nederland in cijfers, n.d., <https://longreads.cbs.nl/nederland-in-cijfers-2020/hoe-wordt-de-nederlandse-bodem-gebruikt/>.

34 EUR-Lex, "Protecting Europe's biodiversity (Natura 2000)," February 21, 2017, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/protecting-europe-s-biodiversity-natura-2000.html>.

35 European Commission, "Green Deal: pioneering proposals to restore Europe's nature by 2025 and halve pesticides use by 2030," EU Press Release, June 22, 2022, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_22\\_3746](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_3746).

36 Figures are from 2020 to be found at Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, "Import soja-bonen uit Brazilië 40 procent hoger," September 30, 2020, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2020/40/import-sojabonen-uit-brazilie-40-procent-hoger>.

into biodeserts dominated by grass and stinging nettle. But then again, as van der Plas reassuringly notes, stinging nettle “is also nature.”<sup>37</sup>

Ignoring devastating EU reports on deteriorating ecosystems and echoing Wilders’ claim that nitrogen regulations should be shredded, Van der Plas dismisses EU regulations as “non-sense.”<sup>38</sup> Conversely, she frames her anti-environmental stance as “common sense” politics, or in Dutch *politiek van het boeren-verstand*, a “politics of peasant wisdom.”<sup>39</sup> This so-called wisdom is questionable given the Dutch agricultural industries’ discharge of nitrogen and pesticide use that have poisoned the soil and surrounding waters. As a result, only 4% of the waters in Dutch ditches and canals is now considered healthy by EU standards.<sup>40</sup> This is hardly surprising, as soil pollution does not remain confined. It either washes into canals or enters the domestic water supply through groundwater in an interconnected system.

Another polluting factor in the Netherlands and in the United States is the intense use of biocides, the chemicals used to eliminate mice, rats, bacteria, or fungi. In the EU, approval for the use of the biocide glyphosate was renewed for another ten years in 2024<sup>41</sup> because the Netherlands and five other key member states did nothing to stop the extension of its use. However, recent studies strongly suggest that glyphosate is not only carcinogenic but also linked to a rise in Parkinson’s disease, particularly among farmers.<sup>42</sup> The renewed ap-

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- 37 Harm Ede Botje, “Hoe de stadse Caroline van der Plas de stem van de boer werd,” *Follow the Money*, March 11, 2023, <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/portret-caroline-van-der-plas>.
- 38 Op1, “Talkshow met wisselende presentatieduo’s, live vanuit Hilversum,” NPO Start, June 5, 2024, [https://npo.nl/start/serie/op1/seizoen-5/op1\\_498/afspelen](https://npo.nl/start/serie/op1/seizoen-5/op1_498/afspelen), 54:56.
- 39 SGP-jongeren, “SGP] café met Caroline van der Plas (BBB) – Politiek van het Boerenverstand,” YouTube, April 22, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R109j2eVGDg>, 1:41:18.
- 40 European Commission, “Water Framework Directive since 2000,” last update December 2023, [https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/water/water-framework-directive\\_en](https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/water/water-framework-directive_en). See also the Dutch Water quality portal “Waterkwaliteitsportaal,” n.d., <https://www.waterkwaliteitsportaal.nl/>.
- 41 Ctgb, “Glyfosaat: de stand van zaken,” n.d., <https://www.ctgb.nl/onderwerpen/glyfosaat>.
- 42 Iemaan Rana et al. “Mapping the Key Characteristics of Carcinogens for Glyphosate and its Formulations: A Systematic Review,” *Chemosphere* 339 (October 2023): 1–20; Bastiaan R. Bloem and Tjitske A. Boonstra, “The Inadequacy of Current Pesticide Regulations for Protecting Brain Health: The Case of Glyphosate and Parkinson’s Disease,” *The Lancet Planetary Health* 7, no. 12 (2023): 948–949.

proval of this unsafe biocide exemplifies the politics of shredding, as its negative impacts on biodiversity and human life quality are nearly irreversible.

The renewed approval of glyphosate also represents a clear example of how scientific evidence is either ignored or viewed as an inconvenience. Within this context, the current Dutch government's significant cuts to university funding across all of the disciplines makes sense, at least from a right-wing perspective.<sup>43</sup> When questioned about these cuts in parliament, liberal leader Dilan Yeşilgöz stated that science is also being developed by corporations outside of universities.<sup>44</sup> Right. The politics of shredding includes not only international agreements, then. Certain forms of knowledge and attitudes that coincide with them are also seen as too constraining, which is why they need to be cut.

## 5. Shredding, Monoculture, and the Struggle for Knowledge

In a struggle to capture the disruptive human impact on the Earth System, scholars have proposed concepts like anthropocene, urbanocene, and capitalocene.<sup>45</sup> These labels represent various attempts to define the scale of planetary change. They all reveal one thing: The enormous acceleration of climate change has been driven by human-made technological, economic, demographic, and industrial developments. In line with the arguments presented in this text, we prefer the term plantationocene. Donna Haraway uses this concept to refer to the reconfiguration of natural environments into var-

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43 Naomi Oreskes and Eric M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2010); Erik MN. Conway and Naomi Oreskes, *The Big Myth: How American Business Taught Us to Loathe Government and Love the Free Market* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023).

44 Redactie, "Noodoproep van universiteiten krijgt weerklank in eerste debat met kabinet Schoof," Scienceguide, July 4, 2024, <https://www.scienceguide.nl/2024/07/noodoproep-van-universiteiten-krijgt-weerklank-in-eerste-debat-met-kabinet-schoof/#:~:text=Noodoproep%20van%20universiteiten%20krijgt%20weerklank%20in%20eerste%20debat%20met%20kabinet%20Schoof,-Nieuws%20%7C%20de%20redactie&text=4%20juli%202024%20%7C%20De%20oppositie,de%20regeringsverklaring%20van%20kabinet%20Schoof>.

45 Jason W. Moore (ed.), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016): 1–11.

ious forms of plantations.<sup>46</sup> The plantationocene emphasizes the ontological link between coloniality and modernity that has driven the development of climate change.

Most evidently, the plantationocene has shaped modern race relations through the creation of industrial agriculture, which relied heavily on the expansion of the transatlantic slave trade to supply forced labor. It became the economic foundation of the United States, especially in the South, where the cultivation of cash crops led to destructive monoculture practices for the environment and enslaved people working on plantations. The consequences of these forced labor practices are still being felt in present-day phenomena such as climate change, monoculture practices, and racial inequality. In many rural areas in the United States, agriculture affects not only the health of the soil but also the health of working-class Black people, who are exposed to a significantly higher premature mortality risk than wealthier people living in metropolitan areas.<sup>47, 48</sup>

Perhaps less conspicuously, the plantationocene has its historical roots in a type of internal colonization that was marked by the Enclosure of the Commons. Enclosures involved excluding peasants from communal lands and forcing them to work as wage-laborers on the private estates of wealthy landowners. The Dutch landscape, famous for its artificially constructed polders, is a paradigmatic outcome of this development. The Commons of Holland's vast lakes were eliminated when the lakes were almost all dry-milled, a process that started in the seventeenth century and continued until the twentieth. The lands that fell dry were then neatly and mathematically cut up and divided by geometrically organized ditches and canals. Here, the Enclosure of the Commons and technological inventions went hand in hand to produce privately owned plantations, worked by hired workers. As such, Dutch polders exemplify an early form of agricultural industry and its ensuing monoculture, leading to the concentration of landed property in increasingly fewer expanding agricultural companies.

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46 Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 1 (2015): 159–165.

47 Gopal K. Singh and Mohammad Siahpush, "Widening Rural-Urban Disparities in All-Cause Mortality and Mortality from Major Causes of Death in the USA 1969–2009," *Journal of Urban Health* 91 (2013): 272–292.

48 Jeralynn Crossman et al. "The Differential Effects of Rural Healthcare Access on Race-specific Mortality," *SSM Population Health* 3 (2017): 618–623.

The practice of enclosing land does not belong to the past. Between 2000 and 2023, the total number of agricultural businesses in the Netherlands was cut by half, while the number of companies with an annual output above €500,000 doubled.<sup>49</sup> The promotion of monoculture and the loss of biodiversity relate intrinsically to social inequality. When the Dutch National Court of Audit noted that “one in five working millionaires is active in agriculture,” it failed to mention that 36% of active farmers earn wages *below* the legal minimum and are burdened by high levels of debt.<sup>50</sup> Public taxes will have to pay the bill for the nitrogen crisis and support farmers in the necessary transition to more ecological practices. Simultaneously, the Rabobank made €4.3 billion in private profits in 2023 by issuing loans to unsustainable farms.<sup>51</sup>

The expansion of agriculture, the emergence of industrial production, and the increase of social stratification necessitated substantial investments in knowledge production in the service of producing ever more efficient monocultures. In the face of climate disaster, knowledge claims are increasingly challenged by various social, political, and scientific actors, leading to contradictory perspectives. To counter this, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was a 1988 initiative of the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environment Program meant to address existential ecological threat. The IPCC maintains complex reviewing processes for making scientifically supported analyses and predictions, which have influenced international agreements on the environment and climate. These agreements are not simply the outcomes of negotiations. Rather, they result from the development of knowledge via struggles between various groups in society, including scientists from various disciplines, think tanks, NGOs, government ministries, corporate lobbyists, protesters, and consumer unions. Accordingly, international agreements have an archival force: they

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49 Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, “Minder landschap, meer bebouwing,” March 6, 2017, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2017/10/minder-landschap-meer-bebouwing-1950-2015>; Compendium voor de Leefomgeving, “Bedrijfsomvang en economische omvang landbouwbedrijven, 2000–2023,” May 16, 2024, <https://www.clo.nl/indicatoren/nl212213-bedrijfsomvang-en-economische-omvang-landbouwbedrijven-2000-2023>.

50 Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, “Miljonairs naar vermogenspositie en leefstijl,” June 25, 2019, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/maatwerk/2019/26/miljonairs-naar-vermogenspositie-en-leefstijl-2019>.

51 Kristen Graumans, “Rabobank: kredietverlening aan boeren voor verduurzamen stokt,” *Boerderij*, February 8, 2024, <https://www.boerderij.nl/rabobank-kredietverlening-aan-boeren-voor-verduurzamen-stokt>.

testify to years, sometimes decades of knowledge production and the actions to which acquired knowledge should lead. The shredding of such agreements constitutes the destruction of the remains of an extremely complex archive, and the elimination of clashes and compromises between different forms of knowledge.

The far right's aggression towards the multiplicity of life is provoked by the constraining climatological measures that aim to protect this multiplicity. The far right promises relief from such restrictions in order to protect businesses rather than the diversity of life. In addition to the underlying economic factors for these actions, we also have to identify the epistemic-affective basis for the politics of shredding. As we have seen, these actual reasons for shredding are consistently masked by media-produced spectacles.

As Debord reminds us, spectacles replace social and biological life forms with representations that effectively reduce natural life forms to consumable commodities. When commodified, knowledge production follows the logic of the spectacle, it results in medialized and alienated forms of knowledge and gives rise to pseudo-knowledge, as in fake news and conspiracy theories, and to fragmented, often opposing, knowledge claims. In this context, the populist idea of a 'peasant wisdom,' as accompanied by images of happy farmers taking care of cows in green meadows, is intended to evoke an ideal of knowledge that has been handed down through the generations. Such images disguise the fact that farmers and cows do not live in harmony with nature anymore but have been reduced to underpaid workers and milking machines in an industry that is, in every reality, dependent on high-tech scientific, chemical, and genetic institutes and corporations.

The success or failure in halting the aggressive appropriation and destruction of natural environments hinges largely on how hegemonic interests are articulated and are influenced by various affectively charged modes of knowledge production. Streams of daily information shape our perceptions of social, cultural, and climatological phenomena and determine our responses. For this reason, business magnates and far-right politicians exploit information channels to garner public support for their policies. If unable to control social institutions that produce knowledge, they resort to labeling the resulting information as 'fake news,' thus alienating scholars, scientists, and investigative journalists.

Currently, the strained relationship between right-wing politicians and conventional information platforms significantly influences the definition of newsworthiness by major media outlets. This leads to practices of self-

ensorship, misrepresentation, and even the suppression of scientific data. A recent case in Dutch media exemplifies this phenomenon. The climate expert for Dutch national public television news resigned after he was pressured to no longer discuss critical climate tipping points such as the collapse of the Gulf Stream, which could drastically alter Europe's mild climate and make agricultural activity nearly impossible.<sup>52</sup>

Arguably, the suppression of climate science is a global issue. Following the 2016 elections in the United States, Columbia University's Sabin Center for Climate Change Law introduced the "Silencing Science Tracker," which monitors instances when governments and media distort scientific research, interfere with education, or restrict the publication of scientific findings.<sup>53</sup> Predictably, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic are among the most frequently scrutinized topics. While biased reporting on climate science is often associated with the far right, Maxwell Boykoff and Jules Boykoff demonstrate that such tendencies existed prior to the Trump presidency.<sup>54</sup> They examine leading newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, revealing that ostensibly balanced coverage has downplayed the human role in global warming, too. This widespread tendency in media coverage serves to support the status quo and to encourage passive information consumption among the public, thus smoothing over discrepancies in media coverage as well as natural landscapes.

The concept of the plantationcene, introduced earlier in this section, extends beyond historical and local origins. It represents a symbolic order where advancements in controlling nature have established a knowledge regime that restricts access to shared information, experiences, values, and social activities. Efforts such as climate change policies, scientific reports, artistic and activist initiatives, aimed at educating or raising awareness about climate disasters, reflect collective endeavors to acknowledge the 'beasts' of climate challenges while preventing further escalations. Eradicating or suppressing these

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52 Rolf Schuttehelmn (@RolfSchuttenh), "Bijgevoegd een foto van een penseelkever. Omdat het de taak is van journalisten het beestje bij de naam te noemen," X, July 10, 2024, <https://x.com/RolfSchuttenh/status/1810970587755401372>.

53 Columbia Law School, "Silencing Science Tracker," n.d., <https://climate.law.columbia.edu/Silencing-Science-Tracker>.

54 Maxwell T. Boykoff and Jules M. Boykoff, "Balance as Bias: Global Warming and the US-Prestige Press," *Global Environmental Change* 14 (2004): 125–136.

repositories of knowledge is tantamount to dismantling an entire intellectual reservoir. An archive is being destroyed by the politics of shredding.

The consequences of such loss of knowledge contribute to a sense of helplessness in forming long-term perspectives on environmental progress. The targeting of current and historical climate literacy obscures human responsibility in climate change and privileges the immediate over the long-term. This approach downplays the urgency of climate issues and allows politicians and voter constituencies to evade collective responsibility to address climate disasters. To make matters worse, the dystopian reality in which digital replicas have replaced actual life forms has now transcended science-fiction fantasies. Vanishing Pacific islands like Tuvalu are being digitally copied and will be uploaded to the metaverse once they vanish entirely. In an age of digital reproduction, even archives become spectacular and hyperreal.<sup>55</sup> The political challenge is twofold, then. First, it is important to counteract efforts by the far right to obstruct the documentation and dissemination of climate science knowledge. Second, we need to ensure that climate denialism does not lead to the further shredding of biodiversity and the further loss, fragmentation, and degradation of diverse life forms worldwide.

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55 TUVALU, "The First Digital Nation," Tuvalu TV, n.d., <https://www.tuvalu.tv/#>.