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The Motif of the Environmentalist in Children's and Youth Literature in Germany¹

Abstract: At the latest since the *Fridays for Future* movement, the child or youth environmental activist has been the focus of social debates. This article examines the environmentalist in German-language children's and youth literature since the beginnings of ecological children's and youth literature in order to identify differences and similarities: Different narratives of the motif can be identified, especially in current children's and youth literature, and correspond with the development of children's and youth literature since the 1970s in West Germany.

Keywords: children's and youth literature, child or youth environmental activist

Greenpeace, Fridays for Future, The Last Generation or Extinction Rebellion: on the one hand, these movements stand for environmental and climate protection; on the other, they are characterized by different forms of protest. While some have been campaigning for nature, environmental and climate protection since 1971, others are still young movements. They choose different actions, but what they have in common is that the focus is on child or young activists who help shape the debates. They act as knowledgeable people, educate others about climate change, organize themselves and plan actions. They are internationally networked and consciously use social media. German-language children's and youth literature has also known environmentalists in various facets since the emergence of ecological children's and youth literature. Have activists always been children or young people in literary texts for children and young people? What do environmentalists look like in ecological children's and young adult literature since the 1970s? The focus is on West German children's and youth literature and excludes East German literature. However, ecological children's and young adult novels have also been published in the GDR since the

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1970s, featuring various forms of activism and combining environmental protection with socio-political criticism (cf. Mikota). It would be worthwhile to compare the ecological children's and youth literature of Central and Eastern Europe between 1945 and 1989.

The article distinguishes between child and adolescent activists in texts for children and young people. While children's literature embeds climate, nature and environmental protection primarily in the everyday lives of the characters, mixes genres and often embeds the plot in a crime story, youth literature endeavours to take an international view. The more topical the texts are, the more radically the characters act. The authors do not offer simple solutions.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SUBJECT

Lindenpütz describes ecological children's and youth literature as texts that "deal with problems of the natural, social and built environment under the guiding idea of the ecological crisis"² (Lindenpütz, 2000: 728). Lindenpütz differentiates between (1) texts on ecological enlightenment, (2) texts on ethical foundations and (3) texts with a radically sceptical tenor (cf. Lindenpütz, 2000: 732). The texts are oriented towards the childhood concepts of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Since the 1990s and increasingly since the turn of the millennium, literary hybridisation processes, genre shifts and intermedial concepts have been added. The texts tell of sustainability and responsibility as well as the ecological discourse – destruction of rural areas, climate, and species protection. Similar to general ecological literature, ecological children's and youth literature also aims to raise readers' awareness of the environmental crisis. The literature studied here is political on the one hand but can also be read as a moral warning literature. In research on childhood and children's and young people's literature, an "opposition formation of the child as a symbol of the natural versus civilisation, culture, the adult world" (Oeste, 2016: 395; cf. also Ewers, 2013)³ is increasingly being noted here. Since the 18th century and with the emergence of children's and youth literature specific to children in German-speaking countries, the natural world has been constructed as an ideal space for children to learn, play and experience. If the childhood concept of the Enlightenment in a sense connects children with the books of nature and its sciences, a romantic-idealistic philosophy of nature views children as beings who "do not belong to the present age at all, but to a distant past"⁴ and

² German: „in denen es um Probleme der natürlichen, sozialen und gebauten Umwelt unter dem Leitgedanken der ökologischen Krise geht.“

³ German: „Oppositionsbildung von Kind als Sinnbild des Natürlichen versus Zivilisation, Kultur, Erwachsenenwelt.“

⁴ German: „gar nicht dem gegenwärtigen Zeitalter, sondern einer weit zurückliegenden Vergangenheit““

are capable neither of “enlightened thinking”⁵ nor of “modern observation of nature”⁶ (Ewers, 2013: 2). Both concepts continue to shape so-called, ecological children's and youth literature to this day. In particular, the image of the environmentalist oscillates between enlightenment and romanticism, and only slowly are the two concepts merging in current actors in children's and youth literature.

This article separates the areas of children's and youth literature, first outlining the environmentalist in children's literature, then in youth literature, in order to work out differences and similarities: Different narratives of the motif can be discerned, especially in current children's and youth literature, and correspond with the development of children's and youth literature since the 1970s in West Germany. But it shows, and this is also what this article would like to address, that not only environmentalists but also ecological discourse has changed.

BETWEEN INSTRUCTION AND ENLIGHTENMENT

In the 1980s, children's literature emerged in the German-speaking world that sought to educate the child environmentalist with titles such as *Das Findelkind von Watt* (1980), *Lasst den Uhu leben!* (1985), *Die sanften Riesen der Meere* (1990) or *Eine Biberburg im Auwald* (1986). Such enlightenment already takes place on the paratextual level: in prefaces or epilogues, dedications or mottos, active and also prominent environmentalists have their say in order to draw attention to the relevance of the texts and also to offer readers a way of reading the texts. For example, in *Lasst den Uhu leben!*:

“My dear young friends,

The eagle owl is one of the many animal species that have become increasingly rare over the years and were already extinct in some areas. Especially in our country, much evil has been done to this shy night owl. Superstition, ignorance and blind hunting have led to its extinction. But energetic conservationists have worked to reintroduce the eagle owl to our country. This book tells how they went about it, how much work and difficulties were involved.

However, nature conservation is not only the task of a few idealists. We must all learn again that nature is a wonderful big family in which every creature and every plant has an irreplaceable place. And we must act accordingly.” (Rauprich, 2009: 7)⁷

⁵ German: „zu aufgeklärtem Denken“ „enlightened thinking“

⁶ German: „zu moderner Naturbeobachtung „

⁷ German original: “Meine lieben jungen Freunde, zu den vielen Tierarten, die im Laufe der Jahre immer seltener wurden und in manchen Gegenden schon ausgestorben waren, gehört der Uhu. Vor allem bei uns hat man diesem scheuen Nachtgreif viel Böses angetan. Aberglaube, Unwissenheit und blindwütige Jägerei haben zu seiner Ausrottung geführt.

Other party texts are advertising references to environmental protection organizations such as NABU. Such promotional texts for organizations explicitly ask the reader to take an active part. Although the accompanying texts refer to such organizations, most of the actions in the novels presented here take place in a private or school setting. Epilogues, dedications or explanations of technical terms partly cancel out the fictional content of the texts and formulate the objectives – i.e. the environmental education concepts – of the texts. Or formulated differently: The child actors must first be enlightened; environmentalists are adult figures and children are seen as learners. The focus is on environmental protection and species conservation in the immediate vicinity, because the children encounter people who save eagle owls, whales, wild cats or seals.

THE (MALE) ADULT ACTIVIST PERFORM

In the examples up to the 1990s, male environmentalists are predominantly attributed attributes such as ratio, while female actors save animals and plants with emotion. Both female and male environmentalists belong to outsiders, do not live in the community but in caravans or houses outside the village or small town. The different levels of knowledge are particularly interesting, as traditional role patterns can be found here and female environmentalists build bonds with animals and plants, while male environmentalists know the facts. In the texts after 1970, the environmentalists usually come from outside and draw attention to a problem: they are academics, especially biologists, who thus appear as authorities by virtue of their profession (cf., for example, *Lasst den Uhu leben!*), but without everyone accepting their knowledge. They meet the childlike characters who want to get involved, and these are thus provided with adults as teachers. They already have ideas for actions and also know possible solutions that they would like to implement together with the children. It is only through such an adult character that the child is confronted with the topic and in the course of the plot recognizes the necessity of acting responsibly towards its environment. In this way, children's novels *Lasst den Uhu leben!* and *Die sanften Riesen der Meere* correspond very well with other texts such as *Eine Biberburg im Auwald* by Andreas Fischer-Nagel or *Das Findelkind von Watt*, which were written in the early phase of ecological children's literature. These

Doch tatkräftige Naturschützer haben sich dafür eingesetzt, dass der Uhu bei uns wieder heimisch wurde. Wie sie dabei vorgingen, wie viel Arbeit und Schwierigkeiten damit verbunden waren, erzählt dieses Buch.

Naturschutz ist jedoch nicht nur Aufgabe einiger weniger Idealisten. Wir alle müssen wieder lernen, dass die Natur eine wunderbare große Familie ist, in der jedes Geschöpf und jede Pflanze einen unersetzlichen Platz haben. Und wir müssen danach handeln. (Rauprich: 2009, 7)“

texts imply that the child protagonist still needs to be enlightened and also guided by an adult. Environmental issues are thus not part of the child's world.

In contrast, the female environmentalist will be presented. It can be exemplified by the children's novel *Der Krötenkrieg von Selkenau* (1987). The novel centres on a family of four who have moved from Frankfurt to the countryside. Ala and her mother enjoy nature and want to live in harmony with it. It is therefore not surprising that they befriend Mrs Julmann, an elderly environmentalist. She saves toads, roses grow (wildly) in her front garden and her house is different from the other houses because flowers bloom everywhere. Ala wants to support Mrs. Julmann and thus Mrs. Julmann is the active and knowledgeable person. We also encounter these (adult) role models after 2000, because in the crime series *Die grünen Piraten* (2015ff.) readers also encounter an environmentalist, namely the chemist Miranda Mühlberg, who stands by their side and corresponds to a traditional pattern of the environmental activist in literature. She does not live in the midst of society, but on a houseboat. In the small town she is considered "a bit odd"⁸ (Poßberg/Böckmann: 2015, 17) and is known to everyone, but without having much contact with her environment. On the houseboat she lives largely self-sufficiently: the roof of the boat has solar panels, she has a greenhouse and her own irrigation system (cf. Poßberg/Böckmann: 2015, 43–55). Miranda takes the children's activities seriously, treating them as equal partners in conversation. With Miranda, readers encounter a female character who possesses rational knowledge as well as empathy, supports the children and organizes her own environmental actions. Unlike Ms Julmann, Miranda also has scientific knowledge, has studied chemistry and also works in this field.

However, the authors of early ecological children's literature offer child readers overly simple solutions and do not manage to develop the child environmentalist as an independently acting being. The literature sees itself explicitly as socialization literature. It aims to enlighten and instruct. Knowledge is imparted via the characters; the children are the learners. Environmental protection is not seen as a global problem. It is also problematic that the environmental activists are often dropouts, hippies or intellectuals and are therefore perceived as outsiders. People who have not been involved so far meet them with prejudice. Environmental protection is not seen as a common problem.

THE CHILD ACTIVIST APPEARS – RESTRAINED, QUIET, BUT COMMITTED

The transition to becoming an independent environmentalist is documented in the text *Conni rettet Tiere* (2011) by Julia Boehme, which is aimed at younger

⁸ German: „etwas sonderbar“

readers. Conni is a popular series in Germany, makes references to current issues and provides readers with solutions.

Here, a primary school class watches a film about endangered animal species and afterwards it is clear to the girl Conni that something has to happen:

“The most pressing question is the one that Conni also asks:

“What can we do to prevent more animals from becoming extinct?”

“First of all, be more careful with nature,” explains Ms Reisig. “Don’t run water unnecessarily, use paper and notebooks made from recycled paper, avoid plastic waste ...”

“We know that,” exclaims Conni. “But we want to do something that really has to do with animals!” (Boehme: 2011, 7)⁹

The impulse to become active comes from an adult, namely the teacher, but Conni and her friends want to get involved and join the nature conservation association. The dialogue makes it clear that children are enlightened and want to get involved. Conni finally joins the nature conservation society to help animals. In the first action, she has to learn to save toads by carrying them across the street. It is less about building a loving relationship with the animals than about saving animals. And this is another way in which current ecological children’s literature differs from earlier texts. It is important to note, however, that the book does not rescue cute animals, but rather uses toads to take in amphibians, and thus the rescue plan also comes with certain caveats:

“Conni, Anna and Billi stare wide-eyed into a plastic bucket full to the brim. Inside, fat, disgusting, warty toads crawl over and under each other. It’s a tangle of twitching green and brown bodies and legs.” (Boehme: 2011, 20)¹⁰

Unfortunately, the girls are still dependent on the help of adults, because they are not allowed to cycle to the collection campaign alone in the morning. Their parents recognize the sense of environmental protection campaigns but are not prepared to make sacrifices – in this case, getting up early. Only Conni’s grandfather helps, and the girls even manage to motivate other schoolmates to join in. The enemy is not specifically named, but it is the car drivers who endanger the toads’ lives. But the volume not only describes the rescue of the toads, it

⁹ German: Die drängendste Frage ist die, die auch Conni stellt:

„Was können wir bloß machen, damit nicht noch mehr Tiere aussterben?“

„Zunächst einmal sorgsamer mit der Natur umgehen“, erklärt Frau Reisig. „Nicht unnötig Wasser laufen lassen, Papier und Hefte aus Altpapier nutzen, Plastikmüll vermeiden ...“

„Das wissen wir doch“, ruft Conni. „Aber wir wollen etwas machen, das wirklich mit Tieren zu tun hat!“ (Boehme 2011, 7)

¹⁰ German: „Conni, Anna und Billi starren mit großen Augen in einen randvollen Plastik-eimer. Darin krabbeln dicke, eklige, warzige Kröten über- und untereinander. Es ist ein Gewirr aus zuckenden grünen und braunen Leibern und Beinen.“ (Boehme: 2011, 20)

also reflects on the treatment of wild animals, which are no longer touched and domesticated almost as a matter of course – as in numerous texts of the 1980s and 1990s. Conni finds an injured jackdaw, takes it to the vet with her grandfather and has to keep it in a cage until it recovers. But the vet admonishes Conni to release the jackdaw after she recovers.

Species-appropriate animal husbandry is an important theme in children's literature after 2000, whereby the examples selected here – *Brennesselsommer* (2012) and *PeterSilie* (2016) – follow traditional patterns of environmentalism. In *Brennesselsommer* Annette Pehnt addresses animal protection and follows traditional narrative patterns by introducing Fränzi, an environmental activist who does not conform to common role patterns and lives apart from society. Similar to Ms Julmann in *Der Krötenkrieg von Selkenau*, Fränzi also lives outside society. She moved “a few months ago”¹¹ (Pehnt: 2012, 5) into the immediate neighbourhood of the two girls Anja and Flitzi, who live with their parents, both of whom work, in a detached house. Fränzi moves into the dilapidated neighbouring farm, which everyone in the village calls “the ruin”¹² or the “eyesore of Lauterbach”¹³ (Pehnt: 2012, 7). She wants to set up a sanctuary there and already tells Anja and Flitz at their first meeting that she has partially rescued the dogs from a killing centre. The two girls are fascinated by Fränzi and her ideas, visit her, take care of the animals and learn about species-appropriate animal husbandry. The two girls spend a lot of time on the farm, freeing animals from restaurants and farms with Fränzi. In this way, Pehnt follows the narrative of taking on an adult animal rights activist who explains ecological aspects to the child characters and introduces them to the subject of environmental protection as well as animal welfare. Unlike in the enlightened texts of the eighties and nineties, however, Fränzi is not a studied biologist and does not give the two girls lengthy lectures explaining the situation, but simply lets them work on the farm. She explains some things to them, some things the girls slowly understand and realise what Fränzi is doing. The naïve gaze and love of animals of a girl of about nine slowly develops into an environmentalist.

Antje Damm also takes up the question of species-appropriate animal husbandry in her novel *PeterSilie*. Similar to *Brennesselsommer*, an adult again appears as the knower who enlightens the boy Nick. Environmental and animal protection is initially embodied by Paul, who is introduced not only as a neighbour with a green thumb, but also as someone who sees himself as an environmental activist, has lived in a shared apartment for a long time and has finally inherited his parents' house. His garden and also his home are antithetical to Nick's living environment. Nick's family itself has no “real garden, just

¹¹ German: „vor ein paar Monaten“

¹² German: „die Ruine“

¹³ German: Schandfleck von Lauterbach“

a front garden, but nothing grows there except grass and the dogs always poop there”¹⁴. (Damm: 2016, 16). The novel plays with contrasts and thus follows a traditional narrative of ecological children’s and youth literature. It uses the familiar images of the environmental activist but changes him in such a way that he no longer appears as the one who wants to lecture and enlighten Nick. Rather, both act as equals, Paul takes Nick seriously as a conversation partner, although he explains his plan to him late in the story. Paul’s garden and house represent a counter-design to Nick’s home and can also be seen as a place of retreat. At the same time, Damm uses the image of the environmental activist who appreciates books, loves nature and places little value on material things. With Eveline, Nick then meets a friend of Paul’s who lives similarly to Paul. Her front garden is already adorned with a “red garden fence, behind which it blossoms in all colours.”¹⁵ (Damm: 2016, 73). Her house is also different from Nick’s home:

Eveline’s house is like a museum. It is so crammed with junk that you could spend hours just looking and marvelling. The furniture doesn’t really fit together. There are old wooden cupboards, brightly painted chairs, a rather wildly painted fiery red picture on which someone has applied paint as thick as a finger, a chandelier dangling in all its glory from the ceiling, and white shelves with countless things, including many fossils. (Damm: 2016, 75)¹⁶

When Paul talks to him about climate change and the way people treat nature, Nick doesn’t know what he can do about it. As in other texts, the question of guilt is asked indirectly, but Nick rejects it. Paul and Nick rescue two geese, give them a home and realize:

It’s quite a miracle, these geese have never seen daylight, a meadow, let alone a pond in their lives, but they behave like normal geese in spite of everything [...] (Damm S. 126)¹⁷

During this statement, Nick also reflects on the fact that only two geese could be saved. But he thinks about further solutions:

¹⁴ German: „richtigen Garten, nur so einen Vorgarten, aber da wächst außer Gras nichts und die Hunde kacken immer hin.“

¹⁵ German: „roter Gartenzaun, hinter dem es in allen Farben blüht.“

¹⁶ German: Das Haus von Eveline gleicht einem Museum. Es ist so vollgestopft mit Krempel, dass man stundenlang nur gucken und staunen könnte. Die Möbel passen alle nicht wirklich nicht zueinander. Da gibt es alte Holzschränke, bunt angestrichene Stühle, ein ziemlich wild bemaltes feuerrotes Bild, auf das jemand die Farbe fingerdick aufgetragen hat, einen Kronleuchter, der in seiner ganzen Pracht funkelnd von der Decke baumelt, und weiße Regale mit unzähligen Dingen, unter anderem viele Versteinerungen.

¹⁷ German: Das ist schon ein Wunder, diese Gänse haben in ihrem Leben noch nie das Tageslicht, keine Wiese, geschweige denn einen Teich gesehen, aber sie verhalten sich trotz allem wie ganz normale Gänse [...]

Thus the text also deals with different possible solutions: when Paul and Nick visit Eveline, she explains that several organizations have already failed. Thus, nothing could be achieved by legal means.

Despite an acceptance of the subject matter, the children's novels presented here show that environmentalists still live outside society, present themselves differently, and the different attributions regarding male or female environmentalists are also only slowly resolved. While the child environmentalists have been acting independently since 2000, the adult environmentalist is still stereotyped – for example, with regard to housing, clothing. Girls and boys act together in groups, have equal rights, and in contrast to adult environmentalists, the child environmentalists are not drawn in a stereotypical way.

Overall, it can be observed that the image of the environmentalist has changed since the 1990s in that child protagonists are becoming more active. And indeed, since the 1990s, a change in the motif of the environmentalist in children's literature can be discerned, which corresponds with the changed narrative instances and the view of the child. With the focus on the first-person narrator in children's novels, the child environmentalist also comes into view and suddenly it is children who act independently and do not always have an adult with academic experience at their side. The adult helper fades into the background and at the same time much of children's literature shows that environmental protection has now become an everyday object in children's lives. The narrative perspective reinforces this, because it is consistently told from the children's point of view. Translations from English may have influenced the changes in the child environmentalist. by the American author Carl Hiaasen have documented these changes since the 1990s (cf. Mikota 2024).

Instruction by adult experts is no longer in the foreground; instead, the child protagonists do their own research and adults only help when asked (cf. for example the series *Die Amazonas-Detektive* by Antonia Michaelis).

However, the novel examples also show that the child environmentalists deal with the issue especially in the countryside and during holidays. Thus, the action is also experienced as an adventure; sustainable behaviour, on the other hand, is hardly addressed. Environmental protection is considered too briefly and is merely reduced to saving the endangered species in the novel.

THE YOUNG ACTIVIST – RADICAL AND LOUD

Similar to children's books, environmentalists in the youth literature of the 1970s and 1980s are actors who stand outside society, have a good, mostly academic, education and are outwardly different from the general population. In the texts, not only does the spectrum of the environmental movement become even clearer, but the differences to the bourgeois population are also

highlighted. In the novel *Aktion Löwenzahn* (1984) by Hanni Schaaf, for example, it is said:

Then there was the fact that we were tremendously united in the foliage colony. That's no wonder, of course. The people who live along the route are only inconvenienced by the coming traffic. But we are threatened by it. [...] And we also benefited from the fact that a large proportion, at least of the younger colonists, are better educated than average. They were or are all students. Just look at how many teachers live there. Then there are a few economists who know their way around the law quite well and find it easier to get in touch with the right people. (Schaaf: 1984, 83)¹⁸

The quote makes it clear: The environmental movement can be seen as a movement that is supported by intellectuals as well as adults. Young people have yet to be sensitised to the issues and introduced to them by adults.

An important theme in youth literature is the anti-nuclear movement, which is taken up in novels such as *Der Neue* (Engl. *Goggle-eyes*, 1989; dt. 1989) by Anne Fine, *Für schuldig befunden* (Engl. *The Guilty Party*, 1986; dt. 1989) by Joan Lingard or the well-known texts *Die letzten Kinder von Schewenborn* (1983) and *Die Wolke* (1987) by Gudrun Pausewang, which have become classics. However, while in *Goggle-eyes* an adult opponent protest and takes her daughters to demonstrations, in the novel *The Guilty Party* it is young people themselves who point out the dangers posed by nuclear power plants, protest against the construction of such a plant and are ultimately punished with prison terms. At the centre is the girl Josie, who mobilises in her town against the construction of a nuclear power plant, distributes posters and leads a protest group. It is not adults who explain the dangers, but the young people who seek to talk. However, the novel does not only address the dangers of energy, but also sketches proponents and, above all, those people who profit from the construction. Similar to other youth literature texts, it is also about questions of jobs. Pausewang, as is well known, treads other paths and in her texts sketches a world that must exist after a nuclear catastrophe. She shows what could happen if one disregards the warnings that Lingard and Fine's texts clearly formulate.

Another thematic area is the link between jobs and the clearing of (rain) forests. In *The Bleeding* (engl. 1987, dt. *Eingekreist. Cols Geschichte* 1991) by

¹⁸ German: Dann kam noch hinzu, daß wir uns in der Laubenkolonie ungeheuer einig waren. Das ist natürlich kein Wunder. Die Leute, die an der Trasse wohnen, werden ja nur durch den kommenden Verkehr belästigt. Wir aber werden dadurch bedroht. [...] Und außerdem kam uns zugute, daß ein großer Teil, zumindest der jüngeren Kolonisten, überdurchschnittlich gut gebildet ist. Sie waren oder sind durchweg Studenten. Schauen Sie sich mal an, wie viele Lehrer da wohnen. Dann ein paar Volkswirtschaftler, die sich ganz gut im Gestrüpp der Gesetze auskennen und leichter einen Draht zu den richtigen Stellen finden..

Nadia Wheatly, for example, the deforestation in Australia is criticised. It centers around 17-year-old Col, who grew up in poorer circumstances in a small Australian town. Most of the men work in the logging industry, which has been heavily criticised for several years. Col is aware of the problem, loves the forest, fears and sympathises at the same time with the environmental movement that has suddenly appeared and wants to prevent the loggers from working. He gets caught between the fronts. Here, too, worlds collide: while the loggers and their families tend to come from the lower classes and have little schooling, the environmentalists are educated, wealthy and come from the city. At the same time, the environmentalists are disparagingly called “ecos” (Wheatly: 1991, 25) and given certain clichés. Col sees them as people from the city as well as beneficiaries who use unemployment benefits to demonstrate rather than work. A coexistence of the two groupings seems impossible and both parties hardly care about a peaceful coexistence. In addition to the conflict between adults – young people, intellectuals – workers, the conflict between city dwellers and country people is also discussed. It becomes clear that the city dwellers have an idealized image of nature, while the workers use nature to earn money. In this way, the “ecos” threaten their source of income. Since the 1990s, novels for young people have also been appearing that seek to highlight the global nature of the ecological crisis and do not exclusively report on specific endangered species. The place of action is also changing: the environmentalists now act in different places and are often networked with each other. Nevertheless, here too the environmentalist is not designed as a figure that is accepted; even in the texts since the 1990s, the environmentalist still embodies an outsider:

“We live the way the rest of humanity should in order not to completely ruin the earth,” Leah said with a mixture of pride and defiance. “We hardly need any energy. We recycle everything, nothing is wasted. We do without things we don’t care about anyway.” (Brandis: 2011, 271f.)¹⁹

With such words, a group of environmental activists is introduced in the novel *Ruf der Tiefe* (2011), which already has dystopian features in parts. The group fights against the destruction of nature but lives far away from civilisation on a deserted island and acts there. The group tries to live with new energies and

¹⁹ German: „Wir leben so, wie der Rest der Menschheit es eigentlich auch tun müsste, um die Erde nicht völlig zugrunde zu richten“, sagte Leah mit einer Mischung aus Stolz und Trotz. „Energie brauchen wir kaum. Wir verwerten alles wieder, nichts wird verschwendet. Wir verzichten auf Dinge, die uns sowieso nicht wichtig sind.“

„Zum Beispiel?“

„Shoppingcenter, Einkäufe, die Berge von Plastikmüll verursachen. Wagenladungen von elektronischen Geräten in unserem Alltag.“

“Like what?”

“Shopping centres, purchases that create mountains of plastic waste. Carloads of electronic devices in our everyday lives.”

argues against the throwaway and consumer society. The “freedom of things”²⁰ (Brandis: 2011, 274) is important to them: the land, the sea and the sky. Humans should precisely protect this trinity. In such statements, the Gaia hypothesis is taken up, which – to put it simply – considers the earth and the entire biosphere as one living being. In fact, the environmentalists in the novel are in the tradition of the hippie movement. Technological innovations only mean progress to a limited extent. Leon, the main character in the novel *Ruf der Tiefe*, also argues against this:

Leon wasn't sure what to make of it. “Maybe other people would like to live like that too. But alas, there is no idyllic valley near them where food grows on the trees.” He looked up at a coconut tree towering above him, ready to thunder a nut on his head at any moment.

“We on Big Island are only a small colony – but there are more and more of us, even in the cities.” [...] “We prove every single day that humans don't just destroy and exploit. That's why we call ourselves NoComs. From No Compromise – we don't make lazy compromises.” (Brandis: 2011, 272)²¹

Similar to other ecological texts, a group of environmentally conscious people appears here who have also decided to live outside society and thus almost outside civilisation.

The approach to environmental protection is designed in a more complex way in current youth literature, but without always offering the young readers concrete proposals for solutions. The novels *Am Rande der Gefahr* (2009) and *Schatten des Dschungels* (2012), for example, attack the deforestation of the rainforest. In both novels, it is young people who are active in conservation organisations, organise demonstrations, distribute leaflets and criticise the adult world. Although enlightenment of society determines their actions, the young people also take up the question of radical resistance.

The novel *Am Rande der Gefahr* focuses on 17-year-old Jan, whose mother is building a holiday resort in Indonesia. Jan is involved in an environmental protection campaign in Hamburg against the cutting down of the rainforest, so it is not surprising that he repeatedly discusses her work with his mother during his holidays in Indonesia. The construction of the holiday resort and the resulting deforestation of the rainforests are justified by the mother as

²⁰ German: “Freiheit der Dinge”

²¹ German: Leon war nicht sicher, was er davon halten sollte. „Vielleicht würden andere Menschen auch gerne so leben. Aber es gibt leider kein idyllisches Tal in ihrer Nähe, in dem das Essen auf den Bäumen wächst.“ Er schaute hoch zu einer Kokospalme, die sich über ihm erhob und ihm jeden Moment eine Nuss auf den Kopf donnern konnte. „Wir auf Big Island sind nur eine kleine Kolonie – aber es gibt immer mehr von uns, auch in den Städten.“ [...] „Wir beweisen an jedem einzelnen Tag, dass Menschen nicht nur zerstören und ausbeuten. Deshalb nennen wir uns NoComs. Von No Compromise – wir gehen keine faulen Kompromisse ein.“

progress. Tourism secures jobs for the local population. The environmentalists in the novel, however, argue that Western European corporations want to enrich themselves. But in fact, deforestation means progress in the eyes of many Indonesians. Environmental protection, on the other hand, is seen as something “white” as well as Western European, brought into the countries from outside. This is what the novel *Am Rande der Gefahr* says:

Ajip reacted harshly to this question: “You Europeans come here and want to tell us something about environmental protection? There is no virgin forest left in the whole of Europe. More forest is protected in Indonesia than in the whole of Europe. Germany has long since destroyed its forests or turned them into commercial forests. Indonesia also wants to develop. For that, it must use its natural resources. Anything else is a new form of colonialism.”
 “Eco-colonialism!” my mother added.“ (Chotjewitz: 2009, 86)²²

Nature is therefore perceived differently here. One part of the people sees nature as the basis of production, the other as an almost spiritual space that must be protected. The novel provides only limited answers as to which view is right and which is wrong.

Brandis & Ziemek go one step further in their novel *Schatten des Dschungels*: the action is initially set in Munich in the year 2025. The focus is on the girl Cat, who is a passionate environmentalist and campaigns for the rainforest at numerous demonstrations. Similar to *Am Rande der Gefahr*, it is statements such as “The rainforest belongs to everyone!”²³ and “Stop the deforestation Stoppt die Abholzung”²⁴ (Brandis: 2012, 9) that draw attention to the problem. At a demonstration, she meets Falk, who also stands up for the rainforest. They finally travel to the rainforest with an environmental organisation called Living Earth. But already there Cat notices that the group is leading a double life and realises that Falk belongs to the radical environmentalists. Together with friends, he has developed a biological weapon and distributes pathogens in the loggers’ camps in order to stop the clearing of the rainforest. The enemy is thus the logger, without Falk reflecting that he is ‘only’ doing his job and wants to feed his family. Cat reacts with concern to her friend’s eco-terrorist actions and leaves the camp. Eco-terrorism is framed in the novel as an act designed to save nature.

²² German: Ajip reagierte barsch auf diese Frage: „Ihr Europäer kommt hierher und wollt uns etwas über Umweltschutz erzählen? In ganz Europa gibt es keinen Urwald mehr. In Indonesien steht mehr Wald unter Naturschutz als in ganz Europa. Deutschland hat seine Wälder längst zerstört oder zu Nutzwäldern gemacht. Indonesien will sich auch entwickeln. Dafür muss es seine natürlichen Ressourcen nutzen. Alles andere ist eine neue Form von Kolonialismus.“

„Öko-Kolonialismus!“, ergänzte meine Mutter.“

“Eco-colonialism!” my mother added.”

²³ German: „Der Regenwald gehört allen!“

²⁴ German: „Stoppt die Abholzung“

In their epilogue, Katja Brandis and Hans-Peter Ziemek, inform about their motives for presenting a novel on eco-terrorism to young people: “We wish for a future without eco-terrorists and only portray this way of thinking in our novel to make them think”²⁵, (Brandis: 2012, 403) they write and show what an ecological youth literature aims at: it wants to make young people think. The novel refrains from painting in black and white.

If we look at the image of the actors of the environmental movement from their appearance since the 1970s within youth literature, we can see that they have hardly changed. They resemble hippies and live in harmony with nature. They are largely well-educated people who have recognised the dangers and do not want to exploit or destroy nature. Nevertheless, the picture is also changing in that the environmental movement is global and people are not only acting from common neighbourhoods, but from different countries. In *Ruf der Tiefe*, the NoCom group consists of Swiss, Germans or Americans who are committed to a common idea.

The environmentalist as eco-terrorist, who still had a negative connotation in *Shadows of the Jungle*, is transformed into a positive figure, for example in Erler’s novel *Brennendes Wasser* (2014) or in Brandis’ current novel *White Zone. Letzte Chance*. Here, the Antarctic in the year 2030 is at the centre of the plot. Six young people, all of whom have criminal records, are to spend three months in a disused research station learning social skills. They are looked after by two social educators, have only limited access to the internet and have to come to terms with their previous lives. However, they are dazzled by the beauty of the country and decide to become active. They spontaneously kidnap a Japanese manager who wants to dissolve the whaling law. Much more important, however, than the deed of the young environmentalists is the epilogue in the book. Here, on the one hand, we are told what has become of the young people, but on the other hand, we are also told that the whaling laws have been restricted. Inevitably, one wonders if it is connected to the act of the environmentalists.

Erler’s novel *Burning Water* introduces Gary Warshinski, who storms the headquarters of National Gas & Oil with a gun and forces managers to drink water taken from the area where fracking is happening. Gary’s father died of a heart attack, and he blames the company and fracking. The managers refuse to drink the water but are forced by force and then go to hospital for treatment. Gary argues that an expert report has proven that it is safe. It is precisely this clause that enables his lawyer to keep Gary out of prison. Although he threatens people, the readers only learn later that the gun was without ammunition, from the beginning sympathy is on his side and sympathy for the managers is non-existent. This is also due to the descriptions of the characters. Gary is introduced

²⁵ German: „Wir wünschen uns eine Zukunft ohne Ökoterroristen und schildern diese Denkweise in unserem Roman nur, um zum Nachdenken anzuregen „

as a “typical farm boy” in “jeans, T-shirt and trainers”²⁶ (Erler: 2014, 30) while the managers are red-faced, fat and “wear expensive suits and watches and sweat like crazy [despite] the air conditioning”²⁷ (Erler: 2014, 33). Erler works with opposites, creating the capitalist adversary of the committed boy who has not only lost his father but is also facing farm ruin. He gets support from environmental groups as well as a lawyer who specializes in environmental law.

If we look at the examples from youth literature, it is noticeable that active resistance has been a topic since the 1990s and that young characters are networking. Questions about illegal action are discussed and sometimes acted out. In novels like *Der Geschmack des Lebens* (2021), author Claudia Praxmayer has her heroine move to the countryside. In the home of her deceased godmother, she discovers a resistance movement that opposes genetically modified seeds and saves old varieties.

By means of the narrative instances, which are close to the young actors, an understanding for the actions is also awakened. Criticism comes only from adult characters, but the young people also experience sympathy despite the illegal patterns of action.

CONCLUSION

It is striking that at least in the ecological novels for children and young people studied here, the image of the environmentalist has changed, and environmental protection is becoming firmly integrated into the everyday world of children. Children and young people become active characters who have the knowledge and want to get involved. In this way, they also become role models for their readers. However, while current children's literature continues to place environmental protection on the doorstep and introduce action spaces to child readers, issues of globalization are being taken up in youth literature. In translations from English, the consequences of climate change are also increasingly becoming the focus of novels, which also tell of the threat to the Arctic, among other things, and what consequences climate change has there for people and animals.

The view of female environmentalists has also changed, because they also appear as natural scientists, possessing knowledge and empathy toward nature. It is this combination of knowledge and empathy that is particularly emphasized in current novels. What has remained, however, is that environmentalists are shown with certain clichés and also that at least the adult environmentalists nevertheless occupy an outsider position in the social fabric.

²⁶ German: typischer Farmerjunge“ in „Jeans, T-Shirt und Turnschuhen typical farm boy“ in „jeans, T-shirt and trainers“

²⁷ German: „teure Anzüge und Uhren [tragen] und [trotz] der Klimaanlage wie ver-rückt“

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