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The Womb, the Banknote and the Trolley. Elements of French Anti-Gender Visual Culture

Abstract: This chapter explores the development of visual vernaculars embedded in tweets that have been published by the French anti-gender movement. The latter took shape during the three following events: the law legalising same-sex marriage in France (2013); the moral panic about the concept of gender (2014–2018); the law opening assisted reproductive technology to women in same-sex couples and single women (2021). After the presentation of the growth of the anti-gender movement as a new political force in France over the past decade, this chapter addresses the key methodological issue of counting and identifying images by proposing a typology of their similarities and variations. In the last section, we consider an iconic pattern associating visual elements related to babies, wombs and money or trading, and show how it became persistent over time and increasingly fuelled the visual material on which the anti-gender movement has built its communication campaigns against the “commodification of living beings”.

Keywords: visual vernacular, anti-gender movement, Twitter, content circulation, images similarities

The controlled communication surrounding the French movement *La Manif pour tous* (Protest for All), along with that of other associations established in connection with the movement against same-sex marriage (SSM) in France (2012–2013), was highlighted in both the media and academic literature. Protestors could find a list of demonstration gear (a “protestor’s kit”¹), “key expressions” to be repeated in off-the-cuff interviews and advice on how to react to “signs of provocation” at demonstrations (such as “kiss-ins” aiming to make same-sex couples visible)², hashtags to be used (see Cervulle and Pailler 2014), and an online self-staging glossary (see Raschini 2016). The production of discourse objects and collective texts

1 “Je prends note du kit du manifestant” (I take note of the protestor’s kit), *La Manif pour tous* 63: <https://web.archive.org/web/20240219210533/http://lamanifpourtous63.weebly.com/je-prends-note-du-kit-du-manifestant.html>.

2 “Manif pour tous, une démonstration de force trop millimétrée,” *FranceTV Info* : <https://blog.francetvinfo.fr/mariage-adoption-gay/2013/01/14/manif-pour-tous-une-demonstration-de-force-trop-millimetre.html>.

(such as manifestos), the use of specific expressions (e.g., “gender theory”), various grammars of protest (die-ins borrowed from events held to raise awareness of AIDS), as well as the appropriation and resignification of texts, images and songs have all contributed to the formation and structuring of political communities (see Kunert 2012). Multiple studies have shown that the use of images is one of the strategies employed by the far right to spread their ideology³, much like internet memes that combine popular culture, humour and hate speech, and help trivialise extremist views on the web (see Bogerts and Fielitz 2019; Askanius 2021). The use of internet memes to build political communities on online forums, such as 4chan, has been demonstrated (see Tuters and Hagen 2020). Political communities are thus also semiotic communities sharing repertoires of signs, types of expression and writing practices (see Julliard 2022).

In recent years, studies have argued in favour of a qualitative and quantitative approach to the analysis of born-digital corpora to shed light on the breadth of the social and cultural phenomena (e.g., debates, cultural identity, etc.) that they open up, while also producing precise scientific knowledge on the meaning of these phenomena (see Venturini et al. 2014). However, such methodological innovations are only really useful for text-based content, given the technical difficulties of collecting and processing multimedial corpora. It appears that new scaled-up mixed-method approaches using computer technology are unable to cope with all the semiotic registers through which these phenomena are expressed (see Courtois and Frissen 2023). As a result, research into online movements in France has generally failed to address the question of how the production and dissemination of images has contributed to the development of political communities (e.g., Bouté 2021). Yet the question is crucial, considering: 1) the increasing use of images in social media posts because of their high visibility (see Gunthert 2018; Chen and Dredze 2018), 2) the role played by images in spreading political ideas on the web, 3) the importance of images given the limited number of signs imposed by Twitter and 4) the role of the industrialisation and exploitation of images in the business model of digital cultural industries (see Alloing and Pierre 2017). For this reason, since 2017 we have been developing tools and methods to enable the systematic collection, exploration and processing of multimedial corpora (see Bottini and Julliard 2017).

Following Philips and Milner about the gradual polarisation of discourses in opposing movements (2021), we hypothesise that this “dichotomic semiotisation” is also communicated through a visual repertoire. In our view, “visual vernaculars,” identified by the literature as being specific to each social media platform

³ Images “appeal to the masses, build affective bonds, package and sell political agendas and transform ideology into a marketable object of consumption” (Askanius and Keller 2021, 3).

(see Pearce et al. 2020, 162), also vary according to the positioning in a debate and contribute to its polarisation.

This chapter explores the development of visual vernaculars specific to the anti-gender movement on Twitter and what it reveals about how the movement was organised. In addition, we address what kind of images were circulating in the anti-gender camp on Twitter over the course of the adoption of the law legalising SSM in France (2013), the debates around the spreading of “gender ideology” in society (and especially French schools) (2014–2018) and the attacks on the concept of gender, and the debates on the law opening up assisted reproductive technology (ART) to women in same-sex couples and single women (2021), which was presented by the anti-gender movement as the continuation of LGBT-friendly policies. One of the most frequently recurring topics across the various debates is the concept of the commodification of life.

In this chapter, we first present three specific debates that took place in France and the growth of the anti-gender movement as a new political force in the country over the past ten years. We then address the key issue of how to count, identify and track images in corpora of tweets, mainly by proposing a typology of similarities and variations characterising these images. Finally, in the last section, we consider the example of the iconic pattern associating semiotic elements related to babies, wombs and money or trading, and show how it became persistent over time and increasingly fuelled the visual material on which the anti-gender movement has built its communication campaigns in the past decade.

1 “Same-sex Marriage,” “Gender Theory” and “Assisted Reproductive Technology for All” on Twitter: Three Corpora Over Ten Years

The research strands we present in this chapter are based on three separate studies, each of which followed one of the events that marked the decade 2010 to 2020 in France in terms of debates over gender and sexuality. An initial study focused on the use of hashtags during the debates on SSM in 2013, and documented the emergence of the reactionary movement, *La Manif pour tous* (Protest for all), on the French media scene. This study did not specifically explore the question of images, but it laid the methodological and theoretical foundations for a socio-technical approach to the formation of online communities of practice, particularly using the concept of “affect” as the overall framework for observing power

relationships in the digital sphere (see Hillis, Paasonen and Petit 2015). A second study addressed the controversy over “gender ideology” in France (especially in schools), between 2014 and 2017. This study developed a technical framework to analyse the definition of the aspects under debate in the text and images contained in the collected tweets (e.g., the meaning attributed to “gender differences” [*différence des sexes*] and the extent to which gender studies is an ideological issue). The study laid the methodological foundations for a technical-semiotic approach to the formation of online communities. Using the concepts of “affect” and “grab” (see Senft 2008), the practice of writing online could be understood as the manipulation of signs (e.g., the creation of images) to create an emotional involvement in the subject under debate. The texts and images produced in this way created a link between anti-gender communities and far-right communities. A third study, involving all the previous researchers, proposed an analysis of the visual imagery specific to the assisted reproductive technology (ART) debate in France between 2019 and 2021.

These three debates are linked by their subject matter, the actors involved and the types of stance taken: Twitter accounts directly or indirectly related to the new French reactionary right – which combines traditionalist Catholicism with an “unabashed” and commonplace far right – use modified, commented, remixed and resignified images to construct a fully-fledged semiotic universe. Moreover, the three debates can all be viewed as reopening the controversy on the definition of “gender difference”, as they question the epistemic regime of gender and are a means of reiterating and thereby reinstating binary categorisation (see Cervulle and Julliard 2018).

Yet the three debates under consideration do not share the same characteristics in terms of the way in which the events played out. The first and third were confined to parliamentary debates, whereas the second mainly took place in the media following various government announcements or public speeches. Because of these differences and the different contexts in which the material was collected, this chapter is concerned less with comparing the three debates themselves and more with tracing the genealogy of the anti-gender movement on Twitter over the past ten years.

1.1 The ART Debate and Collection of Related Tweets

On 24 July 2019, the bioethics bill was presented to the French Council of Ministers and then to the National Assembly. The bill would make it possible for single women and women in same-sex relationships to access ART. As the text was being debated in the National Assembly, a first demonstration against the bioethics bill

was held on 6 October 2019, but failed to sway the Assembly's decision to adopt the law at the first reading on 15 October 15. Nonetheless it took almost two years for the National Assembly to pass the law on 29 June 2021, by 60 votes to 37 with four abstentions. In the meantime, the usual to-ing and fro-ing between the National Assembly and the Senate was particularly drawn out because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns in spring 2020, then 2021, which led to the debates being rescheduled several times. Both passages before each of the two houses gave rise to a demonstration and peaks in online exchanges: Opponents to the adoption of the bioethics bill took to the streets on 10 October 2020, 31 January and 8 June 2021. Interestingly, the joint committee formed to negotiate an agreement between the two houses failed in its task, whereupon the National Assembly passed the law, as it has the final word in this type of situation. As a last attempt to block the law, 60 opposition members of the Assembly sought the intervention of the Constitutional Council to have the law annulled. This was to no avail, as the Council examined the appeal at the end of July and promulgated the law shortly thereafter. As a result, ART is now authorised for single women and women in same-sex couples, but is not reimbursed by the French social security system. Moreover, the self-preservation of gametes, the creation of chimeric embryos and registration of two fathers for a child born through surrogacy abroad are prohibited.

A collection of tweets was organised after the bioethics bill had arrived at the National Assembly. Based on Twitter's streaming API with help from DMI-TCAT software (see Borra and Rieder 2014), it covered the period from 28 August 2019 to 31 August 2021, inclusive. For data capture using the streaming API, we chose a large number of keywords linked to the focal points of the debate, drawing on press articles from summer 2019 to identify them and determine the lexicon, the actors involved, their slogans and the dates of demonstrations. The following keywords – and some variations including common mistakes – were used: “LaManif-PourTous” (Protest for All), “parents d'intention” (intended parents), “6octobre” (6 October), “bioéthique” (bioethics), “directAN” (National Assembly live), “direct-senat” (Senate live), “GPA” (gestational surrogacy), “paternité” (paternity), “PMA” (medically assisted reproduction; [ART in English]), “PMAsanspere” (ART without a father), “procréation” (procreation); “taubira”⁴, “eugénisme” (eugenics), etc. Nearly 12 million tweets were initially collected, most of which were not relevant⁵. We therefore decided to narrow the filter and built a corpus of tweets writ-

4 Christiane Taubira, the French Minister of Justice between May 2012 and January 2016 was in charge of defending the bill opening up marriage to same-sex couples in the National Assembly. At the time, she was violently taken to task.

5 “GPA” (gestational surrogacy), for example, also means “grade point average” in various education systems.

ten in French and containing the following keywords: “PMA”, “GPA”, “bioéthique” and “procréation”. We kept 1,116,557 tweets.

The images were collected in a second stage (2021). We looked for tweets with one or more links to images in Twitter’s search API based on their IDs recovered during the first collection and, when the tweets were still available, we recovered the images. Because of this time lag⁶, it was impossible to collect some of the tweets –they had either been deleted or the accounts that had posted them had been suspended. In our corpus, there were 142,960 links to images still available from 120,774 tweets. A unique signature, SHA-1⁷, was calculated for each of the 142,960 downloaded images. This signature enabled us to identify images that were exactly identical from a technical point of view (for example in the case of retweets). As a result, there are more mentions of images in the tweets than there are unique images (which may have been retweeted several times). This technique allowed us to identify 16,302 unique images in the ART corpus.

1.2 The Debate on Same-Sex Marriage and the Collection of Different Tweets

We should nonetheless mention that, in France, the ART debate did not begin with the introduction of the bioethics bill in the National Assembly. Back in 2012, when the bill on SSM was introduced, questions surrounding ART and surrogacy were publicly discussed, even though they were not on the agenda of the debate. When the text was presented to the National Assembly in November 2012, the parliamentary debate should have been a mere formality as both houses were held by government majority. However, over winter and spring 2012, the debate proved extremely intense and polarised, finding its way into mainstream and social media. At that time, the reactionary, largely Catholic right-wing movement calling itself “*La Manif pour tous*” (Protest for All) surfaced in the media, leading to a series of demonstrations and television coverage. The movement chose its name in response to the label that the government communication team had given to the bill: “*le mariage pour tous*” (marriage for all). While live television coverage of parliamentary debates is not new in France, in 2013 it was closely followed on the web, particularly on Twitter. The hashtags #directAN (National Assembly live) and #directSenat

⁶ For material reasons (delays in hiring an IT engineer, the effect of the pandemic on work organisation, etc.), we were unable to shorten the interval between collecting the tweets via the Twitter streaming API and identifying the images in the tweets in the corpus using Twitter’s search API.

⁷ Secure Hash Algorithm.

(Senate live)⁸, which are normally only used for restrained commentaries on broadcasts, were combined with the much more verbose #mariagepourtous (marriage for all) and #manifpourtous (protest for all). It is significant that, at the time, the opposition to SSM was directly targeting the government and French President François Hollande rather than the French LGBTQI+ movement, which found itself mainly in the role of spectator rather than actor in the debates (see Cervulle and Pailler 2014). A tweet collection was organised during this period⁹, not so much to follow all the debates as to monitor the development of *La Manif pour tous* in the media. The collection began in late January 2013 in the run-up to the National Assembly's first-reading of the text and was completed after the law was adopted in June 2013. We used the streaming API to collect tweets that included one of the following keywords: "manifpourtous" (protest for all), "mariagepourtous" (marriage for all), "#Taubira", "directAN" (National Assembly live), "directSenat" (Senate live), "mariagehomo" (gay marriage), "manifdelahonte" (demonstration of shame). To follow the development of the *Printemps français* (French spring) – a huge movement opposed to marriage reform and uniting traditional Catholics, identitarians and far-right activists –, other keywords related to their lexicon were added during the collection process: "printempsfrançais" (French spring), "francaisenrevolte" (French in revolt) and "veilleurs" (watchmen). A corpus of 964,087 tweets was thus compiled.

The images were collected eight years after the initial corpus was compiled (2021). Once again, we looked for tweets containing one or more mentions of images in Twitter's search API, based on their unique identifiers recovered during the first collection (tweet ID). When tweets were still available, we recovered their images with the same script as that written for the ART debate. The time lag meant that it was impossible to collect a very large number of images, either because they had been deleted or because the accounts that had posted them had closed or been suspended. There are 3,716 links to images, spread over 3,711 still available tweets. Again, a SHA-1 was calculated for each of the 3,716 downloaded images, enabling the identification of 1,547 unique images. Although the images collected are not representative, this corpus is nonetheless useful for studying the genealogy of the visual regime specific to the anti-gender and anti-ART movements that characterised opposition to SSM in 2012 to 2013.

8 #directan, directAN and #directsenat generally refer to threads about ongoing debates at the National Assembly or the Senate.

9 The tweets were collected using the /140dev framework developed by Adam Green in PHP/mysql in the early 2010s.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20130117025238/http://140dev.com/free-twitter-api-source-code-library/twitter-database-server/>.

1.3 The Debate on Gender Theory and the Collection of Related Tweets

The debates around gender theory (GT) stem from the Catholic Church's concern that a certain feminist and gendered vision of society could become internationally institutionalised over the course of the 1990s (see Garbagnoli and Prearo 2017). One of the Vatican's reactions to this institutionalisation (one of the expressions of which was SSM) was to work on the feminist lexicon to redefine the meaning of "abortion", "gender" and "gender studies". In 2005, the Pontifical Council for the Family produced the *Lexicon of Ambiguous and Controversial Terms on Family, Life and Ethical Issues*, in which the expression "gender theory" was proposed to bring to light the "secret aim" of gender studies: to "do away with sexual differentiation" and, beyond that, to "promote homosexuality". In one sense, the production of a new lexicon can be seen as a way of redefining a phenomenon. The expression "gender theory" was gradually gaining visibility in France, first, because of the introduction in 2011 of a distinction between "sex" and "gender" in some natural and life sciences textbooks for high school students, then in the debates on SSM in 2012 to 2013 and finally in the roll-out of the Basics of Equality teaching program in French schools¹⁰ in 2013 and 2014. Initially taken up by the media and French political figures, the term "gender theory" came to replace "gender" or "gender studies", especially in the debates on SSM, and was used above all to imply opposition to gender studies and the political actions it inspired. The wider use of the expression "gender theory" also contributed to the organised build-up of this opposition. The history of how the expression "gender theory" was imposed to denote gender studies in France between 2011 and 2013 also signals that controlling the lexicon is crucial in imposing a viewpoint on a subject of debate, or at the very least in controlling the dynamic of the debate.

The tweet collection began in late summer 2014, following the reaction to the Basics of Equality scheme. Carried out using Twitter's streaming API along with the TOAST¹¹ tool, the collection spanned the period from 5 October 2014 to 17 July 2017. We chose keywords linked to the focal points of the debate, its lexicon, the actors involved and the dates of demonstrations, including: "theoriedugenre" (gender theory), "#genre" (gender), "manifpour tous" (protest for all) and "#5octobre" (5 October). Almost two million tweets containing one of these keywords were retrieved

¹⁰ The "ABCD de l'égalité," an educational scheme aimed at promoting equality between boys and girls by deconstructing stereotypes in terms of professions, leisure activities, etc.

¹¹ TOAST: Outils pour l'Analyse Sémiotique de Twitter (tools for the semiotic analysis of Twitter) (see Bottini and Julliard 2017).

using the Twitter streaming API, with considerable noise¹², and a corpus of 107,209 tweets was compiled. As TOAST can be used for image collection, the collection was carried out almost concurrently¹³. In this corpus, 15,330 tweets contain 17,016 mentions of images, 15,734 of which contain links that were still accessible during the image collection. These links connect to 1,854 different images.

Our analysis of the formation of the anti-gender movement on Twitter based on practices of online content creation (particularly including text and images) therefore makes use of three corpora that are summarised in the table below (see Tab. 1).

Tab. 1: Corpora collected in the three studies on gender controversies on Twitter (2013–2021).

Field	Date of collection 1 (text + metadata)	Number of tweets (total)	Date of collection 2 (images)	Number of tweets with images	Number of image URLs	Number of unique images
SSM	Jan.–June 2013	964,087	Dec. 2021	3,711	3,716	1,547
GT	Oct. 5, 2014–July 17, 2017	107,209	Oct. 5, 2014–July 17, 2017	15,330	15,734	1,854
ART	Aug. 28, 2019–Aug. 31, 2021	1,116,557	June–Dec. 2021	120,774	142,960	16,302
Total		2,187,853		139,815	162,410	19,703

We began by carrying out simple counts to find our bearings in the corpus. In particular, we counted the accounts that had posted tweets and we identified the 2,683 accounts that had posted during all three debates. We also compared the images that we had managed to recover to identify those that had passed from one debate to another.

¹² The term “genre” appears in numerous tweets written in English, referring to a musical genre.

¹³ With a delay ranging from a few hours to a few days.

2 A Visual Regime of the Anti-Gender Movement that Built Up Over Time

2.1 Four Types of Similarities Between Embedded Images

A semiotic analysis of unique images in the corpus relating to the “gender theory” debate revealed that in addition to technically identical images, there were several images that were identical from a semiotic viewpoint even if they were technically different and had unique signatures when computed by a SHA-1 algorithm. This showed that the same image could be published by several accounts without apparent links (e.g., retweets or subscriptions) and led to the hypothesis that the accounts had the same external source of inspiration.

We therefore propose four possible ways of linking images to each other to study the development of visual regimes:

1. images that are technically and semiotically identical;
2. images that are semiotically but not technically identical;
3. images that are clearly derived from the same original image (which are more or less easy to link together depending on the extent of the editing. This type includes combined or cropped images and also memes like image-macros with different texts, etc.);
4. images expressing the same iconic pattern¹⁴, not materially derived from one another but thematically similar.

The corpus we present here includes a total of 19,703 unique images and 139,815 tweets containing images that were extracted from the three debates. The phenomenon of circulation, as we have just shown, applies to different types of (re)posting, whether or not the image is retweeted, used in an identical manner or edited. However, apart from identifying and counting retweets, which was done by the platform and its API, developing a method to automatically identify some

14 We call “iconic pattern” the assembly of iconic signs whose circulation ends up reducing the effects of meaning.

This syntagm results from the association between the concept of “motif”, used in musical analysis “to identify a modifiable harmonic, rhythmic, or melodic figure over time (repetition, variation, development, etc.)” (André 2007, 17–66; our translation), and the qualifier “iconic”, to anchor this concept in the analysis of images. The multiplicity of variations of each assembled iconic sign, always together, ends up freezing, under certain socio-technical conditions and interpretative possibilities. In this way, we distinguish ours from approaches that focus on the analysis of works and their intrinsic meaning (which more often use “pictorial motif” or “visual motif”).

types of image circulation was a much greater challenge¹⁵. How could this process be simplified?

Once we had familiarised ourselves with the context of the 139,815 tweets containing images, we began by using the “average hash” algorithm from the Python ImageHash library, which calculates an approximate signature for an image and thus automatically identifies variations of the same image (reframed, resized, text added). As the results were not entirely robust (some similarities were not identified without our understanding why, some variations were too significant for the images to be linked), “average hash” was primarily used to identify the most obvious similarities. Each image was assigned one or several tags regarding the debate(s) in which it appeared so that we could identify recurrences from one debate to another. Everything was then double-checked with the naked eye.

The images were thematically labelled so that they could be grouped, but the very purpose of this meticulous labelling was to identify variations and the persistence of a picture or an iconic pattern between different contexts several years apart. The groupings were far from straightforward, and we were required to go through the corpus several times to compare the interpretations of the different authors and select the most relevant category based on the context of the tweet, the corpus, the debate, or contemporary events, and sometimes also the origin of the image and the identification of cultural and political spaces in which it was circulating.

2.2 The Persistence of a Visual Regime in the Anti-Gender Movement

In 2018, we had hypothesised that crisis is the epistemological regime of gender (see Cervulle and Julliard 2018). In the French field, this was confirmed by the conflicts we observed around the definition of “gender difference” that have been playing out in several debates in the public sphere since the 1999 adoption of the civil solidarity pact, which enabled same-sex couples to enter into a civil union, parity in politics¹⁶ and the opening of ART to women in same-sex couples and single

¹⁵ The themes evoked in the images might not be mentioned in the body of the accompanying text, which makes it impossible to account for all the potential representations of a theme (especially in images) with a keyword search.

¹⁶ In France, the adoption of parity in politics was justified, among other arguments, by the idea that men and women are different (the “difference between the sexes” being either naturalised or presented as the result of socialisation). The contributions of men and women to public decision making were therefore considered to be different.

women, for example. This may well explain the thematic coherence that we observed in the dataset of 19,703 unique images in the complete corpus under study, even though we did not choose the same keywords to collate tweets for each collection. Several themes also reappeared in the three debates: the fear of seeing “gender difference”, “heterosexuality”, “western masculinity” and the “father figure” being undermined, criticism of the “commodification of living beings” (more specifically wombs and babies), and the “hypersexualization of children”.

Eighteen images featured in at least two of the three debates confirm this thematic continuity and the existence of visual regimes in the movements on social media, with some images reappearing after an eight-year interval. These images were shared 45 times during the SSM debate, 281 times during the GT debate and 88 times during the ART debate. Although sharing one of 18 images 414 times may not appear much compared to the 139,815 tweets in the entire corpus containing an image (0.29%), this figure does not fully convey the scale of the dissemination. First, we identified 81 deleted retweets that initially contained one of these 18 images in the ART sub-corpus. Second, we observed that four of the 18 images circulated as variations, resulting in 11 new images (one occurrence of each). The 18 images are not all related to the core visual regime of the anti-gender movement. For example, three of the 18 images directly mock one of the movement’s leaders, who collapsed during a gathering, and another image pointed to the hypocrisy of the movement by remixing its logo. But most of the other images were used by the anti-gender movement to support its position, whether by criticising queer people (for example a picture of Thomas Beatie, a trans man who has given birth to three children), using cartoons or photomontages to speak out against paedophilia or the “sale of babies”, or posting a photograph from Stephanie Sinclair showing pregnant bodies dressed in shimmering saris. Four other images present famous French scientists or columnists who aligned themselves with the positions of the anti-gender movement. Finally, two images are composed of slogans from *La Manif pour tous*, which also featured on placards during demonstrations.

It was not only topics and images that continued to reappear over the years. Throughout the three debates 2,683 accounts used the collected hashtags, sometimes frequently. Three of these accounts posted one or more of the 18 images that played a central role in perpetuating the visual regime of the anti-gender movement over a period of at least eight years. One of these accounts, which was created in April 2013 and immediately expressed support for *La Manif pour tous*, had accumulated over 13,400 followers by 2021. It shared eight of the 18 recurring images in 15 tweets posted between 2014 and 2021 and sometimes shared the same image twice during the debates on gender theory and ART. We also identified 41 retweets by other accounts of images posted by this account. In other words, 56 occurrences of the images in our corpora are linked in some way to

this account. Finally, the illustrated tweets that this account posted during the ART debate all included the same text (“*#ART without a father #Gestational surrogacy: NO, NO and NO!! MACRON GET OUT!*”), regardless of the attached image.

We can therefore begin to build a visual memory of the anti-gender debates that helped to link the various movements (against SSM and ART, educational initiatives to promote gender equality, etc.), reiterated arguments in support of a position and sent a signal to potential supporters of new movements. Technically duplicated or semiotically equivalent pictures cannot be the only elements to support such a visual memory, so the two last types of potential similarity that we identified, namely edited images and images expressing the same iconic patterns must also be considered here. Materially speaking, an iconic pattern may appear in different images that are not necessarily variations of each other but are linked thematically (identifying such similarities relies heavily on effective labelling).

2.3 The “Commodification of Living Beings”, a Circulating Iconic Pattern

We would like to focus on a picture which illustrates the circulation of the iconic pattern expressing the “commodification of living beings”. The photograph showing pregnant bodies dressed in shimmering saris that we mentioned above was taken in 2008 by Stephanie Sinclair from VII Network for a report on gestational surrogacy in India. The photographer, known for her feminism and her efforts to fight against the exploitation of women in Global South countries, has published 33 of her photographs on her website¹⁷. Since 2008, one of the photos in particular has been used by the mainstream press to illustrate articles on surrogacy, often through the prism of the exploitation of women¹⁸. The photo has also been used to illustrate the anti-surrogacy discourse of pro-life websites such as that of the European Institute of Bioethics¹⁹. It features in the GT sub-corpus (one occurrence) and the ART sub-corpus (14 occurrences including four deleted). In addition, a black and white variant of this picture appears in the ART corpus (one occurrence). On this version of Sinclair’s photograph, a text in French has been added, which can be translated as follows: “Sarah is Indian. She rents her womb for €45,000 to a French homosexual couple. Is this what they call progress?”.

¹⁷ See the photographer’s website: https://stephaniesinclair.photoshelter.com/gallery-image/Wombs-for-Rent/G00009BTG8ME9BWw/I00001Cpw_hOmJA.

¹⁸ See Amelia Gentleman, “India Nurtures Business of Surrogate Motherhood”, *New York Times*, 10 March 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/10/world/asia/10surrogate.html>.

¹⁹ <https://www.ieb-eib.org/en/>.

These reiterations contribute to the debate by integrating signs of money or trading directly in the picture. The risk of the commodification of living beings has frequently been held up by the Catholic Church in response to questions raised by bioethics since the end of the twentieth century, and this combination of pregnant bellies and trading symbols as a visual idea was repeated throughout the three debates.

The iconic pattern takes the form of an image-based oxymoron, combining an element symbolising human procreation (a pregnant belly, a baby) and an element symbolising trading (shopping trolleys, bar codes, currency symbols such as dollars or euros). A few examples of this pattern were found in the SSM debate and the variety increased in the ART debate. It is one of the most prominent examples of iconic patterns to feature in at least two of the three debates. The final debate alone gave rise to 214 unique images depicting the same pattern, and these images were embedded in 2,061 different tweets. Unsurprisingly, the increasing presence of this pattern reflects not only the ability of Twitter users to remix pictures but also various campaigns involving visual material and the staging of happenings in the public space.

During the GT debate, for example, the VigiGender association distributed a brochure in schools containing illustrations that circulated widely on social media and Twitter in particular. The brochure seeks to reveal what it sees as the hidden aims behind various measures adopted by the French government (SSM, the “Basics of Equality” program), namely to promote “sexual undifferentiation” and homosexuality and to “hypersexualize young children”. VigiGender was concerned that the law on marriage and adoption for same-sex couples would “prepare minds for the commodification of human beings and the ‘modern’ slavery of gestational surrogacy”²⁰. To illustrate its concerns, VigiGender used various visual representations in the brochure, including one of a black silhouette of a pregnant belly bearing a euro bank note.

Later, during the ART debate, the pattern was reused, but this time there was no need to edit pre-existing pictures. Instead, the “*Marchons enfants*” collective organised happenings in the public space in various French cities on 8 March 2020. The collective thus provided images showing young women dressed as Marianne, the symbolic figure of the French Republic (Phrygian cap, tricolour cockade), pushing trolleys in which plastic baby dolls were seated on fake money bearing the image of French President Emmanuel Macron. In Paris, the event was staged in a very elaborate way (tents were set up for women to put on make-up and costumes,

20 See VigiGender, “Le genre en images. Quelle société voulons-nous pour nos enfants?”, <http://www.vigi-gender.fr/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Livret-genre-%C3%A9dition-2-site-1.pdf>.

dozens of trolleys were placed in front of the National Assembly, the women arrived on stage and a speech was given by the president of *La Manif pour tous*, while placards with various slogans were waved at key moments in the speech and smoke bombs were set off²¹. The set of unique images that were published and embedded in tweets after this happening represent more than half of the occurrences (1,366) of the iconic pattern for the category “the commodification of living beings”.

Conclusion

By presenting a panorama of recurrent anti-gender visual material produced by the far right and conservative right in France, we have demonstrated that a visual vernacular has built up over the past ten years, based on patterns reproduced or derived from previous images. Although the images were posted by Twitter users, some of them had a long history in the mainstream media while other pictures were part of campaigns targeting social media platforms more or less directly: Some pictures in the VigiGender campaign were never designed to target social media, but the pictures of “Mariannes” pushing babies and bank notes in their trolleys were always intended to go viral. A decade of anti-gender movements has witnessed the progressive appropriation of visual remixes by French conservatives, both regular users and communication agencies working for the Catholic Church. The ability to produce visual content and let users share it online might be the sign of a very well-structured movement. The kind of structure at stake should be further explored. Such an investigation had been, for example, conducted by Jen Schradie during the 2016 election in the USA (see Schradie 2019). The sociologist demonstrated that users’ behaviours on social media were not spontaneously aligned with their camp. To avoid the discursive dispersion of their grassroots activists, both alt-right and religious movements established a very hierarchical communication strategy by producing material that could be reposted by their members on social and stimulate algorithms accordingly.

Our chapter aimed to examine the temporality of content circulation. Most studies that focus on content circulation at the platform level rely on some event coherence and chronological unity: The number of “viral” hashtags often corresponds to a relatively short period, sometimes just a few hours, with a clear be-

²¹ Photos of the “*Marchons enfants*” event on 8 March can be seen on the *La Manif pour tous* website: <https://www.lamanifpourtous.fr/mobilisations/retour-sur-les-actions-marchons-enfants-du-8-mars>.

ginning and end. It's a homogeneous event, and the time of this event coincides with the chronological time that the study can reconstruct from the collected dataset. In contrast, our study focuses on three distinct events, each with distinct hashtags, actors who may renew or sometimes change their names (such as "La Manif Pour Tous" becoming "Le Syndicat de la Famille", etc.), and several months separating these events over almost ten years, etc. However, these events share a political coherence: The reopening of debates attracts previously mobilised users who engage with entirely new actors, images resurface, are remixed and adopted by these new actors, etc.

This raises questions about how one can observe circulations across the three events, as the multiple traces of usage distributed over time are too distinct to be approached as a single and homogeneous event. Nevertheless, they are sufficiently interconnected to suggest a long-term political and cultural transformation (which is particularly relevant in digital media usage related to social protest [see Riboni 2023]). This composite object unfolding over time also has specific methodological requirements. Indeed, for a single event on a platform, content circulations are typically represented by studying variations in the number of messages or images within an indistinct mass of users, or by illustrating the circulation of content through the social graph of users. In both cases, whether through content statistics or user network mapping, the analysis tends to flatten the chronology. In the case of our study, the chronological perspective reveals what has survived from one event to another, prompting consideration of content or individuals that may be less important in other types of approaches but are more structuring from a semiotic standpoint.

This invites to move from an approach considering images as quantifiable units to viewing images as a semiotic variety. This chronological approach to content circulation by serialising distinct events leads us to a new perspective. In recent years, software²² has provided the opportunity to represent the temporality of content publication by zooming in and out of a chronological timeline. Zooming in allows the individual examination of messages or images, while zooming out enables the consideration of daily, monthly, or annual content trends. Our approach employs a precisely opposite mechanism: The more we focus on a single event, the more we approach it by exploring data through this mass. As we begin to zoom out over the entire study period, we shift attention to users or images notable for their persistence across different events.

22 See for example, the software developed in javascript by the knightlab: <https://timeline.knightlab.com/>.

Most of the time, the figures that make virality visible primarily account for most of the content published during an event. In the case of images, these are often retweeted images (thus technically identical) or semiotically very similar ones that are given preference. Conversely, when expanding the scope of observation to the entire chronology, it is the variations in images that become more apparent. The development of a visual regime becomes perceptible, persisting from one peak of virality to another. Additionally, one discovers “intermediate” images that may not have been reposted or remixed extensively and may not have appeared in the most viewed images. Observing the dissemination of semiotic elements then partly diverges from solely observing the circulation of messages or images, aiming to demonstrate their relationships and complementarities over time.

Once this “genealogy” of images becomes perceptible and is separated from the mass of initial data, some of the content producers, whether individuals or professionals, also come to the forefront. Indeed, certain approaches to virality or memes tend to minimise the context of production or reduce this context to the platform where the content emerges. However, while platforms play a concrete role in content circulation, certain types of actors entirely external to them work on remixing and ensuring the longevity of specific textual or visual content by adapting and republishing them. For instance, prescriptive actors (such as Catholic associations) construct a public communication campaign based on an already existing visual regime (the iconic motif of the belly and bills), which is then promoted by media intermediaries: conservative press, other associations and their online accounts. These prescriptive actors take advantage of the centrality of their position and are subsequently validated by the followers of these prominent accounts, who in turn engage in hashtag indexing and retweets. All these actors and their role in the circulation of textual and visual content deserve particular attention.

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