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Eco-Images and Environmental Activism: A Sociosemiotic Analysis

“Nature never speaks by itself,”¹ least of all in ecological discourses, where the line between brand-marketing strategies and the protection of nature is continually blurred. Strategies employed by activists testify that the crisis of nature is being constantly represented and renegotiated by different social actors. The ever-growing number of unconventional advertising campaigns executed by environmental organizations is a clear sign of the changeable nature of discourses about the crisis of the environment.² One of the most interesting and yet unexplored aspects of the mediatization of nature is the continuous evolution of visual communication strategies used by environmental movements to denounce the ecosystem crisis and to influence public opinion.

In recent years, we have noted an increase in *greenwashing* practices: the intentional dissemination of misleading or unsubstantiated information by organizations in order to conceal their abuse of the environment, or to promote vaguely formulated “sustainable practices” and products to present a positive public image. If we focus on the “responsibility” of images in the context of green/greenwashed strategies, two elements become obvious. On the one hand, we can detect the communication strategies adopted by corporations to reassert their environmental commitment. On the other hand, we see the political use of images by ecological movements and organizations, in particular their creative re-appropriation of the visual imagery of sustainability. The imagery used here can be categorized as *eco-imagery*.

This essay will focus on the use of eco-images in unconventional visual environmental campaigns. The subjects of such social communication discourses face a very complex and tricky problem: to incisively depict rooted and almost unresolvable environmental problems, while engaging spectators who are already accustomed to many kinds of shocking images.³ According to the guerrilla marketing lexicon,⁴ the aim is to highlight

1 Gianfranco Marrone, *Addio alla Natura* (Torino: Einaudi, 2011).

2 Paolo Peverini, “Crisi della natura e attivismo ecologista,” in *Semiotica della natura: Natura della semiotica*, ed. Gianfranco Marrone (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2012), 209–32.

3 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux Inc., 2003).

4 Jay Conrad Levinson, *Guerrilla Marketing: Secrets for Making Big Profits from Your Small Business* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Compan, 1984); Levinson and Paul R.J. Hanley, *The Guerrilla Marketing Revolution* (London: Piatkus Books, 2005).

the social issue, trying to “infect” the media system like a “virus.” As a consequence, the effectiveness of unconventional ecological campaigns should be based on the ability to trigger a sort of “contagion,” in particular through the dissemination of images and videos by means of social media.

Environmental crises cannot merely be depicted; people working to draw attention to emergencies and environmental protection need to find innovative and effective ways to communicate visually. Currently, marketing tactics previously used by green activists for their campaigns are becoming one of the top trends in brand discourses.⁵ How do environmental organizations react to the fact that their own “weapons,” their guerrilla strategies, have become part of brand communication? How can they preserve their integrity, while showing as false the “transparency” of brands that use green tropes to enhance their credibility? As we will see in the following analysis of a recent Greenpeace campaign, the exposure of the deceitfulness of corporate (and governmental) green engagement takes the shape of a rich and complex discourse about environmentalists’ own identity.

It would be reductive to think that the aim of “social guerrilla” action consists merely of raising public interest in environmental crises using spectacular methods, or simply taking the audience by surprise. Environmentalists’ unconventional protests are not intended simply as tools to draw the attention of potential supporters of the green cause to the “undeniable objectivity” of environmental dramas, which are often far removed from personal experience. Ecological issues, and their constantly renegotiated visual representations (eco-images), appear rather as a communicative field of conflict where the credibility of different subjects of expression are put to the test.

Campaigns advertising corporate social responsibility, for example, are particularly interesting in this respect. Corporations aim to reinforce their credibility over time, using images to underline the topic of *ethical transparency*. They are constantly forced to renegotiate their reputation, as stakeholders become more aware of the social issues and ethical conflicts that underlie sustainable development.

Environmental issues play a strategic role in the construction of an effective policy of corporate social responsibility. In particular, companies are expected to be accountable

5 Jay Conrad Levinson and Shel Horowitz, *Guerrilla Marketing Goes Green: Winning Strategies to Improve Your Profits and Your Planet* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2010).

for the impact on the ecosystem they operate in and for pollution and the exploitation of natural resources. Companies are attempting to take advantage of the growing public concern and awareness of environmental issues by promoting an image of themselves as environmentally responsible.

As a consequence, communicating sustainability becomes a dilemma. This is due on the one hand to the competitiveness of companies and their reliability. On the other hand, ecological organizations constantly cast doubts on corporate tactics and strategies, undermining their credibility. How can false claims of environmental commitment be detected? Which are the visual counter-strategies deployed to denunciate industry's false transparency, and to depict sustainable development dilemmas more critically?

If corporations use green strategies to seduce customers, activists are compelled to employ an equally seductive strategy to reassert the trustworthiness of their position and to uncover the deceit of corporations, using more and more sophisticated "masks" to unmask the adversary's real intentions in an unexpected process of *aestheticization of the protest*. Referring to Getty Images Collection, the world's largest royalty-free archive of images that are used in advertising and magazines to address climate issues, Hansen and Machin state,

Television and other media visualize the environment through the use of increasingly 'symbolic' and 'iconic' images rather than those which are recognizable because of their geographic/historical or socially specific identity. Through their repeated use these images replace other possible representations, particularly those that locate and connect such issues in actual concrete processes such as global capitalism and consumerism.⁶

One of the main effects of the mediatization of ecosystem crisis is the progressive loss of the significance of eco-images.

Image bank photographs tend to lose their origin in time and space. . . . An image of a polar bear on an ice floe is not about a particular animal, place or time but used to connote global warming, even if the image itself was taken at a time when there was

6 A. Hansen and D. Machin, "Visually Branding the Environment: Climate Change as a Marketing Opportunity," *Discourse Studies* 10 (2008): 779.

a different agenda about wildlife conservation. The result is that a limited number of features, attributes, and landscapes come to represent the whole of a hugely complex issue that is of a particular moment in history and is happening in precise places. So the threat to the environment by climate change can be connoted by a woman nurturing a delicate plant. She references no place or occasion, only the idea of “Hope and union.” But as such images come to dominate the visual language of climate change, to what extent do they shape our expectations of this particular visual world? What scripts are fostered? To what extent will such discourses come to dominate our cognitive models of how such problems can be formulated and addressed?⁷

The starting point for many recent campaigns to raise ecological awareness is an understanding that audiences have become accustomed to consolidated forms of environment crisis discourse. As a result, in the political discourses of nonprofit organizations (NPOs), the visual element becomes more and more essential. NPOs try to bypass the indifference of the public, moving beyond the expectation that displaying the realistic effects of the environmental crisis is enough to obtain the attention of the masses. They use different and unconventional kinds of images in a strategic and political way to depict intractable environmental problems: NPOs plan social advertising campaigns to raise awareness about social issues and influence public opinion, to encourage or discourage attitudes and behaviors, to provoke political reactions, and to raise funds.

The effectiveness of an NPO’s environmental campaign relies on its ability to break rules and subvert stereotypes about the visual representation of certain topics. In recent years, to avoid the figurative clichés often used to depict climate change, pollution, and endangered species, social advertising has started to experiment with unconventional visual strategies and techniques.

Approaches

A new social advertising practice contrasts surrealism, black humor, and visual paradoxes with the classic strategy of dramatization (i.e., *fear appeal*): the communication takes place on a different level, with the viewer’s attention and complicity being stimulated and thus also their cooperation in the interpretation. This strategy emerges in our

7 Hansen and Machin, “Visually Branding the Environment,” 787.

analysis of a wide corpus of international green campaigns:⁸ this strategy is honed over time to raise awareness of a social issue, the expression of social discourse seemingly autonomous from the severity of environmental topics. While, until a few years ago, unconventional advertising meant visual shocks and an authoritative and prescriptive tone of voice, at the moment a second approach is prevailing. An interesting communicative strategy has gained relevance: enhancing the apparent incoherence between dramatic contents (e.g., the crisis of nature) and the characteristics of visuals that aim to provide the text with a “euphoric” tone of voice. While in *fear-appeal* campaigns the aim is to shock the spectator emotionally, this second strategy has two steps. First, the visual/verbal rhetoric is used to emphasize the unpredictability of the message, forcing the viewer’s gaze to stop and look at the text. Second, in an argumentative step, copy and logo give information about the social problem, the complex scenario, its causes, and possible solutions. An exemplary case is a *trompe l’oeil* image showing the aerial view of a city completely submerged in the water of a swimming pool. Only after a moment of bewilderment do the bathers notice a web address (globalwarmingsolutions.co.in) and the logo of HSBC bank written on the pool border, the only elements that reveal that they’re involved in a climate change advertising campaign.

To strengthen the message, three very common discursive strategies in social advertising—*warning*, *suggestion*, and *condemnation*—are being continually redefined using *irony*, often sparking passionate public debates about the ethics of representing a serious situation in a humorous way. In the most relevant examples, the innovative force of the image is based on a metatextual approach to environmental protests, tending to reopen texts, manipulate signification processes, “inoculate” paradoxes within the original message, and, in other words, distort the semantic coherence.

Tactics and Examples

One of the most common unconventional techniques in social advertising is *sticker-ing*, the practice of placing uncommon, often big and spectacular, images in unusual locations in urban territory, taken out of their usual context. The experience involves firstly the passers-by, and secondly the media audience.

8 Paolo Peverini and Marica Spalletta, *Unconventional: Valori, testi, pratiche della pubblicità sociale* (Rome: Meltemi, 2009).

A very recent exemplary case is the award-winning social campaign against traffic pollution commissioned by China Environmental Protection Foundation, *Green Pedestrian Crossing*. In one of the most polluted cities in the world, Shanghai, the campaign re-semanticized a common element of anonymous urban spaces—the zebra crossing—by covering the alternate white and black stripes with a large canvas representing a leafless tree. Sponge cushions soaked in green, environmentally friendly, washable paint were placed on both sides of a busy road. Pedestrians crossing the street stepped on the green sponge, leaving green foot imprints on the tree. Each “green” footprint on the canvas looked like leaves growing on the leafless trunk: people truly felt that they were creating a greener environment by walking.

According to the official press release, the *Green Pedestrian Crossing* was carried out on seven thoroughfares in Shanghai. The campaign was then extended to 132 roads across 15 cities in China, with participation rates exceeding 3,920,000 people. Media interest, both online and offline, was significant. After the campaign launch, there were more than three hundred thousand redirects and fifty thousand posts on the Sina Microblog, the most important Chinese social network. Research revealed that general public awareness of environmental protection had increased by 86 percent. After the campaign, one of the prints was exhibited at Shanghai’s Zheng Da Art Museum.

The effectiveness of the entire guerrilla action was based on the complex relation between media and urban spaces, intended not merely as contexts but as *stratified co-texts*. As Ruggero Eugeni affirms, in the “post-media condition” where the medium is the territory,

Media are not limited to spreading within a territory, but end up losing their specificity in this movement; conversely, territories are not merely occupied by media, but become media devices themselves. In other words, within the current “post-media condition,” the medium is the territory. . . . More specifically, with regard to cities and urban spaces, it is not difficult to see that the city is not just a territory occupied by media devices, but an instrument of appropriation and creation of new territories.⁹

9 Eugeni, Ruggero. “Nikeplatz: The Urban Space as a New Medium,” Paper presented at NECS Conference, Istanbul, Turkey, 24–27 June 2010.

The tactic of semantic subversion of spaces is crucial in social advertising; it is used extensively to address selected audiences specifically. The effectiveness of such unconventional action relies on the successful preliminary observations concerning the model reader profile and the potential symbolic value of the territory to be occupied. The potential strength of this guerrilla approach consists on accurately selecting the receiver, while, at the same time, planning a temporary campaign within a territory that is so familiar to the receiver that it seems absolutely ordinary.

In many cases, protests by environmentalists play with their own typical formulas, build credibility by ironically using a huge repertoire of stereotypes, emphatic tone, hyperbole, and exaggeration in the representation of passions. The exaggeration strategy is particularly common in eco-oriented social campaigns. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) campaign displayed, once again, in China, is an emblematic case, the effectiveness of which is based on a grotesque representation of urban pollution. Creators at the Ogilvy & Mather advertisement agency played with the visual stereotype of black exhaust emissions, using the typical style of cartoon and comics. An enormous and heavy cloud, connected to the exhaust pipe of a real car, transformed a paradoxical object into an original semiotic tool, which combined irony and denunciation—one giving strength to the other—affecting both the urban setting and those passing through it. The WWF slogan and logo, thanks to their position and to the chromatic contrast, draw attention to the message: “Drive one day less and look how much carbon monoxide you’ll keep out of the air we breathe.”

Another exemplary case is the popular anti-environmental pollution campaign *Catch of the Day* launched by the non-profit Surfrider Foundation, which transformed harmless everyday objects such as plastic food packaging into unconventional guerrilla marketing weapons. They were displayed at local farmers’ markets to disturb consumers by questioning the rational and emotional mechanisms that determine their choices. Condoms, cigarette butts, rusty padlocks and chains, and spray cans have been hand-picked from various US beaches and neatly packaged in plastic food trays. The dialectic between pretense and unveiling is taken to the extreme; the campaign slogan and the foundation logo are printed on a label that perfectly reproduces the classical supermarket price and expiration date tag. The packaging and its function are invested with symbolic meaning. The plastic wrap becomes a rhetorical weapon, an instrument to motivate the public to undertake collective action for environmental

conservation. The semiotic revolution is fully completed: the object isn't protected by the plastic wrap, but denounced and presented as evidence. Metaphor and metonymy intersect, body-copy illustrates the tragic pollution scenery, leveraging consumers' competence, reinforcing the visual shock with written information. Once again, the performative nature of guerrilla action frames this text within a text. The association's slogan, "Make waves, go to surfrider.org," is a compelling call to action, fully embracing the principles of word-of-mouth marketing and aiming to become a contagion that transforms isolated individuals into a cohesive virtual movement.

Urban guerrilla marketing campaigns—conceived with the goal of maximizing what a small budget can achieve—clearly use semiotic mechanisms. Their effectiveness, thus, is not merely based on their ability to visually occupy a space and capture the attention of people in the chaos of metropolitan areas; it is based on the ability to translate reading and consumption processes of spaces in a communication project, rooted in a particular territory, which can transform the sense of a place and the identities of its inhabitants.

The communicative strength of these environmental campaigns is often based on *mimesis*: on images that appear to reproduce a place in a common-use situation and superimpose a second level of visual discourse onto it.

Cities are plural texts, subject to continuous transformation and to manifold different readings and practices. In ambient marketing campaigns space is recognized, interpreted, and played with, starting from the tracking of a deep narrative logic, through actions of *camouflage* and *trompe l'oeil*.¹⁰ Images are used to deceive the eye and catch the attention of passers-by, who suddenly find themselves at the center of fictional spaces, assuming unexpected roles. Images (stickers, silhouettes, fake objects) are used here to stage stories of heroes and victims, of desperate missions and brave acts, superimposed on the normal function of objects and spaces.

The metaphorical fiduciary contract between eco-activists and their followers takes on new shapes, and the reliability of the conservationist protest is often staged through a professedly fictional *mise en scène* (narrative).

10 Paolo Fabbri, "Semiotica e camouflage," in *Falso e falsi: Prospettive teoriche e proposte di analisi*, ed. Luisa Scalabroni (Pisa: Edizioni Ets, 2011), 11–25.

The environmental emergency appeal is expected to be more incisive, more apparently incongruous, stratified, or oblique. In particular, on the visual level, the strategy consists of enhancing the reflexive opacity more than the transparency of texts.¹¹

Consequently, a surprising, redesigned experience is the starting point for rapid, word-of-mouth diffusion, which starts in the real world and is soon shifted to social media: the aim is then to guarantee that the sociopolitical content of the environmental campaign will be amplified through its second life on the web.

Here we can see how action methods and self-representation modalities of environmental movements significantly evolve: in the search for public support, the efficacy of environmental discourse is no longer linked to the verisimilitude of images depicting the crisis of nature, spectators are “forced” to experience a situation that becomes explicitly fictional. Significantly, the communication strategies of environmental groups seem to follow the same semiotic logics of a typical brand discourse, in particular the use of interdiscursivity and intertextuality.¹²

Thus, to come back to the theme of greenwashing and to the battle of NPOs against corporations, the recent, much-discussed campaign by Greenpeace against Volkswagen’s (VW’s) fictitious green commitment is a perfect case in point. The non-governmental organization uses irony and the global popularity of the Star Wars saga to put pressure on the German car manufacturer by questioning its green credentials.

The unconventionality of the discourse about nature consists here in shifting the conflict between proponents and detractors of the green cause on an explicitly fictional level. In this campaign, the relationship between the social crisis and the verisimilitude of images is radically rethought: it is based on the effort to highlight, with irony, the dramatic information contained in a report presented by Greenpeace to the public. The provocative impact of eco-images is part of complex argumentative strategies: the seriousness of the research is enunciated by a parodic communication strategy that strengthens the message and allows it to reach a wider audience.

11 Louis Marin, *De la Représentation* (Paris: Seuil, 1993).

12 Gianfranco Marrone, *Il discorso di marca: Modelli semiotici per il branding* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2007).



Figure 1:
Courtesy of
Vintagedept, via
Flickr.

The Greenpeace narrative reverses the communicative tactics of the adversary (VW) in a stratified meta-strategy, which applies forms of reworking, typical of science fiction fandom. With a typical subvertising¹³ action, on the website VWdarkside.com, the campaign assimilates the German automaker's logo to the Death Star, substituting the famous VW brand payoff "Das Auto" with "Dark Side," while Greenpeace reserves for itself the role of the Rebel Alliance.

Our home—Earth—is in trouble. VW opposes key environmental laws we need if we're going to stop our planet going the way of Alderaan (bye bye). But all is not

¹³ The word "subvertising" refers to the practice of making spoofs or parodies of corporate and political campaigns.

lost. We feel the good in Volkswagen. All of us in the Rebellion are calling on Volkswagen to turn away from the Dark Side and give our planet a chance.¹⁴

The Greenpeace strategy is based on a complex cross-media communication project, which consists of a website, two web videos, and some guerrilla action. Volkswagen's official communications are thus the target of an intertextual parody that selects and recombines well-known preexisting texts through an *enunciative praxis*, described by Jean Marie Floch as a typical bricolage process.

As with other enunciative practices, bricolage means calling upon a number of already established forms. However, the enunciative activity involved in bricolage does not lead to the production of merely stereotyped discourse. Rather, in this case, the selection and exploitation of the facts of usage and the products of history lead to a kind of creativity that constitutes the originality of bricolage as an enunciative praxis. We can, in fact, think of this as a double creativity. For, on the one hand, bricolage leads to statements that qualify as independent entities; while, on the other hand, any such statement will give substance, and hence identity, to an enunciating subject.¹⁵

The most semiotically refined strategies used by environmental movements do not denounce the authenticity of a natural emergency, omitting signs of their presence inside the text. On the contrary, eco-activists display the construction of their discourse, the stratification of their protest, pointing out, in other terms, the intricacy of the meaning displayed. As with other typologies of advertising, social campaigns also elaborate their strategies, searching for a balance between themes, *mise en scène*, and display of distinctive and identifying marks.

Eco-images make use of texts within texts, where logos are complete semiotic entities, endowed in some cases with remarkable semantic complexity. To the spectator's eye, they condense values and incorporate the universe of connotative meanings: brands represent an explicit case of delegated enunciation, they are simulacra of the subject who commissioned the advertisement. In this sense, as happens in commercial advertising, words and images concur to reassert the emitter's identity, fields of action,

14 "Rebel Manifesto," accessed September 2012, <http://vwdarkside.com>.

15 Jean-Marie Floch, *Visual identities* (London: Continuum, 2000), 5.

and peculiarities. Caged animals, earth, rainbows, trees, and leaves are examples of essential elements that, combined with lettering, lay the foundation for the representation of themes like environmental engagement and civic cooperation.

Coming back to the Greenpeace versus Volkswagen example, groups of activists symbolically occupied central streets in London, impersonating Darth Vader's evil army, wearing the famous Star Troopers uniform with the Volkswagen logo on it (upside down) while distributing flyers to inform passers-by about the reasons for the protest. These images went viral and—thanks to a powerful and fast word-of-mouth, inside and outside eco-activism and science-fiction fan communities—reached a very wide audience.

From their point of view, the appropriation and overturning of the VW brand became part of a counter-information strategy to denounce environmental damage, not only making use of a visual imaginary seemingly unrelated to eco-issues, but also provocatively assuming the narrative role of the opposition, the villain. Even Greenpeace does not avoid brand discourses. Nature, in the shapes taken by its defenders, cannot but be branded.

My final example is a recent campaign by WWF about evidence of damages caused by global warming that brings the viewer's attention precisely to the overexposure of the ecological debate ("the effects of global warming are becoming more obvious"), while at the same time avoiding photorealistic images and leaving the brand at the center of the scene. The image here stresses at least three points:

- animals, like pandas, risk extinction; people have got used to images of threatened species;
- they have become so used to the popular ecology brand that it can disappear without the message losing strength and without the risk that the brand loses its identifiability; and
- the promoters and the cause converge in one image, and the disappearance of the first one attests to the extinction of the animal.

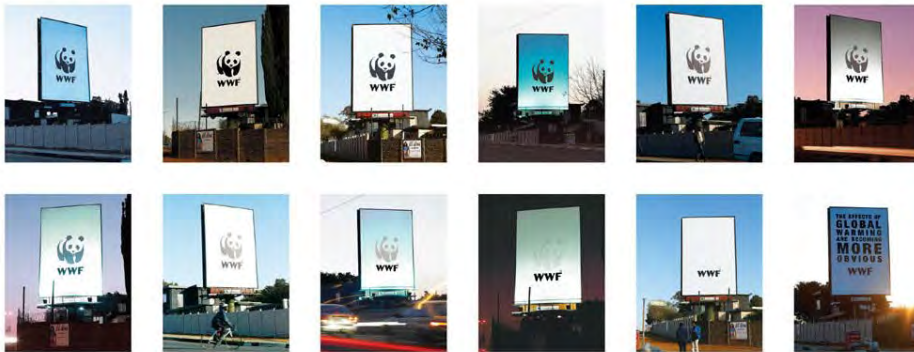


Figure 2:
WWF South
Africa – TBWA
Johannesburg
(<http://www.welovead.com/en/works/details/e3fxjnwA>).

This example attests to the crucial role of images in the context of ecosystem preservation campaigns: to denounce the evidence of global warming there's no need for words, or for realistic and shocking images of environmental crisis. Both the animal and the brand vanish: the conservationists meta-strategy scores a point, claiming the impossible transparency of any kind of discourse to express the environment, in the context of a flawless brand discourse.

Environmental movements, desperately seeking a meeting point between brand discourse and ecology, need to constantly renew their presence in the media and in the public domain to reach the maximum visibility while at the same time pretending to disappear.

The subtlety that characterizes unconventional discourses about climate change can then emerge in the most intricate forms of communication, which relate environmental claims to the identification signs of their promoters, the *eco-brands*.