Interrupting Images: A Rhetorical Analysis of Greenpeace's Advertising Tactics

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Abstract—Ecotage (or ecological sabotage) is a tactic used by some environmentalists to end corporate recklessness. Deluca divides the environmental movement into two. Reforms tend to privilege humans, while radicals see humans as a threat. As an organization that began over 30 years ago, Greenpeace is often associated with the environmental movement. Known for some of their unorthodox methods, Greenpeace utilizes gruesome images and engage in ecotage as part of their tactic. In this analysis, I will draw upon Fisher’s narrative lens and Burke’s analysis of drama to discuss the ways in which Greenpeace communicates and encourages the audience to evaluate the current environmental condition by visually listing, or narrating through images, the many ways humans injure.

Keywords — Ecotage, Environmental Communication, Green Advertising, Greenpeace, Visual Rhetoric

INTRODUCTION

A bird’s eye view captures the image of Christ the Redeemer. The mammoth figure stands tall with his arms open wide and his eyes gazing below. We see a giant yellow banner dropped from his right arm with large caps screaming out “THE FUTURE OF THE PLANET IS IN YOUR HANDS.” This is a message of protest, as well as to remind, undersigned by Greenpeace. This dramatic narrative depicted in one of the radical movement’s videos relates the story of a dysfunctional relationship between humans and nature. In this essay, I will highlight the underlying message from a clip entitled “Inspiring Action”. I will discuss the ways in which images are used to interrupt, and the urgent message that aims to ignite action among the masses.

Skinny on the Green.

In the constant pursuit to advance and “civilize” itself, humans has been found guilty of inflicting pain and destruction unto other creations that have the right to strive. “Indeed, the very concept of ‘civilization’ is problematic as western cultures have defined it in antithesis to everything wild, non-domestic, animalic, primal, emotional, instinctual, and female, all forces to be subdued and conquered” (Best & Nocella, 2006, p.9). The environmental movement is not a new, nor is it a Western concept. According to Brulle (2000), the movement has been in existence even before the American Civil War, “when a number of concerns over the destruction of the natural environment were voiced” (p. 133). It is also interesting to note that, the term “tree hugger” actually originated from the Chipko movement which began in India. The word “Chipko” which translates to “hugging” in Hindi was considered a nonviolent movement. Primarily consisting of women who subscribed to Ghandi’s nonviolent philosophy, the women of the Chipko movement turned to tree hugging as a form of passive resistance, a strategic move that they used persistently to save the forest from irresponsible tree cutting (Mellor, 1997).

Fast forward to the 20th century, at the time of Wapner’s (1996) writing, nongovernmental organizations (NGO) working for environmental protection was estimated at 100,000. A significant portion of this impressive number are said to be activist groups. Membership to some of these groups are said to be in the millions, highlighting the current trends of awareness among the public. Among the well known environmental groups according to Wapner includes Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth (FOE), the Chipko Movement, Conversation International, and World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

Wapner highlight the fact that, not only do some of these groups have budgets more than that of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), these pressure groups also greatly contribute to the cause by maintaining their “transnational” identity or methods, which is often said to cross states borders as well as nations. In this essay, I will be discussing primarily on issues or narratives relating to Greenpeace. As an established organization that struggles to raise awareness and fight for endangered wildlife, Greenpeace has been known to use all forms of unorthodox methods to help preserve the environment. Engaging in ecological sabotage and using gruesome images are among their tactics.

Proudly published on their organization’s website, Greenpeace declares, “Our core values are reflected in our environmental campaign work: We 'bear witness' to environmental destruction in a peaceful, non-violent manner. We use non-violent confrontation to raise the level and quality of public debate. In exposing threats to the environment and finding solutions we have no permanent allies or adversaries.
We ensure our financial independence from political or commercial interests. We seek solutions for, and promote open, informed debate about society's environmental choices.” (http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/about)

What began as a small group of Canadian activists protesting against U.S. nuclear testing on an island off the west coast of Alaska, Greenpeace has come a long way since its inception over 30 years ago. With its headquarters in the Netherlands, the organization now has the support of 2.8 million members from all around the globe. Having been around for a good number of years, Greenpeace is almost always associated with the environmental movement. Their rugged image as defenders of the environment has gained much attention (whether favorable or otherwise) from the larger public. Changing the minds and hearts of people is not an easy task. According to Wapner (1996), Greenpeace utilizes two main strategies to engage the public:

1. Greenpeace brings cases of environmental abuse to a global audience by employing print and digital media. The use of new technology allows the public to witness environmental abuse that occurs globally, including those that are happening in remote areas around the world.

2. Greenpeace highlights the existing gap between “rhetoric and practices of governments, corporations, and ordinary citizens and to demand explanations for it”. In doing so, the organization’s intention is “to point out hypocrisy and to use this to good people’s consciences and thus juggle their conceptions of everyday circumstances” (p.55). In other words, Greenpeace does not merely highlight the wrongdoings that endanger the environment, they hold humans accountable for what they do and “claim” to do.

When navigating the Greenpeace website, one will notice the many voices, images, issues, and links that are assembled to create a unified stance. Visuals posted on the site are both still images as well as videos that usually last for a few minutes. This essay will attempt to analyze just one of their many visuals in order to gain further understanding with regard to the organization’s struggle, the cause, and their voice. To view the full version of the video, please go to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVu9eawb1QY.

Deep Ecology, Radicals, and Reforms

In the struggle to preserve nature, Deluca (2005) puts forth the two types of movements known as the reforms and the radicals. While the first is considered mainstream, the latter is perceived as the grassroots. The two take on opposing stance, in the sense that one privileges humans (reforms), while the other sees humans as a threat (radicals). Radical groups are said to demonize humanity by positioning humans as the “Other”, a “cancer cell” that threatens nature’s well-being (DeLuca, 2005). Additionally, when categorizing reforms and radicals, DeLuca asserts, “The perceived starkest interest is seen to rest on the decision of reformist groups to work with the dominant industrial system and the decision of radical groups to question the fundamental validity of industrialism and thus to work outside the dominant system.” (p.74).

The environmental movement is complex. From conservation and preservation, to ecofeminism and deep ecology, there is not just one voice that represents the ongoing movement. In describing Deep Ecology, Brulle (2000) claims that when nature is seen as an independent being with its own worth, humans are no longer worthy to retain its privilege. Instead of being superior over other creations, humans are perceived as “only one species among many, and has no right to dominate the Earth” (p.196). Simply put, Deep Ecologists see humans as a threat to nature. The radical movement EarthFirst! would be an epitome of what Deep Ecology represents.

In comparison to Earth First!, Greenpeace also adopts some of the beliefs of Deep Ecologist in that they too, see humans as a threat to nature. However, unlike Earth First! which is anti-hierarchical and does not believe in maintaining an organizational form (Deluca, 1999b), Greenpeace may be considered a movement that is well structured and organized. The latter is a transnational organization headed by an Executive Director who is assisted by a Deputy Director, a Chief Operating Officer, a National Campaigns Director, and Actions Director. Taking this into consideration, one may assume that, Greenpeace is an organization that sees structured strategy as another means to get their work moving in an orderly fashion. Being highly “structured” however does not imply that their approach to promote their cause is generic or insipid. On the contrary, Greenpeace has been quite striking in its campaigns, “by engaging in direct, nonviolent action and advertising it through the media worldwide…Greenpeace is able to capture media attention because its actions are visually spectacular.” (Wapner, 1996, p.51)

Ecotage, Image Events, and Visual Rhetoric

Taylor (2006, p.4) cites Saul Alinsky’s Rules for Radicals when he mentions that arrests and jail can actually benefit a movement “by dramatizing the cause, making its leaders martyrs, and inspiring others to action.” As an added bonus, Alinsky also mentioned that the jail time may be beneficial in that, it gives more space and time to think of new strategies for the movement to pursue. On the flipside however, engaging in ecotage may also lead to unnecessary self-sabotage. In the case of John Hanna for example, what was initially a movement to “inform” and “inspire” turned out erroneous when Hanna became the first person to serve time for using guerrilla tactics to convey his environmental message. (http://www.originalelf.com).

John Hanna was founder of the original ELF (Environmental Life Force) in the 1970s. Though later disbanded, the tactics of ELF were copied in the 1990s by “Earth Liberation Front” (the “new” ELF). Based on Hanna’s September 6, 2001 interview (obtained from http://www.originalelf.com), it is understood that the main objective of the original ELF was to “inform” and “inspire” people. This movement however, was not successful due to the extreme nature of its tactics. Believed to be launched by
extreme members of Earth First! sometime in the 90’s, the “new” ELF also engages in extreme tactics. Unfortunately, besides creating a disturbance, the movement does not strive to “inform” and “inspire” (the two objectives of the original ELF). As a result of this, the actions of the “new” ELF has only served to worsen the image of the environmental movement in the eyes of skeptics and a segment of people in the public.

The interview with John Hanna highlighted his previous experience while he was actively involved in the radical movement that was infamous for its acts of ecological sabotage (ecotage). Which by the way often caught the attention of mainstream media. The first person to serve time for using guerrilla tactics in the movement, Hanna’s conversation was very much built on values and beliefs held in common between him and members of the new ELF. Hanna stated, “It would be nice if the people involved in these current activities will listen to me. I’m fortunate because I have the benefit of hindsight. It’s remarkable how insightful one becomes when you’re removed from the heat of the struggle and have years to reflect on the past.”

Though Hannah displayed empathy for the new ELF, at the same time, it was made clear that he does not condone violent acts. Emphasizing the fact that a terrorist and environmentalist are not the same time, it was made clear that he does not condone violent acts. Emphasizing the fact that a terrorist and environmentalist are not the same, Hanna’s struggle and have years to reflect on the past.

This leads us to the question, what exactly is ecotage? Ecotage (short for ecological sabotage) or what some refer, as “monkeywrenching” is a tactic used by a segment of environmentalist to put a halt to corporate recklessness. In Confessions of an Eco-Warrior (1991), Dave Foremen (co-founder of Earth First!) speaks of acting “heroically in defense of the wild, to put a monkeywrench into the gears of the machine that is destroying natural diversity” (p.113). Foremen insists that,

Though illegal, this strategic monkeywrenching can be safe, easy, fun, and – most important – effective in stopping timber cutting, road building, overgrazing, oil and gas exploration, mining, dam building, power-line construction, off-road-vehicle use, trapping, ski area development, and other forms of destruction of the wilderness, as well as cancerous suburban sprawl. (p.113)

Foremen (1991) proceeds to list principles that must be adhered to for the “campaign of resistance” to succeed (p.113-115)

1) Monkeywrenching is nonviolent. It does not aim at humans or other forms of life
2) Monkeywrenching is not organized. There is no central direction.
3) Monkeywrenching is individual. Done individually or small, close knit groups.
4) Monkeywrenching is targeted. The culprit is identified.

5) Monkeywrenching is timely. It takes place at appropriate times and places.
6) Monkeywrenching is dispersed. It is widespread across states.
7) Monkeywrenching is diverse. It consists of all kinds or people and situations.
8) Monkeywrenching is fun. “There is a rush of excitement, a sense of accomplishment…”
9) Monkeywrenching is not revolutionary. Does not aim to overthrow a system.
10) Monkeywrenching is simple. It must be safe and simple.
11) Monkeywrenching is deliberate and ethical. Monkeywrenchers are nonviolent warriors.

In Unruly Arguments, DeLuca (1999b) mentions that contemporary activist groups have three traits that are deemed uncommon. The three traits are:

1) contemporary activist groups reject traditional organizational structure
2) they neglect conventional legislative and material goals, and
3) they neglect formal modes of public argument while performing unorthodox tactics that highlight bodies as resources for advocacy (p.9).

Greenpeace, as one example of a contemporary activist group, follows this unorthodox philosophy to create a necessary message of disturbance. In doing so, the group becomes quite successful in waking those who are still in slumber.

Since most environmental groups do not have the monetary means to gain the much needed publicity in order to get their message to the public, they turn to image politics by staging image events as an effective form of advertising. One such example is the young “tree hugger” known as Julia Butterfly Hill who lived on a platform 180 feet high up on a Redwood tree for two years of her life to attract media attention. Her attempt, though perceived as a bit extreme by some, was successful in curbing irresponsible logging. Deluca (1999b) asserts that, “Unable to buy time like corporations and mainstream political parties do, groups such as Earth First!, ACT UP, and Queer Nation “buy” air time through using their bodies to create compelling images that attract media attention” (p.10).

In Imaging Nature: Watkins, Yosemite, and the Birth of Environmentalism, Deluca and Demo (2000) assert that photography and image politics not only help represent, but also help create reality by bringing environmentalism into the forefront. Sturken and Cartwright (2005) support the notion that images are important in creating ideology when they contend, “To explore the meaning of images is to recognize that they are produced within the dynamics of social power and ideology. Ideologies are systems of belief that exist within all cultures. Images are an important means through which ideologies are produced and onto which ideologies are projected” (p.21). In my reading of the video clip produced by Greenpeace, I have noted that the group has been successful in forming a belief that they (as a group) are separate from the human antagonist, by playing on vague images of their identity.
This essay hopes to contribute to existing scholarship by offering another perspective or analysis, connecting the elements of ecotage and visual rhetoric by looking at a series of images in a video clip, as opposed to only a few chosen still images depicting the human-nature discourse. I will attempt to examine the image choices included in the Greenpeace video by utilizing a dramatic narrative lens, as explained by Kenneth Burke and Walter Fisher.

Dramatic Narratives

Narration, according to Fisher (1984) is a theory of symbolic actions – words and/or deeds- that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them. The narrative perspective, therefore, has relevance to real as well as fictive worlds, to stories of living and to stories of the imagination (p.241). Ultimately, messages are said to be more persuasive and intriguing if it were told as a story.

Additionally, Foss (2004) cites MacIntyre when she mentioned the latter asserting humans as a story-telling animal. Narratives, for Foss is beneficial because it is a means to, “organize the stimuli of our experience so that we can make sense of the people, places, events, and actions of our lives” (p.333). Narratives come in a myriad of shape or form or ways. From the very obvious, such as stories, songs, and films, to the less obvious, such as interviews and visual artifacts (p.334).

Fisher asserts that, narratives “can be considered a dialectical synthesis of two traditional strands in the history of rhetoric: the argumentative, persuasive theme and the aesthetic theme” (1984, p.241). In this essay, I discuss the ways in which Greenpeace encourages the audience to evaluate the current environmental condition by visually listing, or narrating through images, the many ways humans injure.

In his 1984 essay, Fisher states that the narrative lens holds a connection with “dramatism”. For Burke (as explain by Burgchardt, 2005), Dramatism is a “critical system for analyzing human symbolic interaction...dramatism is more concerned with philosophical, psychological, and sociological questions: What does rhetoric reveal about human motivation, action, and linguistic reality?” (p.187). Burke’s analysis of drama also speak of the five elements known as the pentad, which are comprised of the act, agent, scene, agency, and purpose (Burgchardt, 2005). In this analysis, I will address the five elements in the narrative to make meaning of the images as a rhetorical artifact.

Text of Analysis: Greenpeace’s Inspiring Action. Obtained from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVu9eawb1QY, this three minute video clip is an intense series of images that highlights the human-nature discourse. Accompanied by loud beats and impressive camera angles, the video clip shows Greenpeace as the narrator, the protagonist, and ultimately, the “voice” of nature.

Figure 1

Spotlight on the Antagonist (Figures 1 & 2)

Unlike Carlton Watkins’ use of scenic and sublime images to engage the audience (as discussed in DeLuca and Demo, 2000), Greenpeace grabs the audience’s attention by relying on disturbed emotions, aiming to inspire humans to action. This is evident when Greenpeace as narrator, commences their story by depicting unsteady images of the planet and devastation that humans inflict upon nature. In doing so, the radical group creates a climate of interruption for the audience, engaging their reasons as well as their emotions.

In the artifact analyzed, images of killing, death, and destruction are depicted repeatedly for the first fifty seven seconds to emphasize the main events as well as the characters in the narrative. Death is dramatized, while chaos and destruction serve to awaken the viewer. Smoke erupting from titanic sized factories draws attention to corporate recklessness and human greed. Here, it is quite obvious that humans are seen as the villain, the antagonist. While nature is portrayed as pristine, sublime and peaceful in Watkin’s images, Greenpeace positions nature as a victim, facing constant abuse and is waiting to be saved. Acts of ecotage speak out against destruction, placing emphasis on the need to do something Now.

The morbid scene abruptly takes a halt when the camera zooms out to show a view from space of planet Earth. The narrator is faceless. There is no focus on a particular personality, race, gender, social class, location, or nation. We have yet to see any form of identity. Yet, the narrator’s standpoint is made clear. The underlying message derived from this ambiguity is evidence that it is a universal problem. Not one based on race, social class, gender or nation.

Repetitive use of gruesome images not only serve to shape audience’s beliefs and attitudes, it is also a strategy to build a collective perspective that may serve as a unifying tool that could further enhance the human vs. nature discourse.
Differences in standpoint (among the public as well as the movement) with regard to environmental decay make the struggle a difficult one to fight. There may be plenty of voices to represent the environmental movement, yet concurrently, there is also a loud voice to represent the skeptics. Establishing a collective perspective may help iron out the differences in opinion.

Enter the Hero, the Protagonist (Figures 3 & 4)

Approximately midway through the clip, we are shown pieces of art created by children portraying nature under attack and pleading to be saved. This image is followed by a scene highlighting the protagonist, a Greenpeace activist speaking over a walkie-talkie while looking over a field of ashes and open fire. The activist has his/her back facing us. His/her green top and the words “Greenpeace” is printed loud and clear. The green is the only color that stands out against the dark and blurry backdrop.

More scenes of activist enter the frame. They are shown moving swiftly. The unidentified radicals seem unstoppable while they move fast on foot, bikes and speedboats. They are running, climbing, painting their messages on the sides of ships, and saving wildlife trapped in nets out at sea. One particular scene stands out from the rest. It draws attention to two figures of authority in black capturing an activist dressed in yellow. His head is pulled back by one figure, while the other tugs his top to restrain. Again, we do not see any faces, but it is clear which one represents the protagonist.

The Written Message (Figures 5 & 6)

After about two minutes of gruesome images, the written messages enter the frame. Voices written in caps shout out, “ENOUGH IS ENOUGH” and “NO FISH NO FUTURE”. The loudness of the written matches their militant-style actions, making the message difficult to ignore. The protagonists not only want to engage the audience as viewers, but also as agents in their own right. The video may have commenced with portrayal of humans as antagonist, but the concluding message places humans as possible protagonist. The activists do not declare their status as antagonist, or protagonist. They do however create an invisible border, distinguishing themselves from other human-antagonist, by remaining vague in their identity.

As far as the artifact is concerned, it is not only images that help relate the narrative. The loud hurried beat of the track represents a message that is laced with rage. The fast disturbing images coupled with the loud sounds amplifies the weighty issue. The mood is made more mournful with the
absence of vibrant hues. Towards the end, we see a bird’s-eye-view of Christ the Redeemer. Hanging from his right arm is a giant banner. The message boldly declares “THE FUTURE OF THE PLANET IS IN YOUR HANDS.” The fact that the words hang over a mammoth sized statue of Jesus overlooking the Rio landscape, seems to imply that Jesus wishes to see humans cleaning up after their own disorder. It almost seems like He is ordering humans to take responsibility for their own fate. The clip finally ends with the caption:

This fragile Earth deserves a voice.
It needs solutions.
It needs change.
It needs action.

The hostility inflicted upon the environment depicts the imbalanced connection between humans and nature. We see humans as savior, and humans as destroyer. What we also see repeatedly is defenseless nature or wild life under assault. In this story, Greenpeace plays not only the role of narrator and protagonist; they are also the agent or “voice” that helps speak on behalf of the voiceless.

Discussion

What began with the message of humans as antagonist eventually evolved into humans as possible protagonist. Though the visuals initially highlighted humans as the villain, the images later depicted humans aggressively playing their role as savior. Greenpeace as narrator and character remained successful in distancing themselves from the human-antagonist by not only maintaining a vague identity, they were also persuasive in their message by employing overlapping images of both antagonist and protagonist as the same time. Though the group played with an ambiguous identity, the character of Earth or Nature as victim remained the same throughout the clip. In doing this, Greenpeace served not only as narrator and “voice” of Nature, additionally, the group also helped the latter maintain its agency or independence, by portraying nature as the “innocent”.

Conclusion

In “Unmoored” (2008), DeLuca claims that, “Although some scholars in the field of rhetorical studies continue to cling to words, continue to study television while ignoring the “vision thing,” continue to believe that images can be tamed by captions and antiquated rhetorical terms, a growing contingent of scholars is engaging images in ways that fundamentally transform rhetoric and rhetorical studies” (p.1).

Images have the capacity to affect viewers when they are “consumed, viewed, and interpreted” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2005)

In the environmental movement, some groups rely on images as a means to engage the audience, with the aim to change attitudes as well as initiate action. Additionally, though environmentalist could (should they wish) use images of nature that are beautiful, pristine, and sublime, some groups i.e. the radicals prefer to utilize images that interrupt to gain media exposure and public support.

In this analysis, images presented in the clip illustrate the speaker’s desire for the audience to view the world through a lens that is distressing enough to inspire some action. Whether the acts depicted were appropriate or civilized, that is another matter. Facts relayed via visual images were adequate and dramatically displayed by applying impressive camera angles, fast paced music, and dark disturbing images, emphasizing the need to oppose those who damage and helping those who cannot speak.

Based on the artifact analyzed, this essay argues that Greenpeace retains its role as protagonist and moves itself from human-antagonists by establishing its independence via an ambiguous identity. In contrast to Watkin’s use of scenic and sublime images (DeLuca & Demo, 2000) that are devoid of humans, Greenpeace engages its audience by depicting images that highlight humans terrorizing nature that is in decay. In spite of this, I do not hold the view that Greenpeace aims to frame nature as an entity that should be devoid of humans. By including their bodies in the nature-human discourse, the underlying message serves to highlight the need for humans and nature to live in harmony, instead of playing the role of enemies.

REFERENCES

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