

Eco-Images

Altering Environmental Discussions and Political Landscapes

Rachel
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Conveners: Arielle Helmick (RCC) and Gisela Parak (Washington University St. Louis / Kunstakademie Stuttgart)

Presenters: Max Boykoff (University of Colorado), Erika Bsumek (University of Texas), Robin Kelsey (Harvard University), Maryia Kizima (Academy of Public Administration / Dept. of International Relations, Belarus), Sergey Kizima (Academy of Public Administration / Dept. of International Relations, Belarus), Oluwafemi Ladapo (Ministry of Justice, Nigeria), Neil Maher (Rutgers University), Gisela Parak (Washington University St. Louis / Kunstakademie Stuttgart), Paolo Peverini (Luiss Guido Garli University of Rome), Andreas Renner (University of Tübingen)

The goal of this workshop was to shed light on an element that plays a significant role in shaping contemporary environmental discourses, but which has received little attention thus far---an element that can only be seen and not heard, and thus presents a complex object of study. As **GISELA PARAK** emphasized in her opening remarks, visual images are becoming more and more a central component of “environmental” campaigns. Whether utilized by environmental movements, interest groups, or corporations, these so-called *eco-images* can authorize and legitimize conventions, inspire action, raise awareness, or mask environmentally-damaging intentions. But what exactly constitutes an eco-image? Can this broad category be more narrowly defined or classified? Understanding eco-images as a communication tool for influencing political agendas and promoting a specific discourse, the participants of this workshop took it upon themselves over the course of the following two days to identify and examine a wide variety of examples fitting this definition.

In the very first session of the workshop, “Semiotics of Advertisement,” **PAOLO PEVERINI** confronted participants with one of the most exceptional examples of “images” that can be classified as eco-images. Unconventional strategies of *social advertising*—such as stickering, using silhouettes, or introducing foreign objects to familiar territory—frequently use irony to disseminate space and relay a moral message. The defining element of these images, that which makes them an eco-image, is not necessarily what they depict, but where and how. The discussion following this presentation raised a few important insights. Such images defy the purpose of conventional advertising in their attempt to inspire action, not sell a product. However, corporations are catching on and have begun applying similar techniques. Due to their success and popularity, unconven-

tional social advertising techniques are on the verge of becoming “conventional” and, therefore, losing their effectiveness.

In the session “Media Campaigns I: Creating the Environmental Conscience,” **OLUWAFEMI LADAPO** discussed the role of cartoons as eco-images. Examining a case study in Nigeria, this paper demonstrated how cartoons were used to raise awareness and influence public opinion on an environmental issue. In 1988 Nigerian newspapers became aware of the federally tolerated dumping of hazardous waste by several European countries inside Nigerian borders. In an attempt to inform a highly illiterate population, the local media incorporated numerous political cartoons on this topic into their campaign. This campaign was successful in rousing public dissatisfaction and forcing the government to adopt improved environmental policies and introduce a federal environmental agency. Although this mode of communication proved extremely successful in this case study, in the discussion, attention was drawn to the fact that cartoons are losing their sphere of influence in Western cultures.

While the first two sessions focused on types of eco-images the third session, “Preservation Campaigns and the American Wilderness,” began a discussion on the content of these images. **ROBIN KELSEY** presented on the Sierra Club calendar’s selective portrayal of “nature,” outlining the development of the organization’s incorporation of image-driven lobbying strategies into their environmental campaigns and the famous calendar that resulted thereof. Guided by the Club’s political agenda and economic interests (i.e. maximizing membership) and building on the notion that a picture can act as a substitute to personal experience, the calendar affirmed the idea that the “perfect nature” is one untouched by man. As a result, the images employed are isolated and timeless, but also gendered and nationalistic portrayals of the “American Earth.”

ERIKA BSUMEK followed with an analysis of the use of Navajo imagery in environmental and political campaigns. The paper specifically examines the use of the Navajo images in the Sierra Club’s book *Navajo Wildlands* (1976) and the upper Colorado River storage project debates from 1945–1970. While the Native American was classically portrayed as an obstacle to manifest destiny, in the imagery examined here the Navajo became romanticized as the true keepers of the land. In the images, the Navajo were defined by their absence, treading so lightly they left no trace—returning to the idea identified in the previous paper of the untouched perfect nature. Another common depiction, useful in advancing certain political agendas, was of the Navajo as pre-industrial actors requiring economic development. This contradicted the Navajo’s conscious efforts to embrace modernity.

Returning to eco-images in media campaigns in the fourth session—“Creating the Environmental Conscience”—**MAX BOYKOFF** presented a paper on the role of contrarians in the contemporary climate change discourse and discussed why and how they have succeeded in impeding the appropriate response to ongoing climate challenges. He emphasized that media representations play an extremely important, but often overlooked, role in framing the science-policy climate change debate and, possibly to our disadvantage, in presenting climate change contrarians with a platform for pursuing their agenda.

The first session of the following day, “Governmental Environmentalism during the Cold War,” began with a presentation by **NIEL MAHER** on NASA’s usage of environmental motifs to mask the military-industrial complex. In response both to the decline in public support (“NASA fatigue”) and the heavy criticism of the new environmental movement, in the 1970s NASA embraced environmental imagery in its self-portrayal. NASA developed the land immediately surrounding their launch site at Cape Canaveral into a national wildlife refuge, and began publishing public relations material, such as postcards and videos, that framed the innovative technology against natural scenery.

Continuing with the same environmental movement in the United States, **GISELA PARAK** examined the photo-exhibition produced by the newly established US Environmental Protection Agency *Documerica*, in which photographers compiled images to educate the public about environmental friendliness. Instead of using the exhibition to advance debate on the topic, the photographers concentrated on capturing the discourse around specific environmental topics of the time, such as water pollution, air pollution, etc. Analyzing the material over 30 years later, one can identify a clear dissonance with the eco-images of the twenty-first century. The *Documerica* photos inspired an impression of romanticized industrialization, of saving the environment for human utilization.

The final two presentations concentrated on “Atomic Disasters and the Environment.” The paper **ANDREAS RENNER** presented emphasized the absence of “atomic disaster”—specifically, the mushroom cloud—in the media in the Soviet Union. While the angst-inspiring mushroom cloud was omnipresent in the United States and Western media, similar images were virtually nonexistent in the Soviet Union. The analysis concluded that the vast majority of Soviet references to nuclear power were positive, optimistic images emphasizing the value and potential of civilian nuclear energy. It is unclear, however, whether the lack of images the destructive force of nuclear power was a conscious political decision from above, or the result of Marxist understanding of history and nature.

Contrary to the previous presentation of a dearth of “atomic disaster” images, **MARYIA and SERGEY KIZIMA** discussed the abundance of such images—specifically, Chernobyl images—and their utilization in Belarus after the 1986 disaster. References to Chernobyl were ubiquitous in the political imagery both on an international and a domestic level. Despite the extensive political changes that took place in the decades after 1986, the Belarusian government consistently used such images to, among other things, assist in securing international aid. Domestically, Chernobyl imagery was first used as a nationalistic symbol in the struggle for independence against the Soviet Union, then in the campaign of the first elected President of Belarus, and later by the political opposition in campaigns against the Belarusian government.

The diversity of the images, perspectives, and disciplines was the main theme during the closing discussion. The varied presentations illustrated the vast range of topics addressed and the assorted venues for eco-images, making such imagery a valuable basis for discussion in many fields such as political science, art history, and semiotics. Nevertheless, while many participants felt that they had attained a broader perception of eco-images, it was asserted that not only do many questions remain open—what are eco-images, how do they

function—but also that it is necessary to take a closer look at the methodological approaches available. Particularly in light of the current crisis in climate debates and the accompanying distrust in experts and scientists, eco-images—and those who control these images—will play an increasingly important role in shaping this discourse.

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