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Without Context, Environmental Images Obscure Who's Responsible for Climate Change

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Oil-covered bird in Prince William Sound, Alaska, 1989. (Photo: AP Photo/Jack Smith)

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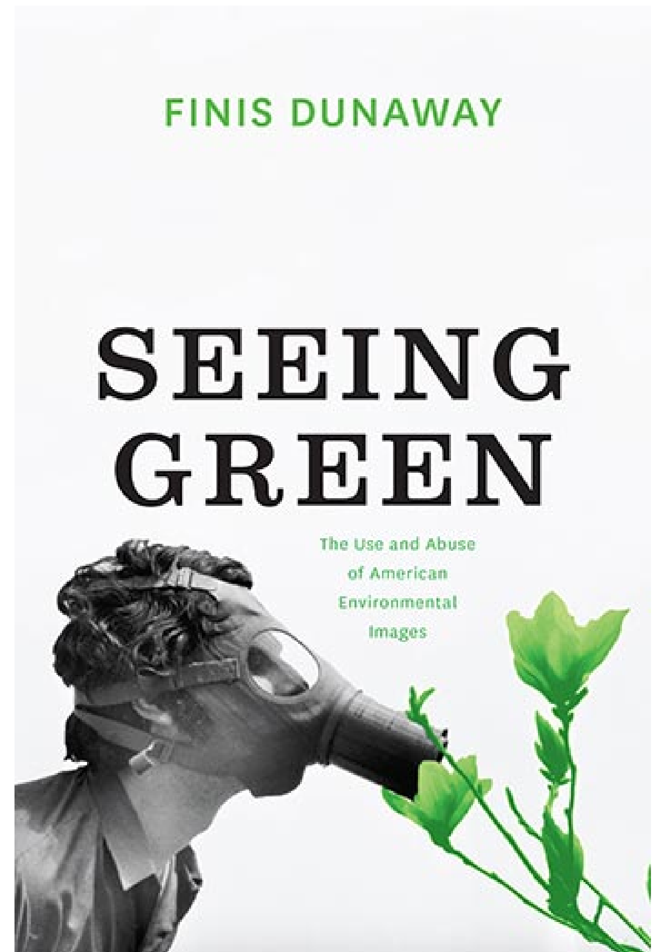
The sorrowful spectacle of oil-soaked birds following the Exxon Valdez spill. The cooling towers of the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant. Al Gore delivering his global-warming slideshow in *An Inconvenient Truth*.

My recent book, *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images*



(Image: The University of Chicago Press)

(http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/S/bo13666193.html), shows how such images have helped bring environmental consciousness into the mainstream of American life. Yet these images have also limited the scope of popular environmentalism. Emphasizing spectacular moments of crisis, they have masked the systemic causes of long-term environmental degradation. Deflecting attention from corporate and government responsibility, media images have instead promoted the idea that individual Americans are personally culpable for pollution and other environmental problems. Ultimately, this dual focus on spectacles of crisis and individual moral choices has hidden underlying causes and structural solutions behind a veil of inattention.

If progressive activists and scholars want to understand both the achievements and limits of US environmentalism, then popular environmental images deserve our critical scrutiny. Too often, media images have provoked environmental anxiety but prescribed limited forms of

action. While emotion-saturated coverage of oil spills, pollution and other environmental dangers has popularized ecological values, the mainstream media has also moved environmentalism from the political to the personal, turning systemic problems into questions of individual responsibility and green consumerism.

The media have framed environmentalism as a form of therapy, a way for individuals to cope with the distressing imagery of environmental crisis.

This story begins during the Cold War, when antinuclear activists began to question the atomic testing program. While government experts tried to reassure the public that nuclear fallout did not threaten human health and the environment, these activists warned of long-term, escalating risks. In particular, white children became the emotive emblem of media campaigns orchestrated by antinuclear organizations. No place, these images asserted - even the lily-white suburbs - were immune to the risk of strontium 90 and other radioactive agents. These images played a subversive role in Cold War culture: They helped Americans see through an ecological lens, to view human bodies and nonhuman nature in a shared, interlinked realm of escalating danger.

These campaigns also created a vision of universal vulnerability. Throughout the history of popular environmentalism, media images have equated whiteness with universal danger to make the environmental crisis appear to transcend race and class divisions. During the period surrounding the first Earth Day in 1970, the media frequently circulated images of white people wearing gas masks to indicate the placeless ubiquity of pollution, to suggest that all Americans inhabited a shared geography of risk. Even though poor people and people of color have been exposed to higher levels of pollution and toxicity, popular imagery has obscured the ways in which structural inequities produce environmental injustice - both within the United States and around the world.

In addition to promoting the idea of universal vulnerability, popular images have also fixated on the idea of universal responsibility: the dubious notion that all Americans are equally to blame for causing the environmental crisis. This emphasis on individual action ignores the role of corporations and governments in making the production decisions that result in large-scale environmental degradation.

The problematic 1971 "Crying Indian" commercial developed for Keep America Beautiful, an anti-litter group, offered a particularly offensive depiction of this theme. Iron Eyes Cody, an Italian-American actor in native garb, sheds a single tear after a careless passenger hurls trash out a car window. Keep America Beautiful, which was formed by beverage and packaging

corporations, induced consumer guilt but staunchly opposed environmental initiatives. While environmentalists protested the increasing use of disposable packaging, Keep America Beautiful promulgated individual responsibility. "People start pollution," the narrator claimed at the end of the commercial. "People can stop it." The ad thus presented ecological issues in moral, not structural, terms. The solution to the environmental crisis had nothing to do with power relations or production decisions; it was simply a matter of how individuals acted in their daily lives.

With the advance of neoliberalism, this model of environmental citizenship has become increasingly triumphant. The media have framed environmentalism as a form of therapy, a way for individuals to cope with the distressing imagery of environmental crisis. During the period surrounding Earth Day 1990, this lopsided faith in personal action and green consumerism became central to popular framings of environmentalism. Americans were repeatedly urged to recycle and, if they could afford it, to shop their way to ecological salvation. The plastics industry proved particularly adept at manipulating consumer desire by exploiting images of sustainability to shore up an unsustainable agenda. The industry altered the original recycling logo - developed in the aftermath of Earth Day 1970 - by placing numerals representing different grades of plastic in the center of the symbol. This popular environmental icon thus helped legitimate the continual expansion of plastics production. Meanwhile, the recycling logo suddenly became ubiquitous, appearing on bins and beverage containers as a reminder for consumers to take personal responsibility for the planetary future.

The growth of popular environmentalism has been entwined with media spectacles of environmental crisis. Yet the goals and ideas of environmentalists have not always corresponded with the conventions of media coverage. Images of nuclear accidents, oil spills and other dramatic events have heightened public anxiety, but have failed to communicate more far-reaching ways to confront larger, slowly escalating problems. In the case of the 1979 Three Mile Island accident, the iconic cooling towers made the nuclear power plant appear to be the sole locus of danger. This coverage obscured the longer processes of production and waste involved in the nuclear fuel cycle - from uranium mining on indigenous lands to the multi-millennial half-lives of radioactive waste. Likewise, oil spill imagery often focuses on the sudden devastation of wildlife and landscapes, but ignores the broader, ongoing ecological consequences of fossil fuel dependency.

The popular vision of environmentalism as a market-oriented, green-consumerist strategy contributed to the national neglect of climate change.

Even when the popular media depict gradually escalating problems, the dominant framings of environmentalism have tended to short-circuit time by promoting green consumerism. Consider Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*. This surprisingly popular documentary visualizes the long-term escalating crisis of global warming but prescribes short-term, consumerist solutions - purchasing energy-efficient light bulbs, hybrid vehicles and carbon offsets - to overcome the climate crisis.

The popular vision of environmentalism as a market-oriented, green-consumerist strategy contributed to the national neglect of climate change and other accretive disasters in the making. The limits to environmental reform were embedded within these depictions of the movement as a personal, consumerist response to crisis. In a period marked by rising rates of economic inequality, green consumerism catered to the affluent and obscured power relations. The structural, systemic assault on the ecosphere continued; the release of greenhouse gas emissions escalated; the poor and people of color experienced higher levels of ecological risk. All of this happened while recycling programs expanded across the United States, while green consumer products promised to shield the affluent from harm, and while recycling and other individual actions provided Americans with a therapeutic dose of environmental hope.

Today, 350.org and other climate activist groups seek to move beyond the limited model of citizenship embraced by the mainstream media. Emphasizing that "it's not light bulbs, not Priuses," but "'large systemic change' that is truly necessary to reduce greenhouse gas emissions," these activists recognize a central truth: Throughout the history of environmentalism, images have popularized the cause, but have also left crucial issues outside of the frame.

Note: This article presents some of the core claims from my book, Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images (http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/S/bo13666193.html) *(University of Chicago Press, 2015), in which I discuss these topics at more length.*

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times.

LATE CITY EDITION

MONDAY, APRIL 16, 1962

Dr. Spock is worried.

If you've been raising a family on Dr. Spock's book, you know that he doesn't get worried easily.

From the university in Ohio where he works, he sends you this message about the resumption of nuclear testing in the atmosphere:

"I am worried. Not so much about the effect of past tests but at the prospect of endless future ones. As the tests multiply, so will the damage to children—here and around the world.

"Who gives us this right?

"Some citizens would leave all the thinking to the government. They forget the catastrophic blunders that governments have made throughout history.

"There are others who think that superior armaments will solve the problem. They scorn those who believe in the strength of a just cause. They have forgotten that a frail idealist in a loin cloth compelled the British to back out of India.

"There are dangers in any course. I would rather we took small risks today if there is hope of lessening the enormous risks which lie ahead.

"And if I am to be destroyed through some miscalculation I would prefer to be destroyed while we are showing leadership in the search for a cooperative world than while sitting in an illusory fortress blaming our opponents for the lack of a solution.

"In a moral issue, I believe that every citizen has not only the right but the responsibility to make his own feelings known and felt."

—*Benjamin Spock, M.D.*

Dr. Spock has become a sponsor of The National Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy.

Other sponsors are listed below, with a brief description of what SANE stands for.

If you are worried too about the impending series of nuclear tests in the atmosphere, telegraph or write President Kennedy and your Congressman.

If you would like to do still more, send a contribution to help us run advertisements like this one all over the country. The National Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy, 17 East 45th Street, New York 17, N.Y.

"Dr. Spock is worried," SANE advertisement, 1962. During the Cold War, SANE (the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy) and other antinuclear organizations protested nuclear testing by emphasizing the dangers to US children. In the group's most famous ad, Dr. Benjamin Spock, the leading child expert of the time, expressed his fears about the long-term risks of radioactive fallout. SANE ads collapsed the boundaries between nature and culture to

envision fragile bodies and ecosystems under siege. These ads created an image of universal vulnerability by presenting white children as emotive emblems of the nation. Courtesy of SANE Inc. Records, Swarthmore College Peace Collection.

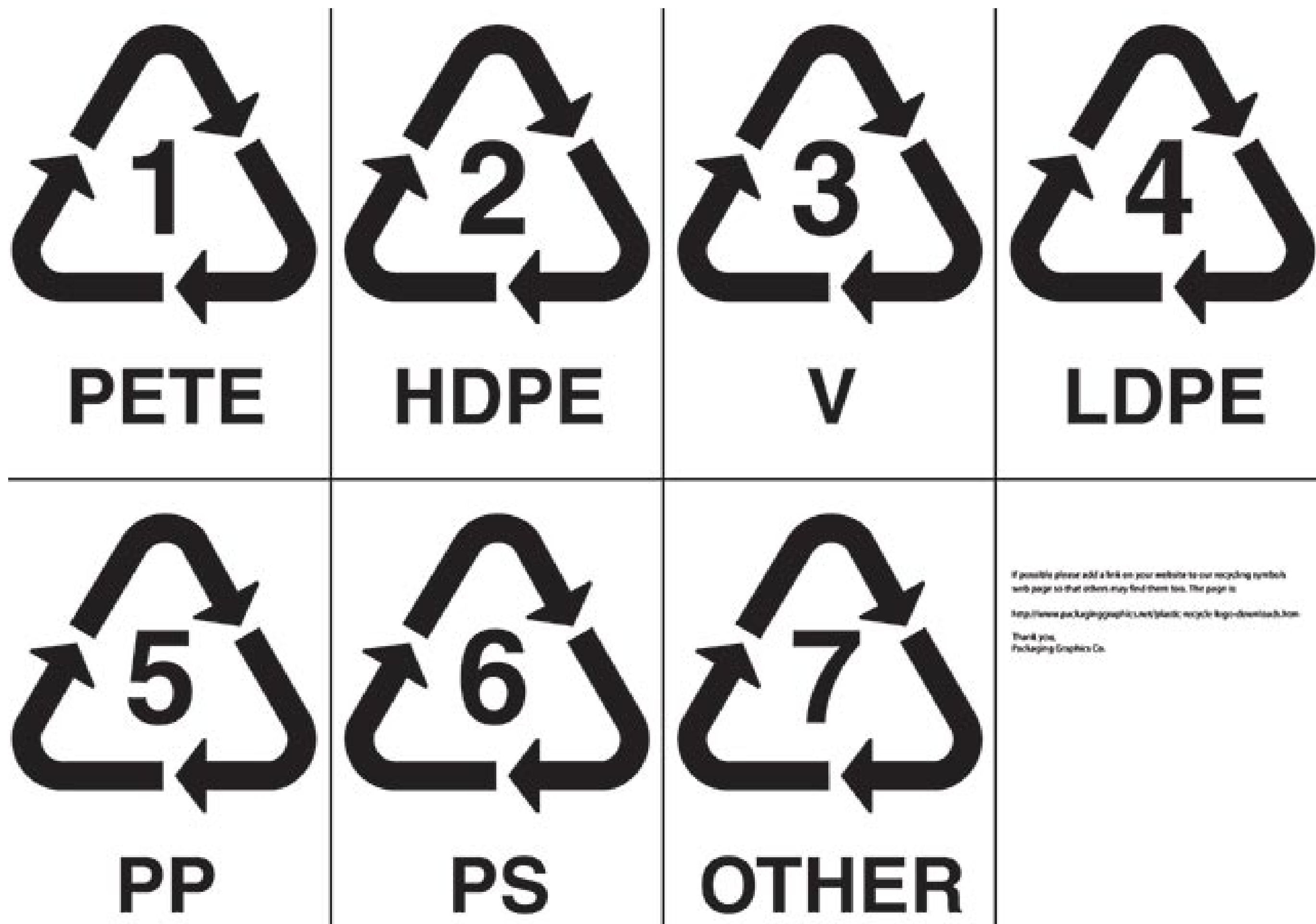
Sarah Pekkanen and Lucy Mauney wearing gas masks; photograph by Michael Mauney, Life, January 30, 1970. During the period surrounding the first Earth Day celebration in 1970, the gas mask became a popular symbol of environmental crisis. Media images showed white people wearing gas masks to emphasize the menace of air pollution and to suggest that all Americans inhabited a common geography of danger. This focus on white bodies at risk obscured the systemic problems of environmental injustice. The mainstream media tended to ignore lead poisoning, rat and roach infestations in the inner city, and farmworkers' exposure to pesticides - all ecological dangers disproportionately borne by the poor and people of color. Used by permission of Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.

"Iron Eyes Cody" - an Italian-American actor who engaged in "red face" both on- and off-screen - is presented problematically as the "Crying Indian" in a 1971 public service announcement created by the anti-litter organization Keep America Beautiful and the Advertising Council. Cody's character, which is presented as a ghost from the past, returns to witness the ecological devastation of the modern United States. At the close of the commercial, the camera focuses closely on his face to reveal a single tear falling, ever so slowly, down his cheek. The campaign sought to elicit consumer guilt for litter and pollution, but deflected public attention from corporate poisoning of the air and water. Orchestrated by leading

beverage and packaging corporations, the campaign promoted individual responsibility for the environmental crisis. Courtesy of Ad Council Archives, University of Illinois, record series 13/2/203.

Recycling logo prototype by Gary Anderson, 1970. Soon after the first Earth Day, Gary Anderson designed the recycling logo - a symbol that may be the most frequently seen image in contemporary culture, encountered daily in a plethora of public spaces and on a tremendous array of containers and packages. Influenced by the Dutch artist M.C. Escher, whose work circulated widely in countercultural and ecological communities, Anderson's design presented a new aesthetic of environmental hope. The ravenous use of resources could continue apace as long as people remembered to close the recycling loop and create, as the logo promises, a sense of ecological equilibrium. While modern recycling emerged as a

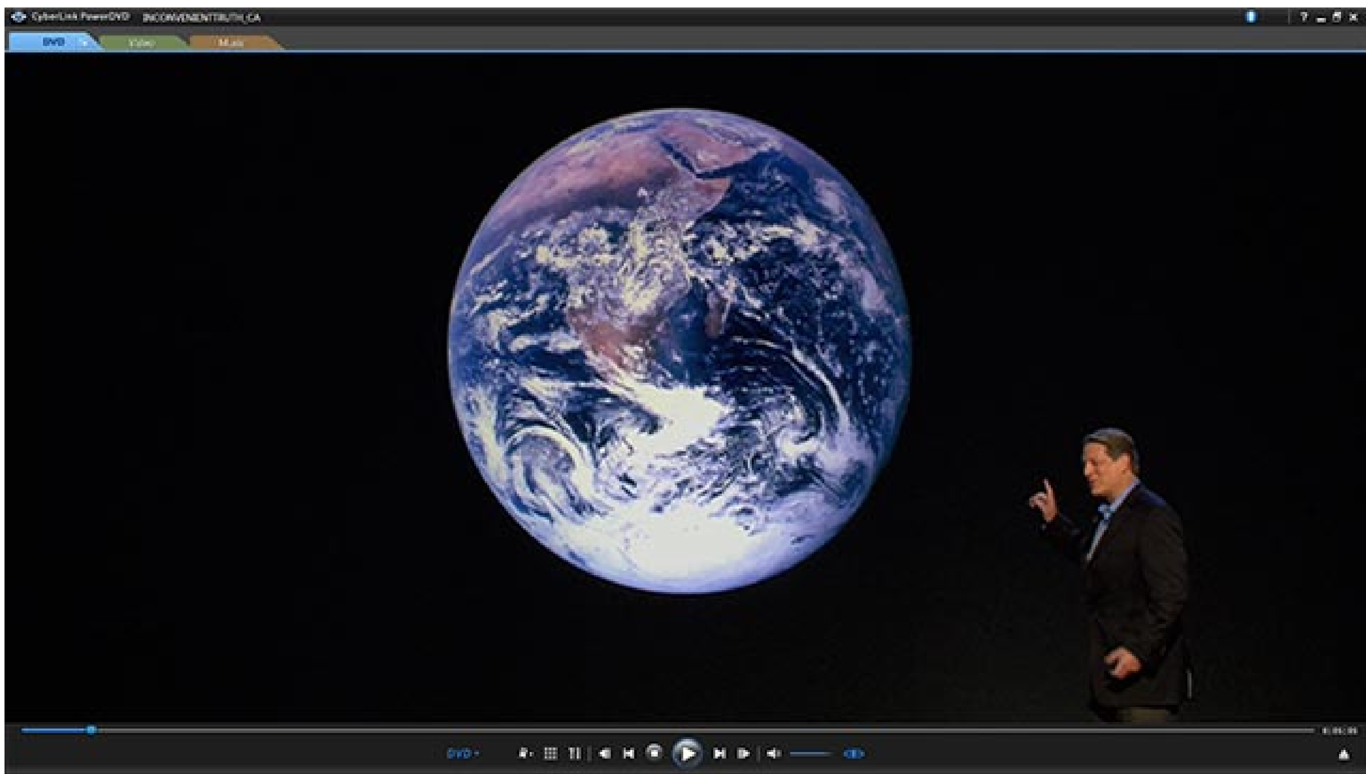
countercultural practice in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the mainstreaming of recycling did not happen until 20 years later as beverage and packaging corporations, together with local, state and federal government agencies, began to tout it as the panacea to the nation's growing solid waste crisis. Courtesy of Gary Anderson.



Recycling logos with resin identification codes, developed in 1988 by the Society of the Plastics Industry. The plastics industry altered the original recycling logo to feature resin identification codes representing different grades of plastic. Even though the rates of plastics recycling never came close to keeping pace with the manufacture of new plastics, and even though the industry frequently opposed measures to expand recycling or regulate its practices, the recycling logo signified the idea of sustainability. As a visual icon of environmental hope, the logo sought to reassure consumers that the three chasing arrows would cycle on and on, that the Escher-inspired loop would promise ecological permanence.

A mother and daughter near the cooling towers of Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania; photograph by Martha Cooper, 1979. In the aftermath of the Three Mile Island nuclear accident, the plant's cooling towers - hauntingly hovering over the landscape - became iconic symbols of nuclear danger. The mainstream media focused on the sudden potential for catastrophic accidents, but overlooked the long-term risks associated with the nuclear fuel cycle. Even though national TV networks provided extensive coverage of the accident, major media outlets ignored the worst radioactive spill in US history. In July 1979, just over three months after Three Mile Island had dominated news headlines, 90 million gallons of liquid radioactive waste were released into the Rio Puerco, a river that flows through land held by the Navajo Nation. The repeated emphasis on the reactor as the exclusive site of radioactive risk overshadowed the long-term dangers of uranium mining and the storage of nuclear waste. AP Photo/Harrisburg Patriot-News/Martha Cooper. Used by permission of AP Photo.

Oil-covered bird in Prince William Sound, Alaska; photograph by Jack Smith, 1989. Following the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, the media circulated numerous pictures of oiled wildlife, close-up shots that evoked sympathy for individual creatures. As audiences glimpsed birds and otters suffering and dying, as they witnessed Alaskan beaches blackened by oil, many felt intense sadness for the threatened wildlife and visceral anger at the corporation and the reputedly drunk tanker captain. While Exxon claimed that the coverage preyed on spectator feelings to malign the corporation, many environmentalists believed that these pictures concentrated public attention only on the sudden violence of the spill rather than the long-term, systemic problems of fossil fuel dependency. Coverage of this crisis conformed to event-driven patterns of media temporality to make this particular episode seem uniquely catastrophic. AP Photo/Jack Smith.



Al Gore and whole earth image; frame capture from *An Inconvenient Truth*, directed by Davis Guggenheim, 2006. The surprising popularity of *An Inconvenient Truth* marked a watershed moment in public understanding of climate change. Through its emotive presentation of scientific data, the documentary rendered visible the seemingly invisible phenomenon of global warming. Yet Gore also adhered to neoliberal models of environmental citizenship: He presented individual consumers as empowered players in the market, ensuring sustainability through their purchasing decisions. Today, 350.org and other climate activist groups seek to build on Gore's success but to move beyond his focus on green consumerism. In contrast to the mainstream emphasis on individual responsibility, these activists use images to foster collective visions of environmental hope and to challenge the destructive power of the fossil fuel industry.

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