

2016

Deconstructing Chipotle: Media as Environmental Education

Antonio López

John Cabot University in Rome, alopez@johncabot.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/tmq>

Recommended Citation

López, Antonio. "Deconstructing Chipotle: Media as Environmental Education." *Teaching Media Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (2016).
<http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/tmq/vol4/iss3/6>

Teaching Media Quarterly is published by the University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

Deconstructing Chipotle: Media as Environmental Education

Overview

Chipotle, a popular fast food restaurant that promotes a sustainability message (“Cultivate a Better World,” “Food with Integrity”), produced two viral animated media campaigns, “Back to the Start” (Chipotle Mexican Grill, 2011, August 25) and “The Scarecrow” (Chipotle Mexican Grill, 2013, September 11). According to the *New York Times*, “Back to the Start” was rated by Zeta Interactive as one of the Top 10 videos in Internet buzz in 2011. The award-winning “The Scarecrow” also achieved critical praise. Both spots use clever animation and popular culture references to promote a sustainability message, allowing Chipotle to position itself as an ethical food alternative in relation to more conventional fast food venues. Chipotle uses its media campaigns to educate consumers about opposing food production paradigms (local and family farming versus factory farming). However, some critics have argued that the campaign is misleading and that Chipotle’s sustainability practices are contradictory and ambiguous; its marketing strategy could be considered to be an example of “greenwashing,” which is the practice of marketing unsustainable products as being positive for the environment.

Drawing on media analysis techniques and ecocriticism, students critically assess in a written assignment (six to eight-page paper) the messaging Chipotle uses to promote its ethical and environmental food brand to explore environmental ideologies and ecological discourses. This assignment builds on five lessons: 1) media as environmental education; 2) environmental ideologies; 3) ecocriticism and environmental discourses; 4) food systems and marketing; and 5) greenwashing. The written assignment and lesson plan prompts students to evaluate Chipotle’s environmental claims, and to determine if its media campaigns can be reconciled with its actual business practices. In doing so students gain insights into how media act as a kind of environmental education (or “miseducation,” as the case may be).

Key terms: environmental ideology, ecocriticism, greenwashing, sustainable food systems

Rationale

Orr (1994) proposes that all education is environmental education. This means that students invariably learn lessons about the relationship between humans and living systems through schooling, even when not explicit (i.e. if environmental issues are ignored, students learn that they are not important). Likewise, media scholars argue that media are a system of informal education, in particular teaching us how the world works. López (2012; 2014) combines these perspectives to propose that all media are environmental education. By deconstructing Chipotle’s marketing campaigns, students will gain a clear understanding of how media can serve as a form of environmental education.

Chipotle is a popular fast food brand that positions itself as an ethical food company by using compelling marketing campaigns to promote itself, but it also educates the public about environmental ideologies. This lesson plan allows students to assess from an ecocritical framework how these ideologies are promoted and critiqued by Chipotle. Given the general

perception that Chipotle is an ethical company, this assignment is an opportunity to question and problematize claims the company makes. The lesson plan combines concepts from environmental communication and media studies.

Ecocriticism is utilizing an ecological perspective to develop “the ability to critique existing discourses, cultural artifacts, forms and genres, and explore alternatives” (Garrard, 2009, p. 19). For background, students will need to have an overview of the concept of environmental ideology (Corbett, 2006), which is the belief of how humans should act in relationship to the environment. This means that they should know the difference between anthropocentric (human-centric and utilitarian) and ecocentric (Earth-centric) ideologies, and be familiar with the range of positions within it, in particular conservationism and preservationism. Moreover, by exploring the spectrum of environmental ideologies, students should develop a working definition of sustainability. *The Handbook of Sustainability Literacy* (Stibbe, 2009) has several accessible short, introductory chapters on a variety of sustainability topics. Ecocriticism (Garrard, 2004) involves looking at the history of environmental discourses (the way the environment is discussed), especially the difference between “pastoral” and “progress” tropes in popular culture (which are used in the Chipotle videos). Environmental tropes are shorthand visual metaphors (primarily metonyms and synecdoches) that allude to broader ideological positions (such as smoke stacks, polar bears, tractors, pastures, windmills, etc.).

To deepen the assignment some background on food systems is helpful. For a basic introduction on the difference between local and industrial food production, the documentary *Food Inc.* (Kenner, 2008) and Michael Pollan’s *Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006) are accessible. The opening scene of *Food Inc.* features Pollan deconstructing food labels in the supermarket, and models very nicely how to apply media literacy to food marketing. Chapter Nine in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* details the contradictions of large-scale organic food production. Students should also be exposed to the concept of greenwashing, which is “the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service” (TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc., 2007, p. 1).

This assignment can be tied into an existing media studies curriculum, connecting concepts such as social constructionism, cultivation theory, media ethics, semiotics, intertextuality, ideology, hegemony, culture industry, advertising, mythology, and political economy.

Timeline

Four weeks (this can vary depending on the number of meetings and classroom sessions that are available). The assignment needs to be scaffolded with readings that draw on the primary concepts discussed above.

Final Assignment Instructions

Analyze Chipotle’s two video campaigns, “Back to the Start” (<https://youtu.be/aMfSGt6rHos>) and “The Scarecrow” (<https://youtu.be/IUtnas5ScSE>) and write a six to eight-page (double-spaced) paper discussing the following questions: How Does Chipotle represent its sustainability

claims in these campaigns? What does Chipotle's campaigns "teach" us about environmental problems and solutions?

The paper should cover the following points:

- Provide an overview of the two campaigns (including the videos, apps, social media campaigns and games) and short profile of Chipotle.
- Identify two environmental ideologies represented in these videos: one that is being critiqued and one that is being promoted.
- Evaluate the kinds of discourses, tropes, symbols, and persuasion techniques being used in the campaigns.
- Perform background research on Chipotle's sustainability claims, paying particular attention to the Chipotle Cultivate Foundation (its nonprofit charity). Use your research to identify whether or not Chipotle can verify its claims about its food production.

Daily Lesson Plans

In preparation for the paper, you can use the following lessons to scaffold each level of understanding. Unless indicated otherwise, each activity should occupy a single class session of an hour and 15 minutes:

Lesson 1: Media as Environmental Education (one to two sessions)

- **Objective:** By the end of the sessions, students should understand the following premises: a) all worldviews are ecological worldviews; b) all education is environmental education; c) all media are education; and d) all media are environmental education.
- **Preparation:** Compile random images of the environment (mountains, sea, desert, streams, waterfalls, moon, etc.) and weather patterns (storms, sunny skies, snow, etc.) into a slideshow so that there is only one image without text per slide.
- **Read:** Corbett (2006) Intro, chapters 1-2; López (2012) chapters 2-4
- **Introduction:** How we define, understand and explain the relationship between humans and living systems is learned through a variety of sources: language, culture, school, and the media. The goal of this lesson is to understand the source of our knowledge about living systems and also to develop an understanding of how we see ourselves as either embedded or separate from the environment. It is argued that one of the main causes of environmental destruction is because people view themselves as separate from living systems and are unable to perceive how their actions towards living systems also affects themselves. Finally, given that most of us don't have access to direct experience of a large part of the world or aspects of society, we learn about them through media.
- **Activity #1, slideshow of nature images:** Show slides of nature images one at a time. Ask students to write the first three words that come to mind when they see each image (stress that they should not overthink their choices and only to write whatever first comes to mind, no matter how "silly"). At the end of the slideshow, go back to each slide and ask students to recount the words they wrote down for each image. Ask where these word associations come from, whether they are from direct experience or mediated. Ask if the

thing they associate with the word (i.e. fluffy clouds with tranquility) comes from nature, human instinct, culture, or media.

- **Activity # 2, discussion:** Break into small groups and discuss the following prompts. Think of an example of when you learned something you didn't know from the media. What was it? What has media taught you about the way things work in the world, for example the judicial system? Assuming that you don't have direct experience with the judicial system, what do you know about it? How did you learn? What kinds of people are police officers, criminals, judges, lawyers and juries? What do you know about the environment from media? What did you learn about the environment in elementary or high school? How was it communicated? What is the boundary between humans and "the environment"? Where did you learn this?

Lesson 2: Environmental Ideologies (two-to-three sessions)

- **Objective:** Develop a working definition of environmental ideology and become familiar with the range of positions from anthropocentric to ecocentric ideologies; be able to identify environmental ideologies in media examples.
- **Read:** Stibbe (2009) chapters 1, 3; López (2012) chapter 4
- **Preparation:** Review and prepare media texts (print ads, multimedia, or short videos) for class discussion. There should be at least one media text for each environmental ideology covered in the Corbett reading (unrestrained instrumentalism, conservationism, preservationism, ecofeminism, deep ecology, and indigenous traditions). I have prepared video examples that you can use (follow the link: <http://www.openmediaeducation.net/cms323/multimedia/week-1-spectrum-of-worldviews/>)
- **Introduction:** Engage students in a broad discussion of ideology and develop a working definition, such as, "Ideology is the unquestioned or taken-for-granted beliefs of a society" (you can also introduce the media studies definition of ideology and Gramsci's concept of hegemony). Next, engage students in a conversation about the range of beliefs concerning how humans interact with the environment. Introduce Corbett's (2006, p. 26) definition of environmental ideology: "a way of thinking about the natural world that a person uses to justify actions towards it." Explain there is a spectrum of environmental ideologies that range from anthropocentric to ecocentric. Ask students what they think the difference is between the two extremes and to give examples from each end of the spectrum. To stimulate discussion, show a picture of an oil tanker and a sailboat (or an indigenous vessel like a Polynesian outrigger canoe) and ask how each of these interacts with the environment differently and why. Ask what kind of environmental ideology produced each type of vessel. Now, give a definition and example of human activity for each ideological position as described by Corbett and ask students to locate each one in the spectrum (draw a line on the board with anthropocentric on the left and ecocentric on the right—Corbett has an illustration in her book that you can base it on). In my experience, there is a very rich class discussion about whether conservationism and preservationism are anthropocentric or ecocentric (or somewhere in-between) ideologies. You can preview the next lesson by pointing out that ecocriticism involves applying an ecocentric framework to the status quo.

- **Group activity:** After following the above steps, spend an entire session reviewing media texts and have students identify the particular ideology represented in each text. You can do this with the entire class by showing a mix of short videos, or break students into small groups and have them discuss prepared print ads.

Lesson 3: Ecocriticism and environmental discourses

- **Objective:** Become familiar with the concepts of environmental discourse and tropes and how to use them for ecocriticism.
- **Preparation:** Review a range of environmental discourses along with symbols and tropes associated with them (for deeper background, refer to Garrard [2004]). Prepare media examples (print and/or video) with several different discourse examples, such as apocalypse (death and fear of environmental destruction), eco-utopia (idealized ecological communities/civilization), wilderness (nature as a wild place away from human activity or presence), pastoral (rural, family farm, ideal setting for human activity), progress (positive benefits of technology, science and industry), anti-progress (threat and danger of technology), and cornucopia (abundant, endless economic success of capitalism). I have prepared a page with videos for each of these discourses (<http://www.openmediaeducation.net/cms323/multimedia/week-2-discourses-and-tropes/>).
- **Read:** Garrard (2004) chapters 1-3, 5; Stibbe (2009) chapters 1, 4, 16
- **Introduction:** This lesson has a lot of similarities with media literacy and deconstruction. While what follows is more specific to ecocriticism, if you have a media literacy background you should incorporate your preferred tactics of deconstruction into the lesson. A discourse can be defined as the way we talk about something. Ask students if they talk the same way in different social settings, such as with friends, at work, or in the classroom. What kind of vocabulary and mode of communication do they use (formal, informal, slang, jargon, etc.) in each setting? Help them realize that we use different modes of communication depending on situation and audience. Likewise, there are different ways to talk about environmental issues that depend on context, goals, and assumptions about how people perceive the issue. These modes of address depend on symbolic resources, i.e. tropes and symbols that people are familiar with so as to make it easier for the communicator to “talk” about issues. For example, smokestacks are associated with carbon pollution and are often linked with discourses around climate change. Green fields and red barns are associated with the pastoral discourse, which is an idealized view of humans working in concert with nature. It is helpful to introduce the concept of tropes by giving examples, such as the Disney princess or Native American as ecologist, which are familiar enough to students to understand. Also introduce the concept of synecdoche and give several examples (I use slides with iconic images like the Earth photo from space, smoke stacks, polar bears, windmills, etc.). Give examples of media with different environmental discourses and ask students to identify the tropes and synecdochies that make up the discourses. Finally, explain that the ability to identify environmental discourses and to critically evaluate them is at the heart of ecocriticism. This will be important when they do the assignment because students will need to understand how Chipotle is playing with environmental discourses in their animated videos. In preparation for the next lesson, you can show the opening sequence of *Food*,

Inc., which features Michael Pollan’s deconstruction of food packaging, as an example of ecocriticism in action.

- **Group activity:** Either do this activity with the entire class, or break into small groups. Using the “Connecting Environmental Ideology With Discourse and Symbols” worksheet, show or handout different media examples representing a variety of different environmental discourses. Have students connect ideologies with discourses and accompanying tropes and synecdochies. Have them critique the media from an ecocentric perspective.

Lesson 4: Food Systems and marketing

- **Objective:** Identify how different agricultural practices correlate with environmental ideologies.
- **Preparation:** Pre-screen *Food, Inc.* and obtain copy for in-class screening.
- **Read:** Pollan (2006) chapter 9; Stibbe (2009) chapters 10-11
- **Introduction:** Understanding food systems would require its own course, so unfortunately it is treated somewhat superficially here. The main concept is that from a sustainability perspective there are two opposing food production paradigms: small-scale, local agriculture based on family and organic farms versus large-scale industrial agriculture based on pesticides, genetically modified organisms, and monoculture. *Food, Inc.* and the Pollan excerpt make the points sufficiently to prepare students to critique the Chipotle ads.
- **In-class:** Screen the entire film and initiate a discussion. What were the different farming practices depicted in the film? How does each farming practice correlate to an environmental ideology? How are these different farming practices represented in product labels, packaging, and advertisements?

Lesson 5: Greenwashing

- **Objective:** To become familiar with the concept and tactics of greenwashing.
- **Preparation:** Search magazines or the internet for examples of print ads or web pages that use any of the six sins of greenwashing. Bring diverse example to class so that the ads or screen shots offer different examples of the six sins.
- **Read:** “Six Sins of Greenwashing™” handout
- **Introduction:** Using the “Six Sins of Greenwashing™” handout, outline each sin and offer an example.
- **Group activity:** Bring several print ads or printed screen shots (enough so that you can break students into groups of 3-5 students) and have students discuss whether or not each example exhibits any of the six sins of greenwashing. Allow time for each group to present their findings to the rest of the class. In addition, have students identify environmental ideologies, discourses, and tropes.

Teaching materials

- The “Six Sins of Greenwashing™”: A Study of Environmental Claims in North American Consumer Markets (<https://tinyurl.com/j8awrtw>)

- Worksheet: Connecting Environmental Ideology With Discourse and Symbols (<https://tinyurl.com/h9q24m3>)

Bibliography

Corbett, J. B. (2006). *Communicating nature: How we create and understand environmental messages*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

Garrard, G. (2004). *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge.

Chipotle Mexican Grill. (2011, August 25). *Back to the Start*. [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/aMfSGt6rHos>

Chipotle Mexican Grill. (2013, September 11). *The Scarecrow*. [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/IUtnas5ScSE>

Garrard, G. (2009). Ecocriticism: The ability to investigate cultural artifacts from an ecological perspective. In A. Stibbe (Ed.), *The handbook of sustainability literacy: Skills for a changing world*. Totnes, UK: Green Books.

Kenner, R., & Pearlstein, E. (Producers), & Kenner, R. (Director). (2008). *Food, inc.* [Motion Picture] Magnolia Pictures.

López, A. (2012). *The media ecosystem: What ecology can teach us about responsible media practice*. Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books.

López, A. (2014). *Greening media education: Bridging media literacy with green cultural citizenship*. New York: Peter Lang.

Orr, D. W. (1994). *Earth in mind: On education, environment, and the human prospect*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

Pollan, M. (2006). *The omnivore's dilemma: A natural history of four meals*. New York: Penguin Press.

Stibbe, A. (2009). *The handbook of sustainability literacy: Skills for a changing world*. Totnes, UK: Green Books.

TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc. (2007). *The "Six sins of Greenwashing™": A study of environmental claims in North American consumer markets*. TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc.

Biography

Antonio Lopez
John Cabot University

A. Lopez

Deconstructing Chipotle

alopez@johncabot.edu

Antonio López, Ph.D. (<http://mediacology.com/>) is an international expert in media education. With a research focus on bridging sustainability education with media literacy, he has written numerous academic articles, essays and three books: *Mediacology: A Multicultural Approach to Media Literacy in the 21st Century* (<http://mediacology.com/the-book/>), *The Media Ecosystem: What Ecology Can Teach Us About Responsible Media Practice* (<http://www.themediaecosystem.com/>), and *Greening Media Education: Bridging Media Literacy with Green Cultural Citizenship* (<http://www.greenmediaed.com/>). He is currently Assistant Professor of Communications and Media Studies at John Cabot University in Rome, Italy.