

# **“It’s Not Easy Being Green”: The Greenwashing of Environmental Discourses in Advertising**

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**ABSTRACT** *Under the political framework of free-market fundamentalism, corporations are appropriating environmental discourses through green capitalism and greenwashing. For environmental emancipation to occur, it is important to problematize the corporate discourses that put a price on nature and obfuscate the domination of nature by capital. The authors use an environmental political-economy framework to examine the ways particular products are represented through television advertising. Using a multimodal critical discourse analysis, they analyze three representations—Clorox Green Works cleaning products, the Ford Escape Hybrid, and Toyota Prius motor vehicles—in order to deconstruct and analyze how specific advertisements operate and how they contribute to problematic environmental discourses.*

**KEYWORDS** *Environmental communication; Critical discourse analysis; Advertising; Green capitalism*

**RÉSUMÉ** *Cet article analyse le fait que sous le système politique contemporain, les corporations sont en train d'approprier les discours environnementales par un processus qu'on peut appeler le « capitalisme vert. » C'est important de problématiser ce phénomène pour montrer comment ces discours commodifient la nature et obscurcissent la domination de la nature par le capital. Les auteurs commencent avec l'approche politique-économique environnementale pour examiner les façons dont lesquels trois produits sont présentés dans les publicités télévisées. La méthode d'analyse critique des discours est employée pour considérer trois représentations: Clorox Green Works, Ford Escape Hybrid, et Toyota Prius. Le but est de déconstruire et d'analyser comment certains exemples de publicités opèrent et contribuent à des discours environnementales problématiques.*

**MOTS CLÉS** *La communication environnementale; L'Analyse critique des discours; Les Publicités; Le capitalisme vert*

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## Introduction

Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring (Jhally, 2000).

Advertising discourses and capitalist ideology play a major role in shaping the attitudes and behaviour of society; through the encouragement to endlessly consume products, they are leading the human race down a road that may eventually lead to catastrophic consequences. The dramatic, ongoing environmental degradation we are witnessing points to the need for increased on-the-ground activism and environmentalism that goes beyond the narrow set of “choices” related to consumerism. However, as we argue in this article, major corporations and big media are deflecting our attention away from this need and replacing it with the apparently easy solution of green consumerism. The problem with green consumerism is that, although buying a “green” product may be the “lesser of two evils,” it still operates within a neoliberal, capitalist context that is more concerned with making a profit than with saving the environment. A neoliberal reliance on the free market as the source of solutions for all problems, along with the complementary focus on the individual and on individual choice within the market mean that individuals are encouraged to believe that they can be environmentalists simply by making ostensibly thoughtful choices from within the range of consumer choices available on the market. Attention is deflected away from the forms of collective action often needed to bring about meaningful social/environmental change.

This article examines the ways in which the corporate appropriation of environmental discourses works to obfuscate the domination of nature by capital. We also examine how green capitalism operates to commodify the Earth’s natural resources and naturalize consumption, and how corporate greenwashing functions to mask this process. Some argue that the representation of environmental products and the discourses of green capitalism can reinforce positive discourses of environmentalism by urging consumers to purchase environmentally friendly products over ones that cause greater damage to the Earth. We challenge this point of view and argue that this discourse merely focuses on the representations of products and does not go far enough to critically interrogate the dominant power structures that undermine collective interests and environmental emancipation and therefore leaves the neoliberal agenda intact.

The goal of the research has been to deconstruct the powerful forces that work to create an ideology that is seemingly aligned with both environmental and capitalist interests. In particular, we do this by examining how this ideology is represented and appropriated within specific examples from advertising, in order to illuminate how these ads contribute to a system of discourses that supports the neoliberal agenda.

### **Green capitalism and greenwashing**

Greenwashing has been referred to as “the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service” (TerraChoice, 2009, p. 1). TerraChoice, an environmentally friendly marketing agency and consulting firm, describes what they refer to as the “sins of greenwashing” to include hidden trade-offs, no proof, vagueness, irrelevance, fibbing, the lesser of two evils, and most recently added to this list, the worshipping of false labels (TerraChoice, 2007, 2009, 2010).

Laufer (2003) found that many familiar Fortune 500 companies engage in greenwashing strategies, such as publishing false health and safety reports, which work to shift the focus from the firm, create confusion, undermine credibility, criticize valuable alternatives, and deceptively promote the firm’s objectives, commitments, and accomplishments. Laufer contends that greenwashing turns on three elements of deception: confusion, fronting, and posturing (2003). Moreover, voluntary environmental reporting undermines the quality and reliability of the reporting, a fact that shows the need for standards in monitoring and reporting environmental information, including third-party verification (Laufer, 2003).

Growing concern for the environment on the part of citizens has led corporations to advance a new ideology of green capitalism, in which consumers are urged to help the environment through the purchase of ostensibly eco-friendly products. The problem with green capitalism is that it still treats the environment as an externality—something that can be bought and sold (Lubbers, 2002; Tokar, 1997). It also places responsibility on individuals to change their habits, which is appropriate to some extent; however, this shifts the focus away from corporations as the cause of many of the world’s environmental problems and also away from the government as regulators. Moreover, placing agency in the hands of individuals rather than corporations serves to further advance the neoliberal agenda by keeping us thinking about ourselves as individuals and consumers rather than as citizens or community members. The discourses of advertising play a key role in this process.

Richard Kahn (2009) discusses the problem of green consumerism as fundamentalist consumerism, with the view that larger structural problems in society can be fixed by acts of individual consumer choice, rather than real corporate change. In this sense corporations are telling the public to “vote” with their dollar. This consumer “democracy” serves to “weaken robust ideas of political and social democracy, as personal agency, social freedom, and the obligations of citizenship are ideologically tethered to capitalist market relations and renewed profiteering” (Kahn, 2009, p. 49).

### **Environmental political economy as an approach**

Environmental political economy incorporates the natural totality of organic life by looking at the links between social behaviour and the environment (Mosco, 2009). This approach is important because if we fail to take the environment into account in our everyday actions, we risk exhausting our natural resources and will create a much more difficult world for future generations to live in, if the planet survives at all (Suzuki & Taylor, 2009).

Environmental political theory calls into question what we value as a society and as individuals. It critiques market-based society, globalized capitalism, and the emphasis placed in our society on the need for endless material consumption (Kassiola, 2003). These common values are inconsistent with our ecological abilities and are resulting in an unsustainable society, and one that is unsatisfying and undesirable for many citizens (Kassiola, 2003). A collaborative environmental perspective requires both collective and participatory decision-making (which we see in democratic socialism) in order to produce a healthy ecology (Mosco, 2009).

Erich Fromm's (1955) work is helpful in its attempt to extend Marx's concept of alienation beyond the realm of production and point to the ways in which humans are also alienated in the realm of consumption. Fromm argues that the process of consumption is alienating since we acquire things with money, which is an abstract representation of our labour and effort (1955). He further says we are alienated at the level of consumption since "we are surrounded by things of whose nature and origin we know nothing" (p. 130). We therefore lack respect for the process of production, and our only connectedness to a product is in how to manipulate or consume it (Fromm, 1955). This is problematic because we are then deeply disconnected from these products and are never satisfied with what we have, which in turn leads us to consume more and more products in the pursuit of feeling fulfilled.

When we begin to lose sight of the things that bring us together as a community and are constantly bombarded by capitalist discourses through advertising and public relations, democracy, human well-being, and happiness are devalued. Neoliberal discourses urge us to think and live as individuals, rather than as a collective, and this alienates us from other human beings, as well as from nature. It is capitalism and the discourses of advertising that "systematically relegates discussion of key societal issues to the peripheries of the culture and talks in powerful ways instead of individual desire, fantasy, pleasure and comfort" (Jhally, 2000, p. 5). This focus on the individual rather than on the collective good discourages the long-term thinking that is needed to address problems of environmental degradation. Green capitalism is in fact extending the externalization of nature by extracting resources without consideration for the environment and selling them back to the public with a big green bow.

Since advertising speaks to us as individuals, it further reinforces the neoconservative notion that "there is no such thing as 'society'" (only individuals and their families) (Jhally, 2000, p. 4). Ideologically, capitalism and the market appeal to the worst qualities in people, such as greed and selfishness, and undermine and discourage our best qualities, such as compassion, caring, and generosity (Jhally, 2000). These ideologies further assert that we should continue to consume things, and to look out for ourselves as individuals over the interests of the collective.

As Terry Eagleton (1991) argues, we should view ideology not as disembodied ideas or behaviour patterns, but as a discursive or semiotic phenomenon because this "emphasizes its materiality ... and preserves the sense that it is essentially concerned with *meanings*" (p. 194, emphasis in original). Moreover, Stuart Hall's (1997) concept of representation is relevant here. Hall asserts that the power to signify events in a particular way is an ideological power. Ideological power is not a neutral force, but is a

site of struggle; therefore, ideologies depend on the politics of signification. This implies that it is the dominant groups in society that have more resources at their disposal to present their ideological interests as natural and “common-sensical” in ways that function to uphold the status quo.

Political economy, ideology, and representation all mesh well with the method of critical discourse analysis insofar as each of them recognize the cultural/political terrain as a site of struggle while, nonetheless, acknowledging that hegemonic discourses are most often shaped by powerful and affluent groups. Most importantly, the animating principles of these approaches contribute to the axiological commitment of critical emancipation and potentially transformative forms of environmental activism, which we contend are necessary to facilitate meaningful change in our interactions with nature. Consumer-driven models such as green consumerism are still part of the economic system, which is rooted in the goal of continuous growth. This is problematic to the environment because “we know that we are rapidly exhausting what the earth can offer and that if the present growth and consumption trends continued unchecked, the limits to growth on the planet will be reached sometime within the next century” (Jhally, 2000, p. 5). Purchasing green products as a form of consumer activism ignores the fact that our earth cannot sustain these continued levels of growth and also ignores the massive amount of waste produced as a result of our excessive consumption.

### **The analytical tool: Critical discourse analysis**

For this research, we employ Thomas Huckin's (1997) approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA) since it accounts for visual representations/images that often accompany written/spoken text. Therefore, Huckin's version of CDA is more useful than other approaches (e.g., Fairclough, 1989, 2003; Wodak, 2004) in examining advertisements—in our case, television ads—because it facilitates a multimodal form of CDA that addresses the use of text, image, and sound in conjunction with one another. Huckin (1997) describes CDA as a “highly context-sensitive, democratic approach, which takes an ethical stance on social issues with the aim of improving society” (p. 1).

Huckin (1997) discusses the analysis as a two-staged event. Following his model, we have first looked at the text as a typical reader would—merely trying to comprehend what the text is saying. Using the advertisement's transcript, we developed a general analysis and summarized the commercial from the perspective of the typical reader. At the second level, Huckin wants the analyst to take a step back from the text and look at it more critically, resisting the text at different levels (1997). This step involves looking at the text on different levels, raising questions about it, thinking about how it could be constructed differently, and comparing it to related texts (Huckin, 1997). We have followed Huckin (1997) in examining the following: genre, framing, visual aids, foregrounding/backgrounding, omissions, presupposition, discursive differences, topicalization, agent-patient relations, deletion or omission of agents, insinuation, connotations, register, and modality.

At a critical level, the reader must first identify the *genre* to which the text belongs—in the case of this analysis, the advertising genre. Some elements to look for in

terms of the genre of the text are how certain statements might serve the purpose of the writer/producer, and most significantly what could have been said but was left out, and why (Huckin, 1997). Examining *omission* is crucial to any critical discourse analysis because it often highlights the hidden intentions of the writer/producer. Omission is a powerful aspect of textualization because when a writer/producer leaves something out, it does not often enter the reader's/viewer's mind and therefore it is not subjected to their scrutiny (Huckin, 1997). This act of omission is a major way that advertising discourses serve to distract the reader from what is really important.

*Framing* examines how the context of the text is presented, and from what perspective. Frames are often presented as narratives or stories with universal themes, such as good versus evil. Another powerful way of framing a text is through the use of visual aids (Huckin, 1997), which is especially relevant to our analysis. The next step in analysis is to look at the *foregrounding* and *backgrounding* of the text; this includes which concepts are emphasized by the writer/producer and which are marginalized or omitted. The writer/producer can also use *presupposition* to influence the reader/viewer, which Huckin (1997) defines as "the use of language in a way that appears to take certain ideas for granted, as if there were no alternative" (p. 6).

In looking at the text as a whole, the reader/viewer must keep in mind the discourse or *register* of the text. This usually takes into account the tone and formality of the text, and whether or not the voice is presented as that of an expert or a typical user. Depending on the purpose of the text, these different voices can be used to manipulate the reader/viewer. For example, using a voice of a typical user can make the reader/viewer feel compassion or connectedness to the ordinary citizen, whereas using an expert voice emphasizes the authority and expertise of the writer/producer.

Finally, the analysis involves examining the *language* used in the text. The reader must first construct the basic meaning of each sentence and should topicalize the sentence by identifying the grammatical subjects (Huckin, 1997). The *agent-patient relations*<sup>1</sup> are also important to identify because they can often uncover the intended power relations behind the text. This includes asking these questions: who is the agent? who is doing what to whom? who is initiating actions? and who are passive recipients (Huckin, 1997)? It is also important to recognize the deletion or omission of agents, often through nominalization and the use of passive verbs. The reader should then identify any *presuppositions* and *insinuations* at the sentence level as well. This is important because according to Huckin, "[p]resuppositions are notoriously manipulative because they are difficult to challenge: many readers are reluctant to question statements that the author appears to be taking for granted" (p. 7).

Since television advertising is primarily a visual medium, we choose to supplement our analysis with the use of Katherine Frith's levels of meaning in advertisements in order to provide a fuller assessment and deconstruction. Frith (1998) says we must learn what an advertisement *means* by deconstructing it, which for her involves its entirety—including text, image, and sound. The first level of meaning is similar to Huckin's (1997) cursory reading of the text, or looking at the text as a typical reader. At the surface level, meaning is based on the overall impression a reader gets from quickly looking at the ad (Frith, 1998).

Next, the analysis of the advertiser's intended meaning examines the writer/producer's intended sales message, which can be directly related to the commodity, but can also sell the reader/viewer a lifestyle or image (Frith, 1998). This is related to Stuart Hall's (1973, 1997) level of *encoding*, in which advertisers place meaning in the text, which audiences *decode* based on cultural referent systems.

Lastly, Frith's (1998) third level of meaning addresses the cultural or ideological dimensions of advertisements. This is closely related to Huckin's (1997) critical in-depth analysis of the text. Frith (1998) says this level relies on the cultural knowledge and background of the reader and is based on common beliefs about our culture. These beliefs are ideological in nature, as they appear to be "common sense" but are not actually universal beliefs or truths. This is the most important level to examine in ads because "[i]n order to really begin to see how advertising works to support and reinforce certain ideological beliefs it is important to deconstruct the deeper meanings of ads and learn how to take apart the cultural or ideological messages" (p. 6). Frith further contends that "[a]dvertising manipulates symbols to create meaning and in our society, the values expressed in advertising mirror the dominant ideological themes" (p. 13).

Critical discourse analysis and "the levels of meaning in advertising" strongly complement environmental political economy, ideology, and representation because all take into consideration the ongoing power struggle as well as the historical context of discourses. Both environmental political economy and CDA seek to examine how dominating forces shape hegemonic discourses that are ideologically and culturally produced and interpreted, and made legitimate through the ideologies of powerful interests.

The three advertising campaigns selected for this analysis were chosen to serve as specific examples of *how* advertisements/campaigns operate and how they contribute to a system of discourses that appropriate environmental messages and concerns in service of the corporate agenda. In terms of consumer goods, cleaning supplies and motor vehicles—and, in particular, hybrid vehicles—represent two prominent examples of product categories that are noteworthy for the presence of supposedly environmentally friendly options within the dominant advertising discourses.

### **Clorox Green Works: The dirty truth about cleaning products**

The first example we examine is the Clorox Green Works line of cleaning products, chosen because of its popularity and its connection to the well-known brand Clorox. Green Works is perhaps the most well-known "environmentally friendly" cleaning product, used in 17 million homes (Green Works, 2011a). At the time of selection the "Green Works Naturally" commercial was the most recent in this series (GreenWorksCleaning, 2011). This 30-second commercial visually focuses on Green Works all-purpose cleaner, but also on promoting an overall awareness of the Green Works line of products.

The representation of Clorox Green Works in its advertising is similar to the corporate responsibility initiative on the company's website, emphasizing the product being "natural," and therefore environmentally friendly (Clorox Company, 2010). The commercial says:

From nature comes Green Works. Natural plant-based cleaners without harsh chemical fumes or residue. Since Green Works products are made by Clorox, they clean with the power you'd expect, and they're made from natural in-

redients. Now there's new Green Works natural dishwashing liquid. It removes grease and baked-on food, leaving your dishes clean and shiny. Green Works, naturally. (GreenWorksCleaning, 2011)

At the surface level of analysis (Frith, 1998), we see a commercial for Green Works all-purpose cleaner and dishwashing liquid that shows a mother and son going about their daily routine and shows how they implement Green Works products into their daily life. The commercial also explains how the product works to remove baked-on food and shows its effectiveness in comparison with another leading brand in a side-by-side shot of both products (GreenWorksCleaning, 2011). At the level of the advertiser's intended meaning (Frith, 1998), and what Huckin (1997) calls reading the text as a whole, the general analysis derived from this commercial is that Clorox Green Works products are connected or in touch with nature. The ad intends to show that these products are safer for consumers, their families, and the environment because they are "all natural." The commercial persuades the reader/viewer to believe these products are better than other cleaners because they are tough on dirt without using harsh chemicals. The mother is using Green Works products to clean the kitchen while the son is working on schoolwork; one discourse presented in this commercial therefore seems to be that if you wish to keep your family safe and healthy, you should use these products.

The ad foregrounds the concepts of natural, powerful, and clean, but backgrounds and omits the larger societal issues such as health, safety, and mass consumption. Similarly, there is an ideological foregrounding of certain values by promoting and legitimating the interests of certain groups as dominant social powers (Eagleton, 1991). Further, this example illustrates the omission of the larger societal or collective issues involved; while omission is a common aspect of how advertising operates, it is important to acknowledge and understand how this function contributes to the system of discourses that reinforce corporate ideologies.

This ad for Clorox Green Works commits the greenwashing sin of vagueness by claiming that the product is made with "natural" ingredients, without ever naming the ingredients used. The sin of vagueness contends that a product's claims are "so poorly defined or broad that its real meaning is likely to be misunderstood by the consumer" (TerraChoice, 2009). After we did further research on the company's website, we found that many of the Green Works product ingredients are actually safe for consumers (Green Works, 2011b); however, several ingredients are synthetically produced, such as sodium lauryl sulphate (SLS), dyes, and a petrochemical preservative (Vasil, 2009). Although there is not enough evidence to indicate that SLS causes cancer, it is a known skin irritant and is associated with skin-related problems (Pierre-Louis, 2012).

The presupposition (Huckin, 1997) taking place in this advertisement is that many natural products are not as effective as chemical products, but the message is that Green Works products are as strong as other chemical cleaners. However, this message glosses over the idea that people can make their own cleaners from household ingredients (e.g., baking soda, vinegar, lemon juice) that are naturally derived and exist outside the consumer system of branded products. Capitalist ideology and advertising discourses have appropriated the idea of cleaning with chemicals and corporate products as the only way to be "truly clean."

In examining the language use, when the commercial says Clorox Green Works products “clean with the power you’d expect” (GreenWorksCleaning, 2011), it presupposes (Huckin, 1997) that the consumer has previously used Clorox cleaners and believes them to be effective. Further, the text is presented as good for nature and good for one’s family. However, this text contains more than one style of discourse, as it promotes both a friendly typical register while at the same time emphasizing the authority and expertise of the Clorox Company. Huckin (1997) says these discursive differences can be exploited to manipulate the reader/viewer. The statement “Since Green Works products are made by Clorox, they clean with the power you’d expect” (GreenWorksCleaning, 2011) asserts authority and places Clorox in the role of expert, which can deter consumers from questioning these statements.

When examining the language used in this ad, the concepts of “nature,” “natural,” “naturally,” and “Clorox” are all topicalized, which is a type of foregrounding at the sentence level (Huckin, 1997). In fact, all but two sentences mention the above concepts, while the other two briefly explain how the product works to remove grease.

In this example, Clorox is seen as the agent, initiating actions by creating these green products, and thus exerting power. The reader/viewer, however, is not just a passive recipient in their role as patient—they must purchase these green products in order for change to be made. Commodity fetishism (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002) is relevant here, as the writer/producer is investing these green products with qualities not inherent in the products themselves, such as the ability to enact social change.

At the words and phrases level (Huckin, 1997), the word “natural(ly)” connotes that these products are better for you and your family, are safer, and are better for the environment. An informal register with a low degree of technicality is used, as often seen in advertisements that serve to attract an audience with a broad range of understanding. And lastly, the modality, which refers to “the tone of statements as regards their degree of certitude and authority” (Huckin, 1997, p. 8), is indicative through phrases such as “they clean with the power you’d expect” (GreenWorksCleaning, 2011). The modality reports the product’s abilities in a factual tone with no trace of uncertainty, to provide the overall effect that there is no question these products are made “naturally” and clean to the consumer’s standards. At Frith’s (1998) level of cultural and ideological meanings, we see how advertising discourses function to naturalize capitalist ideologies and monopolize cultural life to a point where “[t]here is no space left for different types of discussion, no space at the center of the society where alternative values could be expressed” (Jhally, 2000, p. 5).

The visual elements play a significant role in contributing to the greenwashing of this product. The advertisement begins with a close-up of a flower in a meadow. As the camera pans out, a petal from the flower floats away. The camera follows the petal, which floats through a window into the kitchen of a typical suburban home and lands on a bottle of Clorox Green Works all-purpose cleaner. A woman picks up the cleaner and uses it to clean her stove. Other frames in this ad include a shot of the Green Works products against a white background, surrounded by fruits such as oranges, lemons, and coconuts. The fruits fade out and are replaced with other Green Works products. The ad never discusses the ingredients used in the product and only says they are “natural,” which connects this thought to the images of the fruit.

Another element that is noteworthy in this ad is the bright, appealing colours. Vibrant primary colours such as yellow and green are contrasted against clean white surfaces. The composition seems to attempt to appeal particularly to a female audience by using floral/feminine imagery. At Frith's (1998) ideological level of meaning, this ties into a marketing strategy aimed at females that reinforces stereotypical gender ideologies by placing women in domestic roles such as cooking and cleaning. This stereotypical gender ideology is reinforced on the company's website, which is directed toward mothers and states, "We knew that moms like us were looking for ways to live a more natural lifestyle—and we made it our mission to help them achieve this goal" (Green Works, 2011b).

We should note that Clorox Green Works as a brand actually lived up to some of its claims of earth-friendliness, and when tested against other "green" all-purpose cleaners, was given a four out of five rating for its effectiveness (Vasil, 2009). Although the products contain some ingredients that are not earth-friendly, such as sodium lauryl sulphate, dyes, and petrochemical preservatives, they passed testing by the Organic Consumers Association and were supported by the Sierra Club (Vasil, 2009).

However, the key issue is not only the actual makeup of the product but, more fundamentally, the brand's overall contribution to shaping environmental discourses. Although the Clorox Green Works line seems to be fairly environmentally friendly, the Clorox Company is still a major producer of chemical cleaners—products that contribute to the overall degradation of the natural environment. Some environmentalists would argue against supporting a company whose products are responsible for the use of caustic chemicals, while others would say that buying "green" products from a company like Clorox encourages other big companies to offer environmentally sustainable products (Vasil, 2009).

One problematic aspect of the Green Works brand is the deliberate division of these products from their chemical counterparts at Clorox. For example, Clorox has completely separate websites for its chemical products and Green Works products. This seems to show an intentional division in its target marketing groups. Rather than including Green Works as part of its overall line of products, Clorox separates the "green" ideology to target a specific market. If Green Works products are as tough on dirt as are their chemical products, then Clorox could begin to completely transition into an environmentally friendly line and make their chemical line obsolete.

However, natural cleaning products can cost as much as 100 percent more to make than regular cleaners (Casper, 2011). Green Works products range in price from \$2.99 to \$3.59, which makes them as affordable as their chemical counterparts (Casper, 2011). This seems to point to lower profit margins for Clorox on the sales of their Green Works line, which indicates that the traditional products are likely subsidizing the Green Works line. This may explain why Clorox has not transitioned to a solely environmentally friendly line of products, and reinforces our argument that neoliberal/capitalist ideologies have appropriated the idea of environmentalism to support corporate priorities, such as the "greening" of one's image, without ever intending to bring more eco-friendly products meaningfully into the mainstream.

### Car culture and our dependence on the private vehicle

In general, the discourses of personal vehicle use and driving are naturalized in many vehicle advertisements. This is especially problematic when in the United States alone, personal vehicles account for five percent of the world's total carbon emissions, which are a major contributor to climate change (Fuller, 2008). A theme found in many car commercials claiming the car's environmental efficiency is its ability to create harmony between humans, nature, and machine. However, driving is damaging to the Earth—from the removal of green space to create paved roads, to the production and distribution of cars, to the emissions produced by personal vehicle use, through to the disposal of vehicles at the end of their use.

The overuse of personal vehicles is clearly evident, demonstrated by the fact that the average fuel consumption rose by thirteen percent between 1987 and 2004 (Suzuki & Taylor, 2009). According to Statistics Canada, there are more than 26 million registered vehicles for only 21 million licensed Canadian drivers (Transport Canada, 2011). Also, Transport Canada boasts that “Canada has nearly 900,000 kilometres of road—enough to circle the globe 22 times” (para. 1). The capitalist discourses that surround personal vehicle use achieve legitimacy through the device of universalizing and “eternalizing” themselves, which conditions individuals to see these discourses as inevitable and without alternative. Eagleton (1991) discusses how these time and space-specific values and interests are projected as the values of all humanity (p. 56). Since these discourses are naturalized, corporations can convincingly represent their products as if there were no alternative.

#### *Vehicle example 1: The Ford Escape Hybrid*

In a 2007 advertisement for the Ford Escape Hybrid, first broadcast during Super Bowl XLI, it is evident that Ford is obviously attempting to target the vehicle to green-minded consumers, claiming the car's efficiency and the ease with which the consumer can transform their daily driving habits into “green” ones. The commercial features Kermit the Frog singing his well-known song “It's Not Easy Being Green.” The commercial says:

[Kermit the Frog (sung):] “It's not that easy being green / Having to spend each day the color of the leaves / When I think it could be nicer being red, or yellow or gold / It's not that easy being green.” [(spoken):] “Hmmm, I guess it is easy being green.” [Voice-over:] “The 36-mile-per-gallon Ford Escape Hybrid.” (Chiezou, 2007)

Examining this text as a typical reader first (Frith, 1998; Huckin, 1997), we find that the key theme emphasized is how difficult it is to be “green” but how easy it is to be a “green” consumer. The visual imagery shows Kermit the Frog struggling to be “green” by riding a bike down a bumpy mountain trail, kayaking down whitewater rapids, rock climbing to the top of a cliff, and finally peeking through some bushes to find the Ford Escape Hybrid and stating, “Hmm, I guess it is easy being green” (Chiezou, 2007). This suggests that a person does not have to go to great lengths to change their daily habits (by riding their bike, et cetera) to be environmentally friendly, but can achieve this by purchasing “green” products. The commercial empowers the

reader/viewer by offering an easy/manageable solution to becoming “green” by merely purchasing a Ford Escape Hybrid. According to this ad, we do not have to change the way we live to make a change in the environment. If we purchase Ford products—in this case, the Ford Escape Hybrid—we will be contributing to this change without having to change our lifestyle or our transportation habits.

After stepping back from this ad and critically examining the text as a whole (Huckin, 1997) and the cultural and ideological meaning (Frith, 1998), we see that in this representation, capitalist discourses are naturalized and several sins of greenwashing are occur. This commercial suggests that our personal decisions can have negative effects on the Earth by showing Kermit in various situations where he is struggling to change his habits to “go green”; however, it completely ignores any discourse around the impact that the automotive industry—from the assembly line to oil extraction to fuel emissions—has on the Earth. The ad does this is because the discourses of driving have become normalized in capitalist society, and we no longer question these actions as contributing to the larger environmental problems we face.

In our society, personal vehicle use is seen as a necessity rather than a privilege. An approach that incorporates environmental political economy reminds us that in order to make a real impact on the Earth, we need to question the way we live and act to make significant changes (Foster, 2000, 2002). This privileged attitude can also relate to the disconnect that exists between humans and nature, and the need to begin to factor the environment into all things (Menzies, 1999; Suzuki, 2010a; Suzuki & Taylor, 2009). Also, this advertisement highlights the individual’s responsibility (Jhally, 2000; Rogers, 2007; Wallism, 2010), rather than the corporate responsibility of Ford in changing its production practices, or the government as regulators, and even further the collective responsibility of society to re-examine our current values and beliefs regarding the environment. Another problem not addressed by offering hybrid vehicles as a solution to other less fuel-efficient cars is that many drivers erode the fuel-efficiency gains of hybrid vehicles by driving more, therefore, increasing their overall consumption (Pierre-Louis, 2012).

The text’s advertising genre (Huckin, 1997) is evident through the juxtaposition of the benefit of the commodity product compared to a lifestyle without that product. It stresses the word “easy” in order to appeal to the consumer’s daily lifestyle habits. It stirs up a call to action from the consumer by saying that it is easy to be “green” if they only purchase the Ford Escape Hybrid—because it gets 36 miles per gallon fuel efficiency. The images are particularly effective at engaging the viewer, because they offer a connection to nature that may not be easily accessible in the everyday experience of urbanites. This “exotic” experience is highlighted as something to strive for, and the Ford Escape Hybrid is presented as a vehicle that can bring the consumer closer to nature.

The backgrounding and omission (Huckin, 1997) in this ad are very important. Omission occurs in that the commercial does not discuss any of the collective environmental problems we as humans are experiencing or the larger societal questions related to why we might need more efficient modes of transportation, but merely says that if you own the Ford Escape Hybrid, “I guess it is easy being green” (Chiezou, 2007). The message contributes to a system of discourses that both naturalize driving and

support the corporate agenda.

There is also a lot of presupposition taking place in this advertisement, which functions to encourage us to take certain ideas for granted (Huckin, 1997). This ad definitely normalizes the discourses of personal vehicle use and driving as the easiest or most efficient mode of transportation. It also normalizes the idea of green consumption as a way to change the world, as if there were no other alternative (Huckin, 1997). Normalizing and universalizing is another function of capitalist ideology, because corporations have realized the potential of green capitalism to make them *seem* socially responsible, while at the same time still making large profits (Kahn, 2009; Rogers, 2007). Once again, the omissions and presuppositions we are highlighting provide *specific* examples of just how individual advertisements/campaigns contribute to an overall *system* of discourses that obfuscate environmental issues and support the neoliberal agenda.

When we critically examine the language in this representation, we observe that the advertisement uses the phrase "It's not that easy being green" in combination with images of Kermit struggling while using alternative modes of transportation (biking, kayaking, et cetera) that have no carbon footprint (Chiezou, 2007). This is in contrast with the image of Kermit standing next to the Ford Escape Hybrid, giggling, and saying, "Hmm, I guess it is easy being green" (Chiezou, 2007). Ford is presented as helping the consumer who has a hectic lifestyle and also contributing to saving the planet.

As with most advertisements, the visual elements play a key role in the overall effect of the commercial. At the surface level (Frith, 1998), the commercial begins with a sequence of Kermit the Frog riding a bike down a bumpy mountain path, making sounds that imply he is struggling to keep from falling. The second sequence shows Kermit kayaking down whitewater rapids, letting out a frightened cry. Kermit then rock climbs up a steep cliff, looking down to the ground below with a terrified expression. The last sequence shows Kermit peeking through a bush, to find the Ford Escape Hybrid in a clearing. He peers in the driver's side window, and walks around the vehicle until he finds the hybrid logo on the rear hatchback, to which he says, "Hmm, I guess it is easy being green" and proceeds to giggle (Chiezou, 2007). The last shot during the voice-over is of the blue Ford logo transforming into a new green logo. At the advertiser's intended level of meaning (Frith, 1998), these images have a strong emotional effect because they are beautiful, pure images of nature that make us feel connected to it and in turn to the Ford vehicle.

#### *Vehicle example 2: The Toyota Prius*

Almost 141,000 units of the Toyota Prius were sold in the United States in 2010, accounting for 51 percent of hybrid electric vehicle (HEV) sales (U.S. Department of Energy, 2011). Peaking in sales in 2007, the Prius sold 181,221 vehicles, making up 51 percent of the HEV sales that year (U.S. Department of Energy, 2011). As of 2008, over 11,051 units were sold in Canada, and more than one million were sold worldwide (Hamilton, 2008). To date, the Prius continues to be the best-selling vehicle in its class of hybrid mid-sized sedans (U.S. Department of Energy, 2011).

The advertising discourses represented in the Toyota Prius ad are an excellent example of green marketing at its most powerful. At the surface level of examination

(Frith, 1998), the commercial begins with a cheerful song with the lyrics “There’s a reason for the sunshine sky / There’s a reason why I’m feeling so high / Must be the season / So let your love fly / Let your love go”<sup>2</sup> (ToyotaUSA, 2009a). The dialogue in the commercial says, “You get more power and more space. The world gets fewer smog-forming emissions. The third-generation Prius—it’s harmony between man [sic], nature, and machine” (ToyotaUSA, 2009a).

However, even with a high efficiency rating in comparison to other cars and a corporate social responsibility initiative touting the company’s image as environmentally friendly, Toyota opposed a fuel standards bill in the U.S. Congress that would impose more stringent minimum fuel mileage requirements (Miller, 2007). This hands-off approach is part of a neoliberal paradigm that opposes government regulation of the private sector. Companies such as Toyota claim environmentally friendly corporate responsibility and continue to market their products as “earth-friendly” and “green,” but oppose any regulation that would assure citizens of their products’ claims.

Looking at the text as a whole (Huckin, 1997) and the cultural/ideological meanings (Frith, 1998), we can see a discourse representing the harmony between humans, nature, and machine. This is problematic because although the Prius seems to be more fuel-efficient than similar cars, the ad still naturalizes the idea of green capitalism and consumption as a way to save the environment. It creates a false sense of harmony through the use of the language and imagery of humans dressed as things from nature, when in reality cars are only leading to further destruction of the Earth, no matter how “environmentally friendly” they claim to be. This sort of advertising discourse functions ideologically, since the discourses of green capitalism are naturalized, whereby we see “false or deceptive beliefs as arising from the material structure of society as a whole” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 30). It is in capitalism’s best interest to continue promoting the consumption of vehicles, regardless of the implications for our environment.

With respect to omission (Huckin, 1997), the initial “Harmony” commercial never really explains or addresses how the Toyota Prius is environmentally friendly. Later commercials, “Solar” and “MPG,” address the solar-panel cooling function and the miles-per-gallon rating that the car gets. Even in these later commercials, the environmental features are never fully explained. The “Solar” commercial says, “What if we could use the sun to help keep us cool? Solar-powered ventilation. To help cool you. Available on the third-generation Prius—it’s harmony between man [sic], nature, and machine” (Hayden, 2011). Further, the “MPG” commercial says, “It gives the world fewer smog-forming emissions. It gives you a 50-mile-per-gallon rating. The third-generation Prius—it’s harmony between man [sic], nature, and machine” (CopperTunes2010, 2010).

Like the Ford Escape Hybrid advertisement, this commercial series is framed as a narrative of the harmony between humans, nature, and machine. At the ideological level of meaning (Frith, 1998), it portrays the perspective that we can live harmoniously with nature without changing our daily habits, such as excessive driving, by merely purchasing green products such as the Toyota Prius. However, an environmental political economy approach asserts that we must question the very basis of the capitalist system and the destruction it has on the Earth through the commodification of our natural resources (Foster, 2010; Kovel, 2007, 2010). By using the term “harmony,” these

commercials ignore the role that cars and driving have in the ongoing destruction of the Earth. They do this because under green capitalism, environmentalism is ideologically tethered to the capitalist system, and ideology serves to promote and legitimize the interests of dominant groups (Eagleton, 1991).

With respect to presupposition (Huckin, 1997), the language in the text places the words “you,” and “the world,” as the grammatical subjects of the sentences. This works to foreground these concepts and “[i]n choosing what to put in the topic position, writers create a perspective, or slant, that influences the reader’s perception” (Huckin, 1997, p. 6). In the “Harmony” commercial Toyota is given status as the agent, initiating action by implementing the innovative technologies found in the Prius.

Presupposition also occurs in the sentences “You get more power and more space” and “The world gets fewer smog-forming emissions” (ToyotaUSA, 2009a), because the ad does not mention what the power, space, or fewer emissions is relative to—it assumes that the vehicle the person is currently driving is not powerful, is small, and causes a lot of smog emissions. By using the observations “You get” and “The world gets,” the ad suggests that we all get what we want in the Prius, without making sacrifices. This suggestion is very similar to the discourses presented in the Ford Escape Hybrid commercial. This language also contributes to the greenwashing sin of “no proof” and the sin of “vagueness,” because nowhere does the ad or the Toyota website elaborate on how much smog-forming emissions are reduced, nor does the ad explain what this statement really means. Also, interactive features on the Toyota website demonstrate the environmental features of the Prius, but do not adequately explain how the features work or why they are environmentally friendly compared to other cars without those features (Toyota Canada, 2011).

The “Harmony” commercial’s visual imagery is designed using human beings dressed as parts of nature—a very unusual ad in its creative style. As the Prius moves through the scene, the people (as represented components of nature) come to life. This is definitely not a typical car commercial. The artistic components and textures of the human landscape are used to elicit a “feel-good” emotion from the viewer. Humans are dressed in elaborate costumes to represent every component in the scene, including the grass, clouds, trees, water, bridges, et cetera. Through carefully planned choreography, hundreds of people move together in sequence to signify the parts of nature they are meant to represent as “real.” The blue-screen special effects and the literal personification of Nature make the parts come together to truly appear as natural and in harmony.

A video clip showing “The Making of the Prius ‘Harmony’ TV commercial” is very useful to help understand the advertiser’s intended meaning (Frith, 1998) and motivations behind the making of this commercial series. The dialogue explains the reasoning and intent behind the Prius commercials. Creative director Andrew Christou states, “We wanted to put the Prius in a world that was exclusively made out of people; really capturing the harmony between man [sic], nature, and machine—we’re all connected” (ToyotaUSA, 2009).

#### *Some general issues related to the vehicle ads*

Fordism, as an approach to production, completely changed the way we produce cars as well as other commodities. With a focus on technology and the role of the machine

in the assembly of products, society experienced the alienation of humans from their labour. There is also now a disjuncture within the product itself, since parts are made in various places and shipped to one location to be assembled. This global Fordism poses tremendous environmental challenges due to the fuel consumption and pollution related to the shipping of parts and goods around the planet.

With respect to production issues, the British-based car show *Top Gear* argues that to make the Prius as economical as possible, the environmental damage caused in the production of the Prius battery is actually far worse than that caused by a Land Rover Discovery (Wilman, 2008). A special nickel mined in Canada is used to make the battery. From Canada this nickel is shipped to Europe, where it is refined, then sent to China, where it is turned into a foam, and lastly sent to Japan, where it is put into the battery and into the car (Wilman, 2008).

The Impact Lab (2007) further claims<sup>3</sup> that the energy required to build and drive a Prius exceeds that of a Hummer by 50 percent. Also problematic is the environmental damage caused by the plant that mines and smelts the nickel for the battery. The Impact Lab claims that “this plant has caused so much environmental damage to the surrounding environment that NASA has used the ‘dead zone’ around the plant to test moon rovers” and that “[t]he area around the plant is devoid of any life for miles” (Impact Lab, 2007, para. 9).

However, the Pacific Institute, a non-partisan research institute<sup>4</sup> that works to advance environmental protection, economic development, and social equity, has published its own report that claims the *Dust to Dust* report is based on “faulty methods of analysis, untenable assumptions, selective use and presentation of data, and a complete lack of peer review” (Gleick, 2007, p. 1). The institute argues that the *Dust to Dust* data is flawed mainly because of the low lifetime miles credited to the Prius (Gleick, 2007), which makes it seem as if the Prius would last a third of the expected miles compared to a Hummer. However, the institute does not deny the aforementioned production process of the Prius battery, only claims that this process is not as environmentally damaging as the overall use of a Hummer.

The question of the overall implications of extraction, production, distribution, use, and disposal of a product is a complex one (and beyond the scope of this article). However, what this debate highlights is the importance of discourses in shaping knowledge and the way environmental discourses are appropriated to fit the needs of the producers. A typical reader/viewer would not be aware of the environmental implications of the Prius.

The Toyota Prius example shows that it is difficult to take into consideration the global impact of the product as a whole. This seems to be the case with many products that claim to be environmentally friendly. Advertising reinforces this type of short-term thinking by constantly promoting the present and “does not encourage us to think beyond the immediacy of present sensual experience” (Jhally, 2000, p. 7). Rather, the system of discourses promoted in advertising reinforces environmental stereotypes and capitalist ideology by offering the solution of consumption as a way of saving the environment.

While both the Ford Escape and the Prius vehicles may be fairly environmentally friendly in comparison to similar non-hybrid vehicles, the discourses represented in

these commercials obfuscate the damaging effects that personal vehicle use and driving have on our environment. Whereas environmental damage shows that we have become far too dependent on our personal vehicles and that our obsession with the private automobile is unsustainable (Suzuki, 1994, 2010b).

## Conclusion

The existing system of advertising discourses is important to the neoliberal agenda in that these discourses encourage individualism, greed, and consumption, all of which undermine collective social issues, such as those related to the environment. We have analyzed particular examples of advertisements/campaigns in order to highlight the ways in which environmental messages and ideas are appropriated and used to obfuscate these important issues.

Our analysis focuses on the role of some of the key players in the green commerce movement. The Clorox brand is founded upon caustic chemical cleaners that use ingredients that are damaging to the environment, human health, or both. It would be possible for Clorox to recognize this problem and transition to a completely environmentally friendly line. However, it is evident through the separation of the regular Clorox and Green Works brands that the Clorox company is primarily interested in *appearing* green, rather than changing its overall practices, arguably because “green” products are more expensive to make and would therefore reduce the company’s profits. The discourses presented in the Clorox Green Works advertisement serve to reinforce the corporate responsibility initiative claimed by Clorox, by presenting the products as “all-natural” and therefore clean and safe. This is problematic, however, because Green Works products do use some chemical ingredients and therefore are not “all-natural.” Also, the emphasis on the natural state of the Earth as “clean” tells viewers we need to be clean to be natural.

The vehicle ads analyzed herein help to demonstrate how our obsession with the private automobile is unsustainable. The Ford Escape Hybrid ad is important to examine because it was the first vehicle to combine features of an SUV with hybrid technology. This example connects the corporate discourses of environmentalism to the lifestyle and status associated with SUVs in our culture. Our analysis of this ad shows the contradictions that exist in the representation of SUVs, such as the language and visual imagery used to show a connection of humans to nature, versus the actual effect that SUVs have on our planet. The Ford Company, and more broadly the automotive industry, contributes significantly to the world’s carbon footprint. This is problematic because Ford attempts to appear green in the public eye while using greenwashing to serve corporate interests.

At first glance, the Toyota Prius seems to meet all of its environmental claims and appears to be a truly environmentally friendly car. However, the discourses of driving (as in most car commercials) are still naturalized in the Prius ads and presented as if there were no other alternative. In addition, some research indicates that the environmental impact of the production of the Prius battery is particularly environmentally harmful. This further reinforces the way that capitalist ideology, promoted through advertising discourses, urges consumers to think of commodities only in their present

state, with no regard for the effects of extraction, production, distribution, consumption, and disposal.

It is evident that people do believe change is important, given that 90 percent of Canadians have made some move toward being more environmentally friendly (Vasil, 2009). Green consumerism is not in itself destructive, since there are *some* things we must purchase and consume in everyday life. However, green consumerism is not the final answer. Paired with purchasing truly green products is the need to drastically reduce our overall consumption and to implement alternative forms of transportation.

We need to recognize how the overall system of advertising and other corporate discourses operate to better understand the ways in which individual advertisements/campaigns serve to support the neoliberal agenda. This agenda has important implications for our understandings of the state of the environment and our behaviours and choices related to nature.

## Notes

1. *Agent* refers to the person carrying out the action, where *patient* refers to the participant in the situation upon whom the action is carried out.
2. The tune is a cover of the 1976 song "Let Your Love Flow," sung by the Bellamy Brothers.
3. Based on a report titled *Dust to Dust: The Energy Cost of New Vehicles from Concept to Disposal*, by CNW Marketing Research (Spinella, 2007).
4. Although it has the same name, this not the Pacific Institute affiliated with the Fraser Institute.

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