

# Fueling green capitalism: Big Oil and *greenwashing*

Selçuk Balamir, May 2011.

Recently in the aisles of a supermarket, I came across what I believe to be a children's toy. Priced at €5,99 and produced in China, it was a scale model of a wind turbine, cast in plastic and working with two (included) AAA batteries. The packaging depicted lush green fields and bright breezy skies, making the whole product somehow reflect our collective cultural imaginary: celebration of human ingenuity to harness the power of the wind, advancing towards harmony between nature and civilisation. A good, heartening story to tell the children, no doubt.

However, this picture is far from being the reality. The very physical materiality of the same object tells us an entirely different story, a disturbing tale that involves oil extraction, petrochemical derivatives, cheap labor, global trade and toxic landfills. The plastic toy belongs to a very different universe than the real wind turbine. And its biggest irony: the windmill is powered by batteries, and not the other way around. A 'reverse' windmill that sucks energy in order to produce more wind? Then it might be an accurate metaphor of the industries' role in the climate crisis –we are lead to a future of extreme weather events because of their insatiable appetite for energy.

Such a simple decorative object thus appears as the ultimate expression of the profound rift between the eco-delusional consumer culture and its actual environmental impact. Surely a plastic toy that emulates the Deepwater Horizon oil spill would have been slightly more educational and far more sincere about its materiality, but who would really want to play a depressing toxic cleanup game with their children? After all, what would be the point of constantly reminding ourselves about the environmental problems we face, if we remain clueless about how to solve them?

Companies are clearly thinking that way too. They want to make sure that consumers have nothing to worry about, except making the right choices when spending money. Climate crisis, resource depletion and pollution, disappearing species: all this is supposed to be solved by innovative companies that care about our beautiful (and profitable) planet. Consequently, many have already embraced green capitalism, and jumped on the bandwagon of what is denounced as *greenwashing*, to promote how their business practices are more environmentally friendly than their competitors.

Why dismiss these efforts flatly as *greenwashing*? Because all alleged improvements remain negligible compared to the actual flagrant environmental or social consequences of a company's imperative of growth and profit. Let's take an easy target: *Big Oil*, the world's major privately owned oil and gas companies, namely ExxonMobil, Royal Dutch Shell, BP and Chevron. It is the most profitable industry of all times. But from extraction to emission, the entire fossil fuel industry is at odds with the environment, and prone to disastrous spills and political corruption —both of which, when revealed, means bad public image, which in turn could mean (perish the thought) less profits.

If profits are at stake, companies mobilise their best efforts to circumvent or alleviate potential damage. The *Big Oil way to sustainability* essentially involves a complete overhaul of their communication. Instead of genuinely eliminating the sources of trouble, they decided to redesign their mediating channels, such as the logo, advertisements and gas stations. And they did exactly that: in a decade, the whole industry went through a radical image makeover and started to act like a tree-hugger. In short, they went *green* —which is also the colour of money, after all.



BP "Beyond Petroleum" logo change, 2000.



BP adopting protesters' slogan, 2004.

In 2000, BP changed its logo to a sunflower and its slogan to "*Beyond Petroleum*". It started promoting "*thinking outside the barrel*". But these did not mean in any way that the company was abandoning oil and gas, but quite the opposite: it meant "*exploring, developing and producing more fossil fuel resources to meet growing demand*".<sup>1</sup> How sustainable a company that promises to produce more and more fossil fuel? In other words, if BP (along with the rest of the industry) remains dedicated to dig for the deeper, dirtier and

riskier reserves that would ultimately release unrestrained amounts of carbon dioxide, how can it claim to work towards a low-carbon future?



BP "Helios House" gas station, 2007.

Never mind the contradiction. Appreciate the exquisite new gas station that BP has built in Los Angeles in 2007. Called the *Helios House*, its canopy made of triangular stainless steel panels is covered with solar panels, and it also collects rainwater.<sup>2</sup> It looks as if it comes from the future, where every detail is thoroughly designed to be environmentally sound, but that somehow still remains addicted to pumping hydrocarbons into individual cars... By remaining *business-as-usual* while featuring a bright new layer of green, this station perfectly embodies BP's slogan to get "*a little better*"—insignificantly little.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bp.com/sectiongenericarticle.do?categoryId=9028308&contentId=7019491>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thegreencurve.com>



BP logo redesign competition entries, 2010.

Luckily, this “*it is easy being green*” attitude does not go unnoticed. Examples of retaliation by culture jammers are many. For instance, after last year’s disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, two competitions were launched to ‘redesign’ the BP logo.<sup>3</sup> Professional designers and amateurs alike worked together to reflect what BP was really all about —petroleum, not sunflowers. With thousands of entries, the results were spread far and wide on the web. The rebranding campaign had cost \$100 million dollars<sup>4</sup> to BP; a decade later, it was now lying in ruins. Even the Helios House must have felt ashamed of its identity; nowadays it operates under the brand ARCO,<sup>5</sup> another BP-owned oil company.



Chevron “We Agree” original campaign, 2010.

Still, it would be unfair to pick on BP only. The same transformation is underway in almost all Big Oil companies. Some even try to capitalise on the BP disaster: later in 2010, Chevron launched “*We Agree*” campaign.<sup>6</sup> It consisted of a series of bold declarations such as “*Oil companies need to get real*” or “*It’s time oil companies get behind the development of renewable energy*”, signed by leading Chevron directors. It was supposed to be perceived as a sincere *mea culpa* from the industry,<sup>7</sup> finally acknowledging the entire social and environmental challenges it faces.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/files/tarsands/logo-competition.html>  
<http://www.logomyway.com/contestView.php?contestId=1746>

<sup>4</sup> Sharon Beder, ‘bp: Beyond Petroleum?’, *Battling Big Business: Countering greenwash, infiltration and other forms of corporate bullying*, Eveline Lubbers (ed.), Green Books, 2002, pp. 26–32.  
<http://www.uow.edu.au/~sharonb/bp.html>

<sup>5</sup> John Antczak, ‘BP Gas Boycott: Gulf Spill Not Impacting Consumers’ Choice’, *The Huffington Post*, 05.05.2010. [[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/05/05/bp-gas-boycott-gulf-spill\\_n\\_563952.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/05/05/bp-gas-boycott-gulf-spill_n_563952.html)]

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.chevron.com/weagree/>

<sup>7</sup> Barry Silverstein, ‘Agree with Chevron’s We Agree Campaign?’, *brandchannel.com*, 18.10.2010. [<http://www.brandchannel.com/home/post/2010/10/18/Chevron-We-Agree-Campaign.aspx>]



The Yes Men 'identity correction' to Chevron, 2010.

The strategy backfired spectacularly. The same day that the campaign was revealed, the corporate pranksters The Yes Men, together with the Rainforest Action Network and Amazon Watch, hit back with a whole package of 'identity correction' material: fake websites, posters, commercials and press releases.<sup>8</sup> This time the statements proclaimed "*Oil Companies Should Clean Up Their Messes*" and explicitly mentioned the immense destruction that Chevron had caused in Ecuador.<sup>9</sup> The culture jamming team also kicked off a contest where everybody could submit their own 'remix' of the Chevron ads by editing the original template files.<sup>10</sup> Once again a multimillion ad campaign was successfully highjacked. Chevron's stock price plummeted.<sup>11</sup>



some of the "Remix Chevron" contest entries, 2010.

How did we get here in the first place? In the good old days, companies did not have to deal with such annoyances. Besides, if you look at how these companies used to advertise their products before the 1970s, you would see a much different attitude towards the environment. An advertisement for Shell Motor Oil published in Life Magazine from 1955 features a forest where two lumbermen are cutting down a giant sequoia tree. The caption reads: "8 horsepower fells this giant redwood — Your car can get 5 to 10 more horsepower with New Shell X-100 Motor Oil Premium".<sup>12</sup> Man's supremacy over Nature was proudly on display.

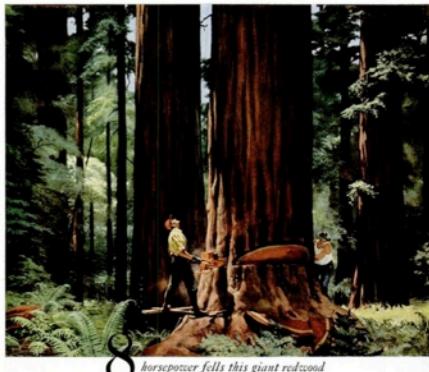
<sup>8</sup> <http://press.chevron-corp.com>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.chevron-weagree.com>

<sup>10</sup> <http://chevronthinkswerestupid.org>

<sup>11</sup> Ben Spurr, 'Just say Yes Men', *Now Magazine Toronto*, 13.05.2011. [<http://www.nowtoronto.com/daily/news/story.cfm?content=180691>]

<sup>12</sup> Life Magazine, Vol. 38, No. 24, 13.06.1955, p70. [<http://books.google.com/books?id=bVYEAAMBAJ&pg=PA70&lpg=PA70>]



**Your car can get 5 to 10 more horsepower with New Shell X-100 Motor Oil Premium**

And you get this increase in horsepower in the kind of driving you do most!

**Plus...**

A new motor oil, developed by Shell Research, does not have to be mixed up to flow freely—dissolving the thick sludge that forms in conventional oils. This is especially important because many engines are now running just engine oil and fully motor oil.

5 to 10 more working horsepower in your



Shell ads, 1955 & 2007.

In the present age of corporate environmentalism,<sup>13</sup> this would be the greatest sacrilege. Shell is busy planting trees now<sup>14</sup>—and this too must be advertised about. The layout of a 2007 print ad is almost the same as fifty years ago, except a cleaner logo and cuter typeface. The forest background is there as well; only this time there is a female silhouette with a tree in her heart. The caption: "*Planting the roots of a brighter future.*" This is to promote the 700,000

trees that Shell has planted in Canada in a decade, that sequestered an estimate of 420,000 tons of carbon dioxide.



Alberta's boreal forests... and the tar sands.



Yet, in the same country in Alberta, Shell is also busy cutting down breathtaking boreal forests in order to get to the tar sands, in a large scale surface mining operation described by Naomi Klein as 'terrestrial skinning',<sup>15</sup> of

<sup>13</sup> Katherine Mangu-Ward, 'The Age of Corporate Environmentalism', *reason.com*, 02.2006. [<http://reason.com/archives/2006/02/01/the-age-of-corporate-environmentalism>]

<sup>14</sup> 'Shell and Tree Canada to plant 120,000 trees across Canada', *press release*, 21.09.2007. [<http://www.treecanada.ca/news/09-21-2007.htm>]

<sup>15</sup> Naomi Klein, 'Addicted to Risk', *TED Talk*, 08.12.2011. [[http://www.ted.com/talks/naomi\\_klein\\_addicted\\_to\\_risk.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/naomi_klein_addicted_to_risk.html)]

an area as large as England. This process leaves behind a devastated landscape very much similar to Tolkien's *Mordor*<sup>16</sup> — a barren wasteland, toxic ponds, foul air... To add insult to injury, the exploitation of the tar sands produces about three times more greenhouse gases than the production of conventional oil.<sup>17</sup> Now, which ad would be more evocative of the manner Shell is currently behaving?

Finally, no critique of Big Oil can be complete without mentioning ExxonMobil, by far the biggest, most profitable and most destructive of all. Yet it has a 'cleaner record' in *greenwashing* than the other companies. This is because ExxonMobil, proud descendant of the Rockefeller Empire, does not play such trivial tricks. They take their business *seriously*, and have no intention to let it go. They are actively seeking to protect by any means necessary. They have so far donated more than \$20 million dollars to climate denial groups.<sup>18</sup> In this light, the now-famous ad from 1962 that touted the capacity of Humble Oil (an ancestor of ExxonMobil) to supply "*enough energy to melt 7 million tons of glacier*" is worth remembering.<sup>19</sup> Today's Exxon provides the energy equivalent of 79 million tons of glacier (excluding its greenhouse effect). Considering the company's scale and enduring recklessness, this ad was its unique —however unintentional— moment of honesty.

When I was writing this essay, it has been revealed that carbon emissions had risen to a new record level in 2010.<sup>20</sup> Apparently, not even the crisis was capable to bring the carbon economy to a halt. The question remains: if neither companies nor states have the intention to pull the plug on fossil fuels, then who will take up the task? *Who will derail this train before it is too late?*

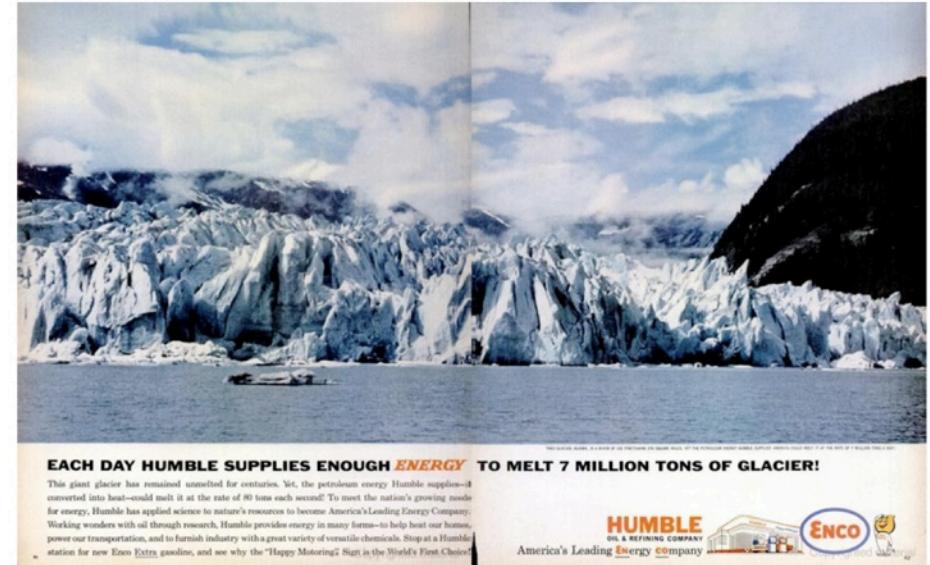
<sup>16</sup> 'UN water adviser calls Alberta oilsands 'Mordor', *The Star Phoenix*, 01.11.2008.  
[\[http://www.canada.com/saskatoonstarphoenix/news/national/story.html?id=313f5534-5283-4f79-93bd-6b775bd64029\]](http://www.canada.com/saskatoonstarphoenix/news/national/story.html?id=313f5534-5283-4f79-93bd-6b775bd64029)

<sup>17</sup> Joseph J. Romm, *Hell and High Water: The Global Warming Solution*, Harper Perennial New York, 2008, pp. 181–82.

<sup>18</sup> David Adam, 'ExxonMobil continuing to fund climate sceptic groups, records show', *The Guardian*, 01.07.2009.  
[\[http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/jul/01/exxon-mobil-climate-change-sceptics-funding\]](http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/jul/01/exxon-mobil-climate-change-sceptics-funding)

<sup>19</sup> Life Magazine, Vol. 52, No. 5, 02.02.1962, p.86. [\[http://books.google.com/books?id=k00EAAAQBAJ&lpg=PA86-IA3&pg=PA86-IA2\]](http://books.google.com/books?id=k00EAAAQBAJ&lpg=PA86-IA3&pg=PA86-IA2)

<sup>20</sup> Fiona Harvey, 'Worst ever carbon emissions leave climate on the brink', *The Guardian*, 29.05.2011.  
[\[http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/may/29/carbon-emissions-nuclearpower?intcmp=122\]](http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/may/29/carbon-emissions-nuclearpower?intcmp=122)



Humble Oil (later ExxonMobil) ad, 1962.