



[\*\*GOING UP THE GROUND ZERO SUPERTOWER\*\* by Eric Gould](#)



[\*\*QUALITY TELEVISION: THE NEXT GENERATION\*\* by Douglas Howard](#)



[\*\*THE RECIPE FOR A GREAT BRITISH BAKE \(OFF\)\*\* by Catherine Johnson](#)



[\*\*DID YOU SEE 'BREAKING BAD'? YOU SHOULD HAVE - THIS JUST MIGHT BE THE BEST TV DRAMA EVER\*\* by Mark Bianculli](#)

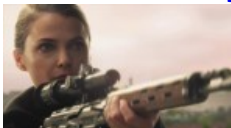


[\*\*MISSING IN ACTION: RECALLING A FAMILY AT WAR \(GRANADA 1970-1972\)\*\* by Melanie Williams](#)

#### Latest from CST blog



[\*\*WHOSE WHO?\*\* by Kim Akass](#)



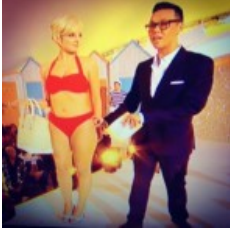
[\*\*RE-APPRAISING THE TELEVISION HEROINE\*\* by Christine Geraghty](#)



## FOR US, BY US? GENDER, PRIVILEGE AND RACE IN HBO'S GIRLS by Lisa W. Kelly



## BBC EXECUTIVE PAYOFF SCANDAL by John Ellis



## TELEVISION TEXTURES by Sean Redmond

### RIDING THE ICE, RIDING A WAVE by Toby Miller

Friday 20 September 2013 Last updated at 07:05

Greenpeace organized an Ice Ride on September 15 2013 to rally support for protecting de-territorialized sections of the Arctic from mineral exploitation. [The \*Torygraph\* has surprisingly good video coverage](#) of the UK-based campaign, which included a vast polar bear puppet, the double-decker-sized Aurora the roarer, who lumbered through London to protest the nefarious activities of Shell and its kind. [Listen here](#) for some background.

Greenpeace seems very adept at using the *bourgeois* media to promote activism, recognizing that all journalists need stories, and nowadays, moving images as well.

When we ponder such uses of spectacle by the left, it's easy to fall into either a critical camp or a celebratory one. The critical camp would say that rationality must be appealed to in discussions of climate change and competition for emotion will ultimately fail. Why? The silent majority doesn't like direct action, corporations outspend activists, such occasions preach to a light-skinned, middle-class eco-choir, media coverage is inevitably partial and hostile, and crucial decisions are made by élites, not in streets.

Conversely, the celebratory camp would argue that a Cartesian distinction between hearts and minds is not sustainable, a sense of humor is crucial in order to avoid the image of environmentalists as finger-wagging scolds, corporate capital must be opposed in public, the media's need for vibrant textuality can be twinned with serious discussion as a means of involving people who are not conventional activists, and a wave of anti-élite sentiment is cresting.

Absent external evaluation of the social composition of Ice Ride participants, the nature of old, middle-aged, and new media coverage, and subsequent shifts in public opinion and reactions from lawmakers, it's difficult to be sure about the impact of a Greenpeace spectacle such as this one. I generally incline towards the skeptic's view of populist activism—but not in these instances. Why? Because I think the lugubrious hyper-rationality associated with environmentalism needs leavening through sophisticated, entertaining, participatory spectacle.

I was in Mexico City during the Ice Ride and signed up for it. I couldn't find a trike to rent, so ended up a spectator at the starting point, the Glorieta de la Palma.



The ride coincided with three big events in Mexico: the country's national day, clashes between teachers, police, and anarchists over school reform, and most interestingly for my purposes here, protests against *la reforma energética* [energy reform]. [Here is the Federal Government's view](#) of the latter [versus Greenpeace México's](#). In addition to Arctic protection and energy reform, Greenpeace México has also been active in [debates about trans-generic foods](#).

Energy and agriculture are both crucial to the country's national structure of feeling. In the first case, Greenpeace sits rather awkwardly in discussions about the hitherto untouchable rail of Mexican political life—petroleum is nationalized and a core component of collective identity. In the other, it fits easily into popular feeling, because non-corporate farming is equally significant. In both instances, Greenpeace is opposed to some scientific and economic *nostra* about the necessity and safety of change and in step with others.

Greenpeace México rejects the expression 'reforma energética,' [calling instead](#) for a 'revolución energética' [energy revolution] focused on solar, wind, geothermic, and mini-hydroelectric energy resources in order to diminish greenhouse-gas emissions. This places the organization on the side of non-corporate progress and rationality. But as noted above, the place of fossil-fuel resources in the Mexican national imaginary is strong. The Constitution declares them socially owned, and consumer gas and petroleum purchases are subsidized by the nationalized industry. This is both a source of pride and a way of easing everyday life. But coin-operated oil, government, think tanks, and economists want to privatize resources. This will fund exploration at levels that the state cannot provide, given both the scale of the enterprise and the use of existing revenues to maintain welfare aspects of national ownership. Much popular sentiment is opposed to this change, but not for Greenpeace's ecological reasons.

On the farming side of "reform," [intrepid Greenpeace activists](#) scaled the Zócalo de México's flagpole in July this year to protest government proposals to license multinational corporations' trans-generic maize. Greenpeace [provided video coverage](#).

In this instance, it is very much in tune with economic nationalism, given the historic cathexis onto *campesino* agriculture and Mexico's 59 types and thousands of varieties of maize and their distinctive use by 62 ethnic groups. Again, Greenpeace finds itself opposed to the technocratic logic offered by terms such as "reform" and "modernization" that produce cheap trans-generics, threatening the subsistence and livelihood of millions of people and the survival of myriad varieties in the name of efficiency and consumer sovereignty.

To combat that discourse, it seems to me that a double-declutching (for those under 50, [quod vide](#)) is necessary

between appeals to the national popular and to rationality. So occupying the monumental Zócalo's flag touches on shared symbolism and pride, while producing scientific but also tendentious written reports adds [reasoned argumentation to the mix](#).

In short, Greenpeace finds itself both on the “right” and “wrong” sides of sentiment and science in its vigorous opposition to fossil-fuel reform and trans-generic proliferation. In the three instances I have explored here, it seems as though fewer spectacles and video materials about energy reform were created than the other actions.

I don't know how Greenpeace México decides on its strategies. But it is potentially a fascinating case study of one more occasion where TV advocacy versus scientific advocacy forms a sticky Cartesian divide between emotion and intellection. Perhaps it feels advisable to sidestep public sentiment over oil but engage it over maize. I need to ask Greenpeace's press people about the mix of science and spectacle and how they navigate the national popular. Watch this page.

In the meantime, I almost forgot: not too many light-skinned people set off from the Glorieta de la Palma on their *bicis* on September 15 ...

**Toby Miller** is Distinguished Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at the University of California, Riverside. You can follow his misadventures at [tobymiller.org](http://tobymiller.org) and the 'culturalstudies' podcast on iTunes or as an application for your smartphone.

#### Comments:

- Contact us: [click here](#)
- Site by [Media Citizens](#)