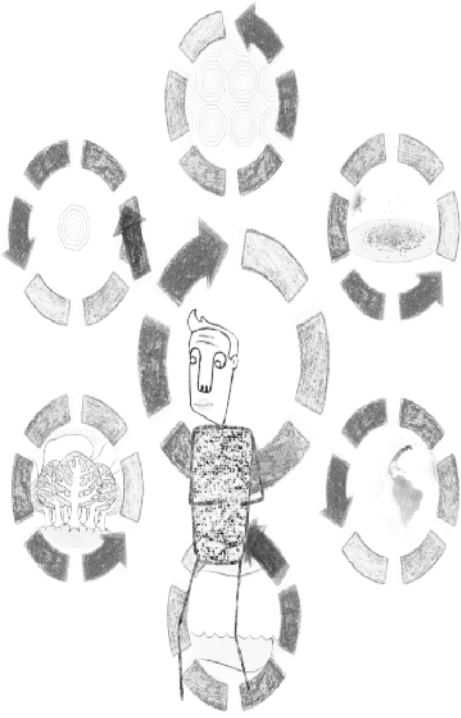


## a post-post-modern public information film

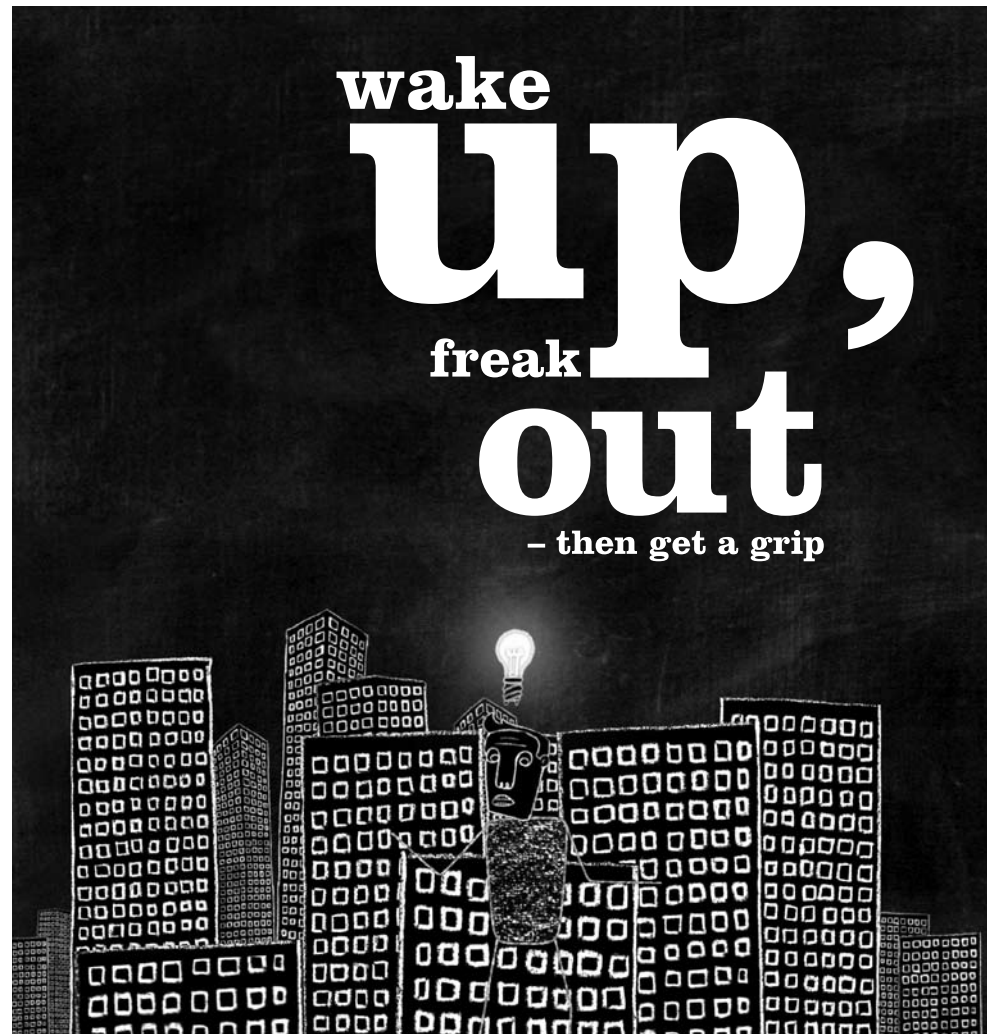


Back in July 2007, I was sat in a conference having the bejesus scared out of me by a short presentation on the most recent science in the field of climate change. The world's most authoritative arbiter of our understanding on this issue, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), had recently published their Fourth Assessment Report, which in itself made for pretty depressing reading. But, the speakers informed us, the report left out a whole raft of extremely worrying developments at the forefront of climatology: namely the growing evidence for a range of positive feedback mechanisms in the atmospheric system, and the possibility that we are imminently about to cross a 'tipping point' to irreversible, runaway warming. Warming that will see hundreds of millions of deaths, the extinction of millions of species, and the probable collapse of our entire civilization. A shell-shocked hush fell across the audience, broken only by the woman from Friends of the Earth bursting into tears.

I was mid-way through my Animation MA at the Royal College of Art. I'd been a busy climate activist for some time already, helping set up the Climate Camps at Drax power station and Heathrow airport, and working as the press officer for the anti-airport expansion campaign, Plane Stupid. But up to then I'd tried to keep my art and my activism separate. It wasn't really working, and I knew that, so I'd already started on a plan for a graduation piece that was an allegory of the blind pursuit of economic growth. That day I scrapped it.

What I'd learned in the conference, and confirmed in a marathon reading session of every related text I could get my hands on, seemed to me to be information that it was utterly vital to convey to every single person living in developed nations today.

By Leo Murray



### **What's required is an awareness of the massive and profound disjuncture between 20<sup>th</sup> Century consumption culture and a new sustainable paradigm.**

But this stuff was far from accessible: the original source material of peer-reviewed climate science was baffling and deeply unappetising to a layperson, and could only be made sense of by putting together the conclusions of a wide range of scientists from across the different disciplines of climate science. The only places this information had been collated in way that ordinary people could actually understand was in 'popular' science books like Mark Lynas' *Six Degrees* and Fred Pearce's *The Last Generation*. But 'popular' is not the operative word here; admirably lucid though these books are, they will only ever be read by those who already have an interest in the subject. Helpful, but on absolutely nothing like the scale of mass communication this emergency seemed to call for.

So I decided to try to condense every bit of 'need to know' information about climate change into a ten-minute animation that could be watched, engaged with and understood by anyone with at least a rudimentary level of education. I spent the next three months dragging my aching brain through dozens of scientific texts (I soon worked out that it's only worth reading the conclusions and executive summaries, unless you happen to actually be an atmospheric physicist), to make sure that the film didn't say anything that wasn't

supported by serious peer reviewed science. A lot of stuff I decided was too complex or difficult to explain, so I left it out.

But what I finished up with was still a lot more than ten minutes worth of material. Reviewing the already greatly condensed volume of material that I had decided was 'need to know', a certainty crept over me that there was only one way to realise the film so that it included everything it had to. I had to make a public information film, with a dense narration, a la 1950s Halas and Batchelor Department of Health stuff. An oblique allegory simply wouldn't do; not if I was going to get all this crucial stuff into a ten minute movie. Self-indulgent aesthetic masturbation is the time-honoured hallmark of the student animation film. This is ideal for works of whimsical self-promotion that seek to showcase talent and facilitate professional ambition. But my film had a graver purpose than this, and whatever I made would have to serve this purpose.

I was filled with misgivings. This type of production has been out of fashion ever since advertising psychologists worked out that human beings are not in fact primarily rational beings, but instead have their beliefs and behaviours determined by the complex interplay of currents flowing beneath the surface of consciousness. On discovering this unpalatable truth, commerce immediately gave up trying to get people to buy things by actually persuading them of the merits of their product, as it turned out this was far less effective than using stories and imagery to co-opt citizens' sense of identity by framing them solely as 'consumers'. Creeping into our psyches by the back door and manipulating our subconscious fears and desires allows marketeers to create needs in their audiences, lacks and deficiencies



that then demand to be redressed – which can only be done by purchasing products. Ker-ching!

The trouble with this approach is that, whilst it works very well to part fools from their money, it has absolutely nothing to say to the twin qualities of awareness and understanding. Indeed, such qualities in the subject are anathema to the entire project of consumerism. Ask a teenager why he prefers one brand of trainers to another, and he is unlikely to be able to articulate anything resembling a coherent answer: this decision has been made for him by forces beyond his conscious control. Which is how the advertisers like it.

But the approach has nevertheless also been adopted by the genre of the public information film. Rather than aiming to flog tat, these films seek to alter other aspects of people's behaviour, usually for the sake of public health and safety. Wearing seatbelts, drinking responsibly, giving up smoking; all of these behaviours have been targeted by ad campaigns seeking to hijack unconscious psychic processes to effect a change in behaviour. In so doing, the 'information' has been stripped from the public information film.

Going for the gut like this leaves the mind largely untroubled, and I believe that this approach holds out little prospect of success in the epic challenge to our society posed by the imminent climate catastrophe. Such tweaking of our psychic knobs may well be an effective way to inveigle us into insulating our lofts or changing our light-bulbs. But what's required is an awareness of the massive and profound disjuncture between 20<sup>th</sup> Century consumption culture and a new sustainable paradigm. People

can't be tricked into a project like that; they need to be made aware of the scale of the necessary changes, and to understand their own responsibility for bringing these changes about. But only boring old information can elicit awareness and understanding.

Here's an instructive example. The climate change challenge can reasonably be characterised as primarily a psychosocial one in developed nations; the biggest and most inadvertently suicidal example of the 'bystander effect' ever seen. This well-known phenomenon describes the fact that the more witnesses there are to a situation where another person is in need or distress, the less likely it is that any of them will lend a hand. The term was first coined around the time of the Holocaust, when people all across Europe stood by and watched as Jewish neighbours and friends were being led to their death. "Some utilized a variety of defence mechanisms such as denial and rationalization to psychologically trick themselves into not having to take any responsibility for what was going on", says Jonathan White, assistant professor of sociology at Bridgewater State College in Massachusetts, and expert on genocide studies. Sound familiar at all?

Today, between the diffusion of responsibility engendered by the near-infinite number of fellow bystanders, and the 'pluralistic ignorance' compounded by the observation that nobody else seems to be acting seriously to address the threat, essentially all of the citizens of the rich world are standing idly by and watching as the victim – in this case, the habitable world we all depend on for our survival – has the life beaten out of it by fossil fuel interests.

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However, studies into the bystander effect have shown that there is a very simple and effective antidote to it; information. Research subjects who are made aware of the bystander effect, and understand how it can affect them and others around them, become largely immune to it – and far more likely to intervene the next time they find themselves in such a scenario.

Whether we realise it or not, we are all now aboard a boat that is drifting ever further up shit creek. The paddles we need are awareness and understanding. Let's start passing round the paddles.

**Visit [www.wakeupfreakout.org](http://www.wakeupfreakout.org) then tell everyone you know.**

Leo Murray is a 2008 graduate from the Royal College of Art's Animation MA, and for the last few years, a very busy climate activist with radical climate action networks such as Plane Stupid and the Climate Camp. Leo recently animated the title sequence to the forthcoming feature documentary on catastrophic climate change, *The Age of Stupid*.