

Filming Electrical Consumption

EDF's Promotional Films (1946-2004)

YVES BOUVIER

Energy consumption is a subject that closely blends the economic with the cultural sphere.¹ Energy suppliers sell energy as a consumer good and households also consider energy as a good when bills arrive. But suppliers, when they aim to sell energy, are using all the symbols of this good. Energy consumption and meanings of energy are socially constructed and energy suppliers are players in this construction process. In shaping the image of energy, the suppliers envision the behavior of consumers. Thus, studying advertising and more particularly advertising of energy suppliers, is a good way to deconstruct the cultural representations associated with energy and analyze how these representations emerged within the scope of business strategies. In advertising, energy consumers are present as projected consumers imagined by the energy supplier.² Analyzing advertising needs to refer to media and cultural studies as well as business history.

This article aims to explore promotional films as cultural representations of energy and energy consumption that have been produced on behalf of the French energy supplier Électricité de France (EDF). Within the framework of this article, I will interpret promotional films of the French national

1 | I wish to thank Karin Zachmann and Nina Möllers for their useful comments and Scott Brown for his help with the translation.

2 | Nelly Oudshoorn/Trevor Pinch: "How Users and Non-Users Matter", in: Nelly Oudshoorn/Trevor Pinch, eds.: *How Users Matter. The Co-Construction of Users and Technology*. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2003, 1-25; Ruth Oldenziel/Karin Zachmann: "Kitchen as Technology and Politics", in: Ruth Oldenziel/Karin Zachmann, eds. *Cold War Kitchen. Americanization, Technology and European Users*. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2009, 13.

electric company from its creation in 1946 to the beginning of 2000s. The objective is to explore how the cultural representations of energy have been employed within the business strategies of a public company and which kinds of relationship between consumers and energy are staged in these promotional films. Meanings of energy consumption and uses of symbols have changed over the last six decades, especially considering the many different historical contexts since the end of WWII: energy shortage, affluent society, energy crisis, nuclear turn, the emergence of renewable energies and many more. How does EDF present electrical consumption in these promotional films and what are the relationships between the objects, the consumers and the firm staged in them? Symbols used in these advertisements need to be questioned as ideologies and modern myths. But it is also necessary to consider the technical and economic basis of these representations in order to go beyond the surface of the films and to detect the deeper meanings of these cultural productions. In his study on General Electric's photographic collection, David Nye writes that "the corporation's creation and control of such materials is a metaphor for its cultural hegemony."³ The same statement could be applied for EDF and its promotional films as the electricity supplier produces not just energy but also culture.

EDF was created on April 8th, 1946 by the nationalization of all French firms of the energy sector (electricity, gas, coal). The idea of nationalization had already been present in debates during the mid-1930s.⁴ During WWII, in March 1944, the National Council of the Resistance adopted a program for the years after the end of the war, which included the nationalization of energy. Occasionally, the French considered EDF as a branch of government but it was a public firm with national goals: providing the perfect grid and low prices for electricity. These company tenets strongly determined its image and its strategy until the end of the 1980s. The national scale is the relevant level for an understanding of EDF's behavior. In other words, EDF's strategies aimed at national growth and modernization of national infrastructures. This is why EDF was the leader of the French electrical

3 | David E. Nye: *Image Worlds. Corporate Identities at General Electric, 1890-1930*. Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 1985, 3.

4 | Patrick Fridenson: "Réflexions sur les étapes de la nationalisation de l'électricité", in: AHEF. *La nationalisation de l'électricité en France. Nécessité technique ou logique politique?* Paris: PUF, 1996, 383.

sector, from industry to private homes. The Europeanization of energy markets and the decline of state-owned companies changed this context in the beginning of the 1990s. In August 2004 then, EDF was transformed into a stock corporation, but the state still owns about 85 percent of its shares.

The corpus I am researching is composed of 62 promotional films made for cinema or TV between 1955 and 2004. In France, TV advertising began in 1968. But until 2004, most of EDF's promotional films broadcast on TV were also aired on the big cinema screen before feature films. This corpus includes only those promotional films shorter than 2 minutes, but not the various movies produced during the 1950s and the 1960s which are between 5 and 50 minutes in length and deal with EDF's large projects like the building of dams in the Alps or the first nuclear power plant in Chinon in 1963. The choice to focus my research on these shorter advertisements is justified by my intention to put the focus on the socio-cultural stereotypes employed in the films. Advertisements concentrate on stereotypes to effect their meaning more efficiently. Not all the promotional films are relevant to my viewpoint on electricity consumption because some of the films show infrastructure or deal with the open offer of shares at the end of the period in question. I select only the advertisements on electricity consumption which constitute 41 promotional films. These films are in the database of the EDF Médiathèque and a few papers are to be found in EDF's Center of Historical Archives in Blois. There are also some EDF publications such as *Contacts*, which became *La vie électrique*, then *Vivre EDF* and which has been the internal publication of the firm since the mid-1950s.

My paper is organized into three parts, defined by three periods:

- 1955-1973: EDF promoted electricity by showing the wide range of possible applications. Eleven films out of 13 made during this period can be attributed to this promotional topic.
- 1974-1992: EDF developed the discourse on energy-saving by showing consumers' behavior. Ten promotional films out of 14 that were produced in this period are relevant.
- 1992-2004: EDF realized films dealing with a "new electrical comfort" by restoring the objects as cultural signs. This corpus contains 14 relevant films out of 35 during this period.

THE MAGICAL ATMOSPHERE OF ELECTRICAL APPLIANCES, 1955-1973

The first period was a time of economic growth and the building of an affluent society in France. The objects of consumer culture were becoming more common, but still the ‘gadgetization’ of the kitchen did not occur before the beginning of the 1960s. The consumption society made these objects sacred, giving them a cultural value which exceeds their use value. Anthropological studies of modern societies, such as Jean Baudrillard’s critiques of contemporary civilization, analyzed the processes of the creation of modern myths.⁵ Objects and mass media are, not surprisingly, the two main fields of reference for him. Baudrillard analyzed how the objects changed the social relationships, the balance of the society and the cultural scheme of individuals. In this framework, advertisements shape the discourse and the image of modernity. For Roland Barthes particularly, some objects (a car, a toy, a plastic artifact...) are the new myths of modern society.⁶ He defines myth as a system of communication which opens the path to semiological studies. The idea of modern artifacts as systems of communication means that objects are “vehicles of meaning.”⁷

EDF did not develop a real communication policy until the mid-1950s. In 1946, and for its first decade, the objectives of EDF were to complete the electrification of the country and to harmonize existing electrical networks. Power cuts were still used until 1950 because of the insufficient electricity production in France. More than 1,000 private companies had been nationalized but they had not adopted the same technology (voltage for example) or the same prices. Of course, all the cities and most of the rural villages had electricity before WWII, but deep regional inequalities remained. In Brittany, for example, 23 percent of homes did not yet have

5 | Jean Baudrillard: *Le système des objets*. Paris: Gallimard, 1968, 288; *La société de consommation. Ses mythes. Ses structures*. Paris: Denoël, 1970, 318.

6 | Roland Barthes: *Mythologies*. Paris: Seuil, 1970, 233. On Baudrillard and Barthes and their links with the electrical households appliances, see Claire Leymonerie: “Des formes à consommer. Pensées et pratiques du design industriel en France (1945-1980)” (Unpublished Ph.D. diss., EHES-Université Toulouse II, 2010).

7 | Roland Barthes: “Semantics of the Object”, in: *The Semiotic Challenge*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, 179-190, 293.

electricity in 1954. Thus, the focus of EDF's business strategy was not toward the increase of consumption via intensified advertising (even if urban consumers liked the advertisements), the priority was instead on the installation of a coherent national network. It took 15 years to achieve this mission by the construction of new hydroelectric production units (factories of Malgovert and Brévières for the use of Tignes dam water for example⁸) and new coal and fuel power stations. At the same time, the standards of the transport network were defined by a 220 kV grid which took the place of the former 110 and 120 kV networks. These achievements attracted the attention of the media. EDF organized a press service in 1946 to relay the announcements of the inaugural ceremonies of various power stations. However, it was only in 1955 that a real communication structure was created, the "communication cell", led by Paul Auriol, son of the President of the Fourth Republic at that time.

The first promotional film to be analyzed is a cartoon entitled *The Electricity Fairy* (1955) in which a small woman waves her magic wand to install or transform old objects into electrical objects (Fig. 1). In her house, each room has an electrical object: lamp and radio for the living-room, refrigerator and oven for the kitchen, washing machine for the laundry and water heater for the bathroom.

The appearance of a household fairy, a perfect maid for all manual work, is a transformation of the old electricity fairy which was a well-known representation for the new energy at the end of the 19th century. In France, the electricity fairy was a political icon, linked with the ideology of social progress at the beginning of the Third Republic. The keywords of this cartoon from the 1950s are "cleanness, comfort and leisure".

8 | The Tignes dam is a good example of the political context of these years: The old Tignes village was destroyed for the building of the dam, in the name of the general interest. Newspapers, newsmagazines, cinema newsreel and TV related the history of this village. In a way, EDF experimented with the power of the mass media for the first time during the building of the Tignes dam. Denis Varaschin: *Tignes, la naissance d'un géant*. Arras: Artois Presses Université, 2001, 197-207; Virginie Bodon: *La modernité au village. Tignes, Savines, Ubaye... La submersion de communes rurales au nom de l'intérêt général. 1920-1970*. Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 2003, 132-137.

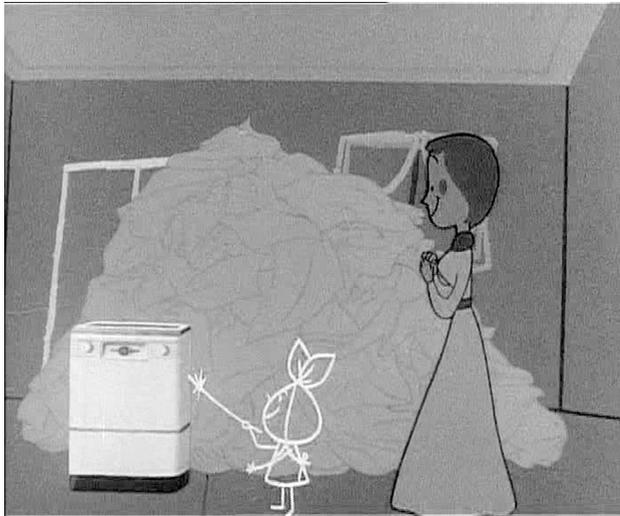


Figure 1: *The Electricity Fairy*, 1955. *The fairy fills up the washing machine.*

But the main purpose of the film is to show an electrical system in the house. Two versions of *The Electricity Fairy* exist. In the second one, the rooms are different and the small fairy adds a coffee machine to the list of appliances.

With regards to poster advertisements, the use of women as an icon for electricity had actually decreased since the 1930s. As electrical technology gradually lost its miraculous nature, the role of engineers was given more weight. The disenchantment of the world went hand in hand with its masculinization in the iconography.⁹ The comeback of the old symbol of the fairy in the films is a sign of the re-enchantment, not of the world but of the house. In the mid-1950s, the icon of the electricity fairy became modest: The area of action is limited to the house, whereas in the 1880s its ambitions were quasi-universal. The films show a pattern of lifestyle where the appliances are not only “little electrical servants”, as the ads said in the 1930s, but they are a system. The house is a closed world and electricity brings modernity into each room. The entire house is like the

9 | Yves Bouvier: “Images de l’électricité”, in: *So Watt! Du design dans l’énergie*. Paris: Beaux Arts éditions, 2007, 10.

modern kitchen: “[A] complex, technological artifact” which “embodies the ideology of the culture to which it belongs.”¹⁰ The link between electricity consumption and modernity was the main argument for EDF as an electricity supplier as it did not sell washing machines or fridges but rather the technological infrastructure needed for the use of these objects.

In fact, it was only from 1963 onwards that EDF reacted to changed patterns of consumption and that communication strategies took the turn of households’ electricity consumption. After the depression of the 1930s, the deprivations of WWII and of the end of the 1940s and the rebuilding of the 1950s, an appetite for consumption was fed as the American consumerist pattern became a cultural reference. The American informal cultural empire, a mix of images and modern distribution systems, contributed to a change of European consumption.¹¹ The extent of the ‘Americanization’ of Europe, however, is still heavily debated among historians: National references still remained strong especially in advertising. Consumption growth began during the last years of the 1950s and increased steadily during the two following decades. The cultural factor was articulated with a deep social change: extremely rapid urbanization, with the percentage of people living in urban settings increasing from 55 to 73 percent between 1955 and 1975. This urbanization pattern produced a modification in the lifestyles of many and an access to ‘modernity’ symbolized by the car and the washing machine.¹²

The context also changed for energy consumption in households which were now able to buy electric appliances more often. Several stages can be described in the structuring of the French mass market of appliances. In 1953, the *Syndicat général de la construction électrique* (General trade union of electrical engineering), representing the manufacturers and EDF, established a joint financial corporation, Cetelem (meaning Credit for electric household appliances). Cetelem made loans for households that wished to buy electric appliances. Another stage was the standardization of the distribution network at the voltage of 220/230 V. In 1946, 86 percent of the subscribers were served by a network at 110/130 V. But most European

10 | Oldenziel: “Kitchen as Technology and Politics”, 2.

11 | Victoria de Grazia: *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance through 20th Century Europe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005, 586.

12 | Kristin Ross: *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and Reordering of French Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996, 273.

countries had made the choice of 220 V and EDF decided to convert its distribution network. This rendered many electric appliances obsolete. With the support of French manufacturers (particularly Moulinex), upgrading the intake voltage of a household to 220 was accompanied by a free replacement of its electric appliances. The law of December 21st, 1960 prohibited the selling of appliances which could not function on 220 V.¹³ The third element is the decision of EDF managers to develop and apply a commercial strategy for the first time. EDF was, and still is, a company of engineers and high-level civil servants, accustomed to celebrating their production capacities. This new strategy was described in a paper from 1962 entitled “The Raising of Electricity Consumption in France” which stated that: “Electricity is a consumer good which needs to be developed. Electricity is an indispensable product for the social and economic balance of a country.”¹⁴ The first advertising campaign resulted in a deep change of strategy within the company. On the occasion of EDF’s board of directors meeting on February 23rd, 1962, a four-year plan of commercial action was presented in which the company adopted the ambitious objectives of the fourth national plan of equipment and modernization.¹⁵ Electricity consumption grew very quickly, doubling every ten years, and the users wanted to be able to use more and more electric household appliances without blowing fuses. In reality, irregularities in the network and insufficiently low voltage were the two reasons for lack of power in these homes.¹⁶ For the first time, EDF organized an advertising campaign on a national scale. The “blue meter campaign” was launched after rigorous preparation. The idea of the campaign was rather simple: In order to be able to use several appliances at once, it was necessary to have a good meter. Thus, the consumers had to install a meter with the necessary

13 | Jean-François Picard/Alain Beltran/Martine Bungener: *Histoire(s) de l'EDF. Comment se sont prises les décisions de 1946 à nos jours*. Paris: Dunod, 1985, 94.

14 | EDF Archives, 801043. Paper “The raising of electricity consumption in France”, May 30, 1962.

15 | Jean Dubois: “Le réveil commercial d'EDF. Compteur bleu et chauffage électrique intégré”, in: AHEF: *L'électricité et ses consommateurs*. Paris, PUF, 1987, 288.

16 | Patrice Carré/Alain Beltran: *La fée et la servante. La société française face à l'électricité. XIX^e-XX^e siècles*. Paris: Belin, 1991, 304-306.

power. EDF decided to make this meter blue, as to distinguish it from older models. A house equipped with a “blue meter” became synonymous with modernity. By guaranteeing a power of 6 kW, then four times the average power demand of an individual household, EDF “broke the deadlock of the power.”¹⁷ The first campaign was bound to succeed. The consequences were dramatic: Domestic consumption, which represented 11.6 percent of the electricity national consumption in 1960, reached 30.2 percent in 1983. EDF’s commercial strategy followed consumer demand and advertisement strategies focused on electrical appliances.

This possibility to accumulate electrical appliances and electronics justified the “blue meter” campaign for EDF’s managers in 1963. Three cartoons were shown in the cinema and one of them illustrates the matter for households perfectly.

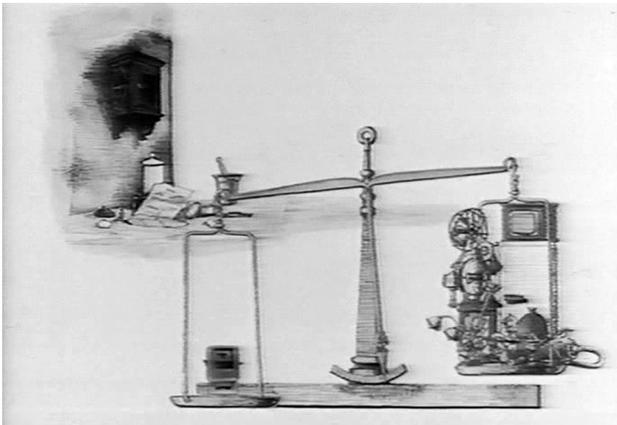


Figure 2: The Pair of Scales, 1963. A blue meter balances the accumulation of electrical appliances.

In the first shot of the cartoon *The Pair of Scales* (1963), we see an electric meter which progressively sweeps across several electrical appliances in the following shot (Fig. 2). About 13 objects were drawn in this cartoon including a television set, an electric flat iron, a coffee machine, a

17 | Jean Dubois: “La société de consommation électrique”, in: Henri Morsel, ed. *Histoire de l’électricité en France. t.3: Une œuvre nationale: l’équipement, la croissance de la demande, le nucléaire (1946-1987)*. Paris: Fayard, 1996, 643.

refrigerator, a vacuum cleaner, an electric heater, a washing machine, a cooker, a whisk, a sewing machine, etc. As the meter sweeps the scene, the narrator says: “Your meter is saturated. How can you enjoy the comfort of all your electrical appliances? Get a blue meter and contact EDF.” The words “incomparable electrical comfort” end the film. Using a meter to promote electricity consumption is at first surprising because it is the symbol of electricity as a consumer good (referring to measurement, control and price). But in this particular case, the symbol is reversed: The blue meter allowed a growth of electricity consumption and the constraints of material goods disappeared. In this campaign, the meter is perceived not just in its symbolic quality which usually refers to the expense of energy consumption, but rather the meter is presented as a technology making more consumption possible.

In the film advertisements discussed so far, the main moving force had been the accumulation of electrical appliances. Resorting to cartoons was a way to show this accumulation. The graphic effects possible thanks to animation are definitely visible in *The Pair of Scales* in which the number of the appliances makes the former electric meter obsolete. In the 1955 film *The Electricity Fairy*, six applications had been presented: lamp, radio, refrigerator, oven, water-heater and washing machine. Eight years later, there were no less than 13 appliances, including a TV, a fan, a washing machine, a sewing machine and a hair dryer. The concept of comfort itself had been transformed in a few years. Whereas comfort referred to the lessening of the more laborious household tasks in the middle of the 1950s, it became a lifestyle in the 1960s. In other words, the ideology of comfort triumphed over the hopes of progress. This fast change corresponds to another way of conceiving energy: From this point in history, the idea of energy as a source of progress and modernity tended to disappear. During the 1950s, electricity was a symbol of innovation, social progress and modernity. In the 1960s, the metaphors of innovation and progress increasingly shifted from the energy sector toward the new sectors of computing and telecommunications. Advertisements accurately point out this shift in the meanings and representations of energy. In this new pattern, energy is no longer pictured as coming from the outside into the households (in the 1955 film the fairy enters the house through a window), but rather as something already integrated into the lives of the consumers. EDF no longer had to focus on convincing its consumers to use electricity because it had already become an integral part of French life at the time,

but their insistence now was on the quality, regularity and safety of the product they provided. It is a way, for EDF, of following the rapid changes in French society.¹⁸ EDF presented itself as a silent partner in the daily life.

During the 1950s and the 1960s, the company sought to equate electricity to modernity, safety and comfort. This is a challenge which needs a mediator. The female figure was the fitting cultural icon for this equation. At the end of the 1960s, the number of women employed was at its lowest level in the 20th century: In 1968, 60 percent of women between 20 and 60 years were housewives. This situation is partly explained by the French baby-boom between 1942 and 1975. Today, film scenes showing women in the kitchen while their husbands are idly sitting in an armchair seem like caricatures to us, but it is necessary to remember that those situations corresponded with the social norms of the time. These norms assigned the domestic area to women and, in fact, the female figures of these films are always shown indoors. They control and organize this closed world.¹⁹ When their husbands or children appear, these 'intruders' are relegated to secondary roles. In its promotional films, EDF reintroduced the woman as an actor of modernity. Women made most of the purchases (but, if we believe statistical data produced by EDF²⁰, big electrical appliances were purchased by men), and so, are the mediators of the system of electric appliances. The following table shows that electric appliances took time to change French homes. We should notice that less than 50 percent of households had a refrigerator in the mid-1960s.

18 | Jean Fourastié: *Les trente glorieuses ou la Révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975*. Paris: Fayard, 1979, 288. Michelle Zancarini-Fournel/Christian Delacroix: *La France du temps présent, 1945-2005*. Paris: Belin, 2010, 656.

19 | Jean-Claude Soulages: "Les avatars de la publicité télévisée ou les vies rêvées des femmes", in: *Le temps des médias* 12 (2009/1), 117.

20 | In 1958, EDF created a division Études économiques générales (global economic studies) to plan electricity demand and ordered statistical surveys. Robert Janin: "Convergence des pratiques technico-économiques à l'EDF (1946-1985)", in: Henri Morsel, ed. *Histoire de l'électricité en France. t.3: Une œuvre nationale: l'équipement, la croissance de la demande, le nucléaire (1946-1987)*. Paris: Fayard, 1996, 371-75.

Table 1: Proportion of French Households Equipped with Electrical Appliances, 1954-1982.

	1954	1964	1974	1982
Refrigerator	7,5 %	46,7 %	87,3 %	98,6 %
Washing machine	8,4 %	34,2 %	66,4 %	80,7 %
Dish washer			5,3 %	18,9 %
Freezer			10,2 %	30 %

Contrary to the United States, France's favorite technologies of the 1950s were also the favorite technologies of the 1960s. Women were the users of electrical appliances because they were at home. But this historical context also explains why it took a relatively long time for the appliances to find their way into the households: their income was low because they relied on the single earning of the male breadwinner.

ENERGY SAVING AND CONSUMERS IN ACTION, 1974-1992

As in many countries of the developed world the oil price crisis of 1973 (quadrupling in October of that year) was a turning point in French energy history that created a radically new context. Consequently, the representation of energy also changed drastically from a formerly abundant to a now, almost instantly, scarce resource. The effects of the crisis were also immediate and radical on EDF. They developed two strategies to cope with the new situation: boosting nuclear power and promoting energy savings.

The government considerably accelerated the civil nuclear program that it had already launched in 1957. More than 50 nuclear reactors were planned, and the building of 18 reactors began between 1974 and 1977. Such a program was, in fact, a complete reshaping of the electricity production in France and led to the decline of traditional coal and fuel power stations. The aim of this policy, decided by President Pompidou in March 1974, was to reduce the nation's oil bill. France has a particular relationship to nuclear energy. Without detailing here the various components of the French 'nuclear choice', it is necessary to briefly discuss certain points. The French nuclear program, initially military, was started with the creation of the *Commissariat à l'Énergie Atomique* (CEA) in 1945. Based on scientific

knowledge and a team of worldwide reputable scientists (Frederic Joliot-Curie, Francis Perrin), the CEA built experimental reactors and France obtained the atomic weapon in 1960. From 1956 on, civil applications were studied, even though it took until 1963 to see the first French civil nuclear power plant producing electricity in Chinon on the left bank of the Loire. The civil nuclear program was and is studied, developed and managed by EDF. The choice of a public firm to lead the building of nuclear reactors expressed the hope that those reactors would provide reliable electricity production and did not represent simply technological experimentation.²¹ In 1969, EDF made the first change in its nuclear policy by abandoning their initial French technical path, which was based on natural uranium as fuel, carbon dioxide as coolant and graphite as a moderator. Instead, EDF now adopted American technology (enriched uranium as fuel and pressurized water as coolant), which was first implemented for the nuclear power plant of Fessenheim, built between 1970 and 1977. The aim of the public authorities was to lead a 'Francization' of PWR (Pressurized Water Reactor) technology, a process which occurred during the 1970s by EDF and the manufacturers Creusot-Loire and Alsthom.

But the nuclear turn was not the only decision linked to the oil crisis. The government started an energy-saving policy. Law number 74-908 of October 29th, 1974, obliged energy suppliers to promote responsible behavior among consumers.²² Energy advertising was forbidden and the only message the suppliers were allowed to convey had to deal with energy saving. Consequently, EDF had to rework its communication policy. The firm was in a very delicate situation. On the one hand, it had to maintain, even raise, electricity consumption but on the other hand, the state-owned firm had to respect the government's energy policy. In 1974, EDF made two cartoon ads for TV: the first one about a washing-machine and the second one about a dishwasher. In both, the slogan was "Don't throw your kilowatt hours out of the window!" The message, however, was not as clear as the

21 | Gabrielle Hecht has shown the ambiguous relationship between EDF and the CEA. Gabrielle Hecht: *The Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity after World War II*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998, 453.

22 | Aurore Toulon: "La sensibilisation de l'opinion publique aux économies d'énergie 1974-1986", in: Alain Beltran/Christophe Bouneau/Yves Bouvier/Denis Varaschin/Jean-Pierre Williot, eds. *État et énergie. XIX^e-XX^e siècle*, Paris: CHEFF, 2009, 263-264.

slogan suggested. The second cartoon promoted the tag line: “Fill your machines up all the way to economize.” The ambiguity of EDF’s position is summarized in these cartoons: reconcile energy saving with economizing electricity consumption.

A real change in EDF’s communication strategy occurred in 1977 when the company ordered six promotional films on consumer behavior. The advertising campaigns became more and more institutional in putting forward EDF’s image. The main slogan of this period, in tune with energy saving slogans, was “men in the service of the people” (1979 campaign). Contrary to the promotional films of the affluent society of the 1950s and 1960s, the ads of the two following decades explicitly casted energy consumers in an active role. For the first time, the cartoons were replaced by movies with actors playing the role of ordinary consumers. Starting with this campaign, the films’ characters – up until the most recent films – always lived in an electrified universe whose slogan was: “Use electricity; do not waste it.” These advertisements accentuate the concrete character of these situations: using an overly large hotplate, filling a washing machine half-way, leaving the refrigerator door open, etc. Electrical appliances lost their “soul” by sacrificing drawn images for the realism of film: They became objects of the everyday life used by ordinary people. We have to be cautious in the analysis of these films. They seem to show “technology in the context of their use”²³, but users are defined by the firm’s idea about their projected users. Creating a concrete, uniform vision of everyday behavior is a trap in which we should not fall, and in these films electricity consumers are idealized based on an image EDF wanted to promote.

In the movie entitled *The Cooking* (1977), we see a woman boiling water on a large hotplate. Her husband and her father are seated, waiting for the coffee (Fig. 3). The father says: “Doesn’t your saucepan get bored in the middle of that big hotplate.” The woman then moves the saucepan from the big hotplate to a smaller one. The father says again: “Don’t you need a flat saucepan instead of your badly dented saucepan? And perhaps you have to put a lid on it, and then the water will boil quicker.” The woman asks him: “Hey Dad, do you know tricks for boiling water now?” And the man answers: “For water no. But I do for saving money.”

23 | Oudshoorn: “How Users and Non-Users Matter”, 2.



Figure 3: *The Cooking*, 1977. A typical situation to promote energy saving.

As we see in this example, the theme of the campaign was not consuming more electricity but consuming it efficiently. Dialogues centering around the accumulation of electrical appliances or on the gain of comfort, which had dominated the films of the 1950s, were now replaced by economic slogans such as: “Don’t have your meter running for nothing” (1977 campaign). Electrical appliances had become everyday things and had lost their status as the protagonists of consumption in promotional films. If they still are ‘vehicles of meaning’, this meaning is restricted to energy saving. Now it was the consumer in person who stood in the center of the films. Electricity was shown as a consumer good and no longer as a symbol of modernity.

Another film in this campaign, *The Washing Machine*, depicts an old woman filling her washing machine. Her granddaughter suggests filling the machine up to the brim. In another film, the same scene is played out by a man and his son who scolds his father for turning on more lights than needed in the living-room. In a third film, it is also a young boy who tells his mother to close the refrigerator door. In these everyday scenes, the consumer in action does not show the most energy-conscious behavior and obviously needs advice. The role given to young boys and girls is a

way of symbolizing the society's future, and also the future of electricity consumption.

What were the results of these energy saving campaigns? There were none. This table shows the repartition of electricity consumption by users, documenting a steady rise in electricity consumption of households from 1951 to 1984.

Table 2: Repartition of Electricity Consumption by User Sectors.

	1951	1963	1973	1984
Industries	24 371 GWh	55 273 GWh	95 379 GWh	118 644 GWh
Services	5 513 GWh	15 351 GWh	34 387 GWh	62 545 GWh
Households	3 523 GWh	10 367 GWh	30 169 GWh	79 830 GWh
Percentage of households in total of electricity consumption	10,55 %	12,80 %	18,86 %	30,58 %

The share of households in electricity consumption reached nearly one third of the national consumption in the mid-1980s. In GWh, household consumption almost tripled in the ten years between 1974 and 1984. Electricity consumption rose drastically after 1973 and it seems like the films did not work at all. This important peculiarity of the French energy system is due to electrical heating. Two reasons explain the choice of electrical heating: the reduction in cost of imported oil (fuel heating) and using cheap electricity provided by nuclear power plants at night. The proportion of new apartments equipped with electric heating grew from 10 percent in 1974 to 40 percent in 1977 and 72 percent in 1988 (compared to the European average that amounted to 21 percent of new apartments equipped with electrical heating in 1988). The example of electrical heating displays an ambiguity within the French energy policy: promoting energy savings in the time of vast nuclear propagation which is based on the growth of electricity consumption. EDF, as energy supplier, was of course affected by this duality. In EDF's promotional films, this ambiguity is also perceptible by the juxtaposition of two discourses on energy: consuming and saving. Consumers were the main agents in promotional films of this

period. In other words, electricity was shown as a consumer good and occasionally as a national commodity.

THE NEW ELECTRICAL COMFORT OR THE REAPPEARANCE OF ELECTRICAL APPLIANCES, 1992-2004

The last of the three defining periods in promotional film marketing began with the 1992 campaign on nuclear energy. For the first time since 1974, it was not consumer behavior which was at the core of promotional films but, once again, as in the 1950s and the 1960s, the electrical appliances. The 1992 campaign was made up of three films: *The Drill*, *The Dance* and *The Dentist*. In the first film, a character is using his electric drill to fix a shelf (Fig. 4).

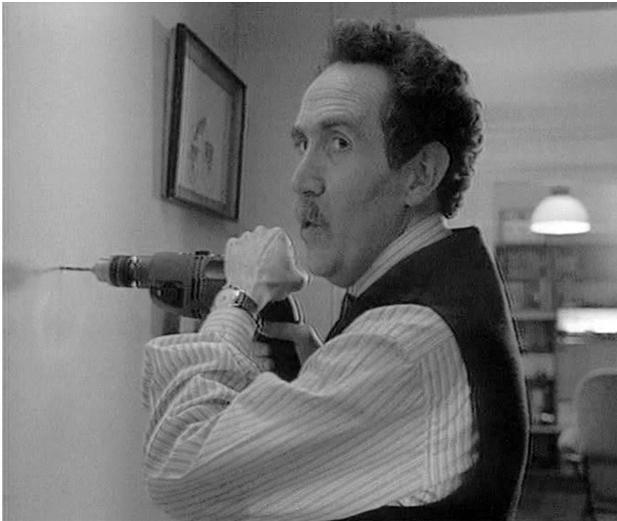


Figure 4: The Drill, 1992. "It's not an electric drill, it's a nuclear drill."

His neighbor, furious because of the noise, knocks at the door and says: "It's impossible to have some peace and quietness, even on a Sunday. Could you stop your damn drill?" The man answers: "My damn drill, my damn electric drill. Yes sir, electric." The neighbor angrily says: "Electric

or not, your drill gets on my nerves.” But the man, drill in hand, replies: “Electric drill, but you can also say my damn nuclear drill. Because when I bore through my wall – our wall I should say – it is thanks to the electricity, which is nuclear.” This promotional film was broadcast in 1992 and 1993 on TV and the sentence “my nuclear drill” became a popular media reference in public discourse for several years. It is surprising to see such a campaign, which reminded consumers that 75 percent of electricity production came from nuclear energy, only six years after the Chernobyl disaster. In a way, the discourse on the nuclearization of the electrical appliances is an answer to the ambiguity that emerged in 1974 between production technologies (nuclear energy) and consumer behavior (energy saving). In Barthes’ framework, the ‘nuclear drill’ could be a modern myth because “the meaning overflows the object’s use.”²⁴ These three films directly link electrical appliances with their production process and with EDF’s industrial choices. The objects are parts of a global productive system and the drill is the bearer of meaning.

While electrical appliances made a reappearance in EDF’s promotional campaigns, the campaigns themselves became more diverse. Consumers and appliances were the focus of only 14 out of 35 advertising films during this period. The ecological argument shaped many of the other films and nuclear energy was presented as a way to reduce the nation’s oil bill. From the beginning of the 2000s, nuclear reactors also began to be presented as low-carbon energy. In this direction, several institutional films showed the attachment of EDF to sustainable development: solar energy in Africa, wind energy, rational energy consumption in cities and so on. All the promotional films, even for electric heating, favorably mention energy saving, since the law of 1974 still applies.

In the 2000s, the corporate image of EDF became a strategic field to prepare the open offer of shares. These various communication strategies suited the variety of energy-related issues as described by David Nye: “At the end of the twentieth century, consuming power had become at once a technical question, an ecological dilemma, an economic field, a political problem, and a highly personal matter.”²⁵ This explains why electrical applications are only a branch of the communication strategy. But in one

24 | Barthes: “Semantics of the Object”, 182.

25 | David E. Nye: *Consuming Power. A Social History of American Energies*. 3rd ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001, 250-251.

third of the communication actions, they still remain at the center of promotional films.

The reappearance of electrical appliances was not simply a fashion. It began in the mid-1980s when the designers tried to create new appliances, using electronic technologies and recyclable materials. The 1960s and 1970s were two decades of standardization while the 1990s was a decade of new design.²⁶ This trend materialized in the interactive technologies which are now integrated in electrical appliances (screen, program, variety of functions). EDF's promotional films followed this trend. The film entitled *The Boat* (1992) shows a man in a small boat, rowing to cross the Atlantic Ocean and dreaming of the electrical comfort of his home by recounting each of his appliances: an electric blanket, a toaster, a kettle, a micro-wave oven, a water heater, etc. The appliances named in this film are quite different from the list of the electrical appliances present in the 1960s (refrigerator, washing machine). Now, comfort is not something magic, it is merely normal and the electrical appliances are more everyday objects. It is not their use but their absence which reminds the consumer of their utility.²⁷

The sentence "the new electrical comfort" was used for the first time in 1997 in the film *Marie-Amélie*. A little girl, named Marie-Amélie, walks around in her home and notes the appliances of this new comfort: micro-wave oven, videogames, and air-conditioning (Fig. 5). She is also the narrator and comments to herself on the world she explores as the appliances are seen through her eyes. "The natives are very sociable," she says when she sees her brothers playing video games. "The kitchen is as warm as the milk," she says as she passes the thermostat because the electric heating adapts the temperature for each room. "The rain is always at the right temperature," when she passes the bathroom where her mother showers. The colors of this film (orange, yellow) are a reference to the 1970s, the period of the birth of the film's older characters. This film

26 | Andrea Branzi: "Disparition et retour des serviteurs fidèles", in: Raymond Guidot/Marie-Laure Jousset, eds.: *Les bons génies de la vie domestique*. Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2000, 162.

27 | Paul Virilio named this process "the aesthetics of disappearance". Paul Virilio: *Esthétique de la disparition*. Paris: Galilée, 1989, 126.

illustrates perfectly the fact that “the high-energy society was increasingly a white-collar world.”²⁸



Figure 5: Marie-Amélie and the New Electrical Comfort, 1997. Marie-Amélie is looking at the thermostat which regulates the temperature in each room.

The woman is not doing domestic work but takes a shower; the man is not watching TV but watering plants. Of course we can see in this film that the new electrical comfort is based on new electrical appliances. The washing machine, the dish washer and the electric iron have disappeared. The meaning carried by objects is quite clear: Objects communicate and adapt their energy consumption to consumer behavior without any consumer action. But neither the appliances nor the consumers are the main agents of this promotional film: The key role is the architect of this lifestyle, EDF. Electricity consumers have become passive in this ideal home shaped by the energy supplier.

28 | Nye: *Consuming Power*, 208.



Figure 6: *Objects*, 2004. *Everyday things dominate the scene while the consumer remains faceless.*

This strategy was further developed in the film *Objects* (2004). This was the year of EDF's status change. This film relates the life of a man without showing his face (Fig. 6). More than 60 electrical appliances appear during the 60 seconds of the film, illustrating the "hyper-consumer society."²⁹ We can imagine that he was born during the first half of the 1970s and we see the electrically operated objects of his life: bottle-warmer, orange yogurt-maker, toaster, string of lights on a Christmas tree, alarm clock, hair clippers, TGV train, drill, heater, coffee-machine, subway car, elevator, fax machine, and computer. The electrical artifacts are celebrated as a substitute for identity. There is no narrator or slogan, just music ("The End has no End", by The Strokes) and the objects. The screen is divided into two or three parts, sometimes horizontally and sometimes vertically. In each window, we can see an object in use. In this film, the omnipresence of electrical appliances causes the disappearance of the consumer. EDF writes the history of a generation by filming a succession of electrical appliances.

29 | Gilles Lipovetsky: "La société d'hyperconsommation", in: *Le Débat* 124 (March-April 2003), 74-98.

Consumers and technology have fused together under the patronage of the electric supplier.

CONCLUSION

Two conclusions should be made to end this paper. The first deals with the social relationship to energy and the second with the construction of cultural representations. EDF's promotional films allow us to distinguish three socio-cultural relationships to energy. The cartoons of the 1950s and 1960s associated electricity consumption with usefulness (this theme had also been the main slogan of the advertisements in the interwar period) and comfort. The housewife was the leader in the modernization of French homes but, in promotional films, the main agents were the electrical appliances. The system of electrical objects shaped a closed world, apparently independent of the electricity network or of the production technologies.

This pattern changed with the 1973 oil crisis. Consumers took over the main role in promotional films and the ideology of comfort was replaced by advice on energy-efficient behavior. Electricity consumption had lost its magical halo and the concrete situations shown in the films were strengthened by the substitution of cartoons with movies. Of course, this change followed the general trend of the growth of the marketing budget. At this time of energy saving, energy consumption became an economic affair for individual households but also for the nation. More efficient electricity consumption was presented as a solution to the energy crisis. A communication strategy was created that used energy as a consumer good.

For two decades, the relationship established between energy and the consumer, as staged in the promotional films, was a cultural lifestyle. The reappearance of electrical appliances in promotional films of the 1990s and 2000s did away with the role of consumers in the films and put forward the role of the supplier.

This paper has illustrated the idea that energy is a socio-cultural construction. But this construction is also created by other power companies the world over. David Nye has expressed this idea in his book about the photographic collection of General Electric: "Thus, if these images emerged

from the necessities of corporate communication and from routinized work in the photographic department, they nevertheless did not serve to reinforce or reify an older social order but to visualize a new one.”³⁰ In this way, EDF’s films are not only products of the marketing strategy but also milestones in the construction of energy as a socio-cultural commodity.

In the films I analyzed, EDF consistently used stereotypes and prevailing social norms from the time of the films’ making. The rapid changes in technological and economic context over the course of the 20th century have created new cultural relationships with electricity. Advertisements are relevant reflections of EDF’s ambiguous and sometimes wavering strategies. The cultural relations I tried to identify between consumers and electricity are, finally, compromises between the state of technology, economic public policy, prevailing social norms and the strategies of an industrial company.

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