

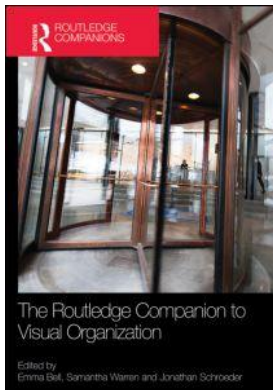
This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

On: 24 Mar 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



## **The Routledge Companion to Visual Organization**

Emma Bell, Samantha Warren, Jonathan Schroeder

### **Visual authenticity and organizational sustainability**

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203725610.ch23>

Emma Bell, McArthur

**Published online on: 22 Aug 2013**

**How to cite :-** Emma Bell, McArthur. 22 Aug 2013, *Visual authenticity and organizational sustainability from: The Routledge Companion to Visual Organization* Routledge

Accessed on: 24 Mar 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203725610.ch23>

**PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT**

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

# Visual authenticity and organizational sustainability

*Emma Bell and McArthur*

---

## Introduction

The rising prevalence of screen-based media has contributed to a growing ocularcentrism or image saturation in contemporary culture. In this, the era of the manufactured image, visual authenticity has become a contested terrain which is open to ongoing manipulation and interpretation. For example, one need only look to the fashion industry and the way that images of female models are routinely digitally manipulated, or ‘photoshopped’ to reflect an ideal of beauty favoured by the industry.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, as a consequence of the shift away from traditional forms of mass-media communication, such as TV advertising, and towards social media technologies that invite a greater degree of audience response and participation, audiences are provided with a potential means of playing a more active role as recipients of image-based meaning.

Videocy, defined as the ability to think critically and use images effectively (Goldfarb 2002), has thereby become increasingly important for individuals and organizations, as a means of mediating and challenging the contemporary image world. In this context, the ability of consumers and publics to assess the authenticity of images by critically appraising the claims made by image producers, such as marketers and brand creators, is of increasing importance. Marketers and brand creators have in turn responded to opportunities afforded by new social technologies by using images in a manner that is intended to demonstrate their authenticity, as ‘beyond the artificially constructed world of typical corporate communication’ (Schroeder 2012: 129). Such practices of ‘calculated sincerity’ (Thrift 2008) are intended to convey an impression of unstaged spontaneity, thereby encouraging the viewer to suspend judgement of any manipulative intent.

The concept of organizational authenticity has also come to be associated with issues relating to sustainability and corporate social responsibility. Much of the debate around corporate greening revolves around the extent to which organizational practices are authentic, or whether corporations are perceived instead to be cynically and deliberately manipulating information in order to conceal less environmentally and ethically responsible aspects of their practice; in other words, engaging with sustainability in a manner which is inauthentic. If an organization is not perceived to be genuine in its actions, through social actors having ‘a felt sense of responsibility,

triggered by guilt or shame, for the consequences of their actions' (Fineman 1996: 480), a truly authentic culture of sustainability cannot exist.

Writers such as Peterson (2005) suggest the management of impressions of authenticity is of particular importance in the creative industries. For Peterson and others, authenticity is understood to be socially constructed and 'used as a renewable resource for securing audiences, performance or exhibition outlets and relationships with key brokers by participants in the milieu' (Jones *et al.* 2005: 893). Guthey and Jackson (2005) suggest organizations explicitly seek to demonstrate authenticity through visibility, for example, in the form of CEO portrait photographs. They also identify what they call the 'authenticity paradox', which arises from the constructed nature of such visual representations and has the potential to expose a corporation's chronic lack of authenticity. The power of representations of authenticity using visual means arises partly from the perceived objective realism of the image, which is sometimes naively understood as providing an unmediated window on the truth (Pink 2001). The reality of organizational authenticity is thus presumed to be visible, observable and recordable using contemporary technologies, in a manner that is not enabled by written and spoken words alone.

In this chapter, we explore these issues by analysing the representational and discursive practices used by one creative design company to define and communicate messages about organizational authenticity. The organization on which we focus is Free Range Studios, a US-based creative design company, which, for over a decade, has produced and distributed short films about social and organizational change that are watched by millions of people around the world, via the online film delivery platform YouTube. We concentrate intensively on this single case study because it provides the opportunity to develop knowledge about new forms of organizational communication that rely on new social media technologies. Using a combination of intrinsic and instrumental case analysis (Stake 2005), we identify the particular strategies of visual film production adopted by this organization and locate them relative to the technological affordances of Web 2.0. Through this, we show how organizational authenticity has been repeatedly linked to notions of environmental sustainability and corporate social responsibility. Using an example of a film that focused on the production and consumption of bottled water, we will suggest that the notion of organizational authenticity is potentially valuable, as a means of assessing the competing claims of organizational image producers as they seek to assert their dominance in this field. We further consider the challenges and tensions that members of this organization face in establishing and maintaining the meaning of authenticity in this context. Finally, we suggest that the social construction of visual authenticity in organizations relies on contrast with less authentic organizations, through which the matter as well as the manner of authenticity is highlighted.

The chapter is written as a dialogical reflection through which we seek to overcome the divisions between our respective researcher and practitioner perspectives. McArthur has been a partner at Free Range Studios since 2000. She managed the growth of the organization from a small, 2-person design studio to a highly prestigious 25-person strategic communications firm with offices in Berkeley, California and Washington DC. Emma is a UK-based management researcher and educator employed by a university. In 2009, she contacted McArthur to try to establish a research relationship with Free Range to understand how and why they made these films and the audience receptions they generate. Emma subsequently invited a creative director from Free Range to speak at a management research conference in 2010.<sup>2</sup> This was followed by a series of research interviews carried out on Skype with organization members and one of Free Range's key clients.<sup>3</sup> This collaborative research project was thus based on cooperation between a researcher, who studies social problems and issues, and a practitioner, who acts on

these problems and issues, based on their shared concern and interest in organizations and how they might do things better (Denis and Lehoux 2009; Heron and Reason 2001). This participatory approach was used to bring together experiential and scientific knowledge and avoid the construction of an authoritative critical researcher subject position which is detrimental to the development of more equal power relations between researchers and research participants (Wray-Bliss 2003). This involved building a reciprocal research relationship where understanding and knowledge was based on exchange and mutuality of interests (Bell and Bryman 2007) and the goal was 'to contribute to the emergence and maintenance of a more cooperative world' (Denis and Lehoux 2009: 365).

## The ethics of authenticity

The modern value of authenticity is widely recognized to be a pervasive feature of contemporary cultural life. Its rise on the cultural stage can be traced historically to the virtue of sincerity, which in Medieval Europe constituted a response to modernity, and the feelings of alienation and meaninglessness associated with social and geographical mobility (Lindholm 2008). Lindholm also suggests that interest in personal authenticity arose from the alienation of workers under capitalism; 'the workplace came to be pictured as a battleground, where combatants must put on carapaces and conceal their true feeling selves behind standardized roles' (2008: 6). In the twentieth century, this lack gave rise to the commodification of authenticity, as a means whereby organizations and marketers could invite consumers to realize their authentic inner identity through the possession of particular goods and services; 'reacting to the dehumanizing effects of mass (re)production and the rationalization of labor, the American general public increasingly strove to achieve some kind of secure identity space through the consumption and display of objects radiating authenticity' (ibid.: 55), the promotion of Coke as 'genuine' or the 'real thing' providing just one illustration of this. This, in turn, gave rise to an emotivistic, narcissistic philosophy of authenticity, wherein the only measure of authentic action was whether or not it felt right to the individual (MacIntyre 1981).

Yet, for Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, authenticity is more than simply an inward-looking, self-directed search for meaning and purpose, although in its lesser forms he acknowledges it can become a wholly narcissistic project. In talking about the ideal of authenticity, Taylor begins by highlighting the malaises of modernity that trouble us. First is individualism, or the ability to choose one's path in life, which comes at the expense of interconnectedness and a sense of moral purpose. Second is the primacy of instrumental reason, epitomized by Weber's metaphor of the disenchanting 'iron cage', wherein decisions in modern culture are based on economic calculations and technologies, and presented as solutions to human problems. As a consequence, Taylor argues, individuals have become increasingly atomized, locked into a 'culture of authenticity', which is self-absorbed and self-absorbing – a form of authenticity that can be identified readily in popular self-help literature (Guignon 2004). However, the answer, Taylor suggests, is not to condemn authenticity but instead to retrieve it, by searching for the moral ideal that lies behind it, which includes a commitment to holistic appreciation of our dependence on the natural world: 'If authenticity is being true to ourselves, is recovering our own "sentiment de l'existence," then perhaps we can only achieve it integrally if we recognize that this sentiment connects us to a wider whole' (1991: 91).

In order to achieve this, we need to distinguish between the *matter* and the *manner* of authenticity. For Taylor, the problem is that authenticity has become a goal in itself, an ethic related

to personal desires and aspirations that is good in and of itself. In other words, authenticity has become a manner of being that focuses on the purely personal project of self-fulfilment. This overlooks the matter of authenticity, or the purposes it serves. Instead, he argues, 'we ought to attempt to raise its practice by making more palpable to its participants what the ethic they subscribe to really involves' (ibid.: 72). Hence, the struggle should not be 'over authenticity but about it' (ibid.: 73, original emphasis). This, he suggests, would enable a break with the cultural pessimism that leads to the condemnation of authenticity and open up the possibility of responsibility, whereby the ideal of authenticity could encourage a more self-responsible form of life.

Taylor uses the example of Romantic art to illustrate how the subjectivation of manner need not necessarily preclude consideration of an order beyond the self, including issues related to human predicament and our place in the universe. The retrieval of authenticity could thus be immensely valuable in helping us to address pressing ecological issues of our time, by getting beyond environmental policies founded on anthropocentric ethics that assume nature is simply a set of resources for human beings to use (Curry 2011). Hence,

We don't need to see ourselves as set in a universe that we can consider simply as a source of raw materials for our projects. We may still need to see ourselves as part of a larger order that can make claims on us. Indeed this latter may be thought of as urgent. It would greatly help to stave off ecological disaster if we could recover a sense of the demand that our natural surroundings and wilderness make on us.

*(Taylor 1991: 89–90)*

Such a perspective potentially enables a move away from managerialist forms of environmentalism and corporate social responsibility. Some suggest sustainability has become a popular cultural fashion, part of the logic of late capitalism, a resource used by the corporate world to generate economic value through ecobranding (Parr 2009). Underlying this managerialist approach to environmentalism is a faith in technologies as the solution to ecological problems, and failure to acknowledge that impossibility of an indefinitely and continually growing economic system within a finite ecological system (Jackson 2009). As Curry (2011) argues, such a shift is reliant on an emotional as well as a rational commitment in determining the value of species and environments based on a more ecocentric set of ethical beliefs. For Taylor, the potential benefits associated with the ideal of authenticity arise from overcoming the polarized debate between the 'boosters' and 'knockers' of authenticity and moving away from the disengaged model of the human subject in order to reconnect with 'our bodily constitution, our dialogical situation, our emotions, and our traditional life forms' (1991: 102). The ideal of authenticity, he concludes, reduces the risk of fragmentation in modern democratic society and enhances citizens' capacity to form, and act upon, a common purpose.

Yet, in the context of debates about the modern workplace, authenticity is presumed to be a highly elusive, if not an impossible ideal. For critical writers such as Fleming (2009), authenticity is understood as a managerialist guise for dealing with the self-alienation caused by modern work, a means of dealing palliatively with the disenchantment caused by rational instrumentalist forms of organization. This has given rise to a managerial self-help literature that claims individuals are obliged 'to participate in a world of jobs where many of us spend a good deal of time not being truly happy' and suggest that we need 'a new model for business' that 'delivers our needs for self actualization' (Crofts 2003: 20–30). For Fleming, this 'celebration of authenticity' in organizations is simply 'an articulation of domination' (2009: 9).

What are we to make of this cynical viewpoint? It may be, as Fleming's study of call centres suggests, that the type of authenticity that has been adopted in some organizations is of the

superficial, individualistic, ‘just be yourself’ kind. However, like Taylor (1991), we do not agree that this is the only type of authenticity that can be pursued within organizations. Nor do we think that the only reason that authenticity is ‘pushed onto the corporate stage’ (Fleming 2009: 4) is because of the inherent inauthenticity of the employment experience in profit-seeking firms. Rather, we suggest that the contested terrain surrounding discourses of authenticity about and in organizations exposes the duplicity associated with some organizational practices, particularly those relating to ethics and sustainability, and through this it opens up discussion about alternative forms of organization (Parker *et al.* 2007).

In this chapter, we want to get beyond debates between the self-help ‘boosters’ and the ‘knockers’ (Taylor 1991) of organizational authenticity in order to explore how the ideal of authenticity might be pursued in a way that is more ethically productive. However, just as at an individual level the notion of authenticity can be used to imply an essentialist notion of selfhood and identity that is deeply problematic, our analysis of organizational authenticity seeks to avoid the suggestion that there can be any truly authentic organization in an absolute sense. Instead, we see organizational authenticity as a socially accomplished phenomenon.

### Organizational authenticity and sustainability

Authenticity is of particular concern in relation to issues of corporate social responsibility and sustainability where organizations have been accused of ‘greenwashing’, branding themselves as environmentally and socially responsible in order to draw attention away from their more ethically dubious business practices (Laufer 2003; Ramus and Montiel 2005; Urbany 2005). Fleming (2009) argues that concerns about corporate social responsibility are a key element of contemporary organizational authenticity. He further claims that they constitute an organizational response to consumer-led pressures for authentic (i.e. unmodified) goods and services and authentic (i.e. not fake, superficial or phoney) marketing practices. Corporate greenwashing, a term coined by environmental activists, refers to strategic practices of organizational reputation management intended to promote a favourable public image of business ethics through deception (Beder 1997), by restricting and deliberately manipulating information that would reveal backstage activities that could undermine this reputation. This has the potential to ‘give an organization the appearance of ethicality and leadership, when no such commitment exists’ (Laufer 2003: 257). Such practices may be understood as an attempt to fabricate organizational authenticity in order to bolster the reputation of the brand among employees and consumers (Fleming 2009). The contemporary obsession with authenticity is also related to the recent popularity of notions of organizational ‘soul’, which exposes ethical tensions arising from the disjuncture between stated moral values and corporate practices (Bell *et al.* 2012).

Much of the literature emphasizes the potential disjuncture between the stated rhetoric of an organization’s published social and environmental accounting processes, policy or value statements and the practical reality as evidenced by their material greening practices (Ramus and Montiel 2005; Urbany 2005). This gap is suggested to be detrimental to an organization’s credibility. The analytical focus of visual researchers has so far mainly been on top-down, or one-way organizational modes of communication, such as corporate annual reports, which are used to manage corporate reputation for internal and external audiences. Examples include Cho *et al.*’s (2009) study of how corporate websites enable use of ‘richer’ (i.e. more complex and ambiguous) multimedia in social and environmental responsibility disclosures and Davison’s (2007) analysis of the use of photographs in corporate annual reports. Such research demonstrates how visual communication can be used by companies and non-profit organizations to enhance their reputation on corporate social responsibility and sustainability issues.

However, organizations are finding it increasingly difficult to control the reputational messages they seek to convey as a consequence of the rise of more informal and interactive channels of communication enabled by the Internet and new social media such as Facebook and YouTube. These Internet technologies enable consumers to talk to one another, as well as back to the corporate image producer. Business reputation management, including practices of green-washing, must therefore be understood in the context of the emergence of participatory culture (Burgess and Green 2009; Jenkins 2006), which involves the use of digital technologies in the creation and circulation of content and challenges established commercial relationships between media industries and consumers. These new technologies open up possibilities for more two-way organizational communications between corporations and environmental organizations and consumer groups, through which the reputational claims of both may be challenged.

### **Defining authenticity at Free Range Studios**

The identity work involved in constructing organizational authenticity is evident at Free Range Studios, which describes its mission as working to sell revolutionary ideas and products that build a more just and sustainable world, in contrast to traditional creative agencies that just work to sell stuff (Sachs and Finkelpearl 2010). In explaining the company's creative approach, Sachs argues that facts and information alone are insufficient as a basis for stimulating social change because humans tend not to be rational actors (Sachs and Finkelpearl 2010). These views are congruent with research which suggests that pro-environmental organizational changes rely on the emotional meanings that key actors attach to greening (Fineman 1996). The company thus advocates a method of identity-based storytelling that can be used to change behaviour, rather than to sell a product. In 2008, Fast Company named the co-founder of Free Range Studios as one of fifty people who might save the planet. And, in 2010, the company was nominated for a National Design Award from the Smithsonian.

The ideal of authenticity is expressed in relation to the creative outputs that Free Range Studios produces, the clients it chooses to work for, and the way the company is organized internally. When asked what authenticity meant at Free Range, McArthur explained:

As more and more companies want to reach into this authentic sustainability world space, then we have to decide whether we're willing to work for them. There's a wide range of opinions at Free Range about who we work for and how authentic they have to be.

McArthur also spoke of the challenges in assessing client authenticity particularly as a growing number of Free Range's current enquiries are from businesses, rather than non-profit-making organizations. When asked how Free Range assesses the authenticity of prospective clients, she said:

It's really hard and frankly tricky. If you're in the non-profit sector we tend to be more casual. We'll read your mission statement and say 'Right, okay, that's great.' But if you're a business, then we are not only looking at your mission statement, but also how you treat employees or what your supply chain is, and we don't do that for a non-profit. We don't go into a non-profit and say 'Can you tell me whether you give your employees good healthcare?' As a society we don't hold non-profits to the same standards. We've been much more demanding of businesses than we have been of non-profits, even though they are on the same slippery slope of authenticity.

For McArthur, a crucial aspect of organizational authenticity involves the cultivation of scepticism through which authenticity is explored and debated as part of an ongoing process reflection.

I don't think these issues are ever resolved. I think it's an on-going question and discussion. Even yesterday I was talking with our Studio Director and she was saying 'Do we want to work for Coke? You know, the fact is their very nature is a product that's not good for people, right? So how do we feel about pushing a product that's not good for people?' That said, people are always going to drink Coke. We're not going to change the world and say 'People, this is bad for you.' And so if Coke, a brand which is ubiquitous, is willing to change how they do business and change the plastics that are in their bottles, isn't that at least better than the business status quo? These are conversations that come up frequently at Free Range and we have a wide spectrum of people who have different ideas all the way from 'Absolutely not, any commercial product – I don't want to do' all the way to people saying 'I'm willing to be team mates with anyone who's being authentic, even if it is motivated by the bottom line, even if it means they're producing a product that I don't particularly think is good for people, I'm willing to play with them if they can effect real world change'. That's a large stretch to reconcile – and we have to make frequent decisions about who to take on as a client.

As this illustrates, authenticity is constructed dialogically within Free Range Studios, through exchanges between organization members. When asked what constitutes organizational authenticity, McArthur said:

Authenticity around sustainability to me means it's not just greenwashing. So you're not just slapping a sticker on something to make it appear as if it were more environmentally or people friendly than it is. And, when I say sustainable, I don't just mean in an environmental way. I mean sustainable for people as well. And so if you're just glossing over the yucky stuff and pulling out a few highlights that are good, with the intent to mislead the consumer, then that's not authentic in my mind. Authentic is sincerely trying to have a product or a cause that is good for people, planet and profits. For me, it doesn't have to be perfect – it just has to be intentional. And for most large-scale businesses, there is no way to be perfect in your supply chain. OK, I get that. But you can have the intention to improve, the intention to care about more than just making money. Don't get me wrong – I am completely fine with profits as the motivator as long as those other two things – people and planet – are part of the measure of success. For example, I like Green Mountain Coffee Roasters' approach in their annual report, where they explain what they've tried, how they've succeeded and failed, and why they made certain decisions. I appreciate that kind of authenticity.

### Visual authenticity on YouTube

A key aspect of Free Range's work involves the production of short films, popularly referred to as 'viral videos' (Wolfe 2009), which contain animated content and are almost exclusively disseminated online via websites and social media including YouTube and Facebook. Free Range films have received significant media attention from TV networks including Fox News and CNN and newspapers (*The New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *LA Times*). One of the highest-profile and earliest of the company's successes was a three-minute-long cartoon-style



animated film entitled *The Meatrix* (2003). *The Meatrix* offers a critique of corporate industrial agriculture that addresses issues of ‘animal cruelty, pollution, food safety and the destruction of American family farming’ (Wolfe 2009: 318). Donated by Free Range to the Global Resource Centre for the Environment, the film was produced pro-bono and released onto the Internet in November 2003. The manner of the film’s production, whereby Free Range was prepared to produce the film without receiving a fee, was seen by members and audiences as crucial in demonstrating the organization’s commitment to authenticity. In its first week, the film attracted 350,000 individual viewers; by January 2005, this had risen to 5 million and, by 2008, the count was over 20 million; it has now been translated into over 40 languages. The film was followed in 2006 by two sequels, *Meatrix 2* and *Meatrix 2.5*. This provided the foundations for many other Free Range films that critique the relationship between business and the environment including *The Story of Stuff* (2007), commissioned by environmental activist, author and campaigner Annie Leonard, and its sequels including *The Story of Bottled Water* (2010), *The Story of Electronics* (2010) and *Citizens United v. FEC* (2011). The core message of *The Story of Stuff* is that globalized corporations are fuelling an unsustainable commodity culture based on an unethical materials economy that is profoundly exploitative of people and the natural world.

Part of the appeal of these texts derives from the childish, playful nature of the stories, as illustrated by the stick figures in *The Story of Stuff*. The films also rely on a high degree of intertextuality, deliberately drawing on other films that audiences are likely to be familiar with. Intertextuality is inherently historical, drawing on film texts from the past and remaking them in ways that reflect contemporary concerns and interests (Frow 2006). For example, Hollywood science fiction films, such as *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*, were used to enable the juxtaposition of good (Moopheus in *The Meatrix*) against evil forces (Darth Tater, *Grocery Store Wars*, 2005). These popular, iconic images help to denote the righteousness of the cause championed by the film. They can thus be seen as exemplars of environmental social movements’ use of ‘kitsch’ to generate collective sentiment and commitment; ‘though we know they are kitsch, we also sense that maybe they are effective, and therefore justifiable’ (Newton and Harte 1997: 82).

They also rely on narrative construction of an eco-hero(ine), in this case Annie Leonard, who provided the original inspiration for, and is a central character in, the *The Story of Stuff* film. Leonard has since written a book based on these ideas (Leonard 2010). She has also been the focus of many audience responses to *The Story of Stuff*, some of which involve challenging her personal authenticity, others potentially reinforcing it. An example of the latter involved a situation where a group of American high-school students watched the film and then created their own YouTube film response to it, as a means of asking Leonard questions. Leonard subsequently visited their school and answered their questions on her blog. As this example illustrates, these new technologies provide the possibility for more robust conversations about organizational authenticity.

Authenticity is a concept that has particular currency within new social media such as YouTube. This is, in part, because of the ease with which identities can be manipulated within the medium. One such example concerns the case of ‘Lonelygirl15’, who purported to be the teenage daughter of religious parents, who ‘vlogged’ (made an autobiographical video diary delivered straight-to-camera) about her fraught relationship with a teenage boy and fellow vlogger. The posts, which attracted a large YouTube following, were subsequently discovered to be the result of a filmmaking experiment that had been carefully scripted and professionally acted, prompting considerable backlash from viewers. There are also examples of perceived corporate inauthenticity on YouTube. One of the most prominent concerns the film *Al Gore’s Penguin Army*,<sup>4</sup> a spoof of the film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) featuring former Democratic Vice President of the United States Al Gore, talking about the effects of climate change.

*Al Gore's Penguin Army* displays many grammatical features typical of YouTube and draws on semiotic resources of vernacular culture including home-madeness, intertextuality and provenance (Burgess and Green 2009). The film also draws on the popular feature film *March of the Penguins* (2005) and uses parody to disrupt and ridicule (Wolfe 2009). The film was posted on YouTube in June 2006 and to date has generated 616,563 views. However, it was subsequently exposed as having been produced by a public relations and lobbying firm named the DCI Group whose clients include ExxonMobil and General Motors.<sup>5</sup>

These examples highlight the contested terrain of visual authenticity within YouTube, including the importance of perceived realness and the willingness of audiences to challenge performances that are perceived to be inauthentic (Burgess and Green 2009). Recently, there have also been concerns that encroaching corporate interests threaten the authenticity of YouTube through the shift from 'bottom-up' to 'top-down' determination of content and the difficulties in finding user-generated content as opposed to that provided by commercial partners. Such concerns reflect subcultural norms that have emerged in relation to the YouTube community and the values that members hold.<sup>6</sup> This has led websites such as 'YouTube Stars' to compile lists of non-corporate films, while complaining that 'lately, it seems that most of the videos on the Most Viewed page on YouTube are made by slick Corporations'.<sup>7</sup> Trying to establish how much of YouTube content is genuinely authentic and uncovering inauthentic authenticity has thus become part of the participatory cultural repertoire within YouTube (Burgess and Green 2009).

### Uncovering organizational inauthenticity: *The Story of Bottled Water*

One strategy used by YouTube audiences to challenge perceived inauthenticity involves redaction, the practice of active audience engagement through content editing (Hartley 2008, in Burgess and Green 2009). This involves editing existing content to add value, often by subverting the message originally intended by the producer. It builds on an already established strategy of visual organizational resistance in the form of culture jamming, involving the artistic appropriation of advertising and branding images to disrupt meaning (Klein 2000). Viral films can be understood as potentially more writerly (Barthes 1975) than other texts such as feature film because they blur the boundaries between the roles of media producer and consumer through involving them more closely in the production of meaning (Bell 2008). This is of particular relevance to companies and marketers who seek to exploit the promotional potential of YouTube. An example involves the car company Chevy, which invited audiences to take clips of their new vehicle, the Tahoe, and make their own animated commercial.<sup>8</sup> The results were far from what the organization intended, in that they deliberately parodied the design features of the SUV in a way that drew attention to its negative environmental impact.

The Free Range film *The Story of Bottled Water* (2010) traces the production and consumption costs, including environmental and social impact associated with drinking bottled, as opposed to tap, water. It builds on the success of *The Story of Stuff*, which, since its release in 2007, has generated 12 million recorded YouTube views and is distributed across 220 countries and territories. Released onto YouTube three years later, *The Story of Bottled Water* also attracted large YouTube audiences, recording 1.3 million YouTube views. However, within weeks of the release of the film, the International Bottled Water Association produced a response, in the form of a viral film entitled *Conflicted Consumer* (2010),<sup>9</sup> which provided a counter-argument to the claims made in *The Story of Bottled Water* by highlighting the consumer health and safety benefits associated with drinking bottled water and promoting the industry's commitment to sustainability (e.g. through bottle recycling). The film is a day in the life of a bottled water consumer as she

struggles with her devilish doubts about drinking bottled water and eventually sides with the angel on her shoulder in realizing its benefits. However, the film 'boomeranged' (Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1968); its meaning was turned around by audiences who read it in a way that reversed the message the producer intended, as comments such as this one on YouTube illustrate:

Wow ... what an excellent video ... It tells you exactly WHY you SHOULD NOT be drinking bottled water. How ironic that the angels is selfish – after having seen this, I too am going to continue polluting because my convenience is WAY more important than common good!!!

These views were confirmed by members of Free Range and The Story of Stuff, who spoke of the resistance to the films as an indication of audience impact.

You know a project is a success in the viral model, you know, if it starts being talked about and if it starts to create a bit of a [buzz] ... if something initiates a debate or really sparks a conversation, you know, lots of good, heated conversation, we like that.

(Free Range executive producer)

That was such a funny video that they made, my goodness. So with *The Story of Bottled Water*, kind of much as you would expect, we got some push-back from the industry and they actually attempted to make their own video to kind of counter ours and talk about the 'real' story of bottled water and how bottled water's so good for you and blah, blah, blah, but it was so tragically badly done that it really just made us look a lot better ... On some level, you know, we can wear it as a badge of honour that our work is meaningful enough and powerful enough that ... people are paying attention to it.

(Story of Stuff director)

It was awful and it was hilariously bad ... The production value was terrible. The message was so transparently bad. It was ... it was grasping at straws and anyone with half a brain could see right through it ... If we receive backlash on what we've done, then we've done our job.

(Free Range creative director)

Indeed, these counterclaims were perceived to be so inauthentic that, for a while, Free Range included a link to *Conflicted Consumer* on its own website under 'Current News'. Under the auspices of the industry coalition 'Bottled Water Matters',<sup>10</sup> a number of related films were made and posted on YouTube including *It's Mr Watercooler!*<sup>11</sup> Despite these efforts, the success of these films never approached that of *The Story of Bottled Water*,<sup>12</sup> which, in March 2010, was at number seven in the viral video chart.<sup>13</sup> While the films produced by Bottled Water Matters display the grammatical features associated with authenticity on YouTube, i.e. they appear home-made, involve cultural redaction,<sup>14</sup> and a degree of playfulness rather than critical-rational debate (Burgess and Green 2009), it is clear that they miss the mark in terms of effectively representing organizational authenticity in a visual form. At the same time, *The Story of Bottled Water* gave other organizations an opportunity to live up to their authenticity claims. For example, in interviews members of Free Range Studios told a story about the owners of an independent organic health food store in the Berkeley, California area who, after watching the film, cleared the shelves of all bottled water products. Instead, on the commercially valuable shelf space they placed a TV and ran the film continuously for a week to explain to shoppers why they no longer stocked

bottled water. As this example illustrates, the ripple effect of organizational authenticity claims can be significant. However, many companies flounder in the face of trying to express authentic messages about sustainability and corporate social responsibility. In some ways, this illustrates how little organizations have changed over the past decade and a half in their response to greening pressures, and many continue to react with emotional hostility towards environmental pressure groups (Fineman 1996).

As responses to *The Story of Bottled Water* also show, organizations increasingly seek to engage emotionally and symbolically, rather than just intellectually, with greening issues, by telling morality stories that try to capture hearts and minds rather than making rational counterclaims in the battle for organizational authenticity. However, it may be that these attempts fail for a different reason. As Fineman (1996: 495) argues, managers may be pressured towards organizational greening as a means of avoiding the emotional discomfort that arises from pressure groups that ‘worry away at executive intransigence and sensibilities’. That *The Story of Bottled Water* precipitated this response from the bottled water industry could be interpreted as a sign that it touched an emotional nerve, which might ultimately result in shaming or embarrassing them into action.

However, new technologies of visual communication like YouTube are commercial enterprises as well as platforms for cultural participation. There are growing signs that commercial interests are seeking to curb the unruly nature of participatory culture’s unintended consequences, and in the longer term this may represent a threat to ‘bottom-up’ user-generated content (Burgess and Green 2009). However, the cultural and economic value of new social media relies partially on participants for the creation of content. Consequently, ‘any platform’s capacity to produce value relies on the active involvement of communities of co-creative users’ (ibid.: 98). This places certain limits on the ability of corporations to manage the collective agency of users in generating and manipulating these visual texts.

## Concluding thoughts

The pursuit of authenticity in the image world has been a longstanding organizational ambition. In recent years, corporations have sought to respond to contemporary anxieties about environmental degradation, climate change, post-peak-oil survival and global population expansion by promoting their practices as authentically sustainable and responsible, using visual forms of communication to convey this message. However, visual authenticity is an increasingly contested terrain, and organizations are not able to control these messages as effectively as they once did. This is, in part, a consequence of new technologies of film production and consumption, which have resulted in more distributed patterns of message production than those associated with traditional channels of mass-media marketing. It may also be a consequence of increased visual literacy, wherein consumers and activists are able to subject organizational authenticity claims to greater critical scrutiny by employing techniques of image production and distribution.

In the Hollywood movie *Wall Street* (1987), there is a scene where Gordon Gekko shows off his multi-million-dollar modern art collection to his guests. The scene is meant to imply that the artistic image has been completely commodified, an observation related to the film’s overall narrative about the explosion of hyperreal consumption in a postmodern world (Denzin 1991). The image world in *Wall Street* is thus entirely symbolic, an illusion or a simulacrum that gives the impression of reality but is simultaneously fictional. Within this, Gekko is the archetypal postmodern person, a restless voyeur who stares restlessly at images on computer screens and pictures on the wall, simultaneously mesmerized and bored by the

illusions that his capitalist lifestyle produces. Such representations suggest that image work in the globalized capitalist landscape is profoundly inauthentic because it involves the disconnection of the signifier from any meaning or concept that it is understood to represent. Wall Street, as Denzin (1991) notes, is thus not a real place, but an imagined, computerized one, where meaning and value is constructed through the flow of imaginary numbers that represent imaginary things.

Yet the collapse of traditional conceptions of authenticity does not necessarily mean that visual authenticity is in crisis. Assessments of authenticity continue to be made on the basis of whether an object, person or organization is what it purports to be, in other words, on the basis of identity or 'content' more than 'origin' (Lindholm 2008). Parody and appropriation in the image world does not, therefore, automatically represent a threat to authenticity; instead, it can constitute a potential means of challenging, verifying and thereby enhancing its robustness. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the context of organizations that have been subject to numerous satirical critiques of visual authenticity (see Klein 2000); examples include American artist Ron English, who appropriates corporate mascots like McDonald's Ronald McDonald and Disney's Mickey Mouse<sup>15</sup> in order to challenge the ethics of their marketing practices, and UK street artist Banksy, whose powerful images critiquing the ethics of multinational corporate interests have been highly commodified, yet he claims not to be a brand and asserts that he does not make merchandise such as greeting cards, T-shirts or mugs.<sup>16</sup>

Debates about organizational authenticity, therefore, need to explore the matter, or the purposes that authenticity serves, in addition to the manner of its communication. Organizational authenticity must also be understood as an ideal, rather than an actuality, which may be founded on responsabilization and communitarianism rather than narcissistic individuality. In this chapter, we have shown how such a project might be developed and how notions of visual authenticity might be usefully and productively understood.

## Notes

- 1 See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBiA5d7HTg> (accessed 27 February 2012).
- 2 'What's Wrong with this Picture? Critical Documentary Film as a Catalyst for Change', Professional Development Workshop at the Academy of Management Meeting, Montreal, August 2010.
- 3 A total of six interviews were carried out by Emma and her research collaborator on the project, Pauline Leonard. These were transcribed verbatim and analysed in conjunction with the film texts and websites.
- 4 Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZSqXUSwHRI> (accessed 9 August 2011).
- 5 Regalado, A. and Searcey, D. (2006) 'Where did that video spoofing Gore's film come from?', *Wall Street Journal*, 3 August 3. Available at [http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB115457177198425388-0TpYE6bU6EGvfSqtP8\\_hHjJ771\\_20060810.html?mod=blogs](http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB115457177198425388-0TpYE6bU6EGvfSqtP8_hHjJ771_20060810.html?mod=blogs) (accessed 5 April 2011).
- 6 See Mike Wesch's Library of Congress lecture *An Anthropological Introduction to YouTube* for an excellent introduction to the values, norms and practices of YouTubers. Available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPAO-lZ4\\_hU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPAO-lZ4_hU) (accessed 9 August 2011).
- 7 See <http://www.bkserv.net/YTS/YTMostViewed.aspx/FlagCorp.aspx?c=olo567> (accessed 9 August 2011).
- 8 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oNedC3j0e4> (accessed 09 August 2011).
- 9 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eklg6j2G2pk> (accessed 09 August 2011).
- 10 See <http://www.bottledwatermatters.org/> (accessed 09 August 2011).
- 11 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uL2VzMl0M0g> (accessed 09 August 2011).
- 12 As of April 2010, *Conflicted Consumer* showed on YouTube as having 3,190 views, while *The Story of Bottled Water* has 1,543,829.
- 13 See <http://viralvideochart.unrulymedia.com/> (accessed 09 August 2011).
- 14 For example, *I am Bottled Water* refers to the 'I am Windows' marketing campaign <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lSkkZj5xFRw> (accessed 09 August 2011).
- 15 <http://www.popaganda.com/blog1.php> (accessed 27 February 2012).

16 <http://www.banksy.co.uk/> (accessed 27 February 2012).

## References

- Barthes, R. (1975) *The Pleasure of the Text*, New York: Hill & Wang.
- Beder, S. (1997) *Global Spin: The Corporate Assault on Environmentalism*, Chelsea Green, White River Junction: VT.
- Bell, E. (2008) *Reading Management and Organization in Film*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Bell, E. and Bryman, A. (2007) 'The ethics of management research: an exploratory content analysis', *British Journal of Management* 18(1): 63–77.
- Bell, E., Taylor, S. and Driscoll, C. (2012) 'Varieties of organizational soul: the ethics of belief in organizations', *Organization*, doi:10.1177/1350508411411759.
- Burgess, J. and Green, J. (2009) *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Cho, C.H., Phillips, J.R., Hageman, A.M. and Patten, D.M. (2009) 'Media richness, user trust and perceptions of corporate social responsibility', *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 22(6): 933–952.
- Crofts, N. (2003) *Authentic: How to Make a Living by Being Yourself*, Chichester: Capstone.
- Curry, P. (2011) *Ecological Ethics*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Davison, J. (2007) 'Photographs and accountability: cracking the codes of an NGO', *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* 20(1): 133–158.
- Denis, J.L. and Lehoux, P. (2009) 'Collaborative research: renewing action and governing science', in D. Buchanan and A. Bryman (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Research*, London: Sage, 363–380.
- Denzin, N. (1991) *Images of Postmodern Society: Social Theory and Contemporary Cinema*, London: Sage.
- Fineman, S. (1996) 'Emotional subtexts in corporate greening', *Organization Studies* 17(3): 479–500.
- Fleming, P. (2009) *Authenticity and the Cultural Politics of Work: New Forms of Informal Control*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frow, J. (2006) *Genre*, London: Routledge.
- Goldfarb, B. (2002) *Visual Pedagogy: Media Cultures in and Beyond the Classroom*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Guignon, C. (2004) *On Being Authentic*, London: Routledge.
- Guthey, E. and Jackson, B. (2005) 'CEO portraits and the authenticity paradox', *Journal of Management Studies* 42(5): 1057–1082.
- Heron, J. and Reason, P. (2001) 'The practice of co-operative inquiry: research with rather than on people', in P. Reason and H. Bradbury (eds) *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, London: Sage, 179–188.
- Jackson, T. (2009) *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*, London: Earthscan.
- Jenkins, H. (2006) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: New York University Press.
- Jones, C., Anand, N. and Alvarez, J.L. (2005) 'Manufactured authenticity and creative voice in the cultural industries', *Journal of Management Studies* 42(5): 893–899.
- Klein, N. (2000) *No Logo*, London: Flamingo.
- Laufer, W.S. (2003) 'Social accountability and corporate greenwashing', *Journal of Business Ethics* 43(3): 253–262.
- Lazarsfeld, P., Berelson, B. and Gaudet, H. (1968) *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes up his Mind in a Presidential Campaign*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Leonard, A. (2010) *The Story of Stuff*, London: Constable.
- Lindholm, C. (2008) *Culture and Authenticity*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- MacIntyre, A. (1981) *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, London: Duckworth.
- Newton, T. and Harte, G. (1997) 'Green business: technicist kitsch?' *Journal of Management Studies* 34(1): 75–98.
- Parker, M., Fournier, V. and Reedy, P. (2007) *The Dictionary of Alternatives: Utopianism and Organization*, London: Zed Books.
- Parr, A. (2009) *Hijacking Sustainability*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Peterson, R.A. (2005) 'In search of authenticity', *Journal of Management Studies* 42(5): 1083–1098.
- Pink, S. (2001) *Doing Visual Ethnography*, London: Sage.
- Ramus, C.A. and Montiel, I. (2005) 'When are corporate environmental policies a form of greenwashing?' *Business and Society* 44(4): 377–405.

- Sachs, J. and Finkelpearl, S. (2010) 'From selling soap to selling sustainability: social marketing', in Worldwatch Institute, *State of the World, Transforming Cultures: From Consumerism to Sustainability*, New York: W.W. Norton.
- Schroeder, J.E. (2012) 'Style and strategy: snapshot aesthetics in brand culture', in C. McLean, P. Quattrone, F.-R. Puyou and N. Thrift (eds) *Imagining Organisations: Performative Imagery in Business and Beyond*, London: Routledge, 129–151.
- Stake, R.E. (2005) 'Qualitative case studies', in N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed., Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Taylor, C. (1991) *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Thrift, N. (2008) 'The material practices of glamour', *Journal of Cultural Economy* 1(1): 9–23.
- Urbany, J.E. (2005) 'Inspiration and cynicism in values statements', *Journal of Business Ethics* 62(2): 169–181.
- Wolfe, D. (2009) 'The video rhizome: taking technology seriously in *The Meatrix*', *Environmental Communication* 3(3): 317–334.
- Wray-Bliss, E. (2003) 'Research subjects/research subjections: the politics and ethics of critical research', *Organization* 10(2): 307–325.