
The Rhetoric of Reputation: Vision not Visibility

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Abstract

This paper offers a critique of conventional approaches to so-called ‘reputation management’: the business function concerned with influencing, often through diverse communication practices, stakeholders’ perceptions and estimation of an organisation’s economic and social practices. Reputation is frequently described and valued (from management as well as from conventional public relations perspectives) in terms of an organisation’s visibility: its capacity to be seen to be (doing) good through various textual media including corporate responsibility reports, speeches and presentations, news media reports, and so on. Hence there is a significant connection between rhetorical practices and reputation management. Drawing on cultural theorist Vivian Sobchack’s (2004) work, I suggest that textual rhetoric can and should be more than a form of visibility. Rather, it can also be a crucial form of social and ethical practice, the meaning and value of which are dialogically negotiated by organisations and stakeholders. To this end, I argue that texts cannot simply manufacture or reflect reputation. Like language, reputation is not an objective entity, but is envisioned by ongoing practices and their negotiated and subjective evaluation by an organisation and its stakeholders. I draw on selected texts (including Nike’s most recent corporate responsibility report) to support the discussion.¹

Introduction

An organisation builds or establishes its reputation. It earns and may (or may not) deserve its reputation. It may work to sustain or maintain its reputation. However, it may also lose—temporarily or irretrievably—its reputation. These active, idiomatic verb forms signal the agency of the organisation as subject in relation to its reputation status. Interestingly, however, this is a clear, linguistically marked, instance where agency is *only* possible when accounted for by an other or others. An organisation’s reputation depends on what others think about it (the term reputation comes from the Latin *reputare*, to think over). More importantly, for an organisation to be defined by its reputation is for it to be defined according to an individual or group’s judgment of its trustworthiness and its integrity—that is, according to its judged capacity to act ethically and responsibly in all its interactions and practices. This point is crucial to this paper, notwithstanding that some theorists argue that corporate reputation is made up of ‘six major facets’ (not all of them relating, or not at least directly, to ethics and responsibility). Lewis suggests the facets are financial performance, treatment of staff, environmental responsibility, social responsibility, leadership, and quality of products/services (Lewis, 2003, p. 362). Harris Interactive and Dr Charles Fombrun, director executive of the Reputation Institute have designed a ‘Reputation Quotient’ (RQ), “an assessment tool that captures perceptions of corporate reputations across industries, among multiple audiences, and is adaptable to countries outside the United States”, which uses six similar dimensions of reputation: products and services, financial performance, workplace

¹ An earlier version of this article was delivered as a seminar paper at the Centre for Public Communication Research at Bournemouth University, England, in June 2005. Dr Surma’s work on Sobchack and objectivating will also appear, but in a different context, in Surma (forthcoming).

environment, social responsibility, vision and leadership, and emotional appeal (Harris Interactive, 2006, ¶.6).

By contrast, in this paper I focus specifically on reputation in relation to notions of ethics and responsibility, and emphasise stakeholders' active roles in enabling an organisation to be defined as reputable (or disreputable). As a consequence, I share the view of Hutton, Goodman, Alexander and Genest that an organisation "attempting to manage [its] reputation might be likened to [one] trying *to* manage [its] own popularity (a rather awkward, superficial and potentially self-defeating endeavour)" (2001, p. 249). In this paper, when I write of reputation, the significant connection between rhetorical practice and reputation becomes clear. Details or accounts of a company's specific social, economic, environmental and other activities are not necessarily *directly* experienced by its stakeholders; in fact, more often than not they are communicated *to* them by the company itself or by various third parties. The role of communication, and particularly of oral and written language, in the forging or modifying of a company's reputation is therefore pivotal. Thus, I reconceive reputation as the verbal expression of a perspective developed and articulated through (direct or indirect) communicative processes between an organisation and its stakeholders. In this account, reputation is understood as a discursive or textual perception of ethical (or unethical), responsible (or irresponsible) action relating to social, environmental and economic concerns. This status, which is always modifiable, results from various direct or indirect exchanges between organisations and stakeholders. Given this focus, the preoccupations of the literature concerned with image management, impression management and identity management in relation to reputation are not germane to this paper's enquiry, though a great deal of research dealing with that nexus has been undertaken (see, for example, Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Fombrum, 1996; Van den Bosch, De Jong, & Elving, 2005; Carter, 2006. See also Pruzan, 2001, for discussion of the pragmatic perspective on and approach to corporate reputation).

Typically, and as we will see illustrated below, reputation is today described and valued (from management as well as from conventional public relations perspectives) in terms of an organisation's visibility: its capacity to be seen to be (doing) good through various textual media including corporate responsibility reports, speeches and presentations, news media reports, and so on. Sobchack's (2004) work suggests that our image-centric Western culture—one obsessed with visibility—has obscured the vitally dualistic nature (the equally significant subjective and objective dimensions) of human existence. Sobchack's work is useful in helping rearticulate the view that textual rhetoric is a crucial form of social and ethical practice, the meaning and value of which are *negotiated* by writers and readers, speakers and listeners. This view is not new, of course. Porter (1998, pp. 33–41) directs us to the concerns of classical scholars Aristotle and Cicero with the relationship between rhetoric and ethics. Such concerns have been refined and developed in both the new rhetoric (particularly in the work of Kenneth Burke (1969, 1970)), and in postmodern accounts of rhetoric as writing (see, for example, Porter, 1998; Berlin, 2003; Katz, 2003; Surma, 2005). Given this understanding of rhetoric, I show that texts cannot simply manufacture or reflect reputation. Like language, reputation is not an objective entity, but is constructed by ongoing practices and their various and variable evaluations by organisations and their stakeholders (see Surma, 2005, pp. 23–35).

Through brief reference to selected high-profile current approaches to reputation management, and through a necessarily cursory examination of Nike's most recent corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative as a more encouraging instance of corporate rhetoric which embodies reputation sensitivity in action, I illustrate the failure by many public relations professionals to acknowledge the ethical dimension of language. Moreover, I demonstrate that there is, in fact, a failure to acknowledge the significance of language at all, except in terms of its function as an instrumental commodity that provides deliverable 'messages' or 'communications'. Thus, such rhetorical efforts to develop and strengthen reputation

(and, by extension, trust and credibility) are both misguided and destined to fall short. Without an understanding of language as having the potential to connect writers with readers or speakers with listeners in a dynamic *moral* relationship, public communication risks being derided as hollow rhetoric, as corporate speak, as shallow spin, as dead language. In other words, the efforts to ‘manage’ reputation through communication activities primarily interested in establishing or sustaining reputation through cultivation of a favourable image are superficial and inadequate, as well as arguably unethical.

Vision and visibility: Vivian Sobchack, culture and language

Language and specifically textual rhetoric may be treated as a potential instance of *objectivation*, a process (according to Berger & Pullberg, 1965) “*whereby human subjectivity embodies itself in products that are available to oneself and one’s fellow men [sic] as elements of a common world*” (p. 199; italics in original). Vivian Sobchack is a cultural theorist whose writing frequently focuses on film and on questions of the experience of the lived body and its representations through various media (Sobchack, 2004; see also Surma, forthcoming). Most helpful to this paper is her harnessing of Berger and Pullberg’s ideas about objectivation to her work on the dialectical processes of the body in culture and her discussion of the contemporary lived body’s pivotal (but now threatened) role in making meaning—ethical and aesthetic meaning—in contemporary culture. These ideas help rearticulate and reinforce the importance of public language in general, and the ways in which public relations texts negotiate questions of reputation in particular.

Sobchack’s interest is in the inevitable and potentially creative tension between the experience of the lived human body and the body as a cultural object. In relation to her discussion of the body in contemporary culture, Sobchack distinguishes between the body that sees: that is, vision, as “a subjective *capacity* and perceptual *activity*”, and the body which is seen: that is, visibility, as “an objective and

perceptual *product*” (2004, p. 179). Sobchack argues that in western culture our potential for perception, for vision—for seeing as “*personal subjects of vision*” and “*social objects for vision*” (2004, p. 181; italics in original)—has been largely reduced to visibility (being seen). She claims that our image-centric culture has “qualified and transformed the essential structures that constitute the duality of our subjective and objective modalities of being as necessarily *objectivating*—that is open, noncoincident and intersubjective—into merely sufficient and reductive structures of *objectification* and *reification*” (2004, pp.181–2; italics in original). In other words, Sobchack is suggesting that our image-centric culture has obscured the vitally dualistic nature—the equally significant subjective and objective dimensions—of our human existence. As a consequence, the body becomes objectified, reduced to the status of an object, a ‘thing’. It is thus denied its full human potential as a feeling and thinking subject with the capacity to represent itself to others and to relate to others as distinct subjective identities in the world.

So why and how, exactly, is Sobchack’s argument relevant to this discussion? It is my contention that there are at least three significant problems with much contemporary language use in public, each of which reduces its use to a process of objectifying (rather than objectivating). First is the regular political and corporate refusal to admit the human into language and language exchange in writing practice. We see instances of this in the obsessive and ubiquitous managerial/marketing language of ‘structures’, ‘systems’, ‘resources’, ‘markets’, ‘models’, ‘deliverables’, and so on, or simply where language seems to be largely writer-oriented and self-referential rather than directed *towards the other*. Second is the use of so-called ‘hollow rhetoric’, that is, language claims unmatched by the social practices they describe. This is to *abuse* language, treating it as if it neither matters nor is material and vitally connected to the lives, activities, and meanings it claims to represent, but as if it were empty space, as ‘hollow’. Third is forgetting that language, once spoken and/or written is *for the other* to interpret (just as our actions once committed are there to be judged not only by

ourselves but by others). Our intentional use of language by no means guarantees its meanings for and uses by others. In fact, I would argue that it is our responsibility to allow others to use our language (rhetoric as matter) *otherwise*, to understand our language from the places, the bodies of others. When we use language to *objectify* rather than *objectivate*, we sever connections with others, and we risk, as a consequence, denying our human, *ethical relationship* with them.

Against these approaches to and uses of language, then, my interest is in public relations texts as *living, dialogic texts* on the one hand and as *culturally visible objects* on the other. Texts are developed and circulated by organisations and corporations to represent who they are, what they do, and how they do it. This function for texts has become increasingly important, as the demand that organisations make their practices available for public scrutiny grows. These texts might be media releases, CSR reports, annual reports, company profiles, web sites, or email exchanges. They may take the form of CEO speeches, community forums, mail bombs to employees, and so on. Of course, these verbal texts are *not* human bodies: they do not think, breathe, or feel as humans do. But my view is that we would be wise to treat our texts as rhetorical matter/bodies gesturing towards our humanness, and as appealing to the humanness of others. For unless we understand texts as rhetorical, they will fail to call to others, and thus fail to help forge meaningful and ethical relations, that is to say, relations of responsibility. This account once again, therefore, reasserts the importance of rhetoric as a *social* process. It also highlights the idea that the world we produce through language must, as Berger and Pullberg also declare, “be confirmed and re-confirmed by others” (Berger & Pullberg, 1965, p. 201).

Most contemporary powerful public relations, despite its apparent embracing of a values-based approach which is interested in communicating an organisation’s “reputation or practical goodness” (Richards, 2004, p. 173), attempts to veil the practice of rhetoric as a social process. It does so in suggesting, by its use of rhetoric, that the world it creates through language represents a set of immutable truths.

This effort aims to objectify language: to disconnect it from its producer as subject (through a strategy of self-displacement) and to disconnect it from others, who are thereby apparently designated no role except to accept or spectate. In other words, the capacity for connection to others through language is impoverished.

So let us explore now some instances of how public relations writers view language. Is language regarded as subject of vision, and for vision, and as a means of communicating *with* and relating *to* others in broad or general terms? Or is it regarded merely as *visibility* (language not for the other or with the other or towards the other, but simply to be *seen* by the other)? This exploration of language use also suggests, by extension, how public relations writers and the organisations they represent perceive, define and approach the notion of reputation—of how they are regarded by their diverse publics—and how to ‘manage’ it.

Reputation and visibility

My interest in reputation in this section of the paper is specifically in how public relations writers (and the clients they represent) appear to understand the ways their various publics develop perceptions about them. A brief look at two of the world’s most prominent public relations companies’ approaches to reputation management will illustrate conventional industry esteem of and faith in reputation as a visible *product* (or objective entity) to be manufactured and promoted. Reputation in these examples is rarely treated as a process of objectivating. Such treatment would involve articulating a language that simultaneously acknowledges rhetoric’s subjective and objective dimensions: in other words, rhetoric that emphasises its vital connection with the embodied actions and practices of its speaker-writer subjects, *at the same time as* it presents those actions as rhetorical objects for others to interpret and respond to as informed and discriminating subjects. However, far more often, rhetoric circulated in the public space is developed as an object of perception.

On Burson-Marsteller’s—reputedly the world’s largest public relations firm—web site

there is a page dedicated to its expertise in reputation management, and a link is provided to a relevant case study. The use of language in the firm's introductory comments on reputation management is revelatory:

Just like any tangible asset, corporate brands and reputations must be managed, and getting the right advice, counsel and tools, to help you develop proactive strategies or navigate major crises is essential. Understanding how your organization is perceived, integrating best practices and leveraging your CEO are just a few of the things you need to get started (Burson-Marsteller, 2006a, ¶.3).

The case study used as a showcase sample of Burson-Marsteller's reputation management describes how SAP—a major German company specialising in business technology solutions—made a transition, in 2003, from joint to sole CEO status under Burson-Marsteller's direction:

Burson-Marsteller was retained to: ensure a smooth transition from two CEOs to one, raising Kagermann's visibility globally, while maintaining Plattner's legacy; raise awareness of strengths of entire top management team, demonstrating stability and depth; and, establish Kagermann's leadership agenda and vision for SAP during his critical first 100 days as sole CEO (Burson-Marsteller, 2006b, ¶.4).

Henning Kagermann (the more serious, “cerebral” CEO of the duo) was being prepared to take sole control of the company. The case study describes how, to preserve the company's “reputation and competitive stance”, Burson-Marsteller felt that Kagermann's “*profile* had to be raised significantly” and a “*global audience*” reassured that the company would not be thrown off course (Burson-Marsteller 2006, ¶.3; italics added).

One of Burson-Marsteller's key roles therefore was to “rais[e] Kagermann's *visibility*” (Burson-Marsteller 2006b, ¶.4; italics added).

Burson-Marsteller did this through developing a strategy and communication plan. This involved promoting Kagermann through the media, and strategically positioning him in campaigns, events, and media opportunities. The case study claims, as a measure of Kagermann's and SAP's reputational success, that share prices and financial performance increased; that there was favourable reporting of Kagermann in the media—Kagermann was “*portrayed* as the right person to lead SAP”; and that his speaking engagements doubled (Burson-Marsteller 2006b, ¶.15). “Within weeks of his transition, Kagermann *was recognized* as a leading technology CEO in *The Economist* technology review” (Burson-Marsteller 2006b, ¶.18; italics added). In a survey of fund managers by *Institutional Investor*, Kagermann “was named ‘one of the most highly *regarded* CEOs’” (Burson-Marsteller, 2006b, ¶.18; italics added).

This focus on the visible (as the objective), underscored by use of impersonal passive voice—“was recognized”, “regarded”—suggests the relative insignificance of any responsive, interpreting subject who might be doing the “recognising” and the “regarding”. There is no reference to *what* Kagermann actually *did* in his first 100 days (in terms of operating the company) to enhance his and SAP's reputation, other than engage in the media circus.

Burson-Marsteller is rather an extreme example. Other public relations consultancies, such as Edelman Public Relations, for example, seem to have embraced (at least) the *idea* that rhetoric mobilised as dialogue, exchange, and debate with key stakeholders is crucial in developing and enhancing a company's reputation.

For example, in an article, entitled “Managing corporate risk and reputation” Richard Edelman, president and CEO of the company, comments that:

Today, corporate reputation is shaped by the interactions between and among an array of involved and equally empowered interest groups—including employees, regulators, trade partners, academics, consumer enthusiasts, investors, NGOs and media. Corporations now operate in a

sphere of cross-influence, where ideas are continuously exchanged and subjected to re-examination (2004, ¶. 11).

This approach—harnessing the idea that “corporate reputation is shaped by the interaction between ... interest groups”—marks an important shift from understanding and treating rhetorical practice as the transmission of persuasive messages. It shifts to an understanding and treatment of rhetorical practice as a complex process of negotiation or dialogue between (always asymmetrically positioned) parties. It is therefore also pivotal to acknowledging the crucial role of readers’ responses in attributing meaning and value to writers’ texts.

Heath (2000) has recommended the value of “rhetorical dialogue” and is sensitive to the ethical implications of rhetoric. (Nonetheless, he assumes, as L’Etang points out, that ethical dialogue is realisable within the conventional paradigm of symmetry (L’Etang, 2006, p. 371). Such a view does not take account of the unequal, and often shifting, relations of power that inevitably exist between communicating subjects in specific contexts.) Similarly, in their exploration of the concept of dialogue in public relations, Kent and Taylor (2002, p. 23) trace the shift in public relations literature from symmetry to dialogue, or from an emphasis on managing communication to communicating in order to negotiate relationships. As well, Botan’s (1997) reflections on dialogue come close to a focus on the relational and ethical dimensions of communicating through which reputation might meaningfully be developed.

This focus on dialogic exchange in public relations scholarship is enhanced if we think of it in Sobchack’s terms. The texts we, as public writers and speakers, subjectively value must be available to others as visible cultural objects, but not *merely* as such. Rather, they should call out to our interlocutors and, in turn, to their capacity to engage with our texts subjectively as meaningful and valuable, or at least as worthy of attention and, perhaps, response. Hence the importance of the subjective-objective dynamic to which Sobchack refers and of the ethical relation which it demands. This, I would argue,

is the far more solid ground on which reputation might be developed.

I am not sure that we can be confident of Edelman’s fully embracing the dialogic approach. Alongside the remark cited above is Edelman’s quote of an observation by the former deputy chief of staff to Ronald Reagan that “effective communication relies on constant repetition of one or two messages in all kinds of media” (2004, ¶. 19). Edelman also refers to his own company’s “Trust Barometer” finding that “80% of opinion leaders in Europe and the US *are much more likely to believe something that they hear, see or read in many different sources*” (¶. 20; italics added). It does not seem to matter, then, whether or not those beliefs are deluded or formed as a result of deception. Edelman goes on to note that “in a world of continuous partial attention, *a battery of spokespeople*, from the CEO to *credible* third parties such as academics or doctors, should be utilized to achieve *frequency of message delivery*” (¶. 21; italics added).

Edelman (2004) also comments that “The task of a CEO is to get employees on side *by creating a master narrative* that coherently articulates the company’s vision and ideals. Progress toward that goal is then *reported* regularly to the employees, who become allies in achieving the mission by *propagating the message* to a broader audience” (¶. 24; italics added). Edelman’s initially avowed commitment to dialogue and exchange with stakeholders does seem to be undermined in the closing words of the article. He remarks that proper risk management (which, he claims, can mitigate threats to reputation) “calls for true involvement in the issues of the day and a strong voice *to assure the company’s interests are served*” (Edelman 2004, ¶. 38; italics added).

Nike’s visionary approach to reputation

I now turn to the global athletic footwear and clothing manufacturer company, Nike, for a brief overview of its *Corporate Responsibility Report FY04* (2005). Here we get a more encouraging sense of this company’s apparent shift in its understanding of language, text, and narrative and, by extension, its means of both

engaging with its stakeholders and making itself visible as a responsible global corporate actor. This shift might partly be explained by the *Kasky v. Nike* lawsuit, which appears to have had a significant impact on the company's sense of its place in and relationship with society (Surma, 2005, pp. 127–29). As a result of a public relations campaign run in 1996–7, the company was sued for false advertising by North American activist, Marc Kasky. During the campaign, Nike had circulated media releases, issued advertorials and sent letters to newspaper editors, and to university presidents and athletics directors, claiming employee pay and working conditions, particularly in South-East Asia, were no longer exploitative. Following the drawn-out case, which was not resolved but concluded by an out-of-court settlement between Nike and Kasky in 2003, Nike decided not to issue its corporate responsibility report for 2002, and decided to continue “to limit its participation in public events and media engagement in California” (Nike, 2003, ¶. 12). Arguably, Nike was left smarting from the effects of the lawsuit, and many other organisations also expressed both their support for Nike's position and their dismay at what they regarded as a damaging brake on corporations' capacity to freely make claims about their practices as part of their engagement in public debate (see Nike, 2003; Lobe, 2003). However, in a turnaround, a media release issued by Nike in April 2005 heralded the publication of the company's second corporate responsibility report. At the same time, the company made available on its website, for the first time, the names and locations of its over 700 contract factories making Nike-branded products around the world.

This most recent report is quite different, particularly in a rhetorical sense, from its 2001 predecessor. While it gestured towards an ethical commitment to its stakeholders, the 2001 report was dominated by a marketing discourse that *objectified* Nike's corporate responsibility activities rather than *objectivated* them. It could be argued that this objectification is *precisely* the function of a genre such as a corporate responsibility report, which arguably aims to present a self-sufficient account of performance.

However, a corporate responsibility narrative, unlike the texts of marketing or promotion, surely has a quite different function, since it calls out to others for its legitimisation.

The 2005 report is different from the earlier one in three key ways. First, its tone shifts; this report is far more reflective, more tentative, far less self-assured, and, it could be argued, also far less smug than the report of 2001. Second, its focus shifts. The 2005 report is twice the length of its predecessor and presents a written record and detailed discussion of Nike's practices in the following key areas: “Company profile” (Nike, 2005, pp.1–4); “Governance” (Nike, 2005, pp.5–8); “Management discussion and strategy” (Nike, 2005 pp.9–14); “Workers in contract factories” (Nike, 2005, pp.15–48)—this is now by far the largest section; “Employees and diversity” (Nike, 2005, pp.49–55); “Environment” (Nike, 2005, pp.56–73); “Community” (Nike, 2005, pp.74–82); “Public policy” (Nike, 2005, pp.83–5); “Challenges and opportunities” (Nike, 2005, pp.86–9). The report is also explicitly addressed to the following identified stakeholders: “members of the socially responsible investment (SRI) community, employees, academics, NGO and advocacy organization leaders and individuals with an in-depth knowledge of corporate responsibility” (Nike, 2005, p.9.). (Although employees are specifically identified as stakeholders in the report, the report is not addressed to the workers in the contract factories on which Nike spends the most space reporting.) Finally, the report harnesses metaphors that indicate a shift in orientation in relation to its use of rhetoric and, by implication, to key (and particularly less powerful as well as potentially less trusting) stakeholders as well. It should be noted too that nowhere does the report mention the term ‘reputation’, although its writers do remark that Nike is interested in representing *facts* rather than *perceptions*—a point I shall return to. However, we can assume Nike must be interested in reinstating or strengthening (depending on your point of view) its reputation as a responsible corporate citizen, given the notoriety that has surrounded its treatment of contract workers in the past.

I cannot do full justice here to the detail and range of Nike's report. Nor do I wish to suggest that a cursory examination of the use of key idioms in the report is a sure indication or reflection of Nike's changing practices. (In their discussion of metaphor, idiom and ideology, Billig and Macmillan (2005) remark that "structures of metaphorical meaning shape our understandings but we cease to notice them for their meanings operate unconsciously. The effects are ideological and the recovery of metaphorical meaning then becomes a task of critical analysis" (pp. 461–2).) However, I do feel that examination of key idioms is important in suggesting the possible shift in Nike's awareness of its role as a responsible rhetorical actor on the contemporary social stage. It is interesting that the report principally makes repeated use of two types of idiomatic metaphor: those related to writing and language and those related to the visual and visual art. (The Nike report is also interspersed with artwork commissioned by the company and produced by young people in inner city Berlin. They took part in a programme run by Schlesische 27, "a local organization that uses art and culture to engage socially disadvantaged youth" (Nike, 2005, p.1).) This use of combined metaphor indicates the ways in which our approach to, and use of, public language can be understood in relation to our understanding of public vision and visibility, and the related notions of perception and reputation. A few instances of such use explore these ideas a little further.

In the report's introductory message, the company's retiring Chairman, Phil Knight, explains that to compensate for Nike's being "fairly quiet" for the last 3 years as a result of the Kasky lawsuit "we're using this report to play a little catch-up and [to] *draw a more complete picture*" (Nike, 2005, p.2; italics added). He then shifts to the writing metaphor: "Over the last decade I've *seen* a number of *chapters written*... in the first chapter ... the second chapter began ... a third long chapter... This report taught us that *to write the next chapter* we and others involved in this discussion are going to need to see common standards emerge and ways to better share knowledge and learnings created" (Nike, 2005,

p.2; italics added). In the next section, the 'letter' from Nike presidents, Mark Parker and Charlie Denson, remarks that "corporate responsibility challenges us to take *a good hard look* at our business model and understand our impact on the world around us" (Nike, 2005, p.5; italics added). They write also that "some of what *we see* is concerning ... With our aggressive, ongoing monitoring programs, we now believe we have *a more accurate picture* of where the problems of non-compliance lie" (Nike, 2005, p.5; italics added). In their remarks on environmental impact, they comment that "here too we are gaining *a better picture* ... Some of what *we see* is thrilling ..." (Nike, 2005, p.5; italics added).

In the third chapter of the report, entitled "Management discussion and strategy", the writers explain that the work for the report began with understanding "our issues and impacts" and that this process "is best undertaken in consultation with others, because both internal and external stakeholders help us gain new *insights* and understand the *perspectives* of others" (Nike, 2005, p.10; italics added). The chapter also explores Nike's long-term corporate responsibility goals, including effecting positive systemic change in working conditions in the industry. The writers comment that these goals are "long-term aspirations. Putting them *in writing* should not suggest we are close to accomplishing them; it instead shows how far we must travel" (Nike, 2005, p.10; italics added). Later in the chapter, the benefits of stakeholder engagement are declared: "they help us to prioritize key issues and develop and implement our CR policies. We've learned a great deal from this interaction. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions and others *have opened our eyes* to new issues and *viewpoints*" (Nike, 2005, p.11; italics added). In the fourth chapter, "Workers in contract factories", under the section "Performance", comes the comment, "Writing this report has been a process of *introspection*. It has also been a process of internal transformation that led us to the decision to *disclose* our factory base" (Nike, 2005, p.33; italics added).

From the brief extracts above, we get a sense of how Nike, as the nominal corporate author of

this report, now at least appears to understand and value *language* differently, recognising it as a symbolic system that, as Mackey argues, “constantly constructs the world which we see” (Mackey, 2005, p. 6). We also get a sense of Nike’s explicitly self-conscious use of language as a process of objectivating. The company writes chapters in its corporate story. It produces a sequential narrative, at the same time as it understands the tentative status of the chapters it develops and presents—“it ... shows how far we must travel”—given that those chapters are to be read, interpreted and evaluated by others. The process of realising itself as an object for self-scrutiny (“a good hard look”; “a process of introspection”) as well as for scrutiny by others is useful for any company interested, as Nike here purports to be, in determining its impacts on the contexts in which it operates and wields material influence. As well, the process of directly acknowledging the subjectivity of others, such as NGOs and trade unions, and their capacity to see, and to write the company in their own ways, as well as to help Nike see itself differently (“have opened our eyes” to new “perspectives” and “viewpoints”) seems to underline the company’s acknowledgment that there are more important aims than simply being visible. Alternatively, and to repeat Sobchack’s words, there are more important (and sustainable) aims than being “an objective and perceptual *product*” (2004, p. 179; italics in original).

Nevertheless, and perhaps this is precisely why Nike steers clear of mentioning its interest in strengthening its reputation, the company’s report also alternates this objectivating stance with an objectifying stance, in its emphasis on *transparency*—a term used repeatedly throughout the report. (For a thorough and thoughtful discussion of transparency, particularly from a relational perspective on public relations, see Jahansoozi, 2006.) Here are just a couple of examples of Nike’s emphasis on transparency. In an early section of the report, under “Reasons for reporting”, the writers declare that “*transparency* is an essential element of our corporate responsibility strategy ... We want to build trust and enable stakeholders to judge us not on *perception but fact*. Transparency is an essential tool in this

process” (Nike, 2005, p.9; italics added). In chapter nine, “Challenges and opportunities”: “Transparency isn’t really a dilemma for us. We’re very *clear* about it: We believe in it, know its value and understand its importance. But it is a risk. And an opportunity” (Nike, 2005, p.89; italics added). In this apparently contradictory move, then, the company implies a view of language as an instrumental conduit to an objective and objectifiable ‘reality’. Of course, this move to embrace transparency is for the most part completely understandable and commendable. In the last few years, as a consequence of the shocking revelations about criminal activities by directors of major companies (such as HIH, Enron and One.Tel), transparency is not just a trendy buzzword but represents corporations’ and organisations’ active response to public outrage at such activities. Nike’s current report is packed with lengthy descriptions, detailed tables, pie charts, and a range of statistics, measurements, and quantitative evaluations of its socially responsible business practices, all designed to demonstrate the company’s commitment to disclosure and transparency. But, like rhetoric, a company’s practices, behaviours, processes, events and so on are never simply ‘clear’. In other words you can’t see *through* them (which implies knowing and understanding them completely, objectively). Brute facts and figures, as objectively visible demonstrations of transparency, while presenting one version of usually very complex stories, cannot elide or eliminate the significance of subjective, embodied—that is to say, human—understandings of them (see Sobchack, 2004, pp. 179–204). Von Furstenberg (2001), provides a persuasive critique of any over-enthusiastic embrace of transparency as an objective ‘public good’. He argues, rather, that questions of and demands for transparency are inevitably bound up with specific relations of power, in particular social, financial, and political contexts. Nevertheless, it seems that, despite its complaint about the risks of transparency and its commitment to “more and better transparency” (Nike, 2005, p.89), Nike appears at least to be starting to understand the necessary, *ethical* limits on its capacity to control the perceptions of its stakeholders, and

by extension its own reputation, particularly in its approach to and practices of rhetoric.

Conclusion

We live in a culture overwhelmed by text, language, and rhetoric. We are constantly confronted with attempts on behalf of organisations, corporations, institutions, political parties, special interest groups, and lobby groups, to gain our attention and influence our perceptions. Too often this rhetorical bombardment, or it might even be called propaganda (see Moloney, 2004), feels as though there are words, words to be seen, words visible everywhere, but too few which directly address us, engage us, and sustain us. Mostly their effect is to silence and alienate us. So what is it that might make a difference? I have tried to argue here that rhetoric *must* matter in public communication practices in general and in public relations activities in particular. This will involve a necessary shift by public relations professionals from conceiving of language as simply image or objective product. It will involve acknowledging the centrality of the dialogic rhetorical practices that help forge a relationship between an organisation and its various stakeholders, and help to define an organisation's ethical stance. Using rhetoric to engage and influence stakeholders is one thing. Believing that rhetoric can 'do the work' of manufacturing and managing reputation, abstracted from the real activities and interests of those people who produce it, on the one hand, and from those people who interpret and make meaning from it, on the other, is cynical or short-sighted or both.

As I have suggested, however, I am encouraged by a company such as Nike, which now appears to understand that using language for the sake of mere (and more) visibility is not enough. It is rather the language of vision, one that takes account of the perceiving human subjects (the readers and the writers, the listeners and the speakers), that may persuade publics to read or to listen, and perhaps even to try and get a word in themselves.

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