

Title: Wonders of Waste: Upcycling and Creative Deconsumption

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Our film explores the upcycling consumer movement, the people attempting to restore the balance between production, consumption, and waste by repurposing waste to promote alternative and more sustainable lifestyles.

FOREWORD

In July of this year tourists poured to pose with the thermometer at Furnace Creek Visitor Centre, Death Valley – some even wearing fur coats as a joke. Thumbs up for 55° Celsius and code red – the dinosaurs and their asteroid.¹ Against the smouldering backdrop of global deterioration, and escalating consumer ignorance, production is set to intensify further – plastic production alone is estimated at 590 million metric tonnes for 2050, a 30% rise on current grossness² – mind-melting numbers. Our negative impact on the health of the planet is substantial: the hole in the ozone layer alone will not be prepared until 2060,³ never mind the many other environmental catastrophes associated with the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is proposed as a new geological epoch, characterised by the negative impact humans have on Earth's geological and biological health.⁴ Sometimes referred to as the Great Acceleration, Britain's industrial revolution is considered the catalyst. 1946 nuclear testing marks another evolution, carbon dioxide emissions, global warming, ocean acidification, habitat destruction, species extinction and widespread natural resources depletion are further evidence of the significant changes occurring to the environment. The Anthropocene emphasises the unsustainability of resource depletion and the trajectory towards the implosion of biodiversity – the complete annihilation of human life – unless drastic changes to human behaviour occur immediately.

Despite heavy media coverage of cyclically performed global summits dedicated to the crisis, earnest enforcements or transformations are complacent, if not entirely action absent – performances in ode, rather than in mode. The logical, rational and scientific warnings did not rally the desired attention. The global warming shock tactics didn't work, the recent upgrade to global boiling still too bubbly and mild a metaphor

to shake sensible convictions. What the 1970 Earth Day recycling symbol represented and the reality of practice, or lack thereof, materialises as a complete con, an illusion with deepening consequences. Still today commercial intermediaries – corrupt marketers – brazenly green wash,⁵ divert progress, suppress science, mask environmental concerns, and denigrate the seriousness of biodiversity collapse. Another problem is that often messages concerning the health of the planet promote the practice of consumer sacrifice, whereas messages that champion active, embodied and creative practices could stand a better chance of engaging audiences because of their uplifting experiential properties, and thus could translate into greater purposive positive action. The current messages in their various shapes and forms aren't grabbing the audience.

Demos claims the bombardment of rational visuals, graphs, diagrams, numbers, detach people from the realities of the Anthropocene – a kind of death by rational data, and are part of the larger problem.⁶ Like Ulmer's emotionally charged photographic essay approach to the Anthropocene,⁷ we believe lively visual narratives can better evoke attention among diverse audiences, and should be, where possible, incorporated when representing environmentally concerned research. The issue of emotional disengagement is serious, so serious that Moore, claims we are living an apocalyptic ontology⁸ – given that we design primarily text-based education experiences despite the ocular centric nature of society and multitude of exciting visual cultures in which people live. Environmental messages, which are now messages of urgency, must be shaped better to fit modern media receptors, be more vibrant. Scientific communicators can no longer rely on text and theory for charge but must instead engage audiences via narratives and multi-media structures. This film project developed with the underlying communication philosophy of attempting to align intentions and outcomes; to move the audience to an understanding, to action.

Upcycling is the practice of utilising waste objects or material and repurposing them, transforming them, to create an object of greater value with enhanced meaning attached. While recycled material utilised in production tends to denote products of lesser value or compromised functionality, upcycling implies an elevation in value, functionality, purpose or symbolism. The term 'upcycling' increases in application in industrialized manufacturing, science and engineering, and also mainstream commercial producers and individual consumers. Fast-fashion brands have begun to utilise upcycling by welcoming the donation of raw material – a shallow and cynical patchwork marketing tactic attempting to portray an environmentally concerned image – corporations interested in 'repairing the world', 'closing the loop' and other empty slogans, although industry progress is promised.⁹ It is the consumer practice of upcycling that is most interesting to us. It holds much optimism – and is considered a potential stepping stone towards more sustainable futures.¹⁰ A thriving global movement of active upcyclists continues to grow, persisting in their efforts to help the Earth by promoting deconsumption via the utilisation of waste.

Consumer movements can be powerful, they can shape global perspectives, inspire changes to cultural practices, shuffle skewed systems and alter the ideologies

supporting the justification of certain kinds of consumption.¹¹ The upcycling movement not only attempts to change the practices of buying and consuming, but also aims to disrupt the ideology of consumerism by encouraging people to explore alternative lifestyles.¹² Upcycling arrives with the active energy of the DIY movement,¹³ and promotes a similar skill set, but is imbued with greater ideological substance and environmental urgency, like dumpster diving, minimalism, freeganism and other emerging alternative deconsumption ideologies¹⁴ – but with artistic flair, playfulness, and creativity. Upcycling has been popularised on social media platforms like Pinterest, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, emphasising the ease of visual access to upcycling and why more visual representation of active embodied environmental work is required in society and in education – not just mediated experiences. What begins as repurposing, mending the broken, tinkering the trash – playing with rubbish – can inspire an ideological shift, a transformation, a reidentification of what's considered waste and consumer sloth – an important step in restoring the balance between production, consumption and waste.

There is value in reframing the many escalating existential issues of consumer society as a childishness problem.¹⁵ It is not difficult to observe the ways the sticky fingers of the market (communication technology, cyber leisure, and digital toys) cultivate people to occupy increasingly immature, fantasy-based, and disorientated mental states. Young consumers' minds are being corrupted for diligent progression towards adult hyper-consumption and diverted from active environmental citizenship and deconsumption lifestyles. The lack of human energy directed towards addressing the Anthropocene should be far more distressing. Media theorists,¹⁶ folktales,¹⁷ and even comic book writers¹⁸ long warn of the social paralyses induced by entertaining technology, of being intellectually and morally zapped by the dazzle of the market! The hyperconnectivity of contemporary culture demands unyielding responses to stimuli while pertinent existential indicators are ignored, the links between consumption and environmental health are missed and the possibility of appropriate action doused by constant presence bleed.¹⁹ The marketer hijacked simulations of play – software thinking – redesigns brain architecture to accept available options rather than imagine creative solutions, as well as diminishing our physical capabilities and overall health. Creative play deprivation present serious risks for human health:²⁰ detachment from nature and life, little curiosity, limited imagination, escapist fantasies, delusions and addiction – all of which prevalent in busy society.²¹ Now seems like the paralyzing inward-looking time between before total collapse – nothingness – but could there be light in the bottomless bin of escalating human childishness?

The main benefit of our childishness is plasticity, which stimulates creativity and playful problem solving. The vitalizing properties of play, as being related to an energy of life, resilience, and confidence of self, are well documented:²² locomotive and embodied play, essential for cardiovascular fitness, strength, balance, and fine motor control; object play teaches us about physics, engineering, action, perspective, and economics; and fantasy play develops the working memory, imagination, flexibility, and improvisation. Upcycling promotes and facilitates access to a variety of these

creative play forms essential for human development. The passionate upcycling participants featured in the film emphasise the importance of redirecting the focus of play to embrace material circularity in society, to enthuse embodied problem solving with a creative and playful spirit, and expose the potential for alternative modes of consumption. The aim moving forward should be to enhance human creativity and curiosity and nurture the ability to imagine alternative ways of being via playful creative environmental engagements, like, but not limited to, upcycling, which could help promote more resilient lifestyles. Active playful transformations offer opportunities to reinscribe objects with amplified value and meanings. Following the upcycling process people can experience a heightened sense of accomplishment due to the elevated amounts of psychic energy invested, physical-material interaction and motor skill required to craft a repurposed piece. The practice of upcycling goes beyond typical consumer self-work projects,²³ as the creativity enacted aims to inspire transformations of self and society, upcycling's underlying ideology goes beyond consumer indulgence. The societal value lies not so much in the individual upcycled pieces but the diffusion of the practice, which could go on to inspire the urgent ideological transformations required in society, from comfort to sustainability, from consumer sacrifice to creative play, from waste to reusable units. While cynics may claim upcycling is the mere moving of rubbish, narcissistic nonsense, or middle-class arts and crafts, the transformations that occur (to self and materials) plant the seeds of change through reskilling and reclassification – an environmental realignment – the creative building blocks of the future. Our film features a range of upcyclists, their individual creative practices and perspectives, and how their deconsumption ideologies diffuse in the marketplace to promote upcycling as an attractive deconsumption practice – one that holds potential to facilitate multiple transformations in society through creative forms of play. Interviews with individual hobby enthusiasts, upcycling workshop organisers, small upcycling furniture shop owners and luxury upcycling designers illuminate the eclectic nature of the upcycling consumer movement. The film showcases several upcycling projects, inclusive of vivid visual examples, playful projects, and creative ideas, drawn from Irish and international contexts.

THE SHOW

While it is always a tightrope designing combinations of words and film, to not detract from the potential of the film medium any longer and not overlap on contextual content, now seems like an appropriate time to direct readers attention, energy, to the film *Wonders of Waste (18 min.)*, which is followed by author reflections on the creative research processes that underpinned its production.

The film can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/170595105>



FILM MAKER REFLECTIONS

Both authors appreciate the opportunity provided by the *JCB* to upcycle this film project, to expand its audience, hopefully extend its impact – and ultimately elevate its potential meaning. The film project was economical and multi-purpose: video interviews contributed to the second author's (GOR hereon) PhD research data set; a creative outlet for the lead author (SOS hereon) trying to develop his filmmaking skills; a submission for the Association for Consumer Research Film Festival, Berlin, 2016; a visual support for our teaching, and a lively resource for other educators to utilise when exploring sustainable consumption in classroom contexts. The film has been thus far been impactful in teaching environments, some students have earnestly explored alternative consumption lifestyles, others have pursued post-graduate research in sustainable consumption, however the ability of the film to engage diverse students and generate in-class discussion on issues of sustainability, which has been most valuable.

Because avant-garde journals, such as the *JCB*, are increasingly showcasing film and visual work, as advocates of visual representation, in an attempt to increase the appreciation and application of visual consumer research we share some of the operations that supported the film's creation. What worked and what didn't. We believe increased transparency around the methods and tactics utilised in art-based research will enhance accessibility and encourage more creativity to be adopted in research and education settings.

GOR adopted 'the woman with the movie camera' and interviewer role; SOS adopted an analytical and director/editor/narrator role. SOS had created one clumsy consumer research film prior, and several since; neither had professional training

and film making was relatively new to both authors: This speaks to the accessibility of the form; film should be considered for adoption by more marketing and consumer researchers attempting to represent behaviour and vivify consumer experiences.

Adhering to guidelines for good interpretive research, GOR conducted the video interviews in the natural settings in which participants were comfortable discussing their upcycling ideologies. Participants were purposively sampled and chosen specifically to explore the range of upcyclist ideology and provide a holistic view of the expanding movement. Semi-structured long interviews were recorded using a GoPro video camera with an in-built microphone on a tripod; each interview lasted between 2-3 hours. While we welcome raw and 'grainy' feels to video footage, a GoPro would not be the first choice of video camera for conducting documentary work, particular given the colouring, lighting, and especially sound issues that had to be addressed in post-work. Many unnatural enhancements were made to participants voices to minimise background noise and maximise vocal clarity. However, in this instance the GoPro served its function of documenting the perspectives and providing ample data for analysis and interpretation.

Following the interviews some supporting B-roll footage was recorded, which included walk-around recording in workshops and the relevant thrift, furniture, and retail stores. These opportunities provided essential access to the tools, techniques, materials, artefacts, products and to illuminate the general atmosphere supporting the various upcyclists processes, projects, and spaces. It also gave participants the necessary opportunities to discuss and elaborate on individual pieces, expand on their processes, clarify their consumption ideologies and direct the research in ways unanticipated by researchers.

Each interview was transcribed with rough timestamping and analysed by both authors using the constant comparison method. No film narrative boundary was constructed prior to filming, and the project materialised as a visual grounded theory research approach²⁴ – focused but open. Prior to interview analysis the plan was to simply make a film about upcycling. Video data was subjected to the established coding practices and procedures typical of interpretive consumer research. As analysis developed it was clear that the film narrative could capture the atmosphere and ethos of the upcycling movement while maintaining the voice of each individual participant and magnifying their creative deconsumption ideologies. The aim was to illuminate the micro (play) and macro (work) consumption contexts of upcycling consumption

Once the strongest themes were identified in the data, data incidents received a 'narrative code' – detailing where data incidents would appear in the film, how it fits with the overall narrative, what it can illuminate emotionally or scientifically, or how it could work to engage audiences. Each individual 2-3 hour video interview was edited to its barebones – transformed into a mini-film of about 10 minutes comprised of what might make the final cut – and from there footage from each individual mini-film could

be cut and placed among the developing *Wonders of Waste* narrative. It was advantageous to manage the separate mini-film interviews – it reduced unnecessary complexity of dealing with long and large files. iMovie software was used to construct the film (and mini-films) due to its accessibility and user-friendly design.

Similarly, B-roll footage for all locations were compiled into a 10 minute mini- film, which could be drawn from when necessary to offset the potential overuse of talking-heads, provide some contextualisation on upcycling processes, or enhance overall empathic access. It was also an objective of the project to illuminate the globality of the practice and ensure many international upcycling context were showcased in the film. As such, B-roll and supporting footage of upcycling in action were sourced from international upcyclists, who enthusiastically shared footage or granted permission to use available online footage to contribute to the academic accessibility of upcycling and visual sophistication the film. The intention was to be multi-vocal, multi-visual, multi-modal – universally accessible – to showcase the vivacious globality of this particular evolving creative deconsumption practice. The authors too got in on the fun and engaged in numerous upcycling projects during the research to enhance their understandings of the upcycling process and the emotional experience of the practice; a bulky bench and dainty desk appear in the film's credits.

A narrator script was written and edited in a back and forth manner after different takes of recording to ensure it flowed with a more natural beat of speech. The voice over was regrettably recorded through the iMac speaker in an echoey office, not ideal for narration work and it caused many issues in editing; good quality microphones are cheap and can add much heightened resonance to films. This film was a great learning experience which catapulted us to explore other research film narrative styles and visual techniques.

Once the scientific aspects and more rational elements were embedded in the narrative the more subjective operations of layering the narrative with emotional resonance was required – enhancing engagement via imagining the audience experience – how people would consume the film. It was a priority to showcase the participants and frame all editing enhancements around their perspectives and activities. The visual-emotional narrative was constructed and framed through the use of minimal cuts, paced timing between interviews, blended transitions between scenes, colour adjustments, sound adjustments, and the musical score added. Generally, we believe footage should be kept as raw and as natural as possible, while not being visually/aurally unpleasant to the audience.

The musical score framed much of the emotional resonance of the film. Reggae was chosen to support the scientific narrative due to the combinations of positivity and lament – suffering and optimism – indicative of reggae music. It was used as a device to emphasise the struggles all humans face, and the opportunity to approach them with positivity and optimism but commitment – essentially reggae music captured the tone of the dilemmas emerging in the interview data. All music was incorporated in the

film under fair usage licensing for educational content. Relying on open source music, while may be playing by the strictest of rules, can limit the emotional pitch, empathic identification, or other exciting associations that can be made in academic films, and thus ultimately, limits the potential accessibility of research representations to non-academic audiences – the opposite of what is required to close the gap. However, all decisions on the supporting resonance structures and devices for scientific film narratives should be decided on a project- by-project bases.

The apprentice like progression from individual upcyclist to luxury brand utilised in the film provided both a logical academic structure for communication and enhanced opportunities for emotional access to the upcycling movement. It allowed the audience, although in a mediated way, to in participate in the journey – one that ends with a focus on nurturing the youth, preserving the future – a device to emphasise the cyclical nature of the upcycling practice further and a reminder that deconsumption ideologies must be actively practiced, not just believed in! The vivid visual examples of upcycling in action and finished pieces are intentionally dangled in front of the audience – to coax – tantalise – entice people to upcycle – to get in on the fantasy and fun – to transform what they see – and how they consume.

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