Written Response
Unit 2: Positions Through Contextualising

Annotated Bibliography

1. Ahmed, S. (2017) 'Introduction' in *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press. pp. 1–18.

Sarah Ahmed introduces the idea of *sweaty concepts.* This I believe is a sweaty concept in itself. She describes it as 'something that is difficult, that resists being fully comprehended in the present … a kind of intellectual labor,' (2017, p. 12). She further expands on this definition; 'a sweaty concept might come out of a bodily experience that is trying. The task is to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty' (ibid. p.13). This idea highlights the labor involved in making, experiencing and interpreting our encounters with the complex systems, spaces, ideologies and worlds our bodies and minds engage with.

In my project, I explore the system or cycle of making and sense-making. We are often faced with complex, difficult and saturated networks of information. However, as John Berger (1972) has highlighted, we are frequently encouraged to create and conditioned to understand messages with immediacy. This raises the question: under such conditions how do we engage with *sweaty concepts*? How do we engage with concepts that are difficult, that require time and labor? I ask myself, why are communication designers encouraged to formulate messages in ways that eliminate all friction? How can we exercise our ways of seeing, engaging and interpreting?

2. Barthes, R. [1967] (1977) 'Death of the Author' in *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana Press. pp. 143–148.

In the seminal text 'Death of the Author,' Barthes aims to emancipate the meaning of a text from the person of the author (1977, p.143). He argues that in the modern world the authority on ascribing meaning has passed on from the influence of a *powerful author* to the inference of a reader. Claiming that a literary piece of work is no longer created and understood as a singular voice speaking to an audience: it is a subject in itself, that sits alongside a vast culture of other such messages, concepts, and ideas. Therefore, placing greater importance on the interpretation of a text rather than its intentions. The meanings created by a text are therefore multiple, complex and contextualised in the knowledge of the viewer.

In my project, I explore the relationship between author, viewer, and subject and the roles they play within the system of making meaning. Is authoritative intent truly dead? Does an author's intent influence the reading of a material? What expectations does a reader have from an author's intent? And how do existing narrative codes and context influence a readers expectations? How do these expectations influence their interpretation? How does a text escape an author's influence to encourage open interpretation and multiple meanings?

3. Berger, J. (1972) *Ways of Seeing.* New York: Penguin Books. pp 129 – 155.

I was specifically interested in the seventh essay in *Ways of Seeing* by John Berger (1972) on *publicity images*. We are most frequently faced with such messages. The jarring juxtapositions of aspiration and fear fight for our attention, turning passive viewers into anxious 'spectator-buyers,' (ibid.).

Such messages often draw upon existing tropes of image-making, such as those within oil paintings, to instantly stimulate certain memories or imaginations. Immediate, subliminal interpretation is the goal within such messages. And their purpose is to efficiently form aspirational imaginations that encourage consumption (ibid.).

Berger also touches upon the fact that this phenomena is not unrelated to our construction of reality and the politics that make up our world. 'Publicity turns consumption into a substitute of democracy … Publicity adds up to a kind of philosophical system … It interprets the world.' (ibid. p. 149)

This, in context of my project, has raised several questions in my mind. How can we create in ways that encourage deeper seeing? How can my project challenge our instinct to make meaning based on existing expectations? And how can this challenge make way for new systems of making meaning? Can the concept of efficiency - achieving immediate interpretation of a message - be upended? How can we communicate in ways that emancipate a viewer from the role of passive spectator to allow them to make sense of our complex realities with agency?

4. Lewitt, S. (1968) Sentences on Conceptual Art.

In this project, I am particularly concerned with a few excerpts from Sentences on Conceptual Art by Sol Lewitt (1968). I've extracted the sentences that have influenced my position and inquiry below:

> *"Illogical judgements lead to new experience.*
>
> *The words of one artist to another might lead to an ideas chain.*
>
> *Perception of ideas leads to new ideas.*
>
> *One artist may mis-perceive (understand it differently than the artist) a work of art but still be set off in his own chain of thought by that misconstrual.*
>
> *Perception is subjective."*

Firstly, I am drawing upon his ideas surrounding perception and misperception of a message and the multiple meanings they can potentially generate. My project, *An Exercise on Seeing*, examines a few things in relation to this. [1] How can the divergence of clarity lead to misperception? [2] And how does this misperception lead to new ways of understanding a message? [3] How can we purposefully utilise misperception to encourage the construction of new meanings and imagination?

Furthermore, I am interested in Lewitt's reflections on the cyclical nature of the act of making, understanding and interpreting. My inquiry takes shape a conceptual exercise, whose physical manifestation is influenced by and iteratively constructed subsequent to an engagement with prior interpretations, imaginations and ideas. I do this by involving the viewer in the process of making; a viewer seeing, interpreting and responding to an initial message influences the next version of the message and so on.

5. *HyperNormalisation* (2016). Directed by Adam Curtis. [Documentary Film]

Adam Curtis is known for using found footage, intercut with interviews and an authoritative narration to make communicate his positioned arguments. In *HyperNormalisation* (2016) he does this to highlight how we as a society, have normalised a false understanding of the world.

By crafting together found footage, the documentary connects different moments throughout history. The contents of these individual clips in context of one another are used to expose the 'unreal' reality we have constructed. The film encourages a deeper engagement with the world we live in. In *HyperNormalisation*, each scene cohesively builds on the previous one to clearly communicate and reveal *the way things really are* according to Curtis. There is clear intention and clarity of the director's position.

My project - *An Exercise on Seeing* - similarly deals with concepts of considered *seeing.* However, where my work diverges from Curtis' method of constructing an argument is that it explores how the instinct to look for connection and meaning is challenged when intent is ambiguous - but not totally absent. How can this ambiguity be used to encourage deeper interrogation of the things we encounter to *imagine new interpretations, responses and ways of thinking.*

6. *View From The People Wall* (1964) Directed by Charles and Ray Eames. [A Multichannel Film Installation]

Conceptually, *View From The People Wall* (Eames and Eames, 1964), likens the ways in which machines function to the ways in which our brains process information function. Formally, the film is constructed from found footage, images and a voice-over narration displayed across multiple panels. It's form mirrors its conceptual position: it forces the viewer's eyes to move across the screen to interpret multiple fragments of audio-visual sensory cues to understand the message being conveyed.

In my work, I hope to similarly experiment with audio-visual material and information simultaneously juxtaposed together in moving-image form. We instinctively draw relationships with the contents from one frame to the next. We are accustomed to inferring meaning and context from prescriptive narration and captions. I'm interested in exploring the potential of challenging the instinct of seeking direct connections, intentions and meaning.

1. Extended Critical Analysis: Lewitt, S. (1968) Sentences on Conceptual Art.

Sentences on Conceptual Art by Sol Lewitt (1968) is an extensive reflection on the field of conceptual art. Given the scope of this limited critical analysis, I will be choosing a small selection of excerpts to focus on.

This analysis will present a selection of sentences to examine the relationship between the form, rhetoric and concepts presented by the text. It also aims to connect these reflections on conceptual art with discourses that surround the field of communication design.

I will do this in two ways: [1] by drawing these sentences into dialogue with itself; [2] by drawing the sentences into dialogue with *Death of the Author* by Roland Barthes.

*

First, let us discuss the form, rhetoric and concepts. Originally, these reflections took shape as hand-written text on paper. This suggest that these ideas were transported directly from artists mind into textual material form. Later it was more formally published and circulated: thus, perceived by others possibly prompting new ideas and reflections. Its original form and subsequent circulation align with the concepts presented below (Lewitt, 1968):

> "10 — Ideas alone can be works of art; they are in a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical.
>
> 13 — A work of art may be understood as a conductor from the artist's mind to the viewers. But it may never reach the viewer, or it may never leave the artist's mind.
>
> 14 — The words of one artist to another may induce an ideas chain, if they share the same concept.
>
> 21 — Perception of ideas leads to new ideas."

Rhetorically, we must acknowledge that these reflections are conceptually mystical. This is in accordance with Lewitt's suggestion that, 'Conceptual Artists are mystics rather than rationalists,' (ibid.). For instance;

> "16 — If words are used, and they proceed from ideas about art, then they are art and not literature; numbers are not mathematics.
>
> 35 — These sentences comment on art, but are not art."

It is unclear whether this text pertaining to conceptual art is to be perceived as conceptual art. This leads me to believe that perhaps the lack of logical clarity here is deliberate, to lead to - as Lewitt poses - 'new experiences' or interpretations (ibid.).

*

Now, let us look at the following sentences from Lewitt's text (1968) that allude to the cyclical nature of the process of making and interpreting meaning:

> *"14 — The words of one artist to another might lead to an ideas chain.*
>
> *21 — Perception of ideas leads to new ideas.*
>
> *23 — One artist may mis-perceive (understand it differently than the artist) a work of art but still be set off in his own chain of thought by that misconstrual.*
>
> *24 — Perception is subjective."*

In my view, this cyclical chain of conception and interpretation implies two things. First, the artist [author / designer] is themselves a viewer of other ideas which have influenced their ideas. Second, a viewer is in turn an author, with the ability to act according to their own subjective interpretation.

In conjunction with the arguments laid out in *Death of the Author* by Roland Barthes (1977), we can read both texts under the lens of the relationship between author, viewer, subject and the making of meaning.

Barthes, similar to Lewitt, argues that no authored material is conceived and perceived in isolation (ibid.). All constructions are shaped and reshaped by culture and contexts we occupy. Barthes goes on to claim that the concept of an all powerful author is dead, and the burden of meaning is shaped largely by the interpreter (ibid.). Lewitt (1968), however, seems to blur the boundaries between artist and viewer. Balancing these two arguments, I'm inclined to infer that the burden of meaning is rather fluidly spread across the intent of the author, the position of reader and the context of the subject being interpreted. The shared responsibility creates space for subjectivity and an acceptance of multiplicities in meaning.

*

Finally, one might argue that communication design practice and conceptual art practice are two wholly separate disciplines. However, these excerpts also raise questions on key concepts within graphic communication design pertaining to meaning and perception:

> *"3 — Illogical judgements lead to new experience.*
>
> *21 — Perception of ideas leads to new ideas.*
>
> *23 — One artist may mis-perceive (understand it differently than the artist) a work of art but still be set off in his own chain of thought by that misconstrual.*
>
> *24 — Perception is subjective."*

If a misinterpretation of meaning can hold potential for new imaginations, one might ask, what is the role of deliberate ambiguity within communication design practice? The discipline of communication design is so often concerned with clarity and efficiency. But is there a context in which misconception be usefully applied in communication design?

2 . Extended Critical Analysis: HyperNormalisation (2016). Directed by Adam Curtis. [Documentary Film]

In this section of the written response, I will be presenting a critical analysis of the documentary film *HyperNormalisation* (2016) by Adam Curtis. I will be analysing [1] its purpose and message; [2] its construction, circulation and meaning; [3] its connection to recurring discourses in communication design practice surrounding authorship, content and shaping meaning. I will do this by drawing it into dialogue with other texts referenced in my inquiry throughout this unit.

*

HyperNormalisation (ibid.) is a long-form, informatively dense documentary film. It presents us with the difficult idea that we have accepted a fabricated version of reality of the world we live in.

Curtis encourages us, the viewers, to see and experience the world around us more deeply. I liken this to Sarah Ahmed's theorisation of '*sweaty concepts,' (2017).* Both these concepts aim to motivate the intellectual labor of seeing, experiencing and interpreting the complex systems, ideologies and realities our bodies and minds occupy.

Curtis' documentary is concerned with exposing difficult truths by painstakingly dismantling the facade of the falsely constructed *unreal world*; I would argue that here the task of the documentary dealing with such a *sweaty concept, '… is to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty' (Ahmed, 2013: p.13).*

*

I will be analysing the construction, circulation and methods of making meanings within *HyperNormalisation* (Curtis, 2016) by placing it in dialogue with the construction of arguments within John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972).

Formally, the documentary combines existing found footage and Curtis's authoritative narration; it applies the formal codes of combining images and words to achieve clarity in message. Berger highlights this method of drawing upon pre-existing expectations to efficiently communicate meanings with immediacy and clarity (ibid.).

Both Berger and Curtis build their arguments by making connections between past phenomena and present conditions to understand our constructions of reality.

Berger traces historical tropes within oil paintings in modern day public images; he does so to illustrate how these tropes in present circumstances perform a new functions. In doing so Berger deconstructs the role of the publicity image; stating that its pervasive nature has a great impact on our constructions of an imagined false reality of aspiration (Berger, 1972). Curtis, similarly curates and edits together footage pertaining to specific historical events and shapes our understanding of these events in the context of our present condition of a false reality. Curtis, utilises the public medium of television with the objective of dismantling the unreal world it has itself helped to create.

*

Finally, the utilisation of existing found footage content leads me to examine HyperNormalisation (Curtis, 2016) through the lens of two of Michael Rock's essays - Fuck Content and Designer as Author (2013). When existing content is manipulated or re-purposed, it often raises questions of ownership and authorship. Rock's essays liken the author to designer to director by placing equal importance on both what is communicated and how something is communicated. He argues that shaping content is as substantial as a method of formulating original meanings, ideas and arguments (Rock, 2013). HyperNormalisation successfully illustrates this concept; found footage and historical clips are given new context through Curtis' narrative shaping.

Bibliography

1. Ahmed, S. (2017) 'Introduction' in *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press. pp. 1–18.

2. Barthes, R. ([1967] 1977) 'Death of the Author' in *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana Press. pp. 143–148.

3. Berger, J. (1972) *Ways of Seeing.* New York: Penguin Books. pp 129 – 155.

4. *HyperNormalisation* (2016). Directed by Adam Curtis. [Documentary Film]

5. Lewitt, S. (1968) Sentences on Conceptual Art.

6. Rock, M. ([1996] [2009] 2013) 'Designer As Author' and 'Fuck Content.' *Multiple Signatures: On Designers, Authors, Readers and Users*. New York: Rizzoli. pp. 45–56, 91–95

7. *View From The People Wall* (1964) Directed by Charles and Ray Eames. [A Multichannel Film Installation]