Reading the Residue

A graphic designer's video essay on how readability is manufactured

Moye Liu

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This text-based version accompanies the four-minute video essay *Reading the Residue*, submitted as part of the Unit 2 midpoint assessment. It contains the full narration, the spoken interruptions of two other "voices" — the **dictionary** and the **reader** — and the references that underwrite the position the essay attempts to define.

The video and this text are two different forms of the same argument. The video runs the argument in time; this text holds it still long enough to be cited.

A note on the different voices

This essay is read aloud by different voices, which are separated so that the text reader can perceive the differences between them, just like the video listener.

Narrator

Dictionary from 1 881

Reader

The argument of the essay is built out of the friction between different voices reading the same patch of sediment.

I.

An opening, with a cup of tea

A woman finishes a cup of tea.

At the bottom of her cup, a small amount of residue remains. She looks at it for a moment.

Then she says:

> [Someone is coming back. From far away.]

This essay is not about whether she is right. It is about everything that happens between that residue and that sentence. The patch of sediment is fixed. The sentence is not. And yet somewhere, there is a book that says exactly what the residue is supposed to mean.

I am a graphic designer. The question I ask in this essay is the same question I have been asking all year, in different objects:

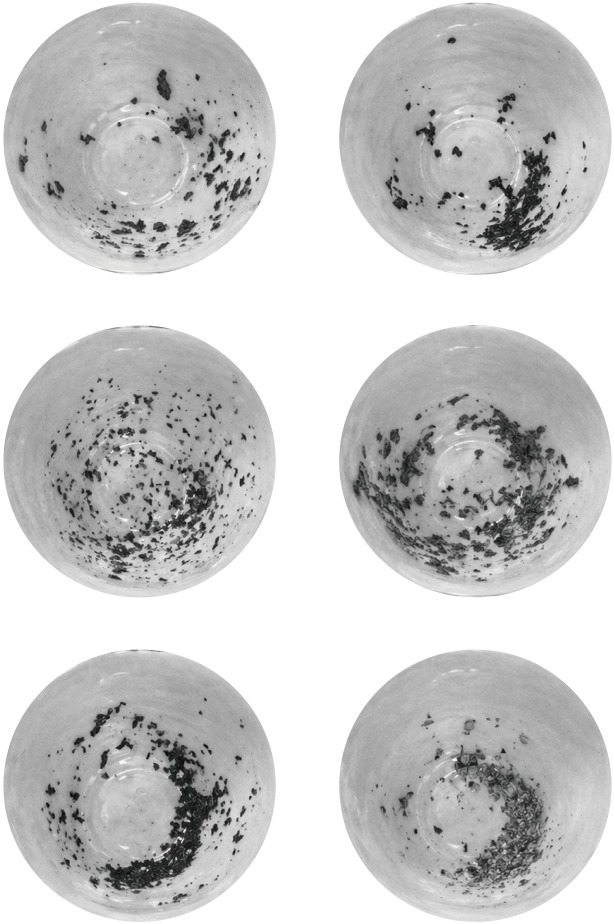
How is readability manufactured?

Three things sit on my desk: a patch of tea residue, a misregistered Risograph print, an 1881 dictionary. To me, they are the same kind of object. Each is a device that converts an image into a meaning. Each pretends that the meaning was already there, waiting to be read. Each, on closer inspection, was put there by someone.

The position I am defending in this essay is short. It fits in three lines:

> The residue is fixed. The reading is not. Yet the dictionary is.

The rest of this essay is the attempt to earn the right to those three lines.



II.

Where the question came from

The question did not begin with tea.

Earlier this year, for a different brief, I was working with a Risograph — a stencil-based duplicator that prints one ink layer at a time. The colours never aligned. At first I tried to correct the misalignment. Then I noticed something stranger. Whenever I instructed the machine to shift in one direction, the actual print shifted ninety degrees off from the instruction. Not occasionally. Every time.

The machine had a rule. The rule had never been declared anywhere, not in the manual, not in the interface, but the machine was obeying it consistently. The "error" was not an error at all. It was a *grammar* the machine was applying silently to every page it produced.

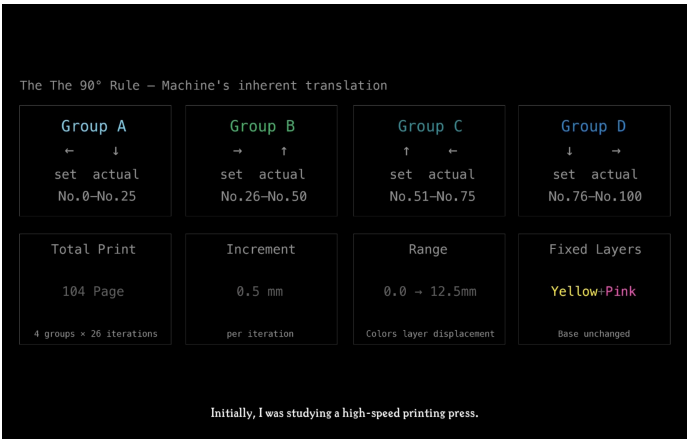
That was the moment I stopped trying to fix the misregistration and started recording it. One hundred and four prints, in four directional groups, in 0.5 mm increments. Each page documenting one step of a rule the machine itself never named. The work I made was a typology in the sense Bernd and Hilla Becher made typologies of a hidden grammar made visible.

What that project taught me, and what carried over into this one, is this:

A "reading system" is anything that takes a random or ambiguous input and produces a definite output, by following rules that are never declared on the surface.

By that definition, the Risograph is a reading system. So is a tea-cup dictionary. So is, on reflection, much of what graphic designers do for a living.

A patch of tea sediment is a much harder object to study than a printing machine. There is no manual to compare against, no measurable offset, no Group A, B, C, D. But the structural problem is the same. Random input. Hidden grammar. Definite output. And the same instinct that pulled me to the Riso pulled me here: *if I can make the grammar visible, the system stops being magic and becomes a thing I can look at.*



III.

The reader is the apparatus

Here is the experiment.

I asked three different people to look at the same cup of tea residue and tell me what they saw. Same cup. Same patch of sediment. Same lighting. Same photograph.

> [Reader A: I see a kangaroo.]
>
> [Reader B: I see two fish.]
>
> [Reader C: I see a dragon.]

I then looked each of these up in the 1881 dictionary. *Tea-Cup Reading and Fortune-Telling by Tea Leaves*, by "A Highland Seer." The dictionary returned, with no hesitation:

> ***KANGAROO — Difficulties will surround you. A journey.***
>
> ***FISH — An important message from afar. Increase of wealth or family.***
>
> ***DRAGON — Great and sudden changes.***

The residue did not change. The reading did. And yet the dictionary, somehow, had a definite answer for each of them.

This is the moment my project turns. If the image is fixed and the meaning is not, then the meaning is not *in* the image. It is in the person looking. The dictionary, which

presents itself as a key to the residue, is actually doing something else: it is **catching whatever the reader has already projected**, and giving that projection a name that sounds older and more authoritative than the projection deserves.

Roland Barthes, writing in 1967 about a different object entirely, called this turn "the death of the author" — the recognition that the meaning of a text is not sealed inside it by the person who made it, but produced, each time, by the person reading it.[1] The tea-cup is a particularly literal case: the "author" is no one. There is no author, just hot water and gravity and leaves and the reader is doing all of the work. The dictionary is the trick that hides this from the reader.

There is a finer point I want to record here, because it is the thing the experiment showed me that I did not expect.

When I collected what the three readers said beyond just the name of the animal they had identified, their full sentences sounded nothing like the dictionary. The dictionary speaks in cold, clipped predictions ("difficulties will surround you"). The readers spoke in something else entirely:

> [The bond is not broken, only incomplete. Affection gathers where certainty has not yet arrived.]

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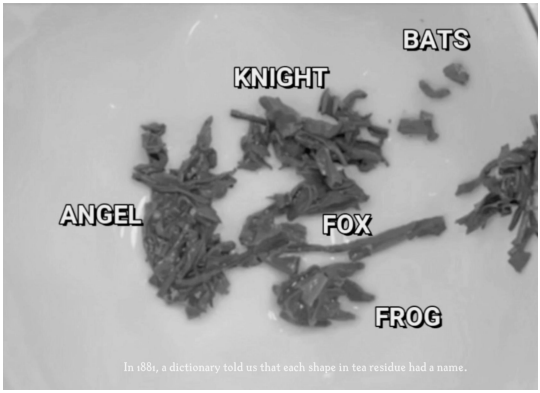
[1] Barthes, R. (1967) *The Death of the Author*. First published in *Aspen* magazine, no. 5–6. Reprinted in Barthes, R. (1977) *Image–Music–Text*, trans. S. Heath. London: Fontana.

> [The thread between you is not broken — only tangled, wavering between longing and distance.]
>
> [The tide bends inward around an empty space. Feelings remain, though silence keeps its distance.]

All three readers, asked to look at a patch of dried sediment, produced sentences about closeness, longing, and the people they could not reach. None of them produced predictions. The dictionary frames divination as a system for *predicting events*; what the readers actually use it for is something quieter *naming a feeling they had not yet said aloud*.

Divination, in practice, is not where we go for answers. It is where we go to hear our own expectations spoken back to us in another voice. The "another voice" is the dictionary. The dictionary's authority is the permission slip we needed to say the thing we already wanted to say.

This is the position the essay arrives at. It is not a refutation of divination; it is a redescription of what divination actually does.



IV.

Why a book

The work that came out of this experiment, in studio, is a printed book, a faithful-looking reissue of the 1881 dictionary, modified at one structural level so that the system the book originally enforced becomes visible inside the book itself.

I want to defend the choice of medium, because it is not innocent.

Tea residue is *ephemeral*. It dries, it cracks, it is washed out within an hour. The readings my three readers gave were also ephemeral said once, in a kitchen, then gone. The dictionary, by contrast, is *fixed*: typeset, bound, reprinted, sold on Amazon today as a print-on-demand paperback over a hundred and forty years after it first appeared. The asymmetry between the ephemeral residue and the fixed dictionary is the whole engine of the system. The dictionary's permanence is what makes it feel like an authority; the residue's transience is what makes it feel like raw material in need of one.

If I had written a critique of this system in another medium like a wall text, a website, a lecture that critique would have been ephemeral too. It would have sat at the same temperature as the readers' kitchen-table sentences, easy to dismiss, easy to forget. The dictionary would have remained the only fixed object in the room.

So I made another fixed object. Not to compete with the dictionary, but to **stand at the same level of permanence as the thing I am critiquing**. The book argues against the dictionary by being a book. It uses the form of the printed authority against the content of the printed authority. The crit comes through the medium, not on top of it.

This is the move Mushon Zer-Aviv makes in *The Normalizing Machine* (2018): rather than describe how a classification system works, he builds the system and lets the viewer operate it.[2] My book makes the same wager in a quieter register. It does not tell the reader that divination is a projection device; it makes the reader, in their own hands, do the projecting — and then, on a later page, shows them the projection laid alongside the dictionary that gave it permission. The critique is performed by the reading, not stated above it.

The book has three parts. The first part is the 1881 manual, faithfully re-typeset. No commentary. The reader is asked to inhabit the system as the original author intended — to believe, briefly, that the residue really does have a meaning the dictionary can find for them. The second part hands the system over to the reader: a catalogue of un-captioned silhouettes, asking the reader to flip back and forth between the image and the alphabetical key, performing the act of reading themselves. The third part places the dictionary's entries beside the readers' own writings, on the same spread, at the same scale. The dictionary is no longer above the

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[2] Zer-Aviv, M., Stavy, D. and Weissenstern, E. (2018) *The Normalizing Machine*. Interactive installation. Available at: https://mushon.com/tnm/ (Accessed: 31 May 2026).

reader; it is *next to* the reader, one more voice among several, all reading the same patch of sediment.

This is the moment Foucault prepared me to see. *The Order of Things* argues that every classification system, at its origin, is an invention — but presents itself, in its inheritance, as a discovery.[3] The 1881 dictionary is an exemplary case. It was written by one anonymous person in Scotland in 1881; it presents itself as the accumulated wisdom of an ancient art. The book I made does not argue against this in words. It simply prints the invention and the discovery on the same page and lets the reader notice.



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[3] Foucault, M. (1966) *Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines*. Paris: Gallimard. Translated as Foucault, M. (1970) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Tavistock.

V.

Closing — *essai*, to attempt

I have used the word "position" several times in this essay. I want to end by saying what I mean by it.

In the brief for this unit, the position is defined by reference to Donna Haraway's notion of *situated knowledges* the argument that there is no view from nowhere, that every act of knowing happens from a specific body, a specific place, a specific moment.[4] What Haraway calls the "god trick" the pretence that one is looking from outside, objectively, without a position — is exactly the trick the 1881 dictionary plays. Its entries are written in a voice that sounds like no one, from nowhere, for all time. *Difficulties will surround you.* No speaker, no situation, no qualification. That voice is the technology by which it makes its inventions feel like discoveries.

My essay tries to do the opposite. The narrator hesitates, names herself, says *I*, leaves room for being wrong. The position is held in a particular voice, from a particular table, looking at a particular cup. This is not a weakness of the essay. It is the position.

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[4] Haraway, D. (1988) 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), pp. 575–599.

The word *essay* comes from the old French *essai*, "to attempt, to test, to try."[5] The form gives me permission to hold a position without claiming to have proved it. Everything I have written here is provisional in that sense it is a position, not a verdict. The video essay closes on the same patch of residue it opens with: same image, same frame, same silence. What has changed in those four minutes is not the residue. What has changed is what the reader is now bringing to it.

That is the experiment, and that is the position. The residue is fixed. The reading is not. The dictionary, the Risograph, and this essay, every system that turns an image into a meaning, is a particular voice, made in a particular place, by a particular person, pretending for a moment not to be.

Including, I should say, this one.

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[5] MAGCD Y1 Unit 2 brief (2026) *Positions through Essaying.* London College of Communication, p. 1.

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