INTENT

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ABSTRACT
This Gestalt artistic research paper explores intent based on the idea that all human acts of creation and communication has intent, conscious or unconscious.

KEYWORDS
Intent
Meaning
Gestalt
Visual expression
Design
Film
Computer games
Animation
Production design
Art direction
Arts
Communication
Converging media

DISCLAIMER
To narrow down the subject matter of intent to creative endevours of practical production I purposely left out the discussion of Intention in the philosophical sense of the word, saving that for future reflection.

METHOD

Artistic research is used to explore questions that can not be discussed in traditional scientific research because the subject matter might be too subjective. Nor can it be discussed in class because some students are still struggling with their own methodology (their *how*) and have not reached intent objectively yet (their *why*). Nor can these debates be had in production due to tight deadlines and heavy workloads.

Reflective writing is used for its freeform, associative thinking properties, letting inter-disciplinary ideas meet. Like literature, theatre and film studies, psychology (desire, conscious / unconscious), philosophy (phenomenology, existentialism), the Arts and communication studies (semiotics).

These reflections have been documented during the development of an animated family feature and are a continuation from my 2013 reflections entitled *Visual interpretation, intent and response.*

INTRODUCTION

All human creation and communication has intent, conscious or unconscious. If we are not clear about our intent with our work the receiver (audience, gamer, reader etc) might misinterpret the work, project their own meaning it (which might be a good thing!) or they might not engage with it because it lacks intent and interest for them. Like too much art, advertising, films, games (etc) today, which few people relate to or even less, emote with. The work that people do relate to or emote with has clear intent, clearly communicated and represented (gestalt). Regardless if the intent is obvious, elegant, provocative or subtle. Consider your own favorites. Do they show clear intent?

DEFINING INTENT

Gestalt, represented, *shown*, experienced, by what we say and do. To show *what is important.*

Intent |in'tent|
noun
Intention or purpose
Adjective
1 [predic.] (**intent on/upon**) resolved or deter-mined to do (something).
2 (esp. of a look) showing earnest and eager attention: *a curiously intent look on her face.*

Phrases
To (or for) all intents and purposes in all important respects: a man who was to all intents and pur-poses illiterate. With intent Law with the intention of committing a specified crime: *he denied arson with intent to endanger life | charges of wounding with intent.*
Derivatives
Intentness noun
Origin
Middle English: from Old French *entent, entente,* based on Latin *intendere.*

IDEAS AND INTENT

A friend asked where ideas come from, claiming not to have any ideas herself. She claimed that she couldn't transcribe ideas from a script, nor express the message. She simply films what happens in front of the camera.

Ideas come from inspiration, opportunity, discussion, exploration, connections of separate ideas (brain storming), dreams, thinking, looking, doing and especially from intent. What is it that we want? Why? "Thinking is part of problem solving as ideas encompass both content and form." "Thinking is especially important in projects that has a specific theme or message.

How can the concept by communicated in visual terms?"(Lauer and Pentak, 2008, p.7, 9).

We can not just sit down and create something from nothing. We could but it might lead to audience apathy (no idea) or rage (wrong idea) or boredom: predictable, prejudistic stereotypes instead of archetypes and originality. In the worst case: insulting, leading to repercussions like demonstrations, violence and deaths after the so-called "Muhammed" pictures in Denmark (2005). Or "Lilla Hjärtat" in Sweden which led to racism, censorship and national debate (2012).

We need to be able choose our intent, our message and our expression – our language – otherwise we don't know what we are saying, to who or why. Much less why people react to it like they do.

We *need* ideas. We *need* intent. This is the power of language, especially the visual language: to (re)create our experience and feelings about what it is to be human, our reality or to create escapism. Then to be able to it share with others through books, films, computer games, arts etc – by design. "Design is not just how something looks and feels but how it works." (Steve Jobs). *Why* it works. *Intent.*

In our situation as creators can we create a tactile experience to move the spectator so they emote with the work for a unique, immersive, experience? Or according to Oscar Wilde "to create, inside us, a new world" and "to give form to formless things" like themes and ideas through art (Wilde 1891 / 2001, Introduction). I.e. an intent to visualise, to represent, to gestalt, to communicate.

"Communication has always been an essential role for art (us). Even before letters were invented written communication consisted of pictorial symbols and before that pictures alone, such as cave paintings. Today pictures function as an international language. A picture can be understood faster, more clearly, especially if the written words are unknown or unintelligible. In art and design, as in communication, the artist or designer is saying something to the viewer. Here the successful solution not only is visually effective but also communicates the idea." (Lauer and Pentak, 2008, p.6)

If we do not progress we die. We can not simply stand on the shoulders of what has gone before. Even if makes it more believable, founded in the contemporary cultural context and was recently commercially popular. This will lead to stagnation. In the best of scenarios we tap into some of their profit, by association. Or actually discover something new, based on what has gone before. If that. The audience has already experienced that which made it popular in the first place, but now they crave a new, unique experience. It is like eating too much candy. The first bit tastes great but after too much the taste oversaturates, disappearing. Even the well established need to innovate, to feed the capitalistic drive of business, to maximise profit, not Art or Humanity, like so many film and game studios. What are they really saying about us as humans and our human condition with their products? Is that really their intent? What does Half life claim? Journey? Battlefield? WoW? Minecraft? Oscar Wilde reflects: "rescue Britain (ourselves) from a steadily encroaching mediocrity from intellectual (and emotional) stagnation and the grinding worship of money." (Wilde, 1898). Truer today than ever, when commercial priority dictate creative endeavours, cutting schedules, budgets and ambition (intent). What is our future without ideas, without intent? How can we have ideas without intent? Or do ideas come first, and then intent grows out of that idea?

DIFFERENT KINDS OF INTENT

PRACTICAL INTENT

When a person creates anew there is a process of what to create and how to create it. This is where many inexperienced and experienced artists stay, trying to meet the demands of their future, problem-solving by design. Example: a new artist will design a game feature simply by what was popular in their own cultural reference sphere 2-3 years ago, playing catch-up technically and artistically by stealing from the "best". The established artist continues to do what they do because it works. "If it looks right, it is right." (Fowkes, 2014).

"A knowledge of the 'grammar' and 'syntax' of the interaction of different signs and sign systems should thus help the director (designer, artist, writer etc) to attain a higher degree of certain that they will actually convey the meaning they intended, at least to the majority of the audience." (Esslin, 1988, p. 50). In this phase many are learning the grammar and syntax by doing. What works, what doesn't, and hopefully why, through case studies and production. Let's call this *practical intent* as the creator / sender uses the tools they have to do what they can.

FUNCTIONAL INTENT

Once the creator feels comfortable with what and how, they move on to why they are creating it in the first place. Perhaps their intent is based on the narrative demands of a script or game play MDA (Hunicke) Example: the artist will consider the demands of a game play feature and the specific demands of this particular game aesthetics. Let's call this *functional intent*, usually resulting on literal visual cues based on story (game play) keywords (Sandberg, 2009, p.18) which generates a completely game play or narrative driven design. This is where most commercial products stay; apps, many films, graphics profiles, comic books, commercials etc. Carl in Pixar's Up is an example of Pixar's "Story driven design" mantra (Nievra, 2014. Hauser, 2009, p. 40, 49). In functional intent form follows story or game function, based on the concept "form follows function" (Pollio, c. 15BC).

DEMOGRAPHIC INTENT

Another intent to consider might be the target demographic, wanting to address a specific group of people with a specific message. Their age, knowledge, experience, cultural context, subjective desires, opinions could all be taken into consideration. Especially desire. The French philosopher Jean–François Lyotard describes desire as separation and unity, the feeling of being alone. "Since we speak, act and live under the threat of loss (death?)... this constitutive incompleteness of meaning... haunted by absence..." (Lyotard 2013, Introduction pages 2-6). He goes on to describe a desire for meaning, in the most philosophical sense of the word: the desire for unity, based in separation. "This constitutive incompleteness of meaning". Further-on "...meaning has always belonged to itself." "...the separation of society from itself, the separation of world from mind, of reality from meaning... the exposure to a brutal emotion that saps language yet demands it. ...the loss of unity, a sense of mourning for lost completeness" and on page 8 "a tension between desire and responsibility." This is very interesting in context to the creative act and sharing it with others, especially people's desire for the unique, moving experience. Could this separation drive many fantasy and science fiction films, computer games and books in the way we desire another reality, rather than that of our own ordinary reality? Many of us desire, even crave escapism. Some make it a living, like athletes and rock stars. The superhuman alter ego, the super star athlete, representing the way we desire us to be, but haven't achieved ourselves. "Buy a Star Wars action figure and bring the fantasy home with you, making it real, in your life." Intent tapping into the desire of escapism, responsibility, existential fulfilment in the subjective experience (phenomenology) and finally meaningfulness. "I have, therefore I am." This taps into Freud's ideas as well of course.

Desire, what we want, not just what we need, is widely popular in advertising and works based on quantitative demographic research and qualitative focus groups. For a more in-depth look at desire and manipulating the masses study *The Century of the Self* (Curtis, 2002). Let's call this *demographic intent*.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTENT

Yet another intent might be to create the ultimate subjective experience for a spectator (user, reader etc). Phenomenology driven intent, *phenomenological intent*. Ie striving to create the most intense phenomenological experience for a specific audience. Bullet time in the *Matrix* films is based in this. The narrative would work without bullet time, but it certainly adds a lot to the experience. Perhaps a part of phenomologic intent would be emotional intent; the intent to create an emotional response for the audience, moving them, having them emote. *Finding Neverland* (the movie) and most music, especially song, has emotional intent. Like *Pavarotti* or *Little Jimmy Scott*. Color saturation is often used with emotional intent, as is theatrical lighting. Gesture drawing tries not only to capture the motion, but more so the emotion, so gesture drawing has an emotional intent. If you design by emotional intent is it the emotion of the story beat, its characters or what we want the audience to be feeling that is your emotional intent? Or are they all one and the same intent through cause and effect if character *is* story and the experience only exists once it has met its audience?

ENHANCING INTENT

"I completely agree that we need a direction before we can actually make something great but sometimes that intent slowly discloses itself. Sometimes we head out in a general direction with an idea to guide us but it can alter as we go. But yes! We do need that initial idea, that intent, that direction. It doesn't have to be ground breaking either, it can be quite simple." (Ruppel, 2014). This aspect of discovery is extra vital for the improvement of the original idea and staying open throughout production to let the best ideas surface ("pulsing": to enhance). Especially when working together with other people to make something great. This type of process demands its team, schedule and budget because changes demand agility, dedication, energy, patience and time. Qualities many contemporary productions can not afford unfortunately. Let's call this *enhancing intent*.

HISTORIC INTENT

If one has a clear historic subject matter one could set out to be faithful to it. Many take inspiration from the setting and the time period to decide sets, costume design and so forth but one could also prioritize historic accuracy before game play or narrative drive. This does not mean that editing, camera language, lighting etc needs to be historically accurate, recreating the surfaces and treatment of the period's painting style for example, but simply that the image's saturation, the visual surface could be. This is of course *historic intent* and is common in the ambition of many documentaries but also in drama (Tashiro, 1998).

DECONSTRUCTING INTENT

To delve deeper into intent, how about the why of the why? One way could be to deconstruct (Derrida, 1967) a narrative: what is the why of a story? Its theme, what it is about? (Vogler, 1998, p.95). Let's call this *thematic intent*. Example: Is the theme empathy, that we need more empathy for each other in the world? How would you visually represent an empathic story arc for a character that learns empathy through the story? How did they solve it in *E.T.*? Empathy was Elliot's character arc. If you know the thematic intent how do you visually express, gestalt, the theme (as your intent) so it is felt, never stated, to the audience? I raise this question in context to the holistic experience of the title, out of a phenomenological perspective for the audiences' experience. See medium below.

EXISTENTIAL INTENT

What if we deconstruct theme? What is underneath a story's theme? Why did the writer (designer, artist) choose this particular theme? A deep personal meaning of the fears, anxieties, hopes and dreams of the creator? A cynical business plan trying to appeal to the masses for profit? A desire for something? To share? To create? To survive? To fit in? To be true? To be accepted? What do you think? What is behind your intent? Why are you doing this? Who are you? Is there an *existential intent* driven by our common human condition? Like Monet's *Water Lilies*, Bergman's *Persona*, or Bacon's work?

LOVE

This is the most famous intent of all: love. For the love of the project, falling in love with the *what* or the *who* (Derrida, interview). We get inspiration and ideas because we fall in love with the idea. "We let ourselves fall in love with it." (Fruergaard, 2014) "Do you fall in love with woman because she is lovable or does she become lovable because you fall in love with her? (Lyotard, 2013, p.21) Let's call this *love's intent*. You let yourself go and explore your relationship to the material through the energy and passion, engagement, you feel for the material. This will be felt by the audience because of how deeply you feel for the material. It is pure.

CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS INTENT

Lacan thought Freud's ideas of "slips of the tongue," jokes, and the interpretation of dreams all emphasized the agency of language in subjective constitution. Lacan proposes that "the unconscious is structured like a language." The unconscious is not a primitive or archetypal part of the mind separate from the conscious, linguistic ego, he explained, but rather a formation as complex and structurally sophisticated as consciousness itself. (Lacan, 2002) If this is true, if the conscious and unconscious has a language, then there is conscious and unconscious intent. Whether we like it or not, as soon as we create anything there will be meaning in it, even in a child's drawing. This claim that every act of creation has intent behind it, consciously or unconsciously; is it true?

Let's call this artistic, or better yet, *intuitive intent*. "It is like looking away from the work ahead of you and just letting it happen. This is especially true if you already have a clear visual voice." (Sandberg, 2014).

SYNERGETIC INTENTS

Can these different intents be combined, to create full and unique work? I hope so. What do you think? Which ones do you work with today? Can you think of other intentions?

WHERE TO START

Where do we start? With the idea or the intent? From the sender, the message or the receiver? Who is saying what to whom and why? Sender. Or what is said to who by whom? Message. Or who receives what from who? Receiver. Or are there only two approaches? Your emotions or theirs. Either gestalt your emotion to the material or create how you want them to feel from the material by showing them how to emote with and interpret your work. This is what Pixar does and it has been criticized as being manipulative. Edvard Munch, Monet and Francis Bacon does the opposite – they are true to their own emotions as auteur creators. Be it musicians, authors, filmmakers, playwrights. Where will game designers take us?

Of course the spectator has to allow for the development of the narrative or game play. Their journey through your work might create "a contest between identification, dismissal, interest, indifference, participation, diversion, understanding, confusion, surprise and so forth... an emotional envelope... of emotional identification (and the) desire for closure". (Tashiro 1998, p. 17) Perhaps this works...

> "See what I am saying and understand what I mean."

This both takes into consideration the creator and her audience.

Or should the message start from the creator, then the message, lastly the receiver? This way the creator needs to know why they have this specific message, this specific intent, to this specific audience and to build, to create, from there. This fits well with love's intent and works well if you have something important to share with the world. But the opposite would be true if you intended to create the optimal subjective experience for the receiver (phenomenology). Can these approaches be united? What would be norm–critical to this?

INTENT AND THE AUDIENCE

There seems to be a general consensus between communication (Fiske, 2011), literature, theatre (Esslin, 1988) and film studies (Church Gibson, Hill, 1998) that all experience must go through the receiving person to become an experience (phenomenology), and that meaning is created in the receiving party. "Thus the skill of the creators of the performance must be matched by, and depends on, the 'competence' of the spectator to 'decode' if not all then at least a sufficient minimum of the signs and sign systems deployed within the performance." (Esslin, 1988, p.139). According to Esslin there is no experience without the audience. This is to claim that the work is only completed in the mind of the audience. Others, like John Fiske, agree (Fiske, 2011). One could have all the intent in the world but it would mean nothing until it meets another human being. Oscar Wilde might argue differently, claiming Art for Art's sake. "The fact of it's existence is the reason for it's existence." "The future for Art (design) rests on the public's permanent stupidity and they shall worship ugliness." (Wilde, 1989). The theory being that we are not born with taste, but that taste is something we learn. Or do we continue consuming what we are served instead of choosing ourselves? *Consumers with intent*?

Is there no meaning, no intent, just because the audience doesn't get it or if the work never meets an audience? Perhaps there is always creator's intent, no matter what the audience thinks or doesn't? Somebody must have wanted to create something for some reason? "The creator has a responsibility to oneself, the piece and the little girl in the audience to do something good. That is why we are the artist." (Rosenthal, 2014).

INTENT, MEDIUM AND
THE AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE

Let's continue based on the theory that no work is complete until it meets the audience / gamer / reader etc. (Esslin 1988, p.128-152).

How you create something affects the experience of the piece as much as what you create and why you are creating it that way. The medium chosen to express the intent with directly sets the tone of the intent and the audience's reception of the intent, affecting how they emote to the intent.

Is using our bodies directly to express ourselves most pure? Dance and song, live acting, stand up. Especially song. Nothing is so uniquely yours as your voice and it communicates your intent most direct to the audience, with your personality. No tools or medium in the way of your intent.

Add an instrument to convey the message and that instrument's voice will carry your message to the receiver. A guitar for example has its sound. As oils has its visual, tactile quality, its look. It takes great artistic energy to get through layers of medium and still convey the idea, the intent, the emotion. That's why CG can be so crude in its expression compared to song. Even if you compare the expressive power of your favourites in both, music will have the most emotional impact, intensity. For me that would be Monet's *Water Lilies* (painting), *Finding Neverland* (live action), *Ratatouille* (animation) and Pavarotti's *Turandot/Act 3 "Nessus Dorma!"* (song). All move me within their respective medium's but song most directly and intuitively.

Is this true? Try it yourself. Compare your own emotional response to each medium you are interested in. Which is the most powerful, affecting you the most, the artists and all Arts being equal? Use mindfulness for example: listen to how you feel. Understand how you feel. Accept how you feel, letting each piece move you to the full extent of your capacity. Some people never emote to anything, especially not art. Others are easily moved. By simply seeing someone else cry, even if they don't know them, for example. Some easily laugh, others artificially smile. Be true to yourself if you try this as you will be searching for the power of expression in your chosen mediums.

THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE

"The medium is the message" is a famous saying by Marshall Mcluhan (Mcluhan, 1964). The medium does give the message its character, tone, voice. A deconstruction of all the visual tools available to you – elements and principles of art and animation, cinematic, kinetic force, editing, words, interactivity, scripts etc – will empower your command in the search for visual expression / intent in the creation of a unique experience for the audience. These tools – like shape, form, color, light, composition, rhythm etc – can be more precise in their expression, as to communicate the meaning effectively, precisely and within cultural context (Fiske, 2011). This is where training, practise, skill and talent comes in. But the medium itself is expressive too! I.e. the oil paint itself, the 3D/CG properties in itself. Its look affects the audience and the message.

DECONSTRUCTION OF THE MEDIUM FOR EXPRESSION

Imagine "to be able to channel whatever you feel through your instrument." (Winehouse, 2004). Take your chosen medium, your instrument, to its extreme expressive potential by *deconstructing the medium to make it yours*. To take control, to explore it. Form follows function but can also follow emotion just like story follows emotion, either yours, the character's or the audiences'. Like all the greats have done, that is part of what makes them great. Intent, idea, technique and exposure to the market/public.

In order to express, gestalt, the intent a deconstruction the medium needs to take place to gain control. If you can't write and don't know the language then how can you express anything vital? This is the deconstruction of the medium to master it. It is partly learning a medium but also taking it apart to be able to put it back together again as you want it, to express what you need to express: your intent. The idea is to deconstruction the medium to find its

intonation range, defining and refining your visual language so you will be able to express yourself. Example: Dali, Picasso and Van Gogh all used oil paints to very different effects. They deconstructed the medium to make it their own. When you know what to express and why you are expressing it you have full range of the emotion of the medium to communicate and affect the audience with. "With greatest effect, precision and within a cultural context." (Fiske, 2011).

THE CONSEQUENCE OF THE INTENT

The consequence of the why is that hopefully, through professional execution and clear yet sublime communication, the intent comes across to the receiver (audience / gamer / reader). This way they can process it with their emotions, knowledge, experience and cultural context, making the experience theirs, turning it into a fond memory or a greater reality (for example the experience of driving a well designed car or enjoying an excellent meal) for an enhanced enjoyment, and meaning, of life (desire, escapism in reality; i.e. experience becoming a memory).

CONTEXTUALIZING INTENT

Dead Poets Society (Peter Weir, 1989) and *Moulin Rouge!* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001) are examples of films with very clear intent. The way they present, *gestalt*, the themes, is by having the characters do what the theme is. In *Moulin Rouge* that is "to love and be loved in return" and that is exactly what the main two characters do. They love and are loved in return. And Ewan McGregor's character Christian goes on and on about this theme, saying it aloud, throughout the film in a very up-front and blunt way. Just like Robin Williams and the boys in the *Dead Poets Society* say Carpe Diem, seize the day, out loud bluntly. And that is exactly what the boys set out to do through the whole film. These are two examples of very clear, theme driven intents.

Other titles might have very subtle themes. For example Journey (ThatGameCompany,

2012) has a very existential feel to it. Especially when you play in single player mode, where you feel more separation. In multi-player there is more unity (with the other players). Also your phenomenological experience of the game will change each time you play the game based on your mood when you play the game, which is a very unique quality for a computer game.

A film with a more subtle intent is in *E.T.* (Steven Spielberg, 1982), which has empathy as a theme. Watching E.T. several times I missed that the theme was empathy. That is what Elliot learns thanks to his relationship with E.T. The cue to the theme in act 1 is when Elliot's brother scolds Elliot for making their mother cry by talking about their absent father. "Why don't you think about someone else for a change?!" Elliot learns this through his relationship with E.T. This was felt. I could not pronounce it when I was younger. I could put words to it thanks to reflective after-thought as an adult. Not having empathy wasn't anything the actor could act out like they do in Moulin Rouge or Dead Poets Society.

Then you have the ones that have no themes visuals, no intent. An example is the story of how Fidel Castro watches *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) and he thinks that the theme is about fat, lazy, white Americans on the beach and how they get eaten by their own capitalism, represented by the shark. This is a very funny projection of intent, which I'm sure Mr Spielberg had no intent on communicating and is fully Mr castor's own projected intent of the film. Mr Spielberg's intent was surely something different. But this story goes to show how your own cultural context, knowledge, opinions and experience will color the communications you receive.

What do you think is Jaws theme?

CONCLUSION

Maybe intent is simply contextual to what you have to create and why? If you are creating a commercial piece then perhaps you have to start from the audience so you know they will accept it? Or, if you are doing a more intellectual or philosophical title you have to start form yourself and hope that you are clear enough so the audience can emote with it?

Note
Some schools, like University College of Arts and Crafts, Konstfack, focus their new students on the concept, the why, and little with the artistic craft, the how. Others, like Florence Academy of Art, base it all in artistic craft first, the how, and little on intent, the why. The intent is left to the individual artist to explore through their career. Both ways work fine and educate amazing artists and designers.

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