

# SENSORY OVERLOAD

## The Age of Infinite Content

### Note

Please make sure to check the [YouTube playlist](#) for the course, where relevant videos referenced in reading assignments will be posted. For this week, for example, the FILM01 project mentioned in Caroline Busta's article is posted and you are encouraged to take a look at it, or even watch all of it (although it's long!). Similarly the Channel 4 documentary about SHEIN that's mentioned in Nicole Lipman's article is also in the playlist and is worth watching if you're interested in the labor and environmental issues raised by the global fast fashion industry.

### Introduction

New Models · NM Reads: Caroline Busta, "Hallucinating Sense in the Era of Infinity Content" (Document, 2024)

What does it mean to "theorize" social media today? What exactly does the term "theory" refer to anyway?

To theorize something involves trying to understand its conditions of possibility; put more simply, why something happened, why it is happening now, and how it came to be. When something is too complex to be factually demonstrable, we can still formulate provisional or hypothetical accounts that may be more or less plausible. These accounts are called theoretical **models**: frameworks that try to understand and account for what is going on in the present, how we got here, and what future outcomes might emerge from it.

Theorizing thus involves constructing a theoretical model that helps us to understand something going on at present, or historically, and the reasons for it. In the case of a complex event such as a war or revolution, many such models have of course been proposed, and of course they are far from equal—eventually consensus usually emerges about which ones are the most plausible.

In thinking about theory, it's also helpful to make a preliminary distinction between what I call **instrumental** theory and **critical** theory, and the different models that each uses. The term "instrumental" here refers to the use of theory as a **tool** in a specific real-world context. In social media marketing, for example, there is a whole body of theoretical models for how to make such marketing most effective, from search-engine optimization (SEO) to models of how to maximize audience size and engagement. These theories are instrumental in the sense that they are strategic and driven by **economic** agendas, rather than wider by societal, political, or cultural dimensions. Critical theory, by contrast, is not driven by such strategic, instrumental considerations, but by often more philosophical questions such as communication, meaning and identity, as well as ideologies and their different agendas—political representation, economic justice, environmental sustainability, and so on.

I want to start by making it clear, then, that this course is concerned with approaching social media from the standpoint of **critical** rather than instrumental theory, since instrumental theory is what would be covered in a social media marketing course. In that sense, the focus of the course is on the social, political, cultural, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of social media, involving issues such as meaning and interpretation, technology and society, social

Caroline Busta, "Hallucinating sense in the era of infinity-content" ([Document](#), 29 May 2024) [[Audio](#)] Nicole Lipman, "Super Cute Please Like" ([n+1](#) 47, 2024)) Timo Kollbrunner, "Toiling for Shein" ([Public Eye](#), November 2023)

(in)equality, political justice, culture and aesthetics, environmental sustainability, and so on.

With these clarifications in place, we can move on to the more specific topics of the weekly course readings.

## Vibing: Sensing over Thinking

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*Nice one and beautiful size size and beautiful dress size size and beautiful beautiful size and beautiful dress size size and beautiful dress nice size and beautiful dress size size and beautiful dress dress and dress dress size size and beautiful dress.*

—SHEIN bot comment, cited in Lipman (2024)

I started out talking about theoretical models because perhaps the central argument of [Caroline Busta](#) in her article about infinite content is that our old reading/text-based models of how meaning works are no longer adequate to the sensory overload of the social-media worlds we live in today. Instead, as she argues, we need to re-think everything we still take for granted about communication and meaning; in short, we need new models. It's interesting in this context that the Berlin-based media theory site that Busta is a co-founder of is called [New Models](#).

In terms of Busta's arguments about how reading has been replaced by reaction, or what she more generally calls **sensing**, denotative (i.e. literal) meaning by connotative meaning, text by visual media, meaning by "vibes", you may already be thinking that this text-based lecture is very old-school, in that it prioritizes close reading over reaction, text over visuals, denotation over connotation. Shouldn't I be using **visual** rather than textual modes of communication, and expecting **reactions** both to the readings and this lecture itself rather than direct engagement with the actual ideas that they are elaborating? In fact, what I am looking for in this course is the **exact opposite**: not just personal reactions (this was relatable because... this reminded me of... etc.) but direct engagement with concepts, ideas, and arguments made in the sources assigned. What do they mean? How valid and useful are they as models of understanding? What counter-examples can be found? These are the building-blocks of critical thinking, and skills that I want to encourage you to develop during the course. What I am interested in, then, is not your reaction to this week's readings but your assessment of the analytical concepts they introduce and the arguments they make.

Our first task is of course to gain a clear understanding of the concepts used and arguments made themselves. For example, you might be unclear about the basic distinction between **denotation** and **connotation** that Busta refers to as one of the shifts in how meaning now works in the sensory blizzard of today's social mediascape. These terms originate in a couple of classic essays by the French semiotic theorist Roland Barthes, specifically the essays "The Photographic Message" and "Rhetoric of the Image," translated in the anthology **Image Music Text**. I'll post a PDF of these essays if you're interested in looking at them, but it isn't really essential to get the basic idea. With regard to Busta's specific claim that in today's social media world connotative meaning has completely replaced denotative meaning. I think Barthes would argue that that has always been the case, not just today, as the two articles mentioned explain. Connotative meaning—essentially the connotations attached to or associated with certain words, images, or symbols—is in fact the basis for Barthes's entire critique of what he calls **mythologies**, or the process by which bourgeois ideology in modern society presents itself as normal, natural, and "the truth" (a process that he calls "naturalization").

While I would agree with Barthes here, it's equally clear that the advent of what Villem Flusser calls "technical images" in the digital and now social media has inaugurated a historical transformation in what had even in the 20C imageworlds of film and TV still a print-based, reading-based culture and its associated systems of meaning. I think we all recognize the world that Busta describes today: the world of infinite content, most obviously embodied by fast-fashion brands like SHEIN and the TikTok platform that enables it. And I think we can agree that at least on the production side, "content" today is structured very differently from 20C media (albeit still driven by fundamentally the same economic model of neoliberal capitalism), and that this is in turn producing corresponding shifts both in how such content is engaged with by audiences and the meanings that they make of it.

Busta's point about how "reading," in the sense of the transmission and reception of meaning, has today been superseded by **reaction**, driven more by sensory or affective (emotional) "vibing" certainly seems to make sense as an idea, as well as in terms of our actual experience. Consider, for example, this celebration of what the YouTube critic Patrick Willems calls "vibe movies," which spends 54 minutes explaining to us why trying to actually understand the plot of Christopher Nolan movies in the traditional sense is just barking up the wrong tree because "that's not what they're about".

<https://youtu.be/ZStkUxC4iL4>

Willems goes on to make the case for an entire genre of "vibe movies," which includes not just Nolan's filmography but anything by the A24 studio, for example. Instead of engaging with and evaluating with movies in terms of old-fashioned realist criteria like plot, character, or the ideological arguments that they are making, we are encouraged simply to "vibe" with them, shifting the emphasis from ideas to affect, from meaning to mood, from plot to atmosphere. It's an argument that on the surface seems appealing—at least you don't have to feel bad anymore about having no clue what's going on in films like **Tenet** or **Interstellar**—but shouldn't we be scrutinizing the concept of "vibe(s)" itself and critiquing what it stands for, in terms of its prioritizing of affective buzz over anything else and the profit-driven agendas that the invitation to stop **overthinking** (as the anti-intellectual ideology often refers to it) ultimately serves? What does it mean to brazenly invite us just to "feel it" and stop thinking?

We see this all the time today around many of the most popular films, such as **Barbie**, where debates about whether the film is "feminist" or promotes commodity culture are routinely dismissed as "overthinking" and we are invited to "just enjoy it"—that is, vibe with it.

It's notable in the Christopher Nolan video that this case is being made not in a text-based essay but the format that has largely displaced it today: the "video essay," in its most ubiquitous form of a YouTube video. This might also lead us towards thinking about the limitations of the video essay format itself, as a kind of compression of ideas into a fast-thinking format that is in some ways a counterpart to the other forms of fast media that surrounds us, including the fast fashion of Zara and SHEIN.

So I wonder how what you make of all this! In terms of developing critical thinking, I think the most important thing here is not to take concepts or arguments circulating in the dominant culture at face value, but to scrutinize and assess them critically, and to consider the interests that they may be serving, whether the individual ones of a creator or the collective ones of a platform or industry.

That's probably more than enough for you to be thinking about for this week—I look forward to hearing your reflections on (but not reactions to!) them soon.