

Fiction *of* *Fiction*

Based on a true story

Fiction *of Fiction*
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Designed by Yasemin Varlık

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Abstract

What I learned through making work constantly in an iterative cycle is that new meanings keep appearing. Every step I take, pulls me into a new direction. Opens my eyes into discovering different intentions, methods and findings. Applying methods which are so unfamiliar to me opens up new doors. Sometimes, I find myself breaking an object down to its smallest particles to analyze and reveal its complexities and hidden networks. At other times, I look at an object from a larger scope and end up in an unfamiliar space which exposes me to a wider range of perspectives. It is a loop process.

In this piece of writing, I will be talking about how language can be used as a tool for writing fictions by reforming truths. I will be using a lot of terms that will repeatedly occur such as facts, knowledge and truth. I want to define them first in the context I am using them.

Facts are what is assumed to be the universally acknowledged, foundational information.

Knowledge is the unity of what one knows.

Truth is what one perceives as real.

Part I

This year I unintentionally found myself eating protein bars in excessive amounts. I started collecting their packaging, keeping them in the back of my notebook (They are still there, all flattened from the weight of the papers).

It was February and just another regular day in London. I left the gym in the morning and headed to my school's library at Central Saint Martins, to find out what I was going to do for a project. I had another protein bar in my hand as I was casually walking into the library (Yes, I might have broken the library rules for eating, oops). I sat down at one of the desks by the window looking out at Kings Cross. I took out a book from my bag and started reading while finishing up the protein bar. I was reading *Being Ecological* by Timothy Morton.

When I was done eating the bar, I added it to the back of my notebook just like all the other ones. It was a cookies and cream flavored Barebells protein bar. 20 grams protein, no added sugar. This is my ultimate favorite protein bar; it tastes like an Oreo cookie in a protein bar format and it is covered with milk chocolate.

I kept reading my book and simultaneously taking notes. As I was writing, all the protein bar packaging slipped out from the back of my notebook. I picked them up, laid them next to each other on the desk. I was showing my ridiculous collection to my friend, who joined me ten minutes after I got to the library. She was sitting right next to me doing her own project. I told her that I have been recently

collecting these bars and that I actually bought five more on my way here.

She giggled and said, "You crazy!"

She paused for a second and then said, "Can I actually try one though?"

I said, "Yes, of course."

I gave her a brand new one from my bag and she started eating it. She confirmed that it was a very tasty protein bar. Then we kept working on our projects independently.

I kept reading for a good while. At some point a sentence in the book made me pause.

"When people use factoids, we feel like we are being manipulated by little bits of truth that have been broken off some larger, truer edifice, as if they were small chunks of cake... A factoid is a chunk of data that has been interpreted so as to appear truthful." Morton (2018)

After reading that sentence, I was now noticing all the little details on the protein bar packaging laying in front of me side by side. Having tasted all of them I started to question the advertising language and what the product itself really offered. There was a lemon curd flavored Barebells protein bar covered with white chocolate, an Optimum protein bar in the flavor chocolate caramel, a chocolate chip cookie dough flavored Grenade protein bar, a Barebells cookies and cream bar and lastly a Fulfil chocolate peanut butter vitamin and protein bar.

Are all facts presented on these products a selling tool or is it an imaginary story?

I observed all the packaging again. They were in such harmony and disharmony at the same time. I found some of them extremely male-oriented because of its visual language and imagery. The Optimum Protein bar was mainly in black with red and light-yellow accents with a monospaced typeface, in uppercase and a secondary sans serif typeface with a long x-height. The emphasis on the amount of protein and no added sugar was highlighted by being put within a red circle. I could definitely sense that there was a hierarchy purposefully set by a designer in all of them. Not only did I look in the front part of the packaging, but I examined the back side where the ingredients and nutritional facts were written. I feel like if you are not a gym bunny who is obsessed with tracking the nutritional value of every food item you consume; you wouldn't even bother looking at the back side to be honest.

I stared at the packaging for a long amount of time and in fact, lost track of time. I was fully focused and in my thoughts. Each protein bar had a different layout, typefaces and font sizes picked for every piece of information. Some were visually soothing in their simple use of graphics as if they were healthy and clean products. Others not so much with their overly decorated, busy and convoluted packaging. They were telling the same narrative in two distinct styles. When you turned to the back side of the protein bars the first thing you saw, in almost all of the ingredient lists, was the added artificial flavorings or simply a language you could not understand nor even pronounce; humec-

tant, maltitol, isomalto-oligosaccharide. The next on the list was "no added sugar milk chocolate with sweetener."

The cover to the story doesn't match the story itself. The product is advertised as "no added sugar" but it is filled with bunch of artificial sugars (as if that doesn't count as sugar). Does this mean I am being lied to as a customer? Am I tricked into believing or choosing to believe this story that was written by some designer?

Who knew that a sentence could lead to a hefty investigation of protein bars? I figured the only way to expose the whole story was to look into them further. One might call it an attempt of object dissection. Drummond (2020)

A method introduced by Hugo Drummond on dissecting an object into its anatomy, form, function, agency, ontology and language can give a better understanding of an object or uncover the abstractness of it and help bring one's practice into familiar grounds. Drummond (2020) It gives a pre-structured system on how to work with an object and learn more about it; finding out more than you thought you knew about it. It offers multiple poking points which exposes the observer to various perspectives. It allows the reader to enter the imaginary world built by others. But it might also limit one to come up with infinite working fields because once all those six poking points are exhausted it will be up to the observer to take the investigation further or not. There is an end to the methodology applied but there isn't an end for creativity. Eco (1989) As Eco (1989, p.44) stated in his book *The Open Work*: "It is to the listener to place himself deliberately in the midst of inexhaustible network of relationships and to choose for himself, so to speak, his own modes of approach, his reference points and his scale, and to endeavor to use as many dimensions as he possibly can at the same time and thus dynamize, multiply, and extend to the utmost degree his perceptual faculties."

What do these product look like? How do I use them?
What are they made out of? How do I interact with them?
What they exist as? Can I describe the objects like I
describe a person?

I started to make flat drawings of these protein bars on Illustrator, breaking it down layer by layer. First, I drew the packaging as it was in its original form with all of the written data presented. Then, I drew it as if the product has been opened up. Almost like a how to open a protein bar instructions leaflet. At least that is how it felt like to me. I slowly eliminated all the pre-written data to purely its packaging outlines and empty charts. I was now understanding that an object has more within itself. It was not just about its visual features. I was learning to make new connections with the object by investigating my relationship with it. I was diving into it as a reader and allowing myself to be immersed within the story and finding bits of a long story.

It can be said that there is a limitation in how far a method can be taken, but it shouldn't stop one from exploring further. Yes, maybe a dead end can be reached with the methodology but the product itself remains open because as Drummond (2020) said in his practice: "Slightest change to a part of an object and what the object was a part of can alter the object." New methods could be applied, diverse variations could appear, could infinitely be redefined and represented.

At this point I have been working for about 3 hours non-stop. Looking back at all the drawings derived from my object dissections; I was intrigued by the empty skeletons of nutritional fact charts. I found them extremely minimal yet visually compelling.

Almost intuitively, I started to fill those empty charts with pieces of information I was interested in. You could say that I was basically using the charts as an information vessel to tell my side of the story. I was just dumping everything that was coming to my mind; clickbait, eating disorders and progress bars. Yes, all very different themes but there was somehow a thin line tying them together.

It was the 'control' that these elements have in our lives. This could be intentional or not intentional at all. They somehow have the ability to take control over our biological lives, whether in a physical or a mental form. We are victims of clickbait every time we click on a YouTube video. Unfortunately, more and more eating disorders and body image issues are arising from the constant scroll on social media and the comparison nature of our generation. We are victims of technology and devices. Don't tell me that you don't get frustrated when there is a new software update notification on your phone and deep down you know that you have to plug in your phone to your charger and watch the apple logo with the progress bar underneath slowly move to a completion?

Using Adhocism as another method, one can achieve endless possibilities and combinations that appear from working with pre-existing subsystems. Everything can be modified and combined limitlessly with another subsystem to make a new one. Those subsystems within themselves can be broken apart and combined with a larger or a smaller subsystem to become something else. Jenks and Silver (1972) The cycle leads you to an infinite openness.

With every new piece of data plugged into the empty skeletons of nutritional fact charts, they were trans-

formed into new narratives. I found myself constantly rewriting and reconstructing endless amounts of stories using variety of pre-existing subsystem combinations. It no longer felt like I was working with protein bars nor nutritional facts. With every sketch I made, content kept changing but form relatively stayed the same or similar to the origin of what a nutritional fact chart looks like. Adams (1977) Then, I made another draft where I combined the nutritional fact charts with progress bars. I was curious to see whether I could make the empty charts tell a story about the "Quantified Self."

The term the "Quantified Self" is the ideology mentioned by Mark Grief in his book *Against Everything*: "In exercise one gets a sense of one's body as a collection of numbers representing capabilities." Grief (2016)

With no surprise, they did. Now all those empty lines in the charts were turned into individual progress bars. I guess, I could call this a new visual essay for measuring bodily actions without using numbers or science. Seeing the results of combining these empty charts with limitless narratives, I was beginning to see the power I had over them. Using the empty charts as a blank canvas, I could write about everything and anything.

With every new combination, the result is different. The definition of what the charts appear as depends on who chooses to see it and as what. A cardboard box could become a pirate ship for a child, and it could simply be a storage device for someone else. Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. (2006) In the end, an author cannot be in control of its work once it leaves its possession allowing a space for fresh interpretations and multiplicity in language. Barthes (1967)

Whatever I placed in the blank nutritional charts, which were reduced to their simplest form, I was able to write a new narrative. They were bound to become whatever I wanted them to be and represent. I have now become the writer.

Every designer is the author of its own work, in a mission to tell a story and that story could be altered, manipulated and represented the way the designer wants it to be. The narrative has no option but to get embellished with subjectivity. There is no piece of information out there that is free of subjectivity even it is said to be objective. We have the power to impose our own imagination into a language and those have the power to perceive it as whatever as they want: "Language appears to you in the way you orchestrate it." Morton (2018) The minute a work is shared, it is vulnerable and is exposed to other authors. It is no longer what it was. As Christopher Talley emphasizes in *The Concept of Agency in Objects* by Claire Russo, "The meaning of an object is born when object is used towards a purpose by a group." Russo, C. (2007)

If I am able to turn these charts into whatever I want in order to tell a story, then it is probably used in the same way for other designers too, when carefully designing products. It was now starting to make sense.

A designer has the choice to pick the plot and the voice of narration. Is graphic design being used as a clickbait language to persuade customers into buying products?

Language can be embellished in a way that highlights the important parts and hides others, just like the emphasis that was put into the amount of protein in the Optimum protein bar with a red circle or the hand script typeface used on the Barebells

bar. I was able maneuver language into saying what I wanted to say using these empty charts. I took another glance at the protein bar packaging altogether that was still sitting in front of me. Initial things that caught my eye in all of them were claims such as high protein, grams, protein and vitamin. Entirely very scientific descriptions, but I was able to understand the story.

Nutritional facts present purely scientific data that we use in order to label things as healthy/unhealthy (as deemed in our society) or as a self-monitoring device to control our biological life. Grief (2016) This is because we were told the same story over and over again where science is always the presenter of true facts. When language is under the umbrella of Science, it automatically hides behind the greater authority. We have to believe that scientific data is objective and therefore “true.” However, science is only another human construct. Like any other field, it is defenseless against all translations. If language can take endless forms, none matching one another Queneau (1947) then science cannot be excluded. Science can serve us a bunch of facts, but those facts are tied to larger practices. “If that network is broken, then all the facts would go with them.” Kofman, A. (2018) Science is merely another form of language.

The brand Activia made health claims in the past, in 2010, where they promoted and marketed a non-scientifically proven probiotic in their yogurts as an ingredient supposedly regulating one’s digestive system in two weeks. Federal Trade Commission (2010) This was then debunked and shown that the story was actually made up.

I found out that the actual story within protein bars was hiding behind these scientific facts: Protein is something I definitely need in my diet. I need to be getting 20g of protein from each meal. Real sugar is bad for me, but artificial sugar is good. These were adding up with other stories I have been told

in the gym: The more protein the better for a superior bone health, for maintaining and building muscle. The whole narration just made perfect sense.

Even though the nutritional breakdown of food is a bunch of numbers, funny enough, they were making sense. At least, it was enough for me to make an executive decision to eat these protein bars.

In his *Minnesota Declaration*, Werner Herzog states: “Facts create norms. Fact is something very superficial, and you can only get the accountant’s truth. Facts have the power to form moral behavior and ethical norms.” Herzog (1999) The only reason why we refer to larger networks and practices such as Science, a reliable resource is that we want to build a common ground of knowledge amongst us. Knowledge only becomes intelligible when there is a set baseline or foundation of what everyone knows. It is a way to bridge communication, through facts. This is a very close-minded way of looking at it, but this is clearly presented in our judgements. Things that are far from the built “norms” are accounted as false information, a lie or purely fabrications.

Part II

After all of this thinking, making and research, I was done for the day and I went home from the library exhausted. I picked the project up the next day with fresh eyes and mind, this time I was in my room instead of the library. I opened my notebook and scanned through my investigation.

It no longer felt like I was interested in protein bars, to be honest maybe it was because I looked at them for way too long. I found my focus shifting from the product as a whole to nutritional fact charts alone.

Something so scientific yet comprehensible and has the power to control our biological lives. Grief (2016)

My next step was to find as many examples of nutritional charts as possible in order to understand my deeper interest in them. I started scanning through every food item that ever existed in my kitchen cupboards and took photos of 100 different objects and scanned 100 different nutritional charts. I drew all of them digitally, one by one. I was trying to classify them, but I wasn't able to find any patterns between each one. As I was digitizing all these photographs into two-dimensional charts, I realized that I was actually changing its visual presentation and representing the charts the way I wanted to see them and comprehend them. I was essentially applying the same strategy as these designers, who created the packaging of protein bars. I was clearly writing a new narrative in the process of re-inventing how these charts exist. It didn't matter whether I redrew

these charts by hand, digitally rendered in a four-dimensional space or scanned. Soon I realized that each distinct visual representation allowed a new story to be born.

Instead of being afraid of imposing my own imagination on to these charts, I wanted to elevate it even more so that within this you can come to the realization of what is true and what is not. I applied ornamentation, decoration and craft to the outlines of these charts. More specifically, embroidery (some simple and others a lot more decorative like fish bone stitching and chain stitching.) This allowed me to comprehend that by elevating the complexity of a visual language through exaggeration, I can reveal deeper meanings or simply ask more from the imagination of my audience.

Werner Herzog, in his documentary practice uses the term "ecstatic truth" to exemplify that when things become perfect, they are no longer real or feel real. It is too good to be true. Zalewski (2006) His aim was to normalize what is assumed to be the abnormal. In a perfect scenario, you might have a scene with the sun glowing over the actors which lasts until the shot is over, but we also know that sun might come in and go. When you compare the two, a scene with the sun there for a second and gone the other second seems more relatable. Zalewski (2006) Hence, closer to truth and reality. Elevating a work through craft and exaggeration creates a truth which exceeds your expectation of the reality. In that you realize what is true.

When I was done with visual explorations, the charts no longer felt like a device for breaking down the nutrition content of food. Instead, they seemed abstract and had no apparent use.

Sometimes uselessness allows for a space where other meanings can emerge because it is easier to insert new interpretations when not bound to a set system. Those moments of extreme strangeness are when the truth is elevated because it asks more from the human mind. Herzog (1999) It is giving the choice of perception for changing the world. Alderman (2016) The object was no longer closed by a system by being classified as purely scientific information.

Even though it was daunting seeing these charts as these useless objects, I was feeling a lot more confident about my project now because I felt freed from the department of Science. I was no longer restrained in a closed system who claims to be based on true stories. I was in control of these charts and in how I use them. To re-iterate, I have become the writer. With every iteration I made, I was constantly redefining nutritional facts and transforming them into new stories.

Nutritional facts are the *quantified self*.

Nutritional fact charts are *instruction leaflets*.

Nutritional facts are *disregarded information*.

Nutritional facts are an *unknown*.

Nutritional facts are *science*.

Nutritional facts are *fabricated truths*.

Nutritional facts are *facts*.

Nutritional facts are *empty skeletons*.

Nutritional facts are *a device for hiding fabrications*.

Nutritional facts are *a tool for writing fiction*.

Part III

It was now end of May and we had an assignment briefing. A visual essay, about 3-5 min long, using our iterative process to explain and deepen our position in relation to graphic communication design.

Compiling all of the chart iterations in a visual essay, I was able to see the myriad of visual and scripted definitions. In the process of repeatedly redefining nutritional fact charts, none of the definitions matched one another. The visual essay was built on this story line; a narrative language reflecting on the repetitive cycle of redefining nutritional fact charts.

In his book *Exercises in Style*, Queneau (1947) emphasizes that language can take on multiple forms, as he explores the possibilities of language. His book consists of retelling of a story 99 times, each one written in a diverse style. 'Exercises in Style' (2 November 2020) Thus, a story can infinitely be told differently because every time someone else tells the story it is from their side of the story. It is embellished with their truth and their fiction.

Making the visual essay was an exercise to get to know my project better, yes, I mean it was an assigned exercise as a part of my summative assessment for the term, but...it helped me shape my thoughts. The visual essay truly became a diary of my process. At the end of it, I was finally finding out where I stood in the field of graphic communication design and what my stance was.

I worded it as: "Utilizing language as a tool for writing our own fiction, our invented truth."

With every iteration, there is a new narrative. Language has the ability to mold itself into every belief and view. "In the first case, man turns himself into a thing; he expresses himself in the world through his creations, thus constructing the world to which he then commits himself." Eco (1989)

As I was making work iteratively, I was rewriting the same story I built around nutritional facts with a different narrative each time. This repetitive process made me realize that I can keep creating fiction of fiction. Each outcome was a story that, I, myself wrote and that I wanted to tell my audience. These stories were induced with my truths, my knowledge and my facts. Crouwel, W. and van Toorn, J. (2015) Nutritional fact charts were only the framing of my stories, which is why they felt like useless objects at some point. The stories became apparent only after I filled the charts because the story was in the visual language.

None of them more unique than the other. Even if the subject matter is the same, the context is never the same. If an individual can redefine an object multiple times, none of them looking alike how come there is a baseline knowledge?

Part VI

After the submission of the visual essay, I took a long break from this exploration. It was now October. I was back home in Switzerland. I did not even look at the project once during this break. Well, things with school escalated fast. It was during the first tutorial back that we played Bingo, yes you heard it right, the game of chance. 'Bingo (American Version)' (27 November 2020) I wrote down a bunch of themes relevant and derived from my visual essay: subjectivity/objectivity, design trickery, hidden truth, fiction/non-fiction, authentic expression and the quantified self. I rolled the dice, using the first thing that appears when you type in dice roller on google, and it was the number five: authentic expression.

Authentic is something that is not false or copied. The origin supported with unquestionable evidence: genuine. The definition of 'Authentic' (2020) Is language used for advertising products considered an authentic expression or purely a market construct? Cultural Criticism and Transformation (1997) Italians are claiming that pizza is their original invention based on historical evidence and that the authentic pizza can only be found in Italy. Thus, all the other versions are copies. However, Japanese are also claiming that they have an authentic pizza invention. These are purely two different versions of pizza and two different authentic stories. Something can be authentic depending on which social context it is in because authenticity is relative to norms. Van Leeuwen (2008) How do we know which one is saying the truth and which version of pizza is true?

My first attempt at exploring authentic expression did not go as planned. I was holding a lamp and using it as a vacuum cleaner and using a bamboo whisk as a massage tool. I thought if I can

change the function of an object but still be true to its original form, I could say that I have created an authentic object. But these visuals only became representations of form versus function. This was definitely not the route I wanted to take. I was not interested in this dilemma. My true aim was to implement authenticity back to the stance I was taking in the field of graphic communication design; using language as a tool to write fictions and develop it further by making new connections.

After searching for other artists and reading more references around the topic of authenticity, I came to the realization that objects get tagged as authentic when there is historical validation because History is also another character in the same story as Science. History is another presenter of true facts. I was very excited to explore this.

Can historical evidence be manipulated in order to fit your truths? The given title “authentic” is just another tool that help hide the truth because it is under the umbrella of History. Thus, the facts built around an authentic object is automatically assumed to be true and unquestionable.

I decided to create a fictional story around an ordinary object, the vacuum cleaner. I thought, if I can write a story that is supported with historical evidence then the object will become an authentic invention. I made a story board, carefully selecting videos, facts and images. Then, I wrote down my narrative; Turks are the real inventors of vacuum cleaner. My first instinct was to open up an Instagram account to share my story because of its fast dissemination and the association that social media has for being a platform which reflects a

fake perfect life, a highlight reel. I published Insta Reels, stories in the form of short clips. I soon realized that maybe Instagram was not the best platform to tell a story at this depth because it was so fragmented which meant the story didn't feel like a one big unit, even after trying it as an IGTV format. It wasn't realistic enough. After a week of brainstorming and really working on a solid narrative, I decided to go with a standard video format and develop a stronger visual language. Nonetheless, this first step into writing a narrative about a vacuum cleaner was enough for me to see how easy it is to manipulate the history of an object and to reword it to fit your own fictional story.

At this point of the term, I was simultaneously working on my second project. It was an addition of a second narrative to the main story. I needed another perspective on the same story that helped me build on to the plot and elevate its trustworthiness. I developed a secondary narration in response to the propaganda using exaggerated stereotypes of Germany, France, USA and the UK. At certain parts of the storyline, Twitter and Instagram notifications of vacuum cleaner brands from those four countries pops up and interrupts the narration to give their side of the same story. Even though, my goal was to develop a plot which was as realistic as possible using historical evidence, I wanted to play with the tension between fiction and reality. This exploration opened my eyes to the possibility of adding multiple narratives to a single object at once.

A story is never one sided unless there is universal knowledge. Every individual is entitled to tell the same story from their side, write fiction in a way that represents their

own biases, background and knowledge. This ends up creating infinite amounts of distinct stories. Therefore, validating the truth of something is incredibly individual.

I began to add other elements of humor to intensify this tension. I always found memes to be incredibly strange in the way they are constructed. They are designed with the same font; Impact, a white text with a thick black border over an image that is widely known by the majority, or a still image extracted from a movie/tv show scene. Memes circulate fast and they can be made quickly by anyone. As they circulate, they evolve and change. Sometimes they take on a humorous stance in presenting important questions too. I thought mimicking the dialect of memes to tie each frame of my vacuum cleaner story could be a way to further question the realistic and the fictional elements in the narrative. I found out that I was able to alter the memes to fit my story and be a part of my fictional world.

The formation of memes is a reflection of a fabricated fiction. Memes are made through replication. Every time a new meme is made, it evolves through new combinations and modifications. Each meme is an imitation of the original one, which is one's fabrication. As Richard Dawkins stated in his book *The Selfish Gene*: "Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, some memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation... Whenever conditions arise in which a new kind of replicator can be copies of itself, the new replicators will tend to take over, and start a new kind of evolution of their own." Dawkins (1989)

Not only did I implement the dialect of memes into my narration, but I combined memes with my own illustrations which added another narrative.

Did I create fiction of fiction? As stated by Alderman (2016): "Story itself is a form that leads itself to be reshaped."

Which means that I can keep creating fiction of fiction of fiction.

In the end, I want my work to be "open", offering multitude of intentions and interpretations. Eco (1989) I do not want my work to have only one reader but infinite. I do not want to give it a name but a story.

Because language is a tool for writing our own fictions.

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