**Elle Laforge -**
**Methods of Contextualising; Written Response**

**Part 1: Reflection**

This project challenged my assumptions about what design can do in the context of climate justice. At the outset, I approached the electricity dataset assuming that the task was to make large-scale data more accessible. However, through developing the film across perceptual scales, I began to question whether clarity alone was sufficient. The issue was that certain magnitudes exceed human comprehension, an interesting problem to solve. By manipulating image resolution and scale, I became more aware that design does not merely transmit information; it structures how responsibility is felt. At the micro scale, energy use appears tangible, at the macro scale, the same energy becomes abstract and cognitively diffuse. This shift revealed to me how scale mediates the message.

In relation to UAL's Net Zero plan, this project pushed me to reconsider design as a critical mediator between data and lived experience. I am increasingly interested in how representation can expose the limits of perception itself. Climate justice depends not only on targets and metrics, but the extent to which systems of consumption can be grasped. Through this project, I see my practice less as simplifying complexity and more as interrogating the conditions under which complexity becomes distant, or ignored.

**Part 2: Annotated bibliography**

   **A.  Two texts from the reading list:**

**Latour, B. (1986) 'Visualisation and Cognition: Drawing Things Together',** *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present*, **6, pp. 1–40.**

Latour's assertion that visualisations can "explain almost everything or almost nothing" (pp. 4), depending on how they are framed, was pivotal to my understanding of this project. Rather than treating UAL's electricity data as incomplete, I began to see it as already structured through specific modes of inscription. When presented through charts, data appears objective and comprehensive, yet its scale often limits full grasp. Latour argues that diagrams function by drawing heterogeneous elements together, enabling distant relationships to be stabilised within a single frame. This directly influenced our decision to move beyond static representation and instead structure the film through perceptual transitions across scale. Rather than displaying mere totals, we staged shifts in resolution and framing to test how relationships between individual action and magnitude could be reconfigured.

However, where Latour emphasises the consolidating power of visualisation, our film foregrounds its fragility. As scale expands, relationships become harder to hold together; comprehension fractures rather than stabilises. This divergence became central to the project, making us question not how data can be made visible, but whether visibility alone guarantees understanding.

**Steyerl, H. (2012) 'In Defense of the Poor Image', in _The Wretched of the Screen_. Berlin: Sternberg Press, pp. 31–45.**

Steyerl's concept of the "poor image" influenced our use of resolution as a conceptual device rather than a technical choice. In her account, image degradation reflects circulation, compression, and shifting value systems. In our film, the progressive blurring from the micro to the macro scale similarly reflects the degradation of comprehension when confronting large data systems. Rather than privileging high-resolution imagery as inherently superior, Steyerl encourages attention to what is revealed through loss. This informed the group's decision to allow abstraction to signify our cognitive limitations as humans. The macro scale does not fail visually; it exposes the structural difficulty of grasping institutional consumption. Steyerl also complicates ideas of accessibility in the sense that an image can circulate widely yet lose detail. This tension parallels sustainability data; widely published yet experientially distant to the common person. Her text deepened my understanding of resolution as political and epistemological, not merely aesthetic.

B. Two external references:

**Thaler, R.H. and Sunstein, C.R. (2009) Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness. London: Penguin.**

Coming from a business background, engaging with _Nudge_ felt intuitive and sharpened my awareness of design's capacity to shape decision-making environments. Thaler and Sunstein's concept of "choice architecture" initially aligned with the idea that design could subtly steer behavioural change in relation to energy use. However, as our project developed, I became less interested in directly influencing individual decisions and more concerned with perception itself.

As a result, rather than engineering behavioural outcomes, the film reconfigures how institutional energy data is encountered across scale. While it does not prescribe action, it incorporates a restrained yet persistent sonic atmosphere that subtly heightens tension, creating a continuous sense of urgency. In this way, the work operates adjacent to nudging rather than fully within it. _Nudge_ ultimately functioned as both reference and counterpoint: it clarified the ethical implications of behavioural influence, while reinforcing my position as a designer more invested in exposing systemic conditions and perceptual limits than in actively directing individual behaviour.

**Barber, R.G., McCoy, B. and Ramirez, R. (2024)** *Why big numbers break our brains*, *NPR*. Available at:
[https://www.npr.org/2024/01/03/1198909057/brain-struggles-big-numbers-neuroscience](https://www.npr.org/2024/01/03/1198909057/brain-struggles-big-numbers-neuroscience)

Barber's article provided a neuroscientific framework for interpreting our encounter with UAL's electricity data. Citing educational neuroscientist Elizabeth Toomarian, the article notes that "our human brains are pretty bad at comprehending large numbers." This observation reinforced my suspicion that the difficulty was not a lack of transparency, but a mismatch between institutional magnitude and embodied cognition. Sustainability data may be measurable and publicly available, yet its scale exceeds intuitive grasp. For me, this became a turning point, prompting me to steer our project beyond data visualisation and toward examining how institutional scale itself structures perception.

Rather than further simplifying numerical values, our project experiments with perceptual translation. The film does not convert figures into smaller equivalents; instead, it reshapes the perceptual conditions under which they are encountered. By moving from embodied actions to institutional abstraction, the work tests the threshold at which comprehension begins to falter. Barber's discussion strengthened my awareness that communication alone cannot resolve cognitive constraints. It also raised a larger question for my practice: if large systems cannot be intuitively processed, should design attempt to reduce them, or make the limits of perception visible as part of the problem itself?

## C. Two design practices/projects

**Eames, C. and Eames, R. (1977) Powers of Ten. Film. USA: IBM.**

*Powers of Ten* demonstrated how scale transitions can be structured cinematically to reorient perception. The film's systematic zoom across orders of magnitude offered a formal precedent for organising our own micro–meso–macro progression. By moving outward from a human body into the cosmos, and inward to the cellular level, the Eameses render scale experiential rather than abstract. Their work suggests that scale can be navigated and cognitively stabilised through controlled framing and narration. Our project initially drew from this logic; that data, like space, could be made perceptible through structured shifts in scale.

However, whereas the Eameses present scale as continuous, rational, and ultimately coherent, our project deliberately foregrounds dissonance. As the frame in our film expands from micro to macro, clarity diminishes rather than expands. The macro does not produce omniscience; instead, it generates abstraction and perceptual strain. In this sense, we adopt the structural logic of *Powers of Ten* but resist its optimism. Rather than reassuring viewers that all scales can be seamlessly comprehended, our film highlights the cognitive threshold at which large data sets exceed lived experience. Scale becomes

not a spectacle of mastery, but a threshold device that mirrors embodied perception and exposes its limits.

**Varda, A. (2000)** *The Gleaners and I*. **Film. France: Ciné Tamaris.**

Varda's observational and ethnographic mode significantly influenced our tonal decisions. In *The Gleaners and I*, meaning emerges through sustained attention to ordinary gestures rather than overt critique or moral instruction. This approach informed our decision to foreground routine energy use without didactic commentary. Instead of framing institutional consumption through a rather dramatic intervention, we allowed urgency to surface through sonic cues, and atmosphere. The restrained soundscape and composed framing aim to cultivate awareness rather than persuasion.

While Varda deliberately collapses boundaries between filmmaker and subject, positioning herself within the narrative, our project maintains a more distanced perspective. Nevertheless, at the micro scale, we aimed to preserve a sense of embodied presence. By closely observing everyday actions; switching lights, charging devices, the film situates common UAL energy use within lived experience before expanding outward to systemic abstraction. Varda's attentiveness to the everyday reinforced for me that large issues do not require spectacle to become visible; they can emerge through careful observation. This shaped my understanding that urgency in climate communication can be sustained subtly, through proximity, and secondary sonic cues, rather than through explicit moral framing.

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