

Conceptual and Critical Thinking

Collective Agency Cluster

Cross-Cutting Theme: Framing

Nominal Workload: 50-60 hours (2 ECTS)



INTRODUCTION

Conceptual and critical thinking is the practice of making sense of the world by engaging with ideas, patterns, contradictions, and the underlying structures that shape what we know, feel, and create. It is not about having the right answers, but about developing the capacity to question, reflect, and imagine otherwise. At its core, this kind of thinking involves: Abstraction and synthesis — identifying broader concepts from specific experiences. Self-reflection — understanding how our own positions, perceptions, and assumptions shape what and how we know. Contextual awareness — situating knowledge within social, historical, and political frameworks. Responsiveness — being attuned to change, contradiction, and the unknown

Historically, conceptual and critical thinking has emerged in many global traditions — not just through Western philosophy. It appears in the oral reasoning practices of Indigenous communities, the poetic and political thinking of resistance movements, and in the creative labor of artists working at the margins. From John Dewey's pragmatism and education as experience, to Jacques Rancière's vision of intellectual emancipation, and from Black feminist thought to postcolonial critique, conceptual and critical thinking is a practice of emancipation — one that equips learners to see complexity, resist simplification, and generate new forms of understanding. It asks: *How do we know what we know? What shapes our thinking? And what might it mean to think otherwise — together?*

KEY CONCEPTS AND ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

ABSTRACT SYNTHESIS

Abstract synthesis is the practice of creating new conceptual frameworks by connecting and reconfiguring diverse ideas, disciplines, and lived experiences. It is more than abstraction — it is the generative act of making relationships visible, holding complexity, and thinking across boundaries. Drawing from Toni Negri, abstraction is a method for holding the multiplicity of the collective. Abstract synthesis allows learners to frame what is shared without erasing difference — to create forms of thought that support togetherness without sameness.

Often, abstract synthesis is described as "translating between disciplines." But translation assumes stable meanings and one-to-one equivalences. What if we instead think of this movement as transposition? Transposition involves shifting ideas across contexts while allowing them to mutate, distort, and expand. It is not about fidelity, but about generating new meaning through displacement. Where translation tries to preserve, transposition invites transformation. Transposition cultivates creative confidence by empowering learners to move across domains not as translators of fixed meaning, but as co-composers of new



conceptual constellations

Abstract synthesis is where creativity meets complexity. It is the work of thinking difference together — and turning that thinking into form.

CRITICAL IMAGINATION AS RE-READING

John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* offers a foundational insight into the role of imagination in critical thinking. Berger argued that what we see is not neutral or objective — it is always filtered through systems of power, tradition, and expectation. To imagine otherwise is therefore to begin by seeing otherwise. Imagination, in Berger's terms, is political. It reveals how perception is constructed and how images carry ideologies. When learners begin to ask: *Why do I see this the way I do? What is absent or excluded?* — they are already practicing imaginative critique. Incorporating Berger helps reframe imagination as a counter-practice: a way of interrupting the visible, questioning representation, and making room for new ways of relating to the world.

Re-reading and imagination are deeply intertwined. To re-read is to return to something familiar with new perception — to allow the known to shift, expand, or reveal something previously unnoticed. In this way, re-reading is an imaginative act: a way of re-visioning meaning, experience, or possibility. Berger's method of re-reading disrupts assumptions and reveals how vision itself is constructed. In doing so, he models an imaginative practice: one that challenges the visible and opens space for seeing — and thinking — otherwise.

Likewise, imagination functions as a form of re-reading the world. It allows us to revisit our present conditions and read them otherwise — through the lens of desire, critique, or transformation. Both processes refuse closure and invite learners to stay in the generative space between repetition and difference.

FABULATION

Fabulation is a conceptual and narrative strategy that resists dominant storytelling conventions and proposes alternate ways of world-building. It combines philosophical speculation, political resistance, and creative invention. Gilles Deleuze described fabulation in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1985), where he develops the fabulating function. Drawing from Henri Bergson and political cinema, Deleuze saw fabulation as a response to a crisis in representation — when conventional storytelling breaks down or no longer suffices. It is an act of inventing people, voices, and visions that are missing, silenced, or not yet possible. Fabulation is not just a story — it is a force that activates thought, constructing alternative modes of collective life through figures, gestures, and imagined worlds.

Ursula K. Le Guin, in her essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, reframes narrative away from conquest and heroism toward containment, care, and survival. Her fabulation insists



on the power of stories to hold multiplicity and sustain life. Saidiya Hartman introduces critical fabulation — a way to speculate within the gaps of violent archives. For Hartman, fabulation is not fantasy but an ethical and affective reconstruction of lives erased by official history. She combines critique with tender speculation to make visible what was silenced.

Fabulation offers a conceptual practice to re-narrate the world from suppressed or collective viewpoints. It encourages narrative experimentation as a method of thinking, resisting, and proposing. This concept supports creative confidence by validating the power to invent and reframe, and fosters collective agency through shared stories that open new ways to relate, imagine, and act.

ENCODING / DECODING

Stuart Hall's concept of Encoding/Decoding offers a foundational lens for understanding how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and contested. Hall argues that messages (in media, education, culture) are encoded with particular ideologies and assumptions, and then decoded by audiences in diverse, resistant, or negotiated ways. While Hall developed the Encoding/Decoding framework in the context of 1970s broadcast media, its relevance has only grown — and changed — in the era of digital culture and algorithmic systems.

Meaning is still not fixed — it is shaped by context, identity, and power. Audiences continue to negotiate, resist, or reinterpret messages in diverse and often collective ways. But Audiences are also producers: today's users encode and decode in real-time through memes, remixes, hashtags, and short-form video. Algorithms shape exposure: what we're able to decode is increasingly pre-filtered by platforms. The message itself is distributed: meaning is now co-constructed across comment threads, shares, and digital subcultures.

For conceptual and critical thinking, this means learners must: Read not only messages but platforms and infrastructures. Decode how visibility and legibility are designed.

SITUATED KNOWLEDGE IN TIMES OF MACHINE LEARNING

Luciana Parisi and Antonia Majaca build on and complicate Donna Haraway's notion of situated knowledge by examining how it functions in an era of algorithmic systems and computational infrastructures. They argue that traditional feminist epistemologies based on embodied, located knowers are under pressure in the face of machine learning, predictive analytics, and automated reasoning.

Parisi highlights that algorithmic systems increasingly operate without understanding, using abstract patterns and data extraction to make decisions detached from human context. Majaca joins this critique by showing how machine-led epistemologies escape traditional frameworks of accountability and situatedness. Together, they ask: *How can we intervene in systems that do not speak, but compute?* This calls for a new kind of situatedness that also



recognizes how code, platforms, and predictive logics shape what can be known or seen.

CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY (LIMITS OF KNOWLEDGE)

Understanding the limits of knowledge is central to critical and conceptual thinking. It means recognizing that knowledge is always partial, situated, and shaped by power. This insight invites learners to reflect not only on what they know, but on how they know — and what remains unknowable, excluded, or contested. It reframes uncertainty not as failure but as a generative condition for learning, imagination, and collaboration.

Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge shows that these limits are not neutral — they are produced and maintained through institutions and discourses. What is visible, sayable, or knowable is historically structured by epistemes — frameworks that define the boundaries of legitimate knowledge. These discursive boundaries mark what can be spoken and what must remain unsaid, forming conditions of possibility — the historical constraints that shape which ideas emerge. Sara Ahmed expands this idea by showing that the limits of knowledge are also enforced affectively and institutionally. These boundaries are not only intellectual but also embodied and emotional — shaped by who is allowed to speak, be heard, or belong. Ahmed's concepts like institutional willfulness and the feminist killjoy reveal how critique is deflected, and how discomfort often signals excluded or marginalized knowledge. Her work reminds us that what is dismissed as subjective or too emotional is often knowledge that disrupts dominant norms. Together, these thinkers invite us to treat the limits of knowledge not as voids, but as threshold zones — where refusal, friction, and new insight emerge.

THE RIGHT TO OPACITY

Édouard Glissant introduced the concept of opacity in *Poetics of Relation* (1990), writing from a Caribbean, anti-colonial perspective. Opacity was his response to the colonial demand for clarity, transparency, and assimilation. Glissant argued that the insistence on being fully understood — particularly by Western systems of knowledge — constitutes a form of domination. Instead, he called for the right to opacity, affirming the value of difference and the refusal to be reduced.

Glissant's concept has since been extended by theorists and artists resisting legibility and rethinking recognition. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney carry this forward in *The Undercommons*, where they describe fugitive planning and Black study as practices that resist institutional capture. Though they rarely use the term "opacity" directly, their commitment to illegibility and collective improvisation aligns with Glissant's vision. For them, study is a form of being together, of sharing knowledge that evades extraction and surveillance.

In the arts, collectives like Black Quantum Futurism and initiatives like Sisters Academy



engage opacity by creating experiences that resist extractive spectatorship. They foreground mystery, ritual, and embodied relation. Opacity here becomes an aesthetic and ethical stance — one that protects, empowers, and allows multiplicity to exist without assimilation.

METHODS

SPECULATIVE RE-NARRATION LAB

Purpose: To re-narrate erased or hidden stories using poetic and speculative storytelling techniques. **Activities:** Learners begin with archival fragments, photographs, or anonymized case files. Through guided prompts, they co-create speculative narratives that center care, absence, and resistance. **Creative Confidence:** Validates intuition and collective imagination. **Critical Thinking:** Engages with power in historical storytelling and asks what is left unsaid. **Learning Outcomes:** Learners recognize narrative silences and gaps as sites for ethical imagination and construct alternative stories grounded in care, complexity, and critique.

Theoretical Support: This method draws from Saidiya Hartman’s “critical fabulation”, which combines historical critique with poetic speculation to address archival violence and recover lost voices.

EPISTEMIC MAPPING

Purpose: To visualize knowledge gaps, silences, and positionality in individual or collective experience. **Activities:** Learners draw conceptual maps identifying what they know, what they think they know, and areas where knowledge is missing or excluded. They may include questions they’ve never asked, voices they haven’t heard, or perspectives that feel unreachable. Mapping “what they don’t know” becomes an act of surfacing silence, naming discomfort, and tracing the contours of erasure or assumption. **Creative Confidence:** Affirms incomplete knowledge as a valuable starting point. **Critical Thinking:** Cultivates awareness of systems of exclusion and recognition. **Learning Outcomes:** Learners articulate their own positionality in knowledge production and practice epistemic humility and identify limits as opportunities.

Theoretical Support: This method is informed by Donna Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledges”, emphasizing partial perspectives, embodiment, and accountability in knowledge-making.

DECODING THE INFRASTRUCTURE

Purpose: To analyze how messages are shaped by platforms, systems, and codes. **Activities:** Learners decode digital texts or artifacts (ads, memes, algorithm-driven feeds),



then re-code them using critical design or counter-media strategies. Creative Confidence: Encourages intervention in public discourse. Critical Thinking: Reveals hidden structures of meaning, bias, and power. Learning Outcomes: Learners identify encoding strategies and power structures in cultural texts and design alternative narratives or critiques that reflect new perspectives.

Theoretical Support: This practice builds on Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" model, highlighting how meaning is produced, negotiated, and resisted within media systems.

REFUSAL AS PROPOSAL STUDIO

Purpose: To use refusal as a generative act of reimagining systems. Activities: Learners identify dominant forms (e.g., syllabi, policies) and create counter-texts or alternative rituals. They present refusals as proposals — visionary and structured. Creative Confidence: Positions dissent as a creative force. Critical Thinking: Encourages ethical critique and systemic imagination. Learning Outcomes: Learners analyze and critique dominant narratives or institutional frameworks and develop visionary proposals rooted in critique, care, and creativity.

Theoretical Support: This method echoes Sara Ahmed's work on institutional critique, particularly her notion of the "feminist killjoy" and willfulness as practices of interruption and redirection within power structures.

CARRIER BAG CRITIQUE

Purpose: To critique dominant narratives using care and relationality as guiding values. Activities: Learners take familiar myths, frameworks, or histories and "carry" them differently — collecting fragments, gestures, or relations instead of plot points or conquest. Creative Confidence: Encourages gentler, more open-ended storytelling. Critical Thinking: Deconstructs hierarchical structures and values in knowledge. Learning Outcomes: Learners practice reframing dominant cultural narratives using relational approaches and articulate the value of care, interdependence, and open-endedness in critique

Theoretical Support: Inspired by Ursula K. Le Guin's "Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction", this method challenges heroic, linear storytelling and affirms narrative forms that are collective, sustaining, and non-dominating.

These methods cultivate creative competence not as mastery but as shared inquiry, layered perception, and ethical engagement with complexity.



WORKING WITH THE UNREADABLE

Purpose: To explore the value of ambiguity, partial knowledge, and resistant legibility in conceptual and creative practice. **Activities:** Learners are invited to work with texts, images, or personal stories that feel unclear, fragmented, or inaccessible. They might respond to a poetic text in a language they don't fully understand, create visual compositions with blurred meaning, or write from the perspective of something that refuses explanation (e.g., a dream, a silence, an unknown figure). **Discussions** focus on what it means *not* to fully understand, and how opacity can be an aesthetic and political choice. **Creative Confidence:** Encourages learners to embrace complexity, contradiction, and the right *not* to explain themselves fully. **Critical Thinking:** Challenges norms of transparency and epistemic mastery; invites learners to reflect on who is expected to be "legible" within dominant systems of knowledge. **Learning Outcomes:** Learners analyze how dominant systems shape what counts as visible, intelligible, or knowable. They engage creatively with ambiguity and articulate how opacity can function as a protective, ethical, or speculative strategy.

Theoretical Support: This method is informed by Édouard Glissant's concept of "the right to opacity", which affirms difference without reduction, and Michel Foucault's theory of "conditions of possibility", which reveals how systems define and constrain what can be known or seen.

SUGGESTED LEARNING TOOLS & RESOURCES

TOOLS

Archival prompts (images, texts, redacted documents)

Collage materials or digital apps (Canva, Figma)

Audio recorders or zine-making tools

Platforms like Padlet, Miro, or Milanote for collaborative work

Large paper, markers, sticky notes for analog mapping

Concept mapping platforms (Coggle, Miro, MURAL)

Structured reflection prompts for surfacing gaps, absences, and silences

Screenshots, memes, or digital ads for analysis

Annotation tools (e.g., Hypothes.is), Jamboard or Notion



Meme generators, simple video editing apps (InShot, Kapwing)

Templates for redesigning institutional forms (syllabi, rubrics)

Poster-making tools (Adobe Express, Canva)

Collaborative writing platforms (Google Docs, Notion)

Story dice, object prompts, zine or scrap materials

Twine (for nonlinear storytelling), index cards, or role cards

Bags of symbolic objects for tactile engagement

RESOURCES

Ahmed, Sara: *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press, 2017.

Berger, John: *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin Books, 1972.

Deleuze, Gilles: *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

Federici, Silvia: *Wages Against Housework*. Bristol: Power of Women Collective and Falling Wall Press, 1975.

Foucault, Michel: *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. Pantheon, 1972.

Hall, Stuart: "Encoding/Decoding." In *Culture, Media, Language*, edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis, Routledge, 1980, pp. 128–138.

Haraway, Donna: "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, pp. 575–599.

Hartman, Saidiya: "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2008, pp. 1–14.

Le Guin, Ursula K.: *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. In *Dancing at the Edge of the World*. Grove Press, 1989.



Glissant, Édouard: *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wing. University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Moten, Fred & Harney, Stefano: *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Minor Compositions, 2013.

Parisi, Luciana & Majaca, Antonia: "The Incomputable and Instrumental Possibility." *e-flux*, Journal #87, December 2017.

Michael Schwab – *Transpositions: Aesthetico-Epistemic Operators in Artistic Research*. Leuven University Press, 2018.

