

FROM: ILLUSTRATION A THEORETICAL + CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE

ALAN MALE



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54 Visual Metaphor

Conceptual Imagery and Surrealism

A generalised definition of a visual metaphor might suggest the description of an image that is imaginative, but not literally applicable. When applied to the discipline of illustration, it is commonplace to describe this form of imagery as being conceptual. This implies a way of depicting content by utilising a number of ideas and methods of communication, illusion, symbolism, and expressionism.

This type of visual stylisation started to evolve during the 1950s in the United States when issues and themes, as publicised in magazines, were becoming more critical and complex. There seemed a need to present the viewer with much more enigmatic and ambiguous images that invited deeper interpretation. Up to this period, illustration was more or less completely dominated by explicitly literal and vividly realistic drawing and painting. The chief exponent was Norman Rockwell who had himself derived his style from early proponents of American commercial illustration; J.D. Layendecker, N.C. Wyeth, et al.

However, whilst this particular visual language is still successful and appropriate for dramatic reconstructions across all contexts of illustration practice, the need to express ideas rather than portray verbatim scenes has meant that conceptual illustration is now the dominant style.

Historically, photography replaced much of the figurative realism used in advertising. Today, it is photography and not drawing that dominates the pages of magazines and roadside billboards. However, this has presented illustrators with a much more challenging role; to be both interpretative and to convey the 'texture' of a topic or idea rather than, like photography, present just the 'veneer' or 'surface' of the subject.

What exactly is the visual language of conceptual illustration and broadly speaking what does it look like? This question cannot be answered fully by merely presenting a singular succinct definition. One has to examine firstly the modern art painting



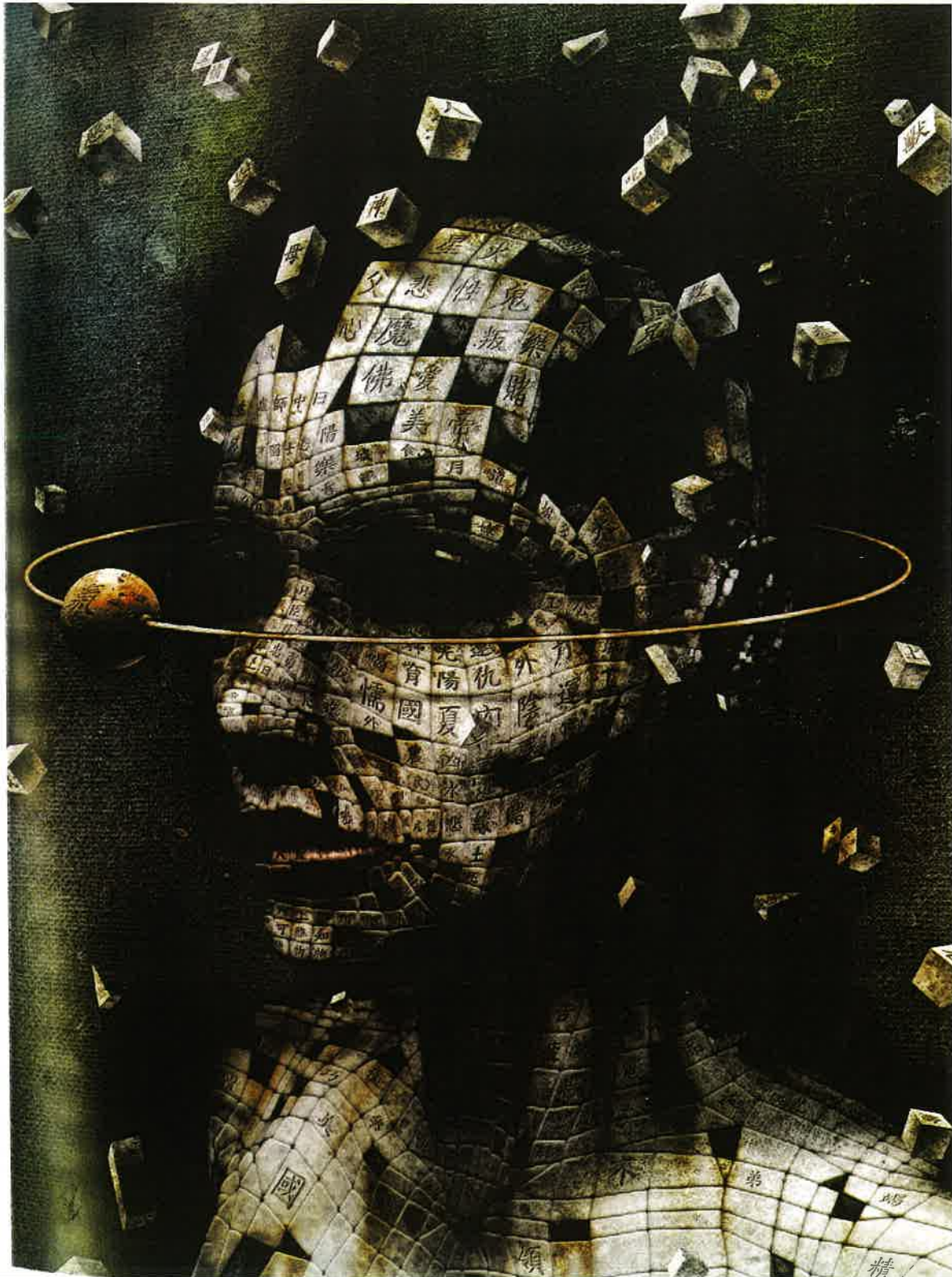
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1,2. Richard Borge's overtly conceptual image presents an unambiguous comment regarding the state of 'censorship'.

3. The illustrator Brad Holland is renowned for conceiving and producing striking visual concepts for a range of contextual uses. This conceptual image is to promote a production entitled 'Red' by the Wharf Theatre Co. The visual message conveys a comment on the effect the Communist Revolution and Red Guard had on traditional Chinese theatre.

4. David Ho produces an uncompromisingly surreal image entitled 'The Way'.







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movements and styles that have influenced the progress of conceptual illustration and secondly view the work of illustrators, both historically and contemporaneously who have been successful proponents of this genre.

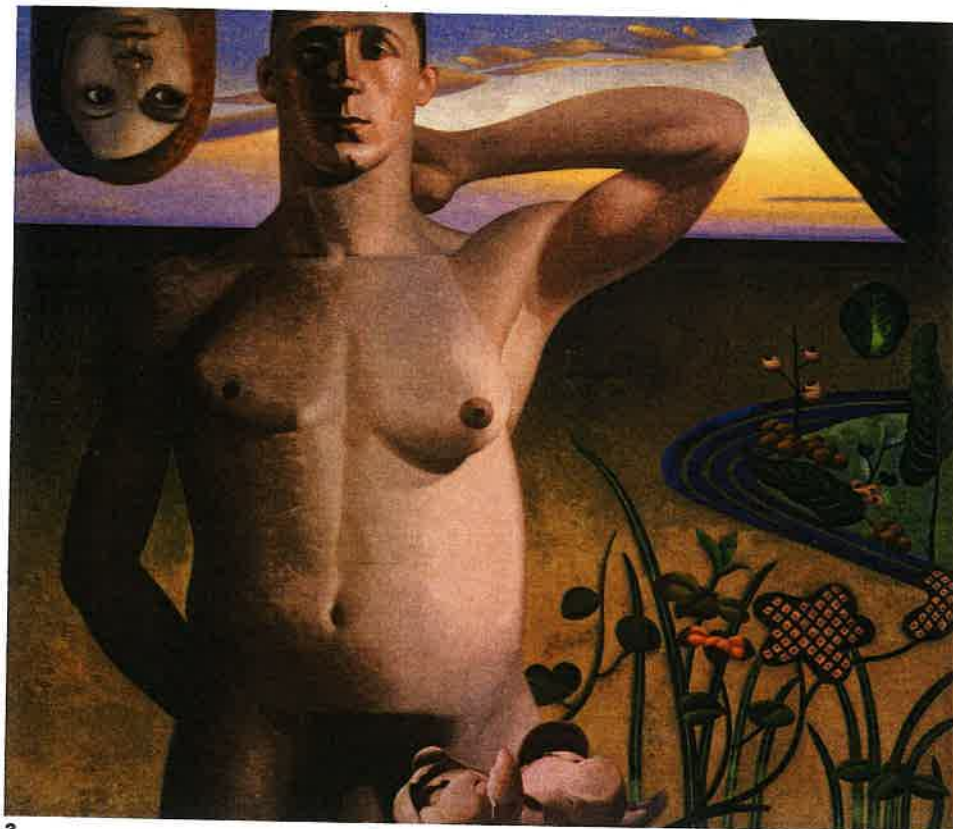
Surrealism, abstract expressionism and cubism have provided illustrators with immeasurable influence regarding the nature of imagery, exemplified by the expressive application of colour and form that marries elements of realism with abstraction. There is also distortion and juxtaposition of compositional elements to create illusory and dreamlike interpretations presenting enigmatic and thought-provoking commentaries, identities and promotions.

Examine the biggest influence on conceptual illustration: surrealism. René Magritte, the Belgian surrealist painter has had a considerable influence on early conceptual illustration. Unlike Salvador Dali, whose paintings were often rooted in interpreting subconscious fantasies, Magritte presented a clearer, though enigmatic, symbolic visual language that illustrators found could be applied to contemporary themes and issues as commissioned by the commercial marketplace; a euphonium and other bizarre objects floating in space, a sky where the clouds have turned into French loaves, a train coming through a fireplace, a rain shower of bowler-hatted men.

These concepts have obviously and unashamedly borne some influence on illustrations that have been commissioned from the 1950s to the present day: businessmen climbing ladders up to the clouds; two men with one eye sharing the same pair of spectacles; twigs, leaves and flowers growing from the fingers of an outstretched hand. Clichéd, yes, and the list of examples is almost infinite. These types of illustrations have been and are to this day being commissioned to promote, comment and give identity to issues related to the economy, politics and society. Commonplace themes manifested by way of published editorials, company literature and promotional material.



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1,2. Etienne Delessert provides surreal portraits of Dracula and King Arthur.

3. Wilson McLean's editorial illustration for 'Penthouse' uses typical

principles of surrealism with scenic distortion and disregard for the conventional representation of 'real space'. There is also an unnerving juxtaposition of visual elements.

4,5. Victoria Rose uses collage to design and construct this conceptual editorial illustration entitled 'No More Coins'.

6. Arthur de Borman has produced an image promoting a motion picture about a man who saves many Jews from death and persecution in Nazi Germany.



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Conceptual illustration has been viewed as an element of the design process and it is the illustrator, not usually the commissioning art director who originates and defines the totality of the image and its graphic positioning, whether a poster, cover of a company report or double-page spread in a book. This often means the illustrator giving due consideration and application to the inclusion and placement of typographic and other visual devices and elements. The whole conceptual image – in other words the complete illustrations – as seen in its complete graphic totality is the work of the illustrator.

In previous times and to a certain extent today, the art director will position the image near or amongst the appropriate text. But it is the illustrator who translates the verbal ideas into visual ones, including the smaller 'spot' illustrations as seen in magazines and newspapers.

To quote the art director Steven Heller: 'Conceptual illustration serves two purposes: It provides meaning – and commentary – and gives a publication its visual personality.'

Conceptual illustrators to be aware of include the following: Marshall Arisman, Brad Holland, Alan E. Cober and Anita Kunz. All have been or are on the cutting edge of this genre: award winning, influential, professionally and commercially successful. An analysis of their work will reveal a challenge to the accepted way in which people see and think. Stylistically different from one another – in use of media and iconography – their work can be seen as a standard-bearer.

To conclude, the visual imagery that is conceptual illustration does not rely on the appearance of being true or the semblance of actuality. It questions the concepts of definition and representation and will continue to evolve and grow with the demands and vicissitudes of society.



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