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Three keywords – Representation, Communication, Conceptual

To develop a proposal for a research question, it is important to investigate key words in conjunction with illustrators and thinkers. The three key words of representation, communication and conceptual will be explored and defined within the discipline of illustration. Research has been conducted and thinkers such as John Berger, Alan Male and Martin Salisbury have been accounted for. Illustrators who have great presence within editorial illustration have been identified including Martin Tognola, Laura Carlin and Paul Blow. By exploring these elements, it is possible to develop potential further areas to research and hence a proposal question

Representation

Representation within and through illustration is vastly important. Male (2019, p.167) argues that through illustration *“it is expected that the imagery you produce will deliver messages vigorously exploiting the vulnerabilities, weaknesses and prejudices of your intended audience.”* Male is explaining when creating an illustration, an illustrator has the role of representing any topic sensitively and accurately as well as representing the audience included in the issue. Male seems to emphasise the importance of recognising and hence representing the audience an illustrator is trying to reach. Indeed, the audience play a great role when producing an illustration and it could be said they are the greatest focal point. An audience has to be considered where representation is demanded from an illustration.

It seems the very role of an illustrator is to represent things. Britannica stresses how illustration is *“the process of giving examples to make something easier to understand.”* This places importance on having the ability to represent something well through illustration. An illustration must be accurate and effective in demonstrating what is desired to be represented. The importance of accurate and true representation only becomes greater when being tasked with illustrating a sensitive issue. Sensitive issues can become more difficult to understand due to the emotions involved within them. It becomes the role of the illustrator to represent the emotions well and perhaps simplify the way that an audience may view it in order for the core of the issue to be understood.

The word representation is described by Cambridge Dictionary as being *“the way someone or something is shown or described.”* The definition of representation, as provided by Cambridge Dictionary, could suggest that anything can be represented however someone may choose to. This could reveal the ease in which misrepresentation can happen. Misrepresentation, in consideration of the definition provided, can happen when something is shown to an audience in a way that isn’t entirely true. Misrepresentation can be caused by the threat of bias. Bias is influencing factors that may skew a view someone may hold and perhaps cause them to have a one-sided view. Illustrators must be aware of the threat of their own bias and try to combat it by gaining an informed view of the issue at hand. To ignore the threat of bias and misrepresentation would be to allow room for illustration not to work as it is necessarily intended to.

The word representation should be considered also in the context of it lacking. There have been many instances throughout history where groups of people haven't been represented, or there has not been an equal representation. One of the most famous of these events within the UK could be the Suffragette Movement, where women had to fight to gain equal voting rights to men. (Haynes, 2018) By considering this meaning of the word, illustrators must consider how they can raise awareness for these issues and provide representation, where it is lacking, through their artwork.



Fig. 1. *Why Young Adults Are Delaying Parenthood*, Martin Tognola, 2022

Martin Tognola, a Spanish-based illustrator, manages to represent many different issues within his editorial work. He has worked for clients such as the Wall Street Journal, The Telegraph and The Washington Post. Some of the topics Tognola has addressed includes dealing with a parent's will after death, delaying parenthood due to financial worries in the modern world and pressure of modern-day offices. His use of characters can allow the

viewer to place themselves within the issue and give them the opportunity to spot their *“vulnerabilities, weaknesses and prejudices”* as Male suggests. It then becomes much easier for the viewer to find representation within an illustration when the chance of relatability is high. Tognola also represents difficult issues in a way that could be more understandable and accessible with the use of simple yet conceptual illustrations. His focus on difficult and sensitive issues helps to provide representation of issues that perhaps are hidden, unspoken or ignored, which is of great importance in order to start providing an equal representation.

Communication

Whilst dealing with sensitive issues, an illustrator must be able to communicate with the viewer what they are attempting to illustrate and how they or a client wants an issue to come across. Salisbury and Styles (2020, p.21) detail how *“words and pictures combine in varying ratios to deliver the overall meaning, complementing, teasing and often contradicting each other.”* Though being applied to illustration of children’s picture books, it is easy to apply this same principle when having the responsibility of illustrating sensitive issues. This applies particularly to editorial illustration where there can be a focus on a difficult topic. Editorial illustration is often accompanied with a body of text with much editorial illustration being found in magazines and newspapers, for instance. The illustrator has the role of considering what the text is telling the reader and providing an illustration that can communicate this. (Brazell, D. and Davies, J. 2017, p.16) This seems of upmost importance when being set the task of illustrating a sensitive issue, which can be perhaps difficult for a reader to understand. Paul Bowman wrote in his manifesto *Educate, Agitate, Abdicate* that an illustrator has to *“attempt to communicate what is wrong with the world*

and indeed, what is right” and hence, the importance of *“producing communication that matters.”* (AOI, 2019) He emphasises the role of experienced illustrators being to complete work that sheds light on what is happening within the world, whether good or bad. This can be achieved by providing communication through illustration to as many people as possible. Bowman’s manifesto has become synonymous with issue-based illustration and great importance has been placed on his emphasis for illustrators to be social commentators. Illustration seems to be one of the most effective ways of communicating all that is happening in the world, according to Bowman. To understand this importance, illustrators must be aware of how their illustrations will communicate with the viewer and the very role they have.

Communication can differ for each individual as John Berger explains in *Ways of Seeing*. He notes how *“every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing.”* (2008, p.7) This can demonstrate how mindful illustrators have to be when trying to communicate something. Every person will view things differently and each person likely has a different visual language when translating an image or illustration. It is important for illustrators to recognise this and navigate it carefully and sensitively, especially when portraying an issue. It is also vital for an illustrator to be wary of their own visual language and why they portray subjects in the manner they do. Consequently, an illustrator then has to be mindful of how an audience may interpret their visual language. In a similar way representation can be skewed, communication can become difficult and uneven. An illustrator has the role of providing visual communication, which can be understood at a much more universal level. However,

there is still great risk in how effective the communication can be and an illustrator must be wary of this.

An illustrator who has great focus in not only editorial illustration but also children's picture books is Laura Carlin. She has had the role, as an illustrator, of communicating what a text is saying to children and to adults. Many of the children's picture books she has illustrated have had difficult issues as their subjects. This has also been translated into her editorial work, where she has looked at issues such as returning to a childhood home after abuse. (Fig.2) Carlin communicates the words very sensitively through her illustrations. Her illustrations seem to communicate much of the feelings that the issue could evoke that perhaps doesn't necessarily come across from just the words of the text. Her use of colour and of placement within the illustration helps her to communicate these feelings to the audience.



Fig. 2. *Jane and Her Daughters*, Laura Carlin, 2006

Conceptual

Conceptual art came into fruition in the 1960s and 70s. It is agreed that conceptual art can look like or be anything so long as it conveys a complex idea or meaning. (Tate) Indeed, Alan Male seems to agree with this definition as he describes how *“an image without context is not illustration.”* (2017, p.100) He later goes on to argue that meaning *“cannot be conveyed by realistic or pictorial means alone.”* (2017, p.117) It seems illustrations must be conceptual if the purpose of such illustration is to depict what that subject matter means, and potential concerns that comes with this. To argue further, Male may claim that an illustration without a concept isn't illustration at all. This places great importance in having a strong concept and a meaning to come across within an illustration. Male states illustration *“disregards aesthetics or notions of ‘good taste’ regarding subject matter or visual language.”* (2017, p.233) Male claims how in some instances illustration has a greater purpose than being aesthetically pleasing. Of course, it must still have aesthetic value, but this value is decreased by a greater importance of concept and communication. This should be a consideration for illustrators when creating an illustration where a strong concept is demanded.

Male also mentions the use of iconography within illustration. Iconography represents a system of symbols or images to convey a meaning, according to Tate. It has often appeared in religious artworks, but it is much more common now in a modern-day society driven by symbols conveying as much information as possible. This theory of symbols representing a concept is one illustrators should consider greatly when trying to create illustrations that convey meaning or represent something complex. Applying this theory to illustrating

sensitive or difficult topics can make the process easier and could make the illustration much more effective.

Often associated with conceptual illustration is the Surrealist movement. Chwast and Heller state *"Surrealism provided a semi-abstract means to visually express complex ideas, sometimes in a simplistic manner."* (P.127, 2008) Surrealism evolved from the conceptual movement and provided illustrators with the means of producing imagery that was still commenting on issues within the world but visual language and how it was translated was not the greatest concern. Illustrators became really imaginative with their placement of imagery with collage playing a great role in the movement. Considering the surrealism movement alongside conceptual illustration allows an illustrator to understand the effects of disregarding visual language in order to provide commentary instead.

Paul Blow is an illustrator from the UK and has worked for clients such as The Guardian, New York Times, and The Economist. Blow's work is very conceptual, and he has illustrated subjects such as the fear of technology, dealing with love during lockdown and couple's attitudes to sex. His use of character personifies the issues at hand. In this illustration (Fig.3), Blow personifies the technology also. It is much more common for people to become afraid of things that are similar to us. This is explained by the term Uncanny Valley. This term is used to describe the relationship between, in this instance, technology and the emotions it can evoke. People tend to feel more uncomfortable as technology becomes closer to being human and being able to do things as a human would. (Cherry, K. 2020) Use of concepts such as this within an illustration only strengthens the effect of it. It allows the

illustrator to communicate effectively whilst playing to human emotion. Blow manages to convey a complex theory by personifying the technology and demonstrates how iconography can be used within illustration to depict sensitive issues. The work becomes highly conceptual, which is demanded for a topic as such.

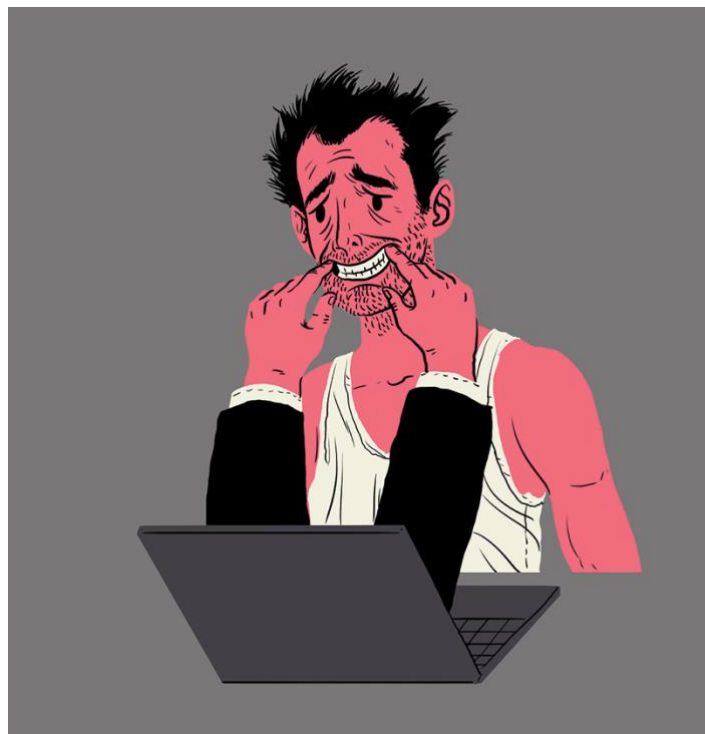


Fig. 3. *Cheer Up*, Paul Blow, 2020

Contextualising the three words

“Illustration has over the years had a significant and influential effect on society and incited a diversity of audience reactions and emotion.” (Male, 2019, p.12) It is important to note the influence and power that illustration has in representing anything and everything within the

world. It has also attempted to tackle some of the most difficult, challenging and sensitive issues whilst providing a visual representation for such subjects. Male (2019) explains the impact that illustration can have in provoking a response from any type of audience and hence its ability to represent anything. Combining the words representation, communication and conceptual seems to happen naturally. It is difficult to explain aspects of research within each word without mentioning the other key words. The relationship between each of the words seems to be strong. By considering the meanings of each of the words, it is easy to see the role they play in difficult and sensitive topics. Illustration has to represent everything within the world, and particularly the issues that seem perhaps too difficult to explain. Illustration must communicate the emotions that a sense of difficulty can bring to allow audiences to understand it. Illustration must contain meaning and convey something more to an audience. Breaking the words down to their core and debating their role within illustration can suggest potential research questions. This can lead to consideration of how illustrators use the notions of the key words to create illustrations, particularly illustrations that portray sensitive and difficult topics. Research has also led to consider how illustrators use their own visual language, whilst also being mindful of the perception of audiences' different visual languages, to communicate emotions that such issues can evoke. There is a greater scope to research into how iconography has developed, how the use of symbols can provide a greater meaning and how illustrators can exploit this to cause their audience to find meaning. By combining the key words and the elements of research within them that can be developed further, there are very clear paths to investigate. By combining all the research undertaken and the questions it has arisen, a proposed research question can be formed. The proposed research question can then inform a practice proposal. Editorial illustration represents very sensitive issues within them

with illustrator examples being included within the text. Alongside the proposal, I will conduct a series of editorial illustrations targeting difficult issues.

The proposed research question is “How do illustrators develop a visual language that allows them to portray sensitive and difficult subjects and communicate effectively and emotionally to an audience?”

Sub questions arising after research include: “How does an illustration communicate an emotion?”, “How has iconography developed and how does symbolism in illustration appear?”, “Why is there an expectation for illustrators to represent difficult issues?” and “How do we determine issues that are difficult and sensitive?”

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