

Student Name: Daria Shmatko

Student Number: 2219579

Programme of Study: BA Illustration

Module: Research In Practice (ADAD5004/C)

Tutor Name: Delyth Lloyd-Evans

Word Count: 2612

Three Keywords: Visual storytelling, Commentary and Semiotics

Proposed Question:

Analysis of illustrators who visually comment about daily-life in their work.

This proposal will explore three keywords visual storytelling, commentary and semiotics.

These three keywords will help me create an illustrated book about a day in a life of an illustration student. Throughout this proposal I would like to deepen my understanding in non-conventional styles of illustrated books especially that could apply to the similar audience as me which are students, specifically the illustration students. I would also like explore the use of commentary and text within visual narrative. And thirdly be interested in learning about the importance of semiotics in illustration as a powerful tool in making and developing my own illustration style. For this book that I am going to produce, I would like to express my own daily and non-daily struggles and experiences. It could be about my daily life 'more like a complaint book' as I like to complain a lot, as well as expressing my own fears and anxieties but in the creative outlet. With my book I am hoping that people could

relate to my experiences, maybe learn something and just have a good time and a laugh while reading it as I prefer books of the similar genre. I would also like to analyse the works of Nina Cosford and Mouni Feddag as these are the artist who caught my attention by their unique books. As well as Cindy Mangomini who creates unique illustrations of daily items and Nikki Groom who focuses on reportage styled drawings.

Visual Storytelling

Visual storytelling is present everywhere in illustration world from the children's picture book to visual novels to comics. It is the pictorial world of traditional books. According to Understanding Illustration by Derek Brazel and Jo Davies, "The story is conveyed through words and text, and the visual approach is an important factor in the communication process" (Brazell and Davies, 2014, p. 17). In order to have that communication process the visual approach needs to include several visual key factors to make a balanced story telling.

The key factors are characters, setting, plot, emotion, conflict or/and resolution.

'Characters' are a centre of the story; they are what the audience could relate to. The

second element is the 'setting', it is as the word entails sets the story precisely its location.

Characters are always in the certain location even if it is an empty white space as that empty white space 'is' its own location. It is just a matter of fact of finding what location to use and

that fits with the character. The third is the 'plot' of the story, which is the sequence of

events that leads the character through beginning, middle and the end. The final key factor

of a great visual storytelling is an 'emotion'. Emotion is a powerful tool that helps the viewer

feel connected to the story. That emotion can be expressed through body language, facial

expression and colour theory. Some additional elements would help with storytelling are

composition which is how and where the elements are arranged in the frame. Another part of making a good visual story is having knowledge of the subjects that you are talking about. As according to Alan Male; “Successful, forward-thinking illustrators need to be educated, socially and culturally aware communicators utilising a breadth of intellectual and practical skill” (Male, 2007, p. 14). Having the knowledge of what you are trying to convey to your readers is as important as the ability to draw because without the knowledge the audience will not understand what you are trying to convey. Therefore, it is a good practice to have necessary materials by your side to help yourself gain the ideas and inspiration from. Those necessary materials are mostly called a reference material. Wigan states that;

Illustrators are usually magpies: obsessive collectors, always on the hunt for reference imagery. The search for inspiring material can get them out of the studio and off to second-hand bookshops, car boot sales, flea markets, collectors’ fairs, jumble sales and charity shops and of course millions of images are a few clicks away on the internet.

(Wigan, 2014, p. 17)

That is why perhaps illustrators have collection tendencies which something that could help with the visual storytelling as it is a backup of knowledge. A particular illustrator called Nina Cosford that have caught my attention with her unique visual storytelling. Nina is a British freelance illustrator from Hastings that is known for her lifestyle illustrations. Nina has collaborated with major companies such as Apple, Google and Netflix. In her book *My name is girl* Nina Cosford portrays daily life of a woman in an interesting visual manner.



Figure 1: Nina Cosford, My Name is Girl, 2016

The main character of the book called 'Girl' is depicted as a person who is struggling through girlhood and trying to grasp an understanding of what to be a girl. In figure 1 they are a lot of simple illustrations of clothing that show no background as it is just plain white, the clothes seem almost floating in the air. In the image the 'Girl' is looking bamboozled at her choice of so much clothing. This is a clean visual depiction of women struggling with, like this simple act of choosing what to wear. The clothing items additionally composed in the way that they are around and above the girl further developing the Girl's tension between her and the clothes.



Figure 2: Nina Cosford, *The Trans-Siberian Railway*, 2019

The next book by Nina Cosford that is worth mentioning is *The Trans-Siberian Railway*. The book depicts the Nina's travel through Russia, Siberia, Mongolia and China. Figure 2 shows the original picture of author-illustrator on the Trans-Siberian railway train. On the picture Nina is staring at the window gazing at the trees that are passing by while the train is moving.



Figure 3: Nina Cosford, The Trans-Siberian Railway, 2019

However, the illustrator has captured herself slightly differently, in figure 3 Nina has added more houses while looking through the window instead of trees to showcase more of the architecture of the country. “I find that illustration is such an effective and powerful way to capture a moment, idea, message or feeling” (Cosford, 2022). Nina Cosford quotes from her interview with Brittany Watson Jepsen.

Capturing a moment is a very powerful skill when it comes to illustration as it helps us keep a record of event, travels like what Nina has capture throughout her travels. That is why where reportage could come handy. Reportage is an extremely useful way of capturing the aspect of everyday life. While Nina Cosford is not a reportage artist or an illustrator, she can provide similar outcomes as one. According to Derek Brazell and Jo Davies “Reportage artist can act as witness to the extraordinary and the mundane, documenting aspects of contemporary life and culture” (Brazell and Davies, 2014). Looking more into detail about this type of art, reportage can provide its own unique type of visual storytelling. Some

reportage artists like to do urban sketching which when you travel around a city or a town in the search for a location to draw on.

Behind each drawing is a story of what was happening before our eyes: a building torn down, a business closing its doors, or an encounter with a stranger in the subway.

(Campanario, 2012, p. 18)

Niki Groom also known as Miss Magpie Fashion Spy is a perfect example of a reportage artist that uses visual story telling as a way of promoting important topics of our society. Nikki's style is very distinctive as the artist uses mainly fine line pens and watercolour and range of other media to capture these significant moments. Since the artist lives in Bristol, she has witnessed many events from marathons to protests to refugee festivals and many others around the UK. Originally trained as a fashion designer she uses that to her advantage capture people and clothing extremely well. You can describe her art as energetic, colourful and it often depicts fast fashion as well as urban landscapes and locations shown in figure 4.

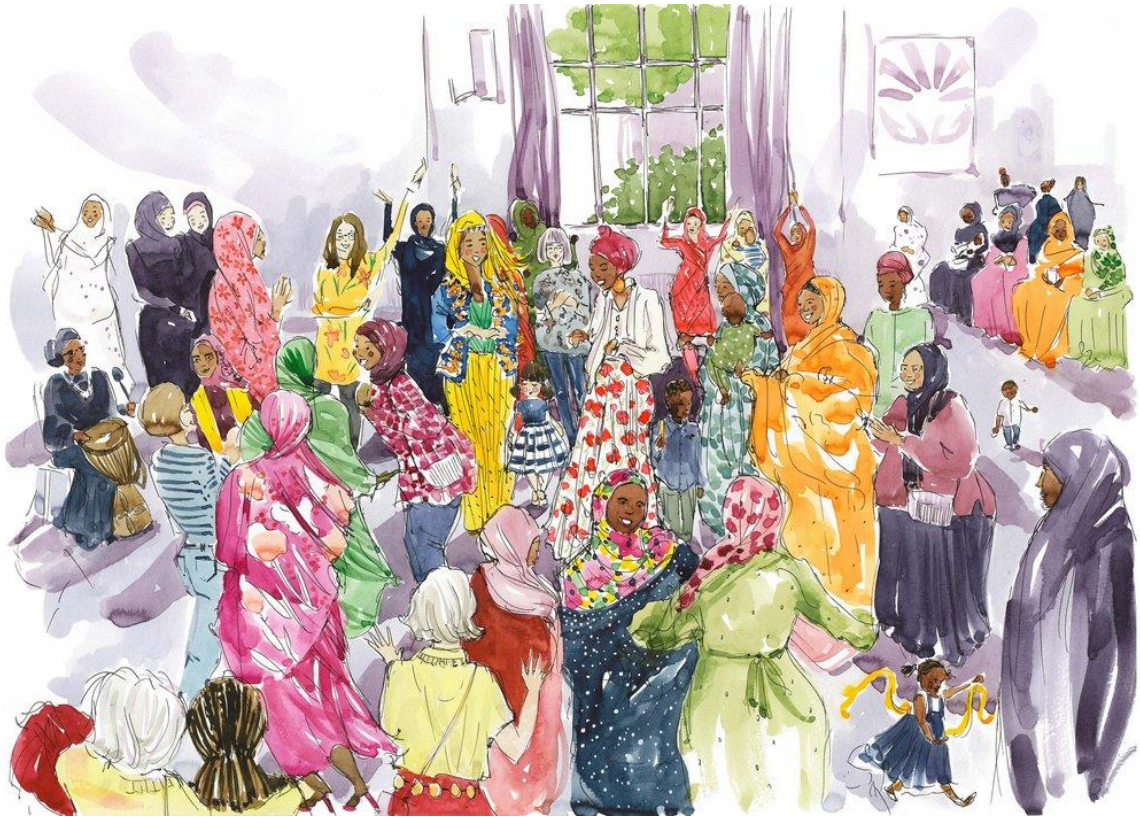


Figure 4: Niki Groom, Refugee women of Bristol-Dance event, 2022



Figure 5: Niki Groom, Reclaim the sea-Documenting a swimming lesson, 2024

Not only Miss Magpie Spy does reportage illustration that just showcase massive events like mentioned prior, but Niki also enjoys drawing more simpler drawing shown in the figure 5 which are the swimming lessons that the artist has attended to. Those are events that need to be represented in the visual manner to the community as they are as important.

Commentary

Commentary is an important aspect of life. We are as a society live by communicating and commenting things to one another. Illustrators also communicate to one another but mainly in the visual form however sometimes without textual context it is hard to understand the true meaning of what is intended. In the illustrated book by Mouni Feddag *Illustration: What's the point* the text is presented as an important part of the story. In the book writer-illustrator explores the contemplating part about the art world and life itself.



Figure 6: Mouni Feddag, Illustration: What's the point, 2017

A quote from the book showcases the author's contemplating ideas if there is a significant barrier between text and pictures. "Pictures can make texts and texts can make pictures" (Feddag, 2017). From such wording viewers can grasp that text is represented as a feature that can be moulded and changed to create pictures and vice versa.

Figure 7: Mouni Feddag, Illustration: What's the point, 2017



Feddag also has the right balance of text and illustration in the book. A quote “Meanwhile in the fine arts...” (Feddag, 2017) is an only bit of text that this page has. In this instance you can say that Mouni uses more visual elements here rather than textual. However, going through the book the visual change all the time as some on the pages are just completely covered in drawings of flowers and some are just bunch of random text. Sometimes that can confuse the readers as the book jumps from one topic to another extremely quickly. However, there is beauty to that because the artist herself embraces this a lot throughout the book, communicating that words and picture could be depicted separately and together as the same time shown figure 8.



Figure 10: Cindy Mangomini, Autumn self-care, 2024

Cindy also illustrated a topic of self-care as shown in figure 10. To Cindy, her autumn self-care items are listening to podcasts, good night sleep, music, streaming on her computer, baking, making art and so on. This way of portraying all the items that she finds relaxing in one singular page helps the viewer associate these particular objects of the idea of relaxation. It is also worth mentioning that my bringing attention to self-care Cindy tells the viewer to look after themselves. Illustration often influences other people in big ways. Alan Male states that "Illustration influences the way we are informed and educated, what we

buy and how we are persuaded to do things. It gives us opinion and comment” (Male, 2007, p. 19). That is why it is also crucial to create illustrations that others might find useful and that help them in the way. It seems maybe that it was not in particular interested in Cindy to influence the whole community about self-care but by posting this out there it has probably managed to do this effect. Christopher Corr mentions this good quote by saying that “I like making pictures for somebody, but I also I do pictures for me...” (Christopher Corr, p. 73). That is also important as illustration is a great nurturing your own mental well-being.

Semiotics

My third keyword is Semiotics. Semiotics are powerful tool in art as it helps the audience to understand what the artist means. It is the study of signs and that they signify from the shapes to the colours which are both important aspects to understand the mood and meaning of the artwork. Taking Nina Cosford as an example of semiotics, her illustrations are whimsical and insightful, they capture the nuances of day-to-day life particularly from women's perspective. The illustrator herself has not explicitly discussed any semiotic underpinning in her work however her style speaks for itself because Cosford's visual signs and symbol convey a deeper meaning. “It is the distinctive visual language that identifies one's ‘mark’ or personal iconography” (Male, 2007, p. 50) Alan Male says about semiotics. Nina's semiotics and iconography- the symbols of her art- would be in mundane objects and scenarios for example her illustration of cozy atmospheres, hairstyle and clothing choices. These elements would be signifiers, which the elements that represent concepts of comfort, challenges of everyday life, womanhood especially and personal individuality.

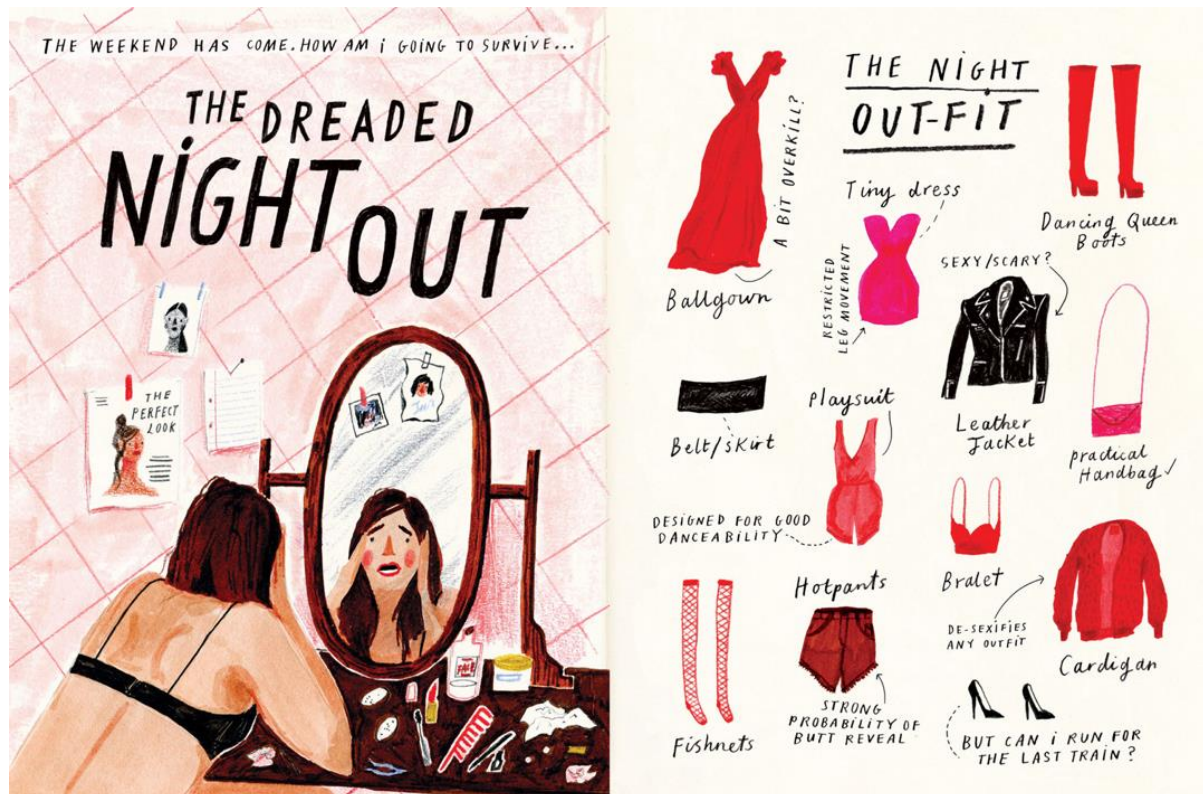


Figure 11: Nina Cosford, My Name is Girl, 2016

In *My name is girl* Nina portrays herself in the light of feeling dreadful due to having a night out that she is feeling scared to go to. The reader can signify the feeling of scared on Nina even though it is not written anywhere textually is due to the drawn expression. Nina is looking at the mirror with her hands on top of her head expressing a worried look that is the 'sign' that someone is stressed. That illustration is also backed up with additional phrases "The dreaded" and "The weekend has come. How I am going to survive" (Cosford, 2016) backing up the viewers understanding of the situation. Additionally, on the next page the illustrator has drawn her clothing options for the occasion, a bralette, handbag, belt, shirt etc. showcasing many options that our character needs to choose from, signifying another barrier and fear to go on the night out.

Practice

To go further in the detail about my practice, I was initially inspired by Nina Cosford. I find her illustrations very captivating and while doing more research about her it has fuelled my passion even more. In my book I would mainly like to touch the aspects of the daily struggles of illustration students, the topics of motivation, meeting deadlines, mental health and overall balance of things as I find that if I am struggling with something I need immediate answer to things. During my practice work, I also intend to experiment with my materials. While mentioning illustrators prior, I have noticed that most of them prefer to use analogue to digital. That is something that is preferable media to me as I find the texture of the analogue more eye-pleasing. Furthermore, I would like to use bits of text in my book as a pointing matter. If I draw an object, I would like to point out what it is, what colour it is and so on and perhaps give my opinion about. And finally, while collecting my research I have noticed that there were lack of experiences beginner illustrator especially an illustration student being mention therefore I would like to go into depth on it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brazell, D. and Davies, J. (2014) *Understanding illustration*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts.

Brazell, D. and Davies, J. (2011) *Making great illustration*. London: A & C Black.

Brittany (2022) *Becoming Nina Cosford, The House That Lars Built*. Available at:

<https://thehousethatlarsbuilt.com/2022/03/becoming-nina-cosford.html/> (Accessed: 22 April 2025).

Campanario, G. (2012) *The Art of Urban Sketching: Drawing on location around the world*.

Beverly, Mass: Quarry Books.

Cosford, N. (2016) *My name is girl*. London: Quadrille Publishing.

Cosford, N. (2025) *Nina Cosford illustration*. Available at: <https://www.ninacosford.com/> (Accessed: 23 April 2025).

Feddag, M. (2017) *Illustration: What's the point?* London: Ilex.

Feddag , M. (2025) *Mouni Feddag illustration, Mouni Feddag Illustration*. Available at: <http://mouni.altervista.org/> (Accessed: 23 April 2025).

Male, A. (2007) *Illustration: A theoretical & Contextual Perspective*. AVA Publishing.

Male, A. (2019) *A companion to illustration*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Mangomini, A. (2024) *Cindy Mangomini*. Available at: <https://cindymangomini.com/> (Accessed: 23 April 2025).

Mei, G. (2015) *Cindy Mangomini is our illustrator of the week! - hellogiggleshellogiggles*, HelloGiggles. Available at: <https://hellogiggles.com/cindy-mangomini-illustrator/> (Accessed: 23 April 2025).

Miss magpie fashion spy (2020) *Miss Magpie Fashion Spy*. Available at: <https://www.missmagpiefashionspy.com/> (Accessed: 23 April 2025).

Wigan, M. (2006) *Thinking visually (basics illustration)*. AVA Publishing.

Wigan, M. (2019) *Thinking visually for illustrators*. London etc: Bloomsbury Visual Arts.

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Cosford, N. (2016) *My name is girl*, London: Quadrille Publishing

Figure 2: Cosford, N. (2019) *Trans-Siberian Railway*

Figure 3: Cosford, N. (2019) *Trans-Siberian Railway*

Figure 4: Groom, N. (2022) *Refugee of Bristol Dance Event*

Figure 5: Groom, N. (2024) *Reclaim the Sea, Documenting a Swimming Lesson*

Figure 6: Feddag, M. (2017) *Illustration: What's the Point*, London: Octopus Publishing Group

Figure 7: Feddag, M. (2017) *Illustration: What's the Point*, London: Octopus Publishing Group

Figure 8: Feddag, M. (2017) *Illustration: What's the Point*, London: Octopus Publishing Group

Figure 9: Mangomini, C. (2022) *Meet the Maker*

Figure 10: Mangomini, C. (2024) *Autumn Self-Care*

Figure 11: Cosford, N. (2016) *My name is girl*, London: Quadrille Publishing