

Dissertation Proposal: Conceptual, Semiotics, Abstract.

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Dissertation Proposal

Conceptual, Abstract, Semiotics

This proposal explores three keywords, that will underpin future work, with the inclusion of related artists, illustrators and scholars. The first keyword is conceptual, with the exploration of two images by illustrators Sebastien Thibault and Ramona Ring. The second keyword is semiotics, paired with the knowledge of semioticians and scholars Umberto Eco and Brian Curtin PhD; as well as an analysis of Salvador Dali's *Uranium and Atomica Melancholica Idyll*. The third and final keyword is abstract, utilizing information produced by Molly Bang and the scrutiny of Picasso's *Melancholy Woman*. The investigation into these keywords is to identify associations to establish an appropriate question for my dissertation.

Conceptual

"In Conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work... all planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair.

The idea becomes the machine that moves the art..."

- Sol Le Witt (1927, quoted in Smith, 1994, p. 261)

The term Conceptual means that "the idea behind the art is more important" (Tate, 2022) than the finished product. Conceptualism derives from "1960s Europe and the US as a critique of Western art" (Senior Editors, 2017, p. 328) emanating from Surrealism, in particular, the prolific artist Rene Magritte (Livingstone, 1989, p. 382). However, it is Marcel Duchamp who is perceived as the inaugurator of this movement, due to his use of day-to-day objects to convey a deeper meaning (Tate, 2022).

Conceptual art can come in all forms - illustration, performance art, sculptures – however, illustration is the focal point of this text, as it is the main approach in modern day.

Conceptual art is commonly a commentary on political and social endeavours and happenings and is considered a “dominant visual language” (Male, 2019, p. 88); it can be provoking and poignant. For this reason, it is often used for editorial purposes and book covers. Conceptual art makes the onlooker question what the artist is trying to portray; an important device to make the viewer think more deeply about the subject represented. In addition, Conceptual illustrations make text easily digestible as it is supported by imagery. During the beginning of Conceptualism, the art was often paired with text – such as Joseph Kosuth’s 1965 *Clock (One and Five)* (Hodge, 2009, p. 91) and Mel Ramsden’s *Secret Painting* (1967-68) (NGV, 2021) – to highlight and emphasise the pieces meaning. This could also be a reason as to why Conceptual illustration are a cohesive match; the onset of the movement was partially defined by art coupled with text.

Conceptual illustrations are usually used to depict difficult and abstract themes – such as emotions, mental health problems, illness – through the use of visual metaphors (Lee-Merrion, 2020) and double meanings; they are visuals, commonly complex, that assist in creating context and understanding of the topic. Visual metaphors are described as “a representation of a noun through a visual image that suggests a particular association or similarity” (Deguzman, 2021), customarily using iconography to construct meaningful imagery. An example of this is the freelance illustrator Sebastien Thibault’s illustration for an “article on people with borderline personality disorder” (Thibault,

2022) for *L'Express Styles*. This illustration, as seen below, contains two images within one; the obvious visual being a female profile. However, there is a hand holding a match to a fuse of a bomb that creates the face. This visualises the emotional instability and impulsive behaviour (NHS, 2019) that people with borderline personality disorder experience. The use of texture not only adds an extra element to the illustration, but portrays the capricious state of mind. It is a clever image as it is subtle, yet effectively conveys the turbulence of such a disorder.



Fig. 1. Borderline personalities, Sebastien Thibault.

Another convoluted yet beautiful example is by the German freelance illustrator Ramona Ring. The Conceptual illustration, depicted below, is for an article for the magazine *Psychologie Heute* – which translates to *Psychology Today* – about “miscarriages and how to deal with the grief and despair you have to face after losing an

unborn baby” (Ring, 2016). The longer the image is viewed, the more there is to decipher. The figures in the illustration are packing the possessions of the unborn baby in a nursery, which immediately emanates a deep sadness. At the forefront is a dejected man with a baby blue sweatshirt and facial hair; the colour symbolises the melancholy he is experiencing. The woman painting the wall black signifies her despair and the poppies on her top symbolise “sleep degeneracy and... death” (Wilson, 2020, p. 56) which revolve around the theme of miscarriages. The moon she is about to paint over symbolises the “lack of reason” (Wilson, 2020, p. 24) for losing a child; often there is no concrete cause for miscarriages. The stuffed animals throughout the illustration either have their eyes closed – portraying ever-lasting sleep and their lack of use – or looking forlorn with their big, black, beady eyes which emphasises the dismal atmosphere. However, the plant, situated to the left, juxtaposes the rest of the image due to the fact it symbolises life and growth, suggesting that the couple mature through their experience: there is “a light at the end of the tunnel” (Collins Dictionary, 2022). The illustration uses colour, visual metaphors and symbols to sensitively convey a harrowing emotional event that not many have experienced, yet through the image, it is easy to empathise. This leads to the next keyword: semiotics.



Fig. 2. *Miscarriage* (2016), Ramona Ring.

Semiotics

“An idea, in the highest sense of that word, cannot be conveyed but by a symbol.”

- Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1817, quoted by Wilson, 2020, p. 9)

Semiotics is the study of symbols and signs as a method of language and communication (Nordquist, 2020). Semiology was founded by Swiss linguist and philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure (Curtin, 2009, p. 52) and subsequent semioticians have deduced a number of codes – “a set of shared understandings... about the relationship between signifiers and signifieds” (Simpson, 2020) – ranging from zoosemiotics to tactile communication and olfactory signs to medical semiotics and

formalized codes to natural languages, written languages, visual communications, cultural codes and aesthetic texts (Eco, 1976, pp. 9-13).

The focus of this keyword is the use of semiotics in visual communication. Images are a form of communication in which the “beholder” (Berger, 1972, p. 16) must decipher, whether this is through “cultural lessons” (Berger, 1972, p. 140) or “abstract ideas” (Doonan, 1993, p. 12). Pictures are “text-like” (Curtin, 2009, p. 56) in the sense that it is necessary to think beyond the obvious, meaning it is imperative to “tolerate ambiguity” (Doonan, 1993, p. 11). “Pictures present something of a puzzle” (Doonan, 1993, p. 11) as the onlooker must piece together the signs and symbols to elucidate the intended meaning. The use of pictorial signs and symbols create a deeper meaning to an image; they may be apparent or open to interpretation. The image may convey different messages to different onlookers; these can become “a new sign which produce new interpretants and an infinite process unfolds” (Curtin, 2009, p. 54). That is the beauty of semiotics in art – there is seldom a singular meaning to a piece – onlookers can form their own ideas depending on their ideologies and emotions. Art can be perceived variously, creating a different meaning to each. Editorial illustrations are often littered with semantics as the signs and symbols “elaborate, amplify, extend, and compliment the words” (Doonan, 1993, p. 18), making the text easier to understand and so the reader can relate. Signs and symbols, commonly indexical, are used on book covers so, at a glance, the onlooker is able to get an idea of the text inside and create intrigue.

Semiotics are rife within illustration and fine art to convey ideologies, narratives and emotions. Signifiers are arbitrary signs create further significance to the art. An

example of this is *Uranium and Atomica Melncholica Idyll* (1945) by Salvador Dali (see below); a dark surreal oil painting inspired by World War 2 and the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía Editors, 2022).

A signifier is the blue-grey faces which signify human decay; the decomposition of corpses and the slow deterioration of the living due to the exposure to radiation: “nausea, bleeding and loss of hair... death” (atomicarchive.com Editors, 2021). This is an arbitrary sign as the knowledge that blue-grey represent morbidity is not innate.

The signifier is the explosion in water that signifies the event of the bombings. This is indexical due to “the registration of the real” (Curtin, 2009, p. 54). The signifier is the plane dropping shells; an iconic sign as it denotes the act of the bombings. The flying birds depicted are an arbitrary sign as they have connotations of hope for future liberation (Clifford, 2021). The next signifiers are the golden/ off-yellow globes – an indexical or arbitrary sign depending on how the onlooker perceives them – which connotes the effect on the world’s civilisation and their outrage and heartache.

However, the globes may signify atoms due to the shape. The overall use of black and darkness symbolises depression and destruction (Editors, 2020), but the splashes of blue and golden sands suggest hope and enlightenment – a symbolic sign. These are mostly syntagm and arbitrary signs which pertain “to cultural ideas that we have learned” (Curtin, 2009, p. 52) and are historically appropriate as they are associated to the atomic bombings. Dali uses visual semantics in most of his paintings and it creates moving pieces; it is inspirational. Signs and symbols are valuable for portraying abstract themes, which introduces the next keyword: abstract.



Fig. 3. *Uranium and Atomica Melancholica Idyll* (1945), Salvador Dali.

Abstract

Abstract means thoughts, emotions or ideas; something “apart from concrete realities, specific objects or actual instances” (Dictionary.com Editors, 2022). Examples of abstract themes include love, death, power, courage (Bradshaw, 2022), illness, mental health problems. It is imperative to portray and explain such themes to create understanding of thoughts and experiences, as well as normalise them. Notably, mental health problems, disabilities and illnesses as they are more common than one may expect: 8 in 100 people suffer with mixed anxiety and depression, 3 in 100 people experience antisocial personality disorder, 1 in 5 people endure suicidal thoughts (Mind Editors, 2020), 14.6 million UK residents are disabled (Scope Editors, 2022), 52% of inpatients in 2014/15 suffered with chronic illnesses

(The Health Foundation Editors, 2016). Therefore, by portraying them through illustration, it generates mass awareness and solidarity for sufferers.

To create an illustration that “evoke a certain emotive intensity and gravitas” (Male, 2017, p. 162), there are numerous stylistic and compositional devices that can be utilised. The first is the use of colours as they “evoke meaning and emotions” (Chen, et al., 2013). Colours have multiple contrasting meanings, so the onlooker must decipher the intended signification through the imagery. Red symbolises anger and passion; purple signifies wealth and creativity; yellow symbolises hope and happiness, yet also deceit (Chapman, 2021). Blue signifies tranquillity and melancholy. A prominent painting that effectively employs colour symbolism is Pablo Picasso’s *Melancholy Woman* (see below) – Picasso is known for his portrayal of a “full gamut of human emotions” (Senior Editors, 2017, p. 295). The overwhelming use of blue oozes an incomprehensible sadness, merely at a glance, creating a sensation of drowning in an ocean of despair and sorrow. The colour, as well as the female sitting further back in the frame, suggests isolation and a sense of inferiority (Bang, 1991, pp. 20-23). Dissecting the painting further, the crossed arms and bowed head implies self-consciousness or the need to comfort one’s self, amplifying the atmosphere of undiminished melancholy. The dark background furthers the sense of unease as “white or light backgrounds feel safer” (Bang, 1991, p. 84), whereas dark backgrounds feel crushing and remind us of night time.



Fig. 4. Melancholy Woman (1902), Pablo Picasso.

The second device is the use of shape; “one of the seven elements of art” (Fussell, 2022). Geometric shapes are “defined in mathematics and have common names” (Esaak, 2019) like square, circle, polygon. Whereas, organic shapes are described as “individual creations of the artist” (Esaak, 2019) – they are free-formed and unnamed. An example of this is the stereotypical depiction of a splat. Pointed shapes – such as triangles and diamonds – create a sense of fear and unease due to the fact that we relate them to objects that can “easily pierce us and kill us” (Bang, 1991, p. 89); like knives and shards of glass. Points make images feel ominous. However, curves or rounded shapes – like circles – make the onlooker feel “secure or comforted” (Bang, 1991, p. 89). They create a sense of ease.

The third visual device to create “sensory recognition and emotion” (Male, 2019, p. 62) is composition. The way an illustration is laid out can generate an emotive atmosphere and, therefore, assists with portraying an abstract theme. To draw attention to a particular object or person, an effective placement for them is at the

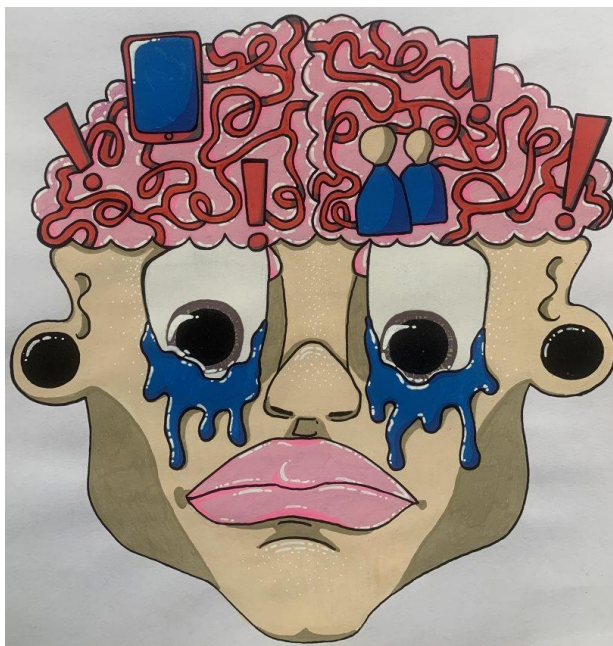
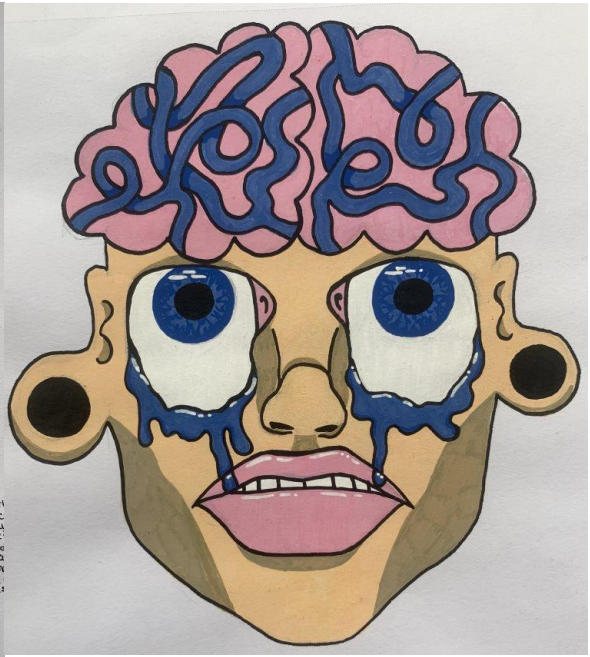
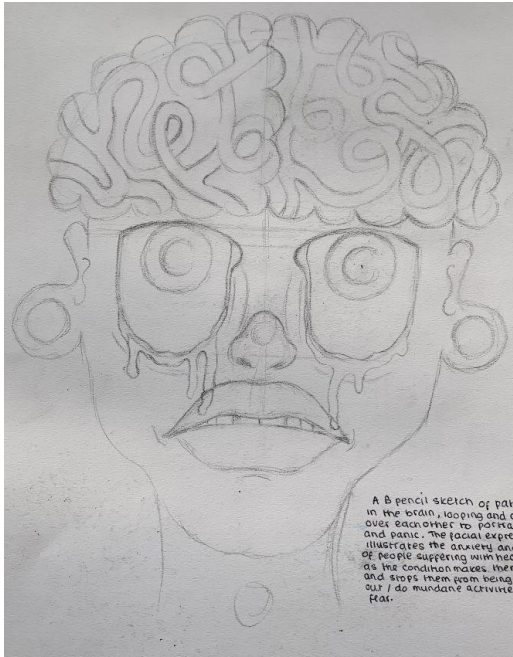
“point of greatest attraction” (Bang, 1991, p. 76) – the centre of the image. This attracts the onlookers gaze and becomes the focal point of the illustration; this is especially useful for editorial illustration. “Diagonal shapes are dynamic” (Bang, 1991, p. 58) evoking a sense of motion, instability and tension. They allude to “falling” (Bang, 1991, p. 58) due to the unnatural angles and, therefore, suggests anxiety. The lower half of the image perceives a “threatened, heavier, sadder or constrained” (Bang, 1991, p. 71) atmosphere; the perfect placement to depict depression or heartbreak. It creates “pictorial weight” (Bang, 1991, p. 71) as if being dragged down by melancholy of a negative experience. The sizing of the main imagery in an illustration can also affect the emotive atmosphere. If the figure or object is large, the onlooker’s gaze is immediately drawn to it and it can exude confidence, competence and strength. Yet, if the figure or object is small, they are less apparent and can be perceived as weak or substandard (Bang, 1991, pp. 90-96).

Upon exploration of the three keywords, I have come across many questions and queries that I can take further for my dissertation. The connection between conceptual, semiotics and abstract appear to be their use in editorial illustration; more specifically lifestyle, political, health, and well-being editorial illustration. Conceptual illustration can effectively portray abstract themes through the use of semiotics. The signs and symbols can create and depict a profound meaning and understanding for abstract themes. The questions I have come up with include: ‘How can abstract themes be sensitively portrayed in conceptual illustration?’, ‘Are semiotics an important feature of conceptual illustration?’, ‘Why are conceptual illustrations commonly used to depict abstract themes?’, ‘How can sensitive abstract themes (such as mental health problems and chronic illnesses) be illustrated through

conceptualism?'. However, I could explore the sub-genres that appeared during my research, for instance: iconography, symbolism, the portrayal of emotions, editorial, colours, narrative illustrations, the importance of composition. I have deduced two more questions from the sub-genres: 'how do colours assist in conveying emotions?', 'Do colours affect how conceptual illustrations are perceived?'.

The analysis of the keywords has influenced the idea for my dissertation and practice-based project. The practice-based project I would like to do alongside my dissertation is conceptual illustrations for editorial purposes. I would like to focus on editorial articles concerning abstract topics as I enjoy the puzzle of trying to create an appropriate illustration through semiotics. In addition, I would like to generate awareness and help normalise topics that are largely misunderstood. I propose to make illustrations for magazines such as *Breathe*, *New Scientist*, *Happiful* and *Therapy Today*, then create mock-ups with the corresponding articles. My proposed question for my dissertation is: 'How do semiotics contribute to the portrayal of abstract themes?'.

I have begun reading through magazines and creating relevant sketches and designs for correlating articles. I have been focusing on *Breathe* magazine and articles surrounding abstract topics. I have created illustrations for *Healthy Concerns* by Kate Orson – concerning health anxiety and the negative connotations of the term 'hypochondria' – using semiotics to amplify the emotive effects of the design, while ensuring the depictions are true to my style.



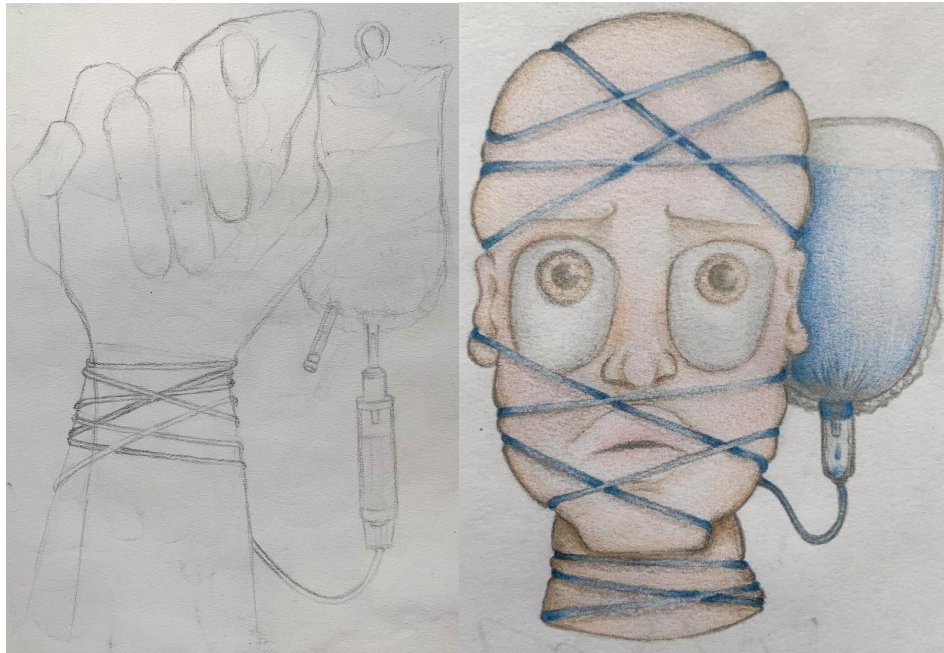


Fig. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. *Editorial Designs* (2022), Ellie Rehmatulla.

Images:

Fig. 1. Thibault, S. (2022) *Borderline personalities*.

Available at: <https://sebastienthibault.com/L-Express-Styles-Borderline-personalities>

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Fig. 2. Ring, R. (2016) *Miscarriage*.

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Fig. 3. Dali, S. (1945) *Uranium and Atomica Melancholica Idyll*.

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Fig. 4. Picasso, P. (1902) Melancholy Woman.

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