

“If ever one art movement consumed the entire genre of illustration, it was surrealism”

(Heller: 2008, p70). Discuss.

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(Heller: 2008, p70). Discuss.

In their book, *‘Illustration: A Visual History,’* (2008) Heller and Chwast argue that “If ever one art movement consumed the entire genre of illustration, it was surrealism” (Heller: 2008, p70), this can largely be agreed upon since “surrealism provided the illustrator with an opportunity for the logically illogical” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p71) and had a rather large following since its conception in André Breton’s 1924 Surrealist Manifesto, and included renowned artists such as Frida Kahlo, René Magritte as well as Salvador Dali; who’s work continues to be of importance due to its heavy use of symbolism and links to the “avant-garde” (Morrill; 2019, p400). However, it could also be argued that other art movements or trends within illustration have had more of a larger impact on illustration as a whole, in comparison to surrealism. For example, sequential illustration is “by far the most popular form of illustration” (Nikolaeva, 2016), as well as reportage illustration due to its “immediacy” (Embury and Mimichiello; 2018, p1), and more modern forms (e.g., advertising, posters, propaganda) of illustration could all be viewed as having a broader reach when compared to surrealism.

According to Heller and Chwast, “If ever one art movement consumed the entire genre of illustration, it was surrealism” (2008, p70), this can be seen as somewhat accurate as “The surrealism art movement had a great impact in art, literature, culture and even extending to politics ... liberating the imagination” (WebDesigner, 2017) and it “sabotaged perception” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p70). Additionally, it’s popularity was due to the fact that it provided relief from the pessimistic tones of dada whilst also

being “much more organic” (Carson, 2019) than the “rigid visual language of contemporary cubist art” (Carson, 2019) enabling heavy use of symbolism and non-sensical methods to create “physical and mental vertigo” (Heller and Chwast: 2008, p71), thus “liberating the imagination” (WebDesigner, 2019). Furthermore, surrealism managed to capture the entire illustration genre as its methods were already extremely common within illustration e.g., photomontage, collage and painting; with roots going as far back as 1850 (Heller and Chwast: 2008, p70) suggesting that surrealism already had a firm grasp on the genre of illustration far before André Breton’s 1924 ‘Surrealist Manifesto.’ However, it could also be argued that sequential illustration has had more of an impact upon the “genre of illustration” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p70) as it is “by far the most popular form of illustration” (Nikolaeva, 2016). Moreover, Heller and Chwast define illustration as “an act of making art, the goal of which is to illuminate a printed visual representation that is used to make the subject more pleasing or easier to understand” (2008, p7) which is most commonly the assigned goal of sequential illustration throughout history in order to explain everything from scripture to an illiterate flock to children’s picture books (Mayoux, 2020). It is even suggested by Heller and Chwast that most people’s first introduction to illustration was likely through illustrated texts (2008, p6), thereby undermining their own argument of the far-reaching nature of surrealism. Furthermore, to argue that “If ever one art movement consumed the entire genre of illustration, it was Surrealism” (Heller and Chwast: 2008, p70) is an extremely eurocentric argument and does not take into account the cultural significance of illustration in other parts of the world. When discussing surrealism, the places of significance are almost always in Europe, as artists such as Magritte (Dupêcher, 2017) and Carrington (Morrill, 2019) moved to Paris and Spain (respectfully) in order to be

closer to the centre of surrealism. To argue that surrealism is the single art movement with the widest impact on the genre of illustration is to ignore everywhere but Western Society, especially when one considers the cultural impact of manga and manhwa, common forms of Japanese and South Korean sequential illustration, which “has become even more accessible and popular” (Fox, 2018) due to its “unique ability to grow with their followers” (Fox, 2018). Due to this, it would not only be inaccurate to argue that “if ever one art movement consumed the entire genre of illustration, it was Surrealism” (Heller and Chwast: 2008, p70) because of the far wider audiences and long history of sequential illustration, but also it would be to discount any other cultures history and relationship with illustration. Therefore, it could be suggested that “if ever one art movement consumed the entire genre of illustration” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p70), it was not surrealism.



Isayama (2020), *Attack on Titan Chapter 134*

One of the key features of surrealism is its use of symbolism, for example, in Frida Kahlo's 1939 painting, *'The Two Frida's,'* "the twin self-portrait represents two states of being" (Morrill; 2019, p207) with Frida on the left seeming weaker and appearing more European in style, suggesting that holding onto the roots of colonisation will cause you to lose your own sense of self, culture and identity. Whereas Frida on the right, dressed in a traditional tehuana dress, appears stronger and is getting more blood than her counterpart as well as a certain "upheaval and vulnerability" (Morrill; 2019, p207). This narrative depicted in the twin self-portrait of embracing culture without colonisation and "separation presented through physical distress" (Morrill, 2019, p207) is achieved through the use of symbols, an incredibly important tool in art and especially illustration. In their book, *'Illustration: A Visual History'* (2008), Heller and Chwast write that "illustration is communication" (2008, p10), therefore it is arguable that surrealism's use of symbolism as a method of communication lends weight to the argument that "If ever one art movement consumed the entire genre of illustration, it was Surrealism" (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p70) since symbolism is such a vital part of both surrealism and illustration as a whole, in order to communicate. Additionally, symbols remain an important facet of illustration and wider life in general as Tillich argues "Man's ultimate concern must be expressed symbolically, because symbolic language alone is able to express the ultimate" (Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue; 1965), suggesting that humanities base desires, wants and feelings as well as spiritual matters are too complex to be explained only through words.



Kahlo, 1939, The Two Frida's

However, it could also be said that symbolism is not the most vital form of visual communication within illustration as “the goal of which is to illuminate... and make easier to understand” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p7), and so surrealism along with its complex symbolism could not have “consumed the entire genre of illustration” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p70). It is possible that reportage illustration had a larger grasp of illustration than surrealism did, especially due to its popularity in media and news as well as its “immediacy that words alone cannot match” (Embury and Mimichiello; 2018, p1). Furthermore, reportage, or “event-based illustration” (Embury and Mimichiello; 2018, p1), has remained as both a popular and impactful way of bringing certain events and atrocities to the public consciousness from abolitionist depictions of slave ships, to the trenches of World War One, up to the protests of the Black Lives Matter Movement and Extinction Rebellion in more contemporary times. This is largely due to the fact that reportage illustration, often found

in mass printed magazines and newspapers, “enabled people to encounter images of horror that would otherwise be hard to believe” (Embury and Mimichiello; 2018, p7) especially when technology such as photography did not exist. Due to its popularity, large audience and immediacy of its visual language it could be said that reportage illustration “consumed the entire genre of illustration” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p70) especially in comparison to surrealism and its complex metaphors and relatively smaller audience. On the other hand, it should be noted that surrealism benefits from lack of understanding, if one were to not understand the heavy symbolism or use of metaphor in an artist’s work then in a way the goal of surrealism, being to create “physical and mental vertigo” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p71), would have been achieved. This is due to the fact that surrealism had “less interest in plumbing the deeper recesses of the subconscious mind” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p70) And instead took inspiration from dream studies, fantasy imagery and the contemporary works of psychoanalysis as documented by Sigmund Freud in order to create a “a sabotaged perception” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p70) reminiscent of its predecessor, dadaism.

However, once again Heller and Chwast have seemingly sabotaged their own argument as they define illustration as “communication” (2008, p10) and therefore an artwork that does not effectively communicate to its audience could lose its status as an illustration by their own description and criteria. As a result, it can be argued with some degree of veracity that “If ever one art movement consumed the entire genre of illustration, it was surrealism” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p70)

It should also be noted that whilst Nikolaeva suggests that sequential illustration is “by far the most popular form of illustration” (2019), and Heller and Chwast suggest that “If ever one art movement consumed the entire genre of illustration, it was surrealism” (2008, p70)

perhaps no other form of illustration has taken hold of the entire genre as that of posters, advertising and propaganda. Throughout the twentieth and twenty first centuries, countries and businesses sought to expand their wealth and influence through “aggressive” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p53) advertising in order to have their message or product viewed by as many people as possible. Illustration was one way in which this was achieved, and it became almost common place for an illustrator to have worked, at least temporarily, in advertising especially “since illustration was the primary means of promoting goods in America” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p7). Perhaps all of this can be traced back to the art nouveau movement, originating in Paris in the early 1890s which “attacked academic realism” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p29) and is characterised by the soft natural aesthetics found in the “golden age of posters” (Moore; 2010) pioneered by artists such as Toulouse-Lautrec and Mucha. Art nouveau sought to “remove the idea of art as a status symbol for the wealthy and elite” (Moore; 2010) and instead introduce it and revitalise it in aspects of every-day life. Due to its long history and extremely wide pool of artists and audiences, it can be suggested with confidence that “if any art movement consumed the entire genre of illustration, it was,” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p70) art that is also advertising, posters and even propaganda. Although it should also be argued that surrealism has roots in the “macabre and nightmarish cartoons by French caricaturist J.J. Grandville, published around 1850,” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p70) suggesting that the art movement has well established roots in the illustration genre and that by the time “surrealism had become fashion” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p70) in the 1930s it had already consumed the practice of illustration. Furthermore, the influence of surrealism exists past the 1920s and 1930s as is seen in the emergence of “Neo Surrealism” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p145), around the 1960s. This movement was very popular in America and was “intensely influenced” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p145) by René

Magritte as “unlike the more flamboyant Salvador Dali, Magritte’s art was less dependent on Freudian dream interpretations than ironic visual juxtapositions which played with common perception” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p145). Neo surrealism is often seen in advertising from the mid-century era as it “offered illustrators a way to address boringly complex and reoccurring issues” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p145) through the use of metaphors and Magritte’s previous depictions of symbolism. This proved to be highly effective since the use of metaphors and symbolism as it “made demands on the reader to interpret the illustration and thereby spend more time absorbing its meaning” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p149). Artists and illustrators also made use of neo surrealism to combat censorship as it provided a tool for subtle visual commentary whilst still abiding by the laws of the USSR, moreover as a “benign art, not a revolutionary language” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p149), surrealism and neo surrealism could be used in any context or place in society as it provided a multitude of ways to depict ideas. Due to this, there are some who may argue that “if ever one art movement consumed the entire genre of illustration, it was Surrealism” (Heller: 2008, p70). On the other hand, to say that a “benign art” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p149) “consumed the entire genre of illustration” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p70) is to go against countless beliefs and viewpoints of what art should be. As Vladimir Mayakowski stated, “art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it” (Mayakowski, attributed by Samuels; 1993) suggesting that art has an extremely important job in changing how we view the world. This idea can be seen all throughout human history where art has been used to “shift public perspective” (Embury and Mimichiello; 2018, p7) throughout both unprecedented times and everyday life. This is perhaps most commonly seen in advertising as it is used “in the modern age to consume a staggering diversity of brands, goods and services.” Illustration as a means of propaganda

has been used by almost every nation in both war and peacetime as well as every business that has wanted to sell their product to the masses, because of this it is viable to suggest that if ever anything “consumed the entire genre of illustration, it was” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p70) the use of illustration in propaganda and advertising, although it should also be noted that surrealism- in particular neo surrealism- did have an impact on it as well.



Toulouse-Lautrec; 1891, Moulin Rouge: La Goulue

In conclusion, whilst both Heller and Chwast make valid claims in their book *'Illustration: A Visual History'* (2008), in regard to their belief that “If ever one art movement consumed the entire genre of illustration, it was Surrealism” (Heller: 2008, p70) through the use of symbolism as a visual language and the enduring popularity of surrealism, especially when one takes into account neo surrealism, it ultimately cannot be accepted as fact. To argue that the nothing “consumed the illustration genre” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p70) like surrealism is an extremely reductive statement. It fails to take into account the influence of

dada, e.g., “art historian Lucy Lippard called surrealism “house broken dada”” (Heller and Chwast; 2008, p 149), over surrealism, as well as any other previous art movements.

Furthermore, the statement made by Heller and Chwast also suggests that other forms of illustration with more enduring histories and far wider audiences have had less of an impact on illustration as a genre in comparison to surrealism. However, the statement “If ever one art movement consumed the entire genre of illustration, it was Surrealism” (Heller: 2008, p70), is extremely Eurocentric and only acknowledges the West’s relationship and experience of illustration, whilst ignoring the importance of other art movements in different cultures.

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