

HEATED DEBATE:
IS ILLUSTRATION A BIG ENOUGH PROFESSION?
BY STEVEN HELLER

HEATED DEBATE IS A PLATFORM FOR THE EXPRESSION OF THOUGHT-PROVOKING VIEWS AND A START-POINT FOR DEBATE. HERE, WRITER AND ART DIRECTOR STEVEN HELLER ARGUES THAT NOT ONLY DO ILLUSTRATORS HAVE TO THINK BIG, THEY HAVE TO WORK WHERE THEY ARE RELEGATED TO FILLING SMALL HOLES IN EDITORIAL TEXT.

What is big? When I was art director of the New York Times Book Review, a post I held for almost thirty of my thirty-three years at the New York Times (until autumn 2006), I met with three illustrators a day, four days a week, to review their portfolios. Discounting the repeat visits (maybe ten per year), and those that really had no business being called illustrators (another twenty per year), this meant too many artists were invariably looking for too few illustration jobs (and, of course, I did not meet everyone who was looking for work). So, in this sense the field may be quantifiably too big.

However, quantity is not what I am concerned with now. By big I mean important, indeed expansive. For me what is crucial to the future of the illustration profession is whether the field's output is big enough to be relevant. I want to know what illustration contributes today, if anything, that other art forms do not. In other words, what are illustrators saying through their work? How are they saying it? And if they are saying anything meaningful, are they pushing boundaries that need pushing?

I'll cut to the chase. I have serious doubts that illustration as practiced over the past five decades – the one-off single image used to illuminate an author's text or sell an advertiser's product – has any real significance whatsoever today. This may be heresy – and it may be wrong – but the trivial ways in which most editorial and advertising illustration is being currently used has marginalized the field and many of the artists

in it. Illustrators are shoehorned into small spaces, so much so that a once innocuous word now has dubious implications: the word 'spot' is not just a genre of illustration it is the state of the art.

An editorial spot was once an opportunity to test young talent. But today spots are among the most frequent illustration formats (covers of the New Yorker being a notable exception). Even some of the most accomplished illustrators are now forced to do spots because it constitutes the majority of work they are offered. Incidentally, doing something small doesn't mean one has more freedom, either. Photographers are routinely afforded big spaces, while illustrators seem to be left with the remains. Spot implies inconsequential, as in filling up space or adding a spot of color to a page, rather than providing meaning. ('Out damn spot!')

But this (and here's the familiar refrain) was not always true. Illustration commanded prime editorial real estate during the mid-1960s throughout the late 1980s and even into the 1990s. Moreover, illustration added visual dimensions beyond the scope of the text. The notion that the verb illustrate meant more than copying a passage from a manuscript was fairly radical in the Rockwellian era, when the most common illustration *métier* was a kind of romantic realism, but when 'conceptual illustration' finally hit in the 1960s, it hit big, like the heavens parted and the lord said commercial art was 'the word.'

I was introduced to this alternative methodology when, during the late 1960s, I met

Brad Holland for the first time, who rebelliously declared to anyone who'd listen he would never merely illustrate but instead would interpret his commissions. Why, he asked, wasn't his visual point of view as valid or profound as a writer's? And so fervently did he believe that illustration should not be subordinate to an author's words that through force of will he convinced editors and art directors of its rightness. He wasn't the only one, but his work on the OpEd page of the New York Times was key in raising the intellectual bar on illustration.

Many of Holland's illustrations started as loose drawings in sketchbooks, which were adapted with a tweak here and a twist there to address specific editorial issues – yet never slavishly so. In this way his ideas were not mimicking particular passages, but instead served as allegories or metaphors representing larger concepts evoked by an author. If his assignment was, for instance, to illustrate American dependence on foreign oil, he adamantly refused to show a predictably contorted Uncle Sam receiving a drug-like 'fix' from OPEC (how many times have we seen that uninspired idea?); instead his image was of a man pouring a dinosaur from an oil barrel. 'Oil' was metaphorically implied, but since the overall image rejected cliché, it forced the viewer to decipher the symbolic code, which in turn triggered a more intense reading of the image. Of course, his image was still worth a thousand words, but it was invested with intelligence that complimented

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those words in ways only a strong visual could do.

Holland was inspired by independent graphic commentators dating back to the nineteenth century, like Francisco Goya and Honoré Daumier, followed in the early twentieth by Kathe Kollwitz and George Grosz, and later Robert Osborn, Edward Sorel, David Levine, Alan Cober, Ralph Steadman, but especially Roland Topor, among the leading conceptualists of the late-1950s and 1960s. Each of these artists created independent visual statements, integral art works, some as socio-political polemics others as expressions of conscience – indeed many of them stand up to scrutiny today.

Big idea-infused ‘conceptual illustration,’ which was diametrically opposed to sentimental Rockwellian realism, was adopted as the gold standard of late twentieth century editorial and advertising. While realism has never been entirely expunged, nor should it be, expressionism, surrealism, and even l’art brut emerged as more viable alternatives for the multifaceted editorial content in such concept-based magazines as *Psychology Today* and newspapers like the *New York Times*. Abstract and symbolic vocabularies gave illustration more cerebral weight. Illustrations were no longer solely objective mirrors of innocuous content; instead the new breed of ‘illustrator/journalists’ turned their subjective lens towards themes and events that demanded more personal analysis. Marshall Arisman, for one, self-published a book of

disturbing black and white drawings about gun culture in the United States, which began because he grew up around weapons, but he used it as a veritable portfolio; Sue Coe turned a critical eye towards animal abuse with a large number of shockingly revealing images of concentration camp-like abattoirs from around the world in her book ‘Dead Meat.’ This so-called ‘personal’ expression was not illustrative in the conventional sense of illuminating a storyline but it nonetheless informed the magazine assignments these artists would also receive. Arisman jokingly recalled, after sending his book to art directors, he mostly got jobs related to heinous criminal acts, but the fact was illustration was entering realms that had been taboo. Ultimately editors and audiences embraced the symbolic visual language for good but also not-so-good reasons.

The superficial elements of conceptual illustration were, in truth, easily appropriated. Surrealist and expressionist tropes – figurative and landscape dislocations, radical changes in scale, hard-edged woodcut graphics, among others – gave the illusion of intellectual complexity even if the images were void of real content. Consequently conceptual veneers were increasingly common, and style over substance was on the rise throughout the 1990s. While this should not imply an entire genre was debased – it was not, and many astute illustrators turned to the big idea with intelligence and panache –

many style-mongers found it easier to make small illustrations that perpetuated the trivial side of illustration (and regrettably the annuals are full of them along side the good). Stock houses have thrived on illustrators who continue to make pictures project a conceptual bent, but are all-purpose templates created with as much feeling as elevator music.

Milton Glaser once said that despite the swelling field of illustrators and designers over the past decade or so, the ratio of good to mediocre always remains fairly consistent. Nonetheless, although some extraordinary practitioners are active, illustration from my vantage point largely gets no respect, at least as a wellspring of big ideas, and certainly compared to ‘fine art.’ And this is where physical bigness is a crucial issue.

Cultural pundits readily accept that fine art is culturally bigger than illustration, and one reason is because fine art is in fact much bigger. Few illustrations are monumental, and most are not meant to endure tests of time. Christoph Niemann’s work, which is constantly clever, and brilliantly packs a wallop in a small space, is nonetheless no match for the painter Walton Ford in terms of sheer ambition. While this is surely apples and oranges – as an illustrator Niemann’s tendency is to solve the problem at hand and the fine artist is not so constricted – a hierarchy is established that relegates illustration to a lesser status. I used to publish smart conceptual illustrations by Mark Tansey, who left illustration to

pursue a highly successful career as a post-surrealist painter, working on a considerably larger scale (albeit in a manner quite similar his illustration, though the content is much more focused on his passions). Perhaps this is why some illustrators, including Holland, Coe, Arisman, and Seymour Chwast, as well as graphic designers, like Paula Scher (with her mammoth hand-lettered maps of the world) produce huge canvases and other media where physical size, and the visionary ambition, is greater than the opportunities afforded the common illustration.

Scale alone does not ensure bigness, and I don’t recommend that illustrators compensate by simply making their work larger. But thinking bigger than that squeezed spot on the page is imperative to raising illustration’s bar to new heights. In fact, this has already begun. With the advent of graphic novels, Internet animation, artists’ toys, and other entrepreneurial wares, illustrators are finding new reasons and outlets for personal expression. The challenge is not to squander the opportunities by simply making trivial stuff. If illustration is to be big (again), it must become culturally relevant beyond making spots for magazines and newspapers. New, indeed big, ideas are necessary. Expanding the role of the illustrator into social commentators and critics, as well as inventors and innovators, and ultimately independent thinkers will be the field’s best growth hormone. ♦♦