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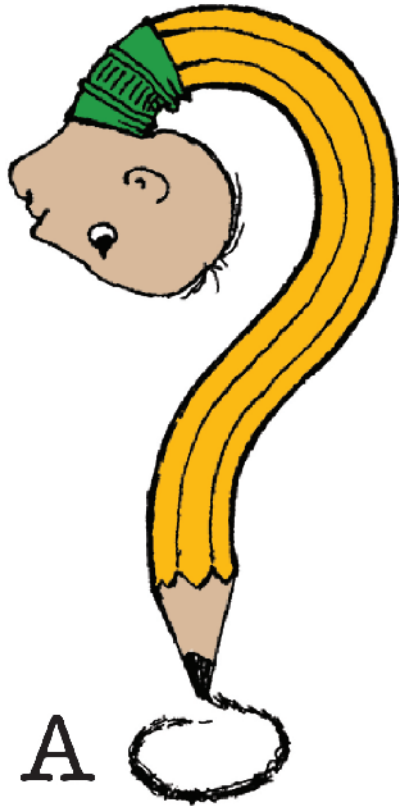
## EDITORIAL

**JALEEN GROVE**

Rhode Island School of Design

# The ‘Theoretical Turn’ and pedagogy in illustration education

For this themed issue of the *Journal of Illustration*, I was moved to initiate an inquiry into the institutionalization of theory in illustration education because, as a historian, I believe it is a defining characteristic that will identify the 2010s when we look back on the evolution of the field later. For the purpose of this discussion, ‘theory’ is defined as the most commonly cited philosophical ideas that have informed the study of visibility and culture in Europe and North America. A short list of canonical theorists and concepts named by illustrator/educator/academics whose input I solicited names, for example, Roland Barthes’ ‘mythologies’; John Berger’s ‘ways of seeing’; Latour’s ‘actor/network theory’; Laura Mulvey’s ‘male gaze’; McLuhan’s ‘medium is the message/massage’; versions of semiology and so on. The ‘Theoretical Turn’ references W. J. T. Mitchell’s ‘Pictorial Turn’, which he coined in 1995 to describe an emerging paradigm of visual thought and thought about the visual that



# A Theoretical Turn?

*Figure 1: Image for the roundtable 'A Theoretical Turn? International perspectives on how theory impacts illustrators' education, output, and identity', 2017, by Jaleen Grove.*

contrasts to the Linguistic Turn in philosophy. The Pictorial Turn was a major concept in the development of visual culture studies, a field that made the study of illustration, formerly classed as insignificant popular culture, more legitimate in academia. If the Pictorial Turn is theorists embracing pictures, then the Theoretical Turn is illustrators embracing theory. Just as the Pictorial Turn changed scholarship, I ask, does the Theoretical Turn change illustrating?

From a distance in North America, I have been following the rise of 'expanded practice' in the United Kingdom, where illustration has been moving from being a picture-provider service industry to a relational-aesthetic, authorial and critical cultural engagement in media and forms that depart from the two-dimensional media that dominated illustration in the twentieth century (e.g., Vormittag 2014). This exciting shift seems related to the high level of theory included in much English illustration-degree curricula in stand-alone courses or rolled into practical ones—approaches utilized in Europe too. As I write, North Americans are only just beginning to mix academic inquiry with practice as former trade-school programmes become degree-granting and as new Master of Fine Art degrees are launched. The new MFA in Illustration and Visual Culture at Sam Fox School of Design, Washington University, will prepare illustrators as critics, writers and curators, for example.

It is no wonder that every now and then, I receive an e-mail from a stranger – usually a student, but most recently a professor who has worked on comics – asking me where 'illustration theory' can be found. There is no such beast, exactly, but there are treatises, studies and theories galore on imagery, image-making, visibility, word and image machinations, and all the ways people interact with the visual. In fact, just about any theory, whether it be scientific, humanist, practice-based, social-scientific, or what-have-you, can be applied to the things we generally call illustration. Perhaps it is because the sky is the limit that people wish to locate some core of ideas that describe and define illustration's universe. What will hopefully help theory-starved illustration students is the new *History of Illustration* textbook (released March 2018), co-edited by myself with Whitney Sherman (Maryland Institute School of Art) under the lead editor, Susan Doyle (Rhode Island School of Design), and written and peer-reviewed by over 50 educators, historians and practitioners from several countries. While students may have had instruction in theory, philosophy and cultural studies in liberal arts courses at their schools, this book for the first time introduces global coverage of illustrative arts, and well-known thinkers from Plato to Walter Benjamin to Judith Butler directly into illustration-focus classes, signalling a sea change in what core illustration education comprises.

Now is a good time to pause and reflect on the motivations, costs and benefits of 'illustration theory', asking some productively hard questions. But to my regret, all the writers here advocate theory in illustration education and we lack a spokesperson from the anti-theory side, despite my personal invitations – and therein lie lessons. I am anxious to avoid in our field the sharpening cultural divisions between 'liberals' and 'conservatives' that we see arising in many cultural milieus now. Illustrators who have not historically been empowered to engage with theoretically-informed

debates in formal writing – they tend to be older and invested in traditional genres and craftsmanship, and are perhaps unfairly branded as conservatives – are not heard except in online troll-fights, savage cartoons, over a beer, or in heated exchanges during panel discussions and faculty meetings. Due to the prejudices of academia that privilege peer-reviewed publication, such informal and oral communication modes mean non-academics are too easily discounted in the very academic channels they would like to ameliorate, intensifying the shut-out feeling they already complain of. I believe the disagreement about what should be taught and how is dialectically useful and deserves some articulation, to record and to understand what is passing, to ensure theory in pedagogy benefits practice and is not a vain exercise in pomposity, and to forestall accidentally losing something. I therefore feel obligated to convey the naysayers' sentiments here, even if I myself advocate equipping illustrators with the tools of critical analysis, theorization and academic-speak.

At an Educators Symposium at the *Illustration Conference (ICON)* in 2014 (Portland, Oregon), where I and my colleagues presented the development of the *History of Illustration* book, a representative of a principal body representing illustrators, who is also a long-time studio practice educator, stood up and objected to our plans to include theory in it as not just unnecessary, but detrimental. Two years prior to that, illustration historian and director of an MFA programme, Murray Tinkelman (1933–2016), advised us, in his words, to 'Kill all the academics' in our selection of writers. In his view, illustrators absorb everything they need to know simply by looking and doing. For him, theorists examining practice using lenses that originated among eggheads who never picked up a pencil themselves is inherently alienating and leads to their misapprehending what they try to assess. In my conversations with those who agree with these two individuals, I find this large cohort feels that all the commentary that generally occurs under the headings of 'critical discourse' and 'deconstruction' devalues imaginative labour, craftsmanship, quality, autonomous authorship and/or talent, the maker's intent, and the social function that the artwork fulfils, particularly if its audience and clientele happen to be an academically gauche demographic. I gather that, in their collective view, we should concentrate on furnishing novices with mechanical expertise and the ability to earn a living providing the culture industry with characters, narratives, styles and other products that are in demand. Questioning the political and ideological aspects of such work, which is stereotypically cast as a species of biased Marxist critique, is not only irrelevant to getting the work done, but a failure to even try to understand why an individual might *want* to participate in big business and mainstream culture and what good can come of it.

Doubters worry that critical theory might ruin illustrators' self-worth and ability to find joy in their work. They argue that academic content makes the intuitive process of creativity so self-conscious that it becomes paralysing, agreeing with art educator Sister Corita Kent, whose advice to teachers and students (popularized by the conceptual artist John Cage) included, 'Rule 8: Do not try to create and analyze at the same time. They are different processes' (Popova 2012 in Kent 1968).

Taking responsibility for what one puts out in the world versus constantly second-guessing oneself is indeed a dilemma: in her recent book, which was being sold to illustrators at the 2018 ICON conference (Detroit), designer and writer Danielle Krysa argues that a head filled with an inner critic who doesn't know when to shut up stymies creativity and ultimately silences the artist (2016).

Practically speaking, just as curricula had to change when computers came along, many fear that something has to shift or even drop if we want to accommodate theory. Ted Hunter, professor emeritus of Furniture Design at OCADU (Toronto, Canada), worries that

Art and design schools push students to be concept-driven designers, and do not advocate the craft of making. Recognition goes to the theorists, not those who build and create things with their hands. Students, consequently, feel they have to go that route; to become theorists, not creators.

What's more, there's little obvious interest from upper management in the areas where hands-on teaching is done. If there are cutbacks, they are in the areas where hands-on teaching takes place. Technicians and class assistants are often the first to go or fall prey to shortened hours.

It's wonderful when design students find jobs where they can use the concepts taught in a theory-driven institution, but these jobs are few and far between when compared to the masses of students graduating each year [...] [whereas] hands-on experience [...] causes young people who thought they were useless to say: 'I can build this and I am proud of myself. I have made something, I have marketed it, I have sold it and I have made money from it'.

(2018)

Trade-offs of manual versus intellectual skills and the assumed superiority of the latter, a class division dating back to Dürer's time, are lately germane to the Ph.D. in design, which has been viewed by many as mere credential-inflation. Despite becoming a norm in Europe, the Ph.D. has been rejected as the terminal degree for artists and designers in the United States by the College Art Association (2014), which feels there is quite enough theoretical content at the MFA level.

Critics might legitimately ask, if Barthes et al. are our canon of theorists, why don't we have any actual illustrators among them? What is lost by their exclusion? Cynics are understandably suspicious of the prestigious admittance to hallowed academia that theory promises to grant to scruffy tradespeople: on whose terms are we gaining respectability, and what or whose maker-identities are we tacitly expected to suppress or abandon as part of the bargain? For those who lack entrée into

theory (I am thinking especially of disadvantaged peoples who have trouble accessing expensive degree-granting colleges), accomplished technique and popular appeal are empowering, because marketable skill is a passport for socio-economic advancement, community respect and a voice in the largest communication channels. They in particular must not be forced to join the theory-bandwagon at pain of otherwise being dismissed as backward or not intellectual enough. We ought not replicate the old high-modernist prejudice against 'mere' illustration and 'low' popular art that we hypocritically purport to reject. Instead, let us together develop theories of the integrity of 'unintellectual' and unfashionable arts.

Related to the inadvertent division of classes of makers along the lines of who can access high-brow education, another concern is that the kinds of theory taught have become canonical and largely Eurocentric. Indeed, the pantheon named in the *History* book and gathered from informal input, given above, is mostly European and American and Caucasian and male. Is being 'educated' commensurate with becoming conversant in a narrow intellectual tradition at the expense of ancient and contemporary thought from Asian, Indian, African, South American and subaltern peoples? If identity and diversity are of utmost concern as the 2017 Nancy symposium on identity in illustration (discussed below) would indicate, and as the supposedly liberal academics are thought to espouse, how do we rationalize these limits to theory as encountered in the majority of classrooms?

Of course, theorizing and making should not be cast as opposites, as Hunter does. A body of science and maker-led theory connects handwork to cognitive development and ideation (Treib 2008). Champions of practice-based and practice-led research advocate for making as a method of inquiry on par with scientific, humanist and social-scientific methods, with art replacing essays and books as the measure of academic worth. Several authors in the following articles describe such approaches to incorporating theory in the studio classroom, and engagement with disadvantaged and non-academic communities. Nevertheless, cachet has not necessarily been extended to non-literary forms of publication, meaning that makers in academia do exhausting double duty by first conducting their creative work, and then writing it up in the usual approved manner. How much should illustration educators be expected to publish in standard academic forms such as this journal? In their paper printed here, Alaca and Onmuş report that in Turkey, illustration professors are expected to have Ph.D.s and to both exhibit and publish in written form. It is hard to be both artist and scholar to the degree decreed by universities; the pressure to satisfy tenure-track criteria may be unfair and perhaps untenable for practitioners who may have heavy teaching loads and a professional practice too.

It's worth considering the systemic impact on illustrator-educators imposed by the global economic breakdowns in 2008 that spurred social, political and economic pendulum-swings in the United Kingdom and United States especially. A disturbing number of submissions to this journal issue mentioned the pressure of more or less neo-liberal attitudes at schools, and how this is eroding

the freedom of exploration that used to characterize artists' and illustrators' education. One wonders if the movement to more traditional writerly methodologies is a symptom of the need to justify the existence of any art and design schooling at all. Is engagement with theory just an attempt to keep our jobs?

The greater thoughtfulness and originality in illustration that some writers argue is the benefit of theory may simply be a response to an urgent need to revive old markets and create new ones for fresh, re-invented illustration, in the face of crumbling old media (traditional print clientele) and emerging forms of capital, business and networks – the avant-garde always did find itself serving capitalism via the provision of competitive new products. Perhaps with newfound philosophical arguments illustrators are just doing what they did when in times past they were confronted with movable type, photography, high-speed four-colour printing, computers, internet and anything else that threatened older means of production: adapting pragmatically to the conditions of the day. Maybe theory is just the latest new media. Shall this too pass?

In support of visual thinkers who aren't interested in writing, I submit that any visualization is in itself a theory, a proposition of how the pictured entity 'is'. The word *theory* means, etymologically, 'viewing seeing' (in Greek, *thea + oros*) – *showing a view*. In other words, illustrating. I hold an idealistic hope that the more craft-oriented ways of 'showing a view' can live side by side with integrity next to the deconstructionist, each learning from the other. What potential is revealed when we admit the supposedly unintellectual tongues to an agora or theatre, rather than ban them from a scriptorium of theory and theorization? Listening carefully and keeping what counts as peer review, discourse or 'text' to a non-writing maker included in the conversation should be part of the work of theory-minded illustrators, to resist uncritical assimilation into the academe that would 'discipline' our discipline out of its regional, sub-field, traditional and unique identities. What if we dared to consider the rudest caricature a serious theoretical proposition?

Dismissing those who put stock in ideas such as quality, authorship, talent and so on as simply old-fashioned or ignorant is lax and misses an opportunity. These experts still represent the norm; they are the keepers of considerable cultural heritage and visual languages that remain socially relevant, understood and appreciated by their publics; and they are quite likely to produce mass-culture hits that have the widest distribution. Polarization equals isolation and intellectual impoverishment: if disavowed and then pushed away from the agora, theory-shy makers will be left to tap tradition minus ethical, historical and cultural examination and may thus unwittingly perpetuate regrettable racist, sexist, colonialist and exploitive forms. The hit video game *Cuphead*, which references early 'bigfoot' cartoon and inadvertently also the racist roots of its iconography, has come under fire for this (Cole 2017). Illustration-academics and theorists should engage generously with resistant producers to consider their values and views, for, if we wish to improve mainstream culture by making it better represent the ethnic makeup, aspirations and concerns of large sections of society,

then we must be able to intervene from within dominant visual culture production through the makers. While confrontation and protest bring awareness and motivation to change mindsets and marketplace, it is translation and code-switching from old ways to new in recognizable, popular, viral visual languages that ultimately integrates and effects change. Let us recruit rather than alienate those who excel at illustration according to customary values, styles and genres.

So far I have been addressing the journal reader as if they are an academic comfortable with theory. Now some words for the practitioner who doubts the value of theory.

Theory is good for practice. We find in the papers here a lot of genuine enthusiasm for the expanded vistas it opens up, professionally and creatively. It can be intrinsically *fun* to muse about philosophical, wacky, intricate, spiritual and scientific notions. It is gratifying to find ways to articulate how our world-views, actions and personal experience are invested in illustrating. It is empowering to go head to head with non-illustrator theorists in an intellectual wrestling match and emerge victorious, scoring points for developing arguments why and how illustration was never 'mere'.

Whether we like it or not, theory is here to stay and ignoring it is not an option. The aforementioned Tinkelman spoke as one of the generation that suffered after New York art theorist Clement Greenberg proclaimed that all published art was kitsch (1939), assigning illustrators to artistic oblivion and moral decrepitude as far as he and a host of other art critics, American galleries and art historians were concerned for more than five decades (Greenberg wasn't original; illustration had been under attack from writerly types since at least Mallarmé's day). But the twentieth century is in no way comparable to today. For one, the conceits of high modernism are generally acknowledged now to be constructs of their period. Besides, tempests in teapots like New York City no longer determine the status quo. The world is now very globalized and networked, facing unprecedented diversity not just in the classroom and on social media but in the workplace as well, and accordingly all must negotiate intense cross-cultural abrasions in ethics, spirituality, politics and social literacy. In order to do that, and to find themselves and their purpose, students must establish visibility and self-advocate for themselves *as they are* rather than as tradition or prejudice or local politics prescribe. As such, today's students demand and need better support and preparation in *why* they make art, design and illustration, as much as how, and they need the skills to discuss it as well as make it. As a teacher, I have no right to decide what tools shall and shall not be allowed – rather, it is my job to make all available and empower students to choose for themselves.

At its best, theory and theorization are a means of extending our communicative powers to address a wider or a more specific audience as needed; and of intervening into an established discourse that may otherwise define illustration for us in ways we object to. It allows illustrators to take a seat at the table of scholarly debate, not as a pretty accompaniment to someone else's ideas, but with autonomous ontological declarations. With increased theoretical powers have come new opportunities for working out the *why* of illustrating, and for wider diversity and creativity – opportunities



that redefine older hierarchies and systems of power, and redistribute the right to make cultural meaning amongst a larger and more varied constituency.

It is fear of this redistribution of power that I suspect is at the root of the protests against theory in illustration and design education, a kind of deep-seated triggering that in fact is responding to the banishing and devaluation Greenberg et al. visited upon illustration 50–80 years ago. I do not see illustration suffering that fate now – rather, the academic trend at the moment is hungry for practical art engagement with social groups, business, policy, health, the environment – not aloof and irrelevant self-expression such as Greenberg championed. The retreat of illustrators to what illustration and design insiders over the past 30 years have decried as too cute, decorative and vapid, or in Lawrence Zeegan's colourful essay on the subject as 'the chit-chat and tittle-tattle of inner-sanctum nothingness' (2012), was, I venture, due in part to being shut out of theorization and critical inquiry. Theory-inspired ways of approaching work can support a wider purview of creative intervention into the complex issues that face the planet, with better chances of success, since a chief advantage of academic training is the ability to avoid oversimplification and misinformation. Theory is creatively liberating.

The theme of this issue of the *Journal* began as a roundtable that I chaired at the annual meeting of two collectives, Illustration Research and Illustr4tio, in November 2017 at the Université de Lorraine in Nancy, France. The colloquium's theme and title was *Illustration Et Identité(s)(Illustrating Identity-ies)*. The roundtable, titled 'A Theoretical Turn? International perspectives on how theory impacts illustrators' education, output, and identity', examined how theory and criticism – so key in conceptualizing identity – are taught and used in illustration education and practice. Participating in the roundtable were Adrian Holme, Camberwell College of Arts/Central Saint Martins (UK); Nanette Hoogslag, Anglia Ruskin University (UK); Martha Newbigging, Seneca College, Toronto (Canada); Ilgım Ververi Alaca, Koç University (Turkey); and substituting last minute for Robert Brinkerhoff of Rhode Island School of Design (USA) was Jeff Pike, Sam Fox School of Design, Washington University (USA). The panelists gave five-minute presentations on their schools' approaches and their views; then responded to the following questions:

What do we want to achieve by integrating theory into illustration practice and education?

What are the costs of not teaching theory?

What is the relationship between theory and identity?

Is theory too dominated by European intellectuals to serve illustrators and students from other regions?

How does illustration's origins and identity as a trade affect illustrators' resistance to theory today?

Can theory bog down practice?

Could referring to a canon of theory and theorists actually limit thought and creativity, by making certain subjects taboo or marginalizing some ways of knowing?

How might we broaden what counts as ‘theory’? What variety of forms could it take?

How does theory in illustration differ from theory in graphic design and contemporary art?

How do critical thinking and critical making emerge in illustration?

How do you interest students in theory, and how soon?

Should an MFA differ from a BFA in how it incorporates theory, and if so, how?

What are the benefits of using academic vs. non-academic texts for illustration?

What are the pros and cons of having students write conventional papers with or about theory?

Are comics and personal work better at engaging with theory than other types of illustration?

What institutional pressures affect how theory is taught and practiced? For example, when a school requires the theory class to also fulfill a writing requirement, or wants a recognizable, conformist theory course to legitimize illustration within academia?

What do educators need from their schools and supporters in order to establish or improve theory classes?

The audience interjected their own questions and comments throughout. From this, two of the panelists, Martha Newbigging and Ilgım Veryeri Alaca, have developed case studies that we publish here.

The following papers begin with an assessment of illustration education in the United Kingdom by Dr Donna Leishman, Head of Communication Design at Glasgow School of Art, and her advocacy of theory integrated into practice with the goal of greater inclusivity and diversity of perspectives. Leishman mentions that junior faculty today have to remain versatile – a point amply demonstrated in the second article by Mireille Fauchon and Rachel Gannon, who describe how they support increased interdisciplinarity in their students, and offer a Manifesto for Illustration Pedagogy that re-visions teaching and practice as a far more co-participatory activity than in the past. Adam Paxman’s visual essay follows, playfully using graphic expression, visual metaphor, sequential images and other tools in illustration’s arsenal to up-end theory and its academic pretensions, giving us some idea of what illustration theory *looks* like. Rounding out these

explorations of British pedagogy is Orla Crean's report on the pressures facing secondary school art teachers in the United Kingdom, from her position as a Head of Art. Her essay also introduces her own 'Catalysts for Creativity' tool to help establish creativity as a learnable, life-long skill in the education of youth.

We then turn to the situation and a case study in Istanbul from Ilgım Veryeri Alaca and Ipek Onmuş, who survey how illustration is taught in Turkey and present a case study of how Omnus integrated theory in her work as a student. Finally, we come to Canada, where Martha Newbigging takes a queer theory approach to pedagogy and presents an autobiographical comic to demonstrate how explorations of identity can be supported in teaching and practice.

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### **Contributor details**

Artworker and illustration historian Dr Jaleen Grove has been publishing on scholarly aspects of illustration since 2006, and working in the industry since 1990. Currently she is engaged in a term appointment as assistant professor in Illustration at Rhode Island School of Design.

Contact: Rhode Island School of Design, Office ISB 114, Two College Street, Providence, RI 02903-2784, USA.

E-mail: [jaleen@gmail.com](mailto:jaleen@gmail.com)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0114-137X>

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