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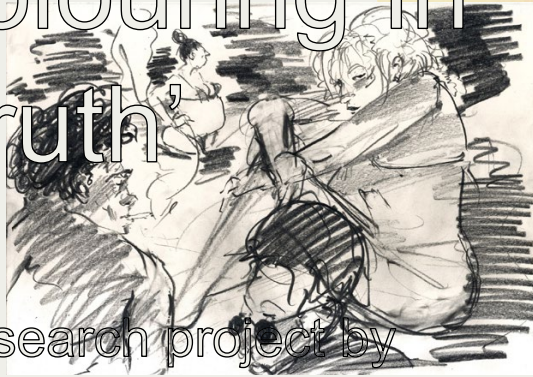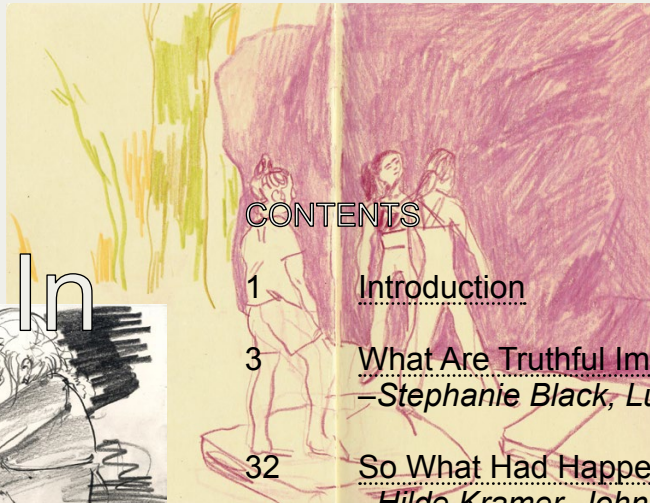# Colouring In 'Truth'

A research project by
Stephanie Black and
Luise Vormittag

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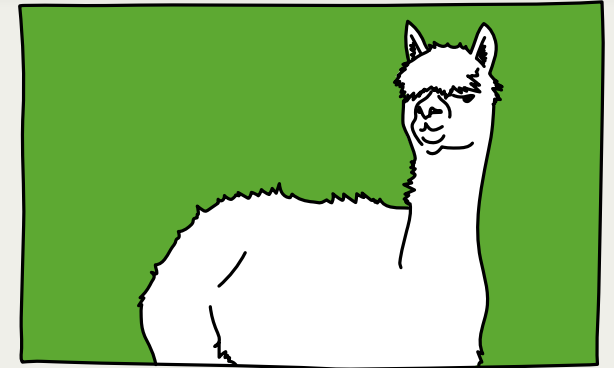
Colouring In 'Truth'

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Introduction

What are truthful images? How can illustration — which often takes the form of fabricated pictures — carry the burden of truth? What kinds of reality do we expect illustration to show us?

In this fourth (and final) issue of *Colouring In*, we plunge into a hugely engaging exploration of the many different ways in which illustration practice intersects and overlaps with notions of truthfulness. The American literary scholar Shoshana Felman notes how truth requires art for its transmission and for its realisation in our consciousness (2000:105). We couldn't agree more. However straightforward this statement might seem, our discussions regarding how this might play out in detail in the context of illustration has meant that this has definitely been the most complex and dizzying topic we have delved into in the course of this series. Our brilliant contributors bring a host of fascinating perspectives to the theme, and the two of us spent many hours debating a seemingly never-ending flow of ideas and examples.

For this issue we decided to pair some of our contributors along thematic commonalities. This resulted in four pairings where each illustrator discusses and presents their work in response and contrast to the other. (Three of these presentations and discussions took place as part of the curriculum of MA Illustration at Kingston School of Art, London, during the autumn term of 2023). After these initial conversations, they each devised their own method for writing it up for publication in this issue of *Colouring In*. Hilde Kramer and John Miers discuss ideas around fragmentation and personhood that arose in their respective illustrative projects. Holly O'Neil and Louis Netter compare their approaches to drawing on site. Michelle Salamon and Geoff Grandfield reflect on the possibilities of illustration as a site of recall and remembrance. Mrudula K and Kathryn Martin consider the importance of sharing individual and collective stories of embodied difference.

In addition to these extraordinarily rich paired discussions we are thrilled to include a number of solo-authored pieces. These include submissions from Susan Doyle, who gives us a wonderful historical survey of 'truthy images', Carolyn Shapiro, who shares her research on Rousseau's 'illusory image', O Haruna, who discusses aspects of his PhD research on representations of Black British masculinity, and Rebecca Douglas Home, who introduces us to the challenges of running a news picture desk in our 'post-truth era'.

As in all three previous issues of *Colouring In* we were keen to work with illustration students and solicit their input. We ran two workshops with MA students

at Kingston where we visually deconstructed and then reconstructed seemingly objective images. You can read the entertaining write up by students Chloe Hayward and Ann Wong reflecting on these workshops. Our reflections on this can be found below under the heading of "*Objectivity*".

Our own survey unfolds over the following pages. It threatened to overwhelm us with increasingly knotty questions alongside a superabundance of examples, where illustration and various conceptions of truth, reality and representation intersect. In our conversations we repeatedly returned to the tensions that arise between totalising truth claims and relativist statements of individualised perspectives. Illustration can bridge this unproductive binary by proposing and constructing partial but relatable and shared worlds — see for example Bug Shepherd-Barron's book *Through the Vitriol* (2022) or illustrator Cat Sim's collaboration with climate-adaptation researchers in *Everyday Stories of Climate Change* (2022).

As we write, developments in AI are constantly in the news, and of course the many challenges that arise from this have also seeped into our conversations. Questions around the increasing likelihood of the circulation of deceptive images are frequently discussed in the media, but another, perhaps more surprising effect of AI generated images we found was that even when people knew them to be fake, they continued to exert their power. One distressing example is the horrendous abuse wrought by non-

consensual deepfake pornography — despite their occasionally obvious fabricated nature, these images remain sadistic and vicious.

After weeks of conversations, we have wrestled some of our considerations into seven categories. Of course there could have been more, but we had to draw a line at some point. We realise our piece is extraordinarily lengthy. We couldn't help ourselves. We hope you enjoy dipping in and out. As always — do get in touch with any feedback!

SB, LV

What Are Truthful Images? –Stephanie Black and Luise Vormittag

In this survey Stephanie Black and Luise Vormittag reflect on seven possible intersections of illustration and truth

Under which circumstances might illustration, a mode of expression generally associated with fiction and fabrication, be considered truthful? What kind of veridical claims can illustrated images make? After countless hours of conversation we managed to agree on seven (provisional!) categories to help us make sense of the myriad of ideas we were considering. Over the following pages you will find our thoughts on the overlap between illustration practice and witnessing, the possibilities of illustration to act as evidence, the occasionally awkward conjunction of objectivity and illustration, illustration's role in visual persuasion and deception, the ability of illustration to construct truths and synthesise knowledge, issues arising from questions on representation and positionality, and finally the role of illustration in circumnavigating taboo and censorship. We are sure we have left out a great deal… do get in touch to tell us where we have fallen short.

Witness

To witness something is more than merely seeing an event unfold. To speak of witnessing anticipates a subsequent retelling of an event — the testimony. It is precisely through this later rearticulation that the act of seeing, retrospectively, becomes an act of witnessing.

The American academic Shoshana Felman reflects on the role of the witness and their testimony in her work on trauma, history and political violence:

> "To bear witness is to take responsibility for the truth" (1991:39)

Felman also comments on the importance of an audience ready to hear the testimony:

> "Memory is conjured here essentially in order *to address* another […]. To testify is thus not merely to narrate but to commit oneself […] to others: to take responsibility — in speech — for history or for the truth of an occurrence […]" (1991:39–40).

Derrida also notes the importance of an audience primed to receive "the truth" of a witness statement. He writes that:

> "[…] 'bearing witness' — is always to render public. The value of publicity, that is, of broad

daylight […] seems associated in some way with that of testimony" (2000:30)

Thus witnessing involves seeing, followed by a public re-telling. With a little scrutiny this seemingly straightforward sequence fans out to reveal a multitude of elements: visual perception, an act of translation (namely the production of an account in coherent, communicable form), the passing of time, a change of context, and the presence of a public primed to receive this narration. This list significantly overlaps with principles and strategies often used by illustrators. The emphasis on seeing and the translation of what has been observed into communicable form for a new audience at a different time in a different context resonate well with our field.

In front of the law a witness is called upon to contribute to the establishment of truth and certainty, even though the notion of the unreliable witness destabilises this ambition. To bear witness as an illustrator inevitably foregrounds the inescapable partiality of the process. The way an event is perceived, interpreted and reported is highly contingent on the witness-illustrator themselves.*

New York-based illustrator Molly Crabapple's portfolio includes an impressive body of work as a reportage illustrator, with drawings from places such as Palestine, Ukraine and Guantánamo Bay. The great volume of her work is as extraordinary as the places she has managed to gain access

to. The illustrations appear to be at least partially drawn on site, or at least they intend to give that impression, with her work bearing markers typically associated with on-location work (ink splatters taking a particularly prominent place).[1] Ironically this body of work prompted us to focus less on the subject matter, and more on the impressive feats of the illustrator herself, drawing us into speculations of *how* she did this. How did she gain access to all these places, how did she negotiate the site, how did she manage to make the space and time to draw there and capture the tumultuous events seemingly on the fly? Does this mean that this method — the fearless and talented reportage illustrator who seeks to document chaotic, occasionally dangerous or sinister environments — runs the risk of drawing greater attention to the compelling story of their own daring feats, rather than the events they are ostensibly testifying to?

Renowned British illustrator Sue Coe addresses this dilemma directly when she says:

> "I'm asking you not to see me but to see through my eyes" (Coe in Coates-Smith 2000:80)

Coe is best known for her work on slaughterhouses, which — similar to some of the places visited by Crabapple — are notoriously difficult to gain access to. Coe recounts how bringing a camera would have been out of the question, while a sketchbook was considered harmless (1995:v).

[1] Referring to these kinds of markers that are often unquestioningly interpreted as indexical signs of authentic on-location presence, Catrin Morgan has spoken of the "mythical speech of reportage illustration" (Morgan 2016)

[2] Crabapple refers to
herself as a 'journalist'
on her website; Coe
in her interview with
Coates-Smith talks
about her work in the
context of 'reportage'
(2000)

While Crabapple's illustrations purport to be drawn in the midst of things, thereby effectively collapsing together the acts of witnessing and giving testimony, Coe's method relies on sketchbook work that is then translated into more elaborately composed paintings in her studio later on.

The painted work is often not a straightforward representation of what would have unfolded before her eyes on site, but a more imaginative, interpretive depiction, where Coe uses pictorial space and areas of light and dark with particularly compelling effect. While the locations she negotiates are every bit as challenging as Crabapple's, the work does not conjure the same sense of spectacular adventure. Perhaps Coe's unambiguous position as a committed activist,

as well as the more obviously considered 'artistry' of her renderings lends her subject matter greater prominence (compared to Crabapple)? The fact that she re-works her sketchbook drawings in the studio can be interpreted as a deeper dedication to the cause, that compels her to reflect on the primary research from her on-location visit, identifying themes and motifs, which are then articulated in the form of a more reflective testimony. (We recognise that there might well be external factors, for example publishing deadlines, that prevent Crabapple from doing the same.)

Generally speaking, Coe's long-term commitment to a number of causes (cruelty towards animals, the AIDS epidemic, mistreatment of sweatshop workers) has resulted in a body of work that powerfully bears witness to some of the brutal elements of our social and economic systems that are generally excluded from public view.

Both Crabapple and Coe identify with journalism and the act of reporting[2], where the focus remains on circumstances or events that are otherwise inaccessible to the intended audience. In contrast illustrator Robert Weaver recorded the mundane everyday (see for example *A Pedestrian View: The Vogelman Diary*) — those scenarios that slip into invisibility not because they are purposefully hidden (such as the violent practices in Guantánamo or in slaughterhouses) but because they are experienced as too quotidian to notice. This kind of work overlaps

with some of the concerns of ethnography in its focus on recording the habitual, everyday life practices of a society or culture, in this case street-scenes of early 1980s New York. The idiosyncratic framing of the images once again draws attention to the partiality inherent in the act of witnessing and the unreliability of the testimony is further underscored by Weaver conjuring a fictional "Vogelman" as the purported author of this work.

The figure of the illustrator-as-witness inevitably highlights the selectivity and the specificities of all acts of witnessing. In these illustrations our individual differences in perception and recounting are made obvious and remind us that all such acts of witnessing, whether they involve the creation of an illustration or not, are highly contingent. Felman highlights this general paradox of the witness: The overall aim is to arrive at an unequivocal account of general validity, something that goes beyond the personal, while at the same time each testimony is unique and irreplaceable (1991:40, 42).

One of the indisputable strengths of the illustrator-as-witness is the *demand* for an audience that is inherent in the work (whether or not the work does indeed gather up a significant number of viewers is another matter). The existence of the illustrations themselves is a call to the public to take note. Curator Kate Macfarlane suggests that one of the qualities of "graphic witnessing" is "to remove contemporary events from the real-time

of mass-shared media and other photographic forms" (2020:56). The fact that the production of an illustration unfolds on a different time scale compared to the instantaneous nature of most photographs taken today, can also prompt a different kind of scrutiny and reflection in the audience. The work can be understood as an appeal to spend time and pay attention, an invitation to join a "community of seeing" (Felman 1991:42).

For illustrators who are bold enough to propel themselves into disturbing environments and come face-to-face with the suffering of others, it is not uncommon to question the validity of their work. Coe highlights the fraught experience of being a witness without power, of creating a testimony of someone's pain, without the capacity to alter their conditions (Coe in Coates-Smith 2000: 80). However she concludes: "For me the process of witnessing through using a pencil has [prompted me to think]: 'Well, maybe I can do a little thing'" (ibid.). Perhaps it's not so little after all.

Evidence

While the act of bearing witness has significant overlaps with principles and strategies employed by many illustrators (see section above), the notion of evidence presents itself as a more awkward fit for our discipline. Evidence is information that can be used for the establishment of facts. The implicit

understanding of an illustration as an interpretive, fabricated image appears to preclude its capacity to stake a sufficiently stable veridical claim to ever be considered as evidence. Even lens-based images such as photos and videos, which tend to be perceived as more objective (see discussion on objectivity below), are not always deemed suitable for the establishment of facts.

With the ubiquity of smartphones, the use of photos and videos as a record of violent and disturbing events has become more frequent, for example as a tool to document racialised police violence in the US (see Richardson 2020). A harrowing instance is Darnella Frazier's video of the brutal murder of George Floyd in May 2020 in Minneapolis, which ended up being instrumental in the conviction of his killers. However media scholar Sandra Ristovska, whose research focuses on the use of video footage as evidence in courts and tribunals, points out that even seemingly obvious video evidence can be subject to biassed interpretation, and is therefore frequently dismissed in legal proceedings (Ristovska 2021). The reason that Frazier's video of Floyd's murder stood up in court was because its narrative was corroborated by many other accounts and videos.

Given that even video, a medium that is generally perceived as transparent and objective, can face such resistance to be accepted as evidence, what chance is there for illustration — images that have

been clearly manufactured by way of a human interpretation of events — to carry the burden of proof? We would like to put forward two examples for consideration.

In December 2019 the *New York Times* published an article called 'What the C.I.A.'s Torture Program Looked Like to the Tortured'. It contains eight extremely graphic illustrations by Abu Zubaydah, an inmate at Guantánamo Bay, who drew these images at the behest of Prof Mark Denbeaux — a member of his legal team. Abu Zubaydah is a Palestinian man born in Saudi Arabia, who was alleged to have been a high-ranking member of Al Qaeda, an accusation now known to be false. He was captured in 2002 and has been held at various US-operated oversea prisons and so-called "black sites" ever since with no charge and no prospect of release. He was also the first victim subjected to the notorious "enhanced interrogation techniques" by the CIA. (See the *New York Times* article linked above, or this article in *The Guardian* for a more detailed account of Zubaydah's case.)

The *New York Times* article was based on a 2019 report 'How America Tortures' from the Law School at Seton Hall University (New Jersey) overseen by Denbeaux, which was followed by a second report 'American Torturers', also by Seton Hall Law School in 2023, which includes the original eight drawings, alongside 32 new ones, as a visual account of Zubaydah's appallingly brutal and humiliating

torture. Journalist Carol Rosenberg writes in the *New York Times* how Zubaydah's illustrations 'put flesh, bones and emotion' on accounts of the CIA's torture practices, which up to this point had been mainly linguistic, often inaccurate and/or sanitized.[3] At the point of the article's publication (2019) more disturbing descriptions of the scandalous "enhanced interrogation techniques" had been leaking out for over a decade, but these images added many new details, and — perhaps most importantly — bestowed a nerve-wracking, visceral quality to these accounts.

In absence of any other visual evidence of the CIA's torture programmes (notoriously video evidence was destroyed in 2005 in violation of a court order) Zubaydah was able to use simple means — pen and paper — to present a powerful, visual testimony.[4] There is no indication that Zubaydah has had any formal training in image making, but nevertheless the images are blisteringly accurate, so much so that the authorities redacted his portrayal of one of the interrogators, for fear of him being recognised. Drawn from memory the illustrations often contain chronological sequences, magnified details and annotations, forcing us to confront the full horror of what Zubaydah endured.

In his two reports Denbeaux has mobilised Zubaydah's illustrations as part of an overall narrative of the nightmarish treatment of his client (as well as many other prisoners), with the ultimate aim of exposing the US agencies involved. Denbeaux

writes that "[Zubaydah's] drawings display the grizzly truth that the CIA, the FBI, and other members of the federal government, understandably, wished the public would never see" (2023:7). They acquire their *evidentiary status* in a similar way as Frazier's video of George Floyd's murder — through corroboration, by strengthening and confirming other pieces of information we have on the appalling situation of prisoners at Guantánamo. They acquire their incredible *power* through their visceral, emotional impact, the "flesh, bones and emotion" described by journalist Rosenberg. These illustrations confirm our worst suspicions of abuses of power, and once seen, cannot be forgotten.

In contrast to the emotional impact of Zubaydah's personal testimony, Forensic Architecture's visual reconstructions stake their evidentiary claims in a different manner. While Zubaydah uses simple, analogue means, works from memory, and produces his illustrations alone, Forensic Architecture mobilise a juggernaut of technically complex visual methods for their work investigating human rights violations. Their analysis of the killing of Mark Duggan by the Metropolitan Police in North London in 2011 is summarised in this video, and is a good example of their methods. Their analysis is rigorous, pain-staking and spatially precise, cross-referencing and synthesising countless snippets of visual media (obtained from multiple sources) alongside other data such as witness statements and diagrams, in order to arrive at a computer-generated 3D reconstruction.

[3] In the introduction to his 2019 report Denbeaux describes the language around torture in the CIA's legal memos as 'formal, legalistic, antiseptic, and euphemistic' (2019:6)

[4] In contrast to Zubaydah whose work derives from his own experience, American artist Daniel Heyman adopts a different approach. In his Abu Ghraib Detainee Interview Project Heyman joined a team of lawyers who interviewed former Iraqi detainees of the notorious prison facility. Rather than visualising the heinous acts of abuse, Heyman decided to create portraits of the interviewees during their moment of testimony, when they were in a place of dignity. The account of their ordeal is rendered in written language that fills the flat pictorial space around them. (See also Sabrina DeTurk's discussion in Afterimage (2011: 68–70))

The key question in this case was whether Duggan had brandished a gun when he was shot dead by police, as the officer who killed him claimed. Despite inconclusive and contradictory accounts, an inquest jury in 2014 found that Duggan's killing had indeed been "lawful", a verdict that prompted rage and indignation amongst Duggan's family and supporters. In 2018 the Duggan family's lawyers commissioned Forensic Architecture to conduct an in-depth analysis of the incident to help challenge the conclusions by the jury (and a subsequent police report).
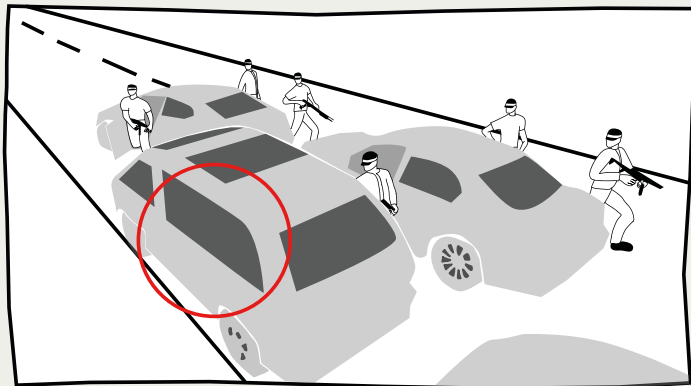
The ensuing meticulous work by Forensic Architecture found that evidence had indeed been overlooked and misinterpreted in previous investigations, and that the spatial and biomechanical data they had brought together suggested it was unlikely that Duggan had held a gun at the decisive moment. By amalgamating

a large volume of information (photos, witness statements, etc.) in one "illustration", namely the detailed 3D visual reconstruction, they could reveal that key statements by the police officer in question do not stack up. Despite this work, the Met Police refused to reopen the investigation.

The formal qualities of the visuals produced by Forensic Architecture could be described as cold and lifeless — we see stiff and faceless grey figures awkwardly moving about, but this pared down, clinical representation contributes to their persuasiveness. This work is meant to convince us through its mathematical exactitude and "mechanical objectivity" (see discussion in next section), not visual appeal or sentiment. It is important to remember that this visual language is also a rhetorical device (see discussion below in "Persuasiveness / Deception") — the visual rhetoric of objectivity. In this case it was used by an organisation whom we trust to be sincere and transparent in order to highlight the inconsistencies in the Met Police's position. However we must remain alert to the fact that this same aesthetic can be mobilised to more nefarious ends. Its formal qualities are utterly persuasive, and would remain so, even if they were achieved using inaccurate, misleading or even fictitious data.

While the visuals produced by Forensic Architecture's mobilisation of technical procedures affords us the possibility of supposedly simulating the lines of sight of individual officers, it is worth remembering that

perception itself does not look like this. We do not see in geometrically precise linear perspective, and our memory does not afford us the possibility to replay sequences in slow motion. Instead our perception is reflective of our biases and ultimately our way of life. The fact that the Met Police continue to use disproportionate levels of force against Black people gives us a clear indication of what many officers actually see in these encounters: a threat to be "neutralised" at all cost.

While Zubaydah's illustrations open up and unpack the details of his torture, presenting us with multiple isolated close-ups and breaking up brutal practices into distinct sequential stages, Forensic Architecture's work acquires its power through the capacity of images to bring dispersed information together. Where previously witness statements, diagrams, photos and videos in the Duggan case were scattered, they are now synthesised in the video footage, highlighting those elements that do not fit the overall emerging picture.

What both projects have in common is the process of corroboration that enables the illustrations in question to carry the burden of proof and act as evidence. In Zubaydah's case the illustrations acquire their evidentiary status by corresponding with other pieces of information that had started to circulate about the C.I.A.'s torture programme, reinforcing them and adding new visceral details. In the case of Forensic Architecture's Mark Duggan

video, the process of cross-referencing reveals those pieces of information that are unlikely to be true. Both examples show illustrated images that indeed are capable of making evidentiary claims and carrying the burden of truth.

Objectivity

The procedures and protocols, and the concomitant visual language of objectivity, mobilised for example in the project by Forensic Architecture discussed above, is not usually part of the discourse in illustration. Objectivity can be described as a desire for "blind sight", a "knowledge that bears no trace of the knower", an "epistemic virtue" that came to particular prominence in scientific image making in the 19th century (Daston & Galison 2007:17, 39). In their brilliant book *Objectivity* (2007) science historians Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison use a fascinating catalogue of scientific images to reflect on the history and practices (gestures, techniques and habits) of objectivity. They describe how the public persona of the artist and the scientist polarised during the mid 19th century:

> "Artists were exhorted to express, even flaunt, their subjectivity, at the same time that scientists were admonished to restrain theirs. In order to qualify as art, paintings were required to show the visible trace of the artist's 'personality'…" (Ibid: 37)

IMAGE
Artists' impression of
an x-ray of a snake
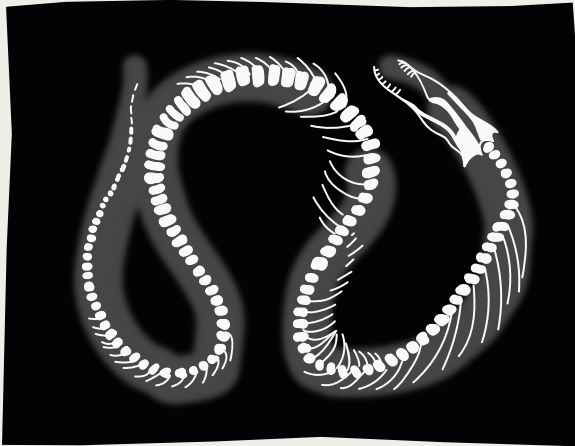
So while scientists tried to develop working procedures that avoided human interference in the production of knowledge, artists were required to foreground their individual subjecthood. This reminds us of illustration students who often talk about their ambition to develop a personal style in their work, a recognisable way of working that emphasises a subjective, unique view of the world. This is an understandable goal for students, as it is often precisely the existence of a personal style that leads to commercial illustration commissions (Hoogslag 2019: 286), presumably as this guarantees a predictable outcome for the commissioner in the risk-averse and time-poor creative industries.

In science the mandate to not interfere in the production of imagery through any human involvement

— may that be by way of bias, interpretation or judgement — was historically meant to put in place a strict set of protocols to create scientific images automatically, either requiring the use of an actual machine, or requiring a person's mechanised actions (Daston & Galison 2007: 121). The conviction that a certain procedural use of technology will result in reliably objective imagery beyond human fallibility was an idea first developed in the 19th century, and it continues to hold sway today — for example in Forensic Architecture's use of photogrammetry in the Mark Duggan video discussed above.

William Fox Talbot, an early pioneer of photo-mechanical reproduction, once hailed photographic images as "impressed by the agency of Light alone, without any aid whatever from the artist's pencil" (Fox Talbot 1844). Even though photography had a complex relationship to scientific objectivity from the start (Daston & Galison 2007: 125–138), and today digital image manipulation and AI image generators continue to destabilise associations of photorealistic images with an objective "reality" out there, something of that trust in the supposed automatism of the photographic process remains. For example Ari Felman's animated film *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) starts by confidently presenting itself as a drawn documentary, seemingly demonstrating that "the artist's pencil" can indeed tell us a truthful story. However, the drawn animation switches to live-action footage in the final scene, falling back on our trust in "the agency of Light alone", presumably to

assure the audience beyond any doubt that the story the film is telling us is indeed objectively "true".

But while we still might hold on to the idea that certain types of technology can create objectively "true" images (for example medical imaging techniques), it has also become common practice to question both the existence and the desirability of objectivity more generally. Celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey extol the importance of *personal* stories and *personal* experiences as a method of "speaking *your* truth". Celebrating individual accounts of marginalised positions and perspectives (Winfrey refers to women's brave testimonies of sexual violence) contains the honourable aspiration of challenging and transforming oppressive (and often violent) power structures, however without more nuanced thought and theoretical grounding the simple insistence on the validity of "personal truths" can, if unchecked, skid towards preposterous lamentations by self-styled "victims of the deep state", absurd declarations of "alternative facts", and other forms of epistemic rot. Surely women's testimonies of sexual violence should be believed because they actually took place, rather than because they represent a personalised version of truth? We need to sustain a shared understanding of a common world, in which truth claims can be received, acknowledged and, if necessary, tested. (See also the discussions below in 'Persuasiveness/ Deception' and 'Representation / Positionality'.) What to do? For our student workshop with KSA

illustration students in October 2023 we gathered up images that claimed various forms of transcendent, objective knowledge: X-ray images, architectural plans, instructional illustrations, illustrated typologies, and various forms of photographic records.* Our first prompt was to critique notions of truthfulness and objectivity engrained in these images, not through language, but by employing visual strategies. Students used some interesting techniques (zooming in, redacting, redrawing images in a different style) and gained familiarity with visual languages associated with objectivity.

We then spent some time discussing Bruno Latour's work with students (via this *New York Times Magazine article*, where journalist Ava Kofman does a wonderful job of summarising some of his work for a general readership). We discussed how a focus on the *conditions* of the construction of knowledge is an alternative to the epistemic nihilism and chaos of the post-truth era. All knowledge might be constructed, yes, but that doesn't mean all knowledge is equally valid. Latour suggests we pay attention to the networks and practices that produce and sustain knowledge, in order to maintain the possibility of a shared, recognisable world.

We looked back over the first exercise and reflected on how the cheeky put-down of the visual languages associated with totalising forms of knowledge is fun, but also how it is much harder to articulate a response that doesn't slide into a dangerous "anything goes"

relativism. The second prompt we therefore set for our students was to reveal the methods of knowledge production in the images in question; not necessarily to critique them, but to show us the networks and practices that resulted in the production of these illustrations. What kinds of expertise, what forms of technology, which economic, social and political formations contribute to the networks that gave rise to them? The results were complex and thoughtful, with illustration students using diagrams, sequence and storytelling to speculate on the various "actors" that brought this image into being.

This has some overlaps with illustrator Catherine Anyango Grünewald's student project with the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm entitled 'Re-Remembering Saint Barthélemy', where students were prompted to visually respond to archival images in their collection, bringing the otherwise unseen colonial, political and technological systems that underpin the existence of these images to the fore.

> "Illustrators do not have to solve historical problems," says Anyango Grünewald, "we can however change the perspective from which we see certain events… We can design how attention is directed to facts" (Anyango Grünewald 2021)

So while the pursuit of objectivity in the form of "blind sight" and "knowledge that bears no trace of the knower" is not viable for illustrators, we can

nevertheless use our work to reflect on systems and bodies of knowledge, and — by doing so — advocate for a greater inclusion of perspectives in a shared world.

Persuasiveness / Deception

Rhetoric is the art of speaking persuasively, and our student workshop began to explore some of the *visual* strategies that compel us to believe the truthfulness of an image, e.g. the expositional nature of the images, the authority of the publisher, or auratic traces of a production process. We are interested in pursuing our examination of how the constituent parts of images cooperate to convince us. In this respect our aims are similar to those of Judith Williamson in her now-classic semiotic analysis of how advertising images work, but here we examine how images that we don't suspect of working on us quite so overtly might operate.

To explore what makes visual rhetoric persuasive we found the concepts of ethos, logos and pathos from Aristotle's analysis of spoken rhetoric to be useful tools for opening up images to see how they work. Journalist and author Sam Leith's book *You Talkin' To Me?* (2011) provides a helpful guide to these terms for non-experts such as ourselves. He describes the three different approaches to building a persuasive argument as follows. Ethos is an appeal to the audience based on the integrity

and standing of the speaker, which establishes a connection with the listener. In illustration we might see this appeal in the work of an illustrator (or publisher) we recognise either as an authority, or belonging to our social group, or a first-hand witness to events. The link between ethos and style is made by Leith, recognising that the language used to deliver such appeals is fundamental to them landing successfully (Leith, 2011: 49). In this respect we might see the link between ethos and style in our response to distinctive visual languages, for these are representative of an illustrator or a particular type of illustration we might have established a rapport with (from Lauren Child to Banksy). Another way in which ethos might work through illustration could be the use of recognisable characters to persuade us (such as the wise cat of the *Charley Says* British public information broadcasts of the 1970s).

Logos is an approach to argumentation that prioritises a logical, carefully staged line of reasoning that appears to be self-evident. This might map onto the plausibility of the "objective" plans and diagrams given to the students in our workshops (discussed above). Logos represents the believability of the staged process represented by assembly instructions.

The third persuasive strategy is pathos, which Leith described as an appeal to emotion and includes fear, pity and laughter (which he notes is "involuntary assent" Leith 2011: 66). In illustration we may see this in the wholesome, patriotic, early works of Norman Rockwell, or Quentin Blake's illustrations for Michael Rosen's *Sad Book*.

The three rhetorical approaches can be seen within images that persuade us, and may be utilised deliberately, or operate unintentionally, in making truth claims through images. We need to sharpen our wits in order to detect when the powerful devices of visual rhetoric are put to use in the service of untruths, asking "is persuasion at work here?" and "to what end?" These are particularly pressing questions at this point in time, for (as scholar Thomas Zoglauer explains) the internet has become the source of so much of our information, but its lack of gatekeepers has resulted in the outsourcing of responsibility for determining what is true to all of us readers and viewers. We can now gorge ourselves on information, but we also have to work to determine the veracity of what we see and read online (Zoglauer 2023:2).

To complicate matters further there's more fat and gristle than ever. At the time of writing, we exist within a "post-truth" political landscape, defined by BBC journalist Sean Coughlan (2017) as where objective facts hold less sway in public discourse than appeals to emotion. Interviewed by Coughlan, philosopher A.C. Grayling traces the phenomenon back to the 2008 financial crash and parallel developments in social media, noting its roots in relativism and post-modernism and the threat posed to democracy by post-truthiness in politics. In the UK, we saw a pronounced shift towards pathos and

ethos in the rhetoric surrounding the 2016 campaign for Britain to leave the European Union, at the same time as the United States was asked to vote for a new president who instrumentalised so-called alternative facts. Within the subsequent analysis of these seismic political shifts, it was revealed that voters in both situations had been subjected to targeted advertising (of the kind usually used in psychological warfare) on the social media platform Facebook, clearly implicating visual communication in the peddling of post-truth claims. This made clear the link between pathos-led visual rhetoric, "psychological operations" and real effects in the world.[5] Examples of ethos at work within fake news images are rolling in with greater regularity, thanks to developments in AI deepfake software. Whilst surveying examples for this article we saw the Mayor of Kyiv being mimicked for nefarious ends, AI offering an incarcerated Imran Khan the possibility of delivering an official political address via a deepfake proxy, and a political campaign in Indonesia featuring an endorsement from former President Suharto — a political figure who is *actually dead*.

The production of untruthful images using AI can be found in further varied examples as deepfake fraud schemes and malicious deepfake pornography, both have the potential to cause significant emotional harm. Writing in the New Yorker, scholar and journalist Daniel Immerwahr discusses the challenges such deepfakes pose to truth and democracy, and finds them to be of limited concern (Immerwahr, 2023).

Situating such examples within a historical trajectory of deceptive image making, Immerwahr suggests that they simply aren't very convincing in either a visual or plausible sense, and operate instead as smutty cartoons designed to insinuate, to criticise and to humiliate, but not to deceive.* Therefore, for Immerwahr, deepfake visual untruths do not pose a threat to democratic political systems and instead reveal truths about the society producing and circulating them.[6] Whilst we celebrate his exploratory approach to recent developments in image making, by presenting deepfake imagery as a mirror rather than a weapon, Immerwahr's argument appears to sidestep the key concern here which is that even when we know that images are not truthful *their rhetoric still operates*. In the previous examples, from psyops to misogynistic malice, and including smutty cartoons, the images have an effect in the world whether they pass as the truth or not.

Immerwahr's faith in our ability to detect untruthful images can also be found in historical presumptions concerning the discernable nature of lies. Psycho-logists Aldert Vrij, Maria Hartwig, and Par Anders Granhag point us to lay assumptions about deception from Freud onwards which suggest that it "leaks" out of the lying individual through their actions, which betray them. We acknowledge that this is nonsense, as Vrij et al discuss in relation to our overly confident assessments (despite pitifully poor performance) of our abilities in detecting deceit in non-verbal cues

(Vrij et al, 2019: 298). However, it is a useful device to help us to discuss how the following practitioners explore and construct "leaky" images to draw our attention to the fact that rhetoric is at work, and how images deceive us.

Initially devised as an experiment in incorporating fiction into art magazine *Modern Painters*, the fabrication of the fictional artist Nat Tate and gallery launch of his biography operated effectively as cultural critique, revealing how endorsements by those in positions of authority persuade us through a large dose of ethos, supported by plausible enough photographs interspersed throughout the book and artwork purported to be by Tate. Questioning plausibility from the outset, we can see overt interrogation of the networks behind facts in the work of Jamie Shovlin, who is "less interested in the idea that something might be true or not, and more interested in how it goes about substantiating its story" (Wrigley, 2012). His meticulous blend of fact and fiction mirrors our students' exploration of visual languages assumed to be truthful due to their scientific exactitude, and he also utilises the form of the archive for its connotations of objectivity. By doing so he draws our attention to the rhetoric of ethos and logos at work in these forms and languages. Both of these examples have been described as hoaxes, although their makers suggest the motives are more questioning in nature, an area of practice that extends to the critical and satirical *Scarfolk* project by Richard

Littler. On his blog about Scarfolk, the fictional town in Northwest England trapped perpetually in the 1970s, you can encounter Littler's meticulous constructions of public information communications. These allow him to highlight the social and political attitudes reflected by the materials informing his images, as well as drawing uncomfortable parallels with our contemporary context.
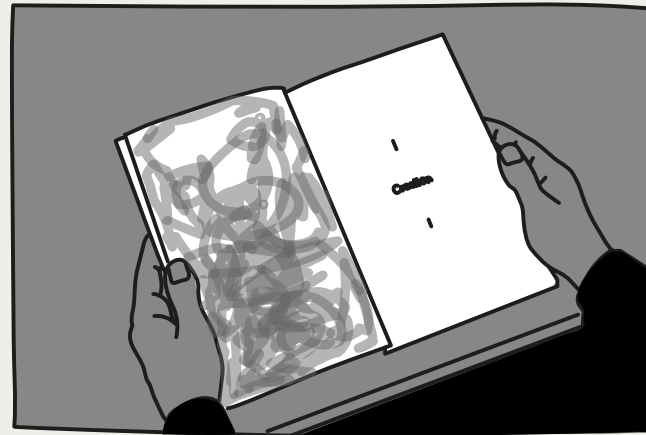
The "leakiest" example we have found is that of Catrin Morgan's book *Phantom Settlements* (2011). Morgan is an authorial illustrator and academic with a long-standing concern with deception in images, and produced the book with Mireille Fauchon. A performative multimodal text demonstrating its message through image, text, page and type design, and structure, *Phantom Settlements* lays out the rhetorical function of images in constructing *and*

unmasking a deception. Morgan's description of the project situates it as an extension of the practices outlined in the previous paragraph, with the addition of a more critical role for the image as signpost, stating that the authors "wanted to see whether illustration could be used not only to alter the editorial flavour of a text, but also to assist the reader in determining its truthfulness" (Morgan 2011: 349). The book uses a repeating structure to demonstrate how each stage of building a deception occurs, with images varying in clarity and emphasis to reflect their role in each stage. However, the final chapter uses images to alert the reader to something amiss with the truthfulness of the story being told. Morgan describes the visual strategy adopted:

> "Chapter 5 is illustrated with what appear to be straightforward images of the artists and works being referenced but on closer inspection turn out to be photorealistic images in a fan art style. Whilst the text in this chapter might seem to be the most straightforward account of the conversation, it is in fact as heavily edited as each of the other chapters. The job of the illustrations in this chapter was to suggest that all was not as it first appeared" (Ibid: 339)

The images in Morgan's final chapter don't clearly operate by way of Aristotelian rhetoric, rather they jam the rhetorical work of the image and create a rupture that draws our attention to how rhetoric is always at work, even stealthily. In this respect, it

is an arms-length solution to the problems raised in relation to actions taken to tackle post-truths, as relayed in Zoglauer's account of the discourse. He summarises (and despatches) the concerns of those academics arguing against the "epistemic policing" represented by attempts to curtail the circulation of untruths.

He also has no time for their claim that labelling fibs as "fake news" is harmful, in its framing as "discriminatory use of language that seeks to discredit and suppress oppositional expressions of opinion" (Zoglauer 2023: 22). In Morgan's work we see illustration act as a quiet signpost to asking better questions of the material, thereby avoiding the value judgements and shaming associated with pointing out post-truths — which could backfire.

These last four examples guide us in the questions we all need to be asking of how images work in the service of truths and untruths, with Morgan's work showing how illustration can be part of the process of determining where the latter lies. But we haven't yet considered what illustration might be or do if it were to work within the shifting landscape of ethos and deepfakes, rather than trying to equip ourselves with tools to fight it. By way of a thought experiment, we introduce the work of Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst as it poses intriguing questions concerning authorship, remuneration and creative identity in relation to its decentralisation of style. We are specifically interested in their creation of a "digital twin" or "vocal deepfake"

IMAGE
Artists' impression of
Amnesty International
image of protest in
Columbia, 2023

of Herndon, called "Holly+". The creation of a model that could be hired to collaborate, for a fee, is Herndon and Dryhurst's contribution to the discussion of how to reconfigure the link between ethos, style, and money so effectively disrupted by AI, to (as Herndon says) "build a new economy around this where people aren't totally fucked" (Wiener, 2023). We look forward to seeing how their proposals play out in different scenarios, in particular how they challenge or utilise the persistence of (ethos-based) rhetoric even when we know the output to be a version of Herndon rather than the author herself.

Constructing Truths

The question of when it might be appropriate to *construct* images that tell the truth arises directly from our thought experiment, above. Here, we look at what happens when the means utilised in the production of our previous examples of untruths are coupled to the aim of communicating truth.

In the examples of deepfake imagery discussed earlier, the creation of a new composite from existing parts was used to persuade us of something that had not happened. In the contexts discussed these images were untruths, but might there be a role for such images in serving the truth? If we were going to adopt a post-truth, entirely relativistic position, then images synthesised from numerous sources might well represent the truth. Zoglauer sets out

constructivist perspectives on truth commensurate with this point, noting the drive towards social change inherent in many of constructivism's permutations (e.g. he discusses social constructivism, laboratory constructivism, media constructivism) but also dismissing the extreme conclusion that reality does not exist. We discussed this "epistemic nihilism" with the students in relation to Bruno Latour's work, noting that he was similarly misinterpreted with regard to the existence of an external reality. Zoglauer references Canadian Philosopher Ian Hacking on this point to explain the widespread misunderstanding: "according to constructivism, it is not individual things and material objects that are socially constructed, but ideas, categories and classification" (Ibid: 55). Therefore it is our perception and interpretation of reality that is socially constructed, rather than the matter itself.

The response to a series of Amnesty International social media adverts circulated in 2023 allows us to explore the practical application of the theoretical basis outlined above. Amnesty used AI-generated photorealistic constructed images of conflicts between protesters and police in Colombia to visualise the widespread protests there in 2021. The organisation explained that they had used generated images so as not to jeopardise the safety of any real people involved, as a photograph would likely have allowed. However, in response to criticism, Amnesty withdrew the images in case viewers' suspicion of AI images detracted from the extensive field work and reporting they had undertaken on the very real issues depicted. In Amnesty's defence, accompanying each image was a disclaimer that it had been generated using AI, so there was not an overt aim to deceive. However, these images transgressed the lingering assumption that photographic-style images record what happened, "without any aid whatever from the artist's pencil" (Fox Talbot 1844), thereby confirming its persistence even if we know better about such images.

Concerns about the Amnesty images raised by human rights advocate Sam Gregory (of Witness, a human rights group seeking to help people use video and technology to protect and defend human rights) point to a deeper problem posed by their use of such images (DeGeurin and Barr, 2023). Gregory points to the challenges faced by activists and journalists highlighting human rights violations globally, who have their work dismissed and de-legitimised as fake by authoritarian governments. This then places the burden of proving the truth onto the journalist or activist, thus showing the constructed image to be instrumental in eroding the fragile systems in place to hold authority to account in relation to unpalatable truths.

Part of Gregory's proposed plan for enabling us to distinguish reliable content from constructed and deceptive content is to grant journalists, community leaders and election officials access to the digital tools available to detect deepfakes. He explains that free access to such tools render them useless, as anyone hoping to deceive their audience will test their material on the detection software and revise it to evade detection. Gregory's suggestion reinstates the gatekeepers Zoglauer (2023: 2) saw diminished by the internet rhetorical free-for-all which placed responsibility for determining truth onto all of our shoulders. Here, they can be reframed as responsible editors safeguarding our interests.

By circumventing the problems posed to our perception of truth by photorealistic synthesised images, the following examples instead utilise drawing to bring together different perspectives to tell a truth. They allow us to consider what synthesised depictions of truth can allow. Gemma Sou, Adeeba Nuraina Risha, Gina Ziervogel collaborated with illustrator Cat Sims to convey the stories of ordinary people affected by climate change

in Bangladesh, Bolivia, Puerto Rico, Barbuda and South Africa. Their primary research informs the illustrated book adopted as a vehicle for their findings, conveying the shared experiences common to participants in their research. The authors state the intentions behind creating composites of the testimony they collected, writing that they "aimed to bring through the personalities, humour, voices, and identities of people because the media often homogenise people into groups such as 'climate victims' or 'poor people'" (Sou et al, 2022: 34). Here, the authors' comments suggest that synthesis, if not used carefully, can be reductive and flattening and diminish the people involved.

By adopting a school lesson as the device used to unify the issues arising in different locations, the comic introduces the real daily effects of the climate crisis as well as raising questions about some of the structural causes for them directly in the panels. The focus on individuals allows us to consider the personal impact of something so complex, while highlighting practical small adaptations that demonstrate the resilience of people experiencing the brunt of crises. The writers are careful not to put too celebratory a gloss on these achievements, though, noting that "we have been careful not to romanticise people's capacity, because governments and international organisations must do a lot more to support families. If not, the burden of responsibility will continue to fall on the shoulders of low-income families." The burden of the labour required by adaptive actions is

frequently borne by women, they note (Ibid: 29–30). Whilst not directly applicable in this case due to the synthesised nature of the individuals pictured, the authors' comments highlight a broader problem with the strategy of focusing on the singular example to represent the general. It can shift our focus onto the achievements of the individual who is then celebrated as a figurehead, an exemplar to be congratulated, diverting our attention from considering (and tackling) the systemic problems leading to their need for action.

In a series entitled *America's Dirty Divide*, UK news outlet *The Guardian* published a comic by Julia Louise Pereira which synthesises a variety of research sources to explain why and how designing climate-resilient cities needs to be done with and for the communities that live there. By using drawing to enable an acceptable synthesis of numerous complicated resources, the comic allows us an entry point into the wide-ranging academic research underpinning the issues discussed. The comic, as published online, also came complete with a list of sources and further reading, enabling us to fact check the piece as well as equip ourselves with further information. This approach is particularly powerful in relation to the post-truth situation outlined previously. The climate crisis is a discussion troubled by conspiracies and claims based on "alternative facts" rather than a verifiable evidence base, and this synthetic approach in comics form goes some way to preparing us to enter the debate surrounding challenges facing the planet.

The strategy adopted by the previous three examples shows two of the principles explored so far used in combination: synthesis, and the use of the particular to represent the universal. What is curious about this is the extra labour involved in boiling down information representing the bigger picture, condensing it into a synthesis that can be conveyed by a representative hypothetical individual, in order to communicate a message about that bigger picture. This is hugely *valuable* labour, given that it improves the accessibility of broad sets of data that are made digestible to the lay reader in a bitesize TLDR form. For us, this raises questions concerning the role of the illustrator and their skillset. Firstly, we appreciate them occupying the role of editor, sifting information, making a judgement and taking a position concerning the information we access. Again, with reference to Zoglauer's point, we see an example of someone filtering information as a welcome activity.

Secondly, critical thinking is the skillset underpinning that editorial role and the illustrative practices employed therein to synthesise complex multi-disciplinary perspectives into images. Critical thinking skills are high level cognitive skills not replicated by generative AI outcomes at this point, and are reflected in Benjamin Bloom's hierarchical taxonomy of learning objectives, as published in his influential book *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals: Handbook 1 Cognitive Domain* (Bloom, 1956). Here, synthesis is positioned near the top of the pyramid as one of the

highest-level thinking skills achievable (surpassed only by evaluation).

Bloom describes synthesis as:

"The putting together of elements and parts so as to form a whole. This involves the process of working with pieces, parts, elements, etc., and arranging and combining them in such a way as to constitute a pattern or structure not clearly there before" (Bloom, 1956: 206)[7]

Recognising that these skills can be taught, and given the role we have observed them taking in helping illustrators to navigate truth, we wonder whether there is a more substantial place for critical thinking skills within the training of illustrators.

Skills that enable illustrators to synthesise research and present it in a manner that is received as truthful may be in demand at the point of writing, where appearing truthful in a post-truth world filled with AI-generated images is a unique selling point of design businesses such as Templo. Pali Palavathanan (Founder and Creative Director) identifies their mission ("human rights, climate change and anti-corruption") and the link between their values and approach to producing visuals:

"All of our work is anchored in truth and accuracy. There's so much misinformation and a lack of transparency. For credibility, we cannot be

generating inauthentic imagery or responses" (Bourton, 2023)

His comments suggest that in his field there is more of a professional need in his field for the drawn synthesis represented by Sims' work than there is for the generative AI-produced image. Hoorah to illustration!

Representation / Positionality

In her famous 1988 article 'Situated Knowledges' Donna Haraway coins the term 'the god trick' (1988:581). She is talking about how scientific imaging technologies promise us limitless, transcendent vision, the supposed ability to see everything from a vantage point up above. She contrasts this with the actual embodied nature of all vision and argues for the benefits of partial perspective, limited location and situated knowledge. Our eyes, she writes, are organic, perceptual systems, giving us "specific *ways* of seeing, that is, ways of life" (Ibid: 583, emphasis in original).

In illustration, questions of whose ways of seeing, whose ways of life, are being articulated in the images that we produce and consume have come to the fore more recently. In the last decade people have finally begun to ask who is being commissioned to create illustrations of whom and what. This can result in uncomfortable

conversations, especially if these questions (unsurprisingly) reveal that power imbalances and discrimination prevalent in society at large are mirrored in the world of illustration — see for example this account of who gets to draw images of Black women for the cover of The New Yorker, or the staggering fact that it is still a rarity to see a medical illustration of a Black foetus today.
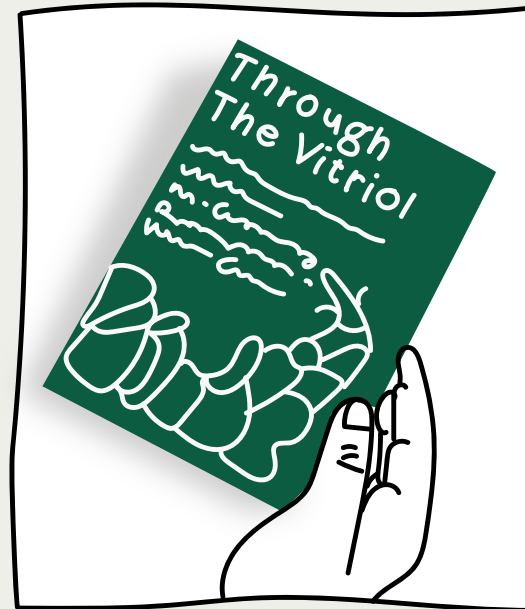
Bug Shepherd-Barron's illustrated book project *Through the Vitriol* (2022) is a brilliant example of an illustrator not only foregrounding her own lived experience of being a transfeminine person

in her illustration work, but also using the work to explicitly discuss the abysmal history of the depiction of trans and gender non-conforming people in mainstream Western cinema. Shepherd-Barron's humour, intelligence, generosity and wit speak through her illustrated protagonist who walks you through the narrative, pulling together a wide range of interesting sources and thought-provoking citations. Quoting American activist Marian Wright Edelman, who famously said that "it's hard to be what you can't see", Shepherd-Barron's character advises us to: "Look for things you can identify with and get joy from" (2022:49). Positive and diverse representation matters, she says, because ultimately these depictions create an environment in which a broader range of people can give themselves permission to carve out a life that feels right and joyful to them (2022:47).

It is of vital importance that more diverse perspectives and positions are brought into illustration — both to keep our discipline relevant and vibrant, while also acknowledging illustration's role as a conduit for broader cultural discussions: if our field stays narrow, the topics and themes that are brought into the visual landscape remain limited too. Multiple barriers to enter the profession of illustration remain a problem, despite initiatives such as Agents for Change. However, the debate about who is best placed to make valid representations of a specific group or experience, while urgent and necessary, should not make us retreat into a self-imposed

solipsism in our practice out of fear of getting the representation of other people and cultures wrong. This would result in autoethnography being the only justified mode of generating work, a scenario which is clearly nonsensical.

In a recent interview illustrator Cecilia Flumé acknowledges that working with other people's stories might indeed be terrifying. She reminds us that while it is right to ask whether it is appropriate to represent someone else's narrative, these questions should not necessarily stop us from going ahead with the project, but instead invite us to consider *how* one might do so in a thoughtful way.

> "Instead of asking the question 'can I?'
> try asking 'how can I?'" (Flumé in Taylor
> 2024: 30)

Acknowledging and communicating your own position is an important part of this, alongside an honest interrogation of your motivations and methods. Illustrator Yeni Kim for example worked with an ethnographer and solicited ample community participation in her project that sought to capture aspects of Jeju culture and heritage. Jeju is a self-governing island in South Korea, and while Kim herself is Korean, she does not have a personal connection to the island's community, culture or language. After extensive research, library and museum visits, time spent on the island interviewing and getting to know community elders and conducting

experimental workshops with local children, she developed a bilingual picture book (in Jeju language and Standard Korean) that tells the (fictional) story of a day in the life of a mother and daughter *haenyeo* — a culture of female free divers specific to Jeju island (see Kim's 2022 article in *The Journal of Illustration* for a detailed and thoughtful write-up of this project). In this project Kim was motivated to contribute to the preservation of a disappearing culture. She explains that despite all her careful research she does not consider herself an expert in Jeju's cultural heritage, and neither does she have lived experience of the diving tradition she is depicting in her book. However she argues that the role of an illustrator in this context can be to educate an audience, to invite people to take an interest in something that is on the cusp of oblivion:

> "As an illustrator, rather than delivering exact information, I can invite people to develop an interest in the images, and in the culture that I can capture through the images." (Kim 2021)*

Haraway's appeal to understand all forms of looking and seeing as situated and embodied (1988), was part of a larger movement in feminist and critical race scholarship that called for greater attention to how a researcher's self-identification, experiences of marginalisation or privilege might influence their work. Reflecting on one's positionality has in recent years also become more established in illustration, see for example Jaleen Grove's article 'The Lacuna's

Calling' (2023) in *Colouring In: The Past*, or illustrator and academic Rachel Emily Taylor's disclaimer in the introduction of her recent book (2024:12), where she acknowledges the inevitable biases her ethnicity, nationality and institutional affiliations bring to her research.

While this is undoubtedly a positive development, and both Grove and Taylor use the acknowledgement of their position as the starting point for a rigorous, wide-reaching and creative body of work, we must remain cautious to not let declarations of positionality lay the ground for unbridled relativism, the conviction that there cannot be any form of shared truth, but only particular, individual experience and context-specific knowledge. Haraway reminds us that "relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization […]; both make it impossible to see well." (1988: 584)

What we have seen in the examples mentioned here, is how thoughtful illustration projects can do their part in bridging the singular and the universal. For example, neither of us identify as trans, and yet, reading Bug Shepherd-Barron's book *Through the Vitriol* was profoundly moving and delightful for us, for three distinct reasons: It gave us the opportunity to learn about the perspective, experience and knowledge of someone who in some ways is different to us, it invited a re-examination of aspects of our own lives and experiences which had been cast in a new light by these differences and commonalities,

and, perhaps most importantly, it reaffirmed our common humanity.

Memetic Images

Our final grouping brings together images that operate in relation to truths that are subject to external limitations, such as taboo or censorship. Here we investigate images that allow their makers to say what is socially unacceptable, and examine their affordances in relation to messages that could pose a threat to safety. We found this function within memes, and we are particularly curious about them because they are not an easy fit for a discussion of illustrative practices. Illustrators don't often allow for decentred authorship and open source usage, and this makes us wonder what it might allow, were we to reconfigure our approach to authorship in the way that Holly Herndon is so radically reimagining it in music. In addition, the social media context for the examples discussed here heavily influences the articulation of illustration processes and products by anyone with a commercial practice working in 2024. Their work in that digital space is subject to the same logic that underpins the spread of a meme, therefore how memes operate indirectly informs the nature of illustration outputs.

Dating from 2012, the "Confession Bear" is one of a number of Advice Animal memes appearing on Reddit and is an example of participatory culture. Jacqueline Ryan Vickery (Associate Professor of

Media Arts, University of North Texas) writes about the complicated ways in which this simple image text combination has been utilised, and how it both liberates and constrains the speaker.

Confession Bear combines a photograph of a sad-looking bear with user-generated text at the top and bottom (an "image macro meme" according to Mina, 2019), and was used to voice anonymous confessions of an increasingly weighty nature, moving from humour to anxiety/taboo, then to voicing revelations of a traumatic nature. Vickery references Foucault to explain the benefits of confessing via such a mechanism, and of users challenging their own position as "silenced victims" in relation to the trauma category of examples (Vickery 2014: 311). However, she also points out that in relation to the taboo category, where examples included subjects such as "taboo sexual desires or acts, politically incorrect or taboo beliefs, and/or morally or ethically questionable behaviors", the meme does nothing to undo the taboo that limits the free discussion of such issues in society (Ibid: 314). For example, Vickery observes that societal expectations of social, personal, or financial success aren't challenged by making a meme about one's failure, and its anonymity limits the impact of any liberatory function that confessing has: "the secret remains a secret even after it has been confessed, as such liberation is contained within the meme itself and does not transcend into offline spaces and lives" (Ibid: 320). In addition,

the meme's format limits the user's creativity, for there is no possibility of authoring the image in the way that the *PostSecret* project allows. However, the benefit of such a rigid format is that it breaks down barriers to entry, also allowing submissions to be untraceable. In rhetorical terms, the link we usually see between style and ethos is challenged, in that style no longer points to its author and their individuality. Instead, style occupies a relational function, situating the message within a specific conversation held by a community of Reddit users.

What is particularly intriguing about Vickery's analysis of the Confession Bear meme is the discussion of *un*truthful confessions, and what this reveals about the desire to engage in truth-telling. Vickery notes:

> "There is a dialectic tension wherein users assume many confessions are false, yet they still long for authenticity and attempt to regulate false confessions in order to maintain some pretense of authenticity. In other words, acknowledging the potential for false confessions does not diminish the pleasures of participating in the space and sharing one's confessions (authentic or otherwise)" (Ibid: 323)

Here, the image allows us to gain satisfaction from engaging in truth-oriented behaviour, where the action of confession and participation seem to be prioritised over the content of the message — over truth itself.

The following example allows us to consider how the image could work within an overtly specified set of constraints, such as state censorship. Digital media scholar An Xiao Mina's book on the social and political role of memes offers many examples of where figurative language uses a visual symbol to stand for something that cannot be discussed publicly, and relies on a specific audience recognising the (frequently metonymic, it appears) relationship between symbol and censored topic. We have seen the persistence of this approach in examples from recent years such as images of A4 paper and drawings and emojis of watermelons.

Of particular note is Mina's discussion of the "grass mud horse", often pictured with a river crab. This was a meme which allowed its participants to speak covertly about the need to speak covertly. The two creatures have their origins in provocative linguistic puns allowing internet users to comment on internet censorship (being in this case the "Great Firewall of China"). Here, the grass mud horse (visually this can be anything alpaca-esque) was used to represent freedom and the ability to tell the truth about one's situation, whereas the river crab stands for censorship and antagonised the grass mud horse. Mina uses these two to explain how canny activists adopted the ways of memes to circulate political messages, allowing them to communicate rapidly and widely. By passing as internet inanity, the activist meme troubles the highly-calibrated censorship apparatus, which can neither judge the content

[8] Kien makes
reference to the
research of Berger
and Milkman (2012:
192) to support this
claim

accurately nor remove it at scale without drawing attention to the act of censorship at work. One of the main tools used by activists to encourage participation with memes is humour (of a particularly irreverent kind), which acts to build solidarity as a profound extension of Leith's "involuntary assent". It does so by thwarting the social division borne of the fear sown by censorship, and replacing it with positive emotions (laughter) and a sense of kinship with like-minded people. Mina elaborates on the potential of memes to build community, in that "they break the silence of self censorship through an addictive participatory culture, while making people with similar concerns and issues visible to each other" (Mina, 2019).
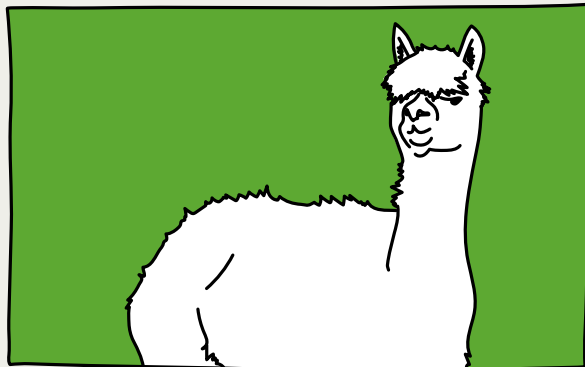
However, as communication scholar Grant Kien points out, forming any online community (conversely) contributes to the isolating echo-chamber surrounding each of us, leaving us impervious to new ideas

or challenges to our own personal "truths" (Kien, 2019: 91). His work on memes in a post-truth political landscape outlines a situation in which we find emotionally impactful content rewarding, seek more of it, and find the participatory engagement with it exciting. This explains the buzz of engaging with Vickery's potentially untrue confessions, but Kien's comments suggest that it comes with a hangover:

> "Clever postmodern playfulness (in rhetorical terms, pathos or feelings)—demonstrated through prosumerist appropriation and transformation of media content from one meaning to another—seems more important than intelligence (logos or logic) for uniting people in a 'post-truth' society" (Ibid: 91)

In Kien's account of the rhetorical operations of memes, laughter as an appeal to pathos is a high-arousal physiological experience, which helps to circulate memes more quickly (Ibid: 58).[8] But the speed of circulation of emotionally persuasive content is detrimental to allowing us the time for a negotiated meaning, with Kien citing Stuart Hall to describe interpretations of media that are more complicated than an immediate agreement or dismissal (Ibid: 60). Furthermore, balanced content that elicits a negotiated reading by being less simplistic won't circulate as it's not exciting. What Kien describes is a mechanism that is primed for untruths to flourish as it prioritises pathos over critical thinking:

"The dominance of electronic media in the twentieth century has encouraged a focus on pathos. The excitation I mentioned above has aroused audiences to grant primacy to the feeling one gets from communication, to the detriment of scrutinizing logic and credibility" (Ibid: 57)

We cannot draw profound conclusions about the relative merits of different roles taken by memetic images from just two examples, but by exploring memes we have been able to consider the image as a shibboleth. We saw the symbolic memetic image allow safe recognition of like-minded others at the same time as it contributed to building this community through humour and the allure of participatory culture's feedback loop. To a greater or lesser degree in each case it enabled liberation and recognition, with its power lying in the cumulative effect of numerous iterations.

Despite the shortcomings listed here, Mina ends her discussion with an inspiring statement on the transformative power of memes:

"Memes are the media through which we test and iterate and envision and contest the type of society we want to live in" (Mina, 2019)

These are powerful claims, but whilst we can see what memetic images can do, in this instance as image makers we can't easily capture their strengths.

Prevalent approaches to authorship and copyright influence illustrators' approach to both the production and circulation of images, which we appreciate is important for many reasons. Whereas, in contrast, the memetic image is shapeshifting in nature and needs to be open to mutations beyond what its originator intended. Otherwise these images would be viral but not memes, and from what we can see illustration seeks out the former online but decries the latter. The social media context for memetic images, as well as the content of the images themselves, compels us to "prosume" through a sense of urgency and the reward of snappy participation, and here we've seen these desires triumph over the truthfulness of content. But what can illustrators do in this regard? If we return to Sue Coe's captivating pronouncement that illustration can "slow time down" we might consider how an oppositional approach may be powerful (Heller 1999: 21). We are not arguing for purely anachronistic practices, rather this is a call for us all to remember to recognise and value the slower works that might not clock up likes and achieve virality. We have seen illustrative practices navigate complexity and nuance over the four PDFs of Colouring In, and argued that illustration exhibits high levels of critical thinking. Therefore we wonder whether a valuable strength of illustration is its potential to use these skills to build corridors between our echo chambers.

Conclusion

What can we make of all of this? There is clearly not one single conclusion to be drawn from the many complicated overlaps between illustration and notions of truthfulness. Even speaking of "truth" on its own spawns seemingly unending discussions, where we brought in questions as to the nature of images and contemporary illustration practice in particular, we found ourselves catapulted into a myriad of complex philosophical challenges. We may not yet have escaped the mire, but we can summarise a few points that really stayed with us.

In our contemporary media landscape, where much communication is emotionally charged, truthfulness and careful consideration often take a back seat. We all know this, but despite this knowledge it can be hard to withstand the allure of high-arousal physiological responses to emotive messages and imagery. The fact that these messages and images might not be truthful does not necessarily detract from their appeal. Even if we know images to be fabricated or fake — simulating a reality that we know to be untrue — they can continue to wield power. The anonymous confessions published under the Confession Bear Meme might indeed be made up, and we know that the pornographic images of Taylor Swift are not really her, but that does little to diminish their influence.

This reminds us that more than ever we all need to be mindful of the institutions, organisations and individuals making claims and publishing images. This is particularly urgent when using a visual language typically associated with objectivity — may that be photography (which somewhat erroneously carries this association) or the type of visual analysis practised by Forensic Architecture. We trust Forensic Architecture to give us a convincing, precise and transparent synthesis of data, but the same apparently logical and irrefutable visual language could be used to mislead and deceive. Even if images and illustrations are seemingly clear and self-evident, we found *ethos* — i.e. an appeal to the audience based on the integrity and standing of the speaker (or illustrator) — to be of greater importance than we initially anticipated. We were prepared for lengthy discussions of the balance of pathos and logos, but weren't expecting this insight!

We saw ethos surface in our discussions of illustrators' style, of the plausibility of the professional back-catalogue of the speaker, and in our discussion of deepfakes. In relation to ethos, we saw our comments on the role of the illustrator coalescing around the idea of the illustrator being someone we trust as an editor of information. In this respect we envisaged illustrators exercising their critical thinking skills to undertake a valuable service in finding, filtering and synthesising information into digestible forms. This saves us time as viewers, while also elevating the position of ethos within the three pillars of Aristotelian rhetoric. We also considered the role of the illustrator as someone who

can unmask untruths. Further to this, Catrin Morgan's critical practice also reveals how deception operates, equipping us with an understanding of images that will help us to navigate our post-truth environment.

These last examples are to be celebrated in what, for us while writing this, occasionally seemed to be an overly challenging cultural landscape. We are buoyed by our findings, in that we have identified several qualities of illustration that enable it to stage meaningful interventions. While there is a lot of discussion in the media that focuses on AI generated images that have a photorealistic quality, with much (and necessary) debate on their potential to deceive, illustration as a more obviously fabricated image can quietly get on with reflecting on the kinds of claims it is able to put forward. For example, illustration can slow time down and has the potential to take us out of the turmoil and chaos of the 24h news feed and invite us to enter into more reflective spaces. We argue that making space in the canon for (and frameworks to evaluate) illustration that operates outside of the immediate rewards of the online pathos factory is more important now than ever, given what "slower" work can offer. Because (much) illustration takes time to produce, it indicates a certain level of dedication and commitment on behalf of its maker, inviting the audience to do the work justice and also take time to absorb it. For example Sue Coe's work on slaughterhouses does not shock and repulse us in the way that a filmed documentary of the mass killing of animals would. Her work invites a

more wide-ranging reflection on our relationship to animals and the complex and merciless systems of industrialised agriculture.

Our final offering is our observation on the capacity of illustration to draw up relatable worlds. This might not sound like much as it seems so obvious, but as publics become increasingly fractured this starts to feel like a revolutionary act. As we are all getting sucked into our algorithmically produced content-bubbles, the idea of living in a connected, shared world seems to be slipping out of reach. Illustration can challenge that. For example Yeni Kim's sensitive work on the disappearing culture of Jeju island reminds us that even if something is not part of our immediate experience, we do well to consider it with the care and thoughtfulness it warrants. Illustration can show us things beyond our own realm, and remind us of our shared humanity.

SB, LV

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