Innocence lost: extreme subject matter in illustration

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Abstract

This paper will examine a current direction of contemporary illustration, highlighting a trend toward the depiction of extreme subject matter. It will look at the origins of this emerging paradigm and link socio-political climates with a general erosion of public morality. It will focus on examples of illustration on an international level and demonstrate a softening of attitudes toward what are considered to be permissible and acceptable images in our day-to-day lives.

Introduction

A picture is worth a thousand words. Surrounded by extreme images we are assaulted repeatedly – in advertising, entertainment and news casting on television, in paper media from pulp magazines to respected news publications. Consider the daily death toll counted off on the news for both Canadian and American troops serving in the Middle East. It raises a question as to our level of tolerance and acceptance of ever increasingly violent and sexually explicit images.

For decades, our world has been defined by photography. Illustration, which took a back seat to the proliferation of wildly used, royalty-free stock photography and generic clip-art has been reasserting itself in graphic design and the publishing industries. In the early 1990s, subject matter in illustration had become more about the tricks or gimmicks of rendering software and the resultant slick presentation of the finished product rather than image content. Technology moves quickly and software was easy enough to master, in the late 1990s, vector style graphics was the shiny new style on the block. This method for rendering was advantageous because both the hardware and software of the time had serious power limitations. Vector based graphic files were small but reproducible at large sizes. Soon everyone

was on the computer bandwagon flooding the market with mediocre illustrations with a similar generic appearance. Work was no longer personalized and the real innovators in the illustration industry found themselves being convincingly copied by other designers. Vector illustration was revolutionary in its time but lacked a human component. Today, the computer, which was purported to replace hand-rendered images, has found its place co-existing with drawing – used as a tool alongside the pencil or other traditional methods of rendering. They are for the most part intertwined and inseparable. When flipping through magazines and News media, one notices a return to traditional media when rendering illustrations – a backlash against the wave of technologically driven subject matter and new media usage of the previous decade. These two examples show work by illustrators using traditional media. Hiroki Tsukuda[1] (Figure 1) uses a standard pencil in this provocative reclining woman in 2005. David Remfry[2] rendered the illustration 'Tatyana Brazhnyk' for a Stella McCartney advertising campaign in 2002 with graphite.

Figure 1.

In addition to traditional methods of rendering, another avenue of subject matter being explored embraces retro-inspired image styling from the 1960s, 70s, 80s, and even the 1990s. Experiments with psychedelic drugs in the 1960s and 70s impressed new altered realities. The raw underground punk music of the Sex Pistols (1975) raged for an angry youth and blockbuster movies such as Stanley Kubrick's, A Clockwork Orange (1971), and Francis Ford Coppola's, Apocalypse Now (1979), shaped a new appetite for the bizarre and violent. The design work of Heinz Edelmann is typical of the era. He gave the Beatle's Yellow Submarine its distinctive look. Current illustration, inspired by the fantasy driven imagery of those decades is clearly evident in the work of Stephane Manel.[3] [4] (Figures 2 & 3)

Figure 2.   *Figure 3.*

Here Edelman's psychedelics invade a woman's bedroom – note the tongue protruding from the wall and Manel's second illustration shows a woman enveloped in tendrils astride a ram reminiscent of yet another revisitation to the Art Nouveau Style. In the illustration "Narcissus," Jo Ratcliffe (Figure 4) describes her illustrations as "Nouveaudelic"[5] – obviously a reference to a melding of Art Nouveau and the psychedelic art styles of the 1960s. Illustrators, (typically identified with artists and their bohemian lifestyles), were also exploring the newly discovered creative outlets of drug use. Today, street art and body beautification are visual themes explored extensively by illustrators. The physical and psychological symbols of bohemians and radicals slowly crept into the mainstream and body modification such as tattoos and piercing were the outward insignia of these left of centre groups. Historically, during the Meiji era (1868-1912) in Japan, considered to be part of anti-establishment behaviour and an embarrassment, "the tattoo which came under close scrutiny from the government, also went underground."[6] They continued to be an emblem for the rebel or society outcast through to the 20th century and currently are in vogue, accepted, as a fashion must have. Jan Feindt[7] (Figure 5) shows a woman covered in tattoos confidently looking back at us while taking a sexual pose.

Figure 4 .   *Figure 5.*

On the western world, a trend for multiple ear piercing began back in the 1980s as a sign of individuality. Today, earplugs, body piercing and scarification are the extreme of one-upmanship in personal statements of character and uniqueness. In Brian Ewing's work[8] [9] his figures are clearly contemporary women of street culture. They are hip, cool, sexy and defiant. In both illustrations, the women are pieced back together with sutures obviously ambivalent to the pain they would most certainly have incurred. At the heart of bohemian or rebel thought is freedom of expression. In the 1970s, the proliferation of street art like Wild Style graffiti in New York and in the 1980s, the influence of rap music, translated into great visual and physical energy. Mattias Gephart's work[10] combines typical painting and stenciling techniques from both the fine art and street art worlds. The gritty street aspect to his work is clearly evident in this piece – a stenciled image of a woman with ample proportions. Thematically re-interpreting early hip hop, rap culture and Blaxploytation film influence, Dragon's illustrations[11] recall 1970s and 80s small production run, hand silkscreen political, rock and movie posters. Disenchanted skateboard culture latched onto extremes because of its defiant attitude and utilized sic graphics like those of Typeholics[12] depicting painful scarification and broken bones – emblems of the dangers of skateboarding and the risks riders take. Combining a graffiti style of image rendering and the anger and energy of rap music, skateboard culture is the current equivalent of the Japanese antiestablishment of the 1800s.

The 1980s marched forward with video games and cultural icons such as Madonna, challenging what we believe to be acceptable attire and appropriate behaviour. She raised the question of permissible sexuality and promiscuity at a time of the infancy of AIDS awareness when globally, media, governments, and the medical community joined religious groups in preaching a unified message of conservative behaviour and a preference for abstinence. Madonna published her book, entitled Sex, in 1992, through Warner Books. It was highly controversial because of the explicit images and adult content. The suggested deviant sexual depictions launched her further in the realm of stardom as everyone clamoured to see what she would do next. It was an early example of shock marketing to stimulate public interest and keep her at the cutting edge of pop culture. Is it pornographic or simply a venture into erotica, which happened to coincide with the name of the

album she released at the same time? Today, illustrations with sexual content or sexuality are commonplace, due in part to the proliferation of graphic sexual content in advertising, daytime and primetime television and the cinema. Tatjana Jeremic's women[13][14] are confident and sexual but modest rather than explicit. The women depicted in Speto's[15], Hiroshi Tanabe's[16] or as in Bernie Reid[17] and Ross Kirton's[18] artwork, are openly flirtatious and exhibit a subtle seduction over the viewer. The coy passive positions draw us into their vulnerable seemingly innocent gaze.

The following group of illustrations represents a selection images that convey sexual prowess, promiscuity and vulgarity. In Yuko Shimizu's images[19][20] (Figures 6 & 8) or Fiona Wylie's illustrations[21], (Figure 7) women are depicted showing us the money shot involving the viewer as a participant or patron watching women crawling around and squirming on the floor in typically demeaning behaviour, and of course when you are cold you could knit a sweater out of your own pubic hair. Which, interestingly enough relates back to decadence in Japanese Fetish Culture, where in the Yoshiwara district, (late 1700s,) "Freak shows showcased women with abnormally long pubic hair."[22] Here, images and subject matter are not relegated to secret pillow books as in the Japanese historical model. None of the illustrators comment on moral standpoints but rather they put sexuality in the public realm for all to see. They are the printed visual equivalent of the television program *Sex in the City*. In these illustrations, the images are less scandalous because the 'shock and awe' technique has worn off.

Figures 6, 7 and 8.

Progressively though, we see overly endowed women in some cases harkening back to the pin up girls of the 1930s and 40s as in the work

of Andrew Bawidamann[23][24]. (Figures 9 & 10) Even though the current depiction of these girls is more aggressive and suggestive, the viewer acknowledges their sexually charged proportions and positions but because it comes from a historical reference, we are not shocked by the connotations. We simply chalk this sort of illustration up to a stylized, cartoon-ish, fantasy, dream girl. The gaming world introduced and perpetuates the penchant for impossibly proportioned female characters. It owes its origins/influence to Japanese Anime style of figurative graphics and to the type of images historically depicted in the common lowbrow comic books for those extraordinary measurements. Marvel comics imbued their heroines with super bodies to go along with their super powers and attract their target audience, the randy teenage boy. Again, it is in our popular history that we have seen this type of woman before. Combining the look of the Japanese wood block printing tradition with current gaming subject matter (an unforgiving warrior bent on violent retribution), Yuko Shimizu's "Revenge of the Geisha Girl,"[25] (Figure 11) and "Panda Girl, the First Asian-American Super heroine,"[26] (Figure 12) show powerful women exacting revenge and surveying territory to be conquered against the odds, sending empowering messages to women across the globe, prodding them to stake their claim.

Figure 9.

Figure 10.

Images from Mateo[27], Kev Speck[28] and John John Jessie[29] (Figure 13) couple the dual power of sex and violence in compelling images that dapple in S&M depictions of bondage and the role of dominatrix.

But where the, 'been there – seen that,' mentality derails is when illustration enters the world of pornography – a much-tabooed subject of public reprimands. Like the implied roles of voyeur or participant in Madonna's book Sex, toying with the viewer, the illustrations of

Underwerket[30], Ross Kirton[31][32] and Jasper Goodall[33][34], either give the viewer a good eyeful or just a sneak peek at the goods. Sometimes the figure in the illustration is openly engaged in exhibitionist activity and sometimes they are unaware that we can see their forbidden fruit.

Figure 11.

Figure 12.

Unlike the following illustrations by Tina Berning[35], (Figure 14) Jan Feindt[36], (Figure 15) Julie Verhovoeven[37] and again in images by Jasper Goodall[38][39], these illustrations go beyond what is commonly accepted as artfully sexual and fall downright into the the realm of pornography. Figures are unabashedly exposing themselves to us, touching themselves and each other. They make eye contact and confront our gaze.

Figure 13.

Figure 14

Figure 15.

Illustrators participating in satiating the mass appetite for full exposure need not look far given the current pop icons of trashy culture. Which includes, Paris Hilton, whose sex tapes were downloaded and marketed worldwide winning three AVN awards.[40] New mom Britany Spears is photographed sans panties, and a current burlesque revival puts the *Pussy Cat Dolls* as a hot theatre show to catch. Continued consumption of this 'striptease culture' disconnects us from the human quotient. Woman as object is the resultant perspective and is clearly

evident in the illustrations from Tim O'Reiley[41] which are schematic diagram instructions for assembling your very own woman.

Gender ambiguity and gay culture have been around for a long time. The figure in Philador London's illustration[42] for Prada, skates the line between male and female. Attributes of both sexes are exhibited. The overall figure is small with soft features but with a man's hairstyle and faint moustache. James Gallagher's photo collages[43] [44] are more perverse not because of the graphic sexual acts between men with men and men with women but because they have their identities removed. The brutal hack job technique use to remove the heads makes them disturbing and so they become even more spectacle.

We are exposed to tales of struggle, strife, and woe daily, yet when that drama is played out for us in a visual manner, translated into an image rather than text, it becomes all the more exciting, shocking, or distasteful. Even in newspapers, a photo accompanies the headline as a way of attracting the reader. It was developments in the film and broadcasting industry that enabled us to see the human costs in war, domestic turbulence and recently, global terrorist activities. Current innovation in the delivery of the news has reporters embedded within regiments at the front line beaming back images and up to the minute activities to us in the comfort and security of our own homes. We are passive participants in the drama unfolding – an army of armchair soldiers if you will. As passive voyeurs, we are dulled, if not immune, to the proliferation of both sexual and violent images.

The computer and television share a similar format in the presentation of information to their viewers. This similarity in the delivery of information and its common captive audience provides a necessary framework for illustrators, in that both pieces of equipment involve the viewers by situating themselves in front of the screen or monitor. Both modes of information delivery enter the realm of fantasy and escapism – through video games, television programming and anonymity. The faceless aspect of the computer enables the user to be whoever he or she wishes to be. This is due in part to several factors – the ease of use, accessibility, the solitary nature for usage of the Internet, and the lack of policing and punishment. Consequently, anonymity is one of the biggest draws for the computer user. You can exist under a false identity, conversing with someone across the globe, playing games or

voicing an opinion, popular or not. In the case of the television, one functions as a passive participant in what is broadcast – from the war in Iraq, to soap operas and recently in the proliferation of reality series. The home viewer becomes part of a distant world perhaps real or fantasy, that doesn't intrude on their daily life. We become info snacking authorities on events that are played out in front of us, resulting in a visual cache that develops due to the quantity and nature of the images we are exposed to on a re-occurring basis. The cumulative effect of visual recall has increasingly stunted our emotional responses to depictions of suffering, cruelty and perversion in a daily experience. Our perception of, or rather, lack of perception and the subsequent registration of these images in our memory increasingly dulls our reactions to representations of high levels of graphic violence and sexual pictures. It is not surprising that we are desensitized – we are desensitized because we remember.

It was through the television that we were first introduced to violence on a grand scale in the comfort and security of our homes – sitting in your favourite chair, perhaps eating dinner and relaxed. Certain global events have affected us so very deeply we earmark the them in our memories. The public assassination of US President John F. Kennedy was one of the first events to rock our cozy world. This stands as the first in a series of events in the turbulent 1960s that changed the collective minds of the world with regard to safety and comfort. Soon after followed Oswald, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. We've seen assassination attempts on other political leaders such as Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul 11. In the work of Airside[45], an unarmed girl is shot in front of us. She appears to be young, possibly in a school uniform – definitely not a threat – an innocent casualty. We visually experience the force of the shot knocking her from her feet, propelling her away from us as if we pulled the trigger ourselves. Graphic sickening images of war from Vietnam, the Persian Gulf War, and more currently Afghanistan and Iraq have come to us through this detached, isolated box in our living room. Our window on the world – the global umbilical cord connecting all of us to the action. The television made it possible to see and experience the conflict without the danger or threat of bodily harm.

Accordingly, one avenue of current subject matter explores sex and violence in our society. How can it not, with the daily death count for

the war counted out in various information modes be it on your cell phone, television or through your computer? City by city the yearly death count from violence on the street is a smaller scale version of an attitude that turns real people into statistics. Which in turn, distills the impact of the act. Some illustrators are representing those acts visually for us to be shocked by, to be shaken into awareness. Take for example, the Rodney King beating, subsequent riots and Reginald Denis beating that exploded into our reality in 1992. Think back to the gripping telecast of Robert Tur – the journalist who shot the footage of the beating of Reginald Denis during the LA riots. Mr. Denis was the unfortunate white truck driver who entered what amounted to be a colossal example of a wrong place, wrong time scenario. We were horrified to watch as the assailants punched, dragged, beat, kicked, dropped cement blocks on and then rejoiced. In this image, you can see a direct relationship between what was broadcast and what has been drawn. When the two men throw bricks and kick Reginald Denis, the barbaric act became part of our popular unconscious. That violence is echoed in Richard Beacham illustration,[46] which shows an act similar to that which sickened us 15 years ago.

Our global awareness of the potential for mass killings dropped on our doorstep with events like the Ricin subway poisonings in Japan in the late 1990s, the attacks on the United States on 9/11 and subsequent anthrax scares across their nation and our own. Bombings in Madrid and Britain continue to fuel not just a national paranoia, but a global one, whose mindset contributes to an exploration of apocalyptic imagery presented by some illustrators. Take for example, the gas mask like faces, by Insect.[47] [48] (Figures 16 & 27) Illustrations from Rinzen[49] and Fabia Bezcsek[50] also represent not just a physical threat but psychological images that codify the power in fear and paranoia.

Society has shared a causal paranoia in all decades, in that it has always looked for a source to blame when something goes wrong. In the 1970s, drugs and the satanic messages heard by playing a record album backwards were held responsible for an unruly youth. In the 1990s, the rise of the still developing video game industry influenced Japanese illustrators. They explored an expanding world of computer graphics through Manga and Anime, which characteristically depict violent, acts and impossibly endowed men and women. In 1999, the filmmaking duo, Larry and Andy Wachowski, explored cinematically the 'Game' reality

Figure 16.   *Figure 17.*

in the movie *The Matrix*. Inspired by video games and the graphics in Japanese Anime, *The Matrix* stimulated a whole genre of quasi-Goth, sexy, violent followers and influenced fashion in the mainstream. The Wachowski Brothers put on film what the illustrators had already been doing. Today, it is the control of gaming that forces its altered reality upon us. Not unlike the draw of the television, the video game has become the umbilical cord that connects us to the action. Through Play Station, Nintendo and X-Box, and in the recently launched Wii gaming system, our participation factor has increased exponentially from our passive role watching the drama unfold on television to actually physically moving, swinging or hitting. Ultra violent video games graphically represent a reality quite similar to our own daily existence and experiences. They allow us to role-play in that world. Kimveer Gill was the gunman in the recent killing spree at Dawson College in Montreal. In his online diary at www.vampirefreaks.com, he is quoted as saying, "Work sucks…School sucks… Life sucks… What else can I say? Metal & Goth kick ass. Life is like a video game, you gotta die sometime."[51] Like you and I, illustrators have a cumulative history of sex and violence that is ripe with taboo topics and controversy. They choose to represent it in a visual manner through artwork. For illustrators it was again simply an avenue to explore. By presenting these subjects out of the original context, the illustrator in effect causes their desensitized audience to take a second look and re-evaluate mainstream attitudes of what is acceptable.

I believe the foundation for the current trend of violent and sexual content in illustration is two fold. The first cause for this extreme subject matter is that current illustrators have been brought up on television and as the years go by the younger generations don't know

life before the game, or for that matter, before the global connectedness of the Internet. Ever increasing brutality and perversion introduced in those arenas has filtered down to an acceptable almost ignorable norm. The scandal Lucille Ball made by showing she was pregnant on television is laughable now given the escapades of pop icons such as Britany Spears, L'il Kim and Eminem.

The second cause, subscribes to the 'shock'em and lock'em', mentality of advertising. You have to shock your viewer into stopping at an image. The viewer has become accustomed to and desensitized by the levels of violence and sex in images because they are bombarded by images and adverts daily. They have grown immune to the 15-second commercial, complacent with the amount of ads in magazines, billboards, on television and before movies at the cinema. Today's illustrators are on the one hand, shocking us with their choice of subject matter while using their medium to convey a message. The message is not about social irresponsibility but rather the artwork highlights a collective numbness or a 'not on my street mentality', prevalent in our society because we are able to participate through passive means.

There is a pluralist effect right now, pulling from all decades and all media – analogue and digital. Fantasy driven art, gritty street driven techniques, and historical referencing are themes concurrently explored by current illustrators. An escalation of the graphic depiction of sexual and violent content in imagery is a hot topic right now. The imagery is less disturbing than the apathetic attitude toward it. Illustration represents the climate in which it is made – ideas and images from the current events and happenings translate into artwork in publications and adverts. It's only natural that the illustrators would respond to current horrific global events and extreme lifestyle trends in popular culture translating them into images, which can be equally appalling. The bigger message is a wake up call. In essence the illustrators have given us the red pill.[52]

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Fig. 12 Yuko Shimizu. Panda Girl, the First Asian-American Superheroine. 2005. Lugli, A. (2006), *Handmade* p.183. (California: Ginko Press)

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