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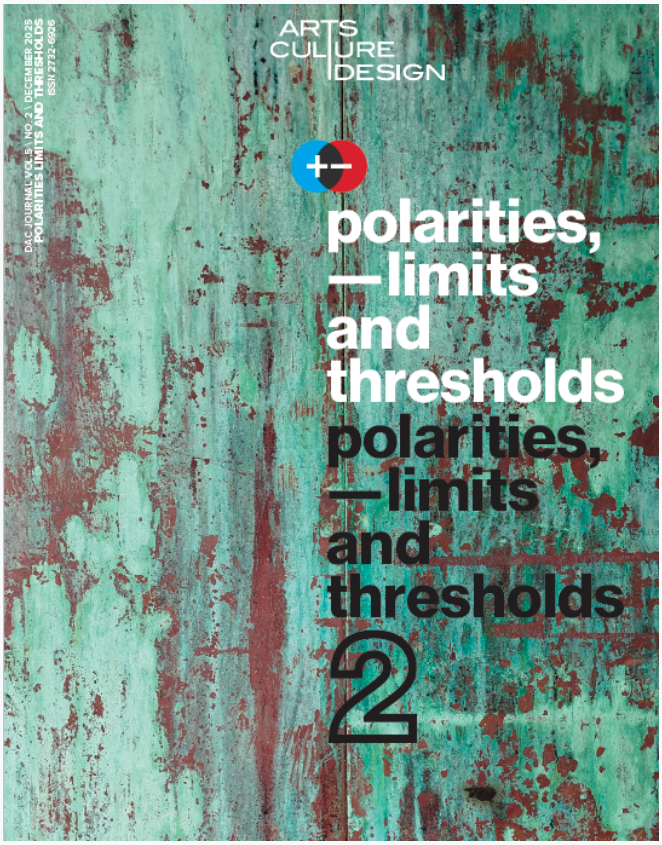
POLARITIES, LIMITS AND THRESHOLDS



THE LIMITS OF THE ILLUSTRATOR IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES: BETWEEN THE POLYMATH, THE DESIGNER-AUTHOR AND MARKET IMPOSITIONS

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PORTFOLIO

THE LIMITS OF THE ILLUSTRATOR IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES: BETWEEN THE POLYMATH, THE DESIGNER-AUTHOR AND MARKET IMPOSITIONS

ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, illustration has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from its traditional role as a form of commercial art to a multifaceted discipline that intersects with design, authorship, and contemporary art practices. This article, included in the Artwork/Portfolio section of the Arts, Culture and Design Journal, examines the evolving position of the illustrator in this complex scenario, focusing on three central dimensions: the rise of the polymath model, the economic and professional constraints imposed by the market, and the pursuit of authorship as a strategy for artistic and intellectual emancipation.

Drawing upon theoretical contributions from Alan Male, Roderick Mills, Sue Clark, and others, alongside the author's own academic and professional experience, and some of his portfolio pieces, the article analyses how illustrators are required to navigate between versatility and specialisation, service and expression, commercial viability and creative autonomy. The polymath principle, which values interdisciplinarity and intellectual adaptability, is discussed in contrast with the precarious economic conditions that characterise much of the illustration industry, particularly in peripheral markets such as Portugal.

The article also explores the tension between authorship and legibility, highlighting how the quest for individual style and artistic recognition may compromise communicative clarity, especially in children's publishing. Through the author's own body of work, illustration is positioned as a discipline that continually negotiates its boundaries, questioning its place between applied design and fine art.

Ultimately, this reflection argues that the contemporary illustrator operates in a state of productive contradiction: simultaneously constrained by market demands and liberated by expanded modes of practice and authorship. In this sense, illustration today functions as a field of negotiation - between economy and expression, legibility and ambiguity, art and service - revealing the complexity and richness of its current identity.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the discipline of illustration has undergone profound changes in its secular nature. The advent of digital drawing, the explosion of illustration courses in universities around the world, and the creation of illustrations specifically for exhibitions in galleries and similar spaces are some of the reasons for this situation. This article, included in the Artwork/Portfolio section of the Arts, Culture and Design Journal, has a minimum length of 2500 words and should be read as such. We seek to present some of our work from the last few decades as examples of some of the characteristics and transformations in the field of illustration during this period.

Historically confined to the limits of 'commercial art', the field of illustration has, in recent decades, redefined the role of the illustrator and the contextual limits of their practice. According to Alan Male, the definition of an image as an illustration lies in its context, the factor that drives the image in the first place, underpinning the essence of the entire brief. Susan Doyle, Jaleen Grove, and Whitney Sherman expand on this idea,

Image 1
"Old Designer Dreaming", 1997

stating that illustration communicates specific messages to a specific target audience and context, inherently existing 'in the service of an idea' (Male, 2019, p.9).

However, the field of illustration is in constant flux and transition, with its boundaries becoming increasingly blurred, overlapping and deeply intertwined with other disciplines (Male et al., 2019, p.9). The impact of this evolution has led illustrators to redirect their talents towards more experimental formats and exhibitions, invading galleries and blurring their role with that of a traditional painter or visual artist.

When we were studying at the Faculty of Fine Arts in our city, expectations in

Image 2
Illustration for editorial article,
Flirt, text by Adília Lopes,
Magazine (Books) No. 17,
O Independente newspaper,
Lisbon, 2001

Image 3
Illustration for children's picture
book, O meu Urso, text by Tiago
Salgueiro, Edições Lobo Bom,
Porto, 2001

this area were certainly more optimistic. Delighted by our admiration for illustrators such as Květa Pacovská, Kent Williams, and Lorenzo Mattoti, we remained fearful of the demands of the market. Image 1 is an illustration from that academic period. In it, an old designer briefly reviews a life that never lived up to the expectations of his youth. It is an image that already showed an awareness that academic creative freedom could be constrained by

the limits imposed by commercial offers. Overcoming these constraints and achieving full expressive satisfaction is perhaps the greatest difficulty for many young illustrators.

1. THE SHIFT TO THE POLYMATH MODEL: THE REQUIREMENT FOR MULTITASKING FOR ECONOMIC SURVIVAL

One of the most significant changes in recent decades is the transition from specialisation to versatility, a practice that Male refers to as the Polymath Principle (Male et al, 2019, p.xxii). This principle implies that the practice of illustration must exude authority, facilitated by a wide range of intellectual and learning skills. The ability to multitask across various creative and practical disciplines has become a fundamental precept.

As Roderick Mills points out, historically, after the Second World War, illustration established itself as a specialisation within graphic design education. Traditionally, students were prepared for freelance work as sole traders or artisans (Male et al., 2019, p. 505). However, this concept is now obsolete. Modern illustrators and designers take ownership of the entire problem-solving process to a certain extent. Today's best illustrators are recognised for being socially and culturally aware, keeping abreast of current affairs and visual trends.

This demand for versatility and interdisciplinarity is reinforced by the need to ensure stable incomes, especially in a competitive and precarious market (Anonymous, 2014). The illustrator's field of activity has expanded enormously, and it is now common for individuals to call themselves 'illustrator-writer' or 'illustrator-designer,' among other varied combinations (Male, 2019). Current practice covers a wide range of contexts, including the music industry, advertising, design, publishing, fashion, the internet, animation, street art, reporting, cartoons, graphic narrative and concept art.

The status of illustrators has increased, with them taking on more responsibility for the context and content of projects. This is partly due to the renewal of university education in art and design, which has reduced the emphasis on pure vocational practice, integrating studio work with contextual, critical, liberal, historical and cultural studies (Male et al., 2019, p.9). This educational model allows graduates to be more independent and intellectually capable.

As Sue Clark points out, the need to be an interdisciplinary visual problem solver is vital for the contemporary illustrator (Male et al., p.200, 2019). The specialist illustrator is categorised as highly educated, visually articulate, socially, culturally and historically aware, an empathetic communicator with a wide range of practical and intellectual skills. Illustrators are urged to engage in a broader education that includes social and cultural studies. In addition, the ability to investigate and apply knowledge across multiple disciplines (science, medicine, entertainment, fashion, etc.) is seen as a shift in professional practice, valued by education programmes.

This need for knowledge is certainly not unrelated to the diversity of requests that contemporary illustrators are required to respond to. From illustrated picture books to covers of award-winning novels and everything in between. Teaching promotes depth in the research process. Illustrators are also educated by this research.

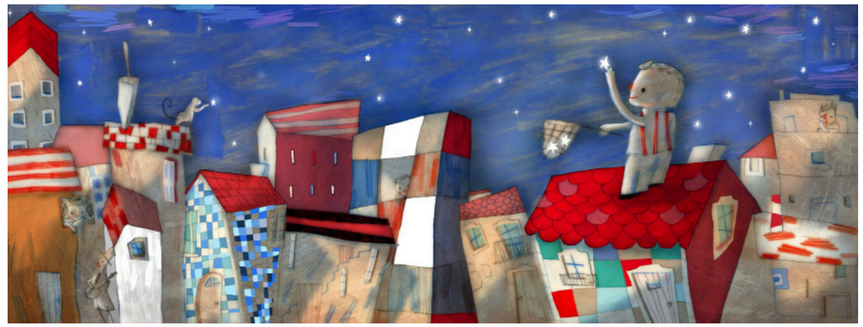

Imagem 4
Juste à ce moment-là, text by Davide Cali, Éditions Sarbacane, França, 2004

Imagem 5
Rouge Cerise, text by François David, Editions Sarbacane Paris, 2005

Image 6
Ghosts from Porto, Ó! Galeria,
2023

2. THE MARKET AND THE LIMITS IMPOSED BY ECONOMIC REALITY

Despite the expansion of roles and the appreciation of the Polymath Principle, illustrators face severe limitations imposed by market realities, which condition their professional and creative choices.

In Portugal, the economic situation for illustrators, especially in the area of children's and young adult books, is precarious. The national market is small, and the saturation of published titles makes it 'extremely difficult, if not impossible, for Portuguese illustrators of children's books to earn enough income to devote themselves exclusively to this area' (Anonymous, 2014, p.26).

The fees paid for the illustration rights to a narrative album, for example, are low (ranging from €1,000 to €1,800 up front). The alternative, a percentage of 8 to 10% to be divided between the author of the text and the illustrator, is also not encouraging, given the low average print run (around 2,000 copies). As Klimowski attests, this precarious financial reality is widespread (Klimowski, 2011).

Traditional professional outlets, such as newspapers and magazines, have been using illustration less and less, often replacing it with photography. The only area that offers some regularity of publication, although not very interesting from a commercial point of view, is the school and children's book market (Moura, 2011).

To combat this precariousness, illustrators are forced to be self-employed and to reinvent their own media (such as fanzines, posters, graffiti, Tumblrs and Facebooks). An illustrator can teach, do commercial work, produce their own publication or be a gallery artist, without any major conflicts. The need for internationalisation is seen as crucial to sustaining the careers of Portuguese illustrators.

Also subject to the financial constraints of the market in Portugal, internationalisation was a path we explored at a certain point in our career. The publication of books by publishers who invest in the sale of copyright internationally was an opportunity that took a long time to develop (images 4 and 5). Participation in illustration fairs and exhibitions abroad made a decisive contribution to this.

This economic pressure not only dictates the need for multitasking, but also influences artistic choices, such as the exhibition of originals. Exhibition in galleries, despite having gained visibility, is often seen as a means of promotion. Interestingly, the economic factor can be decisive in the return to traditional, handcrafted originals (as opposed to digital ones), as the value of an original is higher (4 to 10 times) than that of a digital reproduction.

However, the market demands that the illustrator's message meets the needs of the client who is paying for it, and the message needs to be conveyed in a language that the target audience recognises and understands (Alves, 2020). Alan Male emphasises that illustration is a service (Male, 2007, p.10), and that the illustrator must evaluate the result in terms of the target audience, client, environment and purpose. This is therefore an approach similar to that of a communication designer.

3. THE SEARCH FOR AUTHORSHIP AND TRANSGRESSION OF BOUNDARIES

The desire to escape commercial restrictions and elevate their professional status leads many illustrators to explore what is known as Author Illustration.

Authorship is categorised as a form of illustration practice and expertise, where the professional takes on the role of writer and image creator in the production of an original literary work (David Blaiklock in Male et al., 2019, p. 191). Authorship is associated with the notion of “vision” and creativity. Author illustrators have the freedom to create without the inhibitions of a commission, allowing their imagination to run wild without external pressures.

With the development of digital culture, illustrators today operate with greater autonomy, driven by self-publishing, online stores and print on demand. This leads to a ‘dispersion of authorship’ and a greater emphasis on individual visual identity (their style) as a fundamental design. The need for illustrators to build their individual style — a distinctive visual language that identifies their ‘brand’ or personal iconography — is a cultural imposition in the field of illustration (Anonymous, 2014, p. 187).

However, this search for an authorial voice and a strong individual style introduces a series of limitations and problems, especially in relation to the status of the work and its legibility.

In our journey, we found the possibility of developing books or illustrations for galleries in which we were simultaneously the authors of the concepts or the original texts on which the image was based. These have undoubtedly been projects in which the expressive potential is maximised and where the sense of personal fulfilment is richer (Image 6).

4. AUTHOR ILLUSTRATION VS. ARTWORK

When exhibiting their work in galleries, author illustrators face an ‘existential limbo.’ Mario Moura observes that illustrations exhibited in a gallery specialising in illustration become a form of art that can be purchased for personal taste, placing them in a niche ‘almost outside the art market’ (Moura, 2011). It is as if the illustrator were neither a ‘painter’ nor a ‘sculptor’ in the contemporary art circuit, nor were their work strictly illustration in the sense of providing a service.

Often, in these spaces, what underpins drawings and paintings as ‘illustration’ is essentially the status of their creator (illustrator/designer by training). The insistence on exhibiting originals as illustrations, often based on the desires or anxieties of their authors and existing in the form of a title, places these images in a denial of their functional identity (Anonymous, 2014, p. 29).

The attempt to validate them as ‘works of art’ requires that illustrations be perceived as suggestive and ambiguous, emphasising the subjectivity of interpretation. This appreciation of interpretative imprecision and formal ambiguity is a goal to be achieved in order for illustrations to be elevated to the category of works of art (Anonymous, 2014, p. 214). This aligns with the thinking of Arthur Danto, who defines works of art as representations that are distinguished from real things by having semantic content, a meaning (‘Aboutness’), which cannot be found only in sensible properties. The difference between a work of art (such as Warhol’s Brillo Box) and a real thing (the Brillo box from the

Image 7
Ghosts from Porto
Ó! Galeria
2023

Image 8
Ghosts from Porto
Ó! Galeria
2023

supermarket) is not perceptual, but contextual and meaningful. Danto argues that 'seeing anything as art requires something that the eye cannot discern — an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of art history: a world of art' (Ferreira, 2014).

In this sense, illustration by an author who aspires to the status of art often values conceptual, symbolic and expressive elements that invite interpretation, but which are not always clear.

Examples of illustrations whose conception does not differ from that guided by a painter or writer are those created for the series 'Fantasmas do Porto' (Ghosts of Porto). Starting from the imagery of spirits and souls that have already departed from earthly life, we constructed fictional episodes set in the city of Porto. We sought to create an intimate atmosphere, sometimes permeated with humour, in order to engage the viewer and suggest multiple interpretations and evocations (images 7 and 8).

5. THE LIMIT OF LEGIBILITY: AUTHORSHIP VERSUS TARGET AUDIENCE

The most obvious dilemma in illustration by authors seeking artistic validation is the conflict between individual style and the need for clarity or legibility, especially when the target audience is children.

The insistence on suggestive, ambiguous images with aggressive formal distortions or complex tones, often beyond the cognitive reach of pre-readers and early readers (children between 2 and 8 years old), compromises legibility. Shulevitz and Munari argue that illustrations for narrative albums must be pictorially clear in order to be legible (Anonymous, 2014, p.167).

Illustrators who are overly concerned with style or symbolism may distract the reader's attention from the content, interfering with readability. When illustrations emphasise expressive and conceptual aspects, children may be unable to decipher the image, disrupting effective communication.

The use of advanced stylistic devices, such as visual figures of speech (visual metaphors or synecdoche), is common among Portuguese illustrators. However, the ability to understand literary figures of speech only consolidates in pre-adolescence (10 to 12 years old). The arbitrary use of these visual devices for younger ages contradicts the premise of clarity for children. Thus, the use of ambiguity in the illustration of narrative albums may have the adult reader as its preferred target.

The difficulty lies in finding a balance. The illustration must bear the marks of authorship and expressive richness characteristic of a mature author, but at the same time be seductive and accessible to the understanding of its privileged reader, the child. This controlled ambivalence, as in the work of Danuta Wojciechowska, which skilfully conceals the expressive resources that could disrupt reading, demonstrates that clarity and style can coexist, allowing for a selective interpretation of the visual message, decipherable by both children and adults (Anonymous, 2014).

In short, the limits of the contemporary illustrator are defined by a complex set of factors: the economic need to become a polymath and master multiple areas, the artistic ambition to give their work an authorial status, and the constant negotiation with a

market that imposes functional and, at times, aesthetic restrictions. Breaking free from the shackles of the commercial brief in favour of authorship can lead to an uncertain status (the limbo between art and service), especially if this quest for interpretative imprecision compromises the primary function of illustration: to communicate effectively with its target audience. Illustration, in attempting to break through the boundaries of its historical legacy of service, faces the barrier of legibility, a crucial limit that defines its communicative effectiveness, particularly in the world of children's publishing. Our work over the last few decades reflects many of these concerns.

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