The Illustrator as Visual Problem Solver:

A Deconstruction of Conceptual Strategies for the Contemporary Illustrator

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Abstract

*How does an illustrator get beyond the metaphorical ‘brick wall’ when confronted by a brief, whether searching for effective solutions to a prescribed commission or overwhelmed by the open-ended creative possibilities of self-authored work? How does the contemporary illustrator stand out amongst the current wealth of imagery across the growing breadth of platforms for illustration online, through social media and in traditional print?*

Keywords

*Ideas; Ideas Generation; Visual Problem Solving; Brainstorming; Mind Mapping; Visual Communication; Conceptual Thinking; Ideas Process.*

Introduction

This chapter will examine a range of brainstorming techniques and conceptual strategies that illustrators use for visual problem solving and evaluate their invaluable function. It will identify the importance of ideas generation in helping the illustrator tackle challenging subject matter and study how ideas enable the intellectual interpretation of content through an Illustrator’s voice. It will consider how ideas enable the engaging visual communication of subject matter across different fields of illustration; whether informative, narrative, promotional, or involving opinion and debate, and discuss how ideas make complex subjects more accessible to the audience by offering a visual ‘way in’, consequently making learning easier and more engaging. It will ultimately look at how effective visual problem solving can give rise to sophisticated, meaningful illustrations, which can play a role in educating society, raising awareness and encouraging proactive engagement.

The chapter comprises of two sections: ‘Visual Problem-Solving Techniques’ and ‘Conceptual Strategies’.

The first section, ‘Visual Problem-Solving Techniques’, demonstrates how different techniques provide distinctive frameworks for initiating, exploring and directing idea generation. The techniques have unique properties suited to particular fields of illustration and particular types of thinking.

The second section, ‘Conceptual Strategies for Visual Problem-Solving’, examines a selection of conceptual strategies, which illustrators use to extend and enhance the visual problem-solving process when tackling challenging briefs. They involve a deeper level of thinking and inspire innovation and originality.

The ‘Techniques’ might be seen as the first step in facilitating the ideas process; the ‘Strategies’ might be seen as ‘tools’ to help progress the ideas stage towards a sophisticated solution.

SECTION ONE: VISUAL PROBLEM-SOLVING TECHNIQUES

Illustration is a diverse discipline encompassing a range of fields, platforms, contexts and audiences, all of which have different functions, requirements and creative possibilities. These include editorial work, publishing, advertising, design, online/social media, moving image, and the site-specific. Illustration briefs vary considerably in complexity, timescale and rationale, and can pose a breadth of challenges. Illustrators are often required to respond to a wide range of material that can manifest in different forms, from words and themes, to substantial bodies of text; from the conceptual, abstract, poetic and narrative, to the theoretical, factual and informative. Consequently, Illustrators need to adopt a process of visual problem solving in order to tackle the scope and challenges of different briefs, in order to open up their full potential and to arrive at the most effective and appropriate solutions.

Visual problem-solving techniques provide a framework for ideas to flourish and be processed. Ideas underpin all types of illustration across all fields; they are the backbone on which the visuals hang. Ideas offer an inroad to a brief; a starting point. They enable the intellectual interpretation of content and visual communication through a personal voice, and can determine the development of an illustrators’ unique visual identity.

Visual problem-solving techniques will have distinctive properties, ranging from the structured and systematic to the intuitive and lateral. The following factors highlight why a diverse range of techniques may suit a variety of illustration practitioners tackling illustration briefs of considerable contrast.

Some visual problem-solving techniques offer a visual starting point, while others stem from word based thinking; some illustrators think instinctively through visuals, while others think more effectively through words initially. Research by psychologist Linda Kreger Silverman concludes that 30% of the population think through pictures, 45% think both through pictures and words, and 25% think in words. Both thinking processes provide different creative benefits. Word based thinking techniques enable the illustrator to open up a breadth of possibilities very quickly; image based thinking techniques provide an immediate pool of visual imagery which acts as a springboard for ideas generation.

Some people are proven to be naturally methodical and apply logic and are therefore more likely to respond better to structured, systematic visual problem-solving techniques; others will thrive on adopting more fluid, spontaneous and intuitive thought processes. Structured thinking techniques ensure that all aspects of a brief are considered and explored fully while intuitive thinking techniques can open up fresh and unexpected lines of enquiry.

Visual problem-solving techniques will often involve generating ideas at high speed, which can energise thinking and enable the illustrator to draw on the unconscious without editing, often with surprising results; sustained thinking can enable engagement at a deeper level.

Ideas are commonly associated with image content. However, ideas can be determined by the choice and application of media, the colour palette and image composition. Intuitive visual problem-solving techniques are particularly effective for generating ideas through media and colour.

Some visual problem-solving techniques suit specific fields of illustration better than others. As different fields and contexts function in variance with audience and subject matter, each will require a distinction in consideration and thinking process. For example, a conceptual editorial, such as an illustration for New Scientist on ‘Memory Inheritance’, may require more lateral thinking techniques; a broad advertising theme, such as a tourist campaign to promote the cultural identity of London, may require systematic thinking techniques to help the illustrator embrace the scale of the subject in its entirety and not *go off on a tangent*; a complex non-fiction children’s book, about the human body for example, may require structured problem-solving to guide the research process, planning and designing of content.

Some visual problem-solving techniques will better suit commercial illustration work which is commissioned, prescribed and art directed by a client, while others will be more appropriate for self-authored illustration work which is initiated and directed by the individual illustrator. In the majority of instances, they require different starting points, challenges, deadlines and outcomes. With brief led commissions structured techniques can help the illustrator work creatively within imposed parameters; with self-authored work personal ideas may need initiating and driving with a balance of freer deeper open-ended searching, as well as the self-imposed boundaries of more structured techniques.

Benefits can be gained from utilising a range of problem-solving techniques. Unfamiliar techniques may break routine patterns of thought, therefore encouraging risk taking, new ways of thinking and image-making. When illustrators tackle a challenging brief, they can be confronted by a ‘metaphorical brick wall’ and ideas may feel stagnant, too obvious or superficial. It is useful to have a range of different problem-solving techniques to draw on, offering a variety of starting points, inroads and perspectives, to re-energise the thinking process.

The following selected range of brainstorming techniques are introduced below.

* Mind-Mapping – fast, word based, structured free thinking.
* The Morphological Matrix and other charted thinking – image based and word-based, structured and systematic.
* Intuitive lateral thinking - open ended free thinking, breaking logical thought patterns**.**
* Collaborative brainstorming - playing ‘ping pong’ with ideas.

Some techniques are long established while others have been designed for the Level One ‘Visual Problem-Solving’ Module on the BA Illustration course at Falmouth University. They have consequently been adopted and tailored by students and alumni for many years, to suit their individual thinking patterns and to underpin, shape and bring substance to their illustration work.

Structured, Systematic Visual Problem-Solving Techniques

Technique 1: Mind Mapping

The term ‘Mind-Mapping’ was invented by the psychology author Tony Buzan in the late 1960’s, although the principal originates back to Porphyry of Tyre, a Greek philosopher from

the third century. It is perhaps the most commonly used technique for visual problem solving, combining lateral and analytical thinking, both word based and visual. It provides a structured framework to visually organise lateral free thinking, enabling numerous avenues of a brief to be explored quickly and freely without losing sight of the core theme. It encourages a stream of consciousness that will allow ideas to go on different journeys; these journeys form the visual pathways of a ‘Mind Map’; different routes opening up different solutions to a brief. The map structure, or ‘spider diagram’, provides a visual overview of the breadth of a brief, enabling comparative reflection, evaluation and analysis.

***Stage 1: Creating a ‘Mind Map’:***

*This stage is predominantly word based and involves fast, open-ended lateral thinking and free word association.*

* Extract the core theme of your brief and write it in the centre of a piece of paper, highlighting it with a colour or by circling it.
* Use this core theme to trigger associated themes or words. Write these around your central theme and connect them to the centre with a line.
* Use each word to trigger a stream of new associated thoughts, connecting them with lines to form a series of interconnected branches of ideas, extending outwards from the central core theme.
* When complete, separate branches should radiate from the central theme in different directions, each opening up a different interpretation.

This stage can combine words, symbols and thumbnail sketches, according to preference. However, the advantage of working in words is that the thinking process is not slowed down by the act of drawing, so that ephemeral ideas can be captured quickly before they are lost. A more fluid interpretation of this principle may suit some people better.

***Stage 2: Evaluating the ‘Mind Map’ to Springboard Ideas:***

*This stage combines word based ideas generation and exploratory thumbnail sketches.*

* Reflect on the different branches of interconnected ideas and evaluate directions with visual and conceptual potential i.e. interesting interpretations to your theme.
* Highlight these ideas and explore their potential through fast thumbnail sketches on another piece of paper. Aim to create a pool of visual ‘ingredients’ and exploratory visual ideas, continuing to reflect through annotated words alongside this.

***Stage 3: Processing the Ideas to Develop a Visual Solution to the Brief:***

*This stage involves continued evaluation and processing of ideas through sketching.*

* Review your breadth of imagery and identify ideas with striking visual potential expressive of your core theme. Highlight them and explore their potential further.
* Apply a thorough process of alternating visual exploration and analysis: pulling together threads of ideas by combining thumbnails; use these combinations to spark further sustained visuals.
* The accumulative process of this method should ultimately lead you to consolidate the strengths of your exploratory thinking and find a strong visual solution to the brief.

Technique 2: The Morphological Matrix; A Visual Chart

The ‘Morphological Matrix’, named originally by the Swiss astronomer Fritz Zwicky, is an analytical tool which has been used across various disciplines for many years. He documented the technique in 1969 in ‘Discovery, Invention, Research Through the Morphological Approach’. Its value for creative problem solving has been explored widely, and notable writing on the Matrix includes Tom Ritchey, Dr. Scott Isaksen and Mario Pricken. Zwicky, F. 1969. ‘Discovery, Invention, Research Through the Morphological Approach’, Toronto: Macmillan.

The Morphological Matrix described below is based on Mario Pricken’s ideas, as discussed in his book ‘Creative Advertising’. This thinking technique provides a systematic framework to help break down a complex theme; it enables a wide breadth of imagery to be opened up quickly, ensuring that all aspects of a complex subject are considered. It is driven by image based ideas generation and provides a visual starting point from which to springboard further ideas. It can be applied to any kind of brief, theme based or text based.

Pricken, Mario. 2008.'*Creative Advertising: Ideas and Techniques from the World's Best Campaigns'*, 2nd ed. UK: Thames & Hudson.

The Morphological Matrix involves two important stages:firstly, creating a chart of ‘visual ingredients’, encompassing key identified aspects of the theme/brief; and secondly, selecting and visually combining images from different parts of the visual chart in order to springboard ideas.

***Stage 1: Creating a Visual Chart:***

* Draw a grid on a sheet of paper, approximately A3 (six by six boxes of equal sizes, thirty-six in total).
* If working with a text, extract the 6 most important themes from the text. If working to a broad theme, extract six key aspects of the theme.
* Write these themes, or components of a theme, as subject-headings down the left-hand side of the grid.
* Working quickly in response to each subject-heading in turn, sketch six different interpretations, one in each of the six boxes across the grid.
* Aim to fill the grid with thirty-six thumbnail sketches within an hour.

*The aim of stage 1 is to create an immediate pool of images, opening up a broad range of imagery based on your theme, from which to trigger more sustained ideas and drawings.*

***Stage 2: Using the Visual Chart to Springboard Ideas:***

* Working on a large worksheet with fast thumbnail sketches and notes, select and visually combine imagery from the different subject headings within your chart. Open up a breadth of visual ideas.
* Try to select images with visual potential. Often visual connections can be made between imagery from different subject headings.
* Aim to address all key aspects of your theme/text by combining imagery from all subject headings across your chart. The combined imagery should express both the breadth and the detail of the theme/text.
* Assess the different combinations of images and evaluate which express the overall theme/text most effectively. Continue to develop more considered imagery from these through exploratory fast thumbnail sketches.
* Evaluate and select the strongest idea and image to develop as a consolidated illustration. Aim to be concise but all encompassing, thus expressing the overarching theme/text.

The Morphological Matrix *(Systematic Thinking)*

The example below shows how the chart enables a broad theme to be broken down into manageable components, in this case, ‘LONDON: A Multicultural Melting Pot’.

*COMPONENTS Six different visual interpretations of the components (simple pencil sketches)*

*BELOW:*

1 2 3 4 5 6

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *LONDON:*  *ICONIC SYMBOLS* |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *LONDON:*  *ICONIC BUILDINGS* |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *LONDON: DIVERSITY*  *(CULTURAL REFERENCES)* |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *LONDON: SOCIETY / DIFFERENT NATIONALITIES*  *(GENERIC IMAGERY,*  *SYMBOLS, IDENTITIES)* |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *IDENTITY*  *(GENERIC IMAGERY,*  *SYMBOLS)* |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *CITY*  *(GENERIC IMAGERY,*  *SYMBOLS)* |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Technique 3: A Chart to Trigger Lateral Thinking

‘Lateral thinking’ involves tackling a brief through an indirect creative perspective rather than applying methodical logic. The term was originated in 1967 by Edward de Bono, a distinguished author on the subject. This thinking technique is inspired by his philosophy on lateral thinking, and by thinking processes presented by the illustrator Mark Smith in a forum at the London College of Communication, ‘*Illustration: A Diverse Practice’*, in 2014. It is driven by word based ideas generation and is designed to encourage lateral thinking through word association. It should open up relevant but unexpected visuals in order to trigger less obvious interpretations of a text/brief. It can be applied to any kind of brief, theme based or text based.

This technique involves two important stages:firstly, creating a chart of words associated with key aspects of the text/brief; and secondly, randomly selecting different word combinations from the chart to trigger ideas and visual imagery.

***Stage 1: Creating a Chart of Words Associated with your Text / Brief:***

* Select three key words from your text/brief.
* Draw a chart with three columns and write these three words as headings at the top (see example below).
* Beneath each heading write a list of words associated with it i.e. your chart should have three columns/lists of words, and each list of words should relate to its corresponding heading.

***Stage 2: Using the Chart to Springboard Visuals:***

* Randomly select one word from each column, to create a group of three words. For example, *‘Sundial’*, ‘*Hangman symbol’* and *‘Body silhouette/shadow’* could be selected from the chart below.
* Create further groupings of 3 words, taking one word from each column randomly. Try at least 8 different combinations.
* With each grouping of 3 words generate quick thumbnail sketches in response to their combination.
* Use these sketches as a starting point to open up more considered ideas and imagery that is expressive of your text/brief.
* Evaluate and select the strongest idea and image to develop as a consolidated illustration.

The example below shows how the chart could be constructed to generate words associated with a theme, in this case the quote “Men talk of killing time while time quietly kills them”.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| TIME | KILLING | MEN |
| Hour-glass | Bullets | Head profile(s) |
| Clock | Pistol | Body silhouette / shadow |
| Sundial | Knife | Hands |
| Infinity symbol | Bow and arrow | Fingerprints |
| Timeline | Hangman symbol | Eyes |
| Tally | Crime scene / outlined body | Footprints |

Intuitive Visual Problem-Solving Techniques

The following intuitive thinking techniques enable expansive, unedited freedom of thought in response to a brief, and encourage the generation of off-centered, unexpected ideas and visual solutions. They may need to be combined with more structured techniques to ensure that the creative freedom they offer doesn’t stray from the boundaries of a brief.

Technique 4: Intuitive Brainstorming with Colour and Media

Ideas generation is most commonly associated with subject matter.However, sometimes stepping back from the detail of a text and brainstorming more freely with the underlying mood, atmosphere, tone and pitch of a text can encourage a more subconscious thought process and an abstract interpretation, leaving room for the audience’s personal response.

***Intuitive Brainstorming with Colour:***

The following exercise ensures that colour plays a key role in the ideas process and is not a secondary consideration.

* Write down several descriptive words summing up the underlying theme, mood, atmosphere, tone and pitch of your text/brief.
* Create a colour palette to express these descriptive words. Consider how colour could be used atmospherically to evoke a mood or symbolically to provoke associated meanings. For example, a green colour palette could be used symbolically to convey an environmental theme, fertility or jealousy, or it may simply evoke a fresh, natural, calming atmosphere.
* Explore this colour palette in conjunction with imagery related to the text/brief (generated intuitively or by using other brainstorming techniques such as mind mapping).

***Intuitive Brainstorming with Media:***

The following exercise ensures that the media choices and applications compliment and are instrumental in communicating the theme of a brief, so that media and concept work in tandem.

* Write down a few descriptive words which sum up the underlying theme, mood, atmosphere, tone and pitch of your text/brief.
* Think about what media could be used to express these descriptive words. For example, the graphic harshness of Linocut could express a bold statement, while soft chalks could convey ambiguity or gentleness.
* Explore this media either through abstract mark-making or through imagery related to the themes/brief (generated intuitively or by using other brainstorming techniques such as mind mapping).

The communicative potential of this exercise is opened up when combined with the colour exercise above.

Collaborative Lateral Thinking Techniques

It is easy to automatically apply the same brainstorming techniques when working individually on briefs. When generating ideas collaboratively, ideas can take unexpected directions which can energise, accelerate and enrich the thinking process, triggering unexpected solutions to briefs and stimulating new ways of thinking and working.

Working at great speed can be a little daunting but also liberating; when we don’t have time to edit our thoughts before putting them onto paper they are often less ‘safe’ or obvious.

Technique 5: Collaborative Lateral Thinking for Characterisation; ‘Exquisite Corpse’ Characters

This exercise is based on the surrealist thinking technique ‘Exquisite Corpse’, invented in the 1920s, and the Victorian parlour game ‘Picture Consequences’. It is driven by intuitive image based thinking. The aim is to utilise unexpected directions triggered by collaborative and unedited fast thinking, to open up the expressive scope of the figure. It helps to be open-minded about what constitutes a character. For example, if something has a pair of eyes it tends to automatically take on a personality even if it is an inanimate object.

This exercise is particularly effective when working in groups of three, but can work in pairs. Each person requires a vertical strip of paper to work on and something to draw with.

***Creating a Character Collaboratively:***

* At the top of your strip of paper write down a descriptive word that could in some way be relevant to a character type. For example, it may define their profession, describe their identity, personality, mood, quirks, or have a more random association.
* Swap your strip of paper with someone else.
* Working intuitively for five minutes, depict a head at the top of this strip of paper, expressive of your given word. Your response could be literal or conceptual; it could express external characteristics or inner emotions.
* Fold over your drawing of the head, leaving a neck-line visible, and swap drawings and words with someone else.
* Working on someone else’s strip of paper and with their descriptive word, depict the central body of a figure in the central section of your paper strip, again using the given word to trigger expressive ideas. Limit this to five minutes.
* Fold over your drawing of the body, leaving lines visible for the legs, and swap drawings and words with someone else.
* Working on someone else’s strip of paper and with their descriptive word, depict the legs and feet in the bottom section of your paper strip, again using the given word to trigger expressive ideas. Limit this to five minutes.
* When complete, open up the paper to reveal the whole figure generated collaboratively.
* Working in response to your collaborative character, develop it further, building on its idiosyncratic characteristics and uniting the 3 body parts as an integrated whole. You could draw on top of the collaborative drawing or generate new figurative imagery from it.

This exercise can be explored to generate new imaginative approaches to the figure and character design, or it can be applied to a specific brief to generate figurative ideas in response to a specific narrative text or theme.

Technique 6: Collaborative Lateral Thinking for Sequential Ideas; ‘Exquisite Corpse’ Narratives

This thinking technique is inspired by *‘The Exquisite Book’,* a collaborative narrative created by 100 illustrators, a sequential interpretation of the surrealist thinking technique, ‘Exquisite Corpse’.

Rothman, Julia; Jenny Volvovski, Matt Lamothe. 2010. *‘The Exquisite Book’.* USA: Chronicle.

The aim of this exercise is to embrace the open-ended nature of collaborative thinking, and utilise the unexpected possibilities it generates to inspire imaginative narrative ideas.

It involves collaboratively initiating simple sequential scenarios in three stages, using visual sources as triggers.

It is most effective when working in groups of three, but can work in pairs.

Each person will need the following: a horizontal strip of paper and a pencil; 3 components, including a sourced picture of an object, a named character type and a theme.

***Creating a Collaborative scenario:***

* Divide your horizontal strip of paper into three equal parts to form a fold out concertina booklet.
* Using the above three components as visual triggers (your object, character type and theme), develop an opening image for the first section of your booklet/strip of paper.
* Swap your booklet and your three components with another person in your group.
* Look at the opening image developed by your partner, and the three components providing inspiration. Develop a second image next to this, in response to it, to open up a scenario.  
  This image will form the middle of the sequence of three images.
* Pass your booklet on to the third person in your group. Look at the two images developed by your partners, and the evolving scenario. Develop a final image in response to this scenario, evolving it further and concluding the storyline.
* Reclaim the booklet you initiated, and reflect on the scenario triggered by your opening image.

This collaborative sequence can be used as a source of ideas to inspire more personal and sustained narrative thinking. Reflect on the collective scenario, considering the following: the relationship of the beginning, middle and end; how much is revealed about the character’s personality and the theme over the sequence; how does the atmosphere progress over the sequence (is it evocative, intriguing, quiet or dramatic); how does the scenario hold the viewers’ attention over the sequence; how does the varied composition and scale contribute to the drama?

Develop further ideas through small quick thumbnail sketches, or by drawing several horizontal strips of three boxes to explore different sequential ideas across i.e. echoing the format of the booklet.

SECTION TWO: CONCEPTUAL STRATEGIES FOR VISUAL PROBLEM-SOLVING

This section examines a selection of conceptual strategies which many illustrators use to extend and enhance the visual problem-solving process when tackling challenging briefs. They involve a deeper level of thinking and inspire innovation and originality. Some strategies can become the defining feature of an illustrator’s unique visual language, or ‘style’. Noma Bar’s ‘style’, for example, is founded on the conceptual use of ‘Negative Space’.

The unique properties of each conceptual strategy are identified and discussed with regards to the scope they offer when employed across different fields of illustration. Some strategies will suit particular types of illustrators and illustration better than others.

Strategy 1: Symbolism

Illustrators often have to depict subjects which are not visually tangible; abstract themes such as emotion, theory and opinion, often in the context of political debate, society, science, and financial forecasting. They may also have to illustrate subject matter considered sensitive such as sex, health matters and explicit violence. Rather than visualize literally, it may be expedient to find a more lateral visual approach and communicate through suggestion or visual association. Working with symbolism offers a strategy to visually address text which may be too sensitive to illustrate explicitly, or too complex, theoretical or abstract to pin down to a specific visual interpretation.

In the context of illustration, a symbol tends to be a material object which represents something abstract. Symbols therefore provide the illustrator with the visual means to represent non-visual subject matter. Frequently used symbols common to illustration practice include: *Tree*, representing growth, knowledge and life; *Light bulb,* representing ideas; *Hand*, representing creativity, power and greed; *Cloud,* representing negativity or foreboding as well as imagination and ideas.

Ingledew, John. 2011. *‘The A – Z of Visual Ideas’.* UK: Lawrence King Publishing

Illustrators will rely on their audience to understand and interpret symbols that carry ubiquitous association. However, the way in which an illustrator chooses to use symbols along with their recognised association will provide vast creative and intellectual scope for interplay between illustrator and audience, and will facilitate difficult subject matter to be conveyed in a sensitive and intriguing way. If an illustrator alters, subverts or manipulates a symbol, the associated meaning will change. This encourages a more open-ended approach to visual communication, a more complex space in which the audience is required to engage critically and where multiple interpretations are possible. “By understanding the connotations and potential consequence of having unstated symbolism imbued within an illustration, it can only help to contrive an alternative narrative, challenge socially accepted criteria and communicate more powerfully and effectively. The power and influence of illustration is often reliant on duplicity, intrigue and persuasion. By the subtle use of symbolism, one can go beyond producing acceptable and recognizably ‘good’ illustration.

Male, Alan. 2015. *‘The Power and Influence of Illustration’.* Conference in Illustration and Animation (CONFIA 2015), Portugal.

With this thinking strategy, the challenge for the illustrator is to ensure that their creative interpretations of symbols will be understood by the audience and will echo the text with integrity, while also providing a space for open-ended thought.

There are many ways in which illustrators will utilize the basic premise of how a symbol operates to visually communicate the abstract. It may be a subtle variation in the depiction of a symbol, the cropping, distortion, or alteration of a symbol, or a combination with other imagery that offers a nuance as to how a symbol’s meaning is communicated. It is then the illustrator’s sophisticated handling of this, which provides the audience with an opportunity to correlate visual clues and interpret them in their own way.

The following are examples of strategies which extend the communicative potential of symbols and open up the nuances of meaning they may potentially hold:

***'Focus': Looking at Different Aspects of a Common Symbol to Extract and Convey Different Meanings***

Although a symbol may have commonly understood associations, some symbols carry different meanings according to subtle variations in the ways in which they are depicted. For example, a tree is most commonly associated with notions of knowledge, growth and life. However, discrete parts of a tree may hold different meanings. New shoots or a blossoming flower tend to be associated with the flourishing of youth, while rings of a tree trunk represent age; roots are associated with stability, while branches often symbolize growth or advancement; different types of tree can stand for different things, for example, an oak tree symbolizes wisdom and strength.

In order for the nuance of a symbol’s associated meaning to be expressed, its depiction must work in conjunction with other imagery. Some symbols have contradictory meanings, so as well as considering how the symbol is depicted, the way in which the symbol works in conjunction with other imagery will be vital in triggering the right association. For example, a door can represent new opportunities when depicted as open, but may convey ‘closure’ if shown shut. The imagery working in conjunction with these differing depictions will clarify and reinforce the intended symbolic use; if a closed door were depicted inside a head, it might suggest themes associated with emotional closure; if a sunrise was depicted through an open door, themes of positive openings or new opportunities might be conveyed.

***Altering, Customizing, Distorting, Deconstructing, Adding to and Subverting Symbols***

If a symbol is altered in some way, its meaning will alter accordingly, therefore enabling a more complex sophisticated message to be communicated, beyond the associated denotation. Symbols can also seem clichéd and simplistic, but when customized by an illustrator they can take on a personalized identity, while still communicating the inherent associations the symbol offers.

For example, if an illustrator is working with a heart symbol the associated meaning of love will immediately be understood. However, if the heart symbol is depicted as being broken in two, upside down, and painted black, the distortion of the symbol and its negative association with black implies broken relationships.

If working symbolically with the image of a ladder which has impossible spaces between the rungs, an uphill struggle or an inability to reach a goal is implied. This device, utilizing a symbol for its immediate associations and altering it to add new meaning, enables the illustrator to open up an intelligent visual conversation with their audience, and provides an extensive creative framework for sophisticated visual communication.

***Combining Symbols with Other Imagery***

Symbols work because they are simple, direct and are commonly understood with immediacy. However, for symbolic images to visually engage an audience, and to work effectively and contextually within an illustration, they need to move beyond their purpose as stand-alone symbols. In order to be used to communicate more complex ideas or subtle nuances of a text, it is likely that they will need to co-exist in an illustration with other imagery. There are many ways in which illustrators combine symbols with other imagery, for instance a symbol might be the dominant image, made up of other imagery within it, or it may sit aside other imagery and operate more comparatively.

A striking example of symbols working powerfully in conjunction with other imagery is an illustration by the illustrator Noma Bar that referred to the Netherlands Government proposal to ban women wearingthe burka.

Bar, Noma. 2006. *‘Burka Ban’*, The Guardian.

The image depicts the portrait of a woman wearing a burka, with her face doubling as a no-entry sign. The white strip of the sign reads as the visor for the burka, with her eyes positioned appropriately thus creating an image that embodies a powerful statement against such bans. Bar’s use of the *no-entry* *sign* has given the message immediacy, while also providing an open-ended, thought provoking space for the audience.

A symbols’ meaning may change considerably according to the context it is placed within and how it functions with the other components of an illustration. It will be up to the illustrator to work creatively and expressively with the symbol in conjunction with other imagery in order to trigger the appropriate associations and communicate the right message.

***Combining Symbols with the Figure***

A ‘maze’ or ‘puzzle’ may symbolize variable interpretations around the themes of complexity, struggle, searching, making choices, finding or losing. If explored within the context of the human figure, these symbols can take on a breadth of subtly different meanings. This will be in accordance with how the illustrator utilizes the properties of the symbol in conjunction with the properties of the figure. If a maze were illustrated inside a figure’s head it might symbolize emotional searching, particularly if a smaller figure existed within the maze. If two figures were illustrated across a puzzle it could symbolize searching or complexities within a relationship; if a head were illustrated across a jigsaw and a jigsaw piece was missing from inside the head it could potentially symbolize themes such as memory or emotional loss. These themes are difficult to visualize, but the symbol of the ‘puzzle’ offers a visual device to express their abstract nature. This varying use of the figure or figures in conjunction with the varying use of the puzzle/maze has the potential to open up a wealth of interpretations associated with the symbol, but it is the audience’s ability to apply and adapt the commonly understood meanings that make this possible.

***Symbolism: Flags as a Conceptual Strategy***

Flags are potentially loaded visual devices which offer the illustrator enormous creative and intellectual scope, as they carry globally understood meanings for the illustrator to play with, be subversive with and build on, while providing succinct visual images to make broad, generic visual statements.

By re-appropriating a recognized flag, an interesting intellectual dialogue can be opened up between the illustrator and audience – one that may provoke thought, pose questions, and challenge accepted associations.

Flags are particularly valuable when illustrating complex global themes concerning relationships between countries, which may be hard to visualize due to the vast scale of a topic or its abstract nature. For example, political, social, economic, and environmental themes, which may encompass broad concepts such as *global relationships, interconnectivity, consciousness and growth*. With such extensive abstract subjects, the illustrator faces various visual problems: how is it possible to tackle and communicate such broad themes in a small illustration? How is it possible to be all encompassing while making a clear visual statement? How is it possible to avoid making stereotypical statements about society and different cultures? Flags can provide creative solutions to these questions. However, in order for a flag to say more than we already know, and for it not to read as a cliché, the illustrator needs to be inventive in the way associated meanings are applied to a given brief, context or theme.

The following are example strategies illustrators can employ to utilize the conceptual potential for flags to express national or global themes: the principals can be applied to any kind of flag and context.

***Distorting, Altering, Deconstructing or Subverting the Flag***

It is sometimes expedient to distort the iconic pattern of a flag, deconstruct it, and alter its structure in some way, whilst at the same time retaining an identity for the country or region in question. The following examples reflect different approaches:

* Distort or rearrange the pattern of a flag; depict the flag as ripped as this can be a means for expressing themes associated with destruction or change, such as a divided society, recession or the reshaping of a country.

For example, Michael Bierut deconstructed the American flag entirely in his illustrated cover for The Washington Post Magazine, in order to express the “fractured democracy” of President Trump.

Bierut, Michael. 2017. *‘38 ways to fix a fractured democracy’,* The Washington Post. Accessed 15/12/2017

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/lifestyle/magazine/how-to-fix-american-democracy/?utm_term=.76bfc3f083b6>

* Replace the pattern of a flag with another, thus bringing new meaning or subject matter to the flag or the country it represents. Use the flag pattern as a framework for offering scope to a fresh scenario or narrative about that country.

Otto Steininger’s illustration *‘*Gun Crazy America’ selected for *American Illustration 35,* 2017, demonstrates this strategy. He expresses this theme by replacing the red stripes of the American flag with a pool of red blood and by adding a repeat pattern of guns to the white stars.

Steininger, Otto. 2017. *‘Gun Crazy America’*, American Illustration 35*.*

Accessed 10/01/2018

<https://www.ai-ap.com/slideshow/AI/35/otto-steininger/#1>

* Alter the colour or texture of a flag, thus bringing new meaning to the viewers associated perceptions. Colour holds many different messages and associations.

In Jasper Johns’ acclaimed ‘White Flag’, he removes all red and blue from the American flag, retaining a monochromatic pattern only, leaving the audience to contemplate the significance of a colourless depiction of the icon.

Johns, Jasper. 1955. *‘White Flag’*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 1998.329

* Alter the angle, direction, or scale of a flag as tilted stripes could suggest an upward struggle or the fall of a country.

A powerful example of this is ‘*2011 Aniversary’,* an illustration *for La Repubblica* by Emiliano Ponzi, about the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The American flag is depicted vertically. The twin towers are inserted between the vertical stripes which are seen as bars, trapping America. The base of the stripes and twin towers are bent, conveying the fall of the towers, thus suggesting the vulnerability of the building and America. Just a glimpse of the blue part of the flag with minimal stars edging the image, echoes the loss of hope felt after the tragic event. Ponzi, Emiliano. 2011.‘*10 x 10’*. *‘2011 Aniversary, La Repubblica’.* Italy: Corraini Edizioni.

* Fusing the patterns of two countries' flags provides a means of making a statement about their relationship.

Nicolas Ortega’s illustration for the New York Times depicts an American flag woven erratically from numerous world flags to convey ‘Donald Trump’s strange world view’ in which ‘Trump’s 1st foreign policy speech did not exhibit much grasp of the complexity of the world’.

Ortega, Nicolas. 2016. *‘Donald Trump’s Strange Worldview’,* The New York Times.

Accessed 15/12/2017

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/opinion/donald-trump-to-world-im-willing-to-walk.html>

***Combining Flags with Other Imagery, Symbols, and the Human Figure***

* Combining flags with symbolic objects or other imagery can offer scope to convey themes about a country that may be hard to visualize, such as abstract political concepts. The depiction of symbols or other images imbued within in the colours of a flag will bring a new context, subject and meaning to the flag. For example, a tree, flower, or leaf made up of a country’s flag could symbolize the blossoming or growth for that country; a maze made from a flag could symbolize complexity, struggles, or searching with regards to that country; a bird made up of a country’s flag could symbolize freedom, independence, or liberation of that country, or it might refer to the spirit of a country.

In an illustration for CPO Agenda Magazine, James Fryer combines a Chinese flag with a symbolic cloud of smoke to express the foreboding economic downturn in China and consequential closure of factories. The cloud of factory smoke is red with yellow stars configured like the Chinese flag. Rain falls from the cloud onto a factory below.

Fryer, James. ‘*A gloomy outlook for China as the economic downturn causes many factories to close’.* CPO Agenda Magazine.

[file:///Users/sue/Desktop/JamesF1.jpg](file:///C:\Users\sue\Desktop\JamesF1.jpg)

* Using symbolic images to connect or combine two or several flags can offer scope to explore global themes and relationships between countries. For example, *building blocks* or *cogs* made up of different flags could symbolize different countries working together for a common goal.

For example, for an illustration for The Chronicle of Higher Education, James Yang illustrates a flock of birds, each in the pattern of different national flags, to represent teachers of all nationalities fleeing America in search of “Teaching Abroad”. Yang, James. 2017. *‘Why New Humanities PH.D.s. Should Leave the Country’,* Chronicle of Higher Education. Accessed 15/12/2017

<http://www.chronicle.com/items/biz/resource/ChronFocus_TeachingAbroad_i_v3.pdf>

* Depicting an environment or landscape in the colours and patterns of a flag, can offer scope to apply the flags’ associations to a particular context, and to explore the relationship of a country and place.

In an illustration by Owen Gent for Vogue magazine, the stripes of the American flag become steps which a black figure walks down. The scenario questions how to navigate the downward struggle of “Being Black and British in Trump’s America”.

Gent, Owen. 2017. ‘*What it’s like to be Black and British in Trump’s America’,* Vogue Magazine.

<https://www.vogue.com/article/black-and-british-in-trumps-america>

Accessed 20/12/2017

* Combining flags with figurative shapes, or depicting human figures from flags, provides a means of communicating something about people of that nationality in a general way without referring to personal or cultural identity, thus avoiding stereotypes. Fusing facial emotion or body posture with a flag offers the potential to express the emotion or spirit of a country. Depicting clothing or accessories in flag colours enables the illustrator to express specific character types in relation to a country but in a generic way. For example, a briefcase depicted in the colour and pattern of a British flag could be a means of generically representing a British businessman. This strategy, of combining the image of a flag with figurative imagery, can become more expressive if the depiction of the flag is distorted or altered in some way.

Bill Butcher uses this technique to succinctly convey the theme of collaboration between America and China regarding global environmental issues. The illustration is predominantly of a large handshake containing imagery exploring the environmental theme. The audience reads the hands as representing America and China as their cuffs are depicted in their respective flags.

Butcher, Bill. ‘*US & China needing to work together to combat Air-Pollution’,* McKinsey & Company.

<http://www.billbutcher.com/political/#foobox-1/4/US-China2.jpg>

Strategy 2: Metaphors and Similes

Metaphors operate in a similar way to symbols in that they offer the illustrator a visual way in to tackle dense texts and a more creative and playful spin to work with in conjunction with themes, potentially opening up imagery that may surprise the reader and intrigue them to read the text.

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which implied comparison is made between two different things that actually have something in common. For example, the metaphor ‘*Head in the Clouds’* is commonly understood to represent someone with unrealistic dreams who is out of touch with reality. This theme is quite vague and hard to pin down visually, so the comparison is invaluable in providing the illustrator with specific visuals to express it.

Similes also provide potential for illustrators as they function in much the same way. For example, the simile ‘*Life is like a box of chocolates’* which refers to life’s unpredictability, fate, variety and choices.

There are certain challenging subject areas and themes which illustrators are commonly commissioned to illustrate, where metaphors are a particularly valuable tool. Financial subjects, for example, can be very difficult to illustrate as the themes are often abstract, complex, statistical and theoretical. The illustrator faces two challenges: how they can visualize the abstract content and how they can engage the audience to read the text. This is an example assignment that I, Sue Clarke as joint-author of this chapter, undertook: “I illustrated an article for The Wall Street Journal entitled *Diversifying Investment Strategies.* The text was complex and statistical, so the metaphor *Don’t put all of your eggs in one basket* embedded in the text, *was a gift*. It summed up the essence of the article and offered a succinct and playful visual device to communicate the dense financial content”.

Sue Clarke Illustration. 2017. *‘Diversified Investment Strategies, The Wall Street Journal Asia’.* Accessed 01/12/2017 <http://www.sueclarkeillustration.co.uk>

Other commonly commissioned themes, where metaphors provide an invaluable visual way in, include subjects that are connected to the mind such as memory, dreams, the imagination, emotion, and relationships. In this context, metaphors give the illustrator a license to be imaginative and idiosyncratic, knowing that fantastical imagery will make sense contextually as it is grounded by the commonly understood *logic* of the metaphor.

The key to using metaphors and similes effectively is to ensure that the visual of the metaphor is embraced in conjunction with the subject it represents, the illustrator carefully balancing the imaginative visual freedom metaphors offer with references to the subject matter imbued within the metaphor. Without this balance, the meaning of a text may be lost and the audience may be confused. As metaphors are commonly understood and used there is a danger in them becoming clichéd. The trick for the illustrator is to explore them as imaginatively and personally as possible in conjunction with the unique context offered by the text and overall brief.

Metaphors surprise us, provoke thought, make difficult subjects easier to comprehend, and enrich the level of meaning an image may have.

In the current competitive climate in which illustration floods print and social media, it is becoming increasingly difficult for illustrators to stand out. However, metaphors will undoubtedly continue to provide vast creative scope for a sophisticated means of visual communication.

Strategy 3: Negative Space

The use of negative space can be a powerful visual device for communicating ideas, provided meaningful consideration is placed on the idea and the way in which component subjects are visually represented and designed within an illustration. Negative space forms around an image. It functions conceptually when it is designed to assume the shape of another equally important image. It is the way in which these two interconnected images co-exist that provide opportunities for the illustrator to communicate ideas creatively.

Noma Bar's work epitomizes the creative, intelligent and poignant use of negative space, as evidenced in his book, 'Negative Space', a celebration of his published illustrations which utilize negative space as an expressive conceptual strategy. 'Negative Space', Bar, Noma. 2009. ‘*Negative Space’*. USA: Mark Batty.

He embraces complex challenging topics, such as politics, global issues, sex, crime and national identity, and makes strikingly succinct visuals pinpointing the issue or argument without losing the scale of the theme, sometimes utilizing the interlocking nature of negative space to shock the audience or *make them laugh*.

As the nature of negative space involves two interlocking images or forms, this visual device can be utilized both positively and negatively. It can be used to express the positive themes of connectivity and intimacy, or negative themes such as invasion and intrusion – both inherent in the design. It will be the illustrator’s remit to trigger the relevant tone and message, by choosing interconnecting images appropriately and handling the way they co-exist through negative and positive space.

When two conflicting or contradictory images are juxtaposed through negative space, a conflict or friction exists between them. This notion of conflict has the potential to be reflected in the content or subject matter that is being juxtaposed, perhaps a conflict of opinion or beliefs, opposing theories, or force inflicted by one person over another. As an example of the latter, Noma Bar has used negative space as a powerful visual means of conveying an *invasion of privacy* in an illustration for the The New Yorker, entitled *‘The Science of Sexual Abuse’,* which discusses the relationship between child pornography and sexual abuse*.*

The image depicts a vulnerable child’s open legs within the negative space created by two comparatively large fingers belonging to a domineering silhouetted hand.

Aviv, Rachel. 2013. ‘*The Science of Sexual Abuse, The New Yorker’.* Accessed 09/10/2017

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/01/14/the-science-of-sex-abuse>

*‘The Big Squeeze’,* Bar's illustration focusing on the US 'squeezing oil out of Iraq'

utilizes the conflicting friction of negative space to reflect political conflict between the two countries. An oversized hand, representing America is depicted with the tips of the finger and thumb holding and squeezing a comparatively miniature map of Iraq, while the negative space between the finger and thumb depicts a large pool of oil, in other words, *the oil squeezed out of Iraq*. The oppressive power and force of one country over the other is economically expressed through the domination of one space over another.

Bar, Noma. 2009. ‘*Negative Space*’. *The Big Squeeze.* p13.USA: Mark Batty.

When two images are harmoniously interconnected through negative space, themes relating to intimacy or completeness can be expressed. Bar’s illustration for the television series *‘Mad men’,* created by Matthew Weiner and produced by Lionsgate Television*,* utilizes negative space to convey underlying themes regarding male and female relationships. The illustration succinctly fuses the image of a man and a woman; the woman is depicted much smaller than the man and is hidden within his form. She is represented only by her open legs, which are formed from the negative space between the man’s jacket and tie. The tie reads as a phallic symbol. While the illustration is simple, it provokes the audience to question the nature of sexual intimacy with regards to male domination, and embraces prevailing themes of adultery, gender, power, and sexism.

Bar, Noma. 2017, *‘Bittersweet’, Madmen.* p49.USA: Thames & Hudson

The duality of the way in which negative space operates and the manner in which two interconnected images interact, is determined by the design, scale and colour of both components. If one of the two interconnected forms is larger or stronger in colour, it will be more dominant. These factors will have a bearing on whether the negative and positive space is reversible and whether the negative space can also be read as the positive space. Whether the two images are shown as being starkly juxtaposed or harmonious, opposed or united, the codependent relationship between them offers a powerful and efficient means of communicating complex, abstract themes succinctly, with immediacy and impact. This strategy presents vast scope for the illustrator to provoke thought with their audience, encouraging them to interact with an image and engage in solving the visual puzzle.

Strategy 4: Wordplay and Humour

There are various forms of wordplay that equip the illustrator with similar creative scope such as that provided by the use of metaphors. Idioms, proverbs, puns, ubiquitous phrases, slogans, speeches, film titles, song lyrics, and nursery rhymes are all used by illustrators as conceptual devices to provide a tangible visual image to communicate either a difficult abstract text or theme, or a thought-provoking, humorous visual twist.

These devices all work as problem solving tools because they are commonly recognized, so when applied to an unexpected context, such as a political context, they become intriguing. For them to take on and drive new ideas in conjunction with another context, the illustrator will need to adapt or reinterpret the recognized text, to give it a new and contextually relevant meaning.

Ideas driven by wordplay can be expressed through imagery alone and function as a tool for the illustrator to trigger intriguing imagery. But equally the *words* might be given as much importance as the imagery, the ideas conveyed through the visual interplay of both text and image.

Idioms, commonly used expressions which have a different meaning from their literal interpretation, are often embedded within challenging text to *lighten* *up* an article, thus offering the illustrator a *less serious* means of interpreting the text. An example idiom is ‘a hot potato’ which refers to a disputed issue. Idioms are inherently nonsensical as they bring unlikely imagery to literal interpretation, so in addition to opening up creative visual possibilities, they are often used for comedic effect. For satirical illustrators and political caricaturists, idioms and wordplay are frequently used as comedic devices to make subjects entertaining and more accessible. As an example, the illustrator Steve Bell used the idiom ‘to flog a dead horse’ for an illustration commissioned by the Guardian newspaper to provide a commentary about the 2016 British Conservative Party Annual Conference. The illustration depicts five Conservative politicians attempting to ride a collapsed horse. The caption read *‘A dead horse that works for everyone’,* whichsuggested that the conference agenda was futile.

Bell, Steve. 2016. *‘A Dead Horse that works for Everyone’.* The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/stevebell>

Proverbs, which are usually short well-known sayings or truths, work in a similar fashion. An example proverb, ‘the pen is mightier than the sword’, refers to ideas and words as being more effective than force in their ability to communicate. The image of *a* *pen and sword*, provide the illustrator with something visually tangible to convey an abstract theme of negotiation and communication.

Iconic texts such as Nursery rhymes, song lyrics, famous phrases, slogans and speeches, are a useful conceptual tool for illustrators as they act as a means of contextual reference, to *bounce against* the subject they are tackling. The audience will make comparisons with the familiar text and the new context, actively ‘spotting the differences’, and weighing up both the associative and divergent themes for themselves. This visual strategy can be poignant, thought provoking and humorous, particularly when the comparative contexts surprise or shock.

Steve Bell has frequently used wordplay in his numerous political illustrations for the Guardian, many of which utilize a play on iconic texts. For example, in a Guardian illustration *‘Blairestofall’* in ‘2011, Steve Bell uses the iconic words *“Mirror Mirror on the wall”,* spoken by the ugly stepmother in the Brothers Grimm story ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs’, to portray David Cameron in awe, modelling himself on Tony Blair. Steve Bell. Accessed 07/09/2017 [steve@belltoons.co.uk](mailto:steve@belltoons.co.uk)

Working with the same principle, he adapts the nursery rhyme ‘The Grand old duke of York’ for a Guardian illustration addressing issues in Iraq. He partially rewords the rhyme to read: ‘The Grand Old Duke of York, he had ten thousand men, he marched them off to the bottom of Iraq then he recklessly announced a timetable for bringing some of them back again’. It is the replacement and inherent comparison of the nursery rhyme’s happy ending with the negative reality of current issues in Iraq which communicates the theme poignantly. Bell, Steve. 2007. ‘*Duke of Pork’.* Guardian. Steve Bell’s Cartoon Archive. Accessed 07/09/2017 <http://belltoons.co.uk/bellworks/>

Illustrators have capitalized on the creative, communicative scope of wordplay throughout history. A notable historic example is by the satirical illustrator James Gillray (1756 or 1757 – 1815). His illustration *‘The Plumb Pudding in Danger’* from 1805, depicted the British Prime Minister William Pitt and the French Emperor Napoleon carving up the world between them, or ‘cutting off more than they can chew’. In this example, the idiom is powerfully conveyed through the imagery. Gillray, James. 1805. *'The plumb-pudding in danger’,* UK: Hannah Humphrey. National Portrait Gallery Reference Collection: NPG D12840 <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw62708/The-plumb-pudding-in-danger---or---state-epicures-taking-un-petit-souper-William-Pitt-Napoleon-Bonaparte>

Many examples of wordplay used conceptually in illustration are for political contexts. This subject matter often delivers a form of abstract opinion along with discussion and debate, sometimes challenging to visualize, it highlights some of the difficulties which the illustrator faces. Wordplay as a conceptual strategy provides an identifiable point of reference for the audience, drawing on humour and a playful provocation to consider and reflect upon the context.

Strategy 5:The Head and Body

The human figure is depicted frequently by and through all contexts of commercial illustration practice. The majority of illustrators will develop a personal way of working with the figure employing multi-various approaches that are diverse, ranging from the representational to the conceptual: divergent approaches are often dictated by disparate fields of illustration, a broad range of audiences, contexts, and subject matter, each with their own corresponding considerations, requirements and various visual problems for the illustrator to solve.

For children’s books, characterization is important, and illustrators strive to convey identity, personality and emotion through characters, so that children can identify with them as people and access the themes of a book through references they can relate to. With an adult audience, however, illustrators face different challenges with regards to the figure, which stem from the nature of the subject matter, the context and function of the illustration, and the interaction required from the audience. With regards to the subject matter, depicting the figure generically in order to represent society inclusively and comprehensively without depicting stereotypes can be challenging. For example, a campaign poster promoting victim support would need a generic representation of figures to avoid stereotyping. Another challenge presented by the use of figures may involve the visualization of abstract themes associated with people such as those related to the mind: opinion, debate, ideas, emotions, psychology, memory, dreams, scientific research and theory, medicine, mental health and well-being.

With regards to illustrative context, function and audience, another figurative challenge centers on detail versus ambiguity, and the question of how to define a character but still leave space for the audience’s interpretation.

The following approaches have evolved into recognizable strategies to help tackle the aforementioned challenges, all of which illustrators utilize in their own personal way.

***The Head and Body as Picture Space to Convey Ideas***

When illustrating abstract themes relating to people or the mind, a common strategy is to work with the head or body as a picture space to illustrate imagery within - to reduce the head or body to a silhouette or a simplified shape and to compose an image inside it. When illustrating abstract themes such as ‘ideas’, the visual challenge is to embrace the imagery that is the subject of those ideas, yet also indicate that they are not physically tangible, but come from within the mind. With this approach, as the imagery is composed within the head, rather than in real space or to scale, the audience automatically reads the imagery as having a connection with the mind.

The work of award-winning illustrator David Plunkert exemplifies this strategy, whereby the figure is frequently used as a dominant conceptual framework to convey ideas and imagery. He uses this strategy throughout much of his work, but in a variety of ways. His illustration for the cover of ‘Think’ magazine in 2006, ‘*A Brainy idea’,* about innovative research into the Zeka Virus, demonstrates this strategy clearly. The cover is dominated by a large partially photographic head, within which he has illustrated a systematic network of brains radiating around the central image of a virus. The imagery inside the head illustrates the scientific research about the virus, but as this is depicted inside a head, it becomes linked with the notion of innovative thinking. It is the two layers of images working in conjunction with each other which enables the abstract theme to be conveyed clearly and tangibly, and in an intriguing way.

Plunkert, David. 2006. *’A Brainy Idea’.* Think. Accessed 01/08/2017 <http://davidplunkert.com/>

In Plunkert's illustration ‘*A lifetime of looking’*, for the New York Times in 2014, he has used a more simplified outer shape of a head as a picture space within which to compose various references to art history and architecture. A framed painting of an eye is positioned within the head, where the eye falls, to ensure that we read the overall image as a head, and to focus the theme of ‘looking’ at culture.

Plunkert, David. 2014. *’ A lifetime of looking’,* The New York Times. Accessed 01/08/2017 <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/06/arts/design/a-memory-museum-courtesy-of-a-critic-curator.html>

In his illustration on *‘Shin Splints’*, for Runner’s World magazine, he has applied the same principle of using part of the body as a framework to illustrate something within, but in this instance, he has used the bottom half of a leg. The main focus of the illustration is a swollen leg, within which he has illustrated a hand hammering nails into the shin. By illustrating a tangible scenario within the image of the body, he has been able to express the abstract theme of body pain, and the juxtaposition of one scenario existing within another is also visually intriguing.

Plunkert, David. *’Shin splints’.* Runners World. Accessed 01/08/2017 <http://davidplunkert.com/>

***Rearranging the Head and Body to Convey Ideas***

Another strategy which illustrators use to tackle abstract themes relating to people and the mind is to manipulate the figure and therefore bring new meaning to it, in other words to alter parts of the figure, or to rearrange, distort, or add to it in some way.

For example, Plunkert’s Illustration for Chronical Review on *‘Expanding cultural research’,* collages photographic images of heads into a series of rings which are interlocked, like a chain. Through altering each head so that they read as links in a chain, the abstract theme of one person’s research inspiring and influencing another person’s research has been very simply conveyed.

Plunkert, David. ***‘Expanding Cultural Research’.*** Chronicle Review. Accessed 01/08/2017

<http://davidplunkert.com/>

In the illustration ‘*Bright Ideas’*, for The Wall Street Journal, the theme 'ideas' is conveyed through what is read essentially as one large head, but it is actually made up of half a head and half symbolic objects. The bottom half of the head is depicted as solid and three-dimensional, but the top half becomes a linear drawing of an open cage with a mechanical bird flying from it. Plunkert has visibly opened up the head to convey the inner workings of the mind, and used symbolic association effectively to visualize the abstract theme of ‘ideas’ that are being released from within. The illustration is ultimately a portrait of inside the mind, achieved by altering and adding to the image of an external head.

Plunkert, David. *’Bright Ideas’.* Wall Street Journal. Accessed 01/08/2017

<http://davidplunkert.com/>

For the many illustrations Beppe Giacobbe has developed for themes related to psychology, he often alters, rearranges or omits parts of the head or figure in order to express different abstract aspects of the subject. For example, for an illustration on ‘*Collective Psychosis’,* he depicted the shape of one dominant head, omitted all features, and filled it with eyes. The multitude of eyes within one head represents anxiety of both the individual and of society. In another illustration on anxiety, which is primarily a portrait of a head, the face has one large centrally positioned eye rather than two. Inside this large eye, a tiny figure tentatively peers out of the head, as if trapped and peering out of a cage.

Giacobbe, Beppe. *‘Collective Psychosis’.* Accessed 03/08/2017 <http://www.beppegiacobbe.com/en/portfolio/psiche/p14-284>

***The Body as a Symbol***

Another strategy when working conceptually with themes relating to the mind, body and people, is to depict the figure as a symbol. A typical approach is to visually construct the body or head entirely from other images, objects or symbols, without referencing the figure’s outer physical identity at all. If facial features are replaced with symbolic images or objects that carry associations, they will potentially convey something about the figure. Thus, the overall figure or head reads more as a symbolic representation of a figure, and the images within provide visual clues about its identity, character or the themes it represents.

This strategy offers great potential for expressing figurative themes generically, whether relating to the individual and their inner thoughts, or representing society in broader terms. It also provides a framework to depict a figure’s presence without individualizing their identity, so that the audience is able to add up the visual clues and symbolic references that form the body and create their own image of the character.

With person-related issue based subjects, such as sexual abuse and child abuse, the illustrator will have to avoid making stereotypical statements in the depiction of the figure. For example, for a poster raising awareness about abusive relationships, it is likely that a generic approach to the figure will need to be taken.

To summarize, while identity and characterization is likely to drive a children’s book, identity can be challenging in the context of adult audiences.

Strategy 6:Media

Illustrators have the freedom to work in any media they choose, from traditional pen and ink to digital, either two or three dimensionally, and to any scale, provided the approach will work according to the specifications and the timescale of a commission and will reproduce effectively for publication.

The scope that media provides can be seen as a box of conceptual tools to help the illustrator communicate ideas and solve visual problems in relation to a breadth of illustrative fields and contexts. Divergent media hold their own inherent properties, many of which can be used as conceptual devices. If media is chosen appropriately and in accordance with the subject and context of a brief, it can play a large part in communicating ideas.

The range of media available to produce and make imagery holds inherent properties that have the potential to convey ideas through the atmosphere that they can create. For example, the transparent properties of watercolour and the softness of chalks lend themselves to communicating themes associated with fragility, ambiguity, comfort and quiet, while the harsh, graphic properties of Lino print lends itself to communicating bold statements, harsher themes or illustrative contexts that require immediate visual impact.

The manner in which the illustrator makes physical marks with media will open up its communicative potential further. For example, in an illustration for the New York Times about a Gulf oil spillage, titled *‘Prosecuting Crimes Against The Earth’*, Edel Rodriguez has used bold dripping black paint to depict representatives of the accused companies, BP Transocean and Halliburton, in a portrait format which emulates crime *mug shots*.

In doing so, he was making reference to the black texture of the oil spill as well as expressing the public anger at the treatment of the disaster, thus conveying the concept largely through expressive media.

Uhlmann, David M. 2010. *‘Prosecuting Crimes Against the Earth’.* TheNew York Times. Opinion. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/04/opinion/04uhlmann.html>

The following examples highlight more specifically how media operates as a conceptual tool for the illustrator to communicate ideas.

***Two-Dimensional and Three-Dimensional Collage as Conceptual Devices***

By their nature, two dimensional and three-dimensional montage and collage bring together existing source material. This process of collating existing sources offers a range of conceptual devices. Firstly, the identity of the source material making up a collaged artwork may evoke associations or allude to a period of time, a theme, a gender, or even a story - vintage ephemera will evoke a specific period in time, while old letters, postcards or stamps may allude to a story or embrace themes such as nostalgia or recycling. Secondly, the act itself of collating and combining existing source material together provides the illustrator with a conceptual strategy to communicate ideas - they decide what relationship the images will have to each other, and what statement will be made by this relationship; they make decisions about whether to juxtapose imagery, unify or integrate it, make comparisons with it, make the combination harmonious, complex or surreal. This process, which is unique to collage, can be a very effective conceptual strategy. Thirdly, the physical manner of collaging can be utilized to communicate ideas - the act of cutting or tearing collaged source material might express themes such as loss, distortion, manipulation, destruction, fragmentation, or convey emotions such as anger, ambiguity, confusion or humour. The manner of collage may also carry other associations. For example, Jamie Reid used crudely collaged text to replace the Queen’s torn out features for the album cover design ‘*God Save the Queen’,* by the punk band The Sex Pistols in 1977. Because this image became iconic of the anarchic punk movement, crudely collaged text still carries these associations, so can be used to express subjects with an ‘edgy’ tone.

Reid, Jamie. 1977. ‘*God Save the Queen’.* Sex Pistols Album Cover. V&A Archive

S.1286-1982

Further conceptual scope for collage and montage lies in the scale and the fusion of sourced material with other imagery or shapes. If existing source material is collaged into another shape or image, a dialogue between the two images is made, within which to channel ideas. In ‘*Brain’* by Ogilvy and Mather, a promotional image for The Economist in 2004, the image of a brain is formed from rolled up Economist magazines. This fusion of the collaged magazines with the image of the brain very simply and effectively communicates the magazine as purporting to the *intellectual*.

Ogilvy & Mather Singapore. 2004. *‘Brain’.* The Economist. Advertisement.

<https://www.coloribus.com/adsarchive/prints/the-economist-brain-5656455/>

Matthew Richardson’s series of promotional posters for the Victoria & Albert Museum, London titled *‘Look, Think, Create’,* reflect a range of the aforementioned communicative properties of collage. He has used sourced images of artifacts to convey the identity of the *V&A*, the playful act of collaging to convey the theme of activity and learning, and the conceptual relationship of the collaged elements to make statements about people. The collaged artifacts collectively become different characters for each poster, according to the audience and theme. For the workshop on Postmodernism, the collaged artifacts form a geometric figure, and for the children’s workshop the collaged artifacts form a playful animal character.

Matthew Richardson. *V&A Posters.* Accessed 10/10/2017

<http://matthew-richardson.co.uk>

***Stitch and Textiles as Conceptual Devices***

Stitched artwork has distinctive aesthetic properties, because it is traditionally associated with textiles, fashion and household furnishings. When used in an illustrative context it is often associated with these subjects. Thus, through the properties of the media alone, stitch can be used evocatively to convey themes such as ‘the home’, comfort, tradition, and gender stereotyping.

Stitch can also be used more conceptually. If the physical act of stitching something together is considered symbolically, stitched imagery might communicate themes such as uniting/combining, making connections/links, and healing.

Other textile frameworks such as patchwork quilts, weaving and tapestries are also used as symbolic illustrative devices. As well as inherently evoking a strong sense of the home, family and tradition, they have the potential to communicate ideas such as unity, integration and collectivity, or to convey something whole made of many parts.

The children’s book, ‘*My Grandmother’s Patchwork Quilt’*, by Janet Bolton, embodies this dual aesthetic and symbolic function of a patchwork quilt. It provides a narrative vehicle for the book and represents family unity, while also evoking aesthetic connotations with homeliness. The book introduces children to a farmstead through the visual framework of a patchwork quilt. On each spread, a different animal is illustrated in stitch on a patch of fabric. At the end of the book, all of the illustrated patches come together to form a quilt, representing the farm in its entirety.

Bolton, Janet. 1994. *‘My Grandmother’s Patchwork Quilt’.* UK: Tango Books.

***Three-Dimensional Paper Sculpture, Paper Manipulation and Paper Engineering as Conceptual Devices***

When used in illustrative contexts, paper sculpture and paper manipulation have a range of very distinctive aesthetic properties and conceptual associations which can be utilized as communicative tools.

The aesthetic of paper sculpture can be associated with beauty, play, creativity, learning and performance, and be evocative of the magical and imaginary world of toys and toy theatres. The illustrator can capitalize on these associations and use media as the primary tool to convey such qualities and themes. Paper manipulation can also be symbolically associated with fragility, waste, environmental issues and communication, amongst other themes, and can be used more conceptually to express these themes.

Su Blackwell’s work demonstrates the communicative significance of media particularly well. She uses paper sculpture and altered books to express often literary themes. Her Weekend Guardian cover, a castle sculpted from an old book and photographed with atmospheric lighting, captures the haunted nature of ghost stories largely through the manipulation of media. Blackwell, Su. 2013. *‘Winter Fiction Special’.* The Guardian Weekend Magazine. Accessed 15/10/2017 <http://www.sublackwell.co.uk/editorials-magazines/>

Mathew Richardson utilizes conceptual properties of paper manipulation to communicate the subject ‘*Black holes and dark matter’* in an illustration for New Scientist, a feature on cosmology, in which he literally burns holes in the paper to express the theme.

Jeff Nishinaka’s delicately crafted 3D paper sculpture is notable for its beauty and elegance, properties which have aptly been used to advertise jewelry, perfume and fashion, including campaigns for Prada, Chanel, DNKY and DFS. Galleria. For the Starbucks’ 2012 Christmas campaign ‘*Rekindle the Spirit’,* the aesthetics of his paper sculptures were used to drive the concept and evoke the celebratory Christmas theme by emulating the aesthetics of paper decorations.

Nishinaka, Jeff. DFS. Galleria. Campaign. Accessed 10/10/2017

<http://www.jeffnishinaka.com/fashion/h9xxw8am0upafom9d5jdc3a2wkwqgo>

Nishinaka, Jeff. December 2012. *‘Rekindle the Spirit.’* Starbucks. Christmas campaign. Accessed 10/10/2017

<http://www.jeffnishinaka.com/advertising/8kg4avtioxmuqx6r0iqmbhoyq2bwox>

As well as holding aesthetic communicative properties, paper manipulation and paper engineering equip the illustrator with a plethora of conceptual devices, for example layering, holes/cut outs, flaps, moving mechanisms, pop-ups, and origami all have the potential to conceptually convey themes or aid the communication of information.

Kanitta Meechubot uses layers in her children’s book *‘Atlas of The Human Body’,* to communicate information. The pages of the book are seen as layers of the body, and each page is die-cut to show parts of the body beneath. As the pages are turned, the viewer travels through the body, in a way that is entertaining and simple for children to understand.

Meechubot, Kanitta. 2014. ‘*Atlas of The Human Body’.* UK: Cicada Books.

Paper manipulation and movement can be a very effective media for children’s non-fiction as these interactive properties make learning fun, more engaging and easier to understand, thus aiding the retention of information.

As certain media is so distinctive in its aesthetic and associations it is important that, when used in illustrative contexts, these associations are recognized and utilized accordingly and appropriately to aid the communication of ideas rather than hinder it.

Strategy 7: Colour

As with media, colour can be an instrumental vehicle for the communication of ideas, an effective strategy in itself for visual problem solving. Colour holds various properties which provide the illustrator with a range of different conceptual strategies. Colours can be used expressively to convey ideas through atmosphere; they have recognizable symbolic associations which can be utilized to communicate ideas conceptually; and can be used in a selective manner in order to direct the viewer around an illustration or sequence of images, as if highlighting key points, clues or meanings.

Aurelia Fronty's work demonstrates the significance of colour in communicating ideas through atmosphere. Her vibrant colour palette is fundamental in conveying the rich identity of Peruvian culture in her children’s book ‘Up and Down the Andes’, while in *‘Le Roi la Montagne en hiver’*, her cold limited colour palette captures the atmosphere of winter and drives the quiet mood of the narrative.

# Fronty, Aurelia; [Laurie Krebs](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Laurie-Krebs/e/B001JP4I44/ref=dp_byline_cont_book_1). 2008. *‘Up and Down the Andes’.* UK: Barefoot Books. Fronty, Aurelia. 2013. *‘Le Roi La Montagne en Hiver’.* France: Didier Jeunesse.

Colour has many strong symbolic associations. Some of these associations will pinpoint specific messages, such as red for danger, others carry broader themes such as green for ecological issues, or have abstract associations such as emotion and atmosphere. In this respect, they offer the illustrator a very effective and expressive toolbox for depicting abstract themes and emotions or for capturing the ambiguities of atmosphere and mood. For example, green has various symbolic meanings such as growth, fertility, the environment, renewal, prosperity and jealousy, so colour itself can provide an immediate visual way in to tackling specific or abstract themes.

When imagery is depicted in a colour palette that is different to its natural colour we automatically interpret the colour symbolically and the imagery takes on another meaning. For example, if a human head is depicted as green we might interpret the person to be jealous; if an urban landscape is depicted green, we might presume that environmental themes are being addressed.

Because colours can represent contradictory meaning, the illustrator will have to consider how to trigger the right associations by use of other imagery at work in the illustration itself. For example, red has a positive association with love, passion, courage and winning, as well as a negative association with anger, danger, warning, war and failure. There is the potential here for the illustrator to play with these mixed messages and challenge their audience, particularly when a subject is open to debate.

This set of commonly understood colour association provides enormous scope and creativity when applied to other imagery and other contexts, a sophisticated means of conveying a complex layering of messages, meanings, and statements, for the viewer to unpick and interpret in their own way. It is important to be aware of cultural differences however, as colour associations and symbols can vary considerably across the world. For example, in many cultures black is associated with death and mourning but in South Africa red is associated with death and mourning, white in Asia, and purple in Thailand.

Victor Hussenot uses colour symbolically in his graphic novel ‘The Spectators’, to convey the abstract philosophical subject of existence.

Hussenot, Victor. 2015. *‘The Spectators’.* UK: Nobrow.

The characters are defined by symbolic colours which represent different themes, ideas and emotions. Colour is also used strategically to direct the viewer through the narrative, giving the audience a particular focus, and the book a poetic rhythm.

Conclusion

This ‘*Deconstruction of Conceptual Strategies’* provides a range of solutions to the question *‘How does an illustrator get beyond the metaphorical brick wall when confronted with a brief?’* It has been acknowledged that some techniques and strategies will suit particular illustrators and briefs better than others, however, through examining some of the many strategies available to the illustrator it is hoped that individuals will be able to create their own ‘toolbox’ of techniques and strategies, tailored to their personal idiosyncratic ways of thinking and image making and to their nature of engagement in the field.

The highlighted brainstorming techniques equip the illustrator with the practical means to tackle all types of challenging briefs, to explore their full potential efficiently, appropriately to the individual and to the nature of the brief, employing an exhaustive process of intellectual and creative enquiry. They provide a framework to facilitate a creative journey of free thinking, while embracing the parameters of a brief.

The selected strategies provide opportunities to stretch an individual’s approach to ideas generation to a deeper level, inspiring unfamiliar creative pathways, new approaches to image-making and sophisticated solutions to briefs. They offer a means for illustrators to solve the most complex brief in an effective, innovative way, engaging and challenging their audience.

Disciplines are increasingly blurring and Illustrators are frequently working collaboratively as ‘creatives’ with graphic designers, web designers and animators, in collective studios and design groups, in which skills are pooled together and overlap; illustrators may sometimes take on the role of designer and art director, for example. This ‘toolbox’ of techniques and strategies provides the basis for any illustrator to cope and thrive in any creative environment.

It is becoming more challenging to stand out amongst the current wealth of imagery across the growing breadth of platforms for illustration online and in traditional print. It is often the ideas underpinning an illustration and the individual’s creative skill in visually conveying these ideas that will draw in, engage and have impact on an audience. This is exemplified by the enormous global reaction to Edel Rodriguez’s illustrations on Donald Trump for a series of iconic covers for Time magazine, German magazine Der Siegel and the New Statesman, notably the award winning ‘Melt Down’, ‘Total Meltdown’ and ‘Fire and Fury’. The covers are essentially portraits of Trump, but he has used the face as a vehicle to convey ideas about the nature of his presidency, manipulating key facial features unique to Trump, replacing them with symbols and metaphorical words, and depicting him in media and colour that takes on conceptual values (a combination of strategies addressed in this chapter). The powerful statements Rodriguez has made through these portraits have ignited extensive debate globally across social media and on American television, including MSNBC American News, NBC News, CNN International and Newsroom LA. They have resonated so much with the general public that they have been used in various demonstrations including the ‘Women’s March’ in Washington DC. Rodriguez comments, “I think images have the power to galvanize people and give them something to rally around. Images can sometimes speak for people that don’t have a clear idea of how to say what is on their mind. Nowadays, images can be shared widely and be the catalyst of many conversations, on television, the web, and in life. That, I’ve clearly seen, as people have held up my work on TV shows, at newsstands and at rallies. Whether images can effect real change remains to be seen”.

Brower, Stephen. 2017. ‘Edel Rodriguez’s Powerful Images’, Print Magazine.

Accessed date 15/01/2018

<http://www.printmag.com/political-design/edel-rodriguez-powerful-images/>

However, it is only through acknowledging the role and impact of ideas and by being equipped to embrace the ideas process effectively which will give rise to illustration as powerful as this, that is personal to the individual illustrator, that answers the brief most powerfully, and that is meaningful to society, provoking thought and encouraging proactive engagement and learning; and which ultimately raises the profile of illustration.

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