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EDITORIAL

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Blind Spots

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This volume of the journal, consisting of this first and a forthcoming second issue, are the result of papers presented and subsequently submitted for the *13th Annual Illustration Research Symposium* held at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri in 2023. The symposium brought art and cultural historians, illustration practitioners and practitioner researchers together to present their findings and responses, thoughts and ideas. This volume of the journal represents their research efforts all working towards the common aim of illuminating the various manifestations of the blind spot in the field of illustration.

Blind Spots quietly celebrated the ten years since the first issue of the *Journal of Illustration (JILL)*, which has seen illustration transition from an overlooked critical subject to a valid, thriving and growing area of research. The ten years of continuous discourse, at gatherings and within the journal, have brought a wealth of new knowledge and have been instrumental in establishing illustration

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practice as a field of study. If we are to work towards a true and comprehensive set of criteria on which we can build a framework and enable a balanced and holistic understanding, as a springboard to next and new research, reflection means that we need to ask what areas of knowledge are essential to build on, what so far has been overlooked, avoided or concealed.

Inherent to academic research and reflection is the desire to explore and examine new perspectives. Research is never complete, and findings will commonly be presented with the caveat that 'more research is needed'. It is the function of a research conference and journal to support such ongoing investigations, and readers expect that each article will present something that was previously hidden. But the study of our blind spots requires more than revelatory research. It is also about the assurance of validity – about challenging long held 'truths' and clearing the way for underrepresented ideas and perspectives. *Blind Spots* is also about research into a medium that is distinct from other methods of visual communication in its ability to shine a spotlight on the hidden and what we seek to evade. And how are these qualities understood, used and represented in practice-based as well as cultural and historical research?

Key to the symposium was bringing two different cultures of illustration research together and inviting discussion to explore how we can benefit from presenting alongside one another, and, alternatively, what findings exist at the intersection between these two theoretical and professional approaches. Whilst the journal puts an emphasis on practice-led and practice-based research, art and socio-historic perspectives have always been a much-invited part of the journal and were well represented at the symposium and in the pages of these issues.

However, the distinct differences in approach, frameworks and research methodologies are evident. Crudely, we describe the practice-based research as based on a mixture of personal observations and theoretical reflections on current work, with an open methodological framework. Art historical and cultural studies present a far more defined structure and focus on historical subjects, based on an established framework of visual and cultural analysis, shaped by a long history of arts and culture discourse. Illustration research then presents a spectrum from the speculative 'What if' to an affirmative 'What is'. This difference in focus and knowledge systems might hinder transference or cross-fertilization. Pragmatically, it might be safer to stay 'in your own lane'.

But what might happen if these two disciplines approached each other in more sustained, integrated ways? Some answers to this question were explored in the plenary discussion at the symposium, between Jennifer Greenhill, Steven Guarnaccia, D. B. Dowd, Nanette Hoogslag, Jaleen Grove and Christopher Lukasik, representing a spectrum of illustration practice and scholarship.¹

Jennifer Greenhill began by wondering out loud whether scholars with cultural and art historic perspective on illustration need to have their 'fingers on the pulse of current debates and practices among practicing illustrators?' (Dowd et al. 2023). And vice versa, whether practising illustrators

1. Jennifer Greenhill, endowed professor of American art at the University of Arkansas; Steven Guarnaccia, illustrator, designer and associate professor of illustration at Parsons School of Design; D. B. Dowd, professor and faculty director of the Dowd Illustration Research Archive at Washington University in St. Louis; Dr Nanette Hoogslag, principal editor of the *JILL* and course leader at the Cambridge School of Art, Anglia Ruskin University; Jaleen Grove, editor of the *JILL* and associate professor at the Rhode Island School of Design and Dr Christopher Lukasik, associate professor of English and American studies at Purdue University.

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need to have a thorough understanding of historical debates and practices (Dowd et al. 2023)? She extends this, with what is for Greenhill a rhetorical question: whether the notion of close-looking and deep-reading can actually take place, without contemplating the creative motivation and the creative practice itself. Greenhill stresses that for historians the consideration of ‘making’ – the material and thought process of the illustrator – is of great importance. It enables the historian to see motivation, intent and subversion (Dowd et al. 2023). For instance, archived originals of artwork often show the traces of the illustrators’, art directors’ and printers’ interaction, and this helps historians not only to understand the printed illustration as a collective endeavour but also to see where and how the illustrators’ intent aligns with or swerves against the internal power struggle for message ownership in media production.

The opposite question – whether the practice of illustration holds weight without a thorough theoretical framework – follows. If the illustrator, as Jaleen Grove puts it, is ‘trying to propose some sort of view on the world’, and through the illustration presents a temporary hypothetical truth, the illustrator proposes to the world a theory or critique through the work. But without knowing the grounds and structures upon which to build such visual critique, as is core to art historical practices, without an inherent and deep comprehension of a socio-historical background of illustration, illustration as a truth claim is vulnerable.

The strength of the illustrator lies in their ability to glean first-hand information about the making process – a haptic method of inhabiting and knowing the visual world. But should the art historian, not just consider the illustrator, but ‘learn from the inside’ as well, as Grove puts it? She wonders whether all historians should take a drawing class, to understand how practice shapes experience by living it first-hand, the way art students in their education traditionally have to write a critical essay?

Such inequality in foundational education, and the gap visible in art history education and experience point perhaps to the traditional prejudice placing the academic work above practice, the cerebral above the practical. There might be further sensitivities where illustration, as a form of applied arts, still suffers from the Modernist rejection of the decorative and the narrative and is seen as of lesser value – something to be deliberately overlooked. Steven Guarnaccia, in the plenary, lamented that ‘despite living in a culture where the highest grossing films are all derived from comic books’ and where gaming, which is contingent upon the labour of illustrators, is a booming industry, many illustration students still struggle to validate their chosen profession to their families. Like fish unaware of the water they live within, many people today, despite being immersed in the visual culture of illustration and graphic design, neither understand the professional practice of illustration nor appreciate the impact that illustrated material has on their everyday life. Defining an authentic scholarship of illustration could further illuminate a field that contributes invaluable to the creation of everyday culture and cultural practice.

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Illustration also carries with it other prejudices and wilful omissions. Nanette Hoogslag, in the plenary, described illustration as something that provides ‘the feeling, the interaction, the story, the development, the relation – it gives you another version of what the author is trying to say’ (Dowd et al. 2023). But which voices do we seek to hear? The stories and perspectives most at the forefront have historically favoured white Anglo-American voices. Christopher Lukasik points out in the plenary that while the illustrator can function as ‘truth-teller and storyteller’ or ‘model maker and knowledge disseminator’, they can just as easily manipulate their message to become ‘racist typecaster, and master mis-communicator’ and, indeed, have done so historically (Dowd et al. 2023). Some illustrators today have taken up the mantle of social justice and politics as a means of illuminating and repairing damage done by acts of illustrated racism. But Lukasik questions the impact of such political illustration. He asks whether knowledge of injustice, immorality or inhumanity necessarily leads to the desire for change, whether illustrations can serve as a witness to objectionable acts, whether it should.

Let us return momentarily to the questions posed earlier by Greenhill and Grove: should historians learn to draw and should illustrators learn to critically analyse. Sister Corita Kent, artist and art educator at the Immaculate Heart College famously said in her studio rules ‘Don’t try to create and analyse at the same time. They’re different processes’ (Corita Art Center 2024). Successful illustration requires a zoomed-in focus on texture, line and the delicate dance between the hand and the mind. Successful analysis requires a bird’s-eye view and a familiarity with the cultural terrains and structures through which the illustrator passes. While the two perhaps cannot be conducted simultaneously, they certainly can be conducted by the same person. In his closing remarks in the plenary discussion at the conference, D. B. Dowd argued against viewing illustrators and historians as a binary. ‘The people who are motivated to understand [illustration] are some of the people who make it. We believe those two activities do not have to be opposed’ (Dowd et al. 2023).

Graduate programmes and curriculum structures now promote the intersection of illustration practice and scholarship, including the MFA in illustration and visual culture at Washington University in St. Louis where the *Blind Spots* symposium was held, and British universities like the University of the Arts London. Illustration history books and articles have been authored (and continue to be authored) by practitioner-scholars. And this journal is the result of the work – both visual and academic – of those who know illustration from the inside and out.

You could wonder whether this integrated approach would dilute the focus and disorient readers who often consult the journal for a specific purpose. However, the journal has always welcomed all perspectives, not just to expand the pool of ideas but also to reveal the blind spots that come with a singular view. This makes for constructive research frameworks and can create connections and crossovers as a means of offering new insights. Towards this end, in this issue we bring together a wide range of considerations, from histories, culture and practice through which we interrogate

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existing blind spots that affect our field, whether they are literally to do with vision impairment, ‘actively obscuring’ or finding new ways to be seen. Or whether these blind spots are metaphorical and represent forms that are too obscure to be recognized, too inconvenient for the narrative of our discipline or too close to be noticed.

We start with an article by Catrin Morgan, ‘Refusing representation: Illustrative uses of the black square’, about the recurrence of the black or blank square as an expression of narrative and absence, from Robert Fludd’s ‘Infinite Square’ (1617) to Jamila Thomas and Brianna Agyemang #theshowmustbepaused (2020). Morgan wonders whether we should consider this as a rejection of representation, a fundamental form of ‘anti-illustration’, or just a clever device, in effect pointing to the depletion of the imagination of the creator. Referring to John Vernon Lord’s article in a previous illustration journal she states that the blank/black panel belongs to illustration, and ‘intimately tied up in the urge to illustrate’, and the nature of illustration to be forever tied up with the expression of concepts, including those where image and text are exhausted (29 in this issue).

Beth Duggleby, in her reflection ‘Lullabies in Lockdown illustration exhibition’, describes how the isolation and the experience of new parenthood during lockdown in the COVID-19 pandemic 2020–22 not only blocked access to means of expression and to a community of support but also brought a sense of invisibility. She describes how right after lockdown she transformed a gallery space into a communication medium. This not only enabled the display of visual storytelling but also offered an immersive sharing experience, which allowed for a much-needed healing connection, for the creative parent-community, as well as a wider audience. Duggleby explores both the gallery and the current use of zines and graphic novels as vehicles for emotionally challenging and traumatic dialogues.

Diana Dai in the Spotlight piece ‘The neurological basis for non-visual illustration’ gives a brief perspective on non-visual illustration, ‘simply’ presenting the neurological principles of image perception. It underlines the argument that imagery perception and the creation of mental images can be largely commandeered by the combined understanding of literary meanings and the experiential perception through all senses. If imagery in the mind is created through the active use of interpretation of the signals from all of our senses, this not only shows us how illustration ‘works’ in our mind but also offers new and exciting ways to consider illustration creation, as well as question the dominance of the visual paradigm.

‘Style is a rich concept whose impact on creatives is only mirrored by the lack of research on it’ (65 in this issue). Style is simultaneously what illustration students look for, and a term that their educators would like to avoid. In his article ‘How to do things with style’, Julien Porquet takes a closer look at style as a semiotic device, and the shift from what was once seen as the expression of an author’s uniqueness, to style as commercial labelling practice and ‘the antithesis of artistry’ (66 in this issue). In this, he points to an evident blind spot, where, on the one hand, the value of

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illustration is deemed to depend on its conceptual terms, on the other hand, defined as a normative art historical category. What was left unseen is how style performs as a concept that controls and regulates how illustration operates in the public and commercial area.

But an interrogation of the question of style is not the only blind spot in illustration pedagogies. In her article 'Teaching illustration students to reject stereotyping and cultural inaccuracy through research-based assignments', Alison Nowak directs instructors to teach their students how to use research to challenge bias and stereotypes in their illustration of people – a formidable task given that, until Nowak's work on the subject, little research existed to guide instructors. She shows how illustrators often rely on what she calls a 'stream of these misrepresentations' of people and places when they look to contemporary visual culture for visual inspiration, including, but not limited to, visual stereotypes of Indigenous Americans, inaccuracies in the depictions of people in wheelchairs and offensive visual tropes in images of individuals of larger size. Urging 'practice, not perfection', she provides educators with invaluable tools and teaching examples to guide illustration students in the process of research-informed illustration and shows them how to catch their own blind spots and repair them.

Blind spots can obscure the true understanding and visual communication of communities and cultures, as well as issues of privilege and class. In her article '*Design and How! The history, theory and impact of Virginia Lee Burton's design pedagogy*', Helen Ives highlights the lesser known work of children's book illustrator Virginia Lee Burton, specifically her design pedagogy – *Design and How!* – and the teaching community she founded – the Folly Cove Designers – where she taught other women the principles of design and printmaking. Ives points out that Burton's pedagogy ignored her own privilege. Burton, Ives claims, 'did not consider *who* has access to time, and the affordance of time as related to larger systemic issues of class and race' (103 in this issue). Through a combination of historical analysis and first-hand making-based investigation, Ives urges readers to strive to see beyond their own privilege.

Seeing beyond one's own blind spots may take several different forms. Amy de Nobriga in her article 'The sublime landscapes of *Frankenstein*' explores the ways in which the persistence of a particular visual vernacular can blind illustrators to more expansive and innovative ways of making images. Through an exploration of the visual traditions of a much-illustrated literary classic, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, de Nobriga seeks to answer the question 'how can illustrators interpret a text with an established visual legacy avoiding predictability, parody or repetition?' (108 in this issue). She weaves together discussion with visual exploration based in the techniques of distant reading and data visualization, exploring methods of visual abstraction to illustrate important thematic elements and narrative patterns in *Frankenstein*. She encourages illustrators to consider how even the simplest of visual language – shapes that vary in scale, value and composition – can communicate in visually creative ways.

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Keeping Diana Dai's prompt on non-visual illustration in mind, the article 'Immersive study in illustration narrative of vernacular culture' by Yuqing Evie Zhu and Yunyu Ouyang, questions the limitations of traditional illustration methods, and it proposed a shift in illustration practice from the traditional visual paradigm to a multisensory one. Through innovative investigative methods where taste and emotional memories are the starting points and through taking on the dual roles as both interviewers and co-creators, the illustrator is better equipped to create images that capture more intense and authentic representations, particularly of food. In their review, they present the limitations of vision-centred research processes, which fall short in the translation of the sensations of taste and connected emotions, and equally offer methods for future research. Ultimately, this research contributes to the discourse on modes of illustration and its potential beyond visual media alone.

Pete Williams, in the first of a two-part article, 'Tears and rain', explores the evolving nature of authorship and meaning making in illustration against the backdrop of AI generative art technologies. Taking the 'tears in rain' monologue from the film *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982) as an analogous starting point, Williams asks 'Could it be that authorial intent within our contemporary visual culture is outdated?' (185 in this issue). When image creation and consumption take place in a world saturated with images, illustrations are equally mere fragments of cultural output to be re-coded and re-aligned, such is visible in meme culture. Using an interdisciplinary lens of theory, visual culture and futurism, he explores the way we have learned to understand the bond between authorial image and meaning and argues for a long overdue re-evaluation of such fixed acceptance within visual culture, and in particular illustration practice and its education. Williams offers a radical perspective on what illustration is and does, which demands a review of how we perceive current practice and aims in the context of the burgeoning new forms of image generation.

In addition to remaining open to new possibilities for visual communication, this issue also stresses the importance of new methods of research, collaboration and conversation in illustration. Stephanie Black and Louise Vormittag in their article 'Colouring In: An attempt at polyvocal publishing' cite the prevalence of academic blind spots given the dearth of theoretically grounded writing on illustration. 'As a result', they argue 'there is a risk that emergent discursive spaces remain exclusionary and insular' (193 in this issue). Black and Vormittag describe their own method for preventing such insularity: the Colouring In project, which seeks to make illustration more accessible via a collaborative platform. They cite the importance of bringing together illustrators and researchers of various backgrounds, levels of expertise and stages of career to create spaces less encumbered by barriers like formal publication and peer review. The article urges us to consider the blind spots not only in our knowledge but in the ways we make that knowledge accessible.

As the closing article, Alan Male, in his polemic 'Elitism and the intellectual hierarchies of creative practice', critiques the blind spot within illustration research itself. His article highlights intellectual

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elitism, a selective view which promotes one-sided research based on the celebration of authorial practices, whilst commercial practice is ignored as a valid area of 'serious' research. Commercial practice, Male argues, underpins the fundamental principles on which the whole discipline is based. By keeping the research interest mainly within authorial practice, it has narrowed knowledge on illustration itself. Deeper understanding of how technological, social and economic demands and creative responses have shaped and are driving the discipline are not only revealing but also necessary if we are to understand the future of our discipline. The cross-fertilization of authorial and commercial practice needs to be acknowledged as beneficial. Male makes an argument to look at both sides.

As such, Male summarizes the plea inherent to the majority of the articles in this issue and the plenary discussion – a call to uncover blind spots not just within illustration knowledge but within illustration research itself. The way we establish frames around our research, define the edges of our questions, elevate certain voices and select research methodologies all serve to cast some knowledge in light, and some in shadow. The articles in this issue collectively encourage researchers and practitioners to exercise greater awareness of their world-view, privilege, biases and academic culture, as well as the implications of all of these on their research decisions. An awareness of the hegemony of one research methodology, perspective or culture over another, even within such a small arena as illustration research, can move us to re-evaluate or redistribute our research efforts. The *Blind Spots* issue of the *JILL* offers urgent areas in need of future research by the collective research community. The historians, practitioners and researchers featured herein offer a roadmap for conducting such research – how to step into voids, lacks and absences and use research to take the perspective of the overlooked.

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Contributor details

Nanette Hoogslag is an illustrator, designer, lecturer and researcher and editor. In practice and theory, she explores the role and the potential of illustration within traditional print-based, digital and emergent media contexts. Her particular interest is in how illustration works and how illustration evolves in relation to the ongoing digital transformation. Nanette Hoogslag is currently deputy head of the Cambridge School of Art, Anglia Ruskin University.

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Dr Danielle Ridolfi is an illustrator, a designer, a visual culture scholar and is serving as a guest editor of an upcoming volume of the *Journal of Illustration*. Her studio work includes children's picture-book illustration and publication design. Her first self-authored picturebook has been acquired by a major publisher and will reach market in fall 2025. Her research centres on the pedagogical use of images and collage as an object-based practice. She earned an MFA in illustration and visual culture from Washington University's Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts and a doctorate in psychology from Kent State University. She is currently a lecturer in children's studies and communication design at Washington University in St. Louis.

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