

## Dark and Light: The Strange Case of the Decline of Illustration

*Milton Glaser*

In the field of illustration, we are beginning to feel we've been struck in the head and have fallen into a coma and are waiting to wake up at a more generous time. I'm not sure that better times are coming within my lifetime, and I have little practical career advice for others in the field.

Like all of us, I frequently think about what has caused the decline in the use of illustration. Since nothing occurs in a vacuum, it seems to relate to a transformation that has occurred to the American ethos. I believe it to have something to do with the pervasive and powerful effect of advertising and television. I know TV gets blamed for almost everything in American life, but as they endlessly say about computers, television is only a tool. Television is the tool of advertising, the most universal educational force the world has ever witnessed. Sadly the lesson plan of TV involves only one principle – endless consumption.

If you turn on your TV set and look away at the nearby wall you will discover that the reflections produced by the light from the TV set constantly vary dramatically in contrast and intensity. These contrasts are paralleled by the sounds emitting from the same source. It occurred to me that abrupt changes in the intensity of light were indications of danger that our neurological system has evolved to respond to. What effects can a lifetime of exposure to this assault produce? After all, our children are subjected to it within months of being born. When a shadow passes over a field-mouse, it becomes alert to danger. Every cell of our body has been programmed to respond to light. It's obvious that the intensity of visual and audio contrast has increased though the years. I assume that our brains' response to this continuing onslaught is a protective deadening of our neural receptors.

I am convinced that the passivity and indifference of the American public to their own lives and interests is somehow related to this phenomenon. It is hard to believe, but a poll taken recently indicated that two-thirds of the American public could not name even one of the democrats running for president. Not to mention that three

Copyright © ICPHS 2004

SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, [www.sagepublications.com](http://www.sagepublications.com)

DOI: 10.1177/0392192104043665

times the number of Americans believe in Satan than in evolution. We have lost our sense of what is real, and replaced it with an addiction to the virtual reality created by television, entertainment and advertising. Incidentally, the constant juxtaposition of images like that of a woman crying over a child lost in a fire and a commercial for Pampers amplifies this sense of meaninglessness and daily stupor.

One can make the case that we have lost the capacity for abstract thought. When we read or listen to the radio, the mind forms images in response to the suggestion. The same thing can be said to occur when an illustration provokes the viewer by its symbolic relationship to reality. Abstraction encourages the mind to bridge the distance from suggestion to reality. There are certain tribes in Africa that do not distinguish between their dream life and their daily life. We find ourselves in a similar condition. But one must note that the reality that television has provided us with does not serve our deepest needs.

In our world, reality has been replaced by forms of entertainment that require little mental activity, and encourage apathy and indifference. How else can we explain the incredible passivity we witness that characterizes the American people at this time. The misrepresentations of government, the outrageous dishonesty of business, the attack on our civil rights, the collapse of our educational system and the failures of our social safety-nets have produced almost no response or indignation from the American public. I am certain, as it becomes increasingly obvious that we were deliberately lied to in order to justify a war with Iraq, there will be no general sense of betrayal because we no longer understand the relationship between cause and effect.

The virtual reality created by television is expressed through predominantly photographic means, our culture's most dominant way of expressing 'reality'. Susan Sontag has written brilliantly on photography – in fact, that is the title of her early book – 'Photographs are perhaps the most mysterious of all the objects that make up and thicken the environment we recognize as modern. Photographs are really experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood . . .'. Photography has another intrinsic characteristic that illustration lacks: the innate sense of capturing a 'real' moment in time proving that the subject actually existed. This separates it from other works of the imagination and makes it a perfect vehicle for advertising. Our society requires a culture based on images to furnish entertainment and to stimulate buying. Above all, photography seems to validate and protect the existing social conditions. Because of its believability, photography is unexcelled as a tool to generate desire, which in part explains the diminished role of illustration in advertising. In a culture that values commerce above all other things, the imaginative potential of illustration has become irrelevant. For those who control the narrative of American life, illustration is now too idiosyncratic, harder to control and less reassuring than the photographic imagery we have all grown up with. This is not to say that illustrators exist outside the world of commerce. On the contrary, we are all embedded in that world. But the need to express some aspect of our personal vision makes us suspect, at a time when the bottom line is the bottom line.

The greatest irony, of course, is the emergence of so-called 'reality TV'. Whose reality are we talking about? Producers have discovered that they can discard the

last impulse to conceive of television as a creative medium (as vestigial as that is), eliminate the writers, who have been negotiating for more money, and create a show completely controlled by marketing. The result demeans and further infantilizes the American viewer.

A Greek myth tells us that the first drawing came about as a woman traced her lover's shadow in the sand as he was about to leave for war, where he might be killed and never seen again. The intent of the drawing was to keep his presence alive. The myth, of course, is not literally true since all of us know the remarkable cave-drawings that are unexcelled in all human history. Tracing shadows, on the other hand, is an elegant way of describing the act of illustration. If illustration suggests illumination then the shadow is central to its meaning. All of us who create imagery know that the relationship of dark to light is unavoidable. Although Freud, like all true artists, offered us only one way to view the world, I've always been attracted to his notion of the struggle between Eros and Thanatos, the pull towards life vs. the pull towards death, that seems to preoccupy the human psyche, as well as the world itself. Eros is the mother of sex, love, feeling and the desire to make things. The words generation, genius, genial, genital and generous are all contained within its purpose. Thanatos embraces darkness, obscurity, evil and entropy. Although the dialogue between these two forces predates history, the anxiety of this moment in time convinces us that balance has gone awry.

When I was 8, I contracted rheumatic fever and was confined to bed for almost a year. I entertained myself during that time by creating armies, cities, animals and machines out of clay on a 3-foot wooden board with a deep groove ending in a knot-hole at one end. It created a landscape of unlimited possibilities. At the end of every day I would destroy everything I had made and dreamed through the night of starting again the next morning. My darling mother would bring the board each day with a glass of orange juice and a soft-boiled egg. After breakfast, I would begin my work. I realized then, and even more today, that making things had rescued my life. I know that all of you have had a similar realization.

There is a reason for all of us involved in the practice of illustration to continue making things, even though, vocationally speaking, this is the most difficult of times. The deepest role of art is creating an alternative reality, something the world needs desperately at this time. Artists have chosen to be on the side of Eros, that is they devote their lives to making things, rather than controlling things. I used to feel that it was strange that artists are self-anointed. Now I realize it could not be any other way because, above all, art is a view of life itself. It cannot be bestowed by others or taken away by dealers or marketing men. Real artists are always working for nothing because they don't see their essential role in society as being simply to exchange goods. They turn up first in the anti-war demonstrations, not because they lack patriotism, but because they revere life.

Art is the most benign and fundamental way of creating community that our species has discovered. Mozart and Matisse, children of Eros, make us more human and more generous to one another.

Milton Glaser  
*Milton Glaser Inc, I♥NY, New York*