

YOUR FLIGHT HAS BEEN CANCELLED:

Stock vector landscape as a digital non-place

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Abstract

The paper will present and analyse the results of a research workshop conducted during and after the 2022 Transitus symposium at Falmouth University. The paper aims to explore our visions of physical space, travel and migration through stock landscape illustration. The workshop invited illustrators to draw a 5-step sequence of images customising a stock landscape by turning it into a view out of their window, thus exploring how a visual digital 'airport', a utopian hub of a stock landscape, disintegrates into particularities of individual experiences. The resulting sequences of images were put together in an online magazine about illustration, Slonvboa.ru, and are available here: <http://slonvboa.ru/nonlandscape>.

This webpage collects 30-minute drawings from 14 illustrators based in 9 countries: Armenia, Dubai, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom, with 10 of the participants being based outside of their home country.

Building upon the idea of the 'nomadic illustration' suggested by Catrin Morgan and Marc Augé's notion of 'non-place', this paper will explore further similarities between nomadism and the circulation of stock imagery. It will thus use the term 'nomadic' not only as a metaphor, but also as a direct link to migration studies and studies of digital nomadism, which often describes the precarious occupation of a migrating illustrator.

This project will aim to highlight the unlikely possibilities that stock illustration may offer as a point of connection, rather than an alienating utopian abstraction. It will also analyse how individual authorial strategies deal with the notion of space, and how artistic means shape our visions of private and public spaces.

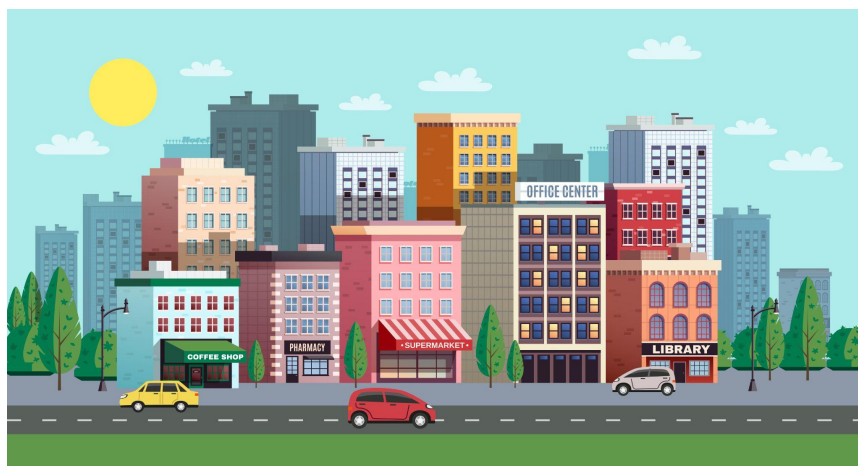
Keywords: stock illustration, migration, non-places, landscape, vector illustration, nomadic illustration

Introduction

Is it possible to come from ‘nowhere’? Is it possible for ‘home’ to be neutral, not defined by a political and cultural context? Is it possible to choose not to have a home or not to assimilate if one is an immigrant? Can someone choose to be ‘unhomed’? In the words of postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, ‘to be “unhomed” is not to be homeless, but rather to escape easy assimilation or accommodation’ (1992).

Can a location be neutral? Can an illustration of a location be neutral? The world we are living in is not global, it is fragmented. The roots, if there are any, are cut by ideologies, politics, and violence. Stock images of unknown places, that may seem cheesy, may symbolise this disconnection. Imagine a postcard from another part of the world – a flattened representation of complexities meant to bring this part of the world closer. Like an image in a telescope, which does not bring the stars closer, a flattened representation does not make the actual place closer: it just reveals the insuperable distance. To quote decolonial researcher Madina Tlostanova: ‘The politicisation of geography is an old and tried-and-true mechanism for imperial conquests and the formation of protective national mythologies. What are, for example, such seemingly natural borders as the border along the Rio Grande, overloaded with political meanings, imperial-colonial asymmetries and quite tangible walls and fences’ (2016). What visual forms may these walls and fences take in illustration?

Our research attempts to investigate how the politics of place and the experience of migration can be reflected in a stock image, and, particularly, a vector landscape, such as the one by Macrovector, distributed under a free licence (Fig. 1):



• URBAN LIFE •

Будь будь будь будь в репродукції в роздрукованій версії цього образу на будь-якій платформі
скачуєш і використовувати безкоштовно, навіть в комерційних цілях безкоштовно

Figure 1: Macrovector. 2022. *Urban Life*. Vector illustration. Distributed under a free licence.

Is this particular stock image political? Does it represent a nowhere land, a utopia of a kind? It is supposed to reflect 'urban life', but where are the conflicts of real city life: poverty, lack of social housing, safety issues which are the darker but very present sides of any European city? Does a stock image reduce reality to a bare souvenir, erasing all the complexities and, as Barry Higman puts it, ironing out 'the lumpiness of the real and imagined world [...] through pictorial representation' (2017)? Or is it something more than just platitude and vulgarisation? In our work we attempted to conduct a practical study of this particular vector landscape to determine if it can reveal a bigger picture of the controversies behind stock illustration, as well as shed light onto some of the unlikely connotations that a stock image may have: in particular, those related to migration, issues of belonging and the politics of space.

Theoretical background

This research is an attempt to take further an idea expressed in Catrin Morgan's article 'The Nomadic Illustration' (2015). Morgan mentions that illustration is often associated with unique images commissioned to illustrators, whereas she works with 'any image that participates in a complex text presented as a communicating artefact' (2015) and images that function as a node or a hypertext that links narratives together. Such images, often becoming autonomous and independent of origin in circulation (Morgan, 2015), is what she calls 'the nomadic illustration'. Some examples that she gives are memes, fake 'documentary' photos circulating in news articles, classic paintings used outside of their original context, some of the book cover clichés (such as a lonesome black and white figure in a coat for a detective cover) and even black pages in books.

Our assumption is that stock vector illustration created for multiple undefined contexts, rather than a defined unique usage, especially those distributed under the CC0 licence (or a 'free licence'), could also be an example of 'nomadic illustration', as it is aimed at multiple users that are encouraged to reproduce it in a variety of contexts that are disconnected from each other or the context of their creation. This kind of images could also be analysed as 'poor images', as a new media artist Hito Steyerl famously calls them in her essay 'In defence of the poor image' (Steyerl, 2009), and this essay, following Steyerl's ethos, is also written 'in defence' of them.

In this paper we will attempt to take this idea of visual nomadism further and explore further connections of stock images and nomadism. Morgan largely uses the term 'nomadic' as a metaphor, but we will attempt to trace a trajectory that would show a link between physical nomadism – migration – and stock landscape illustration. Our assumption is that stock vector images reflect some of the global migration and dislocation processes, and examining these visuals may shed light onto how these processes affect the perception of physical and digital space.

Stock vector illustration is often disregarded and looked upon as 'lacking inventiveness', 'artistic uniqueness', being 'detached and alienating' or simply of low quality; other criticisms, as eloquently highlighted by Josh Gabert-Doyon (2021) and Julien Posture (2022), mainly condemn the capitalist economy behind them and argue that the problem is not with the stock images, but with the global corporations that impose a utopian corporate lifestyle as 'normal' and 'neutral' (Vinh 2018). If applied to images of landscapes and places, this critique probably echoes the issues raised in 'Place and placelessness' as far back as in 1976, where Edward Relph condemned 'the trend [...] towards an environment of few significant places - towards a placeless geography, a flatscape, a meaningless pattern of buildings' (Relph 1976, p. 117). Relph expressed concern about the change in urban organisation which he believed was caused by uncritical acceptance of mass production and the preference for efficiency resulting in 'undermining of place for both individuals and cultures, and the casual replacement of the diverse and significant places of the world with anonymous spaces and exchangeable environments' (Relph 1976, p. 143).

Our assertion is that stock vector landscape illustration is more than simply a vulgarisation and has more to offer. It can be an unlikely meeting point. To imagine it as such, we will be using the concept of a 'non-place' suggested by anthropologist Marc Augé (1992). 'Non-places' in his theory are those devoid of attached identities; transitional spots that are meant to function as temporary hubs that aggregate disconnected individuals in their transitional state. Some examples that he gives are airports, gas stations, motorways, supermarkets. However, Augé talks about physical spaces and landscapes. But what about digital spaces? Our idea is that the stock landscape could represent a 'digital non-place', devoid of any particular identity and uniting a multitude of particular locations. Instead of judging either illustrators or the economies behind their practices, we will try to take a closer look at the less obvious possibilities and opportunities that some of these practices may offer.

In particular, we will be imagining the stock landscape as a 'digital airport': a digital landscape representation that is recognisable, but never familiar; a 'neutral' hub designed to temporarily accommodate a variety of individual, diverse experiences, or a node tying them together for a short period of time. A stock landscape such as the one above (Fig. 1), is a generic city that could represent a huge variety of physically remote spaces. The text on the signs suggests that this is an English-speaking country, but it may well be a city centre elsewhere, or even an abstraction meant to represent 'any place', just as any larger airport has English navigation signs along with the local language. The depicted location is nowhere and everywhere at the same time, just like the purple-skinned Alegria style vector people images, which represent everyone and no one at the same time with their utopia of a 'post-racial, harmonious, equitable society' (Hawley 2021). Aiming to be ultra-inclusive, this space paradoxically becomes alienating, just like the space of an airport, which is designed as a space of no attachments: a space to be passed through, rather than a space to stay in.

Another ambivalence about the space of an airport, that has become especially evident with the break of the pandemic, is that it combines the ideas of access and inaccessibility at the same time. What used to be a transitional space of opportunities and a portal to otherwise inaccessible locations, has become a symbol of inaccessibility and the impossibility of migration itself. Just like airports, stock landscapes are shut gates to a place that never actually exists, and yet, used across a variety of platforms and contexts, they become, just as Morgan suggests, virtual nodes that bring these contexts and narratives together and become autonomous images independent from physical reality (Morgan 2015).

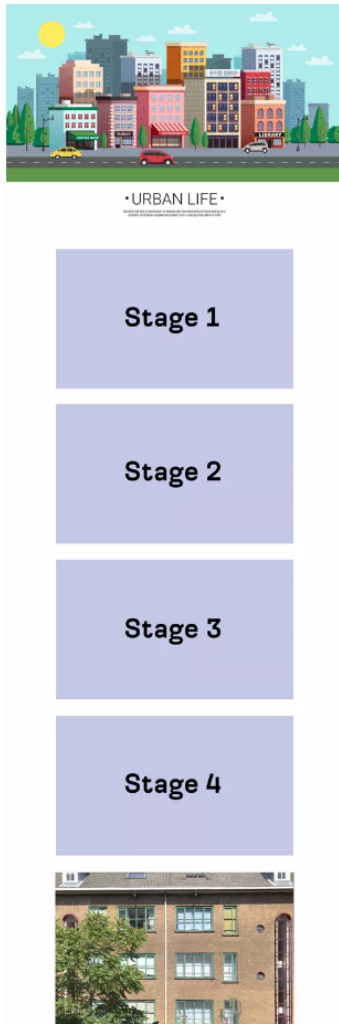
There may be more connections between physical migration and migrating images. One link is that between a migrating image and a migrating illustrator. Both occupy a liminal marginalised position. The 'nomadic illustration' tends to either fall out of the scope of scholars' attention or face strict judgement such as in the case with some of the stock vector images described above. The nomadic illustrator – with illustrators largely being freelancers – tends to be occupied in a highly precarious freelance position and face additional economic and legislative restrictions as a migrant. The marginalised position of both this type of imagery and its creators may offer further insights into studying the nomadic image as a direct result of migration processes in general, with opportunities to apply sources from migration studies to images produced by illustrators.

In this respect, there are multiple approaches to the phenomenon of digital nomadism, a technology-defined mobility type and a 'growing lifestyle [that] undermines traditional sedentary perspectives and attachments to home, work and even nation-state' (Hannonen, 2020). Within some of these approaches 'it is portrayed as a happier and more fulfilling life of location free living and working' (Jacobs and Gussekloo 2016), probably borrowing the understanding of any nomadism as associated 'with the attitude that defines and critiques the settlement, art and power of the state' (Kaplan, 1996). This idealised attitude tends to perceive digital nomadism as a metaphor used to 'illustrate the increasing fragmentation of subjecthood and subjectivity under (post)modernity; to reflect on the semantic instability underlying all constructions of (personal/cultural/national) identity; to insist on the homology between experiences of dislocation and the destabilisation of essentialist ideologies and fixed paradigms and patterns of thought' (Huggan, 2007). Other scholars outline the problematic aspects of this digital version of a nomad, associating it with a type of luxury cosmopolitanism implying that 'instead of immersing themselves in local cultures, [digital nomads] move within the (Western) bohemian—alternative—space and, rather than being at home everywhere, they are with people who share their lifestyle and values. It is thus not simply migration to a specific place but migration to a specific alternative social scene that exists in various places' (Korpela, 2019).

This paper is an attempt to take into account the ambiguities associated with digital nomadism as applied to migrating illustrators and accept that what is condemned as luxury cosmopolitanism and flagged up as a highly precarious position and a result of a traumatic

experience may coexist together at the same time and be equally valid, with stock vector illustration being a direct reflection of that.

The workshop: methodology and limitations



During the Transitus symposium at Falmouth University in July 2022 we organised a workshop that invited participants to create a 5-step transition from a free licence stock landscape (Fig. 1) to an image depicting the view out of the participants' window using a medium and technique of their choice. The participants were presented a template (Fig. 2) to fill in, replacing the bottom image with their window view – either drawn, photographed or created in any other technique. Each stage of the image was to be finished within 15 minutes. The time limitation was crucial for the brief: polished pictures were not what we aimed for. We wanted to publish the sketches, because highlighting the thinking behind the work meant highlighting the research process that usually stays on the periphery of the public eye. Illustration educator Gabrielle Cariolle argues that the thinking and decision-making behind the work does not always require explicit textual explications and is visible in the sketches themselves (Cariolle 2021). The Colouring In project seems to share the same motivations when publishing the results of the workshop with the students (Black and Vormittag, 2022). Nevertheless, we asked the participants to accompany the works with 100-word notes about their process to make sure that the thinking behind the work is conveyed from a multitude of perspectives, both visually and textually.

Figure 2: Masha Krasnova-Shabaeva. 2022. *A sample sequence for the workshop*. Digital collage. @ Masha Krasnova-Shabaeva.

After that the work was assembled into an online publication, <http://slonvboa.ru/nonlandscape>, which collected the works of 14 artists based across 10 countries: Armenia, Dubai, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and United Kingdom, with 11 of the participants being based outside of their home country, i.e. currently having immigration experience. This was not meant to be quantitative research, nor was there an attempt to devise a representative sample. The immigration experience of the participants was not a prerequisite for participating in the workshop: rather it was a coincidental starting point for further reflections over the results of the workshop. Similarly, the particularities of each individual's migration experience did not



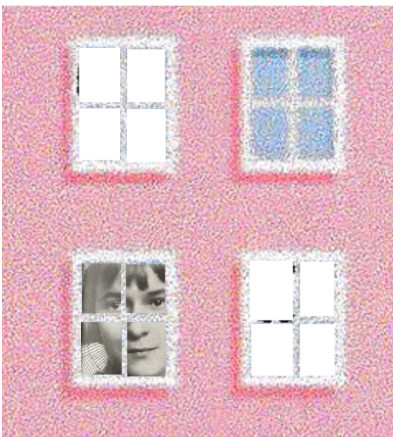
I looked out by window and saw something I had not noticed before



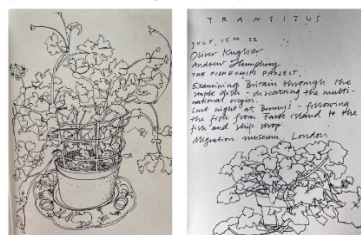
Then I zoomed in on some of the windows...



I discovered my great grandfather, who arrived as an immigrant from Gumbinnen, near Kaliningrad, 128 years ago.



And then I saw some people in the windows, that had no passports, and they begged me not to show their faces. So you will have to imagine them. You might also recognize Wiesława Szyborska as a young woman. (I don't know what she is doing in this context.)



Two windows had flower pots with geraniums. And in fact, these are immigrants brought to Europe by Carl von Linné and other botanists, with the intention of conquering the spice trade from India.

If they could get spices from the African continent, it would save them half the journey! These are *pelargonium gibbosum* (smelling a bit like banana, and it is a night-scented geranium). The other is *pelargonium tomentosum*, with lovely silvery, thick and hairy leaves that smells like peppermint. However, the botanists did not manage to extract the scent in ways that could compete with the spices from India. But you can find a whole range of geranium scents: lemon, cinnamon, pine, ginger... The botanical *pelargoniums* were later outcompeted by geraniums with bigger flowers, cross-pollinated varieties, but are still found in window sills all over the world.

define the methodology, even though all of these circumstances were in various ways difficult or connected with traumatic experience, which could have been a starting point for a separate study. What we were looking for in our project when inviting people to take part in the workshop, was the variety of locations of the participants and the background in illustration. Thus the focus of the research was on visual strategies as such – the ones used to ‘appropriate’ and ‘personalise’ a generic stock landscape, rather than individual biographies and the ways they may be connected to the visual solutions.

Case studies

Initially we expected some similarities in the visual strategies, but the diversity of approaches demonstrated in the outcomes reassured that any attempt of a quantitative analysis, even if it was done on a bigger scale, would probably provide less interesting results than a careful visual analysis of each particular work. In this paper we will discuss some of the solutions that provide an insight into the temporal and spatial interrelations of a stock landscape, real landscape and migratory experience.

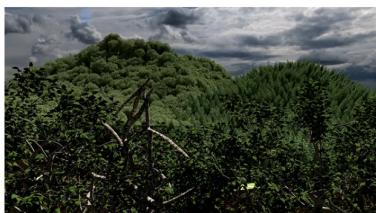
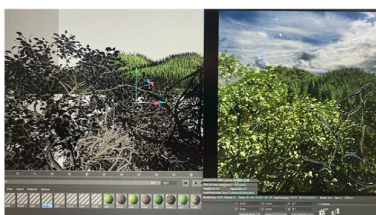
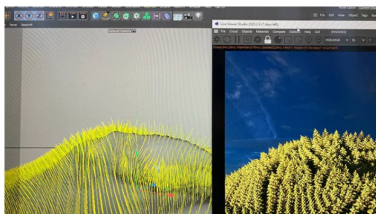
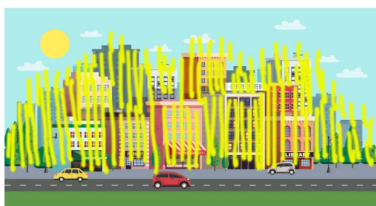
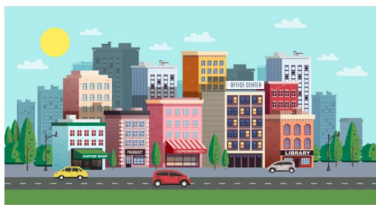
1. Hilde Kramer

A collage by Hilde Kramer (Fig.3) deliberately focuses on the topic of migration. The stock landscape in the first stage of the transition becomes a flat background screen behind a three-dimensional window view that uses linear perspective. Moreover, the drawn stock image is juxtaposed to the photographic fact of the artist's present, which places the stock image further into the realm of generalised approximations. When the view is zoomed in though, this visual approximation is filled in with details specific to a particular location, like graffiti and logos: once again, the ‘flatness’ of the stock landscape, its similarity to a paper screen, is emphasised. What is hidden behind this screen though?

Figure 3: Hilde Kramer. 2022. *A sequence for the workshop*. Mixed media. © Hilde Kramer.

Upon zooming closer to one of the windows, the migrating gaze travels from one face to another, with some of the faces notably being restricted from access (the screen does not allow that), until it finally comes to a full stop at the sight of a confronting gaze from an archival photo. The ‘paper screen’ hides the past – both personal and collective, and hides the vulnerable identities from being revealed. In this respect it is interesting to observe the role of the stock landscape as a protective shield, which hides not only the characters depicted, but the viewer as well – since the viewer is, apparently, looking from outside of a similar window cut inside another protective screen. The gaze pierces that protective screen, tearing it apart and revealing personal stories.

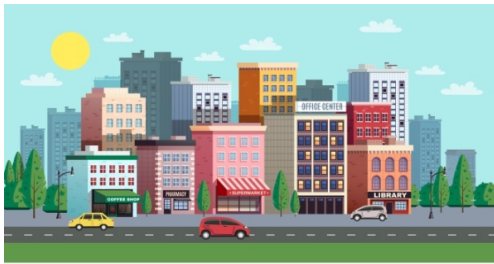
Polina Zinziver



Commenting on her work (Fig.4), Polina Zinziver says: ‘Although the view from my balcony in the forest near Dilijan is fundamentally far from an urban vector image, the methods of creating my illustration and the basic vector image are extremely similar: cold mathematical operations performed by the computer in microseconds while you are looking at the screen’ (Zinziver, 2022). It is interesting that the artist comments on the mathematical basis of the images: even though vector images like the one presented are not generated automatically, it is true that both 3d and 2d vector images are more easily described in mathematical terms, unlike a hand drawn image, even if it is converted into a set of pixels. The artist reveals this similarity by explicitly showing the elements of the software interface in the sequence.

The physical location, captured in a photo, emerges here as a manufactured continuation of a mathematical process, as a hyper-realistic surface that hides a set of computational actions. The 2d stock landscape appears as a rough sketch of this computational performance, a plan. Higman notes that ‘for planning purposes, effective models can be constructed by viewing the world as a series of textured planar surfaces’ (2017). The physical landscape’s ‘realness’, ‘authenticity’, ‘naturalness’ is thus questioned: it is turned into a high-resolution illusion, a texture stretched onto a surface of a 3d model.

Figure 4: Polina Zinziver. 2022. *A sequence for the workshop*. Digital collage. © Polina Zinziver.



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I've been having a recurring dream:



I'm walking in an unknown city.



I can recognize that some of the elements belong to the places I've been before.



They are all mixed and fused together in a weird way.



I'm waking up at home - in Rotterdam.

As Paul Roberts suggests, 'the presence of the 3D model points towards the artificiality and constructed nature of the image, as well as the trace of a maker' (2023). In the context of migration experience, this might reflect the dual nature of the process: the trace of the maker here may simultaneously be a manifestation of an attempt to appropriate and familiarise oneself with an unfamiliar, unhomey landscape that a migrating artist finds herself in, and at the same time, be a reflection of fundamental inability to integrate with the landscape and its experience as derealisation.

Masha Krasnova-Shabaeva

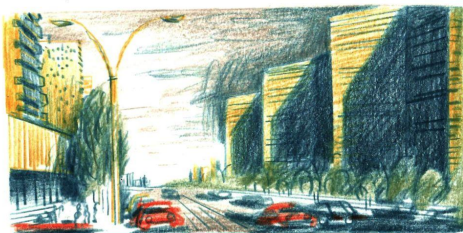
Interestingly, this sense of derealisation is also reflected in the work of the project co-author Masha Krasnova-Shabaeva (Fig. 5), who addresses the issue explicitly by comparing the migrating gaze of the viewer to wandering through a space of a dream in a sequence of images that merge two locations (Moscow and Rotterdam) together. She herself describes it as 'the switch between the non-place of my subconscious and the actual location' (Krasnova-Shabaeva, 2022).

Migration experience in this case is thus likened to a constant state of being in a dream-like non-place, a transitory bardo-like state of (sub)consciousness where 'observed images of the here-and-now (the look of the street where one lives or the appearance of the corner-shop owner) jostle with visual memory flashes of 'home'. 'There' and 'here' intermingle as a stream of consciousness in the inner eye' (Hannonen, 2020).

Figure 5: Masha Krasnova-Shabaeva. 2022. *A sequence for the workshop*. Digital collage. @ Masha Krasnova-Shabaeva.

The stock landscape is a part of this unstable impermanent nowhere, shimmering with familiar elements that cannot be altogether attributed to a particular location. In a juxtaposition to a photograph, especially when accompanied by the line explaining ‘waking up’ – the drawn landscape, be it a digital line drawing or a vector drawing, is placed into the realm of the subconscious, personal, illusory, ephemeral and deceitful. This deceitful illusion is meant to bring physically remote spaces closer to each other; like an airport or a hotel, that stay similar anywhere in the world and function merely as transitory points. Drawing becomes a meeting point, a space of unlikely coincidences and physically impossible encounters. Bending space literally and metaphorically, it warps the mental map and overlaps geographically distant locations. ‘Straightened up’, this reality becomes a photographic representation: stable, rigid, and ‘reliable’, but devoid of any ambiguities suggesting a possibility of a dialogue.

Irina Troitskaya



The flickering glitch of two locations also appears in the work by Irina Troitskaya (Fig.6), who, similarly, shows two cities in her work: Moscow and Berlin, which she moved to. She notes that the first image with a landscape resembling Moscow appeared ‘unconsciously’, in ‘an attempt to redraw the [vector] picture’ (Troitskaya, 2022). Similarly to the work by Masha Krasnova-Shabaeva, this sequence uses hand drawing as a way to create – and reflect upon – an unlikely space of personal spatial collisions. Using the terminology of Maria Lugones, this spatial collision represents a ‘world’ of ‘non-dominant idiosyncratic construction’ (Lugones, 1987): in other words, a space of unlikely interrelations between physically disparate locations.

The vector image (as well as the situation of the workshop), even though excluded from the sequence, becomes a trigger for such a space to appear, and this space is juxtaposed to the excluded stock landscape in the choice of medium.

Hand-drawn pencil image, a highly tactile trace of individual presence, envisions a personal narrative of transition. Using Homi Bhabha’s metaphor, this narrative becomes a novel, that is also a ‘house

where the unhomely can live’ (1992): a place for the displaced, a collaged, physically non-existent, but mentally valid individually constructed space that locates the dislocated transitory experience through drawing practice.

Figure 6: Irina Troitskaya. 2022. *A sequence for the workshop*. Digital collage. @ Irina Troitskaya.

Mia Newton



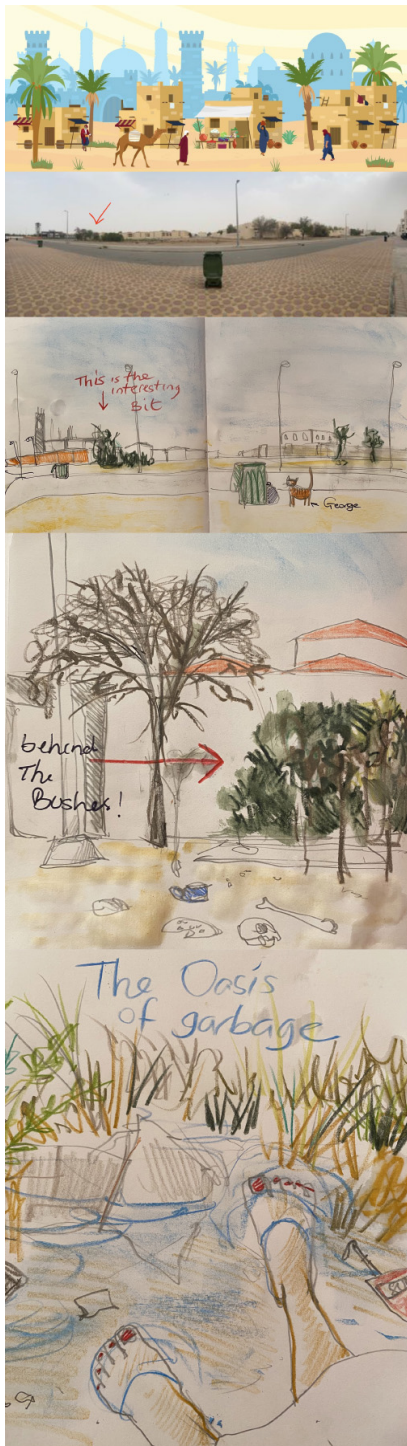
During the experiment the vector image seemed to have triggered not only the spatial, but also temporal collisions. In the work by Mia Newton (Fig.7), for instance, the artist's reality behind the window turned into the sequence protagonist's past, while the vector image demonstrated their present. The depicted character is shown as someone who has, apparently, moved to a new house after a break-up, and has just received a box with their belongings from a former partner, who the protagonist used to live with. In this box the character finds a photo of their home's back garden, which is simultaneously a drawing of the artist's window view.

This interesting relationship between the author's location and the character's location invites various interpretations, but what is important for us is the temporal collision in relation to a (fictional or autobiographical) traumatic experience of migration. Lily Markiewicz notes: 'In psychoanalysis and recent work in other fields concerned with questions of place and memory, traumatic memory is defined as an occurrence that is not located in a past but is experienced non-chronologically and non-topographically as of and in the present. Consequently boundaries between a then/now and a there/here are dissolved and what has taken place in the past is not experienced as separate from the present' (2007).

This idea of migration experience as non-chronological and non-topographical adds up to the notion of it as idiosyncratic experience independent from static and hierarchised representations of space.

Figure 7: Mia Newton. 2022. *A sequence for the workshop*. Digital collage. © Mia Newton.

Sarah Nesti Willard



Sarah Nesti Willard is based in Al Ain, a city on the border between the United Arab Emirates and Oman. For her work, she tried to choose a stock image depicting a location geographically closer to where she lives. Apparently, there has been some misunderstanding during the workshop briefing, as our plan was for everyone to start with the same image. Inadvertently, this misunderstanding led to her contribution becoming a perfect commentary on the problem of representation in illustration.

She comments: 'The only images I could find are these idyllic, frozen-in-time vector pictures of the 'Orient', with camels and Bedouins, sand, no roads, and women carrying water on their heads, as the picture I provided. This is nothing like how people live here! Women would not even carry their shopping, let alone water amphoras on their heads! And there are no camels in the middle of the city; those are found in camel farms only. In other words, I could not find a realistic picture of a desert landscape online' (2022).

Orientalist painting, famous for its faulty, skewed, and imitative depiction of 'the Eastern world' has its roots in the first illustrations made by travelling artists and diplomats. The limited depictions of landscapes, cultures, the people were used as references and reproduced by the European painters, many of which never visited the parts of the world they were depicting thus creating stereotypes that we still see around us, with stock illustration not being an exception.

In her work, Sarah questions these stereotypical representations. She uses Google Street View to show the differences between the stock image and the reality.

She goes further adding more personal details to her drawing by zooming in. She provides not only a more realistic perspective on her hometown but highlights a very intimate attachment to this place. Making her commentary not only critical but offering a very empathetic strategy of representation as an alternative solution.

Figure 8: Sarah Nesti Willard. 2022. *A sequence for the workshop*. Pencil drawing. @ Sarah Nesti Willard.

Digital nomadism of image and image-makers

The stock landscape is a quintessential 'non-place' – identity-less. It's a perfect transitional container which makes us look at and reflect on our own identities, offering us a transformative experience in the process. In its attempt to create an idealised image of a perfect location, it hides an ability to trigger us to go back to our unique migration experiences. The blandness of a stock image creates enough empty space to encapsulate and document our stories – or trigger their articulation. A generic stock representation of a city can be seen as a promise of accommodatedness which serves as a fickle imaginary facade for the core impossibility of being accommodated.

At the same time, the stock landscape makes us question the 'realness' and 'authenticity' of the place we are located in. We are observing that the drawing is a perfect medium not only to document, but to re-create and create reality. Through the attempts to document our realities it becomes obvious how unreliable we are in our storytelling, how easy it is for emotions to leak into our drawing or 3d model to create a skewed version of reality.

The drawings we have received during the workshop made us once again rethink the conventions surrounding the 'reliability' of images: as the sketches of the workshop participants have shown, using photographic images were not necessarily representing 'objectivity' traditionally associated with them due to the history of the medium, while a hand drawn image was often used as a documentary-making reportage tool, not necessarily addressing the space of subjective fantasy. Moreover, the character of those 'subjective fantasies', even if present, seems to have been much closer to the truth of a contradictory and ambivalent migratory experience, than any medium traditionally associated with documentary genres. What might have been called illusory or deceitful by a critic, in fact represents ambiguity that pulls unlikely spaces together and creates opportunities for otherwise impossible encounters.

The image migrates, so do its precarious makers. It seems that the ambiguous nature of the 'poor image' of a stock landscape is a part of a portrait of the creative sector economy, which Claire Bishop describes in relation to the impact of New Labour policies in the United Kingdom, but which seems to be relevant to the global creative economies: 'The emergence of a creative and mobile sector serves two purposes: it minimises reliance on the welfare state while also relieving corporations of the burden of responsibilities for a permanent workforce' (Bishop, 2012). In other words, this idea of the creative sector includes the idea of self-exploitation and risk-taking which is disguised as the entrepreneurial spirit of creativity.

The simple vector image that we have been analysing is thus no longer just a 'corporate art style' that 'feels fake' (Solar Sands, 2021), as it is referred to in wider popular debate about stock illustration, or an example of the 'world's most hated art style' (struthless, 2022) – as it is commonly referred to in a wider pop cultural YouTube debate that at some point

directed its attention towards stock imagery, bringing it to the scope of visibility of a wider audience. It is one of the multiple manifestations of an economy where 'artists often have to adopt a migratory lifestyle [...] and make traditional notions of location, origin and authenticity seem obsolete and in urgent need of reconsideration' (Petersen, 2018).

Conclusion

One of the simple questions we started our article with: Is it possible for 'home' to be neutral, not defined by a political and cultural context? We can paraphrase it: is it possible for a vector stock image of a location akin to the one we used during our workshop to be neutral, not defined by a political and cultural context? Is there something inherently wrong with an image that is trying to be 'neutral' and, therefore, lacks context and identity?

It's important to mention that stock illustration is rarely assessed from the point of view of the broadness and quality of representation. If there is a critique of any kind, naturally, it's more often about the portrayal of humans. The images of landscapes usually elude public attention. Stock illustration tries to be convenient, 'timeless', universal, which in visual culture often means creating a very generalised image devoid of any particularities. An image relying heavily on clichéd depictions in an attempt to be easily comprehensible. These clichéd depictions might range from overused, boring to misleading. 'It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them – that we give them a meaning' (Hall, 1997). What kind of meaning does a stock landscape give to the location it represents? And is it possible for an illustrator to find a sweet spot between being neutral enough to be understood by very diverse audiences but moving away from being over-reliant on stereotypes at the same time?

One of the participants of the workshop, Sarah Nesti Willard, questioned the stereotypical representation of the 'desert landscape'. Her work is an example of an empathetic approach to representing a location, which questions one's point of view. Indeed, it is important for an illustrator to try and see beyond their own assumptions and biases and focus on particularities and sentimental details instead of ignoring them.

At the same time, it is crucial to look beyond representation when we are trying to analyse stock illustration. If the stock landscape strives to be a neutral utopian version of reality, it is useful to explore what signifiers it uses to declare that. These signifiers can be represented, on the one hand, by common-place facts and idiosyncrasies about the depicted location. On the other hand, the stereotypes, and biases that many of us share. Through noticing and analysing this information we can try and decipher not only the seemingly unstable comfortable appearance of those images, but the more concrete and complex connections with the reality of their cultural and political context.

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