Revealing the Visual Logics of Sensational News

Frisken, Amanda. *Graphic News: How Sensational Images Transformed Nineteenth-Century Journalism*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020. ix + 273 pp. $28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-08483-6.

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Thirty years ago, in a history of journalism course, I was taught the prevailing origin story of "yellow journalism," that form of news grounded in melodrama, half-truths, and sensational imagery. I learned that it began in the late-1890s battle for readership between Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, trafficked in lurid, tabloid-style imagery, and led to the Spanish-American War. Yet despite what I and many others were taught, Pulitzer and Hearst were not the first to use dramatic imagery to tell sensationalized stories. Amanda Frisken's *Graphic News* challenges that received narrative by reminding us that yellow journalism had decades of visual antecedents. In tracing the role of sensational illustrations in newspapers and magazines between 1870 and 1900, Frisken skillfully shows that late nineteenth-century print culture was decidedly visual. She points out that while historians do acknowledge the presence and power of visual images, few actually explore how they worked compositionally and contextually (notable exceptions include Joshua Brown's *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* and John Coward's *Indians Illustrated: The Image of Native Americans in the Pictorial Press*). In this wide-ranging study of late nineteenth-century news illustration, Frisken analyzes the visual logics of those images by explaining how they communicated ideas about race, gender, and class and exploring how they both shaped and reflected the contexts of their times.

Frisken argues that it was between 1870 and 1900, what she calls the "formative years of commercial graphic news production," that sensational images emerged as a mode of storytelling trafficking in emotion, drama, and entertainment (4). While sensationalism itself was by no means new, after the Civil War technological changes made the production and circulation of attention-grabbing images easier, and an emerging mass print culture gave those images new visibility. Frisken argues that sensationalism had both a pragmatic and a conceptual side. Pragmatically, dramatic imagery's commercial appeal helped its producers compete in an increasingly congested visual marketplace. In addition, Frisken argues persuasively that sensational illustrations invited attention to moral frameworks as well, which could prove more complex than one might realize at first glance. Such imagery trafficked in racial and ethnic stereotypes and recirculated oppressive cultural narratives, yet Frisken contends that sensational images also had the capacity

to empower activists to challenge stereotypes and biases by crafting their own counternarratives. All told, Frisken makes a convincing case that the visual sensationalism of the period offered more than initially meets the eye.

Frisken's book features five case studies, arranged roughly chronologically from the 1870s to the 1890s. Each case study offers detailed analysis of images. They provide substantive historical contextualization of images of crime in the "sporting" newspapers of the 1870s, anti-Chinese imagery in depictions of opium dens in the 1880s, illustrations of the much-misunderstood Native American Ghost Dance in the early 1890s, anti-lynching imagery produced by the African American press in the 1890s, and accounts of domestic violence near the turn of the twentieth century. Each chapter features a number of valuable illustrations, a particular challenge for the author given that illustrated newspapers of the period have not always been archived or made digitally available with high-resolution visual reproduction in mind.

The book has much to recommend it, but I want to highlight two especially valuable features here. First, Frisken treats the images not only thematically, but compositionally. That is, she explores how specific images worked rhetorically to tell visual stories. In her chapter on sensational images of crime, for instance, Frisken explains how *The National Police Gazette* and other "sporting" newspapers adapted visually to the challenges posed by the Comstock anti-obscenity laws. Needing to get around those laws in order to sell papers, publishers had to think carefully about images that would make it past the censors. Analyzing images of women victims of sexual crime, Frisken shows how the depiction of women's bodies differed depending on class distinctions. Images of lower-class women showing exposed ankles and legs signified their presumed immorality, compositional choices that served as "recognizable visual markers in the paper's moral lexicon" (37). By contrast, images featuring middle-class women needed to depict them as thoroughly covered in order to pass the censors. Such visual signifiers of class determined which images were considered lewd and which were not.

Given the dominance of racial and ethnic stereotypes in the period's visual news, a study solely focused on identifying and analyzing the damaging nature of such images would be valuable enough. But Frisken goes beyond that to consider images designed to counter visual stereotypes. These "counternarratives," as Frisken calls them, challenged visual stereotypes by offering more positive representations of racial and ethnic groups and exposing oppressive social structures. In her chapter on anti-Chinese illustrations of opium dens in the 1880s, Frisken highlights the work of journalist Wong Chin Foo, whose stories designed to "demystify the Chinese and remove the negative stigma" were published alongside realistic illustrations of Chinese life (78). In a subsequent chapter, Frisken chronicles how the 1890s African American press published illustrations "to sensationalize—and thus challenge—mainstream representations of lynching" (125). Casting allegorical characters such as Atlas, Uncle Sam, and Gulliver as visual symbols of Black Americans' struggles, Black artists such as Henry Jackson Lewis crafted sensational imagery that cut to the heart of American hypocrisy. While such counternarratives could not by themselves change cultural stereotypes or stop political oppression and violence, Frisken argues that they illustrate how sensational imagery could mobilize activists.

A comprehensive and thoughtful exploration of the role of sensationalism in visual news, *Graphic News* will be of particular value for scholars and students of late nineteenth-century visual culture, journalism history, communication, and American Studies.