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Making Things Visual: Illustrations in Books for Children and Young Adults from the Perspective of Polish Language Education

In the Context of the Review of the Book
Odpowiedni dać rzeczy obraz. O genezie ilustracji książkowych
by Anita Wincencjusz-Patyna,
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1. ON THE NEED FOR SCHOOL THINKING IN WORDS AND IMAGES: THEORETICAL BASES

The overlapping differences in research disciplines, broadly defined cultural circulations, and the dominant role of the media prompted researchers to describe cultural texts that combine elements of literary and visual works. The same phenomena are increasingly being observed in school teaching (Evans, 2009). Without doubt, an important problem will be responses to picture books and the “theory of literary understanding” that Lawrence Sipe described in *Storytime: Young Children’s Literary Understanding in the Classroom* (2008). Sipe includes five categories of responses to picture books: analytical, intertextual, personal, transparent, and performative.

All occurring enactments of three fundamental impulses – the hermeneutic impulse (mastering and understanding and interpretation of the text), the personalizing impulse (the desire to link oneself to text in some way) and the aesthetic impulse (the pull to enter into the text)– feel like lived-through experiences and use them as a catalyst for creative expression. (Wooten, Liang, Cullinan, 2008: 132)

Issues related to the use of iconic material in Polish language education, referring to intersemiotic relationships between the word and the image and re-

sulting from tasks performed by the student during Polish language lessons have been an important topic of discussion among educationalists for many years. The reform of the education system in 1999 was a turning point in the history of Polish research on this issue. The Core Curriculum for Polish Language stressed the importance and significance of cultural contexts in Polish language lessons. The reform also highlighted an interpretative departure from the literary text and the ability to read an image and emphasized the importance of describing the relationship between the word and the visual text. This approach has been confirmed by literary and iconic material successively reprinted in school textbooks since 1999. A model example in this area became the textbook by Agnieszka Kłakówna, Maria Jędrychowska et al. entitled *Tolubię! Książka nauczyciela* (1994), where for the first time the image appeared as a cultural text functioning in school education on equal terms with the verbal text.

One of the earliest publications referring to the above issues was the 2007 monograph by Barbara Dyduch entitled *Między słowem a obrazem. Dylematy współczesnej polonistyki* (2007). The researcher claims in the book that

one of the most important transformations resulting from the reformist goals of contemporary Polish language education seems to be the cultural orientation of the teaching content. This is a profound change due to the contextual positioning of a literary text against a background of, or even on an equal footing with, cultural texts. (159)

Beata Gromadzka made a significant contribution to the discussion, stressing the importance of the image in literary and cultural school education and intersemiotic relationships between the text and the image, while also taking into account the wider issue of semiotics in teaching. The monograph of the Poznań-based researcher, *Widząc – rozumieć. Dydaktyka polonistyczna wobec edukacji wizualnej* (2009), draws attention to the fact that the school aims to not only prepare the student to perform various social roles but also to understand the symbolic sphere of culture. According to Gromadzka, the sign becomes a category that connects both these areas.

The above argument is also confirmed by a publication edited by Anna Pilch and Marta Rusek and entitled *Ikoniczne i literackie teksty w przestrzeni nowoczesnej dydaktyki* (2015), which has been based on interdisciplinary methodology. As Pilch observes,

equal treatment of literary and iconic texts in terms of complementary reading and development of text interpreting skills should open up new horizons to contemporary young audience of the world of culture, literature, and art in the quest for new meaning, initiating mechanisms of new vision and new sensitivity to the reception of arts... [Moreover,] it should bring awareness that a topic, problem, thought, emotion, or impression can be written down and expressed in different languages of art and the contemporary tendency to mix languages

and deviate from the once-prevailing rules also forces a redefinition of the concepts of interpretation, meaning, and significance. (Pilch 2015: 7)

The author emphasizes the interdisciplinary nature of the research on literature and art, pointing to its historical, cultural, media, librarian but also theoretical, practical, and workshop dimensions. When writing about the reading practices used in the reception of iconic text and their usefulness in teaching, the researcher also focuses on the narrative approach, “open to the polysemy of the text, enabling reading of art in a subjective, but not completely arbitrary way” (Rusek 2015: 9).

Considering the child audience (including elementary school students), it is undoubtedly worth mentioning the discussion that takes place among researchers of the picture book, including Małgorzata Cackowska (2009), Jerzy Szyłak (2014), Michał Zając (2008), and Krystyna Zabawa (2015), who even uses the term “practical integration of arts.”

It is also worth noting here a monograph by the art historian Anita Wincencjusz-Patyna entitled *Stacja ilustracja. Polska ilustracja książkowa 1950-1980. Artystyczne kreacje i realizacje* (2008). The author refers in her research not only to the issue of artistry of illustrators, the concept of their artistic creation, competence, craftsmanship, and imagination but also introduces works of educators and psychologists. Regarding the special role of illustrations in development of the child in the research by Stefan Szuman (1951), Wincencjusz-Patyna (2008) draws attention to psychological, aesthetic, educational, and social issues. The researcher also discusses different functions of illustrations combined with text. Among others, she writes about demonstration and explanation of elements of the created world in the verbal text and the image, about the image interpreting the text, and about the image as an impressionistic work built around the text. According to Wincencjusz-Patyna, the iconic material illuminating the text can also have different functions, ranging from emotive and expressive, to ludic and entertaining, to aesthetic and educational.

2. ON THE ORIGINS OF BOOK ILLUSTRATIONS

Although foreign professional literature on the subjects mentioned above is very extensive (Serafini 2009; Sipe 1998; Sipe & Pantaleo 2008), it does not include a clearly outlined discussion of the origins of book illustrations.

The book by Anita Wincencjusz-Patyna entitled *Odpowiedni dać rzeczy obraz. O genezie ilustracji książkowych* [Making things visual: On the origins of book illustrations] is, therefore, definitely innovative and pioneering in its concept: it not only provides the reader with a rich exemplification of artistic illustration but also explains a wider cultural context, which may encompass the phenomena of imagination and inspiration of the artist at the moment of

creating the concept of the image as well as specific relationships that arise between the writer and the illustrator, often also the harmony characterizing the cooperation of artists.

The treatise has been divided into three extensive chapters, the first of which focuses on the process of creating book illustrations, the problem of artistic concept, sketch, and text inspiring illustrations (e.g. *Lokomotywa / IDEOLO* by Małgorzata Gurowska and Joanna Ruszczyk) or image inspiring artistic expression (e.g. *Sekretne życie krasnali w wielkich kapeluszach* by Paweł Pawlak and Wojciech Widłak), editorial and publishing problems, e.g. discussing the work of publishers (Dwie Siostry, Wytwórnia, Hokus-Pokus), the role of magazines, and the artistic needs, desires, and wishes of the children themselves. In the second chapter, the Author discusses the issues of artistic trends and currents, e.g. she writes convincingly and competently about avant-garde illustrations of Marta Ignerska for the book *Prawdziwa bajka* written by Mikołaj Łoziński, a love affair with René Magritte and surrealism in illustrations by Anthony Browne, the phenomenon of the “New Look” in book illustrations of Katarzyna Bogucka, and illustrations for children’s books appearing in different countries (e.g. in Germany, the United States, and France) on the rising tides of psychedelia. The next chapter of the book, entitled “W sieci relacji” [In a network of relationships], analyses the book illustration as a product of internal and external determinants influencing the author, points to “mutual agreement” in book productions of the duo of Wanda Chotomska and Bohdan Butenko and, finally, refers to post-modern designs by Lane Smith, Jon Scieszka, and Molly Leach.

As can be seen from the above presentation of topics, Wincencjusz-Patyna in her scientific account observes closely and thoroughly various relationships between selected artistic works described as book illustrations.

The Wrocław art historian in a logical and convincing manner draws attention to the artistic side of books for children, focusing on the originality of the illustrations and their great aesthetic value and technical excellence rather than the chosen visual technique.

The arguments of the researcher are based on extensive professional literature and perfectly chosen research methodology; the in-depth analysis of the illustrative material demonstrates high professionalism of the interpretation. Bearing in mind the interdisciplinary and multidimensional character of the research on the book illustration, Wincencjusz-Patyna takes up difficult issues, which concern not only the origins of book illustrations (as suggested by the book subtitle) but also direct the attention of the reader to very specific considerations of the relationships created by the writer and the illustrator (visual artist). In addition, the researcher draws attention to the genealogical perspective of illustrated children’s books (among others, she recalls different definitions and contextual entanglements of the concept of picturebooks) and discusses a wide range of issues related to the mutual illumination of the word and image.

The essence of the research conducted by Wincencjusz-Patyna is perfectly captured by the following quote:

We know the light source (the image) and how it illuminates/explains (with the image), but the question arises as to what it explains and illuminates, because, after all, it “originates” from the illustration. The answer seems simple – it illuminates that which it concerns, what it tries to show (demonstration), present (representation), tell with the resources at its disposal (visual narrative), explain in its own way (individual interpretation), or express (expression), and which results not only from the intentions of the author, but also, above all, from the subject matter of the literary work with which the illustration is more or less closely related.

Analysis and interpretation made by Wincencjusz-Patyna of artistic creations and realizations is also rooted in well-discussed references to the issues of competence, craftsmanship, and imagination of illustration creators.

The narrative of the treatise is constructed in such a way that one can see in it the voice of the illustrators themselves. The author follows in the footsteps of Douglas B. Dowd, an artist and curator of many exhibitions devoted to the history of illustrations, who paid attention to the positioning of illustrations in often complex contexts, in relation to other visual and textual elements and their references to the issue of narrative. Moreover, an important, even if unstated, assumption of the treatise by Wincencjusz-Patyna is that nowadays the artistic book becomes a special medium, also deeply rooted in the problems of broadly understood literary culture and social communication. The researcher observes that a significant role is played by publishing houses and draws attention to the ones that have won international awards, for example Dwie Siostry that publishes art in the broadest sense of the word and has shaped the graphic design of, among others, *Mapy. Obrazkowa podróż po lądach, morzach i kulturach świata* by Aleksandra and Daniel Mizielewski (2010). In the opinion of Wincencjusz-Patyna, the publisher is not just an economic, technical, and substantive creator of book publications but also a valuable intermediary in the process of developing public awareness of the audience: “an initiator of many interesting projects, often whole series of publications, responsible for the concept of the content especially as regards its substance, but also indirectly responsible for design and editorial decisions (the choice of the illustrator and the author of the text, book size, its character, etc.)”

The researcher skillfully discusses various functions of illustrations combined with text, e.g. she writes about strengthening and illuminating of text by illustration and about inspiration, demonstration, and explication of the components of the created world in verbal text and the image. An important role in this context will also be played by the phenomenon of textual polysemy, which enables (also in the case of the child audience) a subjective and individual view of the reading of art.

The book by Wincencjusz-Patyna contains numerous examples of interesting approaches to the origins of book illustration. Some noteworthy cases discussed by the Author include publishing series and the creation of a memorable protagonist, also promoted by literary interpretations. The researcher cites in this context the issues of “migration” of heroes from magazines to books, stating that this applies in the case of *Miś Uszatek* (Teddy Drop Ear), a character very well-known to Polish children, created by Zbigniew Rychlicki and Czesław Janczarski in 1957, but also in the case of the famous Winnie-the-Pooh, who, according to Wincencjusz-Patyna, “owes his portrayal and introduction to E.H. Shepard, an illustrator of the legendary British satirical magazine *Punch* (the publishing debut of the illustration took place in 1913),” and only later became the hero of adventures described by Alexander Alan Milne (book series from the years 1924–1928).

In conclusion, the Author thoroughly and comprehensively analyzed and interpreted many examples of book illustrations, assessing not only their artistic merit but also broader socio-cultural contexts, skillfully using modern methodologies of humanities research. It should be added that the discussion by Wincencjusz-Patynais firmly rooted in international contexts, which makes it extremely valuable. The treatise is original and fresh in its scientific concept and innovative in terms of its presentation. The analysis of the discussed examples of picture books for children and, more broadly, texts belonging to the world of highbrow culture reveals a clear evolution of research on this matter, manifesting in the diachronic perspective by high changeability of methodological interpretations.

Anita Wincencjusz-Patyna uses eloquent and graceful Polish as well as clear and coherent style. The book demonstrates high level of competence of the Author and is written with great knowledge, dedication, and passion. In her discussion, the researcher skillfully combines detailed analyses of the material with a wider perspective of scientific exploration by this art historian as well as socio-cultural contexts, bibliology, editing, and aesthetics, providing a multi-faceted and multi-level – but at the same time comprehensive, coherent, and synthetic – presentation of the origins of book illustration, manifesting, as shown in the treatise, in various texts of publishing culture. In addition, due to the variety of functions and roles fulfilled by the image in the world of artistic book, the author of the treatise notes that the illustration also “speaks” to the reader/audience in different ways. Therefore, it would also be very useful in Polish language school education.

The current Core Curriculum for Polish Language (2017) does not meet the above recommendation in a satisfactorily way. It also does not introduce any

provisions that could be referenced by a teacher implementing the program or specify any issues related to types of relationships between verbal and visual texts. Concerning the current debate on cultural education in contemporary schools, it is worth noting that the new book by Anita Wincencjusz-Patyna, *Odpowiedni dać rzeczy obraz. O genezie ilustracji książkowych*, can be successfully integrated into the canon of required reading for teachers of Polish language and culture as well as, more broadly, into the current, reformed school system.

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