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Attractive lives on attractive pages. Polish illustrated biographical books for young readers

Summary

This paper focuses on an exceptionally interesting kind of books dedicated to young readers, quite popular recently in Poland, namely picture biography books for children and teenagers. Polish publishing houses, especially Muchomor from Warsaw, for the last few years have been coming up with a number of intriguing titles, both in the matter of words, and also in their graphic contents, especially the series “Gdańsk Trilogy”. Brave ideas, young talents, novel artistic solutions, and original illustrations make the lives of famous people, not so very well-known figures and some unknown names – from both far and near, homeland and neighbourhood history – attractive reading matter. The author also looks back at the history of Polish illustrations included in biographies published in the second half of the 20th century. By combining the traditions of Polish applied graphic art with its up-to-date condition the author wants to trace the impact of the old and the novelty of contemporary books. She wants to stress the expressive power of an image turning illustrations into independent works of art. The number of illustrations and the graphic concept of an up-to-date language of visual forms make them genuine picture stories (especially in the designs by Ignerska). By means of comparative analyses of form and style, as well as a theory of image, she is going to focus on features of the visual side of the aforementioned books. The author would also like to stress the change in the way of perceiving the common history of places with such a complicated history as Gdańsk itself (in which Elisabeth and Johannes Hevelius, Fahrenheit, Schopenhauer, despite their German roots, are treated as part of the common heritage).

Key words: illustrated biographies, book graphic design, Marta Ignerska, Agata Dudek, Gdańsk

Słowa kluczowe: biografie ilustrowane, projektowanie graficzne książek, Agata Dudek, Marta Ignerska, Gdańsk

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In the second half of the 20th century the genre of biography books in the area of literature for young readers in Poland, all in all, was not very popular. Even if such titles were published, they were not richly illustrated, and in those rare cases when they became illustrated editions, the images were mainly black-and-white and rather small-sized,

reduced actually to decorative elements (like vignettes, initials, borders, etc.). Wiesław Majchrzak's drawings for Esther Meynell's *Andersen* (1960) and for Jo Manton's *A Portrait of Bach* (1960) may serve as good examples of this sort of "modest" graphic design. However, a few exceptions might be found among other biographies enriched with full-page, coloured illustrations, printed on inserts (usually eight in a volume), to accompany black-and-white "miniatures". These were characterised mostly by an old-fashioned, 19th century-like, realistic style. Perfect examples we may find looking at illustrations in ink and watercolour executed by Antoni Uniechowski to a book entitled *The Enchanted Violins* (1964), Eustachy Czekalski's story about Henryk Wieniawski, a famous Polish composer and an outstanding violin player. The main aim of the pictures in these books seems to be to deliver more knowledge, additional to the text itself, in which are included many details that build up the historic background of the tales. Hence from these illustrations we can acquire a decent amount of knowledge about the architecture, fashion, interiors, every-day items, etc. of the times that passed long ago and the way people used to live then.

After the period of capital transformation in Poland's political, economic, and social system, which began at the turn of the 1980s, and later on, after "the difficult decade" of the 1990s, Polish book design and illustration experienced a sort of revival, and year after year we began to come back to the world's most important competitions, exhibitions, and other events related to the visual side of children's books (Bologna Ragazzi, White Ravens List, Biennale of Illustration Bratislava, Ilustrarte in Lisbon, ED-Awards, Nami Concours, to name but a few). What seems to be interesting, especially in the context of the discussed topic, is that illustrated biographies also became challenging for Polish publishers, not only as a simple source of information, but also as a pretext to create alternative pictorial stories designed by young artists.

In the last ten years (since 2005) I have managed to count more than 30 biographies edited by Polish publishing houses, addressed at young readers, which describe the interesting life stories of protagonists, both world-famous or well-known solely in Poland, and also those completely unrecognised by a wider audience. The heroes are renowned scientists, humanists, musicians, inventors, travelers, and, last but not least, ordinary people from the not so distant past who, for instance, survived WW2. In one case, in the book entitled *Wojtek of Monte Cassino* by Wiesław A. Lasocki (2012), the main character is not even a person. He is a bear-soldier who fought with Polish soldiers during World War II. In the following paper I will focus on seven books only, still these examples I find the most interesting and of the highest artistic value.

In the contemporary Polish publishing market, the leading position is occupied undoubtedly by the Muchomor Publishing House from Warsaw, not only because of the number of already edited biography titles (12), but also for the highest artistic level of these books which also results in the most interesting, original, attractive, or even avant-garde graphic layouts and illustrations.

Not only because of the venue of our conference, I would like to focus in the first place on the so-called “Gdansk Trilogy” which has its two versions: a male one and a not yet accomplished female one as well. The “Gdansk Trilogy” is very important and valuable also thanks to its open approach to the city’s complicated history, as Gdansk belonged to The Polish Kingdom, The Duchy of Pomerania, Prussia, The Weimar Republic, The Third Reich, and Poland again at different points on the time chart. As the series perceives Gdansk’s history as a complex and rich heritage, it is very precious and it is also important for our better understanding of complicated issues. Calling the heroes of the Trilogy **the Gdansk citizens** in the first place, and not underlining their nationalities, seems to be crucial in this context.

The first set of the Gdansk Trilogy was initiated in 2011 with the first volume in the series devoted to Johannes Hevelius (1611–1687, who was born and died in the city), a famous astronomer of German and Czech origins, a skilled mathematician, an inventive constructor of astronomical instruments, but also a town councillor, juror and brewer. *Wandering Across the Sky with Johannes Hevelius* (2011) was written by Anna Czerwińska-Rydel, who is also the author of all the other titles from the Gdansk series. The second biography is entitled *Warm – Cold. Mystery of Fahrenheit* (2011), and it tells the life story of a Dutch physicist of German origins, Gabriel Daniel Fahrenheit (1686, Gdansk – 1736, The Hague) who is famous for inventing a mercury thermometer and a temperature scale. He also constructed a barometer and an instrument measuring altitude. The third book from the “Gdansk Trilogy” is a biography of a German philosopher, a representative of pessimism, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788, Gdansk – 1860, Frankfurt). Its title *A Dog’s Life According to Schopenhauer* (2012) promises an intriguing and possibly not so very gloomy and hopeless story.

The three volumes of the “male” Gdansk Trilogy were illustrated by **Agata Dudek**,¹ and designed by Małgorzata Frąckiewicz, who represents the Poważne Studio, a graphic atelier from Warsaw.² The main graphic concept for the books concerning colour was based on choosing only two brightly contrasting colours to accompany the black and white spectrum – various in each of the books. In *Hevelius* the graphic layout introduces fluorescent orange and dark turquoise which appear throughout the whole volume, and also on the pages with no pictures at all. In such cases the two colours act as text markers – they indicate the chapter titles and accentuate words and phrases which are explained in footnotes. *Fahrenheit* has bright pink and blue which may be quickly and quite obviously associated with international symbols for cold and hot water. Eventually, the *Schopenhauer* tale is “served” in fluorescent green and noble claret (a dark purplish-red colour). In each case the two colours produce an elegant, expressive and very dynamic layout. They build a specific rhythm for the following spreads.

¹ Agata Dudek was born in 1984. She graduated from graphic design (Studio of Illustration) at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in 2010. She was given awards in many national book competitions.

² Poważne Studio is an award-winning graphic atelier established in Warsaw in 2010 by three graduates from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.

The whole of each volume is designed in detail from the front to the back endpaper, not to mention covers, obviously serving as the clearest advertisement for the books. The text is divided by full page illustrations, double spread pages, or even sequences of them, all composed in an extremely dynamic way. The mosaic character of Czerwińska-Rydel's text has been reflected in the use of various fonts. The narration comprises a main story, letters, newspaper announcements, and additional explanations which are printed in different styles. This is the part dependent on Małgorzata Frąckiewicz's / Poważne Studio spectacular job.

The compositions in all three of the discussed volumes are often arranged like collages. They pretend to be a sort of scrap books with photos, scribbles, maps, encyclopedia plates, postcards, playing cards, schemes, diagrams, portraits, funny drawings, and other pictures. This way they also reflect an intriguing mosaic of events which each of the life stories creates. As in a kaleidoscope, where memories of events, people, and scenes, seen as vast panoramas or blow-ups of tiny details, wander through our minds, we receive the double-page-spread collages which build up original pictorial diaries. The use of computers enables graphic artists to juggle with images, and this way of arranging separate pictures into one composition (Fig. 1) seems to be quite popular nowadays in a large number of book designs from around the world, not all of which are biographies. What is typical for Agata Dudek's illustrations, is undoubtedly a great deal of humour. A grain of caricature added to the portraits of the protagonists, presenting the events as in board games or computer games also brings specific dynamics and adds some light tones to serious lives. Dudek also seems to be totally unrestrained while mixing styles and conventions: old etchings (Fig. 2) or woodcuts go hand in hand with simple sketches that look as if they were drawn by children; the iconography of ancient maps perfectly suits scientific schemes; old photographs are arranged anew and decorated with doodles. The double page spreads bring wonderful, exotic-carpet-like patterns. We also have illustrations that pretend to look more traditional. By using old prints – as all these stories took place a long time ago – the artist puts some modern spirit into them by applying colour spots and drawings from a totally different style register – geometrical Abstract art, Constructivist, or Cubist. It also reflects the character of the very text, as it is a combination of documented facts and Czerwińska-Rydel's rich imagination.

In the set of volumes discussed here we can find a huge number of powerful graphic images that more or less literally attract our eyes: contrast colour arrangements, legible, simple and clear forms, captions interwoven in the substance of pictures, or even large-scale shapes of... eyes themselves. Such formal solutions remind us of the well-recognised aesthetics of poster art, so important in the history of Polish graphic design in the 20th century. One of these elements seems to derive directly from poster design, namely the use of letters. What is interesting is that the letters transfer some key messages, but more importantly, at the same time these pictures benefit from decorative aspects of letter shapes. The above mentioned qualities, humour, the use of metaphor, and widely understood attractiveness are common features of these designs and poster art.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Each of the “Gdansk Trilogy” titles has its visual leitmotif, which is obviously connected with the stories of the main characters’ lives. For Hevelius it is a star and astronomical instruments, for Fahrenheit – measuring instruments, scales, and numbers, for Schopenhauer it is... a dog, not so very surprisingly, as we learn from the book about dogs who always lived somewhere around the great philosopher, actually even before his birth, as his parents used to have their animal-friends, and for little Arthur actually the dogs were the essential part of his emotional life.

Dudek’s design somehow pays respect to the old times when the main characters used to live (in the 17th until the turn of the 18th century), but she tries to breathe life into them

by adding vividly contrasting colours, using a modern, “energetic” line, juxtaposing neat, detailed engravings with hurried, “careless” sketches, and last, but not least, inflating the characters associated with very serious matters with humour and frivolousness.

Another set which builds up the second “Gdansk Trilogy” is a series of women’s lives. Having the same author of the texts (Anna Czerwińska-Rydel), the books have a new illustrator, this time also responsible for their graphic layouts, namely, **Marta Ignerska**.³ By now two of the cycle have been published: *Which Way to the Stars? The Story of Elisabeth Hevelius, the First Woman Astronomer* (2014), and *The Baltic Mermaid: The Story of Constantia Czirenberg* (both published in Warsaw in 2014). We will also meet the third intriguing female citizen of Gdansk, Johanna, born Trosiener, Schopenhauer (1766, Gdansk – 1838, Jena, Germany), the philosopher’s mother, herself a writer, who used to run a famous artistic-and-literary salon in Weimar, where she had moved at the age of 40 and became Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s good friend. The book will be entitled *Johanna’s Mirrors. A Tale of Johanna Schopenhauer* (Warsaw, 2015). In this “female” series Ignerska has introduced yet another graphic concept for all the three books. They are actually more like graphic novels or comics which are somehow parallel to the stories, although they do not follow the text narration. In the case of *Which Way to the Stars?* it may be justified by the character of the story which is rather a collection of memories which do not respect a chronological order.

The illustrated pages do not even divide the text pages, as they are placed in the blocks before the whole story (*The Baltic Mermaid*) or after it (*Which Way to the Stars?*). The artist composed 22 double page illustrations and the endpapers for all the titles. The endpapers in *Which Way to the Stars?* are interesting also because they act as mirror reflections and negative images for one another. Ignerska seems to be more restrained regarding colours as well, as she has applied one colour only for each of the three stories: yellow for Elisabeth, red for Constantia, and bright pink for Johanna. Three energetic colours, for which Ignerska has a strong predilection, judging from her other book graphic layout concepts, are spread on black and white backgrounds, or they create the background for the most primary graphic contrast of black and white.

In the book about Elisabeth Koopmann Hevelius (1647–1693, Gdansk), except for the colour itself – yellow, which imitates the gold of shining stars in the night sky, the iconographic leitmotif is the shape of a new moon. In some illustrations it is simply the image of a crescent moon, though it may serve as a seesaw for Elisabeth and her husband (Fig. 3), Johannes, in some others it stresses the edge of Elisabeth’s skirt, her hat, or it becomes a pattern on her dress, it turns to be a frog’s smile, the shape of female legs, flames, or the

³ Marta Ignerska was born in 1978. She graduated from the Studio of Book Design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in 2005. She won the Bologna Ragazzi Award in 2013, the silver prize at ED-Awards European Design Awards 2012, the Picture Book Award 2014 of the jury of young critics in Vienna, and was nominated for the Deutscher Jugendliteratur Preis in 2014 (not mentioning national distinctions and prizes) for the graphic design of *Wszystko gra [All Tuned Up]* by Anna Czerwińska-Rydel (2011), Warszawa, Wytwórnia.

body of a she-wolf feeding her 17 cubs. In the story of Constantia Czirenberg (or Zierenberg, 1605–1653, born and died in Gdansk) the repeating motif of the visual compositions is a multiplication of forms: a school of fish, a tangle of people's arms, girls' legs in synchronised swimming, sea waves, sandcastles, bones, teardrops, and many others, while in Johanna's tale the common motif is a mirror reflection used as main type of arrangement throughout the whole pictorial story. In a large number of illustrations, symmetry seems to be the most evident scheme (starting from the front cover of the book), and sometimes it takes humoristic tones as in the illustration depicting Johanna and her husband demonstrating bellies of the same size, but for different cause – she is pregnant while he is just fat.



Fig. 3

The three books are very expressive in their style of drawing. The artist uses a distinct line to describe the characters and their surroundings, applying white, black, and appropriately yellow, red, or pink as backgrounds. This narrow choice of colours also indicates the time of the story: day or night, and accentuates the most important or symbolic events. For instance, Constantia's mother's labour, or even the gossips wheeling around the mysterious birth, are depicted by a plain red surface and a small speech bubble in the bottom right corner. And the fire at the Hevelius's house is presented on the bright yellow background. The pink background depicts love surrounding Johanna and Heinrich.

Ignerska puts a lot of modern accessories into these historic stories. In *Which Way to the Stars?* our main heroine is turbo dynamic and flies up into the sky like a real cosmic rocket; she rides a scooter, observes planes, wears Converse All Stars sneakers, and has her hair dressed in two bunches which resemble a fashion of the 1960s. The story is universal considering the aspect of time, even if we go back to the 17th century, and we can notice some early modern era elements (Baroque dresses), the 19th century dolls, already mentioned contemporary items, and timeless tribal-like drawings. The similar mixture of time periods can also be spotted in *Mermaid*. The simplified figure of Constantia and her

of The Year Prize in 2011 (IBBY Polish national section's award). The same book and the one about Fahrenheit were given an honourable mention in the 52nd Competition of the Polish Association of Book Publishers (Polskie Towarzystwo Wydawców Książek – PTWK), whereas Marta Ignerska was given the Book of The Year 2014 Prize for *Which Way to the Stars?* The two sets of the Gdansk Trilogy are perfect examples of ambitious publishing projects, both in the sense of their editorial side itself, and in the fact of stressing the common heritage of one of the cities from the so called Recovered Territories with a complicated history and cultural landscape resembling a real mosaic of various national influences.

The same editor, Muchomor published in the meantime yet another interesting biography, this time about a Syrian brown bear called Wojtek who became famous after he had followed the combat trail with Polish soldiers from the II Corps of Andres's Army during WW2. The story follows him from Iran, where he was born (1941), found and adopted by Polish troops, through the Middle East and southern Europe – especially Italy, where at Monte Cassino he gained much of his fame, to Scotland where he ended his service in Glasgow, and eventually his life in the Edinburgh Zoo (1963). *Wojtek of Monte Cassino* (2012) is a book written by Wiesław A. Lasocki originally published in 1968. Right before the 50th anniversary of the brave bear's death it was re-released by Muchomor in 2012. The graphic artist responsible for the illustrations was **Jan Bajtlik**.⁴ Together with Urszula Woźniak he also designed the graphic layout of the book.

The restrained use of colours is similar to the previously discussed examples. This time we have a very noble contrast of gold and intensive turquoise blue. Gold depicts the ubiquitous sands of the Middle East, while blue is for the sky and the water of the sea. The drawings are expressive and humorous. Bajtlik uses simplified shapes with their formal background in Polish posters of the 1950s and 1960s. A funny and at the same time visually attractive solution was applied by the artist at the beginning of the story, when on the next four pages the figure of Wojtek "is growing up" along the additional measure scale placed on the edges of these pages – the pictures act here as a flip book. Then we gain a similar effect of a little bear rolling around in the right bottom corner of the subsequent pages. This kind of pictorial narration, showing the following stages of action, is used by Bajtlik also on full pages, e.g. Wojtek climbing a palm tree. He uses yet another graphic trick when the pictures, or only small fragments of them appear on the turned-on pages as an obvious continuation of the whole composition.

Many of these illustrations are full of humour. Let it be the figure of the bear built of tiny spots resembling bees perfectly depicting Wojtek's escape from a bee swarm, the picture of the bear taking a sea bath, a monkey called Kaśka riding on a black-and-white dog as though on a horse, and others. Some of the illustrations are very decorative – compare patterns on jackals or hyenas' furs and snake bodies, or a tribal art-like drawing of Kaśka. A rhythm of line also seems to be very important, as in an excellent illustration showing

⁴ Jan Bajtlik was born in 1989. He graduated from the Studio of Book Design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in 2013. He was awarded the Bologna Ragazzi 2015 for his activity book *Typo-scrawler* [*Typogryzmol*] published by Dwie Siostry, Warsaw 2014.

Wojtek behind the zoo bars. Bajtlik often repeats some iconographic motifs. The topic of the story is already excellently introduced on the endpaper with regular rows of soldiers running with their guns. The heroes of the following scenes repeat their gestures exactly (compare the swimmers on pp. 76–77, or the saluting soldiers on pp. 104–105, Fig. 5).



Fig. 5

The graphic design for *Wojtek of Monte Cassino* is both somehow disciplined (army rigour?) and dynamic (character of the war story), it is also extremely funny thanks to its main protagonist being an animal acting like the men surrounding him. However, the colour of gold makes it significant and serious to some extent. This matt gold takes us back to old times when the events actually took place and honours the merits of the courageous bear. Still the artistic language used in this design is modern to the core and makes the book attractive for contemporary readers.

Conclusion

The discussed biographies are dazzling examples of the open approach of young Polish graphic artists to the very matter of book graphic design and their great ease in the creation of their own pictorial stories linked only to the written texts. Dudek, Ignerska and Bajtlik feel free to benefit from the heritage of fine arts and applied graphic arts. They mix style registers and genres of graphic art (especially poster art) on the one hand, and on the other they move from one historical period to another with lightness and extravagant imagination (they apply old paintings and prints, 19th century engravings, the first avant-garde achievements, as well as the aesthetics of the 1950s and 1960s), last, but not least, they use a contemporary visual language deriving from the use of modern technology tools. This flexible but very conscious approach results in intriguing, eye-catching, and high-quality artistic creations.

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