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THE BETRAYAL OF CHILDHOOD IN A SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

The relationship between childhood and adulthood in the socio-cultural perspective has been a frequent focus in contemporary social studies (Kehily, 2008). Also, some scholars representing humanities have initiated a spirited discussion about images of both the child and childhood recorded in literary works. For instance, Peter Hunt (Hunt, 2008) argues that depictions of childhood a few YA novels result from a “writerly manipulation” which sometimes was directed against adults. Instead, Grzegorz Leszczyński (Leszczyński, 2012) claims that the trickster figure present in quite a few children’s novels suggests new patterns of the relationships between a child and an adult. Generally speaking, the diversity of childhood constructs developed by both by artists and scientists indicates the presence of an interesting “fracturing” inside the heart of the relationship between a child and adult today. In my article, I focus on the relationship between a child and an adult in socio-cultural perspective in order to demonstrate how the representations of childhood are used by Polish authors of children’s literature in critical descriptions of war and other forms of violence. At first, I relate to the crucial moment in the European history in which there appeared a discourse of senility and youthfulness. Next, I present the main consequences of the “production” and “distribution” of images of childhood in pop culture. In the last part of my discussion, I analyse novels by Joanna Rudniańska, Jacek Dukaj, Grzegorz Gortat and Dorota Combrzyńska-Nogala, who, in their works about the Holocaust, the martial law in Poland and the war in Syria, create the world in which young characters possess certain features characteristic of adults. My analysis reveals the sources of betrayal of childhood which appears in these novels like a sublime sign reflecting primarily fantasies of adults about children. I argue that this sign does not correspond to real childhood, but enables writers to construct multifunctional phantoms of the child and childhood which become useful tools in socio-cultural “games” played by adults.

Senility and youthfulness

In the 17th century, at the dawn of modern civilization, childhood became an essential phenomenon which enabled the bourgeoisie to build the social and capitalist order (Giddens 1990). According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the most prominent representative of thinkers focusing on childhood at that time, culture is created by capable intellect and the demand of the heart. In other words, a man who desires “the state of nature” or harmony should strive to resolve the crucial problem between the individual and the community. Therefore, Rousseau’s man tries to establish an internal cohesion in order to create a rational dimension for his own existence (Baczko 2009). Moreover, a pattern of “the state of nature”, in other words a moral code, is a crucial element of the empowerment process, which in Rousseau’s thought links philosophy with a psychological state. This is a condition of a mental hesitation between recollection and dream. Recollection relates to something that does not exist, but a man can sense it as something lost; whereas, a dream includes a longing capable of finding sustainable aspirations. Rousseau’s idea of the moral code consists of the elements producing a particular tension as a result of an internal conflict and a feeling of strangeness (Rousseau 2003).

The rationalization process is important because it makes it possible to mitigate this psychological “struggle”, which is an inextricable part of the social reality of the

modern civilization. Hence, in this context, the intellectual process of discovering or inventing childhood enhances the creation of a social framework of a “storytelling” about a child as a valid member of the modern community (Ariès 1995). It is very interesting that childhood emerged in philosophical discourse when Comte de Buffon, a famous French scientist, published his *Histoire Naturelle* (1749) and dedicated the ninth chapter of his work to both death and senility (Bois 1989). Buffon’s explanations of the decay of the old body (between 35 and 40 years old) had legal and social ramifications. First of all, there was an increasing number of works focused on the length of human life. Also, the registration of old people began during the second part of the 18th century. For instance, Augustin-Martin Lottin collected in his *L’Almanach de la Vieillesse* (1761-1770) approximately 2,000 100-year-old men (Bois 1989). While the findings of Lottin’s “research”, which encompassed the period since the Old Testament times, mixed sociological facts with mythological figures and events, they initiated reflection about the significance of old age in human life in Western science. Moreover, a few demographers from different European countries (e.g. William Derham, Abraham de Moivre, Pehr Wilhelm Wargentin, Jean-Baptiste Moheau) examined the structure of their communities and collected data essential to analyse the age pyramid.

I argue that childhood was discovered or invented jointly with senility in the Enlightenment in order to enable modern society to be better managed by authorities. Both the first and the last period of human life absorb material and non-material resources to protect the sustainable development of the dynamic structure of modern society. Furthermore, the economic system of the Western countries was turning to capitalism during the 18th century and it was consequently necessary to appoint precisely the pivotal borders in human life measured by work efficiency in the capitalist system. Youthfulness and senility in modern society probably became a new pattern of the traditional topos of *puer senex*, which dates back to classical antiquity (Curtius 1997). Yet, in the new circumstances (capitalism, neo-liberalism), the relationships between youth and maturity, child and adult, young people and old people, are based on competitiveness, economic differences, the protection of private property, and the building of state autonomy by the formation of capital (Giddens 1990). One of the crucial elements worth enhancing as supportive of the co-existence of child and adult in capitalism is confidence. Erik Erikson argues:

But, to repeat this in more dogmatic form, just as there is a basic affinity of the problem of basic trust to the institution of religion, the problem of autonomy is reflected in the basic political and legal organization and that of initiative in the economic order. Similarly, industry is related to technology; identity to social stratification; intimacy to relationship patterns; generativity to education, art, and science; and integrity, finally, to philosophy. The study of society must concern itself with the relationship of these institutions to each other, and with the ascent and the decline of institutions as organizations (Erikson 1977: 251).

Nowadays the trust between child and adult is undermined by pop culture even though such public institutions as school, courts or Child Protective Service strive to support the current “moral code” or public order (Gittins 1998). Nonetheless, it is a very tough and complex situation because the new media have produced and distributed innumerable images of childhood which mostly do not relate to the world of real children.

The simulacrum of childhood

The education process, literature, music, theatre, cinema, television, and new media have offered best ways to develop a sense of trust between the young generation

and adults, with the latter receiving “parental” tools to manage childhood. Furthermore, the modern civilization has produced plenty of images or signs imitating children’s experience although these representations do not demonstrate the actual world of children. Abundant also in literature, these signs do not indicate “the paths” for the reader (young and adult) towards an authentic childhood. Artistic and intellectual visions of youthfulness spread by common means of communication include mainly the simulacrum of childhood. Of course, most ancient artistic paintings and sculptures depicting childhood contained some surplus of the idealization of children, but the power of their interaction with the audience was limited. In addition, pop culture has had a predominant influence on the process of creating social connections among members of modern/postmodern societies. Thus, the child and the adult have become particular “players” in socio-cultural “games” whose rules are based on the mechanism of the capitalist system. However, the recent heritage determining social, cultural, and psychological relationships between the young and the adult generations is being replaced not only by new patterns of behaviours or attitudes, but also by a novel hierarchy of cultural values. Fiske argues:

Culture [...] is a constant succession of social practices; it is therefore inherently political, it is centrally involved in the distribution and possible redistribution of various forms of social power. Popular culture is made by various formations of subordinated and disempowered people out of the resources, both discursive and material, that are provided by the social system that disempowers them. It is therefore contradictory and conflictual to its core. The resources – television, records, clothes, video games, language – carry the interests of the economically and ideologically dominant [...]. But hegemonic power is necessary, or even possible, only because of resistance, so these resources must also carry contradictory lines of force that are taken up and activated differently by people situated differently within a social system (Fiske 2011: 2).

According to Neil Postman, the author of the famous book *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982), distinctions between childhood and adulthood have become blurred because both children and adults participate in the global circulation of the entertainment market. Postman claims that resistance against aggressive media (e.g. television) which are promoting cultural patterns dedicated to the adult-child is difficult. Therefore, the exposure of children to media is still increasing and the authorities have not been willing to “monitor carefully what they [children] are exposed to” (Postman 1982: 152). Arguably, both children and adults have been co-creating and consequently co-consuming diverse pop cultural products for a few decades. However, television and new media reveal mainly recent cultural practices, connected with the increasing significance of the household and, first of all, privacy or intimacy in everyday life already in 19th century (Giddens 1992).

Today we are inundated with multimedia images of children and childhood. These images are managed by adults although cyberspace (e.g. social media, YouTube, fan fiction, blogs) have encouraged young people to participate in socio-cultural activity. It can be a result of the new media literacy among the younger generation and their gaining advantage over adults. Even so, the phenomenon of unique (real) childhood has been engulfed by the accelerated production of various representations of the child for the public space. Childhood has been replaced by the image of childhood, at first photography and next motion pictures¹. And thus has started a long epoch of adults’

¹ The “protection” idea of the child against motion pictures appeared within three decades since the first public cinema festival prepared by August and Luis Lumière (1895). See the twelve-volumes publication *Motion Pictures and Youth. The Payne Fund Studies* (1933) and N. Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film: A History, from Shirley Temple to Harry Potter*, London 2012.

search for their lost, magnificent or horrible childhood. The films showing a child on the large screen (e.g. *The Kid* with young actor Jackie Coogan or *Stand Up and Cheer!* with young actress Shirley Temple) and children's literature, with which authors try to capture an essence of the world of childhood intimacy better and better (e.g. Charles Dickens, Lewis Carroll, James Matthew Barrie, Alan Alexander Milne, Tove Jansson, Janusz Korczak, Kornel Makuszyński, Jan Brzechwa), create very persuasively "polished" (artificial) childlike worlds. I claim that it was the first step toward the betrayal of childhood constructed as an inspiring and attractive phenomenon referring to the socio-cultural issues of the contemporary Western world. Meanwhile, modern childhood disseminated in different pieces of art, but also psychological (Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget) and pedagogical discourses (Édouard Claparède, Maria Montessori, Célestin Freinet, Janusz Korczak) has become an essential element of our communication. For instance, artists of the international avant-garde movement (e.g. German Expressionists or Italian Futurists) utilised an "innocent eye" in order to refresh the language of art. And thus, a naive and childish attitude in the perception of the world enabled artists to identify precisely social, cultural, and political issues of modern societies. Furthermore, the development of the education system in the Western world changed the idea of vulnerable childhood into a problem relevant in the public space. A varied pattern of childhood was recorded in pieces of art during the 20th century, which resulted in generating a substantial heritage of this period. I suppose that including the scintillating reflections or rethinking of an imaginary world of childhood has been determining the relationship between child and adult since World War 2. It could be concluded that the media are the main source of dynamic transformations of the child's position in our daily life. Adults create a simulacrum of young people through literature, theatre, cinema, and computer games and therefore they substitute "real" childhood with a sign of childhood "which holds that nothing exists" (Baudrillard 1994: 12). Nonetheless, childhood in different dimensions of contemporary life is still a major challenge for adults. Goodenough argues:

The various and universal quest to construct secret space is considered by Edward O. Wilson a "fundamental trait of human nature" of "ultimate value to survival". Although architects, city planners, sociologists, and urban historians research adult behaviours in public and private spaces, much less is known about how children explore the outdoors, make imaginary friends, or find havens from violence. What causes them to gravitate to certain locales in quest of comfort, excitement, self-awareness, or beauty and avoid other areas? Conceptions of childhood past, present, and future have been organized around such issues as innocence and deviance, safety and abuse, contemporary "kinderkultur" or the "disappearance" of childhood. But understanding how collective experience, animism, or a child's sense of injustice yield empowerment or liberation, in what D. W. Winnicott calls "transitional spaces" is a far more complex endeavour (Goodenough 2003: 3).

It could be possible that the children's and adults' hemispheres still penetrate each other and thus the recent boundary dividing and ordering our daily life was dissolved into a homogenous (pop culture) space. It is obvious that contemporary children's literature enables us to emphasise both the moral and the entertaining dimensions of the "messages" being sent to young readers. It is hard not to agree with Maria Nikolajeva's claim that children's literature was established by adults and contains adulthood references. The ramifications of this "tough possessing" vary, but researches still deliberate over the signification of the general term "children's literature". Contemporary art has been substantially shaped by changes resulting from the active participation of young generations in culture. Therefore, according to Nikolajeva, the nearest future of children's literature can inspire academic discussions about pivotal terms in humanities: "Adult

authors ostensibly write children's books from wider experience, larger vocabulary, higher cognitive capacity – biological and psychological facts hard to dismiss. Yet maybe the term children's literature will one day be reserved for literature *by* children, just as children's culture today includes children's own stories, drawings, and play" (Nikolajeva 2009: 23).

This is only one aspect of the phenomenon under discussion because the images of a fuzzy childhood can be utilised to formulate the patterns of the discipline of reality – attitudes, behaviours, and skills. Therefore, it is necessary to assess the fanciful worlds dedicated to children as a result of a complex socio-cultural process which started almost 200 years ago. The pictures of the child have been absorbing diverse strategies of communication between adults and young people, extending from a strictness attitude to children to a non-strictness one. Nonetheless, the heritage of the adult predominant "voices" creating children's literacy discourses still endures nowadays, too.

Young figures in a "maturity" world

As a result of the rapid changes taking place in contemporary society, triggered by the pop cultural mechanism, childhood is becoming one of the useful objects necessary to indicate current problems, e.g. discrimination, violence, and poverty. Notwithstanding all positive consequences of this strategy, a massive implementation of images of children is the next step towards the betrayal of childhood. This phenomenon quite visibly emerges in the latest Polish children's literature of the last decade, whose subject matter refers to events from both recent and distant European history. A young character placed in the middle of the war or another conflict situation is converted to someone whose appearance is still childlike although he or she often behaves like an adult or is presented as a heroic child.

For instance, the theme of the short novel *Moje cudowne dzieciństwo w Aleppo* (2017) (Eng. *My wonderful childhood in Aleppo*) by Grzegorz Gortat is the horrible experiences children and adults caused by the present war in Syria. The main character, teenage Jasmin, with her parents and brothers, Tarik and Nabil, takes part in the war horror as a witness and victim of the war atrocities. The writer's strong condemnation of the war in Syria is very persuasive because the essential words contained in this book were uttered by the vulnerable young girl. The reader witnesses Tarik's death through Jasmin's eyes: "I saw that Tarik slowed down; crouched down despite the warning. I saw his inclined small back. Suddenly, there was a roar and a cloud of a dirt covered him. It was not dense, it fell down rapidly and yet I was trying to argue with myself for a moment that it was a good sign." (Gortat 2017: 66) Gortat's novel depicts mainly Jasmin's internal and intimate world reflecting the horror of the Syrian war. Her reflections, feelings, and attitudes to the real world and other people, for instance neighbours uncle Husajn, who cooperates with the troops of strange "soldiers", parents and friends are marked by a mature awareness which includes only few elements of childhood. Even though Gortat's young character spends her free time in the playground and is also taught by the academic Safik from time to time, she still behaves like a mature person. Jasmin's vulnerable appearance is utilised as an argument against the war. In other words, an interesting and thrilling description of the madness of the contemporary war in Syria is created by the selected cultural images of childhood although not from a child's perspective. According to Ludwik Bandura, who in 1947 conducted an empirical study on impact of World War 2 on the condition of Polish children, in reality the atrocity of war rapidly destroys children's hearts and minds (Bandura 2004). Hence, Gortat's

reliance on a pure childlike innocent character (e.g. Jasmin, Tarik, Nabil) to analyse the evil of war is merely a phantom belonging to an adult's imagination.

Jasmin, her brothers, and friends look like children and their behaviours include the typical features of a child. It is the author's strategy that enables the mitigation of the cruelty of the war. Nonetheless, Gortat utilises a really "strong" image of childhood in order to reveal the roots of evil. Yet this phenomenon of childhood does not exist in the Aleppo Syria. Goodness and evil, as well as truth and lie, penetrate into both children's and adults' hearts and minds, but only the adult can resist evil more effectively. It is not a mistake on the part of the writer, but a result of a general literary creativeness which has been emerging over the last few decades in public discourse including children's literature. In opposition to popular children's books, a few sophisticated children's texts portray young characters as nobly "responsible" for the metaphorical evil (contemporary fairy tales, fantasy, science fiction) or different kinds of abnormal behaviours (realistic forms). The vision of well-behaved and brave children, as well as funny pictures of "brats" who cause confusion among adults, delivers a false message about young people and contemporary patterns of childhood. Stereotypical representations of the child and childhood are shaped by two simultaneous phenomena. The first is a result of a strong desire to improve and refresh relevant relationships by active members of society. The second phenomenon is anchored in a "dreaming adulthood" which searches its own childhood times for enviable simulacra of childhood. Therefore, personal elements and pieces of intimacy are mixed with the public flows of the images of childhood. A good example of this process is Jacek Dukaj's contemporary fairy tale or fantasy *Wroniec* (Dukaj 2009), the plot of which consists of both historical elements referring to the period of the martial law in Poland (from 13 December 1981 to 22 July 1983) and the intimate memories of the author, who was a seven-year-old-boy at that time (Sterczewski 2010).

Adaś, the main character of this novel, has to struggle with the antagonist *Wroniec*, whose name was coined from the official abbreviation of *Wojskowa Rada Ocalenia Narodowego* (the Military Council for National Salvation – WRON), a major administrative body during the martial law. The world in Dukaj's novel was built with a few transformed real events and elements which were an integral component of the daily life during the martial law in Poland. In the first part of the story, Adaś loses his whole family: his father, mother, grandmother, and sister are probably kidnaped by *Wroniec*. The vulnerable boy is alone in a horrible world in which troops of police oppress citizens and also Adaś. But suddenly, a neighbor, Pan Beton (Mr Concrete), helps Adaś and protects him in the subsequent parts of the plot. Although, *Wroniec's* power extends very quickly and rapidly engulfs and enslaves the minds of the city dwellers, some people organize a movement of resistance in which Adaś participates as a child witness.

Dukaj utilises a child figure in his novel in order to depict the less tragic aspect of Polish history. Of course, the fairy tale genre mitigates the actual events which happened during the martial law. Moreover, the metaphorical elements of the presented world, first of all the spatial form filled by the strange vehicles (e.g. Machine-Producing-Greyness) and figures (e.g. Mr Beton, *Wroniec*), become an appropriate background for the child character looking for his kidnaped family. In addition, this ghastly story seems to take place in the child's mind or imagination and could be a result of Adaś's real illness. We know his grandmother takes his temperature at the beginning of the book. In the final scenes, the child wakes up in the early morning, but he still has a runny nose and a sore throat.

Dukaj's description and analysis of the martial law in an ethical context were motivated by the stereotypical child's nightmares. The picture of childhood in *Wroniec*, as well as the child's feelings, dreams, and behaviours, has taken the form of an intellectual "tool" essential for adults to tell their own stories.

The motto from Lewis Carroll's novel initiated this work. Indeed, Dukaj's fairy tale has a lot to do with *Alice in Wonderland*. At first, there is plenty of Carroll's language invention, not only formative, which is one of highlights of *Wroniec*. Even the humorous rhymes switch on in the story. Secondly, and importantly, like Alice, Adaś wants to grasp, by all means, a sense of the adult world in order to reveal the rules which govern it. The fact that he desires to regain his family is just a plot motivation. In fact – no longer Adaś, but Dukaj – wants to regain the past (Nowacki 2010)².

The elements of childhood and children's understanding of the world are filtered in Gortat's and Dukaj's novels by the adult desires and aims. The authors omit experiences of young people in their novels because they wanted to gain a functional or efficient picture of childhood. Focusing on the details of a particular environment, they present the war and violence mechanism.

Another Polish author, Joanna Rudniańska, goes back to the World War 2 in her short novel *XY* (2012). Her young characters witness the Holocaust tragedy although the author uses representation of a child in order to analyse evil of the war less frequently than Gortat and Dukaj (Wróblewski 2017). The novels about the Shoah include certain elements of the documentary form (e.g. diary, memories, letter), which enables the author to demonstrate children's tragedy caused by the death of their parents, neighbours and other people. The young twins from *XY* experience evil because violence and death in their world are ubiquitous. Their qualities and personalities resemble more those of an adult than of a child. Their tranquillity and serenity help them to live through the war nightmare. The girls bravely suffer a long separation in order to fortunately meet in the final scene of the novel. Rudniańska's young characters do not lose any human characteristics although the twins have experienced the death of their whole family. The child figure from another novel about the Holocaust, *Bezsennosc Jutki* (2012) (Eng. *The Sleeplessness of Jutka*) by Dorota Combrzyńska-Nogala, also escapes from Łódź ghetto thanks to the sacrifice of several people. For the author, Jutka is a little witness to a poignant tragedy of the Jews. Nonetheless, she gets through from the death zone to the living zone with aunt Ester and then starts to consider her future optimistically. The twins from Rudniańska's *XY* and the girl from Combrzyńska-Nogala's *Bezsennosc Jutki* are presented as heroic characters able to passively resist evil and also remain innocent children. The new rules of literary fiction enable the authors to create the characters of children out of the fragments of both imagined childhood and adulthood, childishness and maturity.

Conclusion

Children's literature presenting a child trapped in evil worlds, for instance the war in Syria, the Holocaust and the martial law in Poland, enable writers to construct a new pattern of young characters who include the elements of both childhood and adulthood. The maturity accompanying childlikeness co-creates a framework for the characters of

² „Rzecz otwiera motto z Lewisa Carrolla. I rzeczywiście z *Przygodami Alicji w Krainie Czarów* bań Dukaja ma wiele wspólnego. Po pierwsze, pełno tu Carrollowskiej inwencji językowej, nie tylko słowotwórczej, co jest jedną z atrakcji *Wronca*. W opowieść wcinają się nawet dowcipne rymowanki. Po drugie i ważniejsze, Adaś niczym Alicja za wszelką cenę chce się połączyć w tajemniczym świecie dorosłych, oczywiście po to, żeby wykryć rządzące nim prawa. To, że chce odzyskać rodzinę, jest tylko motywacją fabularną. Tak naprawdę – już nie Adaś, lecz Dukaj – chce odzyskać przeszłość”. My translation.

contemporary children's literature. As can be expected, problems of today demand childlike witnesses who are suspended between tender age and maturity. Therefore, through these figures the authors can comment on varied forms of evil in the present world. Moreover, the different signs of transformed childhoods enhance the crucial content of the messages referring to the postmodern community rather than to the coherent and traditional picture of childhood. Furthermore, the betrayal of childhood is also an inevitable result of socio-cultural processes, which demands yet new incentives for the sustainable development of young people who nowadays very rapidly start puberty and abandon their childhood.

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