

## **Profile of Illustration in Children's Literature Books Based on the Image Preferences of the Youngest Readers**

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### **Abstract**

The presented paper is a result of research conducted on the issue of visual communication as an art supplement and explanation of printed content.

The publication begins with a reflection on visual culture illustrating its polysemic character and referring to the iconic nature of images. Further, the paper describes the art of illustration and the value of visual communication in the form of book illustration. The last part of the paper attempts to present the structure of a well-designed illustration in the form of profiles, constructed on the basis of picture tendencies appear in a group of pre-readers.

*Keywords: book illustration, visual communication, pre-school child*

### **Introduction**

Recent years have brought significant changes in widely understood culture, which today is undoubtedly of audiovisual nature. The emerging phenomenon in which visuality dominates over the word especially confirms that fact. The expansion of visual communication, visual external advertising, picture books, comics, the spread of audiovisual media – electronic sources of experience and the invasion of homogeneous – often trashy – mass culture as well as dominance of adult culture over the culture addressed to children in both the offer and reception are only some examples where this phenomenon may be observed.

This state of affairs makes a person live in a world in which his or her daily existence depends on certain impulses, pressures derived from visual stimuli and being accustomed to the surrounding images, he or she is unaware of their influence. We often live among fortuitous and poor images which, on the one hand, attack our imagination, shape tastes, inform, play and teach, but on the other hand, they manipulate our images of life.

Considering the above, we can assume that the present civilization is moving towards a paradigm of “visual civilization”, in which the language of image becomes the basic code of communication between people and where the tendency to promote pictorial and symbolic communication is growing, simultaneously setting aside textual messages – presentation means more for the individual than said or written words (G. Sartori, 2005, pp. 11, 15; G. Sartori, 1998).

In this situation, as our environmental imagery is increasing and various forms of visual communication are dominating, it seems more and more important to think of the responsible distribution of the content as well as the quality of messages, including the messages addressed to children, which, as a source of experience affect children’s cultural initiation and through perception (watching) are associated with other sensations appearing in contact with the image (or configuration of objects in space), form visual competences and the ability to find and evaluate visual information (R. Pettersson, 2000, p. 26 et seq.).

There is also a need for systematic analyses of the various problems associated with visual perception and its impact on the young child.

Therefore, due to the commercialization of culture in recent years, the contact with visual message encounters a number of limitations and disruptions and to prepare small children for the contact with this message, this paper focuses on presenting issues that in the age of image revolution introduces modern illustrators, teachers, educators and all interested in illustrative graphics on the specificities of visual messages/visual communication addressed to children being, at the same time, a rich source of information on children’s needs and preferences and the assumptions of composing a picture in a literary book for the youngest recipients.

Taking into consideration the above, further deliberations will bring closer the problem of illustrative graphics and illustrations in the literature for pre-readers, presented in a theoretical-empirical perspective.

## **A few words about the art of illustration and the value of visual communication in the form of book illustration**

For centuries, in the history of culture we have observe the phenomenon of continuous attempts to depict human experiences, to show their content and visually perceived shapes. This kind of human activity is called art. Art in a broad sense may be defined as a field of conscious human activity, which results in products characterized by: novelty, originality and generativity of artistic values, having the properties of inducing emotional states of aesthetic nature.

In pedagogic terms, art has two meanings: a skill of acting in accordance with rules and an identification of all artistic phenomena of a given epoch in a collective manner (I. Wojnar, 1993, p. 805).

Bearing in mind the presented definitions of art, in this study we use this term in the sense of acting according to the rules. While defining *art of illustration and illustration* – which constitute a point of reference necessary for practical solutions and especially for analyses in this field – it has been assumed that the art of illustration means an action in which functionality is combined with artistic requirements and whose formal effect results in an image/illustration being a unique field of art.

In printed a text, the illustration is treated as a graphic, drawing or painting composition, which is a plastic supplement, explaining the content of the printed text. In children's books, illustration is an inherent element, sometimes dominant, often playing a role equivalent to the text. Colorful artistic compositions are used to clarify and illustrate the content of the book to a young reader. Besides, they facilitate the perception and interpretation of the text.

The art of illustration – especially for children – is a difficult form of artistic creation. In literature for an adult reader, graphic design is only a supplement while in children's books it plays a much more important role. A good illustration says something more than what was said in the text. Although it derives from the text, not necessarily directly, it additionally discusses, interprets, adds, and, what is also important, should keep up with the text because children are upset when they need to look for the right image many pages later. An illustructor is a co-author of a book. His task is more difficult, as he has to bear in mind the type of reader, his/her age and perception and in this way create an authentic art product, i.e., he has to be the intermediary between the recipient/the child and the world of art. I. Witz wrote that the ideal state is to achieve a consensus between the transformation of reality based on the achievements of modern painting and graphic art, and

not purely submerge in formal abstract exploration or aesthetic and workshop experiments (I. Witz, 1964, p.7).

Book illustration, and more specifically the illustration of children's books, is an area of art obliging the artist, a graphic designer, to combine artistic requirements and principles of functionality while creating a plastic image. It requires from an artist who wants to get with his/her art through to the child the ability to reproduce, to some extent, the emotional states that are perceived by the young audience in the perception process of an image. The child is a sensitive and absorbing perceiver interpreting a work of art in his/her own way, but he/she does not know the graphics and does not have the ability to evaluate and prioritize the phenomena supported by knowledge of various possibilities of artistic expression. The child sees everything with his/her own eyes and not just as presented in a drawing. This determinant makes the illustration in children's books a form of art, in which aesthetics or style begins to live its own life. It should be entirely artistic and, because of image content, educationally and socially valuable. In other words, illustration for children, like any artwork designed for them, should be a form that combines postulates of aesthetics, psychology and pedagogy. These postulates represent the essence of the illustration in children's books, which consists of: adjusting the content and form of illustration to the psychological characteristics of the recipient at different periods of development, the appropriate relation of the illustration to the literary text and the highest possible artistic value.

It is worth noticing that graphic design for child consumers, in order to maintain the status of "art" without losing its individuality, increasingly needs to confront its own characteristics with a rich cultural context. This makes us face new determinants, such as earlier growth of potential audiences and their emotional needs and interest in new social phenomena. In the course of these confrontations, the boundaries of this art are moved and a question appears of whether the socio-cultural condition of what we see and can see is capable of shaping children's predilections in terms of book illustration or maybe rather children's preference is more permanent than that of adults as more dependent on the stage of their development than on contact with the art from the particular period. According to the authors, the awareness of these determinants and the status of children's literature may help not only to create "good" illustrations, but above all, support the selection of artistic, valuable, interesting, aesthetic, developing or simply beautiful realizations.

In the context of the foregoing considerations, it should be mentioned that problematic researchers show that visual communication in the form of a book illustration as a plastic expression and visual object has the power to consolidate

the personality and point of view. The researchers claim that it can express the mood, stop for a while, give depth and significance, to some extent suggest the appearance of literary worlds which until now the audience could only imagine. They also claim that visual fascination makes a potential recipient recall the image many times to watch and contemplate the discovered values or find new ones. However, no matter how powerful the influence is, the illustration as a visual representation and form of communication must be attractive to the child as each human being has a deep desire for the appearance of things and feels pleased when the artist presents objects that are in harmony with his/her desires (cf., G. Leszczyński, 2003, p.71; S.Wysłouch 1994, pp. 99–138; cf., also: Lacy L.E.,1986; Norton D.,2003; Barr J., 1986).

Additionally, the illustration for children fulfills important tasks in children's development as an intentionally created object, which is a stimulus triggering a variety of mental processes and a source of intense experiences. The tasks can be listed despite overlapping and they comprise: influencing the development of mental processes and dispositions, including shaping perceptive skills, creating images and their consolidation, the enhancement of the literary experience thanks to the artistic interpretation of its content, the extension of knowledge, increasing interests, shaping creative attitudes, providing pleasure and relaxation, as well as introduction of the child into the world of art. Depending on the purpose of the book and the age of the child, the above tasks are carried out in different proportions.

In conclusion, in the context of the foregoing considerations, we can say that thanks to a well-designed illustration, the child as a recipient learns to recognize both the elements that make up the works of art as well as the way they are composed. In the process of perceiving the illustration, the child interprets the work on his/her own, defines it, fills in individual associations, which, in combination with graphic composition, form the basis of his/her artistic culture. In other words, the child acquires the ability to focus, sharpens observations, develops imagination and creativity and above all tries to discover the meaning contained in the picture. Therefore, it is so important that the surrounding world of images should provide new forms of perception, sensitivity, visual perception of experiences, phenomena and social situations and illustrations must contain elements that determine the artistic value of drawings and illustrative graphics as well as communicativeness and they should inspire emotional and intellectual activity.

## **Illustration in the literature for children of pre-reading age – the framework of illustration image profiles**

Taking into account that today's generation functions in an iconosphere completely different from that of the generation of their grandparents and parents and the domination of the medium of moving images (television, video, computer games), the world of Barbi, Japanese manga, and Pokemon influence the boundaries of children's imagination, this paper attempts to present the structure of a well-designed illustration on the basis of children's preferences.

The limited volume of this publications does not allow for presenting the full methodological model of the conducted research, so the author presents only fundamental issues.

Thus, the scope of the study is determined by the areas in which the illustrative picture, i.e., drawing and painting, is realized and – because Polish illustrations at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are again characterized by diversity, variety of styles, free invention and courage in using the newest techniques – we also need to consider graphic illustrations complemented by visual qualities such as abstractness, color, detail, clarity, dynamics in subsequent plans and layers of the visual image<sup>1</sup>.

It should be noted that the categories of analysis used in exploration are especially important for the child audience, as the combination of contained image information with the verbal message determines the full perception of the literary content. In addition, the above-mentioned criteria form some features of the illustration structure obtained by the visual image creator so they may provide some sense of conducted explorations.

Due to the specifics of empirical research, only natural, simple and clear methods and techniques were used to search for answers to posed questions. Thus, the author used a diagnostic survey addressed to children<sup>2</sup> and performed with the use of an interview based on the image material presented after reading a text treated as an induction stimulus. In this type of interview images are used to induce comments (M. Banks, 2009, p.116; cf., also: Banks M., 2001).

Now we will try to make certain generalizations and summary due to the cognitive and practical values.

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<sup>1</sup> The methodological assumptions and accepted procedures of exploration were presented for the first time in: Mazepa-Domagala B.: *Upodobania obrazowe w zakresie ilustracji książkowej u dzieci w wieku przedczytelniczym*. Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> The surveyed respondents were between 5 and 6 years of age.

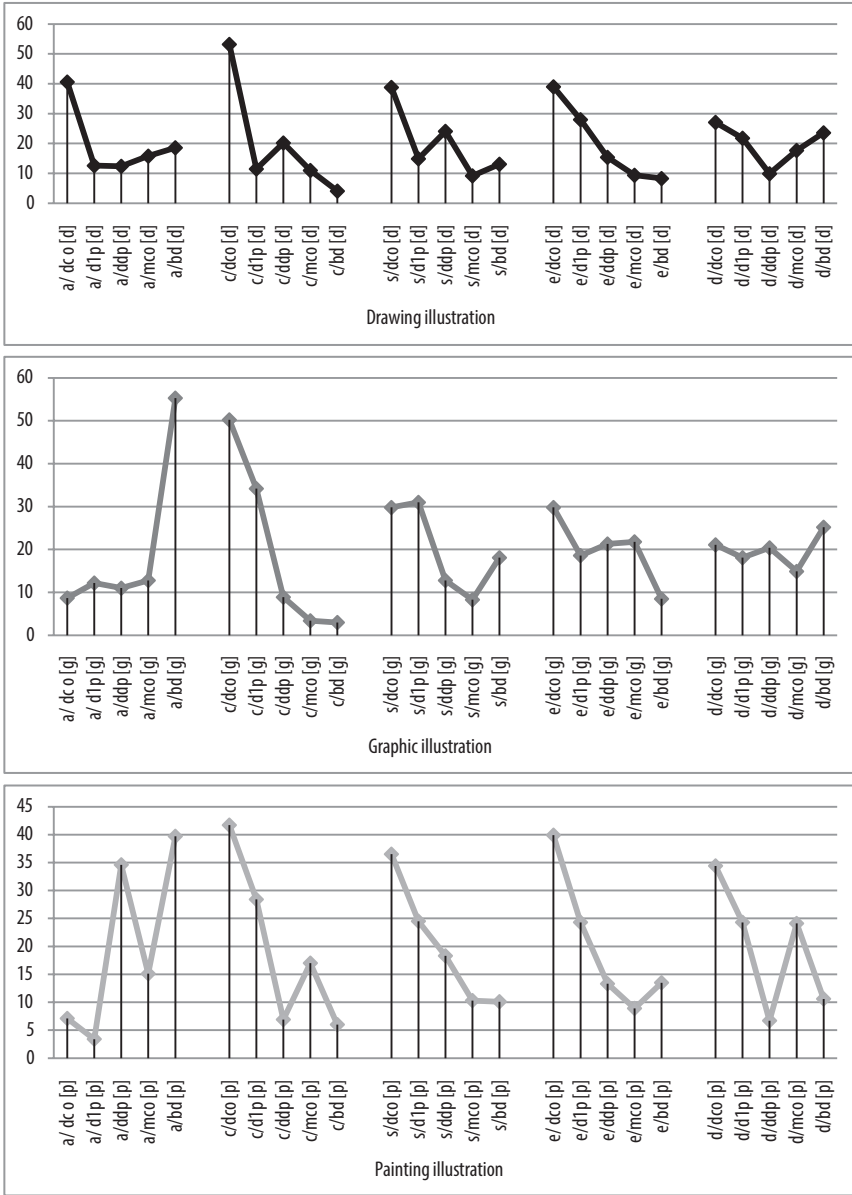
The author attempted to build a structure of a well-designed illustration taking into account children's image preferences. It was presented in the form of profiles constructed on the basis of found picture tendencies in the group of pre-readers (cf., Figure 1). It should be noted that the presented profiles do not suggest that the illustrators strictly adapt their art projects to the average child's developmental capabilities and needs as illustration should outrun the reader's age to a certain extent and include elements that refer directly to the needs of a small recipient. If they are not there, then the illustration will not catch the child's attention. The developed profiles reflect children's preferences and needs conditioning the positive perception of the illustration. Thus, the more assumptions and conditions are considered in the illustrated content of the book, the greater the joy in contact with the illustration the child will have.

Due to the fact that the visual communication contained in children's books is a mass message, although directed to a specific target group, however androgenically formed, in the illustrated profiles the gender variable is omitted, taking into account only the dominants of imaging referring to the area of occurrence in the basic types of illustration. The profile constructed in this way is of synergic nature as it takes into account the participation of all levels of research.

It should be noted that the analysis of the illustration structure in its framed profiles revealed the range of image preferences of the child reader and the differences depending on the type of message emphasizing their differentiation. Thus, we are not going to consider the visual preferences of pre-readers, but only main tendencies in predilection of the significant, but not major group of respondents. The rest of the surveyed directed their preferences on contrasting projects, which emphasizes the wide variety of imagery preferences of the contemporary child, who is now surrounded by various forms of visual imagery constituting the components of his/her natural environment and shaping the inner world of children's imagination, experiences and values.

In total, the obtained data do not allow for the formulation of one universal structure, but only preferred types of illustrations in the context of the distinctive plastic qualities (imaging dominant) in different types of illumination distinguished because of imaging.

Thus, based on the indications in the category of abstract imaging, it can be assumed that the pre-reading child prefers mostly realistic graphic and painting illustrations as well as choosing abstract drawing designs. Statistical verification within the aforementioned dominant occurring in the whole image indicates the differentiation of predilection for drawing and graphic illustrations as well as for drawing and painting prevailing the first one. Additionally, it presents no



**Figure 1.** Framed profiles of illustration in children’s literature books based on the image preferences of the youngest readers (percentage capture)  
a – abstract; c – color; s – detail; e – expressiveness; d – dynamic; dco – dominant occurring in the whole picture; d1p – dominant clearly outlined in the foreground; ddp – dominant clearly outlined in the background; mco – dominant noticeable minimally throughout the whole picture; bd - no dominant in the illustration image



differences in preference for graphic and painting illustrations (statistically confirmed). It confirms the tendency of the youngest audience to abstract drawing compositions. Statistical analyses in the category of mimetic imaging (a/bd- lack of abstractness, realism) confirm the differentiation of children's tastes in relation to types of illustration.

The structure of the pre-reader's predilection for color illustrations clearly shows the visual preference oriented to the colorful drawing illustrations occurring throughout the picture while the second type of preferred illustrations is the graphic composition and then painting (cf., Figure 1). The statistical analysis confirmed that the assumed conclusions were correct as there were some significant differences in terms of predilections for drawing and painting illustrations as well as for graphic and painting ones – prevailing the first one. It means that comparing throughout the whole picture a colorful drawing illustration with the painting one, the youngest recipient chooses the first one, and when it comes to the graphic and painting pictures, the child decisively chooses graphic design. Predictions related to drawing and graphical visualizations do not differentiate, which means that the child equally accepts colored drawings and graphic illustrations.

In the category of detailed illustrations, children's tastes are directed mainly to drawing and painting projects in which the detail is present in the whole artistic realization. Statistical verification showed significant differences in preferences related to the comparison of drawing - graphic illustration – in this layout children definitely prefer drawing projects and when graphic – painting illustration compared, graphical design was chosen in the first place.

In the drawing – painting comparison, no variation in tastes was recorded at the level of statistical significance, so it can be assumed that children equally enjoy detailed drawings and paintings.

In the category of expressive illustrations, the pre-readers would choose drawings and paintings, which was statistically confirmed.

In the case of completely dynamic compositions, the child recipient definitely prefers painting illustrations and then drawings. Dynamic graphic design is liked the least among the listed. Children also tend to like static illustrations, preferring both drawing and graphic projects.

To conclude, on the basis of the image preferences and considering the illustration as a lasting form of art influencing imagination and playing a significant role in defining important life experiences and time periods, being memorized by the viewers and inseparably linking individual visual moments, we can make some implications for illustrator practice.

Drawing images should be colorful, detailed and expressive as well as they may have abstract structure and dynamics. However, static compositions are also approved by the youngest audience.

Illustrations created based on painting techniques according to children's tastes should be: expressive, definitely colorful, detailed, dynamic and realistic in their plastic form. In this type of imaging, if the abstract structure is planned, it should be used in the background of the composition.

Graphic illustrations should be designed more statically based on the mimetic imaging, expressiveness, detail and color of the composition.

Being aware that this description of the illustration is undoubtedly useful, but for someone who wants to understand the essence of issue it may not be enough, the following sections of this paper add particular categories of imaging regarding the visual structure of the illustration.

The illustration in a literary book is often a translation of the book resulting from the individual interpretation of work content by an artist who then builds free impression around the text (A. Wincencjusz-Patyna, 2008, p.68).

This direction seems to be the most appropriate, because one feature of the illustration should be the strength of creation and the desire to incite the child's imagination, leaving the field for the recipient's invention and trusting his/her great sensitivity. Therefore, abstract illustration should be based on schematic deformations, but far from surrealist imaging and visual fiction; however, full of Cézanne-esque cubism. Nonetheless, the explorations have shown that the youngest recipient mostly prefers images reflecting the presented world with a strong narrative character.

The color of the plastic compositions definitely determines predilections of their recipients. In colorful illustrations, illustrators mostly use functional colors that attract with their strength, create an atmosphere through the used range (warm and cool colors), arrange the composition using differentiations and are used in characteristic combinations: colors of the same quadrant of the Wheel of Colors (whispering colors), touching each other (colors which say) or of opposite quadrants (screaming colors) (B. Bergstrom, 2009, p.205).

The precise character of illustrations/illuminations is expressed in the multiplicity and decorativeness of the image structure components, the completeness of the representations as well as in an apparently insignificant detail and presented details determining the narrative of the visualization. In other words, these compositions are extremely decorative, colorful and clear in the image structure.

Expressive visual compositions characterize prominent components of the structure: from the characters and the objects to the background. This clarity is

achieved mainly by outlining structural elements, smooth surfaces evenly covered with color, and a clear composition in a visual expression.

The dynamics of the visual composition is presented in perfectly expressed experiences and emotions of the characters, by introducing movement, pose or mimicry.

To end up this part of the analysis, it is worth quoting Krystyna Lipka- Sztarbałło, who perfectly expresses the essence of the above considerations: "illustration is a narrative that is parallel to the text remaining with it in a continuous relationship. It should not imitate the text, only build a creative dissonance. It should be an addition and a question mark at the same time. It should not only encourage the child to read, but also be worth remembering. If we try to appeal to our memories, it turns out that from the furthest childhood we remember more illustrations than texts. For most people visual memory is stronger than other types of memories and what remains of the childhood is with us throughout the whole life. Investment in professional illustrations, in professional design of children's books is therefore clearly profitable. This is an investment in the future" (K. Lipka- Sztarbałło, 2008).

## **Final considerations**

The illustration, which is a plastic supplement of the printed content and the first signal of art we send to the world of childhood due to children's emotional involvement at the time of its reception, is an excellent tool for the development of the small recipients. Thanks to good illustrations, children learn how to recognize both the elements of the work of art and the ways in which they are combined. In the process of perception, the illustration performs its own interpretation of the work, defines it, fills with individual associations, in other words, it acquires the ability to focus, sharpens the perception, develops the imagination and one's own creativity and, above all, tries to discover the meaning contained in the picture. The capability of creative perception together with children's books illustration may influence the development of children's creative expression, which results not only in their own attempts at creativity, but also expression when creating the work in the process of reception.

For these reasons, illustration in children's books should be carefully prepared in terms of cognitive, educational and artistic value. The illustrators of children's books should more than before make use of the achievements of today's didactics in the ways and means of teaching children, using the achievements of developmental psychology and pedagogy more broadly and deeply.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized once again that good illustrations stimulate creative attitudes, open to new, unexpected and unexplored values. It gives the benefit of broadening the field of the child's cognition, provides the opportunity to refine visual sensibility, sharpens the view and, most importantly, incites imagination, thereby shaping the child's visual fantasy.

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