

THE DIALOGICAL NATURE OF IWONA CHMIELEWSKA'S PICTUREBOOKS –
AESTHETIC AND PEDAGOGICAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT. The issue of art for children as a subject of research has a tradition dating back to the beginnings of the aesthetic-pedagogical movement in Europe. One of the contemporary examples of art for children is the picturebook. As an artefact of visual culture, it fits in particularly well with the current issues of aesthetic education for children. The aim of the presented interpretation is to identify the attributes of Iwona Chmielewska's work that are important in the context of a child's encounter with art. The unique form of the phenomenon described, inherent to works of art, responds to the child's natural characteristics and offers them full participation in co-creating the work.

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of art for children as a subject of research has been explored since the early 20th century, alongside the development of the aesthetic-pedagogical movement in Europe. This movement was guided by the belief that one of the essential aspects of aesthetic education is an encounter with an authentic work of art. This view permeated pedagogical theory and practice throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. The essence of the child's encounter with a work of art has been discussed in Polish scholarly literature by, among others, Stefan Szuman, Maria Gołaszewska, Bogusław Żurkowski, Katarzyna Olbrycht, and Jolanta Skutnik. This postulate has been, and continues to be, an inspiration for further theoretical considerations and educational activities in the field of culture.

Art does not always occupy its rightful place in contemporary educational practice; it is often treated in a superficial and instrumental manner. Its essence as an end in itself is then lost. Many contemporary educational concepts establish art as one of the pillars of education and emphasize its importance in developing 21st-century competencies. Reflection on visual art as a subject of pedagogical considerations therefore seems to be a current issue, especially in the era of image culture. According to J. Skutnik (2004), "new art cannot be ignored in education. Contrary to appearances, it contains a clear educational and upbringing potential [...] it is a kind of mirror in which contemporary people see themselves [...], each seeking their place in this world, which is their reality" (p. 88). According to the author, the primary educational value of art is not only the conveyance of specific content, but above all, the unique method of communication, achievable exclusively through art (Ibid., p. 86). A necessary condition for the value of art to emerge in education is understanding its dialogical nature and recognizing it as an independent and equivalent value (Ibid., p. 87).

2. THE PICTUREBOOK AS AN ART OBJECT

A special kind of creativity is art created with the youngest audience in mind. This area is perceived as a valuable medium supporting child development. Its potential is promoted by valuable creative activities undertaken by educators, teachers, and artists in many areas of non-formal education (including the educational activities of cultural institutions, publishing houses, cultural organizations, etc.). Among the many areas of contemporary art for children, the picturebook genre is worth mentioning, representing one of the paths continuing the rich tradition of the Polish School of Illustration (Boguszewska, 2018).

Picturebooks (except for textless books) address the reader through two linguistic codes: visual and verbal. However, it is most often the visual layer that dominates the overall message. A crucial feature of the picture book genre is the coherence of the graphic, typographic, and editorial concepts. The narrative is constructed not only through the synergy of image and word, but also through paratext, which encompasses all the details that constitute the book's architecture. Attention to detail and a consistently implemented publishing concept make picturebooks a distinguished work. Lawrence R. Sipe (2001) emphasizes that the harmonious combination of all the elements of a book creates specific sequences and relationships that may prove crucial for the full understanding of the message (p. 24).

Małgorzata Cackowska (2017) notes that: "picturebooks, due to their formal features, are treated as beautiful objects – artifacts" (p. 24) and classifies them as works of art created by the creator "for the recipient and their aesthetic experience" (pp. 14–16). Many scholars, such as Barbara Bader, Barbara Z. Kiefer, Perry Nodelman, Maria Nikolajeva, L.R. Sipe, and others, emphasize the artistic nature of the message and form of picturebooks, considering them works of art. M. Cackowska attributes exceptional artistic value to works in which the image and word originate from the hand of a single author. These books, defined as artists' books are distinguished by "the thread of conscious artistic choices of style and means of expression, as well as the position of the artists in relation to the text, how they change or develop the meaning of the image in the book, what boundaries [...] they cross in the pictorial representation of the world" (Cackowska, 2017, p. 16). This category encompasses a significant portion of the work of Iwona Chmielewska, a renowned Polish illustrator and, above all, creator of picturebooks. Her works constitute an intellectual adventure for researchers from various disciplines, demonstrating that they can be considered on many levels and in various contexts.

3. CONTEXTS OF AN AUTHENTIC ENCOUNTER WITH ART

This article focuses primarily on the aesthetic and pedagogical dimensions of picturebooks. The aim of the presented interpretation is to identify attributes of Iwona Chmielewska's work that are important in the context of a child's encounter with art. Citing J. Skutnik (2004, p. 103), the essence of the encounter with art is considered to be the authenticity of the work and a dialogical relationship.

The first category emphasizes the values resulting from contact with authentic art objects. The superiority of original works over copies in an educational context was emphasized by S. Szuman (1975), who wrote that only original works "can lead to the recipients' knowledge, experience, and adequately experience works of art" (p. 118). In this respect, the picturebook exhibits a certain uniqueness. On the one hand, it is undoubtedly a cultural artifact of high aesthetic value. At the same time, however, as an object of applied art, it has the potential to exist in a child's immediate environment, becoming an artifact of everyday life. The dialogical dimension of encountering art suggests an interaction between the creator and the viewer. The narrative, expression, and form of a work, in close relationship, create an open space for multi-level interpretation. This approach to art has been further developed in theories emphasizing the performative dimension of works. Examples include Umberto Eco's theory of open work and Hans Georg Gadamer's dialogical hermeneutics. In both cases, the work is complemented by an encounter with the viewer, understood as a process of interpretation and meaning-making.

The category of dialogicity can also be considered in relation to the features of the work itself. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1984, pp. 6–7) considers the following to be key: polyphony, understood as the coexistence of different, autonomous voices and perspectives; interactivity, or the emergence of meanings in dialogue between the work and the recipient; openness, consisting in the absence of imposed, closed meanings; relationality, referring to the mutual interaction and complementation of the elements of the work's structure; dynamism and actualization of meaning, indicating the processual nature of interpretation; and autonomy of voices, emphasizing the distinct logic and perspective of the individual components of the work. Although the above set was developed based on literary works, its universality allows for the application of these characteristics to visual representations.

As J. Skutnik (2008) writes, "an encounter with art understood as the fulfillment of a dialogical relationship with a work of art may become apparent already in childhood and should accompany an individual throughout life as a kind of permanent experience, implying a deep context of contact with art" (p. 159).

4. SUBJECT AND METHOD OF INTERPRETATION

I. Chmielewska's works are characterized by the privileged role of the visual layer, which, in synergy with the words and the entire architecture of the book, together build a narrative. The specificity of the research

subject, marked by visuality, is exceptionally amenable to a qualitative research approach (Sztompka, 2012), which seems most appropriate in relation to cultural artifacts. The analysis and interpretation of a work of art, in this case the phenomenon of Chmielewska's picturebook, conducted from a pedagogical perspective assumes its humanistic evaluation (Kubinowski, 2017, p. 18).

The collected research material was analyzed using compositional interpretation, proposed by Gilian Rose as part of a critical approach to visual social studies. The essence of this method is to see "an image for what it is, not for what it does, or how it was or is used" (Rose, 2010, p. 58). A researcher seeking meaning focuses primarily on the image itself and its compositional modality (see Rose, 2010, p. 58). The key to receiving the message is immersion in the language of visual arts, its elements (e.g., line, spot, color, texture, etc.), principles (e.g., types of composition, color palettes), and relationships (e.g., contrasts, harmonies).

Rose (2010) emphasizes that the image itself has the power to influence and therefore requires careful observation. She believes that images attract viewers' attention and, in some way, influence them through their appearance (p. 57). An interpretation based on this understanding of the picture book in relation to its visual and material qualities corresponds to a dialogical approach to the encounter behind art.

The subject of this analysis is Iwona Chmielewska's picturebook. The research sample included 12 artists' books published in Poland between 2006 and 2020 (Chmielewska, 2006, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015a, 2015b, 2018, 2020). The choice of Iwona Chmielewska was determined by the artist's stature and international recognition in the field of illustration and children's books.

5. THE OPENNESS OF A PICTURE BOOK TO DIALOGUE WITH THE CHILD

A valuable work of art reflects many characteristics of a child's personality. Among them, J. Skutnik (2004) lists: innate sensitivity and openness, emotional engagement, a willingness to indulge in sensory experiences, spontaneity and freedom in the use of symbols, a searching attitude, the courage to ask questions, authenticity in contact with the Other, and a fascination and curiosity about ordinary things (pp. 103-104). These characteristics can be activated on many levels during a child's encounter with Chmielewska's picturebooks.

A key characteristic of Chmielewska's picturebooks is their openness to the reader. This is reflected in various elements of the book's form and content, which in various ways invite the reader to participate in discovering and adding to the story. The book's narrative is completed through the reader's interpretation, who enriches it with their own experiences, ways of experiencing and understanding reality, as well as their doubts and questions. On the one hand, we are talking about the less tangible aspects of engaging in work, and on the other, about the meanings ascribed to it.

In Chmielewska's books, the author's sensitivity meets that of the potential reader, which is evident in two dimensions: emotionality and sensuality (Ludwiczak, 2024). The book appeals to the realm of feelings and emotions both directly through the content contained in words and images, and indirectly through artistic means. These are revealed through the characters' expressions: gestures, facial expressions, poses, and motifs depicting interpersonal relationships: partnerships, friendships, family, and intergenerational. An example of this depiction of family and generational bonds, as represented by the following excerpt from one of the works:

From then on, the tablecloth became even more beloved and even more of a souvenir.

It is now a memento of my grandmother, my mother, and me. (Chmielewska, 2012, p.)

The narratives portray the characters in various everyday situations and emotional states. They non-judgmentally emphasize the need to express emotions and feelings and demonstrate the power of self-awareness and the strength of connection. References to emotions are also present in symbols, contexts, and details, dedicated to the viewer's attentiveness. Visual expressions such as color, chiaroscuro, texture, perspective, and composition enhance their impact. They allow the viewer to experience a full range of emotions, encompassed by veiled elements of comedy and tragedy, as well as subtle details of the aesthetics of the past and an atmosphere of intimacy.

An important feature of Chmielewska's work, corresponding to childhood sensory sensitivity, is sensuality (Ludwiczak, 2024). It concerns the ennoblement of the senses in experiencing reality and encourages reflection on their role in life. Themes related to sensory perception are explored in both the visual and literary layers, for example:

He who sees doesn't even know what a precious treasure he receives as a gift.

He simply opens them every day, and they guide him [...]

And he can't imagine them not being there. [...]

He who doesn't see, receives a different treasure as a gift [...]

He can find, what he's looking for. [...]

And feel happy like everyone else –

He who sees and he who doesn't see. (Chmielewska 2014c, s.p.)

The illustrations emphasize sensory experiences in depicting everyday, natural, and intimate situations, such as a soothing bath, a walk in a rainy, windy day, farm work, or someone whispering in someone's ear. They engage the imagination and evoke experiences familiar to the viewer: the scent of flowers, the softness of yarn, a gust of wind, the smoothness of a piano keyboard, etc. A common technique in the analyzed picturebooks is the use of close-up shots of fragmented figures, whose presence is indicated only by the images of hands, eyes, and mouths. The artist's craftsmanship lends the books a distinct sensuality. This is evident in the selection of materials used to create illustrations (fabrics, old prints, lace, dried plants, etc.), the color palette (muted and off-kilter hues, including browns, grays, ochres, accents of blue and red), and the artistic technique (collage, sewing, embroidery, crayon drawings, etc.). These elements are complemented by editorial touches that enhance each volume (gilded edges of the book block, cover embossing, cutouts, paper texture). These meticulously crafted pieces, full of subtle details, foster contemplation and emotional and sensual engagement.

A characteristic of Chmielewska's work that responds to a child's natural inclination to freely use symbols is its poetic quality (Ludwiczak, 2024). The narrative form often includes a metaphorical invitation to co-create the work. In this act, the child's joy in action becomes an impulse to experiment with image and text and to complement the narrative through their own interpretive strategies. The poetic quality in Chmielewska's picturebooks encompasses non-literal themes, presenting the world through metaphors and serving as a pretext for asking questions. In these representations, content and form complement each other, jointly creating new meanings. These take the form of multi-layered visual metaphors and, at other times, details marked by symbolism. Examples of metaphorical messages include surrealist motifs, optical illusions, and literary devices such as personification, animation, and periphrasis.

Pokój szykuje się do snu.

Ciemno się robi we wszystkich kątach

– Raz dwa trzy cztery (Chmielewska, 2018, s.p.)

The narrative of many of Chmielewska's works is based on a recurring visual motif (e.g., a silhouette) and the unification of form with ambiguous content. This inspires the viewer to imagine further visual transformations and create new meanings. In many picturebooks, the symbolic space in which the book's narrative can resonate with the viewer's interpretation is provided by the unprinted background spaces. These empty planes emphasize the poetic dimension of Chmielewska's work.

Another significant feature of Chmielewska's picturebooks is relativization, which involves presenting phenomena in a relational and contextual manner (Ludwiczak, 2024). This approach fosters an exploratory attitude, encouraging readers to examine reality from various perspectives and deepen their understanding of observed situations. These themes emphasize openness to difference, multiple perspectives, and the diversity of human experiences. Chmielewska's books feature characters representing a broad spectrum of everyday life: children, the elderly, people with disabilities, as well as historical figures portrayed without pathos, but in a close and human way. They are captured in moments of work, rest, celebrating important moments, sleeping, taking on challenges, etc. Each of these situations is treated with equal attention and contributes significantly to the creation of the narrative. These motifs foster an authentic encounter with the Other, without hierarchizing experiences or simplifying emotions. The diverse emotional states of the characters reveal the ordinariness and complexity of everyday life. They encourage empathy, sensitivity, and attentive companionship with others.

Gdy dwoje ludzie żyje razem,

to jest im łatwiej, bo są razem

i jest im trudniej, bo są razem. (Chmielewska, 2014 s.p.)

Relativization also appears in the formal solutions of Chmielewska's works, for example, in the various ways of capturing depth in the visual layer. In some illustrations, artistic perspective is clearly marked through the use of lines, in others through a backstage arrangement of plane forms. There is also a compositional arrangement in which objects placed centrally against a plain unprinted background appear suspended in an unlimited space. The arrangement of elements on a spread places the viewer in a specific relationship to the representation. This allows the viewer to observe the scene from a specific perspective, for example, from above (bird's-eye perspective), from below (frog perspective), or straight on.

One of the natural childlike tendencies mentioned by J. Skutnik is a fascination and curiosity about ordinary things. Children naturally endow objects with meaning, a consequence of their symbolic and emotional way of thinking. In Chmielewska's picturebooks, everyday artifacts occupy a special place. They play a key role in the narrative centered around human stories. They serve as traces of the past and witnesses to events.

You can write a book about anything.

And anything will be useful in it.

Even four ordinary bowls. (Chmielewska, 2013b, s.p.)

Affirmation of everyday life (Ludwiczak, 2024) explores themes in Chmielewska's work related to the material human environment, everyday activities, and the ennoblement of simplicity. A distinctive feature of Chmielewska's picture books is their consistently developed visual narrative, for example, utilizing the obverse-reverse relationship. The aesthetic conventions of these works often tend toward minimalism and concise form, depicting the world in a realistic manner. Equally characteristic of these works is a tendency toward linearity and flatness. These features largely correlate with the technique and materials used to create illustrations. All works utilize traditional analog techniques such as pencil, crayon, watercolor, and sewing, sometimes woven into collages using fabrics, lace, old prints, dried flowers, yarn, and more. This method of work celebrates the work of human hands, an ethos repeatedly emphasized by the subject matter of the illustrations.

6. CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Iwona Chmielewska's picturebooks are characterized by many categories attributed to contemporary works of art. As J. Skutnik (2004) writes, "new art is the art of our times, our dilemmas, our questions, our aspirations, our fascinations and fears," which is why "her representations are becoming important stimuli for the educational process today" (pp. 103–104). According to K. Olbrycht (1987), the essence of an encounter with art, apart from being subjected to aesthetic experiences, is revealed in the ability to combine experiences and active search for different cognitive perspectives.

I. Chmielewska's picturebooks, as works of art, intertwine two perspectives: the creator's message and the reader's interpretation. These works offer specific ways of looking at the world. They don't provide ready-made answers but rather teach us to ask questions and reflect. They encourage us to be courageous in our subjective experience of the world and to search for our own identity. The message of Iwona Chmielewska's original works is incredibly powerful.

Chmielewska's picturebook, due to its unique attributes, becomes a dialogue partner for the child. This suggests the possibility of an authentic encounter with the work. This artifact becomes a tool for interactive experiences. It breaks the rule of linear narrative reading and encourages the creation of meaning. It also brings to light topics that are uncomfortable, ambiguous, or seemingly trivial. It addresses topics close to the child (and every person), while simultaneously transcending this and enriching the experience. Chmielewska's picturebook is full of respect for each reader. It establishes the child as an equal recipient of art and co-creator of the narrative. It also creates a space for strengthening the child's subjectivity and sharing the valuable experiences inspired by the book between children and adults.

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