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Pictorial Narratives in the Visual Artwork of Iwona Siwek-Front

Abstract

The paper analyses the artwork of Iwona Siwek-Front, a little-known artist, who is especially interesting due to the transmedial nature of her artistic expression. Her work is part of a modern trend in art at the borderline between literature, film, and painting. The relation between artworks and the poetics of comics is studied here by using a set of instruments consisting of cognitive comic book poetics enriched with the assumptions of the psychoanalysis of drawing, as well as the tools proposed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen for reading multimodal utterances. The study reveals that the artist employs unconventional arrangements of comic-style panels, in which the viewer becomes a co-creator of the narrative, while the satirical and column-like elements give the works a distinctive character. The results of the analysis provide a better understanding of the mechanisms of integrating different artistic forms into contemporary art and indicate directions for further research on transgeneric practices in the visual arts. A careful analysis of Siwek-Front's works allows for greater understanding of the evolution of contemporary artistic forms.

transmediality; comics; multimodality; painting; Iwona Siwek-Front

1.

Comics, as a genre straddling the borders of literature, film and painting, continue to evolve, giving rise to a number of definitions in literature. According to Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz, the continuing innovations implemented by artists are the major strength of the genre, as its flexible form aids creative experimentation in response to the ever-changing expectations of contemporary audiences, particularly regarding the visual aspect of comics. A valuable contribution to the research into the unique nature of the genre is provided by the historical study of comics compiled by Jerzy Szyłak, who identifies a fundamental principle underlying comics as a genre, namely the sequential arrangement of the comic panels, which, though subordinated to the narrative, serves as the structural core of the comic book, thus distinguishing it from a picture or painting. The message is generated not by the stand alone aesthetic value of an individual image but by the relationships between successive panels, which form a coherent narrative whole. Hence the name for the genre, i.e., *comic strip* (Szyłak 1999: 14). Comics were first perceived as a separate genre in the 19th century, following cultural and technological developments in the growth of the illustrated press and advances in image reproduction techniques. At that time, the deliberate use of schematic, simplified representations of reality (e.g., a human figure reduced to a silhouette) became common practice. However, this simplification did not stem from insufficient creative competence but was a functional approach, subordinate to the primary narrative objective. The actual priority was to deliver a specific storyline; the dynamics of events and the relationships between characters, rather than to showcase the aesthetic merits of traditional art. Thus, comics should be regarded as a medium of a distinct artistic paradigm, where meaning is generated through the interaction and sequencing of panels as well as the verbal layer (e.g., speech bubbles). The independence of comics as an art form originates from the particular organisation of the visual narration. To stress this unique feature, Will Eisner coined the term *sequential art* (Eisner 1990: 5). As studies of the comic genre have progressed, various research categories have emerged, one notable example being a scientific study by Paweł Gąsowski entitled *Wprowadzenie do kognitywnej poetyki komiksu* [Introduction to the Cognitive Poetics of Comics], which provides an insightful analysis of the poetics of comics, enhancing

the mechanisms of reception by expanding the existing set of interpretative tools. This paper largely draws upon the system for decoding comics based on the interdisciplinary framework presented by Gąsowski.

This article also presents a perspective on the comic book as a published series, where the arrangement of volumes, their numbering as well as their visual or editorial consistency generate additional meanings, adding to the studies that transcend the boundaries of an internal analysis of the visual-linguistic message. Not only does this paper discuss comics as a genealogical construct, a synthesis of various genres (Sęk-Iwanek 2023: 97–98), thus fitting within the concept of a collection, but it also emphasises the flexibility of comics, echoing Jerzy Szyłak, who argues that comic-style stylistics is developed through a process of selection, where the artist does not need to employ all components which have been identified as typical of comics.

The unity of the artistic structure within a comic book lies in the fact that it is a story told through images accompanied by sparse text: dialogue and, less often, a brief commentary (Kopaliński 1994: 269), as Bernard Toussaint aptly states when describing the aesthetics of comics as an iconolinguistic unity (Toussaint 1976: 82).¹ Image and text are condensed, expressed concisely, and subject to a particular symbolisation called *ideogrammatization*, which builds their rebus-like nature. However, this interpretation could be considered an oversimplification, as comics employ a wide range of individualised representations (a plethora of styles and forms), whereas rebuses rely on symbols representing real objects (Toeplitz 1985: 22). Three core components of comics are: a recurring protagonist, the sequential arrangement of the panels, and dialogue within speech bubbles (Waugh 1947: 14). Jerzy Szyłak argues that yet another distinctive feature of this comic-style technique is its simplified depictions of characters and settings, its sharp linework, and the panelling that builds a sense of narrative flow (Szyłak 1998: 40). Comic artists often approach these norms with a degree of flexibility, adapting their creation to suit their individual style whilst still retaining comic-book qualities. As a result, such instances of transmedia narratology (Kaczmarczyk 2017: 34) — which unfold across both written and visual media — have become a subject of interest among cognitive researchers.

Comics in Poland were influenced by the partitions that preceded the regaining of independence in 1918, advances in the press, and the search for effective communication with the general public, which all greatly increased the appeal and widespread popularity of comic strips. In the past, they were seen as an ideal medium for promoting ideological slogans while circumventing censorship under the guise of harmless, humorous storytelling. The Second World War significantly curtailed any artistic activity, including the Polish comics scene, which only regained its full momentum during the politically transformative 1990s. This coincided with Iwona Siwek-Front's time at the Faculty of Graphic Arts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, where she attended the woodcut studio led by Prof. Jerzy Kucia and Prof. Krzysztof Kiwerski from 1989 to 1994. In 1991, she was a scholarship holder at Emily Carr University of Art and Design, in which

¹ “What one might consider *drawing* as opposed to text — proceeding from basic, not to say simplistic, premises — functions in comics as an iconolinguistic unity, rooted in mutual complementarity: the writing-drawing nexus. Consequently, this represents a system of *internal dependencies* characterised by the ceaseless interplay between the graphic image and the written word” (Toussaint 1976: 82).

the illusion of movement was created by the rapid display of sequenced still images depicting the successive phases of a given event (frame-by-frame animation). Thus, it should come as no surprise that her artistic and academic interests then revolved around animated film. The characters and settings in animated films at that time were drawn by hand, which naturally parallels comic books. However, while the two genres are closely linked by the shared visual language — featuring a common aesthetic, simplified drawings, stylised linework and a sequential arrangement of frames or panels, complemented by the written word — the fundamental difference lies in how they are received by the audience. Being a static, visual-verbal art form, the comic book allows for a certain degree of perceptive freedom, i.e., the reader can proceed at their own preferred pace, thus having more time for interpretation. In contrast, the animated film, as a dynamic and audiovisual medium, dictates the time spent decoding the sequential scenes.

Given the growth of Polish comics and how they have flourished in the worlds of advertising and politics, it is hardly surprising that Iwona Siwek-Front turned to the comic-book aesthetic to express her social commitment. The field of comic books is dominated by men, with only two Polish female creators commonly mentioned: Agnieszka Papis, the author of *Komiks. Antologia komiksu polskiego. Najlepsi młodzi rysownicy* [Comics. An Anthology of Polish Comics. The Best Young Artists] (Papis 2000) and Aleksandra Czubek-Spanowicz, a painter and illustrator. Both were 1994 Grand Prix winners at the 5th National Convention of Comic Book Creators in Łódź. In 2003, more women made their debuts on the Polish comics scene, including Joanna Karpowicz, who employs traditional painting techniques in her comics, and Dagmara Matuszak, who made her mark as the author of a war-themed comic book called *Wrześniowe przedpołudnie* [One September Morning]. Comics by female authors are now being recognised, both in Poland and abroad, a fact noted by Michał Błazejczyk, editor-in-chief of the magazine *Zeszyty Komiksowe*, one issue of which, in 2005, being devoted entirely to female comics artists (*Kobiety w komiksie* 2005). It is surprising that, notwithstanding the scarcity of women in the field, the female pioneers of comics still remain either unacknowledged or are discussed in a muted voice.

When attempting to clarify what is a comic, one is confronted with concepts that vary only in subtle details, including the graphic novel, picture book, dual-medium or multimodal art, iconotext, and iconolinguistic unity. What emerges from this tangled web of concepts (when one attempts to systematise facts and stages in the development of comics) is the artist with their imagination unrestrained by terminology, an artist who creates works of unique identity that often only nod at the emerging trends as defined by researchers.

2.

This article focuses on the aesthetic of comics, addressing aspects of comic-style poetics by analysing the artwork of Iwona Siwek-Front (born in 1967 in Kraków), one of the female pioneers of the comic form in Poland. As early as the 1980s, she produced *Szkicowniki* [Sketchbooks] — A4-sized notebooks of 20 pages containing drawings made with felt-tip pens and coloured pencils, which heralded her future artistic and academic achievements, e.g., a series of 2009 comic-style paintings exhibited at the Department of Intermedia at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. Her early days at the Academy,

under the tutelage of professors Franciszek Bunsch, Jerzy Kucia and Krzysztof Kiwerski, resulted in the creation of a series of visual, pictorial narratives called *Dzienniki Telewizyjne* [Television Journals], which showed how artistically oriented she was towards linguistic-visual works of a journalistic nature. These creations were a documentation of events seen on the streets of Kraków, whether from the balcony of her studio flat on Wiślna Street, or during gatherings at the Vis-à-Vis Bar on the Main Market Square (where she still enjoys friendly conversations with fellow artists).

Her art is by no means monotonous; it constantly surprises with its subject matter and style. One time it is an oil painting bursting with vibrant colours, another it is a more modest piece created with ink or a few coloured pencils, or a monochrome drawing executed in black felt-tip pen. Formalistically, many of her works reflect the aesthetics of comics, including *Komiksy na metry* [Comics by the Metre], *Neurony* [Neurones]; (2011) and the drawings found on the walls of the Vis-à-Vis Bar, which depict its life and those of its patrons. Even her doctoral thesis contains elements of comics.



Fig. 1. Iwona Siwek-Front, a piece from the series called *Baba lukrowana z duszą nieczystą* [The Sugar-Coated Crumpet with an Impure Soul], Kraków²

² Translation of the text in the drawing:
“JA JUŻ NIE WIEM CZEGO CHCĘ...” — I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT I WANT ANY-MORE...

Many of her works unquestionably make the viewer feel as if they are looking at a comic panel in which image correlates with text. Scott McCloud claims that the correlation between text and image in comics relies on the close *collaboration* of the two in constructing a meaning. However, he also lists other types of interaction between text and image, e.g., when the latter illustrates the former without adding any extra information; when the image is superior and the text merely serves as a “soundtrack;” or when text and image within a given panel are redundant to each other (duo-specific), i.e., they essentially convey the same thing — the verbal and visual layers convey identical content (McCloud 2015: 153–155). Additional content may also be conveyed by how dynamic the linework is, and by the colour, shape and font size (Szcześna 2011: 305–306), with speech bubbles replacing phrases like “he said” or “she thought,” etc. (Toeplitz 1985: 7).³

The abovementioned norms and principles are the basis for analysing Siwek-Front’s works to determine how she employs the comic-like structure. Drawing on knowledge of experts in the field, this article not only examines the mechanisms of perception underlying the act of reading comics in general, but it also analyses image and text in her artwork, with particular focus on typographical features. Employing the tools for interpreting visual planes proposed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, this paper also indicates the informative value conveyed by the compositions based on a centre-margin layout — a compositional approach frequently employed by the artist in question (and explained below). These tools also allow Siwek-Front’s works to be analysed from the perspective of multimodality, where multimodal composition refers to how different visual and textual components are arranged into a coherent semantic structure. In any study of visual communication, it is vital to scrutinise not only representational relationships (determining what is being depicted) and interactive relationships (pertaining to how the image interacts with the audience), but also the composition itself, i.e., how individual components are arranged within the space of a single image or a more complex visual arrangement. It is the composition that integrates meanings and enables them to be interpreted as a holistic message.

This is achieved through three fundamental systems of visual arrangement: informative value, salience (prominence) and framing. As regards positioning within the visual space, informative value may be found on three main axes: left-right, top-bottom and centre-margin. In the first (horizontal) layout, components on the left are usually deemed as “already known,” representing a familiar starting point for the viewer, whilst those on the right are “fresh,” thus conveying key or critical information that requires special attention. In the second (vertical) layout, the upper section of the composition represents the “ideal” — that is, a more general, abstract or emotional vision of the message, while the lower section refers to “reality,” displaying specific, detailed and practical information. Lastly, the focal element within a centre-margin layout is the core of the meaning, whilst the components on the margins serve a supplementary or subordinate function.

³ The Italian term *fumetti* — literally meaning *little puffs of smoke* — serves as a metonym for comics; it alludes to the convention, quintessential to the medium, of inscribing spoken dialogue or acoustic effects within speech bubbles (Toeplitz 1985: 7).

Another key aspect of compositional arrangement is salience (prominence), i.e., the degree to which individual visual components stand out from the rest. The viewer's attention is more strongly attracted to certain components than others due to size, colour, contrast, sharpness, brightness, or their location in the foreground, as intended by the artist.

The third key mechanism is framing, which is the presence or absence of visual boundaries separating the individual components of a given composition. Dividing lines, frames or other visual devices may imply that the components are either related to or distinct from one another. Framing affects the interpretation of the correlations between the components within a given image.

The principles of the multimodal composition apply to both single images and complex visual layouts, i.e., magazine pages, advertisements, school textbooks, websites, etc. In multimodal layouts, meaning emerges not from the straightforward summation of individual components, but from their interaction and how they are integrated within a single composition (Kress, van Leeuwen 2006: 177–212). This multimodal approach allows for a multifaceted interpretation of the interrelationships between text and image that constitute the iconolinguistic composition of Iwona Siwek-Front's works.

Comics (much like films) employ framing, usually confined to a single panel. In Siwek-Front's works, showing the protagonist from the waist up is most common. While this approach to depicting human figures is not usually considered of great importance, the effects it has on the works under study imply that it may actually have a deeper purpose. What proves helpful here is a psychological assessment method known as a projective test (Popek 2010: 376–377), the results of which indicate that drawing large characters which fill almost the entire panel stems from her desire to be in the limelight (Popek 2010: 388–392), a conclusion further supported when other components of her multimodal artistic messages are interpreted.

Iwona Siwek-Front's uses a square or rectangular comic panel (a shape typical of traditional art of painting) to delineate the boundaries of the composition, a panel that also serves an enclosing purpose, isolating a selected section of reality. A departure from the comic-style convention here is the absence of a shared plane (a tier) for the individual panels, which the artist sees as single, separate works of art rather than a series of typical comic panels meant to narrate a given story. As a result, the arrangement of these individual panels can be changed at random, while their final layout depends on the audience, who can combine the panels into a sequence of their choice, thus making them co-creators of the narrative.

However, certain deviations from this arrangement of individual panels can also be observed. The themes of her works follow the rhythm of the seasons, the cycle of nature, and the sequence of religious festivals and daily activities. The events captured also unfold against the backdrop of the daily lives of Kraków's residents, often the regulars of various establishments that are frequented after dark. In this regard, the artist herself once commented on an exhibition called *Nocne kobiety* [Ladies of the Night] (2010): "I spin stories about the ladies without whom the urban semiosphere would be incomplete" (*Gazeta*... 2011). Thus, the sequence of particular works is determined by the semantics in their titles, which can refer to consecutive days of the week: *Baba wtorkowa pije kawę* [Tuesday's Crumpet Drinks Coffee], *Baba na środę* [Wednesday's Crumpet]; consecutive festive or holiday periods: *Baba grudniowa* [December's Crumpet], *Baba*

poświęteczna [Post-Christmas Crumpet], *Środa popielcowa* [Ash Wednesday], or times of day: *Baba w nocy* [The Night-Time Crumpet]. The titles are a commentary on the scenes depicted — portraying social, cultural and religious topics that resonate with the artist's sociological sensibility. Although the titles appear outside the visual space of the image when seen on her Facebook page, they still become part of a multimedia phenomenon, which Hartmut Stöckl describes as “text and communication initiated through technical media” (Stöckl 2015: 85). The noun “baba” (crumpet), which occurs in almost every single title, carries extra information, commentary or allusions (*Słownik terminologii...* 2006: 127), implying that individual panels may be part of a larger series. However, it is only in conjunction with the image (and the text incorporated within it) that the titles become messages. Following Harald Burger's typology of texts (Stöckl 2015: 30), the works within the series called *Baba lukrowana z duszą nieczystą* [The Sugar-Coated Crumpet with an Impure Soul] are journalistic commentaries by theme; opinion-forming messages by purpose, and explanatory works by the manner in which the content is presented. Interestingly, the very title of the series is a word pun, foreshadowing the humorous and ambiguous nature of Siwek-Front's works. The phrase “baba lukrowana” carries a homonymic ambiguity: “baba” (crumpet) being a type of cake (Bundt cake) but also a colloquial word for a woman. The adjective “lukrowana” (sugar-coated) can refer to the cake, but also to a person, as “lukrować” (to sugarcoat) means to speak of someone more flatteringly than they deserve. Thus, “baba lukrowana” is an anthropomorphisation of a woman obscured by external glitz, yet possessing an impure, and thus sinful, soul.



Fig. 2. Iwona Siwek-Front, *Ale leje* [It's Pissing Down], Kraków, 2016⁴

⁴ Translation of the text in the drawing:
 “ALE LEJE!” — IT’S PISSING DOWN!
 “DOBRZE, ŻE NIE SRA” — THANK GOODNESS IT’S NOT SHITTING DOWN

According to Paweł Gąsowski, a drawing “[...] is a realm of conscious choice, selection, symbolic representations and subjective observations” (Gąsowski 2016: 77). Siwek-Front’s art is a projection of unique observations of reality, mostly depicting the relationship between men and women. She employs schematic figures typical of comic strips, eschewing meticulous mimesis so as not to dilute the essence of her message in a profusion of detail. Mieczysław Wallis refers to the extremely simplified iconic signs which Siwek-Front’s drawings are as “schemes” (Wallis 1983: 39). When drawing women, she underscores their superiority over men, by creating an independent, liberated heroine who flaunts her sexuality to the point of vulgarity. The artist accentuates female physicality, turning her heroines into provocative objects of desire. She makes a woman the protagonists of a story set in a masculine world.



Fig. 3. Iwona Siwek-Front, *Kupcie mi brylant* [Buy Me a Diamond], Kraków, 2016⁵

The composition of her comic-style panel centres around a single dominant component. Here, it is a visual element combining text and image within a centre-margin layout. Applying the tools developed and described by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen in *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design* helps identify a unidirectional reading pattern, leading from the focal element to the subordinate ones around it. The centre, which they call the “divine ruler” (Kress, van Leeuwen 2006: 197), is flanked by marginal components. For Siwek-Front, the point of reference is the woman, e.g., *Anioł w Miasteczku* [Angel in the Town] or *Anielskie opiekunki* [Angelic Guardians], who represents the archetype of strength and independence, along with immense reserves of nurturing care and love in its various guises. Typically, the work is intended

⁵ Translation of the text in the drawing:
 “KUPCIE MI BRYLANT TO BĘDĘ GRZECZNA” — BUY ME A DIAMOND AND I’LL BE GOOD
 “AKURAT” — YEAH... RIGHT.

to be read as dictated by the heroine, reflecting the artist's own value system. With a strong and decisive linework that signals self-confidence, she draws the curvaceous shapes of a female figure to fill virtually the entire panel, thus creating the impression that she unquestionably seeks to be the centre of attention and, by extension, displays high aspirations. Her long eyelashes around large eyes and her hair cascading in lush curls are attributes of sexuality, seduction, coquetry. Her round breasts, tightly encased in translucent clothing, stress not only the erotic overtones of her physicality but also the maternal role of women. Her broad shoulders, on the other hand, denote inner strength, while the teeth visible between fleshly lips (another frequent feature) represent the dissonance between sensuality and voracity, revealing a significant degree of hostility and aggression. This hostility and aggression are further amplified by the austere colour palette, which complements the linework and the general composition of the works, which are most often executed in black, a colour that evokes not only a sense of threat but also intrusiveness. As Maria Rzepińska notes: "Black has carried a negative connotation throughout the history of culture — it has always been regarded as the opposite of light. The negative psychological effects of the colour black are fully corroborated by modern psychology and psychotherapy" (Rzepińska 1983: 132). Siwek-Front's colour palette is occasionally enlivened by a touch of red, a colour synonymous with power. Red is often employed to accentuate the lips, and sometimes also the contours of a woman's figure, thereby reinforcing the impression of strength and dominance. Rzepińska explains the traditional reading of red as follows: "Red. The immense emotional and aesthetic significance of red originates from the ancient tradition of purple, the colour of power, emperorship and supreme priesthood. Since time immemorial, red has always been associated with the concepts of vitality, fire, blood, war, passion and fertility across all cultures" (Rzepińska 1983: 126).

Red and black are employed in the work entitled *Adoracja* [Adoration] (Siwek-Front 2014: 20). The eponymous oil painting of the series is dominated by the female figure filling almost the entire canvas. Her pale face stands in stark contrast to her black contoured, red lips. Her powerful figure, buxom, with a predatory hand resting on her hip, exudes arrogant self-assurance. Her shameless, bloodshot eyes compliment both the vulgar red lips and the unnaturally long cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth. No longer a woman, but a "baba" (crumpet) endowed with an abundance of feminine attributes that ooze sweetness, "sugar-coated" desires and erotic dreams. The black, red and white colour palette lend a ritualistic quality to the scene, depicting a licentious, menacing goddess surrounded by adorers. The interpretation of the painting itself requires no commentary from the artist, and yet at the bottom of the canvas, right where the pubic mound is, she has added a tiny inscription that reads "ADORACJA" [ADORATION], followed by "Iwona Siwek-Front, 19/11/2013, 10:38 am, +8°C."

The hierarchical structure of the composition arises from the carefully planned organisation on the canvas, which defines the semiotic interaction between image and text. The initial intention is to capture the viewer's attention through a top-down visual effect. The viewer is then expected to notice the details of the image, before finally fixing their gaze on the tiny inscription just above the lower edge of the canvas. By incorporating the text into the image — and here, literally onto a woman's body (her womb), the question is raised of how women are objectivised, thus leading to a reflection on the

power relations between the sexes and the mechanisms that determine a woman's place in society. The text and the image create a simultaneous, comprehensively perceived and holistic message.

In this regard, Karen Schriver (Schriver 1997: 360–420) identifies five fundamental types of relationship between image and text: “Text and image may be redundant when duplicating the same information; they may be complementary if the content they convey complements one another, thus contributing to a holistic understanding of the message; they may be supplementary when one component completes another, dominant one; they may also be used in an integrative or juxtapositional manner [...]” The final, fifth type from Schriver is called *stage-setting*, “which occurs when one mode (medium) anticipates the content or idea later presented in another” (Bucher 2015: 85). Her classification clearly shows that the relationship between text and image is not exclusively uniform but rather multidimensional, and dependant on the communicative context. It also confirms that — when analysing multimodal arrangements — one should not focus entirely on examining individual components, as their dynamic interdependence must also be considered.



Fig. 4. Iwona Siwek-Front, *Adoracja* [Adoration], oil on canvas, 140 × 100, Kraków, 2013

In *Adoracja* [Adoration], the woman shares the canvas with smaller figures of men, which are therefore secondary. Although many adoringly gaze at her, she seems to pay no heed to this, staring directly at the viewer, thus oozing an air of dominance, independence. This attitude is reflected in the linework — strong, dynamic, thick, expressive — which, the psychoanalysis of drawing can interpret as an expression of strength of character, assertiveness and authority.

Siwek-Front's paintings feature women with recurring attributes: cigarettes, alcohol and food. Phallic-shaped objects (e.g., cigarettes) raise questions about sexuality, while food (biscuits, slices of cake, etc.) are difficult to interpret unambiguously. However, all these attributes certainly evoke strong emotions, e.g., sweet treats are often consumed to lift one's spirits, much like alcohol. Thus, they also emphasise corporality and the need to satisfy physical, material needs.



Fig. 5, 6, 7. Iwona Siwek-Front, a piece from the series called *Baba na niedzielę* [Sunday's Crumpet], Kraków, 2016⁶

⁶ Translation of the text in the drawing:

"KOCHAM CIĘ" — I LOVE YOU

"BYŁAM NA MSZY, UGOTOWAŁAM OBIAD, A TERAZ IDE NA PROTEST" — I'VE BEEN TO MASS, COOKED DINNER, AND NOW I'M HEADING TO A PROTEST

"UWIELBIAM LENIWE NIEDZIELE" — I LOVE LAZY SUNDAYS

"NIC DZISIAJ NIE ROBIE!" — I AM DOING NOTHING TODAY!

"NIC!" — NOT A THING!

"ZMIENIAM OPONY NA ZIMOWE..." — I AM CHANGING TO WINTER TYRES...

"KIEDY?" — WHEN?

By choosing this particular organisation of the iconolinguistic message, the artist presents a certain world order where society is subordinated to women. She makes women the central protagonists of her visual, pictorial narratives, drawing inspiration from the events observed on the streets of Kraków. Her works feature city walls adorned with graffiti, busy major roads and a tangle of tram tracks. When asked what she finds most interesting as an artist, Siwek-Front replies: “Every day, I interpret the city my own way — the same city that has shaped my hooligan-artistic mentality, sealed by the modernist Young Poland spirit [...]” (*Gazeta*... 2011). Further, she adds about her images: “They’re snapshots of everyday life on the streets of Kraków, animations showing the city from the viewpoint of those who bring its streets and alleys to life, and visions glimpsed whilst flicking through TV channels” (*Gazeta*... 2012).

Siwek-Front transposes selected fragments of the real world into comic panels through her own lens, pairing them with text. The text and image mutually combine, acting as semiotic partners. At the same time, the manner in which the former is graphically rendered holds its own interpretive weight. It adopts certain visual qualities of image as noted by David Crystal, who identifies several semantically distinctive typographic features: “font style (italics, bolding, etc.), the use of upper and lower case [...], the application of a specific typeface (e.g., Gothic script with its sharp angles and dramatic curves), and the arrangement of elements on the page or a given plane” (Antos, Spitzmüller 2015: 186). Text and image interact to complement or amplify the meaning within an iconolinguistic message.

When analysing the properties of the font used in Siwek-Front’s works, the guidelines of graphology (which sees text as an image) should also be incorporated. Notably, she handwrites the verbal layer of her visual, pictorial narratives in capital letters, using neither printed letters nor stencils, thus preserving the distinctive qualities of her handwriting. This is what Aleksander Gieysztor calls the psychological dimension of handwriting, as it reveals the author’s personal traits (Gieysztor 2009: 29). Employing a graphological analysis of Siwek-Front’s handwriting allows for the exploration of her subconscious messages, thereby enriching the interpretation of her works. The handwriting features variable letter spacing, which in graphology is interpreted as dualism in thinking. Individuals with such handwriting tend to have both an intuitive and rational approach to life. Her handwriting can be classified as triangular in form, typical of persons determined to achieve their goals. Triangles pointing to the right support the conclusion that she is an ambitious person (Amend, Ruiz 2006: 114–115). The steady baseline reinforces this interpretation, reflecting stability (Amend, Ruiz 2006: 34), determination, perseverance and courage. The strokes in the letters “K” and “E” (Amend, Ruiz 2006: 163) also lend support to the notion of her high aspirations. What is more, the graphic style of the text helps indicate how the words are uttered, e.g., thin and fine letters may suggest a whisper, while bold type or capital letters loudness.

The shape of the letters and the weight of the lines perform a descriptive function (Gąsowski 2016: 220), complementing the image of the characters speaking. As Paweł Gąsowski puts it: “A properly designed typeface is capable of describing the traits of a given character in a comic book no worse than their actions, appearance or statements. A typeface can also hint at hidden intentions whenever its graphic form implies meanings different to those communicated by the image or the text itself [...]”

(Gąsowski 2016: 221). The visual form of the typeface — that is, the written words — can also be employed to implement acoustic effects, a quality that can be reinforced by punctuation marks (also possessing distinct iconographic features) and a common feature of statements uttered in Siwek-Front's works. Exclamation and question marks as well as ellipses attest to the intense emotional colouring of the dialogues. The iconicity of phonemes, words and sentences reinforces both their communicative purpose and their role in differentiating characters, allowing not only for the visual representation of words to be linked with that of sound but also with a specific protagonist (Gąsowski 2016: 211–212). In the works under study, there is no individualisation of speech, which can lead to the conclusion that all characters serve, at least to some extent, as the artist's *porte-parole*.

In these works, “textual semantic enclaves” (Pelc 1984: 16) are delineated by speech bubbles, whose form is also a semantic tool, given that “the speech bubble is simultaneously a carrier of information and the information itself” (Gąsowski 2016: 211–212), where the shape of the bubble can represent whether a particular sentence has actually been voiced or only thought. Although there is an almost infinite variety of shapes and forms, certain constant graphic patterns can be identified, e.g., a spiked speech bubble indicates shouting or screaming. The works under study feature classic representations of thought verbalisation, where the shape of speech bubbles typically resembles an ellipse with a tail pointing towards the source, denoting a neutral form of utterance. The artist focuses on expressing emotions through the iconicity of words and punctuation marks, whereas the typographic features of the script signal an unmistakable message.

A summary of the general formal qualities that situate the artwork in question within the genre of comics is best supported by an analysis of the form and content of two drawings from the series called *Baba na niedzielę* [Sunday's Crumpet], executed in ballpoint pen on paper. When faced with the narrative of “baba” (crumpet), the viewer is immersed in a subtle world of discreet codes and visual interplay between image and text. However, these works are not abstract, but simplified, and yet entirely unique and distinctive, creations. The comic-style “crumpets” are recurring portrayals of a woman (in a variety of everyday situations), underscoring her physicality and voluptuous figure. The hyperbolic representation of female physicality becomes the domain of visual expression. Each image seems to be autonomous, i.e., it does not have to be part of a sequence of images, nor does it need to fit into a linear narrative of a broader story. A typical comic-like feature of the works under study are speech bubbles, either emerging from the mouth to denote spoken dialogue or from the head to indicate thoughts. The extensive use of capital letters serves to intensify the expressive force of the message, ensuring each statement is articulated with clarity and resonance. Another distinctive feature of comic-style narratives is the capacity to depict the progression of events through static images which, when combined, create an impression of movement. The key to constructing a narrative sequence lies in the continuity between the situations depicted in the individual panels, achieved through minimal temporal shifts. Siwek-Front preserves this linearity by meticulously recording the date, and even the hour, of the composition. Although a clear cause-and-effect order is not always discernible between successive works, they still form a coherent sociological portrait of “baba”

(crumpet) as a representative figure of society, one where she is manifested as a demonic woman, a slothful woman, a devout woman, or a fallen woman. Thus, one may argue that Siwek-Front focuses on the psychological qualities of her protagonist, highlighting her volatility, dictated by dynamic external factors. The artist crafts a figure situated somewhere between reality, convention, imagination and satire, thereby transforming stereotypes through the lens of her own observations of reality.

3.

The purpose of this paper is not to resolve the ongoing academic dispute on the definition of what is a comic strip, but to interpret visual works intended to engage with pictorial narrative by drawing on the cognitive poetics of comics. In the search for her own unique language of expression, Iwona Siwek-Front employs a transcription of diverse semiotic categories, including language, design (graphic arrangement), film, literature, colour. She draws inspiration from snippets of conversations overheard on streets, in pubs and cafés; from media reports and from dialogues in television series. The interplay of image and text thus serves as a potent medium for observations driven by her journalistic inclinations. She creates out of a strong impulse to comment on contemporary social phenomena, directing the communicative process through the image, which acts as a rapid cognitive stimulus for the human brain due to its perceptual ease and powerful emotional impact. She simultaneously compels the audience to engage in more prolonged contemplation of the work so that they can gradually decipher the sequences of linguistic signs embedded therein. When combined with text, the image responds to the multisensory nature of human perception. Her works also reflect a deeply subjective stance on current affairs, suggesting that comics can function effectively as both visual and literary art. To assign a literary genre to her image-text compositions, one should view them not only as comic strips but also as visual *feuilletons* with a pronounced satirical inflection, as evidenced by the diversity of themes addressed; the lightness of storytelling paired with decorative flair; personal takes on social issues infused with humour, and the presence of an indispensable, often ironic commentary. Both the language and the situations depicted in her works should be interpreted through the prism of comic-strip poetics. They also exhibit hallmarks of irony and the grotesque, representing a synthesis of travesty, hyperbole, contrasts, and discrepancies between imagination and reality, or content and form. These features, along with the illogical, chaotically interconnected statements mimicking the fragmentary nature of conversation, parody and absurdity, situate her work within the tradition of satirical comedy. It is within this genre — the definition of which remains indefinite since “satire is neither homogeneous in its emotional colouring nor in terms of its form” (Dziemidok 1967: 95) — that the artist visualises the reality close to her heart: the situation of the modern individual, so ambiguous and multilayered in its psycho-spiritual dimension.

Transgeneric practices in the visual arts constitute a significant issue that merits further, more profound, analysis. The reference to the satirical nature of Iwona Siwek-Front’s works opens up a research trajectory to which the author of this article has devoted analytical attention.

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