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Joanna S. Ludwiczak

ORCID: 0000-0002-2072-4685
University of Lodz

Through Doodling to Visual Culture. "Alphadoodler" by Jan Bajtlik as a Tool for Supporting Child's Visual Competences

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ABSTRACT

Pictographic nature of modern culture initiated the demand for developing visual competences in children starting from early age, which has been mentioned by an increasing number of researchers. A child's environment contains a great quantity of visual stimuli, among which various visual qualities are mixed, i. e. infantile patterns and valuable artefacts. The purpose of this work is to take an attempt at interpreting "Alphadoodler" by Jan Bajtlik in terms of its form and contents as an example of art for children which introduces its audience into the world of visual culture. The qualitative analysis of the selected properties of the activity book was conducted using the method of compositional interpretation, which originates from the critical methodology of visual research. Based on the concept by Gilian Rose, selected issues from the book itself as an object of art, as well as certain aspects related to its production (context of the author) and its receipt (possible meaning) are discussed. The conclusions of the interpretation refer to the valuation of the activity book in the context of it being experienced by a child.

Visuality in a child's environment

Images anchored in the space around us are characteristic of modern culture. They have permeated all spheres of everyday reality through diverse technologies; it is difficult to deny their influence on the process of shaping social life by culture. This phenomenon is also present in the environment where children develop. In the age of ocular-centrism (Banks 2013: 39-40), undeveloped young recipients are completely defenceless against the mass of visual stimuli coming from all sides and directed at their attention. It should be emphasized that young children shape their preferences based mainly on fixed models. It sometimes happens that images seen in early years stay with us until the end of our lives, conditioning our future aesthetic choices (Szuman 1951; Ungeheuer-Gołąb 2015). Stefan Szuman believes that images surrounding us “model and shape our imagination in a specific way. What we were shown most frequently when we were still children, i. e. pictures hanging on the walls in our parents’ house or images in our first books, influenced our imagination and became fixed in it to a smaller or greater extent” (Szuman 1951: 10).

For a small child, visual perception is a tool that enables them to satisfy their natural curiosity of the world. There is no doubt, therefore, that all things in view may have a great effect on the development of many spheres of a child’s personality. Full responsibility for creating the nearest environment of a child rests with adults (parents, teachers), who construct a child’s space according to their own image of childhood (Klus-Stańska 2007). As shown in the report published in 2017 by the National Centre for Culture (NCK/GFK 2018) concerning cultural choices of child minders, preferences concerning aesthetics of books and other products for children are often dictated by screen media. The authors of the report assume that, in their choices, parents rely on the child’s preferences and, most of all, want to meet the child’s expectations. Most frequently, they choose articles (including books) with labels demonstrating their educational value and ones they classify as “pretty,” “nice,” “colourful,” and triggering only positive emotions. The research which refers to the above confirms that the infantile vision of childhood present in the consciousness of children, teachers, and in the objects found in the child’s environment themselves (books, toys, etc.) is very common. The so-called “children industry” is full of individualized products which determine their recipient explicitly. However, those efforts, which, at first, suggest that the child is a priority, are mostly a strategy of shaping consumer needs as early as in the youngest children.

Scientific discussions include the opinions which underline the issues of perceiving, by children, visual qualities of the material space with objects being part of it, which are marginalized in pedagogical practice (cf. Cackowska 2014). Pictographic nature of the current culture initiated the demand for shaping visual competences,

which has been mentioned by an increasing number of researchers. They agree that developing the aforementioned skills, called visual literacy, should become a mandatory task in children's education, one which creates a space for learning skills of separating and interpreting visual messages as well as making critical judgement and creating one's own visual signs and messages (cf. Pater-Ejgierd 2010; Dylak 2012). Shaping competences, understood as a continuous and long-lasting process leading to gaining knowledge and skills and creating traits of personality, means, with reference to visual education, "a skill of creative perception and expression (...), a skill of judging – aesthetic taste (...), social and moral sensitivity (...), aesthetic sensitivity (...), awareness of the function of art in human life (...), an attitude of respect for beauty and art" (Mazepa-Domagala, Wilk 2015: 92-93). The listed competences may be obtained through perceiving works of art and the child's own expression.

Manifesting the need to turn to a widely understood visual thinking, Rudolf Arnheim states that, in every-day life, the widest possible access to art is necessary. It is from the art that we should learn how to "confer a visual form to all aspects of life." The author attributes important functions to art and calls it "a powerful tool for enhancing the skills of perceiving, without which creative thinking is not possible in any discipline" (Arnheim 2011: 11). The artistic vision of the world in the form of an iconic message, i.e. symbols, codes, and signs, contained in images, reaches its recipients through the language of art. To learn that language, one requires conscious development, among other things through the motivation to commune with the works of art. Experiencing art refers to the humane culture of the recipient, influences the sense of vision, supports the processes of perceiving and recognizing the world, stimulates and activates imagination, triggers emotion, and develops sensitivity (Uberman 2005: 364-365). Contact with art intensifies perception of the audience by crossing the boundary of the standard view of visual images. It is a result of creating a work of art, by its author, based on a subjective interpretation of a topic at hand. Primary functions of a work of art may be performed by an appropriate book illustration, which a child naturally communes with during play and study (Boguszewska 2015: 127).

Art in a book for children

Most frequently, images co-exist together with a written text (Rose 2010: 31), which also may significantly interfere with the visible nature of the environment through its meaning and formal properties. Words may take the form of a visual presentation or merge with images in multimodal presentations (Dylak: 121). Even young children, who have not learned how to write or read yet, recognize logos of their favourite brands perfectly, ones which are present on various products dedicated to

children. This example shows that letters combined into words are seen by a child as images, through their artistic qualities, such as line, shape, colour, contrast etc. Here, we are dealing with a specific type of reception, which consists in looking at an appearance of a text rather than on the meaning it carries. Books for the youngest children are created using this convention, where the verbal and visual layer are intertwined inseparably and are connected with each other. A written word is materialised and has its artistic meaning. The logo-visual aspects of that type of books may be seen in their solid typographic form, i.e. an appropriate selection or design of typeface, font size, font density, colours, expression, proportions, composition etc. Those efforts “facilitate (...) recognition of a typographic sign itself, which, for a child recipient, is not transparent and does not send them directly and automatically to an abstract content, thought, or notion” (Karpowicz 2013: 179).

A well-designed book, which is an undoubted example of functional art, combines several disciplines of graphic design, in particular editorial graphics, illustration, and typography, which has been referred to above. In the best book designs, all elements of contents, form, and editorial work are subordinate to a consistent concept. The specificity of a contact with a book may make that book a particularly valuable medium in developing visual competences in a child and may have a useful effect on a broad development of the child’s personality. Many authors agree on the axiological meaning of an image in a book dedicated to the youngest readers (Szuman 1951: 13-22; Iwanicka: 2009: 309; Boguszewska 2015: 127; Centner-Guz 2017: 73-75). However, the data from the NCC research (NCK/GFK 2018) shows a lack of understanding and a clear reluctance of child minders and parents to the works of artistic value, such as “Where the Wild Things Are” by Maurice Sendak (Sendak 2014), which are recognized by the respondents as “strange,” “ugly,” or “not for children.”

Activity book as a visual object – research possibilities

Each sign of visual registration of world fragments is the world’s interpretation and does not show the world as it really is, which, as a consequence, translates into numerous possibilities of receiving and creating meanings. As demanded by many researchers in social sciences (e.g. Silverman 2008; Rose 2010; Sztompka 2012; Banks 2013), images should not be underestimated in a scientific reflection as their analysis may bring valuable cognitive results, in particular “in discovering dimensions of social life which are unknown or which have not been considered so far” (Banks 2013: 199). Gilian Rose assumes the existence of three areas in which meanings are created, i.e. the area of production, the area of an image (visual object) itself, and the area of reception. Each of them may be considered in more detail in three modalities:

technological, compositional, and social one (Rose 2010: 33-48). In the presented discussion, it is difficult to draw clear borderlines between the analysed areas. The discussion is focused on the visual object itself (its formal properties and contents) as well as the area of its production (the context of the author, techniques), and the area of reception (possible effect on a recipient). The analysis was conducted based on the compositional interpretation method (Rose 2010: 62-73).

The presented reflection concerns the activity book titled “Alphadoodler” by Jan Bajtlik (Bajtlik 2014) considered as a material visual object. During the selection of the research object, the deciding parameter was the criterion of uniqueness as compared to Polish activity books for children or even Polish books for children in general. That publication gained international recognition, confirmed by the award given to the author in the “Non Fiction” category at “Bologna Ragazzi Award” in 2015, which is the most prestigious award in the world for illustrations and books for children (<http://www.bolognachildrenbookfair.com/en/home/878.html> [access: 30.10.2018]). “Alphadoodler” was published in six languages, i. e. Polish, English, Italian, French, Spanish, and Catalanian.

The purpose of the research is to attempt to analyse, in terms of form and contents, “Alphadoodler” by Jan Bajtlik as an example of art for children, which introduces the audience in the world of visual art. The main research problem may be expressed with the question: Which aspects of the “Alphadoodler” activity book may support a child in obtaining visual competences?

The expression “activity book” is present, most of all, in publishing circles dealing with books and book illustrations for children, e.g. in websites of online bookshops, blogs, online forums, etc. Usually, it means a publication where centrefold pages are task sheets, which provoke the activity of readers, e.g. searching for elements, drawing a finger along shapes, designing, pasting, drawing etc. Among many types of activity books, a particular place is taken by books for artistic activities. Polish publishing offer includes many interesting books, which may be admired for their artistic merits as well as a creative approach to their topic (cf. Lange 2007; Bogucka, Tomiło 2014; Matoso 2015; Styszyńska, Koziński 2015; Czerniak-Chojnacka 2017).

Area of production – context of the author and technology

The manner and circumstances of creation or production of visual documents may have a great effect on their appearance and results they produce (Rose 2010: 34).

First, the context of the author should be mentioned, as it is his/her concept, creative process, and method that are combined into the final form of the book.

Jan Bajtlik was born in 1989. He graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, where he is now working on his doctoral thesis. His artistic achievements include many awards as well as numerous exhibitions in Poland and abroad. Bajtlik is considered as one of the most recognizable Polish artists of the young generation. He is a multi-disciplinary artist; but although he has succeeded in many disciplines, he treats illustration and design of books for children very seriously. Although, as he stresses himself, he has never participated in any pedagogical training, initial centrefolds of “Alphadoodler” were verified during art workshops for children. During a number of meetings, he collected information concerning the proper understanding of instruction, correct synthetic interpretation of graphic forms, and sufficient space left for children (Bajtlik 2016). Bajtlik believes that it is “designing emptiness, whiteness, which is supposed to be a space for designing an image for the recipient” that is a “key issue in creating an activity book” (Bajtlik 2016: 31).

The artistic expression of “Alphadoodler” is closely related to Bajtlik’s individual style and clear inspirations of the Polish poster school and the city space; however, references to children’s art are also visible. For his illustrations, the author used various drawing and graphic techniques, classic (letterpress, pastel drawing, ink drawing, collage) as well as computer ones (vector graphics, photography).

Many visual properties of “Alphadoodler,” e.g. the layout of text and illustrations, and relationship between words and images, are characteristic of activity books. Their verbal layer usually takes the form of short instructions for readers and individual centrefolds usually contain a space for the recipient’s activity, such as drawing, designing, pasting, cutting, marking, etc.

Compositional structure – the context of contents and form

The final form of the book combines many components related to form and contents, which are called compositional structure by G. Rose (Rose 2010: 62). Formal properties of a book are elements which have an effect on a reader’s senses from the very first moments. The format, the cover, paper, colours, illustrations, typography, and composition of centrefolds – all of them may arise interest of a reader to explore further or leave them indifferent.

Bajtlik’s book is nearly the A4 format and contains over 70 centrefolds on a good-quality paper. It is a paperback with jacket flaps of 2/3 book’s width, which gives the book an additional chic. Outside, the cover contains contrasting graphics, which draw one’s attention with an intriguing composition of black and white shapes (letters) against a fluorescent orange background. Inside the cover, there is the alphabet, i. e. capital and small letters written using white sans-serif linear Antiqua against bright

pink background. The use of colours is also consistently economical on a title page and subsequent centrefolds. Monochromatic (using black, white, grey, purple, bright green, and bright orange) or two-coloured compositions (e.g. orange and black, purple and black, or green and black) appear against the white background (except for several pages with black, grey, purple, and bright orange background). The illustrations have been made using various conventions resulting from the techniques used. They take the form of vector images, severe in their form, e.g. “technical” geometric shapes or rhythmical sign compositions. Sometimes, they resemble an image hand-drawn by a child, stamps, or cut-outs. Some illustrations are photos after desaturation (a view of mountain tops covered with snow, theatre poster pillars in an urban space, product packaging); others refer to comic book aesthetics (illustration of a room, a figure of a “dragonsaurus”). The composition of centrefolds depends on the tasks given to the recipient. In one case, an illustration fills the whole space of two neighbouring pages; another one contains only several small elements, which leave more room for the child’s artistic activity. The instructions accompanying the illustrations are placed, most frequently, at the top of even-numbered pages, rarely on odd-numbered pages, and sometimes they are written into illustrations. The typeface used refers to handwriting in a felt-tip pen, which, combined with direct instructions, forms legible non-paternalistic messages.

The leading topic of the analysed work is typography, which may be understood as giving visual properties to written forms. Typography is a field of functional graphics which deals with widely-understood text design (from letters to text compositions); however, that expression is also used for describing formal and visual properties of a text, e.g. in a publication or a poster. In the illustration layer of “Alphadoodler,” almost each page contains letters or punctuation marks of various sizes, using various typefaces, from classic Antiquas to experimental typography. The signs become a pretext for the recipient to create artistic images, e.g. circus artists, skyscrapers, silhouettes of people, or famous buildings. Letters are transformed into fish bait, vehicle wheels, home devices and furniture, tree trunks, face profiles etc. Topics used in the book are universal and include, among other things, animals, vehicles, spare time, sport, graphic design (poster, logo, packaging, typeface, book cover etc.). The contents of the analysed work include issues close and well-known to children (e.g. portrait of their parents), issues related to play (e.g. digging letters from snow), the world of fantasy (e.g. “dragonsaurus,” conversation of buildings), or possible fears (e.g. worms), and more distant topics, such as ancient writing, famous buildings, or art in an urban space.

“Alphadoodler” as art for children – context of a recipient

“Alphadoodler” is a publication dedicated to children over 4, regardless of their gender; however, for children who cannot read yet an agent is needed to pass the instructions. As the author himself says, it is “a book for children who know the alphabet well, not very well, or do not know it at all” (Bajtlik 2016: 31). A diversity of shapes and letter sizes enables the reader to observe morphological properties of letters, including differences and similarities. The book is not a student’s book leading the recipient through subsequent levels of knowledge and skill. The order of subsequent images does not follow the difficulty level of tasks. The fact that there are no page numbers emphasizes no need for linear reading.

The analysed book may be treated as a kind of a message sent by the author to the young recipient. The text present on the back cover is an introduction to enter “the world of typography,” and an explanation of the Polish title (“Typogryzmol”), as well as the message of the book: “you (“TY”), suggest that the reader is the co-author of this book: you draw, you paint, you play with letter shapes, and you learn how to write. TYPO means typography which is designing and combining letters. Typogames (“TYPOGRY”) mean playing with letters. Doodle (“GRYZMOL”) and draw with a flourish, as you like.” These words are sent directly to a child; they are a declaration of an interaction with the recipient and a proof of treating them as a partner and a co-creator of the book. Through the instructions, the author offers a space for unhindered children’s creativity. He starts a certain artistic game with the recipient by encouraging them to draw, play, and experiment freely. Tasks in “Alphadoodler” give a great freedom to the recipient, e.g. “Build animals using letters “a.” Start from drawing tails”, and do not always impose a method of solution on the recipient, e.g. “Attention! Construction site! Help the builders to construct a house.”

Many illustrations are, as may be supposed, imperfect as intended by the author (effects of print defects, a fingerprint, doodles, photos of shabby-looking pillars etc.). They may interest the recipient and encourage them to dispose of fear of not succeeding; they show that random and undesired elements may be transformed into a new value. In one of his articles, Bajtlik expresses strong criticism of a colouring book, which subordinates a child to contours and enhances fear of drawing outside a line and making one’s own decisions. He also underlines that he often observed that workshop participants were not satisfied of effects of their work; “releasing their emotions in an artistic form often gave great results” (Bajtlik 2016: 26). The quoted reflections show a certain type of social responsibility of the author of “Alphadoodler,” which is also demonstrated through his involvement in art and project workshops, which develop the concept of the book. Those workshops took the form of an educational project conducted in libraries, kindergartens, schools, and cultural institutions, in which app. 2,000 children aged 4-14 participated.

The conducted analysis gives many reasons to believe that ambitious activity books created by artists may be a valuable medium in developing visual competences in children. Bajtlik's book pays tribute to functional art, which originates from everyday life, and, therefore, the book refers to the pragmatic aspect of art. It introduces children in a natural way to issues of modern culture and art. It inspires to observe visual aspects of the environment and objects which form the environment. The topics of the book are often related both to close and further living space of a possible recipient and, by marking the areas of new experiences, arouse cognitive interest. In subsequent tasks proposed in the form of play, children are encouraged to create. They receive a whole range of means of artistic language to choose from. The author does not impose the only correct answer on the recipient, which is burdened with specific expectations. Children gain a feeling of being the prime mover by creating their own illustration, based on their own imagination. The most important value of "Alphadoodler" seems to be aesthetic experience of a child gained in the act of active reception of the book. Therefore, the sign of trust of the author in a child as a co-creator may be considered in the context of supporting child subjectivity. In John Dewey's theory, the foreground of aesthetic experience contains "a significant and dynamic relationship, the point of which is related to the fact that it is updated by the sender and the recipient" (Sztobryn 2007: 104). Thus, a division between an adult and a child fades away, and the author and the recipient become democratized.

Final reflection

What dominates the modern child environment is images fixing clichéd forms, stereotype patterns, banal aesthetics, and sentimental contents. Their influence may damage the child's sensitivity, which is described bluntly by Małgorzata Cackowska (2014: 274-275). The author lists numerous signs of infantilization of child's visual environment, which translate into the domination of kitsch in children's everyday life and significant contexts of development. In Cackowska's opinion, "a child seduced with rubbish and raped aesthetically grows satisfied with kitsch and develops in kitsch; in future, they will offer their children the same type of being in culture and the same aesthetic experiences" (Cackowska 2014: 281).

For the child's development, the sense of sight is "fundamental because owing to it a child opens to the world and takes the world in its possession, multiplies and collects information, increases its sensitivity and imagination, and surrenders to sensations" (Marciniak 1979: 257). Through art perception and expression, a young recipient develops a skill of observation and expands their own experience of the world.

Works created with respect to the youngest audience may be an alternative for books published in large numbers, for which "Alphadoodler" is a great example. The

work offers a whole range of aesthetic qualities and various visual codes. It has an unquestionable potential as a tool for visual literacy, offers creative freedom to a child, and, as a result, enhances a child's personal identity. It fits perfectly in the modern trend of transforming art for children into art co-created with children.

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ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Joanna S. Ludwiczak
University of Lodz
Faculty of Educational Sciences
e-mail: j.s.ludwiczak@gmail.com