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From Exclusion to Inclusion: Audiovisual Identity Literature of Young Students

Od wykluczenia do inkluzji. Tożsamościowa literatura audiowizualna młodszego ucznia

KEYWORDS

young students' reading, identity literature, audiovisual literature, literary communication, pandemic

ABSTRACT

The situation during the current pandemic caused by COVID-19, this time of isolation, difficult health situations, and often familial and social trouble, increasingly provokes a reflection on the literature that is offered in the curriculum for pupils at early school age. My focus in this article is texts of audiovisual literature that use the code of new media and address the issue of dysfunction in the home, which can also be exacerbated in these difficult times. I am referring to the loneliness of a child, adults' disregard and misunderstanding of children, and domestic violence, but also the needs of people with mental disabilities and the situations of their relatives, especially the youngest ones. It is worth noting that guidelines formulated by the government for early literature classes were not based on or preceded by conversations with children in order to explore the aforementioned issues. Meanwhile, literature defined as a kind of thought laboratory, among other things, stands in opposition to governmental regulations. Especially in the current situation, students need literary works which speak to them through relevant content and through the media poetics to which contemporary children and adolescents are accustomed. A reflective teacher can use such books to guide the children to make a discovery about the world, find their own place

in it, and cope with their worries. Therefore, this article emphasizes the texts of identity audiovisual literature which, in building a narrative, fits into the categories of audiovisuality proposed by Adam Regiewicz and deals with the aforementioned problems.

SŁOWA KLUCZE

lektura młodszego ucznia, literatura tożsamościowa, literatura audiowizualna, komunikacja literacka, pandemia

ABSTRAKT

Sytuacja związana z aktualnym czasem pandemii spowodowanym wirusem COVID-19, czas odizolowania, trudnych sytuacji zdrowotnych, niejednokrotnie rodzinnych i społecznych, wywołuje ze zwiększoną siłą przemyślenia dotyczące literatury, która jest proponowana uczniom w wieku wczesnoszkolnym. Chodzi o teksty literatury audiowizualnej korzystające z kodu nowych mediów i jednocześnie koncentrujące się wokół tematyki związanej z problemem dysfunkcji domu rodzinnego, który dodatkowo w tym trudnym momencie może być zwielokrotniony. Mówię zatem o samotności dziecka, jego lekceważeniu i nierozumieniu przez dorosłych, przemocy domowej, ale także o potrzebach osób dotkniętych upośledzeniem umysłowym oraz sytuacji ich krewnych, w tym szczególnie najmłodszych. Warto zauważyć, że ministerialnie konstruowane wytyczne dla początkowej komunikacji literackiej nie suponują rozmów z dziećmi zgłębiających przywołane wyżej zagadnienia. Tymczasem literatura definiowana między innymi jako swoiste laboratorium myślowe stoi na stanowisku *a contrario* do urzędniczego i wspólnie z dzisiejszą rzeczywistością upomina się o utwory, które za pośrednictwem medialnej poetyki, do której współczesny uczeń jest przyzwyczajony, własnej treści i refleksyjnego nauczyciela pozwoli dziecku dokonać rozpoznania w świecie i jednocześnie uporać się z troskami.

Artykuł akcentuje zatem teksty literatury audiowizualnej tożsamościowej, które w budowaniu narracji wpisują się w zaproponowane przez Adama Regiewicza kategorie audiowizualności oraz traktują o przywołanych problemach.

Introduction

The epidemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, which has completely uprooted our way of life, has given rise to new sociological events. There is an assumption that after a period of great economic expansion, after the era of great fun and the civilization of spectacle (Debord 1998; Delsol 2017; Llossa 2015; Postman 2002; Pułka 2004; Szlendak 2004; Sztompka 2012), we are facing an economic crisis as well as a social shift that may lead to a re-formulation of human aspirations, goals, and needs.

It also seems that today the weeks of isolation and difficulties with health and family and social situations paradoxically offer new possibilities and create even more space for philosophical reflection, scientific deliberation, or educational changes. With regard to the school reading list for young students, for example, these weeks of distance learning have allowed us to engage in real discussions on organized literary communication, which especially now demands that we make more use of audiovisual texts based on the poetics of new media. They correspond to the students' habits and their audiovisual cognitive capabilities which result from growing up in the technologized *i-Generation* (Twenge 2019). Narratives which bridge literary and film architectonics, and whose content is delivered in a polysemiotic form also enable today's reader of the culture of participation to become creatively engaged in the act of reading, as it caters to their experiences derived from digital culture.

The article centers on audiovisual reading which is not subordinated to overriding didactic purposes but inspires a dialogue on difficult topics which have not yet been covered in organized early childhood education. It deals with works that talk about problems in the family: the loneliness of a child among their loved ones, living with a person suffering from mental problems, rejection, and physical and psychological violence. At the same time, the literary texts suggested below lead the reader to a satisfactory ending, and offer them the possibility to process their own concerns as understood by Margaret Archer (Archer 2013). In other words, this is audiovisual literature that deals with the issue of identity (Warzocha 2019).

A Young Student and their Reading List in the Times of the Pandemic

Within the framework of such assumptions, it is worth paying attention to the fact that during a global epidemic, when almost all forms of modern human functioning have been put on hold, digitization and digital tools have not slowed down. On the contrary—new media carry more significance than ever in our lives, while the technological prosthetic extensions that Marshall MacLuhan (2004) prophetically spoke about have taken on an almost real form. Virtually all areas of social activity have been organized via the Internet, which has resulted in a remarkably lengthened time that humans spend online. The boundaries between what is real and what is virtual have been blurred, while reality has taken on a phantomatic presence, revealing a dual perception that resembles a dreaming and reflective self (Hopfinger 2003).

Young participants of social life also find themselves in this situation. Confined at home, they look at the world through the prism of websites, inconsistent media messages, and subjective reports. Influenced by other people's thoughts, they obtain their

information from *infovis* (Manovich 2012: 443) and the observations or reflections of their relatives, but most of all they are educated through short virtual meetings with their teachers, or in a different form then they are used to. "The whole is currently nothing more than a makeshift visualization, which can be modified and canceled at one's will, returning to individual components, in order to regroup these elements into a new set, having discovered other, new tools (Manovich 2012: 443).

In short, compulsory social alienation has severely limited the chances of a child's unmediated perception of the world and, at the same time, their relatively equal and reflective development. It seems that disproportions in the outcomes of pupils' education could also have been exacerbated, since the pandemic has highlighted the privileged situation of children who are supported by their families' love, mutual trust, and care, as well as the intellectual abilities of their parents. Likewise, there is a hypothesis that the children who are victims of domestic problems are experiencing a more difficult situation than ever. Governmental reports contain information on the risk of physical and mental violence, or even loss of life. Attention should be paid to the students who are now confused when trying to understand themselves, left without answers to the questions bothering them, and unable to cope with everyday life, current events, and challenges. And although school staff have witnessed many such painful stories of student's lives, so far, especially in the first stage of organized education, no decision has been made to engage in discussions with children on these domestic problems.

Meanwhile, not only does today's reality seem to speak to these changes, but so does literature itself, which in principle prompts us to philosophize. As Paul Ricoeur wrote in *Philosophy of the Person*, "the whole of literature may be looked upon as a vast laboratory of thought experiments which, via the intermediary of reading, can be applied in relation to one's own self" (Ricoeur 1992: 40–41). Literary stories present us experience *per procura* and "offer us the possibility of embracing and experiencing a certain sequence of events as a sort of extracted essence and of gaining insight into their consequences" (Kłakówna 2016: 212). This means that reading closed stories gives us the opportunity to reach into the deep recesses of the self—to question ourselves through introspective self-analysis. Therefore, a space opens up for providing new life energy, which makes it possible to find an antidote to problems.

I'm referring to texts of audiovisual literature, which draw on the poetics of new media, use the structural model of audiovisual texts, and deal with issues and events covered and discussed in the media space (Regiewicz 2015). Such a hybrid narrative, in short, often borrows from the language of film, using words as if imitating the movement of the camera, and taking advantage of the strategies of advertising, media messages, television news, Internet memes, and hypertext. It develops and comments on the topics currently spreading in the media, and brings to life book characters

whose role models are celebrities. It often speaks to the reader with many signs: word typography, text topography, image, color, blankness, book size, and cover. We can also discern in it a tendency for a semiotic transformation, which, according to Mike Sandbothe, is characteristic of online text communication. Thus, in audiovisual works there is a graphitization of speech, an iconization and oralization of writing, and a graphitization of an image, which is read as a sign (Sanbothe 2001).

> Audiovisual literature therefore generates forms that in the (analogue) edition of the book use the structure, composition, and language of an audiovisual or even digital story, becoming somehow its adaptation or mimetic reflection. It preserves the literary form in its traditional sense, but also extends its ontical boundaries. Such changes are made possible by language that takes recognition to the meta-level and explores the very structure of the text. Rhythms and patterns derived from audiovisualism are now the literary fabric of the new stories or known literary structures—human interest stories, including those reported by new media. (Warzocha 2019: 117)

It could be suggested that literary works constructed in this way respond to the current polymedial cognitive capabilities of today's younger students, who are growing up in the world of technological development. They invite the child to "read the meanings inscribed in the structure of a hybrid literary work, which constructs its identity and its literary worlds in imitation of audiovisual and digital mechanisms" (Warzocha 2019: 117). "The audiovisual literary message, following the intermedia narrative structure of audiovisual messages—television, cinema, computer, and others—requires a reception model that has become symptomatic and natural for the contemporary audiovisual student in the first stage of education" (Warzocha 2019: 236).

Thus, the need to introduce audiovisual literary texts to early-education school reading lists is determined by the interpretation strategies that they demand, which combine linear and nonlinear skills (which virtually every student has been practicing very much in recent months), and by the fact that they tell stories in a form that can compete with computer games or media images.

Moreover, literature—which has always reacted to the current needs of readers (Hopfinger 2010)—today offers us contemporary stories that some teachers and parents, who are accustomed to teaching didactic, moralistic narratives, could perceive as controversial. On the other hand, literary scholars call these stories "rogue," capable of "delighting, moving, and amusing a young reader, stimulating their capacity for reflection or provoking laughter" (Leszczyński 2007: 8). The authors of such works, as with the writers of literature addressed to adults,

> show people's behavior in various situations and contexts and experiment with alternative ways of representing men and women and their relationships with others, the world of things, and the world of nature, as compared to traditional literature. They uncover the complex syntax of behaviors and interactions. (Hopfinger 2010: 15)

Therefore, they endeavor to act as guides through the meanders of the human psyche and human concerns.

In the context of literature written with a child/teenaged reader in mind, I call "identity literature" the audiovisual literature that weaves together human stories and discusses relationships in the world, impelling the reader to have an internal conversation and recognize their own feelings (Warzocha 2019: 221–236). Such emotional processing and then naming personal worries, as understood by the British professor Margaret Archer—the pioneer of humanistic sociology (Archer 2013; Domecka 2013: 47)—leads to the formation of a personal and then a social identity. Personal identity, built through a process of redefinition and re-affirmation, regulates human relationships at all levels of reality, roots us in the world, and guarantees our individuality.

Examples of Audiovisual Identity Literature

The model example of identity audiovisual literature is a moving and excellent work, *The Book of Everything*, written by the winner of many awards, the Dutch writer Guus Kuijer (Kuijer 2014); it was thoroughly described in my doctoral dissertation (Warzocha 2019: 220–230). Endowed with a peculiar literary quality (Chrząstowska 1987) and using the language of film, the text evokes a wide range of emotions in both child and adult audiences, lingers in the memory for a long time, urges the reader to talk about painful and difficult topics, and poses questions that require straightforward answers. At the same time, it does not cosset the reader, does not transport them to an imaginary land that is not torn by strife and torment. What this artistically composed story with elaborate and masterly imagery created by the writer and translator does provide is a chance to explain to a ten-year-old child the dysfunctional patterns of family life, which they know either from experience or, more likely, from commonly available media information and products.

The Book of Everything tells the story of a caring, thoughtful, and intelligent nine-year-old boy whose only wish is family happiness first, and then his own. Based on a true story, the story portrays everyday family life with a despotic and sadistic father who, under a religious banner, uses physical and psychological violence at home. The author does not spare the reader descriptions of painful events: the aggressive father's bouts of rage, family quarrels, and scenes of beatings, as well as the helplessness and submission of other household members.

> Father was silent. Solemnly, he put his fork and knife down on his plate and stood up. He grew taller and taller until his head was higher than the lamp over the table.

> Every living thing on earth held its breath. The sparrows on the windowsill choked on their trumpets. The sun went dark and the sky shrank.
> "What are you doing?" Mother cried. She jumped up and pulled Thomas back.
> "Go away, woman," Father roared. "I am speaking to your son."
> But Mother pulled Thomas farther away from the table and put her arms around his shoulders.
> Then Father's hand flashed out suddenly and slapped her on the cheek. She staggered back and let go of Thomas.
> The angels in heaven covered their eyes with their hands sobbed loudly, because that is what they always do when a man hits his wife. A profound sadness settled over the earth.
> "Papa," Margot whispered.
> "Silence!" Father thundered. "Thomas, upstairs. And don't forget the spoon." (Kuijer, trans. John Nieuwenhuizen 2017)

I must note that this passage is not the most graphic one, but the masterful narrative interlaces psychologically insightful threads with artistic, spiritual ones, which—thanks to the main character's meetings with music, angels, and Jesus—invites the reader into a gentler space. This also happens in the scenes with Thomas's adult neighbor, who gives the boy shelter and respite and uses her courage to help him find more strength to fight for himself. This character can be a signpost for someone looking for help, a clue that there a happy ending is possible.

What is important for the interpretation of this novel is its audiovisual structure, modeled on screenplays (Russin, Downs 2005; Hunter 2013), using means of expression that are typical of a film (Plisiecki 2005; Płażewski 2008) and a clear emphasis on the soundtrack. Music is visible in the descriptions, the rhythmic arrangement of the words, and the topography of the text. It highlights and levels, soothes and excites. The book ends very happily, bringing the reader relief and allowing them to move, as Archer wrote, "from what is unexpressed to what is articulated, from less adequate to more adequate characteristics, from early assessment to reevaluation" (Archer 2013: 227).

In the case of the early education literature lessons, excerpts of the text can be read with ten-year-olds, as group reading (Lasota 2011), when it is possible to talk, explain, and ask questions that will not remain unanswered, when the teacher has the opportunity to observe the students' reactions. However, when we are working with a child who is exposed to abuses similar to those portrayed by Kuijer, reading the whole book should be obligatory as a purifying experience. Looking through the lens of the coronavirus threat, it can be assumed that if such works were read in early-school and middle school classes, they might now be able to help the child affected by such problems.

The German novel *Every Wednesday or "Let's just go!" said Aunt Hulda* by Sylvia Heinlein represents other family and childhood problems (Heinlen 2017). The story

shows family relationships in a situation where one of the family members is different. Yet, due to her mental handicap, despite her cordiality and cheerful character, she is a burden on the adults, a cause of shame, embarrassment, or mockery. The text, a work of literary fiction, is a very powerful pull for the reader, as it was inspired by the author's real-life work with a group of people suffering from intellectual dysfunctions (Heinlein 2017: 147).

The main character of the book, the empathetic Sarah, is being brought up in a family devoid of closeness, affection, warmth, or any interest in one another. The father constantly talks on the phone while the mother, a typical representative of the visual culture society (Sztompka 2012), is completely absorbed by the work of a make-up artist. Sarah is different from her peers and loved ones. She remains faithful to her interests and is focused on spending time with her mentally retarded aunt, Hulda.

Along with the main character, Heinlein constructed a reflective adult character who, despite her limitations, does not want to be ridiculed, who fights for her rights, including an independent life, and who stands up for her dignity as well as the feelings of her own sister and her husband. The novel describes the women's struggle with her own bouts of temper, failure to cope with emotionally difficult situations, and her need for family warmth and acceptance. At the same time, she accentuates the wisdom of a child who fights with her parents to see her aunt's feelings and humanity and to establish true family ties with her. The girl objects to her aunt being treated like an object and is in fact the only person who feels good in her company, understands her habits, possibilities, desires, sorrows, and joys. This means that, despite her young age, she tries to restore her aunt's dignity and is able to meet the challenges posed by her disease.

> "Come on out!" she ordered loudly. "I don't have the time to stand here!"
> Sarah tugged on her sleeve.
> "Mum," she said carefully, "Aunt Hulda doesn't like it when someone screams."
> She was right. Aunt Hulda hated noise. Noise terrified her. Then she began to tremble and panic. …
> Sarah's mother groaned and, exhausted, leaned against the wall.
> "Aunt Hulda," Sarah asked through the door, "can we come in? We're not going to make a scene. I promise!"
> Sarah's mother raised her head from the wall and tried to say something. Klaus shook his head and put a finger to his lips in warning.
> "On Wednesdays, I'll be able to come see you again!" Sarah called. "That's all I wanted to tell you."
> "Sarah!" Her mother hissed.
> Sarah ignored it.
> "Come out and you'll be able to smoke a cigarette in the garden."
> "Smoking is forbidden!" said a voice from the room.

> "You can smoke it secretly," Sarah suggested.
> "Damn it," Willi said indignantly.
> Moments later, the door opened slightly and Aunt Hulda peeked out through the crack (Heinlen 2017: 36–37).

Sarah tries to give her aunt safety and love, to mitigate opinions which hurt her feelings, to neutralize family quarrels and resentment arising from this situation, and does not allow her to be alienated. Heinlen shines the spotlight on her thesis, which she twice puts in the mouths of the two protagonists:

> Aunt Hulda has often said that she would love to live with Sarah and her parents. "Families should be together," she repeated, "and I could help you in many things. I know how to wash the dishes well and I am happy to vacuum, and every evening we could kiss each other goodnight." (Heinlen 2017: 61–62)

The author strongly demands family love and honesty towards people represented by the title character, but at the same time she draws a down-to-earth picture of family life. She does not exaggerate or embellish; she shows the intense effort that is required to take care of a mentally retarded person; she details the highs and lows of such care. At the same time, by analyzing the situation, she lets the reader deal with specific problems, feelings, emotions, and worries.

This text, an example of identity audiovisual literature, is constructed similarly to Kuijer's novel, following the pattern of a screenplay and being clearly divided into three acts, with characteristic elements for each (Warzocha 2019: 113–115).

Heinlein's book can be thought of as universal and philosophical, raising potent questions about tolerance and normality, which have also appeared recently in connection with the threat of falling ill with the COVID-19 virus. Such discussions can be seen on various social networks, in para-scientific and scientific considerations, or in editorial columns redolent of political commitment (Sławek 2020).

Heinlein's novel, containing quite detailed descriptions of moments of crisis and situations that are difficult for a person with mental retardation and their family, is a book that, in a different way than is accepted at school, familiarizes the reader with the problems of disability, at the same time providing answers to many questions.

Conclusion

Identity audiovisual literature is a hybrid that responds to the audiovisual experiences of children and also helps them name unknown fears and feelings and to make discoveries about the world.

The literary education of a young student is mainly about educating a reflective, conscious reader and a rational person. Therefore, the inclusion of literature in the educational space, which is a subjective endogenous dialogue intended for the child to deal with the multitude of complex information, seems to be an urgent matter, especially as it allows audiovisually active reading, which not only fits in with the logic of the media and digital systems, but also takes into account the audiovisual opportunities of a younger audience. At the same time, it oscillates around the dominant narratives of cultural texts and draws attention to language: the *modus operandi* of our lives. It fulfills the criteria of literary quality as perceived by Jerzy Cieślikowski (1981), about which Ryszard Waksmund wrote that "even in the broadest conceptual formula, today it includes esthetically clarified and historically proven phenomena" (Waksmund 1985). Additionally, it is characterized by *novelty,* which the scholar demands from literature for children: Waksmund's book even talks about graphic content which the young student has probably come across, if not in person, then through the universality and availability of the Internet and TV. Thanks to this, it opens the prospects of analysis and paves the way for knowledge.

When it comes to the literature recommended in this article, the key figure is the companion or intermediary of the reading process. I am referring to a contemplative teacher, prone to philosophical deliberations, non-negotiable questions, genuinely interested in what he or she reads with a student, one who understands art and educates with the help of literary texts by reading together.

The proposed texts are not subordinated to "relatively stabilized non-esthetic goals, universals of didactics and morality" (Waksmund 1985: 17). Quoting Irena Wojnar, this literature stimulates and disturbs, forces you to think, affects the mind, feelings and imagination, while increasing curiosity both towards the world and towards oneself, requiring independence, criticism, and sensitivity, and accompanying one's self-education and self-knowledge" (Wojnar 1984: 12).

Therefore, including it as part of literary education, especially bearing in mind the problems brought by the pandemic, seems perfectly appropriate.

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