

Marek Jeziński

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4335-8216>

Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń

[jezmar@umk.pl](mailto:jezmar@umk.pl)

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## Editorial

### On Problems with Tytus: Comic Representations of Polish Social and Cultural Reality

In this section of the new issue of *Perspectives on Culture*, we aim to introduce readers to several important aspects of popular culture through the lens of comic art. We recognize that comic art is a product of popular culture and, as such, reflects significant trends within a given society's culture while also providing creators with a space to present their own original vision of reality. This is simultaneously a realm of imagination for authors, for whom reality may serve as a subject treated in a realistic and historical manner or as an unconventional challenge that shifts artistic vision into the world of imagination, incorporating surreal or even fully surrealistic elements.

An example of this approach is the comic book art of Henryk Jerzy Chmielewski, known as *Papcio Chmiel*, particularly his long-running series *Tytus, Romek i A'Tomek*. Published over several decades – the longest-running Polish comic – it appeared in the form of newspaper comic strips, full-page spreads in the *Świat Młodych* magazine, and standalone albums chronicling the adventures of the three titular characters: PRL-era teenagers who, with the inevitable course of history, eventually transitioned into the new post-socialist, free-market reality of Poland.

What makes this comic unique is the presence of an unconventional protagonist who captures most of the readers' attention – a liminal trickster, a half-chimpanzee, half-human figure embodying the struggle between the wild forces of nature and the structured order of human laws and cultural norms.

Tytus is a projection of unfulfilled dreams of acting without the constraints of cultural norms while still remaining within human society. After all, he travels into space and to distant continents, shrinks in size, discovers nonexistent island archipelagos, jumps into movies and becomes their protagonist. At the same time, he attends scout meetings, explores humanity's artistic heritage through textbooks on visual arts, music, and theater,

studies at an ordinary neighborhood school, and struggles with math. He is also incredibly humorous, and fragments of dialogue from *Tytus* have become part of the language of the generation that lived through the final years of the Polish People's Republic.

It must be acknowledged that this character, more than any other in Polish comics (though *Jeż Jerzy* from Rafał Skarżycki and Tomasz Lew Leśniak's comic series clearly followed in his footsteps – albeit as heroes for a new era, suited to the Poland of the late 20th century), manages to reconcile these seemingly contradictory elements, synthesizing their most culturally impactful aspects. Children and teenagers of the PRL era wanted to be like Tytus – to form their own scout troops with Romek and A'Tomek and experience adventures just like his.

At the same time, Chmielewski created his comics within the context of PRL-era popular culture – postwar Poland, with its imposed political regime, economic inefficiency, and technological and cultural backwardness. However, it is worth noting that this very period produced significant works across various artistic fields: film, poster art, sculpture and painting, popular and classical music, and, finally, world-class theater – both institutional and avant-garde. Comics were an essential part of this cultural landscape. *Tytus* stood alongside *Kajko i Kokosz* by Janusz Christa, *Kleks, Jonka i Jonek* by Szarlota Pawel, *Binio Bill* by Jerzy Wróblewski, and finally *Profesorek Nerwosolek* as well as *Bąbelek i Kudłaczek* by Tadeusz Baranowski. The worlds illustrated by these artists played a key role in shaping the identity and aesthetic sensibilities of young readers.

After the political and economic transformation of 1989/1990, Chmielewski had to adapt to the free market and compete for readers' attention in a rapidly growing comic book industry. Moreover, the protagonist of the *Tytus* series himself underwent a distinct transformation. Initially, Tytus's adventures were journeys into the realm of childhood imagination (Volumes III–XVIII). However, over time, they evolved into a series of commentaries on the social changes taking place in Poland (starting with Volume XX). This shift coincided with the country's systemic transformation, and the free market created opportunities for reissuing works originally published during the PRL era. Chmielewski took advantage of this, refreshing older *Tytus* volumes with updated graphics while simultaneously working on new installments. In these, Tytus – once a mischievous trickster and jester – became increasingly lost in the many faces of modernity, gradually turning into a projection of Papić Chmiel's own anxieties and fears.

Regardless of the historical transformations that Chmielewski's comic series underwent over the course of several decades, his work carries a significant meaning that is recognizable on the meta-level of academic

reflection. Through numerous references to both high and popular culture, the *Tytus* comics have become embedded in collective memory not only as commentaries on reality but also as a kind of dialogue with what might be captivating for readers – especially young ones – in a constantly changing world.

In this issue of *Perspectives on Culture*, we aim to approach the *Tytus* series as a corpus of texts that reveal intriguing aspects of culture both at the moment of meaning articulation (the time of a given volume's publication) and in the perspective of meaning concretization (the moment the comic is read). These perspectives overlap to some extent. However, what became the starting point for the authors of the articles gathered in this thematic section of *Perspectives on Culture* is the far more intriguing reflection on the instances where these two aspects of engaging with Chmielewski's works diverge. This divergence highlights shifts in both diachronic and synchronic perspectives – sometimes paradoxical – while also reflecting the cultural changes that have taken place in Polish society over more than 50 years, ever since the publication of the first volume about the chimpanzee being “humanized” by scouts. This is why we turn our attention to aspects present in *Tytus* albums, such as the comic's historical and artistic context, the soundscape within the depicted world, linguistic humor, and themes related to the protagonists' belonging to a unique organization – the Polish Scouting Association (ZHP).

We invite you to explore this thought-provoking collection.

