

Sebastian Jakub Konefał

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8930-235X>

Uniwersytet Gdański

sebastian.konefal@ug.edu.pl

Jerzy Szyłak

<http://orcid.org/https://0000-0003-1934-8413>

Uniwersytet Gdański

jerzy.szylak@ug.edu.pl

DOI: 10.35765/pk.2025.4801.08

Polish *Generacja Nic*, “Denarration” and the Liminal Experience of the 1990s Transformation in Agata Endo Nowicka’s Webcomics

ABSTRACT

Access to the internet revitalized Polish comic art, enabled artists to transition from publishing zines and comic magazines in print during the 1990s and the turn of the century to dynamic online blogging platforms. This shift allowed new generations of Polish comic artists to regain prominence following the collapse of the comic market in the 1990s. Although these artists were familiar with comics from the People’s Republic of Poland, they explored different themes, often addressing national and transnational phenomena, such as “denarration” inspired by cultural texts about Generation X, or offering ironic commentaries on the attitudes attributed to the Polish alternative labeled *Generacja Nic* (Generation Nothing) in the media. Online comics democratized the medium, providing opportunities for those without access to traditional publishing to share their stories and amplify the voices of marginalized women and various minorities within local comics culture. Moreover, webcomics became a springboard for self-publishing careers, helping some authors achieve national and international recognition. Today, Polish webcomics serve as valuable documents, capturing economic transformation of Poland from a communist system to capitalism, as well as preserving a forgotten archive of captivating works by young creators that helped them navigate everyday challenges. The research methodology in this article combines cultural studies approaches with comics studies and the so-called oral history of comics. The primary material analyzed consists of the webcomics of Agata Endo Nowicka – the creator of *Komix*, the most commented blogging platform in the media, which inspired numerous other domestic artists.

KEYWORDS: Polish comics of 1990s and new the millennium, webcomics, internet, Generation X, *Pokolenie Nic*, denarration, Douglas Coupland, *Komix*, Agata Endo Nowicka

Suggested citation: Konefał, S.J. & Szyłak, J. (2025). Polish *Generacja Nic*, ‘Denarration’ and the Experience of the Liminal Times of the 1990s Transformation in Agata Endo Nowicka’s Webcomics. © ⓘ *Perspectives on Culture*, 1(48), pp. 99–119. DOI: 10.35765/pk.2025.4801.08

Submitted: 01.08.2024

Accepted: 27.01.2025

STRESZCZENIE

Dostęp do Internetu ożywił polską sztukę komiksową i umożliwił artystom przejście od publikacji na łamach papierowych zinnów i magazynów komiksowych z lat 90. i przełomu wieków do dynamicznych internetowych platform blogowych. Ta zmiana pozwoliła nowym pokoleniom polskich twórców komiksów odzyskać znaczenie po załamaniu rynku w latach 90. Pomimo znajomości tradycyjnego komiksu PRL-u, nowe pokolenie stawiało na odmienną tematykę, często związaną ze zjawiskami narodowymi i transnarodowymi, takimi jak 'denarracja' inspirowana Generacją X czy ironiczne komentowanie postaw przypisywanych w mediach Generacji Nic. Komiksy internetowe zdemokratyzowały medium, umożliwiając tym, którzy nie mieli dostępu do tradycyjnych publikacji, dzielenie się swoimi historiami, podkreślając głosy marginalizowanych w lokalnej kulturze komiksowej kobiet oraz różnych mniejszości. Webcomiksy posłużyły także jako punkt wyjścia do kariery w zakresie samodzielnego publikowania, przyczyniając się do uznania niektórych autorów zarówno w kraju, jak i za granicą. Dziś polskie komiksy internetowe to przede wszystkim fascynujące dokumenty przemian kulturowych i gospodarczych kraju, który szybko przeszedł od ustroju komunistycznego do kapitalizmu, oraz zapomniane archiwum intrygującej twórczości młodych ludzi, pomagającej im uporać się z problemami dnia codziennego. Zastosowane w artykule badania łączą metodologię kulturoznawcze z komiksologią oraz tzw. historią mówioną komiksu. Materiałem badawczym są zaś webcomiksy Agaty Endo Nowickiej – twórczyni najbardziej komentowanej w mediach platformy blogowej *Komix*, która zainspirowała rzesze innych rodzimych twórców.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: komiks polski lat 90. i przełomu wieków, webcomics, internet, pokolenie X, pokolenie Nic, denarracja, Douglas Coupland, *Komix*, Agata Endo Nowicka

Intro: into the web

In 2003, Henryk Jerzy Chmielewski (known among Polish comic fans as Papić Chmiel) published the 28th volume of the adventures of *Tytus, Romek i A'Tomek* (Titus, Romek and A'Tomek), which explored the peculiarities of the internet, a medium that had only recently arrived in Poland. As a member of the communist bloc, Poland only gained official access to the internet in 1991, after the collapse of the domestic communist regime. The first officially registered international contact via the World Wide Web took place in April 1991, when the University of Warsaw was connected to the University of Copenhagen. Until 1996, the internet was mainly used by academic and scientific institutions, companies, and the government. In 1996, Telekomunikacja Polska (Polish Telecom) began providing home

access, which was very popular among citizens between 1998 and 2001 (Baran, 2013, pp. 75–78).

Papcio Chmiel recognized the importance of the new medium, which served not only to facilitate communication and provide easy access to various information but also to connect his home country (which joined the European Union a year later) with transnational culture. In his album, the character of the famous inventor from the comic, Professor T'Alent, transports Tytus, a humanized chimpanzee, into the virtual world of the net using a device resembling the one seen in Steven Lisberger's science fiction classic *Tron* (1982). In cyberspace, the lovable posthuman character experiences adventures similar to those of Neo, the protagonist of the *Matrix* film series (1999, 2003, 2021). Papcio Chmiel's story not only informs readers about the mechanisms of logging onto the internet and the peculiarities of operating computer networks but also teaches them about computer viruses and firewalls.

It is difficult to say whether Chmielewski was aware of the existence of the online comics phenomenon in 2003, which had also been around for several years. Some strips from his album resemble the aesthetics of webcomics – for example, in a scene depicting a tutorial on how to use the internet. It is certainly thanks to this novelty that new generations of local comic artists were able to regain a foothold after the collapse of the Polish comic market in 1990s, creating stories that explored, in various ways, the themes of economic and cultural change and the problems associated with them. Although these artists were familiar with stories about Tytus and other comic series and characters from the People's Republic of Poland era, most of them felt no connection to the tradition and preferred to focus on other values and draw in different styles.

The lost archives of Polish webcomics

At the beginning of the new millennium, many Polish comics from the Golden Age of Polish Comics (usually dated for 1970s and 1980s) began to appear on the internet. Unfortunately, most of them were scanned and distributed illegally. Soon, the World Wide Web also became a platform for free comic art, dynamically taking over the role of paper zines from the 1990s, which had allowed comics to be published despite the almost non-existent market (Klonowski 2021). In an interview for the special issue of *Zeszyty Komiksowe*, Artur Wabik rightly argues that the introduction of the Internet in Poland was closely linked to the crisis of zines and comic magazines:

The comic artists of the time focused on magazines and zines. It was only later that the internet took over the function of this form of publication. You could even say that it killed magazines. One of the main functions of print publications was to showcase debuts. Before that, if you wanted to make a name for yourself, you had to publish your comic in a magazine or send it to someone for a competition. This changed abruptly in the early 2000s when it became clear that anyone could start sharing their work online. The group of people featured in the album *Komiks w sieci* [*Comics on the Web*] was a kind of vanguard, a cornerstone of a wider phenomenon. Almost all authors of traditional comics followed their lead, realizing that the internet provided them a wider reach (Jutkiewicz, 2018, p. 33).

Similar to zines, webcomics became a tool of uncensored expression that vividly reflected the cultural, social and economic changes in democratic Poland. As previously mentioned, the new generation of artists did not pay so much attention to the tradition of the Golden Age of Polish comics, when artists such as Janusz Christa, Henryk Jerzy Chmielewski, Grzegorz Rosiński, and Bogusław Polch published their legendary works in thousands of copies. Most of the artists of the first wave of Polish webcomics did not work with zines and magazines such as *Produkt* or *AQQ*, which tried to fill the publishing gap in the domestic comic market that radically changed after economic transition (see: Konefał & Szyłak, 2023, pp. 66–67). The early 1990s was a period when many national publishing houses went bankrupt, and the market became dominated by the duopoly of two foreign companies – Danish Egmont and Swedish TM-Semic, which focused on printing foreign albums and comic series (Stańczyk, 2022, pp. 129–130). In contrast to the suddenly changed situation for comic creators who remained faithful to print, the internet was not only a new medium that enabled free, easy transnational distribution, but also attracted the attention of younger artists. They were interested in different aesthetics than those popularized by Egmont’s Francophone fantasy and sci-fi, or TM-Semic’s superhero stories, and were drawn to the self-referential status of new net-art. Marek Turek (born in 1970), one of the pioneers of Polish webcomics, who published his artworks on his blog called *Rapularz deliryczny* (but prefers paper as a final destination of his comics) recalls this different attitude towards new media in an interview conducted specifically for our study:

Most webcomic creators (from successive generations of comic creators) chose to debut online because they didn’t yet see a place for themselves in print. I remember how shocked I was (and how much I shocked the webcomic creators themselves) when I pointed out to them in a discussion ... that they should create and archive their comics in printable quality.

Because most of them were doing their stuff at a resolution that could only be published online (72 dpi) and viewed potential print publication as an unattainable abstraction. ... For me, the decision to publish online was not so much due to the lack of print publishing options, but rather the collapse of the print comics market (I had previously published other comics in print), which coincided with the launch of the comics contest on *Wrak.pl*, which was the impetus for many comics creators to publish regularly online (Turek, 2023).

Paradoxically, despite their independent, sometimes countercultural or even subversive nature, most Polish webcomics were typically published on the most popular blog platforms owned by major media moguls. These included *blox.pl* (one of the first blog sites supported by Agora), *blog.pl* (belonging to *onet.pl*, one of the first internet platforms in Poland), and *bloog.pl* (hosted on servers of Wirtualna Polska, Onet's biggest competitor). In a way, these media companies played a similar role in the Polish comics market as the highly influential television channels such as MTV did in Western countries during the 1980s and early 1990s, which aired alternative culture content alongside mainstream programming (see: e.g. Heat & Potter, 2005, p. 131). On the one hand, they presented and promoted alternative lifestyles and other cultural trends; on the other, they effectively integrated them into popular culture, which gradually led to the emergence of geek culture from the fandom ghetto of science fictions fans and subculture zines (Stańczyk, 2022, pp. 125–134).

We are, of course, aware that writing the history of a Polish webcomic seems to be a thankless task. There are no clear rules governing the appearance and disappearance of various works on the internet. Comics that maintain a high graphic standard, are original and sophisticated, can disappear without a trace, while works of an entirely opposite nature can gain recognition and remarkable popularity, measured by the number of website visits, likes on Facebook, or enthusiastic comments under the posts. As a result, after a few years, no one remembers the latter or feels embarrassed to have enthusiastically applauded, liked and commented on them. In his monograph on Anglo-Saxon webcomics, Sean Kleefeld rightly points out that:

... while a webcomic can be more accessible by virtue of being “always” available, that “always” is a qualified one. Even though there are organizations like the US Library of Congress and the Internet Archive that are explicitly trying to archive webcomic material precisely because of its ephemeral nature, the vast amount of webcomic material that is online already, coupled with the ongoing nature of updates to that material, means that inevitably, not everything will be captured for posterity. Additionally, these

sources may not be able to capture either any dynamic content and/or paratexts that may be significant but not directly tied to the webcomic itself (Kleefeld, 2020, pp. 213).

For these reasons, few people attempt to organize knowledge about the history of Polish webcomics (see: Szyłak, 2021, pp. 152-155). Even in the texts collected in the monographic edition of the domestic magazine *Zeszyty Komiksowe* from 2018, one will not find such an attempt. The authors of the articles published there either address theoretical problems, focus on what is currently considered important, or conduct interviews with webcomic creators in the hope that they will tell their own stories and that readers will fill in the gaps themselves.

Unfortunately, even today, not many scholars in Poland seem interested in researching webcomics, so it is not surprising that even the online data does not provide clear, verified information. For example, in the Wikipedia entry, we can read that the most popular webcomics were: *Losux* by PFreak, *What Did I Say, Fool?* by Godai (Bartek Biedrzycki), *Ke?*, and by Doctor Gonzo and KMH (Wikipedia: komiks internetowy, 2024). The authors of the entry also mentioned the existence of the website *Polskie Centrum Webkomixu* (Polish Centre for Webcomics), which was one of the few reliable sources of information on local webcomics. Regrettably, this last entry is no longer valid. Such a fate has befallen many other internet sources. Therefore, we support our analysis with interviews with some significant artists of Polish webcomics from the first decade of the 21st century. Their recollections and shared archives serve as a guide through the labyrinth of lost internet comic archives. Due to the limited scope of this article, we have selected only the works of one author, Agata “Endo” Nowicka that seem to be most innovative and important for the development of Polish webcomic art, analyzing them over two decades after the peak of their popularity.

The weird and disputed case of *Generacja Nic* (Generation Nothing)

In our research, we focus on the pioneers of Polish webcomics (referred to as the First Generation or First Wave) and the innovative nature of their cultural texts. These works are excellent examples of the intriguing trend of local culture becoming part of transnational currents, as Anglo-Saxon online comics very often employed very similar means of expression.¹

1 For example, consider some already classic strips such as *xkcd* by Randall Munroe, which is drawn in a similarly simplified style to the Polish webcomics of Jakub Dem Dębski, *Dinosaur*

Indeed, many cultural texts from the first wave of webcomics exhibit certain generational affinities in the use of narrative conventions with the transnational Generation X (Henseler, 2013, pp. 42–43) and the domestic alternative known as *Generacja Nic* (Generation Nothing), a phenomenon widely discussed in the Polish media and analyzed by cultural researchers (Wójcik, 2019, 34–48). Wojciech Baluch, in his study on the influences of Douglas Coupland’s prose and some Anglo-Saxon dramas on the Polish culture after 1989, rightly notes that:

The different approaches to the category of generation result from the various genre conventions that shape the discourse describing the phenomenon – be it collections of stories, dramas or films – and simultaneously influence the image of contemporary youth. However, I believe that such a diverse use of the category “Generation X” determines its appeal and, consequently, its significance in defining generational identity. Each time the cultural discourse invokes this term, it defines the identity of a given social group not so much by comparing its image to a fixed definition (which, as we can see, is elusive), but rather attempting to situate it in the context of other uses of this term that operate in different temporal, geographical and cultural spheres. Referring to the concept of Mikhail Bakhtin, I would therefore suggest that this act can be seen as a kind of dialogue with other usages of the term, both in the diachronic and synchronic dimensions, a way for a generation to speak about itself (Baluch, 2010, pp. 39–40).

The 1990s in Poland was a time of the rapid popularization of Western culture. Pirate cassette and VHS tapes, illegally copied software and games, as well as some early efforts to translate and publish sci-fi, fantasy, and horror literature and comics, shaped the tastes of younger generations (See: Drenda, 2016). Agata Endo Nowicka, the most media recognized creator of webcomics in Poland during the first decade of 21st century notes that during this period many Polish artists also encountered foreign cultural trends through the phenomenon of economic migration:

I saw *Fight Club* and *Trainspotting* [movies, added by SJK and JSZ], but also – I lived in England in 1996–99 and was very impressed by the music and art scene there. I regularly bought *The FACE* magazine and read Jamie Hewlett’s *Get the Freebies* cartoons, which later evolved into Gorillaz [English virtual band]. Key inspirations from my teenage years, 15+,

Comics by Ryan North (which in a way resembling the artworks of Pvek), or *Diesel Sweeties* by Richard Stevens III, which employs pixel art aesthetics similar to those found in some strips by Agata Endo Nowicka.

include the TV show *Twin Peaks*, musically Björk, Nirvana, De La Soul, Beastie Boys, visually MTV, *Tank Girl* [comic series], the grunge aesthetic, but also the 70s aesthetic that I was born into. There was probably a lot more, but those are the ones I remember the most. I certainly wasn't very deeply immersed in Polish culture or the music scene (Nowicka, 2024).

Although Polish culture in new millennium might have seemed to lag behind the Western world, domestic authors of Gen X literature (publishing their works mainly in the 1990s), our domestic alternative music and film directors found themselves, in some respects, aligned with their foreign counterparts who grew up in the free democratic countries. The unusual characters in some webcomics from the first decade of the 21st century (as well as the real-life attitudes of young people in post-communist Poland) can be linked both to the transnational phenomenon of Gen X and to the controversial novels and intermedia art of Sławomir Shuty, the queer literature of Michał Witkowski, and the highly innovative literary debut *Wojna Polsko-Ruska* by 19-year-old Dorota Masłowska. Another important cultural text connected to the social and cultural changes affecting younger generations of Poles was the first album by the post-punk band Cool Kids of Death, released in 2002 (and whose two members, Jacek Frańś and Krzysztof Ostrowski, also being comic artists).

While some contemporary academic research rightly highlights stylistic differences and the limitations of the generational perspective (Wójcik, 2019, pp. 15–18), there is also clear evidence that certain webcomic artists were influenced by the transnational currents of Gen X (see: Alaniz, 2002, p. 3, Henseler, 2013). Moreover, the Polish media also noticed these similarities and showed interest in this cultural phenomenon. In an article for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Kuba Wandachowicz (born 1975), the leader of the Cool Kids of Death, referred to his song *Generacja nic* (Generation nothing) and explained that “He sees his generation as unusual because it is... restricted by freedom” (Adamczewska, 2009, p. 203). Izabela Adamczewska, in her research on young Polish prose of 1990s, rightly emphasizes this point:

For Wandachowicz, the regained “normality” is, paradoxically, synonymous with the intellectual emptiness of young people. They do not engage in any discourse – neither social nor political. By adopting an attitude of withdrawal, they neither manifest anything nor take a stand – they simply abandon their intellectual ambitions. For this reason, Wandachowicz referred to his peers as “Generation Nothing.” They are a heterogeneous group. It is worth noting the author's classification – by role: a hip-hop artist, an advertising agency employee (as a symbol of modern social advancement), a marijuana smoker, a hooligan, an alcoholic (who gets drunk on beer in pubs – because it's fashionable now...), a journalist,

a tracksuit salesman, a bank employee, an activist of right-wing youth groups who believes he derives his political drive from pre-war magazines... (Adamczewska, 2009, p. 203).

An attempt to define some characteristic features of young Poles grappling with the effects of cultural and economic change can also be found in comic zines and magazines (Michał Śledziński's *Osiedle Swoboda* is one of the finest examples here) and webcomics, such as Endo's *Komix*, *Evil Cat and Pigeonhead* (also known as *Pigeon Head versus Evil Kat*) by Pvek (created by Dominik "enek" Zacharski and Tomasz Harczuk) or *Co mówilem, durniu?* (What did I say, you fool?) by Bartek Dem Biedrzycki.

Many narratives in these webcomics often contain ironic allusions to consumer goods and advertising associated with the new reality of capitalism (e.g. shopping at malls and supermarkets), which can be seen as a further connection to the transnational Generation X, such as in the novels of Chuck Palahniuk and Douglas Coupland and the films of Richard Linklater or Kevin Smith. Particularly in the case of Pvek and Endo, these narratives might be constructed as mumblecore collages of phrases from television, radio or internet trash news, reminiscent of the famous cut-up technique from the prose of William Burroughs (who is mentioned a few times in the comics' dialogs in Pvek). This technique also parallels the lyrics of rock bands popular in the 1990s, such as Nirvana or Radiohead. The strange quotes from the first wave of Polish webcomic are also an example of "denarration", as described by Douglas Coupland:

It has been said that as animals, one factor that sets us apart from all other animals is that our lives need to be stories, narratives, and that when our stories vanish, that is when we feel lost, dangerous, out of control and susceptible to the forces of randomness. It is the process whereby one loses one's life story: 'denarration' (Coupland, 1996, 179).

Andrew Tate, in his monographic study of Coupland's "plotless" prose, demonstrates that the narratives of Generation X highlight the absence of narrative purpose in modern culture. This is due to the overwhelming influx of electronic and informational media erasing traditional patterns of life. The Western world of the 1980s underwent a transformation where individuals could live without religion, family ties, ideology, class consciousness, politics or historical awareness, profoundly altering concepts of citizenship and collective memory. This "liquid identity", which originally promised liberation and diversity, has instead led to a norm centered around money, a value system devoid of principle and stability, as Terry Eagleton notes (Tate, 2007, p. 39). Tate claims that Coupland's "catalogue

of new temptations” includes information overload, the willful ignorance of history, the belief that spectacle is reality, and “vicarious living through celebrity existences”, trends that were once shocking and are now commonplace in cultural discourse. In such a media-saturated age, the boundaries between fact and fantasy are blurred, and the imagination is reshaped by the ubiquitous mass media. In Coupland’s opinion (nota bene similar to the thesis of postmodern scholars and philosophers), novelists (as well as comic artists) confronted with this media reality must adapt to a world dominated by absurdity (Tate, 2007, pp. 39–40).

In his monograph on the prose and films of the Polish generation of the 1970s and early 1980s, Grzegorz Wójcik also links banal and “ephemeral aspects of their narratives” with the liminal state of liquid modernity and the compulsion to constantly shape identity, which is neither given nor unchanging, as discussed in the essays of Zygmunt Bauman or Anthony Giddens (Wójcik, 2019, pp. 18–19). These narrative strategies may be regarded as social commentaries of the generation that did not fight for democracy during Poland of 1980s and did not find a secure place on the job market in 1990s.

Komix: of Blogs, Women, and Electronic Crayons

The most influential internet comic phenomenon to emerge in the Polish blogosphere was *Komix*, created by Agata Nowicka, known by her pseudonym Endo. She founded it together with Dominik “Enenek” Zacharski and Bartek “belle” Felczak in 2001, but it quickly became her solo project. *Komix* was an autobiographical series portraying everyday scenes, accompanied by short, sometimes aphoristic commentary. The coherence of this loosely structured form was maintained only by the author-protagonist, who appeared either in the drawings or through the commentaries on them. This form bore little resemblance to traditional comics but proved to be immensely popular. The original style and unique approach to semi-autobiographical narration from Endo’s webcomics was imitated by various authors, which Agata Nowicka herself encouraged in 2003 in her blog with the slogan “Girls to colored pencils!” (*Dziewczyny do kredki!*), a phrase that also served as the title of her art exhibition in Warsaw’s Baumgart Cafe.

The reference to colored pencils may sound somewhat misleading, as Endo created her works using digital painting programs (initially Paintbrush, later MS Paint), which were rudimentary tools operating solely with a computer mouse. As a result, her drawings were simple and minimalist, with visibly pixelated edges. Paradoxically, this worked to the

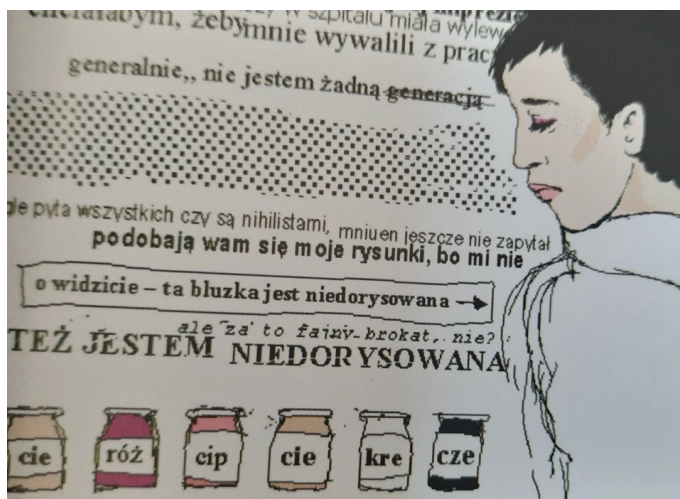
artist's advantage, highlighting the digital essence of her works, i.e. their inherently "internet nature". This style also fitted well into the phenomenon of transnational pixel art renaissance, prevalent in the independent video game industry and among internet artists alike. In an interview for our research, Agata Nowicka recalls:

My pixel art style emerged specifically through the limitations of the hardware: when I first started drawing on the computer, I was about 14 years old, so it was the late 80s, and we certainly didn't have internet access back then. However, our IBM computer had a Paintbrush program that I loved to use for drawing. When I returned to drawing on the computer years later (around 2001), I did so on my work computer, where again I only had a simple graphics editor and a mouse. I definitely wasn't following any graphic trends at the time; I did it spontaneously, driven by nostalgia for my first computer drawings. ... My first tablet was a professional Wacom tablet that I bought second-hand from the illustrator Paweł Jońca, I think in 2002 or 2003 (Nowicka, 2024).

An article in *Wysokie Obcasy* – a color supplement of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, probably the most opinion-forming newspaper in Poland at the time – contributed to the growing popularity of Endo. At the same time, the renowned documentary filmmaker Maria Zmarz-Koczanowicz was commissioned by the ARTE television channel to make a documentary about young Poles coming of age after joining the European Union. The director found her protagonists on the internet, convinced them to keep a diary, and then visited them with her camera for a year. Nowicka (introduced as Endo) is not only one of the heroines of this movie, but also the first to appear in it. In the 45th second of the film, we hear a sentence on the screen (quoted from the blog) that also appears in the text of *Gazeta Wyborcza*: "I can roughly divide my friends and acquaintances into those who call me Agata and those who call me Endo. This is how my online personality has transferred to real life. Even my boyfriend saved me in his phone as Endo" (Skirgajło-Krajewska, 2003, p. 34). This declaration bears similarities to those found in the narrations of "Gen X authors", such as Douglas Coupland, ironically claiming that we live in a world of *monophobia* (fear of feeling like an individual) and *deselfing*, a term that refers to "willingly diluting one's sense of self and ego by plastering the internet with as much information as possible" (Basar, Coupland, & Obrist, 2015). Most of these features may be found in Endo's webcomics. For example, in the picture titled *niedorysunek* ("underdrawing", published online at *Komix* on 08.02.2003) one can see a mix of cut-up sentences informing the reader that narrator was "at a secret party yesterday / that her grandmother is in the hospital after a stroke/ generally I am not any generation," etc. (See Fig. 1).

It is significant that the word “generation” has been deleted, and in several places, there are also comments referring to the accusation (from blog readers or critics) of “underdrawing”, a condition that may relate both to Nowicka’s specific drawing style and, metaphorically, to her disposition or an ironic comment on *Generation Nic*. The pixel picture shows only the pensive figure of the blog’s heroine and pixel pots of paint with fragments of words on them, from which the recipient can create collages or slang phrases. The background of the picture is mostly white, with only the protagonist’s face and the contents of the glasses in color. In some places, there are also comments to the reader, written in a messier, blurred font, and an arrow pointing to an “underdrawn” blouse.

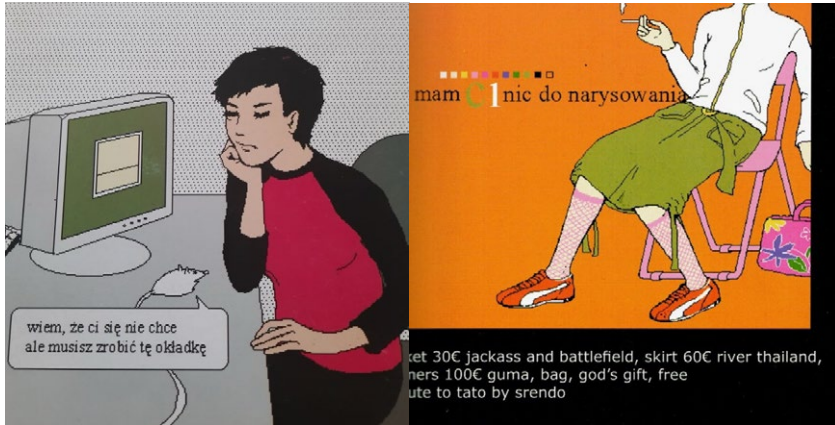
Fig. 1. Agata Endo Nowicka, *niedorysowanie*, (Wabik, 2004, p. 17)



Procrastination, lack of inspiration, and melancholic boredom, as they appear in the narrative of Linklater’s film *Slacker* (1990), for example, are also an important theme in Endo’s webcomics. In another drawing, which was used as the cover image for an anthology of Polish comics published by Artur Wabik, we see the artist sitting in front of a computer. The speech bubble contains the text spoken by the computer mouse, which turns to her and says: *wiem, że ci się nie chce ale musisz zrobić tę okładkę* (I know you do not want to, but you have to make this cover, Fig. 2). In the image titled in English *You are what you wear*, we also see the person declaring in Polish: *Nie mam CI nic do narysowania* (I have nothing to draw) which is a language joke playing with Polish expression *Nie mam nic do zadeklarowania* (I have nothing to declare) used when crossing the border in the duty-free zone. Below the picture there is some information about the prices of the

clothes the woman is wearing (given in euros), as well as some textual references to Western pop culture (MTV *Jackass* program and *Battlefield* video game, see: Fig. 3). Apart from links to transnational Gen X attributes, on the *komix.blog.pl*, you can also find some pictures that are more involved in domestic reality. The joke about duty-free could also refer to Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004.

Fig. 2. *Musisz zrobić tę okładkę*, and Fig. 3. *Nie mam CI nic do narysowania*. (Wabik, 2004, p. I, 19)



Another example of social commentary is the picture entitled *I was on holiday in Europe* (Fig. 4), which shows the naked back of a woman in an ocean blue background and a comment: *Mam nadzieję, że nie obrażam nikogo, w naszym kraju to jest karalne* (I hope I am not offending anyone, it is punishable in our country), which probably refers to the 2002–2010 trial of visual artist Dorota Nieznalska. She was accused of hurting religious feelings by using a cross and sexual organs in one of her works. Here, too, such an explanation could be interpreted as an indication of some cultural differences between Poland and the Western world at the beginning of the new millennium.

The latest works from *Komix* are less pixel art and more comic-like, with detailed backgrounds (probably thanks to the usage of a tablet). The webcomics in the series *Nuda i Nic* (Boredom and Nothing) are laid out in three black-and-white panels and use speech bubbles that focus on the relationship of a couple – a girl named Nuda, and a boy called Nic (Fig. 5). These comics ironically reinterpret both the conventions and stereotypes of Gen X and *Generacja Nic*, as well as Endo's media career. The couple is often shown smoking marijuana, which in turn is a common motif in films and novels about Generation X. Nic likes to joke about Nuda's

career in newspapers and TV. Nuda humorously complains about Nic's behaviors and their dysfunctional relationship.

Fig. 4. *I was on holiday in Europe* and Fig. 5. *Nuda i Nic* (Wabik, 2004, p. 18, 23)



Irony and distance towards the media are probably due to Endo's growing popularity. The cartoonist appeared on another public television program in 2004, in an episode of the series *Jazda kulturalna* directed by Magdalena Łazarkiewicz, which introduced new generation of comic artists to the Polish audience. No Polish cartoonist of the younger generation has received such intensive support. The promotion of Endo was undoubtedly influenced by the fact that she represented the young generation that came of age after the fall of communism, that she used a new medium (which was still unknown to many people in Poland) and that she could be identified with what was fashionable at the time: feminism. There were relatively few of feminist webcomic artist, but, as Kinga Kuczyńska, the author of the anthology *Polski komiks kobiety* (Polish Female Comics), wrote:

the popularity of the blog was determined by its original form and message, which combined the author's intimate statements with universal content that allowed contemporary twenty-year-olds from big cities to identify with the heroine. As a result, a kind of community formed around *the pixels*, commenting on the subsequent entries (Kuczyńska, 2012, p. 54).

Moreover, Endo's works were mostly polite and orderly, without obscene content, unlike those of Ernesto Gonzales, for example (who also appeared in Artur Wabik's anthology of webcomics) and without the radicalism found in some other feminist works and statements from Western Europe. In a book by critic and publicist Sebastian Frąckiewicz, which consists of interviews with comic artists and is entitled *Wyjście z Getta: rozmowy o kulturze komiksowej w Polsce* (Coming Out of the Ghetto: Conversations about Comic Culture in Poland), she is the only representative of internet comics.

A few years later, Endo also published her webcomics about pregnancy, which had previously appeared as strips in *Wysokie Obcasy*, in the form of a separate album diary called *Projekt Człowiek* (Project Human, 2006, Kultura Gniewu). This idea received mixed reviews. Some critics claimed

that the story should only be presented on the internet (Wyrzykowski, 2007), while others praised the original form of the comic diary and the new female perspective on the Polish market (Madej-Reputakowska, 2007). The appearance of numerous comics created by women can be seen as particularly significant. Female creators who found it difficult to break into the traditional comics field, dominated by men who looked down on their work, found a space on the internet where they could publish their work and share their views. Finally, the internet also appeared to be a good place for some Polish female artist to get a foothold into the comics industry in the West. Kinga Kuczyńska pointed out that, according to the catalogue of the Polish Webcomics Centre, every fourth webcomic was created by women (Kuczyńska, 2012, p. 52). She added that this list is not very accurate, as many works are absent or are too short-lived to be included. Among comic blogs created by women, Kuczyńska considers Agata Dębicka's *Piksele* (Pixels, 2005), Ada Bucholc's *Crisis Journals* (2009), Olga Wróbel's *Varieties of Masochism* (2009), and the works of Agnieszka Szczepaniak (2012) to be outstanding. This list can be supplemented by other important works, which may be found, for example in the research of Ksenia Frątczak (Frątczak 2018).

Furthermore, her blog encouraged not only women but also some net artists to become involved in webcomics. In the first decade of 21st century, her success attracted the interest of some art curators. Nowicka's works, together with webcomics of other artists, were presented at the exhibitions and various multimedia performances. Some journalists and art critics have tried to tag the new phenomenon as e-bohemia (Świątkowska, 2003):

At that time, there was a lot of interest in this „new media art” or simply the “internet scene”, both from the traditional media (interviews, articles in *Polityka* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*) and from art institutions and curators. Our works were shown on screens at exhibitions, not printed on paper. In hindsight, I can see that *komix.blog.pl* was a spontaneous creative urge that was initially executed rather casually and was perhaps given more importance than it actually had. For me, it was another stage – a means to an end to become an illustrator and cartoonist (although I think comics are ultimately less important in my career and I don't feel as connected to them anymore). I recently received an invitation to exhibit my comics drawings in a feminist art show. All in all, probably the sheer amount of misogyny I encountered back then is enough to be considered feminist (Nowicka, 2024).

Nowadays, Endo is a well-known illustrator living in the USA and working with influential magazines and newspapers, such as *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and others. She published her comics and

illustrations in many Polish albums and anthologies and exhibited her artworks in Berlin, New York, Prague and Vienna. Sadly, her webcomics from *komix.blog.pl* have disappeared from the internet, a fate shared by many net art artefacts.

A summary of the first stage of “the conquest of the internet” by comic artists, such as these gathered around the *Komix* blog, was the already mentioned anthology *Komiks w Sieci* (Comics on the Internet, 2004), edited by Artur Wabik. The author, recalling this publication years later, says that the creators of webcomics at that time formed a close and friendly group of artists who decided to publish on the internet. They did not fit into the traditional comics environment and were treated with great distance by it. However, they showed many young comic artists how to use the internet for self-expression and initiated a series of changes that led to webcomics developing in many directions, not necessarily the way their creators had expected. The last words Wabik says during the interview are: “I have the impression that the album *Komiks w Sieci*, which was supposed to be a harbinger of change, has become an epitaph for a certain phenomenon and environment” (Jutkiewicz, 2018, p. 33).

Wabik’s prophecy might seem to be accurate for the first generation of artists who disappeared from the internet or turned into more profitable aspects of creative work, such as graphic design or the game development industry. However, after 2004, there was a veritable boom in internet comics (and a very short boom in Polish comic publishing market, lasting only from 2000 to 2003). During this period, both those who could draw and those who could not started to present their work online. Often, webcomics attracted younger generations of artists, secondary school students (like Pretty Freak – the author of the highly popular comic blog *Losux*) or people in their early 20s. A good example might be the members of NetKolektyw group that gathered such artists as Jakub Dem Dębski, who might be considered as a Polish version of Daniel Merlin Goodbrey, a very important creator of webcomics from UK who popularized his idea of hypercomics (Williams, 2017) and inspired Scott McCloud to write about the concept of infinite canvas webcomics (McCloud, 2009). For this reason, the themes and aesthetics of these artworks had to be different from earlier domestic attempts. Jakub Dębski points out that he and most of his friends from NetKolektyw did not feel generational connection with Polish *Generation Nic* or transnational Gen X:

From my perspective, a constant internet connection and English language skills thrust us deep into American pop culture, and we embraced NetKolektyw with glee. To me, these are all heavily millennialist hunks that don’t fit much with the Gen X. ... I don’t know who [Sławomir] Shuty is,

and I haven't read Masłowska. Kevin Smith's films attracted Bele (Robert Sienicki) the most. None of us had heard of Linklater at the time. We were mainly interested in fantasy, Japanese cartoons, games and manga, American animated films and other people's webcomics. Today it's a standard pop culture sandwich, but in 2007, we felt that there were only a few like us (Dębski, 2024).

Conclusions

Webcomics not only provided an opportunity for those who lacked the artistic skills or knowledge of influential personalities to present their works in zines and magazines, but also allowed previously absent or excluded groups, such as female authors or members of various minorities, to emerge. Internet comics became a democratic arena for unrestricted expression, connecting two generations – those born and raised in the communist era and the Polish “internet natives”, often referred to as millennials (Strauss & Howe, 2000; Kisiel, 2016), xennials (Russel, 2022, p. 89), internet natives (Prensky, 2001) or simply the neostrada generation (Paśnik, 2022) in their home country.

On one hand, their cultural texts sometimes aligned with local trends, at the same time expanding, reinterpreting and deconstructing them. On the other hand, many works were compatible with transnational meme culture and easily fit into the global aesthetic of social media. In contrast to the Western webcomics artists, the first generation of Polish internet users sometimes expressed their dissatisfaction with the labor market, political situation or cultural differences between their homeland and richer countries more openly.

Finally, for some authors, webcomics became a platform where they could start their self-publishing careers or take an important step on the way to a national career, as in the case of Endo or Jacek Świdziński, the member of the webcomic group Maszin, who recently received in 2024 the Paszport Polityki Award for his comic album *Festiwal* (the first prestigious artistic prize for a comic book artist given in Poland by influential journalists). Others have also managed to find some fans abroad, such as Jakub Dem Dębski or Kondrad Koko Okoński, who also self-publish English versions of their albums and send them abroad. This situation resembles the experiences of comic artist from Western countries. Ian Hague rightly indicates that:

Online comics can be said to be relatively egalitarian in their distribution because it costs nothing for an individual with an Internet-capable

computer (and perhaps a scanner) to make her/his comics available online. While we have in recent years seen the rise of centralised digital comics distributors such as Comixology, which may limit the possibilities for equal visibility, the medium is not as financially prohibitive as print and therefore does provide reasonable possibilities for independent creators to distribute their works effectively and in competition with more financially powerful groups/pub-Lishers (Hague, 2014, p. 120).

Nowadays, most of the major domestic blog platforms have stopped developing their servers. The most popular internet portal integrating domestic webcomics is *webkomiksy.pl*. This website was launched in 2020, thanks in part to financial support from the Patronite platform. Its archive contains over 600 webcomics, including works by well-known artists (for example Koko Okoński) and many debutants. The content of the portal differs significantly in aesthetic and thematic terms from the proposals of the post-blog generation of pioneers. There are not so many comic book plots related to themes around contemporary youth problems, and the visual inspirations are rather dominated by references to manga and the aesthetics of young adult comics. The internet works of the latest generation also differ from their predecessors in that they turn away from hard science fiction and turn to genres mixed with fantasy elements, zoomorphic conventions, or teen fiction. The founders of the internet platform inform potential sponsors about their activities:

We have created a thriving community of Polish webcomics, run social media, and try to travel to festivals to promote comics and creators who publish on our platform. Several of them have achieved commercial success thanks to our website. Among the titles featured are Yaoi Market, WilderNESs, and Wianek. Despite the increasing popularity of our website and the success of our authors, we want the website to always operate on a non-profit basis. Our team covers the costs of travel, booths, and servers out of our own pockets. We are striving to expand the platform further, which involves additional costs (<https://patronite.pl/webkomiksy>).

With specialized transnational internet platforms such as Tapas and the low-cost self-publishing options both domestically in the form of e-books or traditional comic albums (e.g. with the Empik self-publishing program) and globally (e.g. via Amazon), the world seems to be at the feet of Polish internet comic artists of the third decade of the 21st century.

REFERENCES

- Adamczewska, I. (2009). Autentyzm? Autograficzność? Głos w sprawie najmłodszej polskiej prozy. *Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Litteraria Polonica*, nr 12.
- Alanis, J. (2022). *Ressurection. Comics in Post-Soviet Russia*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Bałuch, W. (2010). *Dramatyzacja "Pokolenia X." Pokolenie – kategoria historyczna czy współczesna? Obraz przemian pokoleniowych w sztuce i społeczeństwie XX i XXI wieku*, red. J. Zając. Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 27–40. Retrieved from: <https://ruj.uj.edu.pl/server/api/core/bitstreams/46246a77-7fe6-4765-b4f4-fab06ae36f81/content> (access: 10.07.2024).
- Baran, D. (2013). *Internet w Polsce. Polski system medialny 1989–2011*, red. K. Pokorna-Ignatowicz. Kraków: Krakowskie Towarzystwo Edukacyjne sp. z o.o. – Oficyna Wydawnicza AFM. Retrieved from: <https://repozytorium.ka.edu.pl/server/api/core/bitstreams/9106b532-755d-4f01-9751-f73c71d8b78d/content> (access: 27.02.2024).
- Basar, S., Coupland, D., & Orbist, H. (2015). Don't be stupid: a glossary for the extreme present. *The Guardian*. Sun 22 Feb. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/shortcuts/2015/feb/22/glossary-for-extreme-present-online-world> (access: 10.07.2024).
- Biedrzycki, B. *Biogram*. Retrieved from: <https://www.gniazdoswiatow.net/godai/> (access: 10.07.2024).
- Cichocki, P. (2012). *Netart: reinkarnacje*, „Dwutygodnik” nr 86. Retrieved from: <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/3734-netart-reinkarnacje.html> (access: 10.07.2024).
- Coupland, D. (1996). *Polaroids from the Dead*. New York: ReganBooks/HarperCollins.
- Drenda, O. (2016). *Duchologia polska: rzeczy i ludzie w latach transformacji*. Kraków: Karakter.
- Drenda, O. (2020). 2020: Pjesek. *Dwutygodnik* nr 272. Retrieved from: <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/8667-2020-pjesek.html> (access: 10.07.2024).
- Endo/Nowakowska, A. (22.01.2024, 2.02.2024, 20.02.2024). *Interviews*.
- Filiciak, M. & Wasiak, P. (2022). *Weż pan Rambo! Społeczna historia magnetowidów w Polsce*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra.
- Frąckiewicz, S. (2012). *Wyjście z getta. Rozmowy o kulturze komiksowej w Polsce*. Warszawa: 40000 Malarzy.
- Frąszczak, K. (2018) Polski webkomiks nie tylko w polskim Internecie. *Zeszyty Komiksowe*, nr 25, 22–29.
- Gracz, D. (2018) Internet jest zbyt wielki. Wywiad z Jakubem Dębskim. *Zeszyty Komiksowe* nr 25, 64–69.

- Hague, I. (2014) *Comics and the Senses: A Multisensory Approach to Comics and Graphic Novels*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Heath, J. & Potter, A. (2005). *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't Be Jammed*. Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Henseler, H. (ed.). (2013). *Generation X Goes Global. Mapping a Youth Culture in Motion*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Jutkiewicz, M. (2018). Epitafium dla pewnego zjawiska. Z Arturem Wabikiem na temat antologii Komiks w Sieci. *Zeszyty Komiksowe*, nr 25, 30–33.
- Jutkiewicz, M. (2018). Krajobraz po rewolucjach. Współczesny komiks internetowy po kulturze remiksu. *Zeszyty Komiksowe*, nr 25, 74–80.
- Kisiel P. (2016). Millennialsi – nowy uczestnik życia społecznego? *Studia Socialia Cracoviensia*, nr 1 (14), 83–94. Retrieved from: <http://bc.upjp2.edu.pl/Content/3428/5.pdf> (access: 10.07.2024).
- Kleefeld, S. (2020). *Webcomics*. London, New York: Bloomsbury.
- Klonowski, P. (2021). Comic und underground – der „dritte umlauf“. *Handbuch Polnische Comickulturen nach 1989*. Berlin: Christian A. Bachmann Verlag, 23–26.
- Kuczyńska, K. (2012). *Polski komiks kobiety*. Warszawa: Timof Comics.
- Komiks internetowy. Retrieved from: https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Komiks_internetowy (access: 10.07.2024).
- McCloud, S. (2000). *Reinventing Comics: The Evolution of an Art Form*. New York: Harper Collins.
- McCloud, S. (2009). *The "Infinite Canvas."* Retrieved from: <https://scottmccloud.com/4-inventions/canvas/>(access: 25.01.2025).
- Madej-Reputakowska, M. (2007). *Projekt: Człowiek*. Jedna Mila w dziewięć miesięcy. Retrieved from: <https://polter.pl/komiks/Projekt-Czlowiek-c8063> (access: 05.03.2024).
- Paśnik, J. (2022). *Dzieci Neo: Między generacją Y a Z*. Retrieved from: <https://truestory.pl/dzieci-neo-miedzy-generacja-y-a-z/> (access: 10.07.2024).
- Pawlicka, U. (2011). Story art i nowe media. *Ha!Art* nr 34, 94–106.
- Russell, M. (2022). *Snaķ Oil. Genuine marketing in an age of cure-alls*. New York, London: Morgan James Publishing.
- Strauss, W. & Howe, N. (2000). *Millennials rising: the next great generation*. New York.
- Skirgajło-Krajewska, P. (2003). ENDO – komixowa dziewczyna. *Wysokie Obcasy*, nr 44. Retrieved from: <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75248,1759055.html> (access: 10.07.2024).
- Stańczyk, E. (2022). *Comics and nation: power, pop culture, and political transformation in Poland*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Szylak, J. & Konefał, S.J. (2023). The influence of local and national press on the comic publishing industry in the Polish People's Republic between 1956 and 1989. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, nr 1(14), 57–69.

- Szyłak, J. (2021). Polnischer Webcomic. *Handbuch Polnische Comickulturen nach 1989*. Berlin: Christian A. Bachmann Verlag, 152–157.
- Świątkowska, E. (2003). e-bohem@. *Polityka*. Retrieved from: <https://www.polityka.pl/archiwumpolityki/1855764,1,e-bohem.read> (access: 10.07.2024).
- Tate, A. (2007). *Douglas Coupland*. Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press.
- Turek, M. (21.01.2023, 2.02.2024). *Interviews*.
- Wabik, A. (2004). *Komiks w sieci. Antologia polskiego komiksu internetowego*. Kraków: Antropos.
- Williams, E. (2010). *Hypercomics: The Shape of Comics to Come*. Retrieved from: <https://www.creativereview.co.uk/hypercomics-the-shape-of-comics-to-come/>(access: 25.01.2025).
- Wójcik, G. (2019). *NICponie. Pokolenie roczników 70 i wczesnych 80. w młodej polskiej prozie oraz filmie fabularnym*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra.
- Wyrzykowski, R. *Portret artystki z czasów ciąży*. Agata (endo) Nowicka „Projekt: Człowiek” – recenzja. Retrieved from: https://esensja.pl/komiks/recenzje/tekst.html?id=3772#google_vignette (access: 10.07.2024).

Sebastian Jakub Konefał – an Associate Professor in the Department of Film and Media at the University of Gdańsk (Poland). He has published texts on genre cinema, comic books and Nordic cinema. He edited the first Polish encyclopaedia of graphic novels (*Powieści graficzne: Leksykon*, 2016). He is also an author of two academic books in Polish (*Corpus Futuri*, 2013), (*Kino Islandii. Tradycja i Ponowoczesność*, 2016) and a monograph on Icelandic cinema in English (*Cinema of Iceland. Between Tradition and Liquid Modernity*, 2019).

Jerzy Szyłak – a Full Professor at the Department of Culture Studies of the University of Gdańsk (Poland). He specializes in the theory of literature, film studies and cultural studies. He has authored numerous academic papers on comics and thirteen books about the history and theory of comics. He edited three volumes of the encyclopaedia of picture books and is a co-author of *Histoire de la bande dessinée polonaise* (2019) published in France. He also writes comic stories.

