

Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska

Visual representations of war in Polish and Scandinavian picturebooks : a metaphorical perspective

Problemy Wczesnej Edukacji/Issues in Early Education 12/3(34), 118-131

2016

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Hanna Dymel-Trzebiatowska
University of Gdańsk (Poland)
filhdt@univ.gda.pl

Visual representations of war in Polish and Scandinavian picturebooks. A metaphorical perspective

Summary

The goal of the article is to show the potential of the war metaphor applied in the picturebook medium and reflect upon the cultural premises of its use. The analysed material includes three Polish and two Scandinavian books, published within four years, 2011–2014: *Pamiętnik Blumki*¹ (Blumka's Diary, 2011) by Iwona Chmielewska, *Powieki* (The Eyelids, 2012) by Michał Rusinek and Ola Cieślak, *Ostatnie przedstawienie panny Esterki* (Miss Esterka's Last Performance, 2014) by Adam Jaromir and Gabriela Cichowska, *Lejren* (The Camp, 2011) by Oscar K. and Dorte Karrebæk and *Krigen* (The War, 2013) by Gro Dahle and Kaia Dahle Nyhus.

Key words: war, picturebook, Holocaust, metaphor, symbol

Słowa kluczowe: wojna, książka obrazkowa, Holocaust, metafora, symbol

War in picturebooks

War is a frequent motif in children's fiction though theoretically it belongs to the domain of adulthood. In fact, adults start wars, adults are soldiers – at least in line with civilized standards – and adults kill deliberately and intelligently. But since we, adults, are unable to change it, we can at least try to make children aware of that dubious human quality, the capacity to fight and incapacity to stop, particularly as children often become victims of wars. No matter how many lives are lost and how many books are written, war can happen – this is a distressing conclusion while observing the eagerness to write about war for children and consequently a remarkable interest in this theme among researchers.²

Limiting these observations exclusively to picturebooks, a basic dichotomy with regard to the structuring of the war motif emerges. Picturebooks' authors employ:

- Explicit, definite wars presented in both words and images, with a varied use of reference to actual historical events; e.g. *Rose Blanche* by Roberto Innocenti (1985),

¹ The book was also published in Germany as *Blumkas Tagebuch* in 2011.

² For example a conference held in March 2015 in Norway *På flukt, på vent, på eventyr? Om krig i barne- och ungdomslitteratur*, a book *An allen Fronten. Kriege und politische Konflikte in Kinder- und Jugendmedien* edited by Ingrid Tomkowiak et al. (2013) or Lydia Kokkola's comprehensive study *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature* (2003).

Humo by Anton Fortes and Joanna Concejo (2008), *Otto: the Autobiography of a Teddy Bear* by Tomi Ungerer (2010), *Daddy's in Iraq. But I want him back* (2005) by Carmen R. Hoyt.

- Abstract wars, referring to timeless conflicts, without a specific location, but including two inherent war characteristics, extreme violence and destruction, pictured with the use of traditional attributes: tanks, weapons, fires, battlefields, barbed wire; e.g. *The Canine Kalevala* (1992) by Mauri Kunnas, *Warum* (1996) by Nikolai Popov, *The Rabbits* by John Marsden and Shaun Tan (1998), *Comme deux gouttes d'eau* (2007) by Vanessa Simon-Catelin and Francois Soutif, *The enemy: a book about peace* (2009) by Davide Cali and Serge Bloch.

These examples of picturebooks are not an attempt at a comprehensive coverage but show the presence of the theme in different languages and cultures. Moreover, these two fundamental categories intersect in multiple constellations with many other aspects, one of which involves characters that can be humans, animals, human/animal hybrids or indefinite fantastic creatures. The other two evident variables are endings, happy or hopeless, and the causes of war, which are sometimes excluded from the plot but when incorporated they range from simple greed to a sudden division of property or other issues. Of particular importance is the employment of the realistic or fantastic convention, which partly entails some of the above-mentioned categories, e.g. anthropomorphized animals are often the main characters in non-mimetic or fantastic stories. The visual representations of war, whose relationships to the verbal are in various proportions and modes, make use of a wide scope of artistic techniques and vary significantly – the illustrations range from minimalistic, even simplistic, to overflowing with details; from black and white to drowned in intense colours. Although all the stories represent a wide scope of interesting literary and artistic solutions, they seem to have one common dominator: all of them have a similar ethical message – to remind, to warn and to educate in the spirit of pacifism.

In relation to all of these concerns, however, what is of interest is that war is not only a theme which in dialogue with children is expressed by metaphors in order to avoid its cruelty and devastation, but it is also a metaphor employed to discuss other themes. It is, therefore, a powerful, symbolic image which expresses the deepest, the most painful human emotions and states.

The Holocaust and metaphoric pictures

I have limited my analyses to modern picturebooks employing the war motif, published in Poland and Scandinavia within four years of each other, 2011–2014. The analysis will be illustrated below with a selection of five thought-provoking examples but has no ambition at being exhaustive.³

³ For example, Jan Hogne Christiansen's *Borgny: det er krig i Norge* (2014) is not representative of the study, whose main goal is analysing metaphors.

The first three Polish picturebooks⁴ that I will discuss fall into the first category of the initial typology, i.e. explicitly referring to an historic event – the Holocaust. All of them were published around the year dedicated to Janusz Korczak, 2012, commemorating the 70th anniversary of his death and the 100th anniversary of the founding of the House of Orphans in Krochmalna Street in Warsaw. The celebrations comprised a series of events and publications in honour of this famous Polish-Jewish educator, writer and paediatrician including a popularisation of his works among a young audience. *Pamiętnik Blumki*⁵ (Blumka's Diary) by Iwona Chmielewska came out in 2011, *Powieki* (The Eyelids) by Michał Rusinek and Ola Cieślak in 2012 and the third one, *Ostatnie przedstawienie panny Esterki*⁶ (Miss Esterka's Last Performance) by Adam Jaromir and Gabriela Cichowska two years later, in 2014. It is noteworthy that although these picturebooks contain clear references to time, space and facts, they are still fictional, distort reality and contain ideology. As Maria Nikolajeva points out, after Bernard Harris, "in addressing the Holocaust, the purpose of fiction is not so much conveying the knowledge-about as it is conveying the knowledge-of – that is, *experience*, refracted through an individual consciousness." (Nikolajeva 2014b: 40)

Blumka's Diary is a first-person account of a girl from the House of Orphans in Krochmalna Street. Although she is fictional, her naïve narration enhances the fact that the book conveys historical events. Blumka's story is framed by an omniscient narrator in the third person, who on the first page states that the girl kept a diary where she pasted photographs, which additionally amplifies the account's credibility. One of the photographs, depicting the doctor and a group of 12 children, including Blumka herself, serves in the girl's diary as a starting point to tell sorrowful stories of the portrayed, parentless boys and girls, often collected by Korczak from the streets in pre-war Warsaw. The children are individualized through short everyday episodes: their hobbies, illnesses, good and bad deeds. The last, most detailed description is dedicated to Korczak and his pedagogical programme including joint responsibility, self-government, gender equality and freedom of religion. The doctor, viewed through Blumka's eyes, appears as a sensitive, fair, engaged, sometimes concerned adult who is wholly devoted to his orphans – indeed, he is almost glorified like a saint.

The verbal account does not touch upon the approaching war, which seems to be beyond the grasp of the innocent child narrator. This is a generally mimetic visual representation that anticipates the war intensely, employing a wide range of imagery. The pale colour scheme, with predominant sepia tones, evokes the atmosphere of the past, which is amplified by the use of collage elements denoting the pre-war Polish chronotope. The re-

⁴ Two of them were co-published with the German publishing house Gimpel Verlag and also came out in Germany.

⁵ The book was also published in Germany as *Blumkas Tagebuch* in 2011.

⁶ It came out first in 2013 in Germany, with the title *Fräulein Esthers letzte Vorstellung*, but the Polish version is not a translation since the author, Adam Jaromir, is a native Polish speaker.

current symbol is the star of David conveyed in numerous pictorial representations, often with a suggestion of destruction, for instance broken glass.

The pictorial leitmotif is lined paper referring to the pages from Blumka's diary, along with the construction of different elements of the created world: clothes, toys and furniture. The colour blue on every spread corresponds both to the ink the girl uses to write and the colour of forget-me-nots, which function as another powerful symbol and message. When Blumka's diary stops suddenly with the entry "I will tell about the rest tomorrow", a voice in the third person takes over to end the story with a clear closure: "Then the war came and took Blumka's diary away too. How do we know what was written in it? Because the diary exists so as not to forget." The last spread and the final endpapers are covered with forget-me-nots, which also appeared a few pages before, growing out of the lined pages in the diary, as the anticipation of the book's last words.



Fig. 1

Blumka's Diary doesn't tell the story of moving to the ghetto or the Great Action in 1942, but the next to last double spread represents part of a cattle car, a clear indication of transports to the death camps.

At first glance, *Miss Esterka's Last Performance* seems similar to *Blumka's Diary* both aesthetically and thematically, but on closer consideration the books differ to a large extent. *Miss Esterka* tells a story from the Warsaw ghetto, which is longer, much gloomier, more complex and apparently intended for older children. The multi-layered text consists of the authentic diary of Korczak, interweaved with rich paratexts and again a first-person

voice, this time of a twelve-year-old orphan, Genia. Korczak's notes, which appear in a typewritten style font, present his distressing observations of ghetto life, and his dreams and concerns about the future. The doctor's verbal picture portrays a very tired, disillusioned man, more human than holy.



Fig. 2

Genia's story revolves around everyday episodes until the climax: the spectacle of Rabindranath Tagore's play *The Post Office*, which the children perform under their guardian, Miss Esterka's supervision three weeks before the so-called 'liquidation' of the orphanage within the Great Action. Korczak was inspired with the idea of the performance by Esterka, and thus the children experience moments of temporary oblivion and happiness; for instance, Genia impersonates the princess character and fulfils her great dream of being a ballerina.

The spreads in this book are covered with realistic pictures in sepia tones applied in collage and erasures, which anticipate the disappearance of the human silhouettes either

during the ghetto uprising in 1943 or in the gas chambers. The illustrator, Gabriela Cichowska, made many of them on the grounds of authentic old ghetto photographs. Different visual modes of representation are employed: children's drawings, real photographs, posters, official announcements of the Judenrat (the Council of the Jews), ration cards, scraps of newspapers, the doctor's handmade prescriptions and notes, and the calendar pages which indicate the passing of time. The last calendar page plays a particularly significant role on the final double spread when the story seems to be over and the reader has already been provided with documentary, authentic information about both the orphans' and Miss Esterka's fate. Surprisingly, the story continues: the single, old calendar card with the tragic date, the 6th of August 1942, Thursday, the day of deportation to the Treblinka extermination camp, stands alone against a dark, brown background with some lighter, erased patches. No words and no images are required to express the continuation of this story in Polish culture. Reticence through a verbal and visual gap is clear enough for the expert reader and can make a novice reader ask for support to gain new knowledge.

After the elaborate colophon, the back endpapers still continue the wordless story: the verso informs about the orphanage bombed in 1943 with children's pictures from Korczak's collection, the so-called Art Academy, hovering sadly in the air, while the recto, also referring to the flying motif, includes Miss Esterka's posthumous image supplied with butterfly⁷ wings. Butterflies symbolize spirit in many cultures, but here they additionally evoke associations to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's discovery, described in her book *The Wheel of Life, A Memoir of Living and Dying*. When she visited the Majdanek concentration camp in 1946 the walls in the children's barracks were covered with hundreds of butterflies scratched with fingernails and pebbles, which Kübler-Ross interprets as a symbolic expression of their belief in the soul's immortality.

Esterka employs an additional resource of picturebook making when one of the spreads suddenly offers a double opening. The pages depicting the orphanage building with cut-out windows can be turned aside to reveal a new scene inside the building. This opening not only contributes to the attractiveness and deeper experiencing of this book but also formally indicates the performativity of picturebooks, situating this medium in a close relation to the theatre. After the opening we are given an opportunity to stand on a stage behind Lutek, a boy playing the violin, and facing his audience – a group of sorrowful children. Moreover, this double perspective illustrates symbolically the outer and inner view of the orphans' situation, their prison-like life when they were forbidden to leave their house for safety reasons and were merely allowed to glimpse the world through its windows. The prison gains here an amplified meaning, because the children were already imprisoned in the ghetto. In this way, as distressful shadow faces in the windows, the children are potentially viewed by the outside as helpless viewers, whereas after the second opening, we are given a chance to look inside and see how "Mr Doctor" tried to make life bearable in such an unbearable reality.

⁷ It may not be a coincidence that Genia is thinking of drawing a butterfly while reflecting on her contribution to the 'Art Academy' that Korczak set up on the top floor.

The metaphor of the Holocaust

The third Polish picturebook, *The Eyelids*, is part of an educational project carried out during Korczak Year by the Podlasie Opera and Philharmonic, which accompanied a spectacle entitled *Korczak*. This book is remarkably distinct from the two previous examples – in its plot, nonhuman characters, imagery and colour scheme. The simplistic text tells a story of mice which spend their boring life in a field when unexpectedly a huge fire surrounds their habitat from all directions. The disaster is incomprehensible, unavoidable, all-embracing and overwhelms the characters, who, as we read, were used to spending life with their noses close to the ground. There seems to be no solution, no way out, when one of them, undistinguishable from the others, appears brave and enterprising enough to climb a tree so as to recognize the danger. The sight of the damaging fire, meanwhile, makes her fall down and discover the sky. She decides to share this astonishing revelation with her friends, who soon – as the text informs us on a pictureless double spread – enchanted by the view, admire a view of the clouds. On the next page the mouse-leader tells her friends to close their eyelids and remember that heavenly sight forever while the red background implies the fire. All the mice lie calmly in the last wordless double spread, hovering against a blue background, with blue-greenish half-moon shapes covering their faces.



Fig. 3

The symbol of eyelids is employed three times in the pictorial representation of the book: first on the front cover, embracing the title like brackets, next on the face of the mouse-leader illustrating the climactic moment when she gives advice to her friends, and finally in the collective scene finishing the story. Surprisingly, the narrative continues on the back cover, providing the reader with extra verbal information: “And before the sky

was covered with smoke, all the field mice were lying with closed eyelids and smiling, imagining more and more beautiful clouds”. The verbal account complements the visual, depicting not mice but curls of dense smoke and finally an explicit sign of the war, two military planes flying above.

The book contains two elements implying war, both within paratexts: one visual, the above-mentioned representation of two planes; and a verbal one included on the front cover – a short text printed vertically in small letters on the right “eyelid”: “Dedicated to the memory of Janusz Korczak”. The other war signifiers, more implicit and presumably meant for more experienced readers, are expressed in the layout. The text in full is printed in black-letter type, associated in Poland with the German language and culture, and some background ornaments also refer to Gothic imagery. The most illustrative example is a page composed exclusively of a red and black Gothic pattern with a hidden star of David against which the mouse-leader’s desperate observation from the tree top is written in white Gothic script: “There was nowhere to run”.

The colour scheme in the book comprises many intense colours referring mimetically to the rendered items: the field representing the mice’s habitat at the beginning is yellow, red accompanies the fire, blue is strictly linked to the sky, whereas the final clouds of smoke are grey. There are not many pictures in this short story and the majority of them stand in symmetrical relation to the verbal content. Only a few provide viewers with some extra information, such as the discussed double spread depicting the mice against the blue sky. However, the visual potential in the book is predominantly employed by the eyelid symbol, which verbally appears only once, i.e. in the title. On the metaphorical level the eyelids, spanning this concise story like brackets, enable the mice to cut themselves off from reality and transfer to the domain of fantasy, which constitutes a reference to Korczak’s pedagogical efforts while stimulating his orphans to use their fantasy in escapist activities in the face of the approaching Holocaust.

This is a highly metaphorical story with covert references to Janusz Korczak, but epistemically it invites interesting observations. As Maria Nikolajeva states, anthropomorphization creates a cognitive challenge to novice readers since they have to develop scepticism and bridge the gap between empirical and aesthetic knowledge. However, it may finally result in achieving a higher degree of cognitive competence (Nikolajeva 2014b: 41–42). It is also noteworthy that although the situation of the mice in this book is unequivocally related to humans, not necessarily children, these animals also have their own symbolic potential. Mice are traditionally perceived as fearful, but the story overcomes the risk of stereotyping and shows that in confrontation with an inevitable danger, it is possible to develop new capacities.

All three picturebooks received a great deal of acclaim both in the Polish media and in single academic studies. They have been unanimously praised as suggestive, touching, informative and symbolical.⁸ The Polish scholars Magdalena Sikorska and Katarzyna

⁸ Kruszyńska Elżbieta, *O świecie wartości doktora Korczaka*: http://ryms.pl/ksiazka_szczegoly/806/index.html; *Ewangelia według Korczaka. Pamiętnik Blumki Iwony Chmielewskiej*. W: *Wyczytać świat*.

Smyczyńska, in their study entitled “The Gospel of Korczak”, call *Blumka’s Diary* “philosophical, spiritual, even mystical travel” (Sikorska, Smyczyńska 2014: 159). Moreover, Chmielewska’s book was awarded both in Germany and Poland, e.g. with the first literary prize of the Polish section of IBBY in 2011.

The Holocaust as a metaphor

Another title, *Lejren* (The Camp) by Oscar K. and Dorte Karrebæk, a much-acclaimed Danish picturebook from 2011, does not fit fully into the initial typology. The story is a hybrid of the first category and a further one in which war denotes an abstract concept and becomes rather a symbol of hostility, violence, fighting and abuse. *The Camp* is a surrealistic play of meaning, shifting between a summer camp, childhood, and a concentration camp. At the beginning a group of children arrive by bus and train at a place similar to a summer camp situated everywhere and nowhere. Soon they have to give away their luggage, their clothes, hair and names, and their surroundings are quickly transformed into an extermination camp, though still preserving clear indications of school rules and family relations. Above the camp gateway that the children pass through, there is a sign stating “Love conquers everyone”,⁹ which in the picture is explicitly styled like the sign “Arbeit macht frei”. They starve, get sick, are forced to work, are punished, take their own lives, and those who survive leave the camp when new transports arrive. The end of their childhood is verbally expressed as the end of their school education: “Out on the grounds the other children stand in slightly oversized coats and black caps. The head congratulates them on their graduation.”

The gruesome atmosphere in *The Camp* is visually constructed by numerous agents, of which the strongest one is the bodily characterization of the figures, pictured in their facial expressions, postures and the imagery of colours. Bright, intense colours express emotions in keeping with widely recognizable conventions: the predominant red is traditionally associated with aggression, grey and black with distress, and it is not a coincidence that the book is lacking green – the colour of joy and hope. The children’s faces are lifeless, their mouths, perceived as the most expressive feature to indicate a state of mind (Nikolajeva 2014a: 131), are rendered by thin lines. Their eyes are empty and the skin bluish and grey. Their emaciated, skeletal bodies, often bent and with hanging arms, amplify a feeling of hunger, fatigue and hopelessness. The pictures would be an explicit portrait of Auschwitz if they did not exploit one surrealistic element: the guards, representing adults symbolically on a metaphoric level, are depicted as obese clowns who dominate the small, skinny children. The clown figures, whose primary function is entertaining, ironically turn into oppressors in *The Camp*. Therefore, the visual representation reverses this symbol of fun into a degenerated version that does not amuse but instead abuses, just as the adults’ verbal statements of love and devotion transform into oppression and violence.

Międzykulturowość w literaturze dla dzieci i młodzieży. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2014.

⁹ The citations come from Oscar K.’s website: <http://www.oscar-k.dk/textdetail.php?id=23> (20.06.2015).



Fig. 4

Oscar K.'s life philosophy, conveyed in his picturebooks, is influenced by Heisenberg's theory of relativity and takes the form of literary irony. The writer argues that children do understand irony, which is proved by the abstract thinking manifest in their games and language. In his opinion, if adults state that children do not comprehend irony, they may mean that they themselves do not, or perhaps they confuse irony with sarcasm (K. Oscar 2012: 105–106). The writer does not touch on the question of children's age, since generally modern complex Nordic picturebooks are nowadays viewed as *allålderslitteratur* – literature for all ages.

There is no consensus among researchers with regard to access to irony comprehension. Limiting the observation merely to picturebook research, Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Jörg Meibauer assert: "Until six years of age, many children mistake irony for lying, and even nine- to thirteen-year-olds have difficulties understanding the concept of irony" (Kümmerling-Meibauer/Meibauer 2013: 153), whereas Maria Nikolajeva is more general and points out: "[...] it is contested at what age children are capable of understanding irony" (Nikolajeva 2014a: 125).¹⁰ What is interesting, Oscar K. emphasizes in his statements that it is not important what adults write about for children but it is important how they do it. The writer does not confine children's literature with any content boundaries, puts a lot of trust in children's capacities and perceives adults as the only endangering instance. Oscar K. is not original in these statements, which have been made before by e.g.

¹⁰ Nikolajeva refers to Ellen Winner's (1988) and Susan Walsh' (2011) research.

Maurice Sendak or Wolf Erlbruch (Evans 2014: 91), but despite similar assumptions he still transgresses the borderline between the acceptable and taboo.

Oscar K. is famous for his controversial, taboo-breaking books, and the use of the Holocaust in *The Camp* is not coincidental. It is a preconceived answer to critical remarks about his previous books from a reviewer, Steffan Larsen, who posed the question as to what worse themes Oscar K. and Karrebaek could take up, and provocatively suggested that it might be the Holocaust. (Oscar K. 2012: 113)

Lejren has generally received applause in the Scandinavian media and was awarded with the prize for the best-illustrated book by the State Culture Fund in Denmark in 2010.¹¹ The book was read as intentionally anti-pedagogical and as a contentious social critique, inscribed in Oscar K. and Dorte Karrebæk's literary programme, whose primary goal is to change the way we perceive both children and children's literature. Opinions were even more positive in Sweden, where the picturebook production of the Danes is considered as an artistic revolution, although there have been isolated sceptical voices concerning the age of the readers, including opinions that the book is about children but exclusively for adults.

Epistemically the book provides complex, multi-faceted information which a young reader may find extremely bewildering – a summer camp converging in the text with school reality, illustrated in terms of extreme violence and abuse. Young Scandinavian readers presumably lack the historical knowledge necessary to comprehend the pictorial representation, but when informed by an adult mediator about the explicit Holocaust references they still get a distorted image of Auschwitz inhabited by clowns. Although the book's purpose is doubtless not to delineate historical knowledge about the Holocaust, it is still a dubious means of representing a general image of childhood that – as the initial motto puts it – “happens to everyone”.

The war metaphor of a divorce

Another Scandinavian picturebook, *Krigen* (The War) from 2013 written by Gro Dahle and illustrated by Kaia Dahle Nyhus, falls into the second category, i.e. an unspecified war whose imagery is employed to portray a divorce from the perspective of a girl called Inga. War, with its cruel and incomprehensible attributes – tanks, weapons and fire – known so far exclusively from TV, suddenly enters the girl's home.

The fighting parents finally decide to get divorced, and Inga transforms into a soldier, who sometimes fights on her mother's, sometimes on her father's side. She is torn between the two people closest to her, two homes and two lives, and is forced to keep bottling up her own emotions while dragging her younger siblings behind her. Nobody pays attention to her and nobody is interested in her severe mental condition. To make others notice her, therefore, Inga stops eating and self-harms, but it does not have the desired impact.

¹¹ Information from: <http://www.dortekarrebæk.dk/priser.php> (29.10.2015).



Fig. 5

The story is presented without sentimentalism, with a ruthless honesty, which Gro Dahle managed to achieve by applying real testimonies of children who are victims of their parents' wars. Though the book takes up an issue which is not questioned in Norway, it is "controversial and may be considered provocative, as it touches upon divorce as a main challenge in Norwegian society, in a non politically correct way" (Ommundsen 2015: 174).

The verbal impression is enhanced by Kaia Dahle Nyhus' illustrations, which following a naive convention imitate the child's perspective and depict simplified figures in a surrounding painted mainly in two contrasting, intense colours. The double spreads are covered with orange and violet, yellow and blue, red and black, in a symbolic play contributing to the dramaturgy of the scenes. *Krigen* is a book which has received a lot of acclaim in the Scandinavian media, among other things because of a nomination for the Nordic Council of Children and Young People's Literature Prize in 2014.

Discussion

To sum up, Polish artists have often taken up the theme of war in recent years, which can be partly explained by the celebration of Korczak Year in 2012, and partly by the popularity of the second world war theme. On the one hand, they want to educate children about the Holocaust, but on the other, they suppress both its explicit verbal and visual representations. They eagerly employ a strategy of reticence in line with Lydia Kokkola's observation:

Picturebooks have great potential for drawing readers' attention to silence, not least because the words are only a part of the total communication in a picturebook. While

pictures cannot be construed as silence, the dynamics of picture-text interaction open up possibilities for the kind of dialogue with silence by drawing attention to what remains unsaid. (Kokkola 2003: 36)

In Polish culture the Holocaust is a delicate, painful, and still present part of history, and adults seem to want to protect children from its harsh reality for fear they will not cope with it. Though the two Polish picturebooks – *Pamiętniki Blumki* and *Ostatnie przedstawienie panny Esterki* – narrate the pre-war period and the war itself quite literally, they still put the focus on more positive sides of the reality. They are purified of overt cruelty and violence which is present in similar literature for adults. It is characteristic that they exclude the depiction of the historic finale – the children's fate in the death camps is merely implied. Here the visual takes over and a flying calendar card or a cattle car tells what happened later. The metaphoric iconographic message embodies the Polish strategy of reticence. The inquisitive child who is the target audience of the book can ask questions to an adult mediator or acquire extra knowledge from the paratext or external sources. *Powieki* is a totally metaphorical story which tells about the Holocaust by means of anthropomorphization with slight references to the war. It constitutes excellent material to discuss in a classroom with young children.¹² It not only introduces historical knowledge in a balanced way but also teaches about the use of metaphors and symbols. However, all these picturebooks need an adult to share the reading because they present a high degree of complexity and symbolism when encountered by an inexperienced reader alone. They interweave factionality with fictionality, which creates a significant challenge for the child. Furthermore, they deliberately leave verbal gaps with slight visual implications about the extermination, which are accessible only to an expert reader with background knowledge who can mediate the facts to a child according to his own convictions and feelings.

The Danish *Lejren* employs the war as a metaphor of general childhood, portrayed in terms of a death camp. Its iconotext is highly complex and epistemically bewildering. It demands both some historical pre-knowledge and comprehension of such concepts as allegory and irony. It is impossible to define its audience as Scandinavian picturebooks are today regarded as all-age literature. Nevertheless, this sophisticated book with its heterogeneous, multi-level narration seems to be more appropriate for young adults than children. *Krigen* makes use again of the war as a metaphor to discuss the ruthlessness of the divorce perceived by a teenage protagonist. To emphasize the divorce's devastating impact on children, the artists – Gro Dahle and Kaia Dahle Nyhus – refer to war imagery in a deeply suggestive way. Gro Dahle is an eager supporter of all-age literature, so the book lacks a clear age recommendation, but it – like the author's previous texts – can be used in therapeutic contexts.

¹² The book does not have an age recommendation, but its mild, symbolic aesthetics makes it possible to read it together with children from about six years old.

References

- Evans J. (2014), *Audience, Theme and Symbolism in Wolf Erlbruch's Duck, Death and the Tulip*. In: B. Kümmerling-Meibauer (ed.), *Picturebooks: Representation and Narration*. New York and London, Routledge.
- K. Oscar. (2012), *Dzieci nie rozumieją ironii!* In: B. Sochańska, J. Czechowska (eds), *Tabu w literaturze i sztuce dla dzieci*. Poznań and Warszawa: Duński Instytut Kultury and Media Rodzina.
- Kokkola, L. (2003), *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature*. New York and London, Routledge.
- Kübler-Ross, E. (1997), *The Wheel of Life: A Memoir of Living and Dying*. New York, Scribner.
- Kümmerling-Meibauer B., Meibauer J. (2013) *Towards a Cognitive Theory of Picturebooks*. "International Research in Children's Literature" 6 (2).
- Nikolajeva M. (2014a), *The Pinguin Looked Sad: Picturebooks, Empathy and Theory of Mind*. In: B. Kümmerling-Meibauer (ed.), *Picturebooks: Representation and Narration*. New York and London, Routledge.
- Nikolajeva M. (2014b), *Reading for Learning: Cognitive approaches to children's literature*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Sikorska M., Smyczyńska K. (2014), *Ewangelia według Korczaka. Pamiętnik Blumki Iwony Chmielewskiej*. In: B. Niesporek-Szamburska B., M. Wójcik-Dudek (eds), *Wyczytać świat. Międzykulturowość w literaturze dla dzieci i młodzieży*. Katowice, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.
- Ommundsen Å. (2015), *Who Are these Picturebooks for?* In: J. Evans (ed.), *Challenging and Controversial. Creative and Critical Responses*. New York and London, Routledge.