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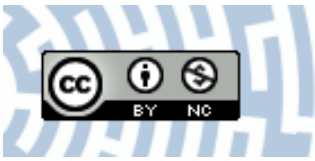

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Pictorial Preferences of Adults as Primary Intermediaries in the Contact Between a Child and an Illustration/Literary Illustration – Empirical Perspective

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Abstract

The presented text is the result of reflections on the issue of perceiving visual messages which are an illustration of the content of printed text by adults as primary recipients of book illustrations addressed to children of pre-reading age.

The article contains reflections on the pictorial character of our environment, it presents the underlying assumptions of the strategy of recognizing image preferences related to book illustration and trends in the preferences of adult intermediaries in the area of book illustration in the aspect of areas of image realization and artistic quality recognized as the dominant elements of imaging. The article concludes with final reflections focused on the quality and value of observations in the context of a visual image in the form of a book illustration.

Keywords: *image preferences, visual image, book illustration, primary viewer*

Introduction

One of the essential features of modern times is their visuality, perceived as enriching the external, directly observable surface of phenomena by saturating them with images and visual impressions. This visuality – connected with a significant change in social practices concerning the production, distribution, and

perception of images, as well as observing other people and their civilizational environment – points to a profound change in contemporary culture, in which visual culture is becoming more and more important. This broad concept covers several categories of phenomena – the components to which it belongs: iconosphere, i.e., images deliberately made by an artist in a particular medium, with the intention of conveying a message, emphasizing a specific meaning, evoking an aesthetic impression or influencing consumer decisions; sociosphere, i.e., the observable surface of social life, everything that is visible and connected with people's actions, their image or the civilizational environment created by them; imaging regimes in the form of rules, patterns, styles of creating images, shaping the image or design of manufactured objects or objects, as well as viewing regimes, i.e., rules that allow for observing or prohibiting certain persons or objects from preserving their image (cf., M.S. Bal, 2003; Ch. Metz, 1982; W.J.T. Mitchell, 2002). Therefore, it becomes evident that phenomena – components of visual culture – constitute an extremely important and attractive research space in the form of visual events – an interaction between a visual sign, a technology that activates and supports this sign and the viewer, in which it is still possible to find places not yet recognized.

In the context of the above indications and assuming that visual messages make it easier for us to get to know our perception habits and, at the same time, open us up to different states of consciousness and other participants of picture culture, and illustration as a visual image is a medium which, through its graphic sign, color, plastic form, can strongly influence the imagination, emotions and intellectual development of the viewer, the issues of the image preferences of adults as primary recipients of illustrations in a literary book for children of pre-reading age[1] appear as an important and interesting research issue.

At this point it should be noted that this problem is currently a little-known area. Although in the scientific literature we find studies concerning both the image preferences of the youngest readers (B. Mazepa-Domagała, 2010) and aesthetic concepts of a picture book, (M. Nikolajeva, C. Scott, 2006, L. Barr, 1986; L.E. Lacy, 1986) as well as postulates constituting the essence of visual messages, which consist of: adapting the content and form of an image/image to the psychological characteristics of the recipient in different periods of development, an accurate

[1] This category assumes limiting the understanding of the pre-reading period to phases in which contact with the work is determined by a dichotomous approach to the equality of word and image, at the same time requiring an adult intermediary in contact with the reading, or assuming the need to master the reading technique by the child.

ratio of a visual message to a literary text and the highest possible artistic value, (E. Arzipe, M. Styles, 2003, B. Kűmmerling-Meibauer, 2011), there is no research and interesting analysis of perception preferences and motives for the choice of artistic images of literary illustrations made by adult intermediaries in favor of children. And yet, the visual images contained in a book for children are in fact a cultural medium in the socialization space, which assumes a strong influence of the intermediary. The significant participation of an adult causes that this artistic picture/image is firstly subject to the interpretation of an intermediary, consisting in the evaluation of value and aesthetics, made on the basis of their own knowledge and experience, and only then it reaches the target addressee, i.e., the child. Thus, the final concretization of visual message/image takes place in a specific situation of a specific initiation circulation, the manner of which depends on the preferences, taste, will, skills and sometimes emotionality of the intermediary. This mediation for the viewer has a considerable significance for the plastic form of this medium.

Based on the above-outlined findings, and taking into account the casual, shallowed opinions of professional and non-professional intermediaries, it is necessary to conduct analyses concerning the knowledge of adult preferences in the sphere of visual aesthetics in order to, on the one hand, provide the desired artistic forms and, on the other hand, diagnose the need for possible intervention in the sphere of shaping the aesthetically conceived taste of the recipient.

Therefore, the issue of exploring the image preferences of adults as primary recipients of the illustration contained in the children's literature book was focused on in the empirical part of the study.

Image predilections of primary[2] recipients of book illustrations – research reconnaissance

At the beginning, it should be noted that the limited volume of the publication does not allow for presenting the full methodological model of the research, so for understandable reasons it is limited to the presentation of the fundamental issues.

Thus, based on the assumption that the most interesting function of illustration is to create fictional worlds, stimulating the imagination of an adult reader, and making it easier for the young viewer to open the door to the world of imagination, in order to determine the specificity of adults' image preferences related to

[2] First text and image interpreter – V.M. Cackowska, Książka obrazkowa dla dzieci (Children's picture book), [In:] *Early school education* […], p. 318.

the form of a book illustration, as well as to make a stylistic and formal analysis of the visual image and to examine the plastic effects of the technique used, the scope of exploration has been determined by the areas of realization of the illustrative image, i.e., drawing, painting and graphic illustrative forms, complemented by artistic qualities of the image such as: abstractness, colorfulness, detailedness, expressiveness, dynamics, which occur in the successive plans and layers of the visual image and are perceived as dominant elements of plastic imaging[3].

Means of a diagnostic survey conducted the preliminary tests addressed to a group of adult respondents[4] and conducted using the interviewing technique on the basis of the image, the material presented[5] after reading a text treated as an inductive stimulus (M. Banks, 2001).

Thus, the basis for the analysis of imaging predictions of adult book illustrators is a collective empirical material in the form of percentage distribution of obtained choices of the most beautiful illustrations within the framework of conducted explorations in a generalized form. The following analysis provides evidence of this interpretation.

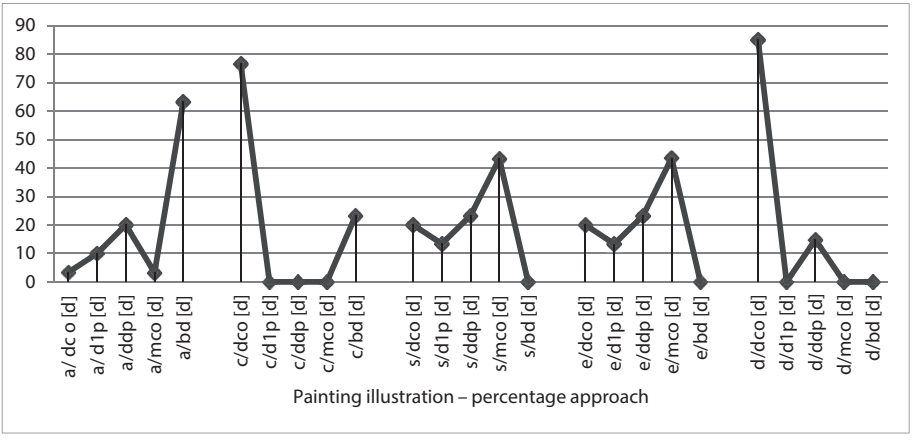
The research has shown that in the area of painting illustrations, adult intermediaries, when choosing the most beautiful in their opinion painting illustration, are guided by the illustrativeness of the painting. They prefer realistic compositions in visual expression and illustrations in which abstractness is noticeable in the back-

[3] In the conducted research, the procedure of exploring the predilection of readers of pre-reading age for book illustrations, adapted for the purposes of these activities, was used, which was presented for the first time in the following publications: B. Mazepa-Domagała: *Upodobania obrazowe w zakresie ilustracji książkowej u dzieci w wieku przedczytelniczym (Image preferences for book illustrations in children of pre-reading age),* Katowice, Publisher: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2010.

[4] Research findings included a group of 50 adults aged 28–35, who were parents or guardians of children at preschool age. The research was carried out on the premises of a public kindergarten institution in a metropolitan environment. Women constituted 90% of the respondents; 62% of the respondents had a university education, while people with a high school education constituted 38%.

[5] The research tool consisted of 75 illustrations depicting a literary text, grouped into three sets – 25 visual compositions for each of the adopted areas of imaging (painting, graphics, drawing). In the individual sets, the illustrations are arranged according to the dominance of the imaging and the image plan/occurrence zone (5 dominance of the imaging and 5 occurrence zones). In individual sets, within each dominance of imaging, the respondent had to choose one of the five illustrations presented, which he/she considered the most beautiful in his/her subjective assessment. The developed set of illustrations enabled the recipient/adult to make a decision and, as a result, to choose the illustration as the one most interesting to them.

ground. Abstract illustrative paintings, i.e., those created on the basis of a number of understatements, are not appreciated by adult audiences. This state of matters is probably due to the fact that the adult viewer seems to have difficulty in perceiving, interpreting and grasping the meaning of the illustrations inconsistent with the text[6], thus clearly inclining towards the concreteness of the representations and classicity in the type of presentation (Figure 1).



Explanations:

dco – the dominant appearing in the entire image;
d1p – the dominant clearly outlined in the foreground
d1p – the dominant clearly outlined in the background
mco – minimum dominant visible throughout the image.
bd – no mode

a – abstractness
c – colorfulness
s – detailedness
e – expressiveness
d – dynamics

Figure 1. Image preferences of adults as primary recipients of illumination in a literary book for children of a pre-reading age in the field of painting visualizations – percentages

The adult viewer also prefers illustrations characterized by a richness of colors, made in saturated colors, considering the bold contrasts of the stains juxtaposed side by side, in which the color of the elements and forms depicted dominates only in the whole picture. Selections of adult intermediaries in this category indicate that the viewers also appreciate images with definitely limited colors but realistic in their expression (Figure 1).

[6] The consistency of the text with the illustration is related to the concept of realism of the world presented in the illustrations.

The surveyed group of intermediaries clearly prefers images in which the precision of processing details as a dominant feature of imaging is minimally visible throughout the image, clearly covers the entire composition, and also approves illustrations with the dominance of details in the foreground, thereby appreciating images with a large number of details, characterized by both the size and decorativeness of the elements, illustrating the text in a very faithful manner, and therefore with an extensive information load (Figure 1).

The preferences of the adult intermediaries in the field of expressive paintings, in which the clarity of illustration is achieved through clear composition, clear contour and smooth surfaces evenly covered with color, include illustrative paintings of little diversity, with blurred interpenetrating plans and colors, and paintings of extremely strong volume, in which the composition components from figures and objects to the background of representations are framed with a line of varying thickness and, consequently, clarity (Figure 1).

In the circle of tastes of the primary intermediaries, there are also paintings illustrations, in which the dynamics of figures and designers is visible in the whole composition, as well as illustrations with a dynamic background. Therefore, the adult viewers appreciate illuminations, which in their synthetic composition impress with the perfectly conveyed movements of their pose and facial expressions. Explaining the nature of these predilections, it can be assumed that to some extent they are determined by the dynamic so-called strong point of the image, which automatically attracts the attention of the viewer (Figure 1).

In summary, research into the predilections of adult intermediaries in painting illustrations has shown that preferences for painting illustrations are clearly marked by the tendency to prefer abstract elements lacking in their structure, in which there is a colorfulness of elementary constructional units of the plastic image, i.e., figures, props, ambient elements and backgrounds that build up the space of the imaginary situation, as well as detail, clarity, and dynamics.

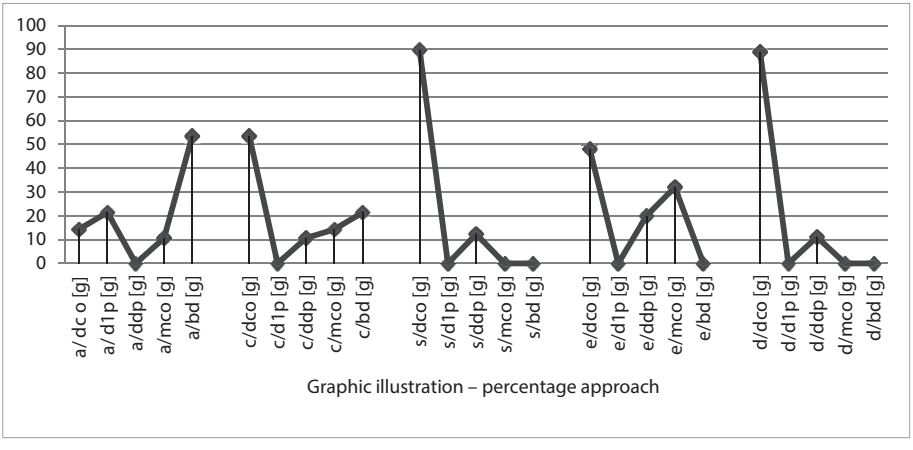
Not wanting to draw too far-reaching conclusions, one can assume that the nature of these predilections depends on cognitive abilities, habits and perceptual patterns, formed during visual experiments, and now connected with the specificity of culture and its characteristic elements, in a world with tendencies built on cultural conditions, and at the same time depending on the way of participation in a given model.

Analyses of the adults' pictorial predilections in the area of graphic illustrations contained in a literary book for the youngest readers proved that within the area of graphic illustrations, the adult intermediaries, when choosing the most beautiful graphic design in their opinion, clearly follow the realism of representations. Abstract graphic compositions in their expression, created on the basis of a series

of deformations, are not appreciated by adult audiences. The specificity of preferences can be explained – similarly as in the case of painting compositions in this category – by a lack of understanding of the language of symbol and abbreviations used in the composition.

The adult viewer also prefers graphic visualizations in saturated colors, taking into account color contrasts, which undoubtedly facilitate associations and recognition of symbols (Figure 2). Within the scope of projects carried out on the basis of the detail of the artwork, the predilections of the adult intermediaries are focused on visualizations containing a large number of details appearing both in the whole picture and in the background. Their ability to notice features can explain the adult recipients' inclination to detailed illustrations and, thanks to them, to perceive the qualities of plastic forms.

The adult intermediaries' preferences for expressive and dynamic graphics compositions include mainly expressive and dynamic plastic realizations, in which these dominants of imaging are present in the whole image and are also noticeable in the background of the image.



Explanations:

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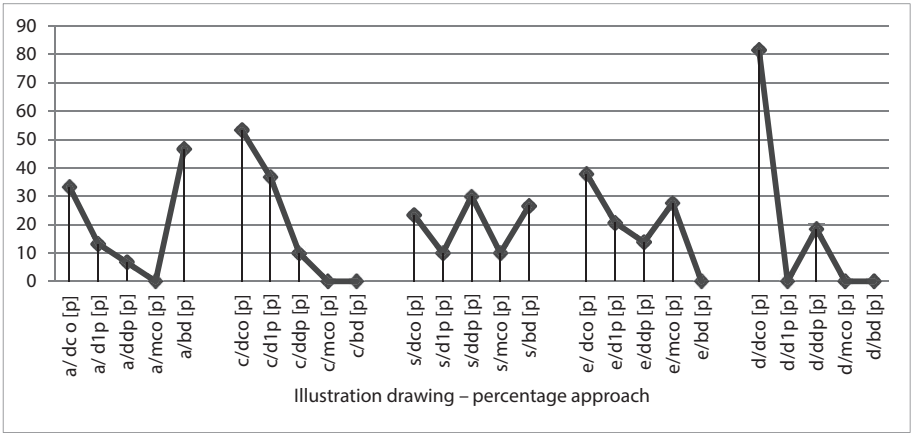
d1p – the dominant clearly outlined in the foreground	c – colorfulness
d1p – the dominant clearly outlined in the background	s – detailedness
mco – minimum dominant visible throughout the image.	e – expressiveness
bd – no mode	d – dynamics

Figure 2. Image preferences of adults as primary recipients of illumination in a literary book for children of pre-reading age concerning graphic visualizations – in percentages

Considering that the image predilections are the expression of individual feelings and do not always undergo rational analysis and measurable evaluation despite the continuum applied, and the starting point of the observations is not the impression, but the information encoded in the activity of the nerves, the statement of issues illustrated here comes down to paying attention to the development of this information through a sensible stimulation. External intervention in the form of valuable visual experiences, including a variety of graphic designs, taking into account to some extent image preferences, may help to perceive heterogeneous plastic qualities and provide the basis for image sensitivity.

The analysis of the adult intermediaries' image predilections in the field of illustrations in a literary book intended for the youngest readers proved that the adult intermediaries, when choosing the most beautiful visual composition in their assessment, tend both towards realistic realization and pictures colored with deformation of a schematic nature, which means that in contrast to painting and graphic realizations, they recognize and understand the abbreviations of thought contained in drawing compositions and the concise form of the images. In addition, they prefer drawings that are rich in colors throughout the composition, and colorless compositions have a low level of acceptance (Figure 3).



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bd – no mode

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s – detailedness
e – expressiveness
d – dynamics

Figure 3. Image preferences of adults as primary recipients of literary images for children of pre-reading age in the field of drawing artworks – percentage approach

The circle of preferences also includes drawing illustrations containing a lot of details and an extensive information load, as well as expressive and dynamic compositions, in which these dynamics are created on the basis of the depicted character movement and the dynamic, meaningful point of the image, which attracts the viewer's attention. In an attempt to explain the specificity of these predilections, one can refer to perceptual patterns assuming, among other things, that the potential recipient of visual messages accepts mainly colorful, clear, transparent and expressive visualizations and to image experiences dominated today by the messages recording and reproducing reality in the form of, among other things, visual advertising, posters, billboards, graffiti, or a number of television and film programs saturated with visual form based on colorful and spectacular images.

Summing up, the presented results of the research indicate a limited dimension of visual messages perceived by an adult intermediary, limiting the educational potential of the field of aesthetic image codes to a low-value scheme and template.

And yet, as researchers emphasize, an illustration in a children's book should be characterized by transparency, justify the use of particular elements, and have an artistic and aesthetic value. It should introduce the child to the world of visual quality, direct his/her curiosity towards visual phenomena, stimulate and enrich the child's sensitivity and create opportunities for creative use of experience gained through perception. Diagrammatic and stencil images, as well as those from the sphere of influence of American and Taiwanese taste, contradict this interpretation.

In the context of the above statements, one more conclusion can be drawn.

Taking into account the image preferences of adults in the field of book illustrations and recognizing that stereotypes, patterns of thought and sense of taste are constructed and reproduced in the process of socialization, it can be assumed that the quality and form of the visual offer addressed to the child-recipient – in the Polish version – is determined by the common taste of adult intermediaries – a popular aesthetic judgement, being a social expert system based on the mass criterion of taste. Thus, through and with the consent of adults, the child receives commercial artistic realization, taking the first lesson in consumerism.

Final reflections

In the context of the presented research results, the conclusion concerning the value and quality of the image message addressed to the child in the form of a book illustration seems essential.

Thus, by indicating the value of an image, one can refer to the process of perceiving and shaping image perception, the aim of which is to discover, and not passive assimilation of nature. The observations allow potential audiences to determine the physical, semantic or functional characteristics, thus providing the basis for visual assessments. It should be remembered, however, that perceptual evaluation is an asset shaped by the sum of experiences recorded in memory. Therefore, it is important to organize the quality of the observations, which would provide the potential recipient with rich and useful sources of information, both for practical as well as cognitive-theoretical and aesthetic reasons. Therefore, if an illustration is to be of value (stimulating development, reflecting needs and attitudes, influencing the creation of new ones), during its perception, there must be activities and information to discover the properties of image forms. For this reason, the direction of research on a properly constructed illustration included in a literary book for children should be, on the one hand, adhering to the aesthetic values and preferences of potential recipients – children and adult intermediaries, but also leaving a specific margin of "openness" of the visual image referring here to the idea of U. Eco, thanks to which the recipient can actively participate intellectually in the creation of the meanings of the work, when the visual image, the illustration either provokes in-depth reflection because it is "incomplete" or because it contains elements that go beyond the depiction of the world presented.

To sum up, we should look for a formula of the illustrative image that would make both dimensions – aesthetic and interpretative – tangent, then we would allow the youngest viewers to creatively interpret the work, indicating its hermeneutical and intersubjective character, which, however, must become a field of research for other studies.

In the conclusions of the presented analyses, it should be stated that the presented explorations are a part of a complex and extensive problem of researching image preferences in the field of visual presentation addressed to children; thus, they do not aspire to an exhaustive view of this issue. They are an inspiration for research activities aimed at searching for a research procedure aimed at defining more precisely the specificity of image preferences of adult intermediaries in contact with a book illustration which is an artistic supplement, the content of a printed text and the first signal of art that we send to the world of childhood.

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