



Conference: **SEEING BEYOND PICTURES?**

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THROUGH A PICTURE TO A TEXT (AT PRIMARY SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN)

We all know when and where the reader is beginning to form himself. At a time when he is still unable to read or even speak fluently, he has the ability to acquire and receive auditory and visual perceptions that are directly related to reading. Children perceive spoken word, singing and other rhythmic sounds, associate it with the image of mother, father, siblings or other close people, with the image of a book, musical instrument or favourite subjects. Connecting picture and sound is synchronous. A child who is accustomed to listening to a "spoken" fairy-tale from grandma or grandpa or the parents, will be asking for it also later, even when he or she can read on their own. The child wants to see the narrator's face, perceive the tone and colour of his voice, he wants his fairy-tale. As with a close person's face and voice, the child returns to the favourite picture in the book and to the words that resonate in the emotional, noetic and fantasy levels.

At this moment, I will focus my attention on the issue of children's illustration, namely the illustration, developing in the context of a family literary-art magazine for children with the distinctive name *Slniečko* (The Sun). In the Slovak context, this is a distinct cultural phenomenon with a rich historical background, which since 1927 has significantly shaped the aesthetic flair, strengthened ethical values and educated generations of advanced children's readers. This magazine for younger school-age children (7-11) is an ideal place to demonstrate the way from the picture, the illustration, to the verbal story.

Since its beginnings, the most important writers and illustrators have leaned towards it. Phenomenal painter Martin Benka - author of the first cover of *Slniečko* from 1927, Jaroslav Vodrážka and other leading artists. Their aim was to awaken the aesthetic feeling in children, the interest in the culture of the word and the relationship to reading and book culture. During the first years of the magazine in 1928-1929, a cartoon story was created on the pages of *Slniečko*, done by the illustrator Jaroslav Vodrážka. However, this free series was not intended for straight-line entertainment: it should inspire fantasy in children, and their role was to invent and write the story. The cartoon story of *Smelný Zajko* (The Brave Rabbit), who went into the world for adventure and new experiences, addressed a number of children who began to send their first stories to the editorial office. In one small village in Central Slovakia, in Zvolenská Slatina, a teacher approached a talented student at that time: "Marienka, you are an excellent writer, write something nice and send it to *Slniečko*!"

Marienka looked at the pictures, wrote an interesting story and could not believe her own eyes, when after some time she found a notice from the editor in chief Jozef Cíger Hronský saying: "Marka Piecková from Zvolenska Slatina wrote this nice story for us. You could say: What a simple story. Well, it would be quite ordinary if that girl was not Mária Ďuríčková, one of the best Slovak writers for children and youth. And in 1969, she became the editor-in-chief of Slniečko, thanks to a play of personal talent, effort, and possibly fate, so that other positive impulses for modern authorial and illustrative work for children could appear in printed form. It would be a great simplification if we thought that, thanks to the cartoon story about The Brave Rabbit, a unique author was born, who initiated and supported other literary talents, who strengthened the Slovak literature for children and youth with her work and inventive editorial work for the Mlade letá publishing house. However, it is undisputed that even seemingly insignificant, yet intense experience or visual perception can turn into a positive trigger that affects the child's direction, personality growth, or professional future. However, the cartoon story of The Brave Rabbit continues. The editor-in-chief of Slniečko at that time, Jozef Cíger Hronský - one of the most important Slovak writers (not only for children) developed the cartoon stories of illustrator Jaroslav Vodrážka into literary form. The legendary book The Brave Rabbit was created, which since its creation in 1931, has spoken to generations of children. It fascinates and enchants with original, classic, and even slightly old-fashioned illustrations. The character, charm and topicality of the legendary fairy tale lies in the expression, in the power of concentration with which the illustrator and his character were able to move in different situations and environments, as he was able to evolve in the various stages of his journey and experience. The Rabbit character is depicted in a very simple way at first, to be simple and naive, and even a bit puzzled, who worries his parents about his tendency to be lazy, but one day he dares to go into the world. His father and mother, as all normal parents eventually, warn him of the dangerous world of people, full of pitfalls and dangers. And right from the start, this exactly happens. At the earliest opportunity, The Brave Rabbit hops on the tail of the plane in the belief that the pilot will certainly not be a man, but some kind of related animal species. His ambition is enormous - he wants to fly to America to make his simple bunny family proud, because they could give him love and security, but not recognition and deserved admiration. At that time, America was the symbol of unknown paradise where poor Slovak emigrants left for work and promising prosperity. Many of them came back really as kings who managed to build fortunes, had property and achieved the status of a world-sighted, even a little bit, royal man. However, those who returned even poorer, many with undermined health, or did not return at all in the worst case, were not mentioned.

This is just to explain why The Brave Rabbit chose America as his destination.

High in the air, sitting on the tail of the plane, he says: "I am brave, I am wise, and therefore I am well. If I were listening to my parents, I would never have been so! 'The Brave Rabbit

liked the journey, he was just sorry that his parents could not see him. If the whole family of rabbits had seen him, he would have been a king!

Illustrator has included with love and understanding in his heart these somewhat naive, troubling, perhaps magnanimous ambitions of the Rabbit, because in fact they were the aspirations of a child who longed to emerge from the ordinary everydayness, gaining the respect and attention of adults, and especially the parents, who do not consider him an equal partner, worthy of attention, lost in the flood of worrying about the material status of the family. The fascinating animal characters of Vodrážka's heroes are strongly anthropomorphized, with the advent of the penetration of The Brave Rabbit into the world of people; they are proportionately enhanced and strengthened. And while The Rabbit experiences less enjoyable adventures, his courage, ingenuity and cleverness stand out, they provide a space for many humorous situations that scoff not only the literary hero, but also the reader and consolidate in him the confidence in the good things and the sense for random situations that on the first look seem dangerous or scary.

An image as a way of identifying a certain fantasy or desirable reality can trigger a number of associations in the child's recipient. Some of the literary characters, who also have a suggestive illustrative form, create all the powerful triggers that enter the life context of many generations of children and even adults.

The children's magazine has an advantage in this respect. If a suggestive hero is created on the pages of the magazine, the child meets him month after month and lives with his inspiring events, it is more than likely that as a contextual component will enter into daily life and, to some extent, affect the behaviour of the child.

Jožko Mrkvička (Joseph Carrot) is another such distinctive literary-artistic hero, who was created on the pages of the magazine *Slniečko* and also got published in a book form. The main character of this story was formed in the 1930s and has survived to this day in various authorial and illustrative forms. What enchanted children on this character? His messy hair, naughty nature, ink stains from his writing pen, which were on letters that he wrote to his readers, full of spelling mistakes? Well, it was probably because he was not perfect or ideal, he was not traumatized, when made a mistake, he made fun of it. But he had a huge gift: he was kind, sincere, honest and cheerful, and what he was writing was making children laugh. Even in times of superficial perfectionism, when many parents mistake their children for show dolls and would like them to function as robots, this character addresses children's souls, looks straight into their hearts and frees them with a good-hearted, relaxing laughter. And so, seemingly simple cartoon character of the funny and not perfect Joseph, provoked further generations of outstanding Slovak authors - Mária Ďuríčková, Jozef Pavlovič, Marta Hlušiková and Margita Ivaničková and top illustrators - Miroslav Cipár, Svetozár Mydlo and Juraj Martiška for further sequels and development of new generations of the Carrot family. Every national book culture seems to find a similar hero who attracts children with his fancy

pieces, playfulness and good humour. It does not have to be just boyish heroes like Giannino Stoppioni - just think of Pipi Longstocking, who literally loves the whole world!

The meaning of the illustrations and picture stories that accompany the readers in books and children's magazines is that these convincing heroes, strong in their sincerity and goodness, are always willing to follow new stories and adventures and that is invaluable. In many cases, they accompany us throughout our lives and I can boldly say - they literally help us to live, make decisions and gain strength in matches with a harsh and absurd reality that tends to catch us up in everyday life.

Comic books also belong to popular children's stories. In our culture in times of totalitarianism, comics have often been presented as artificially fallen genres that spoil children's tastes and reading literacy. Nevertheless, we loved Foglar's Fast Arrows, which we bought in Czech bookstores in secret. We had no idea about the European comic book context because of state censorship. Many Slovak illustrators have written "into the drawer", just for their joy, without any vision of any further use. Why we loved those comics and why they talk to children's readers today is not just their visual transparency and word minimalism. Comics are a provocation of fantasy for the mastery of abbreviations. The creation of bridges between sujet episodes, the fantasy of the unspoken, abbreviated, creates the ideal space for fabrication, gradation of tension, and the creation of parallel author stories that readers spontaneously create for the comic book hero. The reader also becomes an author, narrator, creator of new stories.

The above-quoted cartoon story of Jaroslav Vodrážka about the Brave Rabbit from the magazine *Slniečko* was in fact the first Slovak children's comic book. His tradition, but also the tradition of European comics, was followed by this children's magazine after a velvet revolution in 1990, when ideological tensions relaxed in society. Already in the years 1990-1991, *Slniečko* featured a cartoon story about the adventures of Slovakian Robinson, a trader named Karol Jetting, who was captured by pirates, then to a desert island and experienced similar situations as Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe. This cartoon series was a great success with kids. In the following years, the editorial staff reached to the proven classical literature and the outstanding comic book illustrator Pavol Moravčík portrayed the legendary stories of famous book heroes. Art virtuosity and movement dynamics captivated children. They captivated them so much that they were not left just in comics, but lived in libraries as well. At that time, publishers tracked the increased reader interest and approached re-editions of current book titles. The theory that high quality comic books will destroy or spoil child readers has not been confirmed.

Pictorial stories have their strength and awake in children the interest in less frequent and less demanding genres, such as legendary stories and adventure stories. Unbelievable popularity in our children's magazine has been gained by legendary cartoon stories that have been able to keep the readers' attention for almost fifteen years. Created by three Slovak

illustrators - Marián Čapka, Jozef Cesnak, and Martin Kellenberger, the author of the texts and the whole project was the editor-in-chief of Slniečko, writer Ondrej Sliacky. These comic book stories from the magazine's pages were later published in book form. The cartoon series have become a unique means of awakening and strengthening interest not only in reading, but also in own national history, stories and fates of castles, mansions and towns, their kings or simple heroes, natural unique or unexplained mysterious events from our past. In such a genre, illustration requires great precision, studying period costumes, armaments or architecture, geographic reality or other important details. The persuasiveness of the expression must be strong in the characters, but also factual, because otherwise it would not have its true value or strength.

Children in the younger school age, similar as pre-school children, are still dominated by illustrations and pictures as they are important on their way to reading. In conjunction with a literary text, more extensive or minimalistic, it can leave a strong memory footprint, becoming a provoking and motivating factor, an emblem that opens the gates to the story, not only the author's, but also the story of one's life.

The children's magazine has a specific feature in this regard that allows it to experiment a little more than a book. It regularly speaks to a similar age group and magazine can get feedback from the reader's response, whether the new story is a success or failure.

In accordance with these outputs, the story may stop or continue. The children's magazine should be an appetizer before the book. A creative workshop for illustrators looking for their expression on their way to a child's addressee. They can reliably check their skills first hand because there is enough space for experiment in a children's art-oriented magazine. The same goes for writers and novice authors. The magazine is the space where all generations of authors and illustrators meet for one sole purpose: to let children taste the rich tree of stories, which are developing fantasy, imagination, associative thinking and metaphoric perception of the world, without which we cannot move forward. To move forward not only in art, social culture and ethics, but also in medicine, science and other sectors in which it is not enough to reproduce, but we need to create qualitatively new entities.