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**KATARZYNA SMYCZYŃSKA**
Kazimierz Wielki University

## CONFESSION AND CAMOUFLAGE: BIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY IN VISUAL NARRATIVES BY PETER SIS, URI ORLEV AND MARTA IGNERSKA

The visual narratives I am going to analyse are both portrayals of biographical memory. *Tibet Through the Red Box* (1998)[1], written and illustrated by Peter Sis, and *Babcia robi na drutach* (*Granny Knits*), written by Uri Orlev and illustrated by Marta Ignerska, revive the past of a particular community or an ethnic group. *Tibet Through the Red Box* documents the memories of the narrator who as a child witnessed political oppression in his native Czechoslovakia and learned about similar oppression from his father's stories about Tibet; *Granny Knits* reconstructs metaphorically the biographical memory of the writer who as a child learned about his Jewish identity. Orlev not only had to confront the consequences of Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda during the Second World War, but also witnessed the consequences of anti-Jewish sentiments among his compatriots. Marta Ignerska[2], who is a generation younger than Orlev, masterfully translates the crucial aspects of his humanistic vision into her illustrations.

Both Sis and Orlev have more openly dealt with the turbulent history of their native countries in other works. Sis is the author of the autobiographical visual narrative *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain* (2007), where he recollects his childhood and adolescence in communist Czechoslovakia. Orlev, a Holocaust survivor, is well known for his prose for children and young adults in which he revives war memories. His two works which were translated into Polish (*Biegnij chłopcze, biegnij* (*Run, Boy, Run*) (2013), based on the war memories of the ghetto survivor Yoran Friedman, and *Wyspa na ulicy Ptasiej* (*The Island on Bird Street*) (1981), partly inspired by the author's memories from the Warsaw ghetto) reflect a child's experience of the war and anti-Semitism.

Perhaps one of the reasons why the artists undertake this emotional return in their works is that they are migrants in a real, physical sense. Sis is a Czech, born in 1949, who spent his childhood in Prague and as an adult migrated from Czechoslovakia to the USA. Polish-born Orlev (Jerzy Henryk Orłowski) in his teenage years had to leave German-occupied Poland and has since then lived in Israel. Strikingly, the artists decided to give their memories a literary form only as mature individuals – both were approaching their fiftieth birthdays when *Tibet Through the Red Box* and *Granny Knits* were first published.

Kaja Kaźmierska explains that the idea of the return is connected with the emotional engagement in one's own past which she terms, following Anselm Strauss, biographical work (Kaźmierska 2008: 25, 29)[3]. Biographical work means an effort to interpret one's own biographical experience in relation to one's own identity, one's projections of oneself, behaviours, and undertaken (or not undertaken) activities. The point of biographical work is to maintain a sense of coherent identity, but the task can be more intense for individuals who have gone through difficult, unexpected situations, which force them to radically redefine their identity (29). Biographical memory

[1] The book was distinguished as a Caldecott Honor Book in 1999.

[2] I discuss the Polish 2009 edition of the book, which was first published in Hebrew in 1981 and illustrated by Ora Eitan. The Polish illustrator of *Granny Knits*, Marta Ignerska, was awarded the 2009 Special Mention by the Polish section of IBBY for this work.

[3] This paragraph briefly summarises Kaja Kaźmierska's argument. The quotation is my translation.

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involves doing biographical work, during which individual experience undergoes continuous reinterpretation. The memory "not only refers to images of the past and courses of events stored in our thoughts, but it is always a version of them, conditioned both by the individual life course and the wider socio-cultural context" (Kaźmierska 2008: 90).

Sis' book points to the importance of revisioning biographical memory yet, somewhat surprisingly, retains the idea of strict caesurae within one's own biography. The narrator emphasises the formative role of his father's stories in his own life, but the juxtaposition of the father's diaries and the son's artistic vision of his childhood memories in fact is not dialogical in character – they remain two separate storylines, placed in different sections of the book. Examining the content of the father's secret box initiates the act of re-memorying; still, the son's story is conveyed in the form of retrospective narrative, in which the narrator muses over his childhood from the adult perspective. We can see intergenerational connectivity on the level of the plot, in the declared emotional bond between the son and the father, but not in the narrator's understanding of the self. Whereas the underlying force behind Sis' story is nostalgia, which becomes a lens through which he recalls his own (lost and missed) childhood, Orlev's story is not explicitly autobiographical, although the biographical context perhaps becomes more prominent owing to Ignerska's illustrations. Orlev, unlike Sis, not merely empathises with but really reconnects with his childhood self in *Granny Knits*, as for him it is an indispensable element of telling the traumatic story. The tale about the discrimination of knitted children camouflages the trauma of persecution and exile and reveals the political mechanisms which trigger moral corruption.

Although the narratives appear to belong to the "children's literature" category, in both cases it may be difficult to define the addressee with confidence. The child audience is naturally associated with renowned children's books publishers – Frances Foster Books, which published Sis' book in the USA and Wytwórnia, which published *Granny Knits* in Poland. The elements of fantasy, magic, adventure and the strong presence of the child heroes potentially make both books perfectly appealing to young and very young readers. Sis points to the holistic character of biography – but we can easily distinguish between the narrator's "now" and "then"; the emotional return to childhood instigated by the mysterious content of the secret box is definitely temporary and by no means entirely immersive. Even the book's narrative structure suggests the symbolic "entrance" and "exit" from the (distant, magic, almost unreal) past and from reminiscing. Despite the presence of certain visual motifs which could be associated with child audience, I argue that it is the adult (and nostalgically oriented) readers who will recognise themselves most naturally as the potential addressees of *Tibet Through the Red Box.*

In Orlev and Ignerska's work all the elements of the verbal and visual narration signal the emotional identification with the child self. It is the child's perspective that becomes the narrative norm and the basis of ethical judgement, and it is evident that "childlike" is by no means seen as a chronologically remote category. The form of Orlev's story uses familiar elements from children's genres: it contains rhymes and diminutive forms and has an emotional and expressive character. As a story about knitted children, set in an imaginary universe, it can also bring to mind the fantasy genre. Perhaps that is why it is often automatically assumed that *Granny Knits* is first and foremost a children's text, a universal story about otherness, a tale that teaches a moral. Camouflaging the dramatic socio-political theme in a childlike convention is a result of Orlev's inclusive thinking about biography and his artistic response to the

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reality which he found abnormal. For Orlev, who returns to the theme of anti-Semitism in his literary works for young readers, the identification with his child self is an ethical necessity – the only possible way to articulate the truth about both personal and collective experience honestly. *Granny Knits* is a children's story but, when read by older readers equipped in historical knowledge, it changes its character as the narrative's biographical context eventually leaks out.

Trying to answer the question posed by Åse Marie Ommundsen and many other researchers, "who are these picturebooks for?"[4], I would (tentatively) suggest that *Tibet Through the Red Box* might not really be a children's book or a book with a dual address (although it could be of interest to young readers), whereas in *Granny Knits* the dual address (as defined by Barbara Wall) is undoubtedly discernible. This means, among other things, that the book enables fruitful "kinship readings" proposed by Marah Gubar as a model of reading children's literature which acknowledges the differences between children's and adults' lived experience, yet emphasises "the existence of shared experiences, of considerable magnitude, between adult and child" (Beauvais 2017: 270). Clémentine Beauvais explains that Gubar does not deny the existence of (ontological or constructed) difference between children's and adults' agency; rather, she asserts that children and adults are "separated by differences of degree, not of kind" (Gubar qtd. in Beauvais 2017: 268). Gubar's argument about age difference is linked to her general approach to reading children's literature, which assumes the possibility of shared emotions and intergenerational understanding (2017: 268). *Granny Knits* is evidence that Orlev and Ignerska share the assumption about the ethically engaging potential of literature and art beyond the borders of age.

### Adult nostalgia in a children's book format: *Tibet Through the Red Box*

*Tibet Through the Red Box* opens with a scene when the adult narrator returns to Prague, a city where he was brought up, and starts reading his father's old diaries and letters from a time when he was drafted into the army film unit and sent to China to teach filmmaking. Opening the secret box and reading the partly forgotten stories reawakens the narrator's childhood memories[5]. Incorporating fragments of his father's travelogue into the plot, Sis translates his own and his father's memories into a story told via words and images, telling us about the time-resistant value of the stories once told to him by his father.

In different editions of the book the design of the dustjacket is the first signal of the adventurous character of the journey. In one case, the dustjacket epitomises the magic of Tibet through the crimson imagery and the opulence of symbols which we can later find in one of the openings. In another, the half-transparent parchment-like dust cover has a more subdued character, partly revealing and partly covering the

[4] Åse Marie Ommundsen's study analyses contemporary Scandinavian picturebooks which blur or erase boundaries between children's and adult literature. See Å. M. Ommundsen (2015). "Who Are These Picturebooks For? Controversial Picturebooks and the Question of Audience" In. J. Evans (ed.), *Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks: Creative and Critical Responses to Visual Texts* (pp. 71-93). London & New York: Routledge.

[5] I situate Sis' book within the narrative framework of nostalgia, but I discuss it at least partly outside the context of children's literature. In his insightful book *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, Perry Nodelman suggests that children's fiction is often a product of adult nostalgia. He explains that "the nostalgia that leads adults to attempt to replicate something simple and finished in the context of the complex present inevitably brings with it the marks of its origin, and it imports present complexities into the very texts that represent an attempt to escape them" (237). Sis' book is a special case, however, because nostalgia is not only the driving force behind the book, but also its explicit theme.

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hardcover's image of a labyrinth with an unidentified building surrounded by mountain peaks. It is additionally imprinted with the barely seen, chaotically arranged accumulation of visual signs – pieces of handwriting and drawings. It is an adventure that may impress, and even overwhelm, the reader due the to abundance of imagery, colour, and text.

In her analysis of *Tibet Through the Red* Box, Roni Natov points to the complex structure of the book and indicates the presence of the multiple points of view in the narration: that of the adult Peter, that of Peter the adult recalling his child self, and the father's perspective included in his diary, his letters, and in the collection of objects stored in the secret box (2018: 177). Natov emphasises that this strategy also reflects the way memory works; in her interpretation of the meanings of *Tibet Through the Red Box* "time is represented as multi-chronological – unconscious, subconscious, and conscious time, each with the fitting chronology – moments emerging through the various stories Peter uncovers in the red box" (178).

Memory is represented visually as a vast repository, where similar motifs reappear in different openings, still recognisable, yet transformed. The father's Prague office is depicted in five different openings, one shown realistically, while the others imbued with one dominant colour, transformed in the narrator's imagination into the mysterious world from his father's stories. But although Natov argues in relation to the multiplicity of the stories that "it is hard to distinguish which part belongs to which stage of his life, as they are remembered by Peter as a child, when the stories took place and solidified" (2018: 178), the book's repetitive structure allows the readers to easily identify both the narrator and the approximate time in which the narration takes place. Similarly, it is possible to recognise those aspects of the narration in which the gap between the child and the adult selves is made clear. Even though the idea of a psychological return to one's own childhood is convincingly portrayed, there is a palpable sense of the temporariness of this "adventure", just as there is the sense of the adult narrator and the adult self dominating the narration. The narrative contains elements of confession which concerns the child's sense of shame and awkwardness, but these fragments are always narrated in the past tense, punctured by phrases: "As a child I had a recurrent dream..." and "It was a rare colour in the landlocked country of my childhood".

Some realistic aspects of the journey through Tibet are depicted in the father's diaries, but such detail in the son's account appears only in the form of passing remarks, whereas the visual translation tends to focus on the magical aspects that were relevant to him during his childhood. The son's vision of Tibet seems to remain constrained by what the artist envisions as "childlike optics", populated with mandala-like motifs, labyrinths, and magical figures. The adult Peter mentions the fact of Tibet's occupation, and marks it symbolically via the presence of miniature trucks, tanks and planes in the final openings, but in most of the illustrations Tibet emerges in its somewhat orientalised version, as a mystical land which is symbolically placed within the domain of storytelling rather than politics and history.

There is the obvious discrepancy between the verbal narration in the openings, where Peter the adult recollects and comments on his father's stories in a more matter-of-fact manner, and the emotionally charged imagery blended into these passages representing his longing as a child, coincided chronologically with the verbal account about the father's experience. Time passes differently for the child – the narrator makes it clear that the father's absence in the emotional sense lasted much longer than the actual chronological absence. The first-person account begins rather dramatically:

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"Christmases came and went. I could not remember him clearly any more", but in the closing opening the adult narrator revisions the subjectivity of his childhood perception: "Did he get lost for fourteen months or was it longer?". The political context, perhaps not that meaningful to the narrator's child self, is only hinted at visually by his mature self. As a result of re-memorying[6], the adult narrator revises his biography, and the text locates the childhood in a wider perspective. The visual account focuses on the magical and emotional aspects of re-memorying, whereas in his verbal account the narrator sketches the socio-political context of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the Chinese occupation of Tibet, and points out its impact on his own and his father's biography.

The narrative as a whole can be seen as a testimony of love and commitment, and as a way of preserving the memory which may become endangered with the passing time. Sis pays tribute to his father (curiously enough, the mother's presence is marked only in the form of a silent figure captured in the imaginary photographs), making his stories public and conferring spiritual value upon them. It is not a coincidence that the book ends with a quote from Vladimir Nabokov's work – a powerful comment on the value of individual testimony. In the sections where the adult Peter provides his own account of his father's memories, he does it with thoughtfulness and consideration. There is a sense of empathy for the father's experience, a sense of meticulousness of the report, which shows how much the son cares for the memory to be sustained. The beauty of Tibet is reflected in the several wordless doublespreads, which serve as visual invitations to contemplate the image and appreciate the moment before moving on. The adult Peter realises that Western mentality which takes rational explanations of events for granted does not provide universal answers about the complexity of human existence: he openly acknowledges his father's spiritual transformation in Potala as a kind of mystical occurrence. The recurrent visual motif of the labyrinth reminds us that once we reach our destination, we will never return unchanged.

*Tibet Through the Red Box* is, however, primarily a nostalgic account[7], where the adult-child border is delineated clearly, where childhood seems to be defined through the optics of a keyhole through which one peeps into one's past with sentiment, recalling the sense of magic that Tibet stories provided. The book's final opening features two silhouettes of the son and the father walking off together, their past selves

[6] I borrow the term from Alison Waller's study "Re-memorying: A New Phenomenological Methodology in Children's Literature Studies" (2017), a chapter from *The Edinburgh Companion to Children's Literature* (pp. 136-149), where she applies it to the act of re-reading children's literature by adults and comparing the experience with their memory of reading as children. Waller writes: "The term "re-memorying" signals my interest in *remembering* as an act rather than *memory* as a cognitive faculty or a repository, and the methodological importance of this distinction." (2017: 144). I use the term somewhat differently, in the context of Sis' book, in which the narrator reads the written version of the stories first heard in childhood and re-constructs his biographical memory as a consequence.

[7] Nostalgia is a complex term, whose meanings have been changing with time, as Robert Hemmings shows in his analysis of children's classics. One of the eminent scholars he mentions is Svetlana Boym, the Jewish émigré from the former Soviet Union, who explored the theme in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001). Boym sees modern nostalgia as "a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history." (Boym qtd. in Hemmings, p. 77). Another aspect of nostalgia that reverberates in Sis' narrative is what Hemmings, following Jean Starobinski's theory, calls "a function of the imagination, steeped in temporal and spatial longing", adding that "the illusive object of that longing is childhood" (p. 55). See Hemmings, R. "A Taste of Nostalgia: Children's Books from the Golden Age – Carroll, Grahame, and Milne." *Children's Literature*, Vol. 35 (2007). pp. 54-79.

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depicted symbolically in the form of their shadows. The image portrays time as linear, where the past is definitely a closed stage. This linearity is also visible in the peritext, in the biographical note and the photo that features the author, his father, and his son.

The adult narrator conveys his sense of nostalgia more or less explicitly in many other elements of the narrative. His awareness of the transience of life, the irreversibility of time, the irretrievability of loss, is metaphorically expressed through his reconstruction of the history of Tibet – a land which no longer exists in the form Sis' father experienced it. There is a sense of the past being closed, and the sense of the magic being lost. Although the visual narrative relies on the lavish use of the mandala motif, it remains an organizing device rather than the one which adds new layers to the story. While it may initially seem otherwise, the metaphysical meanings of Tibetan mandalas and labyrinths[8] are not part of the book's philosophical message. Similarly, the hybridical character of the visual and verbal narrations in the book indicated by Natov (2018: 175) is only apparent. At first glance, the blurred background in the illustrations, images interspersing or bleeding into the text, the returns of characteristic visual symbols may create the impression that the visual space is a layered palimpsest, and that it visually defines the work of the mind and memory. But it is not a palimpsest, only a kaleidoscope, in which the elements mix and reappear. The organising principle of the book is a somewhat rigid structure, which allows the readers to navigate effortlessly between the father's and the son's accounts. There is no incentive to uncover the potential hidden layers, but rather to drift from page to page and follow the pattern of the two regularly juxtaposed stories.

In *Tibet Through the Red Box*, the narrator's childhood belongs definitively to his biographical past – it is frozen and immobilised in the verbal sections, which clearly indicate that the past is irretrievable, and in some elements of the visual narration: in the miniature medallion-shaped flashback scenes that capture moments from Peter's childhood, in the silent images that resemble conventional family photographs, and in the ghostlike figures that haunt the narrator in the father's empty office. The narrator admits in the final passage: "It is a Tibet I have never been to, and it may be a Tibet that never really existed – a faraway place I first knew as a young child when my father was lost there." This fictionality of "Tibet" (which even the narrator typewrites in between inverted commas) is evident throughout the whole visual narrative, which portrays it by means of a fairy-tale-like convention, magical, beautiful, yet inscrutable. The endpaper emphasises connections between Peter and his father, as well as those between East and West, portraying metaphorically the arbitrariness of geographical and age distance – but the narrative as a whole relegates Tibet and childhood to the sphere of myth and magic, turning the book into an inherently nostalgic story.

### Camouflage as an ethical choice in *Granny Knits*

Writing about the Holocaust memorials, James E. Young treats books, museums, and monuments as sites of memory, calling them "memorial texts". He warns though that many memorial texts "remember events according to the hue of national ideals, the cast of political dicta" (1993: Preface viii). *Granny Knits* can be called a memorial text, but in a very different sense. Orlev's work can be studied from different perspectives, among which there is the politically steered collective memory and the silence that long enshrouded the theme of the Holocaust and Polish anti-Semitism in post-war Poland.

[8] See "Mandala". *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (2010). Editor-in-chief: A. Ronnberg. Editor: K. Martin. Koln: Taschen.

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Kaźmierska reports in her book the active processes of collective forgetting that took place after the war, tendencies which she calls a form of no-memory, oblivion, or un-remembering (2008: 111, 130-138). In her thorough discussion on the collective memory of the Holocaust in Poland, Kaźmierska writes about the gradual decolonisation of the memory (a term she borrows from Pierre Nora), which would, however, take place only decades after the war (81).

Testimonies are particularly important as a form of preserving memory mainly because, as Kaźmierska observes, it may be difficult today to build common space for biographical memory when generational experiences are so different, while the rooting of experience in a particular moment in time and in particular space makes it at least partly untranslatable (2008: 91). *Granny Knits* may be perceived as a form of artistic testimony although Orlev relies on the strategy of narrative disguise: the story, whose form alludes to that of fairy tales, nursery rhymes, or folk songs and tales, and is often taken for a children's story[9], camouflages his biographical experience of the Jewish boy persecuted by the Nazis during the Second World War and the evil consequences of anti-Semitism when it becomes an official ideology[10]. The essential meanings of the story were perfectly captured and highlighted by Ignerska in the Polish edition of the book. Childlike aesthetics and childlike narrative convention – where "childlike" is far from naive – are treated by both the author and the illustrator as a universal language, and the only adequate language to articulate the protest against any form of institutionalised racism.

Orlev seems to never have abandoned his childhood and his native land emotionally. Born in Poland, brought up as a Catholic by his nanny, Jerzy Henryk Orłowski had Jewish parents who were not religious, and he only learnt that he was a Jew when he was four or five. He was still a boy when the Second World War started. Before he migrated to Israel, he survived the ghetto and the concentration camp. In an interview for Polish Radio One Orlev admits that even if he wanted to, he could not remove his childhood from his heart. He declares himself a Polish patriot, but also says that he feels betrayed by his homeland ("Izraelski pisarz..."). This ambivalence is certainly visible in his art, where hope is not abandoned, yet the dramatic motif of the futile protest against institutionalised evil dominates the narration. In his memoirs, where he writes about the love for the Polish language and the books read during childhood, Orlev mentions two books which were formative texts for him, as they taught him that curiosity about the world helps people survive (2012: 9). Curiosity is another driving force behind *Granny Knits*, manifested by both the author and the illustrator not only in their willingness to experiment with the form, but also in their attitude, where irony hidden behind childlike astonishment prevails over despair.

The fact that the narrator's child self is very much alive and integrated with his adult self is evident in *Granny Knits* and confirmed by the artist's words, where he

[9] Even the author of the Afterword in the book *Książki mojego dzieciństwa* perceives differently Orlev's war novels, where the war context is more explicit, and *Granny Knits*, which she describes as a little book for very young children, "a lighthearted book which has a serious theme – lack of tolerance as an essence of social relations" (p. 37). She continues her comment about *Granny Knits*: "deprived of a happy ending, the little fairy-tale prepares children for life in the adult world" (2012: 37), as if implying that the book's merits are mainly didactic, while the addressee is unquestionably very young. See A. Nasalska in Orlev, U. (2012). *Książki mojego dzieciństwa (1931-1945)*. Lublin: UMCS.

[10] My thanks go to Magdalena Sikorska for pointing out the role of 1968 anti-Semitic campaign in communist Poland as an interpretive context for *Granny Knits.*

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explains why he is unable to write about the war from a perspective of an adult[11]. As Orlev memorably puts it: "Nie potrafię o tym, co działo się w czasie wojny pisać, czy opowiadać inaczej niż z perspektywy dziecka. Nie mogę mówić o tym, jak dorosły człowiek, bo po prostu się tego boję. Mogę o tym myśleć tylko tak, jak pamiętam, jako dziecko"[12]. Orlev's comment about the nature of his writing can be seen as a form of testimony, but it is primarily his ethical credo, which firmly renounces hate towards oppressors despite the experienced or witnessed trauma. He is also motivated by honesty towards his readers: "A jak mam opowiadać, skoro w takim języku widziałem getto, wojnę, obóz koncentracyjny, Niemców, Zagładę? Byłbym nieuczciwy, gdybym pisał o wszystkim, czego dowiedziałem się jako dorosły. Wiedza nabyta nie jest moją. Byłem wtedy dzieckiem. To wszystko"[13].

The declared identification with the child perspective is visible in all the aspects of the verbal narration. Rhymes and rhythm, dynamism, diminutive forms, emotionality, perhaps a sense of stylistic roughness – straightforward style, colloquial register, the uneven number of syllables – are naturally associated with childlike forms and with popular ways of addressing children[14]. But the eloquent phrasing and the bitter irony perhaps associated more easily with adult writing and adult audience are conveyed within the same story. In the Polish version, the grandmother explains to the school officials that there are "hand-knitted" children as well as "skin" children. Turning them into categories that rhyme in Polish and showing them as parallel, not only defamiliarises the "skin" category, but also ironically exposes the absurdity of a thinking based on racism or, more specifically, anti-Semitism. Similarly, in the Polish translation, the writer's ironic attitude towards the communist officials is conveyed via their own words. In the English translation it is phrased differently, but the ironic subtext is also detectable, when the teachers say: "Children made of wool?/ In our very own school?". At the mayor's office Granny hears: "In any self-respecting land,/ Knitted children must be banned!". Even if we assume that the youngest readers may be oblivious to the ironical overtones in the story, the "childlike" and "adultlike" elements are integrated in the text so effectively that its essence remains communicative to readers of different ages.

Similarly, the injustice with which Granny has to deal is conveyed through the focalised perspective – the emotionally loaded, lavish use of question marks and exclamation marks: "Surely this was illegality?/ What a stupid municipality!/ Needles

[11] For Diana Gittins, childhood is "invariably filtered through memory. [...] Early memories can be affected by later images, narratives and experiences." See D. Gittins. "The historical construction of childhood". In: M. J. Kehily (ed.), *An Introduction to Childhood Studies: Second Edition* (2009). Open University Press (p. 36). But Orlev's point is not to reconstruct the memory of his childhood in the story, but to use the convention of a children's story and his own childhood memory as a narrative frame which allows him to tell the story about traumatic events he witnessed in his adult life.

[12] "I am not able to write or speak about what happened during the war in a way that would not be a child's perspective. I cannot talk about this like a grown-up man as I simply fear it. I can only think about it the way I remember it as a child." (my translation). "Nie mogę znaleźć w sobie nienawiści". Polityka. 04.07.2011.

[13] "How am I supposed to talk about this, if this is the language in which I saw the ghetto, the war, the concentration camp, the Germans, the Holocaust? I would be dishonest if I wrote about everything I would learn later, as an adult. The knowledge acquired (later) is not my own. I was a child then. This is all" (my translation). "Najlepsze czasy były w getcie". Gazeta Wyborcza. Duży Format. 30.06.2011.

[14] Communication accommodation theory explains that the sense of solidarity and the need to strengthen the bonds between individuals who belong to different age groups results in stylistic and lexical "convergence", which "occurs when we make our speech and communication patterns more like that of our partners, and it is typical of many cooperative interpersonal encounters" (Williams, Nussbaum 2001: 11-12).

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clicked and clicked at length./ Using wool of double strength,/ Granny knitted a helicopter./ To meet the president, nothing would stop her!" It is impossible to confidently decide whether this is the child's or the adult's reaction – these narrative choices reflect a joint perspective of Granny, the concerned storyteller, and any human being who is ready to react when faced with evil and injustice. But the emotionality of the account and the unconditional trust in the sense of the spontaneously undertaken action is often associated with children's way of thinking, which demonstrates where the narrator's loyalties lie.

Granny's struggle with the system and her decision to unravel her whole knitted universe is a metaphor whose dramatic senses should be clear to any thoughtful reader, even though *Granny Knits* portrays the unbearable as a temporary state, and its ending signals a possibility of a more optimistic future. In the interviews quoted above Orlev speaks that he is motivated by fear, but I am convinced that he is first and foremost motivated by his compassion for the oppressed. The tale, with its profoundly disturbing climax, in a sense may be for contemporary readers what Greek tragedies could have been for the Athenians. Martha C. Nussbaum sees these works in the context of their potential of being "a contested place of moral struggle, a place in which virtue might possibly in some cases prevail over the caprices of amoral power, and in which, even if it does not prevail, virtue may still shine through for its own sake" (Nussbaum, 2001: xxxvii).

In her insightful analysis of ancient tragedies, Nussbaum points out that in Euripides' *Hecuba* and his other plays the good characters often die young, as "[t]o live on in times of extremity like those to which Euripides is repeatedly drawn is, very likely, to make contact with betrayal itself. But the encounter with betrayal brings a risk of defilement: the risk of ceasing to look at the world with the child's free and generous looks; of ceasing, in the Euripidean way, to be good" (Nussbaum 2001: 419). The knitted children cannot be spared, but Orlev lets us hope that at some point they will be resurrected, that their annihilation, although necessary in these circumstances, is only temporary. It is in this ethically motivated sense that *Granny Knits* is an encrypted message, an artistic camouflage behind which there lurks the drama of the 1968 events in Poland. Identification with the childlike perspective and the motif of the reversibility of death in *Granny Knits* is a metaphorical, ethically underpinned way of communicating the truth about the mechanisms of anti-Semitism.

Marta Ignerska's illustrations perfectly capture the sense of Orlev's humanistic vision, turning the book published by Wytwórnia into a visual narrative which could be called a picturebook. Anita Wincencjusz-Patyna quite rightly attributes the characteristic features of Ignerska's art to her inspiration with the noncamera aesthetics of Julian Antoniszczak's animation (2014: par. 11). In *Granny Knits*, this inspiration is not reduced to the formal aspects. Ignerska captures and reworks artistically both the playfulness of Antoniszczak's style and the essence of his ethical engagement. Known as Antonisz, the artist was a Polish experimental filmmaker who used a noncamera technique for his avant-garde films, and although many of his productions were addressed to children, it is clear that they always involved a social and ethical commentary, and often satirised the oppressive reality of communist Poland. Humour, but also the visual style in which naivety and grotesque go hand in hand, was in fact

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a way to show the caricatured portrayal of the world in which Antonisz had to live, a remedy for the difficult reality he had to cope with[15].

The sense of materiality, the roughness of the imagery, and the fact that it was scratched directly on film tape may be the artist's articulation of his struggle with the oppressive system in which absurd was the norm. Antonisz's art camouflages a profound ethical manifesto behind the roughness of the style and behind the laughter induced by his parody animations. His classic animation "How a Sausage Dog Works", created only three years after the 1968 political crisis, is a humanistic protest against violence in any form; through the seemingly absurd convention the artist epitomises the drama: the easiness with which (fragile) life is destroyed by thoughtlessness, ignorance, and contempt for the other. A similar chaos and roughness is the distinctive feature of Ignerska's art in *Granny Knits* and, not coincidentally, her ethical concerns reflected in her visual style are commensurate with those of Orlev and Antonisz.

In Ignerska's visual answer to the text in *Granny Knits*, we see simplified shapes, chaotically spread drops of paint, irregular lines, all of which are interpictorial allusions to Antonisz's animations. This simplicity is, however, only apparent: in fact, the style and the material tools are carefully selected for the purpose of the narration. It is not only the shape and the colour palette, but also the choice of artistic tool, that defines the characters. The knitted children and the grandma are drawn in pencil, sketched via the multiplicity of delicate spiral shapes imitating wool, and surrounded by flashy, vibrant, warm hues of crayon and paint, whereas the teachers and the council members are drawn in charcoal and ballpaint, where black and red dominate. Their blank facial expressions and their body language also illustrate metaphorically, and ironically, the mentality of the representatives of the communist state apparatus.

Ignerska's art in *Granny Knits* continuously erases the border between the "childlike" and the "adultlike"; the only borders the artist depicts vividly are those bred by opportunism, prejudice and rigid minds. The "knitted" children bring to mind the softness of the wool, but they are also astute and solid; there is a sense of freedom, spontaneity and extravagance in the visual aberrations such as eyeballs falling out (an effect characteristic for Antonisz's art) and blatantly shown bottoms. The grandmother also integrates "childlike" and "adultlike" (as well as "feminine" and "masculine") elements: she is wrinkled and grey-haired, and although her jewellery is old-fashioned, she wears a girly flowery skirt and trainers. Her role of a caring guardian and determined defender of the children is evident, but she can also be facetious and easygoing.

The "wooliness" of the elements that make up Granny and her grandchildren's microcosm brings out the significance of the feminine skill of knitting, which is shown as a natural gift that enables Granny (an elderly woman, deprived socially and

[15] The words of Antonisz's daughter probably best encapsulate the artist's everyday functioning and his creative spirit that transformed the mundane into the extraordinary for his family. Sabina Antoniszczak thus remembers her father: "[t]he fact that he coped in that reality does not mean he accepted it or thought of it as rational. He had a unique understanding of what really is normal, a kind of profound awareness of what normal life should be like" (Antoniszczak, S. 2010, my translation). The roughness of his visual style and the childlike aesthetics could have been, just like in Orlev's case, a strategy of survival and an ethical choice. The abundance of colour and grotesque shapes in his animations, as well as the accompanying voiceover – voices of children or those of untrained adults who have difficulty in reading out the artist's verbal commentary – create an effect of defamiliarisation and ironic distance, perhaps in an act of rebellion against the official, smooth-tongued discourse of propaganda. Just as Orlev adopts a style that accommodates elements of the carnivalesque, so Ignerska, following Antonisz, relies on the principle of laughter and symbolically disrupts established hierarchies.

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materially) to create a world independent from the absurdities of the prevailing social order. This private space functions in the illustrations as a kind of alternative reality, which in fact depicts an authentic vision of the world, where all the elements are interconnected and where human and non-human agents are made from the same matter. In contrast, the illustrations ironically defamiliarise public space which stands for the so-called "normal world". Its representatives, school and council officials, are depicted either as dehumanised automatons or as uniform figures, epitomised through the visual metonymies of grotesquely protruding bellies and bottoms.

Ignerska relies on what seems to be childlike aesthetics and childlike audaciousness, portraying the children and their world through a universal ethical optics, which erases age boundaries, thus making Orlev's vision even more intense. While not depriving the story of its terrifying aspects, she always sympathises with the oppressed. Instead, she emphasises visually the absurdity of a social order where injustice and prejudice are institutionally sanctioned. The poignancy of the drawings – the black hostility and the sharp edges of the mayor's office, the caricatured portraits of the administration, the inferno alluded to through the colour and shape of the destroyed mass of living matter – is one such vivid element. The other is the convoluted presence of the socio-political context of the story, communicated via a number of visual allusions which may direct some readers to the theme of the expulsion of the Holocaust survivors from communist Poland.

Such reading is solidified by the dominance of white and blue on the cover, which can be associated with the colours of Israel's flag, whereas the palm tree in the area surrounded by the guards can bring to mind the context of the ghetto. The enormous beautifully blooming tree knitted by Granny may be a meaningful echo of the ritual of planting trees by *aliji*, the Jews coming to Israel – a symbol of the longed-for rootedness (Kaźmierska 2008: 176). The ending of the story tentatively expresses hope for peaceful life in the future; the final lines say: "If the people are caring and kind/And knitted kids they won't mind/Then Granny won't fret and there she'll sit/And need I tell you? Knit and knit and knit...". The hope for rebirth is also implied visually by the abundance of the yellow colour in the finale, which may again be associated with Israel as the new home for the Jews.

Ignerska vividly portrays the world of inhumane institutions by means of an aesthetics which through its grotesque elements and viscerality reflect both a child's and any human being's emotions and even somatic sensations in the confrontation with hostility and its consequences. She thoroughly identifies herself with the perspective of the victims, depicting visually the machine-like mentality of the oppressors imprinted on their bodies, and the literally destructive power of words, hateful propaganda. The captions that repeat and symbolically sanction some of the prejudiced reactions of the officials inserted by Ignerska into the illustrations bring to mind Zygmunt Bauman's central idea in his fundamental work *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1991). Bauman explains that the Holocaust was not the necessity in the modern civilisation, but it turned out to be its possibility. What increased the possibility, according to Bauman, was the prevalence of instrumental rationality and the existence of bureaucratic institutions which privileged efficiency over morality. Despite the short time that had passed since the ending of the Second World War, the state apparatus in communist Poland would not hesitate to reawaken anti-Semitic sentiment for political purposes. *Granny Knits* speaks evocatively about the mechanisms of moral degradation responsible for human tragedy and yet insists on the possibility of recovery and rebirth.

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## Conclusion

Sis and Orlev choose different strategies in their representation of biographical memory. The narrative form of confession in *Tibet Through the Red Box* is never meant to be entirely "realistic"; the narrator comments on his own subjective experience of time and on the subjectivity of his father's account. The subjectivity of memory is validated – Sis emphasises its fragmentariness and its evolution in time. What also matters for him is the act of passing on individual memory as a form of symbolic heritage and a mark of identity. The story starts and ends in the "now", which remains the dominant perspective through which the past is assessed; the past – and the narrator's child self – remain locked in the office, in the box. In *Tibet Through the Red Box*, the perspective of the adult narrator reminiscing about his own past and trying to deal with his biographical memory is conveyed via the adventurous and visually attractive convention which disguises a rather nostalgic vision of childhood.

*Granny Knits*, a camouflaged account of what happens in a world which institutionalises inhumane ideologies, endorses an ethical perspective that valorizes childlike vulnerability and trustful openness; for the writer it is the only acceptable stance, even if it entails the risk of being harmed. Nussbaum identifies a very similar ideal in Euripides' ethical vision: "[t]his willingness to embrace something that *is* in the world and subject to its risks is, in fact, the virtue of the Euripidean child, whose love is directed at the world itself, including its dangers" (2001: 420). The commitment to childlike values inscribed in the narrative voice is for Orlev the most appropriate ethical response to a world whose moral integrity is in jeopardy. In Ignerska's illustrations, the apparent naivety of the form disguises irony and humanistic protest, which exposes the rules of the system that has turned absurdity to a norm. The visual and verbal form of the narrative is the artists' ethical choice – because the only sane and humane reaction to the grotesquely distorted reality is childlike astonishment. Perhaps the identification with the childlike in *Granny Knits* is also the reason why a sense of agency prevails over a sense of despair. Orlev's text and Ignerska's illustrations remain in a truly dialogical relationship, both articulating through their form and content *Granny Knits*' humanistic credo.

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**KATARZYNA SMYCZYŃSKA**

**CONFESSION AND CAMOUFLAGE: BIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY IN VISUAL NARRATIVES BY PETER SIS, URI ORLEV AND MARTA IGNERSKA**

In my article, I argue that Peter Sis' *Tibet Through the Red Box* (1998) and the Polish edition of Uri Orlev's *Granny Knits* (first published in Hebrew in 1981) illustrated by Marta Ignerska (2009) represent two different forms of intergenerational remembering. The visual narratives in question are artistic portrayals of the narrators' biographical memory, and in some sense it is possible to view both works as narratives in which intergenerational connectivity is an integral aspect of the story. However, in each book the symbolic return to childhood has a different character. In Orlev and Ignerska's book, the rigidly delineated categories of "childhood" and "adulthood" are not really applicable, as they merge on every possible level – in their formal, expressive, and philosophical aspects. In Sis' narrative, the (visual) language may resemble conventions associated with children's literature, but it is primarily an element of the book's nostalgic message, not a signal of the narrator's authentic and permanent connection with his child self.