Polityczny monolog a polityczny dialog w powieściach graficznych

Abstrakt

Czy komiks może być wyrazem poparcia dla politycznego *status quo* i próbą edukacji uległych konserwatywnych obywateli? A w innym wypadku, czy może mieć wywrotową wymowę i zachęcać do stawiania trudnych pytań? Z jakiego powodu powieści graficzne sprawdzają się tak dobrze jako środek propagandowy, kształtujący podejście do ideologii? Analizie ukierunkowanej na odkrycie hierarchicznej lub anarchistycznej komunikacji politycznej poddane są wybrane historie z serii komiksowych „Commando" oraz „Battle", obok *V jak Vendetta* Alana Moore'a i Davida Lloyda. Uwagę zwrócono na unikalny charakter komiksu jako medium.

Słowa kluczowe: powieść graficzna, ideologia, faszyzm, anarchizm, terroryzm, Brytyjskie, wartości, propaganda

Abstract

Can a comic book communicate support to political *status quo* and strive to educate a society of obedient citizens who share common conservative values? Can it, in other cases, encourage tough questions and sound rebellious? And why are graphic novels so efficient as means of propaganda and ideological impact? Selected stories from "Commando" and "Battle" war comic series are discussed along with Alan Moore's and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* in order to look at hierarchical versus anarchistic political communication in British graphic novels. Special attention is paid to uniqueness of comic books as a medium.

Keywords: graphic novel, ideology, fascism, anarchism, terrorism, British, values, propaganda

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Political Monologue vs. Political Dialogue in Graphic Novels

Visual media are a very convenient tool of proliferation of social and political ideas. Images seem to create a universal language that can be understood by almost everyone. Therefore, paintings, drawings and cartoons were used in order to transmit all sorts of political messages almost from the beginning of human civilisations. Technological development and the increase of the level of education among citizens provoked the evolution of political communication methods that maximised its effectiveness.

According to McNair, political communication is "purposeful communication about politics" (2003: p. 4). In his opinion, "this incorporates (...) communication *about* these actors and their activities, as contained in news reports, editorials, and other forms of media discussion of politics" (2003: p. 4). Comic books or graphic novels convey a decent portion of messages that refer to politically charged themes in the twentieth and in the twenty first centuries. Since the dawn of the medium, screenwriters and artists have discussed political problems of the societies they have lived in. Comics also became, to some extent, a part of the "marriage" between the worlds of politics and popular culture well described by Liesbet van Zoonen (1998).

The aim of this paper is to present the ways that graphic novels may be used to communicate varied political messages aimed at either preserving certain social or political order or at subverting it. Therefore it is necessary to briefly examine the relations between the politics and the medium. Furthermore, I will present the content analysis of examples of very important, politically meaningful comic books in order to relate to two different goals of such communication.

In my opinion, the amazing power of comics as a tool of social and political communication comes from the unique combination of their visual and textual components. Images can multiply and strengthen the force of verbal communication. Reciprocally, words make static images seem livelier, closer to the real world. As Fredrik Strömberg puts it, "the intimate combination of words and pictures is one explanation [of the magic of comics]. Speech balloons, captions, onomatopoetic words etc. tend to give life and meaning to what might otherwise be lifeless images" (2010: p. 9). Comics' narrative power stems from this very characteristic of the medium, making it an extremely attractive tool of purposeful political communication. "Survey after survey has shown that the comics section is the most well read part of any daily newspaper" (Strömberg 2010: p. 9). Not surprisingly then, comics have been used by those conscious of their "magic", either to try to sustain a social or political *status quo* or to subvert it.

Graphic Novel and Politics

A graphic novel as a medium is a form of a comic book usually referred to simply as "comics". Scott McCloud, a comic book author himself, defines this art form as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1995: p. 9). Will Eisner defined comics as "sequential art". By that he meant "the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatise an idea" (2008: p. xi). Both definitions clearly show that the medium of comics is perfect not only for entertainment, but also as a source of social and political information.

It is important to note the difference between comic books and graphic novels, although the terms might also be used interchangeably. A comic book is a term normally used to describe 24-page comic magazines published monthly and containing serials like *The Amazing Spider Man* or *Batman*. Graphic novels are narrative stories of a format larger than a traditional comic book issue. They tend to contain a relatively independent story – not to be continued. They resemble books rather than magazines. The term was popularised by Will Eisner, whose work entitled *A Contract with God* (2006) is often mentioned as the first graphic novel (Wolk 2007: p. 43–44; see also Szyłak 2016: p. 11–23).

There are numerous ways comic books can be employed to speak about politics. One falls somewhere between education, political declaration and philosophical discourse. This is when a graphic novel wholeheartedly presents the pillars of some ideology but without

a brute scope of directly shaping people's actions or even beliefs. In such a case a comic book will simply argue for and illustrate some assumptions but this is done in a fairly subtle and open manner. It does not need to be designed in order to support actual political players, it may well present private views of an artist, an idea rather than political agenda. In this case chances are that one will obtain a reasonable, valuable, inspiring image of what a certain idea is. *Kto jest górą? Lew czy mysz?* is an example of education on the most basic mechanisms of the society and politics (Morrison, Morrison, Lemaitre 2005).

Propaganda in comics is of course quite different. This is when a graphic novel's primary goal is to present one political option as correct and inevitably favoured over all others. Similarly to other examples of propaganda in almost every medium, it deliberately distorts the image of the world and is often very simply written as an answer to political actors' direct request. In some circumstances (as with war comics issued during the war) it will strive not only to influence beliefs but also to unleash very real and immediate actions (see Strömberg 2010: p. 38–39; Wright 2003: p. 30–55).

Finally, promotion of some collective values may also be seen as political or social communication. Comics can define reasons for national pride or educate citizens or encourage all kinds of responsible pro-social behaviours, like when they are elements of social campaigns, eg. *Jak postępować w przypadku zagrożenia terrorystycznego*, campaign by Public Transportation of Warsaw informs of and encourages appropriate conduct in case of a terrorists' attack (*Jak postępować* 2016).

Comics are readily picked by anyone willing to efficiently convey political messages. Not only can people be reached who normally would not read anything other than an instruction manual, and much less anything on serious political subjects. Furthermore, comics have a power of engaging both the verbal and the non-verbal paths of human perception due to which they cannot be beaten as far as catching attention and getting straight to the heart (see Eisner 2008). The union of words and pictures produces intense emotions and considerable impact – and this has been long appreciated by political forces, specifically when in need of inducing immediate shifts of social attitudes or advertising desired actions by individuals, as in the case of Royal Air Forces (R.A.F.) recruitment campaign (see Rech 2014).

As societies struggle with continuously incoming social, cultural and political challenges, as they take on new debates, graphic novel authors follow, commenting on the same topics, whether spontaneously or on direct request from governments. Anything that has ever been engaging for the public found its place in comic pictures, be it drug abuse issues (preventive comics were ordered by United States' Department of Health,

Education, and Welfare, see Wright 2003: p. 239) or the American army morale during World War II (Rhodes 2008: p. 40). The range of politically meaningful subjects is such that they will "tell you to join a fascist movement, adopt a new faith, or start hating your neighbour for the colour of his skin", as Fredrik Strömberg says (2010: p. 9).

Political Monologue

"War, comics, and propaganda make for a fruitful combination" claims Strömberg (2010: p. 38). And in fact printing of specifically designed comic books was often a part of war effort. During the World War II comics were used by artists to express their view about the United States' engagement in the struggle against Nazi Germany. Comics writers co-operated with the Office of War Information (OWI) and created stories with the aim of supporting the fighting troops: "The OWI wanted to give people details of the war, but at the same time prevented discouraging images or concepts that could demoralise the American people. (...) The comics were meant to give children hope in the outcome of the war, a bit of escape from the actual events and a sense of contributing to the effort through calls in the comic books for scrap paper, metal, war bonds or other related rallies, as well as to remain vigilant against enemy spy rings" (Scott 2007: p. 329). Major comic book heroes of the times were involved in promotion and propagation of the desired behaviours.

American comics of the Second World War are an instructive example of the political monologue, serving the interests of those who have the power. They mostly contained stories presenting American soldiers as heroic figures fighting for the freedom of the globe. American authors engaged the most popular superheroes in the fight against the enemies of the nation (see Wright 2003: p. 30–55). The picture of the enemy was an equally important part of the wartime comics' message. In American comics Nazi Germans and the Japanese were the main enemy. Authors of war stories created derogatory pictures of US' opponents appealing to the worst possible stereotypes of these nations (Scott 2007: p. 327–328; Conroy 2009: p. 70–71). In fact the enemies were presented as sub-humans to contrast the image of the brave and righteous American boys.

British war comics may be an even more interesting example of top-down political communication. Contrary to the American war stories, they only became popular long after the Second World War. They were also different in format and conveyed more complex messages.

War comics became especially popular in Great Britain in the late fifties and were a very important part of the British comic book market till the seventies. Chapman even calls war stories, and specifically World War II stories, "the genre synonymous with the British boy's comic" (2011: p. 95). "Picture libraries" were the most popular publication format of British war graphic novels. They were 64- to 68-pages books published weekly and containing one story each. Most popular of the kind were *Air Ace Picture Library*, *Battle Picture Library*, *War at Sea Picture Library*, *War Picture Library* and *Commando*. Only the latter survived into the 21st century reaching 4 000 issues in 2007 (see Blair 2007).

Compared to their American counterparts, British war comics aimed at keeping the memory of the glorious British war effort rather than at mobilising support for particular military action (which is of course partly explained by the time of their publication: after the war). To achieve this goal publishers chose realistic stories over idealised portraits of combat. Many war veterans wrote for various British war libraries: "The rewards [financial] attracted good writers, many of them veterans of the war themselves. Bensberg [Ted] had been called up for the Territorials in 1939 and served as a sergeant in the Royal Signals. One of his most prolific writers on *Battle Pictures Library*, Ken Bulmer, had also served with the Royal Signals in Africa, Sicily and Italy which gave his stories a verisimilitude lacking in many of the war stories that most of us grew up on in 1970s" (Holland 2008: p. 6). Thanks to the input of war veterans British war comics incorporated more challenging topics and were also a good history lesson for their young audiences.

British war comics focused mostly on the role British and Commonwealth (Australian, New Zealand) soldiers played during the Second World War. Britain's allies appeared occasionally as well (Chapman 2011: p. 98), however, a lot less than it would have been fair judging by their real meaning. This Anglocentric perspective was obviously aimed at producing a message maximising the input of the British and Commonwealth forces in the victory.

British soldiers were usually presented as courageous and patriotic individuals willingly engaging in the fight for freedom, one of the values most cherished by British citizens. And even when some of them were less righteous at the point of entering the battlefield, they have been undergoing a personal metamorphosis as the story unfolded and, when their time came, they were ready to stand up and fight. *Test by Battle* story is a good example. In one of its subplots, it tells the story of a pilot Percy Cook who at first avoids confrontation with overwhelming German forces, but finally decides to

run a brave attack on a German ship in order to save British forces (see *Test by Battle*: p. 201–263). British soldiers were also presented as honourable and fair at war.

Picture of the enemy in British war comics was a little more nuanced and less degrading than in the American ones. Although soldiers commonly referred to Germans as "Jerries", "Huns" or "Krauts", to Italians as "Eyeties" and to the Japanese as "Japs" or "Nips" (Chapman 2011: p. 101), it can be argued that it was simply the reflection of the language that had really been used by British troops, part of the war game. In the visual sphere the enemies were rarely the grotesque animal-like figures known from the American comics. For example in *Fort Blood* story a German officer, major von Schiller, is presented as an honourable enemy (see *Fort Blood* 2008: p. 9–72).

War realities required of British soldiers an ability to survive in difficult conditions as well as creativity to for example overcome even temporary deficiencies in armament. In *Flash Point* story from *Air Ace Library,* British Royal Air Force soldiers had to face better equipped German troops. Due to bravery and imaginativeness of one of them they were able to destroy German supplies and win the battle in the air. Douglas Milner, the main hero, is presented as an adventurous character using all of his skills in a fight against prevalent enemy forces (see *Flash Point* 2009: p. 9–72). Such stories might have inspired the authors of the aforementioned R.A.F. 'Be Part of the Story' recruitment campaign (Rech 2014).

As mentioned before, British war comics embraced a considerable portion of historical truth, enough to even be considered supplementary didactic material by schoolteachers. There was a lot of care about correct appearance of uniforms or guns, about coherence of sites and dates. Stories where inner tensions in the British army were described, served to give some socio-psychological soundness too, *Killer at Large* being a good example (see *Killer at Large* 2008: p. 73–136). These comics were strongly realistic, which allowed them to be efficient means of political communication seen as political monologue. There was a lot of truth within, so the audiences usually uncritically considered the whole contents true. Their belief in national superiority was hence even more consolidated and, more subtly, their future political conformism ensured.

Political Dialogue

Comic books will not always educate for political or axiological obedience. They can be quite different when they encourage criticism, pose tough questions, provoke

discussion. *V for Vendetta* is a good example of a graphic novel designed to educate for intellectual independence. Written by Alan Moore and drawn by David Lloyd, it was published from 1982 to 1989. By showing Britain in fictional circumstances (following a nuclear war), it represents the ideological conflict between fascism and anarchism and becomes a dystopian critique of totalitarianism, with Orwellian echoes.

V for Vendetta is discursive in more than one way. Firstly, Moore discusses visions of two conflicting political orders. Norsefire party that has implemented a classical fascist rule with close surveillance of citizens presents itself to the nation as in any case better than the chaos that had emerged from the recent nuclear catastrophe. The totalitarian British regime's image is well painted with "different branches of the Orwellian repressing state named after body parts; the detective branch is called the Nose, the visual surveillance is the Eye, the audio surveillance the Ear and so on" (Strömberg 2010: p. 161; Moore, Lloyd 2009: p. 19–20, 32–33, 104–108)[1]. Secondly, the idea of anarchy, Bakunin style, represented by "the character V, always clad in a Guy Fawkes mask" (Strömberg 2010: p. 161) is the partner in this dialogue. Anarchy is presented as a loose social structure where independent individuals make decisions that concern them and are free to engage in contracts with others. V explains the true nature of it, when he answers his at first unwilling partner's, Evey Hammond, question concerning riots and disorder caused by destruction of Norsefire's media and tools of surveillance: "This is only the land of *take-what-you--want*. Anarchy means 'without *leaders'*; not 'without *order'*. With anarchy comes an age of *ordnung*, of *true* order, which is to say *voluntary* order. This age of ordnung will begin when mad and incoherent cycle of *verwirrung* that these bulletins reveal has run its course" (Moore, Lloyd, 2009: p. 278). Moore, a declared anarchist himself, frankly admits that there is price to it. The beginnings of an anarchistic society inevitably bring about a period of temporary chaos, part of the game, but so extremely difficult to withstand that it can undermine the whole transformation altogether.

Moore, conscious of the fact that introducing anarchy is simply easier said than done, closes the story in a non-conclusive manner. He gives no guarantee. There is a chance that the fictional Britain will decide to strive for an anarchistic order. There is a chance of an extremely prompt return to hard rule, as soon as the first crisis emerges. This open ending encourages further dialogue (see Moore, Lloyd 2009: p. 357, 360–365).

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[1]   It may at a first glance seem weird to have a party as extreme as classical fascists as one of the voices in the dialogue, in Britain, in the end of the 20th century. Was it really reasonable to fear totalitarianism? It expresses Moore's fears inspired by Margaret Thatcher's government and by the beginnings of the innovation called CCTV (Close Circuit Television) a powerful tool of governmental surveillance of citizens (Keller 2008: p. 23).

Throughout the story the dialogue between the two political ideas is blooming with powerful symbols. The Norsefire party uses names, uniforms and behaviours taken straight from Nazis (see Moore, Lloyd 2009: p. 33–34, 104–108). V reminds the memory of the gunpowder plot and Guy Fawkes – one of the most important rebels in British history. The compelling mask of Guy Fawkes, worn again so often in the 21st century, means the following: resistance to power, rebellion against oppression. V is successful where Fawkes had failed so long ago – he smashes some splendid buildings serving as seats of authorities. The physical destruction of the court or the parliament means the destruction of the sacred symbols of the political power (see: Moore, Lloyd 2009: p. 17, 53, 266–267).

V for Vendetta very obviously contains a well defined political discourse within the story. But it also encourages dialogue out there in the real world. It speaks out to the audience and invites them to think for themselves and to discuss. It openly argues for the case of anarchy.

When looked at from the perspective of cultural studies it embraces yet another fascinating dialogue in that it refers to other texts of culture on almost every page. With all the carefully selected posters and books presented in the background of the scenes, with all the direct citations and subtle allusions, *V for Vendetta* is so dense with intertextuality that one can have an impression that most prominent works of European and British culture, "high" and "low" equally, speak, whisper, shout from the comic book's panels (for example see Moore, Lloyd 2009: p. 12, 68, 241).

V for Vendetta is a very good example of an open, discursive text of culture that is at the same time a conscious act of political communication. Unless read as a simple thriller about power, harm and revenge (which is also possible), it is no less than a mature, well designed ideological treatise, only written in a little less traditional way. For the reasons mentioned in the beginning of the article, a graphic novel treatise can have immense impact on wide audiences (see Kohns 2013).

Comic books "have an almost magical way of catching and keeping the reader's attention" (Strömberg 2010: p. 9). They are extremely powerful as messages on any subject, which is a relatively poorly studied phenomenon calling for in-depth research by psychologists, neurologists and communication experts. No wonder then that they are very efficient means of political communication too. Like with any other tools in the history of mankind, they are axiologically neutral as such and can be employed for any purpose chosen by the author.

As illustrated by the examples analysed above, it means that, when politics or social problems are the subject, comics can either support or subvert a given *status quo*. They

can confirm the dominating values, conserve and strengthen them or they can inspire opposition by offering alternatives to the mainstream way of thinking. The important thing is that they need to be treated seriously as they have a potential to be just as meaningful as more traditional political manifestos.

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