

*You Must Knit It so that It Does Not Unravel*

- Bohdan Butenko

***A BOOK IS MADE LIKE A SWEATER: BOHDAN BUTENKO  
AND THE YOUNG GENERATION OF POLISH COMIC STRIP AUTHORS***

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The project *A Book is Made like a Sweater: Bohdan Butenko and the Young Generation of Polish Comic Strip Authors* presents video-books about selected publications by contemporary Polish artists who work through the medium of popular comics. It is only in recent years that cultural institutions have taken on board the medium of the comic as an artistic currency. Contemporary Polish visual artists have developed a taste for expanding the concept of the comic to create graphic stories, whilst employing the traditions of the Polish school of illustration. The doyen of the genre was no doubt Bohdan Butenko – now sadly missed, having passed away last year – on whose legacy the new generations of sequential art practitioners draw. Bohdan Butenko achieves what, for Scott McCloud, is the essence of a successful comic: reaching a higher level of awareness through interplay of images and text. But Bohdan Butenko, a widely acclaimed illustrator of children's books, was also – unbeknownst to many – an interdisciplinary artist. His works included animations, stage sets – such as those for *Kabaret Starszych Panów* (The Elderly Gentlemen's Cabaret), as well as graphic design publications for other age groups. But it was the comic that successive generations of readers have come to associate with Bohdan Butenko. The best known 'Butencomics' are the serials *Gucio and Cezar*, *Gapiszon and Kwapiszon*, and have been reprinted many times. The artist, who signed off his works with a conventional mediaeval phrase used by artists such as da Vinci: 'Butenko Pinxit' (painted by Butenko)– thus, in a tongue-in-cheek manner placing himself in a long line of a venerable artistic tradition – had an entire repository of trademark graphic signs that he customarily used. These were stylisations of childlike, faux-crude drawings of faces, angular or schematic silhouettes, arrows, and comic-style speech bubbles, complete with clumsy handwriting and crossings-out. Butenko's graphics are characteristically direct in their interpretation of the text, employing thought short-cuts and pure nonsensical humour. Besides his trademark black line drawings, some of the devices that Butenko favoured were the use of collage, self-quotations, and illustrations that interfered physically with the text. Despite the fact that Butenko's perfectly executed publications have more in common with the contemporary artistic book than a traditional comic strip, he did not perceive himself as a contemporary artist.

What, then, does Butenko have in common with artists younger by several generations, who are identified with the field of contemporary art rather than the comic book? Certainly the answer lies in the timeless quality of his aesthetics – especially in the publications from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s – as well as his very ‘contemporary’ approach to graphic solutions, combined with his surrealist sense of humour. In the online exhibition *A Book Is Made like a Sweater*, the artists prove that there is no end to what can inspire a graphic story – from dreams to everyday mundanity and indeed the void itself. What matters is the concept that triggers a book. This was the case with Butenko’s comic series *Kwapiszon*, produced on commission for the publisher Nasza Księgarnia, in which – throughout the nine volumes of adventures experienced by the high-spirited boy scout, running away from a gang of goon robbers – the real protagonists are the Polish cities in which the action takes place.

Similarly, in the comic book *The Adventures of Nobody* by Mikołaj Tkacz, there is no action as such, there are just empty interiors through which the artist leads the readers, making them, willy-nilly, the protagonists of the book. Characteristically, contemporary artists construct the narrative while paring down the text; it is the images that function as a universal language. This is emphatically the case with Jakub Woynarowski’s *Dead Season*. The literary works of Bruno Schultz were for this artist a pretext for constructing a parallel narrative relying on image. This is a device frequently employed by Butenko, who in his graphic stories would create the language of a visual narrative in parallel to the text. Butenko often employed the technique of collage, using existing images – not unlike the contemporary device of employing recurrent online memes. Butenko’s series *Kwapiszon* – called the ‘first Polish photo-comic’ – provides an interesting example. The artist used black-and-white photographs of Polish cities, taken according to his precise instructions, and he combined them manually with the graphic elements to construct the storyline.

Agnieszka Piksa is another artist who likes to use collage – often in order to ‘quote’ fragments of works familiar from art history, interspersing them with old drawings or photographs from her album collection. Let us note the similarity of her strategies, from those that depend on a literally physical interaction with text – as Butenko so effectively deployed, and with his characteristic sense of humour – to creative forays into combining the visual with the literary. Agnieszka Piksa is aware of the physical attributes of language, such as its rhythm and melody, while she takes an almost scientific approach to decoding symbols of language, which for Scott McCloud, is the highest form of abstraction.

Another feature that the artists have in common is their architectural approach to the process of designing a book, which inspired the title of the exhibition, taken from a droll observation by Butenko, rightly considered the 'book architect'. The comic artists of the younger generation have whole-heartedly embraced his holistic approach to producing a book; they create publications that navigate between a picture book and a traditional comic. Butenko succeeded in paying meticulous attention to each architectural detail of the book – from the cover and the narrative, to the typography, the image and the form – often in the face of negotiating printing shortages and the publishing problems that plagued Poland under communism. The younger artists' attention to detail stems from deliberate artistic decisions, consistently pursued. This means that nothing is *less* important. The format, the paper and the typeface used, the column layout, the cover and the endpaper, and even the colophon and the spine all matter equally. A good example can be found in the books of Alicja Pismenko, who creates an autonomous world, including the language.

In the 1970s, such an approach involved much tedious additional effort pasting each letter in the colophon. That was something that the printing house insisted on, otherwise refusing to take on the printing job! Nevertheless, in Poland at that time, books were printed in runs of many thousands, which helped them achieve mass readership.

The comic has never had a favourable reception in Poland. At the time of Butenko's youth, it was considered too American, that is to say unequivocally bad. Today, comic writers, like book illustrators, with a few exceptions, continue to battle for proper recognition by Polish art critics. Nevertheless, young artists are keen to use the medium and are not afraid to experiment with the form. Paradoxically, there is a good side to such a lack of recognition by the contemporary art world. It has enabled the comic to achieve autonomy and establish independent circulation and publishing.

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