



The Aesthetics and Cultural Influence of Polish Comic Zines from the 1990s on the Domestic Comic Market

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As a result of the economic and political upheavals at the end of the 1980s, the Polish comic market in 1990s was dominated by foreign publishers (TM-Semic and Egmont), who concentrated on American comic series and Francophone albums. This situation made it very difficult for young local comic artists to make their debut. Underground zines became not only a place for their unbridled creativity, but also an appropriate medium for a new generation of artists who were fighting for freedom of expression before the abolition of censorship in April 1990. Over the next decade, due to the photocopy aesthetic and the influences of American comix, they also became a tool for testing the boundaries of visual and textual narration. In addition, the third circle press enabled the next generation of artists to find their niches on the market and steer Polish comic culture in a transnational direction. Nowadays, Polish punk and post-punk comic zines are fascinating documents of the rapid cultural change in Poland and the development of local comic aesthetics and subjects, pointing to the problems of youth and the transformed society of the 1990s in a subversive and creative way.



Intro: Creative Time versus Period of the Great Depression

The political changes initiated in Poland in 1989 and the transition to a capitalist economy meant that comics became an important source of income in the last decade of the 20th century. On the one hand, businessmen were willing to invest in comics because the most popular domestic series, such as *Tytus, Romek i A'Tomek* (published from 1957 to 2021) or *Kajko i Kokosz* (continued from 1972 until 1992), often sold more than million copies of each part between 1970s and 1980s—the period called the Golden Age of Polish Comics. Because of this, publishers considered printing imported comics in Polish to be a good financial strategy (see: Szyłak, Konefał 2023: 60–62). On the other hand, after the collapse of the communist system there was galloping inflation that ate away at publishers' profits, made various ventures unprofitable, and forced potential buyers of cultural goods to carefully count their pennies. No wonder, then, that the “comic nineties” are viewed very differently in Poland today. For some researchers, comic artists and journalists, they are the most creative period in the history of Polish comics (see also: Stańczyk 2022: 121–124). Szymon Holcman, an indefatigable promoter of comics and one of the founders of the publishing house *Kultura Gniewu* (The Culture of Anger), gave a positive opinion of the changes taking place in the market:

In December 2010 in *Kultura Liberalna*, in an article entitled *Where from, where to, where to? – Polish comics after two decades of free market economy*, one could read that the first decade, covering almost the entire 1990s, was an exceptionally intense life of Polish comics in their third or perhaps second edition, says Szymon Holcman. – While the mass readership was provided with books published by TM-Semic, Polish comic artists created mainly for zines (...) and a handful of magazines (...). They met at the Łódź Comics Festival, which mobilised everyone with a competition for a short comic form. The works submitted there now form the canon of contemporary Polish comics and are great examples of the talent of stars such as Przemek Truściński, Krzysztof Gawronkiewicz, Jacek Frańś, Krzysztof Ostrowski and others. I dare say that this was the most creative and diverse period in the history of Polish comics (Szyłak 2017: 158).

For others, such as Tomasz Pstrągowski, comics journalist, researcher and comics scriptwriter, the first decade after political transformation was a “time of great depression” and market collapse:

The 1990s were not good years for Polish comics. With the fall of communism, the state-subsidised publishing houses that printed albums in very large print runs were closed down, often against the logic of the market. No wonder, then, that with

the collapse of the largest publishing houses, interest in illustrated stories also declined in Poland. After all, in the 1990s, a time that Wojciech Orliński [an influential journalist from *Gazeta Wyborcza*, one of the most widely read newspapers of the time] described as a ‘great sadness’, American comics distributed by TM-Semic and immortal series such as *Thorgal* or *Tytus, Romek and A’Tomek* (whose circulation fell from 500,000 copies to 15,000, according to the author himself) were particularly popular (Pstrągowski 2015: 35–36).

The negative assessments of the time stemmed from the fact that smaller, domestic publishers who invested in the publication of comics quickly withdrew because they did not achieve the expected results. With a print run of several hundred thousand copies from the bygone era, publishers expected quick sales and a big income, while albums of local comic stories sold poorly. Part of the blame for this situation can be attributed to the low quality of the published works, which were often poorly translated, selected without proper discernment and printed on cheap paper, DC and Marvel’s American comic book series, published in Poland between 1990 and 2003 by the Polish division of the Swedish company TM-Semic. The new, domestic, inexperienced players did not know how to evaluate comics or what to look for, so they printed local works, mostly focused on the idea of imitating Francophone fantasy and science fiction comics. For example, Jacek Michalski, the author of comics *Zagadka Metropolii* (The Riddle of the Metropolis) or *Roy*, both published at the end of 1989, drew his albums in an original way, trying to express his individual style; however, this style did not meet the expectations of recipients craving a Francophone style or superhero stories. However, even the very well-made Polish works sold poorly. This was the fate of, among others, Jerzy Wróblewski, a legend and veteran of Polish comics, who published twelve comics after 1989, but sadly died prematurely in 1991 at the age of 50. Part of the answer to this situation may lie in the fact that at the time there was no research done on the needs of the market, no advertising, and no publishing policy that promoted certain works and authors (Szyłak 2016: 253–254).

Moreover, Polish albums and series were not up to the task, because at the time, comics imported from the West, such as *Superman*, *Batman* and *Asterix*, were difficult to defeat. For them, publicity came from the celebrity that surrounded them, and the knowledge that they had been published for decades, were very popular in the world, and had been adapted into films. Two new foreign major players that entered the market in 1990 knew how to take advantage of this free advertisement. A Polish offshoot of the Swedish TM-Semic specialised in American superhero series and flooded bookstores with cheap editions of the most popular series from the United States, quickly taking the lead and dominating the domestic market. Another international publisher, Egmont (headquartered in Denmark), established its branch

in Poland in 1990, focusing more on francophone albums and the most valuable Anglo-Saxon series. Luckily, the foreign publisher has sometimes also tried to support Polish authors, thanks to the efforts of Tomasz Kołodziejczak, who was in charge of the publishing programme there until 2023. Unfortunately, most young debutants and local artists did not find suitable printing venues for their works either in these companies or in local publishing houses, so they decided to publish them in underground zines or self-publish. This strategy included some unique approaches to Polish history, culture and the reality of the rapid economic transformation. However, it also continued the aesthetics and subjects related to American counterculture comixes of the 1960s and 1970s. The works of Robert Crumb and other underground artists, due to the censorship politics of the communist authorities were known only to the narrow part of Polish cartoonists from satirical *Szpilki* magazine (see also page 7) and the committed readers of this magazine. The subversive spirit of *Szpilki* quickly became viral/memetic and had influenced successive generations of comic creators.

PART ONE: Third Circuit of Publishing and some Delayed Trends in Polish (Counter)culture

Of Punks, Censors and Xerox Machines

At this point, it should be noted that Poland had a long tradition of underground press in the 1970s and 1980s. In domestic academic research, three important terms are used to describe the publishing market in the Polish People's Republic: *the first, second, and third circuits of publishing*. *The first circuit* includes the official books and press, which were strictly controlled and censored by the communist government. *The second circuit* consisted of illegally printed books that presented issues opposed to the propaganda of the political leadership. Comic zines exemplify *the third circuit*, which was closely associated with the counterculture artists and attacked both the legal and *second circuit* texts of the culture (Flont 2017: 250–251).

This form of artistic expression was at first hardly noticed in Poland or even openly disregarded as an amateurish and worthless activity. Dominik Szcześniak, a big fan of underground culture, the editor of *Ziniol* comic zine and an inquisitive researcher, wrote that:

The history of comic zines [in Poland] dates to the appearance of the photocopier, which allowed an inexperienced artist to write on paper, reproduce what he had written, and show it to his friends. The first comic zines were associated with the punk milieu. Researchers unanimously mention three titles here: *Zakazany Owoc* (The Forbidden Fruit) by Dariusz 'Pała' Palinowski (founded in 1989), *Prosiacek*

by Krzysztof 'Prosiak' (Piglet) Owedyk (founded in 1990) and *Inny Komix* (Another Comix), which was created from 1991. *Zakazany Owoc*, the last eight-page issue of which appeared in 1995, has been reprinted several times (published by Kultura Gniewu), as has *Prosiacek*. *Inny Komix* has been somewhat forgotten, but all three titles form the basis of Polish underground comics (Szyłak 2016: 256).

In fact, the history of comic zines begins earlier, as the first editors in Poland were punks and sci-fi/fantasy fans who published their magazines independently in the early 1980s. The first monthly science fiction and fantasy magazine officially approved by the Polish authorities, was called *Fantastyka*. It was launched in October 1982. The magazine published fragments of Polish and sometimes foreign mainstream comics created by artists who gained popularity in 1970s, such as Grzegorz Rosiński (first issue of *Hans* series, with a script of André-Paul Duchâteau, was published in *Fantastyka* in 1986 as *Yans*), but it was extremely difficult for young Polish artists to get through the editorial selection, especially if they tried to present an underground style and some radical themes.

Moreover, it is significant to indicate that some youth subcultures such as punk or reggae fans (as well as zines) emerged in Poland over a decade later than their Western counterparts. For example, the first wave of punk interests appeared in Poland in the early 1980s, while in the United States and the United Kingdom they appeared in the 1970s (Sabin 1999: 2–5). In her monograph *Transnational Punk Communities in Poland*, Marta Marciniak indicates some similarities and differences between punk subculture in Anglo-Saxon countries and Poland:

Punk was born in the moonscape of the collapsing great American cities, and perhaps that is why it was so easily and immediately translatable onto English and then Central European ground – because London and Warsaw have gone through their own deaths, destructions, and rebirths. Punk was a response to the failure of consumer capitalism, but it was also an inspiration for those boxed in the stuffy rooms of people's republics, governed by censorship, propaganda, and central planning. [...] It is important to note especially two things: first, the fact that punk predated the formation of Solidarity, the force that became known around the world as the face of political opposition in the People's Republic of Poland, by roughly three years. The political landscape of the years 1976–1977, at the end of which the first punks appeared on the streets of Poland [...] In this way, [...] punk in Poland was “allowed” to develop to a much greater extent than in neighbouring “brotherly” countries of the Warsaw Pact because, as the argument goes, the Polish comrades had more pressing problems to attend to than the pursuit of kids in mohawks.

The living conditions in Poland in the 1980s looked “catastrophic” not only when compared to Western countries, but also its Soviet bloc neighbours, the GDR and Czechoslovakia. Neither the people nor the government could have any illusions about that. In addition, Poland was affected by a huge wave of emigration. According to data from 1980–1987, more than five hundred thousand people left. [...] Because it came from the West, punk was suspected to be secretly connected with the conspiratorial activities of the political opposition, led by Solidarity. But in the majority of investigations of “punk crews all across Poland, the security service and the militia concluded that punks were not engaged in any explicit political activity. What is more, punks in Poland, unlike those in the GDR, were totally useless as informers” (Marciniak 2015: xxvii, 6–7).

Polish comic artists adopted the habit of using nicknames from the punk zines and American underground comix, as well as sometimes semi-autobiographical elements of the plots, which in the domestic version focused on the difficult economic situation in Poland, intolerance and subculture wars. Artists’ favourite music was sometimes referred to in footnotes, panels (with recommendations for specific songs and bands to listen to while reading the comics) or in dialogues. In the comic series by Krzysztof Owedyk from the punk zine *Pasażer* entitled *Blixa i Żorzeta*, for example, two main characters travel to the Bieszczady Mountains where they interview some members of a local punk band called *Trepanacja* (Trepanation). Not only do they wear T-shirts with the logos of real Polish punk groups (Moskwa, KSU) and discuss catchy names for punk bands inspired by the Scottish group *Exploited* (they suggest that the name should contain many of the letter A, which can be transformed into an anarchy logo), but they also discover that one of the imaginary examples actually performs in the Polish punk scene [See: **Figure 1**].

In another comic album by Owedyk entitled *Ósma czara*, at the end of the story, in a special footnote, there is a soundtrack list. The author mentions that he could not attach the cassette to his album, but he recommends performing some songs by the British band *Coil* during the lecture, as well as the entire work *Peer Gynt* by Edward Grieg. Furthermore, this strategy is also continued in strips from magazines not associated with the punk subculture. The grotesque, darkly humorous stories about the little town of *Mikropolis* by Krzysztof Gawronkiewicz and Dennis Wojda, for example, contain many footnotes to New Wave and Gothic songs by bands such as *The Cure*, *Einstürzende Neubauten* or artists such as *Nick Cave*. In fact, one of the comic stories from this series entitled *Krzeseł w piekle* (A chair in hell) even refers in its title to the song *Ein Stuhl in der Hölle* from 1989 by the German band *Einstürzende Neubauten*.



Figure 1: Owedyk, K 1999 *Blixa i Żorzeta*, p. 24. Prosiacek Publishing © Krzysztof Owedyk.

Alternative music was seen in Eastern Europe as a personal and political strategy of resistance to the official culture controlled by communist censorship. At the same time, however, subcultures were tolerated by the authorities thanks to their permanent surveillance, with the assumption that controlled rebellion was better than a complete ban on youth independence movements. The defining event for some of the first Polish zines' authors was a music festival organised in Jarocin in the 1980s. Even though it was monitored by the communist authorities to surveil the youth subcultures, in many ways it shaped the whole generation of artists. Even today many well-known Polish poets and writers connected with the literary magazine *bruLion* (published between 1987 and 1999) identify their roots with Jarocin and alternative music influences:

This experience seems to be common to the generation of the Jarocin Festival. Writers and poets who grew up in the shadow of “martial law”, and who were generally not old enough to participate actively and significantly in this political event, compensate for this lack with an alternative. Punk became a reaction to the communist drivel, the media kitsch (...). The perusal of records, cassettes, or playlists gave an idea of the time, but also made it possible to determine one’s identity, musical tastes, and receptivity to certain feelings. Finally, music collections were used to evaluate others. On the other hand, they gave an impression of the material culture of that time. The market at that time was very selective, new products released in the West reached Poland with some delay, others were not released at all, so consumers were forced to look for substitutes in the form of cassettes, mostly pirated (Regiewicz 2020: 73–74).

In contrast to literary magazines, comic zines from this period may be considered as a medium of self-expression and fun, but also contained some satirical content with serious social critique. In these cases, however, it was often a matter of crossing the boundaries of parody as a work aimed at another text of culture, and the emergence of a new quality: the construction of an image of the world subject to certain laws or rules, the creation of non-schematic heroes, the extraction of an additional meaning from the story. Moreover, the aesthetics of many Polish comic zines reminds one of techniques used in avant-garde manifestos and by the underground press such as collage, indicating of material structure of cheap paper, photocopier print and amateur drawing tools, as well as quoting different fragments of philosophical texts or artistic and political pamphlets, especially connected with the popularisation of anarchism. For example, one of the most popular Polish anarcho-punk zines called *Chaos w mojej głowie* (The Chaos in my Head), published between 1997 and 2019, often used collages and texts as well as different relations to the comic art. In her research on different styles of journalism in this zine, Oliwia Kopcik from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków regards underground magazines on comics as artzines and punk publications as fanzines:

Artzines are magazines that deal with art in the broadest sense. They offer an alternative to the art fashions propagated in the mainstream press. This type is most often reminiscent of the Dadaist magazines of the twentieth century, not least because of the use of techniques such as collage and photomontage by their makers. Comic zines also fall into this group (Kopcik 2019: 23)

Kopcik rightly indicates that comics strips often served a role of artistic links between different essays, concert reports and subcultural polemics, allowing the graphic editors (who were sometimes also comic artists, as *spiritus movents* of *Chaos w mojej głowie* Paweł 'Pablo' Prystup) to enrich anarcho-punk aesthetics of pages:

Comic zines appear in most issues of the magazine, but they are not linked by a character or a plot. They also differ in graphic style and scope. In issue 17, the comics were a "cross-over" between the reviews in the "What's the Noise?" section. This was a three-part series, but they were not thematically linked. An interesting approach was taken in issue 14, where the author used full-page graphics instead of the traditional picture sequences. The speech bubbles did not appear there either – instead, the cartoonist added descriptions above or below the graphics (Kopcik 2019: 33).

It is noteworthy that Polish interest in zines and underground aesthetics also seems to lag behind the transnational comic development of the time, especially when we consider the American editorial and creative work of Robert Crumb in "Zap! Comix" magazine. The artworks of this American underground legend were presented in most popular satirical journal called *Szpilki* thanks to Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz, the main editor of this journal and a tireless populariser of the art of comics in communist Poland. Toeplitz, the author of first monographs on comics (see: Konefał, Szyłak 2002: 59), was also a politician who wisely used some of Crumb's strips to indicate the criticism of imperial America in his comixes. Such a strategy allowed him both to avoid censorship and promote beloved art. Certainly, the new generation of punk artists did not care about propaganda usage of underground strips stripes, focusing mainly on their subversive style and sharp, social criticism. They shared with some American comix artists, though, the same critical view of social reality, the anti-aestheticism of the line, a brutal humour that did not shy away from obscenities and was often indecent and touched on taboo subjects. Sometimes this was the result of the zines' creators' lack of mastery of drawing techniques, but sometimes it was a deliberate choice of style that ran counter to the poetics of mainstream comics. To divide their underground works from comics inspired by Western sci-fi, fantasy and horror genres they often used the English word *comix* that even today doesn't sound Polish.

The Polish Comic Zine Pioneers from the late 1980s and the 1990s

The cultural delay towards transnational comic culture was not always coherent with some artistic inspirations. For example, Gdańsk, the city of the *Solidarność* (Solidarity) movement, with its famous alternative theatre, jazz tradition and underground culture

movements (such as Totart), was the hometown of one of the first artistic zines that might include comic strips. It was called *Nietoperz* (The Bat):

Founded by sixteen-year-old Gdansk residents, it can be considered the first Polish zine of the third circulation, the first issue of which appeared in November 1978. Janusz 'Jany' Waluszko, one of the creators of *Nietoperz*, recalls: the magazine was "satirical and pictorial, we were big fans of comics and cabarets [...] there were 2–3 copies (...). As a result of the intervention of the security service, not a single issue of *Nietoperz* survived" (Flont 2017: 252).

Gdańsk and Gdynia were the birthplaces of one of the first underground comics. It was called *Wampiurs Wars* and it was created by a student at the University of Gdansk, Jan Plata-Przechlewski in 1981. His comics gained greater popularity a few years later when they appeared in larger editions in various zines published by the Gdański Klub Fantastyki (Gdańsk Sci Fi, Fantasy and Horror Fanclub) and were later brought together in the collectible magazine *Czerwony Karzeł* (Red Dwarf). The first volume contained 20 pages and was titled *Na tropie wampiurów* (In the Footsteps of the Vampiurus). It was published in 1985. The size of 20 pages (including the cover) resulted from censorship restrictions. Paradoxically, the independent press was not taken seriously by the censors if it did not exceed 16 pages (Szyłak 2016: 257).

Plata-Przechlewski's works are about schematism and the use of unprofessional tools (the first part was drawn with a ballpoint pen). The author's memoirs vividly demonstrate that his early way of drawing was not only a matter of artistic choice, but also a sad reality of Polish artists:

Perła (The Pearl) ink was a lumpy slime, and the technical block was no longer a relatively smooth Bristol plate, but (another "advance" of real socialism!) had a rough surface and behaved more like a paper ink dryer (it soaked up the ink and smeared it). (Plata-Przechlewski 2023: 6)

A few years later, when the author began to work on the construction of the never-completed nuclear power plant Żarnowiec, his tools became more professional, and his artistic style was also evaluated:

One day, the engineer in charge of our department persuaded the management (foreign exchange purchase!) to buy a box of three Rotring rapidographs (0.5 0.3 0.2) together with a supply of branded ink. I had the worst opinion

about Polish rapidographs. However, when I picked up the branded devices, I was shocked: they drew like a pen, and the effect was wonderful! If you look closely, you'll notice a slight change in the lines somewhere in the first half of *Attack of Horror*: the lines become even, uniform, with certain thicknesses (Plata-Przechlewski 2023: 6).

The pages of *Wampiurs Wars* usually contain three to nine panels with speech bubbles; however, they often also have a large text section referring to satirical monologues of the main characters and the political situation in Poland, as well as including visual and textual quotations from transnational iconic science fiction, fantasy and horror films, novels and comics. These comics definitely have the character of a parody, but the storytelling crosses its borders, adding the layers of pastiche and social criticism, which Adam Rusek, the author of *Encyclopaedia of Polish Heroes and Comic Series* rightly indicates:

The world presented in this “psychopathic tale” is carelessly drawn deliberately, bristling with dwarfism and ugliness, and the indeterminate country in which the action takes place is somewhat reminiscent of the People’s Republic of Poland. Numerous literary allusions (...) and a vocabulary brimming with obscenity complete the picture of the work, which is probably the first truly underground national work of this genre. At the same time, it is a well-told story. The whole series (...) is a perverse game with the reader. Gossipy heroes, equipped with a large number of bottles and Polish national characteristics, break all the rules of comics. References to George Lucas’ *Star Wars* epic film, John R.R. Tolkien’s trilogy or mockingly quoted formulas of popular literature are mixed here with clear allusions to Polish reality (Rusek 2010: 246).

For example, one of the Plata’s strips begins with clear visual references to the *Star Wars* series (which can be seen in a logo in **Figure 2**), (a lone spaceship and a cosmic void) and both music and conspiracy theories (the rocket will land on the dark side of the moon). The dialogues presented in speech bubbles, though, ironically deconstruct the epic style of these cultural texts, using vulgar language and absurd names (Yogguth), as well as an intertitle in the bottom left corner of the page *Epopeja Idiocia*, which can be translated as *The Idiot Epos*. All these bizarre contrasts only make sense in the following pages, when we see how the main character struggles with life on the alien planet, which clearly resembles the chaotic life during the first decade of democratic transformation in Poland.

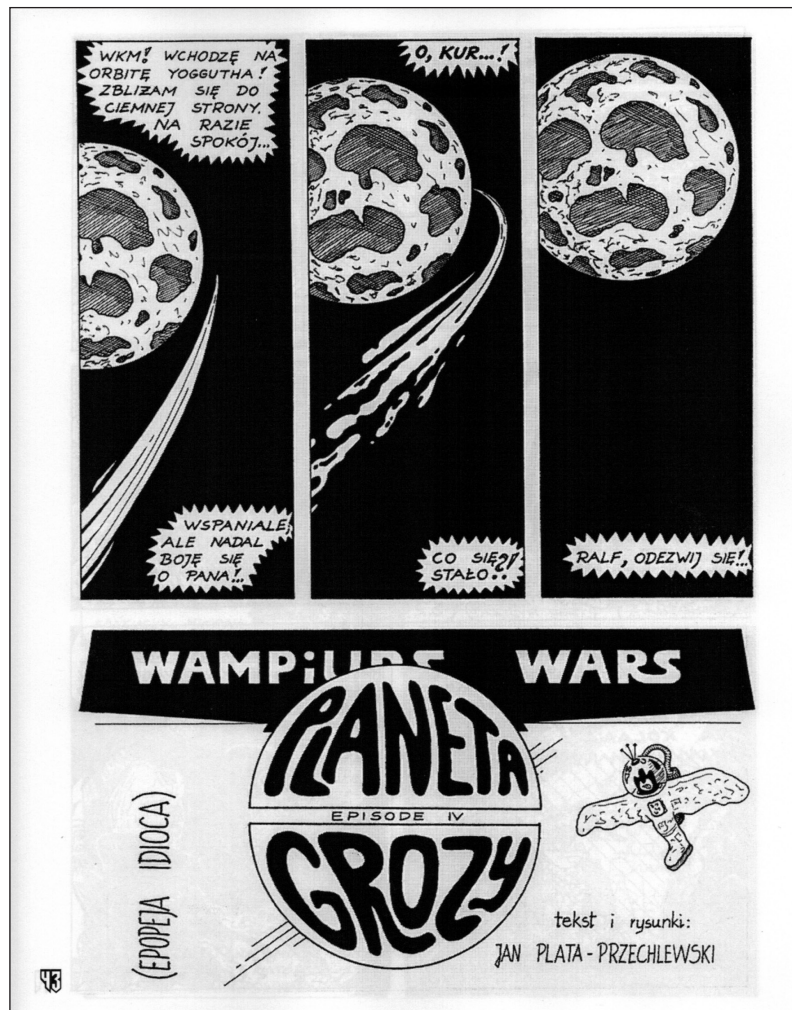


Figure 2: The parody of *Star Wars* logo and intertextual quotes to the landing on the Dark Side of the Moon in: Plata-Przechlewski, J 2021 *Wampiurs Wars*, p. 43. Koluszki: Wydawnictwo Kurc.

All these attributes quickly made Plata-Przechlewski's work become popular among Polish fandoms. *Wampiurs Wars* (published in 2021 in the integral edition by Kurc) ironically made use of a fantasy and horror genre, which can be attributed to the boom of fan culture in the late 1980s and 1990s in Poland (see: Pindel 2019). It was the time in Poland when the first stories from Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Witcher* appeared in *Fantastyka* magazine (which set the trend for both domestic literature and comics), VHS movies and pirated music tapes had a belated second life, and computers entered homes and schools (Sitarski, Garda, Jajko 2020: 31–32, 131–134). All these socio-cultural phenomena contributed significantly to the activation of a new generation of comic artists, often coming from punk circles, but also highly interested in the sci-fi, fantasy and horror genres, who at the end of 20th century will create and publish the

second generation of comic zines and magazines (see: second part of this research). The first decade of democratic Poland, though, was dominated by the comic zines artist who focused their interest mainly on punk aesthetics and themes.

One of them is Dariusz Palinowski, who has achieved cult status in the Polish underground comics fan community. Palinowski, better known as 'Pała' (a nickname that can be loosely translated as the Jerk, the Dork or the Chump), is another creator from the hardcore and punk underground. He is an activist who was associated with the Anarchist International in the 1980s. His best-known comics are called *Zakazany Owoc* [The Forbidden Fruit] and are based on a series of short stories from zines that their author published independently. Palinowski's drawings are drawn in a simple, childlike style with thin lines, often with empty backgrounds and many grotesque



Figure 3: The first issue of *Zakazany owoc* by Dariusz Palinowski.

Palinowski, D 2010 *Zakazany Owoc i Bracia Kowalscy w jednym*. Warszawa: Kultura Gniewu
© Dariusz Palinowski and Kultura Gniewu.

elements. The faces of the Kowalski brothers from the series *Niezwykłe Przygody Braci Kowalskich* (The Amazing Adventures of the Kowalski Brothers), for example, which are round but cut off in the middle, are reminiscent of some of the antiheroes from the animated series *South Park*, but they were created before Trey Parker and Matt Stone started their popular series. Most of his stories reveal the influences of American underground press comics. They have large, eye-catching titles, commentary quotes related to the zine's price and the size of its circulation. Their mini plots are often organised on one page, sometimes omitting the textual narrative, but mostly using it to destabilise the visual harmony of the panels and denote subversive messages and vulgar dialogues.

On the cover of the first issue of *Forbidden Fruit*, which can be seen in **Figure 3**, you may recognise direct references to American underground comics in the graphic motif hidden in the upper right corner under the title, which combines shapes and letters that can be deciphered as a noun *comix*. The counterculture's disregard for the value of money is expressed in the top right-hand corner of the cover, where Palinowski has added the handwritten English text "pay no more than 100 000 zł", indicating an absurd price equivalent to five months' salary in 1989, the year the zine was published. The difficult economic situation and rapid cultural changes following the transition to capitalism can also be found in two parodies of newspaper advertisements. The first, at the bottom left, plays with the meaning of the Polish adjective *ciężki*, which can mean both the English words *hard* and *heavy*, and represents the equivalent of skinheads' Doc Martens boots, which weigh ten kilos. The second joke, which uses both linguistic and visual allusions, is placed below the price and shows the head of a "real punk who should have a belt on his head", making fun of the Polish slang, where the noun *pasek* could be translated with the English terms *stripe* and *belt*. The title page also contains a vulgar introduction in which Palinowski threatens readers not to give his zine to the local scout formation called *harcerze* (spelled here with an ironic misspelling at the beginning of the term).

The grotesque drawings with gel pen, which can be seen in **Figure 3**, are based on strong black and white contrasts and conceal some subcultural symbols such as the anarchy A symbol or names of well-known punk bands: D.O.A. and Ear Damage. Due to their disharmonious arrangement, the comic panels appear to be parts of a collage from another issue, which is a further reference to the aesthetics of zines. The comic panels also focus on *Forbidden Fruit's* subversive and ironic advertising. The upper three panels depict a punk concert and a dialogue where one speaker claims not regretting to omit "the gig" because they had read Palinowski's comics. Down on the left you see a shocking scene of skinhead strangling an African man who is supposed to

be hiding the issue of Pała's comics, and a punk asking his mother where his favourite zine is (the mother replies that it could be eaten by her husband, which is another linguistic joke, this time referring to the title of the zine). Another shocking statement comes from a comic panel with a television screen where a woman claims in a speech bubble to have been raped by a skinhead with a swastika tattooed on his forehead.

Palinowski comments in a brutal and grotesque way on some of the weaknesses of Polish society, such as intolerance towards the Other and the bigotry of the Catholic church. For example, his characters shock the jury and the participants of the Miss Polonia competition with the punky transgender candidacy of one of the Kowalski brothers. Palinowski also criticises the fascination with the American colonisation of culture when his anti-heroes plant a bomb in a McDonald's restaurant; the corporation appeared in Poland in the 1990s and was treated by punk subculture as one of the symbols of evil Western capitalism. Today, Pała's short stories can be seen both as a living archive of the counter-cultural wars between punks, skinheads and militias, as well as a quasi-documentary description of many hardships during the period of Poland's political and economic transformation.

Sadly, despite his legendary status, Dariusz Palinowski is not as well known among younger comic fans as other authors who started their careers in underground zines, such as Ryszard Dąbrowski or Michał Śledziński. The lack of wider recognition of Palinowski's works may have to do with the fact that he stayed true to punk ideals and did not create any mainstream albums. Despite this lack of recognition, he became the main character of the documentary film *Zakazany owoc nr 6* (The Forbidden Fruit nr 6, 2011), directed by Piotr Buratyński, Michał Kowalski, and Dawid Śmigielski, known also as Le Kolektiff Negatif. Nowadays, his original strips can be bought on the websites of Polish auction houses, which suggests that he has in some way joined the domestic mainstream of comic art and is making money from his legacy. Palinowski, though, has lately refused to talk to journalists or academics and does not contact the publishers of his anthologies, which could be a sign of his final departure from zines, comics and the punk subculture.

Faith, Subcultures and Ideologies: The Comics of Krzysztof Owedyk and Ryszard Dąbrowski

Another comic artist closely associated with the punk movement is Krzysztof Owedyk, who used the nickname 'Prosiak' (The Piglet) in the 1990s. In the same manner as Palinowski, in his zines Owedyk attacked not only the opponents of punks, but also the Catholic Church, strictly cooperating with new government. Strangely, these black and white stories were full of deep reflections on religion and faith, which was

not a very popular narrative strategy in either Polish comics or punk underground zines of the 1980s and 1990s. One of The Piglet's popular strip series is called *Blixa and Żorzeta*. It is a comic story that is mainly about two characters—22-year-old Blixa (who is a punk) and his girlfriend Żorzeta, a student at the university (neither name is common in Poland, and they sound more like nicknames). Like most of Palinowski's works, Owedyk's stories mostly focus on short (sometimes as short as three frames) plots about the everyday life of punks and their friends. Here, too, the graphic design corresponds to the satirical comics of the underground press, but they are more orderly with clear white (or sometimes black) backgrounds, classic speech bubbles and onomatopoeia. Nevertheless, the underground style is still clearly recognisable in some artistic approaches such as the addition of some ironic comments in typewriter font or an indication of signs and logos associated with subcultures, like the anarchy A sign or skinhead's Celtic cross. Many panels also include presentations of concerts, band posters and T-shirts with punk groups names. At the end of his comic zine, you may also find the parody of advertisements promoting punk T-shirts and Owedyk's comics, which can be seen in **Figure 4**.

Owedyk draws much more efficiently than Jan Plata-Przechlewski and Palinowski, paying more attention to handling chiaroscuro and filling the background with details. It is important to point out that in all these cases analysed, the underground style is largely a matter of deliberate choice and not a lack of skill. For example, a trained eye will recognise various borrowings in the Piglet's latest cartoons not only from Polish and foreign comics, but also from the history of art and literature, for example, The Bible, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* or classical slapstick comedies. In his stories, there is a clear distortion and subordination of the plot to ideological considerations. Owedyk showcased his artistic talents in his magnum opus of the 1990s—the iconic underground comic album *Ósma czara* (The Eighth Chalice), released in 1994. He not only wrote the script and drew the pictures, but also self-published the album. The original story revolved around the main character's post-apocalyptic search for his girlfriend, who was damned by God and sent to hell.

Prosiak eloquently combined biblical themes with science fiction in this album, making an interesting contribution to postmodern discussions about the role of religion in life and the erosion of Christian symbolism in pop culture, which can also be found in Anglo-Saxon mainstream comic series such as *Hellboy* or *Hellblazer*. The absence of the punk nickname Prosiak on the cover of the book and the more realistic style and thoughtful themes might suggest that the author planned to join the mainstream. Nonetheless, some of his later characters, like Ratboy, were still associated with music subcultures. Today, the original edition of Owedyk's 1994 album is a coveted purchase for collectors.

**DOM MODY NIEKONWENCYJNALNEJ
"LE PROSIAQUE" OFERUJE PAŃSTWU**

KOSZULKI

KOLORY ARTYSTYCZNE FARBOWANIE ESTETYKA NIEPOTARZALNOŚĆ!

Muzyka (hc, punk, industrial, awangarda),
antyklerykalizm, antyfasyzm, antimilitaryzm,
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Z KLIMATYZACYJNĄ POWŁOKĄ

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Czar uwodzenia
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Z EFEKTYWNYM WYCIECIEM, POD SZYJĄ!

128 WZORÓW

W OFERCIE POSIADAMY RÓWNIEŻ CUDY WYDAWNICTWA 'PROSIAK PUBLISHING' (KOMIKSY, GRAFIKI, WERSZE). CZUWAMY CAŁY ROK!
PODESŁYJ KOPERTĘ A5 + ZNACZEK, A OTRZYMASZ BOGATO ILUSTROWANY KATALOG

Krzysztof Owedyk
Chmielowice, ul. Zielona 3
46-070 KOMPRACHCICE

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Figure 4: Owedyk, K 1999 *Blixa i Żorzeta*, p. 31. Prosiacek Publishing © Krzysztof Owedyk.

In 2016, Owedyk once again focuses on counterculture and music with the graphic novel *Będziesz smażyć się w Piekło* (You Will Burn in Hell, 2016), loosely inspired by the phenomenon of the international careers of Polish bands Vader and Behemoth. This album received many comic awards in Poland. It is important to indicate that Owedyk's two 'post-punk' graphic novels exhibit a completely different style. *Ósma czara* is drawn with densely dotted, realistic black-and-white images that are somewhat reminiscent of Francophone science fiction comics and the works of Grzegorz Rosiński, a Polish artist who emigrated to Belgium and created the *Thorgal* series there. The drawings in *You Will Burn in Hell* are more cartoonish, a bit like other modern foreign graphic novels about music such as *Die Band* by Mawil (Markus Witzel, 2004) or *The Garage Band* by Gipi (Gianni Pacinotti, 2005), linking influences of manga aesthetics and Francophone style. In addition, all these comics focus on the friendship between the musicians at the beginning of their careers and operate with a quirky sense of humour.

In 2017 the rights to the movie adaptation of Owedyk's latest album were sold to Polish film producers. The unique status of Prosiak's artwork was also honoured by the fact that the publisher Kultura Gniewu printed some of his most interesting stories from 1990 to 2020 in an omnibus album in 2020. Unfortunately, Owedyk still is not widely known among younger Polish comic fans often called the generation of TM-Semic, a term indicating their interest mainly on American superhero culture.

Probably the most politically radical artist of Polish underground comic zine culture is Ryszard Dąbrowski. In Poland, he is known for his satirical cartoons for magazines and the controversial newspaper *NIE* (NOT), which shocked Polish society in the 1990s under the leadership of former communist propaganda expert Jerzy Urban. Dąbrowski is an art school graduate who began his career with images for punk zines in the late 1980s and *Lagazeta* writings of the Lublin Anarchists, later known as LAGA – Lublin Autonomous Group of Anarchists. *Likwidator* was his comic book debut. It was first published in 1995 as a 16-page zine issue under the aegis of Lagart. His character is a fanatical eco-anarchist fighter who kills all “enemies of the environment”. Such an attitude concerns not only skinheads, militiamen and priests (from the early stories), but also well-known Polish politicians and celebrities. Sometimes *Likwidator* travels through time to help anarchists in important historical events. For example, he joins the Makhnovshchina (also known as the “Makhno movement”) in Ukraine, where he joins the Ukrainian peasantry in 1920 and fights to establish anarchist communism in the country. In another album he travels to Spain in 1973, where again in the name of anarchy he kills and opposes the fascist forces of General Franco. Dąbrowski's graphic style develops entirely in line with the themes he deals with in his strips and full comic albums. Starting from local subculture wars, his character gradually gets involved more into the fight with the world of Polish politics and some global issues connected with ecology. The first short stories from the 1990s resemble the awkward black-and-white drawings by Palinowski (his protagonist even meets the Kowalski brothers from Pała's comics in one of the early strips, which can be seen in **Figure 5**). They are drawn without sophisticated backgrounds and with the heavily satirical faces of the *Likwidator* antagonists emphasising human ugliness. Newer artwork is more carefully designed. *Likwidator* wears black punk boots, a black uniform and a black motor helmet with a huge painted smile recalling the mask known from Spider Man's Venom. The particularly colourful covers of all the albums remind the reader that their author is an experienced cartoonist who has been publishing his works about politicians in the press for many years. Despite these mainstream press connotations, the visual organisation of panels in the *Likwidator* stories is often disturbed by the large amount of text since their antihero loves long monologues linked to ecocriticism, the history of anarchism

and counterculture (quoting Marx and Marcuse but avoiding Mao). Dąbrowski uses pure black and white contrasts to highlight the unyielding character of his antihero. He also likes vulgar eroticism drawn in a style resembling Robert Crumb's artwork. The male characters are often skinny and small (especially when they represent domestic politicians), while women are sometimes presented from a misogynistic perspective, which can be seen in Figure 5.



Figure 5: Likwidator meets Kowalski brothers.

Dąbrowski, R 2001 *Likwidator: Trylogia*, p.57 Warszawa: Kultura Gniewu © Ryszard Dąbrowski and Kultura Gniewu.

His works not only continue to shock readers, journalists and critics, but also once divided Polish scholars. Dariusz Czubaj finds similarities in the ultra-violent stories about Likwidator to the works of Quentin Tarantino (Czubaj 2007: 118–119). The

Polish researcher also draws attention to this character's countercultural inspirations from 1960s American comix and motorcycle subcultures. This may, however, be an overinterpretation, because apart from riding a motorcycle and wearing a leather jacket and helmet he follows quite different ideological aims than, for example, American Hell's Angels, focusing on activities connected mainly with ecoterrorism. Other academics mainly accuse his comics of unjustified vulgarity and kitschy violence (Kochanowski, Stasiewicz 2013: 71).

The strange case of Dąbrowski's anti-hero worried some representatives of the Polish government. This is probably why *Likwidator* was included in the special report for the Polish Ministry of Justice dealing with prejudice and discrimination against Christians where Dąbrowski's comics are portrayed as a threat to Polish culture, together with the anticlerical characters from Krzysztof Prosiak Owedyk's comics and Frank Miller's *Sin City* series (Lisiecka 2021: 12–14). The influence of Dąbrowski's antihero for domestic comic culture was awarded by a two-volume tribute anthology called *Likwidator Alternative*, published in black and white by Zin Zin Press and in colour by Timof i Cisi Wspólnicy in 2007, where most known Polish artist presented their stories about this beloved Polish underground comic character. Drawn in different styles domestic anti-hero fights here not only politicians but also space invaders, yuppies and other surreal characters.

The works of Dąbrowski and Owedyk were also published in another popular magazine AQQ, headed by Witold Tkaczyk. In the early 1990s, it was the only magazine that informed about what was happening in the world of Polish comics. It was published from 1993, officially distributed from 1995 and ceased publication in 2004. More details on influences of AQQ and Tkaczyk on the Polish independent comics market will be presented in the second part of this essay.

Other photocopied publications had a shorter lifespan but were the places where many important authors from the beginning of the 21st century made their debuts. For example, Michał Śledziński started to present his artworks in the fanzine *Azbest* (The Asbestos), Tomasz Leśniak and Rafał Skarżycki cooperated with *Mięso* (Meat), Mateusz Skutnik co-created *Vormkfasa*, Dominik Szcześniak edited *Ziniol*, Rafał Szłapa published in *Lekarstwo* (Medicine), many works of Marek Turek appeared in various fanzines etc. Mateusz Zapała in his research on the domestic comic market indicates that:

The share of the “underground” in the Polish comics market in the 1990s was huge. According to calculations [...] based on the bibliography of zines and *Anthology of Zines between 1989 and 2001* by Dariusz Ciosmak, in the last decade of the 20th

century, about 20 percent of zines published in Poland (over 200 known titles) published comics. Some of them focused only on picture stories (Zapała 2013: 213).

However, from all these zines only one played a special role in the transformation of the Polish comic underground to mainstream in the first decade of 21st century. It was called *Produkt*.

PART TWO: From *Produkt* to Comic Anthologies and Transnational Comic Culture

The Phenomenon of *Produkt* Magazine

One of the most important changes in Polish comics after 1989 took place at the end of 1999. At that time, *Produkt* appeared with the comic *Osiedle Swoboda* (Liberty Estate) by Michał Śledziński, who still uses the nickname 'Śledziu' (The Herring) and was the editor-in-chief of the magazine. This publication is also significant because of the way it was produced. It was run off in a professional print shop on high-quality paper, given a colourful cover (but black and white comics inside) and could be bought in some bookstores. Due to these factors, *Produkt* can be seen as a bridge between the underground zines and the commercial comic magazines that appeared in Poland in the new millennium, such as *Kaczor Donald* (Donald Duck) or *Świat Komiksu* (The World of Comics), both published by Egmont. At the same time, it has also retained some aspects of the underground character associated with subcultural verbal skirmishes, parodies of commercials (as well as vulgar erotic announcements) and many footnote comments that can only be understood by a limited fandom audience. Like Palinowski's and Owedyk's zines, there are jokes about the skinhead subculture (the very first issue features a fake cover picture of a gay skinhead band called Nazijungs on the first page). The strategy of making fun of the mainstream press also appears in the first issue through the grotesque allusions to the teen magazine *Bravo* (here called *Klawo*, a Polish slang equivalent of English adjective *cool*), which can be seen in **Figure 6**. However, due to the vulgar language, subversive themes, and shocking drawings, as well as the rather low profit policy (editors and artists did not receive any money for their work), *Produkt* cannot be considered a full-fledged comic magazine.

Tomasz Pstrągowski, in his essay on autobiographical themes in contemporary Polish comics, points out that the magazine, despite its zine character at the beginning, finally broke out of the "underground ghetto" and reached a larger group of comics fans:

Śledziński managed to gather around him the most talented comic artists and scriptwriters of his generation and create a magazine that appeals to young readers in their own language. The impressive print run of 20,000 copies of the first issue

of *Produkt* was possible because Marcin Przasnycki – co-founder of the legendary video game magazine *Secret Service*, which previously published Śledziński's illustrations – was involved in the project (Pstrągowski, 2015: 36).

The most obvious personalities associated with the magazine (besides Śledziński) were Bartosz and Tomasz Minkiewicz, the authors of the mockery story about the superhero from Opole—Wilq. Vulgar language, absurd villains, and surreal adventures became the hallmarks of *Wilq* strips, as well as parodic references to American comics and transnational pop culture. Not only quotes from classical Superman albums may be found here, but Lovecraftian imaginary and gangster TV dramas as well. Certainly, the creators of *Wilq* play with the underground style, but their thematic interests are closer to street culture than to (post)punk sensibility. All these features helped stories about *Wilq* to quickly gain popularity. Nowadays they are sold in colour omnibus editions but are still published by the independent publishing house developed by one of the Polish post-superhero creators. On top of that, the stories about *Wilq* were even adopted for an animated series in 2019 (co-produced by the Polish private television station Polsat) and a theatre play (directed in 2019 by Remigiusz Brzyk in Teatr Śląski im. Stanisława Wyspiańskiego in Katowice).

The most important comic run that appeared in *Produkt* was *Osiedle Swoboda*. Śledziński's artworks vividly differed from the strips of Polish punk artists of the late 1980s. The psychological portraits of his characters were more sophisticated, and he paid great attention to details and backgrounds. He also liked to change styles, sometimes using the aesthetics regarded by him as “music video montage” (without speech bubbles and text, but, again, with recommended music) or moving to a childish cartoon aesthetic in some strips. More often, Śledziński mixed his images, collages and graffiti inspirations with various written narrative forms such as footnotes, biographies and often vulgar inside jokes. In contrast to the previous generation of zine authors, he can be described as the artist of the late 1990s, fully aware of the new street culture but still more devoted to the alternative music of the 1990s (with band names often appearing in the background of graffiti walls, T-shirts, posters, and some footnotes commentaries, which can be seen in **Figure 7**) than to hip-hop. Polish researchers point out that Śledziński played just as important an editorial and PR role with *Produkt* as Robert Crumb did with *Zap! Comix* in the 1960s (Pstrągowski 2018: 112). Thanks to *Osiedle Swoboda* and characters such as *Wilq*, *Produkt* quickly gained great admiration among comic fandom, which was reflected not only in an increase in the popularity of the authors associated with it, but also in the growing interest of other publishers. It is not surprising that *Produkt* and *Osiedle Swoboda* were, despite their guerrilla anti-profit

policy, also a significant success for their creator. Regrettably, the publication of the magazine ceased in 2004 with a total of 23 issues. Mateusz Zapała points out in an article on the Polish comics market that the magazine:

gained recognition among lovers of the graphic medium and led to a strengthening of demand for Polish comics, especially satirical and socially engaged ones. Paradoxically, it was the increasing popularity of Polish comics that contributed to the bankruptcy of *Produkt*. Lovers of picture stories preferred to buy “full-length” albums by “producers” instead of magazines. They were published at their own expense (e.g. *Wilq* by the Minkiewicz brothers) or by larger publishers (e.g. Egmont). Poznań’s magazine [published by Independent Press] was also affected by rising production costs (Zapała 2013: 219).



Figure 6: The subversive parody of the teenage *Bravo* magazine in first issue of *Produkt* magazine. Śledziński, M 1999 *Produkt* #1 p.1, Dec. Bydgoszcz: Independent Press © Michał Śledziński.

From 2004, when *Osiedle Swoboda* began to appear in separate albums (published by Śledziński's imprint called Independent Press) Śledziński switched from black and white to colour images. The omnibus edition of his *opus magnum*, which *Kultura Gniewu* compiled for the first time in two volumes in 2017, also contains modified footnote narratives. This time, they mainly contain autobiographical memoirs by Śledziu, who describes his career as a comic maker, his life in 1990s and the beginnings of *Produkt*.

In addition to *Osiedle Swoboda* and his magazine, Śledziński worked on many different projects such as *Filo i Mel* (Filo and Mel), a mainstream comic series that appeared in various magazines and was also published separately by Egmont in 2001, or *Wartości Rodzinne* (Family Values), published by *Kultura Gniewu*. In 2014, he



Figure 7: The atmosphere at the independent 'gig' with graffiti and T-shirts of Śledziński's famous bands and the author's personal footnote commentary.

Śledziński, M 1999 *Osiedle Swoboda*, p. 7 *Produkt* #1 Dec. Bydgoszcz: Independent Press
© Michał Śledziński.

presented the first part of the post-apocalyptic comic series entitled *Strange Years: Jesień* (Strange Years: The Autumn, with the script by Artur Kurasiński) online. An English version of this story was also prepared to encourage some foreign readers and publishers. Nowadays Śledziński is widely recognised in Poland.

He appears in documentaries on domestic comic books and works on several animated series and films (often based on Polish comics), mainly developed by the studio Human Ark.

Outro: Independent Publishers, National Grants and Historical Education

Produkt wasn't the only magazine that made some zine editors and writers more professional. In 1997 Witold Tkaczyk established Zin Zin Press, which started to publish the already mentioned AQQ in a more professional way, switching to good quality paper and sometimes printing whole comics albums in colour. Zin Zin Press soon developed into a publishing house and printed individual albums, including the adventures of the already mentioned Likwidator, some reprints of foreign authors (e.g. the excellent Czech graphic novel *Alois Nebel* by Jaroslav Rudiš and Jaromir Švejdík) and the album *Achtung Zelig! Druga Wojna* (2004), drawn by Krzysztof Gawronkiewicz and written by Krystian Rosenberg (artistic alias of the nephew of Grzegorz Rosiński, the creator of popular Belgium *Thorgal* comic series). This story became famous in Poland for its unique style and uncommon attitude towards the Holocaust and is often compared to Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Gawronkiewicz and Rosenberg's masterpiece is one of the most frequently analysed Polish comic stories by foreign scholars (for example: Maaheen 2019, Stańczyk 2014). This story describes the journey of two Jews through Nazi-occupied Poland during the Second World War. Both the main characters and their enemy are portrayed in an unreal and surreal way. The Jews look like strange alien monsters (somewhat reminiscent of amphibious creatures) and the Nazi officer pursuing them appears in the form of a wizard with a swastika sign on his hat. The artistic success of *Achtung Zelig* (fragments of which first appeared in the second issue of AQQ in December 1993), as well as various state grants, scholarships and competitions encouraged Tkaczyk to work intensively on Polish history. This mission is even mentioned on the Zin Zin Press website. Tkaczyk was also involved in the development of The International Festival of Comics and Games, established in 1999, which is now considered the most influential domestic Comic-Con and advertised as the biggest comics event in Poland and Central-Eastern Europe. At the same time, Egmont, a large and influential publishing house, always with its finger on the pulse of the market, published a second collection of Polish comics entitled *Antologia komiksu polskiego. Wrzesień. Wojna narysowana* (The Anthology of Polish Comics. September. The Drawn War) which dealt with the Second World War.

To some extent, this new trend was created by institutions that promoted and founded the publication of historical comic books such as the National Cultural Centre, the Warsaw Uprising Museum, and the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN). The IPN is a Polish state research institute responsible for education and archiving. It also includes two public prosecution service components with investigative, prosecution, and lustration powers. It was created by the Polish parliament through the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance on December 18, 1998. This act reformed and expanded the earlier Main Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against the Polish Nation, which had been established in 1991, replacing a body focused on Nazi crimes founded in 1945 (Wikipedia Institute of National Remembrance). Many comic artists started to cooperate with both institutions. Their comics were often criticised: they were accused of propaganda and compared with the products of communist times, which seems to be a bit exaggerated. It is true that the comics of the Institute of National Remembrance have a didactic function and show a certain bias in the representation of historical events; nevertheless, they are quite well told and drawn with an attention to the realism of the details and drawn stories.

Naturally, this stylistic and thematic turn is a far cry from the aesthetics of punk and the themes of counterculture; however, there are some survivors who are still publishing successfully today. The albums and authors of the Kultura Gniewu publishing house, for example, refer more to the roots of counterculture and Polish underground comics. Founded in 2000 by Jarosław Składanek, the publishing house began with exclusive collected editions of works by such veterans of the comics zine as Ryszard Dąbrowski, Dariusz 'Pała' Palinowski, Krzysztof 'Prosiak' Owedyk and Michał Śledziu Śledziński. Soon they dynamically expanded their offer with comics from the indie scene (*Pixie* by Max Andersson or albums by Charles Burns and Daniel Clowes) and became one of the most interesting publishers of graphic novels and Polish comics for children. Kultura Gniewu is also the publisher of stories about Jeż Jerzy (George the Hedgehog), by Rafał Skarżycki (script) and Tomasz Leśniak (drawings). From 1995 to 2007 they were presented in the *Ślizg* magazine and from 1998 full comic albums were published, containing mainly episodes previously published in the comic magazines. Like the Polish punk and *Produkt* works, the plots of *Jeż Jerzy* series focus on the problems of post-communist Poland. As in the comics of Pała, Owedyk and Śledziński one can find satirical views not only on the last skinheads, tracksuit hooligans (who quickly took the place of the former group in the new reality of the late 1990s) and policemen, but about ecologists and politicians as well (which reminds of Dąbrowski's narrative strategy).

In addition, many Polish underground artists adopted by *Kultura Gniewu* extend their creativity to other media or even receive some audio-visual tributes. The animated version of *Jeź Jerzy*, directed by Wojtek Wawszczyk, Tomasz Leśniak and Jakub Tarkowski, was released in Polish cinemas in 2011 and dubbed by well-known Polish actors. Extensive work on the international adaptation of Karol KRL Kalinowski's *Łauma* (Wooma) are in progress. This graphic novel was created by an artist who published his first works in various zines such as *Koks* (The Coal, which was also a slang term for amphetamines in 1990s' Poland) and magazines, including the famous *Produkt*. The plot of *Łauma* is based on Slavic myths and legends. Its adaptation is being directed by Paweł Borowski from Lava Films Company. The script of this comic book was also presented as a play. Finally, the Polish company EgoFilm, which co-produced Netflix's animated series *Kajko i Kokosz* (based on the popular series of Janusz Christa comics, published between 1972–1992 and often called the local version of *Asterix and Obelix*) announced that they will soon produce an animated film based on *Osiedle Swoboda*. All these optimistic facts seem to prove that Polish comic fans and domestic artists now live in a completely different reality than the authors of *third circuit press* comics from the 1980s and 1990s. However, it is still not easy to survive on the local market or get transnational recognition.

Conclusions: The Legacy of Punk Comic Zines and *Produkt*

While the first generation of punk comic zines neither received great popularity in Poland, nor gained transnational success, they are still fascinating and creative documents of the struggle for freedom of expression, which came to a happy end with the abolition of censorship in April 1990. Polish society no longer suffers from institutional censorship, but extravagant artists can still be accused of offending religious feelings, for example, and face prosecution.

The domestic independent and underground press were also a great help for younger cartoonists who debuted in magazines such as *Produkt* in the 1990s or at the beginning of the 21st century and developed their unique style thanks to the inspiration of the subversive anaesthetics of the “punks”. Artists such as Clarence Weatherspoon (the nickname of Janusz Pawlak), Robert Adler or Jakub Rebelka (both known from AQQ zines and later taken by *Kultura Gniewu*) are slowly but effectively working on their international careers. Pawlak published the adventures of his steam-punk samurai Toshiro in the U.S., which debuted in 2004 in *Produkt* (Dark Horse, 2014). Robert Adler drew the images for the prequel to the award-winning adaptation of Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* called *Dust to Dust* (BOOM! Studios 2010, with

a script by Chris Roberson). The most promising Polish transnational artist seems to be Jakub Rebelka, who started his career in *AQQ* and *Czerwony Karzeł* zines, is one of the creators of *Jim Henson's The Storyteller: Sirens* (2019, Archaia), the illustrator of the post-apo dystopia *Origins* (published from 2021 by Boom! Studios, with the script of Clay Chapman), as well as *The Judas* mini-series (2018, Boom! Studios, Jeff Loveness' script) and many other foreign projects.

The memory of the underground heritage in Poland is celebrated at the most important comic festivals, where special zines are distributed for free every year to promote some debuts. In a way, it can be said that this form of comic expression is now also part of official culture, as many cultural and educational institutions (such as the Comics Library at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań) publish their zines thanks to digital printing technology.

However, there are still artists for whom the independence and contestation inscribed in the formula of the fanzine are very important elements. Even if they no longer publish by photocopying, these authors publish zine-like issues and call them zines. There is a gender swap as well, as these new publications are often the place of creativity for female artists. Among them are authors like Anna Krztoń and Edyta Bystroń, who use their work to challenge the excessive masculinity of Polish comics while creating a model of relationship between the creator and the recipient based on direct contact. Their zines are sold at events where meetings, lectures and workshops are also held. Many of them still have a countercultural flavour, deal with uncomfortable and uneasy topics (like LGBT governmental persecutions in Poland) and use underground styles. In a way, the spirit of punk comic press is now continued in Polish webcomics too. After the parliamentary elections on October 15, 2023, the new government's cultural policy seems to be less conservative, but it is difficult to predict how this situation will affect the domestic comic culture.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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