

Katarzyna Smyczyńska

Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz (Poland)

Ways of Showing: Brecht Evens' *Panther*

In my paper I argue that the graphic narrative *Panther* by Brecht Evens (2016), while relying on refined conceptual means, involves ethically controversial artistic decisions¹. Following Rabindranath Tagore's reflection on artistic ethos, I define controversy as lack of ethical responsibility, excessive focus on the effect of shock and on inducing a sense of hopelessness in the reader². Although Evens' book never states directly if the implied male violence (result of incestuous desire) is really part of the female protagonist's life, the narrative's suggestive power alternating between horror and joke may be unbearable for a perceptive reader. The artist uses the charismatic yet abusive figure of the “panther” (a kind of *alter ego* of the girl's father) as “camouflage” which allows him to literally (if not graphically) depict the verbal and physical abuse of the child. Other potentially controversial strategies involve specific constructions of dialogues and visual metaphors (the girl's body metaphorised as meat, horror aesthetics, the panther's ostensibly mocking and cynical demeanour), as well as obnoxious symbolism and the dexterous use of intertextuality – e.g. the way Evens alludes to children's literature classics in the context of paedophilia. They are all evidence of the artist's emotional distance to the harrowing theme he undertakes. Evens himself reveals his disturbingly lighthearted attitude to the book, confessing: “I had a lot of fun making it, though I'm not sure that's the vibe that comes across to people”.³ I argue that there is hardly any sense of compassion for child suffering in Evens' narrative, and I suggest that the story is a convoluted form of cynical play with the readers' expectations, where a socially sensitive topic and traumatic experience become a pretext to construct a scopophilic 120-page tale of the child's ordeal in the privacy of her own home.

Keywords: visual narrative, father-daughter incest, artistic responsibility, cynicism, scopophilia

Katarzyna Smyczyńska is an Assistant Professor at Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland, an author of a monograph on popular fiction for women (2007), a co-author of a book on feminism in Poland (2011) and an editor of a book on new media (2012). In recent years she has

1 Controversial topics, including various forms of cultural taboo, and controversial aesthetics of picturebooks were discussed by a number of authors in a volume edited by Janet Evans. See *Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks: Creative and Critical Responses to Visual Texts*. London: Routledge, 2015.

2 Smyczyńska, K. “Innocence Lost: Picturebook Narratives of Depravity”. *Image & Narrative*, vol. 19, no 1, 2018.

3 Interview with Brecht Evens. *The Comics Journal*, <http://www.tcj.com/brecht-evens-pantherman/>

published a number of academic articles and book chapters on contemporary visual literature, including a two-author book with Magdalena Sikorska (Tako 2019). Her current research interests and publications focus upon ethics in contemporary visual narratives. She teaches courses in visual storytelling, media studies, and contemporary anglophone literature and culture.