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The meaning of symbols in drawings in the context of the military conflict in Ukraine

Znaczenie symboliki rysunku w kontekście konfliktu zbrojnego w Ukrainie

*Drawings narrate children's experiences before
they can put their emotions into words.*

Anna K. Kendrick

Introduction

A child's drawing expresses its thoughts, makes an indirect form of dialogue with the external world that is still weakly controlled by consciousness. Movements of muscles, directly reflected in drawings, correspond to tempo-

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rary emotions, as well as permanent temperament traits of the child who is drawing (Thestrip, 2019). It is for this reason that an artistic artefact is treated as a kind of communicated message of non-verbal character. Children, by reflecting the surrounding reality, make reference to the shapes that are known to them and the ones that they have observed themselves. This causes the language of drawings to be identical with the conventions imposed by the society and culture which the child is part of (Ezan, Gollety, Hémar-Nicolas, 2015). A particular type of a such message are the drawings presenting idiosyncratic fears, i.e., the ones connected with the circumstances at a defined time and in a concrete place of their occurrence. Children's drawings created after 11 September 2001, or those made after the hurricane Katrina relented, are a good example to confirm the thesis (Burnham, Hooper, Ogorchock, 2011). A similar character is represented by the drawings in conditions of war which always – in a direct or indirect manner – affects children from the country involved in a conflict. They facilitate the access to the unique experiences of collective trauma and an insight into the manner of its interpretation. According to Anna K. Kendrick, who examined children's drawings from the time of the Civil War in Spain (the years 1936-1939), they make “unfiltered records of psychological impact on innocent young civilians, the same drawings are also sophisticated testimonies of agency” (Kendrick, 2021, p. 142). The author observes that they offer “not simply a firsthand view of conflict but also a critical view onto the alliances and ideologies of the adults who guided their creation” (Kendrick, 2021, p. 142). Recognizing how children understand war, allows adults to assist them in coping with negative feelings. It follows from research that 8-year-old children hold fairly clear representation of what a war is. They are able to describe soldiers, the objects used in a war (i.e. weapons) and the situations in connection with it (fight, shooting, killing, death). It is not until children comprehend the real meaning of what a war is that they can make the meaning of the word “peace” more precise. Independent of age, the majority of them define it as no military activity (Jabbar, Betawi 2019).

Methodology of the studies on symbols in drawings

The studies on children's drawings, which are presented here, were of qualitative character and were founded on the hermeneutic concept, which perceives the world as a set of phenomena, in contact with which each individ-

ual executes their interpretation. According to Paul Ricoeur, hermeneutics is processes occurring between the individual and a symbol encountered in the space of culture (Michałowski, 2012; Pondel, 2016). Their interpretation does not rest on merely personal experiences, but on dialogue and opening onto “another”.

The hermeneutic approach allows bringing closer things which seemingly are not related with each other. This, in the case of our studies, consisted in linking the content of a drawing with the meaning of the symbols presented in the culture. Adaptation of a drawing as a specific kind of message, a ‘text’, meant interpreting its symbolism³ in a cultural context. It is a process of comprehending that goes on between text and its receiver. This enables deepening the recognition of oneself. Thus, while examining the meaning of symbolism in a child’s drawing, recognition concerns both the object being recognized and the individual carrying out recognition himself. A researcher, through understanding the meanings of symbols contained in a drawing, discovers the hidden sense of the meanings that remain close to his own cultural identity.

Studies on the drawings were conducted in a group of Polish and Ukrainian children between May and June 2022. The direct impulse to carry out the examination was a drawing made by a Ukrainian girl in the Kiev underground, which – at that time – was used by the residents of the city as a shelter (Figure 1). The aim of our studies was to learn about the symbolism of drawings by the Ukrainian children who had experienced the situation of war and the necessity of emigrating from their mother country, and to compare them with the content of drawings made by Polish children at the same time, i.e., during the first months following the outbreak of war in Ukraine. The main research problem was as follows: What symbols can be identified in the drawings by the children of both nationalities and what meaning they have against the background of the war in this country? In an attempt to make it more detailed, we embarked on explaining which of the symbols relate (or may relate) to the conflict situation in Ukraine. We were also interested in finding out about the denotative and connotative meaning of the symbols included in the children’s drawings.

³ Symbolism means a set of symbols connected with each other, embedded in the given culture (see: Głowiński, 1990, p. 9).

Figure 1. Drawing by a 7-year-old girl made during an air-raid alarm, Kiev, 7 April 2022



Source: authors' own collection.

The study was carried out with the use of the method of drawing, the choice of which appeared the most suitable for a few reasons. First, children's limited verbal competence and cognitive skills require that the applied methods should match their abilities. Children endeavour to recreate what they know or what they perceive in the surrounding reality. Therefore, while creating a drawing, they refer to cultural resources that are present in the given community and which are expressed by means of symbols. This causes this kind of non-verbal communication to comply with – in many respects – the conventions imposed by the culture in which the child is growing (Ezan, Gollety, Hémar-Nicolas, 2015, p. 79-80). Another reason for choosing the method of drawing was the situation of trauma which accompanied the Ukrainian children who had often witnessed military activities or atrocities. Because of the direct neighbouring of the two countries on each other, we could not exclude the possibility that a situation of fear might accompany Polish children, too (Suchecka, 2022). Not wishing to escalate negative emotions, we decided that the suggestion of making a drawing, without setting a concrete theme, will allow children to express themselves in a natural way that will be comfortably safe to them.

With a view to carrying out comparative studies, we divided the whole group into two subgroups comprising eight children from Poland and Ukraine each. The examination in both was run following the established procedure. After obtaining the relevant permission from the child's parent/s or guardian and the child's agreement to make a drawing, a meeting was planned.⁴ Each of us conducted it in the group of children of our individual cultural circle and in the children's mother tongue. As mentioned earlier, we decided to use the method of drawing a picture on any theme. Accordingly, the instruction requesting the child to create a drawing was as follows: "Please, draw what you like, whatever you feel like drawing" (Konieczna, 2022). It played a similar role to that of an open question which the child tried to answer by applying a symbolic language for the purpose (cf. Thestrip, 2019). During the meeting, each of us was running an observation and then an interview with the child to elicit information on the content of the drawing. On completion of this stage of the meeting, an interview was conducted with the child's parent/s or guardian (in the case of Ukrainian children).

Directly after the meeting, we went on to analyse the drawings – the next stage of the study based on the criteria elaborated on by E.J. Konieczna. The first thing to do during that initial analysis (pre-analysis) was to identify the symbols and colours present in the drawing. Here, the basis was the content and the interview with the child. The second stage consisted in the proper analysis of the content of the drawing. The symbols having been identified were then divided into two groups: idiosyncratic symbols of fear and neutral symbols. The former were determined and distinguished on the basis of such criteria as: the cultural meaning of the symbol, the place in the succession in which it was drawn, the place in the succession in which it was mentioned in the interview, the size of the symbol, the place in which it was used in the drawing, its clarity/suggestiveness. At that stage, we also identified motifs, that is the groups of symbols that can have an additional interpretative meaning.

While analysing the drawings by the Polish children, we did not identify any idiosyncratic symbols of fear, the symbols recognized in the pictures having only neutral character (e.g. a car, a house, an owl, a cat, a dog). Still, among the images drawn by the Ukrainian children, 4 of them clearly presented war-themed symbols (e.g. rocket missiles, destroyed houses, a wounded person).

⁴ With regard to Polish children it was their family homes, while the choice of the place where Ukrainian children were examined depended on the current housing or family situation.

All of the drawings by the Ukrainian children included symbols of neutral meaning (e.g. a heart, a teddy-bear, a vase with flowers, a tree, a waterfall, an umbrella).

The third stage of examining the drawings consisted in looking for the meanings of all symbols and semantic relations between them with reference to the codes of the given culture and in the context of the war being fought in Ukraine. To accomplish this aim we applied the method of amplification⁵. Interpretation of each picture was of an individual character and attempted to get to know and understand the child. It was conducted on the basis of the output of culture and the meanings of its artefacts (linguistic, behavioural, physical). The effect of the work was reflected in written explications prepared for each of the interpreted drawings. Below, we present one of such descriptions. Reconstruction of the meaning of the symbolism in drawings was elaborated based on the output related to this subject matter (among others: Dutkevich, 2012; Miroshnikova, 2022; Saienko, 2013; Oesterreicher-Mollwo, 2009; Chenel, Simarro, 2008; Barnum, 2019; Lurker, 1994; Biedermann, 2001; Kopalinski 2007).

Looking for the meanings of symbolism in children's drawings (a case study)

The drawing was made on 17 June 2022 by a 12-year-old girl from Ukraine, who had been staying in Poland since 27 February 2022. As it follows from the interview with her mother, the reason they came to Poland was the war in Ukraine and the anxiety with reference to the unknown future (“What is going to happen next?”). The woman came to Poland with her children (biological siblings of the girl). Her husband and adult members of her family (including step siblings of the girl) stayed in Ukraine. As it follows from the mother's statement, their leaving the country was spontaneous and proceeded “in the atmosphere of great panic”. The journey took three days and was very hard and exhausting.

The meeting was held in a community hall for war refugees, in a separate room, which secured comfort to the child. The girl was in a good mood while

⁵ This is a method of discovering the meanings, which is applied in analyses of night dreams (see: Jung, 2002, p. 31–32). In our study, it consisted in looking for the meanings of the symbols in drawings, which are found in the culture of the examined child.

drawing the picture. She was dedicated and concentrated while drawing, occasionally humming a melody.

Figure 2. Drawing created by a 12-year-old girl from Ukraine



Source: authors' own collection.

While drawing the picture, the child used all the 12 crayons she had at her disposal in the following proportion: yellow, dark blue, light blue, pink, grey, light green, dark green, orange, red, brown, purple, black (for contours). Applying the cross division of the work, the symbols were deployed mainly in the top left-hand and the bottom right-hand corners of the sheet.

The drawing, despite featuring a war theme, does not evoke negative feelings. This can mean that emotions which usually occur in the situation of a sudden change (i.e. the sense of endangerment, fear of the unknown) were pushed out or gave way to other, more constructive ones. Such an explanation is supported by both the symbolism of the drawing (among others, the rainbow – hope) and the child's statement ("We are afraid but we have got used to it a little.")

The girl drew the "Umbrella" as the first symbol, then the cluster of "Houses", "Trees", "Rainbow", and the "Rocket missile" in the end. The succession of drawing the elements and their sizes point to the "Umbrella" as the most

important symbol. An equally important one is the “Rocket missile” directed towards the former, which was added as the last element but was mentioned as the second one (after the “Umbrella”) during the interview. The remaining symbols play a complementary role. There are two motifs that can be distinguished in the drawing, namely: the “Umbrella” – the “Rainbow” – the roof of a “House” and the “Umbrella” – the cluster of “Houses” connected with the handle of the umbrella.

The meaning of the “Rocket missile”, being the only idiosyncratic fear symbol present in the drawing, is rather explicit. The child stressed it herself in her statement (“The Rocket shows aggression of the neighbour towards Ukraine.”) The symbol expresses the sense of danger, a strong nervous tension. It can be a mark of fear of someone’s anger, which in this case should be referred to the Russian aggressor. The direction of the “Missile” points to the topicality of the portrayed event and its potential lasting in the future, at least for some time to come. Still, its colours are rather untypical. The darker contours were filled with grey and pink crayons, both colours being attributed to the feminine element. The colour grey is the colour of concern, sadness, tension. In the language of intuitive symbols, it means disintegration, destruction of somebody or something. Since it signifies negative changes (e.g., like with reference to weather conditions – from better to worse), its use can testify the girl’s expecting an onset of hard times and period of uncertainty for Ukraine. This is also a symbol which means hardness of steel, which – in connection with the symbolism of the “Missile” – emphasizes a fear of its destructive power and a threat that it poses. Grey is also the symbol of remaining incognito (e.g., actions under cover, insincere intentions). The use of this crayon to draw the “Missile” can also highlight the fact that the Russian aggression against Ukraine has a veiled character. This interpretation can be explained by the presence at that time of the euphemistic rhetoric on the part of the aggressor (“special military operation”), obscuring the real motives behind the attack on Ukraine. What is, however, striking about the colour system of the “Missile” are the pink details. Did the girl want to ignore the negative sides of the experienced reality by means of this colour?

The dominant symbol in the drawing is the above-mentioned “Umbrella” whose denotative meaning is fairly clear – providing protection against unpleasant phenomena of nature. The object drawn has a similar meaning in the girl’s picture, which may point to a fear, need for safety and protection against

detrimental influences from the outside. The “Umbrella” is also a symbol of protection against unwanted emotions, in this case possibly connected with the content presented in the drawing. The open “Umbrella” sends a signal of wanting to protect against aggression and preparedness to secure protection. The colours used here highlight the patriotic character of the symbol (the colours of Ukrainian flag), as well as indicate who and what needs protection. The colour yellow of the “Umbrella” can express efforts to restore justice, harmony, a need for cleansing by removing negative emotions. Its function in culture is to draw attention of other people, which in the context of the theme of the drawing can be read as seeking support from others (both personal and pertaining to the sense of offering aid to Ukraine by other states). However, in the negative sense, this colour is again associated (like the symbol of the “Umbrella”) generally with fear or an object to be feared. Thus, in the context of the war the “Umbrella” bearing yellow-blue stripes may mean, e.g., concern about the condition and defensive potential of Ukraine and the need for protecting its inhabitants against danger (apotropaic function of the colour blue). Moreover, the yellow-blue stripes bring along associations with an umbrella used as protection against sunshine, which means a fear of violence and taking measures that are unsuitable as protection against danger. The other explanation can also be supported by the juxtaposition of the two symbols (i.e., the “Umbrella” against the “Missile”), while the opposing directions emphasize their antagonistic attitude towards each other. The size of the “Umbrella”, on the other hand, raises the associations with a canopy which is a symbol of renewal, a need for setting out in a new direction, going on a journey, which can be an expression of the girl’s longing for her mother country.

The “Umbrella” appears in the drawing connected with the “Rainbow”, which allows supposing that the meanings of the two symbols are combined. The “Rainbow” is the symbol of an alliance. Its connotative meaning is connected with hope for the future, making a kind of bridge between people (an expression of longing). It also signifies an attempt at reconciliation of feelings and the mind (striving for a rational evaluation of the situation). The “Rainbow” is also the symbol of a road leading to a better reality. In the symbolism of night dreams, it means the end of a difficult road (literally and metaphorically) and painful (indeed traumatic) experiences which were connected with tears (a rainbow always appears after rain – symbolic tears). This meaning can refer to the sudden and hard journey to Poland, which the girl made with her

mother and siblings – one accompanied by a strong anxiety about her own life and the lives of her closest. The “Rainbow” can also testify for a need for an internal harmony, striving for a consensus (with someone or something), since it is a symbol which combines fire and water, that is something that seems impossible, yet does happen. Because it means agreement, power and unification, judging from the circumstances in which the drawing was made, it can express hope for the peace that appeared possible, though rather distant, to the girl at the time when she was drawing her picture. It recalls also associations with a bow which is an attribute of fighting with an oppressor and means striving for justice. In combination with the “Umbrella” it forms in the drawing a tight protective shield for the trees and houses, as well as points to the will to fight, hope for victory and winning recognition in the eyes of others (the “Rainbow” as an attribute of fame). The compilation of the “Umbrella” and the “Rainbow” with the roof of the “House” underlines, in turn, the necessity of protection and care. The placement of this motif on the right additionally forms a meaningful union with the masculine element. In connection with the sense of the symbols and the statement of the child, it explains what role – according to the girl – men played in her country at that time (“The ‘Umbrella’ is the top of our houses,” “The ‘Rainbow’ shows joy, because we have our army who defend us.”)

The group of “Houses” visible in the drawing can be an allegory of the place where the girl comes from – her mother country. The symbolic meaning of the buildings refers to a group of people, which – in this particular case – means the Ukrainian people. The beauty and the state with which the houses are invested can point to its solid condition, a strong morale of the society. Drawing houses in a cluster and from the front points to the external shows the attitude that the Ukrainian nation assumed towards the rest of the world – one of being united and ready to defend themselves. Such an arrangement of the houses (which are tightly set one against another) may also testify for the need of closeness with others (the family and/or other Ukrainians) resulting from fear. Their location on the right can also suggest that the anxiety refers to the future. Taking into account the symbolism of space (the bottom right-hand corner of the sheet), such an arrangement (that is the alter ego of the Ukrainian nation), being overwhelmed, testifies for the weightiness of experiences, an expected defeat or lost hope.

Regarding the cluster of “Houses”, one of them stands out in the foreground. It resembles a tower from which it is possible to observe symbolic parts of the

world (that is, e.g., reactions of others to what is lost) and the future, which means the need for a better orientation. The blue facade of the tower-house can point to the desire for protection of this important building (i.e., somebody or something) that provides valuable information. On the other hand, the untypical colour of the roof matches the meaning of the “Rainbow” connected with it. This can be interpreted as hope for rebirth and need for a change. In turn, the need for protecting the houses against the attack of the destructive “Rocket” can be read from their linking with the “Umbrella” spread over it by means of its handle. This composition of symbols can be interpreted as a need for holding on to something (e.g., hope) or somebody, which – in the context of the war – can be a sign of expecting support, aid, ‘sustaining’ defence by others, for instance by Ukrainian nation (the cluster of “Houses”) or, generally, by all who oppose the war and the aggressive politics of Russia.

Conclusion

Every war leads to confrontations with border situations of life and causes changes in the individual trajectory of life to date. Its social consequences are felt by successive generations. The emotional meaning of a war is negative, in particular, because a military conflict always takes its toll on children and their childhood – the time which should be associated with carefree playing and security. The war currently fought in Ukraine does not differ in this respect from any other previous conflicts, which causes its youngest participants to be trying to find an outlet for their emotions (Ermolenko, 2022), while adults seek ways of helping them to cope with the war-related trauma (Koshulinska, 2022). One of such ways out is children’s artistic activity which allows them to express themselves by means of the symbols used in their drawings.

A drawing is an act of communication, enabling the child to express its own reactions towards the surrounding phenomena in a natural way (Manathoko, Mamvuto, 2019, p. 384; Farokhi, Hashemi 2011, p. 2219–2224). Accordingly, most children are willing to make use of this means of expression, endeavouring to visualise their representations of the real world. Researchers, in turn, knowing the properties of drawings, seek individual senses and meanings, which make them objects of cognition. Hermeneutic identity of each creation consists in that it “wants to be understood by whoever wants to listen to its speaking” (Sołtysiak, 2013, p. 17). This allowed us to define with more

precision our role as interpreters of the children's drawings. Such a viewpoint on perceiving art makes it possible to study its meanings in culture, where the presence of symbols determines the scope of interpretation of the artefact as indefinite and continuously resumed by others.

The aim of our study was to identify the symbolism in the drawings made by Polish and Ukrainian children. During the initial analysis of the drawings on any theme, we distinguished two groups of symbols. The first one included symbols of fear, that is ones which in a direct way refer to some important event of local (e.g. hurricane) or global (e.g. pandemic) range as well as having a sudden and traumatic course. In this particular case this situation was the military conflict in Ukraine. The other group covered the symbols which, in the context of war, carried a neutral meaning. In the case of Polish children, we were able to identify only symbols of the latter category whereas, as far as the drawings of the Ukrainian children were concerned, there were found instances of both types of symbols. Additionally, those drawings presented patriotic symbols (e.g. a state flag or other objects bearing Ukrainian colours) which – in the context of the war being fought – can be acknowledged to be a symbol of specific significance.

While trying to explain the meanings and senses of the symbols in the drawings, we noticed that some of the neutral ones, which were present in the pictures of the Ukrainian children, possessed an extra interpretative potential. Our application of the amplification method allowed us to discover the semantic relations going on between idiosyncratic and neutral symbols in the context of the war waged in Ukraine. The individual character of interpretation conducted on the basis of relevant output of the given culture constituted an attempt at recognizing and understanding a child and the war seen with the child's eyes. Using the instance of interpretation of the symbolism present in the drawing of a 12-year-old Ukrainian girl, it is possible to perceive the significance of personal experiences of a child who was forced to suddenly leave her mother country. By explaining the individual manner of symbolic representation related to the war, we wanted to reach the content existing outside this individual understanding. Since social experiences of this type are placed in the collective mind, explication of the meanings of symbols in the context of culture which they concern allows depicting the societal construction of the world. Reconstructing these meanings offers an opportunity to pass from an individual manner of explaining the reality experienced to the content existing

outside the individual understanding (Moroz, 2013, p. 40). This way of gathering knowledge allows not only getting to know conceptions of phenomena and their individual sense, but also reconstructing intersubjective conceptions through cultural significance of symbols as they are possible interpretations of the reality.

Abstract: Research objective: To recognize the symbolism of drawings of the Ukrainian children who experienced the situation of war and necessity of emigrating from their mother country and to compare them with the content of drawings made by Polish children at the same time, that it is in the first months following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine;

The research problem and methods: What symbols can be identified in the drawings made by children of both nationalities and what their meaning is in the context of the war in Ukraine? The study applied the method of drawing and interview;

The process of argumentation: Reconstruction of the symbolic meanings of drawings in the cultural context in the conditions of the military conflict in Ukraine;

Research results: It was possible to identify symbols of idiosyncratic character in the drawings of the Ukrainian children, that are connected with the outbreak of the war in this country (e.g., destroyed houses, missiles, rockets). In the drawings of the children of both nationalities, it was also possible to recognize symbols of neutral meaning, which – however – in the case of the Ukrainian children's drawings made reference to the situation of war (e.g. an umbrella as protection against missiles). Interpretation of the drawings was carried out according to one schema, taking into account separate cultural contexts (Polish and Ukrainian), as well as the child's individual experience, which was demonstrated using a drawing by a 12-year-old Ukrainian girl;

Conclusions, innovations, and recommendations: A drawing can offer an alternative method of learning about and making an attempt to understand a child, especially one who has found himself/herself in a difficult situation in life.

Keywords: child's drawing, war in Ukraine, idiosyncratic symbols of fear

Streszczenie: Cel naukowy: Poznanie symboliki rysunków dzieci ukraińskich, które doświadczyły sytuacji wojny i konieczności emigracji z kraju oraz porównanie ich z treścią rysunków dzieci polskich, wykonanych w tym samym czasie, tj. w pierwszych miesiącach od momentu wybuchu wojny w Ukrainie.

Problem i metody badawcze: Jakie symbole można zidentyfikować na rysunkach dzieci obu narodowości i jakie jest ich znaczenie w kontekście wojny w Ukrainie? W badaniu wykorzystano metodę rysunku i wywiadu.

Proces wyводу: Rekonstruowanie znaczeń symboliki rysunku w kontekście kulturowym, w warunkach konfliktu zbrojnego w Ukrainie.

Wyniki analizy naukowej: Na rysunkach dzieci z Ukrainy zidentyfikowano symbole o charakterze idiosynkratycznym, tzn. takie, które związane były z wybuchem wojny w tym kraju (np. zniszczone domy, pociski rakietowe itp.). Na rysunkach dzieci obu narodowości rozpoznano też symbole o neutralnym znaczeniu, które jednak w przypadku rysunków dzieci ukraińskich także odnosiły się do sytuacji wojny (np. „parasol” jako ochrona przed uderzeniem pocisku). Interpretacje rysunków zostały przeprowadzone według jednego schematu, z uwzględnieniem odrębnego kontekstu kulturowego (polskiego i ukraińskiego) oraz indywidualnych doświadczeń autora/autorki rysunku, co zaprezentowano na przykładzie pracy 12-letniej dziewczynki z Ukrainy.

Wnioski, innowacje, rekomendacje: Rysunek może być alternatywną metodą poznania i próby (z)rozumienia dziecka, szczególnie będącego w trudnej sytuacji życiowej.

Słowa kluczowe: rysunek dziecka, wojna w Ukrainie, idiosynkratyczne symbole lęku

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