

## “My most painted word”: Illustrating *Hamlet* in the Digital Age

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**Abstract:** The new transmedial ecosystem, which includes screen versions, cartoons, computer games, infographics, manga, etc., has engaged and affected the practice of reading Shakespeare. In the spirit of the time, the Ukrainian publisher A-BA-BA-HA-LA-MA-HA answered the challenge by releasing Yurii Andrukhovych’s unorthodox and ironic translation of *Hamlet* (2008), the first one made in independent Ukraine. The master coup of the edition is the idiosyncratic artwork by Vladislav Yerko, which is introspective, heavily symbolic, metatextual, and visually mesmerizing. My argument is that Yerko’s artwork, both a manifestation of the materiality of the book and the semantic complexity of the artist’s outstanding visual imagery based on Shakespeare’s metaphors, has the power to harness the hyper-attention of the readers and to switch it into the deep attention mode. In this manner the artwork inveigles the recipient into the dangerous realm of the ‘undersurface’ reading, which otherwise might have been evaded. If in the earlier print versions of *Hamlet* the illustrations played mainly a secondary role, in the age of the intermedial shift, they have come to play a major part in the ‘drama’ of the reading act, guiding, but also questioning and challenging, the interpretation. The clash and the subtle interplay of text and image provide an opportunity for interactivity and quick changes of focus, which effectively integrate this edition into the contemporary reading paradigm that seeks new ways to empower the reader and meet the demand for visuality.

**Keywords:** illustration, conceptual imagery, visual metaphor, bi-literate brain, digital skeptics, digital defenders, interactivity, visuality, transmediality, metatextuality

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When questioned by Polonius about the essence of the book he is reading, Hamlet ironically answers, “Words, words, words...”<sup>1</sup> This reply, simple to the point of being enigmatic, has been interpreted in many different ways, but even when taken at face value Hamlet’s remark hints at some of the most actively debated issues of contemporary culture. Is the verbal component indeed the only one that matters? Or does the process of extracting meaning from the text depend on the medium facilitating it? In Marshall McLuhan’s words, is the medium the message?<sup>2</sup> If so, how does digital reading affect the way readers process and interiorize content as compared to the traditional reading practices associated with print books? And is Google making us stupid after all?<sup>3</sup>

These questions have divided present-day librarians, scholars, publishers, and readers into the two warring parties of the digital skeptics and the digital defenders. Many lances have been broken over the dilemma of whether the digital format of the text hinders thoughtful reading, critical analysis, and the transfer of information into long-term memory, as readers tend to do more scanning, skimming, and multitasking when reading from the screen. Digital skeptics warn against the demise of cognitive skills in those readers who prefer e-books. Maryanne Wolf and Mirit Barzillai predict the appearance of a new ‘fast-food’ generation of readers able to process only limited amounts of information on a basic level:

*The digital culture’s reinforcement of rapid attentional shifts and multiple sources of distraction can short-circuit the development of the slower, more cognitively demanding comprehension processes that go into the formation of deep reading and deep thinking. If such a truncated development occurs, we may be spawning a culture so inured to sound bites and thought bites that it fosters neither critical analysis nor contemplative processes in its members.*<sup>4</sup>

Digital defenders, on the other hand, in a Hamletian fashion, argue that words are what matter in reading, and the format has no impact upon the way the readers interpret and react to them. The book is not the first medium used historically to transmit information, and in time it will be surpassed, just as recitals of epic poetry and cuneiform tablets were surpassed centuries ago. Jeffrey R. Di Leo emphasizes that “there is nothing intrinsically inferior about spreading knowledge on a screen rather than on a printed page,” adding that “words may look better in print, and a book may feel better in your hands than a Kindle or an iPad, but the words are the

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Folger Digital Texts, 2,2,210, <https://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org/html/Ham.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Carr, “[Is Google Making Us Stupid?](#)” *The Atlantic*, July/August 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Maryanne Wolf, and Mirit Barzillai, “The Importance of Deep Reading,” *Educational Leadership* 66, no. 6 (2009), accessed October 1, 2018, <http://ase.tufts.edu/crlr/documents/2009EL-ImportanceDeepReading.pdf>.

same.”<sup>5</sup> The curious aspect of this heated discussion is that both parties seem to be right. All in all, the format matters, digital reading is different from print reading (primarily because readers subjectively see these two forms of reading as different), and these days readers are focusing on new ways of ‘pragmatic’ reading, i.e. reading with purpose rather than for pure pleasure. The matter is that, to use another quote from Shakespeare’s masterpiece, “there is / nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it / so.”<sup>6</sup> In his recent study “Reading in a Digital Age,” David M. Durant (2017) summarizes the findings of the researchers and draws a productive line under the debate:

*Digital reading is here to stay. No one, obviously, is calling to turn back the clock. [...] The key question [...] then becomes, How do we, as librarians, publishers, and software creators, work to preserve reading in all its richness in the digital age?*<sup>7</sup>

In her book *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*,<sup>8</sup> Maryanne Wolf offers a solution: as a civilization we need to learn to build a biliterate brain which will be able to switch between the two types of reading – the thoughtful, analytical mode, and reading for information and decision making.

It is only natural that the primary point of reference in terms of strategies for building a biliterate brain should be the children’s book market. Children are the most demanding readers, so authors, illustrators, and publishers have to ensure that their production is visually appealing, intriguing, and educational. It seems their pursuits have been successful:

*According to Scholastic’s 2015 Kids and Family Reading Report, 65 percent of kids between six and seventeen said that they would always want to read in print, an increase from 2012’s 60 percent. Contrary to what you might expect, it is the youngest readers who are most likely to read in print; 84 percent of six- to eight-year-olds did most of their pleasure reading in print, compared to 62 percent of fifteen- to seventeen-year-olds.*<sup>9</sup>

This hope-instilling result seems to be inseparably connected to the malleability of the children’s book, which is akin to the plasticity of the human brain. In her paper “Influence of the Digital Environment on Literature for Youth: Radical Change in the Handheld Book,” Eliza T. Dresang traces the way in which advances in technology have influenced

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<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey R. Di Leo, “The Cult of the Book – and Why It Must End,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 26, 2010. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/From-Book-to-Byte/124566>.

<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, 2.2.268-270.

<sup>7</sup> David M. Durant, *Reading in a Digital Age* (United States of America: ATG LLC (Media), 2017), accessed October 11, 2018, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cb/mpub9944117>.

<sup>8</sup> Maryanne Wolf, *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), 168-187.

<sup>9</sup> Kate Stoltzfus, [“Do ‘Digital Natives’ Prefer Paper Books to E-books?.”](#) *Education Week*, November 8, 2016.

experiments in the field of children's literature: under the pressure of the new media, children's books are acquiring certain characteristics. They become multilayered, nonlinear, nonsequential, graphic, and interactive.<sup>10</sup> Dresang views the visual nature of books as possibly the most fertile ground that reflects the changes happening in the book market in the conditions of the "digitized world with its readily available, often predominant, visual images."<sup>11</sup> Illustrations can be used to facilitate the interactivity, nonlinearity, and multimodality of digital reading practices. As such, illustrations become a bridge between the print and digital cultures. They can be both visually appealing and intellectually demanding.

In his book *Words About Pictures*, Perry Nodelman dwells on the complicated and profound relationship between the printed word and graphic representations, which results in a "unity on a higher level" (in Roland Barthes's words), where "the difference between the words and the pictures" creates "a significant source of leisure to the 'reader.'"<sup>12</sup> In modern books, authors and illustrators seem to achieve "a new level of synergy between words and pictures," where "words are becoming pictures, and pictures are becoming words."<sup>13</sup> This observation is relevant not only for children's books but also for the illustration in the realm of fiction in general. The modern illustration is a visual language *per se*. The conceptual illustration develops visual intelligence and analytical thinking through the usage of visual metaphors. A visual metaphor is, in Alan Male's words, "the description of an image that is imaginative, but not literally applicable ... [which] implies a way of depicting content by utilizing a number of ideas and methods of communication, illusion, symbolism and expressionism."<sup>14</sup> The idea of conceptual visual imagery first became popular in the USA in the 1950s, when social and cultural issues became more complex and "there seemed a need to present the viewer with much more enigmatic and ambiguous images that invited deeper interpretation."<sup>15</sup> This style has developed ever since to become the dominant style in modern illustration practice.<sup>16</sup> It has helped illustrations survive the avalanche of photographic images by setting a new goal for illustrators, which is "to be interpretative and to convey the 'texture' of a topic or idea rather than, like photography, present just the 'vener' or 'surface' of the

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<sup>10</sup> Eliza T. Dresang, "Influence of the Digital Environment on Literature for Youth: Radical Change in the Handheld Book," *Library Trends* 45 (1997): 645.

<sup>11</sup> Dresang, "Influence of the Digital Environment on Literature," 651.

<sup>12</sup> Perry Nodelman, *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 209.

<sup>13</sup> Dresang, "Influence of the Digital Environment on Literature," 652.

<sup>14</sup> Alan Male, *Illustration: A Theoretical and Contextual Perspective* (Lausanne: AVA Publishing, 2007), 54.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

subject.”<sup>17</sup> This dualistic nature of the conceptual illustration, which is both a source of visual pleasure and a trigger for more in-depth thinking, is a win-win solution for building the bi-literate brains.

The Ukrainian publishing house A-BA-BA-HA-LA-MA-HA, which specializes in children’s literature, has utilized the dual nature of illustration in one of their most unusual projects, an illustrated edition of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.<sup>18</sup> Like many other publishing houses around the world, A-BA-BA-HA-LA-MA-HA has been facing an existential ‘to be or not to be’ dilemma. A children’s book with its lavish illustrations and obvious educational merit has never been seriously denied its right to exist. However, in this digital age, when the position of a print book as a primary source of knowledge is continuously challenged, publishers have to justify releasing one more print book for adult readers, especially if it is a classical text. Shakespeare’s plays are available online in the original and in translation. Print versions have to offer some extra benefits to be deemed a timely and valuable cultural product. Books are forced to adapt to the competition in the contemporary reading environment, even if they are Shakespeare’s plays. A-BA-BA-HA-LA-MA-HA managed to effectively match the visuality and interactivity of the new media in their illustrated books, especially in their editions of Shakespeare, which stand out thanks to the high-quality paper, stylish design and, in the first place, to the conceptual illustrations.

In spite of the rapid spread of technology and the ongoing debate about its effects, the print book firmly holds its place in the hearts of the readers. David M. Durant has discovered surprising yet promising data that “even among K-12 students, whom one would think would be most receptive to primarily reading e-books, there is evidence that many still prefer print for certain forms of reading.”<sup>19</sup> It seems very likely that today, in the age of epistemological uncertainty, readers crave something solid that can be held in their hands, a material anchor to bring some stability into their rushing half-virtual lives. A book makes literature tangible: one delights in the smell of the paper, the roughness of the pages, the beauty of the artwork – in Vladislav Yerko’s case, an artwork so luxurious and detailed that it can keep the reader’s attention for a surprisingly long time. If after the intermedial turn, which has changed the Gutenberg galaxy forever, every piece of text needs to be accompanied by some visual object, such a complex and iconic text as *Hamlet* requires a very special visual

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Vil’yam Shekspir, *Hamlet, Prynts Dans’kyy* [Hamlet, Prince of Denmark] (Kyyiv: ABABAHALAMAHA, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Durant, *Reading in a Digital Age*.

accompaniment. The illustrations created by Vladislav Yerko, extremely detailed and stylistically polished, rich in semantic nuances and open to interpretation, hold the bar high.

Vladislav Yerko is one of the best Ukrainian illustrators, an artist with an international reputation. He has created illustrations for the children's books *The Snow Queen*, *The Tales of the Misty Albion*, and a series of books about Harry Potter, as well as such complex and demanding texts as novels by Paulo Coelho, Richard Bach, and many others. Thus, Yerko was a natural choice for the 'impossible mission' – illustrating the most provocative Ukrainian translation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In 2000, the literary magazine *Thursday* published Yurii Andrukhovych's rendition of Shakespeare's seminal tragedy, which was later released as a separate illustrated edition by A-BA-BA-HA-LA-MA-HA Publishers in 2008. It was the first translation of *Hamlet* into Ukrainian made in independent Ukraine. Andrukhovych had to deal with the weight of the Soviet tradition within which every translation was heavily ideologically charged. When the political situation changed, the new rendering was supposed to reflect the new scene without losing the poignancy of its forerunners. At the same time, it was expected to be an autonomous and self-sufficient aesthetic object. Andrukhovych's strategy of answering this challenge was one of creating an accomplished literary provocation.

In the critical tempest triggered by the publication, Andrukhovych's translation was accused of anti-intellectualism and oversimplification. The distinguished Ukrainian translator Lada Kolomiets called Andrukhovych's *Hamlet* "the new Ukrainian *Hamlet*, almost the same age as the Ukrainian high school and university students of the late 1990s – early 2000s who were not really intellectually demanding."<sup>20</sup> Andrukhovych's unorthodox version possesses a distinct idiosyncratic charisma. His translator's toolkit includes modernization and domestication, slang and obscene language, secondary wordplay, reminiscences, anachronisms and allusions to the Soviet and post-Soviet realia. The resulting controversial translation, at times bordering on a rewriting, is somewhat embarrassing, even scandalizing at times, but also witty and inventive. In an interview, Andrukhovych explains that in his work he relied on Stanisław Barańczak's English-to-Polish translation:

*It was Barańczak who gave me the idea: reading Shakespeare is fun. He destroyed the idea of the great classic Shakespeare, who stands on a high pedestal. He performed the dismantling of Shakespeare, and then the playwright appears before us as a modern idol of pop culture. Shakespeare is still a commercial director of the theater,*

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<sup>20</sup> Lada Kolomiyets', "Novyy Ukrayins'kyy "Hamlet": Perekladats'ka Stratehiya Yuriya Andrukhovycha" [New Ukrainian Hamlet: Translation Strategy of Yurii Andrukhovych]. *Mova i kul'tura*, 3(8) (2005), 349. The translation is mine.

*who is interested in seeing the public come to his performances. Therefore, his plays contain a lot of cheap humor.*<sup>21</sup>

This Greenblattian Shakespeare, a “self-made man”<sup>22</sup> and a “professional risk-taker,”<sup>23</sup> is indeed our contemporary.

Illustrating this literary provocation looks like a challenging project, yet Yerko insists that his work on *Hamlet* was quick and painless: “Sometimes the book seems to ‘fly out’ easily and with great pleasure, and for me, this is the most important thing. That’s how it happened with *Hamlet*,” he said in an interview.<sup>24</sup> But, in fact, it is hard to deny that *Hamlet* is a terribly difficult, almost impossible text for an illustrator. *Hamlet* is elusive, its mystery being an essential part of its irresistible charm. *Hamlet* is notorious for resisting definite interpretation. No wonder it has been viewed as a literary Sphinx. The number of separate riddles is great, indeed, including the most beloved ones, which deal with the role of the Ghost who could be either a loving father or a malevolent devil; the nature of Hamlet’s madness; Ophelia’s love for Hamlet and her death; Fortinbras’s rise to power, etc. This unquenchable mystery of *Hamlet* is an essential feature of the play, which has turned it into an ever-active generator of debate and new creative interpretations (as diverse as, e.g., Cavafy’s benevolent and wise Claudius,<sup>25</sup> the politician, and Updike’s charming and passionate Claudius the lover<sup>26</sup>). In his insightful account of *Hamlet*, Lev Vygotsky, an outstanding psychologist, writes:

*It is very easy to show that the puzzle is drawn in the tragedy itself, that the tragedy was deliberately constructed as a puzzle, that it must be interpreted and understood as a puzzle, unyielding to logical exegesis, and if the critics want to remove the puzzle from the tragedy, they deprive the tragedy of its essential part.*<sup>27,28</sup>

If the veil was drawn deliberately, by removing it one will destroy the innate intricate beauty of the play. The readers will be left alone with the one-dimensional and the ordinary. And

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<sup>21</sup> Kateryna Kyseleva, “[“Ty Bidnyy Pryvyd, Chy Proklyatyy Hoblin?” – Hamlet" v Perevode Andrukhovycha.](#)” [Hamlet in Translation by Yurii Andrukhovych], *Gazeta*, June 01, 2014. The translation is mine.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 12.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 351.

<sup>24</sup> Iryna Olykh, “[“Khudozhnik-Oformitel' Vladislav Yerko: ‘Vse, Chto Mne Khochetsya Delat', Ya Voploshchayu v Illyustratsyyakh k Kniham’](#)” [Illustrator Vladislav Yerko: Everything that I want to do I realize through my illustrations]. *Artchive*. 2015. The translation is mine.

<sup>25</sup> Constantine Peter Cavafy, “King Claudius,” in *Collected Poems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 183–186.

<sup>26</sup> John Updike, *Gertrude and Claudius* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Lev Vygotsky, *Psikhohohiya iskusstva* [The Psychology of Art] (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1986), 208.

<sup>28</sup> The translation is mine.

illustrating *Hamlet* would usually mean choosing one interpretation over an infinity of others, reducing the play's semantic riches to a single picture, even if a splendid one. So, the question arises of what an illustrator can do to respond to this challenge. Yerko's solution is imaginative and elegant. He chooses to follow *Hamlet's* lead and makes his pictorial work as enigmatic and many-layered as possible. The artist says, "almost any of his [Shakespeare's] characters can be turned from an angel to the devil, and vice versa."<sup>29,30</sup> Thus, ambivalence and ambiguity become the signifying features of his style, bringing in the interactivity and freedom of choice characteristic of the new media.

Yerko's personal visual language lacks such words as *obvious* and *predictable*. He mostly avoids pictorial clichés and prefers to portray the verbal element – metaphors, puns, and symbols. He clarifies his position in one of the interviews:

*In Shakespeare's plays, the main events occur not in action, but in pauses, characters, reflections of protagonists, in some ironic remarks. This is much more interesting to me than simply illustrating the action. I do not like being engaged in the cinema, although the illustration is in a way akin to the film adaptation.*<sup>31</sup>

One of the pet devices Yerko uses to play with the verbal element and make it palpable to the reader is the objectification of Shakespeare's symbols and metaphors, which are turned into visual metaphors that can be observed in some of his most intriguing illustrations. For example, one of the illustrations, showing the dead King lying peacefully on a tray amid meat and fish dishes, vegetables and fruit, is an inventive visual representation of Hamlet's bitter lines "the funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables."<sup>32</sup> Claudius and Gertrude painted as two naked bodies with bed sheets flapping in the wind instead of their heads and ruptures gaping in the places where their hearts should be are a visual allusion to the famous personification of "incestuous sheets."<sup>33</sup> The heads of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern become living representations of human hands playing a recorder from the iconic "Will you play upon this pipe?" dialogue.<sup>34</sup> The figures of two clowns in the graveyard scene literally grow out of the bulks of houses referring the viewer to the dark humour of the First Clown's riddle: "What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright,

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<sup>29</sup> Tamara Balaeva, Utomlyonnyi Skazkoy. Kak Vladislav Yerko Pytaetsya Vernut' Svoyo Detskoe Schastye [Tired of the Fairy Tale: How Vladislav Yerko is Trying to Get his Childhood Happiness Back], *Focus*, November 29, 2016, <https://focus.ua/culture/355324/>.

<sup>30</sup> The translation is mine.

<sup>31</sup> Olykh, "Khudozhnik-Oformitel." The translation is mine.

<sup>32</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, 1.2.187.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 1.2.162.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 3.2.380-402.

or the carpenter?”<sup>35</sup> Osric in his posture and complexion clearly resembles a waterfly that Hamlet compares him to.<sup>36</sup> Yerko succeeds in portraying Shakespeare characters without making them too visually definitive, and – as such – limiting. His symbolic take on the classical text is a rewarding strategy, which creates a synergy between the text and the image that ‘cooperate’ rather than simply follow the traditional complementary pattern.

Yerko does not only play with Shakespeare’s text but also follows the path of Andrukhovych and introduces his own innovations, for example, the multilayered image of the crown that opens the edition. Together with the background strokes, it resembles a crucifix, while the shadow of one of the crown prongs looks like a graveyard tombstone. In a symbolic way, this illustration introduces the theme of Hamlet’s messiahship and sacrifice, alluding to the famous lines: “The time is out of joint: O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!”<sup>37</sup> In Alan Male’s words, such enigmatic, ambivalent, multilayered images cannot fail to “invite deeper interpretation.”<sup>38</sup> Yerko’s manner of visualizing symbols and metaphors helps the artist pinpoint the play’s essential features – those which make it such a pivotal work for the Western canon, as Marvin Hunt points out:

*[T]he fact that it [the play] relocates reality from outside the human mind to within it, taking us from a medieval mindset that held reality to be objective, anterior, and superior to human experience, to a modern, or more precisely, an early modern view that holds reality to be in large part, if not entirely a function of subjective experience.*<sup>39</sup>

The result of Yerko’s objectification of symbols, metaphors, and wordplay is a bridge built over the gap between the word and the image. In his book *Writing for Art* (2010), Stephen Cheeke mentions the possible juxtaposition of the verbal as a spiritual element and “the carnality of the visual.”<sup>40</sup> In A-BA-BA-HA-LA-MA-HA’s edition, the borders between the two blur, and the relations between the text and the image become more complex. Three main semantic levels, three worlds, can be distinguished. First, the translation itself – with all the vulgarisms and obscene language, physicality and farce – seems to belong to the material world of flesh and bones. Second, Yerko’s illustrations relishing in the gloomy abundance of claws, bones, skeletons, and skulls represent the world of fine dust, the inevitable end of all mortals. His surreal black-and-white visual metaphors linger somewhere between the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 5.1.42.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 5.2.95.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 1.5.210.

<sup>38</sup> Male, *Illustration*, 54.

<sup>39</sup> Marvin Hunt, *Looking for Hamlet* (N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 8-9.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Cheeke, *Writing for Art: The Aesthetics of Ekphrasis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 6.

material and the spiritual without taking clear sides. Finally, what remains to be attributed to the world of spirit is the reader's idealized vision of Shakespeare's tragedy and its universal, timeless problematics, the way the post-Soviet audience often perceives and treats this iconic text like a cut-glass vase, an object to be placed on the highest shelf and never played with. But, in fact, the tragedy is much sturdier than the readers imagine. Bold interpretations like the one offered by the Andrukhovych-Yerko tandem create the inner tension and flammability necessary to strike the spark of dialogue and discussion, which keep the classical books alive. Yerko's approach focuses on the creative empowerment of the reader, and this strategy makes this edition a true child of the postmodern age.

Another winning strategy that Yerko uses to help the edition compete for the reader's attention in the digital age is detailization. *Hamlet* is very close to fairy tales in the way it functions in modern society as a wandering plot, a plot-scheme, a kind of a colouring book. It offers enough gaps for the recipients' imagination to fill in – with all kinds of remakes, sequels, prequels, details, etc. When introducing himself to the public, Pavel Tatarnikau, an illustrator from Belarus who has created a series of highly imaginative and atmospheric illustrations for the Belarusian print edition of *Hamlet*,<sup>41</sup> writes in his blog:

*I have liked to read and draw since I was a kid. My apologies to older artists, but sometimes I drew right in books. I just added details that from my childish point of view were missing in the illustrations. Luckily my parents did not forbid that kind of creativity. Probably, that was the start in profession of graphic artist. Here on the pages of this site you can see what has been done by now.*<sup>42</sup>

Stories like *Hamlet* give the readers and artists enough space to experiment, fantasize, create, and so to become a certain *perpetuum mobile* of interpretations. This is why the text of *Hamlet* has connected so well with Yerko's love of the detail, which the artist has fostered when working on his fairy tale illustrations. Details provide a whole microcosm for the children to live in and to co-create, and they help turn the book into a game, which can be equally interesting for the adult reader.

Another aspect of Yerko's multilayered visual narrative that aligns it with the contemporary cultural paradigm is the deliberate introduction of anachronisms (such as an electric lamp or glasses) and present-day allusions into the visual texture of the edition in line with Andrukhovych's original and controversial translation strategy. The authentic Ukrainian problems can be found in Andrukhovych's rendering of some of the culturally, socially or politically precarious fragments. Andrukhovych demonstrates that Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has

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<sup>41</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Minsk: Kavalier Publishers, 2002).

<sup>42</sup> Pavel Tatarnikov, "Author," [Pavel Tatarnikov's Professional Website](#), 2018.

become a kind of mirror and a magnifying glass for Ukrainian intellectuals. *Hamlet* has always been perceived by them as a tragedy of consciousness, a drama of a thinking individual who refuses to be broken by the regime. This is why in the Soviet and critical post-Soviet mentality *Hamlet* is closely associated with the celebrated actor Innokenty Smoktunovsky, who played the prince in Grigori Kozintsev's iconic film *Hamlet* (1964). Yerko uses this visual stereotype in his work to allude to the rich semantic palette of the film. The film manages to convey the atmosphere of isolation, ubiquitous distrust, and hopelessness associated with the persecution in repressive regimes directed against each manifestation of independent thinking. Amid this darkness, Hamlet, played by Smoktunovsky, seems to be the only ray of light. Yerko's illustrations build a powerful allusion to this subversive film, making use of the best achievements of the Soviet cinematographic art.

One more transmedial strategy used by Yerko is linking his illustrations to the intrinsic metatheatricality of the play and staging Shakespeare's drama on the page. This coup is both timely and logical. When it comes to *Hamlet*, one may easily forget that the tragedy undoubtedly belongs to the realm of the theatre. In the Ukrainian cultural continuum, its history as a play has been vexed and complicated, and, as a result, it has come to be considered as a piece of literature to be read. A-BA-BA-HA-LA-MA-HA's project offers an unexpected compromise. Their edition is undoubtedly a book, but with the intricate and jocund interplay between the text and the illustrations, this genuinely transmedial phenomenon resembles the theatre. The image of Shakespeare in the prompter's box, the constant repetition of the curtain motif, and the inventive visualization of the actors in the touring company intensify this impression, offering the reader the possibility of renewing the dialogue with the theatre.

This compelling offer has been taken by Dmytro Bohomazov, one of the most original directors in Ukraine and an adept of Meyerhold's symbolic (or conditional) theater. His performances are said to fascinate the spectator with "intellectual refinement, precise mathematical calculation, and beauty."<sup>43</sup> His *Hamlet* was first staged at the Odessa Academic Ukrainian Music and Drama Theatre named after V. Vasylyko on April 15, 2009. This is not the only production that uses Yurii Andrukhovych's translation, but it certainly is the most unconventional, and consequently, the most widely debated one.

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<sup>43</sup> Marysya Nikityuk, "Hamlet Dmytriya Bohomazova" [Dmitriy Bohomazov's *Hamlet*], *Teatre*, October 3, 2009, [http://teatre.com.ua/review/zloj\\_rok\\_gamlet/](http://teatre.com.ua/review/zloj_rok_gamlet/). The translation is mine.

This production is extremely visual: costumes and props play a crucial semantic role, and the elaborate black-and-white set design resonates with Yerko's illustrations. The first act features snow-white tones, which remind the audience of a hospital ward and white coats. White curtains hanging around the stage exhibit barely visible brown spots that look like blood that has been poorly washed off. But in this exquisite and ominous operation theater, the actors playing Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, and Ophelia, with their white costumes and headwear, disheveled dollish hair, restrained unnatural movements, and dark shadows around their eyes resemble patients rather than doctors. In the second part of the production, the symbolic palette changes and the actors, dressed in black, create a sharp contrast with the huge snow-white skull that was only slightly visible behind the curtain at the beginning of the play, but which now overpowers the stage. The skull, omnipresent in Yerko's illustrations, performs a similar function in the production, serving first as a foreboding of the imminent catastrophe and later on as a symbol of the inevitability of death. The black-and-white aesthetics of the costume and the set design are in line with the tradition of illustrating *Hamlet*.

In this production, the colour white has one more symbolic meaning, which is closely connected with the notions of transmediality and metatextuality. It is the colour of a page in a book. If A-BA-BA-HA-LA-MA-HA's edition was to a certain extent "theatrically" arranged, Bohomazov's production is made to resemble a book. In an interview, Olexander Druganov, the theatre designer, revealed the source of his inspiration to be book versions of *Hamlet*, especially the older ones, which have a long history.<sup>44</sup> In his visual work, the designer tried to create an impression that the spectators are turning over pages of an old book with beautiful illustrations. From here one can derive the black-and-white sharpness of the lines in the 'lithographic' set design. The costumes of Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, and Ophelia have their graphic doppelgangers painted on them. Words become images, illustrations function as a visual language, a translation turns into a performance, and a performance resembles a book – the ultimate transmediality is an organic part of the changes taking place in contemporary culture triggered by the dialogue between the media. Children perceive media convergence as a natural process when they simultaneously use a variety of digital toys to create one coherent narrative. Adults seem to be catching up, too. In this context, conceptual illustration offers a bridge that will help cross the digital divide, as it can offer visuality and multimodality, interactivity and nonlinearity, characteristic of the modern digital narratives.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

For modern-day publishers, illustration is a strategy to survive and thrive. Yerko's illustrations belong to the most demonstrative instances. The dialogue with the text, the theatre, the cinema, and other media that they trigger reflect Dan Lacy's famous observation that "connections replace collections in our thinking."<sup>45</sup> Thus, the drama of reading is enriched through hybridization, transmediality, and interactivity. By attracting new readers thanks to the appealing visuality, the publisher will eventually enlarge and extend the semantic field of *Hamlet* because new readers will bring along new, 'foreign', even 'alien' meanings which they will inevitably 'read into' the tragedy. But, at the same time, there is an unexpected, subtle connection with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* established by Yerko's work. The artist's beautiful illustrations turn the book into an *objet d'art*, bringing the reader back in time to the luxurious folios of the Renaissance, proving that the book is a possession to be treasured. A-BA-BA-HA-LA-MA-HA's project is a true oxymoron in the way it makes the old and the new work together, but this unlikely partnership seems to be quite productive for building the biliterate brain with its cognitive flexibility, insatiable curiosity, openness to dialogue and new perspectives, inclusiveness, and focus on connections.

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<sup>45</sup> Dan Lacy, "The Computer and the Print Media," *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 9 2, (1993): 15.

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