

The Kiosk Quest

Dear Superman! I'm writing to you because I like your comics. In these comics I like the pictures and I like your adventures. I like your strength and how you save people's lives. I admire your flying. I look at the pictures in your comics where you have extraordinary, wonderful adventures. I'll keep buying your comics to follow all your adventures. I bought the comic book no. 10 the other day, I really enjoyed it, all the experiences and your cape. This concludes my letter. Your admirer. [Excerpt from a letter to the editor, *Superman* No. 2/1992]

In the 1990s, it was difficult to come across a Ruch kiosk without at least a part of its window display dedicated to Western comic books. TM-Semic was responsible for the first invasion of those—mainly superhero stories—in our country. The company is still regarded emblematic of the comic book initiation for many aficionados of the medium. It would be an understatement, however, to claim that American superheroes found their way to Poland solely thanks to the popular “Semic”. Back in 1989, Alma Press released a volume celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Superman character. Still, it could hardly be considered a fitting tribute to the Western icon: printed on cheap paper in black and white, it was a poor substitute for the dazzling, colourful and flashy originals. The volume, titled *Superman: 50 Years* would not even qualify as an example of a fully coherent work, being a compilation of several separate stories from the American originals. In effect, it was a fairly haphazard assortment of plots and characters.

TM-Semic not only saturated (and ultimately oversaturated) the market with superhero themes, but also fostered the emergence of a local reading culture centred around Polish translations of the American comic books. The history of the publishing house, operating under the original name of TM-System Supergruppen Codem, began officially in June 1990, when the readers got hold of the first two titles: *The Punisher* and *Spider-Man*. The cover of the latter features a telling and symbolic linguistic error: “Welcome, Polish Readers, to the Marwel Universe!” Following the success of the “Marwel” stories, the publishing house quickly began to expand its offering with further titles, most notably *Superman* (1990) and *Batman* (1991), as well as *X-Men* and *Green Lantern* (1992). Between 1990 and 1993, the

number of comics published by TM-Semic soared from 18 to 140 titles per year. The company diversified beyond the superheroes, with *Barbie*, *The Moomins* or *Transformers* series, responding to trends in TV and VHS content.

The comics from TM-Semic are a prime example of the pop-cultural transformation in the press market that the kiosks of the “Ruch” chain saw in the 1990s. Next to VHS rentals and amusement arcades, they became another place of obligatory pilgrimage in the eyes of the young consumer. The uniqueness of those kiosk quests is tangible in the accounts of people who nostalgically recall that period. Though it sounds thoroughly exotic today, they celebrated the wait and the search. Most of the series published by TM-Semic came out monthly, so patience was required of anyone eager for the next issue of the comic they collected. That patience would be sorely tested, as the “coming next” at the end of each book would stoke the hype. Physical fitness was needed as well, because in order to lay your hand on the long-awaited copy, you had to visit one kiosk after another in the entire town. Today, the erstwhile treasure hunters see that effort as a reader’s pleasure where it was not the book itself that counted, but the time invested in finding it.

The colour teen magazines of the 1990s are often approached today as an expression of extreme infantilization, commercialization or outright tabloidization of the Polish press market, which resulted from the opening to Western trends. Although comics published by TM-Semic are also considered a part of it, the period was a real heyday of music and lifestyle magazines for older teenagers, such as *Bravo*, *Popcorn* and *Dziewczyna*, as well as gaming periodicals. When we look with some horror at the cover of the 1995 *Bravo* no. 23, which announces that “Johnny Depp opens his heart”, such a diagnosis may seem correct. Still, if the readers of those magazines were to be asked, we would find that the emotional-anatomical confessions from a famous actor was not the only thing they were looking for. They may be amusing anecdotes today, but various “Letters to the Editor” appeared even in Semic’s comic books. Correspondence in the “Arachnomail” (*Spider-Man*) or “Pages of Steel” sections (*Superman*) had an animating function, expanding and sustaining the discussion about popular culture phenomena via mail. However insignificant they seem now, they were anything but trivial for a child or teenager growing up in the 1990s.

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Thirty years ago, newspapers, magazines and comics were sold in kiosks, which were small, separate shops. You could buy superhero comics there, like *Superman*, *Batman*, and *Spiderman*. There were also comics about Barbie dolls and the Moomins. To find your favorite magazine or comic, you often had to visit many different kiosks. Magazines for young people had information about famous people. You could also write letters, which were then printed in the next issue.