

THE STRANGER AMONG US IN COMICS FROM *CUTEZĂTORII* MAGAZINE. CONSTRUCTING CHILDREN'S POLITICAL IDENTITIES THROUGH INTERACTION WITH THE OTHER IN COMMUNIST ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

A product of popular culture, comics are in tune with the societal context that created them. This article aims to present the hegemonic narrative, reading and messages of comics for communist pioneers in *Cutezătorii* [The Daring Ones] Magazine. To do so, the research material considered is made up of two comics focused on Otherness and Romanians' relationships with state institutions close to the political factor. Qualitative content analysis was performed on both text and images. Findings uncovered a partial view of communist Romania and of the workings of propaganda, because, beside their entertainment value, these comics can be read as political texts or statements. These comics show how the political elite perceived those who wanted to leave Romania (illegally) and those who, of foreign origin, visited this country. Both comics series glorify the collaboration with the Militia, the State Security, and their surveillance methods (through technology and responsible employees and citizens). Communist pioneers are plain clothes detectives who help these institutions to gather their information, catch criminals, and keep the society under control. Because cultural representations impacted the Romanian society in multiple ways during the totalitarian communist rule, a critical reconsidering of cultural products of the past is necessary in order to better understand the present.

Keywords: communist propaganda, official visual discourse, edutainment, emigration, foreigners

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INTRODUCTION

Since their appearance in 1827 in Switzerland, comics underwent many changes and served various functions (Niță & Ciubotariu, 2010). Romanian socialist comics were to educate children as communists and to raise their awareness regarding the concerns of the political system. Two of these concerns were emigration and visits to Romania by foreigners. These comics are also called "actuality comics" (Niță & Ciubotariu, 2010, p. 76), a realist genre focusing on the daily lives of people, in this case of children in socialist Romania.

This article aims to present the hegemonic narrative, reading and messages of comics for communist pioneers in *Cutezătorii*¹ [The Daring Ones] Magazine (Consiliul Național al Organizației Pionierilor, 1967-1989).² This magazine was edited by Consiliul Național al Organizației Pionierilor [The National Council of the Pioneers' Organisation] in Romania and therefore was a propaganda³ mass media tool addressed to children and youth. *Cutezătorii* Magazine, read by children between 8 and 15 years old, was distributed through schools and was expected that its message was efficient. It was an ideologically shaped official mass media product to educate children first and entertain them only secondarily. Children were trained to become good citizens and communist ideology was a prerequisite of this. The national-communist period of Ceaușescu's regime and its values are reflected in the contents of *Cutezătorii* Magazine, which overlaps this timespan entirely (1967-1989). Its values should have been integrated not only in the Romanians' work, but in their entire lives, in order to build the socialist society. Although the 1980s represented the propaganda climax in Romania, the care for including communist values in mass-media for children was manifested by Ceaușescu and other leaders early on (cf. the dialogue between Ceaușescu and other Romanian communists, published in *revista 22*, no. 268/2009, quoted in Niță & Ciubotariu, 2010, pp. 258-260).

From a geographical perspective, I was interested in the places and landscapes pictured in Romanian communist comics. Which were these? And what were their roles? Besides the spatial aspect, I was interested in the power relations among the characters of comics, because their analysis could uncover the various roles of the human resource in the Romanian socialist society. Such roles could shed a light on societal processes such as territorial development, the construction of the Romanian nation, spatial mobility, gender relationships, perception of different values, etc.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A product of popular culture, comics are in tune with the societal context that created them. Being context specific, if created to educate, socialist comics manipulated the readers through official mass media tools. Such instrumentalisation of comics in socialist Romania has been researched by historians, geographers and by those interested in the history of comics in this country (Niță, 1992; Niță & Ciubotariu, 2010; Precup, 2015; Hațegan, 2016, 2017; Ilovan, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

Previous studies have demonstrated that comics, through their drawings, contributed to socialist territorial identities defined by societal modernisation and work (cf. Ilovan, 2020a, 2020b, 2021), as well as to forging the identity of the communist imagined community (Precup, 2014; Hațegan, 2016, 2017). Powerful ideology-driven messages were transmitted through the written text and visual imagery which made up the comics. This visual-verbal interplay had educational and indoctrination functions, successfully instrumentalised by propaganda, as

¹ The title *Cutezătorii*, in Romanian, will be used further on in this article.

² This weekly magazine is first published on the 1st of October 1967. It replaces *Cravata Roșie* [Red Tie] and *Scînteia Pionierului* [Pioneer's Spark], which were organs of the Central Committee of the Working Youth Union (Niță & Ciubotariu, 2010, p. 60, p. 64).

³ "Information, ideas, opinions, or images, often only giving one part of an argument, that are broadcast, published, or in some other way spread with the intention of influencing people's opinions" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022).

comics in *Cutezătorii* Magazine were very popular and widely distributed throughout the Romanian school system (Cioroianu, 2010, pp. 8-9; Niță & Ciubotariu, 2010, p. 86).

In such a context, during the Romanian socialist period, certain comics lost some of their playfulness and took over the seriousness of the political message. These comics were transformed into complex texts whose representations (visual and written) were constructed by communist propaganda content creators. As a result, the political discourse in comics was quite transparent due to the intertextuality characteristic of the political (visual) discourse during that period (i.e., messages in comics were reinforced by the same or similar messages in other sources, cf. Dumănescu, 2015; Georgescu, 2015, 2019; for the role of intertextuality and the coherence of the visual discourse based on school textbooks and picture postcards, cf. Ilovan & Merciu, 2021).

However, as a field, research on comics is quite recent in Geography (cf. Dittmer, 2014; Peterle, 2015) and comics started to be considered cultural materials to analyse and discuss in critical geography in a trial of deconstructing power relations and dominant narratives within a certain society. Studies on comics as representations underlined their potential for our understanding of past and present experiences (Dittmer, 2010; Ilovan, 2020a, 2020b, 2021). These experiences might have referred to space, as well as to historical periods and political systems. Comics – as cultural artefacts resulted from a process of knowledge production – reflected and reproduced power relations in the respective society (cf. Hall, 1997a, 1997b; Rose, 2014). During the Romanian socialism, comics contributed to the socialist visual culture and the new socialist order and world (Ilovan, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

In fact, geographers considered comics as research material starting with the 1980s (Eisner, 1985). However, this research on the relationship between communist propaganda and comics as a form of edutainment is quite new in Romanian Geography and History (cf. Precup, 2015; Hațegan, 2016, 2017; Ilovan, 2020a, 2020b, 2021). The socialist society inspired these comics in the sense that their fictional contents was constructed to answer the utopic objectives of the political system, advertising them (Niță & Ciubotariu, 2010). Still, comics, as any narrative texts, are performed through each new reading. Nevertheless, the cultural embeddedness of the narratives in comics cannot be ignored. Comics are “narrative artefacts” (Bal, 2017, p. xx), a form of art belonging to popular culture. Thus, in comics, perceptions of the social realities resonate with the specific cultural background, despite cultural transfers and influences (Magnussen, La Cour, & Platz, 2015; Salazar-Anglada, 2019; Ciupală, 2021). As such, comics emphasise the traits of a society's cultural evolution, the ideas and circumstances that influence the production of popular culture.

In Romania, socialism and comics (1948-1989) is considered the second period in the history of comics, after the Golden Age of comics (1891-1947) (Niță & Ciubotariu, 2010; Ciubotariu, 2021). Some key features of this second period were pointed out by studies on socialist comics; the contribution of these comics to re-writing the history of previous periods was underlined (Precup, 2015; Hațegan, 2017), as well as the coherence of their visual discourse with communist propaganda (Ilovan, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

At this point, it is relevant to underline the way we used the concepts of *socialism* and *communism*. *Socialism* is a social and economic doctrine that requires public ownership or control over property. Thus, individuals live and work in cooperation, sharing what they produce due to having contributed to its creation. As a result, society is the owner or controller of property for the benefit of its members. *Communism* is a form of socialism. The communists observed Karl Marx's doctrine of revolutionary socialism. It is seen as a promise of a future

classless society. Considering this, socialism, rather than communism, was a lived experience (Jelača & Lugarić, 2018, p. 2).

METHODOLOGY

The research material of this article is made up of two comics about the Other published in *Cutezătorii: La bradul singuratic* [At the Lonely Fir Tree] (13 episodes), script by Ludovic Bokor and Val Dumitrescu, drawings by Viorica Mihăiescu; *Urmărirea* [The Chase] (9 episodes), script by Tudor Negoită, drawings by Albin Stănescu. The first was published in 1973 and the second started the same year and continued in 1974. Out of the 21 comics I identified concerning work and development (cf. Ilovan, 2020b), the two selected ones focused on Otherness⁴ and the relationships with state institutions close to the political factor. Both are serial comics.

Visual approaches to cultural products have become more frequent in Cultural Geography as humanist geographers enquired steadily the relationship between culture, space, and power. And the image, as the main attraction of comics, underwent readings influenced by readers' background. Therefore, the process in which meaning is constructed for comics is an open or never-ending one, adding experimentation with every new reading. However, the historical and geographical circumstances of socialist Romania are well-defined, and our reading of the respective comics uses the lens of the period: the messages of comics were to be interpreted in a certain way (i.e., according to the cultural and political background of the respective period), as certain symbols and messages were meaningful only for Romanian readers during communism.

Considering the above, *qualitative content analysis* was performed on both text and images. The 'code' of communist propaganda was imposed over the 'code' of comics, the latter translated into the interplay of drawings and words which make *the narrative text of comics*. To explain my methodological approach to comics as research material, I include below the definition of two concepts that I use to describe the analysed comics: the *text* and the *narrative text*:

"[...] a *text* is a finite, structured whole composed of signs. These can be linguistic units, such as words and sentences, but they can also be different signs, such as cinematic shots and sequences, or painted dots, lines, and blots. The finite ensemble of signs does not mean that the text itself is finite, for its meanings, effects, functions, and backgrounds are not. It only means that there is a first and a last word to be identified, a first and a last image of a film, a frame of a painting" (Bal, 2017, p. 5).

"A *narrative text* is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee ("tells" the reader, viewer, or listener) a story in a medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof" (Bal, 2017, p. 5).

An imposed script to be used in comics to educate the young (i.e., the 'code' of communist propaganda) was pointed out by previous research by historians and geographers (Precup, 2015, p. 99; Hațegan, 2016, 2017; Ilovan, 2020a, 2020b, 2021). *The visual and linguistic form of comics make it a hybrid narrative structure*, even more powerful because of *the interplay of the two sign systems in the production of meaning: of language and of visual images*. I show how the messages of propaganda are embedded in comics, through *deconstructing them by means of visual and discourse analysis*. Thus, one can see how the drawings in comics add to the meaning

⁴ "Being or feeling different in appearance or character from what is familiar, expected, or generally accepted" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022).

of the written text. The “anchorage”, defined by Barthes (1977) as a process through which the meaning of a written text is restated and built on by images, is realised in comics. Such a ‘natural’ process in comics was instrumentalised by propaganda to strengthen its message. Therefore, analysing the image of comics is necessary and possible in connection to the social, cultural, economic, and political context of its production and consumption. Moreover, critical visual analysis is a must especially for comics having a propagandistic intention. In addition, I also realised a description of the plot in the two comics in order to familiarise the reader with topics, characters, and messages.

In the same vein, it is important to emphasise that because comics can be defined as a mixture of literary text and visual art, they cannot be included into a positivistic scientific discourse. Reading, a subjective activity, is made of “interpretative moments” (Bal, 2017, p. 6). Nevertheless, interpretation, although free and unlimited, is not arbitrary because it interacts with a text (Bal, 2017, p. viii). In this theoretical and methodological framework, my reading is a proposed one for the chosen comics, based on several concepts: representation, discourse, and propaganda. I considered these concepts “as intellectual tools for interpretation” (Bal, 2017, p. 3).

RESULTS

Cutezătorii publishes a variety of ideologically correct educational narratives and comics are one of them. These comics host identity and spatial representations that construct the ideologically-shaped image of socialist Romania and of the New Man.⁵ Through their messages, the young pioneers are included in the wider imagined community of the communists (cf. Anderson, 1991).

In the two comics I selected, the topic of communist work (i.e., work in service of the Communist Party and the homeland) is defined by including collaboration with state institutions. Such collaboration is a patriotic duty as presented by their stories below.

La bradul singuratic [At the Lonely Fir Tree]

Six boys spend part of their summer holiday camping on a hill, nearby a lonely fir tree. They are Communist pioneers who enjoy reading *Cutezătorii* Magazine. These children intersect the plans of a couple of adults, foreigners (a woman and a man from abroad), who are in search of a treasure exactly in the area where these boys have their tents. The couple is portrayed near their car, afraid of children's interference with their plans. The boys suspect unusual activity when they find the couple's device for communication in the fir tree: “There is something of espionage here”; “From the valley, the camp is spied on by two strangers”. They decide to keep an eye on the area.

The story has elements that makes it entertaining for readers: a spy story where boys play detective, with the help of their dog and a trained pigeon (Figure 1). At the same time, knowledge of Physics helps them build devices for sending signals or alarm messages to their families in the nearby settlement. These boys are described as ingenious and courageous.

⁵ “[...] the so-called New Man is defined by three criteria: political (loyalty to the Party), technical (exceptional merit in warfare or productivity) and social (coming from or considered close to the masses). Their typical figures are soldiers, farmers, workers, or even teachers” (Gibert & Peyvel, 2020, p. 266).

Next, through the abstract presented at the beginning of the second episode, the readers are informed that an old jeweller is in touch with the two foreigners. Also, in the first episode, we see that the jeweller is watched by a man who tries to find out the connection between him and the foreign woman. The woman, the only female character to play a role in the story, is presented as worried that their plans are going to be hindered by the children (Figure 2). Pioneers soon label the foreigners as spies, after proved to be Western spies. Another woman who appears in the comics, in one image only, is the seller at the newspapers stand, where pioneers buy the *Cutezătorii* Magazine, in Romanian and Hungarian, both ethnicities being represented in their group of pioneers who camp at the lonely fir tree.

The woman is perseverant and keeps in touch with the jeweller who helps in their search. From the jeweller, we find out the connection between her and Romania: she had an uncle who was in this country in 1944 and was as cautious as she was – he hid a treasure before leaving for Germany. This piece of information offers guidance in further “reading” the intentions of the foreign woman and man. Other comics in *Cutezătorii* exploited the topic of the year 1944 and Romanians’ fight against the German troops who left for Germany stealing from Romania’s valuables and heritage. The topic of the anti-fascist fight reflected in socialist comics had already been analysed (Hațegan, 2016).⁶

Also, at this point, readers might suppose that the man watching the house of the old jeweller is in fact from the Romanian Militia or State Security (the Romanian political police). In fact, in an abstract, the readers’ intuition is confirmed by the information provided: “The woman in the company of the foreign man is visiting the old jeweller and agrees with him on another way to keep in touch. The Militia continues to supervise the jeweller’s house”. The next image shows how the boys work to keep proof intact, thus, unknowingly collaborating with state institutions or, at least, paving the way to protect Romania’s heritage and interests (Figure 3).

Readers see that pioneers know what to do to preserve their safety and write to their parents to announce the Militia because strangers are spying on their camp (Figure 4). Also, another boy, outside the camp, who intercepted the letter, decides to go to the Militia (Figure 5). In the last two images of episode six, we see, in parallel, how the two teams (pioneers and Militia on one hand, and the foreigners, on the other) take decisions. For the first time, readers learn the name of the woman – a foreign name: Anne. This woman is a main character, a role that women in comics rarely have (cf. Ilovan, 2021). However, she is a malefactor, according to the others’ perception in the comics: pioneers and Militia.

While the two foreigners meet at their hotel, making sure that they had not been followed, the Militia send a lieutenant on mission: “a good sportsman and a good radio operator” (Figure 6). The pioneers and the undercover Militia man collaborate (Figure 7), which is easy because the children are part of their school pioneers’ club titled “The Friends of the Militia”. Readers are also ensured that pioneers’ suspicions are real and serious: the woman is a foreigner, and she is not friendly: “I tell you with a stick... get out of here!”; “The lady is pretty! But she spoke as if she had a dictionary in her hands”.

While the jeweller gives the foreigners a sketch where the treasure is marked, the narrator informs that: “The cooperation begins between those in the camp and the Militia officers from the headquarters”. Next, readers see that the jeweller, who helps the foreigners in their search, is paid by the woman for his services (Figure 8). In addition, to mislead, dressed up like a forest

⁶ On the 23rd of August 1944, Romania turned against Nazi Germany, and many fled for abroad to avoid the Soviet troops, invading the country.

ranger, the foreign man sets fire to the forest and keeps pioneers busy while he is searching for the treasure (Figure 9). He is described as the “woman’s accomplice”. The foreigner is thus presented as a bad person who does not care about nature, about the common good, but he is fighting for personal gain (Figure 10). One boy is caught by fire because of the malefactors (as the foreigners are described). He is saved by the Militia lieutenant and a colleague. Then, the foreigners are finally caught by the Militia.

In the end, readers find out that the treasure consists of golden coins. The male foreigner also points out “If we hadn’t found the treasure, we would have crossed the border with the fishing rod. In it we placed the several coins left by our uncle...” Now we learn that the foreigners are the niece and nephew of a man who fled from Romania in 1944 and left behind, buried in the woods, a box of golden coins. The pioneers and the Militia retrieve the box, celebrate their success and the boys are awarded a medal and a diploma for having done their patriotic duty (Figure 11). A large community celebrates the victorious ending of the comics and the idea that moral values will always win if children and political state institutions collaborate. The leitmotif of pioneers’ bravery is exploited in this comics series where children fight enemies (i.e., the Other), as defined by communist ideology.



Figure 1: Two foreigners having a secret in Romania – probably a spy story⁷

Source: *At the Lonely Fir Tree*, episode 1, *Cutezătorii*, no. 25/1973



Figure 2: The country through foreign eyes⁸

Source: *At the Lonely Fir Tree*, episode 2, *Cutezătorii*, no. 26/1973

⁷ Something is whizzing!... Do you hear that, Ioșca?; Yes, Nelule! It sounds like a small engine or an aquarium vibrator...; They are about to discover the battery of our transmitter; Nobody is visiting the old man. It may be that the woman visited him only by chance; Yes, I hear you...; There is something of espionage here.

⁸ These children will prevent us from looking...; Don't worry. They won't stay only in their tents.



Figure 3: The good and the bad in action⁹

Source: *At the Lonely Fir Tree*, episode 4, *Cutezătorii*, no. 28/1973

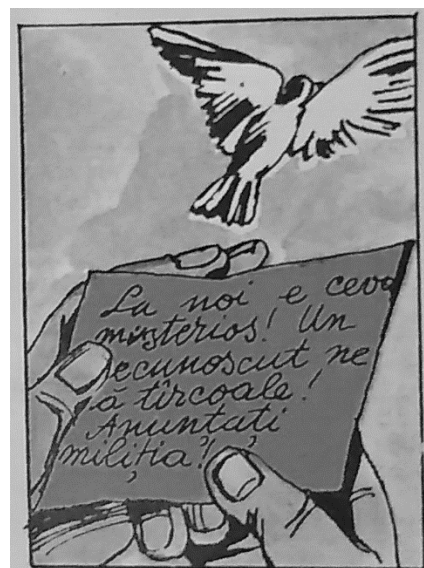


Figure 4: Children do their patriotic duty of informing the Militia¹⁰

Source: *At the Lonely Fir Tree*, episode 6, *Cutezătorii*, no. 30/1973

⁹ I told you. There is no joking with these kids! Their dog identified me. If I hadn't sprinkled the pepper dust...; You should try again. There's something wrong with the battery; It is dangerous to visit you at home. Until we check the battery, you will use this portable device to communicate with us; I like it, delicate like a jewel! This caution reminds me of your late uncle when he was here in '44; The old jeweller received a suspect visitor... I will continue to keep the house under surveillance...; ...We clean the dust, we pour a little gypsum, we place the little sticks and...; But before that, we surround the footprint with the dominoes...

¹⁰ There is something mysterious here! A stranger is hovering around us! Inform the Militia!



Figure 5: Raising awareness of the danger posed by foreigners to Communist pioneers¹¹

Source: *At the Lonely Fir Tree*, episode 6, *Cutezătorii*, no. 30/1973



Figure 6: The foreigners' naivety contrasted with the Romanians' preparedness¹²

Source: *At the Lonely Fir Tree*, episode 7, *Cutezătorii*, no. 31/1973

¹¹ I was using a slingshot and... On Dâmbul cu Brazi there is a group of pioneers. They may be in danger... There I saw some strangers; All right, Iepurilă. Don't tell anyone; Anne! Good news. The battery in the fir tree is OK again!; Great! Let the old man know that we shall communicate through the transmitter.

¹² Has anyone followed you?; This is why I was to town... To convince myself. We shouldn't worry!; Who do you propose to send on mission?; Send the young lieutenant Rotaru. He's a good sportsman and a good radio operator.



Figure 7: State Security: A male dominated affair¹³

Source: *At the Lonely Fir Tree*, episode 9, *Cutezătorii*, no. 33/1973

¹³ ... Then we should search in peace...; No way!...; Nelu! You organise the watch and you Ioșca take Rex and go to the observation spot. Nobody enters the camp without the password "The hawk". The foreigners are in alert. They used the transmitter to get in touch with the old jeweller. They are preparing to hit. We are prepared...; Hello! 202 calling!... Continue to keep under surveillance the house of the old man. We shall keep you updated...; Here is 703! Roger that. I will act as instructed. Here is calm; With this salt in his eyes, he will not be able to run...; Let me see you know arch what you are capable of...; I will replace his hat with this basket...



Figure 8: Simple things hide treacherous behaviour¹⁴

Source: *At the Lonely Fir Tree*, episode 10, *Cutezătorii*, no. 34/1973



Figure 9: The evil woman as leader¹⁵

Source: *At the Lonely Fir Tree*, episode 10, *Cutezătorii*, no. 34/1973

¹⁴ Here you are, Anne. Nobody will guess what is there in the fishing rod... If you discover the rest...; We will try just now. We've found the right place. Anyway, for what you've done so far here is your reward; All the best with fishing, Anne!; Good bye and see you soon...

¹⁵ You can act. All is calm at the old man; I am leaving. I will scatter the children and take the treasure...



Figure 10: When children and the forest are in danger, the evil is obvious¹⁶

Source: *At the Lonely Fir Tree*, episode 10, *Cutezătorii*, no. 34/1973



Figure 11: Pioneers celebrated for doing their patriotic duty¹⁷

Source: *At the Lonely Fir Tree*, episode 13, *Cutezătorii*, no. 37/1973

Urmărirea [The Chase]

In the same year of *Cutezătorii*, another comics series explores the theme of the stranger and the cooperation of children with police: this time with the political police – the State Security. Gold could be stolen. A couple wants to take with them when leaving Romania for abroad, and

¹⁶ That's it! You will run to put out the fire and I will take the treasure...; The forest ranger puts us to test. Fire... Stop the fire...

¹⁷ Comrade major, I report: The Town Council of the Pioneers' Organisation prepared the celebration for 12 o'clock...; Let's make a rehearsal, before the celebration...; Let's hurry!...; Hurray!...; Comrade delegate, the team on Dâmbul cu Brazi did their duty...; I congratulate you and I award you the "Daring One" medal and diploma!; We are all in the photo! Look, there is Tomi!...; But what? You can't see me, Iepurilă? From now on I am also in your team!...; So long boys!; Good bye!; We'll be there to watch you during the match...

for good. The man who prepares to leave the country may be a teacher “And he no longer gives any private lessons, because he leaves the country [...] They say they leave only for a trip, but... they sold all their furniture”. For sure, the man belongs to another socio-professional category than that of a plain worker. He might be an intellectual and thus it has a smaller symbolic value than the worker in the socialist society. It seems that people who leave Romania are not to be trusted, they are traitors. They had hidden gold in their car and transport a microfilm which is worth a fortune (Figure 12).

For several days the couple sleep in their garage. The readers see that the wife is more cautious, but her husband is authoritative and dismisses her worries, commanding her to prepare the food and stop boring him. He wants to leave the country as he already has a passport. It seems that having a passport is not an easy thing. In fact, his remark points out to the “near-impossibility of obtaining a passport” (cf. Precup, 2015, p. 108) (Figure 13).

A neighbour, who is a boy, proposes to a girl who assists him, to go together to the State Security and report what they know. The girl hesitates and then refuses to go with him. From this moment, she no longer appears in the plot. Instead, the boy made the right decision: “Radu helped the Security to discover several individuals who wanted to get a microfilm out of the country” (Figures 14 and 15). Readers learn that the State Security collaborate with the Militia to stop felons who want to cross the state border (Figure 16). Colours used in the drawing show that the boy is part of the team together with the State Security and the Militia. The felons are coloured differently (Figure 17, visible in the coloured original).

In the last image (Figure 18), we see the boy and the major from the State Security shaking hands and praising each other. The boy is congratulated for having informed the political police and the message is that pioneers should follow this example, learn to listen and collaborate with this institution.



Figure 12: Spying on neighbours who are very worried about being caught to emigrate¹⁸

Source: *The Chase*, episode 3, *Cutezătorii*, no. 52/1973

¹⁸ I'm afraid, Alec. What if Savu was followed?; Savu is not stupid. He didn't get close to the block of flats at all. And the little fool...; "The little fool" is you; Hush!; What if they check our package and discover the microfilm?; If they were to discover anything, they would more easily find the gold hidden in the car chair... You want to leave that here, too?!

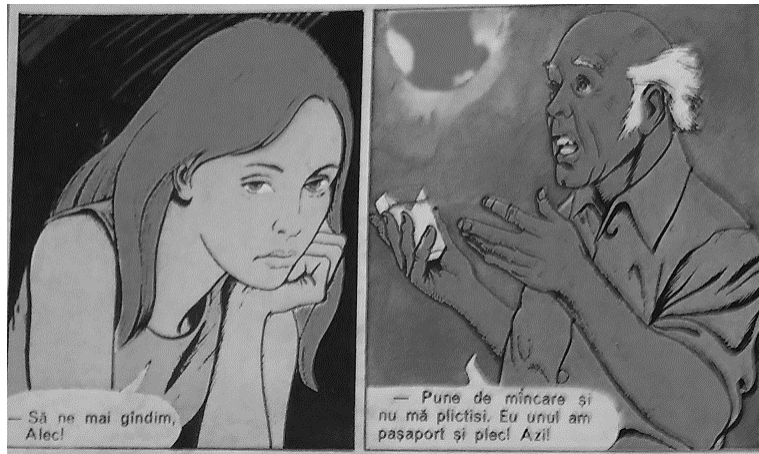


Figure 13: Gender relations¹⁹

Source: *The Chase*, episode 4, *Cutezătorii*, no. 1/1974



Figure 14: Informing the friendly State Security²⁰

Source: *The Chase*, episode 5, *Cutezătorii*, no. 2/1974

¹⁹ Let's think again, Alec!; Pack the food and stop boring me. I have a passport and I will leave! Today!

²⁰ I am major Petrescu; I am Radu Dima. Comrade major, you must catch him before...

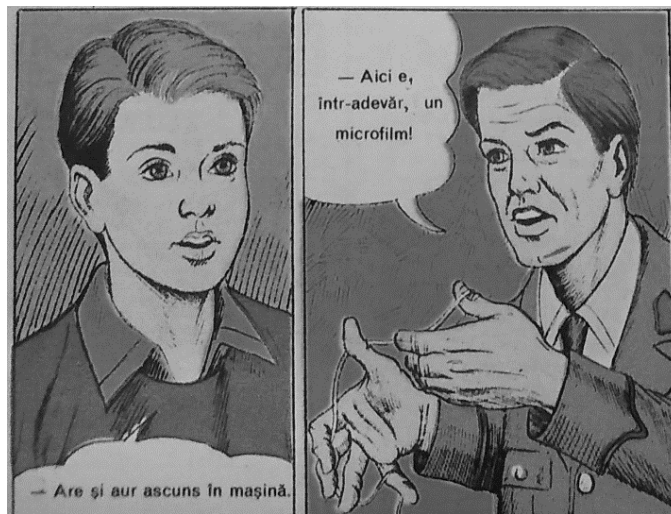


Figure 15: The valued patriotic duty²¹

Source: *The Chase*, episode 5, *Cutezătorii*, no. 2/1974



Figure 16: The boy helps State Security and Militia to catch (illegal) emigrants²²

Source: *The Chase*, episode 8, *Cutezătorii*, no. 5/1974

²¹ It's true, yes, there is a microfilm here!

²² They tricked us. They were not from the Security; My ID. Where do you go?; On a trip. Our passports are all right; The gold is hidden in the car chair, comrade major!; And the package with the microfilm?; They have taken it from us! The ones in the blue Ford! When you were coming, they...; "Egret" I am the "Seagull"! Stop the blue Ford that heads to the border!; Turn around!; Quick! We lose them.

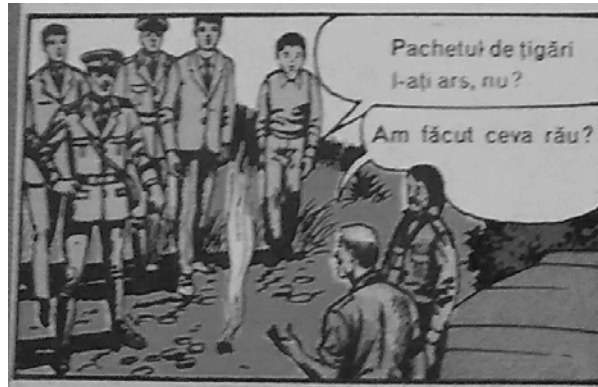


Figure 17: The boy pioneer interrogating the felons²³

Source: *The Chase*, episode 9, *Cutezătorii*, no. 6/1974



Figure 18: Serving the country is both useful and entertaining²⁴

Source: *The Chase*, episode 9, *Cutezătorii*, no. 6/1974

DISCUSSION

Besides their artistic value, socialist comics advocate for a certain message. Therefore, they possess an explanatory power of past events and, by studying comics, we can uncover the mechanisms employed to construct official discourses during a certain period (Ciupală, 2021). Time, place, actors, and events make up the comics. The contents of the comics are built up considering certain values that are 'translated' into the story through a series of events. Also, a point of view is chosen when presenting events – and this choice involves subjectivity. The narrator (whose voice is heard in the abstracts of each episode) and the characters are the

²³ You've burnt the cigarette package, correct?; Have we done anything wrong?

²⁴ You had a great idea to replace the package where the microfilmed had been placed; The chase was like in a movie, comrade major.

conveyors of the propaganda message. The assertion at the end of comics is usually an argumentative one (both visually and linguistically), reaching the conclusion of the story based on moral values, which are related to the activities of the Communist Party. This is how the ideological value of the narrative can be assessed (in this case, as stronger than the aesthetic value).

The Other in *At the Lonely Fir Tree* are the two foreigners, descendants of a fascist and thief. In *The Chase* the Other is the couple who wants to emigrate, represented as thieves or traitors themselves. In both comics, the Other is also represented by the gendered minority of girls and women.

The Other and territorial mobility

People and space are represented in an ideological manner. Ideological education is enabled by the structure of the plot in comics, based on antagonistic pairs (the good and the evil). However, the fight between morally contrasting categories is a real one in comics, thus clearly depicting the friends and enemies of the working people, in the public arena. The pioneers' political identity is also defined clearly because they are on the same side with the state institutions. Their correct political choice is validated by the Militia and State Security. The friend-enemy logic is transferred from the political life to the plot of the comics, where characters' political identities are created and assessed having as criterion the communist ideology (cf. Morar-Vulcu, 2007). According to this logic, the emigrant is a symbol of the West and pioneers are a symbol of the East. The clash between the two is a micro-representation of the West-East confrontation during the Cold War (cf. also Štefančík & Nemcová, 2015). In fact, characters and places were carefully chosen in order to be representative of the reality (camping in nature, the neighbourhood with new blocks of flats) and of the favoured and correct behaviours (brave pioneers who collaborate with the Militia and the political police – the State Security).

These comics try to rehabilitate the image of the Militia and of State Security in the 1970s. Their work is presented as one which requires knowledge and skills, and moral superiority. Therefore, because of the required competences and usefulness, their work should be perceived as a respectable one. The Militia and the State Security are presented as defenders of the country, of its interests and stability against outside and inside risk factors that could jeopardise its political, social, and economic position. In these comics, such factors are presented as foreign or strange: people from abroad who come to Romania to steal from the heritage of the country, and people from inside, whose theft is multiple. The latter want to take out of the country a microfilm (secrets of state, valuable economic information?) and gold (even if they are the owners, such practice is illegal).

The valuable microfilm stands for sensitive information and emigrants are suspected to leak such information in various ways when leaving the country. In that sense, the microfilm is also a metaphor for the regime's fear of not being able to suppress actions that lead to information leaks to the enemy of the people and of the socialist establishment: the foreigners. By leaving the country for good, under the pretext of a trip, emigrants are also against the state politics regarding the increase of Romania's population (i.e., by restricting emigration and forbidding abortion). Moreover, trips abroad were discouraged and restricted because thus Romanians could, if not emigrate, compare the Romanian realities with those from other socialist countries and from the West. Therefore, emigration should be understood as crime and betrayal (Horváth,

2009). Emigration is per se a theft – in this comics series, it is associated with the criminal act of stealing.

Emigration would also negatively impact the image of Romania abroad, because of the political and socio-economic reasons for such a decision. It is treated as a state matter, not a private decision, as we understand that people declare to travel as tourists, but in fact remain illegally abroad and this is a criminal behaviour under Romanian law during that period. Considering all this, beginning as early as 1962, the State Security was involved in issuing visas for Romanian citizens to leave the country (Dobre et al., 2011, p. 29, quoted in Budeanca, 2017, p. 380). One of its objectives was to prevent emigration. Wanting to emigrate and being in contact with foreigners were policed by State Security and this act was justified, as these comics support. Thus, the young were encouraged to treat foreigners with suspicion and to be close to the communist authorities. In this vein, moral inferiority is associated with different ideological opinions from the official ones.

In *The Chase*, the plot aims to support the discourse of limiting people's freedom (to move) by underlining dangerous or subversive behaviour on behalf of those who want to leave the country. At the same time, readers should perceive as a (socialist) normality the fact that some people are spied on by fellow citizens. Such behaviour is motivated by care for the public good and the homeland. Readers can see that not all understand to collaborate with the State Security as a patriotic duty (i.e., the girl who spied on her neighbours, but then refused to take the information further), and thus lose the chance to be congratulated and their services to the country to be acknowledged. Communist arguments are underlying the development of the plot in the two studied comics. Anti-emigration propaganda is at work in *The Chase* (a title that is unintentionally representative of what it means to emigrate from Romania). Although the foreigner is the clear-cut enemy, such as in *At the Lonely Fir Tree*, this enemy can be also a fellow citizen whose behaviour, if watched carefully, can betray inimical intentions (such as that of emigrating). Through emigration the political class is defied, and the working people are despised. Therefore, the emigrant is pictured as a traitor of the socialist ideology, the enemy of the entire socialist society.

The comics series contribute to painting a distorted image of emigrants and visitors in Romania. By contrasting their motivation to leave (which is not mentioned, except for the act of stealing from the country), with the advantages of living in socialist Romania. These advantages are glorified. First, the moral soundness of citizens (irrespective of age and life experience) and its institutions (in these comics, the Militia and State Security). Such people and institutions prove their usefulness, as perils are everywhere, the country is under continuous siege because of ungrateful Romanians who steal and lie in order to leave for abroad and because of foreigners who come to finish the theft started by their predecessors (i.e., the fascists who pillaged the country when heading to Germany in the summer and autumn of 1944, according to other comics – cf. Hațegan, 2016). These foreigners are close to the fascists through blood ties and their intentions (to steal from the heritage of Romania – i.e., gold). Such a description discredits them. Thus, these comics enable the misrepresenting of historical events (for instance, of year 1944) and overrepresenting certain values, considered communist. These processes of misrepresenting, not representing or overrepresenting events and actors modelled Romanian children's (and not only) thinking and behaviour (cf. Verdery, 1991).

The brave pioneer

Despite some smart retorts, these two comics are not humorous ones: they show the bravery of Romanian children who love and defend the socialist homeland. Being brave daily is a feature of patriotic behaviour. Also, space becomes meaningful through the characters' actions: spending their holiday in nature, discovering the hidden plans of the enemies, helping the state. Therefore, the places depicted are the forest, the town, the house where foreigners conspire with a Romanian traitor (the jeweller), the hotel, the block of flats, the garage, the road leading to the state border.

Locations are "given characteristics and thereby transformed into specific places" (Bal, 2017, p. 7). The places where dangerous behaviour may occur are in the city (in the neighbourhood with blocks of flats, where neighbours seem to know much about each other) and in nature (where children spend their holidays). This shows that danger is ubiquitous and, therefore, all citizens, irrespective of age, moment, situation, etc., are expected to get involved in safeguarding the country.

Moreover, the comics try to introduce the young readers to a typology of malefactors: the subversive stranger (from outside or inside the country) and the traitor (e.g., the old jeweller who helps foreign interests). The negative characters are aggressive (the male emigrant, the two German tourists) and jeopardise the peace and stability of Romania. Against evil are fighting the forces of good, represented by the Militia, the State Security, and the vigilant citizen (e.g., those children who are responsible and cooperate with these significant state institutions). Thus, it is acknowledged the moral superiority of those who collaborate with these state institutions since they also protect their homeland in this way.

Characters and places are carefully selected to best reflect communist ideology: they are faithful to the regime or have an educational message. The stories are placed in the socialist reality. If not guarded by all, the space of the homeland seems not to be safe. Iconic places were created in comics, repeatedly represented (e.g., the new face of the city – the socialist neighbourhood of blocks of flats), and also iconic characters (e.g., the brave communist pioneer). Thus, the world of childhood was ideologically shaped with the help of realistic comics which assessed who and what is good and bad.

Socialist realism in comics is useful to create the image of the New Man and of the modern socialist society. The official preference for socialism realism in art during the socialist period (Precup, 2015, p. 105) was reflected also in comics and has a propagandistic and educational purpose. "A realistic representational style" was requested from the comics after World War II when Romania turned arms against Germany and was under Soviet influence. Then, socialism realism in art was promoted by Ceaușescu, too (Precup, 2015, p. 98).

The comics are just a part of the representational strategy of the political regime in what the official visual discourse addressed to children and the youth is concerned (cf. Ilovan, 2020a, 2020b, 2021; Ilovan & Merciu, 2021). The visual discourse was strictly policed too, certain topics and characters being encouraged to be represented. In the selected comics these were: familiar places, communist heroes, and desirable behaviours. This visual rhetoric enhanced certain messages constructed by communist propaganda. These have been handed down from one generation to the next (i.e., Romanian exceptionalism; Romania's superior morality; exceptionally beautiful and unique Romanian landscapes unrivalled by any other places in the world; exceptional human capital and leaders, etc.) (cf. Precup, 2015, p. 106; Ilovan & Merciu, 2021). The Militia and the State Security are presented as competent and working efficiently.

Spying on neighbours is described as natural or common as camping in the woods. Such exceptional situations seem to be part of children's lives.

Comics are elaborated both as ideology and plot (Hațegan, 2017) because their aim is to educate. Through comics, children are socialised politically and in the socialist society. They learn in this way how to socialise with neighbours, strangers, enemies, and state institutions. These are ideological comics: there is a preferred meaning and reading of them. The interpretative freedom is rather limited. They teach the Romanians a certain visuality (way of seeing), according to the context of production for the respective visual imagery; this visuality is space and time specific (Dittmer, 2010).

Social difference is explored through class: *the workers in politically and ideologically involved institutions* – the Militia and the State Security, *the intellectuals* (the family who wants to emigrate), *the workers* (the forest ranger). The children can join each of the above. Their choice is presented in the comics, through collaboration with the Militia and the political police. Having children and communist pioneers as main characters, these comics are supposed to be more entertaining and educational (i.e., the child characters are constructed as models of behaviour). Comics could be perceived as partly real by the young readers because of the plot which features contemporary characters and realities, and most importantly, it features communist pioneers like the readers themselves. These children participate to the construction of the socialist society. Besides the main development policies of Romania, we understand that work to build the socialist society comes in different forms and loyalty to the political regime, too. These comics shape the political identities of the young through the constructed visual discourse. They build both the New Man and the values and places defining the identity of the ideal communist person (cf. note 5 from above). Official ideology is being taught to children by means of comics. These comics are part of the permanent persuasion and manipulation of the propaganda apparatus (cf. also Precup, 2015; Ilovan, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

Women and the gender hierarchy in the Romanian new society

Like in representations from other comics from the period, researched so far, women and girls are mostly secondary characters and have only assisting roles in constructing socialist Romania (cf. Ilovan, 2020a, 2020b, 2021). Nevertheless, one of the main characters in *The Lonely Fir Tree* is a woman, but she is a foreigner and represents the enemy. As such, these comics reflect and support the gender hierarchy in the Romanian new society.

The world of comics is a masculine one, bravery is attached to male characters, while cowardness and bad intentions are associated with both women and men. Unfortunately, these comics do not provide readers with female characters that could be models for strong and exceptional girls and women. On the contrary, in comics, subordination of the girls and women is learned through representations of traditional gender roles. The male character is representative of an entire category: brave boy pioneers stand for the entire class of pioneers; Militia men and State Security officers represent the entire class of those who defend the country (also male-dominated jobs).

In *The Chase*, the female characters are mere auxiliaries to the male heroes. The girl is a coward, she does not want to announce the State Security which makes the reader aware of the bravery of the boy who takes seriously this responsibility. Then, in the same comics, the wife of the man who wants to emigrate is either fearful or cautious which makes the reader aware of her

partner's contrasting features: the emigrant is imprudent and disrespectful (towards his wife and to the homeland).

Although girls and women contribute with information to making decisions, they do not make them in the end. Instead, their male partners, who are always represented as autonomous persons, make decisions. Men and boys have authority, power to decide, and knowledge (sometimes they share knowledge with girls and women, if it is necessary to teach them).

CONCLUSIONS

I proposed an interpretation of comics by decoding their representations in relation to the Other, gender, and values. Through comics I uncover a partial view of communist Romania and of the working of propaganda, because, beside their entertainment value, these comics can be read as political texts or statements. They help to restructure the political reality and enable ideological pressure.

These comics show how the political elite perceived those who wanted to leave Romania (illegally) and those who, of foreign origin, visited this country. In both cases, such persons are represented as suspect, while Romania and its people are exceptional (e.g., morally superior citizens; like the State Security lieutenant, they are models for the Communist youth and contribute to the uniqueness of Romania through their responsibility and bravery). Therefore, these comics could be included in the state's negative propaganda about migration. Emigration was one of the hot topics of the socialist reality that was depicted in comics. Especially during Ceaușescu's authoritarian regime, those who were guilty of wanting to leave Romania, were considered, and represented as enemies of the regime, of the homeland and its working people, and, as such, they were essentially inferior to them from a moral standpoint.

Comics were a propaganda tool for the Romanian undemocratic regime, justifying its policies and aiming to shape people's values, attitudes, and behaviour. Freedom was not one of these values. Freedom to move was restricted or prohibited for the citizens' own good, according to propaganda, as outsiders and the West were represented as potential and real dangers; their image was blackened. A similar process of blackening emigrants took place using comics: emigrants behave like thieves, not acknowledging the success of the socialist society and being ungrateful for the new life they were part of (two tropes ubiquitous in Romanian communist propaganda).

The representations of the emigrants showcase that they are a politically discriminated group. The obstacles created by the political regime for emigration are both visible and left undiscussed in comics. In the analysed comics, emigrants and foreign visitors are criminals and because of this the official care for surveillance and control of the population (who wants to leave, who has relations with foreign people) is morally justified. The State Security is thus a paragon of patriotism, attentively watching over the demographic and economic growth of socialist Romania, as emigrants jeopardise both.

These comics series glorify the collaboration with the Militia, the State Security, and their surveillance methods (both through technology and responsible employees and citizens). The behaviour of the negative characters in these comics is subversive. They are spies and criminals, and, above all, selfish. The damage they may cause can be avoided only if the population cooperates with the Militia and the secret state police. The negative characters are

overwhelmed by fear of having their plans discovered by the good ones. However, it seems that their fear is induced by what seems to be a Big Brother society, where surveillance is performed by everyone.

In this societal context, pioneers are nothing else than plain clothes detectives who help the Militia and State Security to gather their information, catch criminals, and keep the society under control. We see how easy it is to get the State Security involved in policing citizens' everyday lives. By children's enjoying of these comics, propaganda enables their allegiance with the communist rhetoric. The pioneers are young and bold explorers in service of the country. They contribute to the successful project of the socialist Romanian society.

Aiming at the political education of children and at an invasive control of the population, the analysed comics serve ideology and construct the normative discourse. In other words, these comics are a different version of the ideology or propaganda text about emigration, Otherness, and ideal socialist reality. They are a different text (a more appealing one) about a story constructed by communist propaganda. The metanarrative of the political regime governs the narratives of the comics aiming to create the communist imagined community of Romania (cf. Anderson, 1991). Such a visual culture embedded in the political realm controls and shapes children's readings of the society. In the endeavour of propaganda to control their attitudes and behaviours, comics shape children's popular culture during the Romanian socialism and totalitarian regime. Their visibility is educated through a transfer of values and 'correct' interpretations of events. Representations in comics make particular arguments about the production of socialist realities and identities.

My research is relevant because the post-socialist Romanian society is using past representations as cultural heritage at present, more or less, in a conscious manner. Such representations feed in collective sensibilities and territorial identities. Through images and texts, these comics created affective bonds between the young readers and pictured places, as well as to a certain period: childhood, youth, adulthood (that took place during communism). Deconstructing comics is useful to understand, reflect and critically interpret such representations whose role, in present day Romania, is possibly more powerful and impactful on people's lives and decisions than the feeling of nostalgia concerning the period. Because cultural representations impacted the Romanian society in multiple ways during the totalitarian communist rule, such a critical reconsidering of cultural products of the past is necessary in order to better understand the present.

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