

## INITIATION TO READING MULTIMODAL NARRATIVES AN INTRODUCTION TO UNDERSTANDING COMICS

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**Abstract:** In the present article, I try to define comics as multimodal narratives, in order to explain the role it plays in our modern culture and to outline a series of reading strategies it requires. The research focuses on a theoretical approach to comics, but also on the analysis of the vocabulary of comics – both visual and linguistic – which reveals the reading practices it demands. Furthermore, I try to prove that the transformations of our society (regarding technology but also the types of discourse) increase the presence of multimodal texts (such as comics, advertising, poster and film) in our daily lives. Consequently, learning how to read multimodal narratives may become equal to learning how to read the world we live in. This is precisely why the research includes an experiment focused on a didactic approach to comics.

**Keywords:** Narration; Multimodality; Comics; Reading Strategies:

### 1. Introduction: multimodal texts – initiation to a new reading system

In our contemporary cultural environment, there is a series of changes regarding the forms of discourse. The specificity of current cultural behaviors – defined by criteria such as rapidity, synthesis ability, fascination for the visual – imposes new types of discourse that require a refinement of our reading strategies. For this reason, in the Western world of the last decades, the need to initiate readers in media literacy has been stated. This necessity is encouraged by the cultural environment of the postmodern society where multimodal narratives become part of human existence.

Along with the changing of discursive patterns, major advances in technology have been made, which allow the fusion of literature and visual arts (Manolescu, 2011, p. 33), resulting in new ways of narrative construction. We are currently witnessing a phenomenon of massive dissemination of noncanonical cultural products which spark numerous debates regarding their artistic and literary status. The so-called multimodal texts propose new strategies of discourse construction and require the assumption of a new reading system (Manolescu, 2011, p.37), which targets multiple levels of narrative and visual analysis.

The concept of *multimodal text* has been studied among others by authors such as Monique Lebrun or Kress and Van Leeuwen<sup>16</sup> and it was defined as an association of different semiotic systems through which narratives are delivered (Gardner, 2014, p. 193). Jared Gardner (2014) draws a boundary line between classical literary text – where the written language tells the story while the image is a luxury – and the multimodal text – where the written language and the image tell a story together, the latter being a necessity (p. 193). In the contemporary society, multimodal texts – in their various formulas – become more and more present both because they correspond to specific cultural behaviors of our times and because mass media allows a wider propagation of popular culture. Consequently, as readers and teachers, we have to be able to understand these new types of discourse in order to find the best reading strategies that allow their comprehension and exegesis.

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<sup>16</sup> See Monique Lebrun, Natalie Lacelle, Jean-François Boutin, (2012). *La littératie médiatique multimodale: de nouvelles approches en lecture-écriture à l'école et hors de l'école*. Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec and G. R. Kress, T. Van Leeuwen (2002). *Multimodal Discourse: the modes and media of contemporary communication*. London: Edward Arnold.

Comics is the simplest version of the multimodal text, associating two different means of expression that become indissociable: static image and written language. The uncertain status of comics derives from the difficulty of placing it within the fixed frames of a typology. Since it artistically combines linguistic and visual elements, when studying comics most authors discuss two distinct levels of analysis. Although comics is known worldwide as *the ninth art*, it is still seen in many cultural spaces as *paraliterature*, being a subject of controversy both in the artistic and literary research fields. Some authors believe comics is “an art accessible to everyone” (Cahen, 1993, p. 9) while others plead for the readers’ initiation in the absence of which authentic comprehension – in other words, reaching the text’s highest level of accessibility – is not possible.

## 2. Key concepts in reading comics

### 2.1. Comics as multimodal narratives

Comics and film are two narrative types of discourse specific to our times. These are types of discourse that contemporary man encounters in everyday life and he must be able to read and understand them (Gardner, 2014, p. 193). There is a difference between the inexperienced reader and the experienced one - who quickly grasps the message (Eco, 2008, p. 170) - and this difference is visible when trying to understand, to analyze and to interpret the message of a multimodal text. Therefore, an authentic introduction to comic strip reading points at two levels of construction – narrative and visual – and involves both the identification of the invariants of this type of discourse and the investigation of the strategies that allow the comprehension, taking into account the specificity and the complexity of its own aesthetic vocabulary (Teampău, 2012, p. 179).

Depending on each author’s view, comics gets the most varied definitions: it is *drawn literature* for Umberto Eco and Hugo Pratt, a *hybrid subgenre* for Ion Manolescu (2011, p. 140) or a new literary genre, called *graphic prose*, for Ioan Stanomir (as in: Niță, 2015, p. 215). Scott McCloud (1994) talks about a series of “juxtaposed pictorials and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (p. 9). In a wider context, comics is seen as a complex phenomenon of mass culture (Teampău, 2012, p. 161). Finally, a balanced view of this phenomenon should address both means of expression that provide its specificity (Teampău, 2012, p. 144), since comics is at the same time a form of communication and a form of art that combines the letter and the image in a simultaneous reading (Mitchievici; as in: Niță, 2015, p. 5).

Beyond these definitions, a series of analytical levels can show the roles and functions of comics in our contemporary culture. In this context, Angelo Mitchievici (as in: Niță, 2015) states that comics assists on great works that risk marginalization (see the numerous abridgments of literary texts in comic strip language), it plays the role of mediator between elitist and popular culture, it is a graphic representation of our epoch and it can easily become an instrument of social criticism (p. 9). Moreover, according to Charles-Olivier Carbonell (as in: Teampău, 2012), comics is a building site where the images that attest how a society sees itself and how it wants to be seen get formed, achieving, at the same time, the most effective intergenerational relationship (p. 239). Although it plays a role in shaping one’s vision of the world and of itself, Gelu Teampău (2012) states that there are several prejudices regarding comics: a “harmful” effect, a degree of infantilism, a cultural and social inferiority. The primordial interest for profit from the publishers and authors’ side is also seen as a negative factor (p. 172). Comics can be seen as an ephemeral art that fails to perpetuate in time unlike the canonical literature. At the same time, it has a serial character which implicitly provides its continuity (the success of famous superhero comics proves it – if we take into consideration the fact that Superman is born in the 1930s and survives to this day). It is also worth mentioning that comics can become a place for the promotion of axiological systems.

Following a close-reading of Steve Canyon's adventures, Umberto Eco (2008) identifies an ideological declaration regarding the universe of values which becomes possible in the comic strip language (p. 157).

Relying on these considerations, I note that the analysis of this type of text can be done according to multiple criteria: the aesthetic one (regarding the text's semantic density and its configuration), the sociological one (regarding audience, circulation and profit) and the axiological one (focusing on attitudes and sets of values). From the definitions assigned to comics, I retain the narrative construct and the visual dimension of the sequential unfolding, as they are relevant in the comprehension process. I also emphasize the importance of the roles and functions of comics in the contemporary cultural context, outlining that the phenomenon cannot yet be circumscribed as it is still emerging as discourse and consequently the full complexity and specificity of its dynamics cannot be revealed.

## 2.2. Comics – graphic and textual conventions

Comic strip brings together a script and a visual representation. Therefore, reading this type of text will take into consideration both component parts and will involve specific interception strategies. There is a series of key concepts for each of the two means of artistic expression – graphic representation and literary writing – that the reader has to acquire. These concepts become even more important for the teacher who prepares his introductory lessons in comics.

Unlike cinematic art, comics does not hide the linguistic and artistic codes by which the message is built. As it graphically renders a narrative, the first element is the *script*, with a structure that involves the initial situation, a suite of complications and the final situation, all enchainé according to the narrative prototype<sup>17</sup>. Another key element is the *thrill*, perceived as a moment of maximum intensity in the unfolding of the narrative, which involves increased attention, anxiety, abeyance (Durand, 2006, p. 40). It is achieved through overturning moments and its mission is to capture the reader's attention. A comics page musters illustrations and *balloons* (*speech/thought bubbles*), where the characters' *dialogues* are written. Among the most commonly encountered graphic conventions are the *ideograms* (that type of drawing that can acquire, in time, the status of a symbol or *icon*). The *onomatopoeias* are included within the same register, lexical elements that can bear various visual distortions, rendered through easily recognizable aspects (bold characters of different sizes or sharp colors). Instead, *captions* carry essential information or spatial-temporal clues that become a link between those *panels* which have no visual relationship, since the comic strip author must be elliptic (Durand, 2006, p. 67), discharging everything that is not indispensable to the script. On its side, the art of narration arrays its own discursive methods: from the simplest form of story-telling – one sequence after another, chronologically – up to the alternation between two or more actions, simultaneously developed and represented graphically and textually (Durand, 2006, p. 40).

Amidst the features of the characters' construction, the predilection for the *hero* surrounded by secondary characters (*les faire-valoir*) is conspicuous (Durand, 2006, p. 46); the secondary characters are a sort of adjuvants who valorize the hero, especially due to their opposite personalities, as it happens, for instance, with the famous Asterix and Obelix. The prototypical hero is the classic journalist, detective or adventurer; nevertheless, modern culture moves towards other two categories, revealing two extremes: less stereotyped heroes, closer to reality: writers, teenagers, students etc. and superheroes, with an impeccable moral code and with the precise mission of saving mankind (Durand, 2006, p. 45). Regarding the

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<sup>17</sup> See Jean-Michel Adam (2009). *Textele: tipuri și prototipuri*, trans. Cristina Stanciu. Iași: Institutul European.

protagonists, by iconizing them, some symbols belonging to these heroes are established, visually individualizing them and ensuring the continuity of the series.

The graphic design also becomes an authentic art. During the contact with the comic strip, the human eye reacts in two steps: first takes place the global perception of the page, followed by the reading from left to right, from top to bottom (Durand, 2006, p. 54). Consequently, the comics illustrator will turn to a series of techniques meant to guide and facilitate the message reception and the construction of meaning. The cropping (classic or modern) and the assemblage of the panels propound a certain reading grid and dose the amount of visual information. The illustrator prefers certain *angles* (frontal, bird's eye angle, low angle etc.), *shots* (overview, medium, close-up etc.) or *frameworks* (wide, narrow, vertical, horizontal or panoramic). The mentioned techniques originate from the cinematic art and they allow the illustrator to take over the director's position, with the only condition of justifying each decision he takes (Durand, 2006, pp. 57-62).

Due to the hybrid status of comic strips, getting through them involves simultaneous reading of both text and image. Two principles are added to the above-mentioned graphic and textual conventions, principles which exclusively target the narrative form: succession and sequentiality (Munteanu, 2017, pp. 14-20). Starting from these premises, several reading strategies can be outlined, specific to multimodal text - and especially to comics - capitalizing the two construction pillars which are inevitable to this type of discourse.

As cultural products, comic strips reply to the imperatives of an audience expecting another type of discourse (faster, more spectacular and mainly visual), built through techniques which are different from the classic ones and defined through a vocabulary that differs both linguistically and visually. The representation code is synthetic, and it is defined by a series of specific elements: the assertion of a visual repertoire of its own, the inclusion of blanks within the text, the demand of the reader's active engagement through fictional exercise. When assuming a didactic sequence meant to introduce students to specific strategies of reading comics the teacher must be aware of these fundamental conventions which allow its comprehension.

### **2.3. Comics – reading strategies**

Moreover, teachers need to be up-to-date with the most important theories in the field of multimodal narratives. These theories state that the comics reader must be active and engaged, as he is enquired to highlight the linkage between the panels. The “reader-spectator” (Fresnault-Deruelle, 1975, p. 129) deciphers a message built mainly by visual language, but bearing an inevitable textual component, which is visually represented, in respect that within the comic strips poetic metaphors are converted into images, while verbal metaphors are represented graphically (Fresnault-Deruelle, 1975, p. 149). Will Eisner observed that the psychological processes which are engaged while reading one word and the ones activated while reading an image are concurrent, for the structures of illustrations and the ones of prose are similar (Eisner, 1985, p. 8). This is not the only remark of this kind; other authors believe that comics possesses textual techniques which are adjacent to the ones of the great literature, and at the foundation of its construction, an epic pattern similar to the one of the folkloric fairy tales can be spotted. To that end, comic strips get closer to literature through their narrativity, their techniques or forms of expression, while the principle of sequential discontinuity of the story accedes them to the cinematic art (Manolescu, 2011, pp. 16-17). The reader's active engagement within the process of configuring the meaning of the message can be accomplished on two levels: the first one targets the juncture of the two semiotic systems in order to understand the message of the text while the second one regards the necessity to add the missing information from one panel to another – and therefore the active implication of the reader (Gardner, 2014, p. 195).

The ensemble of language elements forms a representation code which is consonant with the expectations of an already existing category of readers. They are enquired to reconfigure that part of the narration which remains unexpressed within the spaces between the panels. Most authors consider that the authentic reading of comic strips occurs scarcely at this level. Paradoxically, whereas they suggest a complex visual art, “the essential point of comic books is the blank space [...] which divides the frameworks [...] the empty space where the mind uncoils the action, the movement, the meaning for itself” (Teampău, 2012, p. 165). The most important stage of the reception of visual narration is accomplished within the reader’s imagination: due to this reason, comics becomes an art which offers only two possibilities: increasing the reader’s intelligence or denying him the reading process (Frémion, 1993, p. 36). Ion Manolescu (2011) names these blank spaces “significant shortcuts” (p. 16), remarking that the deletion of the ellipses allows the decodification of the image’s content and the perception of meaning. For Scott McCloud (1994), the process accounts for the *invisible art* of comics and marks the space where the reader’s mind acts, taking two separate images and transforming them into one idea (p. 66). The same vision is nominated by Thierry Groensteen (2007), for whom the meaning becomes clear by reading the blank spaces with at least the same importance as reading the images (p. 112). Theorizing the interception practices of the multimodal text, Jared Gardner (2014) notes that developing these reading competencies implies discipline and time, while the motivation of their assimilation consists of the fact that comics has an elliptic form, whose blank spaces cannot be hidden, a specific narrative form, profoundly different from novels or movies (p. 208).

Regarding the link between the characters and the universe of values, the degree of the identification with the heroes of the story draws the audience’s engagement (McCloud, 1994, p. 42). This observation is relevant due to two reasons: on the one hand, comics cannot survive without readers or without a cultural context (Teampău, 2012, p. 147); on the other hand, the hero himself can be perceived as a universal metaphor for the human pursuit of self-consciousness (Teampău, 2012, p. 138). Thereby, on the background of cultural changes regarding the discursive typologies and the configuration of meaning, going through comics allows forming some reading strategies which are specific to the current era, involving, among others, the capacity to synthesize, the managing of the blank spaces and the integration of fictional games within the creation of meaning. In this context, a didactic approach to comics should involve a reading exercise meant to reveal the specific elements of its aesthetic vocabulary – a preparation done by the teacher – and a didactic sequence centered on teaching students how to read, understand and interpret comics – a series of lessons delivered by the same teacher.

### **3. A didactic approach to comics**

#### **3.1. *From Harap-Alb to Batman and Căpitanul Ro: a comics reading exercise***

First, I propose a brief analysis of a series of comics, noting that they have been selected according to the following criteria: topic, complexity, narrative and visual relevance. Three of these albums belong to famous Romanian artists while one of them comes from the American area. The purpose of this exercise is to outline the specific vocabulary of comics but also to insist on its ideological content, which proves its capacity to deliver messages with large interpretive stakes. This close-up reading exercise helps teachers become aware of the complexity of comics. It can also reveal the necessity of an authentic encounter with the multimodal text, as a first step in their training for a series of lessons focused on reading multimodal narratives.



Therefore, I will start by discussing a comic album<sup>18</sup> that represents an abridgment of a literary narrative. I chose an album entitled *Harap-Alb*<sup>19</sup> whose primary source is a radio abridgment of Ion Creangă's tale. Although it is proposed as a graphic novel (the boundary between genres isn't clearly drawn, so that a multitude of albums are labeled in libraries' catalogs with both titles – *comics* and *graphic novel*), I focus on the analysis of its textual and visual content precisely because it offers the opportunity to confront the original text and the comic book, highlighting strengths or weaknesses of this abridgment. In addition, the album marks a debut as it is the first comic book written in Romanian by Mircea Arapu. Hence, I foremost note that the author keeps some typical tale formulas, thus proving fidelity to the source text. Also, in this album, the reader finds proverbs or sayings, original verbal forms or other linguistic elements specific to the universe created by Ion Creangă. Among the basic conventions of the comics vocabulary, it is particularly noteworthy the use of bigger characters which emphasize important ideas and the frequent use of onomatopoeias. The artist does not change the original text, but he reduces its size, choosing only what is essential. Thus, from the old lady's advice, he moves directly to the image showing the king's son riding his horse, without reviewing the stages of his preparation for departure.

Visually, I find relevant the constraint of using a small-scale for all the images, imposed by the album's format. Symptomatic is the author's choice for sketches in black and white and the variety of lines in these images. An essential point where classical graphic conventions are overcome is the absence of borders that usually frame a panel, a choice that creates the illusion of a larger space. Neither balloons are surrounded by lines while the pointers are rendered in a unique style. However, although there are no lines to delimit the panels (between three and five on a page), the gutters remain an indispensable element, their role being once again justified. For example, the illustrator omits to show how the hero passes certain trials (picking the salads, killing the deer), being content with only revealing the instructions and leaving the reader to find out how the hero applied them. The fact that the original text is not faithfully observed can be easily noticed in the deletion of some sequences (three trials out of six are visually represented) but this omission can probably be attributed rather to the radio abridgment that served as the true source of the comic strip. It is also worth mentioning how the famous hero's helpers are drawn, depending on the elements that individualize them. Thus, Gerilă wears a hat and a scarf, Flămânzilă is a fat man, Setilă wears a cup instead of a hat, Ochilă has one eye, similar to a Cyclops, while Păsărilă-Lăți-Lungilă is seen as a tall figure, with a dead bird caught at his waist. Although there are some elements of recurrence, they do not, however, acquire the status of symbols. Still, it should be emphasized that, like any other hero, Harap-Alb can be recognized by his clothing, as he wears a traditional suit that the reader can easily identify. The hero's double personality (often used in comics and literature) is emblematic for his initiative journey.

Another *hero to be* is depicted in the comic strip *Ciutanul*<sup>20</sup>, signed by Mihai Grăjdeanu, which presents a special, innovative theme, as it illustrates the world of soccer as seen by a character without exceptional qualities, forced to gain his reputation as a hero. We read again about the initiation of a young boy, orphan and marginalized, who aims to a higher social status. I first note, as matters relating to the textual level, that the comic strip is structured into chapters, each of them bearing a title – a kind of a representative motto – and thus paying tribute to the classical literature by their resemblance to the sections of a novel. I also notice the recurrence of the onomatopoeias used to reproduce some noises (*AAH! BUF! CLAP! TUF! TIUUU!*) and the option for the colloquial language. Different visual and

<sup>18</sup> See Mircea Arapu (2014). *Ion Creangă – Harap Alb, roman grafic după o adaptare radiofonică de Vasile Mănuceanu*. București: Casa Radio.

<sup>19</sup> Ion Creangă's tale is actually entitled *Povestea lui Harap-Alb*.

<sup>20</sup> See Mihai Grăjdeanu, Andrei Toderășcu (2009). *Ciutanul – vol. I*. București: Dacica.

textual techniques are used to mark the transition from one activity to another happening at the same time but in different places. For example, the reader can see the soccer field and Dr. Popescu's secret laboratory on mirrored pages which suggest simultaneity (introduced by *At the same time/ Meanwhile...*). When using flashback, the author chooses a different color, not black and white but sepia. The style of these drawings is simple, but the cuts of the panels are eclectic (straight, oblique, horizontal, vertical etc.). Two images gain the status of icons by their recurrence: the sports complex logo and shirt number 10. In fact, the owner of this shirt seems to be – at a first look – the hero of the first volume: Ștefan Dumitrescu is his son's hero, an identity model for whom the sports equipment plays the role that the suit holds for superheroes such as Spiderman, Superman and others. However, the reader receives clues confirming that the "dwarf" Mihai is the authentic hero (starting from the title, which places him in the center of the story, and going on with the doctor's words, considering him an "unique subject"). There are also the typical characters of contemporary narratives: the hypocrite but rich man, the adjuvants (Anamaria, Ionuț, Alexandra) and the evil doctor with his secret laboratory and his experiments involving genetic modification. The open end of the graphic story ensures the continuity of the series and creates suspense through a rhetorical question, written on a background that shows Stefan's emblematic image and succeeded by the promise of the following volume. The author's choices are partly revealed in the appendix where he explains in five pages the *making of* this comic book.

I also review the latest volume of *Batman's Adventures*, entitled *The Court of Owls*<sup>21</sup> as this is a *New York Times Bestseller*, published in the United States in 2017 and translated into Romanian during the same year. This volume is relevant since superhero comics are (still) extremely popular. What distinguishes them is a constant exploitation of their serial character – for decades now, volumes of Batman's adventures are constantly updated, adopting improvements from each author that writes the story or draws the illustrations. This latest edition is remarkable by its realistic style and by an exceptional visual configuration. The subjective narrator is the hero himself, whose discourse is often like a police man's voice. Batman and his collaborators ascertain and report, always looking for clues, almost like FBI or CIA agents. Some changes in this text mark, for example, the presence of a character (normal, black or white letters) or his absence (italic font) as well as the appearance of new voices (that's when the font and color differ according to the camp they belong to: the *good ones* or the *bad ones*). The linguistic register changes according to the status of these characters: the villains have their own slang while the benefactors speak correctly, frequently introducing specialized terms in their discourse (words coming mainly from the field of technology). In addition to the classical way of suggesting the drama of a certain situation (words accentuated by font and color) there are series of words meant to reproduce noises, visible inside the dialogues and resembling rather captions. That's how the author tells us when someone coughs or screams. An innovative strategy proposes the introduction of an electronic information system that provides accurate data about different characters. The language is clear and concise, willing to show only the essential, and the classical narrative construction is transgressed not only by the framing of the story but also by some smart insertions (such as the series of captions through which Allan Wayne's life is depicted, while our hero doesn't yet know all these details; consequently, we can identify here a voice placed above the subjective narrator, organizing the whole story). The suspense is always renewed, both through narrative and visual techniques, as the reader has only the impression of reaching a climax, which will be followed by another climax, without ever reaching a clear conclusion. There are several visual and textual clues that help the narrative to move forward.

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<sup>21</sup> See Scott Snyder, Greg Capullo (2017). *Batman: Conclavul bufnițelor – vol. I*, trans. Cristian Lăzărescu. București: Art.

The drawings feature realistic lines (much more realistic than the DC Comics' version of *Batman's Adventures* in 1992<sup>22</sup>; although there are some leitmotifs that recur in the two series, such as the banquet or the competition, their visual representation is radically different). In this latest volume, the reader can identify a prevalent chroma, which varies according to the alternation of the narrative plans, namely, depending on the hero's double identity. Thus, Batman's city is a dark place while Bruce Wayne's city is bathed in light. The hero's double personality seems to affect the city, causing a double hypostasis of Gotham: lighted, always warm and good or dark, cold and evil. Between darkness and color, the illustrator creates a chromatic but also an ideological game, as such options suggest an axiological interpretation. The images are very dynamic (hence the preponderance of motion lines) and very powerful. Three of them become icons in the narrative: the bat, the owl and Wayne Tower. A full range of perspectives, angles and frames are used to picture the characters' experiences or the events they take part in. There are, however, pages lacking text, justified by the intention to emphasize the power of the visual language. At the same time, there are posters, big pictures, framed on a full page, reproduced in black and white, like sketches or cinematic cuts. A few landscape pictures focus on intense moments and actions trying to break the monotony. These images are followed by some reversed pages which imply scrolling from right to left, thus undermining reading practices.

The ideational content requires a special attention when reading superhero comics. In *Batman's Adventures*, it is shaped around the hero's secret identity which becomes a necessary condition of his status. Thus, over the public image of Bruce Wayne, an important personality of the city, overlaps Batman's mask, recognized only in a small circle of initiates (the loyal adjutant – Alfred, the collaborators – Dick, Jim etc.). The evil character is, of course, an unknown assassin, becoming the reason for triggering a large detective process. If many of the comics' heroes have some characters around them that highlight their features, Batman has more than this: he has a symbol which gives him the opportunity to show his virtues in fighting against evil. Gotham is, therefore, a topos superordinated to all other narrative motifs, seen as the space where the good has to win. In this confrontation, the alternation between different plans and temporalities is easy to assimilate: the reader recognizes essential clues based on conventions (chromatic, clothing, textual discourse). Along with the obvious axiological system in this comic book, I note other two fundamental elements. First, the appeal to mythological sources, invested with new functions. For example, the coin, an ancient symbol of payment to Hades, is replaced by an owl-shaped sign embedded in a character's tooth to mark his adherence to the evil clan. The same register includes the explanations regarding the Athenian owl, now the icon of the same group. Second, probably the most interesting insertion is a plan that resembles a lesson of cultural anthropology on superstition, built through a succinct discourse that provides correct information, justified in the narrative context, proving, in a way, the creative potential of the comic strip. Finally, a series of intelligent lexical and visual strategies make this volume look like a novel or a police film, announcing that the outcome is not authentic nor final.

Succinct, I recall Puiu Manu's comic book, *Căpitanul Ro*<sup>23</sup> (similar to Captain America, the fictional hero released by Marvel Comics), the illustration of a script written by Adrian Cioroianu, historian and University professor. The merit of this comic book is to bring to the scene a specific Romanian superhero through a series of adventures that define and individualize him. Căpitanul Ro has everything he needs to be a superhero, but he also has something different: beyond the Daco-Roman garment by which he can be identified, his story relies on a rich historical background with many references (most of them ironic) to the

<sup>22</sup> See Kelley Puckett, Ty Templeton (1998). *Aventurile lui Batman I: Penguin lovește-n stil mare*, trans. Emil Bărbulescu and Cristian Lăzărescu. ERC Press: București.

<sup>23</sup> See Puiu Manu, Adrian Cioroianu (2015). *Căpitanul Ro. Vol I: Război în inima Europei?*. Iași: Adenium.



most famous landmarks of mankind (from the Egyptian pyramids to the World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). At the linguistic level, the most surprising elements are found in the dialogues of various characters (either adjutants or opponents), customized according to the geographical area and the historical age where they come from. Thus, Igor always introduces Russian words, the American soldier uses English idioms, the Jews greet the hero with *Shalom* while the Egyptians use *Inshallah*. The footnotes that the illustrator uses to translate this words or phrases or to provide some historical data are particular items. Moreover, word games are innovative, as behind each character's name lays a mythological, historical or political personality, renamed in an ironic, even parodic register (Nefertiti becomes Fenertiti, for example). Through toponyms, the authors draw a real geography. The whole Europe (and not only) seems to be drawn on the conceptual map of this narrative: from Romania's cities (Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca) to the major European capitals (Brussels, Prague, London). Some clues (especially in the characters' dialogue lines) may suggest intertextual references.

The way the University professor becomes a superhero and the recurring motifs in this type of comics (Căpitanul Ro has a secret lab, where a loyal adjunct prepares his tea while he thinks about possible solutions to save Europe – just as the famous Batman would do in his place) demonstrate that the authors applied a standard recipe, that is, they have assumed a series of superhero-inspired comics. The volume gains its originality by the historical themes it includes: in many points of the narrative, the writer's intellectual formation emerges among the images and text. Although there is an almost apocalyptic view of the dangers that threaten the well-being of Europe, the history is seen with an ironic eye, which does not, however, hinder the tackling of some issues such as nationalism or political extremism, xenophobia or natural disasters. At the visual level, we notice the images of a daily routine: the protagonists watch the news on Pro TV (and the presenter is strikingly resembling Andreea Esca<sup>24</sup>), the hero travels with TAROM<sup>25</sup>, an important Romanian airline, the young people talk about Căpitanul Ro on social networks using a specific language. Surprisingly, the hero is a big fan of comic books and, in the middle of the adventure, he gets to a comics festival in Constanța, where a gentleman holds a welcome speech (the initiated reader will easily recognize Dodo Niță<sup>26</sup>). References to mythology are also obvious. Thus, a valuable help is Ana Manola (read Ana, Manole's wife<sup>27</sup>), dressed in a popular costume and wearing traditional shoes. The hero is invested with magical powers by Decebalus and Trajan<sup>28</sup>, receiving as a weapon (and symbol) a mace (like any other Romanian traditional hero<sup>29</sup>) and bearing on his armor the images of two entities: the Dacian bear and the Roman eagle. It should also be remembered that the ideological statement mentioned by Umberto Eco is explicitly noted here: "You will have no peace, Captain Ro! You will have to keep the right way of truth, good and respect for others!"<sup>30</sup> (Manu, Cioroianu, 2015, p. 13). Finally, this comic book gains much in originality by the intelligent and savory lines of its characters (for example, the American agent: "Ha! Like any other French, he's late! In the summer of '44, my father liberated France... but the French were late even there!"<sup>31</sup>) versus the Russian ruler: "Only the Russian soldiers were the most punctual, they even wore two watches..."<sup>32</sup> (Manu, Cioroianu, 2015, 41). This way, the

<sup>24</sup> Andreea Esca is a popular TV presenter since 1995, when she started working for Pro TV News.

<sup>25</sup> TAROM is an abbreviation for Transporturile Aeriene Române.

<sup>26</sup> Dodo Niță is the most important Romanian comics critic.

<sup>27</sup> The authors make some intertextual references: in this case, the text refers to a well-known Romanian myth, where the protagonist is a bricklayer called Manole. He had to sacrifice his own wife in order to be able to build a wonderful cathedral.

<sup>28</sup> Mythological characters seen as founders, Decebalus and Trajan have a very important place in Romania's ancient history.

<sup>29</sup> Usually, the heroes of popular Romanian tales have a mace as a weapon.

<sup>30</sup> Original text: "Sortit vei fi să nu ai liniște, Căpitane Ro! Tu va trebui să îți calea dreaptă a adevărului, a binelui și a respectului pentru ceilalți!"

<sup>31</sup> Original text: "Ha! Ca orice francez, întârzie! În vara lui '44, taică-meu elibera Franța... dar francezii întârziu, chiar și acolo!"

<sup>32</sup> Original text: "Doar soldații ruși au fost cei mai punctuali, purtau chiar și două ceasuri la mână..."

authors succeed, through their texts and drawings, to reactivate a series of historical clichés, reading them in a parodic key.

This exercise focuses on comic strips' graphic and textual conventions, showing how they can differ from one author to another, from one cultural area to another. It also includes some interpretive attempts, in order to prove how comic strips' ideological content can deliver powerful messages regarding human condition. I conclude by noting that such an exercise can help teachers analyze not only the vocabulary but also the universe of comics, thus providing an accurate and global vision on the phenomenon, as part of a wider multimodal culture and as a first step of their preparation for teaching students how to understand the simplest version of multimodal narratives.

### 3.2. *A didactic experiment: initiation to reading comics*<sup>33</sup>

In order to test a series of strategies for reading multimodal narratives, I suggested to my students of the fifth grade from "Horea, Cloșca și Crișan" Secondary School in Turda, Cluj county, to set up a couple of meetings focused on reading multimodal texts. More precisely, we spent seven weeks working on comics as part of an experimental research which aimed at revealing the best methods that the teacher can use in order to introduce students to reading, understanding and interpreting comics. These meetings were meant to become opportunities of discussions on comics. But the overall objective of the meetings was finally extended from reading comics to creating comics. The number of students varied from one meeting to another, but it never reached more than fifteen. These lessons had clear objectives, methods and results recorded.

As a teacher, in order to prepare for the first meeting, I had to consult a specialized bibliography, including the studies mentioned above (see section 2). This first step is essential for the teacher as it implies the familiarization with the universe of comics, working on its specific visual and textual vocabulary. The objective of this lesson focused on reading comic strips and discovering their invariants. The lesson was designed as a reading exercise. I first asked my students what they knew about comics so far. They received a list of questions regarding their reading experience and interests (e.g. *Did you ever read comics?; You like comics because.../ You don't like comics because...; What kind of comics would you like to read: adventure comics, superhero comics etc.?*). The students proved a poor knowledge of this type of multimodal narration. They could only guess some of the similarities or differences between comics and the classical literary text. Moreover, they were lacking the specific vocabulary needed in order to be able to talk about comics. Still, they were attracted by the colors and the graphic conventions of comic strips. Consequently, we read together a couple of pages illustrating Garfield's adventures<sup>34</sup>. This reading exercise's purpose was to show students how to read comic strips. First, they came to know how to talk about what they see in a comics album, using specific terms such as *balloons, panels, onomatopoeias*. Second, they found out that there are two principles specific to the ninth art: the story develops sequentially and in succession, always combining image and written text. Students were encouraged to apply some simple reading practices: scanning the comic strip page from left to right and from top to bottom, providing the information missing from one panel to another (filling in the *gutters* with the missing action) by using their own imagination. At the end of

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<sup>33</sup> An intermediate version of this experimental research was presented as a scientific communication in April 2018, at Bucharest Student Letters Colloquia. Another abridged version of this experiment was included into a wider presentation on the history of comics in Romania, in October 2018 (Simpozionul național de didactica limbii și literaturii române, Cluj-Napoca). Both abridged texts will be published in collective volumes, during the year 2019. The full version of the experiment (with all the insights on methods, objectives, models and results, and including pictures illustrating the didactic process) can be found in *Perspective - Revistă de didactica limbii și literaturii române*, anul XIX, nr. 1(35), Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2018, pp. 51-56.

<sup>34</sup> See Jim Davis (2018). *Garfield*, nr. 99-100/2-3, februarie-martie.

this first meeting, the students were challenged to use all these acquisitions in order to accomplish two different tasks: the first one asked them to fill with text some empty balloons on a page containing only images; the second one involved an opposite situation, asking them to draw some images on a page containing only written text (*balloons*). The aim of this exercise was to show students once again that comics means bringing together visual representation and written language, two different semiotic systems that become inseparable.

The difficulty level of the comics we discussed in our second meeting was higher. The students read fragments from *The Adventures of Tintin*<sup>35</sup> and *Asterix and Obelix*<sup>36</sup>. The visual configuration of these famous comics is far more complex than the one seen in Jim Davis' *Garfield* series. After the students were reminded all the key concepts already discussed during the first meeting, they were asked to identify them while reading a couple of pages selected from these two comics albums. While reading them, the students were guided through specific questions to find out how these visual or written "clues" are used and the role they have inside the vocabulary of comic strips. Once again, the students were reminded the name of every important element of this vocabulary: *balloon*, *panel*, *caption* etc. While reading a Romanian translation of *Asterix and Obelix*'s adventures the students had to identify all these specific elements of the graphic and written vocabulary of comics. Next, they were asked to note down all the key concepts discussed, resumed by the teacher through an interactive lecture. As a follow-up, students met Tintin and his best friend Milou. By reading this comic strip they were encouraged to consolidate all the information already discussed. At the end of such a lesson, as a reflection subject, students can be asked to compare the two types of comics they have read (the so-called "gags", with funny characters and a rather simple plot – e.g. *Garfield* – versus the adventure comics, with classical characters such as detectives, reporters, explorers – e.g. *The Adventures of Tintin*; the teacher can also ask to what kind of comics does *Asterix and Obelix* belong to, trying to help students find its theme and topics – history, community, friendship).

As the first two meetings were focused on identifying graphic and textual conventions of comics, the third one was meant to remind students there is a narrative behind every comic book. In this case, the didactic project focused on the script of a comic book and it allowed debates on superhero comics. The students met Batman and his famous adventures<sup>37</sup>, a comic book that I split into three main sections. Inside every section, the pages were disorganized. The students were asked to find the right order of these pages, following recurrent visual and textual clues. They managed to accomplish the task through teamwork. This third lesson proved students that the written narrative text precedes the final graphic version of a comic book. It also gave them the opportunity to remember the essential moments of the narrative sequence, in their simplest version: initial state (equilibrium), transformation, final state (equilibrium). I also note that the subject itself (superhero comics) allowed an exercise of hermeneutics as students can (and should) be encouraged to reflect on a hero's behavior: *What is a hero? Why is it important for a hero to have a strong and perfect moral code? How could I become a hero inside my own community? What international issues would necessitate, nowadays, the special intervention of a superhero?* Moreover, this third lesson had the mission to prepare students for the next session which involved the production of a comic strip.

During the last four lessons, our main objective extended to a new activity: creating a comic book. This task included two different stages: the first one was meant to help students

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<sup>35</sup> See Hergé (2005). *Aventurile lui Tintin. Țigările faraonului*, trans. Elly Moga, Irina Manulescu. București: M&M Europe.

<sup>36</sup> See René Goscinny, Albert Uderzo (2017). *Asterix – viteazul gal*, tras. Ioana Părvulescu. București: Art.

<sup>37</sup> See Kelley Puckett, Ty Templeton (1998). *Aventurile lui Batman I: Penguin lovește-n stil mare*, trans. Emil Bărbulescu and Cristian Lăzărescu. ERC Press: București.

attain an abridgment of a classical literary text transformed into a comic book, the second one pointed at creating an original comic book (writing a short script and transforming it into a graphic representation). One team made by two of my students from the fifth grade and one student from the seventh grade reached great results during this creative exercise. These students were challenged to make an abridgment of I.L. Caragiale's short tale *D-I Goe...*<sup>38</sup>. Initially, they were asked to create one or two pages of visual representation of the story. Their decision to continue working on this project brought them the chance to expose their artwork in Bucharest, during the 6<sup>th</sup> of June and the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, 2018.

More precisely, this activity can be designed as follows. Students received the narrative text and they were asked to read it once again. Next, they had to outline in the text those elements which they would choose to transpose in visual language. The teacher had to encourage students – now playing the role of some artists – to take any decision necessary but at the same time to be able to justify each move they make. They became responsible for their work, asking for help just when needed (when choosing plans, cropping panels, making some details visible). The initial goal materialized in two pages of comics but later it was extended to a whole authentic comic book. Students decided to continue working at school and afterwards in order to be able to sign up their comic book for an exhibition in Bucharest. Moreover, as the exhibition's topic was *Stories from Bucharest through Comics*<sup>39</sup>, the students added some original pages to their abridgment, illustrating places from Bucharest visited by Goe and his family during their walk from the railway station to the avenue. As a teacher, my role was to guide them and offer them any help they needed (e.g. providing pictures showing Bucharest's streets from the ninth century).

Finally, the experiment proved how seriously these multimodal narratives should be approached in order to get to their real message. One of the most important steps in teaching students how to understand comics consist of reading and analyzing various types of comic strips (as seen above, section 3.1) which make teachers aware of the specificity and complexity of their vocabulary. The second important step is to design a didactic sequence which allows comics reading exercises, followed by discussions meant to show students how to understand and interpret this type of text (section 3.2). Ultimately, learning how to read the simplest version of a multimodal narrative will allow students to reach the next levels of this cultural construction: reading posters, collages, short videos and film. As these visual metaphors surround us in the postmodern society, this initiation becomes important for learning how to understand the culture (and the world) we live in.

#### 4. Conclusions

After the attempt of analyzing a corpus of comics (see section 3.1), we first observe the way the texts confirm both linguistically and visually the categories discussed by the specialists (script, language, specific graphic elements etc.), but also the situations where the basic conventions leave the place to some innovative techniques, both thematically and stylistically, the purpose here being to obtain the originality effect. Afterwards, going through these texts motivates the importance of the reader's initiation in reading comics, an exercise which will allow not only the interception, but also the interpretation of the message proposed by the narration. Starting from this analytical enterprise, we can determine that, apart from the text and the images, comics also possesses an ideational content of its own, like any veritable artistic product. Ultimately, by approaching various and complex themes and by the major innovation within the graphic and discursive construction, these multimodal

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<sup>38</sup> See I.L. Caragiale (2006). *D-I Goe: (momente și schițe)*. București: Corint.

<sup>39</sup> See Salonul BD *Povești din București în Benzi Desenate*, ediția a V-a, Casa Filipescu-Cesianu, Muzeul Vârstelor, București, iunie-august 2018.



texts permit the reconfiguration of some narrative motifs and even the creation of modern mythologies.

Designing a didactic sequence which involves some reading strategies that consider all these features may soon become indispensable for the teacher, as comics becomes more and more visible in our contemporary society. As a multimodal discourse, comics demands its own reading practices. The experiment detailed above (see section 3.2) offers just one possible didactic approach to comics, willing to suggest a reference point for teachers facing the challenge of the multimodal “revolution”.

The above-mentioned reflections are relevant especially because the relation of mutual determination between comics (as a product of mass culture) and the multimodal narration (as a specific form of discourse for our era) cannot be questioned. On the contrary, it becomes more and more significant within the contemporary society. On the one hand, the multimodal invasion, by its various forms (collages, videos, commercials, cinematic art), encourages the comics’ assertion; on the other hand, by assimilating some reading strategies, comics empower the interception and the interpretation of the narrative multimodal texts, in all their diversity and complexity and, consequently, the comprehension of the cultural phenomena of current society. In a postmodernist vision, this dialecticism could eventually impact the cultural trajectories and, even more, it could offer the possibility for the noncanonical texts (such as comics) to leave paraliterature and acquire a new statute. As readers and teachers we have to get prepared for showing students how to understand this cultural environment that they belong to and how to read the multimodal narratives – more and more visible and powerful – that surround them.

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## ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION---TRANSLATING AND RECOVERING THE ETHICAL NORMS OF ALIVE IN LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK OF ROMANIA, CROATIA, POLAND AND SLOVENIA

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**Abstract:** The article reflects the main legislative framework and preoccupations for environmental protection and durable development in four European countries: Romania, Croatia, Poland and Slovenia. There it is an analyse around the question: The national legislative law is it constructed on ethical norms and values which should regulate the human behaviour and can be learned in the schools by a young age? The article brings in attention the ethical dimension as solid base for construction of a durable future of Terra life and try to reconnect the moral norms of alive with the legislation which it is not optional as the moral one.

**Keywords:** sustainable development; environmental education; ethics; human behaviour; life;

### *I. Introduction*

Sustainable development basically means planning economic and social growth and well-being taking in account that such growth does not endanger environment and natural resources for the future generations. The term itself was used for the first time<sup>\*40</sup> in today's meaning when it has become clear that overusing and exploiting natural resources, which started with the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century, would lead to threatening the existence of human race itself. The Stockholm Environmental Conference from 1972 is the moment when it is recognized that human activities contribute to environmental degradation, which threatens the future of mankind. A few years later, in 1983, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) started its activities such as a report on environment and the global problems facing the world to the year 2000 and beyond, and proposed strategies for a sustainable development.

The term "sustainable development" began to become very well known only after the International Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), organized by the United Nations in Rio de Janeiro in the summer of 1992. Also known as the "Earth Summit", the conference was attended by representatives of about 170 countries and it led to the draft of the *Agenda 21* that is being used by the United Nations as a tool for promoting the concept of sustainable development.

Sustainable development has become an objective of the European Union, starting in 1997, when it was included in the Treaty of Maastricht; although the reason for such new worldwide concern for Mother Earth might have been selfishly oriented on humans, it has brought together all contemporary scientists and environmental activists to design a new global framework (*Agenda 21*<sup>\*41</sup>) for maintaining the Life as we know it today.

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<sup>40</sup> UN World Commission on Environment and Development's, Brundtland Commission, Report Our Common Future, 1987.

<sup>41</sup> Action plan of the UN regarding sustainable development produced at Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (*United Nations Conference on Environment and Development – UNCED*), 1992; 21 refers to the 21st century