

ABSTRACT

Key words: myth, image, symbol, hero, popular culture, comics, super-hero, communism, cultural models

This paper aims at investigating the comics as a particular phenomenon of popular culture, by evaluating its ideological dimensions, some symbolic traits of the comics as a vehicle for the mythical background of society, and even some technical details as they are important in the process of defining the comics in the cultural landscape. The comics topic is projected on the larger background traced by a perspective on myth that was intended open and rich, aiming by this to underline the purpose of the paper, which is to provide reasons for the necessity of future studies that would focus on the first-hand role that comics can play in the process of feeding and relocating the collective imaginary, in the transporting and the refreshment of mythical images, and in the creating of new ones, which are to fulfill present-day needs.

The first chapter contains this expose on myth, trying to open as many research trajectories as possible, in a deductive approach, from the general frame of theories on myth, through those on image and symbol as parts of the mythical policies and in the end through the hero as a contact point between the mythical and the comics schemes. The discussion on myth has the main purpose of circumscribing the topic of the paper in this huge sphere, as the insertion of each particular, timed situation in a larger perspective, be it religious, philosophical, anthropological, or psychological is paramount (and necessary), because beyond the acute momentary interests and the timely defined strategies, the human is defined (in the first place) by resorting to memory. And the most part of the memory, be it even personal, is not the product of individual psyche – by education, if not by the controversial strata of the subconscious on which (supposed) existence the psychology of the depths was built (and which presupposes a sort of psychic genetics), the human is defined by categories in which he/she “enters”, which are formed before the individual, and which are not his/her own creation. Thus, on one hand there are the approaches that focus on structures, on the trans-historic permanence, on the

unchangeable (as it is the case with anthropology, philosophy, psychology), and on the other hand the approaches that focus on context and change (as it is the case with the historical disciplines). Even though the first set of approaches, the structural ones, negate the influence of the context and of the time on the elementary schemes and the others, the historical ones, deny the sheer existence of archetypes, the two perspectives are complementary. Robert Segal, an authority in the field, strongly asserts that there is no such thing as research of myth per se, but research in other fields, that also can be applied to myth: anthropological theories (theories of culture in which the myth holds an important role by contributing to the making of the object in these approaches), psychological theories (of the mind, with its functioning principles, with its products and its afflictions), sociological theories (in which the accent is placed on society, the myth functioning in first instance as social link), etc. In all these fields there are three issues that unify the interest in myth – the origin, the function and the subject (the content) – and which most of the times need to be analyzed separately by the different theories and specializations which share distinct and not rarely divergent visions, purposes and methods. Though some endeavors managed to reach notable results in the direction of myth origin, function or subject, the fact is that none of them take on all these simultaneously. But the form that myths take cannot be ignored, even though it is often considered irrelevant to the content or the function; it gives the first (and maybe the most important) hints about the culture the specific myth lives and opens the way for the other approaches (any told story taken as object of study shows external characteristics – the size of the story and its place in the corpus, internal characteristics – rhythms, rules of timely relations, rules of narrative composing, but also enunciation settings – the time and the place of the narration, the identity and the talent of the narrator, etc). The many approaches to myth may be grouped (by forcing and simplifying their meaning, of course, because if there are voices that say the myth can only be evaluated by itself, there should be no surprise that there are theories about myth that cannot be linked to others, because of the radical differences in methodology, concepts, paradigm and, last but not least, because of the researcher's own subjectivity) by the field they belong to, and by the purpose of their endeavor and even by the context of ideas they emerged in.

The myth proves the ability of human imagination to conceive exemplary stories (as Jean-Jacques Wunenburger put it), rich and complex enough to allow countless variants and make room for collective transmission, through a certain “specific imaginative behavior”, from the point of view of the creative activity and also from the point of view of the receiver: the participation in myth is double, each partner being, at the same time, receiver, by listening or reading, but always a bit re-creator, as long as the transmission, be it oral or written, grants the story a personal imaginary aspect. The power of mythical creation is an attribute of the human mind, an “original power of representation for the significant wholeness, which cannot be reduced to its elementary components”, and the myth is a “personal narrating way for exposing a specific thinking content”, which does not transfer a fact or an idea in an imaginary story, but proves to have its own intelligibility, a narrative meaning; the mythical thinking is not, as it has been told, a trait of the infantile stage of human thinking, but an irreducible alternative path, which functions as opposed to the analytical thinking, which expresses the world through distinct elements, that are recombined in significant constructs by logic reasoning. The myth owns a “meaning creating matrix”, an “internal genetic code”, stable and independent of the context inflections (as opposed to the legend, whose significant nucleus comes from outside, as it happens in the case of novelistic imagination), which determines two attributes of the myth: the understanding of myth cannot be performed by its dismantling in intelligible elements, but only by the repetition of the myth itself, as a “redundant imaginary form” that operates by permeation and global understanding, not by decomposition and progressive explanation, and secondly, the unbeatable symbiosis between the intrinsic nucleus and the meaning triggers, not variable, archetypes with the function of symbolic forms generators.

By exposing some of the most important approaches on myth (taking into account the impossibility of a total, exhaustive presentation), on a loose chronological course, underlining only the contributions that have introduced new perspectives or methodologies, from Plato and Aristotle to the 20th century, defined by many as the “century of the myth”, in spite of the strong rationalistic positions that aimed at chasing to the past the irrationality of the mythic background (the all-powerful reason being a strong myth of modernity at its turn), I tried to take the argumentative thread towards

specific areas in the field of myth, which are strictly related to the subject of this paper. Thus, an important part is dedicated to the laic myths of modernity, the prime matter of the political ideologies created in the 19th century, catastrophically and monstrously continued in the following century, cataclysm that require in first instance the analysis of the imaginary reasons that made them possible. Modern myths may differ from the ancient ones, at least at a formal level, but their role is by no means secondary. Great modern mythical structures as the Marxism, the scientism, the psychoanalysis, shook the foundations of a previous imaginary order and generated new forms of identity, but by using the same subliminal background and other previous mythical constructions did (religious or mundane). The progress, the nation, all sorts of millenniums, the otherness, the savior and many others are major themes of modernity, which borrowed different faces, under various interpretations, but on top of the same ancient stratum. Political myths got combined with cultural, literary or artistic ones, the occurring irrational bursts of social imagination being often driven by intellectual output, or by the assistance of personalities from different fields of activity, like politicians, actors, singers, sportsmen, or even imaginary characters, of which the most known are probably those which appear in the American comics, as Superman, Batman or Spiderman do. In the end, it is not even important whether the individual (or the group) is conscious when it is part of myth creating event, but the way in which it feels connected or not to that which brings depth in its life: the myth represents the dramatizing of the conscious or unconscious values of a group or a person (the meaning is there for a human only as long as he/she feels he/she leads a symbolic life, that he/she takes part in a "divine drama"). The myth follows the language and is transmitted with it, and since Indo-European languages took over the Globe (which is probably the most important and the most fascinating historical phenomenon), it is to be expected that the same mythic background got expressed all over the planet. But there has to be said that there are no "pure myths", that we cannot cut a certain discourse, a certain belief or a certain legend to easily analyze its successive mythical strata. Those are interconnected, they influence each other, permanently issuing new forms of expression, and even there where the same theme appears in different historical periods, its functions are different.

The second chapter is the discussion on comics as an important segment of popular culture in the 20th century. The topic is being introduced by a short presentation of some theories on popular culture, enriched during the last century by the entertainment technology progress, from newspapers and radio to television, cinema, music and virtual space, in an acceleration of image production not seen before and a confusing agglomeration of cultural impulses and communication forms. Talking about comics and their serial output, we place the topic in the larger field of modern popular culture, defined by David Rowe as “the sum of delightful forms, meanings and practices whose constituents are not static neither clear, and that cannot be isolated from the social processes and structures they are integrated in”. The comics, be it taken as a respectable art form in spite of its early age (the “ninth art”, born almost at the same time with photography and the film), be it taken as a minor form of expression and communication, irrelevant at best and the vehicle of lethal messages in form and subject at worst, do not exist outside the cultural context in which they are born and in the absence of their public. Like the popular novel, they “reflect the socio-psychological preoccupation of their time, but also move, in historical terms, the present into imagination and fantasy”.

A firm point of view about popular culture is expressed by John Fiske, who insists on the fact that, as opposed to lame intellectualist assumptions, it is not only “consumption” but “culture”, in other words “the active process of generating and circulating meaning and pleasure in a social system”, and that it cannot become a simple consumerist reflex, however industrialized it might be (that is produced and distributed only on the ground of its own economic interests – many products are, in this respect, “expensive misses”, from movies to art albums). Arthur Asa Berger gave a plastic definition of culture and of its ties with the myth, seeing it as an onion, whose successive strata, once taken away, show the central myths that form and inform culture and society (even if, following Eliade, he admits that these cannot be always recognized, because of the long laicization process they were subject to). The scheme he summarizes looks like this: the nucleus in the myth (the sacred story), on which there are laid the historical events perceived as linked to that myth, covered by the elites artwork having the same myth in their center, covered at their turn by the popular artwork, which are, at their same turn, wrapped in everyday activities that reflect the same myth. Popular culture cannot be

considered homogenous, or forever placed in certain cultural practices (which may express themselves in any cultural field), nor can it be disqualified as only being the pool of secondary artifacts (there can always be quality movies, intellectually challenging or aesthetically glittery, the same way there can be not successful sculptures or paintings, which bear important marks). In conclusion, popular culture disseminates the same profound myths, the same fears and desires, in common and easily decodable forms, but may become a myth at its turn, especially after being conceptualized and put into an ideology, or even blamed as the source of moral and intellectual corrupting factors of individuals (point that rejects the objective evaluation of the role, the techniques and the manifestations, insisting on the supposed lethal effects of this undefined nebula), or, on the contrary, celebrated with embarrassing euphoria, that also obstructs the inquiry (some comics fanatics have no hesitation in comparing certain titles to the works of Shakespeare or Dostoevski and find reasons for their superiority). The popular culture output does not have to be compared to those of the legitimated culture, because they are simply “something else”, in purpose, in technique and in the function they fill.

If the Medieval Ages had their sprites, their angels and demons, which coexisted with humans, and the science of the Enlightenment eliminated them, “leaving humans the only inhabitants of the Universe”, the fantasy and SF stories bring them back, “in an apparent correct scientific disguise” (if the SF authors were in their majority males, and Tolkien is the one that imposed the frame for fantasy stories in 1965, at the present the most fantasy authors are women, who depict a fantastic Medieval Age, “as it *should* have been”, without the historical rigorous restrictions, exploring alternate social structures, and narrating old myths filtrated through modern senses). Guy Consolmagno identified a “mythic connection” between SF and science (mostly astronomy), which provides its source and framework, and if the SF offers optimistic, libertarian and “rightist” messages (the SF and fantasy constructs favor the individual against society, on the same narrative structure as the folktales, with a strongly individualized hero in the center, and if until now the depersonalized groups, such as the Nazis, the communists or the invading extraterrestrials have been considered to be “evil” without exception, at the present the main opposing entity remained the “bureaucratic state”), the science is considered to follow the same path, although it cannot be neither optimistic nor pessimistic, and even

more, not even anthropocentric. But “to tell a story, be it around the old campfire, be it in the dark room of the modern cinema, is a timely-honored method of transmitting, reflecting on and exploring our cultural heritage, past or present, real or presupposed, plausible or scandalous”, concludes Anton Karl Kozlovic, the narrative fiction, mainly SF, providing the lens through which we can look at the future, not as actual reality, but as an imaginary experiment about possible worlds, to help us lose a few hours in the imaginary world on the screen in an act of “applied imagination” , the movies being “the favoured channel of today’s storytellers, offering comments on social relationships, human purposes and technology”.

Scott McCloud thinks that the most appropriate definitions for comics is this one: “a juxtaposed series of pictorial or of some other nature images in a certain order, in order to transmit information or to produce an aesthetic response for the receiver”. Far from only representing cheap entertainment or an instrument for keeping the consumer in an illiterate state, the comics are an important factor of imaginative stimulation (at a linguistic level – forced to express in the fewest words the largest sensation palette, and at a visual level), the readers participation not being at all a passive one, for he/she is forced to link the frames, to put them in a certain succession, that is to “move” them. For the American, comic-books are a generational experience, because “the same way a generation writes its own history, each reads its own comics, them being history”, at the crossroads between politics, culture, audience tastes and editorial policy, helping to create a perspective on the world and the self, holding an explanatory, a therapeutic and a commercial function. A main attribute of comics is provided by the target public. They are addressed mainly to young people (the creators being in most of the cases also youngster), dealing with their issues and sensibilities with a consistency and an honesty that is hardly to be found in other media channels. Before television and it’s imposing as the largest and most influential entertainment tool for American families, the comics were the main entertainment practice of adolescents. Although the aesthetic critics compare them to visual media, like the film, on the ground that the image holds the paramount role in the both communication forms, Wright considers comics to be closer to rock music, as function and significance, addressed to adolescents as to a discrete emerging market, with its own tastes and habits, sometimes in opened opposition to that

of the adult's majority – in fact, they even come two decades before rock as products directly addressed to young people, and by through the adults.

Out of the many forms of comics – romance, horror, adventure, western, humour – the most influential (and the most sold) are the super-hero comics, an American inventions of the 30's, which in short time rose to the top of the entertainment public's preferences and even penetrated the collective mind, becoming a permanent source of references, discourses and models (taking advantage, of course, of the American economic and communicational supremacy). Richard Reynolds identifies four meanings of the super-hero comics: at first, comics are a popular form of art known for its hegemonic and sometimes openly authoritarian texts; secondly, they are a kind of publications that reached a degree of respectability because they got distributed for a while in the underground scene; thirdly, an art form looked down upon by the literary establishment, but which constructed its own critical discourse; finally, they represent a corpus of contemporary mythology, which provided inspiration to both Hollywood and television. Besides, the author does not hesitate in stating that the super-heroes are among the most known fictive characters ever conceived, some of them reaching a global degree of reconnaissance, Superman, Batman or Spiderman being known all over the world, even by those who did not watch the movies that dealt with them. Those contributed greatly to the “Americanization” of western culture (and not only), in behaviour and linguistic habits, which reverberate in the comics drawing and vocabulary, and also in the general philosophy or in the favoured topics. Consequently, same as literature, comics are not a creation that drain their meaning once they are created and do not keep it fixed, established from the beginning by the authors or the readers (a Superman story can be perceived in a certain way by a teenager in the 60s and the same story can be interpreted in a different way by an adult in the 21st century). Addressing to young people, the comics' authors manipulate the content and the result, influencing „innocently more or less” (but always aware) the interpretation that they are likely to make”, the image being “a silent, but never mute, resonance box of the world”. Having an entertainment function in the first instance, and not an informative one, comics stories do not correspond to reality, the references to it having the purpose of granting a semblance of authenticity to the heroic, legendary stories (which usually lack proportions). Reality is

not, by any means, nor the origin neither the background, the occasional references to it having just the role of getting the story out of complete timelessness, “the dream being conceived as to having some points of hold in the mundane”. Moreover, comics are “archetypal”, and History is being transposed and sublimed by the author, who operates extrapolations of reality as it is represented in the collective mind, from which nobody (author or reader) may completely escape. The super-heroes are permanently re-invented (each generations had its own Superman), becoming an essential aspect of the entertainment industry and through this, of the collective consciousness. The characters penetrate various communication media in a process of “crossed insemination”, even the characters placed “in the middle of the road” between human and superhuman (Rambo, James Bond, etc., for which a kind of mystique is also activated, because they never die) possessing a “super heroic consciousness”, hoping (and fearing) that the world is more than can actually be seen, possibility that has to be seeded in “our cultural diet”. Most of the analysts have seen in Superman’s effigy not only the absolute moral code of post-industrial American society, but also a specific political ammunition, ideological package that had contaminated all super-heroes in their interwar origins.

Though aiming at being considered a form of art, comics never lost contact with the reality they were first conceived in (although, as Souchet observed, their purpose is not to inform on reality nor to explain). Operating on the openness and intelligibility of the message (because of the target public, young in its majority, but also because of the visual and static, efficient support of messages and slogans), comics always were favored channels of transmitting cultural, social, philosophical, artistic and even political impulses.

Eventually, the third and last chapter of the paper brings a case study on Romanian comics during the communist period, trying to illustrate in a specific context the ideas presented in the previous chapters, related to comics but also to the myths that are to be encountered in their content. A communication tool especially opened to mythic dimension (because of the importance of the visual and because of inherent laconism), comics can provide useful (if not vital) insight on a society’s state of mind or on a group that chooses such a communication tool, on its obsessions, hopes and fears, on the relationships between social and cultural categories involved in dialogue, and, last but not

least, on taboo. In their turn, comics cannot be evaluated in the absence of the social and cultural context they were created in, being a reflection of the authors' personality, also defined by the formative influence of that context (even more, depending on their public success, comics have to resort to widely shared signs and symbols, beyond their own technical codes, which require a previous familiarizing of the readers). During the five decades that Romania has been dominated by the communist rule, we cannot talk about comics (as we cannot talk about any other cultural and artistic field of creation) and ignore the political context, be it in the first period, before 1965, dominated by the communist leaders imposed by the soviet conquerors, and then by Gheorghiu-Dej, and defined by proletarian internationalism, which took a nationalistic turn in the last part, be it in the last 25 years, dominated by Ceaușescu and defined by protocronism and the cult of the leader.

There are four major types of Romanian comics, as identified by Dodo Niță, the historian of the genre in Romania: humor comics, adventure comics, SF comics and mostly historical comics, in which the control of the communist party was the strongest, and in which there can be easily identified the themes, the background and the ideological (and mythical) mechanisms by which the political power disseminated its messages and formative models to the young public (I would add to those the social comics, which were reduced to presenting life in the great construction yards of the country). Out of these models I have selected four, for which the studied material was abundant and helped a clear drawing of the projected human profile (this does not mean that those are the only models in Romanian comics): the illegality communist fighter, the worker, the young pioneer and the outlaw. Capitalizing ideological content and satisfying party imperatives, these four rich illustrated models offered a pantheon of which thorough study could contribute to a deep understanding of discursive strategies and techniques in Romanian communism.

Even though comics were not a favored medium by the communist rule, being considered a minor art form only destined to children and teenagers, their research is essential for a cultural and social analysis of Romania during the most unhappy half of a century.

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