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Banda desenată ca armă a criticii sociale

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prove that artists have understood the force they represent by putting their talent at the service of great movements for social change. In this article we wish to point out key moments for developing a critical discourse in narrative images as the foundation for building socially involved contemporary comics. We shall focus on the evolution of new media in the Digital Age with direct reference to webcomics and their interactive aspect of spreading social messages. In this context we shall analyze the mutations experienced by comics in the light of the social movements that have marked the twenty-first century thus entailing a diversification in styles, genres, and becoming a real political weapon as well.

**KEYWORDS:** comic strip, webcomics, interactivity, new media, activism, social-political criticism, narrative images, journal, satirical publications, political weapon, critical message.

**Introduction**

In the sixteenth century, the representatives of the Catholic Church became the target of artistic criticism, so, during Martin Luther’s campaign against the excesses of the Catholic Church, the artist Lucas Cranach used his talent pledging to support the Reformation within his engraving *The True and the False Church*, a work with strong objector content. This first form of engaged visual art provided the illiterate people a common language that everybody could understand. Later, the first narrative scenes in the French satirical journals (1830-1848), such as *Le Corsaire*, *La Caricature*, *La Glaneuse* and *Le Charivari* etc., contained two written forms, briefs and stories, and a drawn shape, caricatures (Larousse, 1982). The illustrator Honoré Daumier published in 1830 in *La Caricature* one of the most aggressive political satires, *Gargantua*, which was immediately censored and led to the closure of the newspaper and the conviction of the author. At the dawn of the Russian revolution, in 1905, the Zhupel journal published *October Idyll* by Dobuzhinsky, an illustration inspired by the bloody repressed strikes which was considered an artistic engaged chronicle.

The comic strip, which has its origins in the sequential illustrations of such early journals, inherited from them their contesting character, kept it until today and refined its arsenal in narrative discourses on social criticism. History shows that political power was afraid of the messages submitted by artists, thus often persecuting them and that comics have not escaped censure, as their popularity allowed them to turn into an effective medium for spreading subversive messages. It is certain that more and more artists comprehend the power of this medium and its outstanding, almost unlimited potential for expressing opinions.

**Comics and the cultural legitimation**

Different discourses have been applied within contemporary research on comics and
their cultural impact and legitimation. A series of studies, such as *Comics and Sequential Art* (Eisner, 1985) and *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (McCloud, 1994) focus on the “expressive anatomy” achieved in the sense of understanding comics as a sequential art, fundamental for future scientific research. The first full-length treatment of comics from a philosophical perspective is *The Aesthetics of Comics* (Meskin & Cook, 2012, p.29). Comic strip is considered a “sequential art” (Eisner, 1985) or a “multiframe” (Van Lier, 1988) referring to the “comics page as a semantic unit” (Groensteen, 2012, p.112). McCloud specifies that the defining elements of comics consist in the “juxtaposition of pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1994, p.9). Thierry Groensteen turns attention “to the artists’ poïetic creative choices” in comics, while Harry Morgan has a relativistic view in defining the comics as “a medium that has taken various, equally valid forms over its history” and describing it as a subset of “drawn literatures” (Groensteen, 2012, pp.112-13). In this sense, Eisner adds that “the essential characteristic of comics is the incorporation of verbal content” (Groensteen, 2012, p.113). After several definitions as *Picture stories, Pictorial narratives, Illustories, Pictofiction, Sequential Art, Paralittérature* (Gravett, 2005, p.8), the term *Comics* was established and widely used. It is considered a system formed throughout a collection of codes, while its elements form an iconic solidarity (Groensteen, 1999, p.14), as it is not a genre, but a medium (Wolk, 2008, p.11). In the beginning, the Comic strip was considered an entertainment culture, “mauvais livres”, the association of text with the image being perceived as a simplistic and borderline mediocre juxtaposition, while later on, the increase in the quality of discourse and narrative image, the diversification of ways of expression, the complexity of stories have built a fascinating universe accessible only through a careful and demanding reading process. The familiarization of the public conveys the recognition for the comic strip as a cultural object and its legitimation as a stand-alone medium “at the same time a means of mass communication and an artistic subject in its own right” (Groensteen, 1985, p.18) with real aesthetic value, which manages to “impose itself with its authors, ... genres, critics, with its classics and avant-gardes” (Lahire, 2004, p.605), entering libraries, festivals, galleries and museums, and acquiring the status of the 9th Art (Pasamonik, 2015, p.41).

For example, only in France, the comic strip has become “an accessible, vernacular form with mass appeal [...] enjoying a renaissance and a newfound respectability right now” (McGrath, 2004). The public interest is shown, first of all, by the readers’ interest in this type of literature – mm 25 printed magazines, 43 websites and 96 books of history and criticism – and, secondly, by the important amount of sales of these publications, as comics represent almost 10% of the total publications trade. From 1980 until 2000 there were 500 comics publications, while in 2000 the number of publications increased to 1536. According to the ACBD statement (Ratier, 2015, p.6), in 2015, a number of 368 publishers have published 5255 comic books of which 3924 new publications. Four major types have been classified according to the number of publications: the Asian series, 1585; the traditional Franco-Belgian comics, 1531; the
American comics, 419 and the graphic novels, 388, the latter, in most cases, atypical volumes. In the same time, there is a constant increase in the participation in exhibitions and comics festivals, major events organized with the support of prestigious cultural institutions, such as: Comic Con and Japan Expo, Villepinte; Angoulême International Comic Strip Festival; Aix-en-Provence Encounters of the 9th Art; Saint-Malo Bubbles Dock Festival; Lyon Comic Strip Festival; bd BOUM, Blois; Festival BD-Fil, Lausanne etc.

The cultural legitimization of the comic strip does not automatically imply the enrolling of all creators in this industry, which has been constantly evolving over time, as the editorial policies often impose different constraints that some authors might consider restrictive or against the freedom of expression. The development of Internet came as an alternative for those who wanted to express their beliefs, since in the virtual environment one can much more difficultly apply censorship. Therefore, such authors could choose this form of virtual communication through “Digital Production”, “Digital Delivery” and “Digital Comics” (McCloud, 2000, p.16), thus taking benefit of its interactivity, crucial to successfully capturing the attention of the viewer: “[w]hether by choosing a path, revealing a hidden window or zooming in on a detail, there are countless ways to interact with sequential art in a digital environment” (McCloud, 2000, p.22). By taking as a reference the classical styles of constructing editorial cartoon, newspaper strip or comic page with their various genres, styles and subjects, webcomics are published online and intended exclusively for reading on screen, and the continuous development of Information and Communications Technology contributes to their increased popularity and social establishment. When discussing webcomics we do not mean digitized print comic books sold through channels like the digital distributors, we understand webcomics as “comics produced primarily for the web rather than for print” and “made by an independent creator or creators, without an original ‘print version’ or corporate sponsorship” (Fenty et al., 2005). Although webcomics follow the paths of “underground artists” dealing with non-mainstream issues embedded in the Open Source culture, we believe that their goal is not to deal with issues such as Copyleft and hacker ethics, but rather to use editorial freedom in terms of the content, to overcome the limitations imposed by the format printed by “infinite canvas” (McCloud, 2000, p.229), a flexible screen-based layout to increase public visibility at no cost or at very low cost by online publishing and co-distribution. This medium has proven suitable for authors engaged in supporting deep social causes, by encouraging them to draw comics that will turn into true weapons of social criticism.

**Webcomics tackling social issues**

Culture may be used both as a tool for subordinating the society but, at the same time, a form of resistance, a medium allowing the development of solutions for a new social configuration. Duncombe states, in defining cultural resistance, that it is a form “used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political,
economic and/or social structure” (Duncombe 2000, p.5). Manifested in different forms, the cultural resistance is positioned in opposition to the dominant culture, but in many cases, it is using its resources to form “a creative free space where ideas, particularly political ideas may be flashed out in various practices” (Duncombe, 2002, p.6) and in the same time, civic skills may be cultivated. Artists are deeply influenced by the cultural, social and political contemporary context and they often become militants for supporting social causes. With the development of Internet and social networking, activists immediately understood the potential of the online environment whose basic principles were the freedom of expression and the active public participation. The Internet has created a system within which the news and, generally, the information flow do not depend on a central system which provides information, but on everyone’s participation, a bottom-up totally new approach, which radically changes the way people report on authority. When a user distributes a picture to his/her friends, the message is transmitted at the same time, the concept behind it, the dispensing action being clearly an act of free expression seeking acceptance of an idea. Ease of distribution proves that “the Net brings people together. People put into connection with other people can be powerful. There is power in numbers” (Hauben, 1996, p.2).

Michael Hauben describes the role of the citizen actively involved on the internet, calling him/her a “netizen”, and defines the Internet as a factor which provides a possible revival of democracy and the revitalization of the society. “Many Netizens feel they have an obligation to be helpful and answer queries and follow-up on discussions to put their opinion into the pot of opinions” (Hauben, 1996, p.6). “Social media are not solely an instrument for the transmission of information but also an organizational infrastructure underpinning collective action” (Mercea & Funk, 2016, p.291). In this context, people who previously did not necessarily have an artistic voice can retrieve and distribute those artistic representations that raise their awareness both through visual representation and consistency of the message. The socio-political component of the image becomes essential in the virtual environment since its use may generate a “critical citizenship” or “a form of citizenship that empowers each individual’s identity and advances democracy and the pursuit of social justice” (Carducci & Rhoads, 2005, p.2-9).

Nowadays the contemporary society is profoundly affected by increased instability, determined by various incidents that occur as a consequence of the technical development, either incidents intentionally caused by the human being or incidents that occur as a consequence of changes in climate and nature. Various situations are to be found in the contemporary society throughout the world: the Middle East migrants crisis 2015 and terrorist acts in Europe in 2015-2016 in response to the reconfiguration of power in the Middle East, the general rise in nationalist political discourse amid the migrant crisis 2015; the mass bombing – Paris, 2015 / Brussels, 2016; the European economic crisis – Europe, 2009-2016 / Greece 2009-2015; the ongoing Syrian war crisis since 2011; the rhetoric of hatred dominating the American election campaign in 2015-2016; the unclear disaster from Fukushima, in 2011, and its repercussions;
the civil wars and armed conflicts started from geopolitical interests; environmental pollution by toxic accidental release from mining, Argentina – Barrick Gold, 2015; corporate – community conflicts in mining sector: Roșia Montană (Romania), Cajamarca (Peru) and Halkidiki (Greece); pressures in accepting GMOs – Monsanto – and the lobby for the use of hydraulic fracturing technology Pungești (Romania) – Chevron, 2013; or violent protests in claiming rights, demonstrations against racial, ethnic, religious or sexual orientation discrimination. All of these examples can be considered “man-made hazards” referring to artificial phenomena caused by human action, inaction, negligence or error (also defined as “technological hazards” when are determined by technology – industrial, engineering, etc. –, and as “sociological hazards” when they have a direct human motivation (crime, war, conflict, etc.) (Silei, 2010).

Authors’ speed of response, the collaboration of several authors from different geographical areas, the global dissemination of local themes, the speed in delivering messages, the reduced costs for distribution, the increased visibility due to co-sharing, the democratization of the creation tools by the use of free creation and image processing software, the diversification of viewing devices are all the strengths for which webcomics differ from traditional comic strips. The authors closely know the benefits arising from the use of Internet in shaping the social movement, this causing them to use webcomics sites for information and to raise awareness, thus inviting the public to spread the messages contained. Authors often publish their works online even inviting the public to download them free, aiming to “become ammunition in the hand of those who fight, and, thus the author is less important than [the comics] in its final impact and effects. It is the author himself who often incites the audience to remixing and encourages others to unleash their creativity” (Bencze, 2015). The creator often puts the final files to the public online, or the so-called ‘do it yourself’ (DIY) kit to be downloaded and copied by anyone interested (Bencze, 2015).

**Literature analysis**

Webcomics developed a relationship with the society by reflecting major societal issues. Their persuasive narratives often led to the actual implementation of their subversive messages and thus substantially contributed to promote social change. Artists are more than ever deeply influenced by the cultural, social and political contemporary context in which they live and they become activists when supporting causes, many of the authors choosing to refer directly to the social events of the moment. In situations of crisis, we find that the drawers’ prompt response take many different forms. Consequently, in this part of the article we will focus on a series of cases that were a subject of the immediate authors’ response to the societal issues of the moment: the attacks in Brussels on 22.03.2016 – *Brussels Attacks: Emotion in Drawings* (Pasamonik, 2016); the attack in the editorial offices of Charlie Hebdo publication, Paris, on 7-9.01.2015 – *Buttes-Chaumont - The story of Chérif Kouachi* (Costantini, 2015); the Middle East immigrant crisis 2015 – *A Perilous Journey* (Dix, 2015); the hatred discourse
of Donald Trump throughout the USA presidential electoral campaign in 2015-2016 – *Donald Trump’s reactionary recipe*, (McFadden, 2015); the ongoing Syrian war crisis 2011 – *Syria’s’ climate conflict* (Quinn & Roche, 2011); the economic crisis in Greece 2009-2015 – *Greece* (Goodwin & Burr, 2011); TTIP and TPP 2016 – *The Transpacific, Partnership and “Free Trade”* (Goodwin & Burr, 2009-2014); the Nuclear disaster – *Eternal disaster - outline of the Fukushima catastrophe* (Kmölniger & Ölberg, 2015); the climate change – *The Ocean is Broken* (Sutu, Shirokiy, Mencur 2014), Panama Papers leak 2015-2016 – *Optimisation Offuscale* (Vidberg, 2016) or *The Panama Papers explained with piggy banks* (Lopez & Gliesack 2016).

In our analysis we render various methods through which different authors build punctual visual speeches in the above-mentioned webcomics on the events having poignantly marked the recent years. As opposed to traditional comics, webcomics use an unlimited space determined by the screen size, the scrolling, and zooming capabilities. Furthermore, animations, 3D art, and other techniques based on digital technology are used in webcomics and a wide number of genres are covered. The above-selected webcomics correspond to the non-fiction genre and address complex social issues. They have been posted by their authors on personal blogs or websites hosting their creation, but also published on social networks and print media, which provided the general public the chance to further share them. Various forms have been applied by authors in these webcomics and interactive webcomics / motion comics (a genre of animation combining elements of print comic books and animation): confessions, social and journalistic investigations, daily radiographies, monitoring election campaigns, self-help guide sites, technical educational research manuals and social campaigns.

Belgium, also called the comics capital city, was seized with terror after the attacks in March 2016. Solidarity reactions similar to those after the attacks in Paris and Istanbul have occurred worldwide. This time it was the turn of the characters in famous comic books to take a public stand. Regardless of their previously played roles, they leave the stories to which they belong and turn into real citizens of our world and take part in the tragic events. Without asserting any national identity, but rather their belonging to the entire human kind, Tintin, Astérix, Lucky Luke, the Smurfs, Felix the Cat, Gaston Lagaffe, Boule & Bill, Captain Haddock, Dupond & Dupont, etc., express their sympathy for the victims of the tragedy. This metamorphosis is impressive, especially because it was published on social networks and print media but not by the authors of those characters, but by various comics’ creators who, by using these characters, have sent their own messages. Other drawers have sent their characters in front of the general audience to speak for them. The surrealistic character of René Magritte’s painting, even Brussels’ symbol statues, Manneken-Pis and Atomium, became comics’ characters to freely express themselves. In other cases, by retaining key characteristics to be recognizable, while changing according to the style of a comics creator, famous characters get together for the same cause. Prompt reaction from artists shows the versatility of this medium of expression and also the social bond which it creates. Confirmation also comes in the case of the attack in the central office of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris, after which debate has been moved in the *panels*
of many webcomics. The activist artist Gianluca Costantini in *Buttes-Chaumont - The story of Chérif Kouachi* investigates the reason that causes a young man to become a terrorist in the service of Islamic fundamentalists and his reasons for resorting to such atrocities, the author’s journalistic approach heading toward the years of attacker’s youth spent with his brother in the suburbs of Gennevilliers. Another example of graphic journalism is a series of three comics based on real life stories collected by Benjamin Dix within the Syrian refugee camps pursuing the route undertaken by them from their home country to Europe. These webcomics are published by PositiveNegative, an online platform to produce literary comics about contemporary social issues and human rights, where there is a section of free downloadable multimedia resources for schools. The publishing moment is especially appropriate as the flood of suspicion towards these migrants is increasing more and more because of the politicians’ xenophobic speeches who are trying to politically capitalize the fear and the lack of information of the voting masses. With regard to this serious migrant crisis, Comix4 = (Comics for Equality) use comics in combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination in Europe, with a particular focus on Italy, Bulgaria, Estonia, Romania and Latvia, and promote the development of a European society based on respect for fundamental human rights. A series of webcomics are published on the official website of the project where creators, especially those in the affected areas, are invited to contribute with their stories, of which the most successful are awarded. Election campaigns even in democratic countries like the United States of America, give politicians the opportunity to appeal to the rhetoric of hatred to meet xenophobic voters. When presidential candidate calls all Muslim confession citizens as terrorists, requesting afterwards terrorists’ summary execution using bullets soaked in pig’s blood, the reaction comes immediately through the comic strip *Donald Trump’s reactionary recipe*, which decrypts the hating manipulative content of the candidate’s discourse, in an almost school-like manner. The confusion generated by the contradictions contained in propaganda presentations given by all parties involved in the Syrian conflict, should be eliminated, therefore, the comics *Syria’s climate conflict* helps the public clarify some of the information on the essential causes of conflict outbreak and the reasons having caused its escalation to such an extent. The first of the two initial causes detected is the terrible drought caused by the climate change, producing massive displacement of the rural population, and the second is the brutality with which the dictatorial rule has suppressed any uprising, both generating a conflict between multiple armies with various strategic military and economic interests. Their operating (or non-operating) mode is explained in *Economix*, the crisis in *Greece* and *Transpacific Partnership* is clearly explained using comics published online whose simplicity and consistency is rivaling with usage and maintenance manuals of home appliances. The interests of investment funds, banks and corporations put into practice with the help of obedient powers entail social and political effects and their understanding is facilitated by webcomics. A similar informative explanatory approach is found in *Eternal disaster - outline of the Fukushima catastrophe* which is filled with information whose source is verified but suffering in terms of the artistic quality of drawings. The one that may be called
A masterpiece of the interactive webcomics, where simplicity of horizontal scrolling navigation is accompanied by drawings (sometimes animated) with a superlative artistic expression is *The Ocean is Broken* whose dire predictions bring the virulent criticism on both pollution, generated by people who are destroying oceans by dumping non-degradable waste, and on melting glaciers due to global warming.

One of the most debated subjects at the moment refers to the tax haven and their direct repercussions on finance and public services. The Panama Papers Leak refers to a massive disclosure of 11.5 million documents obtained from the Panamanian law firm and corporate service provider Mossack Fonseca & Co., which revealed how businesses, government officials and other high-profile figures were using fake companies to evade taxes and cover up various other criminal activities, including bribery, fraud, drug trafficking and human trafficking. In this context, there have already appeared two webcomics. The first webcomics was created after the text written by Dan Gliesack, in 4.04.2016, a short story concerning the Panama Papers, posted on the *Explain like I'm five* section, included in *Reddit* web platform. German Lopez used the text and explained in twelve illustrations, posted on *Vox.com*, what was happening in this case. The author uses piggy banks to help explain the main (and complicated-sounding) about tax heaven and describes that was happening in this leaks: foreigners setting up Panamanian shell companies to hold financial assets that obscure the identities of their real owners. He later used the images from the webcomics to create *The Panama Papers explained with piggy banks* video. The second webcomics referring to this case is *Optimisation Offuscale* and it is made by Vidberg and posted in 06.04.2016 on *LeMonde.fr* official site at the M Blog section. The artist creates in webcomics an incisive dialogue between the publisher and the comics’ author debating their current state of mind on the Panama Papers case, which revealed that the biggest comics French publisher, Jacques Glénat, was involved in the scandal. Being an ongoing case we will observe if and how the webcomics authors take a stand on this case.

These examples cover a wide range of social issues and show the versatility of this medium of visual expression.

**Conclusion**

The contemporary comic strip is nowadays, more than ever, that particular communication medium that enables artists to construct visual comments on social and political context of the time through intransigent analyses, sensitive radiographies of the contemporary society, giving us unsuspected facts and details which are helping clarifying our own perceptions of the world. This analysis traces comics back from being perceived as a subculture designed for entertainment up to its legitimization as an art form. We have highlighted the importance of classic comics in the Digital Age and the contribution of the Internet in the shaping and the interactive spread of webcomics, specifying the vital contribution made by new media in conferring a wide thematic variety connected directly to the social life. In this context, as technological advances
have increased, webcomics became a popular medium within the field of comics. We have defined the socially and politically engaged art highlighting the importance of involving artists in shaping public opinion and social change by using cyberspace, webcomics, a weapon for social criticism, a medium providing unlimited possibilities for expression and a disarming freedom to express opinions. The increased number of sites, web platforms and independent blogs etc., is a clear proof that comics’ authors acknowledge the potential and strength of the 9th art which has formed an audience, on the Internet and beyond, both numerous and faithful, but also circumspect and demanding. We have focused on a number of webcomics, whose topics are developed out of authors’ more or less prompt reactions on exceptional events and their repercussions, which our contemporary society must currently face. The intention was not to address all topics and social concerns, this research being limited only to the most important moments which have marked the recent years. Through the selected and analyzed examples we managed to prove the versatility and importance of this form of artistic expression, experiment, visual communication that leads to social change.

REFERENCES


ComiX4= Comics for Equality project is based on the need to promote anti-discriminatory attitudes and behaviors across Europe, [Online] at: www.comix4equality.eu [accessed at 11.05.2016].


