

# READING CUTEZĂTORII AND WATCHING JACKIE CHAN: ROMANIAN CHILDREN AND THE COMMUNIST PROPAGANDA IN THE 1970s AND 1980s

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## ABSTRACT

*This article will explore an instance of creative resistance to the intrusion of communist authorities in Romanians' everyday life during the decades of late socialism – the 1970s and 1980s. It will analyse how Romanian children appropriated and renegotiated the propaganda messages that the Romanian Communist Party communicated through media artefacts targeting children. The article will briefly present the Romanian children's media, with an emphasis on the ideological tenets communicated through these outlets, and the principal rituals of childhood during the Ceaușescu era, particularly those associated to pioneership. This section will be complemented by an analysis of ethnographic interviews with Romanian immigrants from Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area, who recalled their response to the indoctrinatory messages they received during the Ceaușescu era. The analysis will be anchored in Michel de Certeau's canonical study of everyday living practices. His conceptual pair strategies, usually understood as the appanage of the powerful, and tactics, the space of manoeuvre for the 'weak', will be discussed in relation with the social context of late socialism. It will be argued that strategies and tactics are not situated on positions of adversity, but are rather engaged in a relation of complicity, very useful when attempting to reconstitute the social context of socialism.*

## KEY WORDS

*socialism – Romania – children – Ceaușescu – Michel de Certeau – strategies – tactics – complicity – propaganda*

## 1. Introduction

Since its posting in 2008, the *YouTube* video of the *Telejurnal*<sup>1</sup> opening credits has gathered 183,255 views. A person who commented on this post recalled the evenings spent with his parents in front of the black and white Astronaut television set, wondering what was new with *Nea Nicu*<sup>2</sup>. Clips of *Tezaur Folcloric*, a weekly programme of traditional folk music, and *Gala Desenului Animat*, a ten minute programme of cartoons broadcast every Saturday afternoon that Romanian children eagerly waited for all week, were also posted and attracted many viewers. Had *YouTube* existed in the early 1990s, when Romanians understandably shared a strongly anti-Ceaușescu discourse, posting a clip from

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1 The prime-time news programme during the Nicolae Ceausescu era. It was broadcast each evening, from 19.00 to 19.45

2 Nea Nicu was the colloquial name of Nicolae Ceausescu.

the decades 'of sad memory', as a cliché went, would have been hardly conceivable. In time, radicalism dissolved into indifference, amusement or a sort of nostalgia, similar to Germans' *Ostalgie* for the former *Deutsche Demokratische Republik*. Ethnographic research<sup>3</sup> undertaken in Romania revealed that the relation between Romanians and the political apparatus could not be reduced to a model of binary opposition. *Martor*, the journal published by *Muzeul Taranului Roman* (*The Museum of the Romanian Peasant*), conducted extensive research on the everyday living practices of Bucharesters during the 1980s. It revealed that ordinary people and the representatives of political power were not on positions of plain adversity, as Romanians found many creative ways to resist the ominous presence of Nicolae Ceaușescu and the Romanian Communist Party (RCP). This article will discuss an instance of creative resistance to the intrusion of communist authorities in Romanians' everyday life. It will analyse how Romanian children of the 1970s and 1980s appropriated and renegotiated the propaganda messages that the Romanian Communist Party communicated through media artefacts targeting children. It will also look at the meaning that children gave to several mandatory rituals during the Ceaușescu era, such as joining the Pioneers' organization or attending patriotic ceremonies. My analysis will use Michel de Certeau's study of everyday living practices, rendered through a lens of *strategies* and *tactics*, emphasizing that these two concepts are not situated on antagonistic positions. Their relation of complicity is useful when exploring the dynamics of communication between the senders of propagandistic messages and their receivers. The discussion of de Certeau's theories will be followed by a brief presentation of children's media in Romania during the last two decades of communism, with an emphasis on the ideological tenets communicated through these outlets. The last section of this article analyses eight ethnographic interviews conducted in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area with Romanian-Canadians who were at least twelve years old in 1989, when the Ceaușescu regime fell. By that time, children had sufficient time to become familiar with the propaganda discourse of the Romanian Communist Party. The analysis will examine the ways in which Romanian children negotiated the propaganda discourse of Ceaușescu's political apparatus, and the unanticipated readings they proposed.

## 2. Strategies and tactics

After World War II, social sciences witnessed a shift towards the human realities of daily life (Mateoni and Gheorghiu 2012: 8). Through his study of everyday living practices, which deems the ordinary man "a common hero" engaged in a day-to-day struggle with the domain of authority, poaching it and challenging its boundaries, Michel de Certeau is a notable exponent of this new research paradigm. A French theorist, his approach of everyday life is nonetheless closer to the British tradition of social history, informed by Raymond Williams' assertion that "culture is ordinary", and not the sole prerogative of elites, artists or intellectuals" (Gardiner 2000: 158).

De Certeau's analysis of daily life builds on the relation between *strategies* and *tactics*. The former entails force and has the capacity to impose their rules, thanks to the privilege of power. Conversely, a tactic is not associated with a form of power and does not have a proper space localization, but "insinuates itself" in the territory of the other. Lacking a space of its own, the tactical movement cannot consolidate its ephemeral advantages.

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3 see Martor 7/ 2002

“Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities’.” (de Certeau 1988: xix). De Certeau maintains that many of our everyday practices are tactical in nature; they represent “victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong’, clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, ‘hunter’s cunning’, maneuvers, polymorphic, simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike” (1998: xix). Michael Gardiner suggests that tactics, as understood by de Certeau, are reminiscent of the “trickster of premodern mythology” (2000: 172), while Jeremy Ahearne notes that subversion, inherent to any tactical movement, is rendered through a semantic sphere which includes terms such as “‘turn’ (*tour*), ‘detour’, ‘diversion’ (*détournement*), ‘inversion’, ‘conversion’, ‘subversion’, ‘torsion’, ‘trope’, etc”, which all indicate “a tear in the superficial homogeneity of the social fabric” (1995: 159).

The practice of reading, understood in its broader sense as the audience’s interaction with a cultural product, is far from a passive activity. It represents, in fact, a tactic, an act of silent production, de Certeau maintains (1998: xxi), paralleling the reading of a text to decorating an apartment, in order to make it ours. Speakers also personalize language through their accent and particularities of expression. This is reminiscent of the linguistic model of competence and performance, i.e. the difference between the set of rules about language and the individual act of utterance. Through an act of enunciation, speakers appropriate language, situate it locally and temporally, and anchor it in a particular network of relations (de Certeau 1998: xiii). De Certeau maintains that the competence/performance model is applicable to any practice creatively refashioned by users; it is the logic of *bricolage*, through which users make “innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules” (*ibid.*).

However, strategies and tactics are not situated on adverse positions. Jeremy Ahearne notes that we should refrain from drawing too firm a line between strategies and tactics, given the versatility that characterizes various forms of power. The more resources a source of power disposes of, the more it can afford to “‘waste’ on tactics designed to confuse, mislead or seduce its targets” (Ahearne 1995: 162). Conversely, elements of tactical movements may be traced in many forms of strategy, thus ‘strategies’ and ‘tactics’ cannot be regarded as antagonistic forces “in a clearly defined zone of combat” (1995: 163). Ahearne’s thoughts are extremely valuable for the analyses of socialist spaces, which are often examined through a binary perspective – the totalitarian state vs. its citizens. According to Alexei Yurchak, this dual approach results from the discourse of the Cold War era, which placed the Soviet Union and the entire Eastern Europe in antithesis with the West (2005). Yurchak rejects both the negative, and the romanticizing, nostalgia-laden accounts of late socialism, as well as the binary models of oppression vs. resistance, state vs. people, official economy vs. second economy, official culture vs. counterculture, or truth vs. lie (2005: 5–7). His perspective is convergent to that of Gail Kligman and Susan Gal, who argue that, in the socialist systems, “[e]veryone was to a certain extent complicit in the system of patronage, lying, theft, hedging, and duplicity through which the system operated” (2000: 51).

Elsewhere in his book, Yurchak writes that late socialism “became markedly an explosion of various styles of living that were simultaneously inside and outside the system

and can be characterized as *'being vnye'*" (2005: 128)<sup>4</sup>. Leading a *vnye* existence would not have been possible without the tacit acknowledgement of the Soviet authorities. The modest and bohemian cafes where young people met for conversations functioned with the approval of the state; in a similar fashion, the authorities knew about the existence of socially peripheral and underpaid jobs that educated young Russians willingly accepted just to get more time to read or think. David Crowley and Susan Reid also maintain that manifestations of dissent in the former East European space are often associated with the underground, "a term that expresses an ideological and social position through spatial metaphor" (2002: 16). The underground is usually identified with "a murky habitat of secret networks, shadows and prisons" (ibid.); however, as Crowley and Reid suggest, acts of dissent were also hosted in less than tenebrous sites, such as kitchen tables or café corners (ibid.).

Resistance to the intrusion of communist authorities into people's everyday life was not always manifested through overt dissent. Romanian children had their own set of practices for circumventing the omnipresent propaganda that required them to behave like citizens in miniature. The fracture between the official discourse channelled through schools and children's media, and the reading lens of the young audiences seems impossible to recuperate. However, children bridged this gap by negotiating with the regime in various ways: by averting ('detouring') the official discourse communicated through children's media; by giving an amusing twist to mandatory rituals; and by feigning devotion towards Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, the parents of all Romanian children, as rendered by propaganda. Through these practices, children subtly intersected with the realm where the strategies of power were configured, manoeuvring it in accordance with their (children's) own needs. Realms of strategies and tactics become thus conflated.

### 3. Children's media and childhood rituals in communist Romania

#### 3.1. High Expectations

In 1971, following a one-month visit to China and North Korea, Nicolae Ceaușescu decided to implement the model of Mao's Cultural Revolution in Romania. He decided that the ideological activities in Romania needed major adjustments. Artistic production had to convey a more solid political content, in consonance with the communist ethic. In his speeches, Ceaușescu emphasized the need to educate the young generations, so as a *new man* would be formed. School was expected to play a key role in this mission: "We must turn every schooling unit into a powerful centre of the education of children and young people in the socialist and communist spirit" (Ceaușescu 1971: 54). A teacher was expected to support the efforts of the communist regime to combat "the tendency of parasitism, of an easy-going life without work", especially among youth, and prevent young people from getting in contact with "the cosmopolitan attitudes, various artistic fashions borrowed from the capitalist world" (Ceaușescu 1971: 177–178).

In the speech delivered at the National Conference of the Young Pioneers' Organization, on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1971, Nicolae Ceaușescu sketched the portrait of the model pioneer. The red-kerchief bearer must possess a daring spirit, skill and diligence, all accompanied by great knowledge. Above everything, though, a pioneer had to enthusiastically

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4 *Vnye* (Russian) = out, outside

participate in patriotic work; in this sense, Ceaușescu praised “the initiative taken by a unit of young Pioneers in Bucharest concerning their participation in patriotic work” (Ceaușescu 1972: 538). The emphasis on physical work to the detriment of intellectual activities is noticeable in Ceaușescu’s requirement that pupils “must prepare to attend the new vocational schools...” which represented genuine workers’ academies (1972: 539).

Radio and television were instructed to more rigorously select the programmes they broadcast, granting priority to socialist productions – both indigenous and foreign. Shows that contain “ideas and principles alien to our [communist] philosophy and ethics, the spirit of violence, the bourgeois way of life and mentalities noxious to youth education will be eliminated from the radio and T.V. programmes” (Ceaușescu 1971: 179). As an alternative to American thrillers or Western movies, Ceaușescu required national television to broadcast operas, operettas and ballets reflecting the people’s fight for socialism. Again, this idea was of Chinese origin: comrade Jiang Qing, Mao’s partner, was a fervent supporter – and sometimes author – of popular operas, broadcast all day long by Chinese radio stations during the Cultural Revolution.

At the same time, Ceaușescu repeatedly spoke about the role of children’s media and literature in the formation of the new man. From an early age a child had to be educated in the spirit of communism:

[Children] want to become familiar with Prince Charming, created by Ispirescu, but they also want to know the Prince Charming of today, the hero of the struggle for social and national justice: they want to know what the dragons of Fairy Tales look like but also what the dragons of modern times look like, and who was the brave lad who cut off their heads.

(Ceaușescu 1972: 59)

In a 1977 meeting with high-echelon RCP members, Ceaușescu criticized the content of children’s media. One of the publications disapproved of was *Arici Pogonici*, a well-known children’s magazine, for its light approach of serious matters (Revista 22: 2009). A substantive change of contents was necessary, and not a mere change of name, Ceaușescu argued:

From the first issue of a publication one may tell its profile, its [ideological] orientation. We need to make these magazines serious, insomuch as they address children. Had they been intended for adults, I would perhaps understand and accept [lighter content], but taking into consideration that they are aimed at children, these magazines need to be very well conceived, adjusted to their [children’s] level of thinking ...

(Revista 22: 2009)

### **3.2. Children’s Media**

*Arici Pogonici* was an appealing read for young audiences. Richly illustrated, it was well-known for Livia Rusz’ series of cartoons featuring Mac the duck, Cocofifi the monkey,

and Cipi the dwarf, characters that became icons of children's pop culture in the 1970s. It also featured short stories, poems, riddles and puzzles for preschoolers and young pupils. As mentioned, Ceaușescu was dissatisfied with the content of this magazine.

After 1980, *Șoimii Patriei* (Homeland's Falcons), the publication that replaced *Arici Pogonici*, featured highly ideological content. The new name is telling: while *Arici Pogonici* evoked a nursery rhyme (arici = hedgehog), *Șoimii Patriei* represented the first level of political regimentation experienced by Romanian children. Upon joining kindergarten, the child became a *Șoim* (Falcon); later on, in the second grade, he would join the Pioneers, while the high-school years brought him a compulsory membership to the UTC (Union of Communist Youth).

Joining the Pioneers' Organization entailed a series of military-like rituals. The ceremony usually took place in one of the landmarks associated with the history of the Romanian Communist Party or the biography of Nicolae Ceaușescu – most often, at the Museum of the Party in Bucharest or at the Doftana prison, where Ceaușescu had been an inmate during his teenage years. However, many school teachers used the ceremony as a pretext for a trip out of town together with their pupils. The initiation ritual of becoming a Pioneer resembled military festivities and the structure of Pioneers' organizations mimicked the army hierarchies. The second-graders were gathered in the chosen festive area, together with their teacher and the head of the Pioneers' organisation in their school. Older pupils, usually fourth-graders, presented their younger colleagues with the rank of Pioneer. The aspiring Pioneers took an oath, a ritual carefully rehearsed in the classroom so nobody would forget the words, kissed the national flag, and then received the red kerchief, the symbol of the Pioneer status. In some cases, however, the ceremony took burlesque twists: “[T]he key point of the ceremony was the oath and kissing the flag. Half of my class skipped the last moment. Because the elder ones scared us by telling that if we kissed the flag (which was obviously dirty and overused) we would become sick of I don't know what terrible disease. So most of us just mimicked the kiss, being twofold scared, not to touch it and to be caught not touching it” (Martor 2002).

In some cases, the best pupils in class were made Pioneers first and took a trip out of town, while those with poorer grades received the red kerchief in the classroom, around two weeks later. Following the initiation ritual, one became a 'regular Pioneer', but study achievements, outstanding extra-school accomplishments or simply teacher favouritism propelled the pupil in the Pioneers' hierarchy. In order to strengthen children's attachment to Pioneer organizations, the political system “made of invented traditions and military-style rituals – reveilles, formal roll-calls, salutes, and parades with drums and bugles – as well as of symbolic attributes such as flags, music, emblems, mottoes, uniforms and badges” (Reid 2002: 149). The lowest rank was that of a 'group commander', marked through a red braided cord worn on the Pioneer's shirt in a similar fashion to the military aiguillettes. Classes were divided into three groups of approximately ten pupils each. Next in the hierarchy was the class commander, wearing a much coveted yellow cord. The highest position a Pioneer could have was that of a unit (school) commander, acknowledged through a blue cord. The unit commander had three adjuncts that wore light-blue cords. In addition to the cords, Pioneers could receive shoulder straps and medals that were usually granted during the festivities at the end of the school year.

Pioneers had two dedicated weekly magazines, *Luminita (The Little Sparkle)* and *Cutezătorii (The Daring Ones)*, both edited by The National Council of the Pioneers' Organization. During the eighties, *Cutezătorii* also edited a summer almanac, *Vacanta Cutezătorilor*. Beginning with 1971, the content of these publications was gradually submitted to conveying the propaganda discourse of the Romanian Communist Party. The cartoon series, the reports on geographical discoveries or famous historical characters and the pages of quizzes and puzzles were either reduced, or eliminated altogether. The reinvented *Cutezătorii* abandoned the escapist perspective of the older issues, which invited readers to take imaginary voyages, in the steps of Magellan or Columbus. Likewise, the *Minitehnicus* robot, featured in a well-known series of cartoons, was replaced by more terrestrial heroes – most often, groups of Pioneers engaged in activities that state propaganda would deem commendable.

From the late 1960s to the late 1970s, Romanian children could also read *Pif Gadget*, a French magazine which contained different types of cartoons, from mere gags with anthropomorphic animals – of which *Pif le chien* was the most famous, to more elaborate stories, involving heroes such as Rahan or Dr. Justice. *Pif Gadget* had its own ideological parti-pris, in accordance to those of its founder, the French Communist Party, but this could only be observed on close reading. Each issue of *Pif* was accompanied by a gadget, such as a water pistol, a rubber snake or a sling. Such destructive or scary toys were incompatible with the sobriety promoted by *Cutezătorii*, but Romanian children were mesmerized by them. However, beginning with the late 1970s, *Pif* gradually disappeared from the market. Children of the 1980s could only read *Pif* from the collections of older neighbours.

The cover of *Cutezătorii* gives a telling account of the discourse shift this publication underwent. The 1970 February 10th issue showcases *Minitehnicus*, the robot, playing a trick on his French counterpart, *Pif*. The cover also announces the first contest of cartoons jointly organized by *Cutezătorii* and *Pif le Chien* (Florescu 2010). Conversely, the 1981 January 22nd issue reproduces a painting that displays Elena and Nicolae Ceaușescu surrounded by ecstatic children who present them with flowers. Near the image, Ceaușescu is commended for his approaching birthday, on January 26th: “To Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu, the homage of our unbridled love, from our children’s hearts! Happy birthday!” (ClickZoomBytes.com 2010).

Romanian television did not grant much attention to children. It only broadcast ten minutes of cartoons per evening in 1970s, and up to ten minutes of cartoons per week in the late 1980s. Children thus reoriented towards other television channels – Bulgarian, Russian or Yugoslavian. Almost each high-rise building in Romania hosted a forest of aerials on its roof, although these devices were quasi-clandestine. Courses in the Bulgarian language were booked well in advance but most people, including children, learned the basic words of this language from television programmes. Western movies and shows, which were a regular presence in the programmes of Romanian television during the 1960s and 1970s, gradually disappeared. The few foreign movies broadcast during the 1980s were produced in China, North Korea or Albania, the countries which inspired Nicolae Ceaușescu’s “sultanistic” ruling style (Linz and Stepan 1996: 347; Tismaneanu 2003: 238), and were named “the traditional friends of Romania” by the communist pro-

paganda.

On Sunday mornings, the Romanian television broadcast *Lumea Copiilor* (Children's World), a programme dedicated to Pioneers. The programme was a media pendant of Palatul Pionierilor (Pioneers' Palace) and the activities conducted here. Susan Reid's description of the Pioneers' Palace in Moscow is extremely pertinent in the case of its Romanian counterpart: "Far more than just a building, it was an entire environment – a 'City of Happiness' or 'Pioneer Republic' – designed to facilitate the socialization and ideological formation of children (...). This exemplary 'socialist space' was to promote their self-realization as fully rounded individuals, at the same time as developing their communist consciousness and collective spirit". (Reid 2002: 142). *Lumea Copiilor* was never tailored to the needs and interests of its young audience. It aimed in fact to reinforce a fixed repertoire of themes that Nicolae Ceaușescu's speeches were constructed upon.

#### 4. Research methodology

The ethnographic component of this article builds upon eight ethnographic interviews with first generation Romanian-Canadians from Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Thanks to their flexibility, qualitative research methods are particularly useful in the context of my research. Statistics classify and tabulate, Michel de Certeau maintains, but our everyday living practices cannot be reduced to a set of taxonomies. Quantitative studies "can grasp only the material used by consumer practices (...) and not the *formality* proper to those practices, their surreptitious and guileful "movement", that is the very activity of "making do"" (1998: 34–35).

All respondents immigrated to Canada after the 1989 anti-communist Revolution (between 1990 and 2004). Persons who immigrated or came as refugees before 1989 were not included in the research sample, as they had a different motivation for leaving Romania. While pre-1989 emigrants left Romania in search of freedom, wishing to escape from Ceaușescu's totalitarian regime and in many cases persecution, after 1989 emigration was predominantly triggered by the economic opportunities of the West. A person who left Romania before 1989, for political reasons, is likely to have a different perspective of the Ceaușescu era than somebody who emigrated after the collapse of communism, searching for a better life abroad.

The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, as this type of investigation best served the purposes of this study. Ethnographic (open-ended, semi-structured) interviews attempt to "understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry" (Fontana and Frey 2000: 653). Any kind of details regarding the respondent's life practices under communism, memories or even jokes of that time were useful, as they allowed for a more faithful reconstitution of the social climate during the Ceaușescu era. As in the case of structured interviews, the list of questions was the same for all respondents. Nevertheless, the sequence of questions was altered in some interviews, according to the respondents' feedback.

To the highest extent possible, both genders were represented in balanced numbers. However, the class representation was homogeneous, due to the strict criteria employed by Immigration Canada in selecting immigrants. The 'benchmark system' in use when the respondents immigrated to Canada encouraged the selection of university or college



graduates, while rendering the immigration process extremely difficult for primary or high school graduates. The sample of respondents was gathered through my contacts within the community of Romanian immigrants in Toronto and GTA. The snowball technique was used in selecting the interviewees. Interviews took place either at respondents' homes, or in places of their choice (public library branches or coffee shops). The entire process of interviewing was facilitated by the common cultural background of interviewees and myself, which helped the respondents gain confidence and encouraged them to speak. The respondents came from different regions of Romania, have various professional backgrounds, and, most importantly, they represent different age segments – from late twenties up to forties. When selecting people of different ages, I wanted to see whether the perception of the communist regime altered with the passage of time.

The seventies were more difficult years than the sixties, but if compared to the eighties, they represented a cornucopia decade. A prerequisite in selecting the respondents was that they had lived for at least 12 years under the Ceaușescu regime. By this age, children would have already been exposed to an impressive amount of propaganda through various channels and were already regimented in structures like the Homeland's Falcons or Pioneers. Because the regime collapsed in December 1989, the youngest participant had to be born no later than December 31st 1977. The respondents were questioned about the years they spent under Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime, and asked to remember the popular culture artifacts they were exposed to as children – movies, magazines, books etc. What kind of reaction did they have toward such materials – acceptance, indifference or rejection? They were also questioned about the rituals of becoming Pioneers, their families' survival strategies, and the breach between speech and thought.

Nevertheless, qualitative research is not infallible. Respondents were invited to recall their reaction *as children* to the everyday realities of the Ceaușescu regime; however, it is difficult to evaluate how (if) the experience of maturity and, moreover, of moving to Canada, have shaped the interviewees' accounts. It should also be mentioned that although qualitative interviews allow the collection of an impressive amount of information, the accuracy of respondents' perspectives cannot be validated. At the same time, the common ethnic background prevented me from establishing an "outsider" perspective with the topic and the respondents.

## **5. Romanian children's response to propaganda – analysis of ethnographic interviews**

During the Nicolae Ceaușescu era, Romanians had a "paradoxical and miraculous in the extreme" everyday life, in a state of "unsolvable tension that nonetheless always finds a solution, an incontestable impossibility of survival that always, inevitably, ends in survival..." (Mateoniu and Gheorghiu, 2012: 7). Negotiating the communist propaganda discourse and, whenever possible, 'translating' it into one's personal language – an exercise of *bricolage*, in de Certeau's terms – represented an everyday practice with which most Romanians, including children, were acquainted. In what follows, the "aberrant decoding" (Eco 1965, as cited in Fiske 1990: 78) that Romanian children gave to various texts and cultural practices of the Ceaușescu regime will be analysed.

### 5.1. The rituals of Pioneership

The propaganda discourse of the Romanian Communist Party emphasized that children should be grateful to Elena and Nicolae Ceaușescu for their peaceful and prosperous life, and also for the honour of being Pioneers. Asked if they had been proud of their Pioneer status, seven out of eight respondents confirmed that they were; however, their gratitude was calculated. It was a tactic aimed at twisting the propaganda discourse and negotiating it in accordance to one's personal needs. Becoming a Pioneer was not a token of devotion towards the Ceaușescu family, but rather a tactic for improving one's own standing, an exercise of negotiation with the communist power, in order to obtain personal benefits, such as power over classmates. Cristina mentions:

*I was the boss in my classroom. The feeling of power was super.*

Robert also enjoyed his power position over his classmates:

*I was a group commander. The group commanders were standing in front of the row of desks they were in charge of and wrote down if somebody was cheeky or noisy.*

Other respondents were more interested in the gratifying pleasures which accompanied the Pioneer status, such as trips to the History Museum or out of town.

The status of Pioneer and, later, of Utecist – UTC member – entailed numerous obligations, among which was participation in patriotic work. Many texts, both in children's magazines and in schoolbooks, presented children who enthusiastically engaged in agricultural work. However, the interviews revealed mixed responses to this obligation. Vlad spoke about the chores he had to undertake as teenager:

*The worst time was in high school, as a UTC member. They were exploiting us big time, in the sense that they were asking us to peel potatoes, gather crops...*

However, Anca remembers patriotic work as a pleasant time spent in the country without doing anything:

*We were a group of girls. We were hiding in the maize fields, had lunch there, and when it was time to go, we were coming out. We weren't working at all.*

This is a good example of *la perruque*, a tactic consisting of “the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job.” (de Certeau 1998: 25). The interviewee and her friends were present at the agricultural site, but used the working time for leisure.

The respondents were also asked whether, in their childhood, they ever attended one of Nicolae Ceaușescu's working visits. The obligation to attend these visits represented yet another way in which the “Romanian Communist Party leadership gradually expropriated Romanians of much of their control over time” (Verdery 1996: 40), in order to prevent the use of personal time for manifestations of dissent. All respondents recalled the “care-

fully planned spontaneity” of such events, e.g. Robert, speaking about his participation at a working visit, explained that:

*We were not standing where we would have liked. There were the representatives of the Party who, neatly dressed, with striped suits and ties, blushing and chubby, were positioning us with their little hands, mightily yelling you here, you there, stand still, don't move. When the comrade appears, applaud and yell: long live comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu, hooray, hooray! (...) Kids were taken and led to the front, with bunches of flowers but probably they were thoroughly checked. They were kids of Party members who were highly trusted.*

Although, officially, there was no discrimination among the children who greeted Ceaușescu at such visits, Andrei could only attend the working visit because his parents held important positions in the local apparatus of the Communist Party:

*Since the majority of Pioneers were sons of party members, of course I was invited.*

Marius and Anca remembered the megalomaniac shows organized to celebrate a national holiday and inevitably attended by the presidential family. Thousands of people, including Pioneers, Homeland's Falcons and UTC members, wrote the name of the president or the Socialist Republic of Romania with their bodies and participated in carefully organized choreographies. Rehearsals for such events usually lasted several months. However, children ignored the political and ideological content of such events. Their tactic was to regard patriotic ceremonies as good opportunities to skip classes and have fun with the class. Alina remembers that:

*...it was nice, because we were all together, all classmates. Nobody cared why we were going there. We were all together and didn't go to school.*

## **5.2. A personal reading of children's media**

Interviewees' also had their tactics for averting the indoctrinating messages transmitted through children's publications, a detour from the omnipresent communist propaganda, an exercise through which children averted the ideology-infused texts in *Cutezătorii*. They found alternate readings (such as *Pif Gadget*, mentioned by all respondents) or selectively read the content of Romanian magazines. From *Cutezătorii*, the respondents only read the last three pages, which contained cartoons, stories of geographical discoveries and practical advice – most often, on how to recycle various items. In turn, the first pages were not interesting for children; in Bogdan's opinion, these pages “were good to go to the garbage”.

When *Pif Gadget* could still be purchased in Romania, all respondents chose it, in preference to *Cutezătorii*, even if getting it was often a daunting task. Alina mentioned that “one had to queue on the day it was brought to kiosks”. During the 1980s, *Pif* could no longer be bought in Romania. Only children who had relatives abroad, such as one of the respondents (Anca) could still read the *Pif* edition that appeared in France, and not

a shabby ten-year old copy borrowed from older friends or relatives. However, even the hand-me-down *Pif* delighted its readers, who could tell the difference between it and the Romanian magazines. An enthusiastic reader of *Pif*, Alina considered that no comparison could ever be drawn between *Pif* and *Cutezătorii*. According to her, the Romanian publication was “*nothing else but propaganda*”.

All respondents employed similar tactics for avoiding the indoctrinating messages in the Romanian television programmes. Older respondents remembered watching *Daktari* and *Flipper* together with their parents in the late 1960s and 1970s, when Western – particularly American – movies and series were still broadcast by the two channels of Romanian television. However, in order to comply with Nicolae Ceaușescu’s requirements, Western productions gradually disappeared from the programming of Romanian television. They were replaced with Romanian movies, or with Albanian, Chinese, North Korean or Vietnamese movies. Beginning with the late 1970s, Romanian television decreased its broadcast time, until it reached three hours on a weekday evening, and seven hours on Saturdays and Sundays. In 1983, *Programul 2*, the second channel of Romanian television was closed.

In response, Romanians tuned their televisions to Bulgarian, Serbian or Russian channels, depending on the geographical area they lived in. People who lived in the central areas of Romania could not receive any of these programmes. Officials frowned upon the forest of aerials that rose from the rooftops of high-rise buildings, but this practice continued unbridled. A detailed account of this practice goes beyond the scope of the present article, but it should be emphasized as an example of tacit complicity, where strategies and tactics conflate.

Children watched the ‘Bulgarians’ and the ‘Serbians’ along with their parents. Recalling this practice, Bogdan and Mihaela mentioned that they considered the Bulgarians “*much more advanced than us*”. The most daring approach belonged to Serbian television, according to the interviewees who watched its programmes in their childhood. Marius considered himself fortunate when he would go to his grandparents and watch Bulgarian television programmes:

*At that time they had reports against the Ceaușescu regime, which I found extraordinary. They were showing empty grocery stores, and telling what a hard life Romanians had. I don’t know how they managed to make these reports. I couldn’t believe I saw something like that on TV.*

Anca also remembered that her family and friends:

*...were looking covetously at what Yugoslavians had in their grocery stores, Coca-Cola and all the chocolates in the world. It was only on Yugoslavian TV that Romanians could see full shelves.*

With Cristina’s exception, the respondents did not like *Lumea Copiilor*, the weekly programme devoted to Pioneers that was broadcast by Romanian television, due to its propaganda content. According to Alina, “*you could tell it wasn’t something natural*”, while Robert remembered that *Lumea Copiilor* broadcast “*only Pioneers, patriotic songs and poems*”.

However, Cristina regarded this programme as an “*exchange of experience*”. Aiming to increase her popularity among schoolmates, she learned how to speak in front of the class from the Pioneers who performed in the programme. The respondent’s approach, as well as children’s ability to ‘appropriate’ the propaganda discourse, demonstrates that strategies and tactics often covered the same realm.

### **5.3. Tactically avoiding Ceaușescu’s television: VCR evenings**

Beginning with the mid-1980s, Romanians who could afford a VCR found another alternative to the two-hour programme of Romanian television other than the programmes of foreign television stations. Older children and teenagers often attended the ‘movie nights’ organized by their parents and friends. Of the eight respondents, it was only Anca who had a VCR, thanks to her relatives abroad. The other interviewees participated as often as possible at video nights organized by different persons. Robert preferred movies “*with beating, with shots, with war, with Jackie Chan, Bruce Lee and Arnold Schwarzenegger*”. So did Marius, while Bogdan watched *Top Gun* and *9 1/2 Weeks*.

The VCR evenings should be considered as a form of popular resistance to communism, even if confined to the space of personal apartments. Children and teenagers were thus resisting the hypocritical chastity imposed by the Ceaușescu regime. While Romanian television was broadcasting Chinese or North Korean movies with happy peasants and cranes returning to their home country, the interviewees were more attracted by the violent side of Asia, appreciating, like many other Romanians, movies with Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. Violence and sex were two taboos in the puritan socialist society. The movies broadcast by Romanian television represented moralizing stories, constructed on the narrative patterns of socialist realism. People were thus seeking what the ideal socialist society could not show them: dynamic (or even aggressive) movies, sexual intercourse on the TV screen or, as in Cristina’s case, movies with a certain substance, with a solid plot and good actors. Furthermore, the VCR phenomenon generated a cobweb of underground social connections among people who were exchanging cassettes. All-night long video marathons were organized. Marius remembered that, late at night, after his parents had fallen asleep, he sneaked out of the house together with his brother, and went to VCR marathons. The communist regime did not allow the existence of private enterprise; however, some VCR owners used to sell tickets for the movie nights they organized. Andrei, an aficionado of movies, spent a lot of time washing bottles and selling them just to get money for the VCR marathons. His case is particularly interesting, because his parents held solid positions in the local hierarchy of the Romanian Communist Party.

### **5.4. Double-language as tactics of protection**

Although media duly responded to Nicolae Ceaușescu’s call for educating children in the spirit of communist values, parents and relatives often counteracted ideology. The ability with which the respondents fended off the intrusive propaganda of the communist regime was taught in the family, from an early age. Marius read in *Cutezători* reports of various activities taking place at *Palatul Pionerilor*. Influenced by his reads, the respondent also joined the literary club of the local branch of the Pioneers’ organization. Marius recalls:

*We had to write stories and read them to the public. I had to write a*

*story about the life of a poor child in Africa as I would imagine it.*

Before reading his composition in front of his colleagues, Marius had several meetings with an instructor, who suggested what my interviewee was supposed to write, and also what was supposed to be deleted from the story. As a consequence of his activity at the literary club, and of what his schoolteacher kept repeating in class, Marius became appreciative towards the communist regime:

*I remember very well, in the elementary school, when they were telling us how bad was capitalism, so many murders in America, and how nice was in Romania, there were no murders at all. I was thinking how fortunate I was for being born in such an extraordinary country like Romania.*

It was only the discussions with his parents and grandparents that made Marius change his mind about the Ceaușescu regime. He soon understood that the instructor's advice on his composition represented in fact an act of censorship.

All respondents recalled the breach between their public and private acts of speech. For those of them who were children during the 1980s, this gap was particularly acute. Bogdan says:

*...the double message with which we were raised has developed us intellectually, I think, but on the other hand it has kind of crushed us as people, as citizens. It manifested everywhere, when we were writing something we knew there were certain canons. We knew that words have a double meaning, their surface meaning and another dimension.*

For Bogdan, the main consequence of this gap was the fear that you could not hide your thoughts deep enough so that the communist authorities would not be able to read them. This fear dominated Romanian society. He remembered:

*Everything was listened to, they<sup>5</sup> could intrude in our lives. Private no longer meant private but public. Telephones under surveillance, microphones...*

Furthermore, the respondent considers that this fear persisted many years after the 1989 Revolution. Anca did not feel the need to talk with her neighbours or classmates, thanks to the vivid discussions taking place inside her family. Her parents, grandparents and relatives were extremely critical of the communist regime. She says she "*kept things in mind but I did not talk about them*".

Listening to Radio Free Europe<sup>6</sup>, a quasi-clandestine but widespread practice among Romanians, particularly during the 1980s, was another practice that had not to be mentioned to neighbours or colleagues. The interviewees knew about the existence of this radio-

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5 The Securitate forces (Romanian secret police)

6 A radio station with an extremely critical discourse against the communist regimes in East European countries; its Romanian language programmes were listened to quasi-clandestinely by numerous people in Romania. It broadcast from Paris and Munich.

station, sometimes they listened to it along with their parents, but did not comment about this practice outside the house. Mihaela's parents were listening to Radio Free Europe, "like most of the people", but were trying not to talk too much in front of her and her sister, and avoided discussing the situation in Romania with anybody, except for trustworthy friends, "people they had known for years", who were less likely to be *Securitate* informers. However, Mihaela's family did not refrain from making malicious comments about Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu and the everyday shortages, such as the six-seven hour queues for foodstuffs. Bogdan's family openly discussed politics in front of him. He recalls:

*I never had that sensation of foggy muttering.*

Other parents preferred to keep their children away from politics. Andrei was advised by his father to read fiction. The interviewee remembered that he read tens of books in his childhood and early teen-age years. However, as mentioned above, Andrei's parents had power positions in the local structure of the Romanian Communist Party. The respondent admitted that the father's advice may have represented a strategy for preventing the son and his brother from asking too many 'tough' questions. In some cases, my respondents' perception of the Ceaușescu regime was influenced by discussions with friends. Andrei began to reconsider communism after returning from a Mathematics and Physics camp. He was so influenced by the conversations he had with his colleagues, all gifted for sciences, that he refused to become the commander of UTC in high school.

## 6. Conclusion

Michel de Certeau recalls the history of Spanish colonizers who attempted to impose their culture on indigenous Indians. The latter subverted the dominant cultural practices and refashioned them so that the colonizers would be compelled to accept them (1998: xiii). Following this model, this article presented an instance of everyday resistance to the insidious strategies of surveillance employed by the Romanian Communist Party. The discourse of indoctrination was ubiquitous; it was channelled through all media outlets, but its intended audience, children, developed a repertoire of tactics for averting it. Young audiences were well exercised in 'detouring' the meaning of the propaganda messages reaching them and in producing new meanings, in mockery, *bricolage* and, through all these, in trespassing the realm of strategies. The article emphasized the gap between the tenets of communist ideology, endlessly rehearsed through all media channels, and children's reading. However, children adopted a pragmatic attitude – Catriona Kelly might have called it "cynical" (2007: 153) – that allowed them to bridge this gap, to their own benefit.

De Certeau wrote that tactics represent "victories of the 'weak' over the 'strong'". (1998: xix). The inverted commas are telling: the "weak" are not actually that weak, while the "strong" are not invincible. This article aimed to demonstrate that strategies, which according to de Certeau, were usually the appanage of the powerful, and tactics – the realm of the weak – were not situated on adverse positions, but rather functioned in a relation of complicity. When researching the everyday realities of Eastern Europe before 1989, this fuzzy interdependence is more useful for understanding the relations between ordinary people and members of the political apparatus – both high potentates and 'petty-

apparatchiks' – as well as state institutions, than a black and white approach.

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