Through the Eyes of Cartoonists: Glimpses of Romanian Socio-Political Life at the Beginning of 2007

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Résumé: Les caricaturistes sont les témoins discrets, mais incisifs, des événements sur la scène socio-politique. Bien qu'éphémère, le discours caricatural surprend le tumulte, souvent déconcertant, de la vie sociale et politique, tout en distillant ironiquement, mais mais de façon conciliante, les essences puissantes des ambitions humaines. La présente communication met en évidence quelques repères thématiques, des analogies visuelles et des insertions intertextuelles au niveau d'un corpus de caricatures sélectées dans quatre journaux roumains parus pendant les deux premiers mois de l'année 2007.

Although today's serial comics and film animation link the word's primary meaning to children's entertainment, cartoons used for political commentary have antique origins. Graffiti survives on the ruins of ancient Roman buildings, the spontaneity and unofficial technique indicating early attempts to express controversial or irreverent opinion in a public forum. The ancient Pompeiian caricature of a politician in Figure 1 is intended to substantiate this statement.

The success of print media eventually legitimized the form, but without diminishing its fundamentally subversive purpose. In today's intensified visual culture the political or editorial cartoon remains a firmly established aspect of public discourse. Usually placed on the editorial page of daily newspapers, political cartoons deal with events or issues currently in the news and are in essence visual editorials. Just like columnists and editorialists,

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cartoonists are trying to make a point; their mission is to "influence the viewer to a particular view-point and to predispose him/her to a particular action" (Várnagy 2002: 254). However, they do not have to argue their positions; they are allowed to "hit and run" (Werner 2004).

In this paper we start from the assumption that "political cartooning is a function of the political system in spite of the tendency of depicting the political leaders in a negative way" (Várnagy 2002: 254).

We also believe that the purpose of political cartoons is to motivate people think about issues of politics, government and subjects of national and international importance. A galvanizer of opinion and kick-starter of conversation and discussion, the editorial cartoon helps to create an atmosphere of questioning, of laughter and of criticism. "Criticism towards the political system is guaranteed by law and even encouraged to contribute in increasing the legitimacy of the system" (Várnagy 2002: 254). Since we share the opinion that a cartoon is often a castigator and common scold of the body politic, we would like to investigate some viewpoints and commentaries developed by several Romanian cartoonists as witnesses of internal socio-political events at the beginning of 2007. In a general attempt at revealing how cartoons mirror socio-political discourse, we shall focus only on their thematic repertoire, visual analogies and intertextual insertions. The corpus of multimodal texts comprises only the cartoons published between January 3rd and February 28th 2007 (i.e. the productions immediately following the accession of Romania to the European Union) in *Jurnalul National* (JN), *Ziua* (Z), *Gândul* (G) and *Curierul National* (CN).

Less than a month after it joined the European Union, Romania was on the brink of political crisis, fueled by escalating tensions within the governing coalition and a bid by a major opposition party to suspend President Traian Basescu. Having traded accusations of corruption and wrong-doing, the country's president and prime minister were locked in a battle of personalities which, according to some analysts, lead to a policy

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paralysis. At the same time, most journalists opined that the assumed crisis was not to be found in the leaders' row, the president's imminent suspension or the spectre of early elections but in the very sad fact that Romania has no viable political alternative. Here is the opinion expressed by Matei Paun, one of *Vivid*[1]'s young writers: "Romania's real crisis is that we currently have no alternative to today's political class. There is not a single individual or party worth supporting in a presidential or parliamentary election, today or tomorrow. The fact that after seventeen years all members of Romania's political class have their roots firmly planted in the former communist party structures or in the intelligence services is Romania's real crisis. The fact that Romania's political parties are frauds and ultimately indistinguishable from each other is Romania's real crisis. The fact that Romania's political class is simply a coterie of power groups competing for economic gains is Romania's real crisis. The fact that we are living in an ideological vacuum, devoid of real national policies, strategies and objectives is Romania's real crisis. The fact that Romania's media is hardly independent, but serves, in fact, as a conduit for the manipulations and proxy wars of their owners is Romania's real crisis" (*Vivid*, February 16th, 2007).

The political turmoil was generally regarded as time-consuming, energy-consuming and even embarrassing.

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The essence of cartooning resides in the simultaneous *distance from* and *proximity to* reality. Olaniyan (2000) refers to this paradoxical nature of cartoons in the following terms: "Embodied in cartooning is thus simultaneously a prescriptive and proscriptive challenge in which to be more iconic, i.e. "realistic", is to lose its cartoonish, i.e. caricaturist, essence, while to turn the other way round and be less iconic, i.e. "abstract", is to lose its

[1] *Vivid* is a monthly English-language magazine published in Bucharest and available online at http://www.vivid.ro.

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referential power and thus its audience and function." And yet, cartoons cannot exist at either end of the spectrum. A scale of iconicity measuring the degree of likeness or unlikeness of a cartoonist's image to actuality may be proposed. Thus, cartoonists are considered to operate within one of three levels of iconicity, expressed in relative terms as *iconic*, *less iconic*, and *least iconic*.

The cartoonists publishing in the four Romanian papers mentioned above appear to operate mainly at the *iconic* level. Even so, their artistry, techniques and imaginaries preclude the homogenous treatment of resemblances. In our opinion, the viewer-friendliness of the iconic cartoons in our corpus manifests itself either in a vigorous form or in a more relaxed one.

On the one hand, the cartoons in *JN*, *G* and *CN* are characterized by leisurely figurative representations, a wealth of visual details, elaborate backgrounds, coloured figures, spaces and zones intended to suggest high modality, as well as a pronounced interest for the contextualization of depicted characters. On the other hand, the cartoons in *Z* are characterized by iconic frugality: the human figures are sketchy and austere, visual details are kept to a minimum, and there are no colored shapes or areas to mimic high modality (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). The general tendency is to construct no setting for the characters depicted or, on the contrary, to offer minimal visual contextualization cues. By being 'decontextualized', shown in a void, the characters become generic. Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 illustrate these two tendencies.

The cartoonist in *Curierul National* constantly slants towards gag cartoons. They are largely word-driven constructions in which the drawing merely illustrates or embellishes a discursive situation or scenario, without any pretensions to anchor or relay the meaning of words. The wit and humour reside only in the verbal message, while the generic pictures are summoned to function as mnemonic devices.

Constructed on a fairy tale scenario, the cartoon in figure 6 depicts a golden fish and a fisherman 'debating' on the idea of wanting more than enough. Traian Basescu's electoral slogan (*May you live well*) was selected to represent the content of the

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fourth wish in the caption, which, regretfully, cannot be fulfilled by the fish. 'To live well in Romania' is presented as an impossible dream, as an already unhealthy obsession among people. And yet, the issue at stake here seems to be the nature of the impossibility. The cartoon hints at the unfelicitous political promise and invites each and every reader to reconsider the felicity conditions for promises in general (*Speaker[S] promises Hearer [H] to do A*: 1. S believes H wants A done; 2. S is able to do A; 3. S is willing to do A; and 4. A has not already been done).

In spite of the predominance of *word-driven* cartoons in our corpus, one cannot disregard the existence of cartoons which exploit the primacy of the visual over the verbal. The cartoon in figure 12 conveys the message verbalized by most political analysts in the press or on TV, namely that the note scandal was schemed at Cotroceni by Traian Basescu and his former presidential counselor. This is a 'transactional'[2] cartoon in which the vector of the woman's hand throwing the note and the vectors of the jumping politicians meet in the middle of the cartoon. These vectors lead the eye and help us realize 'what is visually going on'. In accordance with Halliday's system of transitivity, the cartoon visually depicts a double *transaction* in which the humans depicted are Actors, while the Goal is the note. The woman hoisted on the president's shoulders performs a deed which could be transcoded as 'throwing', and the note is the Goal (i.e. "the participant at whom the vector is directed (…), the participant to *whom the action is done*, or *at whom the action is aimed*"- Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 62, emphasis in the original). The note plays the same function in relation to the jumping people, who are Actors; the process could be transcoded as 'politicians jump after the note'. Interestingly, the woman in the visual transactional process "is not so much the participant which moves (…) as the participant which instigates the movement" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 63); in other words, the cartoon as visual art "foregrounds

[2] The term is used here in the sense of 'visual representational structure' developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) within Halliday's theory of transitivity.

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procedure over substantive content" (ibid.). Further observations could be made if we were to take into consideration the direction of the president's glance; if this is indeed directed towards the jumping people, then the cartoon also exploits the reactional structure. The process 'politicians jump after the note' becomes the Phenomenon of a reactional structure in which the president is the Reacter, the participant who witnesses and reacts to the action performed by the politicians. It is up to every viewer to interpret the president's facial expression and to imagine his thoughts.

Besides *word-driven* and *picture-driven* cartoons, our corpus also reveals the presence of cartoons in which words and pictures are in a complementary relationship. Following the president's visit to Egypt, *Curierul National* publishes the cartoon in figure 7 in which the camel visually instantiates not only the model invoked verbally in the bubble (*Pe tine te iau acasa sa am model când o sa-l cocosez... pe stiu eu cine*) but also the action to be performed by the president on his return home; the same action is supposed to be suffered by the opponent whose identity is not verbally expressed yet visually rendered as 'missing' by the suspension points.

Our collection of cartoons displays another interesting feature, namely a predominant dialogic structure (in the sense of 'exchange of ideas and opinions'). The need of having 'someone to talk with' and of finding 'someone to listen to you' is constantly exploited by cartoonists. The 'identity crisis' theme is approached in figure 10. To be a clown in a circus is serious business because laughter requires good management: one needs to know when to laugh, when to make others laugh and when to accept being laughed at. The clowns are sad because their identity and trade have been stolen by politicians, who have become the laughing stock of the public. The competition is fierce and the wish of having made another choice may haunt people especially in periods of acute financial distress. The problem of financial inequality resurfaces in figure 11. And yet what we may find revolting in the implications suggested by this cartoon is not necessarily the fact that common people live on (very) small

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wages and politicians have too much money on their hands, but perhaps the fact that they resort to an *overt* display of their turpitude and excesses.

The obsession of the 'other' and the capacity to deal with relations of opposition constitute the common ground of many cartoons. Implicit in most cartoons is a righteous 'we' which is superior to a foolish or evil 'them'. The cartoon in figure 8 presents an extreme situation because the confrontation with the 'other' (i.e. the political opponent embodied by the prime minister visually instantiated by the representation of a photograph) is not rendered directly, as suggested by the cartoon in figure 5, but through a very special intermediary: Death. The deep enmity between the president and the prime minister is hinted at by the skeletal figure wearing a white burial shroud and carrying a scythe.

Visual analogies stand at the heart of cartoons, animating thought and emotion. According to Werner (2004), cartoonists often resort to three major sources: (a). mundane situations, objects and common settings such infirmaries (e.g. figure 14), cemeteries, family bedrooms or kitchens; (b). contemporary popular culture, such as movies (e.g. figure 4), TV shows or sports events; and (c.) historical events and personages, and literary texts (e.g. figures 3, 13, 15, 16).

The 'intensive care' setting in figure 14 was selected by the cartoonist to suggest the serious condition of the Romanian coalition which is represented through the pervasive metaphor POLITICAL BODY IS A PATIENT. Here are some other metaphorical and metonymical resources: THE EUROPEAN UNION IS A PERSON (e.g. figure 9 and 17), THE ROMANIAN PEOPLE IS A PERSON (e.g. figure 18), ROMANIA IS A DEVICE IN A COMPLEX MACHINERY (e.g. figure 19), POLITICIANS ARE PERFORMERS ON A STAGE (e.g. figure 20).

The four Romanian cartoonists also borrow or quote from prior visual or written texts. The echoing of historic or historical moments (e.g. the unification of Wallachia and Moldavia), quotations (e.g. figure 21, *Daca voi nu ma vreti, eu ma vreau*),

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famous people (e.g. Traian Vuia, Mos Ion Roata, Al. I. Cuza) or literary characters (e.g. Caragiale's drunken citizen) create visual metaphors and metonymies that encourage the layering of meanings in novel or ironic ways.

Conclusive remarks

The cartoons published in *Jurnalul National* (JN), *Ziua* (Z), *Gândul* (G) and *Curierul National* (CN) during the first two months of 2007 depict a state of *behavioural abnormality* among people. There is an unhealthy competitive stubbornness among the members of the political class, blinded and absorbed by their ambitions and vanities. Greed knows no party lines and all that matters is to become proficient in handling the mechanisms of dispute and conflict. The constructive negotiation strategy *win-win* is disregarded in favour of the non-empathic strategy *win-lose*.



Figure 1. Ancient graffiti caricature



Figure 2. JN (Feb.15th)



Figure 3. G (Feb. 26th)



Figure 4. CN (Feb. 19th)

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Figure 5. Z (Feb. 22nd)



Figure 6. CN (Jan. 11th.)



Figure 7. CN (Feb. 23rd)



Figure 8.



Figure 9. JN (Feb. 1st)

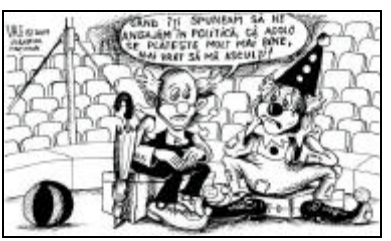


Figure 10. JN (Feb. 6th)

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Figure 11. G (Jan. 13th)



Figure 12. G (Jan. 20th)



Figure 13. G (Feb. 24th)

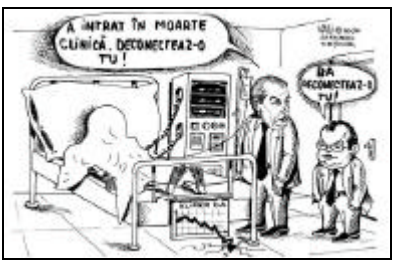


Figure 14. JN (Jan. 31st)



Figure 15. JN (Jan 25th)



Figure 16. Z (Feb 12th)

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Figure 17. CN (Feb.22nd)



Figure 18. CN (Feb. 20th)



Figure 19. G (Jan. 13th)



Figure 20. Z (Jan. 4th)



Figure 21. Z (Feb. 15th)

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