

Youth Culture in 1980s Romania:

Students' comedy brigades

By

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Abstract

The focus of this thesis is the youth culture from Romania during the 1980s. More precisely the students who performed in the student comedy brigades, a relatively well spread phenomenon in this period. This research analyzed their performances considering their content and locations, their depiction in the official student and youth press, and the relation of the student comedy brigades with the authorities and the Romanian and East European underground humor, by using oral interviews with former member of the brigades and the close reading of student and youth press.

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Introduction

“Although man fights them back, the brain cells counterattack.”¹ This was the motto of the Festival of the Students’ Art and Creation (FACS) in 1983, written on a big poster in the show hall from Iasi. Who was the man that fought back the brain cells? And how could the brain cells counterattack? Who put this poster there? These were all questions on everyone’s lips, although they all knew the answer. The man who tried to keep the brain cells back was the Romanian communist regime, the ones who counterattacked were the students and their mean was satire.

The motto of this festival could be easily the motto of all the comedy student culture in the 1980s Romania: fighting the state with their wit. This was not a new method though, and it can be found in the whole communist bloc because, as Mikhail Bakhtin argues when writing about the novels of the French Renaissance writer François Rabelais, an important social function of laughter within the medieval carnivals present in Rabelais’s work: *Laughter [...] overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority.*² The central idea of his

¹ Original: “Desi omul se impotriveste, inteligenta contraataca.” All translations from this thesis belong to me, Ionut Stan, unless indicated otherwise.

² M.M. Bakhtin, “Rabelais and His World”, 1965, trans. H. Iswolski, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Ind., 1986), in *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*, ed. Pam Morris, [London: Edward Arnold, 1994], p.209.

theory is the carnival as a place of freedom, where all social hierarchies and moral authority are suspended.³

But in Romania such a space did not exist, that is why it was overlooked by all the previous authors. However satire and wit in public performances was present here too, and the way it was used presents new and interesting features because it was not used outside the state structures, on the contrary the state resources assured their survival.

The student comedy brigades were formed by 3 up to 12-14 members. All the universities had at least one, since it was compulsory for them to have one as its representatives at the FACS. Some of these brigades were more enduring and could have performances outside the FACS, throughout the year, others were created only for the festival. The period in which these brigades flourished was the 1980s.

This topic has hardly, if never, received any academic attention. There are several reasons for that. First of all is the very tight censorship that existed in the last decade of the communist regime in Romania. This prevented any development of a subculture, counterculture or any alternative or underground cultural scene. Everything had to be in the state administered realm. That is why Romania has a peculiar character, being similar only to Albania in the whole Eastern bloc. So it was

³ By using this idea of a free space some authors analyzed humor in Central and Eastern Europe; see, for example, Andrew Horton, *Inside Soviet Film Satire: Laughter with a lash* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). It is the same with the authors who analyzed rock music or other subversive cultures: see Anna Szemere, *Up from the Underground: The Culture of Rock Music in Postsocialist Hungary*, (The Pennsylvania State University Press), 2001; Sabrina Petra Ramet (ed.), *Rocking the State: rock music and politics in Eastern Europe and Russia*. (Boulder: Westview Press), 1994. Cushman, Thomas Cushman, *Notes from underground: rock music counterculture in Russia*, (New York: State University of New York Press), 1995.

overlooked by western researchers because it did not have, at a first sight, any movement to be studied.

The situation is very much the same when speaking about Romanian authors. There is only one indication of this phenomenon in Adrian Cioroianu's general survey over the whole period of Romanian communism. The book is called *Pe umerii lui Marx. O introducere in istoria comunismului romanesc* (On Marx's Shoulders: An introduction into the history of Romanian communism) (2005). He devotes a few pages (precisely only three) to the Festivals of Art and Students' Creation (FACS) organized by the UASCR (The Union of the Associations of Communist Students from Romania). Students' comedy brigades used to perform in these festivals. The festivals were, Cioroianu claims, like an oasis where one could say and hear things that otherwise could have been heard only on foreign radio stations like Free Europe. And, he continues, these festivals functioned like a vent which released the tensions accumulated into the students' world.⁴ Nevertheless the student comedy brigades had shows outside the FACS, as was previously mentioned, a fact that makes their research even more intriguing.

In this endeavor I will firstly define the theories and methodology used. Then I will proceed by analyzing the official and unofficial student press, following the depictions of the student brigades in it. By doing so I want to unveil how were they perceived by the authorities and what was expected from them. In the third chapter I will approach

⁴Adrian Cioroianu, *Pe umerii lui Marx. O introducere in istoria comunismului romanesc* (On Marx's Shoulders: An Introduction into the History of Romanian Communism), (Bucharest: Curtea Veche, 2005), p.474-477.

more closely the activity of the brigades with an emphasis on the content of their shows, their relation with the authorities and with the underground Romanian humor.

The final aim of this thesis is to prove that in the most powerful years of repression of Romanian communism (comparable only with the period of Soviet occupation), young people, and students in particular, did manage to create “convulsions” and to “counterattack” with their brain cells the system, thus proving that “life” existed in Romania of the 1980s.

Chapter I

Paradigms

1.1 Overview of the subject and historical data

In this thesis I will analyze a cultural phenomenon among Romania's youth, especially students, during the 1980s. In this period, in all major university cities, like Bucharest, Iasi, Timisoara, and Cluj, groups of students performed short sketches with "hints" at the (bad) social and economical situation of Romania. Their shows took place in front of an audience formed mostly by other students, whose number varied from a few tens up to 1000 people in halls with approximately 700 seats. What makes the performances of these student comedy brigades of interest is the fact that their humor contained criticism of the Romanian socialist system and in some cases broke the laws of the state. Paradoxically it was the state that sponsored these student comedy brigades.

The profile of the performers is intriguing too: they were not actors or students of acting, but students of engineering. This fact has several explanations. First of all, during this period 3 out of 4 college graduates were students graduated in

engineering.⁵ So the vast majority of Romanian students at that time were students of engineering.⁶ Another contributing factor is that professional actors' activity was both highly politicized and marginalized by the Ceausescu regime, so that amateurs were encouraged to have artistic performances.⁷ This explains how the main "actors" in this phenomenon were actually preparing themselves to be engineers.

Their shows used to take place almost everywhere: in houses of culture, culture clubs in villages, informal and formal events (even weddings and celebrations organized by different institutions). The most important performances with the biggest audiences took place at the Festival of Students' Art and Creation (FACS), held once every two years. Of course, as Cioroianu notices, here were present not only students of engineering, but also those of economics, humanities etc., because every university center had to send its representatives to these festivals.⁸ And FACS festivals were not confined only to humorous sketches, but the program also included dances, songs, poetry, etc. But the activity of the students' comedy brigades is the one which arouses most interest due to its situation, sometimes, outside the law. So I will focus on the activity of comedy brigades at the festivals from 1983, 1985 and 1987, since for those which preceded 1983 there are no sources and at the one from 1989 the humor

⁵ See Lucian Boia (ed.), *Mitul inginerului* (The Myth of the Engineer) in *Mitologia comunismului romanesc* (The Mythology of Romanian Communism), (Bucharest: Nemira), 1998.

⁶ Considering these data and the fact that technical universities had a very high number of students overall, one can speculate and claim that most of these students were not natives of the cities in which they were studying.

⁷ This characteristic of the Ceausescu regime is very visible in the festival *Cantarea Romaniei* (Song to Romania), where professional artists were only supervising the overwhelming number of amateurs who constituted the mass of performers. Claudiu Oancea, *When Forgers of Steel became Vreators of Art: The national festival "Song to Romania,"* (Budapest: Unpublished Master's thesis, Department of History, Central European University), 2007, p. 7 – 56.

⁸ Cioroianu, *Pe umerii...* p. 474 – 475.

section was banned, most probably because the increasing tight censorship did not allow for these performances to take place anymore.

1. 2 The legal framework

The legal and political background in which the student comedy brigades performed is marked by the presence of The Council for Socialist Culture and Education (CCES) which was formed in 1971 as a result of The Theses from July.⁹ Its most important attributes were established in 1977. From that moment on the Council was controlling *all cultural – education institutions from towns or villages [...] with the purpose of accomplishing the cultural policy of the Party*¹⁰. It was an organ subordinated to the state (the Council of Ministries) and to the Party (The Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party) at the same time. This institution was organizing the festival Song to Romania too from 1977 until the end of the regime in 1989. This council approved the repertoires of theaters and concert halls, of museum exhibitions, of the publishing of books and the production and distribution of movies.¹¹ Many censors from the former institution of censorship (the Committee for Press and Publishing) worked for CCES after 1977.¹²

⁹ The *Theses from July*, a body of directives published under Nicolae Ceausescu's supervision, were the beginning of the re-stalinization of Romanian culture, after the first Stalinization in the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s. They promoted the complete isolation of Romanian cultural productions from the foreign ones which were altering the originality of Romanians. Comisia prezidentiala pentru analiza dictaturii din Romania (The Presidential Commission for the Analyses of the Romanian Dictatorship), *Raport final* (Final Report), (Bucharest: 2006), p. 602.

¹⁰ ANIC, fond CC al PCR – Cancelarie, dosar nr. 116/1977, f. 2 v. și 3 r. *apud* Final Report, p. 602.

¹¹ *Final REport*, 602.

¹² *Ibid.*

But what were exactly the laws that this organ had to supervise? This question does not have a very easy answer because of the secret in which these laws were kept, a fact that opened the door to abuses from the part of the authorities¹³ and for the generalized fear that dominated the Romanian society (since no one could know what was illegal, he could not protect himself; he could only guess from his or others experiences), *the responsibility of fear*.¹⁴

The blur in which the laws were left for the large mass of the population was intentional.¹⁵ This was a part of the control by fear of the society, together with the intrusive surveillance of the political police, *Securitate*. Anything could be a possible crime, since no one knew exactly what was illegal, and the vast network of agents and informants of the *Securitate* would have known immediately if something had happened. So because nothing was made specific, everybody was being afraid to say anything, not knowing where “the line” is.

A short depiction of what was prohibited in the last years of the regime will give a picture of the incredibly tight censorship: any word which might induce the thought of Ceausescu or his wife was prohibited. Examples of such words: *dark, cold, hunger, grey beard, old hag, death, cross, priest, fear, oranges, bananas, coffee*.¹⁶ Also, Ceausescu’s name could not be split in syllables and any misspelling in a text which

¹³ *Ibid.*, 398.

¹⁴ Katherine Durandin, *Istoria Romaniei*, (The History of Romania) (Iasi: Institutul European), 1998, p. 301 in Tiberiu Troncota, *Romania comunista: Propaganda si cenzura*, (Communist Romania: Propaganda and censorship), (Bucuresti: Tritonic), 2006, p. 190.

¹⁵ For instance, in 1985 all Romanian employees had to sign a document in which they admitted that they knew the content of a decree about state security (Decree no. 408), but which remained unknown because it was never published (and the Presidential Commission for the Analyses of the Romanian Communist Dictatorship could not find it at either). The employees just had been told that it has to do with the contact with foreigners and it has a very wide area of application. *Final Report*, 610.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 505 -506.

made reference to him was severely punished.¹⁷ The list of books and movies which were banned or modified is, of course, way too long to be covered in these lines.¹⁸

But the brigades had jokes with hints at Ceausescu. One explanation for the persistence of this student culture in a “grey” legal area for so many years might be the tension releasing function that these performances had both for the audience and for the performers. If the laws had been strictly applied, nothing would have happened. According to Cioroianu, the communists exploited the social function of this activity (releasing the tensions of Romanian students) towards their own ends: controlling and regulating the youth.¹⁹ In other words, by offering this minimal freedom, or the illusion of freedom, the authorities were attempting to make sure that young people would not rebel and cause any real threat to the regime.

1. 3 Concepts and methodology

1.3.1 Youth culture

In my analyses I will use several concepts. Hillary Pilkington’s term “youth culture”²⁰ is relevant, but for the purpose of my work the meaning of the term will be restricted, most of the time, to “student culture.”²¹ Relations with the wider category of youth

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 505.

¹⁸ See *Ibid.*, 503 – 506.

¹⁹ Cioroianu, *Pe Umerii ...* p.474 – 477.

²⁰ Hillary Pilkington, *Russia’s Youth and its Culture: A nation’s constructors and constructed*, (London: Routledge), 1994.

²¹ I will present two other analytical concepts, *youth press* and *student press*, in the second chapter dealing with Romanian newspapers addressing students.

culture will be made where relevant. Through this distinction between “youth culture” and “student culture” the present work situates somehow outside the major theoretical paradigms that have been used in analyzing the youth culture of the post-war period, especially the one from East European countries under communism. In these previous studies, the attention of the authors was directed towards delinquent working class subcultures, fans of different genres of music (punk, rock etc), or the counter-cultural movements surrounding the year 1968.²²

In Romania of the 1980s the very tight state control did not allowed any such advanced development of a subculture, not to mention counter-culture. As Anna Szemere states when speaking about underground rock music in Hungary during the 1980s, developing one of Withrow's laws about ideological production, the state has *to loosen its control over popular music*²³ before any opposing ideological movement can develop. This idea can be extended in the Romanian case to all cultural spheres, since the state control never loosened anywhere, but on the contrary it grew even stronger throughout the decade.²⁴

Thus specific characteristics of the Romanian student culture are less visible than in the other countries. And even those manifestations that can be observed differ in their aim: Romanian students did not straightforwardly oppose the state, because they could not, so they found more diverse means. The strategies that they had found

²² Szemere; Cushman; Ramet (ed),; Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The meaning of style*, (London: Methuen), 1979; I do not include in this list the books dealing with the “high”, intellectual culture.

²³ Szemere, p. 30.

²⁴ More details about Romanian censorship in this period will be on page 17.

present, if not unique, very rare features concretized in a different sort of language and in a constant game of going around the obstacles of censorship, not fighting them.

So why can one name this Romanian phenomenon student culture, if everything is so different about it? The most important argument is the institutional recognition of it by the state. Students had their own newspapers (or, to be more precise, newspapers written for them), their own festivals, and their own programs for summer or holiday camps (of course, all closely monitored, if not even organized, and financed by the state). They were a different social category recognized (or maybe even created) by laws. The certain thing is that they were doing different things (and these boldly performances at that time, which pushed the limit with the social and political criticism are the most important ones) that could not be found anywhere else in Romanian society.

The bibliography regarding this subject is non-existent. So I will focus my analyses on the students' festivals, with an emphasis on the humor section, as it was depicted in the newspapers for the students and remembered by the actual students who participated. In doing so I expect to find the official view over this festival and compare it with what took place. For future work I leave the task to identify and explain all the elements of this network of student manifestations and leisure activities, thus finding its place in the wider picture of Romanian everyday life under communism.

I will argue that in analyzing the Romanian student phenomenon the concepts of subculture and counter-culture can not be used. The latter concept designates a group of people who proposes an alternative way of living to the official or dominant culture.

A subculture designates a group of people who is perceived as deviant from the dominant values of society, without having a totally different social order. So the difference between counter-culture and subculture is a gradual one: while the counter-culture proposes a new social order, practically a new society, the subculture exists in a marginal position within the existing social order.²⁵ Both groups are very visible regarding their dressing style, way of acting and their whole social behavior.

By contrast, the Romanian students could not plan to create a new social order, since there was no space that could escape state control. So a counter-cultural movement could not develop anywhere in communist Romania. And the members of the students' comedy brigades, besides this cultural activity, were completely integrated in the structures of Romanian society: they attended classes, after graduation they had regular jobs, and they did not have any distinctive clothing or behavior in society. So they could not be defined as a subculture. This enforces my analyses on the youth cultural aspect of this phenomenon.

1.3 2 Censorship

When one speaks about any cultural activity in communist Romania, and, by extension, in any communist state, he can not overlook the censorship. The Committee for Press and Publishing, which was the institutionalized Romanian

²⁵ This exact difference between the two terms was explained in a lecture called, , *Theories of Sub-Culture and Counter-Culture; Counter-Cultural movements in Western Europe and USA*, on January 21, by Anna Wessely; also see Hebdige, and Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (eds), *Subcultures Reader*, (London: Routledge), 1997, p.1 – 7.

censorship, was abolished in 1977. But this does not mean that the actual practice of censoring disappeared too. On the contrary, it became even stronger since the censors were moved into every publishing house, newspaper, and all the other public institutions, including universities. Thus the centralized censorship became a vast network of censors spread within Romania who had to report to CCES, to the Central Committee's Press Department or to the Securitate.²⁶ In this way they were able to supervise more efficiently the cultural activity from those institutions.

In dealing with the censors, the intellectuals aroused most scholarly interest. The fight of the writers with the censors in this period is very controversial. On one side there is the theory of the "resistance through culture". The Romanian writer Norman Manea explains this idea. According to him, considering the hard conditions in which one had to express himself, the literature with hidden messages was the only option in doing so.²⁷ This means that through these hidden messages, one could hope to overcome the censors. This genre of literature was highly popular during the communist period in Romania. It consists in the codification of the message, in only hinting at certain social or political aspects without naming them. In order for one to understand these allusions, he would need a "key", some knowledge that would allowed him to perceive the hidden messages named *soparle* (lizards). This dissimulation of the message can be found in other arts too (like movies). And, relevant for the present work, "lizards" were also present in the acts of the students' comedy brigades.

²⁶ *Final Report*, p. 504-505 , Troncota, p. 190.

²⁷ Norman Manea, *On Clowns: The dictator and the artists*, (New York: Grove Press), 1992, p. 29 – 31.

But, as I previously mentioned, this form of resistance is much disputed. *The Final Report* argues that the Romanian writers used this way of writing both for gaining advantages from the state (easy publication of their works, trips abroad etc) and mass success. The first part was achieved by camouflaging in their works only some themes that were allowed by the authorities (so one can speak about complicity in this case), thus being “under control.” Still by attacking or criticizing something from Romanian society, they appeared in the eyes of the reader as fighters against the system. This way of writing showed its limits after the 1989 Revolution when it was completely and very quickly forgotten, in this way proving its failure, the same report argues.²⁸

When discussing Romanian writers under communism, Katherine Verdery underlines the struggle for power within the writers’ world (like the *protochronist movement* or *The “School” of Philosopher Constantin Noica*) notices no preoccupation for subversion in the part of the writers. On the contrary, by their use of Marxist – Leninist terms, later of nationalistic terms, and a combination of the two (*the indigenization of Marxism*), the writers were actually trying to enter under the protection of the Party, a position which could bring them material benefices.²⁹

Another fact that shows the weakness of the resistance of the writers is the case of Paul Goma, the most famous Romanian dissident. In January 1977, Goma wrote an open letter in which he was asking Nicolae Ceausescu to obey the decisions regarding

²⁸, *Final Report*, p.506; Dennis Deletant, *Cheating the Censor: Romanian Writers under Communism*, in *Central Europe*, Vol. 6 no.2, (Nov. 2008): p. 122; for a more journalistic approach of this subject, but still with a good insight, see Traian Ungureanu, *Incotro duce istoria Romaniei*, (Where is Romanian History Heading?), (Bucharest: Humanitas), 2008, p. 42 – 43.

²⁹ Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press), 1991, p. 138 – 141, 184 – 188, 278 – 284.

human rights from the Conference of Helsinki (1975) that he had obliged to obey. Only one writer joined Goma and signed his letter: Ion Negoitescu.³⁰

This last opinion about “resistance through culture” seems to be dominant now in Romanian scholarly circles. So, in this case, can one talk about resistance through humor? And intriguing are the new dimensions of the “lizards” that can be found, since the activity of the students’ brigade was a performative art, where the written text might mean something else when is spoken (due to intonations, for example), unlike literature.

Approaching censorship is a challenging task because the institution of censorship was abolished in 1977, documents were no longer produced. The censors were moved in every cultural institution and reported to the Council for Socialist Culture and Education (C.C.E.S.), to the Press Department of the Central Committee of the Party, or to the Securitate. So the reports of the censors are scattered in the archives of these institutions, making them very hard to find. Thus the most reliable resources in depicting the censorship process are the actual students who had to “fight” with the censors.

1.3.3 Humor and its theatrical forms

³⁰ The other intellectual who signed the letter was the psychiatrist Ion Vianu. Some 200 regular people signed it too, but more to get the “Goma passport” which allowed them to emigrate West. Goma was arrested in April 1977 and released a month later only after a powerful international campaign. He had to emigrate from Romania in November 1977 for Paris with his wife and son. *Final Report*, p. 112.

All the above theories are encircling the core of this youth culture which is humor. This is a very difficult concept to define because of its multiple implications: psychological, sociological, philosophical etc. I will use the definition of the Random House Dictionary, which states that humor is “a comic, absurd, or incongruous quality causing amusement.”³¹ This is a loose and common – sense definition, and since my purpose is not to discover the meaning of the concept humor, but to unveil the way in which it was used by a group of people (the students’ comedy brigades) in a specific historical context (Romania during the 1980s), I find it relevant for my study. By using this definition of humor I will be able to analyze the components of this youth culture which was not limited to performances (although they are the most important), but had also publications: *The Manual for Humor*, and other small magazines.

The theatrical variations of humor (parody, satire) will be dealt in the same manner, based on a common sense perception of them without confining oneself to any rigid system of classification. So the terms will be used very loosely and only to indicate better the content of that particular sketch. With this approach I want to focus on the overall features of this student culture, to have always in mind the whole in which all the parts have to be integrated.

The humor of the comedy brigades, their jokes, will be compared with the underground jokes from that period regarding their themes and their wit. The language used and the interpretation are important factors too, and here a comparison can be made with the literature with hidden messages. I expect to find a much higher degree of

³¹ humor. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged* (v 1.1). Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.classic.reference.com/browse/humor> (accessed: June 06, 2009).

sophistication in the comedy brigades' usage of the language since they could use intonation and non-verbal communication to transmit their message.

1.3.4 Oral history and the methodology of the interviews

The oral history has been used intensely throughout the 20th Century for different research matters: history of the blacks, gender issues, the analyses of the working class, etc.³²

I have chosen to approach my topic with the methods of this discipline because the actual people who performed at these shows are the most reliable and direct source (there are no video or audio recordings of their shows) and the relations with the censors was very informal which means that very few documents were produced.

My methodology consisted in an interview composed from 8 basic questions applied to 3 members of the student comedy brigade Divertis. Two of them are founding members of the group: Doru Antonesi and Florin Constantin (the group was formed in 1981, together with Toni Grecu). The third member interviewed is Silviu Petcu who joined the group in 1982.

The questions were:

³² For a survey of the themes covered and the methodological debates of oral history see Robert Perks, Alistair Thompson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, (London: Routledge), 1998; David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (eds.), *Oral History: An interdisciplinary anthology*, (Walnut Creek CA: AltaMira Press), 1996. For the methodology of oral history see Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral history*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2000; Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral history and the art of dialogue*, (Madison WI: The University of Wisconsin Press), 1997.

1 Divertis was formed in 1981 in Iasi. That was the first time you started writing sketches?

2 Where did you use to have shows in the 1980s?

3 Who was in the audience (other students, teenagers, workers, etc.)? Do you think they came at your shows just to laugh or they were expecting more from you (regarding their social criticism)?

4 Did you ever feel that your performance had a deep impact over someone from your audience, that you made a difference in someone's life?

5 What subjects could you approach in your jokes? How?

6 After your shows, did you suffer any consequences from the authorities?

7 The censorship was equally strict everywhere or it depended on the location of the show?

8 What other similar groups with yours were in the 1980s?

These questions are not strict, but they are just opening the discussion for a subject: how and why did they start writing satire, what was the location of their activity (which cities, events, halls), who was their audience, what was their social impact, how did they interact with the authorities, and how many of these student comedy brigades were there. The interview lasted for 90 minutes and it was with all the three members at once. In this way their memories could be more accurate, since they could correct themselves since at the majority of the shows they participated together.

Besides the interview with the members of Divertis, I used in my paper an informal discussion with Adrian Fetecau, the leader of the student comedy brigade, Voua.

1.4 Conclusion

In analyzing the Romanian student culture from the 1980s I will focus on the most important and most visible characteristic of it: the students' comedy brigades. In this endeavor I will follow the next parameters: the relation of these brigades with the authorities (since the state was present everywhere), and with their place within Romanian youth.

The relation of the brigades with the state's officials will be brought to light by corroborating the interviews of the members of the brigades with information about the Romanian censorship at that time. Approaching the second aim, the location of the students' brigades within the Romanian youth cultures, will be revealed by analyzing the youth and students' newspapers.

Chapter II

Official vs. unofficial youth culture

In order for one to understand where the Romanian student comedy brigades were situated within Romanian youth, it is necessary to present first the official view, or how young people were supposed to spend their time. How and where could young people express themselves during the last decade of Romanian communism?

2.1 Song to Romania festival

The first major way for young people and students to express themselves was the national festival Song to Romania.³³ This was a major propaganda tool though, which was meant to provide legitimacy to the Ceausescu regime. And although the main participants were amateurs, not professional artists (and the great majority of the students' comedy brigades were students of engineering, not acting), this festival could not have provided a way for expressing oneself due to its very clear and closely supervised ideological content. And, even more important for my focus, there was no humor competition.

³³ The source for the presentation of this festival is Claudiu Oancea, *When forgers* unless indicated otherwise.

But Song to Romania left its mark on the performances of the students' comedy brigades. The term *brigazi* (brigades) which designated their groups was the name of the groups of performers from the Song to Romania also. And it may be even more than that. The institutional framework for Song to Romania was the same one that eventually served as performance venues for the student comedy brigades. For example, there were cultural centers in all institutions, including universities, which had to prepare a program for the Song to Romania festival with the staff, or students in the case of the universities, from that particular institution. These performances created a starting point for students of engineering to become interested in artistic performances.³⁴ From this starting point, students' artistic performances became something standing on its own, which in order to be contained, had to circumscribed into a different festival, the one of Students' Art and Creation (FACS).³⁵

2.2 Youth's official organizations

During the 1980s there were two organizations for young people in Romania: the Union of the Communist Youth (UTC),³⁶ which was addressing all Romanian young

³⁴ The source for this idea is Adrian Fetecau, member of the student group Voua. Interview with the author, Nov. 2007.

³⁵ Apparently the first festival of this kind was in the 1950s, maybe 1953. Still it is safe to assume (because there is no literature which can tell us for sure) that the festivals from the 1980s had their unique character compared to the previous ones, probably after massive re-organization.

³⁶ The Romanian version of Komsomol

people, and The Union of Romanian Communist Student Associations (UASCR), which was subordinated to UTC.³⁷

The UASCR published two newspapers: the weekly *Viata studenteasca* (Students' Life) (1956 - 1989) and the monthly *Amfiteatru* (1966 - 1989). The U.T.C published the daily *Scanteia tineretului* (Youth's Spark)³⁸ between the years 1944 - 1989. Academic research about these three newspapers is non-existent. All my analyses are based on a selected sample of issues.

In journalistic terms, the newspapers published by the two organizations belong to two distinct categories: *the youth press* and *student press*. Both of them are on the border between amateur press (like high school papers) and truly professional press, and designate a corpus of newspapers or journals produced by and for youth by different youth or student organizations.³⁹ The difference is that while *youth press* addresses all young people, the *student press* addresses only students, having more subjects related to universities, exams etc. Unlike Yugoslavia, for example, where this distinction is artificial (the great fluctuation of people between them is the best proof),⁴⁰ in Romania the difference in the profiles of the papers published by the two institutions is very pronounced. Placing these papers on the line of professional – amateur, they

³⁷ *Final Report*, p. 599.

³⁸ The name links this newspaper with *Scanteia* (The Spark) which was the official newspaper of the Romanian Communist Party. So *Scanteia Tineretului* was the version for young people (not necessarily students) of *Scanteia*.

³⁹ Markovic, Ljiljana, ed., *Leksikon novinarstva* (The Journalistic Lexicon), (Beograd: Savremena administracija, 1979), p. 200, in Marko Zubak, *"Polet"- Youth Press in Late Communist Yugoslavia*, (Budapest: CEU Press), 2004, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Zubak, p. 3.

were more professional than amateur, a fact which indicates that they were actually written for students, not by students, in Romania.

I will further analyze the newspapers which appeared between the years 1983 - 1985, and the year 1987. Since in the years 1983, 1985 and 1987 there were festivals FASC, I will follow their depiction in these newspapers and then compare that with what some of the students who participated recalled about them. By this comparison I want to find out more about the nature of these festivals, how the people involved in them were depicted and how they saw themselves. I will claim that *Scanteia tineretului* (Youth's Spark) is not relevant for this point because it had its own, different agenda from *Viata studentasca* (Students' Life) and *Amfiteatru*.

The other objective of my analyses of these newspapers integrates and contextualizes the previous one with regard to the way of life they promoted. And since the purpose of this study is not concerned with the various transformations that happened around and within these papers, but only with the general image of their content, what type of articles were published here etc., the sample can be considered representative for the whole decade.

2.3 *Scanteia tineretului* (Youth's Spark): a "spark" lighten for those who did not have any other "spark"

So what did a Romanian youth paper look like? *Youth's Spark* was the only Romanian newspaper of this kind. Its motto was (as for the other two papers) Lenin's saying:

Proletarians from the wide world, unite! Its subtitle was: *Organ of the Central Committee of the Union of the Communist Youth*, so the publisher, UTC, is very clear. It had 6 pages, it was a daily (the most frequent publication of the three), and it was published from 1944 until 1989 (the most enduring also). It was, most probably, distributed in all the newsstands (the central, and the only, distribution network) in Romania.

The content of this newspaper is composed of stories about Nicolae Ceausescu and his activity and speeches, usually on the first page. Then there are social, economical and political topics like Romanian self-reliance on its own natural resources of oil, the state of the crops, the international (and dangerous) trend of increasing the countries' arsenal which was *threatening the future of peace and progress of human kind*,⁴¹ etc.

But the most important subject in this newspaper, with regard to the purpose of this study, is the coverage and organization of the shows *Serbarile scanteii tineretului* (The Celebrations of the Youth's Spark). These shows were actually tours with popular artists and writers⁴² that took place in cities, even small cities, around Romania. Considering the fact that the artists invited to perform at these shows were quite popular at the time, and that they covered even small, industrial cities, where the level of entertainment was very low (this was a characteristic of all Romania, but, for obvious reasons, in these small cities it was even lower), it is safe to assume that they

⁴¹ A formulation found in *Scanteia Tineretului* (Youth's Spark), year XXXIX, seria II, no. 10303, 5 March 1983.

⁴² Apparently writers or cultural personalities who were closely affiliated with the regime, like Eugen Barbu, a well known protégé of Gheorghiu – Dej and, later, of Ceausescu for his praising of the Soviet achievements in the first phase, and for his switch of emphasis towards a nationalistic prose, as this theme started to be promoted later, especially by Ceausescu. Barbu was also involved with (if not coordinated) the Romanian literary censorship.

were major events in those cities. The depictions of these performances in the Youth's Spark with overcrowded halls seem plausible.

So Youth's Spark had its own agenda and its own audience for the activities organized by it (of course, in these small cities there were no universities) up to a certain point. Where this point is located is impossible to tell because one can not find how many students used to buy this newspaper. But considering the general unpopularity of the regime and the fact that two other newspapers were created especially for students, it is likely that the authorities felt that the Youth's Spark is not enough and probably its consumption among students was very low. Thus there is no surprise that FASC festivals are not mentioned here. And the fact that *Youth's Spark* does not mention FASC festivals indicates also that the regime was very preoccupied to limit and contain the festival student phenomenon: since Youth's Spark was read by other people than students, the authorities did not want for anyone else to know much about it, "to give them ideas."

2.4 *Viata studenteasca* (Students' Life) and *Amfiteatru*: or what were the students supposed to do

So what was in *Viata Studenteasca* and *Amfiteatru*? How is the Festival of Students' Creation presented by newspapers for students?

A major portion of these newspapers was occupied by politics and propaganda. This topic was extended in the January issues, when Nicolae Ceausescu's birthday was

celebrated. The two newspapers had some differences regarding their content too, their frequency: monthly or weekly. The monthly *Amfiteatru* was more “cultural.” Here one could find in the January issue, besides the poems praising Ceausescu, some historical information about the Union of the Romanian Principalities from 1859.⁴³ There were book reviews, interviews with personalities from opera, theatre, poems of some young poets or students of poetry. With its essays and articles about different cultural topics, this looked actually like a cultural magazine, one with powerful ideological impregnations, of course.

By contrast, *Viata studenteasca* was oriented more towards the “scientific” realm or, in other words, to the students of technology and industry. The first issue from January contained more political propaganda because of the Leader’s (Ceausescu’s) birthday. But in the rest of the newspaper and in the following issues, most of the space is dedicated to scientific research made in the universities with a technical profile.⁴⁴ But even here, among articles about petro chemistry and heavy industry, there is room for humanistic topics, like the column *Ideologie politica* (Political Ideology), which explains various political concepts in Marxist-Leninist and Ceausescu-ist terms.⁴⁵ There was also a sports section (1 page) and in some issues some information about the

⁴³ In that year Alexandru Ioan Cuza was elected on 5th of January prince of Moldavia and on 24th of January prince of The Romanian Country. This double election was interpreted as the union of the two Romanian principalities.

⁴⁴ One has to be cautious when reading these articles though. The depiction of the over-fulfillment of plans of production, although it was not real, by the other Romanian newspapers of the time was a general phenomenon. There is hardly a chance that this trend of exaggeration for propagandistic ends left untouched the student newspapers, which were edited, after all, by state organizations.

⁴⁵ This term belongs to me, Ionut Stan, and I want for it to be understood more as an irony than as a scholarly idea. It refers to the well known fact of Ceausescu’s adaptations of the few Marxist and Leninist ideas that he knew (Pavel Campeanu named them *rudiments of knowledge*, in *Ceausescu, anii numaratorii inverse* (Ceausescu: The years of the final countdown), (Iasi: Polirom), 2002), to his own purposes. This is one explanation for the Romanian invention of *national socialism*, among other things.

admission to college. The entertainment events are present too, but in a more limited space (1 page). This column consists in the schedule of these events and some small commentary of them. In a December issue some artists are mentioned too. Two pages are dedicated to a type of award ceremony in which the best poet, best singer, best actor, etc. is nominated. These divisions were not rigid and they may have changed during the years, but overall these were the guidelines of these two newspapers.

The tone in which these articles were written is very restrained. There is no emotional outburst or even some completely light subject. Everything is sober, with a pedagogical purpose, one that ignores emotions. Very surprisingly for papers that were addressing students, there is little mention about music or concerts.⁴⁶ There are no jokes or humor anywhere either. So regarding these two students' newspapers, there was no "fun", or one could not find any either by reading or trying to write such a column in them.

How were the FASC festivals depicted in these newspapers?

These festivals⁴⁷ were divided into sections (film, humor, literary creation, folk dances, etc.), with each section being a separate competition. These festivals had a centralized, hierarchical structure. First, every section had its university stage, where the faculties within that university competed against each other. Then followed the university center stage, where all the winners of the university stage from one city

⁴⁶ Pop music and opera were the only genres mentioned. Rock music was completely ignored because rock bands, as Adrian Cioroianu notices, became *genuine Cinderellas of the culture admitted in Romanian society*. In Cioroianu, *Pe umerii ...*, p. 475.

⁴⁷ From the corroboration of the articles in the newspapers and interviews with participants at the festivals.

competed against each other. And after this there was the final stage where all the university centers sent its representatives. The separate timetable of each section consisted in the fact that the shows of every section took place on a different date and, at the final stage, in different cities.

The sections from the final stage usually took place within two months. For example, at the final stage of the festival in 1985, the folk dance section was in Timisoara during the 15-17th of November, the movie and plastic arts section in Brasov during the 26 – 28th of November, the humor and caricature section in Cluj – Napoca during the 3 – 5th of December, the literary creation section in Galati during the 3 – 4 of December, etc, until the end of December.

There are several explanations for these separate sections. The first one may be the logistic and financial effort of the university which hosted one section.⁴⁸ Also the state wanted to involve very many students, so by placing the festival in different university cities, more students got the chance to be in the public, to have an entertaining event in their everyday lives. And, since the dates of every final stage hardly overlapped, one student could participate in more than one section; thus they were encouraged to enroll in more sections. Also, considering the preliminary stages, the number of participants was very high, because if one was dismissed from one section, he could still have the chance to run up into another.

⁴⁸ The number of the participants, very hard to find exactly, could reach up to 100 people. The funds for the organization of the festival probably came from the state, but the personnel were that of the university (teachers and students).

The festivals were presented without many details in these two student newspapers and with a *wooden language*. In 1985 in *Amfiteatru* 4 pages were dedicated to the FACS festival from that year. Two of them named the winners of each section of the festival and the other two print poems that won the section for literary creation.⁴⁹ In *Viata studenteasca* the depiction is quite similar. But since this was a weekly, more space could be dedicated to this event (approximately 2 pages every week); yet the extra space was filled by propaganda. The situation does not change for the festivals from 1983 and 1987.

Were there any mentions of the comedy brigades?

Yes. In *Viata studenteasca* from 1983⁵⁰ there is an article about the humor section from the final stage of FASC which took place that year in Iasi, and among the organizers there were members of Divertis too. In this article the characteristics of the humor that was encouraged at these festivals are visible. The humor present here had to make a constructive critique of “everything that was not normal, criticizing the reality which is forced to obey some dogmas that suffocate any tumult.” The author of the article quotes *Manualul de umor*⁵¹ (the Manual for Humor), a small magazine published on this occasion by the members of Divertis and some of their friends. So the humor had to make visible the absurdities of society, in order for them to be corrected.

⁴⁹ Amfiteatru, Year XIX, no. 5, May 1985.

⁵⁰ *Viata studenteasca*, Year XXVII no. 17 (937), Wednesday, April 27, 1983

⁵¹ *Manual for Humor* (published on this occasion by the members of Divertis and some of their friends), in *Viata studenteasca*, Year XXVII no. 17 (937), Wednesday, April 27, 1983, p.4.

But all absurdities? The author of the article continues with a subtle strategy by saying what was supposed to be said on stage without actually naming it. More explicitly, after that quote, he starts narrating the events of the festival, presenting the winners, general reviews of the sketches, etc. What is intriguing though is that he presents the subjects of the jokes of only one comedy brigade, *Brigada ASE* (from the Academy of Economical Studies in Bucharest), although, surprisingly, they had won the first prize only for artistic performance, at a section for humor.

So why did only *Brigada ASE* have its all program detailed? The answer is clear if one looks at the program of the students of economy. It contained only jokes about the administrators of student dormitories and cafeterias, about the misconduct of students or teachers, so all problems strictly related to student life. Divertis, on the other hand, had won the competition for humor with sketches named *Fabula* (The Fable), *La cinematograf* (At the Cinema), *O zi din viata mea* (A day from my life), and the list stops here; in other words, subjects which were addressing a larger spectrum of life. The brigade from the 3rd place, *Grup Arh* (students of architecture from Bucharest), had jokes which tackled “estetico – moral”⁵² issues in the spirit of the “dry humor.”⁵³ A title of one of their sketches is mentioned: *Oamenii sunt buni* (The People are Good). This group was well known for its abstract and non-sensical humor, so they were outside the rule.⁵⁴ And the brigade from the 1st place (for artistic performance shared with *Brigada ASE*), *Bum* (students from Cluj), addressed “problems from students’

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ See Chapter 3 for more details.

life,⁵⁵ but the author does not actually name them, so probably they were not what was expected.

The message that this article transmitted indirectly, if you want to have success (although *Divertis* was the competition without obeying these rules, a fact which indicates that the jury had a certain degree of independence in its work) and a high coverage by the media, you will have to do something similar to *Brigada ASE*, was clearly perceived by the comedy brigades (with the “help” of the censors too). As Doru Antonesi, member of *Divertis*, recalls, “If it was up to them, we were allowed to joke only about the dorms’ supervisors who in certain conditions didn’t manage to assure the students with [heating, electricity].”⁵⁶

That the censors or other representatives of the state were actively involved in the “production of jokes” is admitted, probably involuntarily, by the same newspaper. In the next page following the above analyzed article, the participants are interviewed. Here, among funny stories from behind the stage and personal rivalries, a student named Horia Crisan, from the Timisoara brigade *Puls*, has a very critical position towards the festival: “We’ve been told not to joke about UASCR, ASC, but only about persons. Who are we supposed to criticize?”⁵⁷ And a text from one of their sketches is

⁵⁵ *Viata studenteasca*, Year XXVII no. 17 (937), Wednesday, April 27, 1983, p.4.

⁵⁶ Doru Antonesi, interview with the author on 28th May 2009; more details about what was allowed to joke about in Chp. 3.

⁵⁷ This final question makes a reference to a famous play from the second half of the 19th Century when the liberal – bourgeois society was consolidating its position in Romania under King Carol I. The play was written by Ion Luca Caragiale, the most important Romanian satirical writer. Its name is *O scrisoare pierduta* (A Lost Letter), and here a character, The Tormented Citizen, asks repetitively, like a leitmotif throughout the play *Who am I supposed to vote* [for the upcoming parliamentary elections]? He represents the confused regular Romanian citizen who did not understand the rules of the new parliamentary regime.

reproduced: “We’ll print everything that is related with students’ life on pink paper.”⁵⁸

This is a very harsh criticism considering the circumstances.

How was possible for such things to be printed? A first explanation is that someone had Horia Crisan’s “back,” that is, he had connections in the apparatus. Otherwise there was no chance for something like this to be published.⁵⁹ But still, how could it be published? Probably the editors of the newspaper tried to simulate impartiality. But the fact that such a criticism could be published has a deeper and sadder reason behind it: interferences in the creational act was such a well known fact in Romanian life, that the editors did not even feel the need to hide it. It was perceived as natural not only by them, but, most probably, by everybody.⁶⁰

The humor section at the FASC festival from 1983 was a little problematic for the authorities. As Silviu Petcu, member of Divertis and presenter of the festival together with Cristian Gretcu, another member of Divertis, remembers, the responsible of the CCES (the censor, in other words) for the university center of Iasi was dismissed after the show. The reason is a big banner (5 meters long and 0,7 meters tall) from the audience hall which had written on it: *Although man fights them back, the brain cells counterattack*.⁶¹ This banner was put there by the organizing committee, in which there were present some members of Divertis too, like Toni Grecu, Silviu Petcu, and Cristian Gretcu.

⁵⁸ *Viata studenteasca*, Year XXVII no. 17 (937), Wednesday, April 27, 1983, p. 5.

⁵⁹ Even members of Divertis admitted the existence of such practices and that they have used them; interview with the author on 28th May 2009

⁶⁰ I must admit that I was influenced by my Romanian background in the formulation of this idea.

⁶¹ Original in Romanian: *Desi omul se impotriveste, inteligenta contraataca*. Silviu Petcu, interview with the author on 28th May 2009.

2.5 Student press

These two pages were the highest coverage that the humor section of the FASC had ever received from the official press.⁶² But there was also genuine student press in the sense defined at the beginning of this chapter. One example of such journal was mentioned above: *Manualul de umor* (The Manual for Humor) published by students from Iasi.

Most probably this journal had a sporadic appearance and it was confined only to Iasi, or, even more, to the universities. One exemplar could be traced in the personal archive of one of the members of Divertis, Doru Antonesi (its name is different here though, *Caiet de umor studentesc* (Notebook of Student Humor), see annex 2 and 3). It was published by the UASCR and it had 6 pages. It contained, besides texts, caricatures and pictures. There is a page here that is a parody of the columns with poems from the official newspapers. Thus one can find here “From the cycle of poetries without a title *So I came to College*, the poem *I didn’t want to, my mother forced me!*” Or the cycle of poetries dedicated to 8th of March named *I made you, I kill you!*⁶³

Besides this magazine, the students from Iasi (including members of Divertis) published some other small journals that were more a supplement to a show (like *The*

⁶² In 1987 apparently it was integrated into the theater section; *Viata studenteasca*, anul XXXI – nr 19 (1147), Wenesday, May 13 1987, p. 7. Still humor existed in the festival, unlike in 1989, when it was completely banned.

⁶³ This is an angry folk saying used by parents to claim their rights over their children; it is funny the combination of the 8th of March with it.

Winter Celebrations from Electro, - see annex 4 - at the Faculty of Electrotechnic, which took place every year in December). The difference from the *Notebook* is that they were handwritten and they have more caricatures.⁶⁴ The content of the jokes is similar though.

Conclusions

The official ways for the students to express themselves were not very attractive to the students. In fact, the authorities were actually discouraging the expressions of one's ideas and tried to inoculate a way of thinking and behaving convenient for the communist regime.

The comedy brigades existed within the official and promoted youth culture, in a way which tried to mask its character (only the *Brigada ASE* had its program detailed). The unofficial comedy brigades managed to have a degree of independence though: Divertis won the competition with a program that had not followed the line promoted by the authorities, the poster from the show hall and the small student press. None of these were completely underground or outside the law acts, but they were not conforming either.

⁶⁴ As Doru Antonesi told me, the caricatures were made by a colleague of theirs from Suceava. The absence from the *Notebook* of caricatures can be explained by the fact that they could not find anyone to draw them then.

Chapter III

Humor, students and “lizards”

In this chapter I will analyze the Romanian students' comedy brigades' performances with a focus on their content. This is a challenging task because no video or audio material with their shows is available. The sources which are available though can present a general picture of their performances. They consist of written material with their sketches, some of it in original copy, and interviews with some of the members of these brigades. I will use three guide marks in this endeavor: a description of the content of their jokes, its relation to Romanian underground humor and the relationship of the comedy brigades to the state censorship and authorities.

3.1 The actors

My analyses will focus on two most important brigades from the 1980s, from the first two major university cities: Divertis, from Iasi, and Voua, from Bucharest. I will provide in the following lines some general information about each group.

Divertis was formed in 1981, in Iasi, by 3 students of the Department of Electro - technology of the Politechnical Institute “Gh. Asachi”: Florin Constantin, Doru Antonesi and Toni Grecu. From these 3 members the group grew throughout the decade by

adding new actors, and by the end of the 1980s it had a stable cast of 12-13 members. They won the first prize at the humor section from the Festival of Students' Art and Creation in 1983 and 1985. This former comedy brigade, now a comedy group, is still active today with shows on Romanian TV stations, just like Voua.

The latter was formed in 1982 in Bucharest, by students of the Bucharest Polytechnic (Politehnica Bucuresti). Its composition was relatively unstable throughout the years and the group was organized around the leader Adrian Fetecau. Their shows were more diverse than those of Divertis because almost half their program was music.⁶⁵ They performed around 600 shows until 1989 at student festivals, in houses of culture, clubs in villages and different official and personal events (celebrations, parties, etc.).⁶⁶

3.2 The shows and their location

The shows in which the student comedy brigades performed were organized by the state (those that were not, were small performances in front of their friends or colleagues at small social gatherings). The bigger the show, the more scrupulous was the censorship, with careful visualizations of the sketches (like at the FASC). The performances were not following a very strict repertoire, but it was changed according to what was allowed by the censors. Still in general a show would have looked like this: all the performances had a master of ceremonies which "warmed up" the

⁶⁵ Divertis started having some songs in their shows from 1987, when the only singer present there, Ioan Gyuri Pascu, joined the group. Both brigades played *folk* songs, which in Romanian mean an acoustic guitar and a voice. Voua's songs were, obviously, youth oriented with titles like: *Young and Free*, *A Regular Day*, and *Romanian Tram*.

⁶⁶ Adrian Fetecau, *Voua. Acum 20 de ani* (Voua: 20 years ago), (Bucharest: Nemira, 2002), p. 8.

audience with a few opening lines and introduced the sketches. Their acts were pretty static, without much agitation on the stage, with 1 up to 6-7 actors on stage. They consisted in monologues, dialogues or interviews (where the master of ceremony was the interviewer). So all their humor was achieved through words (the most important aspect), intonation, and facial expressions and small gestures.⁶⁷ The character of these shows perhaps was dictated by the fact that they did not have any costumes or more than a few chairs and a desk as scenery (since they were not professional actors, they could not get the necessary funds).

As I previously mentioned, all the shows in which the students' comedy brigades performed were organized by the state (there were no other shows in Romania in the 1980s). For their performance they received housing and food in the city where the show was to take place. They could not be paid because they were amateur artists. And in order for someone to become a professional artist, he had to either graduate a college with an artistic profile, or be granted a diploma from a commission of CCES which held auditions for this purpose once every two years (the candidate had to perform in front of the commission).

The members of Divertis, according to Doru Antonesi and Florin Constantin, were not granted with that diploma (due to a kind of solidarity of the older artists, who were in

⁶⁷ One way of achieving the humor was to say with straight, sober face "dumb" things about a serious subject. This was a way of making fun at the official discourse present on television, radio, and newspapers, which was all "dead serious." For instance a joke from 1983 of Divertis called *The Weather Report*. "The national road DN1 is closed from km 38 until km 332, not being repaired for 4 years. [so not because of the snow, as one expected; also one should notice the long distance which was closed]" Or "The wind which had blown here and there with a moderate speed broke in several places the electrical cables. The ones that were not broken will be, very soon, by the workers from the Electrical Department." Divertis, *Manual de umor alternativ* (Manual of Alternative Humor), (Bucharest: Nemira), 1999, p. 35.

the commission, against the young aspirants, they claim).⁶⁸ In the published journal of Adrian Fetecau there is no mention about any performance in front of the commission or about money that they had to receive after the show, so presumably they were not professional artists neither. About the rest of the comedy brigades it is safe to assume the same thing because of their ephemeral character.

According to Doru Antonesi, they were made “for a festival,” that is for a precise event, usually the FASC. They just had a coordinator, who may have been even a teacher, and he organized the brigade and their program for that event. But the rest of the members were changing from show to show, unlike Divertis which was consistent through the years.⁶⁹

The shows in which the brigades performed can be divided according to the size of the audience and the strictness of the censors. The largest audience was, for most of the brigades, at the FASC festivals.⁷⁰ Here the censorship was the most careful not to miss anything, a fact which does not mean that it was the harshest too, but only that it wanted (and succeeded to) cover every little aspect of the show. By contrast, the performances with the highest freedom and the smallest audience were in the student camps organized by UTC and UASCR. Still censorship existed here too, as the case of Ghighi Bejan will prove it later.

⁶⁸ Doru Antonesi, Florin Constantin.

⁶⁹ In this respect, Voua was in the middle, having both members who remained in the group for many years, but also others that spent only a short period of time there.

⁷⁰ Divertis was on tour with *Cenaculul Flacara* (The Flame Cenacle), led by the poet Adrian Paunescu, which took place on stadiums, so the audience was larger than at the FASC festivals.

Another festival was *Serbarile marii* (the Celebrations of the Sea) that took place in Costinesti, a resort on the coast of the Black Sea, well known for its major student tourism. According to Florin Constantin, this was a “festival which had been desired to be for the masses, because they were present thousands of people. And it was a non-stop festival. Then we used to work during the night too.”⁷¹ Probably this festival was organized by the Bureau for Youth’s Tourism (B.T.T.), an organization subordinated to the government. Divertis had here a program called *The Hours*. These *Hours* were small sketches which took place once every hour named *The Japanese Hour*, *The American Hour*, *The Russian Hour*, etc. Here there was not a proper stage or a show hall, because everything happened on the beach. This festival had a very harsh censorship. The winter counterpart of this festival was *Serbarile zapezii* (The Celebrations of the Snow), which was held every year in the mountain resort Izvorul Muresului, Harghita county. So during the 1980s Divertis had regular shows at these festivals.⁷²

Voua was much more prolific than Divertis in this respect. They had approximately 600 shows until 1989 at shows or celebrations organized by universities from Bucharest (like the Military Academy, The Academy of Economic Studies, University of Bucharest, The Polytechnic School), the Students’ house of culture “Grigore Preoteasa” from Bucharest, and many houses of culture from towns and villages in Romania. The shows were organized on personal connections with the presidents of the houses of culture or other organizers (in the case of the universities). Many of

⁷¹ Florin Constantin.

⁷² They had occasional performances in other places too. Some of them will be detailed later on when discussing censorship.

them are depicted in the published journal of Adrian Fetecau, the leader of Voua. Unfortunately there are not many references to the censors, with the exception of one show which will be analyzed when discussing censorship.

3.3 The first student comedy brigade: *Ars Amatoria*

Doru Antonesi, member of Divertis, told me about the group *Ars Amatoria*, an earlier group from the 1980s. *Ars Amatoria*'s members had a more intellectual profile: here one can find a future writer, Ioan Grosan, and a future literary critic, Radu Teposu. They used to set their parodies in the Roman or Dacian past, and they commented on books: "Their parodies were more bookish / livresque."⁷³ Of course, the present situations were only alluded in their acts, nothing was named clearly. Thus they had two filters, or two masking devices to elude the censors: allusion and the projection into the past.

Doru Antonesi believes that they had to do it this way because the censorship was tighter in the beginning of the 1980s. If this was true, and I do not see any reason to believe otherwise, an interesting hypothesis emerges. Comedy brigades were just emerging then and the authorities did not know what to do with them yet, so they were very careful. After a while, discovering its potential for releasing tension among students, the authorities loosened their power and allowed a little more irony. That is why Divertis, Voua and all the other brigades could have acts with present situations.

⁷³ Doru Antonesi.

Then, by 1986 -1987, the censorship became tighter again, culminating with the banning of the humor section at FASC 1989. Probably by this time, the hardship of everyday life in Romania made the regime fearful again of letting free any “spark” that would unleash the Romanians’ anger.

The hardship of everyday life may be combined with the change in the profile of the brigades’ humor: they gave up at “lizards” and started an open criticism. As Florin Constantin remembers, at the FASC festival from 1987, a brigade from Baia Mare had a joke: “Unii dau cu securea, altii sunt securisti.” It is very hard to find a proper translation into English because this joke is a play around the words *secure* (axe) and *Securitate* (the popular name for the Romanian political police). So a *mot – a – mot* translation into English would be: “Some people use the axe, others are employees of the Securitate.”

3.4 Romanian underground humor

According to Cioroianu, the humor of the students’ brigades was a filtered version of the underground humor that circulated throughout Romania at that time.⁷⁴ The political jokes from Romania are an important and the largest portion in the collection of East European Jokes, *You Call This Living?* (1990)⁷⁵ which collects political jokes from

⁷⁴ Cioroianu, *Pe umerii...*p. 474.

⁷⁵ Romania is probably the most important country from this book, considering that the primary source for most of the jokes is a Romanian (but these jokes could be found in other countries as well, as the authors underline) (p. 10) and that the title of the book is actually a part from a Romanian joke: A man knocks at the door of a house in Bucharest. When an old man answers, the visitor asks: “Does the tailor Rabinowitch live here?” “No,” the old man answers. “Who are you [then]?” “Rabinowitch.” “And aren’t you a tailor?” “Yes, I am.” “Then why did you say you didn’t live here?” “You call this living?” C Banc and

throughout the region.⁷⁶ As C. Banc and Alan Dundes argue, the political jokes' function in the Eastern Communist Bloc was to serve as a psychological defense mechanism in a period of powerful political repression.⁷⁷ In the same vein, Cioroianu underlines that the origin of the political joke (just as the origin of the rumor) lies in the difference between public and private obedience: the stricter the public obedience has to be, the more people are inclined towards private disobedience where the destructive charge of the joke assures its success. The unreliability of the official information or the secret in which the information is kept (a characteristic of the communist regimes) encourages the diffusion of political jokes (and rumors).⁷⁸

A small survey of this type of humor was made by Cochran after spending some time in Romania at the middle of the 1980s.⁷⁹ According to him, most of the Romanian jokes had as a main figure (or in the end refer to) the country's leader, Nicolae Ceausescu.⁸⁰ This characteristic is due to the fact that, Cochran argues, Ceausescu's

Alan Dundes, *You Call This Living? A collection of East European Political Jokes*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 1990, p. 14.

⁷⁶ Other similar books are Petr Beckman, *Whispered Anecdotes: Humor from Behind the Iron Curtain*, (Boulder: The Golem Press), 1969 [another improved edition of this work is *Hammer and Tickle: Clandestine Laughter in the Soviet Empire*, (Boulder: The Golem Press), 1980], or Emil Draitser (ed.), *Forbidden Laughter: Soviet Underground Jokes*, (Los Angeles CA: The Almanac Publishing House), 1978, in Adrian Cioroianu, *Ce Ceausescu qui hante les Roumains : le mythe, les représentations et le culte du Dirigeant dans la Roumanie communiste*, (Bucharest: Curtea Veche), 2004, p. 110.

⁷⁷ C. Banc, Alan Dundes, *You call this living?*, p. 11. For the same idea, see Laszlo Kurti, "The Politics of Joking: Popular response to Chernobyl," in *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol 101, no. 401 (Jul. – Sep., 1988), p. 324 -334. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/540473>, accessed: 24/05/2009.

⁷⁸ Cioroianu, *Ce Ceausescu...* p. 109 – 110. See also Jowitt, in Vladimir Tismaneanu (ed.), *Revolutiile din 1989: intre trecut si viitor* (The Revolutions from 1989: between past and future), (Iasi: Polirom), 1999, p. 233.

⁷⁹ Robert Cochran, "What Courage!": Romanian "Our Leader" Jokes, in *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 102, no. 405 (Jul.-Sep., 1989), p. 259-274. Stable URL: <https://www.jstore.org/stable/540637>, accessed 24/05/2009

⁸⁰ For a more detailed review of the collections and studies of Romanian political jokes see Cioroianu, *Ce Ceausescu...*, p. 109 – 114.

personality cult imposed his presence in all the aspects of Romanians' life.⁸¹ One could see his picture on the front page of every book, textbook, in every room of a public institution, hymns and poems were dedicated to him, and his pro-natal policy made him present even in the most intimate place of a couple's life. The irony in these jokes is very biting and, sometimes, bitter.⁸²

Cochran finishes his article with a pessimistic conclusion though: "The joke is a protest, certainly, even in its sharing of risk and laughter more than private protest. But its efficacy is psychological, not political. Generically, the joke is Janus-faced – at once assertion of defiance and admission of defeat." To explain his argument better, he finds (how ironically?), a Romanian joke: "Do you know what they say? The Hungarians, they make Revolutions. The Poles, they make strikes. The Romanians, they make jokes."⁸³ Or a Romanian proverb: "We are all laughing, but the pig is dead in the basket."⁸⁴ So by our laughter, we are not doing anything, but letting bad things happen to us, as this Romanian proverb can be translated. This is a saying full of sorrow and it is a criticism of inaction.

⁸¹ Cochran, p. 261.

⁸² A large variety of themes are covered. Like the prohibition of pornography combined with the rule that Ceausescu's picture has to be on the first page of every publication: "Why there are no pornographic magazines in Romania?" The answer: "Because the first page would be too terrible." Ceausescu was a man in his 70s, so his naked body was not very attractive, to say the least. Also, on a deeper level, this joke means that Romanians did not need any pornography, because a much bigger obscenity is running the country.

Or a joke about the prenatal policy: a party activist goes in Maramures (an area in the North West of Romania, very far from Bucharest) to explain to the peasants that the Leader needs more children to work for the country: "He needs you children. He can not built the nation by himself. He needs your help." After hearing this, the peasants just sit for a while thinking, and finally an older one agrees with the activist. He has just one question though: "Do we have to go there [Bucharest] or does she [Ceausescu's wife, Elena] come up here?"

The jokes continue in the same vein, mocking Ceausescu's lack of a grip on reality, his authoritarian paranoiac madness (even the sun has to "kiss ass" while it passes over Romania), the food and gas shortages, his economical policies, etc.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

3.5 Deconstructing the humor: types of jokes

As was previously mentioned, in the student brigades' jokes nothing was specifically named, and they contained only allusions, "lizards", that had to be understood by the audience to get the meaning of the joke.⁸⁵ I will further provide examples of these jokes explaining their character and the very thin line that one had to respect for not getting in trouble.⁸⁶

As Doru Antonesi recalls, jokes about Ceausescu were not possible on stage, at least not on the above described manner, so Cioroianu's argument about the distillation of underground jokes holds true. This does not mean though that the comedy brigades were just filtering underground jokes and telling them on stage. Cioroianu's observation has to be understood more like the students' humor was of the same kind or type as the underground one, only that it was less sharp, a softer version. Many of these student comedy brigades wrote their own texts and jokes (for example Divertis did not perform any sketch that was not their creation).

The material the comedy brigades used was filtered in two ways: the self-censorship and the official censorship. The first one regards the intuitive process of knowing what can be said on stage. As Doru Antonesi remembers, they were some subjects that could not be mentioned, although it was not written anywhere that. Everybody just

⁸⁵ I have to confess that many of these jokes could not be understood very easily not even by me, the author, because the hints were so discrete that for a man who did not live in that period were almost imperceptible.

⁸⁶ The jokes were performed between 1983 – 1987, unless indicated otherwise.

knew.⁸⁷ They were: Ceausescu, his son, Nicu, Ioan Gh. Maurer,⁸⁸ party secretaries, and members of the Securitate.

But the last subject was tackled in a very allusive manner by a member of Divertis, Ghighi Bejan. Two students go to their teacher for an exam. After the exam the teacher asks one of them: “You are also a student?” And the student answers: “No, I’m his colleague [with the other student]” So, he was not a student, but still he was his colleague. How can it be? It was self – implied that both of them were colleagues at the Securitate. “So at this level one could do something, very subtle. That is why a lot of people told us: *You should be careful because not everyone understands your jokes*. And the truth is that they didn’t.”⁸⁹ Other “untouchable” subjects were the Danube – Black Sea Canal, the “camps for forced labor (patriotic labor),” or the preparation of youth for defending the country, all “very obvious topics [...] We didn’t have any jokes about them.”

How can they be “very obvious topics”? This question can be understood better if the whole mechanism of censorship is explained. According to Doru Antonesi, the members of Divertis knew that they were not allowed to make jokes about the stoppages in electricity, gas, or heating “If it was up to them,” he continues, “we were allowed to joke only about the dorms’ supervisors who in certain conditions didn’t manage to provide the students with [heating, electricity].” “You were not supposed to

⁸⁷ This idea relates to the responsibility of fear and the control by fear detailed in the first chapter (note for prof: after the revisions from the seminar)

⁸⁸ A Romanian communist politician whose career spans from the 1950s until 1989. He was a loyal to Ceausescu.

⁸⁹ Doru Antonesi.

generalize, but keep it on a personal, particular level,”⁹⁰ Silviu Petcu, another member of Divertis, argues. So the jokes were not supposed to denounce a generalized crisis, “because under communism all things were well,”⁹¹ except small problems. Thus nothing could be said about political or ideological subjects because they could not be in any way linked to an everyday event. That is why all ironies were directed towards social problems or some event from everyday life, because this event could suggest a more general, a major problem. Still in order to respond to the requirements of the festivals, Divertis had written and performed some sketches from students’ everyday life with teachers taking small bribe from students at exams, or students cheating during the exam etc.

Some allusions to Ceausescu were still made though. With “lizards,” of course. The actual rule of not mentioning anything that could hint at Ceausescu or his family was mocked by Divertis. There is a Romanian fairy tale *Fat Frumos si Ileana Cosanzeana* (its English correspondence would be *Prince Charming and* [the name of a beautiful girl]). Since Ceausescu’s wife was named Elena, and *Ileana* is just another, more popular, version of it, the members of Divertis wrote a sketch called *Fat Frumos and Mariana Cosanzeana* (my underlining). So this simple change of names threw the whole audience into laughter, precisely because it made reference to the rule of not mentioning anything that could induce the thought of Elena Ceausescu. The rest of the sketch is not even important; the title is everything.

⁹⁰ Silviu Petcu.

⁹¹ Doru Antonesi.

The same fairy tale was also performed by Divertis with its original name. But this just shows another mechanism of overcoming censorship and a higher complexity of the “lizard.” The text of the sketch had been sent to be approved by the censors with the title *Fat Frumos si Ileana Cosanzeana*. Since it was such a popular fairy tale, the censors did not have any problem with it. But, as Florin Constantin, member of Divertis, told me smiling, on the stage the interpretation was not as everyone had expected: “And now, for our new act, the fairy tale *Fat Frumos and* [here he made a small pause and winked very visible a few times at the audience, then with a low intonation] *Ileana Cosanzeana*.” (my underlining). Just as in the previous version, the simple fact that an allusion to Elena Ceausescu was made, stirred up laughter among the spectators.

More obvious jokes about Ceausescu were made. Ghighi Bejan, member of Grup Arh at the time, of Divertis after, performed the sketch: he said “The electric power is off.” Then he turned around and pointed at Ceausescu’s portrait behind him and said: “It must be from the *tablou*.⁹² Probably some fuses or something.” This joke thus refers to Ceausescu by connection with the very frequent stoppages of electricity in Romania at that time.⁹³ Ghighi Bejan was banned for 2 years after he made this joke.

⁹² In Romanian, the word designating an electrical panel and a painting is the same: *tablou*. So this joke is a game of words: it refers to the electrical panel, but at the same at Ceausescu’s picture. So he was to blame for the electrical stops.

⁹³ At a certain moment in time, all electrical power was shut down at 10 p.m. until morning. These electricity stops were tricks made in order to save money for Romania to pay its external debt, together with the rationalization of food consumption. Or the rule that divided cars’ circulation according to their license number: on one weekend only those with an even one could do it, while the next was only for those with an uneven number. In this way the regime hopped to save fuel consumption, by limiting the traffic in the busiest days of the week when people could travel.

Another joke of Divertis about the Ceausescus is also disguised in a fairy tale, *the best wrapping*.⁹⁴ The text was submitted to the censors like this: *Once upon a time there was an old man and an old woman. And they lived together many years, not happy, but like the people saying goes: "The long life is the people's poverty."*⁹⁵ When one reads this, there is nothing wrong with it. But said on stage, with an emphasis on the proverb, it was interpreted like an allusion to Ceausescu and his wife who were quite old (he was on his 70s): their long life is the people's poverty, or as long as they hold the power, the people will be poor.

Another joke aiming at prohibited products (cigarettes in this case) and their smuggling had political implications. It was called *The Boyar and the Horse*. And here one finds the joke: *The boyar was smoking. This thing cost him 80 lei*. As Doru Antonesi and Florin Constantin explain, 80 lei was the price of a pack of Kent, everybody knew it, but no one said it because Kent was not sold in stores, it was prohibited.⁹⁶

Another joke about the Romanians who fled abroad (which was considered a serious crime). The "lizard" was: "[...] *was written by a famous writer of ours which remained*. (my underlining) [pause] *He remained alive in our memory*. [that is, he died]" [But] "When one said *he remained* it was obvious for everybody that he went on an excursion [abroad] and that he never came back."⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Florin Constantin.

⁹⁵ The original Romanian proverb from which Divertis got their line is: *The long talk is man's poverty*, because he is not doing anything, but just talking about doing or just talking.

⁹⁶ But as everybody who lived in Romanian communism can testify, including DA and FC in their interview, if one went to a doctor, he would bring a pack of Kent for a consultation or a big pack (10 regular packs) for a surgery.

⁹⁷ Doru Antonesi.

An example of Grup Arh's⁹⁸ joking shows themselves as the exponents of the abstract and nonsensical humor. There were a few guys who were handing a boulder one to another. At a certain point, one guy drops it and screams: "Fly, boulder, fly! Go high into the country's sky!" The boulder, of course, went straight down. This type of humor was also not liked by the censors because they did not always know what was the meaning of the joke, what was it all about. So they were afraid of missing something.⁹⁹

Another joke of Grup Arh, this time with a "lizard." They gave the following poem to the censors for approval: *There is no sun, but it is fine, / And on the river there is only smoke. / The wind holds still right now / But a stormy rumble comes from the horizon.* This is how they interpreted the poem on stage: *There is no sun, there is no...* [pause] *there is no...* [pause] *there is no...* [pause] *But it is fine.* This was understood like: *There is no sun, there is no [food], there is no [gas], there is no [electricity]. But it is fine [irony].*¹⁰⁰

3.6 The response of the authorities

In 1983, after a Divertis show with sketches like the fairy tale *Fat Frumos si Ileana Cosanzeana*, the authorities decided to introduce a new way of censoring: the visualization. That is, the exact performance had to be done in front of the censors and of the jury before the festival. The text was not enough anymore. At the FASC

⁹⁸ Grup Arh was from Bucharest and it was formed from students of architecture. Its most important member was Ghighi Bejan, who moved after his graduation in 1983 to Divertis.

⁹⁹ Doru Antonesi

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*

festivals, since there were many *brigades* the visualization lasted for 2 or 3 days, from early morning until midnight, as Florin Constantin and Silviu Petcu recall.¹⁰¹

During these visualizations the censors “corrected” some acts that they considered improper, going further to banning the whole brigade for that show or for a longer time if the sketch was too critical. The banning for that show was easy to know because it was told on the spot. The banning for a longer period and how long that period was, was more difficult to find. Practically, the brigades would just find themselves not allowed to participate to the following shows. So it was not made clear. To find out more about their banning, the students used personal connections inside the Council for Socialist Culture and Education (CCES) (usually other censors who were more “nicer people” and would tell them what their colleague wrote about their brigade in his report).

The written censorship implied that the performers should submit the text that they wanted to perform to the censor responsible for that event. At level of the students’ comedy brigades the censors were working for the CCES (it was the same for visualizations). The censors were then writing and making observations on the texts submitted by students and then handed them back. Probably notes or copies of the texts were also kept by the censors.

When discussing the FASC festivals, Cioroianu identifies their unique character in the less harsh censorship that was present there; a fact that permitted for jokes to be told that otherwise could be heard only on foreign radio stations like Radio Free Europe or

¹⁰¹ Florin Constantin and Silviu Petcu; the other participants at the show use to assist the process, since it took place in the same hall as the show while they were waiting in the audience for their turn.

in small familial gatherings.¹⁰² But how lax was the censorship? What was allowed to be said? What were the intricacies of the censoring process?

The relation with the censors was not always conflictual. As Silviu Petcu recalls, “sometimes they were having fun with our texts, they actually made some jokes better.”¹⁰³ For instance, in 1985 they had a joke in which a teacher told his assistant that a machine he had bought for the school laboratory cost 2000 rubles. Initially they wanted to put dollars, but they knew that it will not pass the censors, so they agreed on rubles because they were Russian money. So the censor¹⁰⁴ cut “rubles” and replaced with “any other currency.” This was understood as “any other currency but the *leu* [the Romanian currency],” so the *leu* is useless, is not strong enough.

Some of the mechanisms of censorship were detailed above, like the themes that were allowed and aiming the joke at a particular problem without generalizing. What could happen if one broke these rules?

Ghighi Bejan’s joke about the electric stoppages told in a student camp banned him for 2 years. That is he was never called to have performances there for 2 years.¹⁰⁵ Apparently the organizers or responsible for these camps or any other events used to call these performers for a show and assured them housing and food (they were not paid because they were amateurs).

¹⁰² Cioroianu, *Pe umerii...*, p. 474 – 476.

¹⁰³ Silviu Petcu.

¹⁰⁴ His name was Cornel Dumitriu. At present he is a teacher at the Movie and Theater Academy in Bucharest.

¹⁰⁵ When he made that joke he had already graduated college, so he could not participate in FASC, which was only for students.

An entire show with jokes like Ghighi's was done by Voua in 1984. As Adrian Fetecau argues, the performance took place in the House of Students' Culture "Grigore Preoteasa" in Bucharest. Voua was supposed to have a 2 hour show for the inauguration of the Festival of the Polytechnic. The problems started from the beginning when the members of the brigade entered the stage on the *Phoenix's* music. *Phoenix* was the most famous Romanian rock band, that had fled the country at the end of the 1970s and because of that its music was banned at the time. Then Fetecau went to the microphone and announced the motto of the show: "Every man will have its own border guard,"¹⁰⁶ an allusion to the Romanians' desire to emigrate. After they all started singing that "the road to communism is too long."¹⁰⁷

The climax of their criticism towards the regime was the sketch *Olteni, da' multi!* (They are Olteni, but they are many!)¹⁰⁸ In this act there were some allusions to the general fear of being arrested by the *Securitate*, like: "If you don't behave yourself you'll be thrown in the stomach of the whale."¹⁰⁹ Or a hint at the eventual downfall of the regime: "Do you know what one must not forget? Atlantida. This was a continent and still when its time came, it sank"¹¹⁰ (which has to be understood as: if a continent disappeared when its time came, how do you think that the communist regime will be able to avoid its own end?).

Another theme present in this act was the way production was presented in the communist regime. In a conversation about the drought that destroyed the grain

¹⁰⁶ Fetecau, p. 10.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* Oltenia is a region in the SW of Romania.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

harvest that year, one character says that this does not matter, because eventually the quantities will be those predicted by the five year plan. “Are you dumb?” the other character asks. “Either you have a harvest, or you don’t.” The first one answers: “What do you know? It will always be as the plan predicted. If you have more, you say that you have less, otherwise next year the expectations of the plan will grow. If you have less, you’ll report more, because you’ll be punished otherwise. Anyway, it is still as the plan predicted.”¹¹¹ And the final irony is directed towards the idea present in the communist propaganda that one should work with enthusiasm, even on low salaries, for the future: “Good for them! These are People. They love the future. We are nothing but a bunch of fools. We live in the present”¹¹² So this sketch covered the repression present in those years, the eventual downfall of the regime, the agricultural production and the official propaganda.

After this show Voua was banned for one year, that is they were not allowed to have any performances for a year, no organizer welcomed them in his show. But in order for this show to happen in the first place, Voua used some other strategies to overcome censorship than the ones mentioned so far. That is they submitted some texts to the censors or performed some sketches at the visualization (it is not clear what method was used), and performed others on stage. This show was stopped after 1 hour.

In fact, the banning of a *brigade*’s shows for a certain period of time was the maximum punishment ever received for these activities, as Florin Constantin and Doru Antonesi

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 242.

¹¹² *Ibid*, p. 243.

recall.¹¹³ “We [Divertis] had always a kind of complicity at different levels [of the official structures],” that is why they were not banned (of course, they did not do anything as radical as Voua in the above mentioned show). Because there is hardly a chance that the officials did not know what the students were doing, on the contrary. As Florin Constantin recalls, at the wedding of a daughter of a party official where they were invited, someone told them to say the *American Fairytale*, a sketch which had never been performed on stage, but only in front of their friends or at other small social gatherings. So the party officials knew about it, and they assured them that nothing would happen to them if they told it. Or a similar story with Ceausescu’s son, Nicu. He organized a party where he invited, among others, Divertis and Voua, and he asked one of them: “Is this joke with my father? [You should tell that one].”¹¹⁴

3.7 Conclusions

The brigades’ “fight” with the authorities can be described as going around the obstacles. The direct opposition, although it existed like Voua’s show from 1984 or the joke of the brigade from Baia Mare in 1987, could not have any chance to win. So the only viable strategy was to find a thing that the censors had not considered, to defy them while obeying their rules.

In this way the “fight” of the comedy brigades with the censors looked like a game between a cat and a mouse: when the cat blocks a path, the mouse tries another

¹¹³ Doru Antonesi, Florin Constantin.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

knowing that he can not defeat the cat in an open fight. Thus the new “paths” found by the students were: to respect the words of the text, but through intonation to make them mean something else; when this path was blocked with the introduction of the visualization, the only option was to do a performance in front of the censors and another on stage. Of course, this method attracted the banning of the brigade.

Conclusions

Throughout the thesis I followed the depiction of the student comedy brigades in the official press discovering how were they seen and what was their official purpose, what were they supposed to do. Then I analyzed what the student brigades were actually doing, their “unofficial life,” describing the general conditions of the humor in Romanian society and in the whole communist bloc, deconstructing their shows and their sketches, and underlying the position of the authorities and the reaction of the brigades.

The relation between comedy brigades and state authorities was tense, a permanent struggle where the authorities were imposing a certain behavior and the students responded by developing strategies to avoid it. The state wanted for the brigades to have jokes and satirizes only problems strictly related to student life: topics like the dormitories’ supervisors, teachers, exams, etc. In this way the major problems of Romanian society that affected everyone’s life were kept under silence, exactly like in all the other spheres of life. And exactly in the same way the students’ comedy brigades were prevented for denouncing the big lie in which Romanians were living, and to start living “in the truth.” So the battle for the control of the brigades had the same aim as the battle with intellectuals. The reaction of the students was a reaction that came from the cultural middle ground: not the high culture of the intellectuals, not the minimal culture of the workers or peasants.

The “fight” of the brigades with the authorities is represented by the process of censoring. Thus the means found to overcome it: at first, it was only the written text that had to be submitted to the censors for approval. But the comedy brigades discovered that those exactly same words as the ones from the texts may mean something else with a different intonation or by using gestures, an option that had not been considered by the censors.

So a new way of censoring was introduced in 1983: the visualization. That is the brigade had to perform their acts in front of the censors before the shows. The only mean to overcome this new obstacle was straight lying: do one thing in front of the censors and another on stage. Considering the repercussions that this thing implied, there is no wonder that it was rarely used, but the important fact is that it was.

The humor of the student comedy brigades shared with the underground Romanian humor both of the latter’s “therapeutical” character and destructive force. The student comedy brigades did not pass unnoticed by Romanian society. As Doru Antonesi and Florin Constantin recall, “after 1989 many people stopped us on the street and thanked us saying that we helped them going through depressions before the Revolution.”¹¹⁵

The destructive force of the brigades’ humor was of the same kind as the one of the underground humor. The difference was gradual: the irony from the sketches of the brigades could have never been as acid as the one from the clandestine jokes. But was this humor of the students that could be performed on stage an admission of

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

defeat, like the clandestine one? Its public character indicates that it was not. For instance, no action was taken against underground humor anywhere in the communist bloc. With one condition though: to remain underground. Here lies the defeat of the “whispered jokes,” in their private character.

The humor of the comedy brigades was a public affair, people could see them and sympathize with them. The onus of the authorities was to make sure that this bondage does not last outside the show hall. That is why the brigades were hardly covered by the student press and not covered at all by the other types of press. To keep everything in the audience hall meant to allow students “to blow a little steam.” That at a certain point during the 1980s something more had happened was proved by the complete banning of the humor section at the FACS festival in 1989. What other reasons could the authorities have for this decision?

This research proved, first of all, that during the 1980s in Romania was present a youth culture which defied the system, one so faint that it was overlooked by the researchers who dealt with such topics, but, considering the repressive power of the regime which fought against it, worthy to be considered among the other cultural protest of the youth from the communist bloc. Secondly, it analyzed its major features opening the way for further inquiry in this field.

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Annexes

Annex no. 1



The author with 3 members of Divertis (from left): Doru Antonesi, the author, Florin Constantin, and Silviu Petcu.

In the background one can see a poster with the caricatures of all the members of the group.

Annex no. 2.



The front cover of the student paper *Notebook for Student Humor*

Annex no. 3

DIN LIRICA NOASTRĂ...

Din ciclul de poeme fără titlu:
"am venit la facultate"
vă prezentăm poemul:
EU N-AM VRUT, MAMA M-A TRIMIS

Oooh! Tremul vine zbuciumat spre lași
Eu sint boboc și tata mi-a dat bani
Să fac în viață primii noștri pași
Un cal trăiește circa 20 de ani

Oooh! Bine ați venit și bine ne găsiți
Răcneau acei la care nici gîndeam
C-am fi ca ei, cu blugi și oboșiți
La Polul Nord trăiește frigiderul Fran

Oooh! Dacia tatii fugi ca "Salvarea"
Eu sint boboc și-am venit cu mama
AbiCe mă face? Care o fi scaparea?
In Anai trăiește animalul Iama

Oooh! Astăzi ne luăm angajamentul
C-am învăța aproape pînă la moarte
Pînă să facem de la Kantul
In palmieri trăiesc banane coapte.

Din ciclul de poezii "Eu te-am făcut, eu te omor",
dedicat silei de "8 Martie", vă recităm poemul:

PENTRU TINE

AbiCe frumoasă ești iubita mea
Uite! A rădărit și luna
Și fiindcă becul strălucii tot nu mai ardea
De ești tu aceea, eu nu-s Ală.

Plouă afară, plouă
E cald în florărie
Îți cumpăr o garoafă, două
Plouă și în florărie.

Ce-o fi cu cratița acuma,
Dar cu copiii se s-o fi-nțiplat?
Terță-i sud sau pling într-una
Ce bine e să fii femeie, nu bărbat!

Voi vă iubim oricum ați fi:
Fecioare, mamă, studentă sau bătrîne
Ghei toți bărbații sint ai voștri fii
Iar voi, a noastre, totdeauna veți rămîne

Din același ciclu de poeme, vă supunem atenției o
capodoperă a genului, purtînd titlul bilingv

TESTAMENTUL UNEI FEMEII LETRE OUVERTE À SON MARI...

Peisaj acuma vechiul testament, bărbate
Lăsați-vă toate bunurile ce vi-au fost furate
Și care, dacă vă gîndesc mai bine
Măritia tot le-ar găsi la tine.

In felul meu am fost o personalitate
Cu rude pînă în antichitate
Eu mai vorbesc de grație, virtute
Pînă-ți sînt prea bine cunoscute

N-am reușit în viață să adun avari
Deși mama strălucit din răspateri
Adulterii procese de paternitate
Verbale de conjugala mea fidelitate.

Tinără nu-s, frumoasă nu am fost
Și nînto n-am avut, că n-avea rost
Copiii toți sui seamănă doar mie
Lucru ce nu îl se-nțiplat și ție.

Nu vreau să mai lungesc acuma vorba
Copiii dorm și se răcesc ciorba
Și cred că a sosit momentul
Să-nchei acest testamentul.

FORMA DE DRAGOSTE

IURITA mea de peste dealuri
Vreau să se-arunce în MALURI
Să se UNIN pentru vecie
Cu-o cerșetă a DRAGOSTEI tari!



Se spune că dragoste fără gelozie nu se poate.
Asta înseamnă că între Adam și Eva nu au existat niciodată
fete și sentimente alese, ei fiind doar conștienți de mi-
sărarea ce le-a fost îndeplinită. Străgînici oameni!

Despre femeie s-au scris, s-au vorbit și s-au su-
sit mult. Femeia este dotată cu sensibilitate, farmec,
mădărit, născut, apăsător și forță de atracție, farmec,
atracție cu masa ori accelerația.



Nu acușați niciodată o femeie de frivolitate, pen-
tr-unu o face doar să-și menajere soțul.

Șin gurul bărbat care a reușit să păstreze toată
simbetea unei femei a fost Francisco I, care a em-
pă pe Gioconda cu 4000 florini de aur.

AȚI CITIT

COOP. PRODUCȚIE
A CASEI DE FILME
PENTRU STUDENȚI
ȘI TINERET...



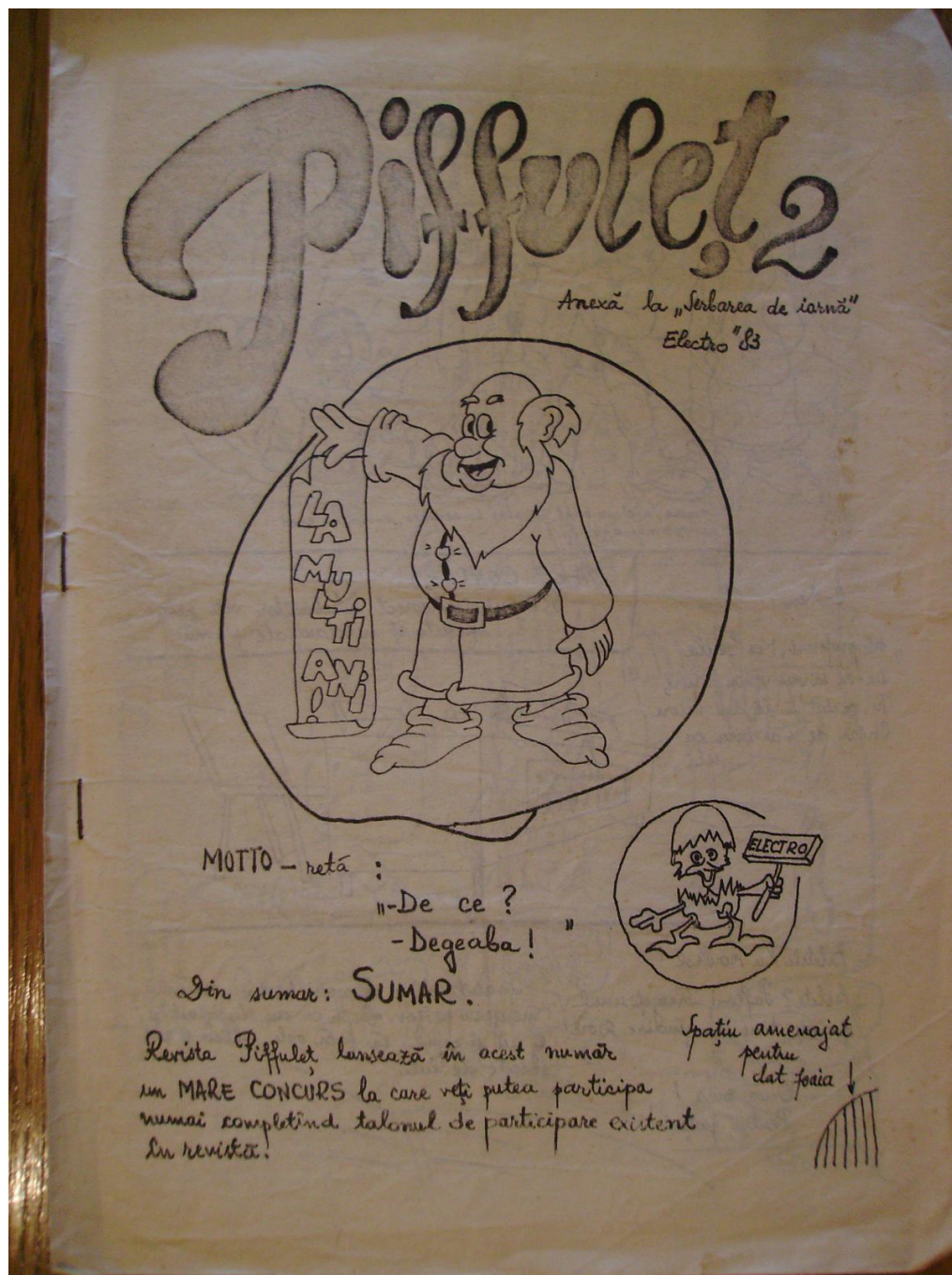
Lumini și poze contra incendiilor - DORIN RADU ANTONESCU
Umbră și prim ajutor - FLORIN VIOREL CONSTANTIN
Scenografie, costume, decor și decor - RADU SAVULESCU
Conducere muzicală și înregistrări - CARMEN MĂLĂR (C. M. Mălăru)
Secretariat de platou și consultant tehnic - SILVIU OVIDIU PETCU
Machaj, coregrafie și șif de tulumă - CĂSTIAN GHETCU
Mășinisti antrenori și colaboratori - TONI GRECU

ERATA

apartine greșeli de tipar și de interpretare nu ne
apartine. Orice asemănare cu fapte și persoane reale nu ne
apartine.
Orice cititor neavînat care va citi acest zădă-
răcit rugat să păstreze secretul publicației.
Vă rugăm să ne trimiteți felicitările, plingerile
și eventualele sugestii pe adresa dumneavoastră.

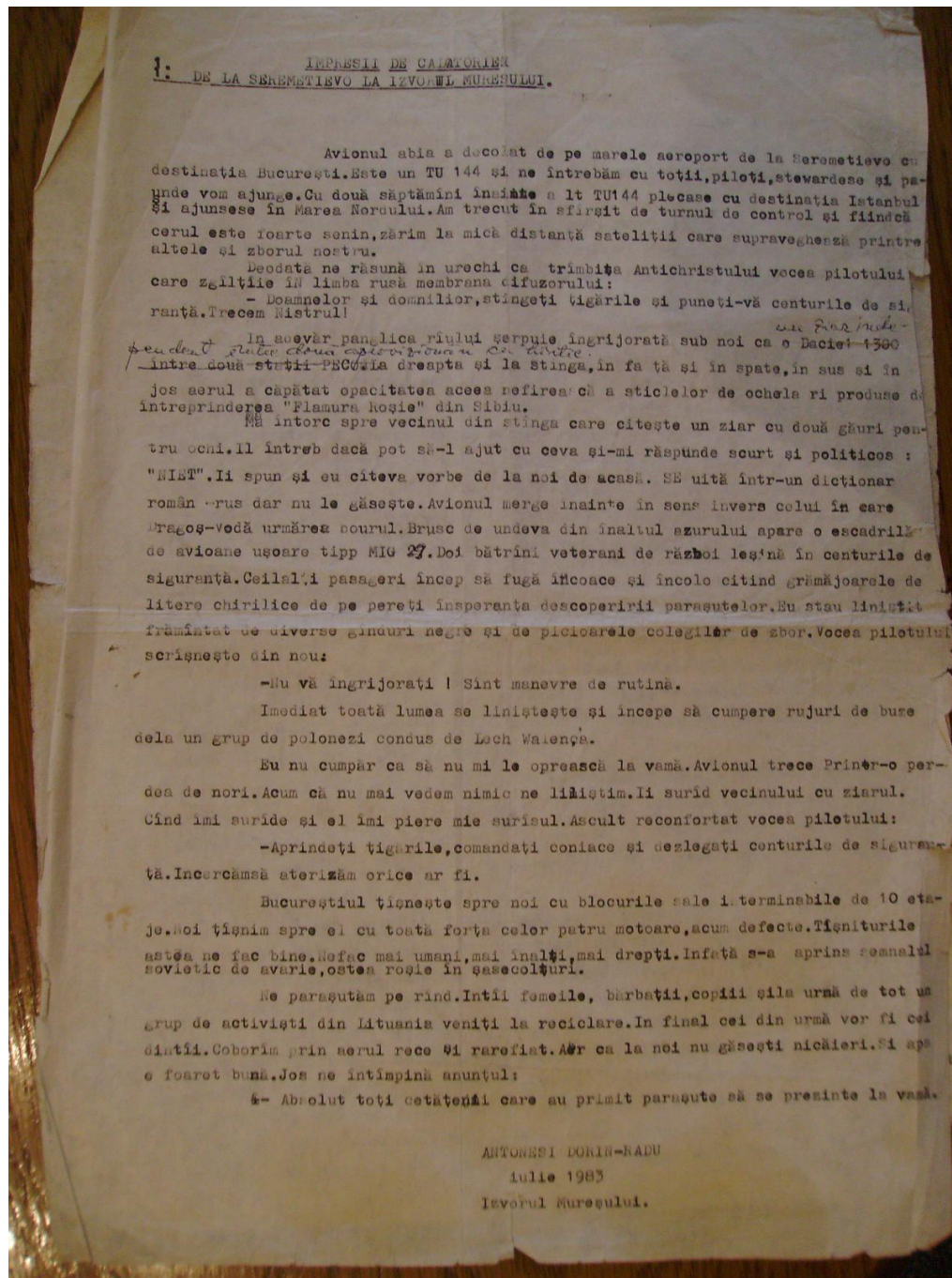


Annex no. 4



The cover of a publication for the Winter Celebrations from Electro

Annex no. 5



An original text of a sketch