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## The Socialist Boy Detectives and the Cold Wars of Childhood

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the various manifestations of children as protagonists in Romanian socialist cinema, and particularly those present in the juvenile detective movies of that time. Several productions of the socialism cinema industry had children as their main heroes and the movies discussed here were deploying tropes and narrative strategies specific to the global genre of boy detectives. The analysis uses examples that range from written texts, books or cartoons, to films and television series, as these cultural products were exploring not only childhood, but also a particular behaviour of young children and teenagers. They are considered to be relevant for understanding the transformations in Romanian society, as the socialist regime was creating an educational environment for children according to the dominant ideology, the narratives were exploring the resources of a wider genre.

**Keywords:** Romanian Cinema; Communism; Childhood; Detective Movies; Entertainment; Cultural Infantilization; Symbolic Exploitation.

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### Childhood, Socialist Romania, Cinema, Novels, Detective Tropes, Young Sleuth

“The child” as a concept and in general childhood have always been polysemantic social constructs. In an effort to coherently describe the evolution of childhood from Renaissance to modern society and now to its digital version, some authors<sup>1</sup> define it as part of a dominant paradigm, a specific Western vision about children which was exported around the world and gradually transformed into a social and political norm. Codified today by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>2</sup>, adopted in 1989, this paradigm is based on values that did not exist a century ago. Even adolescence was a notion recently created, some scholars attributing its invention to the studies G. Stanley Hall published in 1904.

Today we are accepting childhood as a social and biological reality, although it is a bi-product of the *culture of childhood* made possible, as Philippe Ariès<sup>3</sup> argued, by the developments taking place in Europe, and only after the seventeenth century. A more narrow definition of childhood as a cultural construct is provided by

Bruce Bellingham<sup>4</sup>, who argues that it was created later, during modernity, as a direct result of the hierarchies and structures of the bourgeois family. By prescribing modes of interaction and behaviours that did not exist previously and allowing the formation of a dominant image of the child, this “idealisation” of children made possible the socialisation of a new category of humans. Literature, cinema and other cultural products were part of this constructing process, imposing a certain type of children and childhood. Nevertheless, in the field of cinema studies there is a relative scarcity of research dealing with the representations of children, and most of them are often limited to American films, with a few European examples. Many authors have avoided addressing the difficult question of how childhood is created in cinema and its relationship with the ideological functions children have in capitalist society.

Henry Giroux<sup>5</sup>, one of the most astute critics of our contemporary culture, noticed the link between the exploitation of children taking place in early capitalism and the systematic exploitation of their symbolical value in contemporary capitalism which has induced a *cultural infantilization*. The *symbolic exploitation* of childhood, identified by Giroux with the *Disnification* of global childhood, a concept used by other authors as “Disneyfication”, is not limited to children. While Disney Corporation has transformed children and childhood into a source of profit, as this media global empire is now worth, according to the annual report of the company in 2021, over 203 billion USD, the effect was a general puerility of contents, explicit in the so-called “fast-food” films. Based on simple narratives and simplistic characters,

storytelling is now an excuse for product placement and merchandising promotion, with contents created especially for purchase. Movies like *Transformers* or *Star Wars* are today expressions of this childish form of culture not only in terms of their narratives, but also in the way they present the world to the viewers.

As Disney took over the control of global experiences of childhood and of what it means to be a child, in a long process of “Disneyfication”, a version of humanity behaving “like children” was initiated. This is the “Disneyfied childhood” promoted by popular culture, providing a version of what a “normal and natural” child must be like, part and parcel of the Westernised understanding of childhood. Its mechanisms have induced an overall infantilization of society, as one of the mechanisms in this process driven by the increased money spending of children was to change the advertising and marketing practises. In the United States, where young consumers are buying or influencing the buying of products, the spending related to children amounts to 700 billion dollars annually. Thus the rampant commercialisation of childhood, which is accelerating today, with unhinged strategies targeting children in movies, television shows, video games and other media, expands into the world of adults.

The associated phenomenon is thus the infantilization of adults since, as demonstrated by Barber, contemporary consumer capitalism is driven by marketing forces transforming all of us into *kidults*<sup>6</sup>. This infantilization is in fact a “hostile takeover”<sup>7</sup> of our minds, cultivating simplicity over complexity, what is easy over what is difficult. The general *kidultization*

of society has engendered a new ethos, one based on childlike behaviours, which made possible the infantilization of adults and the adultization of children, erasing the boundaries between age demographics. One explanation is that this infantilization of our societies is not harmful, as it can be found in the eternal fascination and attraction towards innocence. The exploration of our fantasies about childhood and the nostalgia of adults for an innocent time and stage could be positive, yet an increasing number of movies, cartoons or TV series are indicating a tendency to infantilize the minds of adults all over the world, infantilization becoming a dominant mind-frame in our society.

As the “kidult” entertainment has become the predominant form of cultural expression globally, “kidult media” practises are expanding<sup>8</sup>. In contemporary cinema there are many relevant examples for this trend, with movies that appear to be created for children, yet targeting adults. Several movies directed by Steven Spielberg disclose the mechanisms of *kidultization*, from *Empire of the Sun* (1987), the masterful kiddie-centric work, to *Hook* (1991), which is based on the story of Peter Pan, the archetype of the child who does not want to grow up. For the following line of arguments, the example of *The Adventures of Tintin* (2011) directed by Steven Spielberg is suggestive. Spielberg himself is disclosing a kidult public persona<sup>9</sup>, was always fascinated by Tintin and finally directed an advanced animated film, with a high degree of photorealism, based a teenage hero created by Hergé’s comic book series. The influence of Tintin, explicit in “The Young Indiana Jones” television series, is centred around the trope of the adventurous boy/

teenager. He serves as an illustration of how the adult-child division is annulled and provides an important illustration for our understanding of the transformations childhood and children go through. Children are participating and are engaged in social life as if they were adults, and the experiences represented in this movie, similarly with many other cultural productions, are cultivating a specific social behaviour. Also the character of Tintin must be related to the ideological function of children’s productions, as it was created as an anti-Bolshevik hero during the 30s and then developed in the historical context of a racist Belgium under Nazi supervision. In fact this inherent colonial and racist content has led to the recent decision of a school council in Canada<sup>10</sup> to withdraw some of the comic books of the series from public access. Thus, Tintin is a suggestive example for the purpose of my study as he brings together the elements of the child/ teenager detective, a popular subgenre which is the main focus here, with the general aspects of contemporary children’s culture and politics.

### Childhood, Ideology, Exploitation and Entertainment

The fascination of cinema with childhood can be traced all the way back to the infancy of the medium. In fact, one of the first films ever made, the production of Louis and Auguste Lumière called “Le Repas de bébé” (Feeding the Baby), was a home video in which the star was the baby daughter of Auguste, being spoon fed by her mother. The cinematic representations of children quickly developed into an autonomous genre, with children becoming a

profitable affair for the film industry. Various forms of cinematic narrations specially created *for* children can be either *about* children or *with* children, brought together by the fact that the screen representations are dealing *with* the issues of childhood. Starting with the earliest forms of cinematic adaptations, such as the cinema version of *Oliver Twist* made by Vitagraph Studios in 1909, to the Technicolor extravaganza of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and ending with the first instalments of the *Harry Potter* franchise, in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (2001), contemporary popular culture remains both fascinated by childhood and using it as a source for material profits. Correspondingly, a phenomenon associated with the presence of children in movies was the apparition of the first child superstars. With Jackie Coogan in *The Kid* (1921) gaining global notoriety and Shirley Temple becoming the global face of baby girl cuteness, this has led to the apparition of innumerable child performers who were transformed into commodities for the profits of film industry only to be discarded when no longer useful, as Maclaulay Culkin's transformation and degradation indicates. As properly observed by Wojcik-Andrews<sup>11</sup>, Hollywood studios continue to function as forms of exploitation of "cheap child labour".

A problem that needs to be addressed before moving forward is the long and convoluted debate in film theory about the boundaries of what can be generically described as a "cinema for children" or "children's films". Obviously all the movies we now identify as "children's cinema" are created by adults. The actions and the thinking of young people represented in films are created by adults, who even

determine what is suitable and what is not for children. The famous (or infamous) rating system is an expression of this coercive attitude towards childhood called "Parental Guidance". Many productions that can be included in the category of "children's films" are sometimes not even *about* children, they are simply intended *for* an audience mainly composed *of* children. Also problematic are those films explicitly dealing with issues *related to* childhood and which include children as their main characters, that is movies *with* child actors, yet created *for* adults, such as *Child's Play* (1988), introducing the scary Chucky doll. Also, children are exposed to many films (and contents) that are obviously not intended for them, yet influence their perception of the world. Brown and Babington<sup>12</sup> ungainly describe them as belonging to "the Child" film, *with* children, but not *for* children.

Obviously such definitions and the diversity of the genre itself leads to a lack of consensus. Some theorists<sup>13</sup> proposed the "family film" as a larger category, including anything from *King Kong* (1933) to *Toy Story* (1995), a general classification that could solve the various issues with children's films. Putting together the movies intended to be consumed by children with their family members, that belong to a family entertainment determined by "age-appropriate" contents and specific to Hollywood productions creates another separation. If these mostly commercial productions made by Hollywood can be accounted for as an autonomous genre, then the films specific to European, non-commercial, cinema must be classified separately. Trying to account for this divide, Cary Bazalgette and Terry Staples<sup>14</sup> separated the cinema *with*

children and that *for* children into two distinct sub-categories. Later Wojik-Andrews<sup>15</sup> proposed a similar segregation, between mainstream and counter cinematic children's cinema, between the amusing and the moralising purposes of the storytelling. For the purpose of my approach and in order to move beyond the terminological confusions referring to "children's films", I consider that such distinctions are excessively formal. Even the distinction between state sponsored, didactic films and the "kiddie films"<sup>16</sup>, as I will argue in the following, is unfitting for understanding the genre. From the very beginning of cinema and irrespective of the political system, films created for children were created to "educate" the young spectators and young people remain the target of filmmakers.

### **Cold War and the Weaponization of "the Child"**

A major issue we need to address is the separation between Soviet films having children and young adults as their distinctive protagonists and those made by Hollywood. Besides the explicit differences, since the ideological functions of children in the movies created in the USSR or the Soviet bloc are obvious, and the kidultization of capitalist representations are also clear, we must overcome the bias of the opposing cultures. Undoubtedly during the Cold War, as the two great powers were competing for military and political dominance, there was a need to conquer people's minds and souls. One of the main battlefields was the one of words and images. Imagination and imaginary constructs were used in this war, and childhood was a part of this confrontation.

As Peacock<sup>17</sup> argued, both Soviet and American propaganda used children as "innocent weapons" in this war of persuasion, which weaponized the image of the child on both sides. Many Cold War productions indicate the way in which the USSR and the United States created iconic images of children based on specific ideological purposes. Children and childhood were means of political mobilisation and of ideological persuasion. Peacock's comparative analysis of the two competing cultures indicates that, throughout the 50s and the 60s, propaganda contents were projecting false images and identities of children in both systems.

Nevertheless, this competition was generating a type of cultural cross-pollination, which is highly disputed by the supporters of the "conflicting" ideological blocs. Yet both in the Soviet Union and in the Western countries, the ideological enemies were in fact exchanging information and cultural values. In cinema the admiration for American movies helped the then nascent Soviet cinematic montage school to formulate its concepts. As Lev Kuleshov<sup>18</sup>, the famed "father" of the Soviet montage school noted in a 1922 article, "Americanism", or the rapid cutting in American films, provided a certain dynamism that was admirable. The "classical" Hollywood cinema was so popular in the Bolshevik state that filmmakers were constantly inspired by the American genres. The detective stories and the westerns were among Kuleshov's sources in "The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks" (1924), where he was parodically reinterpreting many stereotypes of American cinema. Even the rebellious Dziga Vertov<sup>19</sup> acknowledged

this influence in his 1922 manifesto, as he expressed the gratitude of his “kino-glaz” movement to the American adventure films for their “ostentatious dynamism” and “dramatisations of American Pinkertonism”. While “Amerikanshchina” was considered a “childhood illness” of Soviet cinema, many famous filmmakers and theorists observed closely what was happening in Hollywood, while their Western counterparts did the same.

Both adversary and concurrential, the nature of these relationships is complex and would require an in-depth analysis. For the purpose of my argument here, I contend that American authors and artists followed the cultural transformations in the Soviet Union, and their Soviet opponents were equally aware of the productions made in capitalist societies. Clearly, as Lunacharsky<sup>20</sup> claimed and anticipated, the Soviet cinema was about to “overtake” its European and American counterparts and the future “cinema art” will be sailing underneath “the proud Soviet flag” (156). This cinematic competition with (and against) Hollywood was at first based on a relatively free circulation of movies between the two cinema cultures. The first Soviet films distributed, initially illegally, were Protazanov’s *Breaking Chairs* and Eisenstein’s *Armoured Cruiser Potemkin*, in 1925. Then Eisenstein was officially screened in the United States, and in about a decade more than 160 Soviet films were released in the United States, while more than 1000 American films were presented in the USSR<sup>21</sup>. American detective films remained extremely popular, as acknowledged by Kuleshov<sup>22</sup>, who stated that the best foreign films were “American-made detective pictures”. Kuleshov realised that

the attraction of American films was based on the longstanding tradition of detective literature, specially by using a simplistic narrative structure in which the plot is always driven by an increased dramatism and dynamism. Studying the American way of making cinema, he realised that the “theatricality” of Russian films was hindering its development, so he incorporated “the first lesson of American filmmaking”, the efficient montage of individual shots, a technique labelled by some as “Americanism”.

After close collaboration during WWII, when the two future conflictive superpowers were allied in an all-out effort to destroy the Nazi war machine, the anti-American and the anti-Soviet attitudes were amplified politically during the Cold War. By 1940 the importer of Soviet films, Amkino, was liquidated and the number of Soviet films trickled down gradually. Only after the Thaw Soviet films returned to the American screens, and in 1963 Tarkovski’s *Ivanovo Detsvo* (Ivan’s Childhood) was the first submission of the USSR to the Oscars, and the next year Sergey Bondarchuk won the Academy award with *Voina i Mir* (War and Peace). They were later followed by Kurosawa’s *Dersu Uzala* (1975), qualified as Soviet film and *Moskva slezam ne verit* (Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears 1981), directed by Vladimir Menshov. In return, the Moscow Film Festival awarded in 1985 Norman Jewison with the grand prize, for *A Soldier’s Story*.

In this ideological context, childhood became one of the most important tools of propaganda, both for the Soviets and for the capitalist culture. Using children, who were often accompanied by animal pets, was among the simplest and most direct ways to gain emotional reactions and to

convince audiences. In the United States, as it is explicit in advertising and cinema, the images of happy children smiling on milk cartons or dancing in the movies were projecting the desirable “American childhood”, where only “smiley faces” seemed to exist. In the USSR there were several weaponizations of children, perhaps the most famous remaining Zoia Kosmodemianskaia, the anti-fascist heroine whose image was systematically promoted by Soviet media. Soviet film industry even created a specialised studio designed to produce children’s films, named “Soiuzdetfilm”, yet the trope of the adventurous child was included in almost all the plans for cinema productions. This thematic category was combined with other important subjects, such as the war films, and the best illustration here is *Ivan’s Childhood*, directed by the reputed filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky. The movie was a real Soviet box-office success, with more than 16.7 million tickets sold in the Soviet Union alone, and it was exported in the socialist countries and the West. This debut feature was an antifascist film, but also a story about heroism at a young age, a spy film and a partisan heroisation, yet it was a clear antinomy of the “happy child” in the West.

In the case of Romania, although our film industry did not have a specialised studio for children’s films, several studios like Casa de Filme 3 (*Veronica*, 1973, *Veronica se intoarce*, 1973; *Mama*, 1977) and Cinematography Studio “București” (Puștiul, 1962, *Amintiri din copilărie* 1965) were creating films inspired by Soiuzdetfilm. Another model was the existence of Detgiz (Detskoe gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo, the Publishing House for Children’s Literature) and other institutions designed

to perform the instruction of the youth, such as the Soviet Union’s Young Pioneers, which had parallel institutions in Romania. “Ion Creanga” editing house was publishing children’s literature, with several collections issuing translations and national works, the most popular being “The Library of all Children” (Biblioteca pentru toți copiii) with 86 numbered book titles.

It is also relevant that in socialist Romania the books of Agatha Christie, who remains to this day the most translated author in the world, with 7,233 translations and billions of copies sold internationally, were easily available. In 1969, the recently opened collection of the Publishing House for Universal Literature (ELU), published the translation of Christie’s famous novel “The crime in the Orient Express”. This collection, continued by “Univers” editing house and entitled “Enigma” was among the most popular in Romania at that time, including authors like Georges Simenon, Raymond Chandler or Maurice Leblanc. This series and many others exposed Romanian readers to almost all the heroes and tropes of detective storytelling in the West. This fascination with detective stories and crime mysteries was present in the socialist literature, as many other publishers started their own collections and, more importantly, in cinema.

### Children, Cinema and Ideology

Since we are lacking a complete cultural history of childhood in socialist Romanian society, an intermediate interpretative pathway is to analyse one of the special components of this culture, the child detectives as protagonists in Romanian socialist cinema. The focus here is on

the representations of children in several juvenile detective style movies and television programs, created during the 60s and through the 80s by the national film industry.

One of the prejudgments supported without sufficient reflection or investigation is that Romanian socialist society and culture were under the total control of mindless propaganda. Here an important contextualization is necessary in order to move forward. This major bias about socialist literature, cinema and society overall is politically motivated itself. Mobilized by the anti-communist propaganda after 1989, many researchers and academics in post-communist society are quick to perform simplistic and manicheistic interpretations. This preconception is explicit in many studies dedicated to media, television or cinema, considering that during the socialist regime there was neither intellectual mobility, nor quality production. For instance Dana Mustața<sup>23</sup> discusses the relationship between entertainment and popular television programs during the Ceaușescu regime, and advances the typically narrow perspective on how the contents were fully controlled by the ideological machine. By assuming a disciplinary view, this author claims that popular television in Romania was not only controlled by the Party, but it was also subjected to the “exclusivist pleasing of the political elite”. Thus somehow popular television in Romania at that time was addressing “exclusively the tastes and viewing habits of Ceaușescu”<sup>24</sup>. Such reductionist conclusions are impervious to the fact that popular programs were created in much larger context and that many programs of the Romanian television during socialism,

while ideologically driven, remain culturally relevant. Also, the education of youth with the instruments of literature or cinema are not a propagandistic endeavour exclusively limited to communist societies. While Preda<sup>25</sup> is disparagingly dealing with such productions, linking them with “mental abuse” and “political hysteria”, they have played an important role in the formation of social identity beyond ideology.

Another preconceived idea is based on the fact that the socialist and even the communist worldview was presenting the consumers of cultural products with a mindless and collectivistic perspective. Obviously the socialist productions were opposing the individualistic worldview of capitalism, itself ideologically heavy, yet not all representations of groups, not all collective actions of children or young people are collectivist. When the group takes over the needs of the individual, some read here the innate collectivism of socialist societies. Preda couples the Makarenko-style denouncements of individualism and the imposition of a collectivist worldview as an exclusive and negative marker for ideological interventions. Such interpretations must be taken with a pinch of critical salt since one of the oldest apparitions of children in movies was *Our Gang* (or *The Little Rascals*), the humorous series created by Hal Roach. There are hundreds of films produced over a several decades illustrating how children’s gangs are operating, from *A Pál utcai fiúk* (*The Boys of Paul Street* 1967), the masterpiece directed by Zoltán Fábri, an adaptation of Ferenc Molnár’s novel, to the provocative *Lord of the Flies* (1990), the representation of a group of children is not always a form of communist propaganda. In fact, the youth gang, as discussed in the



following arguments, remains a literary and cinematic trope that goes beyond political regimes. In the Western culture the idea of the gang and of youth gang delinquency is one of the most enduring, with Dickens offering in *Oliver Twist* (1839) the immortal illustration of how the fascination for the children's gang, here educated by the infamous Fagin, can become a pathway to understanding society.

As several authors have indicated, children's films are never innocent, they are pedagogical instruments of ideology in all political systems<sup>26</sup>. While children in the USSR were portrayed by the Soviet Union artists as brave peace fighters, in the West the stereotype of communism mobilising children against their parents, even denouncing them to be evicted to the Gulag, was widely circulated. As One of the most widely used propaganda techniques identified by Margaret Peacock<sup>27</sup>. Discussing the building of the child "Other", produced as a negative image of the lives of the political opponents, this author observes how the ideological tensions between capitalism and communism were projected in all aspects of the lives of their youngest citizens. While American propagandists sometimes employed different techniques, their goals were similar to those of their Soviet counterparts. For example, while Grigory Aleksandrov's film *Tsirk* (1936) accentuated the racism in America, the Western media highlighted the lack of freedom of children in the Soviet bloc. In fact, an important component of this new "war of the innocent" and of the use of "infantile weapons" was the representation of childhood by film productions that systematically constructed of a "semiosphere" of childhood<sup>28</sup>. Popular TV series like "Lassie", developed

by CBS starting with 1954, used the "magical" combination between an intelligent dog and a group of farm children. In this competition of ideologies, the Soviets were conveying the image of heroic children, such as Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood*, while in the Western culture also countless heroic films were produced specially targeting youth, with the category of adventure stories being the most relevant. In order to fight the influence of American comedies and musicals, the Soviet cinema (including their Romanian or Czechoslovak versions) started producing comedy films for children. Extravagant fantasies like *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) were countered by *Korolevstvo krivyykh zerkal* (*The Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors* 1963)

At the end of the day, those who conquered the souls of children, those who watched such films in the prime of their lives, and then went on to the streets during the changes at the end of the 80s everywhere in the Soviet bloc, clearly showed which propaganda was most successful.

### **A Socialist Paradox: The Communist Detective and the Socialist Police Procedural**

Children detectives have been present both in literature and cinema, even growing into a definite subgenre. With the young sleuth fictions evolving gradually in the Anglo-American culture, with roots in Victorian storytelling, the trope of juvenile delinquency and the motif of the dangerous or even evil child are today a common place. Popular culture series based on kid detectives like the Hardy Boys, reintroduced by Hulu in 2020, or teenage girl investigators like Nancy Drew, with the most

recent instalment in 2019 directed by Katt Shea, are never go unnoticed by the audiences. Today such criminal investigations are an integral part of a popular culture that anyway exposes children from an early age to transgressive behaviours in cartoons, comics and cinema fantasies. Unexplained situations are resolved by the end, apprehensive events and strange interventions are always made understandable.

Undoubtedly the figure of the detective and the detective fictions were creations of the 19th century industrial society, with the private detective being a particular manifestation of the capitalist worldview. In fact, Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin, the first fictional detective considered to have appeared (in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" published in 1841), was introduced as a special kind of human being, the "gentleman detective" who used reason (*ratiocination*) to solve crimes. This model, later developed by other famous private detectives such as Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot, is based on the premise that any criminal case can be solved by logic, that reason is an instrument to dispel any mystery. As noted by Heather Worthington<sup>29</sup> the word "detective" itself was first created in the English language of that time and was later exported in many other languages of the world.

The mechanisms of these narratives are relatively simple. The viewers (or the readers) are exposed to a crime or a mystery related to criminal activity. This raises a moral questioning about the transgressive act, which leads to a subjective experience, an immersive relationship with the situation. Such crime narratives are functioning like cautionary tales, exposing the defects

of individuals and society. Finally, with the criminals apprehended and punished, the symbolic order is restored and the reader/viewer is educated about the values, norms and rules of human society.

How and why Soviet culture, which was based on the dogma of crime as a capitalist symptom<sup>30</sup>, where crime was often considered to be eradicated from the socialist society, developed its own version of the criminal investigation narratives? One possible explanation is that there is a "culture of crime", extending from Homer to Hollywood<sup>31</sup>, thus appealing to all human beings from the earliest forms of culture. Another explanation, advanced by Kracauer<sup>32</sup>, claims that the detective genre is fundamentally a modernist form of expression as it is built around some of the most important myths of modernity. Thus the power of reason and the scientific investigation, manifestations of the civilising forces of institutional order, together with the rule of logic, which were also inherent socialist values, helped the genre to proliferate in the Soviet Union and in all its satellite countries. The proof of this is that the Soviet film studios kept making movies about Sherlock Holmes, one of the most popular TV series in the USSR being "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson" a production directed by Igor Maslennikov during the 1980s.

Although the Soviet version of the detective genre grew from a fundamental contradiction between socialist values and the Western society, in both cases the crime related storytelling was linked to ideology. The first and foremost issue remains that of the central character, who was the self-employed investigator in classic crime fiction, and who could not be "The Detective", since

the job no longer existed in the communist regimes. So the typical detective story, usually based on a plot structure that comes from the existence of an antagonist (the criminal) and a protagonist (the detective), took a new form. The trope of the “private eye” as detective-protagonist was rooted, as noted by Bran Nicol<sup>33</sup> and many other critics, in American culture. The classic novels which consecrated the most famous detective figures, such as Sherlock Holmes, who helps the Scotland Yard solve crimes wrapped in a mystery, to Philip Marlowe the typical hard-boiled investigator, are promoting the same individualistic hero. Especially the “hard boiled” male protagonist was characterised by the suppression of affects, laconism and stoic detachment from his own activities, and functioned as a “pathological manifestation of American individualism”<sup>34</sup>. This type of manhood was specific to the interwar period, a masculinity born in the pulp fiction magazines of the 20s and 30s, which was later exported into cinema and other cultural forms. Ideologically, the detective is quintessentially a manifestation of the American ideal of independence and social success based on private initiative.

As Alexander Prokhorov and Elena Prokhorova observed<sup>35</sup>, the Soviet literature and film cultures have generated a particular genre, called *militseiskii detektiv*, which functioned as a substitute for the classic Western detective plot, but without the individualistic drive. Since the Soviet productions adopted a more institutional mode of approaching crimes, this was called the “procedural genre”<sup>36</sup>. The socialist *police procedural* films and books (called *detektiv*), which were popular in Romania and in almost all socialist countries, were

often based on the conflict between the evil representatives of capitalism (spies, traffickers, thieves) and the communist militiamen. This Soviet investigators functioned like a “public eye”, using the suggestive term coined by Winston and Mellerski<sup>37</sup>, an expression of the collective resources of the public institutions and of social order. The problem of detective storytelling was important for Soviet society, and in 1969 in the Soviet Union an entire conference was dedicated to the “Soviet detective” genre. Held in Baku, under the auspices the Union of Soviet Writers, the debate about the “Problems of the Contemporary Soviet Detective Story” pointed out that the *detektiv* genre had to be both engaging and also “politically sound”<sup>38</sup>. Famous characters like *Maior Vikbr* (1967) or colonel Zorin (1971) in the movies directed by Anatoliy Bobrovskiy, or the popular Major Zeman, the famous police detective from Czechoslovakia, were embodiments of socialist law enforcement, not individualist heroes like their Western counterparts. Paulina Bren considers that in socialist cinema, alongside the main hero, the Communist Party was always present as a “quiet hero”<sup>39</sup>, albeit this ideological background is true for the solitary detectives developed in capitalist societies.

### The Development of the Socialist Young Sleuth Genre

The appeal of the boy detective stories is universal, nevertheless, as noticed by French critic Paul Hazard<sup>40</sup>, who was also supporting the idea of a “Universal Republic of Children”, there is an obvious difference between the multiple approaches to children’s literature. Hazard convincingly

argued that there was a noticeable preeminence of authors of the great children's books in the "North". Defoe, Swift, Andersen or Lewis Carroll had a fundamentally different vision about childhood than some of their "Southern" counterparts, like Perrault or Collodi. This difference can be observed also between the literature and cinema of the Soviet countries, when compared to their Western works and productions. Starting with the premise that many children's films are perpetuating the adult vision about the world in a particular context, with the imagination of children often directed by adults, we can observe the similarities and differences between narrations which include or are based on young protagonists behaving like detectives or investigators.

The development of narratives having a child detective as protagonist and generally the teenage or juvenile detective heroes, is integral to the Western children's literature. While Lucy Andrew<sup>41</sup> calls the attention to the fact that, unlike the American detective boys, their British counterparts were a result of different expectations, specific to the image of childhood in British Edwardian society, the "youthful sleuth" was born in the British "boy detective" storytelling environment. Made popular by serialised novels extremely popular at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, juvenile mysteries and the teen sleuth stories were popularised long before Edward Stratemeyer published his first "Hardy Boys" novel in 1927. Of course, the Stratemeyer Syndicate capitalised on this fascination, by publishing a long line of juvenile books which promoted repetitive characters such as the Rover Boys, the Bobsey Twins, Nancy Drew and of course, the Hardy Boys.

Yet for the purpose of our discussion, the emblematic "boy sleuth" remains Tom Sawyer. The impact of Mark Twain's hero on the birth of the juvenile detective genre in Romanian cinema is extremely important. Of course, in the development of our children's narratives, both in literature and in cinema, there is a wide variety of tropes and approaches. The Romanian socialist cinema intended for children and youth discloses a genre diversification ranging from the productions made by Elisabeta Bostan, who was leading the way with coming-of-age stories and musical fairy tales, to fantasies like *De-as fi Harap Alb...* (*If I Were Harap Alb*), directed by Ion Popescu Gopo. Yet among the children's films that were most popular at that time are *Aventurile lui Tom Sawyer* (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, 1968) and *Moartea lui Joe Indianul* (with the international title *The Death of Joe the Indian*, 1968). These Romanian-German-French co-productions remain extremely relevant as the movies, directed by Mihai Iacob and Wolfgang Liebeneiner, had over 4 million viewers in Romania, with many more abroad. Iacob, who previously directed *Celebrul 702* (1962), a satire of the typical American gangster movies and a criticism of capitalist society, managed to capture the atmosphere of the novel. As a matter of fact, Tom Sawyer was already an important figure in Soviet cinema: one of the first adaptations of Mark Twain's work was created in 1936 by Lazar Frenkel and Gleb Zatvornitsky.

Twain was integrated in the culture of socialist Romania early on, as his works were popularised by several translations available since 1956, when an edition of "Collected Works" was published by The State Publishing House for Literature and

Art, then his “Stories, pamphlets, short stories” also appeared at EPLA in 1956. Later “Ion Creangă” Publishing House made available some cheap and affordable copies of “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” and “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”, both issued several editions (1985, 1988), after the initial publishing, in 1970, of another popular collection of stories “Tom Sawyer Detective and Tom Sawyer Abroad”, also in “The Library for All Children”.

This is one of the reasons why Twain’s heroes were easily integrated in the local film industry. During the Thaw, as Romanian cinema was opened to co-producing films with Western companies, such a co-production with the ZDF studios was a sign of the openness of our socialist society. The shootings took place at Buftea and in the Danube Delta, with many Romanian actors involved. One of our most important cinematographers, Ovidiu Gologan, was image director and Wolfgang Liebeneiner (a former Nazi director, recycled as an author of television films) was accepted as a co-director with Iacob. The music of this international co-production was written by a Romanian composer who moved to France, the famous Vladimir Cosma. Presented as a miniseries on German television, this production was screened in the German Democratic Republic, specially dubbed for the East German audiences and then distributed in all socialist countries.

What makes Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) very important goes beyond the narrative, which indeed presents us with a trope that will be constantly repeated. A young boy from a provincial town (Tom), witnesses a crime

in which some adults (the body snatchers Dr. Robinson, Muff Potter and Injun Joe) are performing heinous acts (here they are robbing a grave). Together with his friends (Huckleberry Finn and Becky) they are trying to do the moral thing (to prove that an innocent man was wrongfully accused) and go through a series of adventures that test their bravery. The morally just young people are fighting the immoral adults (here Injun Joe). More importantly, Twain was incorporated into the mainstream cultural discourse of the Soviet Union and then socialist Romania because he was one of the critics of American society. Twain was a keen and astute observer of the defects of capitalism and his story about the poor orphan, who clumsily loves Becky Thatcher, and is helped by a disenfranchised Huckleberry Finn, had more to offer than the simple nostalgia for childhood or the adventure typical for children’s storytelling. This was one of the harshest criticisms available denouncing the profound injustices in American society, exposing its inherent racism and the exploitative nature of its system, pointing to the social inequalities and the class segregation, all presented against the apparently innocent background of Hannibal, a forgotten city on the Mississippi river. Twain’s critique of deep-rooted racism in the American South and his sarcastic presentation of US imperialism, which the American humorist often denounced as a malignant combination of religion and exploitation, remained unparalleled. For example, one of his most ironic denunciations of the brutal US military intervention in the Philippines was “The War Prayer”, in which he ironically turns The Lord’s Prayer into a satire against imperialism.

For the focus of my interpretation, the tropes in Twain's books are connected with several Romanian productions, which, starting from it, developed their own distinct visions of the world. One of the most popular children's books during socialism remains *Cireșarii*, which was later adapted into a movie with the international title "The Knights of the Cherry Blossoms". Constantin Chiriță, who began publishing his pentalogy in 1956, wrote a novel first called "The Black Terror" (Teroarea neagră), then rebranded it as "The Knights of the Cherry Blossoms" ("Cavalerii florii de cireș") which took place, just like Mark Twain's story, in a cave. Here the young members of an excursion confront the bandits who are plotting anti-socialist actions (such as The Hunter in the first instalment, finally disclosed to be the "Black Express", the leader of an espionage network),

Otherwise the storyline was originally based on the typical Soviet spy-thrillers of that time. Such espionage films were really popular. *Vultur 101* (1957) directed by Andrei Călărășu, had more than 2,1 million viewers, according to the data provided by The Romanian National Center for Cinematography. The production of this Jewish-Romanian filmmaker, who later emigrated to Israel, was a loose adaptation of a novel written by Nicolae Tăutu, who also authored the screenplay. This was one of the first large scale productions made possible by the new Romanian cinema studios at Buftea, intended to be the largest in Eastern Europe. The drama of captain Timuș, a pilot whom foreign agents are trying to recruit in order to steal secrets from the new socialist state, followed a scheme typical for such espionage stories. They were recurrent in the Romanian socialist cinema, often

broadcasted by the national television, who used the genre to cultivate patriotism and to educate the citizens about the dangers of foreign interests. In some of the most typical examples for this range of films, the lead character is played by Florin Piersic, who illustrated the typical Romanian hero impervious to foreign temptations. Movies like *Adventures on the Black Sea* (Aventuri la Marea Neagră 1972, dir. Savel Stipul), *The "S" Network* (Rețeaua "S" 1980, dir. Virgil Calotescu), or *Recruitment* (Racolarea 1985, dir. George Cornea) were localised versions of the Hollywood espionage films. Their main characters were only socialist mirrorings of the same elements, in which adventure and mystery were combined with the specific ideological twist idealising communist society.

Chiriță's books were also based on a similar propagandistic premise. The subtext of all these novels was the struggle between the young generation, representatives for the future of society, and the evil adults, who were expressions of the revoluted past. By the time *The Knights of the Cherry Blossoms* were first turned into a black and white, 10 episodes television series directed by Andrei Blaier, the main heroes of the books were already extremely popular. Even though Alexandru Boroș, who played the role of Ticușor (Nicolae Țic) in the TV series, or Răzvan Baciuc, in the subsequent movie, were not convincing enough in the role of the brave and naive boy, the clever fifth-grader who is both innocent and resourceful. Nevertheless, these "Knights of the cherry blossoms" managed to lure the viewers into thrilling adventures. They were always unravelling a mystery, they looked for treasures and clues, and they always acted like amateur detectives, with Victor

especially operating as a young socialist Sherlock Holmes. The children in the books and the films are always cohesive as a group and disclose collaborative abilities, fighting the individualistic and egotistic evildoers with their collective intelligence. The combination of mystery, adventures and friendship were the basic ingredients of all these books, from the first in the series, published in 1956, to the last, in 1963, entitled “Good Bye, Cherry Blossoms”. Later Chiriță tried to create another series of detective novels, the so-called “Trilogy in White”, but he was only repeating the same schematic storytelling.

Although the colour movies tried to recontextualize the novels, film director Adrian Petringenaru was not able to fully capture the essence of the books. The first instalment, released in 1984, and followed by the sequels titled *Wings of Snow* (Aripide zăpadă 1985) and *The Hidden Fortress* (Cetea ascunsă 1987), were more spectacular in terms of locations, yet less convincing in terms of storytelling. The films are schematic in their effort to present these schoolboys differently, turning them from detectives and crime investigators like Tom Sawyer, into talking heads of sorts for films apparently designed to promote Romanian tourism, and especially sky resorts.

A mystery solving plot, similar to the one in *The Hidden Fortress*, is used by another children’s film, *The Mystery of Herodotus* (Misterul lui Herodot, 1977), written and directed by Geta Doina Tarnavschi. Here, closely following the structure of a Soviet film directed by Mikhail Shvejtser and Vladimir Vengerov, *Kortik* (1954), in which two boys from Petrograd try to decipher the mystery of a Russian Civil War dagger, we are witnessing the adventures of

two youngsters who find an ancient roman artefact and start searching for the presumed treasure. Once again, this film also returns to the classic Mark Twain tropes, with the boy couple, the secret cave, the mystery and the love interests (Ruxandra). The story, which shares similarities with several Soviet films, such as *Kapitan Sovri-golova* (Captain Lie-Devil 1979, dir. Nikolai Lukyanov), shows children in socialist society during the holidays, getting involved in organised activities, not wasting their time. In the Romanian film the heroes are the typical boy duo, composed of two brothers, Adrian, who is the older and obviously the leader, and his younger sibling, Onoriu. They are fascinated by national history and dream to be published in the “Historical Magazine” (Magazin Istoric). At the end of the adventure, when they discover a Roman inscription which carries both their names, they are metaphorically linked to ancient “Romanian” history. The tombstone uncovered in the cave carries an inscription mentioning a Roman military, Hadrianus Honorius. Ultimately this is the main purpose of the historical mystery which takes the two boys from an ancient Slavonic inscription to a great archaeological find. The Miron brothers, who follow the clues of a teacher and a local amateur archaeologist, uncover the much sought after proof for the continuity of Romans in Dacia, together with a monument to the union between a Dacian woman and a Roman soldier. The children find the ancient city of Lisidava, which they connect to the controversial “Aurelian withdrawal” in Romanian history, proving that the Romans never left Dacia completely, thus supporting the thesis continuity.

This adaptation of a relatively unknown author, N. Ionescu-Dunăreanu's "Movila bătrânului" (The Old Man Hill) is not simply patriotic propaganda. The search for archaeological evidence showing the ancestral origins of the Romanians is the pretext for a typical treasure hunt narrative. Besides the fact that the boys are fascinated by history, they are also real rebels. Called by their neighbours "nichiperci", little devils in popular language, they scare the entire village with their mischievous acts, exasperating their father, the respected local doctor. We can see here the illustration of Paul Hazard's theory about children's imagination, based on make believe and liberty, which is subjected to the oppression of adults. As Hazard<sup>42</sup> noted, the imaginative child is always restricted by the adults, just as the authoritative father of the two boys tries to limit their creativity and to constrain their imagination. Not all the adults act like negative forces denying the children independence and the ability to manifest the natural freedom of childhood. The boys are not only breaking windows or scaring the local cats while shouting like native Americans on the hills of an abandoned archaeological site. They are representative of the desire to be independent and refuse to join the other children in the village, who are members of the "pioneer brigade" and plan an "organised" excursion. Ultimately professor Blidaru, representing the official authority, encourages them to channel their astuteness and courage and the boys realise that selfishness and individualism are not good, a process that ends up with their integration into the larger community.

Tarnavski, who also worked with Gheorghe Naghi for another boys'

detective project, *The Adventures of Babușcă*, is offering a realistic view of childhood in Socialist Romania. These are children who read adventure novels and are exposed to American popular culture. The boys are using as a recognition sign a refrain from the Muppets show (Mahna Mahna, first used on Sesame Street) and they mention Samantha, the main character of the popular television show *Bewitched*, both broadcasted at that time by socialist Romanian television.

A summer vacation mystery and adventure production, which is similar to Tarnavski's film, is based on another mystery solving couple of young school boys. *The White Rocket* (Racheta albă), a TV series based on two novels written by Ludovic Roman – "Racheta albă" (1975) and "Stejara" (1977), published also by Ion Creangă editing house – is based on the authentic experiences of the author with his own children. In fact, the series takes us on a chain of adventures through which two boys uncover various secrets, from the old letter written in Latin discovered in the attic of their house, to the scientific mysteries of laser and photovoltaic electricity. The boys' duo that travels the eight episodes of the television series produced by the National Television and the Bucharest Cinema Studios in 1984, each 30 minutes long, are Viorel Velea, the older one, called The Captain, and Dan Popescu, his younger sidekick. From time to time they are joined by other children, like Dan's younger brother, who wants to participate in their adventures or by their pet, a speaking daw bird. The two boys are intelligent and ironic, well-educated and astute. The trope of the boy detectives is central to each episode, and made explicit when Viorel, who



is asked in school what he wants to become when he grows up, declares that he wants to be a detective.

This series showing the happy childhood in socialist Romania, where children are playing, dancing and studying in science laboratories, was directed by Cristiana Nicolae who later emigrated to Canada. The action is often punctuated by musical moments. Sometimes the episodes even look like musical videos, with the children acting as characters in the songs and enacting amusing scenes or simply having fun. The music of the program was composed by Marius Țeicu, who at that time was one of the most popular song composers, with lyrics written by Constanța Buzea, also a remarkable poet. The lyrics of the main song, entitled “The White Rocket”, reveal the main purpose of these films, which was to symbolically represent childhood as an energetic and optimistic white rocket. The producers meant to encourage the natural abilities of children to dream positive dreams and to project them into the future of their own society. This was a configuration of childhood encouraged by many films and books created in the socialist bloc, not only in Romania. The prescribed role of children in society was based on the idea the young people were supposed to become important contributors to social life. Often described as “our future”, children were targeted by films and television programs encouraging them to fulfil their potential. As in *Fram* (1983), another popular production of that time, directed by Elisabeta Bostan and based on a popular children book by Cezar Petrescu, a miniseries about the adventures of a polar bear, children were encouraged to dream, to become explorers or scientists. While they romanticised the child and showed an idealised childhood,

these films were intended to have a positive effect on the minds of the young generation, often avoiding any direct political involvement.

### Ideologized Stories and the Boy Adventures

But not all productions of that time were free of political intentions. The child protagonist in several movies, television shows and even cartoons were explicitly using the representation of childhood to convey a political meaning. For example, the “Cutezătorii” magazine, one of the most important publications for children in socialist Romania, developed several popular characters presented in serialised cartoons. One of these stories, deployed in eight episodes entitled “The Fearless” (“Neînfricații” 1983), was featuring the exploits of a young boy named Ionuț who, during WWII, takes action against Fascism. Substituting his brother Ștefan, who was arrested after he distributed anti-Fascist manifestos, he follows a heroic and investigative path, which eventually leads to finding that his brother was tortured and assassinated by the Secret police of the bourgeois state. Written by Costache Anton, with drawings by Valentin Tănase and Radu Vintilescu, it used recurrent narrative motifs. Even the main hero is described as red haired, as the already iconic anti-Facist junior character.

This is relevant for understanding one of the most popular boy characters in Romanian socialist culture. “Pistruiatul” (The Freckled), together with his almost identical version developed later in another production called “Roșcovanul” (The Redhead), was influential for an entire

generation. First developed in 1973 as a television series still broadcasted today., In 2008 TVR Media issued as a 6 DVD pack containing the remastered films. *The Redhead*, a movie directed by Francisc Munteanu in 1976 and *The Freckled*, the cinematic version of the TV series, distributed in 1986 as a filmic trilogy (Pistruiatul I: Evadatul; Pistruiatul II: Ascunzişuri and Pistruiatul III: Insurecţia) aggregated almost 8 million spectators (3,6 million for *The Freckled* and 3,3 million for *The Redhead*). Both of these famous socialist boy heroes were played by Costel Băloiu, an amateur actor who later became a taxi driver and who had his hair dyed and his face splattered with painted dots to qualify for the image of the rebellious boy.

As mentioned before, Soviet cinema and the Romanian socialist film industry borrowed massively from the tropes of Western culture, and the proof in this particular case is in the fact that the main protagonist of *The Redhead* (1976), Mihai, is sharing many traits with *Oliver Twist*. Orphaned after his home was bombarded, this young Communist hero is recruited by an immoral pickpocket, nicknamed “Lamp”, who tries to initiate him in the art of stealing wallets. During one of the stings orchestrated by the gang coordinated by Lamp, The Redhead discovers that one of the torturers of the Secret police, who also abused his father, was now hiding as the head of a correctional school for teenagers. After being imprisoned in the same correctional facility, Mihai bravely uncovers the wrongdoings of the former police officer and takes the results of his investigations to the local Communist Party headquarters.

The movie is clearly propagandistic and, while it manages to present a

convincing image of the underworld of Romanian society during capitalism, it fails to persuade the viewers to believe the dogma of the Communist Party as a leading political force during the war. *The Redhead* was an attempt to capitalize on the popularity of a previous hit, equally written and directed by Francisc Munteanu, the above-mentioned *Pistruiatul* (The Freckled)., This was one of the first TV series on Romanian national television shot and broadcasted in colour format. Each episode had about 35 minutes and the pilot was broadcasted on December 23rd 1973, followed by weekly instalments, running intermittently until February 24th, 1974. At the end of the story, in the final episode “The Freckled” takes over a machine gun and participates in the war against the Nazis, heroically sacrificing himself for the Socialist future that his young spectators were beneficiaries.

One of the sources of popularity for *The Freckled* was another motif inspired by Western programs: the combination between the child investigator and a dog. Made popular by the American TV series *Lassie*, the trope of the boy-dog team is recurrent in many children’s detective narratives. In the Romanian series, The Freckled has a close friend and helper, the German shepherd “Calu” (Horse). The boy-dog couple goes through several adventures, as Calu is often getting involved in the detective-like actions of the boy, who considers himself the owner of the brick factory. In this “quality” he encounters an escapee, the illegal activist Andrei Bogdan, played by Sergiu Nicolaescu. Faced with the abuse of the chief commissioner of the Police, Mihai gets involved in a series of secret activities, managing to fool the police officers in

several chases and covert operations. As the young boy is transformed from a bystander into an active political agent, his exploits are designed as a model for the viewers.

The real inspiration for *The Freckled* is another Communist hero, a character created by French comic book writer, Roger Lécureux. “Le grêlé 7/13” (meaning Hailstorm 7/13) is the code name for a young maquisard who has seven freckles on his left cheek and thirteen on his right one. Just as “Le grêlé” joins the French resistance fighting the Nazis, the Freckled act in a similar way in the presumed resistance in Romania. This story, running from 1966 to 1974 in the Communist magazine “Pif”, edited by Vaillant, was available to the Romanian public since during socialism this magazine was sold only in specially selected bookstores.

Socialist Romania imported the model of the French communist magazines, and that of their Soviet counterparts. One of the most widely read magazines for children was “Cutezătorii” (The Courageous), as it was rebranded in September 1967, was one of the oldest magazines for children, the first issue published in March 1953 as “Scânteia pionierului” (with reference to the official Party newspaper named “Scânteia”). Relevantly enough, the first issue of this new magazine created for the socialist children published in a feuilleton format the first instalment of “Ostrovlul lupilor” written by Petre Luscalov (The Wolves Eyot), indicating the interest for serialised adventure novels. “Cutezătorii” included many detective stories, one example is the 1973-1974 comic strip called “Urmărirea” (The Pursuit), written by Tudor Negoită, with drawings by Albin Stănescu. Here two young amateur detectives, a young boy

named Radu and his friend Elvira, investigate the suspicious actions of their neighbours. These fellow citizens sold all their belongings and live in their garage. At the end of an investigation involving a microfilm hidden in a pack of “Snagov” cigarettes, a gang of thugs and finally a providential helping hand from the Securitate, the readers discover that the older couple intended to traffic gold and wanted to immigrate.

The critics<sup>43</sup> of socialist culture interpret such productions, including the books of Petru Luscalov and many other novelists of the time writing children’s literature, as planting the “germs of Communist propaganda”. Preda uses the negative model of Pavlik Morozov, the Soviet boy who informed the authorities on his parents and was murdered by his family, to disparagingly minimize the qualities of all characters in Romanian socialist literature and cinema. Nevertheless, these child protagonists were neither powerless, nor subservient, they were conscious and morally strong individuals, disclosing courage, ethics, and moral values. They are not just tools of ideological propaganda, they are also typical heroes of commercial literature and films, which had their versions in socialist Romania. Of course, not all critics agree with these negative evaluations, as indicated by the more nuanced approach provided by Eugen Negrici<sup>44</sup>, who noted that these literary works created for children had often a liberating effect, that they provided an escape from the political anxieties of the adult society.

One of the best examples in literature and cinema that developed a specific version of the adventure narratives for children are the books written by Petre Luscalov, including *The Wolves Eyot* (Ostrovlul Lupilor,

Tineretului publishers, 1969) and “*The Extraordinary Adventures of Scatiu and His Friend Babușcă*” (Extraordinarele peripeții ale lui Scatiu și ale prietenului său Babușcă, Ion Creangă publishers, 1971). These most popular boy detective stories were turned into a movie for children with 1.5 million viewers during the 1970s. *The Adventures of Babușcă*, directed by Gheorghe Naghi and Geta Tarnavski in 1973, takes place in the Danube Delta, where two brave local boys are caught in a series of criminal investigations. This “Eyot of the Wolves” is a secret place discovered by the youngsters who are hired as boatmen and guides for a stranger, who needs them to find his way along the beams of the Delta. The story, which begins with the murder of a foreign sailor, as his ship was anchored in the port of Pardina, shows the two heroes caught in a struggle with a gang of international smugglers of gold watches. In a movie in which the actions take place against the backdrop of extraordinary landscapes in the natural refuge of the Danube Delta, two charming characters convincingly absorb the spectators into their adventures.

Once again, as Babușcă (a nickname referring to the red eye fish) reveals at the very beginning of the film, there is a direct connection with Mark Twain’s heroes. Babușcă, played by Gabriel Nacu (who, as an adult, will sing for a while with the popular rock band “Roșu și Negru”) and Scatiul, the son of the port captain (played by Horea Zugrăvescu) always get in trouble due to their adventurous nature. Babușcă comes from a poor family, but is brave and kind, while his friend Scatiul is smart. Together in a series of wanderings and adventures taking place along the arms of the Danube, they manage to unravel the plans

of their adult antagonists - The One Eyed (Chiorul, with Amza Pelea in the role of the evil character), the Hunter and the Teacher. With the help of “Nenea Vlad”, the good-natured militiaman, accompanied by the funny puppy Spic, they solve the mystery case like true professionals.

Luscalov, who was deputy editor-in-chief of the screenwriting guild in Romanian Socialist film industry, also authored other books turned into films, such as *Alarm in the Delta* (1976), with the even younger characters Voinicel and Azimioara, or *The Son of the Mountains* (1980, directed by Gheorghe Nagy). *The Son of the Mountains* is also an adventure film, in which brave children fight bandits, spies or criminals, yet the story has a less convincing narrative structure. Like in *The Knights of the Cherry Blossoms*, children confront a foreign spy agency who has sent two agents in Romania, Wolf and Rudy. Trying to kidnap the daughter of a Romanian engineer in order to blackmail the father to divulge the secret of his invention (like in *Racolare*). Matei, a brave boy who lives alone in a weather station, realises the dangerous plans of the spies and is able to fight off the bandits, with the help of a local bear who seems to intimately share his dislike of foreign gangsters.

These unequal representations of children in Communist cinema shows that the viewers were not always victims of an all-powerful ideology, they were not necessarily “inoculated” with the unwanted values of Communism and other “evils” that socialism might have generated. In fact, many productions are weak not because of their propagandistic intentions, but because of the inability of the filmmakers to be convincing, as even the film critics of that time noticed.

One explicit common trait remains the persuasive pattern, which is sometimes hidden in a narrative that follows the model of Western productions. In these ones, children get into action when faced with crime and criminality, with social injustice and the moral degradation of adults. In the Socialist films and novels, the agency of the youngest members of society is more limited. The young people, who refuse the existing social order and rebel against authorities, are nevertheless friendly with the adults who represent the power institutions. Here the dialectics between rebellion and docility, between the rejection of authority figures and accepting social order is channelled towards political symbolism. The freedom of childhood is opposing only those institutional figures that are linked to the past. The protagonists are often metaphors for a society refusing its ideological past, while the coming-of-age stories, which show the transformations of the heroes, are indicative of the general transformation of society.

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## NOTES

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