Visual Imagery and Propaganda during Communist Romania (1948–1989): Picture Postcards as a Tool

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Abstract

There are continuities in any transformation and the memory of the Communist period (1948-1989) is part of the identity of many people and urban landscapes in post-socialist Romania. Postcards matter when telling the story of urban landscapes and people in Romania in the 20th century. The remodelling of urban space through massive industrialisation and territorial systematisation, reflected by picture postcards, was a strong process that took place during the Communist period. I argue on the basis of illustrated postcards with representations of the urban areas during Communist Romania, obtained from the Geography Archives of Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, that the propaganda of the Romanian Communist Party created a visual discourse intertwining the development with territorial identity. I also address a methodological question, namely, how can one analyse these official images of the Romanian socialist regime. I prove that representations on picture postcards were inscribed with an agenda: elements of the ideological project of the Communist Party were represented, underlining the idea that postcards were not mimetic depictions of reality. They helped to teach the Romanians the alphabet of development, aiming at disconnecting people from what they knew and connecting them with the changes within a once familiar urban landscape.

The period at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th gave a boost to the fashion of collecting postcards because this was the Golden Age of postcards production (this was due to the utility of postcards as a means of communication in a variety of situations rather than strictly related to tourism[1]). Postcards, in addition to a cheap and fast means of communication, were used, especially because of the pictures on the front, as a tool to create visual discourses on diverse topics and a source of information about nature and society.[2] In this context, I have shown the „relationship between the political ideology in Romania, the discourse on economic development and the representation of societal development through industry".[3]

My interest in picture postcards from Communist Romania is related to my personal history, as a citizen of Romania, who wants to understand better the past and present of this country, and as a researcher trained in Regional and Human Geography, as well as in Historical Social Anthropology (both at Babeș-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania). I argue that our better understanding of the political and power relations inscribed in the cultural landscapes (*material* ones or *represented* by means of visual imagery) of present day Romania is enabled by research on picture postcards circulated during its Communist period. A forward-looking rather than nostalgic reconsidering in research of the multi-layered past and its representations could help regular inhabitants and decision-makers alike relate in a critical way and contribute to on-going and future urban development and regeneration processes that impact their daily lives in multiple ways.

Following up on this, I argue here on the basis of the visual imagery and, more exactly, the illustrated postcards with representations of the urban areas during socialist Romania (1948-1989), obtained from the Geography Archives of Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography (IfL), that the propaganda of the Romanian Communist Party created a visual discourse based on the transformations brought in during its rule, focused on massive industrialisation and urbanisation, intertwin-

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[1] Sandra Ferguson, „A Murmur of Small Voices": On the Picture Postcard in Academic Research, in: Archivaria 60 (2006), pp. 167-183.

[2] Hinnerk Onken, Frühe Bildpostkarten aus Südamerika im Deutschen Reich, in: Irene Ziehe / Ulrich Hägele (eds.), Gedruckte Fotografie. Abbildung, Objekt und mediales Format. Visuelle Kultur. Studien und Materialien, Vol. 10, Münster 2015, pp. 194-215; Eva Tropper, Kontakte und Transfers. Der Ort der gedruckten Fotografie in einer Geschichte der Postkarte, in: Irene Ziehe / Ulrich Hägele (eds.), Gedruckte Fotografie. Abbildung, Objekt und mediales Format. Visuelle Kultur. Studien und Materialien, Vol. 10, Münster 2015, pp. 216-234.

[3] Oana-Ramona Ilovan / Zoltan Maroşi, Markers of Visual Identity: Industrial Sites and Landscapes in Picture Postcards during the Socialist Period of Romania, in: Acta Technica Napocensis: Civil Engineering & Architecture 61 (2018), pp. 132-151.

ing the development with territorial identity. Picture postcards were a tool in the significant process of educating the Romanian citizens to become good patriots (or communists, as those two terms had the same meaning[4]). Elements of the ideological project of the Communist Party are represented in the picture postcards analysed, underlining the idea that they were not mimetic depictions of reality.

The discourse created by the powerful Romanian communist leaders (i.e. Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and Nicolae Ceaușescu) influenced citizens' consciousness and representations of spatial transformation, territorial identity and heritage, and important historical events and processes in general and in socialist Romania in particular. These representations were part of Romanians' lived space:

History is not just the past but is also with us. The past casts a shadow over the present, but the reverse is also true, as new social and political concerns provoke revisions of our understandings of the past. Space is seen as not merely a topological category but as a social and political construct, whose meaning is given by its content. State space defined by jurisdictional boundaries is merely one meaning, an important one given its connection to power, but challenged by other spatial imaginaries, above, below and across it.[5]

In this context, during the last decade, Romanian historians started to use picture postcards to explore time and space, thus, adding to a vast international literature using this research material. The present essay and my previous study[6] are the first from Romanian geographers using this type of visual imagery.

I combine both discourse and visual analysis in my research as it is extremely important to contextualise the picture postcards. These two methods enabled the analysis of picture postcards and scientific texts (the pictures on their fronts and the written texts on their reverse in the cases in which the two sides were related) from a geographical perspective. I analysed a sample of more than 200 postcards of Romania in a previous study[7] and that exploratory work made it easier for me to select picture postcards from the Leipzig collection depicting Romania (Archive for Geography, IfL) which were representative of the display of national development symbols that created and promoted the visual landscape represented in the picture postcards of that period.

1. Picture Postcards – Images Making Past Discourses Heard

The postcard collection depicting Romania in the archive of the IfL includes over 200 items. According to Bruno Schelhaas, Director of the archive, the „picture postcard collection was originally a private collection and was incorporated into the image collection of the former German Institute for Regional Geography in the 1960s. After that, the collection had numerous new accessions, but in no systematic order. We have no information about the accession of the Romanian postcards."[8]

The collection of historical picture postcards is part of the *Bildarchiv* (Archive of Photographs), alongside hundreds of paintings, within the Archive of Geography of the Central Geographical Library of the IfL.[9]

These postcards were published by private and state-owned publishing houses in Romania and abroad (in cities such as Berlin, Dresden, Jena and Prague). The publishing houses in Romania were established in all types of towns (small to large) before 1948 when a nationalization campaign started. The oldest postcard in this collection, according to the date on the postal stamp, was sent from Craiova to Prussia in 1899. There are also many interesting postcards from the beginning of the 20th century and the interwar period. A series of postcards

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[4]Emanuel Copilaș, Națiunea socialistă. Politica identității în Epoca de Aur [The Socialist Nation. Identity Politics during the Golden Age], Iași 2015.

[5]Michael Keating, Time, Space and Methodological Pluralism, in: Territory, Politics, Governance 6 (2018), pp. 277-278, here p. 277.

[6]Ilovan / Maroși, Markers of Visual Identity.

[7]Ilovan / Maroși, Markers of Visual Identity.

[8]October 2018, personal communication.

[9]Max Linke / Ingrid Hönsch, Geographical Archives of the Institute of Regional Geography (Länderkunde) at Leipzig, Germany, in: GeoJournal 26 (1992), pp. 223-224, here 224.

represent Ada Kaleh, a small island on the Danube that disappeared in 1970 when it was submerged during the construction of the Iron Gates hydroelectric plant.

I chose 22 examples from this picture postcard collection for a more detailed analysis. This selection was a subjective one. I selected the postcards according to their relevance for my research topic focusing on the use of visual imagery as a means of propaganda or tool during the socialist period in Romania (1948-1989). One should keep in mind that subjectivism is ingrained in this private collection donated to the Archive of Geography. It is also important to underline that this collection is a small one and displays the changes in urban area representations in Romania during the 20th century only to a certain degree. Nevertheless, it allowed me, for the first time, to study different representations of Romanian space based on a single sample of images. This enabled me to conduct more informed and in-depth research about similar picture postcards using online collections offered for sale or exhibited on blogs and write a paper.[10]

The remodelling of urban space, also reflected by picture postcards, was a strong process that took place during the socialist period. It was reflected in both discourses and the field by *urban systematisation*, which was a priority; in the first stage, it focused on large cities and after 1980, on small and medium-sized towns.[11] Massive industrialisation and territorial systematisation were generally the main processes that changed the landscape of Romania between 1948 and 1989. The entire social system was represented in the territorial organisation (which was related to the political and the cultural systems), and the landscape was the result. The landscape is a social product; it is a collective creation, not an individual one.

However, for this essay, I selected a series of picture postcards

from the socialist period, items that could be found in the archive mentioned above. As a researcher and cultural geographer using a visual imagery and methodology[12], I consider that picture postcards including collages instead of single images are very useful to highlight a visual discourse, the iconic or visual markers of a place, of its territorial identity, because they tell the story of that place through images (sometimes also making references to its past, not only „showing" what the present looks like). Collages suppose that another selection was realised by those who chose the respective pictures which make up the collage.

2. (Re)Writing the Past and Understanding the Present: (Re)Presenting Memory Places and Socialist Achievements

Most of the 22 picture postcards of the sample analysed were written and circulated by tourists in Romania who sent greetings back home to family and friends (to Eastern and Western Germany). They usually mentioned the good weather, information about food, accommodation, that the country was poor but offered everything to tourists, about the beautiful landscapes and their plans to travel to other places in Romania (e.g. the Romanian seaside, the Carpathians, the Danube Delta) and even to Istanbul, with possible other routes to Kiev and Moscow. These pieces of information are important to understand the context in which those postcards were circulated.

Among the postcards of the Romanian socialist period selected, I present and analyse these five (see Fig. 1-5) in the following. One can see here how memory places, symbols and different types of institutions are intermingled with representations of Communist power (Fig. 1).

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[10] Ilovan / Maroși, Markers of Visual Identity.

[11] Veselina Urucu et al., Probleme ale sistematizării teritoriului şi localităţilor [Issues of Territorial and Settlement Systematisation], in: Vasile Cucu, Ion Iordan (eds.), Geografia României – Geografia Umană şi Economică, Vol. II, Bucharest 1984, pp. 504-510, here pp. 503-504.

[12] Hannes Wietschel, Skeptische Faszination. Spuren in die fotografische Werkstatt des Vulkanologen Alphons Stübel, in: Rundbrief Fotografie 25 (2018), pp. 10-23.

Figure 1. *Bucharest*, published in 1971, but not circulated (Source: Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Archive for Geography, Picture Postcard Collection Romania)

The first image on the first row, from left to right, is the Arch of Triumph. It was built between 1921 and 1922 to celebrate the victory of Romania in World War I when, for the first time, almost all territories inhabited by Romanians were part of Romania.

The first picture on the upper right, the House of Scînteia (Casa Scînteii; built between 1952 and 1957), now Casa Presei Libere [House of Free Journalism], was the highest building in Bucharest from 1956 until 2007. This building hosted the main printing press of Romania and it was named after the *Scînteia* newspaper, the main propaganda newspaper of the Romanian Communist Party. The place where the House of Scînteia was built was previously a part of Băneasa Hippodrome (representing the image and identity of old Bucharest).

The communists demolished the hippodrome to build new buildings, while the old ones were also symbolic of the high life of the capital city, many of its inhabitants being anti-communist. In this picture, one can see the statue of Lenin (which was there from 1960 to 1990), a homage to the Soviet tradition of Romanian communism. A new monument („Wings"), dedicated to the heroes of anti-communist résistance in Romania, replaced that of Lenin after 2016.

The Romanian Opera House is in the picture below this.

The second row, from left to right, presents: The Museum of the Romanian Peasant, with its heritage building, hosting traditional art objects; Victory Road [Calea Victoriei], with the Capitol Hotel, the Theatre and the Palace of Telephones, while on the right side is Capșa House (a prestigious hotel complex in Bucharest); the Mausoleum in Charles Park [Parcul Carol], on Filaret Hill, which bore the name of *The Monument of the Heroes Fighting for the Peoples' Freedom and Fatherland, for Socialism* during the Communist rule. It was inaugurated in 1963. From 2006, it has borne the name of the Monument of the Peoples' Heroes. The next image is of the CEC building on Victory Road. The CEC was the first bank in Romania set up in 1864. The final picture is of Magheru Boulevard (this one, similar to Scînteia House, was often represented in picture postcards of Bucharest during that period). It was named after Gheorghe Magheru (1804-1880), a Romanian army general and politician. On the right side, is the Dalles Exhibition area that, in 1958, was shadowed by a big block of flats that the communists placed in front of it. This was called the Dalles Block.

These images were mediating inhabitants' experience with the urban realm; they were shaping people's encounters through the narrative they developed (targeting mainly the public at home or other inhabitants of Romania). One can notice nowadays that there are still symbols in the landscape alluding to the period of Communist power or to people's memory of it. Ideological legacy is reflected in the urban landscape and, therefore, in representations of the urban space. Thus, the dominant discourse was a cause and a reflection of the shift in

political and social consciousness.

Images from magazines and textbooks were not „innocent" either. Textbook images were especially highly powerful.[13] Similar to these examples, postcards were aligned with the official political discourse, they were telling its story, and a hierarchy of the symbols was promoted through postcards (e.g. political symbols, economic achievements and societal changes). However, most importantly, the Communist Party propaganda was creating and promoting belonging to a new type of urban landscape, aiming at people's identification with the Party's policy and ideology.

In addition to representations of public spaces and institutions, another example represents the residential districts. During communist rule, this area of Bucharest – *Giurgiu Road* – was transformed from an agricultural (i.e. orchards) to a modern and quite green residential one, with blocks of flats ranging from four to fifteen floors high (Fig. 2). The systematisation of the area was realised between 1962 and 1989. I chose this picture postcard because it is representative of most of the new residential areas of the cities and towns in Romania, with a standard image of many identical buildings. Such picture postcards were „strategic documents" presenting Romania as a developing socialist country. Therefore, picture postcards were imbued with socialist/developing country stereotypes.

Figure 2. *Bucharest. Giurgiu Road*, not circulated, no year mentioned, possibly from the 1970s (Source: Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Archive for Geography, Picture Postcard Collection Romania)

A similar image represents Cluj (Fig. 3); the name of the new residential district with blocks of flats is not mentioned on the back of the postcard, but we know it is Gheorgheni District. The name Cluj

on the back of the postcard indicates that this postcard was printed before 1974 when the name of this city became Cluj-Napoca to remind everybody of the Roman period of its history (HU: *Kolozsvár*, GE: *Klausenburg*).

There are continuities in any transformation and the memory of the socialist period is part of the identity of many people and urban landscapes in post-socialist Romania. New types of belonging to the city during the socialist period were reflected in changes of the landscape in picture postcards. This was the case with the heritage of socialist residential districts consisting of blocks of flats. People in these areas have practiced belonging in all kinds of ways and this heritage is still present in people's place attachment.

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[13]Oana-Ramona Ilovan / Péter Bagoly-Simó / Georg Herbstritt, Visual Discourse in Romanian Geography Textbooks during Socialism (1948-1989), in: Romanian Review of Geographical Education 7 (2018), in print.

Figure 3. *Cluj*, not circulated, no year mentioned, possibly from the late 1960s or beginning of the 1970s (Source: Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Archive for Geography, Picture Postcard Collection Romania)

These images with new residential districts were tools for creating place-attachment, they were media to communicate what the common symbols and values were, which of those symbols and values changed, which new ones appeared or were introduced, and which new landscapes were created and then represented. Therefore, such images from picture postcards give us a surplus of meanings; they offer a look back to the recent past to redefine ourselves and our home cities.

Moreover, these images deconstructed the jargon of the system in control, because political ideology was supported by economic achievements in these representations, bringing the illusion to the people that they had the power as they contributed to development. The new socialist society built a new way of representing the old urban landscape. The representations created by the Communist system, from its power stance, were, in fact, manipulated representations. This landscape was dynamic, it was a social object but not an impersonal one, because people saw beyond these representations (i.e. they noticed and were also part of what was happening, of what was being transformed).

The Black Sea seaside was also systemized during this period, as seen in picture 5 of the following collage (Fig. 4). At first sight, the seaside here is represented through a collage with pictures representing people looking at a road with neighbouring hotels, young people and families on the beach, a statue, an ancient pot, etc. Among the tourist resorts represented, the first one, with the ancient pot in the foreground, is Vasile Roaită (its original and present name is Eforie Sud), named after a worker that the Romanian Communist Party turned into a hero through its propaganda.

Figure 4. Black Sea seaside, circulated in 1971 (Source: Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Archive for Geography, Picture Postcard Collection Romania)

The numbered pictures are referenced on the back of the postcard: 1. Vasile Roaită, 2. Constanța, 3. Mamaia, 4. Eforie, 5. Mangalia, and 6. Techirghiol. This last resort is represented by the image with the Heroes' Monument of World War I. Thus, there are references to tourism and to the distant and recent history of Romania on the same postcard: the name of a communist hero and that of past military heroes are linked, while ancient history (Histria, Tomis and Callatis – Greek colonies on the Romanian seaside) is recalled through an artefact (i.e. the pot). Such historical reminders (artefacts, names, monuments) were used by the communist rule to legitimise their power and argue that the history of Romania had a certain continuity and ideals for which the socialist society fought. The Communist Party/state tried to influence the public opinion, inhabitants' and, generally, Romanians' perceptions of space through picture postcards. Stereotypes in cultural, social, economic, and political representations were a proof of the Party's interference because all these constructed a narrative connected to development during the socialist period (frequently combining the legacy of the past with the achievements of the present with the aim of legitimising political power).

Izvorul Muntelui Lake (Fig. 5), also known as Bicaz (after the name of the town 4 km downstream), is the largest internal accumulation lake in Romania, situated on the Bistrița River in the Eastern Carpathians, which appeared after the building of a dam between the 1950s and 1960s. Today, the lake is heavily filled with sediments and has more of a touristic function. The hydropower plant and dam were built using political prisoners as a work force, while 22 villages had to be moved in order to build the dam and create the lake. The dams were some of the iconic places that the communist leaders preferred because they showed how strong and efficient the socialist economy was. How the country was fashioned or modernized was reflected in

representations on picture postcards: the fact that opening the road to modernity during the period of Romanian socialism was realized by self-dismembering our roots was also relevant.[14]
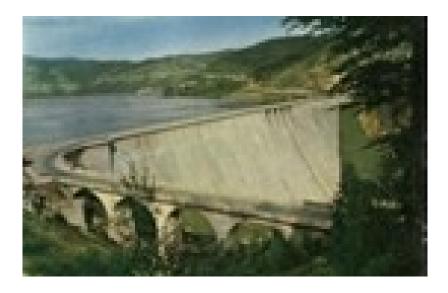

Figure 5. Bicaz – Dam of the „V.I. Lenin" Hydroelectric Power Station, circulated, year not visible on the stamp, possibly late 1960s or in the 1970s (Source: Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography, Archive for Geography, Picture Postcard Collection Romania)

Representations used symbols that people understood, their messages were clear, and the respective symbols were also used in other contexts as they were part of the national propaganda and education. School textbooks, for instance, that dealt with Heimat geography in school lessons were accompanied by books on the Didactics of Geography, explaining how to read the textual and non-textual information offered,

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[14]Copilaș, Națiunea socialistă; Ilovan / Maroși, Markers of Visual Identity.

providing the methodology to look at certain images (part of the official discourse) that have become iconic in time.[15] The representations were shown and stories were also told to those people who were not familiar with the places represented through school geography textbooks as well as through picture postcards. The community was related to the building of certain physical elements in the territory, and rules to be observed in the future were being established: the landscape was irreversible, once changed, it was impossible to go back to the original one. Its signs have remained; they have their history and a significance. These signs are moments in the culture and civilisation of the Romanian people, therefore, the urban landscape is part of our history.

3. Concluding Remarks: The Socialist Past as a Meeting Place and an Asset for Present and Future Development

Images have been analysed, but picture postcards (a certain type of image products) of Romania have not been researched, especially not by geographers from that country. I also address a methodological question in my essay, namely, how can one analyse these official images of the Romanian socialist regime: totalitarian and patriarchal.

Because picture postcards host representations of the urban in the socialist past, they present representations of space and culture and that is where identities have been forged; they are also closely related to the real world due to the fact that their impact was societal, affecting the experiences of many, influencing people's subjectivity and what they internalized as their city with new symbols embedded in space and, subsequently, also in their memory and memory of space. This heritage had been constructed from the new values promoted to enact belonging to Romanian society during the socialist period, constructing new landscapes.

Postcards matter when telling the story of urban landscapes in

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[15]Ilovan / Bagoly-Simó / Herbstritt, Visual Discourse in Romanian Geography Textbooks.

Romania in the 20th century. The picture postcards had a public role and reflected visually ritualised contexts. The representations proposed and circulated were not distant or neutral, but they involved the viewer. They involved the people visually with certain characters highly promoted on the urban development stage. They helped to teach the Romanians the alphabet of development; they did not expose critical issues but enhanced the mythologizing ones. They gave the impression of telling real, truthful or authentic stories as tangible as the landscapes, objects or beings represented. People were motivated through representation to believe that coherent visual discourse was reproductive not critical.

Representations on picture postcards were inscribed with an agenda. They were made with the aim of disconnecting people from what they knew and connecting them with the changes within a once familiar urban landscape. Therefore, those images, including mainly political symbols and economic and cultural capital, were relevant for the state and its self-presentation in the larger context of the Cold War.

I think it is safe to say that an ideologised and nationalised landscape was represented in picture postcards from Communist Romania and that these images had more significance to the citizens of Romania, in the context of internal tourism or for communicating outside the tourist phenomenon, than for foreign tourists. However, several postcards from this collection printed in Prague took over some of the symbols or images represented on the ones published in Romania. That illustrates once more that the visual discourse used by picture postcards was powerful and influential. Romanians' identity and feeling of belonging were articulated by this visual discourse and place memory should be taken into account during present and future territorial planning actions so that the newly created places or remodelling actions are not alienating ones.

Urban communities are currently part of the cultural intangible heritage (e.g. culture, way of life, a manner of being), where the built environment has had a role in the construction and destruction of

social capital, it is part of people's emotional geographies. However, different urban interpretations of the urban tissue and of the civic centres, for instance, appeared after the fall of the socialist system. In this context of new forms of sociability as part of the present social capital, urban regeneration or giving sense to places always involves social participation. Therefore, new practices and activities are needed to regenerate and preserve the intangible and the built heritage, part of people's attachment or belonging to places, part of their group and personal identity.

To sum up, working with images means working with memory and relevant information. Nevertheless, using postcards as a lens to see the social-economic and political context of Romania clearly has some limits. Therefore, this research could be continued with one of urban ethnology, focusing on how the Communist past is remembered now, starting from picture postcards from the socialist period. It could show how one valorises that memory (negatively or positively, e.g. as an asset, a valuable resource). The sources for such research, in addition to journals, magazines and picture postcards from libraries, archives and the online environment, should also include conducting interviews, questionnaires and focus groups in order to identify people's perceptions and opinions. Such an approach would be valuable in making decisions about urban regeneration in Romania today.