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CULTURAL DIFFUSION AS DIFFUSE KNOWLEDGE:
 YOUNG ADULT FICTION (*MY SWORDHAND IS SINGING*, 2006)
 AND
 COMEDY COP SHOWS (*COMRADE DETECTIVE*, 2017)

Abstract

Notions of dissemination across cultures as one-dimensional flows are increasingly challenged by paradigm shifts in cultural diffusion studies. This is also true among niche-market commodities of (young) popular English-language cultures whenever they build on the legacy of Dracula. Plots that feature mainly British and American storytellers, historically-situated in Romanian-set narratives, indicate that totalitarian settings (with a focus on Nicolae Ceaușescu, the former dictator of Socialist Romania) are gaining some traction as well. Such cultural contact is documented, for instance, by *My Swordhand is Singing* (2006), a British young-adult novel, and by the Amazon television series *Comrade Detective* (2017), an American comedy cop show. The former's plot develops into a vampire novel that references *The Ewe Lamb* (i.e., the folk ballad *Miorita*), widely considered to be the Romanian national epic; the latter is allegedly produced by the government of Communist Romania and introduces Ceaușescu's regime to international audiences, not to mention young (English-speaking) Romanian audiences. This suggests that culture bound meanings, believed to be entrenched in Romanian (literary) culture, potentially make their way to the cultural market of the English-speaking world. However, national distinctiveness is likely lost on a large majority of the international public. Only Romanian-speaking audiences – and those interested in the rare subject of Romanian studies – are likely to ponder on its (ir)relevance. For everyone else, narrative fictions (literature and/or moving images) ostensibly reinforce the dichotomous construction of cultural diffusion in terms of linear, West-East oriented circulation of ideas. The sharing of cultural and literary information on Romania in English is fraught with the complexities of cultural transmission as inherently diffuse (rather than one-way) knowledge transfers.

Keywords: cultural diffusion, Romania, *My Swordhand is Singing*, *Comrade Detective*

1. Introduction

Mediated by narrative media consumption, cultural contact and diffusion are powered by ever-increasing rates of transmission. At least to some extent, they are molded by the interdependence of global “identity-related meanings” (Hopkins, 2008: 366). There is evidence that cultural transfers, prompted either by visual (Sklar, 1994: 18-19) or written storytelling (Broomans and Klok, 2019), shape how national identity in narrative fictions is adapted and, particularly, how “minor language areas” (Broomans et al., 2015) fine-tune fictional genres to their own contexts. Current paradigm shifts in cultural diffusion studies essentially argue that the boundaries between “innovative centres and imitative peripheries” (Roig-Sanz and Meylaerts, 2018: 6) are increasingly blurred against the backdrop of “developments in world-wide transnational mass cultural diffusion [...] [that] sharpen further than

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ever the question of the role, if any, that national media can have in popular culture” (Dyer and Vincendeau, 2013: 2). With this in mind, I focus on two primary sources that give insight into the way culture-bound meanings, believed to be entrenched in Romanian (literary) culture, potentially make their way to the English-speaking public. In the absence of Romanian-language media, such meanings also make their way back to young, English-speaking Romanian audiences. Despite the fact that Marcus Sedgwick’s *My Swordhand is Singing* (2006) and the Amazon series *Comrade Detective*, aired in 2017, are also available in Romanian¹, their major impact is likely achieved in English. The plot of the British vampire novel develops to include *The Ewe Lamb* (the folk ballad *Miorita*, i.e., the Romanian national epic), while the series claims to be a cop show produced by the government of the communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. These two disparate elements, i.e., the folk ballad of *The Ewe Lamb* and Ceaușescu’s dictatorship seem to be locking together as the identity narrative of Romania for most English-speaking audiences, alongside figments of popular imagination about Dracula or women’s gymnastics (Borcila, 2015). Even if unrelated, both the national epic of Romania (*The Ewe Lamb*) and the totalitarian regime of the 1980s are also enmeshed in the country’s public understanding of its own history. Other than this, the availability of the primary sources – which, ultimately, appropriate for the benefit of Romanian audiences influential identity tropes without and beyond the mediation of their own language – is yet another reason for looking into them. Both can be construed as effective conduits for the exchange of cultural information. What is more, they definitely make sense according to mainstream theories on the diffusion of social and technological innovations. In other words, such narrative fictions point toward the hybridization of identity (self-)perception, inasmuch as they document

abstract ideas and concepts [...] and actual practices within a social system, where the spread denotes flow or movement from a source to an adopter, typically via communication and influence” (Wejnert 2002: 297)

Notably, the flow of ideas and concepts moves from Romanian contexts to the (far) background of the English-speaking world, within the framework of “a commercially driven literary culture” (Broomans et al., 2021) that finds (some) value in fictional storytelling set in distinctly Romanian locales like Bucharest and Transylvania.

2. Young Adult Fiction and Comedy Cop Shows: Making the Case for Romanian-set Narratives

What used to be the fearsome reputation of Transylvania still looms large in English-language young adult culture. In some dark corners of the Eastern world, young audiences of the 21st century are bound to find, over and over again, terrifying experiences. Most of them are based on vampire lore. Although the original “unique type of undead-corpse” (Keyworth, 2006) is increasingly hybridized as fictional narratives rethink the meanings of the vampire archetype (Ramsland, 2002: xvii; Coker et al., 2020: 4), Marcus Sedgwick’s *My Swordhand is Singing* (2006) takes head-on on the challenge to return 21st-century vampirism to the unmistakably remote setting of Transylvania, the land of Dracula. As a matter of fact, the novel’s “Author’s Note” reads:

[the] most unholy of vampire lands [is] Transylvania, literally the Land Beyond the Forest. Transylvania is in fact a beautiful place, with mountains, pastures, and forest just as described in this book. And it is here that the stories of the Miorita, the Wedding of the Dead and the Shadow Queen would be familiar to local people, though again I have had to take certain liberties for the sake of the story. Nowadays we know all these fabulous stories of the undead to be myth, though it might be wise to remember that there are still some people who do not agree with this conclusion. Even in the first few years of this new century, stories have emerged from Romania of modern-day belief in vampires; in 2004 the relatives of a Romanian man were prosecuted for exhuming his corpse, burning his heart and drinking the ashes in water because they believed he had been visiting them in the night... (Sedgwick)

¹ *My Swordhand Is Singing* was translated into Romanian by Silviu Genescu; the novel was released by Nemira publishing house in 2009 as “Sabia Magica (In inima Transilvaniei, raul isi afla salasul...)”; *Comrade Detective* is available in Romania on Amazon Prime Video.

On the other hand, the six-episode series *Comrade Detective* (2017, Channing Tatum, Amazon Prime), set in Communist Romania, proposes “overtly spoofy Police Squad moments [...] [with] every stock trait you’ve ever seen, pushed through the weirdest filter you’ve ever encountered” (Heritage, 2017). For the most part, it reveals many of the male stereotypes and narrative conventions associated with the police action films of Hollywood “in the late 1980, [when] cop films of all types started degenerating into action comedies” (Rafter, 2006: 78). However, the story of two policemen investigating the murder of their partner revolves around the clash between the capitalist West and the communist East. Car chases, gunfire and verbal exchanges pay tribute to American cop movies, yet the show essentially looks back on the exploits of communist propagandists. In other words, the spoof detective series “plays upon what cinema theory designates as hors-champ, the externality of the field of vision, which, in its very absence, organizes the economy of what can be seen” (Žižek et al., 2005: 134).

Cultural studies approaches, with a focus on diffusion theories, can give insight into the paradoxical nature of exoticizing discourses of identity in intercultural contexts: although the Romanian other is at the center of narrative development in both *My Swordhand is Singing* and *Comrade Detective*, the identity of the professed Romanians is quietly becoming increasingly less identifiable across the English-speaking world. In this respect, the novel follows in the footsteps of the original *Dracula* by setting up binary references in order to delineate characters (and, ultimately, the unnamed placename of Transylvania itself) as exemplary instances of traditional ways of living.

3. *My Swordhand is Singing*

The very fact that lately the “transnational *Dracula*” (Gelder, 2017) is something to be reckoned with gives insight into the original national underpinnings of the vampire archetype. *Dracula* and, generally speaking, vampires have a long history of moving Westward; as far as most can tell, they do so by narrative means only. Except for being a threat to civilization, they turn out to be agents of cultural diffusion across narrative media, from literature to still or moving images. Moreover, Transylvania is firmly connected with the spawning ground of a kind of evil that endangers the English-speaking world. Irrespective of the literary (de)merits of *My Swordhand is Singing* (a somewhat gory novel released, paradoxically, by a children’s book publisher i.e., Orion Children’s Books), my concern lies with “the transmission of cultural elements from one society or cultural group to another” (Andersen & Howard, 2016: 53) as documented by narrative fictions.

The novel suggests that culture bound meanings, (believed to be) entrenched in Romanian literary culture, potentially make their way to English-language readers. While they find out more about Tomas and Peter, a family of woodcutters who settle in Chust, this cold and rather gloomy place, appropriately forested, the meanings of the Romanian national epic are debated and re-created for the benefit of international audiences by a British writer². Set sometimes in the 17th-century, the plot makes the most out of a memorably atmospheric setting, which is more consequential to the plot than, for instance, Tomas being a fierce wielder of the swordhand. In the fight with the undead, he turns out to be the hero father figure that Peter finally connects with. Everything starts with their arrival in an enclosed world, which makes known their place in the broader scheme of the community:

Outsiders were never welcome, even though this father and son had taken to their work well enough. They were a strange pair. The father was a drunk, everyone knew that, but there was an air about him. Something in the way he held himself. He was fat from drink, his face flushed and his eyes milky, but he still had a head of strong black hair. The son was a young man, really, new to the game. He had even darker, thicker hair, and his skin was smooth and brown, as if he was from somewhere in the south. His eyes were rich and dark brown, like Turkish coffee, but he was nervous, for all his young strength, and there was something about him that made him seem more refined than his father. Few of the villagers had ever wondered what might have happened to the boy’s mother, though it must have been from her that his refinement came. (Sedgwick)

² According to his website, Marcus Sedgwick is “born and raised in a small village in East Kent in the south-East of England”, <https://marcussedgwick.com/biography/>.

Although Sedgwick shies away from the actual placename Transylvania, this particular novel³ is revealing of the enduring sway of Bram Stoker over both the English-speaking world and Romanian culture. However, such ideas of Eastern otherness, located in Romanian lands, are to be credited not only to Stoker but also to other influential “cultural transmitters and authors in peripheral literary fields” (Broomans and Ronne, 2010). For instance, to Carmen Sylva, the first queen of Romania, who made sure “a significant proportion of the British public would have been introduced to Romania [...] a number of years before the appearance of Stoker’s *Dracula*” (Nixon, 2016: 62). Consequently, the scene is long set for cultural contact between the English-speaking world and the budding Romanian literary culture. On the one hand, the cultural traction of “the *Dracula* dilemma” (Light, 2016) in Romanian popular culture attests to the diffusion of what is essentially “a Western myth” (Light, 2012: 71) disseminated in local contexts. Conversely, the tropes of identity embedded in Romanian literary culture are circulated, even if to a much lesser degree, for instance by *My Swordhand is Singing*.

Other than Transylvania, the word ‘vampire’ goes unmentioned as well (except for the same “Author’s Note”). Despite of this, the motif of the Transylvanian blood-sucker is engendered by notions of setting, which draw greatly on the “legacies of orientalism” (Macfie, 2019: 355). In the 18th century (and later), orientalism had become a British byword for Eastern nations as opposed to Western, civilized ones. Even if Romania was not necessarily among them, it later found a place for itself on the spectrum of minor Eastern European cultures. The appeal of landscapes loosely connected with “time-worn stereotypes and clichés [...] one associates with the *Dracula* myth” (Andras, 1999) is undeniable in *My Swordhand is Singing*. Even if Romanian historians are keen to point out that feasting on human blood is nowhere to be found in the history of ethnic Romanians⁴, the conflation between Vlad the Impaler, the Prince of Wallachia (1456-1462) and the archetype of the bloodsucking undead is in the background of this father and son story. The novel is taking stock of the Eastern vampire within the “Gothic’s blend of historical fantasy, uncanny phenomena, sexual danger, and extreme situations” (Gamer, 2020: 289). In doing so, it reinforces its cultural roots in narrative ways that come across as a (Young Adult Fantasy) pre-sequel to the grand narrative of *Dracula*. This is where fantasy is supposed to meet plots designed for (self-identified) young readers:

[the genre] features central adolescent characters and situations adolescents might be concerned with – interacting with adult characters and institutions, understanding and solidifying their identities, forming relationships, both cooperative and adversarial, with other young adults – but it hails an audience much wider than adolescents, offering pleasure to much younger readers (who may, perhaps, enjoy it aspirationally) and to much older readers (who may, perhaps, enjoy it nostalgically). (Wilkins, 2019: 6)

Somewhat casually, the novel explores tropes that most Romanian speakers have learned to cherish; as far as they are concerned, the storyline develops to include distinctly Romanian quotations in English translation. The most striking example is, of course, *The Ewe Lamb* (i.e., the folk ballad *Miorita*), widely considered the national epic of Romania. The ballad is referenced throughout the plot, yet such distinctiveness is likely lost on the English-speaking readers⁵. It follows that, Western knowledge about their country and culture, according to the Romanians themselves, is often found to be somewhat faltering as it favors “binary representations [...] set in an antinomic relation” (Andras, 2001: 238) between the East (Romania) and the West. What is more, this seems to have resulted in a sense of exceptionalism that also triggered an “inferiority complex caused by the negative stereotyping of Romania as a Balkan state” (Mădroane, 2012: 47).

³ The novel has a sequel, *The Kiss of Death* (2008), set in Venice that features some of the characters introduced by Sedgwick in *My Swordhand Is Singing*; as the negotiating of identity along cultural and geographical spaces delineated by notions of overlap between *The Ewe Lamb* and English-language readers is less obvious, I find that *The Kiss of Death* does not fall within the scope of this paper.

⁴ The Hungarian Countess, Elizabeth Bathory (1560-1614), is a worthy contender for the title of the first ever vampire (Pop, 2020: 140-141).

⁵ As suggested, for instance, by the video review of *MSIS* posted on YouTube by the user RambleRazz: RambleRazz Reviews, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUEhiaOq41M>.

Although sometimes its chronicle of the clash between the living and the undead is teetering on the brink of the trivial violence, the novel makes the most out of gruesome themes that hinge on hearts being pierced and, ultimately, eccentric rituals. As such, *My Swordhand is Singing* strives to operationalize vampire-related themes in order to look back on the vampire archetype in a manner that builds on the idea of weird places in the East, mostly on the stereotypical image of Dracula's ancestral homeland. They translate into compelling narrative discourses about the Transylvanian setting:

Around the coffin stood the mourners, around them lay the graveyard, and outside the graveyard lay the village. Beyond all of this stood the endless silent forest, watching the Wedding of the Dead, seeing all, saying nothing. (Sedgwick)

For all intents and purposes, the Romantic visions of the vampire and even Dracula himself are overlooked in favor of a (more) mythological approach to the species of the undead. As far as the Romanian-speaking readership is concerned, the novel appropriates mainstream folk tales, loosely familiar to most of them. They are steeped in a narrative structured around the leitmotif of the song *Miorita*, with two arch enemies, i.e., the Shadow Queen and the Winter King, clashing over the world of the human characters. Although they are mentioned repeatedly, both of them fail to make sense as round literary characters (Forster, 1962: 78) inasmuch as their inconsistencies are self-evident: the Shadow Queen, as the evil force behind the vampires, and the Winter King, her archenemy, are often present(ed), yet they do not add to the plot in a comprehensive manner. Their clash is indicative of a whole narrative strand that is possibly central to the diegetic world, yet missing: explicitly, this likely kernel of the plot's faithfulness to the folk tales would elaborate on the way both of them draw their mythic power from the world intimidated by the

the song that was always sung whenever anyone died, or was married, or, indeed, when anything important happened at all. Peter had heard it many times, in all the other places they had lived. It was called the *Miorita*. The Lamb. (Sedgwick)

However, this kind of depth, which most readers are prompted to expect from the plot on account of frequent references to the Shadow Queen ("born at the beginning of time. She has no age.") and the Winter King ("who'll save us all from every evil") is a gaping hole in the narrative. As the story goes on, readers find out that the dead rise from their graves to feed on the living. Meanwhile, the father digs something of a moat around the family's hut, much to the surprise of Peter; only later he is to find out that Tomas is a slayer of moving corpses who, as a matter of principle, cannot cross running water. They express the agency of evil while being held captives (presumably by the same Shadow Queen): "We call people like him 'hostages.' He is dead and he is out there" (Sedgwick).

The diegetic world is filled with such strange creatures and people who rationalize the presence of overpowering evil by singing the story of the Romanian folk ballad *Miorita*. The land beyond the forest is a Gothic image of endless and dark woodlands as well as the reason for an epidemic of vampirism. The "graveyard from which the epidemic had first sprung, now truly a place of final rest" (Sedgwick) provides the big picture of the truly Transylvanian experience, while the superstitious townsfolk take comfort in the song. For instance, Peter engages head-on with *The Ewe Lamb* by means of quotations; his exposure to the story explains its dramatic effects and soothing nature for the villagers:

As Peter listened to the song, his mind began to drift. When he was a child he had been fascinated by the song's story—the little lamb that talks to its faithful master, the murderous shepherds, the princess. The mother, who will wait in vain for her son to return. Peter had never known his mother, but though he tried very hard to feel something of a life that never happened to him, nothing came. Later, as he grew up, he thought about the story in more detail, and came to think it baffling and stupid. (Sedgwick)

Effectively, the readers are taught to decode the lyrics of the Romanian national epic that, for example, read: "By a rolling hill at Heaven's doorsill, / Where the trail descends to the plain and ends, / Here three shepherds keep their flocks of sheep". They are expected to interpret them according to existing knowledge on *Miorita*. Although the experience of the protagonist (as a matter of fact, of all

characters) is what drives the meaning of the song for readers, its underlying system of values has long been taught in Romanian literature classes:

Death is part of life. They are inseparable. You cannot have one without the other. The song teaches us that if we accept a wedding with death, we can go to our graves content. It is people's failure to understand this that makes them prey to the Shadow Queen." "How?" asked Peter. "She can feel the discontent of the dead, those who were not content, those who had not understood the Miorita. These people are open to her power, and so she brings them back from the grave." "And now we have another weapon!" Peter cried. "A song!" (Sedgwick)

The universe where loosely defined vampires challenge the order of worldly life is however absent from the Romanian national epic, yet the above-mentioned worldview on death and life feels familiar to most graduates of Romanian public schools. Inadvertently, *My Swordhand is Singing* works as a lens into Romanian self-identification because of the author's intent appropriation of the so-called Transylvanian lore as a means to return the vampire to his Eastern roots, which, apparently, do not necessarily serve anymore to its public traction across the English-speaking world.

4. *Comrade Detective*

The medium of (streamed) television series means that, perhaps even more than *My Swordhand is Singing*, *Comrade Detective* is contributing greatly to the perception of Romanian culture among English-speaking audiences. As a matter of fact, *Comrade Detective* openly references Romania and the former communist regime in ways that add to the "American representations of post-communism" (Borcila, 2015). So far, the story of Romania on the American screens has unfolded in the vein of exotic poverty. As a matter of fact, most Eastern European countries share "gloomy, colorless, monotonous, post-apocalyptic image[s]" (Batori, 2018: 7). On-screen Romanians are often disenchanting with the lives they are leading in Romanian productions as well: "some of the most important characters in the new Romanian cinema are simply "angry young men," thus this antiheroic trait can be seen as a constant unifying element of many of these movies" (Pop, 2014: 90). The visual storytelling of and about Romania builds on the distinctive tropes of the orphan, of the Roma population and of the former totalitarian regime, which have all swelled in size to the point they are bywords for Romania's readiness to be known mostly as the home of Dracula.

Shot on location with Romanian actors (Florin Piersic Jr, Corneliu Ulici) and dubbed in English, *Comrade Detective* features two policemen, Gregor and Iosif (voiced by Channing Tatum and Joseph Gordon-Levitt), as they investigate the death of a former friend and colleague, killed by the foreign agents of capitalism. Purportedly a propaganda film of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime, it promises to be a revealing example of how American commercial TV is normalizing Eastern European communism, with a focus on Romania. Through the lens of American filmmakers, both Romania and its people become a compelling symbol in a communist propaganda story. The camera follows the point of view of the policemen whose portrayal "often deals in exaggerated and often contradictory stereotypes" (Popescu-Sandu, 2020: 432), while allegedly revealing the life of the 1980s Romanians. The comic tone of the comrade detectives who warn against the impending dystopia of capitalism is a self-consciously dramatic performance of communism, certainly ripe for caricature.

At the peak of the standoff between the East and the West, on and off-screen histories are interwoven, merging the Romanian past and its (perceived) connections to the US. In doing so, the diegetic world is a means of diffusing (some) knowledge about the Socialist Republic of Romania and the present-day EU member Romania. Moreover, *Comrade Detective* affords the opportunity of delving into the overlap between notions of communist politics and national identity. Ultimately, the series gives most English-speaking viewers unprecedented insight into Romanian life, in line with filmically documented assumptions that:

cultures continue to come into contact across borders that either allow fluid diffusion of ideas or block their passage. A post-modern world continues to deal with issues still vital as cultures face off and open or close frontiers to ideas, customs, ideologies and the arts (Corfis, 2010: XIV).

Drawing on performance theory (Butler, 1990), various ideas of how nationness can function as fake daily performance (Edensor, 2002; Skey and Antonsich, 2017) on camera are triggered by the exploits of the two communist detectives. Performance (cultural staging) and performativity (gestural conventions) are giving an unexpected lease of life to Romanian-set narratives, not to mention the genre of spoof cinema. It turns out that the spoof genre gives insight into Romania as a country in a changing world, long after the fall of the communist bloc.

Essentially, *Comrade Detective* is a “parody [that] plays upon—spoofs—a pre-established artistic structure” (Gehring, 1999: XIX) and offers “the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of style” (Butler, 1988: 520). As such, nationhood is a side-effect of the cold war, plain to see in the way the on-screen Romanians sit, speak, dance, eat or dress. The difference between the Romanian and the American characters is heightened by their relation to the camera. As such, identity (i.e., Romanianness) is definitely not essentialist, but rather positional (Hall, 1996). Each iteration of what nationhood is can be read through performance frames that place communist Romania in stark contrast to the US. However, the (re-)enactments that elaborate on notions of identity show a comforting familiarity with the Western world in the diegetic world. The camera is mostly interested in exploring a paradoxically familiar political activism rather than detective fiction themes. Prior to the fall of the Eastern Bloc, looks and glamour were deemed instrumental to differentiating between East and West: the average Romanian as well as the people of the US embassy in Bucharest belong to strikingly different (political) cultures. Irrespectively, some of them fall for one another and work together for the greater good of their people.

Comrade Detective makes the point that nationness relies on a reductionist view of the communist-capitalist divide. Accordingly, the series articulates notions of Romanianness across exotic landscapes that English-speaking audiences have come to associate with mass poverty brought about by communism. Essentially, setting and characters are excessive in their repetitive enactments of communist nationalism. At the same time, they virtually help make history: “in the performative parody of these terms arises the potential for political and cultural subversion” (Kim, 2007: 101). The implications of the spoof show the way in which the very genre is performative: it helps reflect, describe and make the history of the US and Romania come alive on screen. On the one hand, the discursive and visual practices are essentially limited by parody as film genre. On the other hand, the Romanian landscape and the characters carry arguments somewhat independent of the action-packed period spoof. Consequently, the series “shows how parodic performance could work both as criticism and as successful commercial content” (Thompson, 2011: 2). The plot offers a conception of Romanianness that transcends inherent exoticism through its possibilities and claims. As the unfolding of events progresses toward the realization that national identity is dependent on contingencies and contradictions, its performance is gaining in depth. In this way, *Comrade Detective* attempts 1) to share both the story of Romanian communism with those who have not heard it all before and 2) to argue for those already familiar with it that there is definitely more than what meets the eye in the re-enactment of the past. One way or another, *Comrade Detective* shares with *My Swordhand is Singing* a focus on English-speaking rather than on the Romanian audiences:

Director Rhys Thomas may well have gathered elements of *couleur locale* and historical atmospherics such as civilian and police clothes, cars, interior decorations, still the creators were manifestly indifferent to Romanian elements beyond the possibility of using them as vectors of Sovietness. While perfectly familiar and comfortable for an American audience, the discrepancies generated through this approach are disturbing not only for Romanians. (Dobrescu, 2021: 168)

For the Romanian public, this is a case of irony gone awry: patriotic flag waving, both American and Romanian, is still carrying weight for most audiences. However, this “product of the neo-network era in American television [...], simultaneously anchored in the social context of the period in which its story is set, i.e. the early 1980s, and the contemporary context of text production” (Colipcă-Ciobanu, 2021: 131) is fully meaningful to the American public. The fast-paced thriller looks back on the political highs and lows of both the US, while mocking the whole thing in the process. The self-conscious lines of dialogue are aimed to English-speaking audiences. Self-aware nods to the American public make it exceedingly clear that the Romanian setting is not for real, yet effective enough to downplay the in-your-face anti-Americanism of the Romanian characters. The ultimately failed Romanian attempts at

foiling the American plot to destabilize communism suggest that the setting is “ideal for blowing the whistle on a resurgent Eastern ‘totalitarianism’ seen as a possible cause for such slippages of the West as personified by both Brexit and Trump” (Țion, 2020: 88).

The spoof genre celebrates itself as the narrative form of political meanings achieved mainly by criticizing Marxist categories, such as capitalism, communism, class struggle, etc., in Romanian settings. Drawing on humorous incongruities between ideologically-minded characters like the American diplomats in Bucharest and local policemen

casts communist propaganda as less sophisticated and more heavy-handed but also highly effective, mapping it onto an even more retrograde hierarchy between the enlightened civilizing West and primitive natives not unlike Dracula - another, older Western invention planted into a mystical Romania. (Imre, 2022: 285)

Nevertheless, the re-framing of Romania’s past both affirms and discredits theories about the East-West divide and, eventually, about 21st century propaganda wars. Both the communist regime under the strain of capitalism’s toxic excesses, embodied by the board game Monopoly, and Reagan-era America reveal the entertainment value of Romanian settings and characters, which is self-evident. But, as in the meanwhile, the profit-driven nature of the market-economy is well known even to the people of Eastern Europe, the self-reflexive cultural staging of Romanian communism displays awareness of the Western world that the Romanian people have seem to have never actually left. Conclusively, the representation of Romanian communism is conducive to a sense of transience built into processes of cultural dissemination that audiences experience as political events, long forgotten, yet ever present. Therefore, the narrative of cultural (and political) transfers on screen complicates critical perspectives on collective memory, across real and perceived civilizational divides, and beyond notions of metropolitan and (semi-)peripheral areas.

5. Conclusions

By means of cultural diffusion models, narrative ideas about one’s own and other cultures come together in a web of imagined experiences that give insight into self-identification patterns across genres and media. The construction of identity narratives, in literature or still and moving images, conjures up a process of mutual cultural transfers. Nevertheless, they are taking place mostly within the reference frame of English-language communication whenever working knowledge of English manages to bypass exclusive exposure to national language narrative media in peripheral cultures. By providing discursive frames for one another, culture-bound meanings across borders are likely to make their way to the mainstream of the English-speaking world because of fictional narratives like *My Swordhand is Singing* and *Comrade Detective*. Cultural contact mediated through setting and, implicitly, character delineation is factual in both my primary sources. Notably, their Romanian background is not necessarily obvious to English-language readers. Yet, the many instances of geographically-bound otherness, alongside anecdotic experience of Romanian identity (garlic smeared window frames, dead people returning at night to visit their loved ones, the Monopoly game as an existential threat coming from the US, etc.), point to popular wisdom on and about Romania.

The dichotomous construction of cultural diffusion in terms of mostly one-dimensional flows is reinforced because both *My Swordhand is Singing* and *Comrade Detective* thrive in a niche-market of English-language (young) popular culture. The cultural tropes of national identity they appropriate are meaningful only to audiences well-versed in Romanian culture. In short, such narrative fictions are largely unreceptive to incorporating accurate knowledge on foreign cultures, yet information is nevertheless conveyed to English-speaking audiences. Ultimately, both *My Swordhand is Singing* and *Comrade Detective* seem to reinforce the dichotomous construction of cultural diffusion in terms of one-dimensional flows (West-East). However, for the Romanian public (and for those interested in the rare subject of Romania), the full reality of diffuse knowledge on and about Romania suggests that sharing cultural and literary information across language boundaries is fraught with the complexities of cultural transmission as inherently diffuse (rather than one-way) knowledge transfers.

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