

# The Romanian Academic Novel and Film through the Postcommunism/Postcolonialism Lens<sup>51</sup>

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**Abstract:** The last two decades have witnessed an intensified academic interest in a potential rapprochement between Postcolonial Studies and Postcommunist Studies, the former a firmly established discipline in global academia, while the existence of the latter as a discipline in its own right is still debatable. As the possibility of this alliance is – as was to be expected – both contested and supported by various scholars, this article attempts to investigate this issue as illustrated by the postcommunist Romanian academic novel. Aware as it is of contemporary intellectual debates, the genre of the academic (or campus) novel seems particularly suitable for shedding light on the matter: academic fiction frequently engages in a more or less explicit dialogue with academic criticism. A brief overview of the main arguments against and in favor of the Postcolonialism/Postcommunism juncture will constitute the first part of the article, followed by a survey of Romanian academic novels published and films released after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Finally, the applicability of postcolonial concepts to postcommunist cultural phenomena will form the concluding argument.

**Keywords:** postcommunism, postcolonialism, Romanian academic/campus fiction, realism, metafiction, magical realism

The last two decades have witnessed an intensified academic interest in a potential rapprochement between Postcolonial Studies and Postcommunist Studies, the former a firmly established discipline in global academia, while the existence of the latter as a discipline in its own right is still debatable. As the possibility of this alliance is – as was to be expected – both contested and supported by var-

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Ever since David Chioni Moore's article "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique" (2001), scholars from various regions of the world, and more particularly from Eastern Europe, have engaged in a heated discussion of the pertinence of subsuming or integrating Postcommunist Studies into Postcolonial Studies. From the vantage point of Eastern European scholars, Western academics have been perceived as reluctant in accepting the juncture and a ready (though perhaps inaccurate and insufficient) explanation has offered itself: in view of the poststructuralist and Marxist bedrock of postcolonialism, Western postcolonialists were unwilling to acknowledge an analogy with a phenomenon engendered by leftist politics: "For how would it benefit a postcolonialist critic to acknowledge the possibility that the colonized might be Caucasian, that the colonizers might not be capitalists, and that the ideological indoctrination forced by the colonists on the colonized might be Marxism?" (Ștefănescu 2013, 22). Moreover, suspicion of Marxism permeates Eastern European intelligentsia, especially the generations that have experienced the traumatic communist period. There are Eastern European scholars who express doubts about (though not an unwillingness to critically engage with) the applicability of postcolonial concepts in postcommunist contexts: like Andrei Terian, who argues "against a postcolonialism without shores" (2012, 25), Liviu Andreescu claims that "the Soviet Union has not been investigated in this [i.e. postcolonial] context because in many respects it does not fit the postcolonialist paradigm" (2011, 59) and that a dilution of postcolonialism into a mere ethical attitude would also deplete it of its explanatory power (2011, 61) and render it useless. A distinction needs to be made at this point: while some scholars are keen on pointing out the many differences between the situation of African and Asian colonies

of Western powers and the condition of Eastern European countries as satellites of the USSR (e.g. native governments, no loss of native languages in spite of intense Russification, the same treatment of people in the center/metropolis and in the peripheries, etc.), others highlight the fact that former communist countries in Eastern Europe are now colonized by the West, in its many institutional, cultural and economic guises (EU, NATO, IMF, U.S. culture etc.) Nataša Kovačević, for instance, advocates the existence of a colonial or “proto-colonial” (2008, 2) relationship between Eastern Europe and “the West”, which is mostly epitomized by the European Union. Eastern European countries negotiating their admission to the EU must conform to externally imposed criteria and in this they are relegated to a subaltern status. Drawing on Larry Wolff’s *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1994) and on Maria Todorova’s *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), Kovačević furthermore claims that there is

...a long history of Western attempts to identify Western Europe as enlightened, developed, and civilized in distinction to Eastern Europe and, as a result, to intellectually master Eastern Europe through description and classification, fixing it into stereotypes of lamentable cultural, political, and economic backwardness (e.g. agrarian, old-fashioned, despotic, totalitarian, obedient, abnormally violent, bloodthirsty), or, alternately, praiseworthy conservation of its “noble savages” (here, pallid Western city-dwellers, enervated by industrial fumes or corporate discipline, are contrasted with big, healthy, lazy, and gregarious Eastern Europeans). (2008, 2)

Bogdan Ștefănescu and Maria Todorova elaborate on the trope of the lag, i.e. on the need of Eastern Europe to catch up with the developed West, as Eastern European countries are described in terms of “lack, absences, what one is not, incompleteness, backwardness, catching up, failure, self-exclusion, negative consciousness, and so on” (Todorova qtd. in Ștefănescu 2013, 142). In this context, the “self-colonizing” tendency (Kovačević 4) of marginal cultures which “import alien values and civilizational models by themselves and ... lovingly colonize their own authenticity through these foreign models” (Kiossev qtd. in Ștefănescu 2013, 132) is pervasive. However, as Ștefănescu shows, self-colonization is not a new phenomenon in Romanian culture, as “[e]mbracing and rejecting foreign

standards became, at least since the early nineteenth century, the systole and diastole of Romania's cultural pulse" (2013, 153). It does seem indeed as if the communist period of Soviet domination was merely an interlude in Romania's West-facing mimetic strive. Ștefănescu goes further in his analysis of colonization to argue that

the capitalist West colonized the very concepts of time and historical progress as templates for positioning and evaluating any culture as either modern (civilized) or pre-modern (primitive), while the Soviet East counter-colonized the discourse of temporality with its own version of utopian futurism. (2014, 355)

The result is, as might be expected, cultural trauma and a sense of the acceleration of time, as one needs to catch up with the elusive West in the race towards "progress", as well as a ready acceptance of (mainly economic) Western neocolonialism.

All these issues come to bear on the genre subjected to scrutiny in this article. The genre of the academic novel is traditionally thought to have emerged in post-war Anglo-American literature (i.e. in "the West"), a fact which would position its Romanian counterpart in a relationship of mimicry (to use Homi Bhabha's term). Whether or not this is the case, the following readings will show. The novels and films to be discussed here were published or released between 1992 (three years after the revolution) and 2018, spanning a quarter of a century. Without attempting to construct a linear progression of the genre, three periods or phases nevertheless emerge, in terms of the dominant aesthetic: the realist phase (early 1990s – mid-2000s), the metafictional phase (mid-2000s – early 2010s), and the magical realist phase (from the early 2010s to the present). Given the occasional overlaps of these intervals, this tentative periodization will be taken with a grain of salt in the following. In view of the postcolonial interest of the present analysis, I will therefore refrain from reading too much into the seemingly non-arbitrary development of the Romanian genre from an apparently innocent realism through a self-aware and self-doubting metafictional phase to magical realism (the mere mention of which triggers postcolonial associations).

The Romanian academic novel genre was practically nonexistent before the fall of the Iron Curtain; an explanation of this is the fact that the older generation of academics and therefore potential academic novelists had been either collab-

orationists with the communist regime and therefore not enthusiastic about exploring their intellectual lives or, if they were anti-communists, they were most certainly persecuted and either ended up in exile (e.g. Norman Manea) or died as political prisoners in one of Romania's communist extermination-camp-like prisons. Communist Romanian academic realities are fictionally depicted from without, e.g. in Patrick McGuinness's novel *The Last Hundred Days* (2011) or in Saul Bellow's *The Dean's December* (1982). McGuinness's comments on the fate of many Romanian intellectuals under communism are telling:

Ex-professors haunted the university buildings, minimum-wage ghosts who dusted their old lecture rooms or polished floorboards on all fours as their ex-colleagues stepped over them. The old joke, that it was in the janitorial strata of Romania's universities that you found the real intellectuals, was, like all good communist bloc jokes, less an exaggeration of reality than a shortcut to it. (2012, 31)

After the 1989 revolution, the silenced Romanian academic voices become audible, with a vengeance. Thus, the first post-communist Romanian academic novel, Max Torpedo's *Ghici cine trage în tine?* (Guess Who Is Shooting at You?, 1992), reads like a loud, strong parody of another genre which flourished during communism, i.e. the mystery novel. Communism is regarded as the 'golden age' of the mystery novel in Romania, as it was actively encouraged by the State due to its ideological brainwashing potential (Iovănel 2017, 178), constructing as it did a heroic image of the *milițian* (policeman) and the *Securitate* (secret service) agent – the most hated figures in communist societies – and encouraging suspicion against any foreign (cultural) elements. Torpedo's novel is a relentless parody of these communist conventions. The English pseudonym stands for three academics from Transylvania University in Brașov, all of whom will later on also publish their own, individual academic novels: Caius Dobrescu, Alexandru Mușina and Andrei Bodiu. The pseudonym, as well as the fact that the novel masquerades as a translation from English, are symptomatic of Romanian culture's West-facing attitude: at the time, Romanian audiences avidly consumed Western cultural products, American ones in particular. Given the fact that the illusion of the novel's Western origin is "torpedoed" by the novel's first three words ("Major Eugen Simion") and that the translation is ostensibly the work of Vitoria Lipan (the well-known protagonist of another Romanian

crime novel), Torpedo's novel parodies Romanian readerships and their uncritical, wholesale consumption of American crime novels. The novel's plot itself seemingly encourages a postcolonial reading, as it is constructed around a *fatwa* and Salman Rushdie (occasionally spelled incorrectly as "Rushdi") is repeatedly mentioned. However, the fatwa-ed character is the fictional Romanian poet Cosmin Trunchilă, who in communist times used to write regime-approved patriotic poetry and who abruptly veered into hermeticism after the revolution. The fatwa turns out to be an unoriginal concoction of the poet himself, whose waning popularity drove him to construct a self-image as "the first writer from the East condemned by Islamic fundamentalists. Neither Kundera, nor Solzhenitsyn, nor Czeslav Milosz were thus honored..." (Torpedo 1992, 130).<sup>52</sup> "The East" here clearly means "Eastern Europe" and all the enumerated writers were dissidents under communism. This early fictional parallelism between postcolonialism and postcommunism is ambiguous: as the fatwa turns out to be nonexistent, it might suggest that the analogy is far-fetched, forced and ultimately counter-productive. The main target of the novel's parodying strategy is the host of "recycled" members of the Romanian police and secret service, formerly members of the *miliția* and *Securitate* respectively, yet the name of the protagonist (police major Eugen Simion) and his counterpart (Securitate colonel Eugen Simion) is the name of a prolific Romanian literary critic. This extends the parody to encompass Romanian literature and criticism as well and turns Torpedo's novel into a veiled metafiction and *roman à clef*, thus anticipating the Romanian academic novel's following stage.

By contrast, Andrei Bodiș's *Bulevardul Eroilor* (Heroes' Boulevard, 2004) reads like a dismal "condition-of-Romania" *cum campus* novel, as it centers on the drab post-communist experiences of academics, students and their extended families. This *roman à clef*'s central theme is what is known in Eastern Europe as the "transition", i.e. the painful macro- and micro-economic, social and political process of transition from a state-controlled economy to free-market capitalism, from totalitarianism to democracy, and the emerging brain drain phenomenon, as it is felt in the newly founded Faculty of Philology of Brașov. The university, like any institution recovering from decades of communism, employs educational methods which are "a mockery typical of *transitional* Roma-

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52 In the original: "...primul scriitor din Est condamnat de fundamentalistii islamici. Nici Kundera, nici Soljenitin, nici Czeslav Milosz n-au fost onorați..."

nia, with barely recycled old farts humiliating confused youths who indeed pay them for it" (Bodiu 2004, 214, my emphasis).<sup>53</sup> University professors of the older generation exhibit *comprador*, but also pre-modern, indeed feudal behavior: "The university chairs were like small enfeoffments, in which the thane led as he saw fit. The thane and the vassals" (2004, 246).<sup>54</sup> Bodiu's terms are redolent of Ștefănescu's: "[T]he reality of communism displayed [...] a *feudal* mentality at best"; he goes on to enumerate its pre-modern features: "gerontocratic organization of decision-making", "use of forced labor", "nepotism and vassalage, personality cults and courtly fawning" (Ștefănescu 2013, 137, emphasis in the original). The political amnesia affecting the whole country is denounced in no uncertain terms: "In Romania there is nothing but "the short past". In 1990, some people were born a second time" (2004, 238).<sup>55</sup> There are no attempts at anything like *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Also, importantly, the complicity between the "recycled" or neo-/post-communists and the EU is hinted at (2004, 188).

Oana Tănase's *Filo, meserie!* (Philo, Nice Work!, 2005)<sup>56</sup> reads like the students' reply to Max Torpedo's novel. Both are collaborative works, as Oana Tănase is the pseudonym employed by eight students who attended creative writing classes with Alexandru Mușina and Andrei Bodiu, two of the authors of *Guess Who*. This campus novel is a light-hearted, comic Bildungsroman, a stylistically heterogeneous first-person account of student life written in a colloquial style. The pervasive presence of student dorms as spaces of student life invites a comparison between the novel and Cristian Mungiu's film *4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile* (4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days), winner of the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2007. However, the contrast in the student dorm atmosphere could not be more salient: published/ released only two years apart, the events narrated by the two fictional texts are set almost two decades apart – two very significant decades which have brought on massive changes in Romanian society. The pervasive oppressiveness of Mungiu's film, set in 1987, is absent from Tănase's novel, though the living conditions in the dorms have hardly changed; in other words, "transition" is slow when it comes to the material lives of ordinary people. However, the thematic

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53 In the original: "...o bătaie de joc tipică pentru România tranziției, cu boșorogi nici măcar reciclați, umilind niște juni derutați, care-i și plăteau pentru asta".

54 In the original: "Catedrele erau niște mici feude, în care nobilul conducea cum vroia el. Nobilul și vasalii".

55 In the original: "În România nu există decât 'trecutul scurt'. În 1990 unii s-au născut a doua oară."

56 The novel's title alludes to David Lodge's academic novel *Nice Work* (1988).

focus of the two texts is very different: Tănase's novel focuses on exams, student elections, parties and falling in love, whereas Mungiu's film is full of trauma, as protagonist Otilia organizes an illegal abortion for her roommate Gabriela, a crime punishable by up to ten years of imprisonment under communist law. Moreover, Otilia is blackmailed into having sex with the abortionist. The film is representative of Romanian New Wave Cinema, a cinematic movement which advocates a minimalist, observational style redolent of André Bazin's aesthetic and restraint in passing political or moral judgement on its characters. The literary equivalent of this cinematic movement in Romanian literature at large would be what Mihai Iovănel terms the "miserabilist realism" of the 1990s, characterized by a primitive anti-communism (2017, 142).

The last novel to be mentioned as pertaining to the realist phase of the Romanian academic novel is Domnica Rădulescu's *Train to Trieste* (2008), written in English by a diasporic writer, a novel which traces the heroine's flight from totalitarian Romania to the United States. Significantly, the protagonist Mona Maria Manoliu, daughter of two academics and later an academic herself, alludes to what has come to be known as "resistance through culture", a withdrawal from public into private life, from the material into the spiritual. Mona and her father – who owns a typewriter, a forbidden object under communism – preserve their sanity by reading forbidden, i.e. foreign books (it is telling that they are English and German, i.e. Western books). However, her father's lectures are under permanent surveillance – he is not allowed to talk about "*metaphysical ideas and forbidden authors*" (57, italics in the original). Mona will herself become an academic in the United States, where she will experience other forms of inequality.

Bodiu's, Tănase's and Rădulescu's novels share a distinctly "documentary" quality: they seem to be chronicles of Romanian postcommunism (and in Rădulescu's case, communism), explanatory analyses of Romanian society at large, marked by linearity of plot and an intensely representationalist impulse. The effervescence of Max Torpedo's early postcommunist novel seems, in this context, to have been an elated, enthusiastic reaction to the rapid changes taking place after the revolution, soon to be dampened by the new social realities of the transition.

The metafictional phase of Romanian academic fiction debuts with Florin Piersic Jr.'s film *Eminescu versus Eminem* (2005), which marks a departure from Mungiu's representational style towards a self-reflexive mode. As a black and white feature, filmed with a handheld camera, it immediately flaunts its "uncon-



ventionality". The film's plot does not boast exciting events; instead, it is driven by the discussions between three film students, mostly revolving around American popular movies (*Matrix*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Hannibal*, *Terminator*, *Jaws*, *The Godfather*, *Alien*, *Chucky*, *Rocky*). The obtrusively discontinuous style of Piersic's film makes a point of violating every aesthetic convention of classical Hollywood cinema, also known as continuity or invisible editing or style. Rapid and blurred zooms to extreme close-ups of parts of the students' faces or hand gestures, the blatant disregard of eye-line matching and of the shot/reverse-shot pattern evince the film's intention of questioning mainstream cinema. Cinematic style is complemented by content, i.e. by the metaphorical and symbolic interpretations with which the students choose to endow American movies. These are highly parodic, though delivered in a very serious manner: *The Godfather* is seen as a sequel to *Jaws* expounding on American greediness and consumerism, while *Chucky* is read as a coded message to the Soviet bloc, a call to arms which has brought about the fall of communism. As the film's title intimates, it is concerned with (autochthonous) high culture and (Western) popular culture: Eminescu, the Romanian national poet, versus Eminem, an American rap artist. Thus, the film is a comment on the (self-) colonization of Romanian culture by Western culture, American culture in particular.

The metafictional novels of the second phase are remarkable for their (post-modern) playfulness: Caius Dobrescu's *Teză de doctorat* (Doctoral Thesis, 2007) and *Minoic* (Minoan, 2011), and Lucian Bâgiu's *Bestiar: Salată orientală cu universitari închipuiți* (Bestiary: Oriental Salad with Peacock/Imagined Academics, 2008). Dobrescu's *Teză de doctorat* bears all of the formal features of a doctoral thesis, one which claims to tackle transition in the context of globalization, but which apart from titles, subtitles and the bolded phrases which dapple the text itself (meant to catch the eye of the examiners), is a loose narrative of episodes in the life of Gică Ludu, an academic fraud who wants to pass off his graphorrhoea as scientific work. The imposture inherent in post-communist "transition" is thus alluded to. *Minoic* reads like an academic thriller set at Shebango University (a thinly veiled fictional version of the University of Chicago), where the protagonist arrives on a research scholarship. References to communism and post-communist transition abound, for instance in the protagonist's comment on Romanian academics' skepticism in referring to the fall of communism in Romania as the "Revolution of 1989", as they prefer to employ the phrase "the events of 1989", thus positing an unwelcome continuity between communism

and post-communism, between totalitarianism and corrupt post-communist “democracy”, between West and East.

Bâgiu, a younger novelist who was only ten years old at the time of the 1989 Revolution, relentlessly employs the conventions of postmodernist metafiction and consistently alludes to canonical academic novels such as David Lodge’s campus trilogy. Thus, the novel’s style is as eclectic as that of *Changing Places* (1975), and David Lodge makes an appearance as a character in the novel. Postcolonial (rather than postcommunist) references abound, as the novel’s action takes place mainly in Alba Iulia, the mainstay of Habsburg hegemony in Transylvania, with short episodes set elsewhere, e.g. at an academic conference set in Vienna in the twenty-first century. An elusive, almost mythical book, which bears the value of the Graal in the novel’s economy, is at the heart of the academics’ search: the Hermannstadt Catechism, allegedly the first book printed in Romanian, in the sixteenth century, of which no copy has come down to us. In Transylvania’s troubled colonial history, Romanian ethnics have been denied the civil, linguistic and religious rights of German (Saxon and Swabian), Hungarian or Szekely settlers. It is this colonial history Bâgiu alludes to, thus complicating a potential postcolonial reading of the novel by adding another center or metropolis to the already mentioned ones. This, in turn, gestures towards Romania’s long colonial history, dating back to the Roman invasion and colonization of Dacia, as well as to other colonial powers which colonized Romania to different extents and degrees later on (e.g. the Ottoman Empire, the German Empire, etc.). Bâgiu’s allusions to (post) colonialism are not confined to Romania. His various narrators find frequent occasions to comment (usually via footnotes) on former British colonies in the Pacific, from Australia to the obscurest of islands, which are relentlessly brought to the attention of the reader, thus reinforcing the idea of postcolonialism.

Bâgiu’s novel and, to a lesser degree, Dobrescu’s novels as well, are marked by frequent frame-breaks, authorial intrusions (e.g. via footnotes), collages, fragmentariness, the alternative construction and deconstruction of realist illusion, ostentatious instances of “baring the device”, the playful subversion of narrative, in short, all the paraphernalia of (postmodern) metafiction. The global financial crisis of 2007-2008 and its sobering effects may or may not have had something to do with the change in mode which the next three novels substantiate.

Anton Marin’s *Eu, gândacul* (I, the Bug, 2009), Alexandru Mușina’s *Nepotul lui Dracula* (Dracula’s Nephew/Descendant, 2012) and Radu Vancu’s *Transparența* (Transparency, 2018) mark a departure from metafiction towards magical

realism and make up the third phase in the development of the Romanian academic novel identified above. The metafictional element is much less prominent in these novels of remarkable hybridity and irony.

Anton Marin's novel is an ironic, postcommunist take on Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915). Its protagonist, a young lecturer in organic chemistry named Dan C. Mihăilescu, bears the name of a real Romanian literary critic, whose connection to the novel is openly disavowed. The protagonist's metamorphosis into a cockroach enables him to witness and narrate events which constitute a panorama of Romanian society in the 2000s: discussions between his department chair and a corrupt professor, between the equally corrupt University administrative staff and the Minister of Education, doctors who discuss abusive organ transplants, watchmen who steal, a philistine newspaper editor and her real estate agent boyfriend, both exponents of Romanian "corporatists" obsessed with money, greedy church representatives, etc. Colonial undertones dapple the novel: Dan learns to "speak cockroach" and manages to save not only the twenty-million cockroach population of the university building, thus becoming the "Great Civilizing Hero" (Marin 2009, 65) of cockroachhood, but also to rid Romanian academia of its most corrupt elements, human relics of communist times, who, like Bodiu's "old farts", would not retire to make room for their younger and more motivated and capable peers. Of all the novels included in this discussion, Marin's novel most faithfully mimics street language and therefore exhibits a vulgarity of language which the other novels lack (though Vancu does not shy away from rough language either). Including street language in literature is one of the so-called "points of resistance" identified by Iovănel, who borrows the concept from Stanisław Lem: it refers to writers who have published under a totalitarian regime and have sought to transcend its censure-imposed limitations, seeking new limitations, new prohibitions which would have to be transgressed in post-totalitarian periods. One such point of resistance is street language, which pervades Romanian culture via hip-hop, an American popular music genre (Iovănel 2017, 35-8). However, hip-hop itself is the product of African American communities, as well as Latin American or Caribbean immigrants to the U.S.

Muşina's novel *Dracula's Grandson* or *Dracula's Descendant* claims that its protagonist, a Proust scholar at a university in Braşov, is the direct descendant of the fifteenth-century Wallachian voivode Vlad Ţepeş, also known as Vlad Drăculea, an object of Romanian nostalgia since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, due to both his anti-corruption reputation and his struggle against Ottoman occupation.

Additionally, this historical figure was Bram Stoker's source of inspiration when he invented Dracula. Academic dishonesty and corruption in the university are constant concerns in Mușina's relentlessly parodic novel. The "Pentagon" (a self-appointed elite group consisting of five male professors of literature) maintains a patriarchal academic dominance which frees them from bureaucratic burdens and enables some of them to under-perform. However, the school's chief secretary, Enikő Trăistaru, a former *Securitate* member who is also a woman, an ethnic Hungarian and a Protestant in a predominantly Orthodox country – apparently, the quintessence of the minority status – is revealed to be the school's true director, exceeding the Dean in power. The continuity between communism and postcommunism is again suggested, but then again so is the continuity between Transylvania's colonial past (Hungarian settlers had civil, linguistic and religious rights that the native Romanian population lacked) and its more recent communist past. The Dracula myth is playfully deconstructed from several critical perspectives by the said "Pentagon". From a postcolonial perspective, "Dracula is their [i.e. the West's] cultural product, not ours... Anthropologically, it's a common occurrence: you project the evil in yourself into the Other, the foreigner" (Mușina 2012, 149).<sup>57</sup> He is also construed as a "blood terrorist" and a "terrorist avant la lettre" (140),<sup>58</sup> whom Western culture insists on endowing with a human face, just as leftist intellectuals from the West supposedly wanted to humanize communism. The European Union's vampirism towards countries rich in natural resources is obliquely pointed out, as is the economic neo-colonialism of multinational corporations, and the increasing emigration and brain drain which plagues contemporary Romania: Romanians have become stateless "neo-Jews".<sup>59</sup> From "the darkness of communism and the fog of post-communism", the "communist Red Plague" followed by "the Yellow Plague of generalized theft and reckless consumption",<sup>60</sup> every politically corrupt fact about contemporary Romania is relentlessly foregrounded. Mușina's text is keen on flaunting its politically incorrect stance. It openly pokes excruciating fun at Cultural Studies, which comes to the rescue of contemporary vampires, a "new minority to be acknowledged,

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57 In the original: "Dracula e produsul lor cultural, nu al nostru... Antropologic, e ceva obișnuit: proiectezi răul din tine în Celălalt, în strain" (149).

58 In the original: "terorist sangvinic", "terorist avant la lettre" (140).

59 In the original: "neoevrei" (155).

60 In the original: "bezna comunismului și ceața postcomunismului", "Ciuma Roșie ... Ciuma Galbenă, a furtului generalizat, a consumului nesăbuit" (408).

to be protected, positive discrimination, special parking lots, [admission quotas] in universities, not too strong a light in the lecture or seminar room, because their eyes might hurt ... the whole thing"<sup>61</sup> – even Vampire Protection Services. The Romani minority looms large in Mușina's novel, but not as exponents of "internal colonization" (Ștefănescu 2013, 54). Instead, they are empowered, highly prosperous "Gypsies" who resent being called "Romani" (Mușina 2012, 173) and who earn their great fortunes by donating blood, a business which originated in their giving blood to the protagonist's vampire forebears. The novel is unambiguous in rejecting several key paradigms of contemporary intellectual thought: post-modernism (the category that is most relentlessly subjected to irony), cultural studies, political correctness, the myth of Western progress, etc.

Radu Vancu's *Transparența* is the most recent academic novel under scrutiny, a novel which traces two love stories: the overly sexualized love story between the male protagonist R. and Mega, both philology students in Sibiu, and the love story between R./Radu Vancu and the city of Sibiu, whose history the novel reconstructs in mythical, magical realist and postcolonial terms. R.'s political vehemence, his ferocious disgust with politically motivated evil and with the "Westerners' atrocities [which] made Eastern communism's atrocities look innocent" (Vancu 2018, 85)<sup>62</sup> result in an obsessive inventory of atrocities within the novel's pages (e.g. the charred body of a child found in a mother's suitcase after the bombings of Hamburg in the Second World War). The suicides of R.'s father and of Vancu-the-character's father occur during and due to post-communism and communism, respectively, a fact which suggests a continuity between communism and post-communism (like Mușina's and Dobrescu's novels). R. denounces the West's superiority in its "better" administration of memory, i.e. its superior metabolization of evil (Vancu 2018, 53-4). Romania's communist past looms large in Mega's father, a character who epitomizes all the crimes which were committed in the name of an ideology. R.'s traumatic (and surreal) post-communist legacy is his propensity to become literally transparent<sup>63</sup> every time he feels extreme fear or pleasure.

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61 In the original: "O nouă minoritate de recunoscut, de protejat, discriminare pozitivă, locuri speciale în parcuri, în universități, să nu fie lumina prea tare în sala de curs sau de seminar, că-i deranjează la ochi... tot tacâmul" (143).

62 In the original: "atrocitățile occidentalilor le inocentau pe cele ale comunismului estic" (85).

63 This ability could be read in connection to what Ștefănescu, drawing on Zygmunt Bauman, calls the "regenerative void" (2013, 190).

The most consistently academic Romanian film is *Q.E.D.*, released in 2013, an award-winning black and white film of formal perfection and exquisite set design which strongly resembles Donnersmarck's *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*, 2006), a drama set in communist Eastern Germany also concerned with surveillance and the way it destroyed human relationships and lives. The plot of *Q.E.D.* seemingly revolves around thirty-five-year-old mathematician Sorin Pârnu, who refuses to join the communist party and can therefore neither publish his theorems, nor obtain his PhD. To circumvent the oppressive system, he smuggles a paper outside the country and manages to have it published by an American university's academic journal, which will complicate the lives of all those close to him: fellow academics, friends and family. However, the film's true protagonist is Elena Buciuman, who is overwhelmed by her many responsibilities: she is the wife of an academic who managed to escape to France, which puts her in a difficult position with the *Securitate*, the mother of a boy who blames her for having urged his father to make a change for the better, the daughter of an elderly and sick father, and the friend of a scholar who wants her to smuggle an article to France. The moral dilemmas faced by the characters take center stage, as do their traumas, in this deliberately slow-paced film which flaunts its artificiality and its status as a work of art.

In conclusion, the wealth of references to communism evinces just how much the "life of the mind" (which is what academic novels are mostly concerned with) was colonized by communism (just as Romanian art was colonized by the Soviet "socialist realism" in the 1950s and 1960s, when control and censure were at their worst). However, as we have seen, the situation of Romania in particular is a complicated one, deriving from the many "centers" to which Romanian culture relates, one way or another, throughout its history: ancient Rome, the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, the USSR, the "West". The very hybridity of Romanian culture, which boasts Latin (linguistic) origins, but is a Christian Orthodox country (as opposed to Slavic Poland, which is Roman Catholic in its religious denomination), marks the uneasy ambivalence of its (Balkan?) identity. As the survey above has shown, postcolonial and postcommunist readings are frequently intertwined, though they are not necessarily interchangeable. The fictional texts invite postcolonial readings of themselves, but it does seem as if they are meant to complement, not to replace readings in postcommunist terms. The move towards magical realism and the employment of autochthonous myths

is a symptom of an increasing critical distance from Western cultural influence, but it can equally be viewed as an attempt to work through communist trauma, to perform a sort of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* with regard to our own responsibility for what happened during communism. Ironically, this move towards magical realism also mirrors a tendency in the American academic novel itself, as epitomized by James Hynes's *The Lecturer's Tale* (2001). However, viewed in the larger cultural context which goes beyond the confines of the genre, the Romanian novels undoubtedly (and, in part, overtly) react against Western cultural colonization. In employing a mode which is also used in the "West", academic fiction itself enacts the somewhat paradoxical move of that part of Romanian academia which attempts to appropriate the largely Western terminology of postcolonialism in its investigation of postcommunism.

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