

ROMANIA AS AN ONGOING VAMPIRE STORY: COUNT DRACULA AND THE POP-CULTURAL DÉTENTE

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Abstract: *The present article analyses two recent fictional reiterations of Count Dracula's topos – namely, Alucard in Kouta Hirano's Hellsing manga series (1997-2008) and Fifi/FAD (Florin Anghelescu Dragolea) in Alexandru Mușina's novel Dracula's Nephew (2012) – as two rather authoritative contemporary references modifying the vampiric epitome originally outlined by Bram Stoker (and others). The focus is set on the evolution of 'nation branding' related elements reflected inside the common fictional paradigm. More specifically, this imagological investigation revolves around the ethical-symbolic dimension of the two selected contemporary works, in its particular relation to the controversial tendency of 'branding' Romania (or Transylvania) as the 'actual' homeland of the vicious vampire count. The ethical response both works imply is distinctive as well as significant, in the sense that it illustrates a current tendency towards what will be referred to in the present study as a 'pop-cultural détente'.*

Keywords: *nation branding; popular culture; manga; vampire; Dracula.*

1. THEORETICAL GUIDELINES

It is common knowledge that the original definition of the concept of 'branding' is closely related to marketing. Much in the same line of thought, 'nation branding' is typically defined as "the application of corporate marketing concepts and techniques to countries, in the interests of enhancing their reputation in international relations" (Kerr, Wiseman, 2013:354). Nevertheless, even in this traditional (i.e. 'functional', 'materially-oriented') definition, certain fiction-related elements are still inherent to the concept, since 'branding' is still seen as "a marketing tool associated with perception, image, mental associations in the minds of target groups" (Vuiginier, 2016:5). This means that imaginative creation, narrative patterns (especially popular ones), stereotypes, mythopoetic production – in a word, fiction (in the broadest sense of the word) and fictional *topoi* are a part of any process of brand-generation.

Now, while the meaning of the concept of 'topos' – a fictional motif, theme or reoccurring, structured discursive convention – is quite clear in comparative literature and cultural studies, things are a little less axiomatic when it comes to the idea of 'pop/popular culture'. Taking many forms according to various competing or successive

theoretical definitions, this rather controversial notion will be used within the framework of the present approach in a (mildly) Gramscian connotation. As such, 'popular culture' will be understood as a terrain of artistic production where significant cultural negotiation between the masses and institutionally-produced discourses occurs. Unrestricted, in our view, to strictly consumerist productions, the concept extends in such a way as to encompass elements issued by different 'alternative culture(s)' or 'subculture(s)', in those cases where the cultural product reaches massive acclaim or exerts significant influence. The concept will hence broadly oppose the notion of artistic 'canon', i.e. those productions issued or validated (so far) as 'high culture' by a certain cultural establishment. In this line, we approach John Storey's definition of 'popular culture as *Other*' (Storey, 2001:14-15).

Coming back, at this point, to the notion of 'nation branding', most of the recently-issued theoretical syntheses similarly concur towards the conclusion that there is more than one plausible understanding of the term. In a rather influential study on the concept, Nadia Kaneva identifies three basic possible viewpoints on 'nation branding': a technical / economic perspective, a political perspective and a cultural / critical perspective, respectively (Kaneva, 2011). Of course, this clear-

cut, three-fold distinction is merely heuristic, but as it is rather intuitive, it serves our immediate purpose of delineating the range of meaning we are interested in. Concretely, the present study thus falls into the category/range of cultural approaches, since it basically envisages “a critique of nation branding’s discourses and practices as they relate to national identity, culture, and governance” (Kaneva, 2011:127)¹.

Another initial remark worth making here would be that the perspective on Dracula’s myth as a nation branding phenomenon that I am proposing is (again, in Kaneva’s terms) constructivist², in the sense that the spotlight is rather set on the evolution of the allogenic stereotype as an identity-related issue³. In other words, the main pursuit of this study is basically imagological in nature, as it analyses and interprets some recent (and perhaps, significant) changes in the features of an image still automatically (and traditionally) associated with Romania and its identity.

2. DRACULA AS A HETEROGENIC NATIONAL BRAND

“I’ve asked a few British what they knew about Romania. You would be surprised to hear that number one on the list was Dracula / Transilvania.

¹ This is why, for any references and discussions related to Dracula as an economic asset or to governmental policies related to reputation management or exploitation, see, for instance, A. Sepi’s (2013), *Nation Branding: The Case of Romania* (E/IR&CD), www.culturaldiplomacy.org. Available:

http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/pdf/case-studies/Andreea_Sepi_-_Nation_Branding_-_The_Case_of_Romania.pdf. [03.04.2018]), pp. 5-6 (the chapter referring to Dracula Park); A. N. Candrea, A. Ispas, E.N. Untaru & F. Nechita (2016), *Marketing the Count's way: how Dracula's myth can revive Romanian tourism*, in *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov*, Series V: Economic Sciences. Vol. 9 (58), No. 1. 83-90 or C.-M. Preliceanu, *op. cit.*, *ed. cit.*

² For a more detailed description of the ‘constructivist’ approach on nation branding as opposed to ‘essentialism’, see Kaneva, *ed. cit.*, 129-130.

³ This is why the present analysis will also refrain from expressly contrasting the stereotype/brand against historical, social or cultural realities, figures or places in Romania. For such approaches, see, for instance, Monica Hârşan, *Bram Stoker et la genèse d’un stéréotype géoculturel : « la Transylvanie hantée »*, in L. Dupuy, J.-Y. Puyo. *L’imaginaire géographique. Entre géographie, langue et littérature*. Pau: Presses de l’Université de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour, col. Spatialités. 209-222.

Some of them were uncertain if that was in Romania”, said PR specialist Trevor Morris, cited by nation-branding.info in 2008. And he is but one in a long list of specialists still ranking Dracula first of all Romanian national brands when it comes to international popularity⁴. Of course, the economic aboriginal exploitation of this hetero-image has generated its own complementary fictions and *topoi* (such as, for instance, Bran Castle’s fictional assignment as ‘Dracula’s Castle’). Also, the popularity of the fictional vampire count and his (far-fetched) association with one of the most notorious Romanian historical figures – Vlad the Impaler – has generated critical reaction among Romanian scholars, who strived to clarify (and over-clarify) the scientific incongruences – and the deficiencies with respect to political correctness – of this imaginary fusion. But between such scholars who, offended by the Count’s bloody countenance, attempt to dismiss Dracula and his authority as an identity brand and those conversely militating in favour of a cleverer commercial exploitation / governmental policy in the matter, not many locals pause to consider the actual image and its fictional potential as a discourse⁵ in itself. That is to say, the force of purely fictional productions (literary works or graphic novels, cinematic productions etc.), understood as a potential ‘brand-producing’ mechanism, should perhaps be reconsidered, as they still seem to be unparalleled in terms of influence by both scholarly work and the bare media/PR strategies employed so far by Romanian governance. But let us first briefly overview the actual fictions, their inner structures – and the nation-branding connotations behind this famous literary topos.

3. THE FICTIONAL TOPOI: A VAMPIRIC ARCHETYPE AND ITS AVATARS

3.1 A few remarks on a classic: Count Dracula. Since there is a lot of scholarly literature analysing this (nowadays, archetypal) stereotype, I will just briefly review some less-known aspects and their implications for Romanian identity.

To begin with, it is significant to note that Stoker’s Count Dracula is not singular or unique as a representation, but rather the last (and most prominent) element in a string of popular Western European 19th century Gothic fictional depictions of

⁴ For further details, see Preliceanu, C.-M. (2015:157).

⁵ In a mild Foucauldian definition of the term, i.e. a social system’s produced knowledge and meaning as a position of power.

vampires and/or vampiric figures. Little is said on the fact that Bram Stoker's interest in a vampiric Transylvania was, for instance, preceded by Jules Verne's nearly-supernatural Transylvania in *The Carpathian Castle* (1892). It is also almost unknown that Dracula's emergence follows a series of writings featuring a similar (and rather successful) character: Lord Ruthven, a vampire of non-specified national appurtenance, first starring in Dr. John William Polidori in the short story *The Vampyre* in 1816. This first notable representation of an aristocratic, sensual, but ruthless vampire generated a whole series of literary reiterations, among which one by none other than the famous Alexandre Dumas père (*The Vampire*, 1865, drama)⁶.

There are striking similarities in the narrative scheme as well. The vampire (or vampiric figure) dangerously charms his way into the civilised world by manipulating a young, inexperienced European nobleman. But if Lord Ruthven was originally a-national and a-geographical, with Dumas' rendition, the topos of his fictional (ancient, aboriginal, excessively rocky and richly forested) country visibly evokes Dracula's. Moreover, the vampire's homeland is placed in Circassia, on the north-eastern shore of the Black Sea. Later, with Jules Verne's baron Rodolphe de Gortz, the image of a dark (obscurantist / occult) Transylvania emerges and gets to be associated with the already shaped stereotype of the aristocratic vampire.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) is thus the successor of a rather prosperous 19th century popular literary tradition in which the vampiric figure of another (or an 'other', heterotopic⁷) Europe comes into shape and is gradually associated with Transylvania, a region which was just struggling to place itself on the map of Europe at the time, but was still widely unknown to the majority of the public. Attached to Romanian identity on-the-go, as a sort of a dark-romantic, gothic-horror topos basically opposing the positivist-rationalist spirit of the 'civilised world', and bringing a half-horrifying, half-alluring mystical primitiveness into the public eye, the image of the obscurantist, delayed Other might have generated both an unsettling sensation and a certain melancholic revival of Europe's (already) lost mystical / magical past – a

combination which most likely converged into the tremendous success of the initial Gothic topos.⁸ Its echo in Western consciousness was, as we know, amazingly powerful, spawning an extensive vampire subculture in the 20th century. Still, let us maintain that, as a representation of otherness, it remains in many ways a less-than-flattering and ill-documented depiction.

3.2 Alucard, the vampire hunter (1997-2008; 2001-2006; 2001-2002; 2006-2012)⁹. Of course, the famous vampire is also a presence in various vampire comic series and graphic novels, usually making secondary-character majestic appearances as the unsurpassed ancestor of all vampires. In contrast, Kouta Hirano's Alucard plays the role of the protagonist in the Japanese *Hellsing* series – initially a *manga* (graphic novel) series, further developed following its popularity into two *anime* (animation) series and doubled over by a prequel *manga* (*Hellsing: The Dawn*, by the same author).

Obviously, the character's name reads 'Dracula' in reverse, pointing out to the old blood's conversion into a vampire hunter, an enemy of his own kin (so, a supposedly positive character), as he joins Hellsing, a British secret organisation designed to fight emerging supernatural menaces brought about by the Undead. The reasons for which he does so are (and remain) inexplicit: even if he apparently swore an oath of faith to his old archenemy, Abraham Van Hellsing (whose descendant, Sir Integra Hellsing is the current head of the organisation), he still seems to act as if out of sheer boredom. More than that, he is in a permanent search for a truly challenging, perhaps deadly opponent.

The character is mysterious and intimidating in many ways. His brutality and lust for blood, his fierce, unpredictable, untameable nature and appearance, his rather beastly sadomasochistic and uncommunicative attitude and his formidable vampiric powers bring sheer charisma into the character and give it the stature of an elemental force. However, there is a second dimension to this

⁸ I have extensively developed this thesis in a scientific (see Hărșan, 2014).

⁹ The mentioned periods of time correspond to the successive continuations and video transpositions of the series, as follows: 1997-2008 – *Hellsing*, the original 10-volume issue of the *manga* (published in *Young King OURS* magazine, Tokyo: Shōnen Gahōsha); 2001-2006 – *Hellsing – The Dawn*, a *manga* 10-volume prequel (id., see above); 2001-2002 – the 13-episode *Hellsing* TV Series' original run; 2006-2012 – the 10-episode OVA series *Hellsing Ultimate* (release date).

⁶ Namely: *Lord Ruthven or the Vampires*, 1820, novel by Cyprien Bérardand; *The Vampire*, 1820, novel by Charles Nodier, adapted for the London stage by James Robinson Planché and re-played at least four times within the same year.

⁷ Both terms are used in their Foucauldian sense, as defined in *Of Other spaces* [Espaces autres]. (1967).

protagonist which actually provides him with unparalleled charm: he is also awash in dark humour. Utterly charismatic, but rather monstrous as a physical presence, he tends to look pretty hilarious in his frill shirt adorned with a red cravat, white gloves and generally, in the oldish-gentlemanly 19th-century-like, scarlet attire making out his uniform, as his dandyish clothes never quite seem to properly suit his unnaturally tall and bony appearance and messy hairdo. Also, the weapons he carries are unusual (to say the least): two preposterously-dimensioned, large-calibre handguns (named Jackal and Casull), charged with consecrated bullets purposefully issued by the Protestant Church are meant to put his ordinary opponents to (eternal) rest. And last, but not least, he has a hilariously hideous, toothy grin.

In what concerns his true identity, he gloriously reveals it as the plot of the initial series reaches its peak – more specifically, as he manages to impale his ultimate foe and shows colossal, ungovernable force: he is both Dracula, the supreme vampire, and Vlad the Impaler, hereby presented as a Christian warlord having long fought the Ottomans and ultimately turned his back on God as he was eventually defeated and executed by them. The anime rendition of the scene in the TV series is monumental, as the protagonist's face – normally well shaved and framed by an unruly short haircut, usually hidden beyond his rounded specs and a large, floppy hat – intentionally gives away, by means of a mere shadow play, its stunning resemblance to the most famous portrait of Vlad Țepeș. This wordless avowal is followed in the later-issued OVA by further reassertion, as he appears in some sequences cloaked in a dark cape, wearing long, dark hair and a moustache, much in the manner of the Impaler.

Thus, Alucard seems to correspond, in general, to the wider stereotype of the ultimate vampire; still, there are some notable particularities which are worth mentioning. First, the character's half ridiculous appearance – stemming from the organisation's absurd efforts to civilise him is also doubled by the fierce dark humour of his rarely articulate commentaries. For instance, he would laugh at a disabled opponent's desperate attempt to launch a last attack, and ask if he should really fear dying by being 'chewed to death' by his broken, armless adversary.

Then, there is a visibly hyperbolic lust for violence attached to this character: just killing an enemy is never enough for this mentally deranged vampire. Sadistic chopping, blood baths and even masochism (as he frequently invites his enemies to

slay him and provides them with occasions to do so) result in intentionally-exaggerated, Tarantino-like displays of physical violence. Touching the absurd, and thus turning most battle scenes into parodic, farcical parades, Alucard's own moped tone and sickly-ironic comments, as well as the willed repetitiveness of the scenario add up to generate a striking of their nonsensical character. The nonsense hence hints to an implied meta-discourse on the repetitiveness of the explicit violence typical for the *manga/anime* Shōnen/Seinen culture¹⁰ (which are sometimes directly hinted at via hidden references), but not exclusively (as references go as far as including bloody Victorian plays such as Shakespeare's tragedies, for instance). Also, there is a legibly critical take on the very topos of the bloodthirsty, morally ambiguous superhero often presented and/or perceived as a positive character, as well as on the topos of the hero's (all-justifying) over-professionalism specific to so many contemporary action-movies (and narratives in general) – as Alucard is ostentatiously over-efficient and ultra-professional, as well as obsessive in his work. Third, there is also a subtle innuendo that the anti-hero's emotional immunity/numbness to bloodshed resonates with the public's unconscious emotional immunisation to (and saturation with) obsolete, gratuitous and unreasonable adrenalin-filled story patterns.

As far as the discrepancies in relation to the original stereotype Alucard brings along (beyond its ironic hyperbolising), two aspects are also worth noting. First, the fact that the personal history of the *manga* hero shows an increased awareness (and perhaps more thorough documentation) in what concerns the historical figure of Vlad Țepeș, who is this time correctly associated with Christianity and the wars against the Ottomans – even if the cruelty of his demeanour is fictionally motivated by his satanic turn. Second, the fact that Țepeș/Dracula is, in this case, the protagonist of the story and, in spite of all his moral/mental issues, he is definitely not all bad. In fact, Alucard joins the cause of the Good, and despises the undead. More than that, it is suggested in the *Ultimate* OVA that he is actually incessantly seeking for his own death both out of a need for redemption and because of his low self-esteem, which, combined to the never-ending boredom of his infinite existence, progressively turns into sheer depression. Now, both these

¹⁰ Types of manga/anime whose main target audience is made out of a male public (adolescent and older, respectively), and which is notoriously dense in fighting scenes.

features show a deeper concern for political correctness, a pursuit Stoker (or Verne, for that matter) obviously ignored. Additionally (and accidentally, to all appearances), low self-esteem is more often than not mentioned as one of the traits plaguing Romania's public image (see, for instance, Prelipceanu, 2015:158).

To sum up, in all his apparent barbarity, Hirano's Alucard makes up a more aware, self-conscious, documented and updated rendition of the initial stereotype's national implications, as the character's cultural appurtenance and affiliation become altogether secondary to its showy biological otherness and psychological alienation – or, in a word, to its individual difference, which puts its problematic singularity first and makes its metafictional traits move to the centre of attention. Consequently, Hirano's take on the paradigmatic vampire moves away from nation-branding elements (or from the temptation to produce cultural labels), by displacing the emphasis laid on Transylvania as an emblematically Gothic-horror territory and shifting the public focus towards the narrative, i.e. the weirdly dramatic individual difference of the protagonist and the (meta)fictional potential of ingenious intertexts.

3.3 Dracula's nephew, the faint-hearted professor (2012)¹¹. Yet another parodic reprise of Count Dracula's topos is the sarcastic fictional construction of an alternative self-image articulated in Alexandru Mușina's seemingly pop-fictional enterprise in the satiric campus-novel *Dracula's nephew*, published in Romania in 2012. However, quite opposite to Hirano's rendition (which is a neo-allogenic perspective, i.e. both foreign and secondary, as it retells an allogenic original story), the Romanian author's novel is an autochthonic response to the first-hand outlandish perception of Dracula as a nation-branding element. That is to say, Mușina overtly addresses the issues related to the political (in)correctness of the association and its rather laughable superficiality.

As an eminent university professor in literature and folklore, a nationally-acclaimed literary scholar, theorist and poet, the Romanian writer naturally has both the proper theoretical and the practical insight on the matter, as well as the creativity to set up a deeply critical discourse under the form of light, relaxed narrative. In fact, he chooses to confront the issue of negative 'nation branding' in such an extensive way that it implicitly comes to constitute

the major theme of the novel. In other words, as I have stated elsewhere, "[t]he playful, *opera buffa*-like surface of the story shouldn't misguide interpretation: real and thorough culturally critical observation is constructed by means of the (apparently) humorous decontextualisation of stereotypes. As they are ironically approached and hilariously recontextualised, their meaning gets "deflected", i.e., it changes its course, it gets "reprogrammed" so as to serve a different purpose and create new significance" (Hărșan, 2016:550).

The entire fictional setting of the novel is, for instance, playfully based on Mușina's real life experience as a university professor at "Transilvania" University of Brașov (placed some 30 kilometres away from Bran) – a circumstance which he cleverly intends to enable as a possible novel-related cultural/tourist attraction. According to the author's own sarcastic claims¹², he intended for the novel to be translated at least in English and Chinese, in order for it to generate a new and 'more credible' popular tourism brand than Stoker's. In any case, the alternative Transylvanian setup was directly inspired by the (apparently, ridiculous) fact (commonly known among faculty members at "Transilvania" University) that the first thing to come up in connection to the institution's name in any conversation with foreign peers or students was, of course, Dracula's name (or alternatively, Dracula jokes). Ironically, Mușina overtly and outspokenly uses one of his younger colleagues' profile as a basis for the figure of Dracula's nephew in the book¹³.

The profile of the vampire is also utterly dissimilar to both Stoker's paragon and Hirano's version of the anti-paragon: "The most blatant (counter-) stereotypical representation in the novel is the theme of the vampire and his Romanian ancestry. [...] Since any respectable vampire must descend from Vlad Țepeș, alias Dracula [...], so does Florin Anghelescu Dragolea, actual nephew of Athanasie Drăculea, Țepeș's last known descendant. However, apart from this 'stereotypical imperative', nothing else is, 'vampirically' speaking, *comme-il-faut* in what concerns this civilised (and thus, degenerate), postmodern anti-vampire" (Hărșan, 2016:550). Mockingly surname "professor FAD" (meaning "dull" or "insipid" in Romanian) or "Fifi",

¹¹ Alexandru Mușina. (2012, first and so far sole edition). *Nepotul lui Dracula*. Brașov: Aula.

¹² During book launches, conferences or various scientific events, and in particular discussions (I have worked closely to Alexandru Mușina between 2010 and 2013 as a PhD candidate at "Transilvania" University).

¹³ The name of the real person isn't displayed here because of the personal nature of such information.

“the poor benign grand-grandson of the noble Athanasie is, in fact, a modest, depressive, shy, scrupulous, scruffy and tedious middle-aged Junior Lecturer in French literature at ‘Transilvania’ University of Braşov [...]. Personally, Fifi is a three-time divorced recovering alcoholic, living (and depending, emotionally) on his (over)affectionate mother. His social status is less than dignified [...], his self-esteem and psychological composure are free-falling as he is constantly stressing about his own worth and the opinions of others [...]. Thus, our vampire’s disposition is (understandably) morose, introverted and... uptight, as he constantly manages to hinder and ridicule himself.” (Hărşan, 2016:550).

Thus, as I have stated in my above cited study, “Fifi’s ensanguine, anaemic, starved figure, contrasting with his (much-too) gentle behaviour is a visible (tragi-) comical parody of the gloriously menacing, mysteriously fascinating romantic image of the vampire” (Hărşan, 2016:550), even if the story is actually a bildungsroman in which the fading vampire is brought back to himself and the “old ways”, becoming a “civilised (noble, even!), a legitimate, respectful and extremely polite consumer of (Romani) blood” (Hărşan, 2016:550). That is, of perfectly bottled (for export) and thoroughly verified (for hygiene-related issues), premium-quality (Romani) bio-blood. The narrative is provided with a happy-end, as Fifi is brought to himself by his loving would-have-been victim-slaves and Lulu, a rich student who falls in love with him. In the end, he comes to establish a “good marks for (donated) blood” trade with his students (Hărşan, 2016:551) and ends up dreaming of being installed king.

Of course, this is both a reversed and satiric reaction to the ‘negative’ hetero-images produced offshore as it is a criticism of Romanian post-communism, global consumerism and the policies economic domination which relies, in Muşina’s case, on deep cultural observation. In sum, Muşina’s ‘over-civilised’, faint-hearted and vulnerable avatar of the vampire is definitely ‘brand-oriented’ and functions, just like Hirano’s rendition, on a meta-discursive level. The difference consists, however, of the implied metadiscursive reference: *Dracula’s Nephew* doesn’t refer as much to (popular) fictional patterns and their inconsistencies – even if popular fiction per se and its instructive potential has been one of Muşina’s constant ethical preoccupations over the years; in spite the novel’s ‘pop’ surface, it is, in fact, a sort of a “fictio-critical” approach to stereotypes (Hărşan, 2016:549) I have previously described in terms of a “deflective” strategy

(Hărşan, 2016), i.e. a strategy setting up a delicate, fictional and intellectually relaxed refusal of such uncomplimentary nation-branding associations.

4. SOME GENERALISATIONS: ON POP-CULTURAL DÉTENTE AND THE INTERNATIONAL FICTIONAL IMAGERY OF NATION-BRANDING

As a conclusion to this brief analysis, let us first note that Dracula’s current secondary, if paradigmatic role in vampire culture remains, for now, the typical one. But such generalised withdrawal of the original topos towards the margins of contemporary narratives and into archetypal appearances is perhaps less a sign of its exhaustion, as one of transformation. It is conspicuous that the two fictions examined here come to ‘tell a different tale’: that of a possible fictional re-signification of the master-narrative¹⁴ and its probable success (as both stories have reached, in their own terms, considerable notoriety and were given a warm reception by their target audience).

Some common features of the two contemporary representations of Count Dracula’s theme in what concerns their relationship to the nation-branding features of the topos also become evident. The fact that the sombre, menacing Gothic-horror atmosphere is transfigured and relativized into parodic, present-day or even futuristic set-ups (i.e., gender transshipping), that the figure of the vampire essentially becomes less ominous, even attaching – at least to some extent – as human anxieties and predicaments come to trouble the vampires’ inner lives (i.e., the resemantisation of the narrative content and themes), the raised degree of awareness and concern for political correctness in the fictional rendition of identity-related cultural detail, and the fact that both stories are, one way or the other, metafictional (i.e., they are stories, but also function as self-conscious discourses on narrative techniques and conventional representations) – all these attributes concur towards the idea that the stereotype, the paradigm itself is (slowly, but steadily) undergoing significant change under the pressure of globalised dialogue and shared experience, even as it remains at the core – or the

¹⁴ In the sense assigned to the term by Jean François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge [La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir]*: that of an all-encompassing, global cultural narrative pattern organizing and explaining knowledge and experience. 1979, Paris: Minuit.

basis – of such narrative constructions. Reiterated, it survives, but it is also bound to adjust to the gradually changing perceptions of Romania as an Other, of Romania as a potential identity under (a self-)construction (in progress). If with the classical stereotype, which is a classic example of a (rather ‘negative’) hetero-image, the Other (in this case, Transylvania / Romania) was the ‘stranger’, both exotic / fascinating / mysterious / vitalistic and possibly dangerous / brutal / primitive / risky, at the dawn of the new paradigm, otherness itself, in terms of a hetero-genetic definition of Romania either becomes less important as a trait (as with Hirano) or is addressed head-on, finding its own untamed, ‘uncivilised’ voice (through Mușina’s self-image generation). Tables are turned, and the Other apparently tends to reach global integration, as the newer definitions refuse to focus on difference (or exoticism) as much as the old did.

A certain relaxation in the general tone consequently ensues in what concerns Romania’s reflected image, a sort of ‘a pop-cultural(ly generated) détente’: fiction is either relegated back into fiction, as public awareness becomes more and more able to distinguish between real-life and imaginary stories; or it becomes a proper vehicle of cultural dialogue and negotiation when used in such a way by both parties, and does so in the terms of a more open and less hurtful or belligerent rhetoric.

This last observation could also open the way to a more general conclusion on the importance of fiction (and especially of popular narratives) in today’s globalised world. As archetypal patterns are simultaneously perpetually recycled and perpetually re-assigned new meanings, we could probably talk about the establishment of an ‘international fictional imagery of nation branding’ (as one among numerous other such globalised patrimonies of essential images). It is mainly on what the abstract reality ‘fiction tourism’ or ‘place branding’ draw on, for instance; there is also a massive amount of stories (cult or simply folkloric), popular sayings or stereotypical narrations defining and redefining national or regional identities; and it is, in sum, a global patrimony of tremendous representational force that should neither be used lightly, nor ignored

as unpractical or unrelated to a community’s material existence. On the contrary: as archetypes and fictions never stop merging, emerging and re-emerging in a perpetual, unstoppable loop – and that, with or without our consent, advertently or not – to seriously consider a mythopoetic effort in the sense of attempting to ‘tame’ them, to knowingly contribute to their configuration, generation and perpetuation when it comes to nation branding related issues would probably be a profitable strategy in itself.

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