

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)

CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication

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Section: Literature

LITERARY DEFLECTION OF CULTURAL STEREOTYPES AS DELIBERATE DECONTEXTUALISATION : A CASE STUDY ON ALEXANDRU MUŞINA'S UPTIGHT VAMPIRE IN DRACULA'S NEPHEW

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Abstract: Using (and to some extent, "abusing") Jacques Derrida's concept of "decontextualisation" (and "recontextualisation"), the broadest interest of my paper is the deliberate (and critical) decontextualisation of stereotypes through literature. My study particularly focuses here on a fictional strategy I will call "literary deflection", i.e. the intentionally distorted reflection – having critical deconstruction as its main intent – of a cultural stereotype. As a hands-on illustration of this fictional policy, I have chosen Alexandru Muşina's take on the profile of the vampire in his last novel Nepotul lui Dracula [Dracula's Nephew] (2012). Starting from a thorough observation of the hilarious (ironical) "misuse" of the original romantic stereotype of the vampire in Muşina's story, this approach will eventually reveal the essentially ethical nature of such implied cultural identity (re)negotiation and the pertinence of fictional discourse as an instrument for cultural analysis.

Keywords: decontextualisation, orientalism, popular culture, stereotype, vampire

The critique of stereotypical representation (be it stereotypical thinking or expression) has been a rather common preoccupation for some 80s and 90s Romanian fiction writers (or poets engaging in prose). From Mircea Nedelciu's critical take on officially imposed moral identity patterns during Ceauşescu's regime and his critique of the regime's stereotypical perspective on the seemingly liberal and Westward-oriented youth of the 1970s to Petru Cimpoieşu's view upon stereotyped thinking in post-communist Romania in *Simion Liftnicul* [Simion the Elevator-Occupying Saint, 2001, 2007], or from Caius Dobrescu's criticism of stereotypical discourses concerning European integration in *Euromorphotikon* back to Max Torpedo's mock-police fiction, mock-popular "anti-sixties"¹ satire *Ghici cine trage în tine?*

¹Cf. Simona Sora in *Piaţa seducţiei*, "Dilema veche", no. 454, 25-31, October 2012, URL <http://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/carte/articol/piata-seducției>, consulted October 5th, 2016.

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[Guess Who's Shooting at You?, 1960²] – and then again, to Alexandru Muşina's more recent novel *Nepotul lui Dracula* [Dracula's Nephew, 2012] I will be discussing here –, a visible tendency to deconstruct various cultural or discursive stereotypes by using the ironic potential of prose can be spotted and “located” around the end of the 1980s, in the 1990s and in the 2000-2010s with authors that can be placed inside or around the so-called “80s generation” or in some of its direct influence zones³.

This type of “fictio-critical” approach⁴ to stereotypes actually uses a mechanism proper in general to the production of meaning through language and discourse Jacques Derrida called “decontextualisation” (and “recontextualisation”)⁵, i.e. the somewhat erroneous (or intentionally distorted and distorting) moving of a certain meaning – through “translation” – from its original context to another, which is different and unspecific, and which, by its nature, consequently alters the meaning itself in such a way as to create a new, different signification. In our case, fiction itself functions as such a new, differing context – either by recreating more or less mimetically an unlike cultural reality (as with Nedelciu and Cimpoieşu, or even with Torpedo and Muşina), or by creating a symbolic, dissimilar imaginary universe (as with Dobrescu) –, an “other”⁶ context configured in such a way as to affect the meaning itself. The transfer of stereotypes in fictional contexts which do not correspond to the original cultural circumstances in which those stereotypes have been produced thus functions with the authors I am referring to as such “translations” meant to create new meaning through the critical deconstruction of the initial significance and the construction of a new one having the first as a

²Max Torpedo, *Ghici cine trage în tine ?*, Sophia, -, 1992. Max Torpedo is a collective anonymous author (or “Ghost writer”), in reality made up of/by Alexandru Muşina, Caius Dobrescu, Andrei Bodiu, cf. Vasile Dan in *Un intelectual pursânge*, “Vatra”, issue no. 4-5/2014, “Dosar Alexandru Muşina” [Documents on Alexandru Muşina], pp.74-75.

³ Such as the group of 90s writers in Braşov mentored by Muşina, like Caius Dobrescu or Andrei Bodiu.

⁴ The meaning of the term shouldn't be confused with the concept of “critifiction” coined by Raymond Federman in *Critifiction: Postmodern Essays*, State University of New York Press, 1993.

⁵ Mainly in *Margins of Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1982 and *Of Grammatology*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore & London, 1998.

⁶In the sense given to the term by Michel Foucault in *Des espaces autres. Hétérotopies*. Michel Foucault, « Altfel de spații », in *Theatrum philosophicum*, Michel FOUCAULT, Ciprian MIHALI (ed.), Cluj-Napoca, Casa cății de știință, 2001, pp. 251-260.

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basis for creation. Obviously, these “fictio-critiques” are no cases of “mistranslation”, of unintentional inadequate usage of meaning, but cases of deliberate, intentional “deflection” having an ultimately ethical core. The message invariably links to a vision of critical thinking and perception closely related to the idea of an authentic freedom of thought and expression which can be easily traced as far back as to the Kantian definition of human dignity as a consequence of rational, intellectual and morally responsible behaviour and activity.

Context, communication and interdisciplinarity are therefore necessarily related when discussing such texts. Using fictional worlds as context, they also function, in fact, as dialogic discourses, as attempts to communicate and to (re)negotiate identities, principles, and value structures via literary discourse. This is why they sometimes also require interdisciplinary (philosophical/ethical, sociological, broadly cultural) rather than (just) meta-literary reading and interpretation.

In the case I’ve chosen for illustration – that of Alexandru Muşina’s *Nepotul lui Dracula* – cultural studies may come in handy too, for instance, as the book not only mocks commonplace pop culture imaginary and functional structures (from the vampire himself to the typical mechanisms of the bestseller), but its omniscient narrator also configures ironic, phantasmatic cultural analyses of his own, while the novel itself ultimately comes to constitute an ingenious (if heteroclitic) ethical meta-cultural discourse.

In other words, in *Nepotul lui Dracula*, several levels (or layers) of ironical and satirical fictional discourse add up to generate the actual cultural message dissimulated behind. The playful, *opera buffa*-like⁷ 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

⁷ Cf. Christian Moraru, *Romania’s Reluctant Vampires: Alexandru Muşina or, the Academic Novel as Cultural Analysis*, trans. into the Hungarian by Mihálycsa Erika as “Kétkedő vámpírok Romániából”, in “Magyar Lettre Internationale”, Budapest, Hungary, issue no. 93, July 2014, pp. 73-74 (8-p. mss.), trans. into the Romanian by Ramona Hârşan as “Vampirii refractari ai României: Alexandru Muşina sau romanul academic ca analiză culturală”, for “Alexandru Muşina. Viaţa şi opera”, national conference organised by the “Transilvania” University’s Faculty of Letters, 1st Edition, Braşov, 17th and 18th July 2014. The term is taken as such from the English variant of the text I have translated.

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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. But let us first have a quick look at the way these layers operate and the way in which stereotypes are deconstructed and re-used/recycled in order to generate new meaning.

The most blatant (counter-) stereotypical representation in the novel is the theme of the vampire and his Romanian ancestry. At this level, irony is intended to be visible and accessible to any reader, cultivated or not. Since any respectable vampire must descend from Vlad Țepeș, alias Dracula (via Bram Stoker and the entire popular culture reiterations that followed), 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: also (ridiculously) surnamed “professor FAD” (i.e., “dull”, “insipid” in Romanian) – or, in short, Fifi – 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, passionately teaching the same old infinite semiotics of Proust every year in a row. 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 (to the point that he cannot actually afford to go out for dinner, not even once in a while, if he is to pay out of his own pocket), his self-esteem and psychological composure are free-falling as he is constantly stressing about his own worth and the opinions of others (his colleagues especially – Fifi is actually terrorised by frequent nightmares involving the people he works with and the institution itself). Thus, our vampire’s disposition is (understandably) morose, introverted and... uptight, as he constantly manages to hinder and ridicule himself.

Obviously, 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. Of course, the story is in fact a false *bildungsroman*:

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the fading vampire (whose natural evolution and emancipation had been – of course – cut down by what else than the emergence of communism) slowly comes to life and becomes who he really is – i.e., a civilised (noble, even!), a legitimate, respectful and extremely polite consumer of (Romani) blood. And this, just after eating up a few good old steaks tartares⁸, accidentally meeting one of his would-have-(willingly and lovingly)-been Romani victim-slaves and finding true love in the arms of an obliging and overwhelmingly rich student of his, Lulu.

If revitalised, though, poor Fifi Drăculea doesn't get any more charming for that matter. The novel closes, for instance, on Fifi's dream of being enthroned king, while still wearing his pyjamas and his night beanie under a majestic tiger skin cape. His morals do not improve either at the same pace as his moral does. On the contrary: he comes to accept corruption as a fact of life, establishing a "good marks for (donated) blood" trade with his students. Thus, Fifi's revival becomes a hilarious (but clever) mixture of ridicule, bad-taste and... deep cultural observation. For his transformation can be very well interpreted as a symbolically displayed analysis of Romanian post-communism in terms of a society in which feudal or even pre-feudal-like relationships (e.g., master versus slave, hunter versus pray, superiority versus inferiority relationships which, in the end, manage to reduce the principles of the free market economy to raw exploitation, and competitive commercial exchanges to fair and square barter or to corruption etc.) and morals (based merely on survival values⁹, submission as foundation of social cooperation, inexplicit but internalised racism, assumed low self-worth of the "inferior" and illegitimate self-praise of the traditionally "superior") are disguised under superficially updated behaviours (e.g., the blood-offering Romani demand to be called gipsies / "țigani" in Romanian as they once were, and are now "cultivated" on an "industrial" scale in stock farms made and owned by themselves, their blood is willingly and legitimately sold as a vital good – used in perfectly "hygienic" and medically supervised transfusions etc.). Briefly, "it's a

⁸ A dish made up out of finely chopped raw beef.

⁹ In the sense given to the term by Ronald Inglehart, in *Culture and Democracy*, in *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, Lawrence E. Harrison Samuel P. Huntington (coord.), Basic Books, New York, 2000, pp. 79-96.

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(vampiric) jungle out there”, where adaptation actually equals (large-scaled, if somewhat benign) moral or identity compromise(s).

Of course, Christian Moraru is at least partially right when he assumes that this “resurgence” can be read, in fact, as a relation of submission between cultures (between influential and less influential ones), a matter of accepting an externally assigned identity (that of the vampire) and “living up to it”, willingly or not¹⁰. Obvious criticism is set, via the theme of the vampire, on the idea of “vitalism” labelling Eastern European cultures in general – and its immediate implied consequences for our society: being assigned the role of “raw material” supplier on the international “market” of material and non-material goods, our externally assigned, but internalised system of survival values comes to articulate a mechanism whose functioning inevitably calls to mind Michel Foucault’s depiction of the “panopticum”.

However, the entire symbolism of the narrative display also encourages an interpretation simultaneously “aiming” Muşina’s criticism at other (Western, too influential) cultural discourses (such as the Anglo-American one) and to our own, internal faults and cultural drawbacks (as Romanians). The ethical renegotiation of identity with Muşina can therefore be understood as a double, critical and self-critical (re)negotiation: with authoritarian but external discourses, on the one hand, and with our own frustrations and points of cultural stagnation on the other. As I have briefly shown, the level of the story alone already surpasses a simple deconstruction and decontextualisation of the classical (and rather obsolete) vampiric stereotype itself; or, better said, it “opens” the signification of this quite simplistic romance *topos* to deeper cultural meanings, that can more or less be summarised as a refined critique of the badly understood (and enacted) idea of a democratic free market system in post-communist Romania. And it may very well be that this is the reason why, narratively speaking, the “new-generation Dracula” becomes at the end of Muşina’s novel something of a burlesque and well-meaning Godfather, acquiring the aura of a local baron whose social success is based upon what

¹⁰ Christian Moraru, *op.cit.*

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Eduard Banfield called “familial amoralism”¹¹, i.e. a corruption system based on personal closeness, from kinship to close friendships, clientelar relationships, partnerships or allegiances. It is a type of amoralism that indisputably went on fuelling corruption in Romania after the fall of Ceauşescu’s regime, as most professional analyses of the Romanian society have shown since. Also, again according to Banfield, it is a kind of mentality specific to underdeveloped and rather traditional countries – just as Muşina symbolically suggests. In the meantime, the initially “uptight” profile of the vampire hints to theories of corruption such as Robert Merton’s¹², where amoralism is presented in relation to the degrees of frustration versus self-realization or achievement the member of a given society can (or cannot) achieve while holding on to his/her moral integrity.

But now, going back to the “layered” rhetoric of the novel I was mentioning before this short and rather hasty incursion in the novel’s possible narrative symbolism, it becomes more easily noticeable that this “double-aimed” culturally critical discourse isn’t contained in the symbolic image of the “(uptight) vampire” solely, but also goes beyond it in more than one way and at more than one expressive level. Thus, at a “second/ary” level, the same “double-tongued” critical discourse can be spotted in the intricate rhetoric net generated by some secondary characters’ speech(es). And I am especially referring here to the members of the “C.O.I.”, the self-instated “club of the (most) intelligent people” in the Faculty – whose abbreviated denomination can also be read in Romanian as a weird and significant singular form of the argotic term for “testicles”. And not accidentally so – as Teodor Cossiga (the “head of the organisation”) openly explains in the novel in such a way that the significance behind becomes quite self-evident –, but because the members of the “club” consider themselves to have half the (number of) “balls” (i.e., half the dignity and courage) average people have, but yet still think they have half more than most of their Romanian fellow conationals.

¹¹ In *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, Free Press, 1958.

¹² In *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Free Press, New York, 1957.

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This set of secondary characters (Cossiga, Stroescu, Cruceru, Bazil and Miky the Dean), sometimes doubled (or completed) by the observations of the omniscient storyteller, bring more to the text than meets the eye, i.e., than the “campus farce” dimension of the novel (or “university satire”, as Simona Sora puts it in her enthusiastic review of Muşina’s book¹³). Beyond the fact that they serve as ironic and auto-ironic hypostatisations of the author and a recognisable group of close friends and colleagues, these (again, relatively) false intellectuals in the story are (and are meant to be) little more than a sort of discursive functions of the text, or “discourse transmitters”, allowing the collateral rendition (and the *mise-en-scène*) of less formal and politically correct points of view on a variety of “hot” issues preoccupying the civilised world, from vegetarianism to political correctness itself, from unethical cultural PR and self-promotion strategies to conspiracy theories or to minority emancipation (such as vampires’ or women’s emancipation versus male emasculation, in the manner of Houellebecq’s *Extension du domaine de la lutte*¹⁴) etc. These characters (even if they do have extremely individualised intellectual profiles and stand for a caricature of the Romanian intellectual always trying to keep up with the “mental realities” of the most advanced societies of his time and disregarding the needs of his/her own) are basically dialogic, their presence in the book is in fact the presence of transmitted and scholarly interpreted cultural discourse, the spectre of its polyphonic – often confusing – (omni)presence, influence and pressure. The members of the C.O.I. – again, doubled sometimes by the narrative voice – thus function, stylistically and ethically, as auto-ironic, self-destructive entities producing mock-meta-cultural speech, a fictional mechanism warning about the dangers (and absurdities) of the inadequation and inappropriateness of ready-made, foreign (and thus estranged and estranging) cultural discourse.

And finally, the last and most subtle level of Muşina’s cultural discourse might be found – if rather unexpectedly so – in the programmatic aesthetic choice of the novel’s form. During

¹³ Simona Sora, *op.cit.*

¹⁴ Michel Houellebecq, *Extinderea domeniului luptei*, Polirom, Iaşi, 2005.

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the first national conference dedicated to his life and work¹⁵, there has been much and vivid talk on the novel's bestseller-like appearance and much controversy on the author's supposed serious or on the contrary, ironical intention to write a popular book, a best-selling vampire story. Mainly, some scholars argued that the intent of doing so existed and was earnest (but failed, the novel remaining undeniably too sophisticated to reach the average reader), while others thought that no talk about such intent could be taken seriously. All things considered, my demarche seems to point out that even if to a certain extent the novel's deep-level discourse is highly cultural, it has been nonetheless intentionally "wrapped up" by Muşina in an accessible, reader-friendly aesthetic "packing" in order to appeal and to "seduce" (as Simona Sora again very well puts it¹⁶). Now, this practice is not new, neither with Muşina himself, nor with Mircea Nedelciu or with the group of 90s writers Muşina has mentored in Braşov – and I am especially referring here to Caius Dobrescu and Andrei Bodiu – with whom he had already written, under the name of Max Torpedo, *Ghici cine trage în tine?* and (otherwise, significantly) founded, among other literary personalities of the 80s "generation", *Transilvania University's Faculty of Letters*. This practice of a "high" popular fiction genre – revolving somewhere around the conventions of the campus novel, (and/or) the detective fiction, (and/or) fantasy novels, (and/or) comedy (combined or not), while still addressing subtle and highly cultural and moral identity issues in the stories' background and vexing the dominant Romanian literary conventions – may constitute a rather significant direction of 80s and 90s authors' prose which has not yet been studied deeply enough. But apart from that, we should keep in mind, for the sake of the present argumentation, that this is first of all, with Muşina as well as the others, an aest-ethical option, i.e., an aesthetical choice based on an (ultimately) ethical standpoint. It is a principle literally expressed by Muşina probably more often and more overtly, especially in his comprehensive essayistic works, than by any of the other authors cited here (even if it functions just as well with all of them) – a principle I would call, in short, "the principle of cultural

¹⁵ The national conference *Alexandru Muşina. Viaţa şi opera* [Alexandru Muşina. His Life and Work], organised by *Transilvania University of Braşov*. The conference was held on the 17th and 18th July 2014.

¹⁶ Simona Sora, *op.cit.*

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adequacy”. It is a principle referring (and applying to) to any cultivated discourse, fiction included – because like Nedelciu before him, Muşina too thought that the “language” of literature in general, that of prose in particular, can and should be used as a dissimulated, attractively-wrapped (in the actual story) cultural discourse.

Explaining it briefly, this ethics of “cultural adequacy” implies that any cultural signification (cultural typologies, symbolic images, hypotheses, definitions of identity etc.) in any type of cultural discourse must be, above all, adequate to the phenomenon, to the phenomenological reality of the culture it refers to or is being applied to. Or, in other words, it means that in order to avoid stereotypification, cultural discourse must (imperatively) be (or become) adequate to culture. “Adequacy” here also implies that if cultural “ready-mades” do not match a certain cultural community, the reality of the “phenomenon” (as they usually don’t because of unavoidable contextual differences), then the cultivated discourse itself must be critically adapted, re-made, selectively and thoughtfully altered, or in a word... recontextualised. Paradoxically, this accessible satirical *mise-en-scène* in fictional (cont)ext(s) of academic, thorough cultural observation is thus actually meant to signify that cultural vocabulary cannot, by any means, be taken lightly. Or in any case, it cannot be taken lightly without falling into farce, falsity, bad-taste or unintended, morally-compromising stereotypical use of logos. It is, in the end, a discourse on the responsibility of cultural discourse and analysis, on the responsibility of its expression/transmission as well. In the end, it is again a *de facto* demonstration of Muşina’s permanent attention to the immediacy of real life and of his ultimate belief that literature can be fundamentally defined as “attention to the Other”, i.e., as an ethical approach having responsibility towards the reader at its core – a reader who can and should be any reader at all, with (theoretically) any potential level of perception –, an ethics which is before all things as dialogic, pluralist and integrative as it is critical and self-critical.

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