

Failed Cultural Hybridity and Takeaways for the Euro-Noir in the American-Romanian Series *Comrade Detective*

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Abstract

Comrade Detective (Amazon, 2017) is a crime spoof that employs Romanian actors dubbed by famous Hollywood stars to pretend to recover a propaganda TV series produced in 1980s Communist Romania. The paper explores the huge asymmetry between the apparent cosmopolitan and glocal program of the show and its total failure in activating the meaning processes and circuits that generate cultural cross-fertilization. This failure is the result of an involuntary deconstruction of the very conditions of possibility for representing multicultural personalities: by creating a symbolic gap between the corporeal and the vocal performers, the series highlights a power relationship that denies the personalist essence of a cosmopolitan ethos. Hybridity is also absent from the series: the presumable networks of connexions activated by a Romanian versus an American ideal viewer are completely non-interfering.

Keywords: Spoof – carnivalization – dubbing – hybridity – Communism

The present case study is in several ways eccentric with respect to topic of this issue. Actually, it attempts to illuminate it from a reverse angle. First of all, it touches on the European area only in a marginal way, since the analyzed series, *Comrade Detective*, is narratively set and filmed on location in Romania, a country generally perceived as one of the remotest and most questionable recesses of the EU. But marginal and questionable as it may be, this area is nonetheless part of Europe, and its image problems, as reflected in the series, are European problems. On another level, the European relevance is challenged by the fact that the series is actually a US production, with a US commercial and political agenda. Even so, a series produced in an EU country, by US creators and sponsors, implicitly asks questions of transatlantic European image and perception.

The case study equally implies the treatment of cosmopolitanism and glocality from a reverse perspective. That is to say, it presents the manner in which the series emphatically contradicts both of these notions / values. But presenting cosmopolitanism and glocality in a distorted mirror of ethical and artistic failure implies not simply their deconstruction, but bringing to the fore their deeper nature: the (possibility of a) multicultural person / personality, for cosmopolitanism; the blending of the global / local space as intertwined cultural memory networks, for glocality.

Vanity Fair expressed a rhetorical puzzlement, probably striking a chord with the larger US audience, when asking, in the subtitle of its review titled "Back in the USSR: 'What the hell is *Comrade Detective*?''" (Schildhause 2017). *LA Times* lapidary answered that it "purports to be a lost Romanian police procedural from the twilight of the Cold War" (Lloyd 2017). Indeed, the show is a six-episodes spoof, "so meta" in the eyes of *New York Times*, "that it's hard to tell what it's actually parodying" (Castillo 2017). *The Guardian* elaborates on this: "OK, fine, *Comrade Detective* isn't a real show. [...] Instead, it's an astonishingly high-concept Amazon comedy; a detective spoof written in English, then filmed in Romania with real Romanian actors speaking Romanian, then dubbed back into English" (Heritage 2007). *Comrade Detective* was indeed filmed on premises, that is to say in Bucharest, the Romanian capital city, employing a Romanian cast and crew. The executive producer of the show, Channing Tatum, dubbed the main character, detective Gregor Anghel of the "Bucharest PD" (played by Romanian actor Florin Piersic

Jr.), while lining up the voices of Hollywood peers to interpret the other characters, such as Joseph Gordon-Levitt to vocally impersonate detective Anghel's partner, detective Baciu, (physically played by Romanian actor Corneliu Ulici). An American blogger highlights other dubbing luminaries in the following rapid survey:

Nick Offerman plays [actually, dubs] the chief of police in Bucharest and Jenny Slate voices Sally, a secretary at the US embassy who becomes the ambassador to Romania. Jason Mantzoukas and Jake Johnson voice two other cops on the force who are lazy and always make fun of our lead duo, and Bobby Canavale appears in an episode as a sleazy porn director peddling porn into Romania. Daniel Craig makes a supporting appearance in an episode [actually, two episodes, CD] as a secret catholic priest running services underground and dealing Bibles, and what makes it so hilarious is he does it in this ridiculously heavy Scottish accent for some reason. Talents like Chloë Sevigny, Richard Jenkins and Debra Winger lend their voices to other roles (Griffin 2017).

To this, we could add Kim Basinger, dubbing Sally Smith, the US ambassador who mysteriously commits suicide at the end of episode 1, and the vocal cameo of Oscar-winning Mahershala Ali, dubbing a wrestling coach who pops up in the childhood memories of the lead Communist detective.

In the following, I will analyse the series along two main axes. On the one hand, I will explore the textual inscription of the logic of cosmopolitanism, understood non so much as an expression of a multicultural society, but of a multicultural personality. This perspective implies a clear link between pluralism and a sense of entity or personal closure. On the other hand, I will propose glocality as a blending of mental spaces defined and constituted by networks of cultural memory that develop analogies and semantic hybridities; consequently, I will evaluate the chances that the networks of cultural associations presumably activated by an American vs. Romanian ideal audience of the series would overlap and develop such hybridities.

Possession and Ventriloquism

Conceptually, cosmopolitanism cannot be separated from the idea of an empowerment bestowed upon the individual person. Therefore, it should be understood against the distinction between multicultural societies and multicultural individuals (Wieseltier 1994, Kern 2003), or citizens (Kymlicka 1996, Delgado-Moreira 2018). The distinction is intuitive: the coexistence of different social-cultural communities in the same political and administrative space does not imply, or automatically generate, the capacity of the individual members of assuming several cultural identities (van der Zee & Oudenhoven 2000, Ponterotto 2010). Cosmopolitanism implies a capacity for transcending cultural boundaries, but, at the same time, the basis for flexibility and pluralism is given by a sense of individual/personal consistency (Moses 1997, Ramirez 1998).

In *Comrade Detective*, the policy of separating voices and bodies is a manner of devaluing the personal integrity, consistency, and autonomy that are foundational for the constitution of a cosmopolitan mind-frame. The regime of bodies vs. voices in the series can be seen as illustrating the definition of spiritual possession given by anthropologist Ann Grodzins Gold: “any complete but temporary domination of a person’s body, and the blotting of that person’s consciousness, by a distinct alien power of known or unknown origin” (quoted in Keller 2002: 3-4). The use of disembodied voices, akin to superior ‘spirits’, could be easily associated with ventriloquism, in a metaphor that “allows the violence and violation that are bound up in the exercise of the voice to be deflected into a judicial register of ownership, possession, property and appropriation” (Connor 2001, 75). It most specifically recalls “the ethnic ventriloquism” as identified by Meena Banerjee in 19th century American literature, “through which the white subject creates a situation in which it is un-identical with itself. Ethnic ventriloquism represents the strategy of a white subject looking at itself through – presumably – ethnic eyes” (Banerjee 2008, 16). Though the local Romanian actors are racially white, the telluric inferiority of their muted ‘proletarian’ bodies might bring to mind the times when anthropologist Franz Boas was opposing, as head of a research commission appointed by president Theodore Roosevelt, a pseudo-science that “used to construct buffer races or intraracial categories of inferiority that were imposed on Italians, Sicilians, Slavs, Hungarians, and Rus-

sian Jews during the first two decades of the twentieth century – the height of the Eastern European migration to the United States” (Baker 1998, 88). Boas’ report was dismissed, and, in 1924, the “Immigration Restriction Act” was passed with the explicit intention of keeping at bay immigrants of “inferior stock” (Schaefer 2008, 473).

Even if the voice actors of *Comrade Detective* follow the actual script to a T, the series is in fact no less culturally schizoid than *What’s Up, Tiger Lily?*, Woody Allen’s 1966 experiment with the absurdist dubbing of a hardboiled Japanese spy movie. It is obvious that both the onstage and backstage universe of *Comrade Detective* bears the imprint of the geopolitical discrepancy between the U.S. and Romania – not dissimilar to the “asymmetrical political order” postulated by Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande with respect to the power balance between the Western and Eastern members of the EU (quoted in Rumford 2008, 99). The interaction between the ‘upper’ voices and the ‘lower’ bodies can be associated with what Bakhtin has called “carnivalistic mésalliances” (Bakhtin 1984, 123).

Comrade Detective reverses the normal distribution of symbolic capital between the dubber and the dubbed. The norm has it that the visible performers are the actual stars, while the voice actors are, more often than not, compelled to anonymity. Undoubtedly, a large part of the international audience has seen the stars of *Comrade Detective*’s voice line-up expressing themselves fluently in French, German, Spanish, or Cantonese without a shadow of interest in finding out who were the actual owners of the voices. But in this fake-1980s, fake-Communist show, the aura resides in the audible, while the performing actors are relegated to the condition of a sub-altern who, as in the classical analysis of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), cannot actually speak. Their bitter silence is similar to the one suggested by Mike Presdee with respect to television contests that brutally and inconsiderately expose the privacy of the participants: “Of course [they] sign a confidentiality document that restricts them from telling how the programme was made, thereby keeping hidden the processes of the production of humiliation” (Presdee 2002, 69).

Failed common space, diverging memory networks

Glocality is a specific form of shared, and therefore blended mental spaces (Fauconnier 1994, Fauconnier & Turner 2002, Benyon 2014).

The spatiality of the mind could be construed as an indefinite expansion of cultural memory networks. The global-local blending implies the analogies, leading to mutual metamorphosis, or transgressions, between the elements of two different memory networks.

Theoretically, the worlds that seem to collide almost by mistake in *Comrade Detective* could have created at least a piecemeal perception of a “space of wonder,” such as those which are “made manifest by processes associated with globalization, which have an unsettling, destabilizing, or disorienting effect in the sense that they are difficult to comprehend or assimilate into understandings of political topography to the extent that they inspire awe or wonder in those trying to apprehend them” (Rumford 2008, 70). In the following, I will show that the networks of associations presumed to underpin the popular culture memory of a Romanian versus an American viewer are completely divergent, and therefore unable to generate the field of reticulated analogies, i.e. hybridities – even the kind of “hybridity without guarantees” mentioned by (Kraidy 2005, 148-162) – that would generate a properly glocal mental space.

Among the most salient stimuli set to trigger the recognition response of an American audience are the Russian and Soviet symbols. Creators Gatewood and Tanaka have generously spread such markers throughout the story, their interest being actually to build a fictional space that would be immediately identified as Soviet. Director Rhys Thomas may well have gathered elements of *couleur locale* and historical atmospherics such as civilian and police clothes, cars, interior decorations, still the creators were manifestly indifferent to Romanian elements beyond the possibility of using them as vectors of Soviet-ness. While perfectly familiar and comfortable for an American audience, the discrepancies generated through this approach are disturbing not only for Romanians. For example, answering the question: “What do Romanians think about *Comrade Detective*?” on the “Quora” platform, David Herron, an American resident of Romania introducing himself as “independent writer and software developer,” states:

“Do Romanians drink Vodka? Nope. Tsuica or Palinka are the choice depending on whether you’re from Transylvania or Oltenia. Why were so many of the names slavic sounding? It’s almost as if the writers expect all Eastern

European countries to be Slavic, when Romania definitely is not a Slavic country. I saw interviews of the writers – they’d never been to Romania, and seemed to not know much about the country. There’s a whole lot of story things like that which grated on me the wrong way around.” (Herron 2017)

Even more misplaced are the pervasive allusions to the international Communist mythology. A short list of the sequences that emphatically display this symbolisms should contain: the Che Guevara-ish detective Anghel giving his new partner detective Baciu, as a bond of trust, his old copy of Lenin’s teachings; detectives Anghel and Baciu going to the movies and letting themselves be mesmerized by Eisenstein’s 1925 *Battleship Potemkin*; detective Anghel remembering the moment in his childhood when he discovered that his parents had fallen prey to capitalist hedonism, and consequently turned them in to the political police – a strident allusion to the Soviet child-martyr Pavlik Morozov, who allegedly gave away his own father to the KGB and was eventually killed by his own family (a myth, according to recent investigations, that seems to have been invented by the KGB; see Kelly 2006). This entire symbolic infrastructure is alien to a contemporary Romanian audience, just as it would have been to the audience of 1980s. At that time, the ideology of the Ceaușescu regime had switched completely to nationalism, and allusions to the Soviet origins of the system, or even to Marx himself, were carefully excluded from the propaganda rhetoric, and even seen as almost subversive. The only accepted public idolatry was strictly reserved to Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu (Tismaneanu 2003, 187-232).

Another network of innuendos that exclusively appeal to an American public is connected to the carnivalization (Bakhtin 1984) of the American establishment. The purely American terms of endearment (or revulsion, for that matter) with *Comrade Detective* would imply an up close and personal connection to the reversal of authority postures and the mock-desecration of American symbols: an assassin wearing a hideous Ronald Reagan mask; the US ambassador represented as a femme fatale with connections to the basest underworld; the US embassy, a sacred space of the civil religion, ostentatiously feminized (both the ambassador and the assistant

who takes over the office after her death are female figures, sexualized in the disco fashion of the 1980s, and then penetrated by the macho Romanian militiamen, who seem to barge in whenever they like, rattling the sack of presumed capitalist conspiracies). The mockery of religiously inspired politics is also done in a manner that is familiar to American audiences – since it reproduces the stereotypes through which the domestic ‘religious right’ is portrayed in liberal filmmaking, television and media. Anarchy, promiscuity, orgiastic explosions – the carnivalization permeates the whole series and from an all-American perspective.

The presumption that this discourse is intrinsically subversive and that, in spite of its lack of cultural sensitivity towards the Other, it confers the series a certain countercultural edge deserves a special note. Comedian Joseph Gordon-Levitt, who dubs the supporting character of detective Baciu, argues for such a status, on grounds of the claimed independence of the series from all ideological allegiance:

[...] the right-wing *National Review* praised it as “Anti-Communist”. But then again, left-wing *Vice* praised it as “Pro-Communist”. So, who’s right? Well first of all I should probably say, it’d be fair to call me a Lefty. My parents were dedicated peace activists in the ‘60s and ‘70s. I voted for Bernie Sanders. I played Edward Snowden in an Oliver Stone movie and donated my fee to the ACLU. So it might be surprising to hear me agree [that] the Communist regimes of the Cold War era deserve to be made fun of. And then some. They were brutal, tyrannical dictatorships. They completely shat on many of the values I hold dear: freedom of speech, press, and religion, the right to privacy, a fair trial, and I could go on. However, *Comrade Detective* isn’t only making fun of Eastern Bloc Communism. It also takes a few shots at Western Capitalism, but in my opinion, that’s not it either. There’s a different “ism” that I think it’s really getting at – tribalism. (Gordon-Levitt 2017)

This attitude might invite the sympathy of the liberally-minded, but what the series actually delivers is not a subversion of the men-

mental conditioning that turns communities into mobs, but rather a mechanical reversion of narrative and ideological stereotypes. The ideological equidistance claimed by Gordon-Levitt is in fact only the other side of indifference. Basically, *Comrade Detective* is as formulaic and, implicitly, as voided of any serious political meaning as the classical spoof recipe of Leslie Nielsen's *Naked Gun* franchise. Authentic subversion presupposes the art of letting expressions of lived experience become apparent through the fissures that it creates in the façade of the officially codified 'reality'. But in *Comrade Detective* there are no underlying levels of experience, be they American or Romanian. The series has only to offer a comic collision between the two rudimentary models of ideological propaganda on the one hand and 'capitalist' mass-culture on the other, a show no more subtle or complex than a monster trucks battle.

Let's go back now to the set of interlaced indices presumably activated from the perspective of the Romanian spectator with a history of pre-1989 socialization. This level of meaning is completely inaccessible to an American or a Western European spectator, who could understand neither the point to which, especially in the 1980s, the ideal image of the Romanian society projected by the media was deliriously disconnected from what ordinary people experienced as reality, nor the implicit but pervasive double decoding (as understood in Hall 2018) of official messages.

In the popular culture archive of the Romanian viewer, the Manichean image cavalierly projected by creators Gatewood and Tanaka over the domestic media mythology of the 1980s inevitably resonates with the most successful crime films of the Socialist era, namely Sergiu Nicolaescu's series of films featuring "the Commissar." Surprisingly enough for a Western mind set, this police rank denomination was not derived from the Soviet *komisar*, but rather from the French *commissaire*: it referred to a detective of the pre-Communist Royal Romanian Police, investigating around 1940, a time when the country was collapsing into Fascism. This background allowed for presenting the 'vices' of 'capitalism', mainly the alleged irresponsible hedonism of the upper classes. Brothels and lewd parties were liberally inserted in the movies, just as in the final episode of *Comrade Detective*, which presents the den of anti-Communist saboteurs as a completely implausible Hugh-Heffner-ish manor. At the same time, the arch-enemies of the Commissar were not regular

gangsters or bootleggers – just as in the American series, largely popular in Romania, *The Untouchables* (1959-1963, Desilu Productions/Langroed Productions, for ABC), which obviously inspired Nicolaescu. They were religious fanatics of the radical right, depicted in a somewhat similar manner (e.g. long black leather jackets) to the improbable 1980s fanatical underground patronized by Father Streza in *Comrade Detective*. But an older Romanian audience reminiscent of the television campaigns orchestrated by the Romanian Communist authorities, especially in the 1970s might read *Comrade Detective's* figuration of religious fanatics rather as a parody of the propagandistic grotesque portrayal of unregimented Christian communities in a feature film such as *Întuneric alb* (lit. White Darkness, 1982, Româniafilm).

But perhaps the most salient element on a map of connections accessible only to the Romanian audience is the fact that the name of *Comrade Detective's* lead actor, Florin Piersic Jr. (b. 1968) carries the specification “Jr.” in order to distinguish him from his father, Florin Piersic *tout court* (b. 1936), an iconic actor of the Communist times. Still immensely popular in Romania, Piersic Sr. starred in detective and spy movies that were intimately blending ideology and consumer culture, such as *Aventuri la Marea Neagră* (lit. *Adventures on the Black Sea Riviera*, 1972, Româniafilm), *Un august în flăcări* (lit. *An August in Flames*, a 13 episodes TV series, 1974), *Agentul straniu* (The Strange Agent, 1974, Româniafilm), or *Racolarea* (lit. *Crimping*, 1985, Româniafilm). For the Romanian public, the complexity of Piersic Jr.'s symbolic/symbiotic relation with his father connotes the continuities and gaps between Romanian generations in general. The identification with the father icon is doubled by an implicitly ironic distancing – the character played by Piersic Jr. is worn out, unshaven, decaying, alcoholic, turbulent, in total contrast to the neat, impeccable, elegant secret service officer, clearly fashioned on the James Bond/Roger Moore pattern, played by his father.

The diverging lines of propagation of the Romanian vs. American popular culture memory networks offer an expressive representation of the extended fault that peremptorily divides the global and the local. A concentrated explanation for this failure can be found in an essay on “ethnic detectives” fiction by Gina and Andrew Macdonald (1999, 93): “context rules [...] transforming the meaning of what is borrowed; only if large segments of context are

also absorbed does true cultural melding take place” (93). Indeed, both reception horizons surveyed above seem to lack any context transplant that would allow the candid perception of elements coming from the other side, or “world”.

Takeaways for a Federating Euro Noir

Comrade Detective is produced by forcefully compacting distinct networks of popular culture and social memory, in such a way as to speed up, artificially and commercially, the ripening of a glocal hybrid. The outcome, at the end of the day, is neither global nor local. But this shouldn't be seen as the fatal outcome of the mental and emotional gap between the two cultures. In order to pre-empt such a hasty conclusion, I will point out at least one area that suggests the (missed) opportunity for an authentic communication that could have transgressed historical, social, ideological, geopolitical divides. Let me start from the fact that most of the Americans and Romanians involved in the project belong to the same generation: they were kids in the 1980s, and their memories of the period are interspersed with the movies and popular culture of that age. In a *Vanity Fair* interview, co-screenwriter Brian Gateway confesses: “We grew up in the '80s, watching *Red Dawn* and *Rocky IV* and all these films – not really knowing as kids that we were essentially watching propaganda,” prompting executive producer Channing Tatum to add that every movie that impregnated his juvenile imagination “had a Russian bad guy” (both quoted in Schildhouse 2017). At his end, Florin Piersic Jr. also reverted to teenage memories when asked to assess his personal connection to the project:

It has nothing to do with Communist nostalgia. I have the right to my own personal nostalgia, because back then I was 15, and enjoying my high-school epoch. [...] Back then I had the distinct feeling that life is infinite. The fact that everything was forbidden had a charm of its own. Whenever you listened to a Pink Floyd cassette, you instantly became a dissident... (Piersic 2017, my translation).

Paradoxically or not, the decision to treat the series in a neo-noir visual register can be construed, from both the American and the Romanian sides, as an attempt to retrieve the replenishment of ‘ir-

responsible' youth. The re-loading the macho mythology of the 1980s could be seen as purely and gratuitously playful, thereby fuzzing the childhood/teenage nostalgia with the fluid melancholy of noir and neo-noir detective movies. Dawn and twilight, aural and nocturnal fantasies seem to convene around a dreamy proliferation of 'crime fighting' childhood fantasies. An authentic transatlantic empathy could have been developed around a common state of mind, such as the one suggestively described by Paula Saukko in an analysis of the cult animation show *South Park*:

[...] the way in which the four central children resist the normalizing agencies and institutions in their lives, such as parents, school, counselling, army, religion, mass media, consumerism and political correctness, is very much in keeping with the notion of the romantic male child, such as Rousseau's Emile, that resist restrictive authorities (Saukko 2003, 145).

Starting from this focal symbolism of the playful/mockery recovery of 'natural' childhood, the crime pattern can as well become a tool for exploring the relationship with the world of the 'adults'. If played upon in an intelligent and insightful manner, this imaginary layer could have transcended the *mental* Iron Curtain, which, instead, is reinforced in the outcome of the project. The fact that such promising latencies have been completely aborted in the actual series should count as a lesson and a warning for a Europe whose prospects of cohesive and robust citizenship are staked on the emergence of vibrant popular narratives that could weave national experiences into a shared cultural memory (Delanty & Rumford 2005).

Among the main takeaways of such an exemplary failure, we should count its implicit representation of international space – which is essentially a mental and imaginary one – as undetermined, governed by caprice and mood, a place of arbitrariness, essentially barren, given its incapacity of nurturing actual cultural hybridization. It is most certainly not the manner in which Europe would want to propagate through symbolism, imagination and fiction its notion of fair and fruitful international communication and cooperation.

Then, *Comrade Detective* could teach Western Europeans a lesson in the moral costs of manipulating the representation of Eastern Europe for domestic purposes. The caricature of Romanian Communism is meant to mock in retroversion the propaganda of the US interventionist right. But this allegedly liberal goal is actually tainted by a complete instrumentalization of the Other, in blatant contradiction to the basic Kantian principle of treating human beings not as means, but as goals to themselves. The problem is not the irreverent treatment of Communism, but the total lack of empathy or, at least, intellectual curiosity for the human experience beyond the ideological façade of the regime. A consequence of this complete lack of empathy is the reinforcement of stereotypes on Eastern Europe as a realm of eternal poverty and destitution – which encourages an attitude of covert revulsion and/or fantasies of unrestricted sadistic power. Eastern Europe is perceived as a territory placed outside social and moral restrictions, the inert setting of an orgy (in the sense of Pettman 2002) enacted by the ‘citizens of the world’ at the expense of the menial locals.

Europe is the stage of a grandiose moral parable. The problem with Europe’s East-West cohesion lies with the solution of the moral conundrum of bringing together a prosperous West that tends to go beyond itself in the Faustian quest for owing everything, of exercising an unlimited and arbitrary authority, and a destitute East whose hubris is the desperate attempt to escape the overload of its indigence and subalternity. A common temptation is experienced from totally opposed angles – selling everything out for standing and status vs. purchasing even the most intimate and valuable things of the disenfranchised. The example of *Comrade Detective* shows that, in and by themselves, strategies of parody and satire are powerless in front of such a tremendous challenge. Mockery could and should be part of the solution, as far as it is a part of the European core cultural legacy, but it cannot frame a substantial process of cultural blending. *Comrade Detective* shows that, left to its own devices, mock-cracy overcomes and paralyzes the fertile hybridity of actual carnavalization.

Europe has to create a shared world – or succumb. A common cosmopolitan and glocal imaginary is instrumental to this, and the transgressive and cohesive latencies of noir crime series already proved very effective in capturing intercultural chemistry. Europe

has the opportunity not simply to use crime narratives as a form of sensitizing its transcontinental texture of moral awareness, but also to project, on a global scale, its own model of productive transgression of narrowly defined cultural identities. And from this perspective, it should act, in its noir and crime fictional exploration, rather as a de-mock-crazy.

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