

The Functions of Socialist Realism: Translation of Genre Fiction in Communist Romania

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Socialist realism has often been perceived as a mass culture movement, but few studies have succeeded in defining its true structure as being mass-addressed. The general view on literature under socialist realism is that of standardized writing and formulaic genre. This paper aims to analyze the genre fiction and subgenres of fiction translated in Romania during socialist realism with a view to acquiring a more comprehensive perspective of the social purpose and functions of socialist realist literature. There have been many attempts to control popular and youth novels in keeping with the ideological program of the USSR and its entire sphere of influence. At the same time, these struggles should be opposed/connected to the development of popular fiction in the Western cultures, as the two opposite cultural systems share several important similarities: if we consider that the most translated authors of fiction within the Stalinist Romanian cultural system were Alexandre Dumas, Jack London and Mark Twain, the gap between Western and Eastern popular fiction would no longer seem so great, while their functions may be opposite.

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Socialist realism is not entirely made through realism.¹ In fact, over the last several decades, literary studies have shown that socialist realism is not even related to realism. Katerina Clark's 1981 *The Soviet Novel* or Greg Carleton's 1994 seminal essay *Genre in Socialist Realism* have demonstrated how socialist realist fiction was undermined by its mythological representation of figures or by annulling the fictional pact through the exaggeration of truth lying at the core of the narrative

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world. This is, in a way, why soviet dissident critic Andrei Sinyavsky (Abram Tertz) stated in his *On Socialist Realism*, as early as 1959, that socialist realism is a “loathsome literary salad” (91). In other words, what socialist realism did was, on the one hand, to hyperbolize characters, transforming them into mythological figures and on the other, to sell fiction as undisputed reality and truth. The latter strategy broke all the imaginable conventions of mimetic projections, as any socialist realist representation claimed to constitute rather than duplicate the truth. In Katerina Clark’s words, “fictional, historical, and actual experience were homogenized insofar as they all tended to be refracted through the lens of myth to form one of the archetypal patterns” (40). Greg Carleton underlined the effects of this principle put forward by Clark and showed convincingly that literary genres lost their specificity during socialist realism precisely as a result of the abolishment of genre peculiarities. As the distance between fiction and non-fiction became unnoticeable, reading conventions were destined to follow the same path: “Subordinating concerns for genre to the reification of topoi ensures that the constitution of textual function occurs at an antecedent and higher axis than genre per se” (1004).

But socialist realism in literature does not comprise socialist realist literature only. Those analyses have largely grounded their arguments on a literary corpus of the official literature of the party, commissioned in the bureaus of the Soviet Union and written to fit the strict criteria initially formulated in 1932 and actively in force since 1934, when a unique mode of representation was adopted. In communist Romania, after 1946, and officially after 1948, this high role inside the cultural field was reserved for the “truly faithful, or the ones to which the truly faithful had given this privilege to” (Goldiș, *Critica* 17). A paradoxical guideline for creativity, socialist realism was, in fact, a slaughterhouse for the literature of the past and present. It is not entirely far-fetched to say that no other ideology has set its goals so direct in reorganizing world literature and the bourgeois literary canon like the Soviet state-planned culture did. So that while modern literatures in Europe have established their canonical figures through what Franco Moretti called “blind canon makers” (210), the Soviet Union and the annexed Eastern European cultures following World War II did anything but that. But the process of selection and production of literature should not be seen only against this one-way negotiation of the literary space alone; the general taste of the masses and the international scene also played an undoubtedly crucial role, no matter how convincingly Boris Groys argues the opposite by

stating that “socialist realism was not created by the masses but was formulated in their name by well-educated and experienced elites” (9). As recent studies show, “the decision as to which Soviet authors were canonized was determined not only by Stalin’s decision but also by the popularity of these authors among Soviet readers, as well as among fellow writers” (Safullina 559–560), drawing in my reading to what Evgeny Dobrenko has called “the power-masses” (135), a hybrid between political power and tastes of the reading public. “In sharp contrast,” Safullina continues, “in the canonization of foreign authors political considerations dominated entirely.”

My thesis is that for the postwar cultural logic socialist realism itself is in fact one of the most important managers of global genre literature and one of the most subgenre diverse literary phenomena through translation and Soviet production. A fact not very often debated or, in the Romanian case, totally neglected up until recent studies, but a fact that is crucial for the understanding of cultural production in Eastern Europe during the Cold War.

World genre fiction in Romanian translation during Stalinism

Stalinism’s relationship with world literature has always been hard to portray. This is, on the one hand, due to a necessary assumption of a selection paradox: while annexed cultures are starting to translate faraway literatures with no precedent in their translation process such as African, Asian, and South American literatures (Baghiu 2018), the political agenda limits the possibilities of translation to a very small number of authors and titles. In 1946, a decree published in *Adevărul vremii* [*The Truth of Our Time*] set the parameters of translated literature in Romania by presenting an account of world fiction published in the Soviet Union. The subchapter “Literatura străină în URSS” [“Foreign Literature in the USSR”] provided a list of authors officially authorized by socialist realism. This list restricted a lot the possibilities of translation, but featured many a foreign writer of French, English, and American literatures, among which primary were Jules Verne, Victor Hugo, Guy de Maupassant, Emile Zola, Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland, Paul Lafargue, Anatole France, Honoré de Balzac, Prosper Mérimée, Gustave Flaubert, Jack London, Mark Twain, Upton Sinclair, Seton Thomson, Roberts Charles, O. Henry, John Steinbeck, James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, H. G. Wells, Rudyard

Kipling, Charles Dickens, Jonathan Swift, William Shakespeare, John Galsworthy, Daniel Defoe, Jerome K. Jerome, Walter Scott, Joseph Conrad, and Robert Louis Stevenson (CVLR I 203).

Although varying in narrative style and subgenre, they have been put together for either their voluntary declarations of enthusiasm for communism and Stalin, or for the manner in which their literature could be likened to socialist ideology. Hence it is that among the authors accepted by socialist realism there were many authors whose works were not based on realism at all. The internationalist mission of socialist realism was as dogmatic as it was impure, and engaged in a constant pursuit not to dissolve the impurities within its system, but transform them into assimilable components, in a true “tendency towards homogenization” (Goldiș, *Literary* 88). A process of incorporation that was also visible in the communist states of Eastern Europe, applied this time to their own literatures, which were struggling to establish their local socialist literary canon. A good example in this regard is the debate over Ion Creangă, one of the most important Romanian nineteenth-century fiction writers. His alleged class struggle was put forward by socialist realist critic Al. N. Trestieni in 1946, who argues that his children’s prose, drawing on folktales and fantasy, has depicted “under the guise of fantasy ... genuine exploiter typologies” (CVLR V 186).

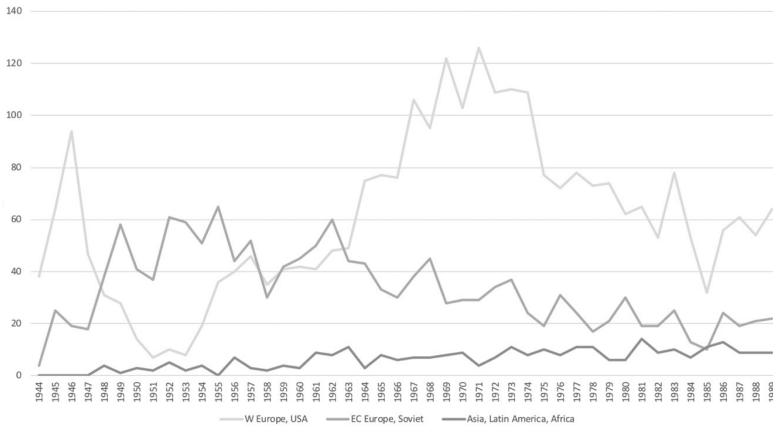
It is this kind of arguments that were used to align every possible genre fiction and consumption literature with the socialist realism desires, ranging from the European and American classics of detective, adventure, SF to fantasy novels. The inherent escapism of those subgenres was largely ignored by the Soviet translation programs despite their natural incompatibility with a strict, rigid, and formulaic literature. As Mihai Iovănel notes, referring to Stalinist Romania, “limiting the genres and, in turn, Western competition allowed for genres such as detective novels to thrive considerably in comparison to the pre-communist tradition” (165). Which is quite controversial to Evgeny Dobrenko’s suggestion that inside socialist realism “science fiction is ‘nonsense’” (154).

The list published in *Adevărul vremii* features different authors of genre fiction, covering adventure novels, dystopian fiction, military Science-Fiction, horror stories and space exploration novels. And it also brought forward authors of children’s literature, this genre too being just as diverse. This is the reason why I consider of major importance to place more emphasis on the functions of literature within socialist realism, a matter Gary Saul Morson has stressed in his bril-

liant 1979 essay *Socialist Realism and Literary Theory*. Because it is crucial to understand that literature, despite the very precise ideological purpose the Soviet culture attributed to it (Tucker), never actually fulfilled only one function.

Yet observations such as these only arise when certain quantitative facts are brought to light. First, the fact that Jules Verne is the most translated author in Romania during socialist realism. He is, of course, the most translated author in Romania of all times (Ursa) and the second most translated author in the world according to *Index Translationum*. But during Romanian socialist realism, conventionally starting in 1948 and dissolved in 1964, he is as translated as Maxim Gorki or Feodor Gladkov, who are the pioneers and most notable figures of Soviet culture. How did socialist realism handle such diverse authors against its struggle to legitimate the Soviet proletarian fiction? Second, how were H. G. Wells or Jack London translated and what social functions did their novels fulfill? It would be quite unprofessional to believe that they had no impact whatsoever on socialist realism, since theorists as Bourdieu (64) and later on Andrew Millner (396) have convincingly shown the important position genre literature occupies in the French and, to some extent, the world literary field, at once close to autonomy and stretching for heteronomy. The question should be further directed toward the presence of unnoticed writers of genre fiction inside socialist realism: in what ways were the novels of Ivan Yefremov, Vladimir Obruchev or Alexander Belyaev imported in Eastern Europe during communism, since Darko Suvin argued that “Soviet SF of the 1920s had ... established a tradition ranging sociologically from facile subliterate to some of the most interesting works of ‘highbrow’ fiction” (262)?

To contextualize the topic and illustrate the proportions of the phenomena, I have put together a graph of all novels translated in Romania between 1944 and 1989 (Baghiu 2018). Exhaustive as it is, it contains a large number of genre fiction works, in different unidentified proportions. Unidentified, because there is no possible way of saying how many, since a quantitative analysis of the corpus in order to establish a genre pattern has not of late been put forward. The most important instruments in this area were only drawn in 2011 by the Stanford Literary Lab (Moretti 2017) and imply computational analysis. But Soviet literature studies have always been tempted to rely in their research on the novels deeply entrenched in formulaic socialist realism, neglecting, to use Jordan Y. Smith’s concept, this entire translation-scapes inside Soviet cultures.



Graph 1: The General Timeline of Translation of Novels in Communist Romania (1944–1989)

Genre fiction in Romania: from “subliterature” to functional literature

In 1848, only three novels were rendered in Romanian: *Istoria unui mort*. *Povestită de el însuși* (unidentified original title) by Alexandre Dumas, père, *Speronare* (part III, part I–II had already been published in 1846) and the more famous *Călătoriile lui Guliver în țări îndepărtate* [*Gulliver’s Travels*] by Jonathan Swift. The latter would not be commented in literary magazines until 1879, in a translated article of French critic H. Taine. Most of the translated literature from the mid-nineteenth century was, in fact, genre fiction, specifically adventure novels and sensationalist ones. In 1849, only two novels were translated, one by Alexandre Dumas-Père and the other by Mme Célariet. During the 1850s, translated fiction was genre fiction with the exception of Chateaubriand and Balzac, and hence it appears that from 1840 to 1860 the most important authors translated were Alexandre Dumas, père, Eugène Sue, George Sand, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, with the latter two often presented as sentimental novel authors (Cohen 106). By 1880, they would be joined by authors such as Victor Hugo and Goethe, alongside James Fenimore Cooper, Jules Verne, and Xavier de Montépin. After 1880, the translations of fiction in Romania became more and more diverse, point-

ing at an institutional modernization, which coincided with what is believed to be the end of the “critical spirit in Romanian culture” [“spiritul critic în cultura română”], a phrase Garabet Ibrăileanu coined in 1909, which implicates that a true analytical stage had only emerged in Romania in 1880. In a way, the so-called “critical spirit,” which represents the rampaging criticism stage in the Romanian culture (1840–1880) ended through a maturation that implied the discrimination of literature for consumption and genre fiction due to a new desire to create a literature that would better portray the “national trait” (Terian 6) through highbrow oeuvres assimilation.

Although publishing houses continued to sell translations of sensationalist novels (especially French and American), those were never commented on and had little impact within the world of the cultural elites. For this reason, Alexandre Dumas, père, Jules Verne, and Eugène Sue were never seen in a light other than a condescending or a pejorative one in Romanian culture. In the twentieth century, and especially during the interwar period, a large number of genre fiction works had been translated for commercial purposes, but the high expectations and superiority complexes of the literary system, doubled by the emergence of Romanian nationalistic movements and the rising modernist trend rendered them practically invisible, barring the reading public. Nationalistic movements tried to raise taxes on any translation, so that national literature would prevail (Goldiș, *Beyond* 101) and modernists neglected genre fiction since they focused more on highbrow literature.

Starting with 1944, Romanian culture faced a problem of organizing all those trends, and the distinction between high fiction and popular fiction had to be revised completely because of a transversal problem, that of valid or invalid fiction on ideological grounds. Even if popular fiction as represented by sensationalist novels was seen as a capitalist product, driven by consumerism, the political agenda was nonetheless compelled to recover some of those “capitalist editorial enterprises” because of the importance of some of those popular fiction writers for the communist party. In *Scântea* [The Spark], the most important magazine in Romania following World War II, this struggle comes in the following words:

Against the rise in the profitability of literary works produced by Romanian authors, editors multiplied and thrived. It is true, however, that only a mean share of these writers benefited from this increase in the circulation figures: some of great caliber such as Mihail Sadoveanu, others producers of ready-mades, for the use of disoriented youth. (12 October 1944)

As a result, by reconsidering the authors close to the party and through the interventionist dimension literature had in the socialist education, socialist realism revisited the need for genre fiction.

Soviet genre fiction vs. world genre fiction in translation

It is easily observable in *Graph 1* that the Soviet Union's confidence in Russian literature had a significant impact on the countries occupied following 1946. What Nailya Safiullina calls "the myth of Soviet literature" (Safiullina 562–567), put forward in the early 1920s and gaining momentum within socialist realism in the 1930s, emerged in the states belonging to the Soviet sphere of influence following World War II alongside socialist realism, eclipsing all the other national literatures. From the account given by the Saint Petersburg-based professor, it results that this "myth of Soviet literature" encapsulates a common belief among Soviet authorities according to which Russian literature was "the best in the world and ... a model for literatures worldwide" (563). Yet, for this to be accepted as an undisputed fact, external legitimation was necessary. This came from authors such as Romain Rolland, Henri Barbusse, André Malraux, Heinrich Mann, and André Gide, or through the genre fiction of authors such as Jack London and H. G. Wells. Indeed, as Safiullina notes, this legitimation of Russian literature through foreign works proved useful to the selected contemporary authors, albeit in a very short run. This was due to the fact that their level of popularity among the readership in the Soviet Union had never been high. Nor had they come close to destabilizing the positions of the already canonized Victor Hugo and Jules Verne with the Russian literary hierarchy. The popularity among the readers, which rose prior to the establishment of socialist realism as a "shadow canon" (Damrosch 45), was also a by-product of socialism's reliance on popular culture.

The Pragmatic Function in Children's and Young Adult Literature

Of the Soviet authors rendered between 1948 and 1965, some are genre fiction writers par excellence. In 1951, Dan Petrașincu's "Literatura Fantasticului" ["The Literature of Fantasy"] appears in after the translation of several SF novels, primary among which is I. A.

Yefremov's *Corăbii astrale* [*Stellar Ships*]. Over the next few years, V. A. Obruchev's *Țara lui Sannikov* [*Sannikov Land*] and *Plutonia*, translated in 1955 and 1956 respectively, and A. Belyaev's *Omul amfibie* [*The Amphibian Man*] and *Ariel*, rendered in 1958 and 1959, would be published alongside works of authors ranking high in the socialist realist hierarchy such as Aleksey Tolstoy's *Aelita*, issued in 1958. In 1962, works such as H. G. Wells's *Insula doctorului Moreau* [*The Island of Doctor Moreau*] or *Mașina timpului* [*The Time Machine*] would also be translated, his *Oameni ca zeii* [*Men Like Gods*] closely following them in 1964. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and Stanisław Lem's *Astronauții* [*The Astronauts*] were also rendered much around the same time, in 1963 and 1964 respectively. By and large, these renditions were published under the imprint of important Romanian state publishing houses, either as part of the wider Soviet literature promotion campaign carried out via *Cartea Rusă* [*The Russian Book*], or later by the publishing house targeted at the younger audience, *Editura Tineretului* [*Youth Publishing House*], which was also granted the rights to print and distribute subgenre fiction. During socialist realism, dystopian, military SF, horror, and space exploration genre fiction novels were translated in Romania, since among the most important objectives of the Soviet translation program was to introduce the young readers to an ideological agenda. For which reason a large number of socialist realist canonical authors were presented as genre fiction authors. Thus, classical Soviet propaganda novels end up being advertised as literature for children and the youth, which points to an almost overt acknowledgment of the obsolescence of socialist realism itself. Writers such as Alexander Fadeyev, Veniamin Kaverin, Boris Polevoi and Aleksey Tolstoy, having been published in the late 1940s under the imprint of *Cartea Rusă*, were reissued in the 1950s and 1960s by *Editura Tineretului*, alongside genre fiction and children's literature authors. Notable mentions of writers *Editura Tineretului* marketed as writers of Bildungsroman, historical novels, SF or adventure novels include Feodor Gladkov and Nikolai Ostrovsky with their *Childhood Story* and *Born in Storm*.

In his 1951's *Flacăra* article on the role SF literature plays in the communist society, Dan Petrașincu legitimates the genre by identifying an educational function it is supposed to fulfill, a mission which, he argues, lies at its very core:

We need science-fiction [and] adventure literature to instill the love for science in the youth, to elicit their interest in research and gaining insight into life and

nature phenomena, to stimulate their boldness, to educate their heroic spirit, while providing them with a broad perspective on the future. (CVLR II 35)

His wooden language aside, Petraşincu, translator of Victor Hugo and one of the most fervent supporters of genre fiction in the Stalinist period, relegated to obscurity soon afterward, does nonetheless make an important point for contemporary decoding: for socialist realism, concerned as it was with contributing to a socialist future, SF literature was, first and foremost, a form of cultivating pragmatic interest in science. A recurrent theme of the Stalinist cultural discourse, the obsession with “science” – manifested mainly as a thirst for knowledge at the expense of speculation and metaphysics – is extended to include literature too through the integratory dimension of SF. In 1955, upon the publication of the Romanian science-fiction novel *Drumul printre aștri* [*The Road Through the Stars*], written by M. Ştefan and Radu Nor, a letter is received by the editor of *Scânteia tineretului* [*Youth's Spark*], in which a Sibiu technical school principal exhibits a similar rhetorical obsession with the education of younger generations:

By the end of the book, the young adult would have acquired a series of thorough and helpful scientific concepts, and therefore feel more capable of pursuing bold and useful endeavors, his will to overcome hurdles is greater, and with them, his inquisitive spirit has become sharper. (CVLR VI 277)

The official discourse of the period's literary institutions and the mainstream press in particular had always insisted on highlighting this role of SF literature. Moreover, socialist realism persistently defended the genre, arguing that

there has been talk of “the place” of science-fiction literature to discuss whether it qualifies as “true” literature, whether it belongs to “technically” inclined authors or to “literary endowed” technicians is to artificially narrow down the frontiers of literature. It is advisable to have more quality science-fiction novels, for they can elicit interest in technology, inventions and daring research. (CVLR VI 358)

However, the fascination with science is hardly a peculiarity of socialist realism. In his discussion on the reception of H. G. Wells, Gary Westphal notes that *The Time Machine*, within six months of its publication, many laudatory letters were sent to the editor of *Amazing Stories*, yet none of those discussing it at length referred to its literariness: “[W]hile there were some general words of praise or criticism directed at Wells, and a few brief compliments for *The Time Machine*,

the only three letters with substantive commentary on the novel ... focused on purely technical issues” (131). Socialist realism did nothing but capitalize on this function, incorporating it in the wider program whereby any form of art was to serve as an instrument in the advancement of science, a concept subjected to much trivialization in the era. As Mihai Iovănel states,

socialist realism, in a manner similar to its predecessor, Marxism, was based on a secular scientific foundation, and took much interest in positive disciplines such as physics, astronomy, and medicine, which serve as basis for science-fiction literature. Included in the program and supported by the system, including through the then-highly popular “Colecția Povestiri științifico-fantastice,” [“The Science-fiction Stories Series”], SF was one of the most efficient instruments for scientific promotion and ideological education of the 1950s. (165–166)

Conclusions

Despite having clouded genre differences in the essentialist view on the role of literature (Carleton), socialist realism was also built on translations of genre fiction, a fact most often neglected in socialist realism studies. While creating an artificial dominant canon, Sinyavsky shows, in a way similar to how highbrow literature builds itself as the dominant canon in modernist cultures, socialist realism has often attributed to this privileged literature the same role popular fiction and genre fiction enjoyed, seeking to market them both as mass-oriented culture. While homogenizing ideologies and genres of the local production of novels, socialist realism diversified with translations. It is for this reason that the analysis of functions of genre literature within socialist realism has a truly important role in mapping the development of fiction in Eastern European cultures. In Gleb Tsipursky’s words, “the party-state intended state-sponsored popular culture to help build a socialist, alternative version of modernity” (221). This alternate modernity could only be construed by reevaluating modernity’s highbrow expectation itself, and the lowering of the literary bar may be perceived as a reduction of literature to pragmatic functions, divorced from any abstract aspiration and any magnanimous attitude. Socialist realism did that unrestrained by highbrow aspirations, since the high Soviet canon was projected as mass addressed as well. Therefore, since Soviet’s propaganda literature has proved to be more obsolescent than genre literature, we should assume that socialist realism helped genre fiction more than it changed highbrow literature. This is how socialist realism

created an “alternate modernity” in literature (Tsipursky), pleading, in fact, for a “non-modernity” (Brennan 274). One that was as eclectic as its antithetical projection, and even subgenre diverse, since it always aimed to prove that its ideology pre-exists the diversity of topoi.

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Funkcije socialističnega realizma: prevajanje žanrske literature v komunistični Romuniji

Ključne besede: literatura in ideologija / socialistični realizem / Romunija / prevajanje / komunizem / žanrska literatura / Vzhodna Evropa / sovjetska literatura

Socialistični realizem pogosto razumemo kot pojav množične kulture, čeprav so njegovo dejansko strukturo usmerjenosti na množice uspele definirati le redke študije. Splošni pogled na literaturo pod socialističnim realizmom je, da gre za standardizirano pisanje in formulaičen žanr. Članek skuša analizirati žanrsko literaturo in literarne podžanre, prevajane v Romuniji v obdobju socialističnega realizma, da bi pridobili bolj celosten vpogled v družbene cilje in funkcije literature socialističnega realizma. Skladno z ideološkim programom Sovjetske zveze in njenega območja vpliva je prihajalo do številnih poskusov nadzora nad popularnimi in mladinskimi romani. Hkrati bi morala biti ta prizadevanja nasprotna/povezana

z razvojem popularne literature v zahodnih kulturah, saj si ta dva nasprotna si kulturna sistema delita številne pomembne podobnosti: če upoštevamo, da so bili najbolj prevajani literarni avtorji v stalinističnem romunskem kulturnem sistemu Alexandre Dumas, Jack London in Mark Twain, se vrzel med zahodno in vzhodno popularno literaturo ne zdi več tako široka, četudi so njune funkcije različne.

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