
The Birth of the Romanian Western

By Marian Tutui

As with any illegitimate children it is really difficult to reveal the ancestors of non-American westerns. We may consider them pedantic, and therefore not take into account Charles Ford's explorations of early cinema, which unearthed films like *Indian Banquet/ Repas d`Indien* (1896, directed by Gabriel Veyre for the Lumière brothers), or the 1911 Joë Hamman's cycle *Arizona Bill* ¹, proclaiming them to be 'the first European or French westerns'. Acknowledging Giacomo Puccini's 1910 opera "La fanciulla del West" as the first spaghetti western would be just as shocking ². However, it may be acceptable to consider *La Vampira Indiana* (1913) among the old roots of the spaghetti western, at least because it was directed by Vincenzo Leone, father of Sergio Leone ³. Further on, it is difficult to pinpoint the first western film in a certain country because we should previously decide if we are going to accept only the pastiches and not the parodies and local adaptations of the genre. Robert Hossein's films *The Taste of Violence/ Le goût de la violence* (1961) and *The Rope and the Colt/ Une corde, un Colt...* (1969) and Luc Moullet's *A Girl is a Gun/ Une aventure de Billy le Kid* (1971) can be regarded as first French "modern" westerns.

If we do not take into consideration all the adaptations whose plots take place elsewhere than in the United States, we have to ignore a lot of important films which are sometimes considered "local westerns". Among them, we would find films like Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961), György Szomjas' *Goulash westerns* from 1976- 1979, and lots of other films such as *Captain Lechi* (1960, Yugoslavia, d. Živorad 'Žika' Mitrović), *Miles of Fire/ Ognennye versty/ Огненные версты* (1958, USSR, d. Samson Samsonov), *The White Sun of the Desert/ Beloe solntse pustyni/ Белое солнце пустыни* (1970, USSR, d. Vladimir Motyl), *At Home Among Strangers, Stranger at Home/ Svoy sredi chuzhikh, chuzhoy sredi svoikh/ Свой среди чужих, чужой среди своих* (1974, USSR, d. Nikita Mikhalkov), the Bulgarian films *Manly Times/ Mazhki vremena/ Мъжки времена* (1977, d. Eduard Sachariev) ⁴ and *The Judge/ Sadyata/ Съдията* (1986, d. Plamen Maslarov) ⁵, the Greek *Blood on the Land/ To Homa vaftike kokkino/ Το χύμα βάρτηκε κόκκινο* (1964, d. Vassilis Georgiadis) ⁶, as well as the Romanian cycle of films featuring the character Mărgelatu (1982- 1987, from *The Yellow Rose/ Trandafirul galben* to *The Turquoise Collier/ Colierul de turcoaze*).

If we limit our search to non-American westerns whose plots are located in Western America things get much easier. For example, with West or

East German westerns it is easy, in both cases, to go back to the origins: *Treasure of Silver Lake/ Der Schatz im Silbersee* (directed by Harald Reinl, starring Pierre Brice and Lex Barker), produced in 1962, is the first West German western (although it is, in fact, a West German- Yugoslav-French co-production), while East Germany's first film of the genre was the 1966 *The Sons of Great Bear/ Die Söhne der großen Bäarin*, directed by Josef Mach, also a co-production (East German- Yugoslav). We can add that *Treasure of Silver Lake* was also the first western shot in Yugoslavia ⁷. Bulgaria was also a partner in such co-productions, both with West Germany (1965, *Legacy of the Incas/ Das Vermächtnis des Inka*, d. Georg Marischka, a film also co-produced by Spain and Italy), and with East Germany (1971, *Osceola*, d. Konrad Petzold, a production in which Cuba was also involved).

In Eastern Europe, Czechoslovakia also delivers an early western parody in 1964 with *Lemonade Joe/ Limonádový Joe aneb Kanská opera* (d. Oldrich Lipský, after Jirí Brdecka's novel and play with the same title).

All of the westerns or related films made in the 60s mentioned above, along with a lot of other genuine American westerns, have been shown in Romanian movie theatres. We can even detect Sergio Leone's influence on both the *Transylvanians'* and the *Mărgelatu* cycles of Romanian western inspired films, even only because the main characters John Brad (played by Ovidiu- Iuliu Moldovan in the *Transylvanians'* cycle), and *Mărgelatu* (played by Florin Piersic) have unshaven faces, undoubtedly reminding of Clint Eastwood in Leone's films. However, without denying the influence of previous foreign productions, Romania's foreign policy in the seventies might have actually played the decisive role in the birth of the three Romanian westerns made between 1979- 1982.

The Czech film *Lemonade Joe* had been a parody not only of the western genre, but also of multinational corporations and the Western way of life. Like other communist countries, Romania also made films whose plots were located in the West. Two such films were produced in the early sixties: *A Bomb Was Stolen/ S-a furat o bombă* (1961, d. Ion Popescu-Gopo), and *The Famous 702/ Celebrul 702* (1962, d. Mihai Iacob). Both have plots which are typical for crime films, but there is also an ideological aspect, and both films can be also seen as satires of the West. However, this ideological war was quickly and almost entirely abandoned in Romania, at least in fiction films.

Beginning with 1965, even before turning into a tyrant, Nicolae Ceaușescu left his mark on Romanian society. In 1965, on the occasion of the Ninth Congress of the Romanian Communist Party, he declared the end of socialist realism as the one and only artistic approach validated by the party, encouraging the exploration of the whole "diversity of styles".

Indeed, a short “thaw” followed, whose liberalism was beneficial for all forms of expression, including cinema ⁸. However, there was also a negative side to this strong personal influence Ceausescu had on all aspects of society, and this negative side finally prevailed. Although generally after 1968 Romanian culture enjoyed greater freedom, in cinema things were a bit more complicated. For instance, Ceaușescu loved the historical character Vlad ‘the Impaler’ so much, considering him a national hero, that he could never accept any horror parodies on Dracula. Not subjected to such restrictions, the Czech director Oldrich Lipský could turn Jules Verne’s novel *Castle in the Carpathians* into a charming horror parody with his film *The Mysterious Castle in the Carpathians/ Tajemství hradu v Karpatech* (1983), while Romanian Stere Gulea, in his *Castle in the Carpathians/ Castelul din Carpați* (1981), could only turn it into a painfully flat political film. The only time Dracula was mentioned in a Romanian film in the 70s was in the documentary *Dracula: Legend and Truth/ Dracula, legendă și adevăr* (1973, d. Ion Bostan), a film targeted at foreign tourists, which aimed only to explain the relationship between the historical figure of Vlad the Impaler and the legendary vampire Dracula. The only parody on Dracula accepted on the Romanian screens during communism was Oldrich Lipský’s film which subtly alludes to the legend.

As it is known, after his 1968 speech in favor of Czechoslovakia’s political right to self-determination, Nicolae Ceaușescu was no longer in good relations with Moscow and with some of its satellites. This was one of the reasons why he sought to approach the West, the USA, and Yugoslavia. He was the first communist leader to visit London and Washington, while Bucharest was the first communist capital visited by Charles de Gaulle and by American presidents. Richard Nixon visited Romania in 1969, and his successor, Gerald Ford, followed in 1975. In return, Ceaușescu also visited the United States twice, in 1971, and 1978 ⁹.

The three Romanian westerns *The Prophet, the Gold and the Transylvanians* (1979, d. Dan Pița and Mircea Veroiu), *The Actress, the Dollars and the Transylvanians* (1981, d. Mircea Veroiu) and *The Oil, the Baby and the Transylvanians* (1982, d. Dan Pița) are parodies and this is what makes them valuable, probably more than they would have been if they were serious westerns. Unlike with classical westerns, the main characters are not American and they do not intend to settle in America. It is the story of three brothers from Transylvania, the oldest and the youngest arriving in the USA, not as immigrants but in order to look for the middle one and bring him home. The historical circumstances are barely credible: the elder brother, having participated as a volunteer in the Romanian War of Independence of 1877 (although, as Romanians from Transylvania they would have been, at that time, subjects of the Austro- Hungarian Empire), he wants to bring his brother home believing

that, now that Romania had become independent, their fate as Transylvanians would be more promising. Once in America, the brothers are reunited but they encounter various obstacles which prevent their return. First, there is gold and a Mormon leader, then oil, then the marriage of the youngest brother and the birth of a baby, a conflict with Hungarian neighbors (even in America!), fighting bandits, and finally, the eldest brother's passion for an actress. All these will postpone their trip back to Europe during the first film, and also during its two sequels. Each of the three brothers has his own skills and character traits that help them survive and fight against the villains of the West: the elder brother with his mixture of native force, peasant wisdom and innocence, the youngest with the knowledge he'd earned from books, and the middle one with his riding and shooting skills he had acquired as a frontier man in America. Thus the Transylvanians solve America's problems before getting a chance to solve their own back home! Even the episode of the quarrel and subsequent alliance with the Hungarians symbolize that the old Romanian- Hungarian feud is not irreconcilable.

Paradoxically, the three Romanian westerns resume the ideological war with the West in subtler way. To understand that we have to remember two other films made the same time: Aurel Vlaicu (1977, d. Mircea Drăgan) and Stefan Luchian (1983, d. Nicolae Mărgineanu). While the westerns deal with a Transylvanian peasant who looks for a better life in America, the films mentioned above are about two famous Romanians, an airplane builder and a painter who are lured for a while by Paris. So we may say it about immigration ¹⁰ and brain-drain, same as in the Yugoslav contemporary production *The Secret of Nikola Tesla/ Tajna Nikole Tesle* (1980, d. Krsto Papić) where the Serbian inventor is a victim both of Edison and J.P.Morgan, which might be true and that is why turned into a patriotic film. Such an interpretation may seem far-fetched with the westerns, but we must remember that it is not a case of immigration from Romania but from Transylvania under Austrian-Hungarian rule and the elder urges his brother to return home because "Our country Romania is free now".

The scripts belong to Titus Popovici ¹¹, probably the greatest Romanian scriptwriter during communism, already specialized in epics and friend of director Sergiu Nicolaescu. The fact that he was a member of the central committee of the Romanian communist party is obviously quite an important detail. In spite of that, according to the documents regarding the production of *The Prophet*, the *Gold* and the *Transylvanians* kept by the Romanian Film Archive, Titus Popovici was advised to "underline the seriousness" of certain scenes and, because he didn't quite stick to all the terms of the agreement, was finally fined with 10% from the value of his contract. The total value was of 140,000 lei which, at that time, was worth about 10,000 USD, or the price of two Dacia automobiles.

The three westerns present some unusual situations. First of all, they are about Romanians going to America and intending to come back. Even reconstructing the Far West using Romanian locations was unusual, although the 1968 Romanian- West German- French co-production *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer/ Aventurile lui Tom Sawyer* and its sequel *The Death of Indian Joe/ Moartea lui Joe indianul* (d. Mihai Iacob and Wolfgang Liebeneiner) were the first films made in Romania whose plot required an American western atmosphere. The French, German and Romanian cast tried to play Midwestern Americans living at the end of the 19th century, while the Danube played host to Tom Sawyer's adventures, replacing the Mississippi.

During communism, Sergiu Nicolaescu was the first director who shot some scenes abroad, in Istanbul and Prague, for his epic *The Last Crusade/ Michael the Brave/ Mihai Viteazul* (1971). Nicolaescu was one of several Romanian filmmakers who have been involved in international co-productions, including westerns. Between 1968- 1988, Nicolaescu directed a film and two TV series of the western genre. They were screen adaptations of novels by Fenimore Cooper and Jack London: *The Prairie/ La prairie* (1968, France- Romania, co-directed by Pierre Gaspard-Huit), and the two series *Leather Stocking Legend/ Die Lederstrumpferzählungen* (1969, France- West Germany- Romania- Austria) and *The Gold Rush/ Lockruf des Goldes* (1975- 1988, Austria- West Germany- Romania- France, with Alecu Croitoru as co-director). Several Romanian actors were cast in westerns shot in Yugoslavia, such as Violeta Andrei ¹² who became Gojko Mitić's partner and a prototype for the beautiful 'squaw' (the American native chieftain's wife).

It is maybe a significant illustration of the 'relative liberalism' of the 1960s that "Romanian Folk Ballads", a collection of folklore published in 1966, included an early 20th century ballad from Maramureş called "The Song of Immigration"/ "Cântecul emigrării". The ballad tells about the adventures of Transylvanians travelling illegally from Austro- Hungarian Transylvania to the harbor of Fiume (Rijeka) in order to embark on a boat for America. The ballad ends with the first impressions of the naive Transylvanian in New-York: "Arrived in America, guess what I saw then:/ Only black folks and Englishmen." ¹³. A similarly rare and amusing gem is the documentary film *If I Were a Cowboy/ De-aş fi cowboy* (1972) ¹⁴. Nicolae Cureliuc, a self-educated peasant from the village Mariştea Mică, sends a letter to the magazine "Cinema" in which he asks whether cowboys still exist nowadays. Director Iancu Moscu tried to find an answer and made two trips to Mariştea Mică, a village in North-Eastern Romania where the residents live mainly from livestock. He interviewed some naive youngsters and even screened *The Miracle Rider/ Călăreţul misterios*, a vintage western (1935) starring Tom Mix, at the local cinema. Iancu Moscu's documentary shows the faces of the spectators while

watching the film and alternates images of the Romanian village with scenes from the old film. Although the documentary also shows images from the nearby modern silver exploitation at Leșu Ursului, much different from an early 20th century gold mine in the Wild West, the village itself ironically proves that life was still similar. Such ironical conclusion contradicted, in fact, the official propaganda of the times about communism having improved the village life. In 1972 Romanian villagers still used, as they still use today, horse-drawn carriages, still got drunk at the local bar and, while some rode motorcycles, most still proudly wore their wide-brimmed hats.

It is important to consider some other facts about the period when the three 'Transylvanian' westerns were made, in order to better understand and assess the extent of their boldness. Four years before, the first Romanian western writer Nicolae Frânculescu ¹⁵ published his first western novel: "The Fangs of the Jackal"/ "Colții șacalului" (1975). It was followed by "South of Rio Grande"/ "La Sud de Rio Grande" (1980). Both novels pretend to render the notes and adventures of Ștefan Șercanu, a Romanian who crossed the Wild West. In 1988, the first novel was turned into a comic strip by Sandu Florea (under the pseudonym Dorandu) ¹⁶.

In 1977, two years after Gerald Ford's visit to Romania and one year before Ceaușescu's second visit to the USA, the Romanian Academy published a first collection of studies on the history of Romanian-American relations: "The Image of the New World in the Romanian Principalities and Their First Relations before 1859" ¹⁷. In fact, Gerald Ford's visit is mentioned in the foreword of this book. The most interesting fact is that the book offers a short biographical note about George Pomutz (1818- 1882), an American hero of Romanian origin. He was a general during the Secession War, and because of his knowledge of foreign languages (he knew no less than eight), he was later appointed general consul for the USA in Russia, where he was the one who bought Alaska for the US ¹⁸. Two years before the publishing of this first collection of studies on early contacts between Romanians and Americans, Val Tebeica published a book (also the first of its kind) on Romanian explorers ¹⁹. Although he wrote about several explorers such as Iuliu Popper, who went as far as Tierra del Fuego, or Samuilă Damian, a globe-trotter who met Benjamin Franklin, the author does not mention George Pomutz, whether because he did not know about him or he simply did not find his story relevant enough.

In order to render Romania's efforts at that time to play the card of collaboration with the West and the USA, we should also mention that, in 1974, the Romanian air company TAROM inaugurated the first regular flights to New York, soon after Yugoslavian JAT and Aeroflot from USSR ²⁰. In 1976, to celebrate the USA bicentennial anniversary, the Romanian

Navy exercise clipper “Mircea” visited several US harbors; in 1980, Bucharest hosted the 15th International Congress of Historical Sciences, and, in 1984, Romania and Yugoslavia were the only communist countries who attended the Olympic Games in Los Angeles. Perhaps of less importance, but still relevant, is the fact that, in the late 70s and in the 80s, Bucharest had a cinema theatre specialized in screening mainly westerns. It was called “Luceafărul” (The Morning Star), today “MediaPro Cinema Theatre”, and centrally located.

And, for the picture of that era to be complete, we should also mention that, when the three Romanian westerns were screened (1979- 1982), the times of “national communism” had already begun. Economically it was the beginning of a period of severe deprivation and shortage of consumer goods, after Ceaușescu had decided to urgently repay the country’s foreign debts through massive exports and a drastic reduction of imports. Thus, the number of genuine American westerns had already decreased, as did the overall number of foreign films released in Romania, while the number of Romanian feature films reached its peak: 30 films were made in 1980 ²¹. Maybe it is not only a coincidence that three of the people involved in making Romanian westerns left Romania soon after completing their works: director Mihai Iacob left Romania for USA in 1973 (where he also died in 2009), director Mircea Veroiu left for France in 1984 (but came back in 1996), while cartoonist Sandu Florea also left for the USA in 1991.

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Frames # 4 11-19-2013. This article © Marian Tutui. This article has been peer-reviewed.

Notes:

1. Ford, Charles: *Histoire du Western* (Paris: Ed. Albin Michel, 1976) p. 263-264, Fenin N., George and Everson, William K.: *The Western: From Silents to Cinerama* (New York: Orion Press, 1962) p. 322- 323. [↵](#)
2. Tomassini, Anthony: “Music; The First Spaghetti Western”, *The New York Times*, June 27, 2004, see <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/27/arts/music-the-first-spaghetti-western.html>. [↵](#)
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spaghetti_Western [↵](#)
4. Yanakiev, Aleksandar (editor): *Balgarskoto kino*. *Entsiklopedia A-IA*, (Sofia: Ed. Titra, 2000) p. 446-447. [↵](#)
5. *Idem*, p. 552. [↵](#)
6. Dimitris Koliodimos considers it “a kind of Greek western”. See Koliodimos, Dimitris: *The Greek Filmography, 1914 through 1996* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: Ed.McFarland & Company, 1996), p. 235. [↵](#)

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7. Kosanović, Dejan, Tucaković, Dinko- Stranci u raju. Koprodukcije i filmske usluge. Stranci u jugoslovenom filmu. Jugosloveni u svetskom filmu (Belgrade: Biblioteka Vek, 1998) p. 55-56. [↵](#)
 8. Stoil, Michael Jon: Cinema Beyond the Danube: The Camera and Politics (Metuchen, N.J: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1974) p. 173-174. [↵](#)
 9. <http://www.rri.ro/arh-art.shtml?lang=2&sec=40&art=18406>. [↵](#)
 10. Immigration for Romanian citizens, with the exception of those from German or Jewish minorities in some periods, had hardly ever been an option during communism. The propaganda was pointing out the deceptive lure of the West, such as in a well-known play by Paul Everac with a suggestive title “Moth on a Lampshade”/ “Un fluture pe lampă” (1972). [↵](#)
 11. The last of the three westerns, The Oil, the Baby and the Transylvanians had also Francisc Munteanu as co-scriptwriter. [↵](#)
 12. Actress Violeta Andrei was married to Ștefan Andrei, minister of Foreign Affairs between 1978- 1985. It seems that her participation in four westerns shot in Yugoslavia between 1978-1981 was also due to Elena Ceaușescu’s envy and jealousy. [↵](#)
 13. Balade populare romanesti, 2nd tome, (Bucharest: Ed. pentru literatură, 1966) p. 56. [↵](#)
 14. In 1974 a cowboy shows up also in the animation film Cupid`s School/ Școala amorașilor (d. Victor Antonescu). [↵](#)
 15. During communism they published some novels about exotic adventures abroad by Romanian authors. Romanian explorer Mihai Tican Rumano (1893- 1967) published his adventure novels in Spain and some of them were translated in Romanian during the inter-war period. During communism they intermittently published his adventure novels between 1957- 1975, most of them after 1968. [↵](#)
 16. Between 1973- 1988 Sandu Florea published in Romania no less than ten comic books before he immigrated to USA. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandu_Florea. [↵](#)
 17. Cernovodeanu, Paul, Stanciu, Ion: Îmaginea Lumii Noi în Țările Române și primele lor relații cu Statele Unite ale Americii până în 1859 (Bucharest: Ed. Academiei RSR, 1977). [↵](#)
 18. Ibidem, p. 65- 69. See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Pomutz. [↵](#)
 19. Tebeica, Val: Români pe șapte continente (Bucharest: Ed. Sport-Turism, 1975). [↵](#)
 20. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TAROM>, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jat_Airways and http://www.aeroflot.ru/cms/en/about/history_70-78. [↵](#)
 21. Voiculescu, Elefterie: Buftea jubilee. Adevăruri dintr-un semicentear de vise (Bucharest: Ed.Arvin Press, 2005) p. 78. [↵](#)
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