Iovănel's Sociology and the Utility of Pop Culture. Analyzing the Contemporary Understanding of Literary Marginality in Romania

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Abstract: This article analyzes the role of cultural sociology and elements of pop culture when exploring the current relationship between Romanian literature and the world literary system. I use Mihai Iovănel's work (his recent *History*, as well as previous research) as a springboard into a discussion about the paradoxes and the disputes characterizing contemporary World Literature studies and I argue that his employment of materialism and cultural sociology alike helps move past some of the blind spots of the discipline. The final section of the article then shows that Iovănel's focus on popular culture also informs his understanding of literary circulation, highlighting its unpredictable and non-linear nature.
Keywords: World Literature, cultural sociology, materialism, temporality, pop culture, literary history, Mihai Iovănel.

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After more than six hundred pages spent untangling the literary and ideological projects developed in postcommunist Romania, the last few chapters of Mihai Iovănel's recent *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature*[1] finally turn to the world literary system, investigating the status of Romanian literature in relation to the (ever-changing) Western canon, as well as local attitudes towards the leaders of the international literary system and their perception of Romanian culture. In many ways, this is a natural conclusion to an extremely ambitious volume, which never falls for the critical cliché of aesthetic autonomy, for restrictive close-reading or organicist perspectives on the evolution of national literature.

However, far from being a purely descriptive endeavor, Iovănel's work engages with the very methodology of World Literature, questioning some of the assumptions of systemic literary historiography (to be found in Pascale Casanova's theories, for instance) and introducing the concept of "recursive globalization" as an alternative to the linear depiction of literary export and worlding. Therefore, this article aims to analyze the specific combination of materialist critique and cultural sociology employed by Mihai Iovănel in his work – both in *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature* and his contribution to *Romanian Literature as World Literature*[2] – arguing that his approach is not only convergent with the recent mutations in the discipline, but also instrumental in going past some of its paradoxes and insufficiencies. Among these, he addresses the tension between global patterns and local specificity, the problematic notion of literary autonomy and the limitations imposed on theory by the center-periphery model.

At the same time, Iovănel is well-known for his excellent grasp of both high and popular culture, with examples coming from heterogenous sources (national television, contemporary political discourse, obscure publishers and so on), which makes

his (almost) weekly book reviews for *Scena 9*[3] and his academic work share a decidedly non-elitist approach to literature and ideology. This is in part due to his methodology, inspired by Marxist critique, and the holistic understanding of history that comes with it, but it also brings significant advantages when it comes to World Literature studies and the exploration of the global book market. Therefore, in the final paragraphs of this article, I will be discussing the relevance of Iovănel's forays into Romanian and foreign pop culture for a more accurate and balanced understanding of literary peripherality.

Materialism in World Literature Studies

In the last three decades, the fundamental concepts and the disciplinary goals of World Literature studies have undergone several significant mutations, including a series of alternative definitions of *Weltliteratur* itself. While Goethe's initial understanding of the term was an aesthetically selective one[4] – great works of literature, traveling from one culture to another – most contemporary theorists have looked at the global network of literature through the lens of globalization, capitalism, and its implicit power imbalances, acknowledging the mutual dependence between literature and history. Especially once the field of postcolonialism experienced its own internal debates and was divided into an earlier, poststructuralist branch (with Bhabha and Spivak as leading figures) and a Marxist one, the overlaps between World Literature and postcolonial studies became more frequent. Consequently, ethical concerns took center stage and the brand of universalism favored by Goethe – advertising the fact that Chinese writers, for instance, "think, act, and feel almost exactly like us,"[5] differing only through their expressive means and aesthetic preferences – can no longer be seen as uncomplicated humanist dogma, since it obscures the artificiality of the canon and the unequal nature of literary circulation. As a result, prominent theorists like Moretti, Casanova, Damrosch or Walkowitz have focused on the material circumstances reflected in the emergence, translation and reception of World Literature, so that, in Lorna Burns's words, they "can be broadly aligned with a materialist approach which views the text primarily as a product of various factors that condition the literary field."[6] Casanova, for example, begins her famous *World Republic of Letters* by announcing that she will employ the insights of postcolonial critique, "which has played an important role in reintroducing history, and in particular political history, into literary theory."[7]

Ultimately, this is the critical strand that also informs Mihai Iovănel's history of Romanian literature. Not only does he argue that, in today's critical landscape, "converting literary works into aesthetic value, that is, into a false universality, will have to be identified as problematic and then corrected,"[8] but he makes his theoretical framework of choice extremely clear from the very beginning. In the introductory chapter, Iovănel establishes both his systemic outlook on literature (following in the footsteps of Moretti and Casanova) and his allegiance to Althusser's materialism of the encounter (also known as aleatory materialism):[9] in short, Iovănel uses Althusser's metaphor of the moving train (designed to represent the world in general, as well as any political order) to describe the work of the literary critic – while being able to deduce and analyze certain rules regarding the mechanics of literary production and consumption, only the acknowledgement of contingency allows the critic to understand how new worlds are born out of the interaction of pre-existent material elements. In contemporary Romanian literature, the uncertainty and the impossibility to predict the evolution of the artistic field derive not only from the inherent instability of history (the material world interfering with and generating literature), but also from Moretti's "great unread." To quote Iovănel, there are many "opaque areas" which cannot be integrated in any statistical or theoretical attempt, for example thousands of books which were never officially recorded in any sort of archive.[10] This only goes to show that, in spite of the author's penchant for intellectual history and cultural sociology, his historical survey starts off with a solid and coherent theoretical base.

All this being said, Iovănel's participation in the systemic and materialist approach to World Literature is no mere exercise involving preexistent theoretical frameworks, nor is it a demonstrative case study viewing Romanian literature through a prescriptive lens. Global patterns of evolution like those drawn by Casanova[11] and Moretti have been met with various forms of criticism, ranging from counterexamples to investigations into their main concepts. The former is an unavoidable consequence for any project spanning centuries and continents, trying to pinpoint the constants and the variables of the literary field and resorting to generalization as an essential logical operation. For instance, Christopher Prendergast's well-known article about *The World Republic of Letters* points out that "the most predictable objection to [Casanova's] model is that there are variables other than nation and relations other than competition."[12] He then goes on to give an example and to question Wordsworth's supposed role in the rivalry between British and French culture, arguing that his poetry had different ideological drives than international competition, such as the preference for the language of the *common man* (a class-based choice), an effort to repair traditional masculinity (as opposed to eighteenth-century "feminine" literature) and an allegiance to rural, Northern Britain.[13] Iovănel makes a similar point regarding another one of Casanova's global observations, namely the time lag between the Greenwich Meridian of Literature (that is, the aesthetic standards of Western culture and, more specifically, French literature) and the periphery, as well as the impossibility to fully catch up with the center. According to Iovănel's analysis of certain Romanian success stories on the international stage, "this description is not always correct. Although Romanian literature as a system is, indeed, behind the French literary system, unlike economic relations in our material reality, this time lag can be bypassed through individual innovation."[14] This hypothesis is proved especially in Iovănel's chapter from *Romanian Literature as World Literature*, where he discusses

the strategies employed by Cioran, Eliade and Ionesco in order to reinvent their work in accordance with Western expectations, as well as in his micro-monographs on Norman Manea, Paul Goma, Cărtărescu and so on, which make up the final section of the *History.*

At this point, however, it is obvious that Iovănel's account of the transnational specificity of Romanian literature does more than just determine which Romanian cases comply with Casanova's model of evolution and which evade it. Instead, his discourse engages with some of the core assumptions of *The World Republic of Letters* (the consistent movement of the periphery towards the center, literary teleology, the relative autonomy of the literary field) and proves them to be the result of a particular understanding of literature rather than undeniable historical phenomena.

To begin with, the *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature* can be read alongside a number of recent attempts to recontextualize literary production and circulation: in 2016, Bloomsbury launched its *Literatures as World Literature* series, edited by Thomas O. Beebee and designed to compensate for the largely "theoretical and thus abstract" perspectives in the field, as well as the traditional focus on canonical texts. Exploring the new life of various national literatures (German, Brazilian, Dutch etc.), currents (Surrealism) and authors (Elena Ferrante, Samuel Beckett) when traveling abroad and the influence of the world system on their emergence, these volumes should allow "scholars to move outward from their own areas of specialization, fostering scholarly writing that approaches more closely the polyphonic, multiperspectival nature of world literature."[15] In short, the global, generalizing theories developed by Casanova and Moretti are supplemented by relocalized analyses addressing the production of World Literature at a national or regional level; instead of starting off from the center or from possible explanatory patterns amalgamating geographically disjunct cases, the authors of these new critical volumes (which are, generally speaking, anthologies, rather than the work of a single critic) are interested in the particular and often contrast the most influential theories in Western academia with the coordinates of finely delineated socio-cultural contexts. Detail, nuance, and a multiplicity of perspectives are in themselves necessary in negotiating the relationship between universality and specificity (which has been a point of contention for both World Literature and postcolonial studies for quite some time), but this is not a solely quantitative or geographical turn (more national literatures or more texts from a specific culture). Rather, a closer investigation into local perceptions of World Literature – the influence of the center (Casanova's Paris, for example), forms of resistance, assimilation, imitation or innovation, an author's ambitions, political leanings and idiosyncrasies – serves to show above all else that throughout history the relationship between national literatures and alterity has changed considerably, in a back-and-forth that has a lot to do with material circumstances like political autonomy (or the lack thereof). This is certainly why many contemporary World Literature scholars including Iovănel have also devised their own theoretical instruments or concepts, based on the local modulations of world literary processes.

In this sense, one eloquent example is Marko Juvan's recent discussion of nation-building through the figure of the national poet. In *Worlding a Peripheral Literature*, Juvan uses two apparently conventional concepts – nationalizing (i.e., the involvement of literature in the ideological apparatus of local politics) and worlding (literary export and international success) – only to highlight the variation of such general and widely theorized processes. For instance, he describes the institution of the national writer as a widespread nineteenth-century invention in marginal cultures, presented as the embodiment of a collective identity (according to Virgil Nemoianu's frequently quoted work) and "proving that a nation – especially if deprived of statehood or the importance within the universal history – was equal to other established nations despite the apparent shortage of cultural capital."[16] His comparison between Slovenian bard France Prešeren and Icelandic author Jónas Hallgrímsson (contemporaries belonging to non-communicating literatures) is meant to show that even the "most remote European literatures adapted the same matrix of cultural practices, forms, and representations to their particular needs of their nation-building".[17] Adaption is the key-word, because, although this transnational parallel is a solid argument in favor of certain universal patterns of cultural self-legitimization or self-promotion, Juvan also makes it clear that Prešeren and Hallgrímsson both exemplify the complicated and diverse interactions between individual ideological convictions or intentions and, on the other hand, historical contingency. Both authors produced "radical and Romantic" cultural programs, oriented towards a local audience and were therefore faced with "public opposition of supposedly more realist and practical strategies of national awakening."[18] This did not prevent their ulterior canonization ("sainting" in Juvan's words), however, once their entry into the canon of World Literature seemed to automatically elevate their national cultures. Thus, Prešeren and Hallgrímsson demonstrate the unpredictability of worlding, where one's aesthetic projects collide with their manipulation by political discourse, either in their own time or decades and centuries later. For Juvan, their evolution within the national and the international pantheon of writers proves once again that World Literature "implies historicity and a specific spatiotemporal breadth (...). Adequately understood, world literature is historical both as a concept *and* as reality designated by this concept."[19] In other words, far from proposing a unanimously approved and timeless scale for the measurement and the evaluation of literature, the discipline itself goes through internal movements (zooming in and out, for example, from the systemic to the particular and back again) in an attempt to catch Althusser's moving train.[20]

Contributions to the Discipline

In the same vein as Juvan's introduction to the myth of the national poet and its variations in time and space, Iovănel's

conclusions about the last three decades of Romanian culture bring into question some of the classical assumptions of World Literature studies, especially when compared to Casanova's work. While *The World Republic of Letters* discusses all cases of peripheral development, synchronization and integration as a single movement towards Western Europe (and, more precisely, Paris), Iovănel pays more attention to regional competition and mutual perception, envisioning World Literature as a polycentric system or a fluctuating network rather than a concentric model. For instance, when discussing the theoretical currents which permeated Romanian culture in the last thirty years (postmodernism, postcolonialism), he references Walter Mignolo's decolonial utopia, based on regional solidarity in the face of neocapitalism and totality. Iovănel dismisses this theoretical strand as idealistic and ineffective,[21] but he also readdresses the issue of intraperipheral relations later in the book, when he identifies various instances of unexpected convergence or, more often, a lack of communication and mutual interest among Eastern European literatures. He highlights the discrepancy between the constant admiration for Western literary trends (which could make Romanian literature *less* obscure when followed closely) and, on the other hand, the disinterest in Bulgarian or Hungarian literature – neighbors that are simply "too peripheral."[22] Sorin Antohi's observations about Central Europe and its tendency to marginalize the East immediately after becoming free from Soviet influence (in *Practicing Distance*)[23] are also quoted in order to counter the highly optimistic perspective of philosophers like Constantin Noica and his students. For these intellectuals, Germany, rather than France, was the center of European culture and the prime environment for philosophy, as it struck a balance between debilitating poverty and Western decadence.[24] In other words, not only have regional connections been oftentimes ignored in favor of a direct path to the source of cultural validation (Paris and the anglophone world), but various "marginal" authors have opted for a different exemplary metropolis, based on their ideological leanings.

At the same time, Iovănel discusses Mircea Cărtărescu's strategies for "traveling" abroad and compares them with Orhan Pamuk's, another author emerging from a "minor" culture and gaining recognition in translation (Pamuk won the Nobel in 2006, as well as other prestigious French prizes).[25] In Iovănel's words, "Pamuk's Istanbul is the twin brother of Cărtărescu's Bucharest," although "we cannot surmise any sort of direct influence between the two."[26] Their similar recourse to a mysterious city, hiding conspiracies and a convoluted personal history, the transparent Jungian archetypes and symbols spread throughout their work – all these prove that peripheral writers can devise similar narrative patterns of interest to the Western book market, without needing universal themes or linguistic reconversion.[27] This is but one example of what Iovănel calls "complex networks, both local and global" which ensure an author's participation in the world literary system: governed by high-currency themes (like the Holocaust), genres (magical realism, for instance) or currents (the theater of the absurd, the avant-gardes), these temporary webs can be seen as a secondary structure of the republic of letters, besides the infamous center-periphery dichotomy. In fact, this is precisely one of the arguments from "Temporal Webs of World Literature," Iovănel's chapter on Eliade, Cioran and Ionesco: looking at their trajectory from interwar Romania to Paris and beyond, the critic notices that "the cultural network to which they [the three writers] would eventually gain access were more complex than Paris, which was rather 'one-dimensional' despite its claim to work, according to Casanova, as a 'universality' factory of sorts."[28] While France might have been the terminus in many cases of literary export, Ionesco, Cioran and especially Eliade used it as a springboard into other book markets: German, British or American. This transfer took place through translation (*The Sacred and the Profane* appeared in Germany several years before it reached the French public), reputation (Susan Sontag wrote about Cioran in 1967), institutional recognition (Eliade's teaching post in Chicago) or aesthetic kinship (Ionesco's place alongside Beckett and Adamov in the emergent absurdist current). Once again, the transnational lives of authors and literatures are shown to be intricate and unpredictable enough (both geographically and temporally) to render linear, center-periphery evolutionary models insufficient.

This is also why materialism needs to meet cultural sociology in Iovănel's *History.* On the one hand, the two approaches might seem incompatible, as pointed out by Florin Poenaru in his remarkably comprehensive review of the book,[29] and, indeed, idealism (that is, Lovinescu's focus on intellectual history) and a critique devoted to material changes and their impact are by definition opposite methods. Iovănel himself is perfectly aware of the contradiction and makes his use of cultural sociology very clear by indicating those elements of Lovinescu's criticism which can be included in a materialist analysis: "In spite of his idealism from the *History of Modern Romanian Civilization,* where he prioritizes ideas (the superstructure) rather than any material conditions (the base), Lovinescu is a materialist through the denunciation of the fetishist, aesthetic hypervalorization of past literary works. He does so in the name of a historicist reading of the relationship between material conditions and the artwork."[30] It is precisely Lovinescu's aesthetic relativism, namely the belief that the reception and the valorization of literature must change with the times that plays into Iovănel's already declared allegiance to Althusser's temporal model – the unpredictability of both philosophy and art, the contingent value of theory. Of course, Iovănel is not trying to settle the idealist – materialist competition once and for all: not only is a simple solution hard to devise, but this is not the purpose of his historical project.[31] However, the chapters exploring the transnational specificity of Romanian literature, which constitute the main focus of this article, provide several case studies where discourse and matter are obviously interlinked and interdependent in the process of worlding, showing that clean-cut demarcations between economic and intellectual factors or clear chronologies between the two are no casual endeavor.[32] For

example, Cărtărescu's access to the international stage is discussed in comparison to similar literary formulas, like Mircea Ivănescu's or Mircea Horia Simionescu's, both of whom used intertextuality and other strategies that made the West more permeable for Romanian literature. According to Iovănel, though, Cărtărescu's relative success was granted by his more accessible prose, his "blockbuster" stage props and his ability to travel abroad, promoting his work in person.[33] Thus, Cărtărescu has written *for* Europe since quite early in his career, but it was his direct contact with the Western literary world (translators and publishers included) that facilitated his worlding. Similarly, Iovănel references *6 Bullets*, a B movie set in Chișinău, but filmed in Bucharest for financial reasons, in order to show that economic considerations can be decisive in determining apparently abstract or discursive constructs like Western perspectives on Romanian culture, the perceived interchangeability of Eastern-European capitals and the defining traits of a peripheral city like those in Romania and Bessarabia. In Iovănel's words, "the real world, with its geoeconomic relations, created a spontaneous distortion in the superstructure's system."[34]

On the other hand, Iovănel's focus on intellectual history and the mutation of aesthetic values is significant for the methodology of World Literature studies specifically because it does not take for granted the unique, homogenous movement from the periphery to the center, which is generally implied in systemic accounts. Not only does the author use extensive contextualization to reveal the complex networks (based on transnational themes, genres, currents) which mediate the export of literature, but he also investigates the role of individual initiatives and creativity when it comes to bypassing temporal and geographical distance. In this sense, both his article about Eliade, Cioran and Ionesco and his other monographs on Romanian writers whose work was transplanted abroad (Goma, Andrei Codrescu, Norman Manea, Cărtărescu) shed light on the strategic thinking of these authors: their ability to innovate literary form, style, and imagery, as well as to reinvent their own past works. In part, their success is arbitrary or at least obviously dependent on political events (Romania entering NATO and the EU led to cultural projects in support of translation and literary export)[35] and shifts in mentality (Goma's novels were well-received in France because Solzhenitsyn's work had just been published in the West, triggering strong anticommunist sentiments).[36] Nonetheless, these writers were also aware of the political and economic climate they were trying to navigate, and their writerly personas were sometimes geared towards capitalizing on the historical moment. In this sense, Iovănel mentions Cărtărescu's defence of Romania's place in Europe and the negation of any irreversible cultural lag, which coincide with the diplomatic process aimed at military and political integration.[37] In short, Iovănel shows that "worlding" is not a universal reflex or an automatic process, in which the periphery passively obeys the laws of the world system. Rather, World Literature is born at the crossroad between already theorized, global processes (attempts at synchronization with the center, Casanova's depoliticization, imitation, experimentalism and translation), as well as pure contingency and individual strategies around the dominant ideologies and values of the world system.

Lastly, this perspective on World Literature and the consequent methodology seem to respond to (and, to a certain degree, to resolve) one of the main arguments of anti-Marxist critique in literary studies, namely the perceived disempowerment of literature and art in relation to the historical reality. For instance, in the already quoted volume, Lorna Burns notes that theorists inspired by Fredric Jameson's concept of the "political unconscious" (Moretti, Casanova, WReC) tend to view the capitalist world (marred by structural inequality) as an *a priori* reality, an unchangeable premise, which literature can only reflect and adapt to.[38] As for the issues of literary circulation and center-periphery relations, the debate has been organized around two competing viewpoints: dialogism and diffusionism – the former corresponds to the optimistic celebration of literary transfer and translation, in spite of material disparities (to be found in liberal-humanist works like Damrosch and Sarah Lawall's), whereas the latter looks at the margins of the system as a largely reactive pole.[39] Ultimately, while resisting any utopian belief in the immense transformative power of literature or the primacy of discourse over history (which would contradict his materialist approach), Iovănel provides a remarkably balanced example of literary historiography, which takes into account both the crushing power of the economic system feeding into, as well as off the cultural one and, on the other hand, the innovation happening in the midst of these negotiations.[40]

On Temporality and Pop Culture

Finally, Iovănel's most spectacular twist regarding World Literature has to do with the concept of "recursive globalization," introduced both in his recent *History* and in the chapter on Eliade, Cioran and Ionesco. Granted, the circulation of literature has been looked at from a temporal point of view before, most notably by Wai Chee Dimock. In her work on World Literature and literary continuity between historical periods and geographies, Dimock opposes the assumption that spatial boundaries and statal structures can be immediately translated into political, economic or cultural entities; that is to say, she opposes the very foundation of traditional national literary studies, based on extreme specialization and theories of identitarian homogeneity.[41] What is more, Dimock argues that different cultural phenomena require different units of time, with periodization (offering "a linear chronology, segments of time neatly sliced") being "no more than a fiction."[42] *Deep time*, her response to the sterility of conventional literary history, is meant to reinvent "American literature," freeing it from the constraints of the nation and the few centuries in which the United States have existed as such and recovering "its backward extension into far-flung temporal and spatial coordinates"[43] (Islamic deep time connects Malcolm X and the Transcendentalists, for example).

In another article, Dimock defines literature as a "continuum" which "extends across space and time, messing up territorial sovereignty and numerical chronology"[44] and claims that it is precisely the spatial and temporal elasticity of the readerly experience which makes literature a free agent in relation to the state, various ideologies or authoritative histories.[45]

All these ideas paved the road for a new understanding of World Literature, and Iovănel actually quotes Dimock in "Temporal Webs," analyzing the three Romanian writers under discussion as "deviations" from the expected development of national literature: Ionesco appears as a radical innovator, who supported his dramatic writings from the 1950s and 1960s by having his plays produced, by writing essays and giving interviews, so that the theater of the absurd was actually consolidated in collaboration with the press and the academic world; as for Cioran and Eliade, Iovănel writes about "a belated shockwave that reanimated their posterity" when their fascist past came to light, although their reception was obviously different at this point.[46] The conclusions of the case study are convergent with Dimock's – "such variations, I propose, warrant an analysis of globalization as a *recursive* process, to wit, as a spatial-temporal world phenomenon that, because it is not a perpetuum mobile, requires periodic jumpstarts to keep going"[47] – and indicate a coherent theory of temporality in the author's perspective on World Literature. In *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature*, too, he argues that the model of necessary synchronicity with the Greenwich Meridian, based on the hypothesis of isomorphous temporality, is contradicted by the Romanian case, in which the abolition of censorship after 1989 caused the discovery and the revalorization of multiple authors.[48] Thus, "the predictability of spatial, center-periphery relations is compensated for/counterbalanced by temporality – the latter generates a complementary movement alongside intrasystemic evolution, which remains unpredictable, since future occurrences that will erase/select/modify the past cannot be anticipated from our present."[49]

This non-linear, often surprising process of literary travel and consecration poses significant challenges to any totalizing theory trying to explain the mechanisms of World Literature and is, generally speaking, caused by the heteronomous nature of literary reception in space and time. For Iovănel, however, it also stems from the unpredictability of pop culture, which is listed among the contributing factors, although it does not get a more detailed explanatory note at this juncture. Iovănel's work is nonetheless full of references to popular cinema, music and novels that could easily be categorized as "trash literature", combined with the ideological content they convey or protest. In 2015, he dedicated an entire critical volume to the detective novel, which is hardly ever included in the pantheon of high culture and which was deemed unacceptable for academic research until recently. As Arthur G. Neal has noticed, it was only when sociology became more interested in subjective meanings and perceptions (rather than the pretense of scientific objectivity and clean-cut social phenomena) that pop culture (including topics like the detective novel, slapstick comedy or the circus) also became a legitimate field of inquiry.[50] Iovănel's study reveals the ways in which the ever-changing conventions of the genre reflect and integrate significant mutations pertaining to Western philosophy, specifically gnoseology: according to the author, the detective novel and hermeneutics both emerged as symptoms of modernity and secularization, as Biblical exegesis was forced to establish itself as an autonomous discipline (separate from philology or dogma) under the pressure of more literal, Protestant interpretations; as hermeneutics changed, Iovănel argues, incorporating the twentieth-century discovery that the mere observation of an object could alter its properties, so did detective fiction – unlike classical plots, in which the investigator studied the unknown past and the suspects from afar, gradually deciphering their secrets, noir novels were characterized by the direct involvement of the detective in the storyline, contributing to the criminal's fate, while also being affected by it.[51] Here, the detective novel is not evaluated from a canonical point of view, trying to establish its aesthetic quality or lack thereof, since pop culture is governed by different criteria: entertainment and market value, the immersive power of the text and its historical legacy – that is, will it be remembered as a mere solution to an enigma or can it be complicated enough to prevent such summarization?[52]

Additionally, this focus on the extrinsic aspects of literary reception is especially useful when exploring the world literary system, in which phenomena like market success and even canonization also depend on the masses and their response to the cultural product. Of course, pop culture itself has been given multiple definitions, from "a residual category" (what is left after the demarcation of high culture) to "mass culture," inherently commercial and aimed at undifferentiated groups rather than individuals.[53] Nonetheless, even considering a very simple definition – such as Tim Delaney's "products and forms of expression and identity that are frequently encountered or widely accepted [...] characteristic of a particular society at a given time"[54] – we can still infer that the story of literary translation, circulation and success across borders cannot be reduced to its institutional or academic dimension, whose goal is to draw an orderly, coherent image of cross-national transfers. "Subcultures" – in their multiplicity and volatility – are just as relevant.

In discussing the status of Romanian culture on the international stage, Iovănel thus analyzes the depiction of national identity in local pop culture, such as well-known lyrics written after 1989 and the myths they perpetuated: for instance, the band *Timpuri noi* is mentioned because of its portrayal of Romania as a vulnerable woman, passed from one political power to the next.[55] The author uses this example in relation to Romania's fascination with America during the communist regime (that is, expectations regarding the *arrival* of the Americans and, implicitly, democratic rule) in order to demonstrate the continuity between the post-communist political agenda (the rush to join NATO and the EU, an obsession with Romania's Balkan identity and its cultural lag) and contemporaneous social attitudes. In other words, the

internalization and the metabolization of various inferiority or superiority complexes by the Romanian public are often more clearly visible in pop culture than in political discourse or critically acclaimed literature. Were we to look solely at the narratives of reputed intellectuals and public figures regarding international competition and Romania's place in the system, we would be able to identify a handful of ideological stances, from the fetishization of Romania's postcommunist lag to Cărtărescu's insistence on our European status – Iovănel does take all these into consideration, commenting on their implicit biases and agendas, but his short case studies in terms of foreign pop culture paint a much more nuanced picture, in which Romania appears as a cultural construct treated with both indifference and fascination, through Orientalist tropes and fantastic improvisations. For example, the chapter dedicated to Romania's transnational specificity opens with a description of "Gipsy Jigsaw," an episode of a Canadian tv series, in which Romania is distorted and reimagined through an almost magical realist lens (involving guns, Gothic imagery, a Roma king and medieval castles).

Ultimately, we must keep in mind that the reception of Romanian literature in the West and beyond is always dependent on the cultural exports surrounding it – cinematography from and about Romania, internet culture, local news which permeate the Occidental media and so on. In this respect, the post-Marxist understanding of pop culture is extremely eloquent, because it acknowledges its subversive power and its impact on dominant narratives: in John Storey's words, "popular culture in this usage is not the imposed culture of the mass culture theorists, nor is it an emerging from below, spontaneously oppositional culture of 'the people' – it is a terrain of exchange and negotiation between the two;"[56] similarly, John Fiske has argued that pop culture is created by disempowered groups, using resources provided by the same society which marginalized them in the first place.[57] Finally, although the struggle is not always apparent in the field of World Literature and its interactions with various subcultures dealing with national identity or self-perception, the process of literary circulation and the periphery's self-worlding techniques are never truly insulated from competing discourses and the anarchic nature of pop culture.

Future Research

In a 2019 article, Iovănel took a different approach to pop culture, tracing its relationship with mainstream literature and criticism in Romania and concluding that not only were the last three decades disadvantageous for paraliterature (with authors like Cărtărescu having more commercial success than popular genres), but also that certain pop elements included in so-called "quality" literature were more frowned upon than others – namely, romance was still gendered (as literature *for* women) and considered inferior to crime fiction or sci-fi.[58] This being said, there is still a lot to explore in terms of the export of Romanian literature today and the role played by pop culture in the design and the enactment of these strategies. In his *History*, Iovănel does points out that younger generations of Romanian writers are much more dismissive and self-ironic when it comes to the perception of their homeland and their national literature on the international stage[59] – the postmodern deconstruction of political concepts and the newly-formed ethical objections to the mechanisms of globalization and neoliberalism have surely contributed to the shift. But, since these writers are also the most willing to cross the line between "literariness" or aesthetic refinement and mass culture, incorporating such elements into their work, it seems that the dynamic between worlding and pop culture is mutating, as well. In short, the utility of pop culture in contemporary literary studies is not limited to the comprehension of local or foreign perspectives on national identity, alterity, and the status of Romanian culture in the West, although these indicators are undoubtedly instrumental in a discussion about Romanian literature as World Literature. At the same time, however, the current attitudes towards pop culture in Romanian literature might very well determine our future interest in worlding, the type of texts that reach the international market and the inherent compromises with (or resistance to) the global economic system.

Notes:

1. Mihai Iovănel, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990-2020* [The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990-2020] (Iași: Polirom, 2021).
2. Mihai Iovănel, "Temporal Webs of World Literature: Rebranding Games and Global Relevance after the Second World War – Mircea Eliade, E. M. Cioran, Eugène Ionesco," in *Romanian Literature as World Literature*, eds. Mircea Martin, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 217-233.
3. https://www.scena9.ro/articles/by/mihai-iovanel.
4. Of course, Goethe himself was aware of the competition between national literatures in the nineteenth century and did not labor under the delusion that literature existed in an isolated, autonomous realm, untouched by politics and economy. In fact, Marko Juvan's recent analysis of the beginnings of World Literature has shown that "Goethe's self-canonizing efforts to become a German classic" (p. 3) and his awareness of Germany's marginality on the continent at the time contributed to his cosmopolitanism and his belief in the translatability of human experience. However, his criteria for welcoming a literary text into the pantheon of Weltliteratur were still aesthetic (intrinsic literary value, timeless and constant) and, what is more, manifestly Eurocentric (with the ancient Greeks being explicitly revered as masters of thought and form) (p. 20 in Goethe's conversation with Eckermann). See Marko Juvan, *Worlding a Peripheral Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2-3.

Goethe, "Conversations with Eckermann on *Weltliteratur*," in *World Literature in Theory*, ed. David Damrosch (Somerset: Wiley, 2013), 15-21.

5. Goethe, "Conversations," 18.
6. Lorna Burns, *Postcolonialism After World Literature: relation, equality, dissent* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 4.
7. Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, translated by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), xiii.
8. Iovănel, *Istoria*, 105.
9. Ibid., 12.
10. Ibid., 13.
11. Since Iovănel himself repeatedly references *The World Republic of Letters*, either as a theoretical source or polemically, my analysis of his methodology will focus primarily on a comparison with Casanova's work.
12. Christopher Prendergast, "Negotiating World Literature," *New Left Review* 8 (Mar/Apr) (2001): 100–122. Quotation from page 109.
13. Ibid., 109-110.
14. Iovănel, *Istoria*, 661.
15. According to the official description of the series, which appears at the beginning of each volume, as well as on Bloomsbury's website: https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/series/literatures-as-world-literature/?pg=1.
16. Juvan, *Worlding*, 38-39.
17. Ibid., 44.
18. Ibid., 48.
19. Ibid., 35.
20. In Iovănel's words, "there are maps, routes, preexistent information, knowledge derived from the process [...] But, on the other hand, the exploration process, ultimately finite, is infinite when compared to the abilities of one individual." Iovănel, *Istoria*, 13. My translation. All the other translations from Romanian to English are also mine.
21. "This entire discourse remains nothing more than a utopia, unable to realize itself and to become practice, beyond discursive practice." Iovănel, *Istoria,* 162. The intellectual and philosophical (rather than practical) nature of Mignolo's decolonial worldview is painfully obvious in this passage from *Epistemic Disobedience*: "in order to take the necessary steps in this direction [decolonization], we need an ideal, non-competitive society, that is, a societal model in which states and people are not just trying to win, to be the first and/or to be the most important. On the contrary, this ideal societal model proposes a world in which states and people alike work together for everyone's sake." Walter Mignolo, *Dezobediența epistemică: retorica modernității, logica colonialității și gramatica decolonialității* [Epistemic Disobedience: the rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of decoloniality], translated by Ovidiu Țichindeleanu (Cluj-Napoca: Idea, 2015), 25-26. In this sense, the Marxist emphasis on the economy and the struggle between social classes is replaced with the so-called "decolonization of knowledge and being." Mignolo, *Epistemic Disobedience,* 43.
22. Iovănel, *Istoria*, 649-650.
23. Sorin Antohi, *Exercițiul distanței. Discursuri, societăți, metode* [Practicing Distance. Discourses, societies, methods] (București: Nemira, 1997).
24. Iovănel, *Istoria*, 650.
25. In *Surrealism as World Literature*, Delia Ungureanu also compares Cărtărescu and Pamuk, focusing on their "second-order surrealism" (p. 259) (personal mythologies, including their home cities, oneiric prose), while also pointing out their different class origins and their divergent politics: Pamuk was part of the Turkish bourgeoisie and became a politically involved writer and a defender of human rights; Cărtărescu, on the other hand, belonged to the working class in communist Romania and opted for "resistance through culture" (which effectively meant political disengagement) (p. 264). In other words, it was their similar literary formulas that granted them access to recognition and even market success, in spite of their different relationships with their home nations and their politics. It could be argued that this convergence in terms of narrative technique and fictional architecture was made possible by another phenomenon, namely the renewed appeal of Proust: Delia Ungureanu actually begins her chapter by showing that Proust's reinvention of the subject-object relation introduced a new type of memory, containing not only personal experience, but also literary, artistic or borrowed memories (p. 259). Therefore, Proust's influence on Cărtărescu and Pamuk goes hand in hand with the primacy of intertextuality, mediating their encounter in the field of myth and the subconscious. See Delia Ungureanu, *Surrealism as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).
26. Iovănel, *Istoria*, 675.
27. Iovănel places Cărtărescu and Pamuk within a larger family of European writers, including Olga Tokarczuk, David Albahari, and Jáchym Topol.
28. Iovănel, "Temporal Webs of World Literature," 222.
29. Florin Poenaru, "Istoria lui Iovănel – epitaful optzecismului" [Iovănel's History – an Epitaph for the 1980s], *CriticAtac*, May 2021. Online: http://www.criticatac.ro/istoria-lui-iovanel-un-eveniment/.
30. Iovănel, *Istoria*, 105.
31. This divide is glaringly obvious in the field of postcolonialism, for example, and has been theorized as such. In a recent response to Edward Said's renowned *Orientalism*, the Marxist critic Vivek Chibber expressed his doubts regarding the traditional chronology of colonialism, as seen by Said: a political and economic process resulting from the Western discourse about alterity; a consequence of latent Orientalism. For Chibber, there are several reasons why this causal mechanism cannot hold up, including that a simplifying, othering perception of

the foreigner is universally human, no matter the cultures involved, yet it was only the West that established colonial empires in modern times. Therefore, he concludes that colonialism began with the economic interests of powerful Western nations and that the rationalizing, moral discourse (colonialism as charity, civilizing mission, religious conversion) was a common by-product. Ultimately, it is a question of prioritizing either the base or the superstructure as the main cause of colonial expansion. See Vivek Chibber, "Orientalism and Its Afterlives," *Catalyst* 4, no. 3 (2020). Online: https://catalyst-journal.com/vol4/no3/orientalism-and-its-afterlives.

32. In this sense, Iovănel is noticeably involved in the ongoing methodological reinvention of Romanian theory and criticism. Besides his combined use of materialism and cultural sociology – discussed above – Snejana Ung has pointed out and discussed the impact of the "transnational turn" on Iovănel's volume and literary historiography more generally. At the same time, Victor Cobuz has argued that projects like *Romanian Literature as World Literature* are not only meant to shed new light on the various topics approached by the authors, but they also aim to reimagine local literary studies from a disciplinary and methodological point of view. The same goes for Iovănel's *History,* where the critical and the metacritical discourses constantly interrupt each other.
33. Iovănel, *Istoria*, 675.
34. Ibid., 647.
35. Ibid., 653-654.
36. Ibid., 672.
37. Ibid., 651.
38. Lorna Burns, *Postcolonialism After World Literature*, 6. As an alternative, Burns proposes "a world provisionally constituted as an assemblage of forces and actors, none of which can be said to be either reducible or irreducible to anything other [...] the world and the literary text can be read as the unfolding of a process by which structures of dominance or inequality can emerge but never as the *a priori* conditions or teleological ends to which all actors are fated to be governed by."
39. To quote Marko Juvan's description of the current: "According to diffusionism, texts and conventions that are produced or mediated by the major Western languages and cultural metropolises spread throughout the planet, whereas peripheral or dependent cultural spaces only passively adapt them." Juvan, *Worlding*, 13.
40. In her article starting from Iovănel's *History*, Snejana Ung makes the point that, while national histories are still necessary at the periphery – given the uneven nature of the world literary system and its impact on theory – Iovănel's brand of historiography manages to transcend the traditional focus on aesthetic autonomy and to re-think Romanian literature as World Literature, analytically rather than descriptively. In other words, his work is precisely a space of negotiation between the inevitable specificity of the local context (shaped by unequal cultural exchanges) and the critical ambition to destabilize the center-periphery dichotomy when approaching literature from a transnational perspective.
41. While discussing the discourse surrounding American literary studies, Dimock writes: "We assume that there is a perfect fit, a seamless correspondence, between the geographical boundaries of the nation and the boundaries of all its other operative domains" (p. 755). Wai Chee Dimock, "Deep Time: American Literature and World History," *American Literary History* 13, no. 4 (2001): 755-775. Online: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3054595.
42. Ibid., 757.
43. Ibid., 759.
44. Wai Chee Dimock, "Literature for the Planet," *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 173-188. Quotation from page 174. Online: https://www.jstor.org/stable/463649.
45. Ibid., 174-175.
46. Iovănel, "Temporal Webs," 228.
47. Ibid., 229.
48. Iovănel, *Istoria*, 659.
49. Ibid., 664.
50. Arthur G. Neal, "On the Linkages between Sociology and Popular Culture," in *The Dynamics of Interconnections in Popular Culture(s)*, eds. Ray R. Browne and Ben Urish (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 55-66.
51. Mihai Iovănel*, Roman polițist* [Detective Novel] (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2014), 23-25.
52. Ibid., 160.
53. John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (Pearson, 2009), 5-12.
54. Tim Delaney, "Pop Culture: An Overview," *Philosophy Now* 64 (2007): 6-7. Quotation from page 6. Online: https://www.pdcnet.org/philnow/content/philnow_2007_0064_0000_0006_0007.
55. Iovănel, *Istoria*, 649.
56. Storey, "Pop Culture", 10.
57. John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 2.
58. Mihai Iovănel, "Mobile Frontiers: Instrumentations of Paraliterature in Modern Romanian Literature (1878– 2018)," *Transylvanian Review* Suppl. 1 (2019): 75-82. Online: https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=855276.
59. Iovănel, *Istoria*, 647.

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