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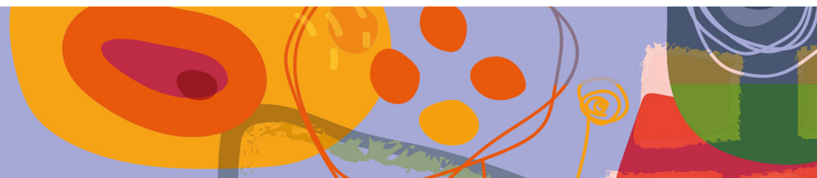

ARTICLE

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The transmedial triangulation of Dracula: how cinema turned the Gothic bloodsucker into a Gothicized serial killer

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G. M. Amza and Al. Bilciurescu's *Vampirul* (*The Vampire*), the first vampire novel in Romania, was published in 1938, a decade after the release of the first translation of *Dracula* into Romanian. Instead of emulating Stoker's bloodthirsty undead aristocrat, the two authors envision a priest who exploits the community's magical thinking, masquerading as a vampire-serial killer and haunting the increasingly industrialized community in the hopes of discouraging capitalistic ventures. Although evoking East-Central European representations of heretic vampire priests, there is textual and circumstantial evidence suggesting that the villain in *Vampirul* was (in)directly inspired by movies which revolutionized the Gothic trope of the vampire via exposure to real-life crime cases such as that of the Vampire of Düsseldorf. Through a close reading analysis, the article revisits Franco Moretti's theory of the (semi) peripheries importing "foreign plots" through "local characters" and expands Andrei Terian's concept of "cultural triangulation" to include cinema, which offers fresh insights into the evolution of literary tropes. As for the influence of this medium on the vampire myth, the article shows that the first vampire narrative in Romanian literature is the product of transmedial triangulation, a process whereby the narratives of 1930s horror cinema influenced the literary reception of the "foreign plot" in *Dracula*, which was, in turn, reinterpreted through a serial killer vampire priest, a "local character" who embodies the period's concerns about a lingering feudal order that threatens to hinder the development of the then fledgling Romanian society.

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Introduction

The main story of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is well-known: an aristocrat who resides in the heart of an archaic world derives sustenance from consuming the blood of others. Since the novel was originally published in 1897, the narrative has been reconceptualized time and again through various rewritings, imitations, adaptations, and instances of transmediation. From early cinema adaptations such as Károly Lajthay's 1921 *Drakula halála* (*Dracula's Death*) to contemporary reinterpretations by authors such as Anne Rice, *Dracula* has significantly influenced the vampire trope, and its Gothic formula has, in turn, been constantly reformulated, so much so that the novel contributed to the emergence of Dracula studies, a field of research devoted entirely to this work. Numerous studies over the past decade have highlighted its potential for economic and political interpretations (McNally, 2012; Morrissette, 2013), while others propose postcolonial readings of its plot, particularly by exploring it as part of Irish literature (Smart and Hutcheson, 2007; Keogh, 2014). Still other studies have focused on its political undertones. For instance, the late nineteenth-century relocation of the archaic and feudal Count Dracula from a remote Transylvania to London can be interpreted as a form of "reverse colonialization" (Arata, 1990), or in other words, as a metaphor for the Western anxiety of potential "colonization" by the peripheries. Such studies show that the possibilities for reading the vampire trope and for integrating other fields—economics, postcolonial studies, etc.—are vast. Today, when we discuss Dracula, we are not just referring to Bram Stoker's novel but to an entire complex of mutations that have enriched and altered the original Gothic formula over time. Other readings, however, have not elicited as much attention: for instance, what might a reading of *Dracula* look like from the perspective of Transylvania, the place it represents? What effects has this vampire novel featuring Transylvania had on a minor and peripheral literature, which Stoker's work has drawn into this imagological game? Moreover, how has *Dracula* served as a model in other cultures that have adopted it, whether through translations or imitations?

The answers to these questions, we believe, offer surprisingly fruitful theoretical models. The emergence of the vampire novel in Romania is not the result of the direct literary imitation of a Western work on the periphery but rather exemplifies a type of transmediation seldom explored in literary studies, which we term "transmedial triangulation." This process involves a literary work appearing in a new context as a direct influence—or even reproduction—of another work, but with its form significantly altered by an intervening artistic medium. From the publication of Stoker's novel to the emergence of the first vampire novel in Romanian culture—which preserves elements of *Dracula*'s original Gothic formula—the advent of cinema has profoundly influenced the reception of the trope, not only abroad but also at home.

Romania is widely considered the cradle of the modern vampire myth not only because of Transylvania's association with the trope, which predates Bram Stoker's *Dracula*[1] but also due to academic studies promoting a link between the history of the region and Stoker's Count Dracula, on the one hand, and the commodification of the novel as a local tourism brand on the other.[2] Recent research has shown, however, that the Gothic iteration of the vampire—the bloodthirsty undead with an aristocratic background—has little, if any, representation in the Romanian oral and written culture, and that the introduction of the word in the language and its understanding were initially influenced by the French and German models, which the fledgling Romanian society tried to emulate in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and by the spread of theaters during the 1930s, which exposed the vampire-related discourse of the country's mass media to the cinema iteration of the myth.[3]

Romania's historical position on the periphery of European literary currents, primarily as a recipient rather than a progenitor of literary motifs and narrative structures, presents an intriguing standpoint for reconsidering this perspective and engaging with Fredric Jameson's (1993) discussion of the circulation of literature, popularized by Franco Moretti. Moretti's conceptualization of literary borrowing as a mechanism rooted in world systems theory—core cultures furnishing "foreign plots" that are subsequently adapted by peripheral regions using "local characters"—warrants reevaluation in the Romanian context. In recent decades, Franco Moretti has been the theorist who offered perhaps the most complex systems of analysis concerning the circulation of literary works from center to periphery through literary geography (Moretti, 1999) and distant reading (Moretti, 2013). For him, the evolution of the modern novel—and literature in general—appears as a compromise: "when a culture starts moving towards the modern novel, it's *always* as a compromise between foreign form and local materials" (Moretti, 2013, p 52, original emphasis). This pattern is frequently observed in the evolution of modern cultures, and in Romania, it has been adhered to almost religiously: Eugene Sue's novels about *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842–43) became *Misterele Bucureștilor* (*The Mysteries of Bucharest*) in Romania between 1862 and 1864, transplanting the "foreign form" onto "local material." The plot (form) remained the same, but the setting (material) was different.

But contrary to this remark, Romanian literary tradition, notably as the presumed birthplace of Dracula, did not fully conform to this model of adopting Gothic literary narratives from the West and overlaying them with local characters. Instead, it turned to cinema for creative stimulus, appropriating literary narratives already influenced by motion pictures. In our view, this phenomenon epitomizes a form of *transmedial triangulation*—the "foreign plot" is transmediated first, and only then reinterpreted by "local characters"—, which offers fresh insights into the evolution of literary tropes within the Romanian cultural milieu. Additionally, it demonstrates that literary influence must be envisioned as a complex transmedial system, whereby the source plot frequently reaches the target text through intricate processes of triangulation.

As articulated by Andrei Terian, "comparative cultural studies … tend to judge interliterary and intercultural relations solely in terms of binary pairs, which leads, in turn, to an imminent limitation of such perspectives" (Terian, 2019, p 16). To address this issue, the scholar proposes the concept of "cultural triangulation", which perceives "*all* (inter)cultural processes [as being] ideologically filtered and [implying] the existence of an intermediary C between A and B, which takes various roles, mainly of camouflaging / altering / compensating / overturning certain power relations that are by no means perceptible or inescapable" (Terian, 2019, p 19, original emphasis). According to this vantage point, every cultural exchange between two entities, whether national literatures or literary groups, is perceived as being influenced by a third entity, which acts as a "hidden third" in the process of cultural transmission. Illustrative examples of such literary triangulations abound—the Russian influence on Romanian French literary exchanges during the long nineteenth century or the Soviet influence on the discourse of East European literatures on Asian cultures—yet our study seeks to show how triangulation can also operate across different media. The "hidden third" is not necessary a different culture here, but a different medium: cinema. A hypertext of *Dracula*, G.M. Amza and Al. Bicliurescu's 1938 *Vampirul* (*The Vampire*), the first Romanian vampire novel,[4] is not tethered to its literary source; their

connection was mediated and modified by a process of *transmedial triangulation* which blended the Gothic iteration of the vampire with the monster narratives of 1930s cinema.

This article explores the textual and circumstantial evidence underpinning the hypothesis that *Vampirul*, while implicitly and explicitly inspired by *Dracula*, was intricately shaped through a process of transmedial triangulation involving two motion pictures from the 1930s, which had, in turn, been loosely based on Stoker's novel or the trope it inspired. In other words, influenced by vampire films based on *Dracula*, the first Romanian adaptation of Stoker's novel transcends the Gothic vampire trope, proposing instead a Gothicized crime fiction antagonist that aligns with the vampire narratives of 1930s cinema. Furthermore, by embracing Jacques Rancière's concept that "the real must be fictionalized in order to be thought," our study seeks to elucidate how the depiction of the vampire as a serial killer in *Vampirul* was also influenced by the real-life case of Peter Kürten, known as the "Vampire of Düsseldorf", which encouraged the "commodification of violence" (Jarvis, 2007) and the reshaping of the vampire myth in the then contemporary fiction and cinema productions. To understand how literary motifs change over time, it is, we believe, imperative, to depart from a purely literary lens of influence and explore possible transmedial triangulations.

The vampire trope and cinema of the 1930s

According to Anca Simina Martin, "Romania, widely considered to be the cradle of the vampire myth, was, in fact, neither its originator nor its innovator. In fact, the evolution of the trope aligns closely with the developments seen in the German and French cultures, to which the Romanian society looked for inspiration in its early days" (Martin, 2023b, p 21). The term "vampire" entered the language as late as 1839,[5] and the supernatural apprehension of the word "was, by and large, imported through foreign plays, motion pictures or translations" (Martin, 2023b, p 21). The preface to the new edition of Ion Gorun's interwar translation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* has shown, among others, that the advent of the cinema was an especially auspicious context for the vampire trope in Romania.[6] The publication of Gorun's rendition—to current knowledge, the first one in Romanian and among the first ten translations printed internationally—coincided, in fact, with the release of Tod Browning's *London After Midnight* (1927) in Romanian theatres. Like F. W. Muranu's *Nosferatu* (1922), which was initially advertised as having been based on Stoker's novel, the movie—now one of the Holy Grails of lost media—did not garner too much critical attention, save for an article noting the similarities between *London After Midnight* and "*Mosferatu*" (sic), and praising Lon Chaney's special effects make-up (Rampa, 1928). Its talkie twin, *Mark of the Vampire* (1935), starring Bela Lugosi, famed for his role in Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931), did, however, have an impact, not only because it helped to establish a new understanding of the vampire trope but also because its official rendition into Romanian, *Vampirul din Praga* (*The Vampire of Prague*), echoed the case of the period's most infamous serial killer, Peter Kürten or the Vampire of Düsseldorf.

Despite the connection between the fictional Dracula and the historical voivode Vlad the Impaler, which Raymond T. McNally and Radu Florescu convincingly advocate in *In Search of Dracula* (1972), in Romania, the word "vampire" entered the language only a century before the publication of *Vampirul* and was primarily used as a metaphor for urban typologies, such as the *femme fatale* inspired by Greta Garbo in movies such as *The Temptress* (1926). and the working-class "oppressors" which informed Karl Marx's theory of the "vampire capitalism" (Martin, 2023a, p 18–19). In the 1930s, however, the vampire acquired a different meaning. On 28 November 1929, the daily *Dreptatea* (*The Justice*) cites *Le Journal*, which announced that "the Vampire of Düsseldorf had made a sudden appearance in Bucharest" (Dreptatea, 1929).[7] It is difficult to say whether the news sent a wave of terror through the capital of the then young modern Romanian society; what is clear is that the topic elicited enough interest for the period's press to cover the case extensively—the serial killer's young and unsuspecting victims, his extensive hunt and anticlimactic apprehension—, emphasizing the murderer's proclivity to consume blood.[8] The serial killer from Düsseldorf, which the press labeled a "vampire", was named Peter Kürten. His execution, closely followed as it was by the Romanian premiere of Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), earned this movie the subtitle *Vampirul din Düsseldorf* (*The Vampire of Düsseldorf*). As revealed in a 1963 interview, Lang did not base his villain, Hans Beckert, on this 'vampire' alone (Gandert, 2003, p 33) and for some cinema critics of the early 1930s, this appears to have common knowledge[9]; in fact, the nickname is missing altogether from his account of directing *M*. This, however, did not discourage reviewers to attribute to him a novel interpretation of the vampire trope; an anonymous contributor to *Rampa* (*The Ramp*) remarks, in an article on Lang's movie, how "[t]he vampire [Beckert] commits crime in a state of abnormal arousal, somewhat resembling sleepwalking, or rather, by switching personality. They are usually common people, peaceful bourgeois, devoid of any extravagance" (Rampa, 1931a).

This is not to say that this perspective on the vampire myth superseded the popularity of the Marxist understanding of the term in Romania—numerous press articles and literary works of the 1930s still spoke of the vampire capital and vampire capitalists of foreign and local origins[10]—and Stoker's legacy in the West—this decade saw the release of Tod Browning's *Dracula* and *Mark of the Vampire*, Carl Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932), and Lambert Hillyer's *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), of which all but one draw varying degrees of inspiration from Stoker's novel. Undeniably the most influential, Browning's *Dracula* garnered significant attention in Romania, no less due to the Transylvanian origins of the lead actor, Bela Lugosi, which, in the view of one local critic, combined "the distinction and elegance of Don Juan with the sadism and monstrosity of [Count Orlok in *Nosferatu*]" (Curentul, 1933). However, it was *Mark of the Vampire*, Browning's second collaboration with Bela Lugosi in a title role, which seems to have contributed more to establishing the iteration of the vampire myth inspired by the Vampire of Düsseldorf.

The connection between the case and the movie is evident from *Vampirul din Praga*, the title with which *Mark of the Vampire* was marketed in Romania, which echoes the period's practice of associating murderers with this fictional creature and the location wherein they operate.[11] Following the tone set by Lang's *M*, *Mark of the Vampire* "[modernized] the trope of the [v]ampire," who, in this movie, turns out to be a "mere hired [actor], commissioned to terrorize one baron suspected of being the author of a murder" (Suchianu, 1935, p 9). A caricature of Lugosi's role in *Dracula*, the vampire-actor Count Mora parodies not only the real-life actor's typecasting as different variations of the same villain but also the supernatural iteration of the trope epitomized by the Irish writer's antagonist. Similarly, vampirism in the vampire novel of the period is a simulacrum; rather than combating evil, Amza and Bilciurescu's vampire-priest adopts this identity to exploit the other characters' belief in the supernatural for his own benefit.

Amza and Bicliurescu's *Vampirul*: a synopsis

Written in 1936 and published near the end of the decade which saw these developments of the myth, G.M. Amza and Al. Bilciurescu's *Vampirul*, in which the vampire is revealed to be a

priest-turned-serial-killer, reflects a transition of the vampire trope from Gothic antihero to Gothic crime fiction character. However, according to David Pirie, author of *The Vampire Cinema*, "[t]here is a world of difference between the psychological horror of mass murder and the dreamy romantic atmosphere of the undead," and, in his view, this accounts for how, of all "human vampires," only Elizabeth Bathory, the historical noblewoman who allegedly bathed in maidens' blood, served as inspiration for movies featuring bloodsucking vampires (Pirie, 1977, p 17). As shown previously, this is not always the case: modern "characterizations of serial killers converge with those of vampires" (Picart and Greek, 2003, p 42) and literary vampires have evolved to become serial killers. Such alterations are the result of the process of transmedial triangulation, whereby a literary figure altered by cinema is reintegrated into literature. Through the sensationalist modalities inherent in cinematic expression, the Gothic Dracula, emblematic of what Pirie describes as the "dreamy romantic atmosphere of the undead," has undergone a metamorphosis into a serial killer.

With its "elements evoking typical Gothic works" (Vartic, 2003, p 1692), the "horror novel" *Vampirul* tells the tale of Corneliu Cociu, a philosophy and literature graduate fluent in Greek, Latin, German and Hungarian, who leaves Bucharest for the village of Marilla, situated near the spa town of Sommerfrische in Banat, western Romania, very close to Transylvania. His goal is to meet his future employer, baron Julius-Adalbert Wirth, who hired him as a private secretary responsible for organizing the extensive library in his late brother-in-law's home, the castle of the Kol[l]ovrat Counts.[12] Wirth, however, is not only an erudite aristocrat, who pursues various scholarly endeavors but also a patron of less fortunate intellectuals, who also include the village priest, Dr. Almaș Becker, an ex-theologian whom he similarly persuaded to relocate to this remote region.

The baron is also remarkably open-minded, as he does not object to the love relationship that blossoms between Corneliu and his ward, the nineteen-year-old countess Ermina Kollovrat, who, like his secretary, is an orphan. Although the "proprietor of [a] castle and the surrounding mountains," the young woman feels "more miserable than a beggar" (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 18): she blames herself for the vampire's victims, correlating its increased activity in the area with her hesitation to take the veil. In contrast, Corneliu remains skeptical throughout, refusing to believe that supernatural forces are at work. Determined to debunk the unfounded fears of the locals and alleviate his paramour's sense of guilt, he asks his friend, the equally rational detective Dr. Rudy Tamasch / Tomasch of Hungary, to come to Marilla to assist him in investigating the supposed vampire case.

In short order and aided by several helpful locals such as, among others, the Kollovrats' two servants Fritz Krauss and Roza, the county doctor Geza Vendelin and the forest ranger Miloș Kiraylli, Corneliu and Rudy discover whodunit in this "drama of proof" (Carroll, 1990); one night, Corneliu has the sudden realization that much of the vampire activity is centered around a place called "The Rabbit's Crossroads". After noticing a moving rock and a woman's handkerchief, he decides to investigate the nearby cave. Meanwhile, Rudy, who started suspecting who the vampire was, goes looking for his friend. While trying to find him, he meets an old acquaintance they made in Marilla, Miloș the lumberjack, who suggests searching for Corneliu at the crossroads. Rudy follows his advice and eventually reaches the cave, which branches off into a series of tunnels leading to the Kollovrat castle. There, he witnesses a satanic ritual involving two unwilling participants: Corneliu, who is immobilized, and a naked and hypnotized Ermina. To his astonishment, Rudy also discovers that the priest, Almaș Becker, is the true author of the vampire attacks and a follower of Belzebuth. Without hesitation, the detective shoots Becker and promptly unties Corneliu. Startled by the confrontation, Ermina comes to her senses then faints shortly after, being plagued by fits of anxiety for several months until she ultimately makes a full recovery. The story concludes with Corneliu and Rudy giving testimonies of the events and expressing their opinions on the priest's motives for the attacks.

As is evident from above, the trope of the vampire undergoes a notable transformation in this novel as Becker, unlike Count Dracula, is not "undead". Central to this metamorphosis is the class dynamic of the community terrorized by the vampire, which is more evident than in Stoker's novel: the peasants attribute the phenomenon to supernatural forces—some of them even engage in animal sacrifices to ward off the vampire (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 36–37)—, the working-class, represented by the region's miners, perceive the crimes as being orchestrated by a force aligned with capitalist interests, whereas the intelligentsia of the village, comprising the middle and upper classes, largely reject these narratives, believing that the perpetrator is, in fact, a serial killer masquerading as a vampire. In other words, *Vampirul* is not the product of *repurposing* the cinema trope of the vampire serial killer for literary purposes. What might have been a simple case of *transmediation*—Bilciurescu and Amza writing a story in the vein of their period's vampire films—is, as we show next, a *rewriting* of Stoker's *Dracula* through transmedial triangulation.

Similarities between *Dracula* and *Vampirul*

As the previous section shows, Amza and Bilciurescu's *Vampirul* does not perfectly overlap with *Dracula*: the baron is not the antagonist of the story nor is the vampire villain a Gothic vampire in the Stokerian acceptation of the term. However, there are several notable similarities between the two novels, which, in some cases, suggest that the two authors may have drawn inspiration from Stoker's magnum opus, either directly or through the many motion pictures of the period based on it. In this respect, the most illustrative example is Corneliu Cociu's and Jonathan Harker's journey to the vampire's hunting ground.

Young, more or less fluent in German and eager to set their careers into motion, Cociu and Harker are both outsiders in relation to the space they are traveling through—admittedly, the culture shock is higher in the latter's case, since he comes from an entirely different country –, noting, either through the narrator's voice or in their diary, the local cuisine, sometimes in a derogatory tone—the "bad, bad Timișoara beer" (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 8), "robber steak … in the simple style of London's cat's-meat" (Stoker, 1996, p 13); the area's mountainous landscape —"[r]ight and left of us [the Carpathians] towered" (Stoker, 1996, p 15), "the cluster of mountains surrounding the region" (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 3); the first contact with the locals' superstitions—"two desperate lads, their faces scrunched with terror, rushed in, [shouting] 'The vampire!'" (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 9), "I could hear a lot of words … both of which mean the same thing … something that is … a vampire" (Stoker, 1996, p 13–4); the fateful coach ride to their destination —"May God watch over us,' the driver said, making the sign of the cross" (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 13), "the passengers offered me gifts … [making] the sign of the cross" (Stoker, 1996, p 16); the supernatural events witnessed along the way—"a powerful flash of lightning crossed the forest, … [revealing] the fantastic figure of a monk [Becker], without dimensions and proportions" (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 13), "when he stood between me [Jonathan] and the flame he [the caleche driver / Dracula] did not obstruct it, for I could see its ghostly figure all the same" (Stoker, 1996, p 19).

The vampire antagonist—whom Stoker describes as a red-eyed man "clad in black from head to toe" (Stoker, 1996, p 21) and Amza and Bilciurescu similarly characterize as a "large figure dressed in black" (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 15) with "frightening eyes like two brass plates forged in fire" (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 10)—are both pillars of their community[13]—Dracula is a nobleman and Becker, the "spiritual father of the land" (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 43)—and well-versed in the occult—the former "learned his secrets in the Scholomance, … where the devil claims the third scholar as his due" (Stoker, 1996, p 212), while the latter confesses to being a follower of the demon Belzebuth. Unlike Dracula, however, Becker is not afraid of sunlight nor is he immortal, although the novel features episodes in which some characters interpret characters as evidence in favor of his possessing supernatural powers.

Rudy Tanasch, however, is not a near-exact replica of Dr. Van Helsing. Like his Stokerian counterpart, the detective is a doctorate holder and although he comes from Budapest, he converses with Corneliu in Romanian—admittedly, without the grammar errors Van Helsing produces in English. What distinguishes the two is the fact that Tanasch remains steadfast in his belief that the vampire does not have supernatural powers: when questioning the priest about being allegedly attacked by the vampire inside the church, he picks up on Becker's referring to the creature as a man and jokingly concludes, based on the victim's statement, that the culprit could not have been an "evil spirit" (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 161). In contrast, Dr. Geza Vendelin, "one of those physicians who are completely over their head due to their lack of contact with the city" (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 25) shares Van Helsing's conviction that vampires are real, even though the latter's reputation is not similarly affected by it:[14] they both recommend using garlic to ward off the vampire, arguing that 'it is the fault of our science that it wants to explain it all' (Stoker, 1996, p 171), while "[remaining] completely powerless … in the face of certain supernatural events" (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 25) such as those involving Lucy Westenra or Ermina Kollovrat.

In addition to their similar biographies—nineteen years old, absent parents,[15] privileged upbringing, appreciated mostly for their innocence and looks –, Lucy's and Ermina's encounters with the vampire are, in many respects, the same: his visits, often in the shape of a winged animal and even in other people's presence —"[Outside Ermina's window, Corneliu notices] a peculiar bird, which in a flutter of wings darkened it" (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 19), "there came a sort of dull flapping … at [Lucy's] window…. I [John Seward] could see that the noise was made by a great bat" (Stoker, 1996, p 144); their frequent episodes of losing consciousness—"[t]he countess [Ermina], … as if in a dream, seemed frightened at being told things she could not remember" (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 146), "[l]ast night I [Lucy] seemed to be dreaming again…. I can remember nothing; but I am full of vague fear"' (Stoker, 1996, p 103); and their corruption at the hands of the antagonist—"the poor countess [Ermina], … under the power of the same hypnosis, was the vestal priestess of an evil cult" (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 191), "[s]he [the undead Lucy] seemed like … a devilish mockery of Lucy's sweet purity, … for all that die from the preying of the Un-Dead become themselves Un-Dead…. And so the circle goes on ever widening" (Stoker, 1996, p 190). Conversely, Eva Tanasch, the other female character in *Vampirul*, shares little in common with Mina Murray, except for the fact that, like Jonathan Harker's wife, she accompanies her husband, detective Rudy Tanasch, Romania and is subjected sometimes to belittling comments on the part of the other male characters.[16]

The instances above are not the only contexts in which *Vampirul* and *Dracula* overlap—although not an epistolary novel, the former includes a fragment of Ermina's diary and Coroana (The Crown), the hotel where the Tanasches lodge evokes the Golden Krone in Bistrița, which Harker leaves for the Count's castle—, and the comparisons above are not aimed to promote the hypothesis that the Romanian authors partially reproduced Stoker's work. What we have tried to show is that *Dracula* seems to have generated emulations in this geographical area, either through contact with the novel or Gorun's translation, or through the movies fully or partially inspired by Stoker's cult classic, which preserve many of the characters and scenes analyzed in the paragraphs above.

Vampirul and its era's vampire movies

Despite the stark similarities between Stoker's novel and *Vampirul*, we have not been able to identify journalistic sources which point to either writer having read *Dracula* and / or Ion Gorun's serialized translation of the novel into Romanian. Similarly, *Digitheca Arcanum*, the largest online database of various Romanian periodicals, has yet to compile articles liking Amza or Bilciurescu to the craze generated by the Vampire of Düsseldorf. However, there is circumstantial evidence that at least one of the authors was familiar with two contemporary movies which had been inspired by Stoker's work or Peter Kürten respectively—Browning's *Mark of the Vampire* (1935) and Lang's *M* (1931): the surname of Lang's antagonist, Hans Beckert, differs from that of the vampire-priest, Almaș Becker, by a single letter, and in a September 1930 issue of the magazine *Cinema*, Al. Bilciurescu signs a eulogy for Lou Chaney where he mentions *London after Midnight*, the silent twin of Browning's 1935 production (Bilciurescu, 1930). In addition to being a novelist, poet and lawyer, Bilciurescu was also a movie critic, penning regular reviews for various Romanian publications. That he was extremely prolific as a novelist, publishing, in more cases than one, two or three novels per year makes it even more likely that he drew inspiration from the motion pictures he commented on.

This, in turn, would explain why he and Amza did not try to emulate the nineteenth-century trope of the vampire bloodsucker in *Vampirul*; by the time they wrote the first vampire novel in Romania, the myth, although still indebted to Stoker's vision, had already suffered significant mutations, not least through Lang's *M* and Browning's *Mark of the Vampire*, which have bled into the Romanian authors' *Vampirul*. Despite his associations with the occult, Almaș Becker is a human being nonetheless, as are the motivations for his attacks. Like most crime fiction novels, Amza and Bilciurescu's concludes with a synopsis of the clues, investigation and the discovery of the murderer, which foretells David Baker's conclusion regarding the 1930s iteration of the vampire myth: in the period's motion pictures, "vampirism [became] a masquerade—a ruse on the part of a non-vampire to achieve some end" (Baker, 2021, p 217):

> [t]here is no human action without a well-determined motive…. When I [Rudy Tanasch] first stepped into the territory tormented by the so-called vampire, I did not think for a moment of anything else, except the interest that a man might have in frightening a whole region, under the guise of a vampire, who exists only in the fantasy of weak-minded men. I knew that there must be a man of exceptional attributes, who, under that demonic garb and fabricated appearance, mocked the world. But to what end? Without a goal, even a madman, escaped from an asylum, would not devote all his activity to such experiments. I had to look for the motive, and since human rapacity targets money, I had to investigate this lead. I began to study the psychology of the people who lived in this vampire-terrorized area. At first, I saw a baron, bibliophile, very rich

> and passionate, the guardian of the fortune that belonged to his niece, Countess Ermina of Kollovrat, a naive girl with mystical ideations, the heiress to an immense fortune. Around the countess, [there were] harmless servants and a librarian who was neither a clerk nor a servant. Apart from them, there was this priest whose aim was to turn the young countess into a nun to get hold of her fortune indirectly, in the name of the church.
>
> … Something fluidic, unusual, a Rasputin-like magnetic power laid at the very center of Almaș Becker's physical and emotional structure, as is evident from his curious force of commanding and taming animals, making them obey him.

At his place, I found, among many strange things, a trained owl which, sent in the evening around one house or another, roused with its cries all the night birds. He also had a wolfdog, black as pitch, which consorted with the wolves in the woods, and prowled about the places where its master sent it.

> … [The] super-energy whereby Almaș Becker rose above all other mortals and human potential coerced him into living a double life, which is, to put it mildly, symptomatic of delusion.

This explains all the murders he committed, ruthlessly, sadistically and for whatever purpose. The drunkenness of his own power, of which he was conscious, made him identify wholly with the role of vampire, and shedding the modest stole of a poor country priest, he thought himself at night an archangel, a rival of God, a high priest of the cult of Belzebuth. (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 190–191).

Rudy's criminal profiling, coupled with the comparative analysis of the similarities between *Dracula* and *Vampirul*, show that the antagonist in Amza and Bilciurescu's novel, as mentioned previously, transcends the parameters of the Gothic vampire, proposing instead a Gothicized crime fiction character. The vampire guise, reminiscent of Count Mora in *Mark of the Vampire*, is, for both Becker and Lugosi's character, merely performative, serving as a means to, admittedly, different ends—to catch a killer and spread terror respectively. However, both pretend vampires acknowledge how potent this role is, as they "gave all of [them]" to the act (Rhodes, 2022, p 138), identifying with it to the point where some of their actions are, at least at first sight, difficult, if not impossible, to explain. In both cases, the reader / spectator is left confounded as to how they are supposed to reconcile the less rational events depicted in the book or on screen—Count Mora's and Becker's power to hypnotize both man and animal—with their humanness. As far as *Mark of the Vampire* is concerned, "[t]he only explanation that makes any sense is that Count Mora … [is a] [vampire] pretending to be [an] [actor] pretending to be [a] [vampire]" (Rhodes, 2022, p 71), a theory that would also account for the vampire-priest's "super-energy", as Rudy the detective calls Becker's apparent supernatural powers. However, as Gary Rhodes aptly notes in relation to the movie, "it's just as possible that *Mark of the Vampire* is Browning's ultimate illusion, … the cinematic equivalent of a professional magician suddenly deciding to unpack his suitcase of illusions for the astonished crowd and invite them to join in on the fun" (Rodes, 2022, p 71). Inspired or not by this motion picture, Amza and Bilciurescu seem to have attempted the same trick on their readers, confronting them with the biases resulting from the human propensity to seek patterns.

The reason why Browning and the authors of *Vampirul* chose an actor and a priest to enact this illusion is, perhaps, not arbitrary. In a study of psychotic traits in professional actors, Ando, Claridge and Clark (2014) show that actors rank higher than the norm in point of magical thinking, while Cholewa and Gilski (2012) suggest that available models distinguishing between religious and magical thinking have not succeeded in drawing a clear line of demarcation. Indeed, neither Browning nor Amza and Bilciurescu had access to these studies, but given actors' and priests' line of work, which lies at the intersection between the rational and the imaginary or supernatural, there is reason to suspect that they saw potential in exploiting these backgrounds to construct a scenario in which an actor / priest develop a vampire persona and challenge the characters' grip with reality, while foregrounding the tendency of attributing societal issues to a malevolent supernatural force.

The vampire trope: from gothic bloodsucker to gothicized serial killer

René Girard famously asserted that "[w]e must think of the monstrous as beginning with the lack of differentiation, with a process that, though it has no effect on reality, does affect the perception of it," because "[it] always [consists] of a combination of elements borrowed from various existing forms" (Girard, 1986, p 33). In the context of the present article, "existing forms" refers not only to *M* and *Mark of the Vampire* as likely points of reference for Amza and Bilciurescu's novel but also to the real-life socio-political background of the novel and its possible sources of inspiration. In *The Criminal Brain*, Rafter, Posick and Rocque see in Lang's motion picture a reflection of the post-World War I Weimar Republic, where high crime and unemployment rates "[became] symbols of the country's inability to cope with its problems" (Rafter, Posick and Rocque, 2016, p 193). The late 1930s in Romania, when the two authors wrote and published *Vampirul*, experienced their fair share of turmoil, too, when in the elections of 1937, the far-right Iron Guard, a nationalist party, "won a disturbing 15 per cent of the vote," and the constitution of 1938 abolished political parties and "the separation of powers was practically done away with in favor of the King," Carol II (Boia, 2001, p 104). This atmosphere of social unrest bled into both movie and novel, with the posse, distrustful of the law enforcement authorities, taking it upon itself to punish *M*'s serial killer and a mining accident in *Vampirul* leading to a revolt of the workers, who attribute the event to their superiors' "[bringing] a vampire, himself a capitalist, to terrorize [them]" and destroy their livelihood (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 52).

An extension of the white-collar capitalistic agenda, the vampire is depicted here as what early twentieth-century criminology would label a "criminaloid," who E. A. Ross, the father of Gothic criminology, defines as the criminal who "slinks in the shadow, menacing our purses" (Ross, 1907, p 50). This type of perpetrator, writes Cesare Lombroso two decades earlier than Ross, comes from the ranks of those "high in power, who society venerates as its chiefs," and this privileged status frequently "prevents their criminal character from being recognized" (Lombroso, 1887, p 47). Outdated today, such typologies were very popular in the late nineteenth century—Stoker mentions Lombroso in his novel (Stoker, 1996, p 296)—and their legacy seems to have persisted well into the 1930s—"to play this part [Hans Becker], Lang cast Peter Lorre, a sinister-looking Hungarian Jew" (Rafter et al. 2016, p 193), who, in accordance with Lombroso's theories, which exerted "[t]he strongest influence on German criminology in [that] period" (p 194) "[reflected] the growing belief that crime is often committed by non-Germanic "outsiders" and likely to be biological in nature" (p 195)—and they account for why the vampire-priest, the shepherd of the region and the comforter of the community in the wake of the accident, was not suspected of having committed the attacks. This new breed of monster, which Almaș Becker personifies, lies at the heart of Gothic criminology,

a theoretical model which looks into how literature and movies portray "unreal horrors attendant upon a realistically/cogently imagined fictional world, and [how] factual cases (of serial murderers) [are] framed in gothic terms" by the mass media (Picart and Greek, 2003, p 40).

In a study informed by this paradigm, Picart and Greek argue that there "is a striking similarity between the mythic characterization of a vampire and the description of a serial killer: both kill out of an overpowering compulsion, and in similarly periodic and patterned ways" (Picart and Greek, 2003, p 43). "The drunkenness of power," which fed Becker's urge to kill according to Rudy the detective, prompted him to eliminate all contenders for authority in the area, be it financial—the engineer Heinrich, the director of the mines—or political—the mayor, Bela Toroky—, and in both cases, the murders were committed because the victims contested the terror rule of the vampire. In line with Baker's analysis of the 1930s iteration of the trope and the Gothic criminological perspective on vampiric serial killers, Almaș Becker "emerges as a figure both sympathetic and terrifying" (Picart and Greek, 2003, p 55), as the priest claims to have been possessed by a satanic vampire, who sought to dismantle not only the political and entrepreneurial bodies which gave structure to the region, but also the couple formed by Ermina and Corneliu, "whose reproductive relationship facilitates the reproduction of community" (Baker, 2021, p 216).

With communion resembling the ritual of blood drinking, it is not difficult to understand why priests were depicted as vampires as early as the *Russian Primary Chronicle* of 1047, in which a Novgorodian priest is nicknamed the "Wicked Vampire" (Garza, 2017). In fact, conflations of the two appear as far away as Central Africa, where, during the early twentieth century, "Catholic missionaries [were] accused of drinking Africans' blood" (White, 1993, p 747). In Romania, an indirect association, mediated by the local vampire breed, can be tracked back to at least 1709, when the physician Samuel Köleseri recounts an episode in which the village-dwellers in today's Transylvanian county of Alba "disinterred several former *strigoi*, including a priest, and pierced their hearts with stakes" (Cosma, 2014, p 114). Contemporary scholars such as Evseev (1997, p 444) and others (Hedeșan, 1996, p 26) note that the word "*strigoi*" is associated not only with a vampire-like monster but also with individuals who dabble in the occult, and this acceptation existed when Amza and Bilciurescu published their novel (Șăineanu, 1929, p 621). If the priest in Köleseri's recollection was thought to fit the profile of an undead *strigoi* or whether he practiced witchcraft, the source does not say, yet by the time the novel was released, Romanian authors had started writing stories about exploitative priests, whose deviations from the teachings of the Bible qualify as grounds for becoming *strigoi*.[17]

However, the vampire in Amza and Bilciurescu's novel is a guise and not a diagnostic, and akin to his counterpart in *Mark of the Vampire*, who admits to have played a role, and Gothic serial such as that portrayed in Po-Chih Leong's 1998 *Immortality*, who can no longer extract sustenance from blood when he falls in love with his victim, Becker's masquerade begins to lose credibility when he deviates too much from the Gothic conventions of a preternatural murderer, first by coercing the vampire-fearing doctor into tending to a gunshot wound and secondly, by attempting to dispel any suspicion that he was the vampire by claiming to have been attacked while praying in the church. When the two primary tenets of the vampire myth prove to have been an illusion, the 'super-energy' of the Gothic vampire-serial killer subsides, leaving room for the only rational explanation possible: fearing the prospect of losing his influence over an increasingly industrialized community, the priest guises as a vampire, exploiting the villagers' magical thinking to discourage any form of capitalistic secularization and prolong the feudal order he represents.

Conclusions

Vampirul garnered little to no contemporary attention—*Digitheca Arcanum*, the largest online database of various Romanian periodicals, records a single short review, which praises it for its "lively plot," "entertaining well-paced intrigue," and "surprising conclusion" (Adevărul artistic și literar, 1938). Modern commentaries have not been too generous with it either: one critic, for instance, argues that "the superficial manner in which [the authors] [treat] the theme strips [the novel] of the particular qualities of the genre, darkness and mystery being reduced to the banal" (Vartic, 2003, p 1692). Yet *Vampirul* is not without its merits; it is not only the first Romanian novel to feature a vampire antagonist explicitly but also a work whereby the co-authors do not propose a local Gothic formula but a Gothic crime fiction product, which revisits the "foreign plot" of *Dracula* and reinterprets it in accordance with the era's vampire cinema tropes. However, unlike *Dracula* and its 1930s cinematic iterations, whose "foreign plots" envision the vampire either as an undead aristocrat or as a pretend monster, in *Vampirul* the two dimensions of the trope combine to produce a "local vampire" who evokes East-Central European representations of the monster as heretic members of the clergy (Garza, 2017) who seek to sustain the feudal system they represent through terror. While *Vampirul*'s narrative framework may be based on *Dracula*, the Romanian novel shows that there are instances in which authors sometimes depart from the "foreign plot, local characters" formula when crafting (semi)peripheral iterations of narratives from the center. In our opinion, *Vampirul* proposes a revisitation of the literary source text with a cinematic perspective on vampirism, achieved through triangulation with a third medium, more closely linked to the sensationalist media of the 1930s: the portrayal of the vampire as a serial killer. This delineation bears significant implications not only for literary scholarship concerning the dynamics of literary influence but also for media and cinema studies, unveiling a direct pathway through which cinema emerged by the 1930s as a vector for shaping the trajectory of literary evolution.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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Notes

1 We refer here to Alexandre Dumas père's 1849 "La Dame pale" ("The Pale Lady") and Jules Verne's 1892 *Le Château des Carpathes* (*The Castle of the Carpathians*), whose stories focus on vampire-like monsters haunting Transylvania.

2 The most influential academic study to advocate a link between the region's history and Stoker's novel is Raymond McNally and Radu Florescu's 1978 *In Search of Dracula*. Their work spurred the emergence of a Dracula tourism brand in Transylvania, which is analyzed in Duncan Light's 2012 *The Dracula Dilemma: Tourism, Identity and the State in Romania*.

3 For a more detailed history of the trope of the vampire and *strigoi* between 1839 and 1947, see Martin AS (2023) The trope of the vampire (and strigoi) in Romanian culture and cultural products imported to Romania (1839–1947). Transilvania (7):17–25.

4 Subtitled "a novel" Mircea Eliade's 1938 "Domnișoara Christina" ("Miss Christina"), more closely fits the formula of an "extended novella" (Mitchievici, 2009, p 22). The

antagonist, Miss Christina, is not a vampire per se—the word is nowhere to be found in the story –, but an aristocratic *strigoi* who torments those who visit her manor.
5 Ivan Evseev, author of *Dicționar de magie, demonologie și mitologie românească* (*Dictionary of Romanian Magic, Demonology and Mythology*), identifies 1872 as the year in which Romanian poet Costache Negruzzi published his version of Victor Hugo's "La ronde du Sabbat", which features the word "vampire" (Evseev, 1997, p 482). However, Romanian critic Eugen Lovinescu (1913) points out that Negruzzi's translation was originally released on September 17, 1839 (Lovinescu, 1913, p 96).
6 For a detailed account of the history and development of the vampire trope in Romania between 1839 and 1929, see Martin AS (2023) Studiu introductiv. In Stoker B (ed) Dracula (trans. Gorun I). Dezarticulat, Bucharest, p 3–38.
7 All translations are our own unless otherwise noted.
8 The byname appears to have caught on as well, with various Romanian newspapers using the word "vampire" to refer to other perpetrators such as the "Vampire of Chicago", "Bridgeport", "New York", or "Łowicz" throughout the 1930s. In most of these instances, the articles do not mention their real names, either because the identity of the murderer was unknown at the time when they were reporting on the incidents or due to the fact that the bynames were more likely to attract attention However, English-speaking sources record only two serial killers active in the 1930s and associated with these locations who were nicknamed "vampires": Albert Fish, the "Brooklyn Vampire" and Tadeusz Ensztajn, the "Vampire of Łowicz". What this suggests is that the Romanian newspapers of this period appear to have developed a tendency to attach the word "vampire" to murderers even in cases in which they did not receive this byname in other languages.
9 In October 1931, a promotional article notes, in line with Lang's later confession, that "[t]he recent cases of the vampires [Henri Désiré] Landru, [Fritz] Haarmann, [Karl] Denke, [Carl] Grossmann, [and Peter] Kürten, whose infamy has caused a stir and panic among all people, inspired the author and director of this film" (Rampa, 1931b).
10 In the late nineteenth century, journalists started using the metaphor of the "exploitative vampire" to target Jews, accusing them of engaging in "twisted business practices" which "drain[ed] the wealth of thousands and thousands of families," but also other ethnic groups such as the Transylvanian Saxons and Hungarians living in Transylvania (GJM, 1863, p 330).
11 It should, however, be noted that the movie was originally marketed under the name "Vampires of Prague" (Senn, 2015, p 264). That the distributors in Romania chose to replace the plural of "vampire" with the singular in spite of the plot—that is, a troupe of actors posing as vampires in an attempt to force a killer to turn in—bears witness to the influence of the period's popularization of vampire-serial killer cases.
12 Amza and Bilciurescu are inconsistent in terms of how they spell the names of certain characters. When we refer to these characters for the first time, we provide both spellings and thereinafter, we use the stylization found to be the most widely used in the novel.
13 That neither Jonathan Harker nor Corneliu Cociu initially suspect Count Dracula and Becker the priest respectively to be responsible for the superstitions or crimes in their communities is reminiscent of the Romanian reviewer's remark about Lang's "vampire" in *M* (1931), which is a "common [man], peaceful bourgeois."
14 Vendelin and Van Helsing also share the same low proficiency in the languages spoken by most of the other characters in *Vampirul* and *Dracula*, i.e., Romanian and English respectively.
15 Ermina has lost both her parents sometime before the storyline in the novel. Lucy's mother is still alive, yet her father is never mentioned, probably because he has passed away sometime before the events in *Dracula*.
16 Unlike Mina, who is proficient in shorthand and figures out Dracula's route back to Transylvania while weakened by his attacks, Eva is depicted as engaging only in stereotypically female activities such as "browsing through a fashion magazine, brought all the way from Budapest" (Amza and Bilciurescu, 1938, p 141).
17 Take, for instance, ex-monk Damian Stănoiu, who dedicated a substantial collection of novels to such priests in the first half of the twentieth century. *Cazul maicii Varvara* (*The Case of Mother Varvara*), published in 1937 around the time of *Vampirul*, tells the story of a priest in a convent who kills a nun's cat.

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