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## Intersecting Inequalities in Romanian Crime Series *Shadows* (HBO). Expressions of Identity between Authenticity, Stereotypes and “Eastploitation”

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**Abstract:** The representations of gender, ethnicity and class play a particularly significant part in structuring the way in which East European crime fiction makes sense of its cultural identity. Issues of social inequality and discrimination are addressed by the European institutions through the promotion of inter- and multi-cultural values that are meant to foster awareness about social stereotypes and prejudices and promote the artistic expression of more balanced representations (i.e. the EIGE policies). Yet sometimes the gap between the inclusive aims pursued by the European policies and the realities represented in crime films, TV dramas and novels is more than noticeable. This article aims to discuss this fluctuation between disparity, stereotypization, realism and exploitation in the HBO production *Shadows* (*Umbre*, 2014-2019).

**Keywords:** Eastern European Identities; Crime Fiction Series; Exploitation; Cultural Stereotypes; Self-Orientalization; Gender; Class; Ethnicity.

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Over the past few decades, research in literary and media studies has shown that detective fiction tends to respond to the social contexts where difference, vulnerability, marginality, minorities, and poverty are increasingly foregrounded<sup>1</sup>. Female detectives, masculine victims, sexual minorities, migrants, children, and the impact that crime and abuse may have on constitutive elements of one’s background make up just a few of the identity categories intersecting in contemporary crime fiction across Europe. By engaging such representations, contemporary crime fiction implies not only accounts of police investigations, but also an interrogation of norms, of dominant perceptions and develops “investigations of subjectivity”<sup>2</sup>, in oblique or outspoken approaches to identity politics, body politics, or other areas of normative discourse.

Recent Eastern European television series circulating internationally have been developed mainly by HBO Europe, based on the media giant’s strategy to recruit local talent and create products which convey a

sense of regional representation, as well as a wider perception on European identity. As Aniko Imre puts it, “HBO’s virtual map of European “territories”, parceled up by nations and regions with a well-calculated recognition for the need to cater to national and regional identities, has brought to life a kind of e-EUtopia under the umbrella of a corporate brand”<sup>3</sup>. However, this “e-Eutopia” encounters limitations in the disparities characterizing Eastern Europe’s presence and representations on the “virtual map”. As far as Romania is concerned, its own internal political, economical, and cultural issues and complexes, as well as the West’s perception of the region and the country in particular, determine representations marked by grim inequalities, discrimination and the creators’ choice to exploit these traits.

The arrival of HBO in Eastern European countries dates back to the 1990s<sup>4</sup>, but the switch from broadcasting and streaming services to production has taken place almost two decades later and it comprises some compelling cases as far as the content of the Romanian-produced series is concerned. There appears to be a contradiction between the intention HBO has always promoted openly, namely to produce quality television, and the expression of violence, the coarse language, and brutal exacerbation of gender relations’ dysfunctionality used in recent Romanian series, such as *Shadows* (2014–2019, dir. Bogdan Mirică and Igor Cobileanski). On the one hand, HBO Europe producers have always stated their goal to help create “authentic stories”: “The transnational streamers [...] know local audiences want to watch things that speak to them more directly and in their own language”<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand,

authenticity and ‘true-to-life’ stories are imbued with stereotypes and sometimes render perceptions on Eastern Europe from the angle of a certain “Western gaze”. The tendency to integrate foreign orientaling images about one’s own culture and identity is not new in Romanian culture. Shame about one’s own background and the sense of backwardness in Romanian culture has been a constant trend as Romanian modern cultural products have always aimed to compare to Western ones, either by adopting Western models starting with the 19th century, or by integrating the “Western gaze” in the historically fluid matrix of national self-consciousness. New Romanian Cinema and Romanian-produced series seem to convert 20th century self-deprecating attitudes towards being Romanian (the one that is most famous internationally occurring probably in Emil Cioran’s diaries and in his post-war reflections) into something else, something which could be defined as: the intention to blot out despair and drama and instead show the viewer slices of reality “as it is”, infused with no other features than those provided by irony, dark humour and facets of social and geocultural periphery, such as crime and inequality. *Shadows* is not focused on a detective plot, as there is no hero on the part of the police. Instead, the narrative is set in the underworld of criminality and abuse, displaying dark humor and rough, blood-splattered scenes.

The concern for diversity (or the lack of it, therein) in Romanian crime series does not pertain only to *Shadows*: it can be detected in other productions which underscore the Eastern European imaginary related to crime and investigation in a country struggling with overcoming the legacy of

the communist decades, as well as a harsh post-communist transition. For instance, another HBO series, the Romanian-German co-production (in partnership with the German producers of TNT) titled *Hackerville* (2018, dir. Anca Miruna Lăzărescu and Igor Cobileanski), focuses on a police investigation in a case of cybercrime and brings into play interethnic, international, and gender relations. It is the first post-communist series set in the city of Timișoara, a symbol of anti-communist resistance and the place where the 1989 Revolution started, eventually leading to the collapse of Ceaușescu's dictatorial regime. In a more distant past, Timișoara was the centre of the historic region of Banat, once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, therefore the city had a decisively polyethnic structure and was marked by strong German cultural influences. The lead female character in *Hackerville*, Lisa Metz, was raised as part of the German minority in the final decade of the socialist state, but escaped Romania and grew up to be a cyber-crime expert in Frankfurt. The series incorporates the narrative of her return to Timișoara and rediscovery of her fragmented identity as well as of a country of misogynistic attitudes, shallow detective performance, insufficient social care for orphaned children, underdeveloped urban infrastructure and deserted German households. Lisa Metz's newly-acquired "Western gaze" on Romania dominates the perspectives in *Hackerville* and leaves the viewer wondering whether such creative enterprises are meant to raise awareness on the stereotypes the West has secreted about the East<sup>6</sup>, or whether they have already been internalized and are regarded at most with a complacent sense of irony in the Romanian social imaginary.

Although *Shadows* and *Hackerville* share the same co-director (Igor Cobileanski), the former encapsulates a significantly higher level (and more occurrences) of gang violence, domestic violence, attacks on human rights and dignity, drug abuse, torture, prejudice and derogatory speech about women, children, ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities. The prevalence of shocking images and brazen lines uttered by the characters can stimulate reflection on the stages in the evolution of a country where strong patriarchal views are still in place<sup>7</sup>, as well as on the level of acceptance of multiple discrimination. The show testifies to several types of collective trauma in a society where the debate on intersectionality and anti-discrimination rights and policies is still insufficient.

### Elements of Eastploitation in *Shadows*

In addition to the extended use of oppressive stereotypes and violence, *Shadows* deploys another means of challenging the audiences, by pushing the representation of Eastern European identities to the limit of exploitation (a phenomenon which can be named "Eastploitation"<sup>8</sup>). The notion of exploitation has been used in cinema theory in order to commonly describe low budget productions which outline various trends or lurid content in order to trigger fascination or jarring responses from viewers. The category emerged after the Second World War in American film and gradually expanded into several strands, such as Blaxploitation (exploiting and exaggerating traits presumed as typical for people of colour), Latsploitation (focusing on Latin-American people), or sexploitation. "The

films' conditions of production have consequences for content too: in order to attract/exploit their target audiences, exploitation films contain a high degree of sensationalised sex and/or violence, apparently playing on the more retrograde, sadistic/voyeuristic fantasies of young male viewers"<sup>9</sup>. In keeping with Pam Cook's view, there seems to be a gender component involved in targeting audiences for such productions, as well as an age limit, according to Igor Cobileanski: "we have taken responsibility for the fact that it would be a show with 16+/18+ audiences"<sup>10</sup>. In the case of the series directed by Mirică and Cobileanski, the HBO production work precludes the low-budget category usually encountered in exploitation films or series. However, as Igor Cobileanski declared in an interview for the research project DETECT, *Shadows* expressed "an attempt to create a masculine, sort of testosteroneal series"<sup>11</sup>. The statement would imply that the target audience of the show is, to a significant extent, gendered, and that it would conscientiously adopt views, attitudes and social roles commonly or traditionally perceived as masculine. Therefore, how the viewers could interpret the intersectional identities, the attitudes towards women, children, minorities would partially evade the directors' intentions.

In recent cultural studies and theory, the notion of Eastploitation (as, obviously, a variant of exploitation thematizing the East) has been approached only *en passant* in order to reflect some particular self-representations that occur in Eastern European culture. For instance, it was theorized as an attitude that constructs „an (auto)orientalist fantasy"<sup>12</sup> in Hardbass music and dance, or as a reference to

sexual exploitation of women from Eastern Europe. But the concept seems to invite a debate on its presence in crime fiction as well. Beyond self-exoticizing attitudes, derogatory speech with reference to identity, *Shadows* moulds together peripheral and primitive impulses which are part of the gang and street culture. *Shadows* takes the representation of post-socialist Romania one step further from the New Romanian Cinema aesthetics, which was at times regarded as minimalist and has set the standards of a day-to-day realism sometimes heightened by the unexpected presence of crime (for example, Cristi Puiu's *Aurora*, released in 2010, four years before the first season of the HBO series). Exploitation elements seem to function here not only as an approach to "Eastern European reality" and to Western "eastern-ization" of notions such as backwardness and criminality. The exploitation tendency is also talking back to conventional realism. Exploitation features in *Shadows* also draw on the fact that in transition societies, the very grounds of the social contract and the ethics on which contractualism is founded are shaken to the core, thus creating space for violence-driven fantasies and extreme corruption.

Another (atypical) trait in discussing the presence of exploitation elements in *Shadows* is that exploitation film is commonly thought to speak to disenfranchised audiences. In this case, the series is addressed to mainstream Romanian audiences in an attempt to prove that quality television is possible in Romania (technically and aesthetically), while targeting international audiences in addition to local viewers. We can argue that *Shadows* is meant to trigger a certain sense of authenticity 'with a twist', and it does so

by using the ambivalence of exploitation, the concurrent attraction and repulsion responses it elicits. Director Bogdan Mirică has described the series as “a slice of life”<sup>13</sup>, while Cobileanski completes: “we took the chance to create characters that would not imitate reality, but would simply be taken straight from reality”: how do such statements about realism fit in with the exploitation elements? Probably the answer has to do with the audiences the series has reached: for the Romanian audience, the series has been construed as realist, while for some international viewers, everything was perceived as shocking and disturbing to the point of becoming unwatchable:

In *Umbre*, the dialogue strongly suggests that when men get together, the talk is ripe for misogyny. Ripe? According to *Umbre*, it's rancid. (...) According to *Umbre*, they say things out loud in Romania, that obviously never in 50 years of Australian TV has any screen writer been game enough to write for our admittedly sanitized TV land.

A steady consumption of Nordic Noir with increasingly eccentric female lead detectives had obviously lulled me into a false impression of European gender relations.<sup>14</sup>

The verbal and physical abuse in the series seem to stretch beyond the limits of relatable aesthetics of trauma and to get closer to historic features of exploitation film as well as avant-garde, in the sense outlined by Mathijs and Mendik: “European trash and underground cinema represents a unique fusion of the aesthetic sensibilities associated with the avant-garde and

the visceral/erotic thrills associated with the world of exploitation”<sup>15</sup>. According to David Roche, “the relative freedom the filmmakers had to experiment artistically and sometimes to ground exploitative imagery in radical political subtexts” is a defining trait that situated exploitation on the fringes of entertainment over a few decades in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and can account for exploitation elements currently being included in films or television series which are not underground. Roche's position maintains that the notion of exploitation defines “not a genre, but a label”<sup>16</sup>. In this context it could be relevant that *Shadows* is the work of directors primarily specialized in cinema, in some ways responding to or following in the footsteps of a certain “consecrated avant-garde” direction such as the Romanian New Wave, and reinterpreting its realism and social critique. Much like the films interpreted as “New Romanian Cinema” (a phenomenon starting in the early 2000s and spearheaded by directors such as Cristi Puiu, Cristian Mungiu, Corneliu Porumboiu, whose films have become international successes and have set the scene for further developments in Romanian cultural industries), the TV series seem to follow a set of values based on authenticity, realism and the focus on the present time. However, since the production norms, the narrative conventionality, as well as the audiences of cinema and television are significantly different, the television series resort to representations of Easternness, gender, class, nationality and/or ethnicity in manners which are either more familiar or more transparent for the viewer, thus somewhat simplified, sometimes bordering on the aesthetics of exploitation.

In *Shadows*, all of these traits result in the depiction of brutal murder “legitimized” by corruption and organized crime networks made possible by a nebulous post-communist past. This topic’s intensity is enhanced by exploiting the image of the Eastern European *via* banal racialization of extreme violence, misogyny, derogatory language and play with discriminating attitudes towards minorities. The city and its peripheries loom large in Mirică and Cobileanski’s scenes, with dark scenery, abandoned places, half-finished buildings such as Relu’s house, contrasted with the opulent kitsch from the Captain’s residence. Igor Cobileanski stated: “we wanted to be tough as well as honest, straightforward about this toughness”, while also mentioning “abandoning certain manners of concealing brutality”. Through this statement he probably alluded to the aesthetics of communist era film and television, where state censorship would deny the representations of violence and crime (because the socialist state was reflected as perfect in propaganda), reducing criminal behaviour to disagreement with the regime.

Instrumental in this take on realism is the language used in the episodes, as it represents “part of the narrative”: giving voice to a gritty representation of Eastern European society through offensive, shocking discourses of masculinity represented through primitive impulses (“Actually, it is embarrassing to see films where sometimes interlopers, prostitutes on the highway, or plumbers speak an academic language of sorts”, Cobileanski said). One of the characters representing police force, Emilian, is prone to violence and displays signs of a borderline personality. He uses drugs, he obsessively follows the gang and

reflects that in his surveillance style (he spies on sexual activities of some members of the gang as if watching and dubbing pornography). He goes on to rape Nico (the only woman with some power in the gangsters’ mob) in a very explicit scene, and viewers learn he has become part of the police force with the aid and influence of a relative.

The main character, Relu, also uses coarse language and resorts to brute force in order to educate his two children, though throughout the seasons he undergoes dramatic changes accompanied by signs of his qualms of conscience. The series discretely constructs Relu Oncescu’s psychological profile as different from the primitive gangster, as his course of action seems to imply he mostly acts with cruelty in self-defense or especially in defense of his family. The Romanian series borrows from *The Sopranos* and other American TV shows about the mafia tropes such as the leading character’s struggle to keep his family life in balance with his foul business. He is not exactly an Eastern European version of Tony Soprano, although the third season finale puts him in the position to become a new leading figure of the mob, with Căpitanu’s influence and criminal network now shattered. Relu is not in psychotherapy and therefore does not directly disclose his views to someone who mediates between social functionality standards and individual subconscious impulses. However, the directors do use scenes where the character’s dreams and projections are shown, revealing his dark drive towards violence and brutal sexuality. In his attempt to build a “good gangster” patriarchal model, he fails, as his family, especially his wife, do not endorse the path

he has taken. In this case, Relu's personal life serves as an instrument for exploring gender roles in Romanian "upper lower class" families and putting forth social issues: he is not involved with the gangsters due to his criminal inclinations, but instead he reluctantly joins Căpitanu's people because the economic precarity and corruption in Romania do not allow him to find an honest, stable, and decent workplace. This type of fictional situation is rooted in Romanian realities of unemployment rates and low income in the post-socialist transition and the early years after the EU integration.

Cobileanski states that the creative team tried to "avoid stereotypes" and stereotypical representations. However, several stereotypes related to Eastern Europe can be recognized precisely as they are exploited in each season of the series: the co-dependent housewife, the victims of sex trafficking and violence, the sadistic gangsters, the ethnic stereotypes related to Roma infractionality and sexuality. The series go from eschewing the stereotypes enforced during the socialist decades to embracing stereotypes stemming from the spectre of the "Western gaze".

What singles out the representation and the use of stereotypes in *Shadows* is their dark, violent and ambiguous turn, or sometimes their somewhat comic irony: just like the series' title indicates, viewers are facing the shadows of a society and of its most frequent internalized stereotypes. One of the most telling instances of self-orientalizing attitudes occurs in the third season, when the representatives of the Europol are tricked by the sociopathic Emilian into participating in a meeting with one of the subordinate staff or a

former convict helping out at the precinct. The latter is played by Vasile Pavel (alias "Digudai"), a Roma actor known for stereotypical racializing roles. In this episode, his unnamed character embodies all the clichés engendered by the ideas of backwardness and discrimination: he wears a formal grey coat over a fuchsia tank top with a huge logo, mixing office and *gopnik* culture style apparel, he gulps down the snacks prepared for the meeting break while talking with his mouth full. He barely speaks any English and resorts to sign language, basic French ("*comme ci, comme ça*"), or vulgar Romanian, he initially fails (more or less deliberately) to explain to the officers who he is and accordingly they mistake him for Emilian. Eventually he manages to communicate the purpose of his presence there: he is not a policeman, he is a "cleaning lady" for the police building, and he had been sent to introduce the Europol representatives to some "good fun" in the Bucharest Old City Centre (a place known for exploiting foreign tourists' appetite for nightlife attractions): "girls or boys", plenty of food and alcohol.

### **Intersectionality, Gender, and Crime – Diversity Empowerment vs. Reinforcement of Identity Stereotypes**

As a notion that emerged within the field of legal theory and justice practices in the U.S.A., intersectionality can now be regarded as a "travelling concept"<sup>17</sup> that has changed its range of action and comprehensiveness over the last three decades. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her legal theory stance for fighting intersecting inequalities (1989), the term managed to describe individual and group

identity and belonging in relation to several defining categories, such as gender, sexuality, social class, race/ethnicity, disability, among others. Identity categories seen from an intersectional angle are traits that have the potential to make individuals or groups vulnerable to oppression and discrimination (i.e., the categories defined by race and gender identity, in Crenshaw's typical examples). Intersectionality also encompasses and leads the discussion on how certain types of identity and belonging shape privilege and power. Belonging can be part of intersectionality investigations in a twofold manner: on the one hand, it can define a subjective sense of identification with a group or power structure, and on the other hand, it refers to the public categorial labelling of individual persons. For example, intersections between citizenship and migrant status can give rise to conflicting performative dimensions of identity and to complex dynamics of inclusion and exclusion: "Individual social actors can belong to more than one polity or social group, they can move back and forth between identities, even if a particular state system defines them in only one way"<sup>18</sup>. In this sense, the idea of European identity provides the opportunity to reflect on these notions beyond the boundaries of modern nation-states and engages transnational representations.

The concept has been adopted and "institutionalised"<sup>19</sup> in Europe as well, not only in the academic conversation, but also in the social and political praxis. As strong concerns of the European Commission, equality and anti-discrimination policies have focused on diminishing disadvantage and fuelling empowerment and awareness on the plural dimensions of identity.

Intersectionality and its avatars can provide a meaningful axis to analyse identity representations in crime fiction. The intersectional view on identity shapes the necessity to "analyze the interconnectedness of structures of domination"<sup>20</sup>. The notion can be engaged in a network of relevant concepts to be applied in analysing representations of identity in European contemporary detective novels, TV series and films. As it structurally involves relations between victims and perpetrators, between legal authorities, the subjects of law and outcasts, crime fiction can invite reflection on the multiple facets of identity that these interactions imply and frame as representative. Intersectional perspectives can point to how certain social categories are criminalised while others tend to be typically victimised in popular crime narratives.

European crime fiction often explains the reasons behind perpetrators' actions by constructing identity conflicts which can be read using intersectional angles. Marginality, rejection, trauma, inadaptability are phenomena and types of behaviour featured in many literary or film productions; their various combinations shape a certain 'exceptionality' which defines detectives, victims and murderers. Intersectional traits of representation in crime fiction can be found in Jo Nesbø's novels, such as in *Flagermussmannen (The Bat, 1997)*, where European identity itself is the target of serial murders in Australia. Nesbø portrays an Aboriginal Australian man as the killer of young European women, thus constructing a racial, gendered, historical and political perspective on crime. Intersectionality also "inhabits" representations of identity in Camilleri's fictional Vigàta,



Fred Vargas' critical view of the French Revolution in *Temps glaciaires*, or Henning Mankell's *Faceless Killers* and *The Shadow Girls*<sup>21</sup>, to name but a few literary examples from different European countries. Research on crime fiction has also employed the concept of "intersectionality" in the sense of interdisciplinary perspectives that may better grasp the relation between identity and society: the "surveillance gaze" and "the male gaze" have been used to interpret Stieg Larsson's famous Millennium trilogy in a "theoretically intersectional approach"<sup>22</sup>.

Intersecting gender and social class issues are brought on screen in *Shadows* through the image of prostitution, early (and unplanned) motherhood, sexual abuse, objectification of women. Andrea Kriszan and Violetta Zentai explain the history of post-communist gender policies and the deficit in measures for women's emancipation:

In Romania, women's NGOs were weaker and more fragmented in terms of policy advocacy than the ones in Poland and Slovenia. In the 1990s, international funding played a major role in the development of women's organizations. Notwithstanding this, these organizations took a strong anti-political position inspired by the former dissident approach and did not strive to engage in political and policy debates.<sup>23</sup>

After 2000 and after Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007, the scope of women's NGOs and gender equality activism has widened. However, in the official database provided by the

Chamber of Deputies in Romania<sup>24</sup> there are still only three registered NGOs which list as a primary field of activity the rights of women and gender equality, and fourteen others which include these objectives in the second or third position among their priorities. In recent years, activism for the rights of women has intensified after the investigation of a crime case from 2019, where two adolescent girls were successively kidnapped by the same perpetrator, abused and either murdered or trafficked for prostitution (the trial of the suspect has not concluded yet). The authorities' intervention in this case has triggered accusations of sexism and incompetence, and women's associations organized protests, sometimes inspired by writers such as Medeea Iancu, who wrote a poem<sup>25</sup> about the grim case.

R.W. Connell eloquently explains the consequences of living in a culture where masculinity is dominant and therefore it defines all other gender roles:

Patriarchal definition of femininity (dependent fearfulness) amounts to a cultural disarmament that may be quite as effective as the physical kind. Domestic violence cases often find abused women, physically able to look after themselves, who have accepted the abusers' definitions of themselves as incompetent and helpless.<sup>26</sup>

In the HBO series, dependent fearfulness is at extreme levels in some instances from the first season. Eastern Europe countries (and Romania in particular) still have the lowest ratings in EIGE assessments<sup>27</sup> due to violence and discrimination against women and vulnerable social categories.

*Shadows* turns this topic into an instrument of discussing femininity and masculinity in exploitation-like scenes. In the first season, a group of prostitutes procured by Nico are held prisoners in a cage, injured from beating and visibly frightened. When Nico gets them back under her gang's protection, she dissuades one of the girls from reporting the abuse to the police, by saying: "By the way, what do I tell the boss when he hears about the complaint? Don't you trust him to take care of this mess?" Freedom and decision-making are no longer available for these women, as they surrender their human rights to the Captain in control of the network. Nico herself struggles with patriarchal domination, as she comes from a background of childhood sexual abuse inflicted by her own father. Connell states that two patterns of violence stem from such patriarchal contexts: The "members of the privileged group use violence to sustain their dominance (...) Intimidation of women ranges from wolf-whistling in the street, to office harassment, to rape and domestic assault, to murder by a woman's patriarchal 'owner', such as a separated husband."<sup>28</sup> *Shadows* sees the victims of patriarchal intimidation avenge their status: Nico is exhilarated by the death of her own father who had abused her as a child, Gina accidentally murders her harassing boss-turned-lover. What prevails in such scenes, however, is not the women's power and intention to subvert masculine authority, but the visually shocking images of dying, corpses and blood. Instead, revenge is an instrument of power among the male characters, confirming once more statements such as Connell's account of hierarchy building in patriarchal societies: "Second, violence becomes important in

gender politics among men (...) as a means of drawing boundaries and making exclusions"<sup>29</sup>. A simplified, visceral understanding of physical force, age, ethnicity underpins masculinity and male hierarchies in *Shadows*, focusing on displays of brutality and domination in an underworld where being a "boss" becomes a supreme representation of power.

Another phenomenon among the intersecting inequalities featured in *Shadows* is adolescent pregnancy: Relu's teenage daughter Magda accidentally becomes pregnant with her boyfriend Teddy's child. Teddy is the son of The Captain, the cruel and petty leader of the gang, often viewed by his father as 'too feminine' and challenged to prove his skills as a successor. Therefore, Magda's pregnancy becomes an opportunity to demonstrate his masculinity to his father. Although in post-1989 Romania abortion has become legal, Magda, her family and her partner's relatives do not even consider the option: instead, The Captain quickly arranges for the young couple's wedding, as a means to strengthen the gang. In the second season of the show, Magda's miscarriage (following a staged car accident plotted as revenge by the Captain's enemy Toma) becomes another reason for trauma, as her marriage and her entire life seem to have lost purpose after the dramatic event. A UNICEF report on "Adolescent Pregnancy in Romania" reveals that lack of information, of community awareness, and of social measures leads to numerous unintended pregnancies followed by dropping out of school or interrupting studies for a very long time, as early motherhood equates with a disconnection from further education and support networks<sup>30</sup>. Recent data by the

National Institute of Statistics suggested that in 2020 over 16 000 teenagers have become mothers<sup>31</sup>, thus situating Romania among the EU countries with the highest rate of adolescent motherhood. The young family in *Shadows* shows the tendency to repeat generational patterns in this respect, as Teddy is encouraged to become the provider for the family, while Magda's project-role would be that of caregiver.

Gina Oncescu is a mother of two, a homemaker who tries to look after her children as well as her husband's troublesome father-figure, nea Puiu. As she learns about Relu's real trade, she tries to deal with the psychological and moral distress it brings to the family, but the choice to leave in order to protect her children from a world of crime and mischief is a prompt one. She gets a job as an assistant manager in an office, but the corporate world soon reveals its gender biases and masculine domination, as Gina's boss wishes to become her lover in exchange for offering a place to stay for his protégée and her son. The stereotype of the affair between the assistant and the manager is thus embodied here in a caricature that shows men in power position have no interest in a woman's professional skills or her reasoning, instead merely regarding her as a sexual object. Gina and Sebastian's affair ends violently due to his sense of entitlement to have access to her body whenever he pleases. This finally leads to a ludicrous accident in the shower, with Gina unintentionally causing his death by pushing him away as he was trying to force himself upon her. Gina tries to escape the world of crime and become an honest working woman but the end of the series shows her desperately trying to hide Sebastian's death and her involvement

in it, as she calls up Relu to dispose of the body and help her quietly evade the crime scene. The characters are all affected by the dominance of traditional gender roles (the man as a provider, the woman as a caregiver for children and the entire household, or else an "easy woman", such as Nico).

The series tends to drift away from the Romanian cinema and television before 1989, where women, with very few exceptions, were mostly relevant in order to mirror or to account for men's feelings or actions<sup>32</sup>. Even though they became more present as an individual force in the series discussed here, women are still represented facing inequality, discrimination, gender difference as far as autonomy, power, and social status are concerned. Partly this is due to the "rebirth of the patriarchal model" as "a reaction to communist propaganda, which hypocritically placed women in the foreground of social life"<sup>33</sup>. As Duma shows, of these female figures with artificially inflated prestige and even granted academic titles in spite of being complete imposters was Elena Ceaușescu, wife of the communist dictator and deputy prime minister of the country, as well as president of the Council of National Science and Technology. Her abusive power and the desire to be glorified for what were in fact inexistent merits most certainly have determined a disdain for women's professional ambitions and a lot of prejudice regarding their capacity. Most sociologists and scholars in gender studies agree that after 1989, women's role in Romanian society was downgraded and they lost many of the advantages provided by the socialist state: "Increasingly victims of domestic violence, sex trafficking, the commercialisation of sex and media-induced standards

of ideal beauty, women are the losers in the transition to capitalism”<sup>34</sup>. The socialist era stereotypes seem to be replaced by post-socialist transition clichés, some of them painting the image of the Eastern Europeans in broad brushstrokes with the poignant exacerbation of negative features, mainly punctuated by poverty, dishonesty, corruption, lack of moral scruples in general.

### Conclusion

*Shadows* is the HBO series incorporating the highest level of violence used against women as well as the most numerous and visually shocking attempts to “put women in their place”, while other such productions (*Hackerville*, for example) tone it all down and resort to tamed

images of stereotypes. Several Eastern European crime series try to bring forth the issue of gender relations and power relations implicitly as they reveal elements of the struggle that women, ethnic minorities, children, and other members of society regarded as vulnerable, have to put up against the potential or sometimes extremely concrete threats to their personal well-being, safety, and dignity. The series is not a manifesto for the liberation of the oppressed social categories, as it conveys a rather grim (*noir*) perspective on the possibility of social progress. Instead, it seems to be indebted to several types of influences, some of them surprising: New Romanian Cinema and its concern with quotidian matters concealing dramatic tension, as well as exploitation film and its focus on brutality and sexuality.

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4. See Aniko Imre 2018, *op.cit.*; Anna Batori, "The Birth of the Post-Socialist Eastern European Televisual Collectivhood: Crime and Patriarchy in Shadows [Umbre, 2014-]", in *AM Časopis za studije umetnosti i medija* no. 17, 2018; Anna Keszeg and Roxana Eichel, "Paths to Quality Television in Eastern Europe. Where Do Hungarian and Romanian HBO Series Come From?", in *Cinéma & Cie. Film and Media Studies Journal*, no. 21(36/37), 2021, p. 101-123.
5. Antony Root quoted in Scott Roxborough, "HBO Europe: The Best TV You've Never Seen", in *Hollywood Reporter*, published October 16, 2017, available on: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/hbo-europe-best-tv-youve-never-seen-1048497>, last accessed: 18.09.2022.
6. For a more thorough investigation of the topic, also see Dobrescu et al., "A Game of Mirrors: Western/Eastern European crime series and the struggle for recognition", in *Journal of European Popular Culture*, Volume 12, No.2, October 2021, p. 119-134.
7. See Anna Batori, "The Birth of the Post-Socialist Eastern European Televisual Collectivhood: Crime and Patriarchy in Shadows [Umbre, 2014-]", in *AM Časopis za studije umetnosti i medija*, no. 17, 2018, p. 42.
8. The topic of „Eastploitation” in crime fiction was initially explored as part of the DETECT research project based on an idea by Caius Dobrescu, developed in a conference paper presentation titled "Euro-Gangsters and Eastploitation: The West-East European Contest of Constructing and Deconstructing Subalternity" and co-authored by Roxana Eichel, during the online conference *Detecting Europe in Contemporary Crime Narratives: Print Fiction, Film, and Television*, organised by LINK Campus University in Rome, 21-23 June 2021.
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10. Igor Cobileanski, interviewed by Roxana Eichel for the DETECT project, 2019.
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22. Jeff W. Marker, “Surveillance and the Body in the Millennium Trilogy”, in *Surveillance & Society*, No. 16 (2), 2018, p. 159.
23. Andrea Kriszan, Hege Skjeie and Judith Squires, *Institutionalizing Intersectionality: A Theoretical Framework*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 186.
24. According to the website of the Chamber of Deputies of Romania: [http://www.cdep.ro/informatii\\_publice/ong\\_pe\\_dom?dom=62&cidl=2](http://www.cdep.ro/informatii_publice/ong_pe_dom?dom=62&cidl=2), last accessed: 17.09.2022.
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26. R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005, p. 83.
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29. *Ibidem*.
30. UNICEF Report available here: [https://www.unicef.org/romania/media/4081/file/Adolescent\\_Pregnancy\\_in\\_Romania\\_Report.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/romania/media/4081/file/Adolescent_Pregnancy_in_Romania_Report.pdf). Last accessed: 18.09.2022.
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