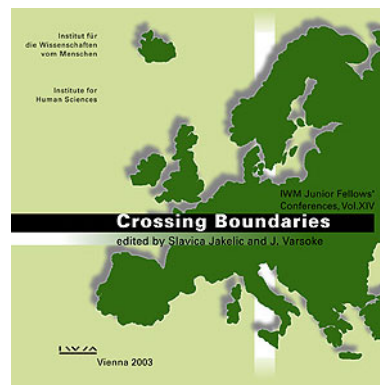


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Hollywood Movies, American Music and Cultural Policies Behind the Iron Curtain. Case Study: Cold War Romania, 1945-1971

Bogdan Barbu

This article is a reflection of a larger research project dealing with the US presence in Romania during the Cold War, building on this author's previous work and focused on the presence of "America" in Romania during the inter-war period and in the 1940s. The study of the pre-Cold War period, as well as the awareness of the current situation were helpful in gradually building a chronological outline of the American presence in Romania for the whole 20th century, and provided the necessary historical framework for the current project.

The present paper focuses on analyzing the connections between the US cultural presence in Romania and the country's cultural policies during the period considered. The main reason for concentrating on this issue is that, when looking at the presence of products of a foreign culture in a given society, it is essential to consider the mechanisms of transmission and reception of those cultural products, in which politics is inevitably present. Moreover, in the specific case of the Cold War period,

taking into account the involvement of political power in cultural exchanges over the Iron Curtain appears as an unavoidable task.

The reasons for choosing 1945 and 1971 as chronological landmarks are the following: 1945 is the year when the first communist Government took power in Romania. This political change decisively influenced the US-Romanian political, economic and cultural relations, and implicitly the ways in which the United States was officially perceived and presented in the country for decades to follow. The other end of the interval, the year 1971, has a double significance. On the one hand, this is the year when an American library opened in Bucharest, thus signifying the end of the period when the Romanian government perceived and presented the US as the country's main enemy. At the same time, 1971 is the year when Nicolae Ceausescu, the leader of the Romanian Communist Party initiated what was later called "the mini cultural revolution," a set of cultural policies aimed at limiting the volume of Western cultural exports and promoting "national communism." Thus, for the history of the US presence in Romania, 1971 is simultaneously a moment of openness and one of closeness. Although, given the Cold War context, the US-Romanian relations remained good in the first half of the 1970s, economic and cultural openness towards the US and Western Europe gradually diminished, as the Ceausescu regime became increasingly rigid.

The present article traces the presence of American movies and music in Romania, and looks at the ways in which the authorities reacted to their presence in the country. During the Cold War, such products were disseminated both through official channels and underground networks of exchange. The work attempts to assess the extent to which American cultural products could be disseminated officially and looks at alternative ways in which such products reached Romanians.

1. Theoretical considerations

This paper is a reflection of a wider project aimed at initiating a debate on reconsidering the significance of the American cultural impact on Eastern Europe during the Cold War. When analyzing the increasing American impact on European politics, economy and culture, especially after World War I, most authors tend to look only at Western Europe, while the eastern part of the continent is either mentioned marginally or ignored completely. The two parts of Europe are usually perceived as distinct objects of research even for the interwar period when, although less devel-

oped, Eastern Europe was connected through economic networks with the rest of the continent and the US.

One of the reasons for such an approach is that American studies as a discipline has developed during the Cold War, therefore the discourse on the cultural impact of the US tended to translate the paradigm of political bipolarity according to which an Americanized Western Europe opposed a Sovietized Eastern Bloc. Another reason is the absence of research in the field produced by local scholars. During the Cold War period such studies were discouraged in the region, and after 1989 the colonization of the field continued to be slow.

When analyzing the US presence in Romania, and Eastern Europe in general, this study tries to establish a link between previously distinct academic themes such as Americanization in Western Europe, East-West cultural diplomacy and Cold War propaganda. Instead of simply stating that Eastern Europe was Sovietized, it argues for a more careful analysis of the multiple ways in which East European societies had been exposed to American and West European cultural influences during the Cold War period.

Such an approach suggests that in terms of the American cultural impact, the Sovietization vs. Americanization bipolar paradigm should be reconsidered, while Eastern Europe should be perceived as part of a European continent significantly influenced by American culture in the 20th century. From such a perspective, understanding the impact of American culture in the region before 1945, as well as after 1989, is a must. In terms of exposure to American cultural influences, this study does not perceive the Cold War as a historical fracture, but rather as a cause for a temporary slowing down of a process that had started several decades before. It is often forgotten that at the beginning of the Cold War, many Eastern Europeans, especially those living in urban areas, were already familiar with American culture, as American movies, music, literature, cars, radios, and advertising techniques had been part of the daily life of Prague, Budapest or Bucharest dwellers in the interwar period and even in the 1940s.

In spite of the authorities' attempt to impose new cultural standards, most visible in the 1950s, Western/American culture continued to arrive in Eastern Europe through various channels, such as the black market, as well as official cultural exchanges, throughout the period. In the 1960s, because of the changing climate in East-West, as well as in East-East relations, Soviet cultural imports started decreasing in numbers and significance, while Eastern countries' cultural borders became increasingly permeable to Western/American products.

Instead of the cultural Sovietization vs. cultural Americanization image, this work suggests a picture of a European continent exposed to American cultural influences at different speeds and intensities. It also argues that, in the absence of political and economic factors that have operated in the case of the American presence in Western Europe, making it highly tangible and visible, we can talk merely about a 'symbolic presence' of the United States in Cold War Eastern Europe. The concept encompasses a whole set of components including political and intellectual discourses produced both in the East and in the West, popular mythologies, as well as the reception of American cultural products. It reveals the existence of a rich "market" of representations of America in Romania/Eastern Europe during the Cold War, shaped by various political configurations and ranging from extremely critical views, produced by communist propaganda in the 1950s, to positive ones, created by US Government information campaigns and American popular culture in the 1960s.

2. *Hollywood Movies*

The following section will discuss the consumption of American popular cultural products between 1945 and 1962, focusing on the interaction between American products, their Romanian consumers and the communist authorities. The time interval chosen offers two contrastive situations: on the one hand, the 1950s, a period when the attempt to Sovietize culture had been the most intense, and on the other hand, the 1960s, a decade of communist Romania's maximum openness towards the West.

American movies had been present on the Romanian market in large numbers during the interwar period. Major Hollywood studios like *Paramount*, *Metro-Goldwin* and *Universal* had representatives in the country. In the 1920s and the first part of the 1930s, American movies accounted for the largest part of the Romanian market. The Bucharest of the 1930s had 36 cinema theatres and 10 summer gardens that were showing movies. Other large cities such as Brasov, Iasi, Cluj and Constanta had many cinemas as well. Going to movies was among the favorite forms of entertainment for the Romanian city dwellers of that period, and Hollywood productions dominated the market.¹

¹ Bogdan Barbu, *Cultura americana si impactul sau asupra societatii romanesti in perioada interbelica* (American Culture and its Impact on Romanian Society in the Inter-war Period), BA thesis, University of Bucharest, 1997.

Due to political changes in the region, the imports of American movies declined at the end of the decade, being largely replaced by German and Italian productions. The imports virtually stopped during the war, for the most part of it the US being an official enemy of Romania. Nevertheless, after the country joined the Allies in August 1944, Hollywood movies returned to Romanian theatres for several years, until the nationalization of the film industry in November 1948.²

The communist authorities, interested in displaying an image of an opened, democratic country abroad, initially tolerated showing American movies. The situation changed radically after signing the Peace Treaty with the Great Powers, on February 10, 1947. Following the Soviet model promoted by Andrej Zhdanov, the Soviet ideological tsar at that time, communist activists in charge of culture started a big campaign aimed at eliminating Western and especially American cultural influences, replacing them with a new system of cultural values embodied by so-called “social realism.”³ In terms of cinema, the campaign was aimed at liquidating the private distribution companies (there were 26 throughout Romania), imposing the state monopoly on film distribution, and changing the main provider of movies from Hollywood to the Soviet film studios.

At the beginning of November 1948, the authorities required all cinema theatres in Romania to celebrate the anniversary of the Russian revolution by showing Soviet movies during the first week of the month. In the midst of the celebrations, on November 3, the nationalization of the film industry was unexpectedly announced. Thus, the week of Soviet film was expanded to more than a decade, as during the fifties Soviet productions dominated the market.

The nationalization of the film industry was clearly aimed at eliminating private networks of distribution, thus transforming the movie industry into a state monopoly, following the Soviet model. It also became clear that under the new system of distribution, Western movies, which traditionally accounted for the largest share of the market, were to be replaced with Soviet productions. All these aims were almost openly affirmed in the wide media campaign justifying this decision. The preamble to the law, published on the first page of all the large circulation newspapers stated:

² Bogdan Barbu, *Political Power, Popular Entertainment and the Symbolic Construction of America in Romania of the 1940s*, MA thesis, Central European University, Budapest, 1999.

³ Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Reinventarea Politicului. Europa de Est de la Stalin la Havel* (Reinventing Politics. Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel), Iasi: Polirom, 1997, 90.

Owners of film houses are importing decadent films with open or camouflaged imperialist propaganda, which aim to poison the masses and draw them away from their concrete interests and claims and from their social tasks... The democratic regime aims to put the motion pictures in the service of the people, to contribute to the education of the large masses. This end can be reached by showing films with a high ethical, cultural and artistic level. Fulfillment of this end will be possible only when the motion pictures will be put into the hands of the people, when the motion pictures will be controlled and planned by the State.⁴

The government controlled press was quick to take over and develop the official ideological justification of the measure, presenting the “old” film industry as a tool used for “undermining the moral health of the working people” and as a component of a well articulated set of activities directed against the communist regime. Here is an example from *Scinteia*:

Until the recent past, the cinema was used as a means of spreading the poisonous propaganda of the internal and external enemies of the working class, thus completing—in another form—the criminal activities of the group of spies, conspirators, and saboteurs, [...] the imperialists’ lackeys who have recently been sentenced.⁵

The law clearly stated that from then on the state had “a monopoly over the production, adaptation and sale of cinematographic products.” Also “all concerns for the import and export, letting and selling of cinematographic products pass over to the state.” The text also listed the types of assets nationalized. They included “...all real estate and movable property, whether concrete or not, such as land, buildings, plant, patent rights, licenses, contracts, permits, trade marks, bonds, promissory

⁴ US National Archives, Record Group 84, Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Bucharest, US Legation, General Records, Box 81, File 840.6, Motion Pictures, Enclosure No.1 to Despatch No. 708, of November 23, 1948, translation from *Scinteia*, 3 November 1948.

⁵ Idem, Articles and News on International Politics, Translation from *Scinteia*’s editorial “Care for the Physical and Moral Health of the Working People,” by Tudor Savin.

notes, savings bank accounts, cash, debts owned to the concern, accessories, raw materials, semi-manufactured and finished products, and so on.”⁶

The text of the law promised compensation for the assets nationalized, but not in the case of those who “enriched themselves by illegal activities established as such by the courts,” “left the country in secret or fraudulently” or “do not return to the country after the expiration of the validity of their traveling papers issued by the Romanian authorities.”⁷ Such provisions made it easy to avoid payment of compensations to many local or foreign owners that could be easily presented as “enemies of the working class.” Those who did not comply, and tried to “damage, destroy, convert, move, export or diminish by any means property or installations subject to nationalization” were to be “punished with five to ten years hard labor and confiscation of their entire property.”⁸

The number of cinema theatres nationalized in 1948 is relevant for understanding the dimensions of the movie business in Romania in the pre-Cold War period, an industry in which importing, distributing and showing American productions played a central role. An initial statistic, published together with the law listed four hundred and twelve theatres to be nationalized. Out of these, sixty-four were located in Bucharest. Brasov, Cluj, Constanta and Timisoara had nine each, Ploiesti had eight, while Iasi and Sibiu had five halls each.⁹

Arta Film, the Romanian representative of the Motion Picture Export Association, the largest distributor of US movies in Romania, was also nationalized. On November 5, the manager of the firm announced to the US Legation that “the Romanian authorities appeared to take over the business of *Arta Film* and to seal the warehouse where films belonging to the MPEA.” As a result, “all furniture, equipment and accounts of the company have been expropriated.” At that moment, in the warehouse of the company there were eighty-five feature films, one hundred and thirty seven documentaries and one hundred and forty five newsreels.¹⁰ Accord-

⁶ Idem, British Information Office, Translation of “Decree No. 303 for nationalizing the film industry and regulating trade with cinematographic products,” published in *Monitorul Oficial*, 3 November, 1948, 2.

⁷ Idem, 4.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Idem, Annex 2, “List of Cinemas to be nationalized,” 5.

¹⁰ US National Archives, Record Group 84, Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State, Bucharest, US Legation, General Records, Box 81, File 804.4—Nationalization, Memorandum: Nationalization of *Arta Film*.

ing to the documents of the US Legation in Bucharest, the films have been recognized as property of the MPEA, and returned to the owner, but the business, like all the other distributors of Western movies, ceased working.

In the following years, Hollywood films were banned, being labeled as products of imperialism that showed nothing but the rotten, decadent nature of Western world. As a result, Romanians could not see any new American movie until the end of the 1950s. Even older movies were banned with the exception of a few comedies, such as those featuring comics Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, which were shown occasionally.

Nevertheless, American movies were still present in Romania even during this period, and shown in close circuit to a very exclusive audience. Special shows were organized for communist Party leaders, members of the *nomenklatura* and their families. Occasionally journalists would be invited on the condition that they took notes and later criticize what they had seen in their newspapers.¹¹

The overwhelming majority of films presented were Soviet productions, depicting the accomplishments and praising the superiority of the communist regime: the films presented were mostly Russian, dealing with the Russian war of liberation, with rural life in the *Kolhoz*, or with the accomplishments of workers and scientists in factories and laboratories. Soviet newsreels entitled 'We are Building Socialism' preceded every cinema performance.¹²

During the first years of the 1950s, when the enthusiasm for communism was greater, some of these movies, offering the hope of a better world, had enjoyed some success. Yet, after some years, people probably became tired of the stereotypical plots and the lack of glamour characteristic for most of them, and stopped going to the cinema. This should be the most plausible explanation for the fact that at the end of the decade most of the Romanian cinema halls were losing money and had to be subsidized from the state budget.¹³

It was decided that tickets should be distributed through institutions, so that each employee would be required to buy a certain number on a regular basis. The system did not seem to work properly and, in the second half of the 1950s importing Western movies appeared as the main solution for bringing people back to cinemas. The first non-Soviet movies to be shown in the 1950s were French and

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Idem, Item No. 275/55.

¹³ Idem, Item No. 15081/52.

Italian productions. Those were the most ‘socialist’ Western countries and were producing movies more likely to be approved by communist censorship. American movies continued to be almost totally absent for the greater part of the decade.

One of the first “American movies” to be shown on Romanian screens was the documentary presenting Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s visit in the United States. The film was distributed in 1959 and was enormously successful. In Iasi, for example, where it was shown for seven days, 20,000 tickets were sold, a number equivalent with a quarter of the city’s population.¹⁴ In 1962, during the American film festival, people had to wait in line from four in the morning in order to get tickets. On this occasion, Hollywood stars Jack Lemmon and Shirley Mac Laine visited Romania.¹⁵

3. *American Music*

Since Hollywood movies had been banned, as well as most of the American literature (Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Walt Whitman were the main exceptions), jazz was the American cultural form that managed to survive the 1950s. One reason for that was the existence of a large group of talented local musicians trained in the lively clubs of the inter-war period and of the 1940s, who continued to offer jazz music played live. A good example is Sergiu Malagamba, the *wunderkind* of Romanian jazz in the 1940s, an extremely gifted jazz drummer, conductor and trendsetter, imprisoned in 1942 by the pro-Nazi Government for corrupting the youth. Liberated in 1944, he was imprisoned again, this time by communists, but was allowed to play after becoming free again. In the 1950s, he was the conductor of the Bucharest Symphonic Jazz Orchestra, a successful big band that toured Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.¹⁶

According to Johnny Raducanu, one of the most famous Romanian jazz players of all time, and a survivor of the period, jazz was tolerated mainly because it could be played instrumentally. Those songs that included lyrics had to be eliminated, as the usage of English was prohibited in the 1950s.¹⁷

¹⁴ Idem, Item No. 9458/54.

¹⁵ Idem, Item No. 1608/63.

¹⁶ Bogdan Barbu, *Political Power*.

¹⁷ Johnny Raducanu, one of the best jazz players in Romania, interviewed by author on 18 April 1998.

Many of the jazz clubs had to close their doors, but some managed to survive benefiting from favorable circumstances. One example is *Mon Jardin* garden in Bucharest, owned by a friend of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, the leader of the communist party at that time. While Dej was in prison in the 1940s, the owner of the club took care of his family and as a reward he was allowed to remain the director of the club in the 1950s, after the communists had come to power.

The manner in which communist institutions in charge of censoring culture perceived American music is fascinating, and the reports of the Romanian Union of Composers are illustrative in this respect. According to these reports, at their meetings composers analyzed issues such as “the influence and position of the bourgeoisie in regard to music” and “the spread of the bourgeoisie poison through dance music,” acknowledging that in the times of the previous regime “they would rarely play Romanian music in the dance saloons.” The reports also gave examples of what communist composers understood by “good songs and bad songs.”¹⁸ At the meetings of the Union, composers and conductors such as Dinu Serbanescu were criticized for promoting jazz, criticism to which the musician answered courageously: “Comrade Elly Roman, when saying that Dinu Serbanescu still plays as if he were on Broadway, forgets that in fact he was a sort of a professor to me, he was my orchestra conductor and in this way, he took me to Broadway.”¹⁹

During the 1950s, communist composers tried to create revolutionary music, eliminating American influences. Yet, their effort does not seem to have been very successful. For example, during one of the composers’ meetings one comrade pointed out that “a Romanian theme, on a fox-trot rhythm gives the impression of a Romanian-American alliance,” which was not acceptable and therefore could be a reason for banning the song. However, this would lead to “a persistence of foreign music at balls, dance saloons and parties,” which was even worse, so he recommended that, “for the moment, these dance rhythms should be continued.”²⁰ Comrade Cosma, commenting on some compositions belonging to the head of the Union says: “although I liked them, I haven’t found anything revolutionary there. I liked them but they were still fox-trots.”²¹

¹⁸ Romanian National Archives, Bucharest, The Union of Romanian Composers Archives, File No. 448/1951, 107.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

The predictable conclusion of such meetings was that the Soviet example had to be followed. Comrade Hilda Sera explains:

While being in Moscow I saw that in the hotel they had an orchestra and people were dancing. I have seen people dancing waltz, polka, but also some tango and foxtrot; yet, there was no rumba, conga or bugi-hugi [boogie-woogie]. Those dances are the expression of an ideology hostile to us. They are formulas that have reached the peaks of decadence.²²

At the end of the 1950s the situation started changing. The whole international situation became more relaxed. The Soviet-American diplomatic contacts (including top-level meetings), as well as an increase in cultural exchanges, brought about a climate of increased cultural openness in East-West relations. In this context, Romania and the United States signed in December 1960, a cultural agreement that opened the way for American cultural imports including movies, music, translations and art exhibits into Romania.

Apart from the more favorable international climate, one has to take into account the particularities of the Romanian case, characterized in the 1960s by a policy of openness towards the West, which was orchestrated by the leaders of the local communist party as a reaction to the increasing tensions between Bucharest and Moscow. The result was a campaign of distancing from the Soviet Union, promoted by the leaders of the party, which started with the withdrawal of the Soviet Army from Romania in 1958, continued with the closing of the institute for Soviet studies in 1963, and reached its peak with the condemnation of the Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968.²³

In the 1960s, the Soviet Union was no longer presented as a model, as the internationalist communism centered in Moscow was gradually being replaced with a national form of communism. One of the side effects was that the cultural borders of the country became increasingly open, leading to a significant increase of the West European and American cultural presence in the country. During this period, the authorities became more tolerant of Western/American products, not necessar-

²² Ibid. 138.

²³ See David Floyd, *Romania-Russia's Dissident Ally*, London: Pall Mall Press, 1965; Stelian Tanase, *Elite si Societate. Guvernarea Gheorghiu-Dej, 1948-1965* (Elites and Society. The Gheorghiu-Dej Administration, 1948-1965), Bucharest: Humanitas, 1998.

ily because they appreciated their value but rather because such products could be used as tools in the process of distancing Romania from the Soviet model.

It is also relevant to mention that during the last years of the 1960s and for the most part of the 1970s, Romania enjoyed a kind of a special political relationship with the United States. The new leader of the Romanian communist party,²⁴ Nicolae Ceausescu, had established a good relationship with Richard Nixon even before the latter came to the White House. After the condemnation of the intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968, a political act much appreciated in the West, Nixon came to Bucharest, becoming the first American president to visit an Eastern Bloc country.²⁵

Such a political context permitted Hollywood movies to return to Romanian cinemas in the 1960s, with the new ones featuring famous actors of the day enjoying large audiences.²⁶ American movies and series could also be seen in larger numbers on Romanian television. Towards the end of the decade, American movies available on the Romanian “market” equaled and even outnumbered the Soviet movies, while the image of the United States in the press started changing. Although we cannot talk about a market in the Western sense of the term for that period, it is also true that the selection of movies to be presented in Romanian cinema theatres started to be less ideologically controlled and became increasingly money oriented, and those in charge were increasingly concerned about the box-office rather than the message.

As for jazz, in the 1960s top class American stars performed in Bucharest and other Romanian cities. Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Dave Brubeck, Dizzy Gillespie, The Golden Gate Quartet, all visited Romania, and other East European countries under cultural exchange programs organized by the Cultural Exchanges Program of the United States State Department.²⁷ Local jazz also developed as Romanian bands were increasingly broadcasted on radio stations, while the national records company, *Electrecord*, began producing jazz albums. While jazz started to be accepted as part of the musical mainstream, the acceptance of rock-and-roll proved to be more problematic, the word itself being banned for the most part of the

²⁴ Ceausescu came to power in 1965.

²⁵ See Dennis Deletant, *Romania Under Communist Rule*, Bucharest: Civic Academy Foundation, 1998.

²⁶ See *Cinema* magazine collection, Bucharest: 1963-1973.

²⁷ Radu Toma, *Inapoi in Viitor. Bucuresti, New York, Bucuresti* (Back to the Future. Bucharest, New York, Bucharest), Bucharest: Globus, 1997.

1960s. Consequently, for a long time local rock-and-roll bands were officially labeled “vocal-instrumental” groups.²⁸

Yet, even without a name, rock-and-roll was very present in Romania in the 1960s. Movies such as *Girl Happy* and *Viva Las Vegas* featuring Elvis Presley were shown in Romanian cinema theatres, while the more permeable cultural borders permitted the latest records and magazines devoted to music to arrive into the country. Interest in such material led to the development of extremely dynamic networks of exchange that circulated, recorded and photocopied them. Nicu Covaci, the leader of the legendary rock band *Phoenix* wrote in his autobiographic book that “each issue of *Bravo*, *Musical Express* and *Rolling Stone* was being read countless times, devoured by the youth who wanted to identify with their heroes.”²⁹ The decade witnessed the development of an increasingly numerous rock-hippie subculture, including youth in search of an identity different than those offered by the communist regime. The 1970 concert of the American band Blood Sweat and Tears in Bucharest, a major rock event in the region and a live example of American music for local players, was followed by incidents between fans and the *militia*, which ended with arrests. The events convinced the authorities that the young had undertaken a worrying path and made them become more vigilant. As a result, at the end of the 1960s the *militia* started taking longhaired young men from the streets directly to the barber, while those who were found carrying Western/American music records could easily end up in a police station.³⁰

Yet, the youth groups that were trying to adapt the hippie lifestyle in Romania managed to survive for several reasons. First, the ideological pressure was no longer as strong as in the 1950s. Second, there was a tendency to adapt the hippie identity to Romanian traditions by associating it with the cult of the long-haired forefathers, which was to a certain extent in line with party’s effort to promote a new image of communism, less related to Moscow and more rooted in national values. Third, the authorities perceived the hippie movement as anti-capitalist, although the Romanian hippies saw it as being directed against the establishment in general. Fourth, many children of the *nomenklatura* were part of it, which made it difficult for the *militia*, when it was about making arrests, to distinguish in a group of hippies between the “good” and the “bad” ones. In any case, the campaign of negative articles

²⁸ Ion Stratone, rock music critic, interviewed by author, February 2001.

²⁹ Nicolae Covaci, *Phoenix insa eu*, (Phoenix But Me), Bucharest: Humanitas, 1995.

³⁰ Ion Stratone, rock critic, interviewed by author, February 2001.

about the hippies conducted in the press at the end of the sixties and the beginning of the 1970s had as an effect an increasing adversity among the population, resulting in occasional street clashes between “defenders of socialism” and “exponents of capitalist decadence.”³¹

In 1971, the general secretary of the Romanian communist party Nicolae Ceausescu visited China and Korea, and seemed to have been deeply impressed by those countries’ policies in regards to culture. Inspired by what he had seen, he initiated a program aimed at creating a sound cultural legitimacy for his regime by placing a strong emphasis on “national values.” The program involved measures aimed at supporting Romanian cultural production glorifying the virtues of socialism at the expense of the foreign one. At the official level, and under the guidance of Ceausescu, the Romania of the 1970s and 1980s increasingly closed its channels of the reception of foreign culture, becoming more and more isolated. Nevertheless, certain cultural products coming from the US and Western Europe continued to flow into the country as during this period, non-official, underground networks of distribution gradually replaced the official channels. In the general context of Eastern Bloc’s decline, the flow of information coming from the West through videocassettes, records, radio airwaves and satellite television could no longer be stopped.

4. Conclusions and suggestions for further research

American popular culture has been present in Romania since the inter-war period and continued to be consumed in various forms during the first two decades of the Cold War. During the 1950s, the period when attempts to Sovietize the country had reached their peak, jazz played by local musicians was the main American cultural presence, while Hollywood productions were scarce. But, the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s represented a period of openness towards American culture. In the years following that period, the official channels of transmission have been gradually obliterated, yet American and generally Western culture continued to arrive into the country through underground networks.

The consumption of American popular culture, especially music, has often worried the authorities, which reacted in various ways, trying to stop or at least control the infiltration of American/Western products. Why was American culture perceived as a threat? Americanists generally agree that cultural products “made in

³¹ Ibid.

USA” have been consumed all over the world during the 20th century as “signifiers of modernity” associated with an idealized America, usually imagined as a place of freedom and good life. Foreign audiences have used them in different circumstances than American ones, often associating new meanings to them. Therefore, contextualizing various ‘moments’ of this history of cultural transfer is inevitable for a better understanding of the impact of American movies and music in Europe. The fascination generated in Eastern Europe by such products often came from their quality as forbidden fruits, products of an idealized “other world” that offered tools for building identities different from those praised by the communist party regimes.

In depth micro-histories employing tools of sociology and cultural studies could reveal a wealth of information on the ways in which the lifestyles associated with American culture have been “re-contextualized and re-semanticized,”³² being adapted to Romanian/East European realities. Besides the political component associated with consuming American culture, the social component involving the “conflict of generations” idea should also be considered. The consumption of such products was not only a form of defying communism but, like elsewhere in Europe, also an act directed against “old” visions of life largely grounded in local values.

Local discourses on the reception of American music are to be looked at as a part of a more general cultural debate having at its core the relations established between a given culture and foreign products and values. Here it is worth mentioning the disputes between “autochthonists” and “Westernizers,” as well as those between the partisans of high culture and those of popular culture, and the generalization of the disputes into an inevitably hierarchical comparison between Europe and the United States.

Another layer of further analysis on the reception of American culture in Eastern Europe should employ comparative studies among countries in the region, including the former USSR, as the degree of permeability of their cultural borders may have differed along time, due to political, cultural and geographic reasons. For example, countries such as East Germany³³ and Poland, geographically closer to Western Europe, but also Yugoslavia, which had a distinct position within the Eastern Bloc, tended to be quicker in opening themselves to American and generally

³² Rob Kroes, “American Empire and Cultural Imperialism: A View From the Receiving End,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol.23, No. 3, Summer 1999, 463.

³³ See Uta Poiger’s book *Jazz, Rock and Rebels. Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany*, Berkley: University of California Press, 2000.

Western cultural influences at the end of the 1950s.³⁴ Comparative East-West studies are also a necessity, and works such as Uta Poiger's book *Jazz, Rock and Rebels*, discussing the American cultural impact on East and West Germany, are useful references in this respect.

A study of the process of transmission of American culture could also reveal interesting information on the efforts undertaken by the US government to export popular culture over the Iron Curtain, as well as in Western Europe as part of the East-West cultural contest. Although "jazz, rock-and-roll and Hollywood, did not need US cultural propaganda as desperately as US propaganda needed jazz, blues and rock-and-roll,"³⁵ as one author put it, many jazz players benefited from the Cultural Presentations program of the State Department, which sponsored European tours aimed at promoting American culture abroad. The role of international radio stations, the Voice of America, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, sponsored by the US government has also been significant in disseminating American culture and in general information about the United States.

A study of the American cultural presence in the former Eastern Bloc countries should also use instruments offered by disciplines like social psychology and the history of mentalities. Such instruments would be especially welcome when analyzing issues such as "the reversed reaction" cases. The closure of the cultural borders of the former Eastern bloc countries, and the fierce anti-American propaganda of the 1950s had for many people a reversed effect, leading to the developing of a whole mythology centered on the image of the United States as an ideal country. On the other hand, the invasion of American products following the fall of the Iron Curtain is increasingly being perceived in negative terms, as a form of cultural colonization. It would be useful to integrate the findings of a political/historical approach with those of sociology and cultural studies in an effort to understand the new constructs of "America" and "the West" produced in Eastern Europe at the intersection between Cold War mythologies and post-communist realities.

This article is intended as a call for further debates on the nature of the US presence in Cold War Eastern Europe. Popular culture products such as music and movies are just a component of what could be defined with the term symbolic presence, a concept aimed at reflecting the complex nature of the US cul-

³⁴ The case of Yugoslavia is particularly interesting, as Western/American products were present in large numbers here even during the 1950s.

³⁵ Reinhold Wagnleitner, "The Empire of Fun, or Talking Soviet Blues: The Sound of Freedom and US Hegemony in Europe," in *Diplomatic History*, Vol 23, No3, Summer 1999, 480.

tural/ideological impact on the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War. This symbolic presence can be identified in political actions translated into official discourses, as well as in popular perceptions of such actions. It is to be found in cultural/ideological transmission but also in cultural reception; it implies US propaganda, but also knowledge about the United States and its place in world affairs produced outside the US, serving the needs of the societies that have conceived it. By looking at the peculiarities of Cold War cultural interaction over the Iron Curtain, and at the same time by challenging the bipolar paradigm Americanization-Sovietization, a debate about the US symbolic presence in Eastern Europe can contribute to a wider intellectual effort to better understand the US-European relations in the twentieth century.

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