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THE CONCEPT  
OF “CAPITALIST REALISM”  
IN LITERARY CONTEXT:  
READING ADRIAN SCHIOP’S  
NOVELS IN TERMS  
OF THE SOCIOLOGY  
OF LITERATURE

ABSTRACT

The first part of the article proposes a general overview of the notion of “capitalist realism,” introduced by Mihai Iovănel in his *History of Romanian Contemporary Literature 1990–2020* as one of the paradigms which help to read and classify post-Communist Romanian literature taking into consideration the political, social and economic conditioning of literary production.

The second part of the paper aims to investigate the individual trajectory of Adrian Schiop (b. 1973) – one of the authors classified by Iovănel as representatives of “capitalist realism,” whose literary and artistic work is defined by a high degree of social relevance. By deconstructing collective narratives and clichés, Schiop proposes a polemical point of view on post-Communist society, occupying at the same time the position of a very self-conscious agent within the Romanian literary field.

KEYWORDS: contemporary Romanian literature, capitalist realism, sociology of literature, literary field, social relevance of literature, autofiction, symbolic capital.

*The world we are building now  
does not have the same rustle  
of a cardboard universe. (...)  
No one can forbid us to write* (Vlădăreanu 2004: 327).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Romanian are translated into English by the author.

## INTRODUCTION – THE CONCEPT OF “CAPITALISM REALISM” IN THE CLASSIFICATION OF ROMANIAN LITERATURE AFTER 1989

In a critical approach commonly used by Romanian literary scholars,<sup>2</sup> Romanian literature is periodized by generations, borrowing names from consecutive decades – so authors debuting in the 1960s are the so-called *șaizeciștii* (from the numeral “șaizeci” – sixty), then the 1970s belong to *șaptezeciștii*, the 1980s – to *optzeciștii*, the 1990s – to *nouăzeciștii*, and 2000 – to *douămiștii*. Indeed, such an approach has functional ordering qualities from the point of view of the history of literature. However, even if the mentioned above generations have their specific policies, it cannot be the only criterion for the complete characterization of aesthetic tendencies and literary forms and strategies which are in permanent dialogue and interdependence that specific time intervals cannot determine. That is why Mihai Iovănel, in his recently published study *Istoria literaturii române contemporane. 1990–2020* [History of Romanian Contemporary Literature. 1990–2020] decides to broaden the perspective of describing contemporary Romanian literature. Hence, the author proposes a conceptually more capacious distinction, which allows identifying currents and poetics in Romanian prose and poetry of the post-communist period. According to Iovănel, what connects Romanian generations of prosaists, is the attitude to realism and a specific interpretation of mimetic aesthetics – the critic distinguishes three categories here: postmodern metarealism [Iovănel Mihai: “metarealismul postmodern”], miserabilist realism [“realismul miserabilist”] and capitalist realism [“realismul capitalist”].<sup>3</sup> In my article, I would like to focus on the latter, used by Iovănel to create a paradigm that could describe a heterogeneous literary reality of the writers who valorized fiction after the so-called “memorialistic turn” (Mironescu 2015: 40) in the early 1990s and who have been functioning in the new post-communist reality of literary production.<sup>4</sup>

Iovănel borrows the concept from Mark Fisher, whose book *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?* uses this term to characterize “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher 2009: 2). According to Fisher, before the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were still some alternatives to capitalism –

<sup>2</sup> For the theoretical background, see: Tudor Vianu, 1936, *Generație și creație. Contribuții la critica timpului*, București: Editura Librăriei „Universala”; Mircea Martin, 1969, *Generație și creație*, București: Editura pentru literatură; Nicolae Manolescu, 2000, *Generație literară, România literară 2*, [http://arhiva.romanialiterara.com/index.pl/generaie\\_literar](http://arhiva.romanialiterara.com/index.pl/generaie_literar) (access: 20.09.2021).

<sup>3</sup> Iovănel discovered the concept of „capitalist realism” after he published in 2017 *Ideologiile literaturii în postcomunismul românesc* [The Ideologies of Literature in the Romanian Post-Communism], where he used a more precise term of „petit bourgeois realism” [realismul mic-burghez], focused on the economic condition of writers debuting after 1989, representing a specific social class with similar economic position and material interests, called by Iovănel “an intellectual proletariat” (see: Iovănel 2017: 145–148).

<sup>4</sup> The writers whose chosen novels are entering into the paradigm of capitalist realism in Iovănel’s *History...* are: Dan Lungu, Sorin Stoica, Ovidiu Verdeș, Florin Lăzărescu, Radu Pavel Gheo, Lavinia Braniște, Mihai Radu, Dan Alexe, Bogdan Răileanu, Iulian Bocai, Adrian Schiop, Alexandru Vakulovski, Dan Sociu, Nicolae Strâmbeanu, Filip Florian, Ruxandra Ivănescu, Radu Paraschivescu, Doina Ruști, Ioana Părvulescu, Cezar Amariei, Cristian Teodorescu and Gabriela Adameșteanu. This list, reduced to several dozen names, is dictated by the character of such overview that formulates historical and literary generalizations – although such research is laborious and time consuming, it is often accused of gaps and simplifications.

they disappeared after 1989, the symbolic year of the decisive victory of capitalism, which started to capture and to determine the public thought, to “occupy the horizons of the thinkable” (Fisher 2009: 8). With our reflection and linguistic imagination, we are not able to go beyond the limits of capitalism. As Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge explain in their study *Reading Capitalist Realism*:

Realism, as described by Fisher, is not a representational mode or aesthetic. It is instead a general **ideological formation** [OBN] in which capitalism is the most real of our horizons, the market-dominant present that forms the limits of our imaginaries. Thus Fisher argues, echoing similar statements from Fredric Jameson and Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Shonkwiler, La Berge 2014: 2).

Although Iovănel has a pretty vague usage of “capitalist realism” and introduces this concept to describe a diverse and aesthetically heterogeneous group of writers, Fisher’s diagnosis can become, as I argue, a very inspiring key to reading and classifying post-communist Romanian literature. On the one hand, it emphasizes the political, social and economic conditioning of literary production; on the other hand – it accentuates the importance of the historical turning point in Romania after 1989: “communism is no longer alpha and omega, its experience no longer filters any other experience (although it continues to be relevant), it becomes a secondary reference, mediated by the neoliberal horizon” (Iovănel 2021: 409). Moreover, the new paradigm proposed by Iovănel is characterized by the domination of *a story* over the complicated formal literary strategies and postmodern experimentalism. According to the theoretician, it was a reaction of the authors in the 2000s to the abstract ideologies of the 1980s. New writers want to grasp more on reality and reach everyday life’s simplest, most banal experiences while making a detailed and challenging diagnosis of the contemporary Romanian society which is dealing with the reality of capitalism.

Furthermore, unlike the other proposed *realisms* (the miserabilist one and the post-modern metarealism), which reveal primarily aesthetic categories, the capitalist one<sup>5</sup> relates to a specific socio-economic system. Thanks to such an approach, the development of literature is understood as closely related to several significant changes, both at the regional level (the collapse of Ceaușescu’s regime and the birth of a free market economy at the beginning of the 1990s, the accession of Romania to NATO in 2004 and to the European Union in 2007) and at the supra-regional one, including globalization and mass-media development. Such an interpretative horizon makes us realize that it is difficult to discuss Romanian literature after 1989 without being aware of the changes in the publishing market (the most important being abolition of censorship, liquidation of centrally controlled publishing plans and privatization of publishing houses, change

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth mentioning that the concept of capitalist realism was used for the first time in the 1960s by a group of German Pop artists and then by Michael Schudson in his 1984 book *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion*. Both were making parodic and obvious references to the notion of socialist realism (which constitutes, in the Romanian case, a very interesting comparative context). But, what is important, in contrast to socialist realism, capitalist realism traverses the terrain between the ideological and the critical (cf. Shonkwiler, La Berge 2014: 15).

of the writer's social status, increasing competition in the free market, related to, among other things, the emergence of numerous translations from other languages).<sup>6</sup>

Hence, taking into consideration the theoretical framework proposed by Mark Fisher and applied by Iovănel to describe changes in the field of Romanian literature after 1989, my article will focus on the literary phenomenon of Adrian Schiop, whose both work and literary persona, as I claim, illustrate the effects of capitalist realism on the contemporary society as presented in Fisher's book. My article aims to demonstrate that reading Schiop through this concept can be a useful interpretive tool for two main reasons. First, Schiop-the author fictionalizes in his novels the problems of Romanian capitalist society and the complexities of transition times – by recreating the elements of his biography and placing them in the wider context of social life, he shows what consequences had the new political and economic system on social, cultural and work structures in Romania, especially within the marginalized groups. He provides a credible portrait of contemporary Romanian society, "authenticated" by the aesthetics of "microrealism" and strongly defined authorial self-positioning. Second, in interviews and public statements, Schiop-the individual presents his views on his precarious and difficult status as a writer. In the world where "capitalist realism has successfully installed a 'business ontology' in which it is *simply obvious* that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business" (Fisher 2009: 17), he is aware that writers have to deal with the commercialization and commodification of literature. He is thus conscious about his double position of being a critic and a beneficiary of the capitalist system – eventually, he transforms his experiences and storytelling skills into a product that enters the market and becomes subject to its pressure.

## THE EMERGENCE OF ADRIAN SCHIOP IN THE ROMANIAN LITERARY FIELD

Adrian Schiop was born in 1973 in Porumbacu de Jos (a village in Sibiu county); he gained his cultural capital following a conventional path of education – in 1997, he graduated from the Faculty of Psychology and Science of Education at the Babeş-Bolyai University, then he did his Master's degree in Linguistics at the same university. After graduation, he worked five years as a Romanian literature high-school teacher. From 2004 to 2010, he collaborated as a journalist with the daily newspapers "Evenimentul Zilei," "Prezent" and "România liberă." Nowadays, he calls himself an independent journalist, and he collaborates mainly with some online magazines (e.g. CriticAtac, a left-wing group of social, intellectual and political critique).

In 2014 he completed his PhD in sociology at the National School for Political and Administrative Studies. The supervisor of his doctoral thesis with the title *Şmecherie şi lume rea. Universul social al manelelor* [Cunningness in an Envious World. The So-

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<sup>6</sup> To read more about the transition from the communist centralized market to the post-communist free market in Romania, see: Vladimir Pasti, 2006, *Noul capitalism românesc*, Iaşi: Polirom; Adriana Stan, Cosmin Borza, 2020, *Deetatization of Culture, Privatization of Politics: The Case of the Publishing Houses in Post-Communist Romania*, *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review* 20(3): 382–397.

cial Universe of ‘Manele’ Ethno Pop] was Vintilă Mihăilescu, one of the most renowned Romanian sociologists and anthropologists. As a recognized representative of a specific apparatus of consecration (the university), Mihăilescu legitimized with his name and position such a doctoral dissertation which addresses the subject of *manele*, the musical genre considered by a large part of the Romanian society as the embodiment of bad taste, kitsch and a form of ‘low culture.’<sup>7</sup>

Schiop published his thesis in 2017 in the Moldavian publishing house Cartier, thus consolidating his position as an expert on the *manele* cultural and social phenomenon. His name had been associated with this topic for years – already in 2009, he organized a party with the support of the National Dance Center at the National Theatre in Bucharest, which is considered the first *manele* party for hipsters and artists. Subsequently, he will fulfil a role of a DJ at many of such events in Bucharest – mostly in Macaz, an autonomous community center for independent culture and left-wing thinkers, but also in some other unconventional spaces, sometimes even in Ferentari. Thus, he became the initiator of a trend called ironically “manele for intellectuals” [*manele pentru intelectuali*] – young people from intellectual and artistic circles organized parties with *manele*, inscribing them in the anti-discriminatory discourse: with their gesture of acceptance of this type of music, they were expressing support for the so-far excluded Roma people, who are still considered as the largest group of *manele* consumers. The subject of *manele* will also constitute an essential reference in the Schiop’s most famous novel *Soldații. Poveste din Ferentari* [Soldiers: Story from Ferentari] – the writer correctly diagnosed their lyrics’ subversive potential corresponding to the social and cultural changes of the post-revolutionary transition. *Manele* put forward the dream of getting rich – both their lyrics and the acts of prodigality of the *maneliștii* openly fetishize money which makes people react to their own disavowed desire of being wealthy and extravagantly wasteful. Thus, they represent “a defiance of the rational labor ideals of capitalism that the people well settled in their lives and careers are just trying to establish in Romania” (Mihăilescu 2014: 191).

Schiop started his literary career in a strongly ideologically and aesthetically defined milieu of the young, rebel artists – he made his writing debut in 2002 in “Fracturi”<sup>8</sup> magazine with a fragment of his first novel *pe bune/pe invers* [straight/queer<sup>9</sup>], fully published in 2004 in the Polirom collection “Ego. Proza.” Since then, all his other books were printed in the very same collection, which contributed to the accumulation of symbolic capital of his writing – Polirom (founded in 1995) is one of the leading private publishing houses in Romania. The collection “Ego. Proza” was launched in 2004 as an effect of a marketing campaign entitled “Vote for the Young Literature,” due to which, as

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed overview of this phenomenon, see: M. Beissinger, S. Rădulescu, A. Ghiurcescu (eds.), 2016, *Manele in Romania. Cultural expression and Social Meaning in Balkan Popular Music*, Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>8</sup> The magazine “Fracturi” [Fractures] was founded by Marius Ianuș, co-author of the *Manifesto of Fracturism* (published in 1998 with Dumitru Crudu and centered on authenticity, sincerity and reconnection between poetry and real life), and its 8 issues printed between 2002 and 2003 were considered a platform of a young, revolted literature. The contributors to “Fracturi” were indeed the most prominent representants of the emerging generation, among others Ionuț Chiva, Mihail Vakulovski, Dumitru Crudu, Ruxandra Novac, Elena Vlădăreanu, Răzvan Țupa.

<sup>9</sup> I use here Andrei Terian’s translation of the novel’s title (Terian 2021: 113).

“it is commonly accepted (...) the larger readership became interested in contemporary autochthonous literature during the second half of the 2000s” (Mironescu 2015: 37). The Polirom publishing series of the new Romanian prose is equated with a sizeable symbolic capital – in this collection, led by a renowned writer Lucian Dan Teodorovici, appeared the most important Romanian fiction books from the 2000s and still it represents the most important publishing series for the debutants.<sup>10</sup>

Schiop’s debut novel announces the style and themes characteristic of his entire literary work: the first-person narrative with apparent references to the author’s biography,<sup>11</sup> a disillusioned vision of reality (called by Fisher “neo-noir worldview,” understood as “stripping the world of sentimental illusion” [Fisher 2009: 15–16]), metafictional elements, colloquial and vulgar language, presence of the so-called “romgleză” (characterized by the introduction of entire phrases/expressions in English into dialogues thus imitating the contemporary colloquial Romanian language), numerous inspirations of counter-cultural tendencies resulting from the need to oppose the mainstream conventions. As Costi Rogozanu, an influential left-wing journalist and author of the novel’s preface (which also had an impact on the reception of the book), observes:

Schiop proposes a naive, homosexual, complex, inhibited, (semi-) socially failed character. His text is a kind of report of a group. (...) The young people in Schiop’s story pour out their bitterness by reinventing a language of “street” philosophy. They are part of that generation mesmerized by the high subculture of the ‘90s: Nirvana and almost everything that moves through Seattle, Suede, BUG Mafia [a Romanian hip hop squad – OBN], etc. Sometimes, there is an irresistible linguistic mix, sometimes too artificial, between the hermeneutics of Baudrillard-type suspicion and Tataee-type subcultural revelations. This slang is Adrian Schiop’s main bet (Rogozanu 2004).

In his 2009 novel, *Zero grade Kelvin* [Zero Kelvin], Schiop changes the spatial scenery and fictionalizes his experience as an expat worker – in the early 2000s, he travelled to New Zealand with a tourist visa and a plan to remain there (then he worked as a house painter and finally, he decided to return to Romania). Michel Houellebecq’s characters visibly inspire Schiop’s protagonist<sup>12</sup> – he is cynical, frustrated, hopeless for other people, as well as for the entire concept of society. At the same time, *Zero grade Kelvin* keeps its social-engaged dimension by introducing the topic of Romanian economic emigration (at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, very often partially legal) and poor working conditions. It is a significant and widespread problem in Romanian society – according to the World Bank Report, “Romania experienced the highest increase in emigration among the EU countries since 1990 and this high emigration dynamic affected both high-skilled and low-skilled migration” (World Bank Report 2018:4), this

<sup>10</sup> Nowadays, there are two more collections with this profile, yet neither of them took away the consecrating status from the “Ego. Proza” series: in 2017, the Humanitas publishing house created a publishing series 821.135.1 – *Scritori români contemporani* devoted to contemporary Romanian literature, coordinated by Andreea Răuceanu; in 2018, publishing house Nemira created a *n’autor* series coordinated by Ana Nicolau.

<sup>11</sup> To read more about the autofictional aspect of the novel *pe bune/pe invers*, see: Florina Pîrjol, 2014, *Carte de identități. Mutații ale autobiograficului în proza românească de după 1989*, București: Cartea Românească, 228–236.

<sup>12</sup> Iovănel argues that Schiop also borrowed from Houellebecq’s 2005 novel *The Possibility of an Island* a dystopic plot, whose pastiche, unfortunately, did not add any positive value to the book of Romanian author (Cf. Iovănel 2021: 431).

tendency concerning both temporary and permanent emigration. The transitional capitalism affected thus all social classes, Schiop’s autofictional alter ego and Schiop-the actual author representing an example of a precarious intellectual, who, though well educated, is forced to search for financial security outside the country: “I had finally reached my money, and this had never happened when I worked in Romania – there I depended on the food from my uncle or the money I received from time to time from my family” (Schiop 2009: 163).

### *SOLDAȚII, POVESTE DIN FERENTARI* – A MIRROR OF SOCIAL COMPLEXES

Published in 2013, the novel *Soldații. Poveste din Ferentari* has been Schiop’s most significant literary achievement,<sup>13</sup> representing one of Romania’s most discussed fiction books in recent years. First – due to the topic it addresses: the same-sex relationship between the main character, Adi, an anthropology PhD student and his Roma friend, a former convict named Alberto, coming from Ferentari, Bucharest’s impoverished and ill-famed neighborhood. Second – due to the highly inventive and often vulgar language, the hallmarks of Schiop’s writing since his debut.

The power of Schiop’s story lies in the fact that he introduces ambivalence to the stereotypical perception of the inhabitants of Ferentari, being aware of his privileged class origin (despite his financial instability, as a son of a local village doctor, he could be considered as a representant of the countryside’s middle-class, while his educational and artistic decisions include him to the intelligentsia status class), but also of his own “weirdness.” Applying in 2015 for a writing residence with a project *Single Man Looking*, Schiop confessed:

I was still an alien in the world of Ferentari. (...)What I want to do as a writer in residence at ODD is to dig deeper into my schizoid identity as a member of the world of the Center, where I don’t feel I belong, and a wannabe denizen of Ferentari, where I can’t really fit in. It’s interesting and sad at the same time to be amongst ‘real people’ of the working class, but the cost of such a life is a certain exclusion and obtuseness which, especially to a gay person, are of no help, but on the contrary, they bring even more alienation (Schiop 2015).

By exploring his own alienation, Schiop does not fall into the trap of exoticizing the “forbidden ghetto neighborhood of Bucharest,” he avoids a patronizing perspective. On the contrary, he wants to become a part of this urban tissue he describes, but instead, he finds himself a pariah due to his gay relationship with Alberto. He neither identifies with left-wing activism from the downtown – he mocks his friends from Bucharest’s leftist circles, showing their ignorance of the world whose values they seem to protect and being acutely sensitive to their moral and intellectual hypocrisy. Andrei Terian calls this particular kind of positionality *hypermarginality*, “a sociological category or condition

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth mentioning that Schiop has been noticed and appreciated already after having published his second novel – in 2009, his name was included by Tom Wilson and Miloš Jovanović in the “100twatch” anthology, featuring the most promising 100 Romanian artists of the young generation.

where an individual's outsider standing as a member of one or more minority groups is reinforced and further complicated by his or her marginal place in those communities" (Terian 2021: 114).

As well as his literary alter-ego, the writer moved to Ferentari to write his PhD thesis about *manele*. After *Soldații...* publishing success and its screen adaptation, he bought an apartment in this peripheric area and lives there until now, confirming the authenticity of his declarations. He presents his life situation in his new book, introducing – as always – some autobiographical details: "In 2013 I published a novel, which, a few years later, was adapted into a movie – and with the money from the film and with my family's help, I took an apartment in Ferentari, where the prices were half lower than in the rest of the city" (Schiop 2021: 36). The writer's life seems thus to be a natural continuation of the story described in the novel, and Ferentari represents his "place," a concrete social area which determines the scope of his artistic project.

Preoccupied with his economic situation, Schiop underlines very often, both in his fictional writing and interviews, that life in Ferentari is cheaper than in the rest of the city and that it reminds more of the reality of the first transitional years after 1989 than the contemporary Bucharest's world, where the global capitalism is experienced intensively through the flows of consumer goods and technologies. He describes it explicitly in a long paragraph of *Soldații...*, where he calls Ferentari his "90s bubble that protects him from the present" and describes the transition as a time when "everything spiraled downward, hopelessness flourished, where overnight the old system was replaced by a new one, incomprehensible to absolutely no one" (Schiop 2013: 150–151).

Although the 1990s are presented as a decade of insecurity, confusion and sociopolitical mess, the narrator's nostalgic perspective seems to justify all the disadvantages of that historical period. Otherwise, Schiop is quite aware of the political contemporaneity and social anxiety of present days, using novels, articles and his Facebook profile (often in an exaggerated, caricatured way) as a vehicle for his views. He is very consistent in his vision of reality, it is important to him to demystify the current order, to describe the dark side of the ideological climate in which capitalism flourishes. As he underlines in a 2019 questionnaire for "Nowa Dekada Krakowska" magazine in response to the question whether literature can be considered an instrument that shapes social self-awareness:

It is obvious that capitalism has completed its mission on Planet Earth in conditions in which humanity has rapidly reached its finite point and is no longer able to develop. On the other hand, I am like a child in the fog, I have no idea what the socio-economic model of the future will look like<sup>14</sup> – one that can manage regression and then a period of stagnation – in the hope that one day a technological leap will come down as *deus ex machina*. Anyway, to not let everything go to the dogs, I think we need a state in which WE ALL WILL FEEL EQUALLY BAD... [Schiop announced here the title of his future novel, *Să ne fie la toți la fel de rău*, published in 2021– OBN]. But before that happens, I am glad to see that more and more people are waking up, I am glad to see more and more politicized art. As an artist, I try to contribute to this progressive disfigurement of the world, in short – to present it even uglier than it is, to add even more hopelessness to this black despair (Schiop 2019: 175).

<sup>14</sup> A book that provides some inspiring answers to Schiop's questions and doubts, is recently published Jason Hickel's *Less is more. How degrowth will save the world*, London: Penguin Random House, ebook 2020, paperback 2021.

However, Adi, the protagonist of *Soldatii...*, is not “innocent;” he addresses the capitalist fantasy of his own business by organizing trips to Ferentari for people from the center of Bucharest. Therefore, he wants to earn money by monetizing the “exotic dimension” of the neighborhood, still dominating the collective consciousness. He is aware that Ferentari, this “anachronical enclave of Bucharest,” represents “what the emerging Romanian middle class is most ashamed of, and thus functions as a mirror showing the complicated picture of its complexes” (Kołakowski 2019: 33). Moreover, in the microenvironment of Ferentari, the narrator shows that even human relationships can be measured as financial transactions – Adi offers Alberto gifts and money, and promises to help him get his papers and an honorable job, while Alberto seduces Adi with his body, tender words and gestures. Finally, Adi, the one with more considerable cultural and economic capital, decides to end this relationship. As Ioana Macrea-Toma observes, “Schiop succeeds as an author, but fails as a character (...) instead of freeing his Ferentari friend from the cycle of poverty and degradation, he merely ‘immortalized’ him in a book quite literally, cooping him up forever in an ancillary social identity” (Macrea-Toma 2021: 103).

#### *SOLDATII...* AND THE RISE OF SCHIOP’S SYMBOLIC CAPITAL IN ROMANIAN LITERARY FIELD

The literary/aesthetic and the socio-cultural quality of Schiop’s novel were noticed by critics and the public (although it cannot be associate with popular literature, it received the status of a Polirom bestseller), setting in motion numerous consecration instances that contributed to the increase of the writer’s symbolic capital. Thus, the book gathered excellent reviews from a big part of the most influential Romanian literary critics, and it has won two prizes for best novel in 2014, from the important, opinion-forming weekly magazine “Observator Cultural” in the category “Prose” and from the Book Industry Gala in the category “The best book of the year” – both maintaining authority of consecrating institutions. The reviewers “acclaimed the novel quasi-unanimously, no matter the ideological positions of the publications where it was reviewed” (Terian 2021: 115). Hence, his book was seen among others as “a brick taken from Jacques Balthazart’s and Zimbardo’s constructions and thrown at literature’s window” (Baghiu 2014), “an impressive social-milieu novel” (Chivu 2014) or “a homosexual, but at the same time a universal love story” (Dinițoiu 2013).

In 2017, Ivana Mladenović directed a film based on the novel, and Schiop played there the main character (which was a demanding and challenging task, as he repeated in many interviews) and co-wrote the scenario; Mladenović won Best Debut at the 2018 Gopo Award (the most prestigious film competition in Romania), the movie has been shown successfully at many international festivals (e.g. San Sebastian, Toronto). It existed within a context of the most influential and worldwide known product of Romanian culture – Romanian New Wave Cinema, characterized by the documentary-like atmosphere, a minimalist and realist style, and often illustrating the local experience of the transition from communism to post-communism. Mladenović’s movie follows the aesthetical path of this new filmmaking school, whose main goals: naturalist approach

and intimate representation of “slices of life” (Doru 2014: 59) correspond perfectly with the universe depicted in the novel. Furthermore, the movie inscribed Schiop’s story in the global distribution channels, placing it in a larger market of ideas and increasing the attractiveness and visibility of the novel.

Participation in the film production also opened Schiop to screenwriter’s experience, which resulted in another collaboration with Mladenović – they co-wrote a scenario (also nominated to Gopo award) for her newest movie, *Ivana cea Groaznică/Ivana the Terrible* (2019).

Moreover, in 2018, *Soldații...* was translated into Polish,<sup>15</sup> increasing Schiop’s international visibility and broadening the reception of his writing to a new literary market.

But, as I claim, the most critical effect of the novel’s success and its direct impact on the development of the literary universe in Romania is that Schiop gained a visible position as the voice of LGBT+ literature. This visibility is taking a practical dimension – for example, in the period 6<sup>th</sup> May – 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2021, the author conducted a workshop of creative writing queer, organized within the Triumph Amiria. Museum of Queer Culture [?], which aimed to support this concrete area of young literature. Such involvement of the writer, who represents himself a very vulnerable minority, supports diversity, equality and inclusion in the Romanian literary field, still dominated by cis white male authors.

Nevertheless, although thanks to *Soldații...* Schiop became better known and established a certain readership successfully, he does not create a “mass-market” literature and his literary production is not very high (4 novels in 17 years). He still needs to practice what Bernard Lahire calls *the literary double life* – in order to earn a living, he must undertake various activities, “combine literary and extraliterary activity” (Lahire 2010: 449). Thus, he activates as a journalist, conducts creative writing workshops, writes film scripts, participates in meetings with authors and at literary festivals, applies for grants and residencies for artists. As might be expected, the greater the writer’s symbolic capital, the more orders, invitations and opportunities he receives to gain the economic capital.

These social conditions of the production of literary works constitute an essential point of reference in Schiop’s works - he enumerates his numerous and varied sources of income in all his novels (in the most recent one, *Să ne fie la toți la fel de rău*, he is happy about the relief grant provided to the artists to support them during the COVID-19 pandemic) and in his writing one can feel a constant fear of economic insecurity – so common in the capitalist system.

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<sup>15</sup> *Żołnierze. Opowieść z Ferentari*, transl. by Olga Bartosiewicz, Universitas, Kraków 2018 (until now, October 2021, it remains the only translation of the book). One can find translated fragments of his writing in magazines from Belgium (“DW B”), Switzerland (“Heterographe”), Czech Republic (“A2”), Germany (“Parsimonie”) and Poland (“Nowa Dekada Krakowska”).

## CONCLUSION

The literary and artistic phenomenon of Adrian Schiop constitutes an interesting case of an author present in the public space in Romania after 1989, advancing along his career path in parallel to all capital transitional and post-transitional challenges of the country. The main topics present in his prose reflect significant, yet insufficiently present in the public debate, problems of Romanian society (e.g. LGBT+ community, everyday life of the working-class, harsh realities of freelancing, social and economic inequalities, life on the periphery, financial emigration, COVID-19 pandemic seen through the eyes of ordinary people). Writing about minority groups and socially excluded individuals, he emphasizes at the same time his own existential and social alienation. His literary work seems to correspond perfectly with Elena Vlădăreanu’s anti-postmodernist citation I have chosen for the motto of my article – by combining the formula of fictionalized autobiography and an essayist style focused on social realities, Schiop avoids formal experimentalism and builds a hyperrealistic, overwhelming world, revealing the (mostly pessimist) structures of everyday life. Concomitantly, he remains a highly self-conscious writer. Although he is critical of capitalism, at the same time, he is aware that to be able to function in the literary field, he must sometimes act according to its rules in order to gain sufficiently strong symbolic capital that will allow him to maintain an anti-conformist attitude. However, his writing is not truly a use of the critique of capitalism for capitalist goals, but rather a conscious exploration of the symptoms of the failures of the currently dominating political-economic system. Both the author’s literary alter-ego and Schiop himself try to adopt an ironic attitude toward capitalism’s constitutive imperative consisting of growth and accumulation of goods. A general air of malaise and helplessness that emerge from his prose seem to correspond with a surprisingly optimistic sentence ending Fischer’s book: “From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again” (Fisher 2009: 81). But since there is no alternative yet, Schiop and his literary characters are inevitably encapsulated in the most real of our horizons – the capitalist one.

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