TRANSLATING AND REVIEWING CANADIAN SF IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA. THE CASE OF WILLIAM GIBSON

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Abstract: This paper examines the Romanian reception of a reputed English Canadian writer of science fiction, William Gibson, via the translations from his novels and the critical studies published in periodicals. Our aim is to establish the place of the SF genre in post-communism, based on the allegations in the Romanian Translation Studies discourse and assess the writer's role in the Romanian cultural and literary polysystem as compared to other Canadian authors.

Keywords: Canadian science fiction, Romanian reception, polysystem theories, Translation Studies Discourse, Romanian periodicals

Introduction

During post-communist Romania, Canadian literature has flourished due to the set-up of Canadian Studies centres and academic programmes in most universities of the country, not to mention that doctoral theses and academic papers in the field are now published. As tackled by our previous research (Petraru, 2014: 536-537), the increasing interest in Canadian Studies and literature also showed in the higher number of translations from Canadian writers and the criticism devoted to them. If before 2000 works that were unavailable during the communist years were mostly published (not only various cheap sensational novels, but also translations from William Gibson's SF novels), the new millennium has also seen the publication of translations from novels by important Canadian authors. Furthermore, there are the critical pieces devoted to them, both in periodicals and academic writings that enjoyed book-length treatment; thus, the works of major postmodern Canadian authors such as Margaret Atwood, Leonard Cohen and Michael Ondaatje are usually analysed in individual chapters (*cf.* Florin Irimia's *The Postmodern Canadian Novel. Perspectives on Four Major Writers* published in 2006). Last but not least, after the fall of the communist period new media of reception are brought into play; such instances are film adaptations of Canadian novels and literature sold cheaper with daily papers or other magazines.

1. The Context of William Gibson's Reception

As a general remark, after 1989, Romania witnesses the privatization of the state publishing houses with coherent editorial policies that functioned during the communist years; new private ones are also founded and their incoherent programme almost exclusively guided by commercial criteria could be compared to the situation of inter-war Romania. This had an impact on post-communist rewriters[1] that had to adjust to the new capitalist market economy which also includes the book market. Thus, translations carried out during the early 1990s were a result of the incoherent translation policies of newly established publishing houses; as tackled by the post-communist Translation Studies discourse,

[1] We employ the term as coined by the Translation Studies scholar Andre Lefevere to refer to the agents that manipulate a text (i.e. not only translators, but also critics, commentators or annotators).

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"In Romania, like in the other ex-communist countries, the first years after 1990 mark a kind of "reading celebration" as books invaded the streets of small and big towns. Apart from books that had been prohibited or censored in the previous periods, bookstalls are now invaded by 'low genres': dime novels, detective novels, spy novels, science-fiction novels or cheap sensational novels. They all aim to make a quick profit by sacrificing the quality of translations and the price to be paid consists in the flaws of a copyright legislation not entirely settled yet; the rising inflation has led to a production of books destined to be sold quickly on a market lacking proper distribution channels and considered as inoperational by most actors in the field. (…) 'Intellectual' works that address a small number of readers are less popular whereas other genres (such as poetry) hit a low and make room for mass literature (…). New fields, either partially or completely neglected during the previous period, such as religion, mysticism, esotericism, homeopathy, popular medicine, and cookbooks, attract editors."[2] (Jeanrenaud 2006, 180-181)

Such instances of low genres, in general and cheap sensational novels, in particular are *The Baby Arrangement/ Necunoscuta din casă* (1999) by the Canadian Moyra Tarling, *Macnamara's Bride/ Anunț matrimonial* (1998) by the American Quinn Wilder or *For Now, for Always/ Nu poți fugi de dragoste* (1999) by the British Josie Metcalfe. In our case, translations from genres that were little enjoyed during the communist regime for ideological reasons are William Gibson's SF novels, namely *Neuromantul/ Neuromancer* (1994), *Virtual Light/ Lumina virtuală* (1995), *Chrome* (1998) and *Count Zero/ Contele Zero* (1999).

Gibson's *Neuromancer/ Neuromantul* was sold with the daily paper *Cotidianul* in 2008, as well (the novel was also translated by Mihai-Dan Pavelescu and previously edited by Leda Publishing House in 2004, in the Science Fiction collection). However, it was argued that the translations published with *Cotidianul* were not as accurate as they should be; this was probably due to the fact that they were carried out very hastily (as in most cases of translations entrusted to young professionals at the beginning of their career). As a general remark, young Romanian translators such as Radu Pavel Gheo (2007: S1) argue that it is not difficult to penetrate the market as a translator from English in the post-communist period due to an increased demand which softened the selection of translators, hence the high number of poor translations. Well-established publishing houses such as Polirom hire translators based on a positive translation test and have enlarged their team of translators for the world literature series in the past years. Young translators such as Andra Matzal also complain that translation brings a low income in Romania and translators are forced to have other jobs, as well. Therefore, some members of the young generation (Radu Pavel Gheo, Andra Matzal, Mihai Chirilov) admit that translation is more of a hobby they practice in their spare time beside a regular job or their studies (*ibidem*).

2. William Gibson in the Romanian cultural and literary polysystem

In the context of post-communist reception of Canadian authors in Romania, it can be easily argued that the major postmodern writers previously mentioned (i.e. Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje and Leonard Cohen) are also the most translated ones after 1989; the number of articles devoted to them in periodicals comes to support our thesis since they account for more than a third of the total amount of criticism devoted to English Canadian writers which adds to the studies in conference proceedings or PhD chapters.

[2] All translations mine, unless stated otherwise.

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William Gibson is an English Canadian novelist that occupies a peripheral position in our cultural and literary polysystem[3] in the larger context of the place of Canadian literature in post-communist Romania. Based on the translations and criticism on his works, his position is similar to that of Douglas Coupland, the postmodern who wrote about the X generation and its discontents; even in international criticism the two are compared (with Nick Bantock), the "three bestselling authors who seem utterly globalized, stylized, and deracinated producers of a 'location-independent' literature" (Paul Delanay, quoted in Petraru, 2014: 537).

Gibson's success could be related to the preference of publishing houses for new genres that boosted after the fall of the communist regime. As mentioned above, four of Gibson's novels have, so far, been translated, including his masterpiece, *Neuromancer*: *Virtual Light/ Lumina virtuală* (1995), *Chrome* (1998), *Count Zero/ Contele Zero* (1999), *Neuromancer/ Neuromantul* (2005). The author is renowned for having introduced the cyberpunk genre in literature:

"In 1984, William Gibson published *Neuromancer*, a novel that established the genre of cyberpunk. Here Gibson coined the phrase *cyberspace* to describe his science-fictional vision of a virtual reality environment wherein users could interface with each other within, as part of, and constituted by the flow of information or *the matrix*. *Neuromancer* was composed the same year that Apple Computer Company launched its Macintosh personal computer but when Gibson constructed his narrative of computer hackers he had never seen a computer; ironically Gibson used a portable typewriter to produce his award-winning portrait of a digital global capitalist technoculture in the not too- distant future. Nevertheless, fifteen years after the novel was published, cyberspace was no longer a far-fetched idea from a paperback novel; the term was adopted to describe the vision that computer scientists, programmers, and hardware designers had for the information society they were building." (Matrix 2006: 11)

The translations from Gibson were published by Nemira Publishing House and Fahrenheit which are specialized in science fiction; only *Neuromancer* came out with Leda Publishing House in the 'SF Nautilus' collection which is coordinated by Mihai-Dan Pavelescu and is considered to be one of the best known brands of Romanian science fiction. As far as the translators of his works are concerned, Mihai-Dan Pavelescu who translated *Chrome*, *Count Zero* and *Neuromancer* is also the founder of the Romanian Society of Science Fiction and Fantasy, and a science fiction editor. Besides, he has published articles on SF works and translations since the communist years. Mircea Ștefancu, the translator of *Virtual Light*, is another specialized SF translator.

Furthermore, if we were to compare Canadian SF writers and their place in the Romanian polysystem, we would rank William Gibson along with another reputed Canadian SF writer who was introduced to the Romanian public after 1989, namely Robert James Sawyer. Winner of over forty awards for his twenty novels published, Sawyer's work explores the intersection between science and religion, where rationalism frequently wins out over mysticism. He also has a great fondness for paleontology (*Calculating God*), for an alien world to which dinosaurs from Earth were transplanted (*End of an Era*) and explores the

[3] Our approach draws on the Polysystem Theory as developed by the Israeli scholar Itamar Even-Zohar in the 1970s and further developed by the TS scholar from the same area, Gideon Toury. The former author reduced the literary polysystem to a number of contrasting pairs so as to illustrate the status of translated literature based on its position in the literary polysystem of the host: centre vs. its periphery, canonized literary forms vs. non-canonized ones, and primary (innovatory) literary forms vs. secondary (conservative) ones. (Even-Zohar 2000, 193-194)

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notion of copied or uploaded human consciousness (*Mindscan, Flashforward, Golden Fleece, The Terminal Experiment*) [S2] with his *The Terminal Experiment/* Alegerea lui Hobson (2008) published by Nemira Publishing House in the Science Fiction Collection and *Calculating God/ Programatorul divin* (2009) by Leda Publishing House. The translations from his works are signed by specialized SF translators: Antuza Genescu and Mihai-Dan Pavelescu, respectively.

2.1. William Gibson in Post-Communist Romanian Periodicals

William Gibson is one the most discussed Canadian authors after Cohen, Atwood and Ondaatje in post-communist periodicals. Interestingly enough, some of the articles that mention him are just an occasion for Romanian critics to debate on the phenomenon of cyberculture. This is the case of Adrian Mihalache's *Cibernetică, cibercultură, ciberidentitate/ Cybernetics, Cyberculture, Cyber Identity* (2002) or Ion Manolescu's *Cyberpunk. Zone iconice ale viitorului/ Cyberpunk. Iconic Areas of the Future* (1999) and *Literatură şi ştiinţă: atractorii stranii/ Literature and Science: Strange Attractors* (2002). Furthermore, Gibson is the first English Canadian writer to be mentioned by post-communist periodicals in 1992 by Sebastian-Vlad Popa in *Teatrul azi/ Theatre Today*.

The articles in *Cotidianul/ The Daily Newspaper* which distributed Gibson's *Neuromancer/ Neuromantul* in 2008 in the "Literature Collection", and Victor Martin's *Un început, la sfârşit / A Beginning, in the End* published in both *Contemporanul – Ideea Europeană/ The Contemporary – The European Idea* and *Luceafărul de dimineaţă/ The Morning Star* in 2008 refer only to the author and his *Neuromancer*.

None of the articles in the Romanian periodicals mention Gibson as a Canadian writer as is the case with other major postmodern figures. He is usually discussed in the context of cyberpunk along with other authors of the genre: Rudy Rucker, Lewis Shiner, John Shirley or Bruce Sterling, the main contributors to *Mirrorshades. The Cyberpunk Anthology* edited by Sterling in 1986, rendered by Manolescu (1999) as *Antologia Umbre de Oglindă. Cyberpunk*. Gibson is mentioned when high-tech professions or 'secret jobs' of cyberpunk heroes are listed: console men and cyber-space cowboys (in *Neuromancer*), dead and cloned mercenaries (*Count Zero*), netrunners, digital sectarians and detectors of digital signatures (*Idoru*). Cyberpunkers are hybrid entities that created cyber-real interzones (after the British SF magazine *Interzone* that published most of the authors of the genre). Manolescu (*ibidem*) further argues that the fictional *interzone* of cyber worlds is a way of generalizing individual interfaces (e.g.: spaces between real bodies and holograms in *Virtual Light*). To support his allegations, the Romanian rewriter quotes Mike Featherstone and Richard Burrows's *Cyberspace, Cyberbodies, Cyberpunk. Cultures of Technological Embodiment* (1995), Gibson is the author of one of the most sophisticated types of cyberspace, a universal, interactive, intelligent entity populated by avatars of cyberbodies. Cyberspace is a global computerized network of information, a matrix that operators may 'jack-in' by 'trodes' via a 'cyberspace deck'. The cyberspace geometry adopted by cyberpunk authors varies; Gibson's cyberspace is configured by iconic scraps (*Count Zero*) or dimensional abyssalization (*Mona Lisa Overdrive*). Manolescu concludes that the cyberspace described by Gibson in *Neuromancer* refers to a real world of the generalized electronic matrix.

In his other article, *Literatură şi ştiinţă: atractorii stranii/ Literature and Science: Strange Attractors*, Manolescu (2002) departs from the notion of 'strange attractors' as textual motives or narrative figures in postmodern literature, originally coined in the field of exact sciences. He claims that these literary structures of chaos and irregularity organize and disorganize the epic of the novels by William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, Lewis Shiner or Mircea Cărtărescu. He further notes that it is not always easy to distinguish strange attractors from the predictable ones in the sphere of literature, especially when it comes to the genre of

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cyberpunk. He gives the example of the character Cody Harwood in Gibson's *All Tomorrow's Parties* due to its informational body structure and behavior which may be attributed to a strange attractor (an association that Gibson actually makes in his novel); Hardwood works as a resort meant to change the course of history due to the nanotechnology he possesses. Thus, he manipulates the potential of historical change to ensure the optimal exploitation of resources in every possible scenario. Manolescu describes him as "the post(human) strange attractor that attracts and submits the apparent free course of history" (*ibidem*). Gibson also includes the butterfly effect in his novel as the most typical chaotic behavior related to the existence of a strange attractor.

In *Cibernetică, cibercultură, ciberidentitate/ Cybernetics, Cyberculture, Cyber Identity*, Adrian Mihalache (2002: 14) argues that William Gibson coined the word 'cyberspace' in *Neuromancer* (1985) and introduced a new literary genre, the cyberpunk that would replace the outdated SF and gave an attractive name to the virtual space created by the Internet. Mihalache also claims that for Gibson, 'cyber' was meant to suggest the immaterial, light and transparent environment where specific practices of communication, signification and development were meant to take place. If Mihalache considers the genre of cyberpunk as a revival of the SF literature, an opposite claim is made by another Romanian rewriter, namely Victor Martin (2008). The latter makes comments on *Neuromantul/ Neuromancer*, the novel he bought with a newspaper and knew it had been awarded many prizes. The critic admits that he became familiar with the subgenre of cyberpunk due to the Romanian admirers that contributed to *Jurnal SF/ SF Journal*, a movement he compares with dadaism and paradoxism. Gibson's book is considered to have the typical setting of bad American movies with samurai, Japanese slums – an old fashioned cliché, as well as the poor fantastic elements and the uninspired gadgets. The style of the novel is extremely 'tangled' and Gibson as an author is weak and worth reading only as an alternative to Herbert or Dick. The Canadian writer's work is compared to Franz Kafka's *Amerika/ America* or Stanislaw Lem's *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub/ Edificiul nebuniei absolute*, both novels of initiation; however, Gibson's *Neuromancer* is filled with cybernetic terms and "the vulgarity of some terms does not save it" since "young people do not read cyberpunk unless they are told" (*ibidem*). In Martin's opinion, cyberpunk has nothing to do with modern science fiction and is as outdated as John Brunner's *Telepathist/ Telepatul.* The Romanian reviewer considers this type of literature (and Gibson's novel) to be fit for computer game lovers, an act of subculture that plays the same role as astrology and metaphysics in the Middle Ages; it is an artificial plague for SF literature, similar to the psychedelic genre of the 1970s to pop music in general. *Neuromancer*, Martin further argues, does not pertain to the SF genre; it is a novel written with talent, but it does not have a main idea or a narrative structure, it is action for the sake of action. According to Martin, the prizes awarded to Gibson were meant to encourage this type of literature by American publishers. The reviewer does not understand why *Neuromancer* is thought to be a 'warning novel' and a 'pseudo-technical' one. His conclusion is that cyberpunk is not science fiction, but only an insignificant part of it which acts as if it were the whole.

Andra Matzal's short critical pieces in *Cotidianul/ The Daily Newspaper* introduce William Gibson as the one who patented many of the concepts used today by literature and science such as cyberpace. If Victor Martin argued that the literary prizes awarded to Gibson were meant to encourage such a subgenre, Matzal (2008a) claims that, due to *Neuromancer*, Gibson won the most important awards for this type of literature. The novel was brought to Romanian readers twenty years after its publishing in the USA. In an impressionistic tone of voice, the reviewer argues that *Cotidianul/ The Daily Newspaper* and 'Univers' Publishing House have introduced one of the most appropriate metaphors of the moment to Romanian readers, i.e. a 'postmodern' world, a city of hybrid beings moved by the so-called 'designer

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drugs' and anatomies ready to receive, at any time, a surgical 'upgrade'. All in all, we are dealing with a world of classic cyberpunk imagery, haunted by hackers and system extensions. Andra Matzal concludes with a remark on the importance of the book which gave birth to a wave of imitators and supporters and deserves its place in most tops of one hundred greatest novels of all times. In *De la hippie la cyberpunk/ From Hippie to Cyberpunk*, Matzal (2008b) emphasizes the biographical dimension of Gibson's creation and the travelling that inspired the 'achievable dystopias' in his novels. She argues that cyberpunk was the departing point for the next SF subgenre, namely steampunk that combines Victorian elements with science fiction best reflected by the novel he wrote with Bruce Sterling, *The Difference Engine*. In *Cyberpunkul a făcut tranziția la arte/ Cyberpunk Went to the Arts*, the reviewer (2008c) claims that the cyberpunk imagery and its dystopian world have rendered Orwell's *1984* or Huxley's *Brave New World* 'innocent' literature. Generated by the scenarios of a devouring technology and its implications shown under continuous control, a long debated theme from Foucault to the more recent Big Brother scenarios, cyberpunk extended, as a genre, to music, film and online or video games. Matzal gives the example of industrial music and cybernetic punk, of films such as *Blade Runner, A Scanner Darkly, Minority Report* and *Johnny Mnemonic*, not to mention the Japanese manga and anime films.

To conclude, the critical pieces that focus on Gibson's cyberpunk and his novels make use of the theoretical assumptions in the field of science fiction. Apart from the articles by Andra Matzal in *Cotidianul/ The Daily Newspaper*, he is discussed along with other authors of the subgenre (Bruce Sterling, Lewis Shiner, etc.) (Manolescu, 1999). The criticism practiced by Romanian rewriters is generally impressionistic, sometimes biographical (as in Matzal's articles) and supported by the SF theorists of the (sub)genre. Few comparisons are made with other authors; in terms of science fiction, Gibson's dystopian world is compared to Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *1984*. Manolescu found that the concept of 'strange attractors' may be applied to Gibson's prose, as well as to Cărtărescu's trilogy.

Conclusions

In our paper we assessed the minor role of Canadian SF in the Romanian cultural and literary polysystem of the post-communist period which comes second after Canadian postmodernism; our allegation is based on the fact that the most translated and discussed Canadian authors are the major postmodern ones, namely Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje and Leonard Cohen. The popularity of the genre is roughly explained in the Translation Studies discourse (*cf.* Jeanrenaud, 2006) by means of the fact that SF was little known to the Romanian public before 1989 due to ideological reasons. Along with Robert James Sawyer, another renowned Canadian SF writer, William Gibson (whose Romanian reception could be also compared to Douglas Coupland's in terms of translations and critical studies) has his major works translated by reputed professionals, also specialists in the SF movement (Mihai-Dan Pavelescu, Mircea Ștefancu). Critical pieces (generally impressionistic, sometimes biographical) on his works largely debate the issue of *cyberpunk*, a SF subgenre Gibson founded, the dystopian views in his novels being compared to Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *1984* (Manolescu, 1999, 2002), Kafka's *Amerika* or Stanislaw Lem's *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* (Martin, 2008).

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