Clowns, Guns and a Writer's Block: Romanian-American Encounters in *Her Alibi* (1989)

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Abstract

When Bruce Beresford's film Her Alibi *was released in early 1989, it was unenthusiastically received by the American critics and audiences as just another mixture of romantic comedy, crime and mystery, better suited perhaps to television than to the big screen. What seems to be paid little attention to in numerous professional or amateur reviews of the film is that it actually foregrounds the encounter of the American culture with the Romanian other. Not only does it reflect cultural differences that shape the sense of identity of the American hosts and of the Romanian migrants, but it sets them against the background of the tensions between the West, represented by the USA, and the East, represented by communist Romania, over the last years of the Cold War. The paper proposes an imagological exploration of the interplay of images of American identity in the late 1980s and of the Romanian migrant, trapped between 'Home' and the 'West', in an American production that, more or less explicitly, draws on propaganda-ridden Cold War themes.*

Key words: *film, self/other, migration, East/West, propaganda*

As early as December 1988, *Variety* magazine announced the coming out of a Warner Bros. film that got "high-gloss, top-talent treatment" yet was disappointing by its "general lack of credibility" (Variety Staff 1988). Directed by Bruce Beresford (famous, at the time, for *Tender Mercies*, 1983, and *Crimes of the Heart*, 1986), written by Charlie Peters, produced by Keith Barish, designed by Henry Bumstead ("who's done everything from *Vertigo* to *To Kill a Mockingbird* and from *The Sting* to *The Little Drummer Girl*") and assembling "a world-class technical slate" [1] (Benson 1989), *Her Alibi* did not impress the critics upon its release in the USA on the 3rd of February 1989, being dismissed as "endless, pointless and ridiculous, right up to the

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final shot" (Ebert 1989), a "bad" movie Simon 1989), "a romantic melodrama of a boringness to make your average tooth extraction seem preferable" (Canby 1989). Three major flaws were recurrently signalled, even in reviews dated years later (e.g. Minson 2000, Weinberg 2003): Beresford's surprisingly "weak direction" (Minson 2000); the casting of Tom Selleck and Paulina Porizkova in leading roles; and, above all, the plot of the screenplay, described as "dodgy" (Minson 2000), "loosely crocheted" (Benson 1989), "a wandering mess" (Weinberg 2003). Tom Selleck, well known to the American audiences from the successful comedy *Three Men and a Baby* (1987) and the TV series *Magnum, P.I.* (1980-1988), particularly adored then by female viewers as "the closest thing (...) to Clark Gable" (Benson 1989), impersonates Phil Blackwood, a writer of successful, though rather bad, mystery novels, who, desperate to overcome a writer's block, seeks inspiration in the cases tried in court. There he falls in love with a murder suspect, Nina Ionescu, performed by the "gorgeous international model" (Simon 1989), "turned-hopeful-actress" (Weinberg 2003), Paulina Porizkova. His uncanny decision to provide her with an alibi, even if it entails the risk of his being imprisoned for visiting her in jail disguised as a priest and then for lying about their alleged affair, triggers a series of 'accidents' that endanger his life. Many of Phil Blackwood's experiences – which put Tom Selleck in the position of "lurching about like Chevy Chase" (Benson 1989) – are incorporated in a new novel and reshaped, in bombastic prose, to make his fictional alter-ego Peter Swift hero-like. The contrast between macho Swift's actions and Phil's "own klutzy behaviour" (Benson 1989) is intended as a source of fun in the film. Mixing "sexual tension, physical danger and quirky black humour" (Variety Staff 1988) with "not very inspired slapstick" (Simon 1989), the film's narrative thread progresses, naturally, towards a happy ending: a family is reunited amidst a crowd of merry clowns, the lovers are reconciled and the villains are arrested. Still, doubts about Nina's innocence seem to linger on.

Interestingly, although a large number of critics' reviews refer to the Romanian nationality of the leading female character Nina Ionescu, that remains, more often than not, a mere detail; actually, many viewers have even chosen (ever since) to ignore it in their unprofessional reviews posted online, for instance, on IMDb or Rotten Tomatoes. There seems to be little to no interest among the largest share of audiences in the fact that, though the film plot involves several (allegedly) Romanian characters, there is no Romanian actor/actress in the cast: the Romanian protagonist of *Her Alibi* is performed by a Czech-born model, whereas the minor Romanian characters are played by American actors (with the exception of the Polish-

born Liliana Komorowska). Moreover, focusing almost exclusively on acting and directing style, on the construction of romance as well as of the comic moments, film critics and ordinary viewers alike seem to pay little attention to cultural differences and the way they are represented in Beresford's film or to the ideological charge that is unavoidably added to its plot by the encounter of American and Romanian characters, of the capitalist 'West' and the communist 'East'. The present paper aims to explore, from an imagological perspective, precisely this dimension of *Her Alibi*, in order to reveal how, as a product of American popular culture in the 1980s, it constructs images of the American self and especially of the Romanian other, as perceived in the American collective mindset in the late years of the Cold War, subtly lending itself to anti-communist propaganda.

As Joep Leerssen points out, images are meant to be studied "as properties of their context" (Leerssen n.d.). Therefore, the proper understanding of the self/other representations in *Her Alibi* must be based, to a certain extent, on "historical contextualization" (Leerssen 2007: 28), in other words, on the consideration of the factors characterising the text production context, here including the political and social realities in the observing – American – culture, and the attitudes towards the foreign - Romanian – other at the time when the film was made. Although the film was released on the 3rd of February 1989, within days after Ronald Reagan was succeeded at the White House by George Bush, its production belongs to the last year of the Reagan era.

It is true that it is not the purpose of this paper to provide a detailed description of life in the USA in the 1980s and particularly towards the end of the decade, yet it is worth mentioning that, within this temporal frame, President Ronald Reagan's policies definitely reshaped American economic, social and political thinking. At home, Reagan promoted "a more optimistic and positive conception" of conservatism, labelled, hence, "new conservatism" (Dunn and Woodward 1996 qtd. in Busch 2015: 100), which fostered a "forward looking, individualistic, and freedom-loving political culture" but also caused "the conservative emphasis on restraint [to lose] to the seductive appeal of a materialist paradise" (McAllister 2003: 58, 55 qtd. in Busch 2015: 100). The economic plan that he and his advisors advocated, known as "supply-side economics", which presupposed "giv[ing] the tax cuts to the top brackets, the wealthiest individuals and largest enterprises, and let[ting] the good effects 'trickle down' through the economy to reach everyone else" (Greider 1981: 46–47 qtd. in W Brownlee 2015: 137), turned out to be less successful than expected, unable to stop recession in 1981-1982 or to prevent the crash of the stock market in 1987.

Even so, many middle-class and wealthy Americans continued to support Reagan's economic policies, choosing to turn a blind eye to the record budget deficit it created. The changes at the economic level and their social effects implicitly impacted on Americans' identity. As Bryn Upton puts it, "the flower children of the 1960s [who] became adults in the 1980s (…) struggled to reconcile their 1980s-era quest for financial reward with their youthful idealism"; they "embrace[d] a renewed image of America as a land of prosperity and opportunity" and measured success mainly in terms of material gain (2014: 128). But, though intrinsically related to "economic expectations", adult Americans' identity was also marked by emerging anxieties, chief among which the fear of losing one's job, and doubts about whether success should be measured exclusively in financial terms or whether getting more money was worth the sacrifice of personal happiness and self-esteem (Upton 2014: 128, 176). All these transformations in American public and private life, with its ideals but also worries and uncertainties, were represented in a wide range of products (music, television, cinema) of the 1980s American popular culture.

As for American foreign policies in the 1980s, they should be regarded against the background of the Cold War. President Reagan's administration continued to play on the ideological differences between the 'West' and the 'East', capitalism and communism, authoritarianism and democracy, and made efforts, therefore, to counter the spreading of Soviet influence in the world. In particular, from among the communist states, Romania had been the "the darling of the United States" (Kirk and Raceanu 1994: 1) since the mid-1960s. Romania's determination to be an independent socialist state resenting Soviet domination, as well as its openness to trade and good relations with the West, had brought about "a qualitative leap" in the American – Romanian contacts especially during the Nixon and Ford administrations, the best expression of which was the "U.S. extension of MFN [most-favoured-nation tariff treatment] to Romania" in 1975 (1994: 4). The renewal of MFN on a yearly basis by the American administration was conditioned, in the 1970s, by Ceauşescu's government granting the permission to migrate to the USA to Romanian citizens who applied for a visa and preventing human rights abuses. After the accession to the White House of Ronald Reagan, in the 1980s, stress rather shifted from U.S. concern with emigration issues to the violation of human rights in Romania "including religious freedoms, release of imprisoned dissidents, and even the economic deprivation of the Romanian people" (1994: 6). By that time, the increase of Romania's foreign debt had determined Ceauşescu to implement, "at the cost of substantially lowering

the Romanian population's standard of living" (1994: 9), a series of austerity measures meant to contribute to eliminating the debt, including cuts in housing, healthcare, education, culture and science-related expenses, as well as the rationalization of electricity, heating, hot water consumption, petrol and even basic foodstuff (bread, milk, cooking oil, sugar, and meat). That added to: the decline of Romanian industry and the decrease of real incomes; the growth of Ceauşescu's autocratic power (which tolerated no criticism of the 'beloved' socialist leader) and of state control over all aspects of life with the help of the *Securitate*; the denial of the freedom of speech, assembly and religion; and the unacceptable development of Ceauşescu's personality cult to which all media had to be subordinated. Against this background, with the drastic fall in imports from the USA and increasing trade with the Soviet Union in the first half of the decade, with Ceauşescu's reluctance to respond to American demands regarding human rights issues (fuelled by his paranoiac conviction that "Reagan was out to overthrow him for ideological reasons" – 1994: 13), the "special relationship" between the USA and Romania started to dwindle. In February 1988 Romania renounced the most-favoured-nation tariff treatment and found itself isolated both from the USA and from the Soviet Union and other Eastern Europe countries, where reform started spreading (1994: xi-xii, 13-14).

Historical contextualisation must, however, go hand in hand with the imagologist's awareness of the intertextual nature of images as tropes (Leerssen 2007: 28). Thus, a text like *Her Alibi* that focuses on the encounter of characters representative of cultures that fall on different sides of the West/East divide, like the American and Romanian ones, should be examined taking into account the conventions of national representation established by the use of film as an instrument of propaganda meant to win "the battle for the hearts and minds of the American public" (Upton 2014: 1) during the Cold War. According to Nicholas Reeves, "ever since the First World War the myth of the power of film propaganda has taught us to see the cinema as a very special weapon, uniquely capable of moulding and leading public opinion" (1993: 198). Its strength lies in the combination of positive, even idealised, images of domestic identity (self-images or auto-images) and negative images, sometimes gross caricatures, of the foreign Other that stands as the 'enemy' (hetero-images). This 'recipe' seems to have been largely preserved in many propaganda-ridden American film productions until the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s. "Cold War propaganda played up the notion of the U.S. as a liberating force and the leader of the forces of good in the world, while the USSR was evil and

attempting to subjugate the world" (Upton 2014: 8). These ideas came to grow strong roots in American mass opinion owing to the influence of American popular culture, in general, and of cinema, in particular, as "an extraordinary range of genres [comedy included – my note], many of which appeared innocently apolitical to most cinema-goers" (Shaw 2007: 5), developed upon them, more or less discreetly. In the 1980s, even if, after "the psychological crisis of the Vietnam War, the economic crisis of the early 1970s, and the spiritual crisis born of the long civil rights struggle of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s", the Americans had started to see themselves in a different light, Reagan's more aggressive policies and stand in the Cold War, "designed to reassert America's position in the world", boosted American optimism and brought about "a rise in patriotic symbolism" in films (Upton 2014: 6, 12). Some films did actually begin "to reimagine the East versus West dichotomy", yet "the fear and anxiety that pervaded the Cold War era" endured and paranoia related to potential threats posed by some external – most likely communist – enemy continued to creep in Americans' minds, despite the successful meetings between Reagan and Gorbachev which suggested that there was "hope that the Cold War might come to a peaceful conclusion" (2014: 11-12). Against this background, Romanian characters in American films were rarely discerned from the 'grey' mass of Eastern spy faces threatening from behind the Iron Curtain (one of the relevant cases in this respect being *The Third Man*, 1949, produced in the first years of the Cold War). As *Her Alibi* shows, such characters re-emerge on screen as a source of paranoiac fear after the irremediable deterioration of American – Romanian relations in the late 1980s.

The beginning of Bruce Beresford's 1989 film projects abruptly a negative image of the foreign – yet unidentified – other when Lieutenant Frank Polito (James Farentino) is called to investigate the murder of a foreign student who had been stabbed to the heart with a pair of scissors. The hetero-images discernible in the dialogue between Polito and a police officer who had come earlier at the place of the murder clearly attach criminality to the representation of the other and differentiation is emphasised when the language the murderers spoke is described as "a weird language" (Beresford 1989) that the American neighbours who had heard them could not understand.

The second sequence puts exclusive stress on auto-images and introduces the main American characters, the novelist Phil Blackwood (Tom Selleck) and his publisher Sam (William Daniels). It recommends the film as a midlife crisis one, a genre that Bryn Upton (2014) considers

particularly fit for the exploration of the changes in American identity during the years of the Cold War. Phil Blackwood's midlife crisis stems from a failed relationship (his wife Susan had left him, ironically, for a critic), as well as from a writer's block which has been lasting for too long and which endangers his popularity as a bestseller writer and, implicitly, his collaboration with the publishing house, hence the potential loss of his financial security. Therefore, Phil is urged by Sam to take a first step to reclaiming his masculinity and inspiration by getting involved in a new relationship. Unfortunately, Phil is not ready to do that as his failure to convince a young and sexy American waitress to at least talk to him demonstrates. As for the quality of his writing, it seems to be so poor that, in a mock exchange with his Zenith laptop – an obvious sign of the technological advance in the American society of the late 1980s – Phil's decision to delete the document he had created is wittily greeted as "probably a wise decision" (Beresford 1989).

Thus, the next step that Phil takes to overcome his writer's block is to go to courtroom and hear some cases that might spark good ideas for his new novel. While in the company of "a quartet of old courtroom regulars [Oliver, FX, Millie and Rose] who greet [him] as one of them, cluing him in to the juicier cases in the building" (Benson 1989), Phil sees Nina Ionescu, a young beautiful Romanian introduced in the court as a murder suspect whose trial is, nonetheless, adjourned until a translator could facilitate an interview with her lawyer and allow the latter to construct the defence plea. This character that turns out to be the film's female protagonist, whose first name has rather Russian than Romanian overtones, is subtly cast in the stereotypical mould of the Oriental woman, mysterious, tempting, yet dangerous by her potential for cunningness and deceitful appearances (e.g. she speaks fluent English, yet, at the beginning of the film, she feigns complete incapacity to understand or communicate in the host culture's language). Such a hetero-image may be regarded as drawing on the pattern of supranational characterisation (Leerssen 2000 and 2007: 29) opposing the West to the East, perhaps less strictly along the lines of Cold War propaganda and rather in terms of the stereotyping, retraceable to nineteenth-century Western representations, of Romania as belonging to a picturesque, exotic, fascinating Orient, as well as in keeping with the 'traditional' Orientalist gendering of the West as masculine (here represented by Phil Blackwood) and of the East as feminine (here represented by Nina Ionescu). Not only is Phil instantly smitten with "drop-dead beautiful Nina" (Variety Staff 1988) but he describes her in his novel in relevant terms that project her image as that of a sexually

attractive, apparently innocent-looking woman: "She had the face of an angel, fragile, ethereal. He wondered what her breasts looked like" (Beresford 1989).

The mesmerising effect of the mysterious Romanian on Phil determines him to act foolishly, against his better judgment and the American law, and, disguised as a priest, he visits Nina while she is still in police custody in order to offer her an alibi. Phil's choice of a disguise reveals another stereotype deeply rooted in the Western collective thinking, namely that Romanians are deeply religious. Either because he does not know that the majority of Romanians are Orthodox Christians or because he expects Nina to belong to one of the religious groups more likely to be subject to restrictions and persecution by the communist regime, Phil dresses up as a Catholic priest, carries a cheap metal cross and a Romanian dictionary/ conversation guide instead of a Bible. Though obviously equipped with rather shallow knowledge of the Romanian culture, Phil proves to be aware of the importance of language as the "vehicle of a culture transfer" (Gavriliu 2002: 14), but he lamentably fails to communicate with Nina in broken Romanian, to her amusement:

> *Phil*: Bună dimineața. (wrong pronunciation) (English subtitles: Good morning)
> *Nina* (correcting him): Bună dimineața. (English subtitles: Good morning)
> *Phil* (repeats, this time pronouncing the words correctly): Bună dimineața. (English subtitles: Good morning.) (He continues to speak in barely understandable Romanian) Dumnezeu doreşte să ştii unde este toalet (English subtitles: God wants to know where the toilet is.) (Nina smiles.) Câinele meu s-a ... căsătoreşte astăzi. (English subtitles: My dog is getting married today.)
> *Nina* (still smiling): Felicitări. (English subtitles: Congratulations.)
> *Phil*: Să te ascult... (English subtitles: I'm here to listen to -)
> *Nina*: The word for confession, Father, is 'spovedanie'.
> *Phil*: Spovedania? Thank you. Mama mia este o caracatită. (Nina laughs.) What did I say?
> *Nina*: You just said your mother is an octopus. (Beresford 1989)

The scene is essential in sketching the profile of the characters as largely based on stereotypes and emphasising the distance between the two cultures. For instance, Nina's mistrust of her interlocutor, natural for someone who comes from a communist country where, as later on Rose (one of the courtroom regulars and Phil's friend) puts it, "you grow up not trusting anyone. Half the country informs on the other half." (Beresford

1989), lends certain verisimilitude to her character and may account for her initial denial of her faith: "You know, Father, I'm from a communist country. We have no religion" (Beresford 1989) [2]. Yet, the stereotype of the Romanian as a religious person is reinforced by Phil's revealing the well hidden pedant, a simple golden cross, which she is still wearing. Caught on 'the wrong foot', Nina accepts, still keeping her guard up, to talk to Phil. His attempts to help her find the right word when she is at a loss ("deceased", "destroyed", decapitated", whereas she means "despaired") and his questions about her sins ("You didn't cheat at cards? Steal anything? Do insider trading? Murder anybody?" – Beresford 1989) reveal not just his hope to find anything 'juicy' to give him an idea for his novel but also that he implicitly associates the Romanian other to crime and is, hence, prone to thinking the worst about Nina. It is actually Phil's confession that he is not a priest that alarms Nina, reminding of the fear of persecution and of being constantly spied on typical of totalitarian regimes like the Romanian one in the late 1980s. At the same time, Nina's lines – "Who do you work for? The police? (...) Who then? KGB?" (Beresford 1989) – draw attention to an inaccuracy, most likely reminiscent of the enduring tendency in the American collective mindset of perceiving all communist countries as subordinated to Soviet control (though Romania had repeatedly declared its independence from Soviet domination, on account of which it had been granted the MFN status since the 1970s) [3]. Even if Phil denies being there to spy on Nina and affirms his intention of providing her with an alibi after seeing her in court, she becomes defensive, even scornful, and voices clearly her awareness of being perceived, primarily, in negative stereotypical terms as a temptress and a whore: "What do you want in exchange? Sex?" (Beresford 1989). However, Phil's strong rejection of the idea that he might have such 'impure thoughts' ultimately makes her lend a more indulgent ear to his proposal.

As a matter of fact, Nina Ionescu's reserve and fear of surveillance by communist secret services is entirely justified by the recurrent appearance in the film of a small "band of spies" (Ebert 1989) made up of Troppa, 'Lucy' Comănescu and Avram (performed by the American actors Hurd Hatfield, Ronald Guttman and Victor Argo). Almost invariably dressed in grey suits and observing a well-established hierarchy, symbolic perhaps of the large-power distance (Hofstede et al. 2010: 61) characterising the Romanian totalitarian regime, they first make contact with Nina at the police station. Their interaction with the representatives of the American legal system – the assistant district attorney Craig Farrell (Bill Smitrovich), Lieutenant Frank Polito (James Farentino) from the Homicide Division and

the public defender Eugene Mason (David Chandler) – is civil yet obviously bearing the traces of mutual hostility: the communist agents require that Nina be released to the Romanian government, but their claim is instantly and sarcastically dismissed by the American hosts (Farrell: "Sorry, comrade. No can do. [...] The victim "made the mistake of being killed on US soil." – Beresford 1989). The short dialogue in poor Romanian between Nina, on the one hand, and Troppa and Comănescu, on the other, reinforces the stereotypical construction of the latter as 'messengers of terror' who put pressure on their victim to force her to tell them what they want to know and to cast a negative light on the ideological – American - enemy (Troppa: "Cum e să te culci cu temnicerii americani?/ English subtitles: "I hear sex with prison guards is very satisfying." [4]). However, having been for some time in the USA, Nina seems to have learnt to take advantage of the freedom of speech which is granted by the American democracy (a positive auto-image in the film). She defies her persecutors, verbally and physically (she slaps Troppa), implying that life, even in an American prison, would be better (since American prisons are "like Romanian hotels" – Beresford 1989). That shows the Romanian protagonist to be on the path to acculturation, adopting the values of the American host society.

Such behaviour does not discourage the Romanian *Securitate* agents from surveilling Nina from a distance. But, throughout the film, they evolve from threatening figures, whose 'long shadow' makes Nina still fearful, ready to accept Phil's alibi and to live, though initially unwillingly, in his Connecticut house, to silly foes, who will not be killed but ridiculed and laughed at. For instance, when they break into Phil's house looking for information about Nina, her family and her relationship with Phil, Avram chooses to use the spy camera to take pictures not of Phil's interview published in *Playboy* but of the magazine pages that arouse his senses by showing quasi-naked women. That reveals him secretly attracted to at least one aspect of the American popular culture, prone to breaking the rules and ultimately funnily hypocritical as he tries to save face in front of Troppa and Comănescu, turning quickly the pages of the magazine saying "Good interview!" (Beresford 1989). Moreover, the three agents become the protagonists of one of the comic moments of the film when they try to corner Nina in a shopping mall where she had come, on her own, to call her sister Laura from a public phone. The chase through galleries and shops ends in "slappy slapstick" (Minson 2000) as Nina, who proves to be an excellent acrobat, particularly skilled at bouncing from trampolines that

she conveniently finds in the mall, outsmarts them and makes them look clumsy and ridiculous.

Their caricature is rounded off by the scene of the accident that they have on the road while on their way to Phil's house to resume surveillance. In a hurry to take Phil to the hospital, after unintentionally shooting him with an arrow in his rump, Nina drives Phil's GMC tempestuously and in total disrespect of traffic rules – as she does in Romania (hence, another negative hetero-image) – and she forces the agents' car off the road and across a fir tree clump. More or less severely injured in this car accident, the 'bad guys' appear beaten, ready to give up the pursuit, though aware of the consequences that failure to fulfil their superiors' orders in the large-power distance socialist system might entail, i.e. imprisonment at Gherla. Their dialogue briefly alludes to Ceauşescu's personality cult as expressed through books meant to extol the 'excellence' of the communist leader (Comănescu: "Să citim operele complete ale iubitului conducător?"/ Should we read the beloved leader's complete works? – my translation). Yet, typical of American propaganda films, even the foreign agents would prefer American popular culture products – be they bad mystery novels – to the phoney praise of a communist dictator (Troppa: "Romanele lui Blackwood ar fi mai pe gustul meu."/ I'd rather read Blackwood's novels. – my translation) (Beresford 1989).

Surprisingly, the English subtitles in the consulted version of *Her Alibi* radically shift the meaning from caricature to the stereotypical Cold War propaganda representation of Eastern secret services as a source of violence and a threat to the security of their fellow countrymen (Nina, in this case) and especially of the American citizens:

Original Romanian dialogue (Beresford 1989)	**My translation**	**English subtitles (Beresford 1989)**
Avram: O urmărim degeaba. Nu-i vom găsi pe ceilalți.	*Avram*: We follow her in vain. We won't find the others.	*Avram*: She is not going to lead us to the others.
Troppa: Dacă nu-i găsim, ajungem la Gherla.	*Troppa*: If we don't, we go to jail. At Gherla.	*Troppa*: We must kill her. Then the others will give themselves up.

Comănescu: Să citim operele iubitului conducător?	*Comănescu*: Should we read the beloved leader's complete works?	*Comănescu*: But he is always near her. That tall writer.
Troppa: Romanele lui Blackwood ar fi mai pe gustul meu.	*Troppa*: I'd rather read Blackwood's novels.	*Troppa*: I'm not concerned with Blackwood. He is expandable.

Leaving aside the blatant disregard for the principle of equivalence in translation, the English subtitles prepare the viewer for the most obvious demonstration of the 'evil nature' of the Eastern enemy in *Her Alibi*. After Nina has finally let go of her fear of being used by the American other and accepted her blooming feelings of gratitude and love for Phil, offering him, first, a rose, then herself, the happiness and the security of the couple is endangered by an explosion in Phil's house for which the *Securitate* agents seem to be responsible (though Nina is again the prime suspect in the eyes of the American police).

Nevertheless, the film remains essentially centred on the relationship between Phil Blackwood and Nina Ionescu, and on the way in which their identity changes through cross-cultural interaction. For the white, middle-aged Phil Blackwood, who is "not very rich, but [does] ok" (Beresford 1989), the meeting with the young Nina is a chance to help the other, and especially to help himself. He hopes that the mysterious Romanian and her story could give him valuable clues to overcome a writer's block which endangers both his professional success in a competition-defined world (he is already regarded as a failure and mocked at by a fellow mystery novel writer) and his financial security (as his publishers have started losing patience after waiting for more than four years for a bestseller). With his big country house in Connecticut "which appears to have been furnished by Bloomingdale's" the day before he brings Nina there (Canby 1989), his big GMC car provided with a phone, kept in a garage with remote-controlled doors, or his Zenith laptop, Phil functions as a metonymic symbol of the prosperous American middle-class which enjoys the benefits of technological progress. By contrast, Nina Ionescu as a representative of the East evokes, in some of her questions and comments, the poverty and the technological backwardness attributed, stereotypically, to her home country. She asks if Phil's house is a hotel, is surprised to hear that he lives alone, and claims that Romanians "don't have phones in [their] houses", let alone in their cars. Moreover, her lack of

familiarity with how the garage remote control works and how well-equipped his car is generates a hilarious situation whose 'innocent' victim is Phil, "hurled onto his car with his face smooshed up against the windshield and the wipers on" (Benson 1989).

Phil and Nina's being very different is further emphasised in terms of their attachment to high or low culture: she is accustomed to reading "serious books" (Beresford 1989), like Proust's or Dostoyevsky's, whereas he writes mystery novels that his readers, including Nina, but also Sam and Frank Polito, find comfortably "predictable" (Beresford 1989).

Their relationship with their families reflects the rather individualist or collectivist nature (Hofstede et al. 2010: 91) of the cultures they belong to. Though he has a brother, Phil does not really keep in touch with him and joins his brother's (also well-off) family only occasionally, after his house is badly damaged by an explosion of unknown cause (Nina or the *Securitate* agents?). Phil's absent-mindedness and unusual silence at the barbecue cookout seem to draw the attention of his brother and sister-in-law who urge him to confide in them and to tell them what is on his mind. But their concern about Phil's state of mind and emotional problems turns out to be merely formal: while Phil finally starts speaking about his anxieties, his marital failure, the fear and doubt that still plague his relationship with Nina, his relatives and friends do not listen to him, preferring to discuss about such trifles as the best spice – paprika or parsley – to add in the salad and to joke about its effect on their sex life. On the other hand, Nina is very attached to her family, whose picture she cherishes and keeps on her all the time, she stays permanently in touch with her sister Laura, and is ready to sacrifice her freedom to save her family from the *Securitate* agents hunting them down.

Phil and Nina must learn to overcome their cultural differences for their relationship to become credible in the eyes of the rest of the American society and to bring them personal fulfilment as well. That seems like an achievable goal as long as Phil shows availability to see beyond appearances, to think of Nina in more than stereotypical terms and discover that she is more than "an exotic, sensual creature whose obvious passion (...) was barely contained beneath a cold facade" (Beresford 1989). It is true that most American men in the film seem irresistibly attracted to Nina and view her primarily as a sex object. For example, during the police interrogation when, convinced that the Romanian student, who has got a valid study visa, most likely obtained at a time when Romania still benefitted from the MFN agreement, cannot understand what she is told in English, the assistant district attorney Craig Farrell asks her if she would like to have his children. Sam, Phil's friend and publisher, is convinced that

she is "a tornado between the sheets" (Beresford 1989) and is surprised to find out that Phil has not had sex with her from the very beginning. Even Lieutenant Frank Polito, who is the most prejudiced against Nina and is convinced, up to the end, that she is a murderer, not because he has got enough conclusive evidence in this respect but simply because he mistrusts this foreigner who comes from the communist East, secretly desires her and envies Phil when he thinks he hears them, on the phone, making love: "She's an animal. She's tearing him apart. The lucky putz!" (Beresford 1989) (Actually, Nina is trying to help Phil pull out the arrow which accidentally injured him when the neighbours' dog distracted her attention causing her bow to misfire.) As time passes, Phil appears to become, unlike these men, more eager to believe in Nina's innocence and to look upon her as if she were "a lost child"; but his mind continues to be divided and "sometimes [he] think[s] she's hiding something" (Beresford 1989). Fear of the foreign other, especially if s/he comes from the communist East, a "familiar Cold War-era theme" in America (Upton 2014: 10), remains, hence, a dominant of the plot construction.

Indeed, Nina's reluctance to disclose personal life details (e.g. Phil: "Are you married?" Nina: "And Romania's 91,700 square miles." – Beresford 1989) – which contrasts with Phil's verbosity – together with her unusual and exceptional skills that Phil cannot understand as long as he knows little to nothing about her, deepen the 'mystery' that surrounds her. She hurls kitchen knives at the wall to kill bugs, is a reckless, though impressively calm driver, even when she risks causing an accident, as well as a skilled archer, rider and acrobat whose remarkable abilities turn out more than helpful in a crisis situation that could have ended tragically for Phil's nephew stuck on the barn roof; in brief, she "do[es] not fit in [Phil's] world" (Beresford 1989). Thus, her actions, even when well intended, are unfortunately misunderstood and enhance the influence of prejudiced, stereotype-ridden patterns of thinking about the Eastern other that dominate the 'software of the American mind' (Hofstede et al. 2010) and that Phil shares. Drawing Phil's attention to the fact that "her freedom would be practically guaranteed by [his] death" (Beresford 1989), Lieutenant Frank Polito, in particular, fuels from the beginning Phil's lingering fear of Nina and triggers his paranoiac behaviour. Not only does Phil lock the door of his bedroom thrice, but he pushes a heavy chest-of-drawers in front of the door to block Nina's access, in case she might try to attack him. (The explanation that he provides for his actions makes him look even more ridiculous: he is exercising!) He spies on Nina in a local shop when a shop assistant shows her a sharp kitchen knife and thinks that

she intends to use it to kill him (just as she killed the bug on the wall). He is afraid of a banal hair cut that Nina offers to help him with because the scissors might turn into a deadly weapon in her hands. The fact that he catches a glimpse of Nina, alone in her dark room, painting her face white in what he labels a "strange, exotic ritual" (Beresford 1989), gives him a nightmare filled with gothic images reminiscent of the Dracula myth and its representation in the Western mindset: on a stormy full-moon night, the bedroom door creaks open and Nina, with a whitened face and floating above the ground like some ghostly Dracula-bitten maid, approaches his bed and lifts up a knife/pair of scissors to kill him. Phil's persistent fear of and doubts about Nina's behaviour are transferred upon his fictional double, Peter Swift, who repeatedly wonders: "what if she was a killer?" (Beresford 1989).

Whereas Nina manages to overcome the culture shock stages of disorientation and even slight hostility (Hofstede et al. 2010: 384) to the American host environment (she makes several attempts to leave Phil but is always dissuaded from taking such action by the *Securitate* agents harassing her), Phil remains highly suspicious of her, though he would not admit it, and some accidents (the misfiring of the bow, the explosion in Phil's kitchen) that seem to cast doubt on Nina do not help, quite the contrary. That Nina "has slowly learned to function under the new conditions, has adopted some of the local values, finds increased self-confidence, and becomes integrated into a new social network" (Hofstede et al. 2010: 384-385) is proven by her feeling welcome among Phil's family members and friends to the point of cooking dinner for them. Her explanation for not joining them for dinner related to some Romanian custom on St Stanislaw's day, which is meant to reinforce her image as belonging to a profoundly superstitious Eastern culture [5], is hardly satisfactory for Phil and her story of St Stanislaw's martyrdom [6], by its gruesome details – "St Stanislaw went to convert [the heretics], but they captured him, cut his tongue out, hung him naked by the testicles and burned him alive." (Beresford 1989) – is likely to bring back stereotypical images of Romanians' savagery and violence. There is no wonder then that, when he discovers Beeswax, the cat, dead after having eaten from Nina's casserole, Phil, who has just confessed, to his family and friends' amusement, that he thought Nina responsible for all the accidents that happened, jumps to the conclusion that she has poisoned them all. In a black humour scene, the eight American characters try to save themselves from sure death by doing dry heaves, under the stolid gaze of the Mexican maid Consuela who does not understand the cause of all that fuss, and,

when they fail, they rush to the hospital to have their stomachs pumped and a casserole sample tested. The scene thus gives the viewers a full picture of the hysteria that is triggered by the fear of dying by the hand of a foreigner who is too beautiful and too good to be true and whom the American hosts should not have trusted. The irony is that, upon their return home from the hospital, they find out that the cat was accidentally electrocuted in the basement of a neighbour who 'solicitously' placed its body by the bowl where the casserole had been.

To Phil's misfortune, the grossest expression of his mistrust juxtaposes with Nina's greatest demonstration of trust. Though she plans to leave Phil in order to be with her family, she asks her sister Laura (Liliana Komorowska) to drive her back to the house to tell him the whole truth and explain her decision. With the whole party away to the hospital, Nina gets easy access to Phil's study where she discovers the electronic draft of his new novel. Reading it makes her realise that Phil's reasons for helping her were far from selfless, that he is still afraid of her and that he still suspects her of being a murderer. Phil's clumsy attempt to excuse himself – "Well, fear is part of any healthy relationship." (Beresford 1989) – triggers Nina's most explicit manifestation of independence and free will, values which, the film implies, she has acquired living among her American hosts: "I'm not a character in your book. You cannot tell me to stay or to go. And you didn't invent me. And you do not write my words. I do as I choose. And now I choose to go. Goodbye" (Beresford 1989).

This new major crisis that risks disrupting Phil's personal and professional life (because he does not know how his novel will end) finally determines the American protagonist to take action that confirms his being on the path of regaining his masculinity. The mystery generated by Nina's behaviour is cleared when, with the help of his courtroom friends, he finds out more about Nina's family. They are circus performers, famous acrobats who want to defect and had been hiding for a month with the help of American clowns, for the American authorities apparently would not get involved in such "political staff" (Beresford 1989). At this point, the film seems to temporarily leave aside subjectivity-defined textual tropes of otherness and to get better grounded in the historical reality of communist Romania in the late 1980s, when Romanian – American relations had deteriorated, the Romanian state's control over its citizens tightened to an almost unbearable level, everyday life was grievously affected by deprivation and lack of freedom and the only chance to reach the West in search for a better life was that of illegal migration. Naturally, as the film also mentions, the Romanian government did not want to lose such

"national treasures" as a family of highly-appreciated acrobats; "it would be bad PR for the comrades" (Beresford 1989). And, indeed, Romanian communist authorities feared that "asylum-seeking by a large number of Romanians would discredit the regime and threaten its legitimacy as a functioning political system, in the eyes of both foreign governments and remaining citizens" (Horváth 2007: 2). That is why, Nina, who had had the chance to obtain a valid study visa and live in the USA for a while, had to be very discreet in order to help her family and to protect them from the 'long arm' of the *Securitate*.

Interestingly, the film suggests that, in the American society of the late 1980s, despite some still lingering fear of the communist threat, there was greater sensitivity to and sympathy with the Romanian illegal migrants who struggled to be free and to become a part of the American dream. That can be best seen in the final sequence set at the annual clown meeting referred to as the *Funeral of Grimaldi*, where friends and foes, American and Romanian characters, ordinary people and state agents come together. Among the noisy clowns, national and cultural differences disappear, but ideological divisions endure. Phil takes the opportunity to save his 'damsel in distress', Nina, and rises to the mass American viewers' expectations when, like the macho heroes of the American Cold War cinema, he manages to triumph, barehanded, over the most aggressive of the Romanian agents, Comănescu; at the end of the fight, he is bruised and bleeding but the enemy is defeated. Furthermore, somewhat helped by the jolly clowns, Sam also regains his masculinity and lives his moment of glory after he manages to capture Avram. Nina's family is ultimately rescued from the most cunning and dangerous agent, Troppa, by the intervention of the police and of the federal authorities which, even if not acting openly against the Eastern threat, do not 'sleep in the dark' either. When Troppa is disarmed and invokes his diplomatic immunity, he is mocked at by a federal agent: "Yes, sir. Thank you for your information" (Beresford 1989). Polito brings the happy news that "the feds [had been] working on this defection deal", that the asylum request has been approved and that there are only some formalities to be completed at the State Department (Beresford 1989).

Still, even if all legal problems are solved and the Romanian immigrants enjoy the prospect of integrating in the American host society, the film's open ending is not that light-hearted and indicates that there are still good chances that cultural and ideological differences may not be fully overcome and that the 'ghost' of the fear of the Eastern other may continue to haunt the Western mind. Phil asks questions about Nina's involvement

in the death of the Romanian student at the beginning of the film and seems satisfied with her explanations until Nina hurls again, unexpectedly, a knife hidden under her pillow to kill a bug on the wall. After a moment of fright, Phil smiles and he and Nina kiss. Yet, the last sentences of Phil's novel announce that: "He felt he understood this woman completely. No part of her existed that he didn't know. Except, of course, what she didn't want him to know" (Beresford 1989). One may read that as indicative of the existence of a potentially dark side in this representative of the East, so the American hero should stay alert and ready to act to defend himself from any kind of attack.

To conclude, that most viewers have taken *Her Alibi* lightly, focusing rather on romance, comedy and performance than on the representation, in more or less plausible terms, of cultural and ideological differences seems to confirm Tony Shaw's remark that "in the battle for mass opinion (...), few weapons [are] more powerful than cinema", especially when propaganda is quite well 'camouflaged' in the filmic text (2007: 1). Beresford's film may be rooted in some historical realities enough to give a veneer of verisimilitude to the narrative. Otherwise, it draws extensively on mainly negative stereotypes in the construction of the Romanian other, combined sometimes with (linguistic and cultural) inaccuracies, and maintains "the East against the West trope" (Upton 2014: 20) as well as the theme of the fear of communism recurrent in Cold War American film propaganda. Therefore, even if not particularly well-made, *Her Alibi* is at least worth remembering as a film which foregrounds an interesting interplay of images of American identity and Romanian alterity as perceived towards the end of the twentieth century and of the Cold War, and which reveals something of how the marriage of ideology, propaganda and popular culture functions in order to influence and manipulate mass audiences.

Notes

[1] "England's great Freddie Francis (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Dune*) was the cinematographer; France's Anne Goursaud (*One from the Heart*, *Ironweed*) was the editor; Wayne Fitzgerald designed the titles; the music is by Georges Delerue (*Jules and Jim*, *Silkwood*), and the splendid Ann Roth (*Klute*, *Day of the Locust*, *Working Girl*) did the costumes." (Benson 1989)

[2] Nina's remark about her coming from a communist country with no religion may also be interpreted as the verbalization of another stereotype that Cold War

propaganda had spread ever since the 1950s and 1960s, namely that the communist East, to which Romania belonged, is "godless and inhumane" (Upton 2014: 5).

[3] The same inaccurate reference to the spies as belonging to KGB instead of the Romanian *Securitate* occurs at the end of the film when Nina and her family are pursued by them at *The Funeral of Grimaldi*.

[4] Apart from an uninspired vocabulary choice – the archaic 'temnicer' for the English 'prison guard' – the dialogue between the communist agents and Nina is not entirely rendered in the English subtitles and its translation occasionally entails (as in the case of Troppa's quoted line) deviations from the meaning of the original Romanian dialogue.

[5] The reference to St Stanislaw's day, celebrated by the Catholic Church on the 11th of April, is probably meant to complete the image of Nina Ionescu as a Catholic (not Orthodox) Romanian.

[6] The story of St Stanislaw's death, apart from being set against a Polish medieval background, differs somewhat from that told by the character Nina Ionescu in *Her Alibi*: the Polish Catholic bishop was slain by King Bolesław while celebrating the mass in Skałka, outside Krakow; his body was then cut to pieces by the king's guards and scattered in the forest to be devoured by beasts (Wikipedia 2019). That may lead one to the conclusion that the gruesomeness of the story is purposely exaggerated by the script writer to sustain negative stereotypes of the Romanian other.

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