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## MONSTROUS GENDER QUEERNESS: CODIFYING FEMINISATION IN 20TH CENTURY ROMANIAN PROSE

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**Abstract:** The theme of queerness within Romanian literature remains relatively marginal and is often treated as an exotic subject, thus representing a substantial opportunity for literary scholarship. Furthermore, in Romanian cultural discourse, queerness is frequently perceived as deviant, perverse, or scandalous, and conceptually aligned with the monstrous. Employing Susan Stryker’s theory of queer monstrosity, it becomes visible how queerness is often commonly interpreted and represented as a form of monstrosity. Broadly speaking, queer characters are depicted as having grotesque and unintelligible qualities, rendered into symbolic embodiments of the monstrous and as delineating the boundaries of the (un)representable. Engaging with Stuart Hall’s coding-decoding framework, this study aims to examine the dimension of gender queerness within the construction of male characters in several key texts: *Remember* by Mateiu I. Caragiale (1924), *Ambigen* by Octav Şuluţiu (1935), and *Travesti* by Mircea Cărtărescu (1994). I will analyse how the ambiguity of gender identity, arising from the feminization of masculinity, is encoded through representations of monstrosity, emerging in both character portrayal and narrative structure. The selected texts exemplify an enduring trend in interwar prose characterized by a dual encoding of queerness – through both explicit and fragmented representations – a trend that Mircea Cărtărescu later reinterprets as a central thematic focus. This analysis will interpret the queerness of

these characters through an exploration of the mechanisms of exoticization, racialization, animalization, and sexualisation of the feminine body, which concomitantly shape the notion of queer monstrosity.

**Keywords:** monstrosity, queer theory, Romanian literature, gender, Mircea Cărtărescu, queer coding, trans theory.

Monstrosity and queerness, as categories delineating the boundaries of normativity, are constructed as figures of difference, possessing an ambiguous status that enables their reciprocal interpretation. Within a heteronormative and phallogocentric framework, queerness is perceived through the lens of monstrosity, while monstrosity itself is configured as a queer entity. In an epistemology grounded in visual cognition, both monstrosity and queerness coalesce at the level of corporeality. Here, the cisheteronormative system is reinforced through boundaries inscribed upon matter, rendered coherent by the body. Through this process, matter is understood as a process of materialisation that stabilises over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter” (Butler, *Bodies* 9). At the intersection of these two categories of differentiation lies the trans body at the level of material embodiment, which epitomises a perceived monstrosity due to its gender ambiguity—an ambiguity that consistently challenges and destabilises binary power structures. Within a framework of intelligibility and legitimation that equates femininity with inferiority, disruptions of masculine boundaries and their openness towards feminisation result in the inscription of monstrous attributes onto that body. This monstrosity emerges from the intersection and layering of multiple axes of differentiation. Consequently, the feminisation of the male-sexed body may be articulated through processes of exoticisation, racialisation, or animalisation—each contributing to a chain of equivalences that culminates in the construction of monstrosity.

Queer monstrosity constitutes a broad conceptual category encompassing multiple intersecting dimensions of ambiguity, including sex, gender, race, class, nationality, ability, and ideology. Sara Ahmed identifies figures such as the feminist or the lesbian—who are often perceived as masculinised representations of femininity and are associated with the “killjoy” archetype—as bearing traces of monstrosity. This association becomes particularly evident through the alienation generated by their resistance to established power structures, as embodied in the

feminist or lesbian killjoy's challenge to normative logic (Ahmed 250). While these dimensions of monstrosity are particularly fruitful for exploration—especially in present times—this paper will not engage with such forms of queer monstrosity. This is because they imply an intentional and committed input of ideology that does not correspond with the positions and writings of the authors I have chosen to discuss within their respective historical contexts. Moreover, I have chosen to focus on the feminisation of masculinity as one of the many dimensions of queer monstrosity, as it tends to be not only an especially prolific trope in modernist texts but also an obsessive recurring point in modernist discourses on sexuality, psychoanalysis, and human essentialism at large. Emma Heaney carefully analyses how trans women were transformed into explanatory and allegorical figures of all sexuality and gender expression throughout modernist discourses:

The Modernist negotiation of internal division and the resultant vexed relation between private truth and social identity is uniquely represented by the allegorical vehicle of the trans feminine, which literalizes this internal divide, this internal difference, and holds the experience of internal division as an essential, eternal component in the allegorical figure. [...] Modernists install the trans feminine to represent this 'internal division' (Heaney 64).

In the post-communist era, the concept of queerness has progressively permeated Romanian academic and social discourse, gaining visibility in both theoretical frameworks and LGBTQIA+ activism, with a notable increase in intersectional approaches in recent years. Drawing on the thought of Luce Irigaray, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, Ovidiu Anemțoaicei explores male embodiment beyond traditional dichotomies such as mind-body dualism, seeking “a reconfiguring of the masculine subject formation in non-violent terms” (Dima 2) by reframing sexual difference through feminist methodologies. In a book centred on queerness in Romanian contexts from the early 20th century to the present, Ramona Dima tracks the historical and cultural development of LGBTQIA+ representations, particularly in literature and public discourse, aiming “to capture the way in which elements of queer culture react to the mainstream discourse” (Dima 1) within specific historical

contexts.<sup>1</sup> Linking sexuality and capital through queer theoretical approaches, Bogdan Popa delves into archives of communist Romanian cinema to shed light on middle-class normative sexuality and to imagine alternative possibilities of “antiheterocapitalist practices”<sup>2</sup> (Popa, *Sexul* 12). He also aims to “de-centre queer theory” in order to uncover “the shared and complicated history of communist projects and queer theory” (Popa, *De-Centering* 9). While these contributions are foundational to the development of queer theory in Romania, they do not engage in a specialised analysis of queer literary texts. Although closely aligned with the exploration of queer fiction, Ramona Dima’s research primarily focuses on cataloguing texts and identifying predominant themes and motifs, rather than undertaking a comprehensive examination of the structural and theoretical dimensions of queer literature. Building on Dima’s foundational observations, the present study seeks to delve deeper into the interplay between textual mechanisms and queerness in a selection of fictional works, offering a more nuanced analysis of their literary and theoretical configurations.

This study aims to examine the tradition of constructing and codifying queerness in three notable 20th-century prose texts: *Remember* by Mateiu I. Caragiale (1924), *Ambigen* by Octav Șuluțiu (1935), and *Travesti* by Mircea Cărtărescu (1994). Each of these works posits queerness as a distinctive feature of the male characters, highlighting unique modes of queer expression. Within this framework, Cărtărescu reinterprets and extends the methods of encapsulating and codifying queerness employed by Caragiale and Șuluțiu, explicitly referencing the (loss of the) intersex body as a defining aspect of the protagonist’s identity. A common thread across all three texts is their effort to represent the ways in which the trans body challenges and transcends the binary structure of sexual morphology. The queerness embedded within these texts centres on the trans body, articulated through discursive mechanisms that both conceal the unutterable and strive to give it expression—despite the absence of a precise term in the historical and geo-cultural

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<sup>1</sup> When it comes to non-academic contributions to the discussion on Romanian queer culture, Valentina Iancu’s articles written in “Revista Arta”, a Romanian magazine dedicated to art and culture, addressed the question of queerness since 2017. (See, for instance, Valentina Iancu. “Cultura queer în România (I) [Queer Culture in Romania (1)].”) See more of her articles about queerness here: <https://revistaarta.ro/ro/column/author/valentina/>.

<sup>2</sup> “practici antiheterocapitaliste” (My translation).

context. The texts capture gender performativity<sup>3</sup> on a discursive level, where gender norms are both reiterated and disrupted. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the tradition of queerness encoded within these works, focusing particularly on the paradigmatic monstrosity projected onto the trans body.

In a foundational text for trans studies focused on the interaction between trans subjectivity and a binary medical framework, Susan Stryker asserts the association between the trans body and monstrosity as a foundational premise: “I am transsexual, therefore I am a monster” (Stryker 246). Her theoretical argument in “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix” begins with the observation that Frankenstein’s creature, by acquiring human language, secures a position as a subject within a cultural logic that would otherwise exclude it from viability (Stryker 247). In contrast, trans monstrosity is not afforded full access to this mode of resistance, as binary language cannot adequately encompass fluidity within the gender binary:

Transsexual monstrosity, however, [...] can never claim quite so secure a means of resistance because of the inability of language to represent the transgendered subject’s movement over time between stably gendered positions in a linguistic structure. [...] Unlike the monster, we often successfully cite the culture’s visual norm of gendered embodiment. This citation becomes a subversive resistance when, through a provisional use of language, we verbally declare the unnaturalness of our claim to the subject positions we nevertheless occupy (Stryker 247).

The trans “monster” thus exists within a dual dynamic: on one hand, there is the inescapable process by which language brings the materiality of the trans body into the realm of signification through gendered markers; on the other, there is the imperative to subvert this regulatory schema by self-exclusion from cisheteronormative frameworks. This tension gives rise to what Stryker terms “transgender rage”—an affective tool through which language can be reshaped to facilitate access to signification.

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<sup>3</sup> This study will employ Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity, defined as the repetitive enactment of behaviours that reinforce and naturalize the binary gender system by aligning sex and gender within a presumed continuum. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990).

Stryker's inquiry into the relationship between language, gender, and power illuminates a critical aspect of the trans position as it shifts between monstrosity and subjectivity. Citing gender norms is essential for occupying a position of viable subjecthood within cisheteronormative frameworks. This act of citation aligns with Butler's concept of the repetitive, stylised acts through which gender is materialised at the bodily level, as theorised in *Gender Trouble*. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler further refines this notion, suggesting that gender performance should not be understood as theatrical or arbitrary; rather, it operates as a citation of the productive laws governing both "gender" and "sex." Butler conceptualises "sex" as a regulatory law that establishes itself precisely through its continual citation, with this repetition also constructing the subject position (Butler, *Bodies* xxii–xxiii). Stryker's work highlights the position of "false citation" that trans subjects occupy within cisheteronormative frameworks; their recognition as viable subjects within this system does not imply an actual expansion of its boundaries. This provisional citation renders trans bodies in perpetual proximity to monstrosity, thus maintaining the threat of exclusion for those trans bodies that do not align with the normative citation of the law of "sex".

Benny LeMaster identifies in Stryker's text two interrelated processes that parallel the dynamics of dystopia and utopia: "becoming monstrous" and "monstrous becoming" (LeMaster 98). The first process describes the discursive and material mechanisms through which the trans body is constructed as monstrous under cisheteronormative pressures. The second captures the affective responses that arise as resistance to this system. LeMaster insightfully articulates the potent force emerging from the simultaneous operation of these processes, as highlighted in Stryker's text: "«transsexual monstrosity» resists a cis-human/trans-monster distinction by contextually meeting cisheteronormative standards while refusing to be interpolated as such through linguistic means" (LeMaster 100). This resistance to the dichotomy intensifies the ambiguity surrounding these subjects, whose monstrosity is ultimately amplified by the imperative to inhabit a space marked by abjection.

The category of the abject operates socially as an imagined boundary between the self and that which may pose a threat to it. In her essay "Powers of Horror," Julia Kristeva theorises the abject as a demarcating element between the human and the non-human, embedding within this relation the distinction between the fully realised

human subject and the partially constituted one. Kristeva observes that the abject arises from elements that disrupt a normative, systematically functioning logic: “It is thus not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). It must be noted, however, that for Kristeva the abject is related to the pre-Oedipal stage of psychosexual development, whereas for Butler this abjection operates at the level of language, where the normative discourse of “sex” simultaneously produces the “domain of abject beings” (Butler, *Bodies* xiii) as that against which the subject is formed.

Building upon Kristeva’s thesis, Barbara Creed argues that the abject maintains its functionality through a simultaneous process of exclusion and toleration, serving as a threat that upholds the boundaries of the legitimate. While the coagulated subject delineates the realm of signification, the abject signifies the area where signification collapses. The boundary between these two realms embodies a duplicitous force characterised by attraction and repulsion, through which meaning is constructed:

The subject, constructed in/through language, through a desire for meaning, is also spoken by the abject, the place of meaninglessness—thus, the subject is constantly beset by abjection which fascinates desire but which must be repelled for fear of self-annihilation. A crucial point is that abjection is always ambiguous (Creed 10).

In her analysis of horror cinema, Barbara Creed distinguishes between the normative, ostensibly clean body and “the abject body, or the body which has lost its form and integrity” (Creed 11); the former, due to its symbolic status, must distance itself from any biological references, including bodily fluids. Conversely, the cis female body, which cannot physiologically detach from these associations due to menstruation and reproduction, is more likely to embody the abject (Creed 10). This distinction can be further augmented if correlated to a similar mechanism discussed by Rosi Braidotti, which differentiates between the de-corporealisation of male subjects, whose positions become universalised, and the hyper-corporealisation of female subjects, who, within cisheteronormative cultural logic, are perceived solely as sexed bodies lacking access to the realm of reason (Braidotti 152). Consequently, the feminisation of the male body brings the abject into the visible domain, transforming the trans body into an exemplar of monstrosity and simultaneously resulting in a loss of subject status through the removal of reason from that body.

The monstrous can also be understood as a constellation of attributes that remain distinct from the normative, encompassing a wide spectrum of differences. Certain attributes hold particular symbolic significance when applied to the trans body. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen identifies the monster as an embodiment of a specific cultural moment, of a spatio-temporal and affective context. As a figure that disrupts established order, the monster must be analysed within the relational framework from which it emerges at a given time, and through which it is reinterpreted in later contexts. Another key characteristic of the monster is its resistance to categorisation, which generates a crisis of established categories: “they [monsters] are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (Cohen 6). Thus, the monster possesses the ability to translate one form of difference into another, layering multiple forms of otherness onto a single body, a process in which the feminisation of the East remains a prominent pattern.

Edward Said notes that, for 19th-century European writers such as Flaubert and Nerval, the East evoked notions of “not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies [...]” (Said 188). Said’s framework, which represents the East as a feminised entity available to the penetrating, implicitly masculine rationality of European thought, reveals an underlying heterosexism that provides only a partial understanding of “the sexual politics of Orientalism” (Boone 25). Orientalism’s hypersexualisation and racialisation of Eastern differences also imply non-normative sexuality and challenge Eurocentric gender norms, linking the image of the inherently promiscuous “Oriental” woman to queerness as a form of libertinage. Furthermore, the Orientalisation of homoeroticism is rooted in “the projection of desires deemed unacceptable or forbidden at home onto a foreign terrain, in order to reencounter those desires [...]” (Boone 5). Cultural encounters between Eurocentric and Eastern paradigms, particularly when viewed through the lens of homoeroticism (especially male homoeroticism), destabilise modern conceptions of homosexuality as an identity marker and challenge the Western notion of masculinity. These dynamics also impact the narrative structures employed by European writers. In Romanian literature, influenced by the French model, a type of queerness filtered through the



lens of perversity that the West projects onto the feminised Orient circulates in local textual forms, as will be demonstrated later.

The monster serves as a boundary marker for the realm of the possible, a role that becomes particularly salient in the context of non-normative sexuality. The monstrous body is thus functionalised as a “scapegoat” for marginalised sexual practices that are pushed to the periphery, following the mechanism theorised by René Girard: “[...] the import of the operation is to lay the responsibility for the crisis on the victims and to exert an influence on it by destroying these victims or at least by banishing them from the community they «pollute».” (24) Within a paradigm of “homosexual-homophobic knowing” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 97), more precisely “paranoid knowledge” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 100), that operates mimetically (in Girard’s sense), the queer monster serves as a cathartic figure, purging the community of the abject that it expels both symbolically and materially. This dynamic configures affect towards the monstrous in a dual manner. Fear of the monster is intricately mirrored by an attraction to the forbidden space it represents:

The same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint. This simultaneous repulsion and attraction at the core of the monster’s composition accounts greatly for its continued cultural popularity, for the fact that the monster seldom can be contained in a simple, binary dialectic (thesis, antithesis... no synthesis). We distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair (Cohen 18).

When discussing the concept of “paranoid reading”, Eve Sedgwick points out that “paranoia is a strong theory of negative affect” (Sedgwick, *Paranoid Reading* 136). She explains that a paranoid reading is mimetic and anticipatory of potential meanings that are yet to be exposed, and thus manifests as a strong theory that integrates each new phenomenon into its totalising scheme. Moreover, by virtue of the faith it places in exposure, paranoia is a theory of negative affect that builds strength by failing to provide protection in the face of negative affect (Sedgwick, *Paranoid Reading* 134); in other words, it needs to (re)produce negative affect in order to survive as a strong theory. However, Sedgwick points out that mere paranoid knowledge does not imply actual change in the structure that paranoid reading seeks to expose, whilst Butler associates knowledge per se with “troubling”

that structure. This is one of the nodes in which the two theorists do not align, since Sedgwick argues that Butler deploys some sort of paranoid knowledge in *Gender Trouble* that reinforces the faith in exposure as a self-sufficient strategy (Sedgwick, *Paranoid Reading* 139). While troubling the normative discourse does not in itself demolish or change that discourse (whose power structures remain very much in place), it does contribute to the deformation of that normative discourse, as Stryker claims. Moreover, this paranoid reading may have a role to play in how phenomena are understood in retrospect. In the case of Romanian queer literary texts, the queering of narrative did not alter or influence the construction of the literary canon, and it certainly did not lead to any substantial deconstruction of it. However, in retrospect, the exposure of queerness in Romanian fictional texts does offer a reparative perspective on the matter of their former exclusion and/or partial obfuscation: that queer literature has existed in Romanian literature for quite some time and is not merely a Western import, either in the first half of the 20th century or in post-communism.

The process of proliferating negative affect may be linked to the purging that the queer monster is more often than not condemned to undergo by the Law of cisheteronormativity. The continuous failure to ward off negative affect pertains to the need to re-enact the ritual of expelling the queer monster from the clean body of cisheteronormativity—that is, the Real from the Symbolic. The texts analysed depict the ways in which queer monstrosity is ritually expelled from cisheteronormativity through negative affect that reproduces itself by virtue of the attraction generated by normativity's failure to protect against it. The mechanism at work is that of attraction–repulsion towards the queer monster, whereby paranoia towards the Other and the Self engenders ambivalent and mimetic negative affects that lead to the ritualistic purge of the queer scapegoat. The ambiguity within these texts, the sense of suspicion they evoke in readers, and the interplay of curiosity (Mateiu I. Caragiale), aversion (Octav Șuluțiu), confusion, and exotic fascination (Cărtărescu) serve to codify queerness through affect. Once recognised as something *other*, this queerness disrupts the constructs intended to segregate the non-normative, revealing its presence precisely within the boundaries of cisheteronormativity.

### **Queer, between trans body and normative subject**

In Mateiu Caragiale's text, queerness is codified as monstrosity through decadent elements that symbolise various forms of transgression. Unusual beauty and its

counterpoint—the grotesque distortion of deformed imitation—along with the constant oscillation between reality and illusion, are set against a backdrop rich in orientalist, exotic, and fetishistic accents. This is the environment within which the character Aubrey de Vere is constructed, situated in 1907 Berlin—a city that was a hub for queer cultural scenes and “popular entertainment at the turn of the century” (Beachy 171). Spanning from queer balls to sexology research, Berlin was where Magnus Hirschfeld founded the first institution that provided sex-reassignment surgeries (Heaney 26), alongside further research on Berlin’s queer life at the time<sup>4</sup>. Likewise, Mateiu Caragiale lived in Berlin with his father between 1904 and 1905, a period of exploration that influenced the writing of the novella *Remember* (Hanganu 104).

The novella follows a narrator who lives in Berlin, where he meets a rather mysterious young man, Aubrey de Vere, whose decadent appearance and demeanour spark his interest. One night, while walking in Tiergarten Park, the narrator first meets a woman who resembles Aubrey de Vere, and later encounters Aubrey himself, who, for some unknown reason, seems particularly distressed. Unable to discover the reason for Aubrey's distress, the narrator learns a few days later that a body has been found in the river and, based on the rings on its fingers, realises that it was Aubrey de Vere. The novel ends with the narrator returning to Bucharest, where he refuses to uncover the reason for Aubrey's death.

From the outset, Aubrey de Vere is portrayed as embodying multiple transgressions against Eurocentric norms. His gender expression challenges not only sexual norms but also geocultural ones, as his presentation shifts with specific (trans)national contexts (Berman 238). His decadence and allure are largely derived from his fluid navigation between European and Orientalised spaces. The narrator’s depiction of the protagonist is characterised by a pronounced aestheticisation bordering on the grotesque, which engenders a dual affect specific to monstrosity—a mix of attraction and repulsion. The narrator exhibits a simultaneous fascination and aversion to the protagonist’s rapid and ostensibly enigmatic transitions between gender expressions. Furthermore, the narrator’s delineation of queerness is inherently contradictory: while he distinctly identifies and excludes Aubrey de Vere<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For an account of Berlin’s queer life at the turn of the century, see Magnus Hirschfeld, *Berlins Drittes Geschlecht. Homosexualität um 1900* (Hofenberg, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> “Should I have supposed him, after this, to be one of those misguided loafers whose numbers seem to have increased in recent times everywhere to a saddening extent? No, I couldn't believe it, for if the

from what Foucault termed the “homosexual species” (Foucault 43), he simultaneously asserts that “finding out *what* he was, I understood him at once in everything [my emphasis]”<sup>6</sup> (Caragiale 57). Aubrey de Vere embodies the definitional crisis inherent to both monstrosity and queerness. The narrator's omission of human agency from the relative pronoun underscores the character's interstitial position, both as a subject and in terms of corporeality, with the two existing on a continuum. The narrator deliberately leaves a “what” unspecified, maintaining its ambiguity throughout the narrative. This ambiguity is perpetually displaced onto decadent symbols—ranging from sapphire rings and an abundance of carnations to the predominance of the colour blue. The concealment of the past and the reluctance to provide a clear identification of the character<sup>7</sup>, beyond serving as narrative mechanisms of ambiguity, reflect forms of inexpressible queerness that exist outside the realms of legitimacy and visibility.

The episode in which Aubrey de Vere presents as a woman highlights how monstrosity is associated with the enigmatic “what” that defines the character. The trans body is here identified as female; however, it lacks the definitive attributes that would allow it to be categorised as such. Instead, the trans body is recognised through adjacent objects—more specifically, artificial elements such as sapphire rings—which shape its gender expression in a transhumanist manner. The absence of feminine morphology, despite a feminine gender expression, evokes a sense of the thanatic, reflecting a lack of agency encoded in the image of a spectral apparition<sup>8</sup>. In Aubrey de Vere's subsequent appearance, characterised by a masculine yet distinctly feminised gender expression, the same monstrous signifier persists. The character's garish make-up, rendered in expressionist hues, is further amplified by an atypical

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doll's lips sometimes flashed an unsettling smile, under the severe arc of the brows, drawn black with the pencil, the eyes had that innocent clarity that shines only under the eyelids of heroes and children” (Caragiale 56, my translation).

<sup>6</sup> “[a]flând ce era, l-am înțeles pe dată în totul [...]” (My translation).

<sup>7</sup> “If the stubbornness in which he was so obstinately obscuring his brief past and everyday life had a purpose, it could well have been so [...]. It had not escaped my notice, however, that sometimes he would seem to say something more, but would change his mind on the spot, stifling the words on his lips. [...] After a while, without our friendship growing closer, we saw each other more often, sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon, but never in the evening, never” (Caragiale 59, my translation).

<sup>8</sup> “A tall woman with rich red hair beneath a large feathered hat, a thin, bony, hipless woman in a tight black butterfly dress, was passing by. She walked stiff as a dead woman, who would be impelled or drawn by some outside power, foreign to her will, toward some mysterious goal in the night. I don't know why I could not believe that she was a woman like all women, from the very first, even before in her large, wide set eyes, which seemed to look inward, and in the features of her face too subdued to seem to me to recognize... But, should I still have doubted, could there have been a suspicion when seven Ceylon sapphires were smiling in her long-fingered hand?” (Caragiale 60, my translation).

state of agitation and fear. The narrator conveys a similar sense of distrust upon encountering the woman, underscoring the pervasive discomfort associated with Aubrey de Vere's fluid identity: "Just as I could not believe then that the apparition that had passed by me was a woman, it seemed to me now that the being that was dragging me with her in the shadows was not a man"<sup>9</sup> (Caragiale 61). The narrator's disbelief underscores the crisis of categorisation that the monster introduces into the realm of the intelligible, thereby contributing to the ambiguation of gender categories and the stable, binary expressions of sexual morphology. Notably, this phenomenon is preceded by two imperfect citations of cisheteronormativity. Aubrey de Vere's agitation elicits repulsion from the narrator, who perceives it, though not explicitly naming it as such, as a form of vulnerability. This vulnerability signifies feminisation and, by extension, monstrosity, as it represents a deviation from the male archetype. When the character regains his characteristic composure, the narrator shifts his focus to an idealised image that further distances Aubrey de Vere from the realm of humanity, comparing him to a seraphim or archangel. The biblical depiction of angels encompasses a dual aspect: it evokes admiration while simultaneously inciting fear. These two responses—attraction and repulsion—culminate in a sense of veneration, wherein the divine merges with monstrosity due to its exceptional nature. Furthermore, the angelisation of the trans body entails its depoliticisation, rendering it immaterial, which perpetuates the same exclusionary effects.

This interpretation reflects how the text's surface conveys meaning, akin to the queerness expressed through the trans body within the narrative. However, the novella's intrigue deepens when we shift our focus to the narrator. A pivotal question in the text concerns Aubrey de Vere's death, intricately linked to the source of his terror on the night the narrator encounters him. The dual representation of Aubrey can be viewed through the lens of cruising<sup>10</sup>, a practice that complicates the dynamics of desire and identity. Thus, the narrator's presence in Tiergarten Park at night from the very outset may be even more intriguing than the character's distress. Indeed, within the initial pages of the novella, the narrator inadvertently reveals aspects of himself: "Like him, there were others in Berlin-W., but you could only seldom

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<sup>9</sup> "După cum atunci nu-mi venise să cred că arătarea ce trecuse pe lângă mine era o femeie, acum mi se părea că ființa ce mă târa cu ea în umbră nu era un bărbat" (My translation).

<sup>10</sup> Cruising refers to the act of visiting designated areas known for sexual activity, such as parks, to seek anonymous sexual partners. This practice is particularly prevalent among individuals who may not publicly identify as queer or gay, as it allows them to conceal their true identities and mitigate the risk of potential homophobic repercussions and reactions.

glimpse them, riding in the morning mist or flying swiftly in the evening to their blooming revels”<sup>11</sup> (Caragiale 57). Pertinent questions emerge upon re-reading the text: how does the narrator acquire this knowledge? What motivates the narrator to frequent spaces associated with cruising? At no point does he clarify his relationships or the reasons for his presence in specific locations, and this omission serves as a form of codification, an effort to obscure personal connections. Furthermore, the narrative structure may mislead the reader into accepting the reliability of the narrator’s voice; captivated by the exotic and dandyish monstrosity of Aubrey de Vere, the reader may become distracted from the narrator’s own actions and intentions.

In this context, the protagonist’s death may be interpreted as emblematic of a transgression of cisheteronormative boundaries. The anonymity of the discovered corpse becomes symbolic of a lack of agency and, ultimately, the erasure of the trans body from the framework of intelligibility that legitimises subjects. Consequently, the trans body is marked by the violence of both the act itself and the subsequent anonymisation, which excludes it from the realm of legally recognised bodies that “matter”. The act of burning the face of this body intensifies the process of anathematisation, concentrating the full force of its exclusion. The narrator’s paranoia surrounding his own potential guilt—that is, his fear of being considered a suspect—is not rooted in the police investigation per se but in his contact with the queerness embodied by Aubrey de Vere. Thus, the narrator’s movement through the narrative is one that refuses exposure, so as to alleviate the negative affect of his paranoia, in the framework employed by Sedgwick. The trans body becomes the means by which the paranoia—threatening to mimetically reproduce and, consequently, to disturb borders—is expelled via murder, purging the cisheteronormative body of the Real; i.e., the monstrosity against which the normative body defines itself and which lies at the very heart of its definition, although obscured. This tension is conveyed symbolically through the motif of the colour blue, as the protagonist’s blue makeup becomes mirrored in the narrator’s “blue fear”. Here, the suspicion does not concern murder so much as it centres around the implication of homosexuality. The preservation of the victim’s anonymity and the subsequent refusal to uncover the truth behind the murder are, in effect,

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<sup>11</sup> “Ca dansul, în Berlin-W. mai erau și alții, dar pe aceia nu-i puteai decât rareori zări, călărind în ceața dimineții sau zburând repede seara la înfloritele lor desfătări” (My translation).

gestures aimed at concealing the narrator's own queerness, his latent monstrosity buried within the text. By transforming the murder into a mere anecdote, the narrator affirms the reliability of normativity that eludes further scrutiny, securing his own perceived normality.

Through subtle signs embedded within its pages, the text redirects queerness onto both the narrator and the reader, exposing, in Lacanian terms, the Real within the Symbolic order. Aubrey de Vere—the queer monster, simultaneously revered and annihilated—serves as a figure of the irreducible. His presence foregrounds the inherent queer monstrosity residing within the normative framework, a monstrosity that both shapes and disrupts the very system against which it is defined.

### **The trans body's duplication**

Published approximately a decade later, Octav Șuluțiu's novel *Ambigen* centres on a male protagonist who confesses to a range of insecurities, largely stemming from his inability to establish a heterosexual relationship with the "ideal woman." He recounts a series of failed relationships with women, as well as his obsession with being loved and understood by the women he meets or merely sees on the streets. The narrative culminates in his marriage to a sex worker, named Elina, at her proposal. On one hand, the novel is laden with misogynistic clichés, with female characters cast exclusively within the archetypes of madonnas or prostitutes, thereby reinforcing this tone. On the other hand, the text's misogyny may also be interpreted as a discursive manifestation of internalised homophobia, a discourse at odds with the underlying message it seeks to convey: the queerness of the protagonist-narrator, named Di. Consequently, the narrator's expressed longing to enact a heteronormative role reveals, in fact, a desire to embody femininity.

The episodes in which the narrator trails women on the streets reveal, from the novel's opening pages, an ambiguity underlying his pursuit. The protagonist's actions and his descriptions of female characters signal a shift in the nature of his desire. Here, "possessing" the female body moves beyond a conventional euphemism for sexual conquest, instead hinting at a literal desire to inhabit female bodily attributes—a longing that remains unarticulated yet emerges subtly through the narrator's discourse.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the narrative voice occupies a frequently

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<sup>12</sup> "What were I looking for? I was looking for a woman. [...] In each I saw the possibility of erotic understanding. I hoped that one would understand why I was following in her footsteps and would encourage me and entrust me with happiness. [...] With each stranger I believed that I would finally be

duplicitous position: the male gaze is simultaneously enacted discursively even as the voice subtly distances itself from it. The narrator states, “My eyes do not rape women, but caress them. [...] A woman wants to be shaken, rushed, so as not to have the remorse of falling, of sin. [...] I cannot violate. I cannot rape. My eyes ask only the favour of a caress”<sup>13</sup> (Șuluțiu 35).

A central mechanism encoding the queerness of the male character operates through syllogistic reasoning about feminine characteristics, particularly psychological ones (conceived in essentialist terms, though this aspect becomes secondary). The feminisation schema can be outlined as follows: (i) the narrator’s recognition of a personal trait, perceived negatively; (ii) the labelling of this trait as feminine; and therefore (iii) an implicit identification of the narrator with femininity (as he defines it, albeit through a misogynistic lens). This identification remains unnamed but follows logically from the syllogistic structure<sup>14</sup>. Throughout the novel, femininity is constructed in a way that is simultaneously misogynistic and fetishising, functioning within the affective tension of repulsion and attraction evoked by the monstrous. This affective mechanism is especially prominent in an imagined scene of a sexual act between two women. The male perspective, with its fetishising and sexualising projections, is entwined with an underlying desire to embody this idealised image of femininity.

The question that emerges here concerns the conditions underpinning this discourse: does it merely replicate the cliché-laden, stereotype-ridden language characteristic of its era, or does this replication also function as an attempt to enact, through an oppressive language, a form of liberation from that very oppression? This dynamic reflects the mechanism identified by Susan Stryker in her analysis: “Phallogocentric language, not its particular speaker, is the scalpel that defines our flesh. I defy that Law in my refusal to abide by its original decree of my gender. Though I cannot escape its power, I can move through its medium. Perhaps if I move furiously enough, I can deform it in my passing to leave a trace of my rage” (Stryker

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able to establish a communion of tenderness and sensuality.” (Șuluțiu 22, my translation); “One that I vainly chase in everything and it would be indifferent to me which. Only let her come after me at once. I need not her flesh, but her soul. [...] I seek tenderness, not a love” (Șuluțiu 31, my translation).

<sup>13</sup> “Ochii mei nu violează femeile, ci le mângâie. [...] O femeie vrea să fie zguduită, bruscată, pentru a nu avea remușcarea căderii, a păcatului. [...] Nu pot violenta. Nu pot viola. Ochii mei nu cer decât favoarea unei mângâieri” (My translation).

<sup>14</sup> “I am filled with a sense of humility. [...] I like to have another share my pain. [...] After all, confessing pain is humiliating yourself. [...] And humiliation is the essential quality of womanhood” (Șuluțiu 92, my translation).



253). Similarly, the narrator experiences the imagined lesbian sexual act within his own corporeality, distinctly separate from the reactions of other male characters, and his vision is accompanied by the anguish of “not being a woman” (Șuluțiu 55). Thus, the misogyny embedded in the narrative discourse is revealed as a veiled expression of gender envy.

References to the feminisation of the narrator’s own body, whether overt or subtly concealed, consistently highlight the ambiguity inherent in the character’s confessional discourse. What may be interpreted in contemporary medical terms as gender dysphoria is articulated by the narrator within a heterosexual framework. However, the disjunction between mind and body undermines this framework, serving as an indicator of the internalised cisheteronormative logic that the narrator perceives as embodied in the trans body<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, the distinction the narrator makes between the soul and the body reveals his difficulty in adequately performing the norms of masculinity—a struggle prominently reflected in his perception of his own corporeality. The narrator’s discursive operations of animalisation and racialisation further proliferate the notion of monstrosity within his own physical attributes: “A monkey would proudly wear that nose. [...] Mongol eyes, [...] mulatto lips. [...] Ugly face, my face”<sup>16</sup> (Șuluțiu 23). Simultaneously, monstrosity is deliberately pushed to its extremes, becoming a performance in its own right; if the narrator cannot be recognised as a legitimate subject, he appears to strive to embody at least the figure of the monster<sup>17</sup>. Androgyny, in turn, is a physical characteristic that the narrator links to monstrosity, encompassing the partial citations of the trans body. This androgyny represents, on one hand, a manifestation of deficient masculinity and, on the other, a feminisation that distorts the body through grotesque features.

Ultimately, the recognition of one’s own queerness manifests through self-loathing; even when feminisation is accepted, it continues to function as a distorting factor that leads the character to consistently reject the position of subject. Furthermore, the expression of this queerness is conveyed through an assertion of

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<sup>15</sup> “My brain tells me that women would accept me, but the mirror tells me they wouldn’t” (Șuluțiu 28, my translation).

<sup>16</sup> “Nasul ăsta l-ar purta cu fală și o maimuță. [...] ochi de mongol, [...] buze de mulatru. [...] Figură hâdă, figura mea” (My translation).

<sup>17</sup> “In my room, I go to the mirror and display my grotesque qualities. The series of black idols express all sinister ideas and feelings. [...] Like this. Now here’s the original: the small sausage nose of a monkey, eyes slit under the forehead like a Chinaman’s, lips like a Malay” (Șuluțiu 30, my translation).

incapacity, reflecting a profound absence of agency that comes to define the trans body as possessing ambiguous subjectivity. The character's self-perception as a subject is experienced as a void of action, stemming from the inability to self-create or to shape corporeal existence in alignment with an accepted expression of gender. Consequently, what remains is the transformation of syllogisms into comparisons, signifying an acknowledgment of a distance that the trans body strives to bridge but ultimately fails to transcend, remaining delineated within the two normative constructs of sexual morphology: "In me the woman is stronger. I feel her in my flesh, I feel her in my skin as white as the blondest woman's skin. I see her with the eyes of the chained and powerless man"<sup>18</sup> (Șuluțiu 161). In relation to the previous association of queer monstrosity with racialisation, it is interesting to observe that the idealised femininity is, by the same token, that of white beauty standards. In this context, the confessional pose can be interpreted as a rearticulation of an unattainable act by the narrator, namely, the confession of that which is inexpressible—specifically, the acknowledgment of inner queerness.

In this regard, the shared thematic element between *Ambigen* and *Remember* resides in the portrayal of the mechanism through which the narrator's discourse addresses queerness from within the framework of normativity. Furthermore, it shifts the focus of monstrosity not toward visible queerness, which has already been excluded and categorised as Otherness, but rather toward that queerness situated at the core of cisheteronormativity. Octav Șuluțiu's significant contribution lies in the projection of monstrosity onto the narrator's own body, as opposed to an external body, as exemplified by Aubrey de Vere in Mateiu Caragiale's narrative. This internalisation of monstrosity, acknowledged by Șuluțiu's narrator, facilitates a dual incorporation: that of the normative voice alongside the monstrosity it delineates. Ultimately, however, Di/Dida, the feminised narrator of *Ambigen*, creates space within the discursive spectrum for the recognition of her own trans body, despite the incomplete citation of gender norms: "She does not want to die. And I can only do what she wants. In me it's complete menage with female domination. Why can't I not know!"<sup>19</sup> (Șuluțiu 166).

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<sup>18</sup> "În mine e mai tare femeia. O simt în carne, o simt în pielea mea albă ca pielea celei mai blonde femei. O văd cu ochii bărbatului înlănțuit și neputincios" (my translation).

<sup>19</sup> "Ea nu vrea să moară. Și nu pot face decât ce vrea ea. În mine e menaj complet cu dominația femeii. De ce nu pot să nu știu!" (My translation).

### **The queer spider web**

Mircea Cărtărescu's novel adopts a significant portion of the apparatus used to camouflage queerness in earlier texts from a different historical period, thereby demonstrating the continuity of codification mechanisms based on carefully controlled visibility. Femininity, expressed in a deliberately grotesque manner, is carried over from Mateiu Caragiale's novella to Cărtărescu's work. Similarly, the narrative device of protagonist doubling is employed to reveal non-normative corporeality, albeit with distinct nuances compared to Șuluțiu's portrayal. A key difference in Cărtărescu's approach, however, lies in the type of transparency granted to the text: although the premise does not directly name it, the central focus is on an intersex body, which is, this time, decoded through the narrative. The narrative becomes an endeavour to decipher this corporeality, initially invisible due to a medical surgery displaced in the narrator's memory onto a hypothetical younger sister, thus unpacking layers of identity and embodiment.

The modifications across these three texts reflect a shift from certain encoding practices to a partial decoding of queerness. In Mateiu Caragiale's *Remember*, cisheteronormative logic renders queer identities as aberrant or monstrous, with the narrative striving to maintain distance between the reader and the queer "secret." Octav Șuluțiu's *Ambigen*, while revealing queerness, encodes it within misogyny and an internalised trans anger embodied by the protagonist. Mircea Cărtărescu's *Travesti*, in contrast, places the search for an initially invisible queer corporeality at the very centre of the narrative. However, this exploration does not signify an acceptance of queerness. Rather, it aims to expunge queerness from the body. The narrative economy of the text—focused on decoding—works towards the resolution of duplication and the closing of the gap between subject and body. In doing so, it reinscribes the partial subject (the narrator-protagonist) within the dominant cisheteronormative logic, thereby claiming for him a full subject position.

*Travesti* tells the story of a 34-year-old man who must write a fictional text. In trying to fulfil this task, he decides to write about Victor, a 17-year-old alter persona, and the week he spent at a camp in Budila. The entire narrative is a quest to unravel a layered structure of trauma that the protagonist has carried into adulthood. By communicating with Victor, the narrator digs into those layers until he finally sheds light on the true sources of his traumas: the sex reassignment surgery he underwent and the sexual abuse he suffered as a child. These impactful events manifest on a

*fantastique* level throughout the narrative: as the “transvestite” character, Lulu; as a forgotten little sister residing inside the narrator’s mind; and as other symbols, such as an enormous spider and a hermaphrodite statue.

Similarly to Mateiu Caragiale’s approach, Mircea Cărtărescu constructs a surrogate figure onto whom queerness and its associated monstrosity are projected, only to later reflect and dismantle these attributes within the narrator himself. Lulu emerges initially as a symbol of psychosis but is gradually unveiled as a monstrous body inscribed with the narrator’s own queerness. Through a grotesque simulation in the form of cross-dressing, Lulu simultaneously exposes the narrator and catalyses the de-naturalisation of normative structures. The narrator is acutely aware of Lulu’s intermediary role in decoding his own corporeality, which he perceives as “the true Enigma”<sup>20</sup> (Cărtărescu 70).

Lulu is the monster of an always dislocated femininity, where attraction derives from a fearful repulsion, rendering his image irresistible despite the dread it elicits. Lulu’s monstrosity is rooted in a distorted performance of feminine gender expression, inflected with elements of violence, racialised markers, and animalised masculinity. This convergence amplifies the distortion of Lulu’s appearance and the subversion of categorical boundaries, destabilising normative understandings of gender<sup>21</sup>. Lulu’s citation of femininity, through cross-dressing in a carnivalesque framework, fuses obscenity, sexual taboo, animalisation, and the hypersexualisation of the female body into a single figure. His construction operates as an ironic citation of feminine gender norms<sup>22</sup>: Lulu’s cross-dressed simulation trivialises and distorts feminine traits, casting them as marked by abjection and peril upon a male morphology—a deliberate act of transgressive violence<sup>23</sup>. Lulu’s grotesque

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<sup>20</sup> “adevărata Enigmă” (My translation).

<sup>21</sup> “[...] he grinned with a nigger's toothy smirk, his eyes gleaming demonically” (Cărtărescu 53, my translation); “Lulu, the leader of the Cantemir gallery, was always on his feet, a dwarf with too broad shoulders, a bird-like face, his eyes staring and injected under his jointing eyebrows, always sweating, roaring until he had no voice, in a kind of trance like that of the mountain rooster” (Cărtărescu 63, my translation). The racial slur has been retained in the translation to underscore how queerness is encoded through racialization as a means of constructing monstrosity. This analysis does not aim to legitimize such representations of queerness, nor does it endorse racialized or racist portrayals. Instead, it critically examines these constructions to highlight the mechanisms through which otherness is narratively coded.

<sup>22</sup> The citation of a gender norm can also be understood as a material reference, embodied through the physical body, of a hyper-referential gender ideal – a normative construct that the gender binary assumes as its archetypal representations of femininity and masculinity.

<sup>23</sup> “And Lulu, Victor, was a Woman. She was a whore, she was a bitch, she was a stinker, she was a creep. [...] She lifted her skirt up, on her thick thighs, in pearly stockings, until above the garters her

appearance becomes a tool to subvert the entire sex-gender system, where his monstrous transgression fractures the binary structure and exposes the multiplicity that lies beyond normative intelligibility. Continuously engaging with the abject, this focus uses the artifice of monstrosity to expose what Cărtărescu calls the “obscene and filthy core” (Cărtărescu 114) embedded within cisheteronormativity itself.

Octav Șuluțiu’s staging of mind-body discontinuity is similarly employed by Cărtărescu, though the latter reverses this dynamic to re-establish a continuum between the two. In the queer narrative economy of *Travesti*, the unwritten Book—one of the narrator’s obsessions—symbolises a constructed masculinity, initially presented as an intellectual creation that transcends corporeality, following Rosi Braidotti’s model. As the narrator distances himself from conventional male subjectivity, the Book shifts, becoming an embodied creation linked more directly to the visceral and scatological. This merging of mind and body dissolves the binary opposition of man/reason and woman/body, advancing the decoding of the intersex body while reinscribing it as a male subject<sup>24</sup>. The hermaphrodite statue at the Budila mansion may symbolise the culmination of this encoding-decoding process. Rather than alienating, the nymph’s body—with its male sexual morphology—reflects the intersex body explored in the narrative, its feminisation becoming clearer as the plot unfolds. As an obfuscated, subversive facet of memory, the nymph becomes monstrous, embodying, as in the previous texts, the queerness embedded at the core of cisheteronormativity<sup>25</sup>.

One of the most subversive memories concerns an episode from the narrator’s childhood when he discovers an illustration of heterosexuality in a book. The narrator’s recollection reflects the artificiality and strangeness of the normative narrative of reproductive sex. The deformed manner in which he describes the illustration betrays the same affects of attraction and repulsion. This projection onto the cisheteronormative couple indicates not only the monstrosity at the centre of normativity but also the authorial consciousness of the process of de-naturalisation at work in the text. Where Mateiu Caragiale codifies queerness as mystery, the dream

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lace panties appeared, with her horrible sex piercing, black as a spider-monkey, through the fine eyelets” (Cărtărescu 109-11, my translation).

<sup>24</sup> “And the sex of the nymph, once protected by the little hand, was now revealed, hideous, unbelievable in its monstrosity: for, between the full and delicate thighs, the nymph had the sex of a man, of a satyr ready to mate” (Cărtărescu 78, my translation).

<sup>25</sup> “And the sex of the nymph, once protected by the little hand, was now revealed, hideous, unbelievable in its monstrosity: for, between the full and delicate thighs, the nymph had the sex of a man, of a satyr ready to mate” (Cărtărescu 78, my translation).

and hallucination of *Travesti* manages to transgress precisely what everyday life camouflages.

The huge spider encountered by the narrator functions as a correlative of monstrous queerness, dislocated and dissociated from human corporeality. The ambiguous and hallucinatory scenario in which the spider captures Lulu in its web—while in his transvestite appearance—marks the deformation of normative order and its transgression. The psychotic image of the spider unravels intelligibility and exposes the arbitrariness of boundaries. The paranoia generated by the spider suggests that here, the expulsion of queerness takes the form of an abscess that, once exposed, is removed from the cisnormative body. This cleansing is finalised by the injunction written on the mirror at the end of the novel, addressed to the traumatized alter, Victor: “DISAPPEAR!”<sup>26</sup> (Cărtărescu 143). In this way, the narrator decodes the illusion of the little sister as a deflection of his own intersex body.

The narrative in *Travesti* engages in a partial decoding of queerness; however, this process does not lead to a politicised embrace of transgressing cisheteronormativity. Instead, it retreats into a space that seeks to distance itself from the potential stigma associated with such transgressions. The decoding of queerness emerges from an obsession with uncovering a temporarily obscured cause. Once the queer dimensions of the body are identified, they lose their political significance, or at the very least, their inherent ambiguity and fluidity. In contrast to Susan Stryker’s approach, Cărtărescu does not aim to disrupt language to create space for, or to salvage, that which exists beyond the confines of sexual intelligibility. The narrative structure encapsulates this dual relationship: vivid imagery, intricately woven into hallucinatory networks with a bookish and intertextual foundation, interrogates a monstrosity whose constructed nature becomes increasingly evident. At the same time, the discursive approach—dislocating realism and thrusting the narrative into the realm of nightmare and dream—re-codes queerness within the textual fabric of the novel.

Cărtărescu appears to push the boundaries of language to momentarily reveal the artificiality of the subject, only to subsequently preserve the secrecy of this artificiality within the narrative’s inherent ambiguity. Had the novel explicitly adopted a queer perspective, it would not only have served as a critique and unmasking of cisheteronormativity, but also as a pathway toward transcending

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<sup>26</sup> “Dispari!” (My translation).

binary frameworks and envisioning alternative modes of subject formation in literary texts. Such a narrative trajectory would have held significant potential, particularly in decoding and reintegrating the representation of queerness within broader social and cultural structures. Exposing cisheteronormativity as a construct perpetually troubled by the spider of queerness could have contributed to dismantling the monstrous connotations historically associated with queerness, especially within the context of Romanian history and the enforcement of Article 200, which criminalised homosexuality and remained in effect until its repeal in 2001<sup>27</sup>.

### **Final considerations**

Stuart Hall's coding-decoding framework is particularly effective for analysing the aforementioned fictional texts. Hall identifies dominant codes of meaning embedded within hegemonic discourses that shape every element of the circuit of exchange in communication processes. Although dominant, these codes are open to modification and contestation. Hall stresses the importance of examining "the manner in which the interplay of codes and content serves to displace meanings from one frame to another, and thus to bring to the surface in «disguised» forms the repressed content of a culture" (Hall 266). Among the four positions Hall outlines in the communication process, the third—the "negotiated position"—is especially pertinent for these texts. This position acknowledges "the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations," while at "a more restricted, situational level" reserving "the right to make a more negotiated application to «local conditions»" (Hall 173).

The asymmetry between coding and decoding processes that Hall describes is particularly evident in texts with queer themes and elements. Caragiale and Șuluțiu's works encapsulate the coding of queerness as a surplus of meaning within the hegemonic discourse. The narrative mechanisms they employ illuminate how queerness is encoded through references to non-normativity that, even as they disrupt surface-level norms, ultimately reproduce the dominant cisheteronormative structures. In contrast, Mircea Cărtărescu's *Travesti*, situated in a different historical context, engages more directly in decoding queerness from the dominant discourse. However, the negotiated position is preserved in Cărtărescu's narrative, as both the

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<sup>27</sup> For a broader analysis of the process of decriminalization of homosexuality in postcommunist Romania, see Florin Buhuceanu, *Homoistorii: ieșirea din invizibilitate* (Humanitas, 2022).

narrator and the reader ultimately relinquish decoded queerness, reducing it once again to a surplus of meaning that is unearthed but ultimately obscured.

The temporal discontinuity of the historical contexts evident in the selection of texts presents a significant consideration. While Mateiu Caragiale and Octav Șuluțiu attempt, to varying extents, to encode the presence of queerness within their own normative bodies, *Travesti* adopts a methodology of decoding, wherein the extreme manifestations of monstrosity are designed to deconstruct the naturalised artificiality of binary sexual morphology. Caragiale and Șuluțiu published their texts during the interwar period, a time when queerness was more of a shock to the bourgeoisie, who were among the only literate classes and thus had access to literary texts (Oișteanu 641). Moreover, Romanian society of that era experienced several scandals and trials involving accusations of pornography; one of the most notable cases was the campaign initiated by the magazine *Gândirea* [Reasoning], whose editors and contributors sought to expose male public figures of the Romanian cultural scene as gay (Iovănel 319). While homosexuality only became illegal in 1936 under the authoritarian regime of Carol II of Romania, it was nevertheless regarded as obscene, meaning that “[...] homosexuality could only be silent and invisible”<sup>28</sup> (Buhuceanu 45). Within this historical context, it is unsurprising that authors sought to camouflage or encode queerness in their works; this process demonstrates that queerness is not merely encoded within texts but is actively constructed through the mechanisms of textual encoding itself.

In *Remember*, Mateiu Caragiale presents a figure of queerness characterised by a boomerang effect: despite being excluded, the potency of queer secrecy reflects back upon the cisheteronormative logic personified by the narrator. The novella illustrates the complex dynamics of queerness within the social order: on the one hand, the trans body is depicted as a monster initially revered but ultimately stripped of its status through violence; on the other, the disruptive influence of queerness persists and returns to impact the absent corporeality of the narrator. The ambiguity does not primarily reside in the presence of Aubrey de Vere but rather in that of the narrator, which serves as one of the mechanisms through which queerness is encoded. A similar encoding is evident in Octav Șuluțiu’s work, where the narrative structure converges two characters into a singular, subjective narrator. This novel, framed as an extended confession, encapsulates queerness as a consistently

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<sup>28</sup> “[...] homosexualitatea nu putea fi decât tăcută și invizibilă” (My translation).



dislocated narrative, positioned in the interstices. The essence of this codification lies in how the character's misogynistic discourse emanates from a deep-seated desire to embody the very object of that discourse. In this context, the individual's body is reconstituted as a monster marked by racialised features, resulting in a subjectivity that remains perpetually open due to the insurmountable distance embedded within corporeality.

The post-communist context of *Travesti* inherited many of the operational associations by which queerness was understood in the interwar period—as something that should remain private and thus became scandalous when public. Furthermore, the communist regime represented queerness in public discourse and literature as an element of decadence and disorder specific to capitalism (Iovănel 320), an interpretation that merged with religious discourse after the fall of the communist regime, thereby reinforcing the stigmatisation of queerness with even greater force (Woodcock 67). Homosexuality remained illegal in Romania until 2001, and the immediate post-communist years were marked by an especially homophobic and machismo-driven perspective on queerness. Accordingly, Mihai Iovănel observes that “Cărtărescu’s literature captures the homophobic psychosis of an era in an exemplary way”<sup>29</sup> (Iovănel 321). In light of this historical context, Cărtărescu’s text reveals two simultaneous yet contradictory dynamics: the newfound freedom to write without censorship, exemplified by dissonant descriptions and shock-value imagery, is juxtaposed with an underlying stigmatisation of queerness. This tension prevents the text from fully embracing and affirming queerness in its narrative and thematic structure. In *Travesti*, Cărtărescu engages with irregular manifestations of queerness, amplifying and intertwining them to disrupt the linearity of the queer experience. Queer monstrosity proliferates and permeates the entire narrative framework, positioning the characters within complex and ambiguous networks articulated through the narrator’s voice. Simultaneously, it is this very narrative ambiguity that re-establishes the cisheteronormative apparatus, as it facilitates a separation between the subject and a corporeality from which queer traces have been systematically erased. Thus, what the reader encounters in Cărtărescu’s text is a partial decoding that resolves queerness according to its contemporary codes, negotiating queerness only to the extent that it reintegrates the subject back into the dominant cisheteronormative discourse.

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<sup>29</sup> “[...] literatura lui Cărtărescu surprinde exemplar psihoza homofobă a unei epoci” (My translation).

In all these representational scenarios, the role of the reader as a paratextual witness is a critical factor in the encoding-decoding process. The reader, engaged in the codification underpinning the construction of narrative discourses, can be conceptualised as a variable entity, whose reception determines whether queerness is rendered intelligible, remains obscured, or is perceived merely as stylistic exoticism. The subjective nature of the three narrative voices encountered is deliberate, drawing upon the symbolic significance of the first-person pronoun, particularly in its confessional aspect and its embodiment of a perpetually dislocated coming out. Consequently, the texts in question can be understood as networks facilitating the circulation of queerness in various forms within twentieth-century Romanian literary prose, while they may also be reduced to their standardised receptions of dominant discourses, whether as flirtatious decadence, simplistic masculinised authenticity, or even the unique instance of a hermaphroditic character.

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