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## Criticizing Past and Modern Ideology Through Twisted Comedy Series: A Case of "Comrade Detective"

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## Criticizing Past and Modern Ideology Through Twisted Comedy Series: A Case of "Comrade Detective"

### Abstract

The objective of the paper is to solve the interpretative controversies around *Comrade Detective*, one of the most original TV entertainment productions of the recent years. This production is a pastiche of American buddy police films. The plot refers to the reality of the socialist Romania in the 1980s and presents in a satirical way the local militia's fight against the American threat. We have attempted to prove that its not only deriding the reality of the political system, but the series constitutes also a satire on American propaganda films. Although the humour in the series seems vulgar and absurd, it has a dialectic character as fun is made of both the capitalist and the socialist systems. Furthermore, we have attempted to solve the controversy connected with political interpretations of the series. Its ambiguity ensues from the use of an artistic strategy which is close to the postmodern artistic strategy defined as *retro-avant-guard*.

### Keywords

Comrade Detective, television, comedy, comicality, ideology, Slavoj Žižek, communism, capitalism, postmodernism.

## **Introduction**

*Comrade Detective* was released by Amazon Prime in 2017. It was written by Brian Gatewood and Alex Tanaka, and directed by Rhys Thomas. It was filmed in Romania with local actors and then dubbed into English by American actors; two popular actors Chunning Tatum and Joseph Gordon-Levitt dubbed the main roles. The main objective was to provide viewers with a completely new type of entertainment, different from the well-known comedy formats.

Formally, the series presents Romanian militiamen dealing with the underground aiming to introduce capitalism in the country, and it “promotes” a communist world-view. This caused serious controversies in publicists’ and reviewers’ discussions concerning the world-view actually promoted by the series and the targets of its mockery. We think that this target was not only old socialist cinematography, but also mockery of American cold war propaganda movies, and modern neoliberal politics. To explain our point of view, we intend to outline the general plot structure of the series in order to assign it to a proper genre by making references to the history of cinema. Secondly, we will attempt to reconstruct the forms of comicality used in the series and to find an answer to the question about the exact type of humour used in it. The third part will focus on the artistic strategy in *Comrade Detective*, which we think is the cause of the diversified interpretations of the series by viewers and critics. And finally, we will discuss the references of the content of the production and its producers’ attitudes to the current political situation in the world, to which the production is strongly related. The paper will end with general conclusions concerning the character of the production.

## **The plot and foundations of the structure of *Comrade Detective***

The series is advertised by the actors and producers as a lost “socialist realistic” super-production about militiamen from Romania which was to present in an attractive manner the propaganda content sponsored by the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu. It was allegedly made in the early 1980s during the decisive stage of the Cold War and it was to be a reply to American films presenting the communist threat. After the fall of the communist regime the series was lost and then found by some Americans who dubbed it in order to mock the odd pro-communist screenplay. Due to reducing dialogues to absurdity, an unusual comic effect was to be achieved that revealed the peculiarity of propaganda to the east of the Iron Curtain.

This is a fictitious story created by the producers for marketing purposes. In fact, it is a contemporary series made under the supervision of American producers from the first to the last scene. It is true, however, that originally the Americans wanted to buy one of the old Romanian TV series about militiamen and dub it, but the Romanian TV authorities did not allow them to get access to their archives, probably in fear of the Americans' mocking presentations of the Romanian film art. Therefore, the Americans made a six-part mini-series on location, with Romanian actors who, for a better effect, recorded exactly the same dialogues in their language as those dubbed subsequently by the American actors.

It is true that the producers wanted to make a series being an anti-thesis of American cold-war propaganda films, such as *Rocky IV* (1985), *Rambo III* (1988), *Red Dawn* (1984), and others. In American films, communists had a huge advantage based on a well developed technological and propaganda apparatus that the American hero needed to face, relying on his talent, mind and muscles. In *Comrade Detective* the relation is reversed. The communist heroes had to face the preponderant machine of capitalist influences and ideology. The main power in the series is the party, the militia collective body, and the omnipresent Securitate, because, as the militia commander explained in one of the early episodes, individual militiamen cannot do much on their own, but together they form a clenched fist which will crush the capitalist enemy.

Although the spirit of collectivism and socialist brotherhood expressed in many comic dialogues is to emanate from the production, the plot concentrates on two detectives: Gregor Anghel and his partner Iosif Baci. At the beginning, Anghel loses his partner in a trap organized by drug dealers – the man is shot by a killer wearing a mask of Ronald Reagan. Anghel blames capitalism and America for the death of his partner. He gets a new partner from the countryside who has some history of employment in Securitate. Despite some initial discord, the new partner turns out to be a true guardian angel for the defiant and impulsive Anghel. Together they discover a huge conspiracy of the imperialist America which threatens their peace-loving homeland. To cope with it, they have to learn the capitalist methods of thinking, which brings about numerous traumatic situations which, however, they manage to finally overcome in the spirit of socialist unity.

Officially, the main model for the producers was old socialist productions presenting militiamen from the Eastern Bloc. The direct inspiration was the Czechoslovakian series *30 Cases of Major Zeman (30 případů majora Zemana)* (1975–1980) made in the second half of the 1970s at the order of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Some of that production was made by the Czech

State Security and the series was to be a counterbalance for the western productions and to present in an attractive manner the work of a militiaman who solves interesting cases in which the causative element is the activity of forces from the other side of the Iron Curtain. Similarly to the Polish series *07 Come In [07 zgłoś się]* (1976–1989), the production enjoyed great popularity even after the fall of real socialism (Pehe 2014). Among other inspirations, the Americans mention also such productions as the East German *Polizeiruf 110* (1971).

Regardless of these inspirations, the main cultural source of the production is American police films of the 1970s and 1980s. Some inspiration by *film noir* can also be seen in the general stylistics of the picture, in the aspect of a dark crime story, subversive and being in opposition to the film *mainstream*, although it is a presumption only and it should be remembered that the very definition of *film noir* is not simple at all (Naremore 1995; Krutnik 2006). The general plot structure, however, corresponds to American films on the other side of the Iron Curtain in the years when, according to the marketing campaign of *Comrade Detective*, the series was made.

The character of Anghel, the main protagonist, abundantly draws on police films of the cold-war times – he is a strong, white, heterosexual middle-aged man who would like to deal with the world's lawlessness on his own. He resembles the *noir* model of a *hard-boiled detective* – a tough cop loyal to his ideals and the so-called *rogue cop* known from the *Dirty Harry* (1971) films. He has no illusions about the world but he is convinced that his objectives are right and wants to accomplish them regardless of the price. In his methods, he is close to *western-type* lone wolves. This model is usually accompanied by a hegemonic type of man, or a strong male character whose actions legitimize the patriarchal and hetero-normative order (Cornell, Messerschmidt 2005). Anghel's relations with women are typical for films representing patriarchal models, and the equality of rights motif (characteristic for many socialist productions) is in fact absent.

Baciu is Anghel's anti-thesis: he is calm, composed, living in a permanent relationship and having children. The relationship between them evolves from asymmetry seen in the gross jokes made by Anghel and his colleagues at the station about Baciu's origin and his alleged inclinations (he is described as a *goat-f\*\*\*r*) to full partnership. In this respect, the series represents a sub-genre of police films, typical of the 1980s, i.e. *buddy cop movies*. The relations between Anghel and Baciu concern also the differences in their origin, education and work. It is a relation between a city cop living a lonely life in Bucharest and a family man and father from the peaceful countryside.

It seems that there is also the *Doppelgänger* motif in the production, i.e. a dark double. It means the policeman's unique *alter ego* – a very intelligent and skilful criminal whom the policeman has to face himself, as he is too good to yield to anyone else. It is the specific ‘not-me’ corresponding to the ‘me’ created by the policeman. They must meet so that ‘not-me’ can be defeated, and the social standards determined by the film for which the main protagonist fights can be preserved.

The comic thriller set in socialist reality presents a problem to viewers concerning the purpose of combining the “capitalist” and “socialist” motifs. One might also wonder what the absurd humour in the series refers to and what kind of comicality it represents. These issues will be discussed in the following part of the paper.

### ***Comicality on the screen***

The series *Comrade Detective* is classified in many different ways in reviews and online discussions. Some critics think it is a parody of the socialist cinematography. Others claim it is a political satire on socialism or a pastiche, or just a comedy of absurd. Such different opinions may result from the notional chaos concerning the above mentioned terms. Satire is often distinguished from comicality as such, because its purpose is not just a humorous effect, but attracting the audience's attention to certain ideological issues, e.g. social, cultural or political ones, in which the author is interested. According to Bohdan Dziemidok, in this aspect, satire consists in the presentation of certain phenomena which in the artist's opinion are the source of social evil, and the artist's attitude is determined by his ideology, beliefs, mental orientation and personality. Satire makes use of different weapons, such as hyperbole, caricature or deformation. It can have a grotesque (exaggerated) or realistic (based on probability) form. It is divided into various specific forms, such as political satire or social satire (2012).

*Comrade Detective* might be said to be close to a form of political satire with a political character. It is grotesque, because that is how the protagonists behave praising socialism or condemning capitalism in their peculiar dialogues. The protagonists on the capitalist side act in a similar way. According to the producers, the shaft of satire is aimed at propaganda as such, both socialist and capitalist. The producers also claim that it was not their intention to mock the communist ideas as such or the Romanian culture (Peltz 2017). Because of the setting, a lot of attention is paid to the satirical presentation of the socialist community in which the dominant values are common denunciation (presented by the protagonists as a virtue), absolute loyalty to the party and to homeland,

and a grotesque love for the goods of domestic production. The image of Americans is also a caricature, because they are all presented as being completely addicted to money, alcohol, sex and drugs, and blindly believing in the free market propaganda. A question arises whether it is the producers' satire on capitalism, or simply a parody of the presentation of the capitalist culture in films made in the socialist countries.

It should be noted that producers quite mistakenly equate socialist television and its programmes with pure propaganda. Contemporary studies show that: *while endeavoring to foster an alternative form of modern society and culture, state socialist television was not entirely different from its relative in the West, or completely isolated from it, because: paradoxically, socialist television was better at entertaining than at propagandizing* (Mihejl, Huxtable 2018: 9-11). The analyzed series focuses on ridiculing propaganda and at the same time resembles entertainment like Borat. As Leshu Torchin pointed out:

*Is it a documentary? A mockumentary? A narrative fiction? Most efforts to categorise the film focus on the humour, referring to it as comedy and mockumentary. But they do not account for how Borat Sagdiyev (Sacha Baron Cohen) interacts with people on screen or for his own claims that these encounters produce significant information about the world* (2008).

Borat led to confusion amongst critics, who could not decide what kind of genre this film presents. Moreover, despite its purely entertaining purpose, the film not only shows Kazakhstan and the United States in a distorted mirror, but also subtly criticizes capitalist culture. It seems that we can have a similar situation in the case of this production.

We think that the answer to this question depends on providing an answer to the following question: What form of satire is used in *Comrade Detective*? Satire usually uses the form of pastiche or parody. Both of them are based on imitation of a satirized phenomenon. According to Simon Dentith (2000), the constitutive characteristic of parody is that it includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice. The series is in fact critical of propaganda movies, but does it really consist only in mocking the crude ideology-riddled productions made over 30 years ago? The producers seem to be making a hint, claiming that they also wanted to celebrate the genre as such – both old police movies and propaganda movies, chiefly American ones. Viewers also noticed it (Dawidziak 2017). This implies that it is a pastiche, since the main feature distinguishing it from parody is that in a pastiche, celebrating a particular genre is more important than mockery (Hoesterey 2001). According to Linda

Hutcheon (1985), pastiche becomes parody when the simulation on the screen diverges significantly from that which has been simulated. Frederic Jameson said that in postmodernism, contemporary artists were unable to create new forms, but could only use the old ones (1985: 111–125).

The structure of *Comrade Detective* resembles such a play of pastiche and parody. The series convention is therefore some sort of a post-modernist trick: it is a pastiche of American police movies hidden behind the apparent parody of socialist militia movies. This specific “trick” caused some significant interpretative confusion, but the production authors’ hints should be trusted. They are convinced that capitalist films demonised socialism more than socialist productions demonised capitalism. The narrative structure of the series shows that the pattern was radically reversed here: the American propaganda motifs were pasted directly in a “socialist” production; the actors playing the militiamen loyal to the communist party act, behave and demonise capitalism just like their counterparts from western films demonised socialism and communists. Therefore, it is a post-modern pastiche using the “socialist-realist” shell as a means of expression, because a typical parody of American films, for instance presenting American policemen as fools, would not be anything innovative. The transfer of the American feature film style to a production formally being a parody of policemen makes it possible to increase detachment from American propaganda movies and to highlight the peculiarities characteristic of screenplays typical for such movies.

Our proposal is well illustrated by the type of humour presented in the series. In one of the episodes Anghel says, “You don’t become a good Communist by going to meetings. Or memorizing the *Manifesto*. You do it on the streets. You do it with your fists. The rest is bulls\*\*\*t, and you know it.” In another episode Anghel, visiting an illegal casino, wins money by playing roulette with capitalist lackeys and when they ask him about the secret of his success, he replies briefly, “I always bet on red”. The militiamen are ready to do anything to hunt down enemies of socialism, and it is usually accompanied by ironic communist clichés about the necessity of collective cooperation, loyalty to the party, and the virtues of denouncing one’s parents and colleagues. Humour in the series was largely based on this fundamental contradiction between the capitalist momentum and the “socialist” content.

Nevertheless, the main comicality axis in the production is close to the classical Hegelian interpretations. We can see that in the series, similarly to Hegel’s theory of comedy, “all relationships and objectives are governed by the subjectivity of will and action and external coincidence” (Hegel 2011: 256). And although the party and Securitate are omnipresent in the series, it is external coincidence and the will of the protagonists that influence the course



of events. The Hegelian fundamental contradiction between the protagonists and the world is also visible here. Equipped with communist clichés, the protagonists try to remain indifferent to the reality into which capitalism forces its way more and more often, undermining the foundations of their existence. It is like in a comedy of coincidence described by Hegel as well: although the protagonists know little and are motivated by their wishes, due to coincidences they eventually solve their problems (in the series, temporarily at least).

Hegel's followers, such as Christian Weisse, Adolf Ruge, and Karl Rozenkranz affirmed the Hegelian concept of negation of the negation as a category of the aesthetics of comedy. In this context, it consists in the negation (for instance, by making fun of) the negative effects of reality, or definite evil, such as criminality, deviations, indifference, etc. (Roche 2002). In *Comrade Detective*, this category is present at two levels. The first level is the “socialist film” level at which the negativity of capitalism, i.e. its greediness and individualism, is explicitly criticized in dialogues and in the protagonists’ actions. The protagonists frequently make fun of foolish capitalists who due to their blind love for money are unable to understand the wisdom of the officers of the communist security agency.

The essence of the above mentioned aspect is grasped in the second the last scene in which the main protagonist engages with the other characters in a refined debate on Adam Smith, capitalism, and the invisible hand of the market. But the capitalist propaganda is ineffective, though, and the officers make a final negation – by means of a ball they transform the visible hand of the protagonist into an invisible hand. Using this “subtle” allusion, the actors performing in the “socialist” production imply that choosing the way of the “lone wolf” and life in the world of uncontrolled capitalist production and consumption is not an optimal solution (in particular when the protectors of social justice are armed).

It may be added that in the series the formula of jokes often reveals a negation of the negation of another type, i.e. the proper negation of negative phenomena in the producers’ perception. In other words, the negativity of such phenomena as propaganda, omnipresent control, fanatic attachment to ideology, etc. is uncovered. A typical example is a scene in which Agent Baciú tells Pavel about his uncle from America, “I have an uncle, Pavel, who was seduced by the West. Needless to say, things did not end well. He was forced to start his own business just to survive. He opened a car wash... And soon one car wash wasn’t enough. He opened another. And another. Now he is shell of a man he was.” This comic negation of negation is reinforced by the rest of the scene, where our heroes state that Americans are so lazy and immersed in decadence

that they do not even know how to wash their cars, hence the need for such companies.

What is also worth remembering is the specific negation of the negation at the institutional level. Because of its perverse sense of humour (criticism of socialism as a medium of criticism of capitalism), the series criticizes the American productions as the products of the free film market. It makes fun of many clichés that used to be almost obligatory in every American crime story in the late cold-war period, thus somehow undermining the “freedom” of the film market. And yet *Comrade Detective* is also a product of this very market. Its producers consciously based the marketing campaign on false assumptions. They made use of one practice of *mock marketing* in order to uncover another practice of that type, i.e. propaganda. To put it dialectically, by criticizing the system the production simultaneously contributes to its reproduction.

The original definition of a joke presented by Jacques Lacan referring to absurd humour is suitable to the series. According to the French psychoanalyst, something more than just the punch line proves a joke's dynamics and temporality. The essence of a joke is the possibility to create nonsense using all available types of sense. The idea is to negate all sense at any time using meaningful senses. In other words, we deal with a gap between two types of sense, and a joke itself represents the limitations of meaning. There is no logic in a joke apart from the paraconsistent logic of the joke itself (Chow 2014: 227-228).

As we can see, the series is a post-modernist pastiche making use of various types of jokes which can not only amuse the viewers, but also make them feel confused to some extent. Is it just an ordinary satire using a pastiche? If this were the case, there would not exist too many problems with interpretation. What is the reason for the versatile reception of the series, and its viewers being both leftists and rightists? It seems worth taking a look at the artistic *modus operandi* of the series in order to understand better its importance.

### **A retro-avant-garde comedy?**

The fans of *Comrade Detective* cannot reach an agreement as to the meaning of the series. Rightist portals wrote that it was a splendid parody of communist propaganda uncovering the absurdity of life in the world of socialist realism in which breaking human rights used to be presented as a normal thing. More leftist portals implied the pro-communist meaning of the series, pointing out the leftist sympathies of the producers and the many biting texts about capitalism and capitalists, which would uncover the hypocrisy of liberals

critical of “totalitarian systems”. It makes one wonder how much irony and how much seriousness there is in particular scenes and dialogues.

These interpretative misunderstandings resemble those connected with the Slovenian music group Laibach playing mainly industrial music and being a part of the artistic collective *Neue Slovenische Kunst*. The artists love provocations and they make use of the aesthetics of totalitarian systems, in particular that associated with Nazism and fascism. They also draw from the contemporary popular music and the previous avant-garde artistic movements (Goddard 2006). They have become famous for their covers of well known rock or even pop songs by modifying the texts and making them similar to the texts of songs glorifying totalitarian and authoritarian systems. They also perform on stage and in video clips in clothes resembling the uniforms of Nazi Germans (Hanley 2004). People have also wondered how much irony there is in this case and whether it is a specific parody or pastiche of Nazism. Some people have also wondered whether the group members are not seriously affirming totalitarianism.

According to Slavoj Žižek, the controversies result from conceptual mistakes. In contemporary capitalism, ironic detachment from something does not mean that a play has a subversive character. On the contrary, ironic, or even cynical detachment from the surrounding reality is the foundation of conformist functioning in a system. And a serious attitude does not imply affirmation and identification with a particular ideology.

The members of Laibach abandoned the old formula of avant-garde art because they think it has been compromised by its collaboration with the 20th century regimes. In other words, their strategy of open criticism of the system turned out to be inefficient and insufficient. The group and the entire NSK collective was established in the 1980s in socialist Slovenia. They made a specific reversal by appointing “a rearguard”, since the ruling communist party was considered to be the avant-garde. Being unable to openly criticize the system they chose the tactics of over-identification with the system, thus avoiding manipulation on the part of the system. Through this type of identification with the effective “communist” system, they could draw an analogy between this system and other systems they considered to be totalitarian (Erjavec 1996, Szczepanik 2014). The system and its ideology were to be destroyed not by ironic imitation but by over-identification and presentation of the system's super ego. The purpose of such identification with the system and its presentation in all its glory was to deprive it of effectiveness, since this type of systems is largely based on secretiveness and confidentiality concerning the true motivation of its administrators.

Žižek claims that Laibach's chief accomplishment is the reversal of the relation between the artists and the viewer. The latter is driven by a desire to finally learn about the values and motivations of the beloved group. He is looking for the big Other who is to be the answer to his desire. *Laibach* reverses the pattern: they do not want to be the big Other based on a concrete ideology, they do not want to give a final answer. The group's artistic strategy consists in not providing the viewer with any ready-made interpretation. It resembles a psychoanalytical strategy in which initially the analysed person, due to ignorance, wants the analysing person to point out their desires to them, but in time learns that there is no big Other who knows their desires. Similarly, a viewer or listener will not get any confirmation of their interpretations during a concert of Laibach until they realize that there is no external legitimization for them.

The situation is similar in the case of *Comrade Detective*, whose producers do not want to take any final position in the dispute between capitalism and socialism. Their intention was to criticize propaganda as such. The identification with American movies does not allow viewers to unequivocally answer the question about who they stand for. One person will say that it is an anti-communist film, as ironic references to communist expressions and bombastic clichés evidently appear in it. Another person will claim that this is just a veil, because it makes fun not of communists, but in fact of the American perception of communism and communists.

In this meaning, the production corresponds to some extent to Todd McGowan's theory of the *cinema of fantasy* (2008: 42-44). This type of cinema leads to the involvement of the viewer's desire and thus makes it political. No answers are provided, though. The authors do not tell viewers directly whose side they should take, leaving them to speculation only, which leads to disappointment. Thus, a mass culture product can become a source of suffering in the Freudian sense.

The producers of *Comrade Detective* state clearly that making the series, they identified themselves with the western cinematography. On the one hand, this makes the Romanian detectives unusually comic characters in their extraordinary attachment to various anti-democratic or simply absurd customs of socialist realism. On the other hand, viewers can see exaggerated characters of communists and demonization of socialism, evidently typical of Americans, and the producers were aware of that aspect of American films, and therefore, this was a conscious choice. Viewers also get camera work, action scenes and actors' performance completely different from those characteristic of the socialist film art. It is an American series, and a very contemporary one (which can be proved by camera work, montage, etc.) in every inch, despite the

“socialist” stage setting, which is also exaggerated. According to Internet surfers from the post-socialist countries, Romania looks much poorer and much more awful than it used to be in reality. The capitalist world is also exaggerated here, as the series presents capitalism as the Great Other in the communist propaganda, as a terrifying reality legitimizing totalitarian methods of governing in the socialist states.

The specific “retro-avant-garde” character of the series is illustrated in several interesting scenes. In the course of the plot, Anghel and Baciu come across an intriguing track in an investigation; it concerns the smuggling of the Monopoly game. The game consists in property buying in order to collect as much rent as possible from the opponents. Anghel and Baciu contact some prisoners familiar with the game (by the way, Anghel’s parents whom he denounced himself) who explain that the game ends when all the other players get into debt with the winner. Baciu comments, “You’re telling me that the purpose of this game is to drive your fellow citizens into poverty so you may get rich? It’s diabolical.” It can be interpreted in two ways: the rightists will interpret it as a good joke in which the former Securitate officer interrogating his colleague’s parents, who are in prison due to their own child’s denunciation, tells them about the destitution and diabolical character of capitalism. The leftists will say that there is a rational core in it and the capitalists indeed launch products on the market which seriously influence buyers’ awareness, thus preparing a ground for pro-market indoctrination. To go even further, shouldn’t a capitalist propaganda film present communists in such a manner, as blood-stained apparatchiks talking nonsense about social justice?

Another interesting scene presents an ideological clash between capitalism and socialism: the militiamen banter with captured drug dealers. Anghel says, “The CIA imports drugs so they can destroy their black community. What’s your excuse?” The dealer answers, “Money”. Anghel continues, “For what? All your needs are taken care of. Healthcare. Education. Food.” To this the dealer says, “Free market, motherfuckers. Only the strong survive”. The pattern is similar to that in the previous situation. The striking thing is that even though one can disagree with the militiamen, they still present rational arguments which are ridiculed mainly by the situational context.

There are many similar scenes. For instance, during an interrogation of a priest who says that it cannot be proved that God does not exist, one of the protagonists retorts rationally that negation cannot be proved. And answering an ambassador’s remark that by keeping the priest in prison he breaks the fundamental human right of freedom of belief, Baciu replies, “Healthcare is a fundamental human right. Believing in an imaginary god is a sign of insanity.”

The communist officers are presented as rational people with substantial knowledge whose comic predicament results from fanaticism and commitment to ideology. It should be added that despite this, these officers are always opposite to the apparatchiks and their opportunist colleagues, and therefore, their fanaticism has a bottom-up character. The manner of mockery is similar to that in American films made 30 years ago; their predilection to violence and a sense of being lost in the confusion of communist propaganda is shown. However, thirty years ago American script writers did not write communist dialogues taken right out of the *Communist Manifesto* for their characters in fear that someone might take them seriously.

Another interesting scene is the one in which Anghel catches his parents making love. They were prompted by the scent of an expensive fur they had access to as they were privileged employees of the Romanian embassy in the USA. This could be typically interpreted as a caricature of the demonizing socialist propaganda, or the reception of commodity fetishism could be detected in the caricature, or even young Anghel's castration syndrome could be suspected (Pohrib 2017). It can also be seen as an exemplification of the American propaganda making frequent use of the *reductio ad absurdum* principle with respect to adversaries whose motivation seems totally absurd, just like the viewer may perceive Anghel's behaviour as absurd when, due to his denunciation, his parents are sentenced to many years of imprisonment.

Although it is quite difficult to suspect Channing Tatum and his friends of being well familiar with the Slovenian school of psychoanalysis and studying the notion of retro-avant-garde, in the manner of narration presented in the film one might attempt to perceive considerable analogies between *Comrade Detective* and the music of Laibach. It is also difficult to suspect the producers of over-identification with the system that collapsed thirty years ago and an attempt to criticize it, since such criticism is explicitly presented in the absurd jokes about the socialist expressions. It makes much more sense to attribute over-identification with the American cinema to the producers. Making use of the American means of expression in almost all aspects of the "socialist" series proves not only their derision and mockery of both types of cinematography. It proves that by playing with the form of an American propaganda film the producers avoided being manipulated by this type of formula and reducing the entire *show* to the presentation of the same anti-communist clichés as thirty years ago, only in a fresh form.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, in our interpretation they reveal the patterns of the functioning of American films, or of propaganda in

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously, the aforementioned production conditions cannot be forgotten here, as because of them, regardless of the ideological message, the series is absolutely embedded in the context of capitalist cinematography.

general, in which several relevant procedures are sufficient to ridicule quite rational theses and opinions. In this respect, they unmask the operations of the American film industry (simultaneously extending its spectrum with a new type of a TV production), providing viewers with entertainment, and moreover, assuring some viewers that it is yet another anti-communist mocking production. It uncovers the mechanism of the propaganda system to the viewer, but it does not impersonate the Great Other imposing upon the viewer its own vision of the world, it does not tell the viewer whether liberalism, conservatism, social democracy or revolutionary Marxism are the best, but offers the viewer a chance to think and choose as they please. This does not change the fact that it is a criticism of the ideology of the American film industry close to the leftists. And this does not mean that it is not critical of the propaganda of bureaucratic regimes of the socialist states. This political aspect will be discussed in the final part.

### **The political aspects of a comedy**

So far, the producers have been blamed for both pro-communist and anti-communist sympathies. The two leading dubbing actors, Tatum and Gordon-Levitt, openly admit their leftist sympathies, though. The former was *Magic Mike* (2012) in a film presenting the problem of commodity fetishism in relation to the human body (the film shows male stripteasers), he made the antiwar film *Stop Loss* (2002), and finally played the communist spy in *Hail Caesar* (2016) (Abriss 2017). Gordon Levitt openly presents himself as a leftist who voted for Bernie Sanders. He also played Edward Snowden in a film directed by Oliver Stone. Nevertheless, the actors as well as the other producers of the series attempt to remain apolitical and do not answer any questions concerning the ideology of the series.

To alleviate the situation, Gordon-Levitt (2017) said that the series was directed above all against “tribalism”, i.e. an attitude supporting some social and political movement or institution in the name of its dogmas, regardless of the costs. He thinks that the series deals with this type of fanaticism and the human inclination towards such authoritarian tendencies. Brian Gatewood also said that the series was satirizing propaganda and “extreme ideology” (Glover 2017). In this respect, the producers indeed talk as typical post-modernists fighting against “great narratives”.

The filming of the series began during Donald Trump’s election campaign for the president of the USA. Gordon-Levitt referred to Neil Postman’s book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (2006) and said that he was impressed by an analysis of the stupefying effect of TV propaganda on people and its impact on

politics. Therefore, *Comrade Detective* can show people how propaganda works and make them resistant to it, regardless of what they think about the production itself and its producers. Trump's election was simply to strengthen the producers in their conviction that they did the right thing, and partially influenced the screenplay. Gatewood said that the Americans' choice was the effect of their being accustomed to propaganda and manipulation they were exposed to on a daily basis on TV. Rhys added that being transferred to the world of old propaganda can be a good lesson for the future, although after Trump's electoral victory it was probably too late, anyway (Schildhouse 2017).

Of various ideological trends, it is nationalism that is the most ridiculed, not communism or capitalism. And it refers to both the Romanian and American versions. Communism is more comic in such scenes as the one in which the radio breaks down in a Romanian car, and people say, "It's a Dacia, the best car in the world, it could not have broken down!". This is what it all comes down to: in Romania everything is the best – cars, gymnasts, wrestlers, etc. Another interesting example is the scene in which one of the characters tells Anghel that his former partner might have been corrupted, to which he replies, "Impossible! There is no such thing as a corrupt cop in Bucharest!" There are also numerous allusions to the current wave of nationalism and many politicians' statements truly resembling the narration in *Comrade Detective*. Protectionism, economic and political nationalism, closing the borders to emigrants – all these aspects are ridiculed by the series and they are not rationalized at all, which was the case of the socialist rhetoric.

The producers can be blamed for not going deeper than just a general criticism of propaganda and ideologization. They do not want to take any side officially, they just want to start a discussion, and they were partly successful in it. If other seasons are to follow, it will certainly develop. They also succeeded partially in causing some rightist commentators' hysteria; they claim that the producers did not treat communism as a twin of Nazism.<sup>2</sup>

The authors' declarations resemble one of the theses of the Hungarian philosopher Agnes Heller, one of the most important contemporary ideologists of liberalism and post-modernism. She wrote about "refusing to bet", i.e. refusing to take a position on either side of the dispute concerning truth, sense or the ultimate objective. In other words, it means an unwillingness to provide ultimate answers and develop great narratives. According to Heller (2012: 90-92), great philosophers refer to these aspects by negation, i.e. by remaining

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<sup>2</sup> Such an opinion was presented in one of the right-wing blogs – *Comrade Detective's Welcome Perspective* (2017).



silent, for instance. The producers of the series do the same. The question is whether in fact they, just like other critics of Trump's politics from Hollywood, did not lose to him just because the latter, being unfamiliar with such nuances, was able to provide the masses with ready-made answers, similarly to those provided in American cold-war movies.

## **Conclusions**

Summing up the above deliberations, it should be strongly emphasized that the discussed series is primarily a product of the entertainment industry. It is also an expression of some nostalgia for cold-war films (Poniewozik 2017), even though references to that period were made from an unequivocally critical perspective. Thus, it is not apologetic cinema. Above all, it is a satire on the omnipresent propaganda in the age of so-called *fake news* and *post-truth*, and a pastiche of various motifs of American police films of the past years which are also in a sense admired and celebrated by the series. It does not follow a homogeneous path, it does not impose its own vision of politics and history on the viewer. Its artistic strategy is similar to Laibach's strategy. It could be said that the producers of *Comrade Detective* also perform the function of the rear-guard whose task is to remind people about the past propaganda in order to prevent them from being deluded by contemporary propaganda. In this respect, the very funny comedy is certainly a work of art that can be recommended to viewers interested in critical thinking.

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