

THE IMAGE OF ROMANIA AND THE VAMPIRE OBSESSION

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Abstract

The paper studies how Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and the screenings and animations it inspired affected the image of Romania overseas and permanently associated Vlad the Impaler with the fictional character of *Dracula*. Even the Romanians embraced this association in order to boost tourism. However, the official branding strategy places the accent on authenticity, and therefore we ask ourselves whether it is worth having a vampire myth based on a tourism strategy or not.

Keywords: *tourism, branding, vampire, authenticity.*

The Image of a country

The principle of any country brand is the fact that the brand represents "the image not of what the foreigners believe about a certain nation, but what the inhabitants of that country believe about themselves and their country" (Ivanu, 2019). The specialists in country brand politics only attractively wrap these images, according to the author. However, we cannot ignore the stereotypical representations that the foreigners already have about our country, especially if one nation decides to make good use of them, whether they are shared or not by the people in order to attract tourists. In this paper we will review the common representations about our country based on the myths of the vampires.

The belief in vampires

The belief in vampires is not unique to our country. In The Middle Ages, alongside the belief in witches or werewolves, the belief in vampires was a fact. This belief can be based on the biological phenomena and changes that a dead body undergoes in the decaying process, so that it appears that nails and hair grow after death or that the body moves and makes noise. People feared vampires and there have been cases in which they stabbed the bodies with a

wooden stick. The belief in vampires is still very real nowadays as well. In our country, in the western regions and in the neighbouring countries (such as Bulgaria) people from more secluded villages still believe in vampires. Even those people who do not believe in vampires practice different customs such as placing garlic at the doors on Saint Andrew's holiday in order to keep themselves safe from vampires.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

Although it is not the first novel with vampires, Irish author Bram Stoker's "*Dracula*" is of interest for us since it links vampires to Romania. Written in 1897, it was inspired by the 1885 paper "*Transylvanian Superstitions*" by Emilie Gerard, as well as by the 1820 "*Account of Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia with Political Observations Related to Them*," written by William Wikinson. It is also said that the author found inspiration, although never setting foot in Romania, from a picture of Bran Castle as well.

The name *Dracula* is the name given by foreigners to the descendent of Vlad II, surnamed *Dracul* (son of, or little Dragon) after he was invested in The Order of Dragons, a Christian order formed to defend Christian religion. The main character of the novel is Count *Dracula*, one of the most famous vampires in the literature ever since. Bram Stoker used as inspiration for the vampire character Vlad the Impaler, the Medieval Wallachian ruler viewed as a hero by the people he protected against the ottoman invaders, still regarded as a hero by the people of Romania today, although well known for the punishment of death by impaling. Stoker associated him with the myth of the bloodsucking bat. The action of the novel takes place in

Transylvania (now a region of Romania), in the 19th century.

Although it was not a bestseller when published, the novel grew in popularity and relevance for the modern readers and became a legendary book when it was multiple times put on screen.

Screenings

Among the numerous screenings of the novel, we mention Bram Stoker's *Dracula* from 1992, a box office success. The movie centres around Vlad Dracula, member of The Order of Dragons. The movie keeps on inspiring from the ruler Vlad the Impaler in order to create the character Dracula and a major part of the action takes place in Transylvania. The movie won three Oscars and Four Saturn prizes. The popularity of the movie reveals a strong association between Romania and vampires overseas.

The Invitation

One of the most recent movies that centre around a vampire character inspired by Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is *The Invitation*, in 2022. Invited to a family wedding by a newly found relative, Evie discovers that the wedding is hers to a vampire – the strongest and the eldest – suggested to be Dracula. The vampire refers to himself as “the son of the Dragon,” a rough translation of the surname of Vlad The Impaler, Vlad the Third, ruler of Wallachia.

This movie is proof that the association between our country and vampires in the overseas representation is as strong as it ever was since Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

Hotel Transylvania

Hotel Transylvania is an American Franchise produced by Sony Pictures Animation. It consists of four animations, three short movies, an animated TV series and several video games. The first animation premiered in 2012 and the last in 2022, so it shaped the representations of children for a decade. The last animation was released as recent as possible, proof that the association between Romania and vampires represents a success among children as well.

The animations' main character is count Dracula who builds Hotel Transylvania in

Transylvania as a refuge for monsters, who were persecuted and drove into hiding. Therefore, in the mind of the little children our country is, from the beginning, associated with the vampire (a good one, for a change) Dracula (Tourism.gov.ro, n.d.).

Vlad The Impaler - Dracula Facebook Page

Even the Romanians use the association of Vlad the Impaler with Dracula in order to attract tourists. Vlad The Impaler is not viewed by Romanians as an actual vampire, but more of a hero, given his resistance to the Ottoman Empire. The guerrilla tactics he used since his army was of no comparison to that of the Ottomans, and the punishment of death by impaling gave its rivals reason to portray him as cruel. The Facebook Page *‘Vlad The Impaler - Dracula’* uses the surname *‘Dracula’*, which is the name the foreigners translated the Romanian *‘Draculea’*.

Emilian Isaila, founder of the page, writes on the site *Draculafanclub.ro* that the page was created from his wish to “show the whole world what Romania is really about” and signs its entry with the surname “Dracula.” The author also criticizes Romania's online tourism strategies and his page addresses over 10 million people every month from 130 countries. On the page we can find pictures and films with the touristic attractions from our country, with the purpose of attracting foreign tourists, whether it is haunted forests (which also appear in *Hotel Transylvania*) or beautiful landscapes and castles. One of these touristic attractions we learn on the page is the Bran castle (*Draculafanclub*, n.d.).

Bran Castle's Dracula Experience

As we said above, not only the foreigners embrace the association of our country to vampires. Bran Castle, surnamed Dracula's Castle, offers a vampire experience inspired from Bram Stoker's novel “*Dracula*,” whose atmosphere was recreated at Bran Castle. For instance, guests can be greeted by Dacre Stoker, the great nephew of Dacre Stoker, they can enjoy red wine and sleep in velvet wrapped luxury coffins, just like a real Bram Stoker's vampire would.

There was even a documentary about this, episode 1 from series 2 of “*Legendary Locations*” – “*Back From the Dead*,” in 2018, in which

unusual amenities are presented. The Romanian Media reported on the two Canadians brothers, Tamin and Robin Varma, who have spent their Halloween in Bran Castle after winning a contest organized by Airbnb.

Although neither historically indubitably linked to Vlad The Impaler, nor linked to vampires, it seems that this brand strategy is successful. On the castle's website, the link between Vlad The Impaler, Bram Stoker's Dracula and the Bran Castle gets a special section, in which it is said that Bram Stoker found inspiration in this castle, since it is the only one fitting the description in the novel: it is "a stone castle on the perch of a rocky mountain, with a spectacular view, spooky vibes, and alongside a flowing river in Transylvania. However, the resemblance stops here (...)."

Bran village is also famous for its celebration of Halloween. Although not a Romanian traditional holiday, many Romanians seem to enjoy it and the celebrations also attract foreign tourists (Brancastletours, n.d.).

An overrated vampire business experience

Not all foreigners appreciate this strategy, though. The journalist Hillary Macaskill, after visiting Bran Castle, wrote a critical article for Daily Mail, in 2014, in which she expressed regret about the association Romanian people make with the famous Bram Stoker's Dracula. She considers that "Dracula is big business for Romania these days" (Macaskill, 2014). The author appreciates the rural scenery of Transylvania and regrets that "Transylvania is now synonymous with Dracula." The author also visited Sighișoara, the birth place of Vlad the Impaler and complains that even here "reality and myth mingle: a young man showed us to a room dimly lit with red candles at the foot of a red coffin-shaped dais." She also visited The House of Dracula in Brașov.

The echo of this article arrived in the Romanian press as the Adevărul Journal accuses the journalist of a lack of objectivity, as she came to visit the common objectives linked to vampires only to prove them a business and criticizes her for expressing the opinion that "we con the tourists with the myth of Dracula." (Băltoc, 2014)

We believe though that the Haunted Tourism is indeed a big business in The US and it is that model the Romanian borrow, together with the celebration of Halloween, but we ask ourselves if it is suitable for Romania from the point of view of the official branding strategy.

The Official Branding Strategy

We believe we should conform to the official branding strategy, "Romania, Explore the Carpathian Garden." The officials placed at our disposal a Visual Identity Manual on the Government site in which it is recommended to place the accent on authenticity which is "one of the most valuable assets and the rarest in the global industry of tourism today." (Turism.gov.ro, n.d.) The manual recommends all promoters to put an accent on nature, culture and tradition.

According to Emilia Ivancu, the current country brand, launched in 2010, "Explore The Carpathian Garden," after the launch of Wild Carpathia documentaries intensely promoted by Prince Charles, who is famous for his love of Romania and Transylvania, represents the first branding strategy commonly accepted. The author believes that it was easily accepted by Romanians because it was suggested by an outsider, since Romanians have not previously come to a "consensus as to what the image of Romania should be" (Ivancu, 2019). Maybe this tendency of Romanian people to accept suggestions from outsiders more easily, alongside the material benefits, represents one of the reasons they so easily embraced the myth of the vampire Dracula as portrayed overseas.

It is our opinion that no material gain is worth sacrificing the tradition and authenticity of one's country and that we should embrace the official branding strategy and place authenticity as a priority. Therefore, we should promote our own legends on Vlad the Impaler, instead of taking as our own the overseas media association with Bram Stoker's Dracula, since before the novel there was no association between the Wallachian ruler and vampirism.

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