

## **BETWEEN MUSIC AND SUB-CULTURE: ANALYSIS OF *MANEA* AND HIP-HOP IN ROMANIA**

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Post-1989 Romania is increasingly defined by the search for cultural identity and the clash of cultures. The communist regime of 1944-1989 opposed extraneous invasive elements, whether political, economic, or even cultural. Thus, people became more attached to what they considered to be “their own,” particularly in the cultural sphere. This broad trend is reflected in terms of post-1989 attitudes in recording music.

Among the issues relevant to the cultural clashes is the way in which a post-communist popular culture overcomes important nationalistic boundaries. Nowadays, Romania searches for its cultural identity in a particular way, torn between developing nationalistic spirit and the need for western novelty. These two trends are the result of such transformations such as economic globalization, revolutions in technology, and the opening of markets<sup>i</sup> — one of the most accessible being the audiovisual market. It is simultaneously the most prominent forum for the expression of a cultural identity, shaping the image of life styles, a relatively new concept for the Romanian people. In the context of accession to the EU, there is a growing interest and focus on the audiovisual, as a way of battling Americanization. For many people of the former eastern bloc, this term connotes sexuality, violence, and the ruin of “Europeanness.”<sup>ii</sup>

As with most European youth, Romanian teens are great media consumers, increasingly interested in keeping themselves updated with products from around the world. For them, music is an important way of expression in the search for personal identity. They are torn between nationalism and the need for multiculturalism. The possibility of choice generates reactions of confusion, because it is genuinely difficult to find a clear trend when it comes to their social

affinities translated into music preferences. On one hand we have *manea* described in dictionaries as a slow love song of oriental origins;<sup>iii</sup> on the other hand we have *hip-hop*, described as an urban youth culture associated with rap music and the fashions of African-American residents of the inner city.<sup>iv</sup> In a world of intermingling cultures, it is possible that these two genres could either be particularly appreciated, or highly criticized for the perceived bad influences they bring on the young generation. Both moreover represent the emergence of “lower-class” artistic production into the Romanian mainstream. Overall, they bring controversy, conflict and confusion.

## BACKGROUND

There is much discussion with regards to the origins of *manea* on how they should be interpreted, creating strong rifts between detractors and supporters, and ultimately being united by the same debate around multiculturalism. The genre is usually related to its interpreters, mostly Roma singers, and this brings a note of controversy. Are the divergent reactions around the *manea* and its relation to Roma legitimate? Do *manea*’s supporters belong to a different culture? Does this controversy send messages about multiculturalism in the Romanian space?

Historically speaking, the Ottomans are thought to have introduced *manea* during their occupation in the eighteenth century. One assumption is that the Ottomans disliked the Romanian traditional music; therefore, they imported musicians from Istanbul.<sup>v</sup> However, at present the *manea* is chiefly associated with Roma culture and musicians, generally considered outcasts of Romanian. The assumption is that at the core of this genre lays the pure, traditional Roma music (*Muzica lautareasca*). *Lautari* are professional Romani musicians who fulfill a niche by performing at weddings or other family celebrations. They are perceived to express skilled professionalism, despite a low ethnic profile. They even see themselves as being a separate group that is closer to their

Romanian audiences than their own Roma community. Their relatedness to Romanians essentially becomes more of an act of identity construction whose main function is to protect them against prejudices of the Romanian society.<sup>vi</sup>

*Manea* is a genre of eclecticism in the sense that it encompasses different cultural aspects: from oriental to pure Romanian folk, played in a very rhythmic, more modern manner. One of the most interesting aspects of this genre is the fact that its popularity began among a subordinate niche of the population, among the perceived “lower classes”, and has subsequently gained mainstream attention. This prompts worry, predominantly among the intelligentsia, and even for the authorities. Recently, the Censorship Association (CNA) has started to “let its guard down” with respect to *manea*, provoking virtual among the detractors of the genre. This includes assertions that, because of this looseness, Roma culture will influence Romanian national folk traditions, destroying the proper national identity that a country should have within the European Union. The general association of *manea* with the Roma has triggered a public debate, and some of the constituent opinions will be analyzed below.

*Manea* is, by definition, a rather old influence on the Romanian musical mainstream; hip hop is definitely an example of the Americanization of Eastern Europe after 1989. In fact, this is perceived as another way how the “lower-classes” (e.g. ethnic minorities, the unemployed, low-wage earners, or peasants forced to move in towns during communism) found a means of expression in the Romanian popular culture, with massive success. However, Romanian hip hop’s goal is to send a socio-political message to the masses, connected to the anti-nationalistic attitudes of the youth. It takes the artistic expression from American hip-hop, but its politicizing messages relates to events in Romania, without emphasizing the gangster lifestyle. Hip-hop artists represent the expression of the post-communist transformations of economics, politics and society, which had an important

psychological effect on the suburban young person, who need to rebel against the system one way or another.

The two genres, thus, come from two different backgrounds: *manea*, a musical expression that draws on the traditional forms of music, seemingly receptive to nationalistic concepts, while hip-hop is perceived as an “infectious” American way of expressing problems within Romanian society. However, both express messages coming from minority groups and former proletarians, the cores of lower classes. Both reflect the voices of Romanian youth social movements in the twenty-first century.

### AUDIENCES

From the author’s own experience, it is rare that an individual will admit that he listens to *manea*—surprising, considering the popularity of the genre. The assumption concerning this attitude is that they are afraid of being called “gypsies” in a society that still shows direct signs of prejudice towards Roma. In 2007, the Romanian Ministry of Culture released a report containing the portrait of the *manea* listener: an urban Roma male, with a middle-level of education, normally only a high school graduate.<sup>vii</sup> This analysis does not really address reality, as most people think that this music appeals to a much broader audience, thus to just give a general portrayal is evasive. At a first glance, the average Romanian would immediately recognize the consumers of this musical genre, as they created a stereotype in society: men or women, usually wearing thick gold chains, bracelets and rings; they show off their expensive cars, villas and apartments. They are anti-middle class, but at the same time they portray an upper-level (a *nouveau riche*) of the mixed form of post-communist urbanism.

They are defined by a level of excessive consumerism, lacking engagement with any form of high-culture. Moreover, the stars of the genre portray exactly the same image, which successfully

enters the audiovisual media. In an interview for *Jurnalul National* (The National Journal), the most widely read newspaper in Romania, popular singer Adrian DeVito declared that he is constantly “craving” a luxurious, powerful car and women as accessories, despite having been married for 12 years.<sup>viii</sup> The public worry expressed by the intelligentsia and the state are based on the fact that post-1989 audiences relate to that: does the *manea* encourage its listeners to see this as how things should be? This example offers the certainty that it has stopped being a musical genre, and turns into a new sub-culture. *Manea* has become a way of life that revolves around quantity over quality, around explored (and exploitative) sexuality, around violence and death, disdaining education. All these are recurrent themes of the songs, their message seen as cancerous by many of their out-spoken detractors. It takes the individual to levels of kitsch and malicious thinking. He starts to live his life based on what he listens to and what he sees on TV.

The topic has been debated for years, but what is utterly fascinating is the reaction of the public. While most Romanians feel a personal contempt for the Roma, they express their feelings mostly in private situations. As mentioned above, people generally try to avoid the topic in public settings, but the internet offers exceptions. Posters on forums and blogs express their absolute loathing for the genre, and there is a powerful, yet subtle, anti-Roma feeling. It is clear that in the context of the European Union and globalization, Romania is trying to bridge the gap between the East and West, and is gravitating more and more towards the Western opinion. Many Romanians care about what the westerners say, and they care about their image in a global context.

Other important worries gravitate around the use of inappropriate lyrics and the effects they could have on people. This *anti-manea* movement is chiefly championed by the self-expressed intelligentsia, under the banner of high-culture. These are the people who suffered during communism, and they still have to suffer now when they see the “*nouveau riche*” holding expensive

dinners, going to casinos, gambling, showing every possible sign of flamboyance and bad taste.

They do not like to see the “carnavalesque” side of a confused, unorganized popular culture.<sup>ix</sup> This trend is clearly pushing the limits of Romanian culture, creating a sub-culture that many view as extremely harmful.

However, at the same time, the hatred expressed by many is moderated by those who believe that freedom of speech should work in this case, that one cannot interfere with someone’s musical taste. Even more so, while detractors attack the Roma culture and its negative influences on the Romanian individual, this genre has many open supporters, who see it as pure “Romanianism.” Some argue that 50 cent or Snoop Dogg’s music is actually worse than the *manea*, blaming its “Americanness”: *manea* is Romanian and should be given more credit and more respect.

Furthermore, American hip-hop is considered to display the same bad taste: thick chains and flamboyant behavior, with lyrics emphasizing lower-class mentalities.<sup>x</sup> Generally, as with the genre itself, there is a variety of opinions, and this does nothing but generate confusion. It ultimately shows that the acceptance of multiculturalism is still seen as something that affects the image of Romania in Europe, or even in the entire world. In fact, it will be interesting to see in the future how the reactions towards the genre and even Roma culture will change: will it become more exacerbated? Or will it be more restrained?

In the case of hip-hop, the distinction and the problems raised are different. There is no one who would consider it Romanian or even European. This is the specific type of “ghetto” music, influenced by the American expression. As a genre, it was introduced immediately after 1989, and it is probably the most obvious mass manifestation of artistic free speech and interpretation. Hip hop carries Romanian texts that usually reflect the post-communist political, economical, social state, and its influence on the “ghetto.” This genre found a very specific niche in the market, and its

audience is often called in the media the *Pro Generation*, described as superficial, oriented towards a westernized type of consumerism, modeling itself on western symbols.<sup>xi</sup> Despite this negative image, there are far more people of all ages that admit to listening to this type of music, or connecting with the rebellious lyrics. Its adherents would much rather say that they live in a country full of bitterness, poverty and problems, than in a country ruled by wealth, BMWs and women. It is far from a humble form of nationalism, considering the initial influences of the genre, but the hip-hop artists express ideas and feelings so specifically and so directly related to Romania, that many people believe that the lyrics portray an image of the real country; this ultimately gives a whole new definition of what nationalism means today. Whether realistic views can be considered nationalistic, it is difficult to determine, but there is a form of certainty or awareness when it comes to what these ghetto bands have to offer message-wise.

Despite the strong support coming from their audiences, this genre has its own issues concerning acceptance. Paradoxically enough, hip-hop tackles the same themes as the *manea*: violence, sexuality and even racism. What makes hip-hop different? The bitter attitude towards any political rules can captivate a lot of young people. Most of them live in a society that lacks the diversity of the American one. However, it is in a full process of transformation, especially those who live in a society who is not as diverse as the American one, but it is in a full process of transformation. This creates a whole new dimension to how Romanians support their national spirit and how ready they are to accept the multicultural aspect of their own culture.

## REACTIONS

One of the most controversial topics of the last two years concerns the accessibility of *manea* in any form of cultural or even political form. Its performers openly pay to broadcast their television appearances, in a business where the moguls rule the audiovisual brands. Accessibility has turned into excessiveness, and some authorities charge that this “intoxication” is starting to get extremely serious, even proposing the banning of this genre.

One of the most controversial episodes happened at the beginning of 2007, with the adherence of Romania to the European Union. PRO TV, the most watched TV channel, launched a version of Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy,” the European Union Anthem, remixed with *manea* influences. Public reaction thought it appalling; the middle class and intelligentsia vocalized a fear that the Romanian nation might be confused with gypsy ethnicity in a European environment.<sup>xii</sup> Cristina Trepcea, member of the Censorship Association, argues that the Roma culture should not be related to *manea* as a cultural movement, especially because they are not the only ones who accept it and listen to it. While she is right, this comes from a necessity to justify a series of fallacious actions, or even the straight lack of actions in the media and its acceptance of such a controversial topic. In an interview given to *Jurnalul National*, Trepcea emphasized the fact that television channels have a freedom of expression won after 1989, and this cannot be diminished in any way. They are basically free to do whatever they want with their air-time, and the case of European Union anthem is the consequence of this “freedom.”

Moreover, she accuses the Romanians of a so-called *phariseeism*, or hypocrisy. She gives the example of a man, who would say that he would want more high-level culture on TV, but the radio station in his car plays *manea*. The underlying question that this problem poses is whether the



Censorship Association can have any impact on *manea* as a continuous cultural intoxication.

Trepcea argues the Association cannot influence this cultural movement, nor pull it off from the mainstream media. While she does make an interesting point, referencing the communist era and its history of restraint on the press and media, the consistency of her argument and the Association's actions calls its credibility into question. This can be seen in the case of censorship of hip-hop.<sup>xiii</sup>

Unlike the case of the *manea*, where the authorities profess a “hands off” attitude towards free speech and the media, hip hop bands are frequently censored, their lyrics considered to be too damaging, especially for the teenagers who listen to this type of music. At the beginning of 2000, hip hop tapes and CDs were withdrawn from the market; televisions were also prohibited to show the genre's music videos. So where is the freedom the Censorship Association talks about in *manea* case? As a response to the Association's inconsistency, bands started launching singles that specifically talk about censorship and the way it brings back memories of an era that everybody wants to forget. One of the most popular bands, Parazitii, is prominent in this regard. They consistently attack post-communist Romanian society, using themes of sex, drugs and life in the ghettos of Bucharest. But because the American symbol has to be present somehow, their expressed goal is to be heard and to make money out of it—a form of “the Romanian dream.” The application of the laws of censorship grew extremely controversial, and it was only a matter of time until hip-hop songs attacked them.

In 2004, Parazitii released what is probably their most popular single: *Jos cenzura (Down with censorship)*. In a very direct way, they summarized what Romanian hip-hop represented for its fans, and for the society as a whole: a way to express pain, bitterness and everything that is miserable in their lives:

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| <i>Exprimarea libera e castigate-n revolutie</i>       | Freedom of speech was earned during the revolution |
| <i>E dreptul nostrum si e garantat de Constitutie,</i> | It is our right, guaranteed by Constitution        |
| <i>Institutiile bruiaza undele:</i>                    | Institutions annoy the wave                        |
| <i>Romania intra-n Europa doar cu numele</i>           | Romania enters Europe only by name                 |
| <i>Promisiuni-minciuni</i>                             | Promises-lies                                      |
| <i>Emisiuni-presiuni</i>                               | Shows-pressure                                     |
| <i>Televiziuni-sanctiuni:</i>                          | Television-sanctions                               |
| <i>Showtime la romani.</i>                             | Showtime in Romania. <sup>xiv</sup>                |

The video, released three days before the presidential election, brought Romanian TV stars together, announcing to the whole country, including the pressuring authorities that they fight for the same cause. It also included a public and televised letter from *Hustler* mogul Larry Flint, who emphasized the fact that there are some decisions that could essentially create “social disdain.”

*"I can't believe that, Romania, being a country that should have learned from the past, is still exercising censorship. Nothing worthwhile can come of this. And people have an inherent desire to be free, and they're gonna be free -- if not with the existing government, a new government that they will put in their place."*<sup>xv</sup>

Thus, an American symbolic figure tells Romania what to do and how to do it, and as the manager of the band, Gianniny Munteanu, said in an interview, “one needs real guts to do that on TV in Romania.”<sup>xvi</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Struggles by the lower classes and minorities are not new to the world. Neither are the popular forms of expression in music. Looking back, people will always remember the public resistance during the 1950s towards Elvis Presley as an icon, or Eminem’s emergence in the early 2000s as a white hip-hop star. Take music as a form of direct expression, throw it in a controversial historical context, and the result is the situation in Eastern Europe, where the 1989 political changes had results in many different ways. Multiculturalism has been brought more and more into the mainstream, and *manea*, the musical genre that is specifically related to Roma, their history and their impact on Romanian society, is one of the most discussed topics in the world of the intelligentsia.

Going to the opposite pole, hip-hop is not an original genre that can be attributed solely to Romania; it is a new genre expressing the low-class, particularly the “ghetto” youth, who wants to rebel against the fallacies of the political system. They are both manifestations of the “lower” defeating the “upper.” They gain attention, and they might even be crucial in terms of social or even political changes: *manea* singers as potential role models, hip-hop singers who fight against censorship. In the end, it is only a matter of time until the society models itself after one or the other, as the trends have become so popular that every sign of stopping them seems to fade away.

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<sup>ii</sup> Lars-Erik Cederman. Constructing Europe's identity: the external dimension. (Boulder: L. Rienner, 2001, p.95

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<sup>iv</sup> “Hip-Hop.” WordNet. 2006. Princeton University.  
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<sup>v</sup> Miron Manega, "Cui ii e frica de manele?." Jurnalul National 5 January 2006

<sup>vi</sup> Margaret H. Beissinger, "Occupation and Ethnicity: Constructing Identity among Professional Romani (Gypsy) Musicians in Romania." Slavic Review 60:1 (Spring 2001), 24-49.

<sup>vii</sup> Monica Andronescu, "Manelele si telenovelele otravesc romanii." Ziua 30 May 2007

<sup>viii</sup> Dana Cobuz, "Mesterul Manele." Jurnalul National 5 January 2006

<sup>ix</sup> Denise Roman, Fragmented Identities: Popular Culture, Sex, and Everyday Life in Postcommunist Romania. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), p. 52

<sup>x</sup> Craciun, Ana, “Despre manea.” [Weblog entry]. *Ciprian Pop*. 15 Jan. 2008.  
(<http://www.ciprianpop.ro/2008/01/15/despre-manea/>). [Accessed 15 Nov. 2008]

<sup>xi</sup> Roman, p. 70

<sup>xii</sup> Krossfire, “Manele in UE.” [Weblog entry]. *Krossfire's Blog*. 20 Jan. 2007.  
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<sup>xiii</sup> Andronie , Dana. "Fariseism si Manelism." Jurnalul National 5 January 2006

<sup>xiv</sup> Parazitii. “Jos Cenzura.” *Jos Cenzura*. 20CM Records, 2004

<sup>xv</sup> «Parazitii Jos Cenzura \*Necenzurat\*. » YouTube.com.  
<[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Y\\_\\_9MeB2vY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Y__9MeB2vY)> [Accessed May 26, 2008]

<sup>xvi</sup> Matt Welch, "The Second Romanian Revolution Will Be Televised." Reason Online October 2005