

**Taste as ‘The Forbidden Fruit’: Interracial Marriages
- A Comparison Between Andrei Oisteanu and Spike Lee –**

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The paper analyzes the way in which two contemporary ethnic voices, one from Romania and the other from America, understand to make themselves heard, speaking on behalf of those ethnic minorities they belong to, both for their own communities and for each country’s mainstreams. The focus will be on their way of dealing with the idea of ‘taste as the forbidden fruit’, as the main argument when choosing or rejecting the ‘other’.

In the first part of the paper I will establish a connection between the common attempts of Romanian-Jew researcher – Andrei Oisteanu – in his *Imaginea Evreului in Cultura Romana*, and of African-American movie-director – Spike Lee – in his *Jungle Fever*, to expose and destroy long-standing traditional stereotypes. In this part I will also justify my reasons for choosing to compare two representatives of different ethnic minorities, with different ways of expressing themselves.

In the second part of my paper I will explore the situation of intermarriages in the two countries and ‘the forbidden fruit’ theme as explained by Andrei Oisteanu and as seen by Spike Lee. My examples will be taken both from literature and media. For the Romanian side I will follow Oisteanu’s titles, but with a deeper analysis, and for the American side I will use *Jungle Fever* as the best choice for my argument.

As you can see, my object in this paper is not the same ethnic minority in two countries, but the evolution, perpetuation and modern perception/deconstruction of a stereotype, and even more, of a universal idea or myth: the exotic attraction of a mainstream man towards the ‘forbidden fruit’, that is, towards the ‘other’ woman, in terms of a different color, ethnicity, religion.

My thesis is that not only do these two voices sound extremely similar, but we also have the same situation in the two countries when talking about desiring what law and education officially forbid.

We usually speak of interracial marriages only in countries like America, officially defined as a Multiculturalist state. However, pioneering researches in the last decade have begun to give more and more objective evidence about the actual existence of such a phenomenon also in Romania. One important example in this case is Moldavian-Jew researcher Andrei Oisteanu, an ethnologist, cultural anthropologist, imagologist and an expert in the history of religions.

As the author himself explains us in the Foreword to his *Imaginea Evreului in Cultura Romana*¹, his preoccupation for the ethnic imagology began fifteen years ago and he received a scholarship from the International Center for Anti-Semitic Studies in Jerusalem in the years 1997-1999. Later, he decided he should study whether the stereotypes regarding Jews, in the Romanian tradition, have or have not survived in the so-called high culture.

Unanimously regarded by critics as “a professional authority doubled by a good communicator and a successful manager of his own ideas²” (Cernat, 1), Andrei Oisteanu is praised for his objectivity and his ample documentary work, while his book is received as “the most important study of imagology ever published here³” (Ciurtin, 1). Besides the harmonious combination of cultural anthropology, imagology and journalist activity, an important feature of the book seems to be the structure. The idea of analyzing different kinds of portraits, all of them stereotypes, seems to appeal to both critics. As they notice, we have a standard Jew, with the ritual side-whiskers, a hooked nose and thick lips, a dishonest merchant or publican, a clever but cunning character and an agent of Satan. However racial and negative these images are, Andrei Oisteanu is quoted by Paul Cernat with an interview for *Observatorul Cultural*, where he proves his impartiality when accusing Romanians of being anti-Semitic:

We shouldn't make classifications when talking about anti-Semitism, as if we were talking about sports. [...] To ignore details, to give up objective and carefully balanced analysis, not to consider the historic, politic and specific circumstances [...] is to use the same patterns, the same crude stereotypes and mental cliches we deny the anti-Semitic thinking.⁴" (Oisteanu, 1)

His interest in comparative studies is underlined in a quotation from another interview given by Andrei Oisteanu to the *Orizont* magazine:

I think it would be interesting to make similar studies about the image of the Hungarian or of the Gypsy in the Romanian culture. It would also be interesting to shift and see the image of the Romanian in the cultures of other peoples, which sounds like a great book, a self-imagology book. Self-imagology is a branch of imagology and I think that there would be many things to tell in the case of the Romanian, because he sees himself in a stereotypical way, with an emphasis on his virtues, as well as on his vices. That's why I hope to write the book called *The Image of The Romanian in the Romanian Culture*.⁵" (Orizont, NR 8, qtd in Ciurtin 3)

Only one of the articles mentions the apparently positive stereotypes I am going to analyze in my paper: the beautiful, elegant Jew-woman, seen as a derivation of a negative image, too: the 'forbidden fruit', 'the promised exoticism'.

His peer, in my opinion, in regard with exposing stereotypes and the problem of interracial marriages in America is African-American movie filmmaker, Spike Lee.

And I think one of the most important similarities between the two regards their common purpose understood as exposing both the stereotype and the medium that helped its perpetuation and permanence in the public mind. If with Andrei Oisteanu we are talking about Romanian folklore and literature, with Spike Lee we have, in Paula J. Masswood's words, another Woody Allen, in terms of being a quintessential New York filmmaker, due to his "microcosmic studies of the city's neighborhoods – BedStuy in *Do the Right Thing*, Harlem and Besonhurst in *Jungle Fever*, and the Bronx in *Summer of Sam*, providing intimate access to the people and places, as well as "an ongoing analysis of American race relations". In an interview he gave the *Cineaste*, he clearly states his mission: "...to show that from their births, these two great mediums, film and television, have promoted negative racial images." (Cineaste, 1)

"You see the same thing with the portrayal of women that you see with the portrayal of people of color or other minorities. [...] Look at three of the earliest so-called 'landmark' American films – *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Jazz Singer*, and *Gone with the Wind*. It's not a coincidence. You have to understand that these mediums are not separate from society. Racism is woven into the very fabric of American society, and it just makes sense that it's going to be reflected in sports, in movies, in television, in business and so on." (Cineaste, 1)

Speaking about the women and, particularly, the women of color, or the "other" women, we will see they attract the attention both of the writer and of the movie director. For Andrei Oisteanu we have another stereotype image, this time a positive one: the beautiful and elegant Jewish woman. Although not really noticed by critics, this chapter provides us with interesting details regarding our literature, our folklore and the enforcement by law of unwritten customs forbidding mixed marriages in the history of Romania.

In the sub-chapter called 'exotic eroticism'⁶, he assigns the belief that "the Jew woman is beautiful"⁷ to the same category of ordinary people for whom "the Jew is smart"⁸. And we have a very nice example from our folklore: it seems that "for the villagers in Bucovina, St. Sunday – a holy day personified by a beautiful woman with her hair undone, associated with cleanness and joy – is a Jew woman"⁹ (Oisteanu, 86). Then he explains this erotic attraction by the man's need to contradict a whole social code in which he has been educated, thus involving any ethnic minority, not only the Jew.

Generally speaking, men assign a different sensuousness to the women considered to be different (ethnically, racially and religiously speaking). The more different a girl is perceived, the more sensual she is considered and the more curious and attracted the man feels towards her. In North America, for instance, this sensuality in excess is attributed to the Negro woman (*Brown Sugar* in whites' folk songs), while in South America we have popular love songs where the Negro or the Mulatto woman (*La Morenita*) makes the object of sexual desire¹⁰, (Oisteanu 86)

Speaking about South-Eastern Europe, he sees the eastern woman, that is, the Turk, the Jew, the Greek and the Gypsy woman, as the symbol of attraction. And he chooses Mircea Eliade's *La Tiganci*¹¹ to illustrate his theory. Here the mainstream main character is supposed to identify each prostitute's nationality by certain so-called 'defining' features assigned by Romanians to each ethnic minority.

In the next sub-chapter called 'Forbidden Love-Affairs'¹², Andrei Oisteanu gives concrete examples of Romanian laws that tried to stop Romanian men from even loving a Jewish woman. We have an order from Romanian ruler Matei Basarab in the 17th century saying that "The orthodox shouldn't couple with an heretic woman."¹³ (Oisteanu 90). We also have the Jewish interdiction: "You will not marry these people: you will not give your daughters to their sons and you will not take their daughters for your sons."¹⁴ (Oisteanu 90). The traditional idea was that there was no place for two different gods, two incompatible traditions, and, especially, two opposite images of each other under the same roof. It was also forbidden to marry a foreign person, even if Christian, as official documents from 18th and 19th centuries show us. The unwritten customs were enforced by the official ones. And we have Calimachi's Code (Moldavia, 1817), Caragea's Code (Tara Romaneasca, 1818) and the Civil Code, 1865. The final period taken into account is 1938-1944. The purpose of such laws in the 20th century was to "avoid the mixture of ancient Geto-Romanian blood with Gypsy or Greek blood, and lately, with Jewish blood." (Oisteanu 91). Traditionally speaking the fruit of a mixed marriage was considered doomed. And we have a parody published by I. L. Caragiale in 1901: "The <Green Romanians> Society:

The man who has children with a foreign woman or vice-versa, brings up some monsters, who will half madly love the people where they first saw light, and will half fiercely hate it. May the God of our ancestors protect any Romanian man or Romanian woman from giving birth to such teratological examples!¹⁵" (Oisteanu 91)

Next we have the already married mixed-couples, forced to run away from home. And Andrei Oisteanu finds a lot of interesting plays dealing with such preconceived ideas in literature. I think the most important examples in this case are *Manasse* written by Romanian-Jew Ronetti Roman at 1900, and *Take, Ianke si Cadar*, written by Romanian Victor Ion Popa in 1933. The first play shows us the Jewish point of view at the end of the 19th century. And what is even more interesting, the way a Herderianist Romanian Jew, who made his studies in Berlin and wrote at *Timpul* at the same time with Eminescu and Caragiale (cf. Calinescu 554), tries to solve the problem of interracial marriages. Why would that be so important for my argument? Well, because I can integrate him in that category of rather traditionalist Jews who found the cohabitation with Romanians really difficult, a category that Oisteanu doesn't forget to mention. According to Calinescu, Ronetti was an intelligent person who tried to understand and objectively judge his own race. His play is the saga of a Jewish family presenting the mentalities of three generations, which is why the message is not very clear. The first generation, Manasse, is from Moldavia and he is the true conservative and Herderianist character in the play. He keeps the religious tradition like a Rabi, and just like Romanian nationalist Eminescu, dreams of his family being united only with Jews. In Romanians he can see nothing but hatred and prejudice:

Lea! There is a limit in everything! Where do you think you are? In what home? A young lady in the house of a foreigner! What world were you about to enter? What do you know

about that world, you, a Jewish woman? There is nothing there, but hatred. The disastrous hatred against me, against you, against every Jewish thing.¹⁶” (Ronetti 30)

The second generation is that of his son, Nisim, who makes business in Bucharest, and has a Jewish wife and children. Nisim and his wife are much modern and tolerate Romanian friends. They have already forgotten some of their family traditions.

The last generation is that of Lea and Lazar who will marry Romanians. Lea is very fond of Manasse but she is very in love with a Romanian lawyer. She is no businesswoman, instead she likes to play the piano. Nisim opposes her Romanian lover and finds her a Jewish one, described by Ronetti Roman as an extremely practical and business-oriented person, someone sensitive Lea could not possibly fell in love with. And I think here we have the ‘professional stereotype-portrait’ of the Jew, used by the Jewish-writer himself. At the end of the play she marries the Romanian lawyer, while Lazar marries the lawyer’s sister, against Manasse’s advice. The result will be devastating: Manasse dies.

For George Calinescu, in his *Istoria Literaturii Romane de la Origini pana in Prezent*, the message is ambiguous and he identifies Ronetti with Manasse instead of the young generation (Cf. Calinescu 554). I think Ronetti presented the true conflict between Romanians and Jews in 19th century Moldavia: even if a mixed marriage is acceptable as a possible solution, he also answers to the nationalist politics by pleading for the preservation of his own race: Manasse, the real Jew, will never accept this mixture. I think it is his friendship with Eminescu and Caragiale who puts this touching words in Lea’s mouth: “we should not define one against each other, but we should all be the same, humans, Romanians, no matter the religion or the ethnic group we belong to¹⁷.”(Ronetti 108)

Even if mentalities may change in time, Ronetti still uses the positive female stereotype when talking about Lea, thus stressing a Jewish woman’s main quality, and with reference to the Bible, to the very origins of the myth: “You are a beautiful woman, Lea! God made you inherit the beauty of our ancient mothers. So beautiful and proud did our queens walk on mount Zion!¹⁸” (Oisteanu 97)

This was a drama that didn’t remain without an answer. In 1930, the Romanian Victor Ion Popa was writing his *Take, Ianke and Cadir*, in the same region, Moldavia, with the same problem: a Jewish woman marries a Christian. But this time it was a story with a happy ending and in the comic key. Unfortunately it is Victor Ion Popa’s play that remained so many years without an answer in the view of our critics until its last performance in 2002.

In order to understand the impact of this play we are forced to use only very recent comments that see it as an extraordinary pledge for interracial tolerance, even when working with stereotypes.

The three main characters are the representatives of three different ethnic communities in Moldavia: a Romanian, a Jew and a Turk. They all are businessmen in the old sense of the word: they have their own little shops. Here I think we should take into consideration that Victor Ion Popa was a Romanian, so let’s regard his description of the three characters and their relationship as a Romanian point of view.

In the first act we have the description of their houses. They have the same forms but different colors, or the same colors placed differently, to show how three apparently different nations, or ethnic communities, can live in harmony in one and the same city in Romania. What we have here is the mainstream Romanian ‘Take’, the Romanian Jew ‘Ianke’, same houses, different colors, and the Romanian Turk, ‘Cadir’, a synthesis of the others two. Then we have the ‘border’ between Take and Ianke, a “sort of bay window with the doors open¹⁹” (Popa 47). The fence that separates them has the “little gate open²⁰”(Popa 47), too. And, still another important element to express today’s idea of ‘unity in diversity’, that is, the old tree in the last act. As we can see, these seem to provide the readers with all necessary arguments for three different ethnic and religious groups to tolerate each other in today’s Romania.

Both the houses and their jobs make the three of them friends. And there is nobody in that market town to challenge it. Unlike Manasse’s case, the second generation has the same preoccupations, only at a different level: Ana and Ionel are ASE (Economy) graduates. So the friendship is already there, as already natural in the era the play was written. Take loves

Ianke's daughter, and Ianke loves Take's son. Only Cadir is completely alone, since he didn't have the courage to marry a Christian, something he deeply regrets. This might still be debatable today, since the play was written by a Romanian and not by a Turk. One might argue that the characters are only stereotypes. This might be, on the one hand, meant to represent a general idea, about to refer and expand to other regions in the country. On the other hand, the only thing we can find out from George Calinescu is that Popa was very fond of using dialects in his plays (cf Calinescu 555). And I think the stereotype here is mainly through language, since the standard image of the old Jew as it appears in Andrei Oisteanu's book is either a Rabbi or a businessman with side whiskers, something we do not find here. It is true, though, that Popa presents Ianke as the best shopkeeper, as opposed to the Romanian Take, and Ana respects the pattern of a very beautiful woman.

And still, is it all right for a Jew woman to marry a Christian men? A grandfather like Manasse would have clearly forbidden it. But perhaps Romanians and Jews have changed, even in Moldavia, and, perhaps, those who appreciate this play today, move from the 19th century (extreme) herderianism to today's multiculturalism and tolerance.

With Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* we have this idea of taste as a forbidden fruit, in both senses: the Black man with a white woman, and the white man with the black woman. If Andrei Oisteanu's examples are taken from Romanian folklore and literature, Spike Lee places his action in his beloved New York, today. His characters are real people from two neighborhoods, Harlem, the Black neighborhood, and Besonhurst, the one district inhabited by Italians, the whites in the area. Unlike the traditional myth propagated both through literature and media in the US, with the woman of color as the beautiful exotic fruit, here we have Flipper, an African-American architect, already married with a Mulatto-white woman, living in the elitist part of Harlem, who decides to cheat on his wife in order to try a love affair with a real Caucasian. The film works both with the black's erotic desire for the white woman and his final rejection, and with spots of black and white history of America in order to remind the audience who was supposed to be the ruler, and who hates who. It might be, in my view, Spike Lee's answer to the ex-master: this time blacks reject whites and not the other way round. A second response might be directed to another mythical image very much promoted through media and films: the beautiful mainstream white woman, any man's ideal. One may find the proof in the women's council's debate, that is, in the dialogue among Flipper's wife's friends: the only black men who are not drug addicts, or in jail, or homos, are married, or have 'ten women'; white women continually 'throw' themselves at black men (another way of seeing the 'forbidden fruit' and a negative image for the white women); black men feel successful only when they have 'a white woman on their arm' (the forbidden fruit seen as a proof of progress in the social hierarchy).

The family point of view is extremely important. Neither the Blacks nor the white Italians agree with this love relationship. The Blacks, like his father for instance, hate the white people and especially the white women. And the Italians don't want a Black in their family. But I think the Blacks' point of view, even Flipper's own way of provoking the breaking up, is much more radical, more categorical than the Italians' one. After all, Paulie ends up falling in love with a Black woman (Orin) who was coming to his shop. Towards the end of the movie, Flipper says something very important to Angie: he doesn't want their children to be a mixture of Black and White in the country they live. So they finally break up. In my view, Flipper's idea about a mixed-couple's children in America is perfectly similar with I. L. Caragiale's ironical passage I quoted before, criticizing a real fact in Romanian's history and mentality.

I also think she was a sort of a forbidden fruit, that was the sense of his erotic curiosity towards her. Generally speaking, most of the movies show the Anglo-Saxon Americans and the Blacks as best friends, but not as lovers, or even more, as husband and wife. So, in my view, this might be, among many other things, a sort of an answer to that kind of movies, too. After he managed to taste the 'apple' he doesn't need it any longer. Because of his family, because of her family, and because of him.

With Andrei Oisteanu the focus was on the 'other' woman, the Jewish woman in particular. With Spike Lee, the focus is on the white woman. There are laws in the history of

the United States, as well as in the history of Romania who clearly forbid mixed marriages, and Oisteanu gives us examples, since he studies this mixture as a researcher looking for the truth. Unlike him, Spike Lee bases his movie on “how the others see us” with no reminder of any written law, only the unwritten contemporary prejudices and their so long lasting history. Blacks’ hatred, especially Flipper’s, is directed mainly towards white women as the symbol of the ruler. The Italians don’t want a black in their family, but they are less radical than blacks. This might illustrate Lee’s own way of getting rid of the so-called ‘forbidden fruit’, in fact something worthless. We might see this in Flipper’s pretext for provoking the break up at the end of the movie: he doesn’t want their children to be a mixture of Black and White in the country they live in. In other words, once he managed to ‘taste the apple’, ‘the fruit’, he doesn’t need it any longer. Looking at the movie one might feel that this couple was immoral, so it shouldn’t have been given any chance to succeed: he had cheated a wife in order to satisfy a black male’s caprice, while she had broken up with a nice Italian boyfriend from her social background. On the other hand, Spike seems to approve of the traditional media promoted white man and black woman, provided that she is a respectable black journalist, that is, another beautiful but at the same time, intellectual woman, a parallel to his own lawyer smart black wife, maybe.

Footnotes:

1. *The Image of the Jew in the Romanian Culture*
2. “autoritate profesionala dublata de un bun comunicator si de un manager eficient al propriilor idei”
3. “cel mai important studiu de imagologie aparut la noi”
4. “Nu cred ca putem intocmi clasamente la antisemitism, asa cum o facem la atletism [...]. A nu vedea nuantele si detaliile, a renunta la analizele obiective si echilibrate, a nu tine cont de conditiile istorice, politice si culturale specifice [...] inseamna a folosi acelasi tip de sabloane, de scheme rudimentare si de clisee mentale pe care le reprobam gandirii antisemite.”
5. “Cred ca nu ne-ar strica studii similare despre imaginea maghiarului sau a tiganului in cultura romana. La fel cum ar fi interesant sa schimbam perspectiva si sa vedem imaginea romanului in culturile altor popoare, ceea ce mi s-ar parea o carte exceptionala, o carte de auto-imagologie. Auto-imagologia este o ramura a imagologiei si cred ca, in cazul romanului, ar fi multe de spus in acest sens, pentru ca el are despre el insusi o imagine stereotipa, care accentueaza in exces virtutiile, dar si viciile sale. Sper deci sa scriu cartea *Imaginea Romanului in Cultura Romana*”
6. ‘erotism exotic’
7. ‘evreica este frumoasa’
8. ‘evreul e destept’
9. “Pentru taranii din Bucovina, Sf. Duminica – o zi sfanta, intruchipata ca o femeie frumoasa, despletita, asociata curateniei si veseliei – este personificata de o evreica”
10. “In general, barbatul confera o senzualitate diferita, femeii considerate diferite (etnic, rasial, religios). Cu cat este o fata considerata mai “diferita”, cu atat mai mare este senzualitatea atribuita ei si cu atat creste “curiozitatea erotica” fata de ea. In America de Nord, de exemplu, acest tip de surplus de senzualitate este asociat negresei (in cantecele folk ale albilor, ea este alintata cu numele de *Brown Sugar*), iar in America de Sud sunt foarte populare cantecele de dragoste in care fata dorita erotic este negresa sau mulatra (*Morenita*).
11. *To the Gypsy Women’s Place*
12. *Legaturi interzise*
13. “Nu se cade pravoslavnicului sa se impreune cu femeia eretica.”
14. “Nu vei incheia casatorii cu aceste popoare: nu-ti vei da fiicele fiilor lor si nu vei lua pe fiicele lor pentru fii tai.”
15. < Societatea “Romanii Verzi”>: “Barbatul care are copii cu o femeie de alt neam, sau vice-versa, creste la sanul lor niste monstri, care jumatate vor iubi pana la nebunie neamul

- in mijlocul caruia au vazut lumina, iar jumatate il vor uri cu inversunare. Sa fereasca Dumnezeu strabanilor nostri pe orice roman sau orice romanca sa dea nastere la asa specimene teratologice!”
16. “Lea! Este o limita in toate! Unde te crezi? In ce casa? O fata tanara in casa unui strain! In ce lume era sa intri? Ce stii tu despre lumea asta, tu, evreica? Nu e nimic aici, decat ura. Ura dezastruoasa impotriva mea, a ta, a tot ceea ce este evreiesc.”
 17. “Nu ar trebui sa ne definim unul impotriva celuilalt, ci ar trebui sa fim toti la fel, oameni, romani, indiferent de religie sau de grupul etnic caruia ii apartinem”
 18. “Esti frumoasa, Lea! Dumnezeu ti-a dat mostenire frumusetea mamelor noastre strabune. Asa de frumoase si de mandre se plimbau reginele noastre pe coastele muntelui Zion.”
 19. “un fel de geamlac cu usile deschise”
 20. “portita deschisa”

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