IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHIES, *DRACULA* AND THE TRANSYLVANIA 'PLACE MYTH'

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Imaginative geographies have become a central concept in Anglo-American cultural geography in recent years. We all form knowledge, ideas and beliefs in our minds about what other places are 'like'. In some cases these ideas may so strong that a distinct place 'myth' develops. In this paper I focus on the Western place myth of Transylvania. In the Western imagination this region has come to be constructed as a remote, backward, sinister place on the very edge of Europe, where vampires and the supernatural reign unchecked. I examine the historical development of this place myth in the West with particular reference to the role of popular culture in reproducing and circulating this myth on a global scale. I also seek to situate this place myth in its broader historical, political and social contexts.

Key words: Imaginative Geographies, Place myth, Transylvania, Romania, Dracula

Introduction

Geography is a subject that has long been firmly grounded in the material world. It has a reputation for focussing on what is visible and tangible – the 'real' world. We study landscapes that we can see, touch, smell, walk over – and, if necessary, measure. Geographers are known as people who engage with the world, rather than distancing themselves from it (Driver 2005). To investigate places and landscapes we need to get 'out there' and experience them for ourselves. It is for this reason that geographers regard fieldwork as so important to the teaching of Geography. We want our students to see for themselves the places, landscapes and environments that we teach them about. And our students frequently take it for granted that geographical 'knowledge' is confined to an observable 'real' world: material places and landscapes.

However, within Anglo-American human geography there has long been a recognition that geography is about more than the visible, material world. Of perhaps equal importance are the geographies that exist in our heads. We all have knowledge about what other places, landscapes and environments are 'like' even though we have no direct first-hand experience of them. It may be tempting to dismiss such 'mental geographies' as trivial and insignificant. However there has long been recognition that the way we think or 'feel' about other places is a big influence on our behavior in the material world. The most obvious illustration is tourism. The whole act of holiday-making is about travel to a place that we have not previously been to. It is underpinned by mental ideas or pictures of the destination held by tourists. When tourists believe that a destination offers them interest, excitement or relaxation they will choose to make a visit to that destination. On the other hand, tourists will shun places believed to be uninteresting (or even dangerous).

Within Anglo-American human geography such mental ideas or pictures about other places and

landscapes are known as 'imaginative geographies' (after Said 1995). At this stage it is important to clarify what is meant by 'imaginative'. In everyday usage the term 'imagination' is frequently associated with creativity, particularly artistic creativity (Driver 2005). For example, we might talk about a particular writer as having a powerful imagination. However the word also has other meanings. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines imagination as "a mental faculty forming images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses". This refers to the ability of the human mind to form mental ideas about objects, events, people – and places - that we have not experienced directly. Similarly, the term 'imaginative' refers to the ability to use the imagination in this way – which is essential in enabling us to understand the world (Light and Dumbrăveanu 2004).

The study of imaginative geographies focuses on the ways that we form geographical knowledge about places, whether these are within our own country or in other parts of the world. On one hand we all gain knowledge about some places through direct personal experience (for example, by growing up there or visiting for a holiday). However, we also gain a vast amount of knowledge about places that we have not been to and experienced for ourselves. I can illustrate this with a simple example from my first year teaching. For the past 10 years I have given students a list of countries and asked them to choose the one they would most like to visit on a holiday. The actual list varies from year to year but the one constant is New Zealand. And every year, regardless of what other countries are on the list, the most popular choice (of around two-thirds of the group) is New Zealand. Then I ask these students if they have already visited New Zealand; to date, not a single student has done so. This demonstrates the way in which young people in the United Kingdom are forming pictures in their minds about what New Zealand is 'like' and that these pictures are predominantly positive and favourable.

When considering imaginative geographies it is important to recognise that such mental geographies are as much collective as they are individual – as the New Zealand example above clearly demonstrates. An acknowledgement of the collective nature of imaginative geographies is an important difference from earlier attempts to investigate geographies of the mind such as behavioural geography, which focused on individual mental images or maps (Gold 1980, Walmsley and Lewis 1984). While people clearly do form ideas and images about other places on an individual basis, this process is also situated within a broader political, economic, social and cultural context and it was the failure to take account of these broader influences that was one of the major criticisms of behavioural geography.

Central to the study of imaginative geographies is the importance of 'representation' – defined as "the cultural practices and forms by which human societies interpret and portray the world around them" (Cloke *et al* 2005: 610). Places are represented in a huge variety of ways – from novels, newspapers, magazines, films, television programmes and tourist brochures to name just a few. Experiencing (or consuming) such representations is crucial for the way in which we construct mental pictures of other places. Moreover, many of these representations are transmitted through 'popular' (or everyday) culture. Such representations of places are frequently 'embedded' in other media that are

intended for entertainment (such as films or novels). As a result we may absorb information about places without being aware that we are doing so and without reflecting on the representations that we have experienced. However, representations of places are always selective and partial: no place can be represented in its entirety. As a result we may construct imaginative geographies of other places that are incomplete, inaccurate, exaggerated or based on clichés or stereotypes (Shields 1991). The ideas and pictures that we have in our minds about other places may be vastly different from what that place is 'really' like but if we do not have first hand experience of that place we are not in a position to judge this.

In some cases, the way in which we imagine other places may be vague, uncertain and poorly defined. We may have only the most superficial impressions about what that place is like. But in other cases we may develop very specific, clear and detailed imaginative geographies of that place. Moreover, there are certain places that acquire a strong reputation in the collective imagination. Such places can be the focus of a powerful set of shared ideas, beliefs, meanings and values and the place can come to represent or 'stand for' something more. Such a collection of ideas has been termed a 'place myth' (Shields 1991; Urry 1995). The term myth in this context refers to a form of belief (Johns and Clarke 2001), in this case about the nature and character of a place. The key point about myths is that, whether or not there is a factual basis for them, they are believed to be true and these beliefs are ways of interpreting and explaining reality. Thus, place myths are enduring ideas about what a place is 'like', regardless of whether these ideas actually bear any relationship with that place in 'reality'.

In this paper I focus on one place myth that has developed an extraordinary resonance within the Western world: the place myth of Transylvania. In particular I consider what Transylvania has come to symbolise or represent in the Western imagination. My approach is interdisciplinary and I use perspectives from cultural geography, literary criticism and cultural studies to examine the historical development of this place myth from the late nineteenth century onwards. I pay particular attention to the role of Western popular culture in circulating, propagating and reproducing a particular 'idea' of Transylvania in the collective imagination.

The Early Development of the Transylvania Place Myth

Up to the late nineteenth century Transylvania was almost unknown in the West. There had been occasional earlier references to the region in English literature (Miller 1997, Andras 1999). For example, Transylvania is briefly mentioned in Shakespeare's *Pericles* while, in Robert Browning's poem *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* (1842), the children of Hamelin taken underground by the piper emerge in Transylvania. During the second half of the nineteenth century a number of travel narratives from Central/Eastern Europe were published, some of included Transylvania (for example, Boner 1865, Crosse 1878, Johnson 1885). These universally portray the region as quaint (even slightly exotic) but backward and undeveloped. If they had heard of it at all, most people in the West knew Transylvania as just one part of the little-known and distant Eastern periphery of Europe.

However, towards the end of the nineteenth century a particular place myth started to be

attached to Transylvania: the region came to be associated with the supernatural and with beliefs and practices that had all but disappeared from Western Europe. The first such portrayal was by Emily Gerard, a Scottish novelist who was married to an officer in the Austro-Hungarian army who was based in Transylvania. Gerard took a particular interest in Transylvanian customs and folklore and in 1885 she published an article in London entitled 'Transylvania Superstitions'. She claimed:

> "Transylvania might well be termed the land of superstition, for nowhere else does this curious crooked plant of delusion flourish as persistently and in such bewildering variety. It would almost seem as though the whole species of demons, pixies, witches and hobgoblins, driven from the rest of Europe by the want of science, had taken refuge within this mountain rampart, well aware that here they would find secure lurking-places, whence they might defy their persecutors yet awhile" (1885: 130).

Gerard followed her article with a book entitled *The Land Beyond the Forest* (1888) in which Transylvania is linked for the first time with vampires. She wrote: "Most decidedly evil is the *nosferatu* or vampire, in which every Roumanian peasant believed as firmly as he does in heaven or hell" (1888: 185). The source of her observation is unclear since the word *nosferatu* does not exist in Romanian (or any other language) and, in any case, vampires are unknown in Transylvanian folklore.

There are a number of significant elements of Gerard's account of Transylvania. First the region is presented as a remote and almost unknown place (the 'land <u>beyond</u> the forest') on the very edge of Europe. It is also clearly portrayed as somewhere

untouched by Western rationality and science, so that supernatural and mythical creatures that no longer had any place in Western Europe were able to find safe refuge in Transylvania. Moreover, superstition, and fear of the supernatural are presented as an essential part of the fabric of everyday life for rural Romanians. For a reader in the West such an account would firmly construct Transylvania as strange, 'different' and decidedly Other.

A few years later, Transylvania was portrayed in a very similar way, this time in the French language. In 1893 Jules Verne published *Le Château des Carpathes (The Castle of the Carpathians).* Transylvania is repeatedly portrayed as being remote, backward and far removed from the 'civilisation' of Western Europe. For example:

> "Civilisation is like air or water. Wherever there is a passage, be it only a fissure, it will penetrate and modify the conditions of a country. But it must be admitted that no fissure has yet been found through this southern portion of the Carpathians" (p. 33).

Like Gerard, Verne portrayed the people of Transylvania as superstitious and fearful of the supernatural. For example, Transylvania is described as one of the most superstitious countries of Europe and as being "still much attached to the superstitions of the early ages" (p. 1). Although Verne had probably not read Gerard's accounts the similarity between them in the way that they situate Transylvania in 'another Europe' is striking.

However, the most significant contribution to the development of the Transylvania place myth was, of course, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, published in 1897.

Stoker had never visited Transylvania and when he started his novel in 1890 he probably knew next to nothing about the region. Indeed, his working notes indicate that, following the established conventions of Gothic fiction, he had originally intended to locate *Dracula* in an area of Eastern Austria known as Styria (Leatherdale 1985). However, in the course of writing the novel Stoker decided to move the action to Transylvania. He is known to have read Gerard's (1885) article about Transylvanian superstitions and given that he was writing a vampire novel, it undoubtedly made sense to locate the action in a remote part of Europe where, according to Gerard, belief in vampires was widespread. Stoker subsequently gained more information about Transylvania through reading travellers' accounts of the region (Miller 1997, 2000).

In *Dracula*, Stoker painted a vivid picture of Transylvania. It is presented as a remote and sinister place on the very margins of Europe. Thus, Jonathan Harker (the novel's early narrator) describes the region as "one of the wildest and least known portions of Europe" (Stoker 1997: 10). Count Dracula himself remarks: "We are in Transylvania; and Transylvania is not England. Our ways are not your ways, and there will be to you many strange things" (pp. 26-27). Transylvania is also portrayed as emphatically Eastern. On leaving Budapest Harker notes: "The impression I had was that we were leaving the West and entering the East" (p. 9). He later remarks: "It seems to me that the further East you go the more unpunctual are the trains" (p. 11). Moreover, following Gerard, Stoker presents Transylvania as a place ruled by the occult and the supernatural. Harker notes: "I read that every known

superstition in the world is gathered into the horseshoe of the Carpathians, as if it were the centre of some sort of imaginative whirlpool" (Stoker 1997: 10). Later he is told: "It is the eve of St George's Day. Do you not know that tonight, when the clock strikes midnight, all the evil things in the world will have full sway?". The population of Transylvania are represented as exotic, rustic but essentially harmless: they are also "very, very superstitious" (p. 312). Finally, even the physical landscape of Transylvania is presented as being strange and demonic, a place that does not obey the normal laws of science:

> "The very place, where ha have been alive, Un-dead for all these centuries, is full of strangeness of the geologic and chemical world. There are deep caverns and fissures that reach none know whither. There have been volcanoes, some of whose openings still send out waters of strange properties, and gases that kill or make to vivify. Doubtless, there is something magnetic or electric in some of these combinations of occult forces which work for physical life in strange way" (p. 278)

Bram Stoker was not describing Transylvania; instead he was effectively inventing it. His account of Transylvania owed more to his imagination than to any first-hand experience of the region. His novel was about a sinister, predatory vampire – Count Dracula – that terrorises his own land and is set on expanding his 'territory' by invading England. Therefore Stoker needed a believable home for his vampire. It had to be a sinister, terrifying place where the supernatural reigns supreme; a place that represented threat and menace. But Transylvania also had to be just recognisable enough to be

European (Dracula himself is a Hungarian aristocrat), but located far from the 'civilised' West. Transylvania suited Stoker's purpose perfectly. The very name Transylvania –' the land beyond the forest' – immediately evokes somewhere remote, strange and timeless. Stoker could also take advantage of the fact that hardly anybody in Victorian England knew what or where Transylvania was. In effect, Stoker appropriated Transylvania to suit his purposes. As such, *Dracula* is one example of Western Europe's 'imaginative colonisation' of South East Europe (Goldsworthy 1998: 2) to supply its literary and entertainment industry.

To understand better the significance of the Transylvania place myth we need to look at the broader context in which *Dracula* was written. For a start, the novel was published in Victorian Britain, a country that was a major political and economic power. As such, Stoker's writing is infused with an imperial and colonial geographical imagination (cf. Pile 2005) which places Britain firmly at the centre of the developed and 'civilised' world. As a result there is a tendency to treat the more peripheral and under-developed parts of Europe with a certain amount of imperial condescension (cf. Goldsworthy 1998). Thus readers of *Dracula* would have had little difficulty in believing in the existence of Transylvania as a backward and under-developed periphery of Europe, stalked by vampires and other supernatural creatures. Indeed, in the Victorian imagination the belief in 'barbarian' places (such as Transylvania) was a way of affirming Britain's self-appointed place at the pinnacle of Western 'civilisation' (cf. Said 1995).

However, for all the self-confidence of late Victoria Britain, there was, paradoxically, also a national mood of uncertainty, doubt and fear, which is expressed in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. At the end of a century that had witnessed unprecedented change, prosperity and imperial expansion some Victorians were "uneasily aware of the fragility of their sophisticated civilization" (Auerbach and Skal 1997: x). Moreover, Britain at the end of the nineteenth century was gripped by a perception of political and economic decline (Arata 1990) and a sense that its 'greatness' was now over. In this context Victorians were apprehensive that their 'civilized' country was vulnerable to attack and invasion from 'savage' and 'barbarian' forces from outside Europe (Arata 1990; Andras 1999). Indeed, this theme was so common in late Victorian literature that *Dracula* appeared commonplace as an adventure story that pitted Englishmen against foreign monsters (Auerbach and Skal 1997). In the British colonial imagination the closest source of 'foreign' invaders and 'barbarians' was to be found on the Eastern and Southern fringes of Europe. In *Dracula* this British anguish about the 'East' is projected onto Transylvania – a place that few people in Britain knew of, but which they were prepared to believe represented "an indistinct danger which might menace Western civilization" (Andras 1999). It is perhaps for this reason that Wall (1984:20) describes Transylvania as "Europe's unconscious".

While the representation of Transylvania in *Dracula* reveals much about specifically British attitudes and fears at the end of the nineteenth century it also expresses and articulates much broader Western ideas about the nature and

boundaries of Europe itself (Wolff 1994, Todorova 1997; Dittmer 2002/2003). In particular, since the seventeenth century, the West has treated Europe as being divided into two halves, West and East (Wolff 1994). Western Europe has defined itself as being the centre of the Modern world, characterised by civilisation, development, rationality and progress. However, in the Western mind these qualities were thought to be absent or under-developed in the East of Europe which came to be viewed instead as a backward, static, under-developed and less civilised periphery of Europe. Over time it came to be taken for granted in the West that Europe was divided between a 'civilised' West and a more primitive 'East'. Hence, Eastern Europe came to be constructed as the counterpart, opposite or 'Other' of the West. It is somewhere that the West often evokes as an ambiguous and transitional space, neither fully European nor fully Asian (Dittmer 2002/2003). As Todorova (1997: 188) argues, this region is "geographically inextricable from Europe, yet culturally constructed as "the other" within". For the West it is an unpredictable space, viewed with uncertainty and suspicion.

Again, these ideas about the Eastern margins of Europe are clearly expressed in *Dracula*. The novel presents Transylvania as identifiably part of Europe. It was, after all, a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire when the novel was written. It is connected to the rest of Europe through a modern (if slow) rail network. German – Europe's language of trade (Kittler 1989) – is widely spoken in Transylvania. The region also has its own, recognisably European, aristocracy (Dracula is, after all, a Count). And there are other features of Stoker's Transylvania –

buildings, transport, food and drink, clothing and religion – that it shares with the West of Europe. But at the same time there is much about Transylvania that is 'different' from the West. This is "a distinctly eastern portion of Europe where the laws and customs of the West do not apply" (Wasson 1966: 24). It is an area where the population is mostly rural; where Western Modernity has barely penetrated, where local people are fearful and superstitious; and where the supernatural reigns unchecked. In short *Dracula* presents Transylvania as sufficiently different from the West to be menacing, sinister and dangerous. It is an entirely plausible home for a monster intent on invading and colonising the civilised West.

The Transylvania Place Myth in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Had *Dracula* enjoyed the same success as Bram Stoker's other novels it would have been all but unknown today. In such a case Transylvania would be known not as an ominous place haunted by vampires and the supernatural but simply as a mountainous region of contemporary Romania. Indeed, the word 'Transylvania' would probably be as little known in the West as Wallachia, Ruthenia or Slavonia. However, *Dracula* has enjoyed an extraordinary popularity. It has been reprinted numerous times (and has never been out of print) and has also been translated into more than 25 other languages. In addition, the novel has been adapted for a range of other media including stage and screen. As a result, Bram Stoker's portrayal of Transylvania has circulated among a global audience.

Cinema has played a crucial role in the reproduction and circulation of the Transylvania

place myth. The first film based on *Dracula* was F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*, made in Germany in 1922. The central character is Count Orlok (clearly based on Count Dracula) a sinister, rat-like vampire. Orlok's home is Transylvania, described in the film as a land of ghosts and robbers, and represented visually as a barren, mountainous wasteland. The film was well regarded, but its circulation was limited: most copies were destroyed as a result of legal action for infringement of copyright by Bram Stoker's widow.

A far more influential film was Universal's 1931 version of Dracula, directed by Tod Browning and starring the Hungarian actor Bela Lugosi. Described as the most influential of all vampire films (Melton 1999) this version of Dracula was a huge commercial success. It also popularised a defining image for Count Dracula as a suave but sinister European aristocrat with black cape, piercing eyes, sleek black hair and a strong Eastern European accent (Skal 1990). The film was also notable for its portrayal of Transylvania, where the first 17 minutes (of a total of 75) of the film are set. All the elements of the Transylvania place myth are present: rugged, mist-shrouded mountains; Dracula's sinister castle on a mountain peak; and superstitious peasants living in fear of vampires and supernatural forces. This portrayal of Transylvania also has a distinctly Hungarian feel to it (perhaps as a result of Lugosi's influence). For example, the peasants in the Borgo Pass are speaking Hungarian while the signs outside a local inn are written in Hungarian. Overall this film played a key role in constructing Transylvania as a strange and distant land in the American popular imagination. In addition, Universal made a parallel version of the film in Spanish, largely for

the Latin American market so that the myth of Transylvania also circulated in the Spanish-speaking world. Universal went on to make a number of further films featuring Count Dracula during the 1930s and 1940s.

Indeed, by the time of the Second World War Count Dracula had become a recognisable cinematic monster, a figure of both hate and fear. This was demonstrated by an American propaganda poster which showed the image of a German soldier onto which had been added exposed canine teeth dripping blood in the style of Dracula (Ronay 1972; Leatherdale 1985). In this interpretation Dracula now represented the enemy of the West. Indeed, Count Dracula proved a highly adaptable enemy. During the Cold War, Dracula came to symbolise the threat posed by Soviet Communism to the capitalist, democratic West. Understood in this way, Dracula represented "those forces in Eastern Europe which seek to overthrow, through violence and subversion, the more progressive democratic civilization of the West" (Wasson 1966: 24). Dracula – like the Soviet Union – was an enemy to be feared and watched. Such an interpretation had additional resonance in that Transylvania, part of the Socialist Republic of Romania, was now situated firmly behind the Iron Curtain, further adding to the mystery and alterity of the region in the Western imagination.

Meanwhile, the popularity of Dracula continued to increase throughout the post-War period. The Dracula myth was reinvigorated by Hammer Studios in Britain which produced a collection of further Dracula films between 1958 and 1973. Christopher Lee in the title role portrayed the Count as a

ferocious and menacing predator from Eastern Europe. Further cinematic versions of *Dracula* were made in America in 1973 and 1979. But Dracula films were not confined to the English-speaking world. In the 1960s and 1970s films featuring Dracula were also produced in France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Philippines, Portugal, Spain and Switzerland (Skal 1996). By now, Count Dracula was an internationally known cinematic villain, with the result that the Transylvania place myth continued to gain momentum and extend its circulation.

Public interest in Dracula received an additional stimulus with the publication in America of a book entitled *In Search of Dracula* (McNally and Florescu 1972). The authors claimed that there was a factual basis for Count Dracula. They argued that, in writing *Dracula*, Bram Stoker had unearthed the life and deeds of Vlad Țepeş and had used the voievode as the inspiration for his vampire. *In Search of Dracula* is unequivocal in presenting Vlad Țepeş as a tyrant and psychopath. For good measure it also claimed that vampires were an integral part of Transylvanian folklore: indeed, after Stoker's novel itself, *In Search of Dracula* has probably played the decisive role in constructing Transylvania as a land of vampires in the Western (especially American) popular imagination. The book has subsequently been the subject of a vigorous critique (Miller 1997, 2000) which has challenged many of its claims and conclusions. Nevertheless, in the early 1970s *In Search of Dracula* successfully caught the public mood in America seeming to confer an additional authenticity and legitimacy on Count Dracula.

Indeed, during the 1970s vampires were at the height of their popularity in America (Auerbach 1995) as a broader vampire sub-culture emerged that took its inspiration from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Thus there was a big increase in vampire cinema, while a new genre of vampire fiction emerged, inspired initially by Anne Rich's *Interview with a Vampire*. Much of this new wave of vampire cinema and fiction eagerly adopted Stoker's portrayal of Transylvania: the region continued to represent a convenient (and seemingly natural) home for vampires and other supernatural creatures. Indeed, by this time Transylvania had become inseparable from vampires, Gothic horror and the supernatural in the Western imagination. This is apparent in the following quote from a book published in America for Dracula enthusiasts:

> "What other land calls up such mystical visions of shrouded, misty forests; of driverless coaches pounding up treacherous, uncharted trails to hidden castles; of black-cloaked figures stalking across moonlit cemeteries in the chill of night?… Transylvania lies in that "twilight zone" of the mind – a place that just *might* exist" (Brokaw 1976: 12-13).

Such was the mystery, allure and appeal of Transylvania that, from the late 1960s onwards, Western tourists travelled to Romania in increasing numbers on their own searches for Dracula, vampires and the supernatural in Transylvania (Light 2007). Given that vampires are unknown in Transylvanian folklore and that socialist Romania had little inclination to cater for Western visitors in search of the supernatural, many of these tourists must have returned home disappointed. Nevertheless, such were the expectations of Transylvania that Western tourists were able to make it into what they wanted it to be. The best

example is the transformation of Bran Castle into "Dracula's Castle". Although the building has no connection with either Stoker's fictional vampire or with Vlad Ţepeş, Western tourists projected all their expectations of Transylvania onto it. In this sense, renaming Bran as "Dracula's Castle" was an act of appropriation by those visitors who wanted (or needed) to encounter Dracula in some form during a visit to Transylvania (*ibid*).

Indeed, tourism has been another medium for through which the Transylvania place myth has been reproduced. Romania's tourist planners have consistently been reluctant to exploit the Transylvania place myth in order to promote tourism in Romania and create a recognisable brand for the country. However, Western holiday operators have had few such reservations. Instead, they have been eager to exploit Western myths of Transylvania as means of selling holiday packages to Romania. Take, for example, this quote from a British holiday brochure:

> "Transylvania! The very word conjures up romantic images of a mysterious land where myths and legends are closely woven into the fabric of everyday life. Wooded forests line the slopes of the Carpathians mountains – home, rumour, has it, to werewolves and vampires. Towering castles with fairytale turrets grace the skyline…And is Count Dracula man or myth – we'll let you decide". (Shearings Holidays 2001: 127)

The description of Transylvania in this way mobilises the existing place myth as means of selling holidays to those tourists who are attracted to this idea of Transylvania. But at the same time it is reproducing and reinforcing this idea or myth and

contributing to its continued resonance in the Western imagination.

By the late twentieth century Transylvania had become virtually synonymous with vampires and the supernatural. However, such was Transylvania's reputation that the region became a form of generic home for everything that was strange or wonderful within Western popular culture. As Skal (1996: 194) dryly observes Transylvania has become "a pop culture dumping ground for just about every monster under the sun – not just vampires, but just as frequently Frankensteins, mummies, werewolves". The best recent illustration is the 2004 film *Van Helsing* (directed by Stephen Sommers) in which Transylvania is home not only to Count Dracula, but also Frankenstein's monster, the Wolf Man and various werewolves. In the Western imagination, Transylvania has become a recognisable and plausible home for every type of evil, predatory or supernatural creature that can be imagined.

Conclusion

Geography does not deal only with the physical, material world. We also have extensive geographical knowledge in our heads - in the forms of ideas, beliefs and stereotypes about what other places are 'like'. Within the Anglo-American geographical tradition such knowledge is known as 'imaginative geographies'. Such mental geographies are individual constructions but they are also formed collectively within a particular political, economic and social context. Thus, we form collective ideas about the nature of places that most of us have not been to. In some cases these ideas are so powerful and clearly-defined that they can be identified as

constituting a 'place myth': a set of beliefs about a place that may not have any correspondence with what that place is like in 'reality', but which nevertheless have a wider meaning and significance in the collective imagination.

In this paper I have examined the place-myth of Transylvania in the Western popular imagination and I have paid particular attention to the role of popular culture in creating, circulating and reproducing this myth. A decisive role was played by one late nineteenth century novel, *Dracula*. Bram Stoker's portrayal of Transylvania was almost entirely an imaginative construct but nevertheless it connected with deep-rooted apprehensions in *fin de siècle* Britain about national decline and fear of the 'East'. For readers of *Dracula*, Transylvania was a place that they could believe in: a mysterious and menacing Eastern realm that was home to supernatural creatures and practices that had disappeared from Western Europe. This myth of Transylvania was eagerly exploited by cinema, which was instrumental in introducing it to a global audience. And with the rise of a much broader vampire and horror sub-culture within Western societies Transylvania has been appropriated as a generic home of all that is strange, magical and sinister. As Gelder (1994) notes, a real place has been turned into a fantasy. Almost everybody in the West has heard of Transylvania but not all realise that it is a real place.

In this paper I have focused on just one place myth of Transylvania: that which exists in the West. However, places can be interpreted in many different ways and can mean different things to different groups of people. As such, a place may be the focus of multiple place myths. For example, Romanians do not identify at all with the Western place myth of Transylvania. For them, Transylvania means something entirely different: it is a place that is the cradle of their political and cultural identity. And, of course, the Hungarian place myth of Transylvania will be completely different from the Western and Romanian versions.

This exploration of the Transylvania place myth also illustrates how imaginative geographies are linked to wider issues of power and inequality. It goes without saying that Romanians vigorously reject the Western place myth of Transylvania and do not accept that the region is the home of vampires and the supernatural. Moreover, since 1989 Romania has been striving to remake itself as a modern, democratic, developed European country and to present itself to the EU in these terms. Yet this project is frustrated by Western imaginative geographies of Transylvania – and Romania more generally – as a backward, undeveloped and sinister place that menaces the West. Clearly, Romania is not represented in the way that it would choose to represent itself but instead in the way that the West chooses to represent it (cf Morgan and Pritchard 1998). Yet, relatively speaking, Romania has less cultural power than the West so that it has had little success (to date) in countering the Western portrayals of Transylvania. As such, Transylvania can be identified as a site of cultural struggle between Western representations of the region as the home of the strange and the supernatural and Romania's efforts to define itself in its own way and on its own terms.

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