

BOOK REVIEW:

Schiop, Adrian. 2018 [2017]. *Șmecherie și lume rea: Universul social al manelelor* [Trickery and Perverted World. The Social Universe Of Manele]. Kishinev: Cartier Anthropologic

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Published in 2017 and re-edited in 2018, *Șmecherie și lume rea: Universul social al manelelor* [Trickery and Perverted World: The Social Universe of Manele] was written by Romanian author Adrian Schiop as an adaptation of his doctoral thesis in anthropology on *manele* (sg. *manea*), a genre of pop folk music with an oriental twist that gained popularity in Romania after the fall of the communist regime.

This work by Schiop focuses on one of the popular themes of the songs: trickery (*șmecherie*), defined as the ability to get something, e.g., to get rich, by fooling others. He explores the form that trickery takes in the everyday life of the audience and in the songs by using semi-structured and non-structured interviews with musicians, singers, and discussions with *manele* fans, a content analysis of songs, participative observations in bars and clubs dedicated to the genre in Bucharest, analysis of press articles, YouTube archives of private events and ethnographic observations in Ferentari and in a village in Transylvania. Schiop shows that *trickery*, as manifested in songs and in everyday life, creates distrust of others and a perverse (*rea*) worldview.

In the first of five chapters, Schiop presents the evolution of the genre since 1980. He shows that the popularity of *manele* can be interpreted in terms of periodic tendencies trending from mass to marginal popularity. From 1985 to 1992, the genre gained popularity, even though it was not featured in the communist mass media. It was praised for its ability to describe the everyday life of its listeners, which was characterized by frequent shortages of goods and food and the need to be resourceful in order to survive. From 1992 to 2000, the genre was overshadowed by Anglo-American pop music, which offered an opportunity for *manele* to link itself with “businessmen from the underground economy” (Schiop, 2016, p. 189). When the mass media began to carry it in 2000, because of its new Anglo-American sound, *manele* gained incredible national popularity. However, only bands made up of majority non-Roma members benefited from this trend. It is also during this period that *manele* were accused in media campaigns of promoting immoral values to the youth. After 2008, the genre became less popular, although *manele* were still the fourth favourite musical genre of Romanians 18 and older by 2017 (Institutul

național pentru cercetare și formare culturală, 2018).¹ Schiop shows that the popularity of the genre is determined by how much the audience sees itself in the lyrics and themes of the songs and whether it is featured in the mass media. He also discusses the evolution of the *manele* industry and its professionalization.

The second and third chapters deal with how the audience influences the themes of *manele* songs. Schiop focuses on two social categories which make up an important part of the audience: *bagabonții* and “businessmen from the underground economy” (Schiop, 2016, p. 189) who value the use of trickery and are the protagonists who embody it in *manele* songs. They respectively belong to the “poor audience” (*publicul sărac*) (p. 67) and the “rich audience” (*publicul bogat*) (p. 121) of the genre.

In the second chapter, the author describes *bagabonții*, a label given to men who have little money but like spending it on entertainment, and who like to seduce women and sometimes do all sorts of scams. To satisfy the desires of the *bagabonții*, the singers refer to the tricks and cleverness that enables them to seduce women, have sex and make easy money. The lyrics reflect the desires and values of the audience and are characteristic of the musical tradition from which *manele* originates: the folk (minstrel) bands called “*lăutarii*”. The *lăutarii* are groups of musicians who usually play folk songs on demand for an audience in exchange for money. *Manele* singers play requests, e.g., announce the name of the person requesting the song and how much money he paid for it. This dynamic gives the audience the power to influence the “discursive universe” (*universul de discurs*) of the songs (p. 67), as the ones they like are the ones they will pay money to hear.

In the third chapter, Schiop shows that the “businessmen from the underground economy” (Schiop, 2016, p. 189) have a strong influence on *manele*, because they tend to be very rich and powerful. When hiring a singer to play at a private event, they tend to feel as if they were the personification of the “wiseguys” (Schiop, 2016, p. 188) (*șmecherii*), a popular theme of the *manele* songs before 2010. To please their audience, the singers will chant about the “wiseguys”, who are described in the songs as men who enrich themselves by their trickery and cleverness and who are envied for their success. This particular audience also use the musicians as a way of showing off their financial power and prestige. Schiop recalls that to book a popular *manele* singer like Florin Salam for one night can cost up to 10,000 €, which speaks volumes about one’s financial status and cleverness.

In the fourth chapter, Schiop presents the main thesis of his book and argues that trickery in everyday life presents the world as perverted and filled with “two-faced” (*două fețe*) (p. 181) friends, whom people should be wary of. Relationships of trust exist only between family members and with God. In this chapter, Schiop presents the different forms that trickery can take in everyday life and the strategies

¹ In order of preference, the percentage for the top five genres that Romanians across the country said they listened to “frequently” (*des*) or “very frequently” (*foarte des*) were: 48 percent folk music (*populară*) and *etno*, 30 percent Romanian pop; 19 percent foreign pop; 17 percent *manele* and 11 percent religious music (Institutul național pentru cercetare și formare culturală, 2018: 196).

people use to deal with the distrust it creates. He offers the example of *vrăjeala*, the ruse used to make someone believe something false in order to trick them, such as selling someone an old phone by telling them it is brand new. If trickery creates distrust, Schiop describes the strategies used by people to create “relational security” (*securitate relațională*) (p. 168), where they will not be victimized by trickery. For example, people may say they have a “moral compass” which prevents them from tricking others.

The last chapter² of the book opens with a reflection on the importance of considering *manele* as a form of *gangsta pop*. Recalling that his doctoral research was in an anthropology program studying public policy, Schiop argues that this label best reflects the influence of *gangsta rap* on *manele* after 2000 and offers, at the same time, a non-stigmatizing label with an aura of “cool” (p. 186). *Gangsta pop* means that *manele* did not maintain the subversive aspect of *gangsta rap* and that the latter helped *manele* gain popularity in the 2000s. People then realized that a genre embedded in what they considered as a “modern” and “civilized” society shared themes with *manele*, such as power and material wealth. This conferred social legitimacy on the genre.

Schiop’s book contributes to the existing literature on *manele* a deep reflection on how the social representations of everyday life and social relationships in Romania have influenced the “poetics” (*poetică*) of the songs (p. 136). The form and writing style of the book is captivating, as Schiop alternates between anecdotes, observations, quotes from individuals and passages from song lyrics. This allows him to show the interconnections between social representations and the themes of the songs. Even though his book is aimed at an academic audience, anyone who is interested in learning more about *manele* will realize from reading it that the genre comes from a complex universe. The broad diversity of qualitative methods on which the author relied makes this work an intriguing and profound reflection on a central theme of a musical genre which, since the fall of the communist regime, has gained a special place in the popular music landscape of the country.

Reference list

1. Institutul național pentru cercetare și formare culturală. 2018. “Barometrul de Consum Cultural 2017. Cultura în pragul Centenarului mării uniri: identitate, patrimoniu și practici culturale [Cultural Consumption Barometer 2017. Culture on the Threshold of the Centenary of the Great Union: Identity, Heritage and Cultural Practices].” București: Editură Universitară. Accessed at: https://www.culturadata.ro/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/2018_Barometrul_de_consum_cultural_web.pdf (26 July 2019)

² Schiop’s book has a text in the annex that was previously published in *Criticatac* (2011) entitled “Cum au îngropat elitele României manelele. O poveste cu cocalari [How Romania’s elite buried *manele*: A story about *cocalari*]”.

2. Schiop, Adrian. 2016. "Cum au îngropat elitele României manelele. O poveste cu cocalari [How Romania's elite buried *manele*. A story about *cocalari*]." CriticAtac. Accessed at: <https://www.criticatac.ro/cum-au-ingropat-elitele-romaniei-manelele-o-poveste-cu-cocalari/>
3. Schiop, Adrian. 2016. "Manele and the Underworld." in Beissinger, Margaret, Speranța Rădulescu and Anca Giurchescu (eds.). *Manele in Romania: Cultural expression and social meaning in Balkan popular music*. London: Rowman & Littlefield: 185–204.