

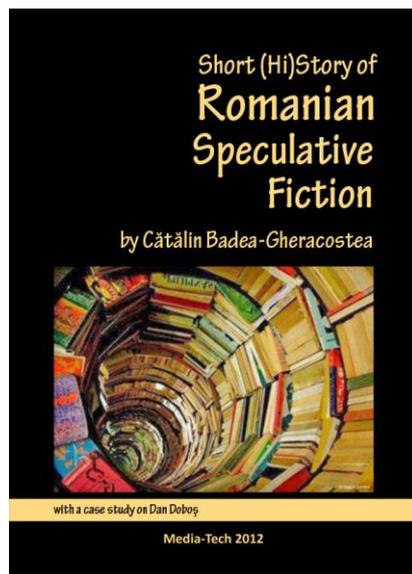
The ISF is proud to present a series of articles by Cătălin Badea-Gheracostea called “Short (Hi)Story of Romanian Speculative Fiction”.

This great pamphlet of Romanian Speculative Fiction was presented in Croatia, during the Eurocon 2012, and aims to “raise awareness, to inform and to be liked”. Starting off today, we will present the full pamphlet in a series of chapters, published once a week.

The Editor in Chief: Roberto Mendes

## **Short (Hi)Story of Romanian Speculative Fiction**

told for strangers,  
aliens and secluded scholars  
by  
**Cătălin Badea-Gheracostea**



### **The Reassess before The Start**

It is the Romanian way of doing things, or at least we like to consider it so, to ponder right at the beginning of an endeavour, in the very moment when others would say “Go!”. In other words, we shall start this run through Romanian Speculative Fiction with a “Stop!”. I believe it is not only a matter of style, of national identity, but this will help the reader enter the right frame of mind for the journey he or she will take with us.

There are three purposes of this pamphlet and all can be better fulfilled if all are taken simultaneously into consideration. The first is to raise awareness, the second is to inform, the third is to be liked. A pamphlet has some liberties that an academic paper has not and in these liberties lies sometimes a faster comprehension. One of these liberties will be the lighter writing, prone to bring smiles on the readers’ lips. Another might be the fast-forward

(fast-backward, in this very case) approach, which is suggested primarily by the almost non-existing translations of Romanian writings with “speculative fiction/SF” label on them. To present 200 years of literature, no matter how thin the niche might be, is a work for a storyteller, because there is the need to summarize subjects, novels, tendencies. That storyteller better brace himself and I, in his role, have to ask my reader for tolerance, promising I will not give away too many of an abstract term and judgement, letting the entry **Romania** from *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction* by John Clute, to end that mission ([www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/romania](http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/romania)).

One, two more things before we actually start storytelling about Romanian SF: unlike the “normal” history of a literature which starts at the beginning of the beginning, this pamphlet gives a fall back approach, considering that the present is more important than the past, without diminishing the causalities in all their extra- and intra-literary forms and without disrespecting any of the “Founding Fathers”, or Mothers, whomever they might have been. Also, unlike other (hi)stories, this would bring in the front line/front pages the other historians, critics and theorists: without them to have fun storytelling the Romanian speculative fiction would be a multi-layered superficial attempt.

### The Romanian Speculative Fiction as it sees itself

When these lines are written, at the beginning of the year 2012, to be a SF writer or artist in Romanian language and space is not unheard of and it is nothing to be ashamed about, but definitely is not putting bread on the table. To be a SF critic or theoriser is then a stranger than average part time job without pay. This being said it is proof for the genuine passion and drive the Romanian authors have for their fiction and non-fiction writings. It helps that every Romanian author has today a very dedicated fan base, numbered in tens, maybe hundreds, who agitate the larger public who might buy Romanian speculative fiction volumes in thousands... This is still to be achieved.

The way there is paved by the literary prizes given for speculative fiction of Romanian authors, following the Nebula and Hugo examples. The media coverage which every prize is gaining marks a forward step for the authors and for the genre itself. So, the “Romanian Nebula Award” would be “Premiul **Vladimir Colin**” - it has a non-annual periodicity, it started in 1999 and has had five editions. Its jury of five consists of critics, writers and academics. In the current form, **Vladimir Colin** was conceived by Ion Hobana and Gerard Klein, both friends of Vladimir Colin – one of the legendary figures of Romanian SF&F literature -, like a tribute to his memory. The “Romanian Hugo Award” would be the national convention prize, the **RomCon** – it has a longer existence than the **Colin**, but went under great changes in its voting procedures and several “forgotten years” tribulations. Its edition of 2012 is a step to normalcy. In between those two awards, associations (ARSFAN, SRSFF), gatherings of fans or magazines (*Galileo*, *Helion*) held some contests with prizes or just vote on the Romanian SF from that specific year.

At the beginning of the nineties, after the collapse of the communist dictator Ceausescu’s regime, with the disappearance of censorship, the Romanian book market was flooded with translations, and the Romanian authors’ volumes were lost in recurrent tsunamis of foreign books. *Dune* sold 100 000 copies of its first Romanian printed edition. It still sells. *Săritorii în gol* (*Jumpers in the Void*), of Mihail Grămescu, coming out almost alongside *Dune*, never made it beyond 2000 copies. Only 15 years before that, *Aporisticon* by the same Grămescu was published in 150000 copies. And today, the average first printing run for a Romanian author is never bigger than 500 copies. I saw 50 copies editions too, for critique and theory...

The Romanian old media treats speculative fiction as an appendix to Hollywood. The flooding of American films and TV shows gave small chances to Romanian creators. After the badly preserved and less and less showed filmography of Ion Popescu-Gopo, the “Romanian Walt Disney”, with his peak years in the ‘60s and ‘70s, the isolated and somehow

downgraded work in video clips of Adrian Chifu seems to reach only the pace of post-industrial desolation. It is not true, in 2012, the people is dancing on Adrian Chifu's music in clubs all over the country. Youtube'im for *Aion Photon* or *Time Travel*. The national radio, with the oldest broadcast on science fiction (30 years, celebrated in February 2012), has *Exploratorii Lumii de Mâine (The Explorers of the Tomorrow's World)*, where Ștefan Ghidoveanu presents Romanian and international SF actuality - with insights and dialogues about books, events, films and games - for half an hour, in every second Saturday.

Why is this important to know? Because an outsider needs to asses the sheer **area** of the subject, of a market even. Area calculation is not enough for a complete view, let's see what is the **depth** of Romanian speculative fiction phenomenon.

Well, it is good to say, from an academic point of view, Romanian SF goes very deep. The first university degree obtained in Romania on the study of science fiction belongs to Ion Hobana, at the beginning of the '50s. Today, a science fiction or fantasy academic degrees, even PhD.'s, are no longer a curiosity, some Universities having optional science fiction studies included in their Literature Department's curricula. The first PhD. in Literature, in Romania, with a thesis on science fiction, belongs to Florin Manolescu, at the end of the '70s, and that came out as the first extensive monography on science fiction as a genre, in Romanian language, in 1980: *Literatura SF (SF literature)*, one of my personal dearest readings. Moreover, some highschool or even primary school literature manuals have examples of science fiction texts. The short story *Broasca (The Frog)* by Romanian author Vladimir Colin and excerpts from *Cyberiad*, by Stanislaw Lem, are easy to remember. So, I can say the educational system in Romania is not impervious to science fiction or speculative fiction.

The new media brings new chances for Romanian speculative fiction. If we are not published on paper enough, there is always a site available. With various grades of professionalism, with or without a parallel issue on paper, Romanian web-sites cover the internal production of text. At the beginning of 2012, **seven sites** are important for their particular approach. [www.atelierkult.com](http://www.atelierkult.com), cared for by Bogdan Bucheru and Cătălin Sandu, is a workshop, a wild creative-writing course, if I may, where tens of amateurs made their first step to more professional writing. <http://fanzin.clubsf.ro/>, brings the youngest generation of Romanian SF writers and commentators under the title of *Gazeta SF (SF Gazette)*; started as a fanzin, it is the fastest growing and most ambitious web presence for speculative fiction in Romanian. <http://revista-galileo.ro/> is the web issue, with daily uploads, of the printed magazine *Galileo* (four issues till today, in paperback book format, with an average of 200 pages), a sidekick of Millenium Books publishing house, where Horia Nicola Ursu and Michael Haulică appear to be the most dedicated publishers of Romanian SF in recent years. Maybe similar with *Galileo* at its founding, [http://revistanautilus.ro](http://revistanautilus.ro/), even without a printed self, tried from the beginning to be a support for Romanian authors and an interface with its mother publishing house, the behemoth Nemira, publisher of the above mentioned *Dune* editions. The difference between the last two sites is that Nemira published only one Romanian SF author in more than six years, while Millenium Books counts on them! *Nautilus*, which has the very name of Nemira's science fiction collection, is today, after 50 issues, an entity with no relevance in its mother's publishing policy of Romanian authors. Maybe that is why *Nautilus* pairs so well in attitude and ideology with [www.srsff.ro](http://www.srsff.ro), a publication which is primarily an association site, very prone to partisanship, but benign through its literature quality standards. Both Marian Truță from *Nautilus* and SRSFF's site people courted the Eagle publishing house, where Mugur Cornilă has had in 2011 the most significant jolt for Romanian speculative fiction, organising an original novel contest. With SRSFF, Eagle publishing house had two short-stories anthologies, thoroughly presented in the above site. The voice of tradition, or of conservatory views for antagonists, is [www.helionsf.eu](http://www.helionsf.eu), with a significant archive at [www.helionsf.ro](http://www.helionsf.ro). It is the website of the oldest science fiction magazine from Romania, *Helion*, bearing the name of one of the oldest science fiction clubs of Romania. 30 years and 30 printed issues were celebrated in 2011, with a great joy by the club members and their fandom friends, in the hometown of

Timisoara. Being a generational melting pot as well as a place where not only literature, but also visual arts can express themselves, the *Helion* club and magazine is a sheer example of cultural survivalism: it was with us in the dark final years of communism, it is with us after several black-outs under the capitalism system. Maybe not all the time in the avant-garde, *Helion* is by itself an enduring chapter of Romanian science fiction on which its leaders, Cornel Secu and Lucian-Vasile Szabo, should write a book. Last, but not the least of the sites with a strong character, is not a site per se, but a column in one of the three most important literary reviews of Romania: [www.observatorcultural.ro](http://www.observatorcultural.ro). The column which today is called *SFada cu literatura (The Quarrel with Literature)*, was for almost eight years the interface between speculative fiction and its Romanian fandom with mainstream and the wider public, under the brilliant signature of Michael Haulică. Two volumes of articles were published by Haulică with what he covered on a weekly basis in *Observator cultural*. It is a feature of arms I would be proud to equate, as I am the following fellow critic of *SFada*.

Throughout the last two decades, there were several other magazines and publications dedicated to speculative fiction in Romanian language, some of them pioneering the passage between printed to electronic publishing. Again, the entry **Romania** of John Clute's Encyclopedia, under the signature of Cornel Robu, makes them justice. I would only repeat with nostalgia the titles of them. *Jurnalul SF (The SF Journal)*, the first and only printed weekly science fiction magazine in the world, which burned out between 1992-1996, with its Romulus and Remus under the names of Adrian and Ionuț Bănuță. *Pro-Scris*, the only site strictly dedicated to science fiction critique, with Cătălin Ionescu and Györfi-Deák György at the helm. *Anticipația - CPSF (Colecția povestirilor științifico-fantastice)(The Science Fiction Short Stories Collection)*, the monthly sequel of the legend magazine with the same acronym, which first publishing period spanned over 1955 to 1974, for 466 issues, the second period being 1990-2004, for other more than 100 issues... And last, but not least for me, *Lumi Virtuale (Virtual Worlds, www.lumivirtuale.ro)*, a bold electronic, then printed enterprise which allowed me to work directly with Michael Haulică, between 2000 and 2005 – I believe the printed issues are still the best looking magazines with Romanian SF).

Now it is clear for every reader of these lines who made it to this point, that Romanian SF is very self-aware and, even if there is not yet enough money to transform it for mass consuming, there is enough text, image and sound to claim its own originality. The **depth** of SF phenomenon, was analysed, theorised and criticised by Romanian specialists, over the last five decades, whether it was a search of the Romanian say in the universal science fiction, or a Romanian point of view over the universal. Yet again Cornel Robu gives a comprehensive list of people and their essential writings, in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. I shall allow myself only to underline three of those names and adding two extras (no, not mine, I'm already there, though with a mistyped reference!...) Without a doubt, over five decades and under two political regimes, the writings of Ion Hobana, Cornel Robu and Mircea Opreță are the most important contributions of Romanian critique and theory to the general history of science fiction. The work of Ion Hobana on Jules Verne and H.G.Wells, not only brings these two giants closer to the Romanian new generations of readers, but he discovered new things on Jules Verne's life and opera, brought to print in two volumes. Ion Hobana was in love with Verne's writings – the best example is that the Verne's novel *Paris in year 2000*, discovered in an archive and printed in French in 1995, was having the first translation and edition in Romanian, in 1996! Also, the overall influence of Ion Hobana's personality in the developing and permanent quest for normalcy of Romanian science fiction is second to none. Cornel Robu's **opera magna**, *O cheie pentru science fiction (A key for science fiction)*, with the introduction of the **sense of wonder** as a tool to understand better the inner mechanisms of this literature, is the most and best argued theory on science fiction ever conceived by a Romanian. As I tend to know my colleagues, I don't believe it will be equalised any time soon. Last but not least, Mircea Opreță, with his grandiose work, some would say too grand for such a tiny subject, *Anticipația Românească (Romanian Anticipation – a chapter of literary history)*, gives a complete image of anything written under the codes of or nearby SF, in Romanian language. The abstract of this history can easily be as a good

reference as the said entry in the said encyclopaedia. Precisely with the same attitude like John Clute's, Mircea Oprea continues to update his history, preparing the next edition, the third, comprising the latest developments in the Romanian SF niche. I believe his book should be a project of national interest. The names I want to add here, for the sake of the discourse, are of Cristian Tudor Popescu and Ștefan Ghidoveanu. The first is important because he was the very first to mention the phrase *speculative fiction* with today's meaning, for Romanian readers, at the back of his volume *Planetarium*, in 1987. The second, Ștefan Ghidoveanu, is important because he holds the best blog on SF in Romanian language (<http://moshulsf.wordpress.com/>), with its own exclusive rights collection of short stories, plus astute, but well-balanced comments on Romanian SF events, and, above all, the project of the *Bibliografia generală a ficțiunii speculative în România (1899-2011) – The General Bibliography of Speculative Fiction in Romania between 1899 and 2011* -, a multimedia project which allows references not only over Romanian authors, but on what was translated in Romanian in those 123 years... I believe this should be a project of national interest too.

One more paragraph and we can start the fun, the storytelling... I think it was good to see how the Romanians perceive the SF world and their own input. If it is and when it is more **science fiction** than **speculative fiction**, I let the reader to decide. For just a brush with a niche of a small literature which contains nonetheless somewhere like 3000 SF titles (said Ghidoveanu), it is good to have both phrases in our bag.

## First quantum leap: 2012 – 1989

### The Last Break, I promise

Storytelling a literature is a different approach to tell its history. This happens not only if you ask your reader for permission to tell the story from present day towards the past, hence the name "history" wouldn't have the same "normal" significance. But you need primarily a common thread between the history's periods, the one which brings coherence and makes the reader wanting for more. So, one of my options would be to tell the super-stories of the sub-genres, in Romanian language, something like *Space Opera in Romanian*, or *Utopia, Dystopia in Romanian literature* etc. Another would be to follow a SF typical character and exemplify with Romanian examples where, when and how that character shows up: *The Robot in the view of Romanian writers* or *ET and Romanians* etc. In a way, a history of sub-genres, throughout the sub-currents (**steampunk, cyberpunk, hard sf** etc.), and/or one of themes and motives is very tempting. However, I bet it'll be boring also, too academic, even if I don't believe "academic" is a synonym for "boring", they only just live in the same neighbourhood. More about that history: it will carry the strong possibility for the specific reader to forget at one point what author precedes another inside a sub-genre and what author shares the same period with another, but in parallel sub-genres or sub-currents.

Therefore, I decide to write against time, from present to past, and against causalities. I decide to write about landmarks and then to assign them labels coming from today's judgement. Maybe, if the read is fun enough, the reader will be curious to see the mnemonotes at the end who are to summarize my (hi)story, following the above observations.

For the general usage of this story, please mark these ideas:

1. the overall Romanian literature is prone to extra-literary periodization due to major historical changes (e.g. 1989 – Romanian revolution overthrows communism; 1947 – communism regime starts in Romania; 1918 – Romania becomes the "Great Romania" after WWI, with all Romanian language speakers between the borders of one state etc.)

2. every critical approach on the Romanian literature is very much linked with a generational thinking, as “generations” were significant for extra- as well as intra-literary changes in the artistry of texts since mid-XIXth century.
3. the average “generation” is accepted, when speaking/teaching about Romanian literature, to be 20 years long. There were cases with “generations” who “lived” longer or shorter literary lives (30 or 10).
4. For the best writers, the “generational” approach is counterproductive.

## Steampunk, New Weird, Cyberpunk and their Exceptions

Today is a great day for Romanian speculative fiction. If by a magic gift I could translate every text under the SF label published in Romania by a Romanian author in 2012, I could show the world that every type of sub-genres, every motive and theme are exploited. The national awards given by professional juries, clubs, associations or gatherings of fans tend all to have the “total image”, some of them giving voters a long list of texts which qualify for the contest (e.g. *Galileo* magazine’s prize has held its voting electronically; the short-short stories list, only for 2011, numbered in tens). Of course, I am not exalting here the **quality** of all the texts, but, from a **content** point of view, we have the **quantity**. Therefore, one might speak of what is “fashionable” to write these days in Romania. Two are the main influences over an author’s decision to write a text: the fan’s demand and the international trend. Very often, both influences go hand in hand, as the Romanian SF fan is pretty much in tone with the international SF market, not only via translations, but by reading in English – at least the abstracts from Amazon on international SF awards’ titles.

So, the last **fashion** in Romanian speculative fiction is **steampunk**. Well, one might argue that Romania in her rural areas still have to achieve the technological wonders of the steam era, but that would be just mean. The urban boys (and girls), who are into science fiction, understood the charm of this sub-genre and, with not only a grain of salty irony, took it on the page. The short stories anthology *Steampunk – the Second Revolution (Steampunk – A doua revoluție)*, published by Millenium Books in 2011 after the impulse of a crazed fan (the Romanian expat Adrian Craciun, a fierce SF blogger), was as a huge success as it could have been. At the moment, only the novel *The Abbey (Abația)* of Dan Doboș (see the “Case Study” chapter) has been having a better promotion. Ten out of ten stories from *Steampunk* share the same space – Romania -, but at various moments in time; we have then combinations of uchronia based on Romanian history, with details going to individuals, and the steampunk characteristics taken more or less as decor. My favourites and, according to the nominations and awards they took, everybody’s, are Michael Haulică’s *The Story of Calistrat Hadîmbu of Vizireni, Recklessly Killed by Old Raul Colentina, at an Inn by Bucharest’s Boundary* – please, believe me this is the title! (*Povestea lui Calistrat Hadîmbu, ucis mișelește de nenicul Raul Colentina într-un han de la marginea Bucureștilor*), and Oliviu Crîznic’s *Last Clepsydra (Ultima clepsidra)*. Haulică took for *The Story of Calistrat...* two awards: *Galileo* magazine’s and **RomCon** 2012. He tells the story of Calistrat, a confused character, marred by an undying curiosity, which will get him killed in the end, who enlists into a sci-fantasy sort of war. This war is fought with “giffards” (i.e. “zeppelins”) and armored trains and vehicles, as well as “falx” (an ancient sword curved as a sickle, in Dacian hands during Roman conquest) and other blades coming from all eras and areas (e.g. katana). The campaign takes Calistrat Hadîmbu and his “giffard-born” stormtroopers comrades from Romania to Denmark, for a purpose called “The Greening” (“Înverzirea”). On the way, Calistrat falls in love with Magdalena Ghica, a fascinating warrior-woman, the only woman on the giffard where from Calistrat jumps into battle. She is more than a woman and more than a warrior, the writer finds time to describe her ways with men, her costumes and, during the psychedelic nights spent with Calistrat, her magic transformations in enormous mythical creatures who cover the world... Since the beginning of his career, Michael Haulică follows the poetry in every speculative fiction text he is writing, with devastating effects in readers’

minds and with a would-be sweet nightmare for his translators. *The Story of Calistrat...* ends as its title says. Asked for the reason why he is named as he is named, Raul Colentina is cutting the throat of Calistrat Hadîmbu, behaving as a villain from a western, cursing as if the author wants the reader to forget the dreams, the love and the poetry before.

In a more sombre atmosphere, really gothic, Oliviu Crîznic writes a text on time dissolution, as a dimension of his fictional world, with all the physical implications, from the foreseeable apocalypse to various original ideas how to solve criminal enigma. Telling the story only by first person, Crîznic balances with ambiguity the unstoppable rationalising of his characters. Starting with a monologue of the main character in which are expressed doubts on what he hears from an interrogated woman, the story is built simultaneously on several levels. The main character, Robert Mihnea is a 1st degree police investigator („chestor de rangul 1”), he works in solving a crime-crime and a time-crime with an „arch-count” („arhonte”) and an eschatologist... In a rapid shootout which takes place in a basement transformed into a laboratory filled with objects which – maybe, maybe not – allow time and space travel, Robert Mihnea loses his grip on reality. He is becoming in the end the interrogated person, by a new investigating character without name, who’s disbelieving inner monologue finishes the story. *The Last Clepsydra* is a very dense text, probably the best written till this hour by Oliviu Crîznic, in his beloved bleak atmosphere lightened by characters’ thinking – there is no wonder his debut was happening with a “proper” gothic novel, ...*și la sfârșit a mai rămas COȘMARUL (...and in the end there was left only the NIGHTMARE)*, for which he gained *Galileo* magazine’s award in 2011.

I would gladly write several lines on the other stories from *Steampunk*, but we have to go further, faster. Even if only in the last two years the Romanian speculative fiction public found out about **steampunk**, there is an exception I have to signal here. Sebastian A. Corn’s novel, *2484 Quirinal Ave.*, published in 1996, after winning a novel contest organised by Nemira publishing house, bears the characteristics of the said sub-genre. At that moment, I said about *2484...* that it can be understood as a “financial western + uchronia” – the antagonists had to be the first to buy the other at the stock exchange, in a parallel history; I am not taking my words back, but the label **steampunk** goes very well over this novel. The fictional world is approaching the Millennium, and there are immense rewards at stake, an almost magical power of modifying reality, given by the mythical “Insignia” („Însemne”), which will be awarded by a no less mythical powerbroker, Amphiarao, to any of the competitors who can find him in Manhattan. The world is described to be without electricity and without plastic, but with a Roman Empire which conquered what we know today as America and in which capitalism as we know it today, with its banks and stock speculations, have developed at a slower technological pace, but with the same greed. What makes this novel **steampunk** is the abundance of items who release steam (land vehicles, hot air balloons) or just have the use of their electrical counterparts, with a different efficiency (“cymbalophon” and “luxofor” – for sound and light telegraph). Sebastian A. Corn is good because he is able to create the tiniest detail of his world while the reader is thrown in the middle of a chase or a vivid dialogue.

Sebastian A. Corn is the first exception I am signalling, that sort of a writer who does not need to follow a fashion, a sub-genre, and if he chooses to do so, he tailors the fashion or the sub-genre to suit his imaginary needs. Having his debut in the pages of *The SF Journal (Jurnalul SF)*, in 1993 with the short story *Snorky*, Sebastian A. Corn became quickly a leader, gaining critics and fans to unconditionally like him; he received every possible Romanian award, twice the **Vladimir Colin**, plus the Eurocon Debut, at Glasgow in 1995. Every short story by Corn was the backbone of the magazine’s issue it came out. However, the novels of Sebastian A. Corn are more important for this (hi)story. If the first two of them, *Aquarius* (1995) and *2484 Quirinal Ave.* (1996), as well as the naturalist novel *Cut me with edge of your bistoury, wrote Josephine (Să mă tai cu tăișul bisturiului tău, scrie Josephine)* (1998), develop their fabric in steampunk or sci-fantasy or today’s universes, the rest of them are telling one story and one story only, with baroque ramifications and several particularities in décor. The story Sebastian A. Corn tells is beginning with *The Healer (Vindecătorul)*

(2008) and is the story of a world where the language, either verbal, non-verbal, mathematical or non-formal, becomes the exploration task, the vehicle and the prize of the fictional world. This idea can be found in various degrees in the three novels first mentioned, but the jump in between those worlds would have been too big. So, in *The Healer* we have a world before spoken language, and we recognize in the Stone Age, a main character who is a telepath, sent in a journey around Earth by his shaman to light the articulate language within Man's tribes. Nothing is easy during this journey, especially that it is, as in any of the other main writings of Corn, a chase and a race. The spoken language is the actual Prometheus' gift, as well as a Pandora's box. Then, in *The Empire of The Great Graal (Imperiul Marelui Graal)* (2004), sewn on a "time-surgery + parallel universe" structure, we have noble families, time nomads and super-high-tech witches racing against one character called "Eight Steps" ("Opt Pași") who wants to find the nodal point in time and space, maybe somewhere in XIIIth century's Buhara, before Genghis Khan took it, The Graal to control mankind throughout space and time. There are hundreds and hundreds of pages where the implications of the language, only mentioned or guessed in *The Healer*, are taken to the last consequence: one can jump between universes, or within the same time, or the same space, using gates which can be something from a snowy slope to a computer game to a letter – in sound or shape! – itself. The intricacies of *The Empire...* are asking for a longer analysis, but the sheer reading of this novel, including the index of internal valid concepts, similar with the indexes from books like *Anathem* or *Dune*, gives the speculative fiction reader the maximum intellectual pleasure within the **sense of wonder** theorised by Cornel Robu. The stage of *The Empire...* was prepared by *The Highest Tower from Baabylon (Cel mai înalt turn din Baabylon)*(2002), where we have winter blizzards blocking the characters on a mountain top and in parallel realities. The link between all these stories, Corn gave it with an apparent fan-fiction novel, *Dune 7. The Brunts' Book (Dune 7. Cartea Brundurilor)* (1997), signed as Patrick Herbert and using some elements from the original Herbert's world, but not to the extend wanted by the Nemira publishing house, hence being an original piece, marred by extra-literary intervention. The story of ...*The Brunts' Book* is having three worlds existing simultaneously on and around a future Earth covered with ice. On the cold surface, there are the legions of fierce men and women with cultural and psychological special characteristics who fight to establish their supremacy. Under the ice-caped seas, there are the towns build using bio-engineered flesh and bones, with their inhabitants separated in aristocracy and commoners, caught in games, luxury and depravation. Somewhere in the air, there are entities who can be understood either like a sort of djinnis or, more plausible, A.I.'s who copied human minds and became independent. All these three manifestations of mankind are linked by **vortex**, which is the wireless device, implanted under the skin over the whole body of a person, as well as the field which contains every thought, feeling and sensation of that person. The three worlds influence each other, a battle's outcome between legions offering solutions to under-sea towns politics or keeping alive the djinnis. Again, the complexity of dialogues, had on several levels (verbal, non-verbal, „in the field” plus their two-by-two combinations), which reflects the complexity of the conflicts, is the personal note of Sebastian A. Corn writing. If I mention that the **vortex** is tantamount for *The Empire...* and foreseen in *The Highest Tower...*, one can understand me why I said Corn wrote only one story: the story of humanity, from Stone Age to several high-tech or low-tech futures, having in its centre The Language in its most powerful and compelling manifestations.

Coming back on the nice attitude to follow fashion or sub-genres, before **steampunk** there was **new weird** in Romanian speculative fiction. Less declarative in following the world's input, preceding the fans' desire, at the beginning of the first decade of the new century, some authors formed the group **Kult**: Costi Gurgu, Bogdan-Tudor Bucheru, Ana-Maria Negrilă, Jean-Lorin Sterian. Their ideology is asking for an urban universe, a cleaner language, a catalogue of images coming more from arts than from sciences, a fight between ideas and ambiguity, between ethics and esthetics within the characters. One of **Kult**'s by-products is the mentioned creative writing workshop [www.atelierkult.com](http://www.atelierkult.com). The most important product of **Kult** for my (hi)story is the anthology *Radharc* (2005). It is a "shared

world” book, in which all four authors have one novelle each. This world, Radharc, is a mental construct of three mythical founding figures, “three Apostles”, Petre, Matei, Nobilia, the firsts to share their visions given by a drug synthesised from autists’ blood, and the first to jump and live only in their more-than-real world. They shall be followed by people with any and all motivations possible – to escape, to have fun, to build an empire, to die a better death, to find a missing child -, helping to extend and to re-model the initial Radharc (a three sectors copy of real Bucharest, with geographical and architectural surrealist improvements: seaside, Venetian channels, baroque and minimalist facades, fantastic creatures between plants and animals etc.). Costi Gurgu’s piece, *The Maps’ Way (Calea Hărților)*, gives the start with a journalistic inquiry on the border of industrial espionage which ends very bad for the protagonists. It is a „description by action” text, where real world, sorry, realist world characters, a team of three journalists, Cristian, Emil and Fane, gets acquainted to Radharc following the secret maps of a shipping magnate, Alexandru Pavel. If they find the maps in Radharc, they have them for real. What is real becomes a deadly game, the young men end their lives one by one, either in their own bed from a Bucharest’s seedy block apartment, or meeting a non-human creature in a cellar from Radharc. The art of Costi Gurgu lies on how he balances his characters perceptions of reality, as well as their moral motivations, between curiosity and greed, fear and sense of adventure. This balance will be found in the following texts of the volume as well. The second piece on *Radharc* is Bogdan-Tudor Bucheru’s *The White Devil (Diavolul Alb)*. It tells the story of a husband and father, Marcel Pereanu, who lost his wife and daughter into an accident, plus his autistic son got missing. This character will do everything to find the last living member of his family, and by “everything” the author understands passages between worlds, searches of the source of evil in both worlds, the constant questioning of the nature of reality and of the people’s motivations. All these tribulations are taken place in an even more luxurious Radharc, counterpointed by an even more grotesque Bucharest. Sex and death are the joined dimensions of both worlds and only the ardent parental will keeps Marcel Pereanu from losing his grip on his goal. In the end, helping the police to solve crimes linked with the other world and getting help to find his son, Marcel Pereanu survives, but apparently with his moral compass altered after so many trips to Radharc. Maybe the source of Radharc’s universe, Ana-Maria Negrilă’s story *From Now on till the Night (De acum și până-n noapte)*, the only one found in an author’s volume before *Radharc*, shows another death because of tripping by Radharc’s drug. This time, the story is told by first person point of view and this belongs to Dan, a “veteran of Nobilia’s world”, who will guide the playboy Sebastian Panu to his death in the most flamboyant and decadent parts of Radharc. There is a process of alteration, of self-destruction not recognized by the victim, thoroughly observed and understood but never really blocked by the guide, during several, deeper visits in the other world. Starting with sequences similar with *1001 Nights’* opulence, enjoyed with a sense of equilibrium by Dan, but to the fullest by Sebastian, the story ends with the latter devoured by “the forgetfulness fish” (“peștii-uitării”) under the sight of the first, lost amongst an underwater club’s patrons. In the end, maybe Dan needed to see Sebastian’s death not for the secret clause of his guiding contract, but just for being able to come back himself from “the worlds”. Out of the four texts of *Radharc*, Ana-Maria Negrilă’s is the most poetical. The ending of *Radharc* is not so poetic at all, even if there is a revenge brought to the Apostles’ world by an Archangel. Jean-Lorin Sterian’s *Impossible Paradise (Imposibilul Paradis)* brings a character who can modify Radharc’s reality as good as its founders. This Archangel, in love with an autistic boy, Alin, wants to protect his lover and to revenge the deaths of his friends, all who have succumbed to Radharc Syndrome – they stood in Radharc till their bodies died in the real world, starved and dehydrated. This real world decayed to the stage where 43% of Bucharest’s inhabitants are addicted to Radharc. The Archangel evolved from a common user to a guide, to a fighter, to the final entity possible as a guest in Radharc. He almost succeeds in destroying the worlds, fighting in the end even the Founders, but the very soul of Radharc, never conceived by a human mind, stops him. The final lines of the *Impossible Paradise*, where the Archangel is met by his secret love’s projection, are pure poetry, a perfect example for **Kult**’s artistic creed.

Before moving forward/backward to the next landmark in Romanian speculative fiction, I have to say about the members of **Kult** that they dominated the genre's contests around the year 2000, gaining all the awards. Even if two of them, Costi Gurgu and Bogdan Bucheru have expatriated to Canada and US, they haven't forgotten where from they left. They continue to write in Romanian and started to write in English, with some success if we consider the today's nomination of Costi Gurgu for the Aurora Award in Canada. One last word on **new weird** in Romania: the same Costi Gurgu wrote *The Recipe Book (Rețetarium)* before 1994 – when makes the 2<sup>nd</sup> place at Nemira's contest -, published by Tritonic publishing house only in 2006, and which book still is, in my opinion, the peak of weirdness in Romanian speculative fiction. Wrongfully judged and received by editors, some critics and some fans as a work of **fantasy**, *Rețetarium* won **Vladimir Colin's** award in 2008, with the right argument that if you can structure a world around feasting, invent a species with a peculiar taste-gland which can give orgasms(!), and all the relations and conflicts within your society are a matter of "real good taste", then you are in speculative fiction, even science fiction if cooking is a science! Dare to contradict me, especially under **new weird** banner!

With a delay of ten years, **cyberpunk** arrives and conquers Romanian science fiction, in the first years of the '90s. Again, *The SF Journal* is the culprit for educating the fans for revolution, allowing a new generation of Romanian authors to shed off their complexes, ideological as well as sexual, to clear their throats through cursing and their minds by writing continuously for the only SF weekly magazine in the world. Of course, the quantity is not bringing all the time the quality leap forward, as the bearded Marx said, fact which was duly observed by the more traditional part of the period's critics – in *Anticipația* and *Helion* magazines. However, the strength of the hardcore group of young writers around *The SF Journal*, was to make literary history. The anthology *Motocentauri on The Roof of The World (Motocentauri pe Acoperișul Lumii)* (1995), is dominating by far the publishing landscape of the decade. This is a hindsight, based on what the authors who gave the *Motocentauri*...were to do till today. Michael Haulică, Sebastian A. Corn, Doru Stoica, Petrică Sârbu, Dănuț Ivănescu, Ionuț Bănuță, Cătălin Ionescu changed forever the way science fiction was to be perceived in Romania, being more of "speculators" than of "scientists", with a talent second only to their will of success. The first three of them made it to the utmost recognition, with **Vladimir Colin** awards for their personal volumes: Haulică in 2000, for *Madia Mangalena*; Corn in 2005 and 2012, for *The Empire of The Great Graal* and *The Healer*; Stoica in 2012, for *Between Barriers (Între bariere)*. Dănuț Ivănescu is a perfectionist who sadistically delays the publishing of a volume of his own works, consuming his energy as a heavy metal publisher and critic. Ionuț Bănuță could have remained memorable even if only his contribution was the invention of the **motocentaur** (visualise this: take out the horse of a centaur, put a motorbike instead), but his avant-garde spirit expresses itself further in visual arts. Cătălin Ionescu, probably the closest spirit to a classicist from that insurgent group, tried to make some order in Romanian SF and held the already mentioned *Pro-Scris* site dedicated to SF critique. As it can be seen from this overall image, the *Motocentauri*... authors very different people. Maybe that was also their second greatest asset, after their individual talents. The anthology they made is a story of the world under the „what if” the Dacians under Burebista would have conquered Rome after Caesar's death. It sounds simple? It is not, because the uchronia bears an entire history of science, religion, social strife and political evolution and involution for mankind, till the human species, becoming one being of transcendental consciousness, moves outside the scorched Earth, on the asteroids ring. „2277. All souls migrated to The Ring. The last nostalgic human dies on Earth.” – this is how is ending the *Short General History of Things (Scurtă Istorie Generală a Lucrurilor)*, a story started with the above „what if”, but treats uchronia as a chronology, henceforth allowing the rest of the texts from *Motocentauri*... to develop their own, more detailed conflicts, characters or, in some cases, their very own atmosphere. Received with disdain or adulation, never with a balanced view – OK, maybe Radu Pavel Gheo and me were more balanced, but nonetheless partisan – *Motocentauri on The Roof of The World* had texts who were sheer manifests of a rejuvenated avant-garde, even in the

visual way the text should look like (*Ragnarok* and )sony against virgin records( on the roof)?(, signed by Sebastian A. Corn and Ionuț Bănuță - please believe me that that is the title...), some poems in prose (*Ana, Electric Blue*, signed by Petrică Sârbu), some texts which preserve a story, but the actual **style** mattered more (*Lumbricus Glacialis*, Doru Stoica, *Roles Song (Cântul lui Roles)*, Dănuț Ivănescu, *Neverly Hills (Biotronic Action Hero)*, *The Motocentaur sleep alone (Motocentaurii dorm singuri)*, *Madia Mangalena*, Michael Haulică) and, last but not least, some good old fashioned, storytelling texts, filled with action and gore or philosophical dialogues (*Copal Flavour (Aromă de copal)*, *Germisara, Kogaion – torrential rain (...- ploaie torențială)*, Sebastian A. Corn, *The Unfulfilled Shangri-La (Neîmplinita Shangri-La)*, Cătălin Ionescu, *The Bullfight (Tauromahia)*, Doru Stoica, *Rivus (Diary for the End of the Century) (Jurnal de sfârșit de secol)*, Petrică Sârbu, *Așteptându-l pe Corban* and, probably still the most popular piece, *Blindfolded Hide and Seek on The Roof of The World (Baba-oarba pe acoperișul lumii)*, Dănuț Ivănescu. Can you imagine that this book has only 220 pages, including indexes and Ionuț's drawings before each text?! It will be unfair to tell only one of those stories, but if I am to choose I would stay with *Baba-oarba...* by Dănuț Ivănescu. In a post-industrial, post-war, uchronic future where the human species is no longer separated by politics, but by the attitude towards technology and environment (till becoming two sub-species, the **technos** and the **echos**), the breeding females of the echos are hunted by the technos, because their owns cannot bear children anymore. Dănuț Ivănescu's main character is also the narrator, an echo man who has his woman, Petra, kidnapped by Alaric, a techno. He knows where his target's lair is, so he just go, in a pure Terminator style, to save Petra. The language is strong, the visual elements stronger, the action flows with the conscience or consciousness, whatever that might be. But the rescue is no longer possible – after yet another kill, the character finds Petra modified to bear a techno hybrid (“her belly, starting right under the breasts and stopping above the pubis, is translucent, and inside...Inside there is a foetus with wrinkled face and sheen metal”). So, Dănuț Ivănescu's last hero is punching Alaric into a mass of flesh, bones and chrome components then takes a free fall from the highest tower. In his flight to the ground he has the epiphany that he is the last autonomous mind on The Ring, the one of the last human survivor on Earth, and what he has just experienced was the Ring's entity way of making him ready for absorption/transcendence. “What about Petra?” were his last thought words.

The great absent of the *Motocentaur*s... group, though a fellow writer at *The SF Journal*, is Liviu Radu. Starting to publish after he turned 40, Liviu Radu is having today his own shelf in Romanian SF, with no less than 17 volumes. His writing was under constant growth in the complexity of the build worlds and in the psychological approach towards his characters. Liviu Radu has written in every given manner, under each fashionable sub-currents or sub-genres. His strong points are his chronic universes, developed with a personal logic and the best documentation possible, under the idea of “what if”. *Constanța 1919* (2000), *The Modifiers (Modificatorii)* (2011) and especially the novel *Questionnaire for Ladies who were the Secretaries of Some Very Nice Gentlemen (Chestionar pentru doamne care au fost secretarele unor domni foarte cumsecade)* (2011) are Liviu Radu's and, very possible, overall recent Romanian speculative fiction, the best parallel universes and/or time intervention books. *Constanța 1919* presents Romania after WWI under three different cultural conquests, with minute observations over the characters' morals and behaviours, according to these influences: Austrian, Russian or Turkish. *The Modifiers* lets the reader wander in time, in a history where major changes are to happen to Russia as we know it. But the *Questionnaire...* deserved to win the Eagle Publishing house novels contest because is a report of no less, and yet no more, of a world with Adolf Hitler being a boshevik! And the story is told by three German ladies who were the secretaries of Hitler, Mengele and Hess. The secretaries ought to answer the questionnaire, which is helping the author to build the world where WWII it would happen, but only as a treason of Stalin against comrade Hitler, after Germany is already at war with Britain and US... However, my personal favourites amongst Liviu Radu's writings are the novel *The Option (Opțiunea)* (2004) – his personal remake of Christ's story, a real apocryphal gospel, with a very present pagan-like god or an

Old Testament devil's character -, and the *World of Waldemar (Lumea lui Waldemar)* (2010) – his own remake of some Romanian fairy tales with mythological creatures, in a more urban décor. Liviu Radu was awarded **Vladimir Colin** at the second edition (2001), for *Constanța 1919*, and since then is a member of this award's jury.

I cannot finish this chapter without mentioning two more exceptions. Well, the first is not quite an exception, as being a **cyberpunk** author, with a PhD in it: Florin Pîtea. Two volumes of short stories, *An/Organic* and *Necropolis* (2004) and one published novel, *Gangland* (2006), out of several on his computer, are the most elaborate writings within the sub-genre in Romanian language. There were that good that way too often were paralleled with Gibson's and Sterling's texts, by benevolent, but not very attentive critics. I say that because Florin Pîtea has his own approach especially in building characters who, even placed in post-industrial, post-cataclysmic America, or just into an dissolute American society, have an original mind and soul, different from the flaunted models. I don't believe an American writer could have written *Sarariman*, from *Necropolis*. It simply has a different psychology, I wouldn't say "deeper", but "different". The best examples for the originality of Florin Pîtea's writing are two other characters, from *Gangland*, this time: Maria Alonzo, the single parent, federal agent who was laid off and takes a contract to find a teenager in Gangland; the "Father", the teenager who takes care of younglings in Gangland. Both of them are humane not through their heroics, but for doing what they are supposed to do, by their own code, despite their heroics. Pîtea received for these books the **Vladimir Colin** award twice.

And last of this chapter, last without doubt and setting herself aside ever since she erupted in Romanian speculative fiction, here she is: Ona Frantz. Her book, *Tearing Apart (Sfâșierea)* (1999), is the best novel in Romanian language about the end of a world. If in the beginning, the good side and the bad side seem very clearly identifiable, we see corruption and depression affecting everybody with a sense of inevitability very much alike ancient Greek tragedy. The novel is a compulsive reading because its characters realise what is happening, it is not just an apocalypse coming from the almighty author, they struggle to regain their will and their dignity. But to no avail. It is no wonder, *Tearing Apart* was awarded the **Vladimir Colin**, at its first edition.

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