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Introducing *Pop Culture and Audience Reception in a Transnational Context*

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Screencapture from the music video of Mongolian Hip-Hop Artists *Toonot*

Cultural exchange and diffusion have been enduring features of almost all human societies, and a key driver of progress. The Silk Road, our name for an ancient network of trade routes that crisscrossed Eurasia, stretched from China to the Mediterranean. It facilitated not only the spread of transformative technologies–such as paper making and gunpowder–but also the diffusion of religions like Buddhism alongside a plethora of artistic influences. As Buddhism spread via missionaries and traders, its adherents adapted and changed it to suit

a variety of cultural contexts, leading to diverse forms such as Zen Buddhism in Japan and Tibetan Buddhism.

The Mongolian hip-hop video linked above demonstrates that cultural exchange and adaptation continue today on an even broader scale, made possible by modern technologies. Globalization has accelerated the spread of popular culture in particular, as music, films, dance styles, fashion, stories, video games, and television series find new audiences that re-interpret and reshape transnational art and culture to suit their own needs and local cultural contexts. This issue of *Linguaculture* showcases multiple instances of these ongoing processes in transnational pop culture.

These globalizing trends have, in many ways, facilitated a different approach to cultural products; consumers of pop culture who are sometimes (self-)identified as "fans" start off from the premise, now validated by social sciences and cultural studies, that "participation is often as important as observation" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 4). Jenkins and other fan studies scholars have found that community members actively participate "in the construction and circulation of textual meanings" (24), reworking intellectual properties within the specific context of their interactions, while being "undaunted by traditional conceptions of literary and intellectual property" (18). Fans challenge certain privileged positions of looking at culture by "treating popular texts as if they merited the same degree of attention and appreciation as canonical texts" (17). Within this new framework, we can also speak of a form of "pop cosmopolitanism" that embraces cultural difference, as fans "[seek] to escape the gravitational pull of their local communities in order to enter a broader sphere of cultural experience" and cultural exchange (Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, 155).

When earlier generations of fans entered the world of pop cultural participation and reinterpretation, they were initially joining a world in which American pop culture provided a common global playing field for such fan works. The early dominance of U.S. pop culture and other intellectual products was key to American "soft power" in the mid- and late twentieth century, and is still important today. As the photographer Chris Arnade (whose travels are truly global) has observed, enthusiastic engagement with American pop cultural products can be found across a stunning variety of cultures, from small Ugandan fishing villages, to Jakarta, to the Faroe Islands. Arnade argues that just as

English has become the *lingua franca* of the world, so too has American pop culture become a sort of *cultura franca*. Indeed, the ubiquity of American music, TV shows, and movies both supports and benefits from the fact that English is a global language: *Friends*, for example, has probably been responsible for improving the English fluency of far more people than its producers ever intended.

But in the twenty-first century, the dominant role of U.S. intellectual and cultural properties in global pop culture has come under increasing challenge. What this issue of *Linguaculture* brings to the fore is the rise and global prominence of East Asian pop culture, which has captured audiences' imaginations and researchers' interest in terms of cultural exchange and diffusion. A significant number of our entries deal with East Asian pop culture as exemplified in films, TV Shows, manga, pop bands, but also food and cosmetics brands.

Perhaps no other East Asian pop cultural movement has taken the world by storm quite like the "Korean Wave" or "Hallyu," embodied in the proliferation of K-Pop, K-Dramas, Korean films, cosmetics and many other cultural products. This "wave" has been heavily encouraged and subsidized by the South Korean government as a form of soft power, as **Alexandra Bija** argues in her paper, "The Transnational Flow of Korean Pop Culture: A Case Study of Audience Reception in Romania". Bija points out that the recent spread of Korean pop culture in Eastern Europe is a very deliberate move towards market expansion, and she tackles in particular the growing impact of Korean pop culture on Romanian audiences who consume and engage with popular Korean brands (food and cosmetics, especially) and transform and translate Korean media (K-Dramas, K-Pop, Korean films) as active fans.

The spread of East Asian pop culture has encouraged the rise of more specialized fans who showcase certain "cultural competencies that could only originate in the context of global convergence, requiring not simply knowledge of Asian popular culture but an understanding of its similarities with and differences from parallel traditions in the West" (Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* 169). East Asian pop cultural diffusion allows certain fans to display their knowledge and expertise by teaching other consumers how to understand, interpret and even "decode" the work (169). Such is the case for **Daniel Nedelcu's** paper "Blending Cultures in BTS's 'Blood Sweat and Tears,'" in which Nedelcu

traces the parallels and connections between Eastern and Western traditions in one of the recent music videos of the most popular Korean band of the moment, BTS. The Korean band knowingly markets its music and visual content as interpretative occasions for the fans, embedding their songs and videos with messages that speak to both local and globalized contexts - in the case of "Blood Sweat and Tears," blending the interest of Korean audiences for the German-Swiss author Herman Hesse with Hesse's own East-Asian philosophical influences.

The interesting tension and mutual mirroring of East and West is also reflected in **Sheng-mei Ma's** paper, "Sino-noir of Serial Killers and Dismemberments," in which Ma deconstructs the 'sino noir' genre's tropes and predilections, arguing that many of the violent visuals and storylines present in these TV shows stand for a particular psychological malaise at the heart of the Chinese state, "a symptom of China's physical and phantom pain". Ma also underlines China's "Occidentalism" as a counterpoint to the West's Orientalism, as some of the TV shows under discussion toy with and privilege Western iconography.

Certainly the interactions and correspondences between Western and Eastern representations are at the heart of **Ioana Ruxandra Toșu's** paper "The Linguistic Landscape of Popular Culture: Analyzing Military Speech in Manga," wherein she considers the translation of Japanese manga into Romanian, focusing on the linguistic phenomenon of *yakuwarigo*, or "role language". Toșu is particularly interested in military speech as "role language" and its differing rhetorical functions in Japanese and Romanian, filtered through the massively popular manga series, *Attack on Titan*. The author also makes the case that East Asian pop culture is on the rise in the Romanian book market, as one of the country's leading publishing houses, Nemira, recently launched the NEZUMI project which oversees the translation of manga into Romanian.

Interactions between East Asian and American representations can also be seen as problematic, as **Xinzuo Li** argues in "Multimodal Adaptation, Reconstruction, and Deviation of Immortal Ones: An Upside-Down World of Chinese Mythology Created in *Monkey King* (2023)." *Monkey King*, a Netflix production, was inspired by several comic book series and graphic novels whose authors were Japanese, or Chinese American. The comic books and graphic novels, in turn, were based on a classic Chinese novel, *Journey to the West*. Netflix's

Monkey King was thus based on sources that were themselves examples of transnational pop culture: an adaptation of adaptations. Li proposes a multimodal analysis of the Netflix production, but also takes issue with the ways in which *Monkey King* has altered character traits from the original Chinese novel. Cultural exchange and diffusion can lead to changes and re-interpretations of the original sources that can be upsetting for the "owners" of the original cultural property, which explains why Italians developed the adage "Traduttore, traditore" (usually problematically translated as "the translator is a traitor").

In "The Role of Hip-Hop in Community Building and Its Influence on Cluj-Mapoca's Young Urbanites 'Concrete Rockers,' A Case Study," **Bettina Ene and Iuliu Rațiu** examine how young Romanian hip-hop fans have reworked the original American art forms associated with hip-hop, particularly break dancing, to meet their own needs. Fans of popular culture around the world have found that their own intense engagement with a novel, film, dance form, etc. leads to their discovery of and membership in a supportive fan community. Ene and Rațiu argue that the hip-hop fans of Cluj-Napoca are no different in this regard, and work hard to maintain the community that they have built around hip-hop. But they also examine the ways in which the "Concrete Rockers" have adapted hip-hop art forms for a Romanian cultural context, in order to increase broader social acceptance of hip-hop in Romania. The Cluj-Napoca fans have consciously tried to project a public image that is more "clean cut" and wholesome, to offset the associations (poverty, criminality) that hip-hop might have with Romanians who are not fans. Hip-hop is of course originally an African-American cultural movement, and race might well also contribute to fans' perceptions regarding the need to "polish" the presentation of hip-hop in a Romanian context.

Finally, **Claire Patzner's** "The World is Cursed: Studio Ghibli's Radical Environmental Philosophy" compares the ways that environmental themes have been handled by the Japanese Studio Ghibli, with the work of American producers who have created films on similar themes, including Disney and Pixar. Patzner contrasts the ways that Ghibli and American producers deploy film elements such as pacing, narrative structure, and characterization in order to explore the reasons underlying the more nuanced and less optimistic stories created by Studio Ghibli. Hollywood productions, she concludes, place less pressure on audiences to take action to avert a climate crisis.

The issue concludes with two book reviews tackling transmediality and the iconography of the female writer. *The Indiscipline of Fiction (Indisciplina ficţiunii. Viaţa de după carte a literaturii)* by Mihaela Ursa, reviewed by Professor **Mihaela Mudure**, centers on the afterlife and transformation of literature when transposed and translated into new media, a process which may involve or create new readers (dubbed as "digital travellers"/"digital natives"), but also new cultural exchanges on a wider digital scale within the "transmedial constellations of travelling fictions". The second book, *Sophisticated Ladies in Life and Literature: Selective Portraits*, by Anca Peiu, reviewed by **Cynthia Balea**, considers the work and image of several female writers and scholars of American, British, Canadian, and Romanian nationality in relation to each other in a multifaceted study that tries to demonstrate that these women's intellectual and cultural "sophistication" goes beyond certain ideological trends of the 20th and 21st centuries.

As has no doubt become apparent in this introduction, a number of this issue's papers and reviews have chosen Romania as the site for examining transnational exchange and cultural diffusion, not only because Eastern European markets and audiences have become central to the spread of East Asian pop culture, but also because Romania is a culture which, by its very nature, is open to and relies on such exchanges. In his scholarly study, *Literary Translation and the Idea of a Minor Romania* (2014), award-winning translator Sean Cotter describes Romania as a "minor culture", not in the sense of being "insignificant" or qualitatively inferior, but rather as a site for constant interaction and cultural exchange, wherein the nation is not an essence, but rather "a nexus, a particular point of international cultural contact" (7). In this light, the "minor" mode troubles the "major" "because it is inapt for images of purity and control" (6). In other words, a "minor" culture thrives on the hybridization of culture and the proliferation of cultural diffusion. As a translator, Cotter argues that the "minor national imagination" does not identify with one translation from a particular language/culture or another, but with the process of translation itself (14). Likewise, we can make the case that Romania does not necessarily identify with one particular transnational exchange or another, but with the very notion of transnationality as a kind of prerequisite of being a "minor" culture. In this sense, Romania and Romanian culture can only

gain from the transnational cultural exchanges that have been interrogated, analyzed, and celebrated in this current issue of *Linguaculture*.

Works Cited

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