

# ASPECTS OF GLOCALIZED POPULAR CULTURE IN HUNGARY

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**Abstract:** *Reflecting on the realities of current societies, the paper aims to provide an insight into how global values adapt to fit local needs. The presentation covers several communicative (both verbal and non-verbal) aspects of popular culture in the Hungarian media.*

**Keywords:** *glocalization, cultural heterogeneity, multiple identities.*

## 1. Introduction

Considering my professional background, which reveals a commitment of more than two-decades to linguistics, I strongly believe that I must begin with some justification related to the choice of the topic of discussion. So, the question logically follows as to why would a linguist, fully dedicated to historical and comparative linguistics, feel the need to apparently divert from her main stream interests?

I will attempt to answer this question by borrowing a quotation from the Core Curriculum of Harvard University (Luntz, 2007:184), which clearly states that in undergraduate education an important paradigmatic shift has been experienced lately, moving away from

the old or canonized curriculum, which manifests itself in the form of current knowledge in certain fields, a tremendous amount of information digested from the Great Books, to a new one, aiming at introducing students to the major approaches to knowledge in domains the faculty considers indispensable. It goes without saying that the philosophy of all colleges and universities is to form broadly educated graduates also trained in a particular academic field.

Consequently, at undergraduate level nowadays intellectual breadth includes primarily intellectual skills and habits of thought, understanding of the ways in which young people can gain and apply knowledge of the natural world, of society, or "...thinking critically about moral and ethical problems, examining

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their own moral assumptions, and judging with some objectivity the assumptions of various alternative traditions of ethical thought and practice.”

(<http://th-th.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=2800975192&topic=3568>)

Why should we try to design our own courses in an interdisciplinary way? Why should we turn “green” in our professional activity and recycle old content? Well, because the world is changing too fast! In higher education Hungary has also joined the Bologna system and the faculty has to cater for the needs of young people in their late teens and early twenties who see life through contemporary lenses. First of all students would rather cope with manageable amounts of knowledge. Their natural curiosity has to be stimulated by easily accessible information. We must agree that the best way to do this is to design problem solving tasks relying on elements of popular culture. One cannot imagine what a relief it is for a language historian to have the movies *Beowulf* (2007) or *King Arthur* (2004) close at hand before introducing Old English, and I could continue the list.

In what follows my presentation is devised along three main lines, with the first part providing a short definition of globalization and glocalization, followed by a second part which attempts to legitimate the content and role of studies in popular culture and a final part which

displays examples of glocalized culture in Hungary.

## **2. Globalization/ Grobalization/ Localization**

Generally speaking the concept of globalization (Scholte, 2000) refers to the globe-spanning network of communication and trade. From our perspective, though it might be more interesting to focus on its additional meaning referring to the transnational circulation of ideas, languages, or popular culture through acculturation. Following the 1993 introduction of the concept of the McDonaldization of societies (Ritzer, 1993), in 2003 the famous sociologist George Ritzer also coined the term of grobalization in his book entitled *The Globalization of Nothing*. According to Ritzer grobalization represents “the imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations, and the like and their desire, indeed need, to impose themselves on various geographic areas”. (Ritzer, 2003:73) In his work Ritzer opened new horizons in the scrutiny of globalization by highlighting the growing influence of corporations, which lead to the “grobalization of nothing and the glocalization of something.”

Along this line, glocalization had been born from the slogan governing the last decade of the twentieth century when the key to success was guaranteed provided

one was capable of “thinking globally and acting locally.” Ever since the term has been employed to describe the process through which the elements of global culture are customized to suit local culture, since the glocalization of a product is more successful if it is adapted to the locality or culture it is marketed in. With the expansion of multinational companies people encounter the same elements of commodified popular culture, products which they consume passively. Meanwhile in the process of glocalization the products are appropriated and translated into local contexts, which results in active consumption. This bipolar representation of the world also translates in the debate between the two concepts, namely *gro/globalization*, which results in global homogeneity and the concept of *glocalization*, which leads to global heterogeneity.

Remembering that the present paper’s scope of interest is to position the concept of *globalization/glocalization* into an educational context, let us examine some aspects of *globalization* impacting on our own professional fields. But before listing my examples, which will definitely mention American products first, we should not forget that as a rule *globalization* often equates to “*Americanization*”, which is usually approached from two aspects. On the one hand it can be viewed as cultural imperialism that threatens local and national cultures, but on the other hand it can be perceived as an act of liberation,

where the young generation uses popular culture as a liberating act of expression. Let us proceed along this latter line and quote some of Dr. Frank Luntz’s ideas, who in his book *Words that Work*, (Luntz, 2007:184) talks about American myths that need elucidation. The first one is that most Americans are highly educated, which is false, considering that only 29 % of U.S. adults over 45 possess a college degree or above. As we have already seen from the Core Curriculum of Harvard University, most higher education has taken on a distinctly vocational bent, as core curricula and “*Great Books*” have been abandoned even in the institutions belonging to the Ivy League.

As to average Americans, usually their knowledge of history, politics, philosophy, sociology, and many other fields is acquired from some aspect of pop culture, primarily TV and movies. For instance the generation called “*Digital natives*” – people younger than 30 – learn about politics from Jay Leno, David Letterman, Jon Stewart, get an understanding of the legal system from Judge Judy, *Law & Order* (2nd half an hour), knowledge of the health system comes from *Grey’s Anatomy*, *House*, *ER*, while law enforcement is learned from the *CSI* franchise and *Law & Order* (1st half an hour). In Hungary most (if not all) of these programs are available on different commercial TV channels, consequently the public at large can get a picture of this version of the American society, which is an enjoyable way of

learning about far-away lands and their people. But looking at some of these films and talk shows one might be easily caught in the trap of globalization and get the false impression that the world is flat and that all the differences between countries and cultures have been levelled off. The reason behind this is that Hungarian TV channels dub virtually all broadcasted foreign productions and whenever possible, the foreign realia are replaced by their Hungarian counterparts, which might mislead people into thinking that round the world the same products are commercialized, from soft drinks to medicine. Even more dangerous might be the confusion emerging from the misinterpretation of sociolinguistic – verbal and non-verbal – elements of communication such as turn-taking, conversational maxims and conventions.

Another myth (Luntz, 2007:187) is that people in the USA and around the world still read, which is not really the case as worldwide the readership of newspapers and magazines has dropped dramatically. The reading experience has been supplanted by television and the entertainment component of the Web. Nevertheless the internet has had its positives, as over the past two decades the email has raised the importance of the written word even if dramatic prose has been replaced at times with misspellings, typos or textese. A negative effect though is that the young undergraduates are incapable of

switching from the language of emails and texting to formal, academic writing. As mentioned before globalization is mostly transmitted by the media in general and American pop culture in particular. But in reality the media does not represent America as a nation-state. Rather the language and style of mass publicity is to create an imagined America, not in the form of a mini-version of American culture but a new culture that might have absorbed local differences.

### 3. Popular Culture and Education

When visiting higher education sites focusing on Popular Culture Studies, one would more likely encounter the following fields of study: advertising, technology, television, film, music, university courses, fashion. As the scope of this paper is mainly institutionalized education, in what follows I intend to highlight only a defined area related to branches of applied linguistics such as sociolinguistics and translation issues. As mentioned above people are less keen on reading printed media, they prefer the electronic ones instead, where multi-level communication is guaranteed by a concerted interplay of verbal and non-verbal, visual and auditive elements.

Against this apparent loss of hegemony the exclusively linguistic expression is currently experiencing, blogs definitely counterbalance the disinterest in literacy.

“A timely vehicle for self-expression” (McNair 2006:125), the blogosphere is seen as a connected virtual community or as a social network. Usually the bloggers are enthusiastic and heated to engage in online debate, and often their individual voice will be exposed to public opinion. Blogs are highly interactive, provide unlimited space for dialogue and allow communication in both directions. It is also true that quality control and originality raise serious concerns. Yet, the blogosphere and emerging “citizen’s journalism” provide unlimited space for dialogue and allow ordinary people to contribute with reports, realia, information of local relevance. If texting and emails are more often instances of simplified and informal language, blogs can range from teenage diaries to elaborate linguistic masterpieces. As an illustration of this I would come up with the example of the movie *Julie and Julia*, which has also been nominated for the Academy Award in 2010. Julia Childs wrote a French cookbook for American housewives and Julie Powell, more than 50 years later, decided to cook her way through Julia Childs’s cookbook and write a blog about it. She shared with the readers not only her cooking but also her life experiences. The outcome of the project has been the publication of this blog in the form of a book that served as the script of the movie. Following the same pattern, in December 2009 a new cookbook appeared on the Hungarian markets entitled *Chili & Vanília*. It was written by Zsófia Mautner, who

graduated from a foreign trade faculty. Though not a professional cook, for some years she has been running a blog to get her readers acquainted with new recipes from all around the world. Her blog provided strong grounds for the publication of the book..

In addition to the benefits of blogging, distance education has also been gaining remarkable grounds lately. A great number of institutions and companies advertise themselves on the Internet and offer, for example, online language or university courses. There is no need to travel as the entire education process can be solved at home with the help of an internet connection. Searching on the web one can come across several American online Universities, such as the Atlantic International University which “offers distance learning degree programs for adult learners at the bachelors, masters, and doctoral level. As a nontraditional university, the institution offers self paced programs taken online, by correspondence or home study...”

(<http://www.aiu.edu/>)

Another interesting aspect related to the growing importance of popular media is the spreading of media-related subjects in the so called serious domains of study, namely academic fields. For example Staffordshire University offers a course entitled *The Life and Works of Victoria Beckham*, whereas Georgetown University announced a course *Philosophy and Star Trek* to investigate

the great philosophical themes that appear in the sequels. The site [www.geeks.co.uk](http://www.geeks.co.uk) provides an incredibly amusing list of diverse courses offered at different universities, just to name some: Surf Science (Plymouth University), Maple syrup – The real Thing (Alfred University, New York), History of European Witchcraft (Oneonta College, New York), Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll (Utah State University), Simpsons Studies (New Jersey College), Disney, Muppets, The Beatles, and Grateful Dead (UC Santa Cruz, California). In Hungary the offer is slightly more meagre, yet we can mention ELTE (Budapest), which has launched a sci-fi course to categorize sci-fi works

(<http://www.sfportal.hu/elte-sci-fi-kurzus-onsai-benyomasai-4806.scifi>)

As far as research and plagiarism is concerned, in the age of the Internet a tremendous amount of information and resources are available online. When exploiting these materials, people in general and students in particular, have to quote them properly, unless they wish to be rightly accused of plagiarism. For the cheaters, technology is both blessing and punishment, as in order to help the work of teachers and scholars, plagiarism detectors became available on the internet. They scan the given documents or certain key sentences to discover whether they show a distinctive similarity with other online works. Such pages are:

<http://www.plagiarismdetect.com/> or the Hungarian

<http://kopi.sztaki.hu/index.php?check=0>

#### 4. Hungarian Glocalization

The following part exemplifies elements of globalization that have been adapted to Hungarian society and culture in the fields of television, music and film.

Television is an appliance present in most American and Hungarian homes today. Ninety-eight percent of households in both countries have at least one television set and 34 percent have

two.

(<http://www.tavmunka.org/content/view/394/233/>).

In general the channels offer a large variety of programs from talk shows, cartoons, reality shows, makeovers, to news and sadly violence as well. The average American child sees 200,000 violent acts on television by the time he or she reaches the age of 18. (<http://www.soundvision.com/Info/misc/tvturnoff.asp>)

In the U.S. a talk show is generally a program where one person (or group of people) will discuss various topics put forth by a host. Sometimes talk shows feature a panel of guests, usually consisting of a group of learned people who have great experience in relation to whatever issue is being discussed on the show for that episode. Television talk shows often feature celebrity guests who talk about their work and personal lives

as well as their latest films, TV shows, music. The hosts are often comedians who open the shows with comedy monologues. Current late night talk shows are The Tonight Show with Conan O'Brien and Late Show with David Letterman. There are also tabloid talk shows from the Jerry Springer Show to celebrity interview shows like Ellen and the Wendy Williams Show. These programs have served as a model – both in structure and quite often also in content – to Hungarian talk shows: Fábri Show, Mónika Show, Balázs Show, Joshi Bharat, Friderikusz Show, Esti Frizbi, Mr.& Mrs Show.

A television “reality” show features talent recruited from the ranks of 'ordinary' people, not professionally trained actors. Reality show producers typically shoot hundreds of hours of footage per episode and use creative editing to create a narrative thread. Subjects of a reality show may be given some rudimentary directions offscreen, but the point is to allow the performers to act and react as normally as possible. A reality show is not to be confused with a documentary, in which the subjects are asked to ignore the cameras and behave naturally. Many reality show producers encourage participants to play to the cameras as characters or use private taped conversations, called confessionals, as a form of narration. (<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-reality-show.htm>)

Reality shows: Big Brother, The Biggest Loser, American Idol, Extreme

Makeover: Home Edition, America's Toughest Jobs, One Tree Hill, Deal or No Deal, America's Next Top Model, Last Comic Standing, Kitchen Nightmares, Hell's Kitchen. Most of these reality shows have been introduced also in Hungary and adapted to local taste, some preserving the original English title, like Big Brother, other providing a literal translation such as “Áll az Alku” Deal or No Deal). Nevertheless the tendency is to translate the title and use catchy old slogans or known phrases, for instance Dancing with the Stars has been translated into Hungarian by “Szombat Esti Láz” (literally: Saturday Night Fever)

In the U.S. some so-called reality television shows cover people wishing to improve their lives. Their transformation is broadcast sometimes over an entire season, as they gradually change different items in their physical appearance or material background. U.S. self-improvement or makeover shows include "How Do I Look?" (fashion makeover), Extreme Makeover (entire physical appearance), Supernanny, Nanny 911 and World's Strictest Parents (child-rearing), Made (attaining difficult goals), Trinny & Susannah Undress (fashion makeover and marriage). Makeover shows in Hungary on Viva Television: Randikommandó, (Date Commando), Szeretem a testem. (I love my body).

The most obvious instance of ubiquitous American culture is the

influence the U.S. films are exerting on popular culture all over the world. Needless to say that American films are usually far more successful everywhere than home made productions. In Hungary, as in most parts of the world, it is basically the lack of available money to be invested which significantly handicaps filmmaking. As a matter of fact one could agree that it is only a recent phenomenon that Hungarian films started to “imitate” the American movie stereotype, which might just as well be a consequence of globalization. (Acland, 2003) In the past realism, self irony and abstract humour of the character constituted the major elements of Hungarian cinematography. Films like *Zimmer Feri* (1998), based of the German phrase “Zimmer Frei” (Room to Let), which presents in a quite humorous way the overnight introduction of market economy in tourism around Lake Balaton, or films tackling the topic of the communist past like *Csinibaba/Dolly* (1997) or *Csocsó* (2001) are original representations of Central and Eastern European identity. Nowadays, it seems that there is a tendency of Hungarian films to losing this specific feature, which is probably best illustrated in the film entitled *Álom.net/ Dream.net* (2009), a poor imitation of American teenage comedies with a pathetic plot and ridiculous characters totally unsuitable in a Hungarian context. Obviously the process of cultural adaptation is indispensable, as certain elements are not interchangeable, i.e. the

typically American story of cheerleaders becomes not only strange but also ridiculous when placed in a Hungarian context. (Nevertheless, lately a Hungarian beer commercial, while promoting a nice local beverage, is also highlighting the importance of recruiting cheerleaders for the success of local sports teams – thus in a decade this above mentioned phenomenon might “naturalize” into Hungarian culture. Counterexamples are also available, for instance in the case of the film *Valami Amerika* (*A Kind of America*) and its sequel *Valami Amerika 2* which are a great example of the fruitful interweaving of Hungarian and American elements of film culture. Among the ideas that are often subconsciously associated with America, the most prominent ones are money and illusion, money, as the most essential requirement for a flourishing entertainment industry, and illusion, as a root for misconceptions carrying the possibility of fraud.

As far as the term cult film is concerned – popular culture-wise – it is a category used to label films which have a small, but highly devoted fan base, who quote phrases from the actual film when talking to each other. These films are usually weird and eccentric in some aspects, that is why they fail to achieve wide popularity. Some cult films are unknown for the public at large, though sometimes the title may sound familiar. Among the most popular cult films overseas we could cite *Star Trek* or *The*

Rocky Horror Picture Show. They developed such a high appeal that in a way they are exceptions in the category of cult films, but they still belong to this group since the audience is a specific one. Star Trek has definitely gained admirers in Hungary as well, like in many other European cultures. Cult films might develop a sense of “religious adoration”, like in the case of *The Big Lebowski*, which, with a sense of irony towards religion, generated ‘Dudeism’, a hippie-like philosophy, recognised as a religion, the basic idea of which is: “Life is short and complicated and nobody knows what to do about it. So don't do anything about it. Just take it easy, man. Stop worrying so much whether you'll make it into the finals.” (<http://www.dudeism.com/whatisdudeism.html>)

This film is rather unknown to the Hungarian ‘mainstream’ audience, like American cult films in general, since average people are not ready to digest these often abstract films. Funnily enough, the situation is very much similar in the case of Hungarian cult films. By definition, the category of cult films in Hungary is rather an artistic category, since most seem to be appropriate almost exclusively for educated Hungarian film critics ready for deep highbrow analysis. Unfortunately most of the titles available on lists viewed on the net are completely unfamiliar to, for instance, BA and MA students in the Faculty of Arts. When trying to find out the reason behind this

lack of cinematographic culture, they considered it a consequence of their American-films-based rearing and their relatively young age. As a conclusion we may say that cult films, by their very nature, are usually not known by wide audiences, nevertheless it seems that American cult films are still better known in Hungary than the Hungarian ones.

As opposed to cult films, trilogies are usually blockbusters. *Star Wars*, *Godfather*, *Matrix* or *The Pirates of the Caribbean* which have raised incredible revenues to filmmakers, are the best examples of global culture. Wherever you are in the world, but preferably in a developed country, when entering a supermarket, you will certainly bump into some products bearing Captain Jack Sparrow's photo on it. So far no Hungarian trilogy has been shot, the third episode of a film entitled *Üvegtigris* (*Glass Tiger*), is coming out this year.

After a while, certain films, no matter how popular they were, become out of date in the eyes of the new generation due mainly to technical developments, or just simply to social changes which urge film makers to place previously successful films into a modernised new context. Both were certainly significant drives for Hungarian film makers when they decided to remake *Hyppolit*, a *lakáj/Hyppolit the Butler* (1931) in 1999, or *Meseautó/ The Fairy Tale Auto* (1934) in 2000, perhaps the most famous ones, but we could mention *Egy szoknya és egy*

nadrág/ A skirt and a Pair of Trousers (1943, remade in 2005) or Egy bolond százat csinál / One Fool Makes Other Hundred (1942, remade in 2006) as well. All of these were directed by the same person, who has summed up why remakes are to be treated as independent pieces: "I'm careful with using the word 'remake'. These are independent films with independent lives. These pieces have been made for completely different audiences from those 60 years ago, and the context has also changed. In Egy Bolond for example, characteristic figures of the contemporary subcultures of Budapest also appear: down-and-out intellectuals, pussycats and Chinese immigrants can all be seen in the film." (<http://index.hu/kultur/cinematrix/ccikk/k/bolond0421/>) The story of the film is based on a novel. Interestingly enough, quite a few films that have one or more remakes are adaptations of books. That is logical, however since books allow different interpretations, and thus, more opportunities for different directors to distance their piece from the other film versions. My favourite example for this is Tim Burton, whose worlds and visions depicted in his films are quite unique and even bizarre. Charlie and the Chocolate factory (2005), for example is based on a novel and the original film version came out in 1971. His remake of Alice in Wonderland was released this March. His 2007 project also used an old legend that had been put on the screen several times before, Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street, played by

Johnny Depp. Their frequent collaboration is also a worldwide known one, a key to success everywhere in the world for people with a specific taste, in for a two-hour absurdity and darkness, a sort of psychedelic experience. Interestingly their partnership has a more populous and stable fan base in Hungary than any Hungarian director or actor would ever dare to dream of. The reason behind it is much more than Johnny Deep's incredible male beauty (he is usually made almost unrecognisable in these films anyway), what makes these films 'very global' is that they are set in the world of fantasy, many of them has not got explicit connection to the culture they were made in. Moreover, the above mentioned examples reveal another interesting topic, since the books and ideas on which these three films were based on come from Britain, suggesting the fact that many American productions indeed borrow their basic ideas from other cultures. Because of their obvious common roots of these cultures it might not be as an expressive example, as e.g. Meet Joe Black, a well-known American film starring Anthony Hopkins and Brad Pitt, which is an adaptation of an Italian play written by Alberto Casella in 1924, La Morte In Vacanza, which some years later also became a Broadway success entitled Death Takes a Holiday, then adapted to the big screen in 1934. The rich soil from which the American film culture is nourished from can be presented through an Eastern European, Hungarian-related example as well,

namely through Count Dracula, the legendary Székely vampire, played by Béla Lugosi.

Along the same line television is a powerful tool for communicating ideas, and popular adult cartoons can be a special reflection to the U.S. and current world events. The ones that have reached the Hungarian viewers are *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Family Guy*. By presenting social commentaries related to both U.S. specific and global issues, in a simple, often very vulgar but also impressive and representative way *South Park* has become an organic part of global popular culture. Unfortunately there is no Hungarian mainstream equivalent for these animated cartoons, yet some episodes are available on YouTube and entitled *East Park*, have been made by Hungarians based completely on the analogy of *South Park* and placed in a Hungarian context, elaborating on Hungarian issues. It seems that the Hungarian media is still rather immature for this degree of freedom of speech, and the result of broadcasting a kind of program which introduces such a harsh commentary on current social and political issues would result in an array of miserable suits by offended celebrities and politicians. Episodes often have scandalous reverberations in the U.S. as well, but nothing like the Hungarian reactions would be if the whole thing were placed in a Hungarian context.

## 5. Conclusion

As a conclusion we may say that the glocalized elements of popular culture clearly underlie Rob Kroes's (2009) thoughts namely that the Western civilization is experiencing a history of cultural translation where cultural reception is put in the service of the quest for and defence of national identities as culturally defined.

As to the cultural capital shared among Europeans and Americans it has been said, in jest, that the only culture that Europeans have in common is American popular culture.

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