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Negotiating the local and the global in the construction of semiperipheral identity in Polish science fiction and fantasy fandom

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[0.1] Abstract—An analysis of Polish science fiction, fantasy, and role-playing game fandom brings to the fore problems of Polish identity and patriotism, as well as views on Polish fandom as a specific local phenomenon and as a part of global pop culture. Polish fandom may be framed as a semiperipheral culture, with fans expressing Polish identity and engaging in strategies of negotiating the global and the local.

[0.2] Keywords—Cultural negotiation; Globalization

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1. Introduction

[1.1] We aim to examine how Polish science fiction and fantasy (SF&F) fans construct and perceive their identity as members of a local (national) and global fandom. We follow the basic premise of historically, socially, and economically conditioned specificity of the Polish fandom, established and developed under the circumstances of an Eastern bloc country, one economically constrained and largely isolated from cultural exchange with the Western world, and which after 1989 underwent rapid social changes and exposure to global market and pop culture (Wasilewski 2006). Contemporary Polish SF&F fandom seeks more participation in the English-speaking fan culture commonly perceived as the global mainstream while emphasizing local specificity, national values and language, and locally produced media. These form a basis for semiperipheral identity. Fans confront their tastes and activities within a vision of Western fandom. The negotiation between the global and the local performed by fandom is a specific part of a wider cultural process connected with notions of national identities in a globalized world.

[1.2] The significance of researching the cultural practices performed in cultures other than central ones lies in the possibility of exposing mechanisms of circulation of meanings in globalized pop culture and expanding the archive of descriptions of specific local fandoms. As Polish researchers immersed in general Polish national culture as well as in SF&F and role-playing game (RPG) fandom activities, we can describe this semiperipheral culture from within, not just from a dominant central perspective, and we can diagnose the observed phenomena with a better recognition of social context.

2. Subject and methodology

[2.1] Here we interpret and analyze one of the topics addressed during an exploratory study of Polish SF&F fandom. The results of this study were published on Henry Jenkins's blog as a part of the Participatory Poland collaborative project (Janik et al. 2013). We carried out a computer-aided qualitative content analysis of content published during September 2013 on the Polter (Poltergeist) (<http://polter.pl>) Web site, the largest Polish site dedicated to SF&F. We established a code book with an array of categories that aimed to examine various phenomena. The items were sorted according to categories used by the Web site. Coding categories were subject to modification during the course of the research. The scope of the analysis also included various strategies of validation and discursive tactics of forming fan identities, including strategies of inclusion and exclusion.

[2.2] After we conducted this exploratory study, we formed a hypothesis based on the source material: an interpretation of Polish SF&F fandom as semiperipheral in a cultural sense. Polish fandom is in a constant process of negotiating its identity and position within global fandom. We supplemented our analysis of the original source material with a longitudinal analysis of the relevant articles and posts published on Polter between July 2010 and September 2013.

[2.3] Our framing of Polish SF&F fandom as semiperipheral was derived from an examination of dominant tendencies evident in the source material—that is, the content posted on the Web site. As Ulf Hannerz notes, "The flow of culture within the contemporary world is in large part asymmetrical, [with] a stronger flow from center to periphery than vice versa; in cultural terms, this is what defines center and periphery" (1996, 60). Semiperiphery can be understood in this context as a place of mediating activities between core and peripheral regions and areas in which institutional features are in some ways intermediate between those forms found in core and periphery (Pieterse 2009). For historical and economic reasons, Poland as a country gained a semiperipheral status in the global cultural exchange, which has consequences for the shape of Polish pop culture and fan practices. In SF&F fandom, the cultural consumption practices and fans' self-identifications constantly negotiate among globalized SF&F media, fandom, and the commonly shared notion of Polish specificity accompanied by a need to maintain a certain extent of cultural autonomy.

3. Fandom in a postcommunist country: Semiperipheral circumstances and identities

[3.1] Historically, Polish SF&F fandom emerged and developed within a very different set of social circumstances than those in the United States and Great Britain, where the mainstream of postwar global pop culture was established. After World War II and until its political transformation in 1989, Poland was a part of the Eastern bloc of nations, and because of the strict limitations placed on free trade and travel abroad, cultural exchange with Western countries was constrained. This resulted in a different set of texts being available during the

formative times of Polish SF&F fandom and therefore in a different set of SF&F works being regarded as canonical. The core of fandom interest during communism was literary; the translations of Western books and the distribution of foreign films were not subject to many censorship or trade limitations. Other media phenomena, such as TV shows or RPG games, considered to be milestones in English-speaking SF&F fandom, did not appear in official distribution channels. Despite some amount of unofficial circulation, thanks to photocopying texts and pirating VHS tapes, these texts remained largely unknown to Polish fans. For instance, the vastly influential RPG system, *Dungeons & Dragons* (Tactical Studies Rules Inc., 1974; Wizards of the Coast, 1997) was published in Poland after a 25-year delay. The first RPG system translated into Polish (in 1994) was *Warhammer* (Games Workshop, 1986) which is still perceived as the prototype RPG by Polish fans. Similarly, the absence of any Star Trek series in Polish television until the 1990s is a telling example of differences in consumption of popular texts in Poland and in English-speaking countries. As Siuda (in press) points out, much of fans' activity during communism was devoted to gaining access to foreign texts and organizing fandom despite institutional hardships.

[3.2] An analysis of the frequency of references to various kinds of media in the Polter Web site's content leads to a conclusion that books and RPGs are at the center of today's fandom interest. The literary tastes of Polish fans and their perceptions of canonical SF&F works developed differently than in the case of American or British fans. This was the result of two important factors. First, the canon consisting of world-acclaimed Anglophone SF&F classics was supplemented with works by Eastern European authors, such as the Strugatsky brothers or Kir Bulychov. Second, the Polish tradition of science fiction (and to a lesser extent fantasy) was heavily influenced by works where speculative fiction was used as a vehicle for social, political, and sometimes philosophical topics that could not be spoken about openly as a result of censorship before 1989. This tendency was largely established by the (dystopian and anticommunist) prose of Janusz A. Zajdel and Stanislaw Lem, and it has consequences that remain to this day. Polish SF&F readers are accustomed to searching for sociopolitical meanings in speculative fiction and discussing them; in addition, the majority of Polish speculative fiction books tends to have slightly conservative, right-wing overtones.

[3.3] The political transformation of 1989 resulted in an opening of the Polish market, and with it Polish fandom, to a wide variety of previously unknown or little-known literary and media texts. The processes already noted of negotiation between fan identification as part of both local and global fandoms, as well as the dichotomy of Polish fan identity as a part of Western fandom as a whole and a localized, more patriotically minded Polish fandom, are strongest after 1989.

4. The Polish case: Finding Poland in globalized culture

[4.1] Analysis of our source material revealed that even the smallest mention of Poland and Polish matters in cultural texts are noted and commented on, usually favorably, but with a series of caveats related to perceived truth values and authenticity. In September 2013, Polter hosted a series of posts of news and reviews of the new Graham Masterton novel, *Forest Ghost* (2013). The sheer number of news items and discussions coincides with the fact that Masterton has professed a special affinity for Poland. However, although Masterton's books are guaranteed wide, in-depth coverage because of their Polish connections, they are also subject to avid criticism on the same basis. As opined by a reviewer writing for Polter:

[4.2] The biggest wasted opportunity has to be the fact that only the briefest attention is given to the massacre of Polish intellectuals in the Kampinos. It was announced months ago that this tragedy would have a prominent place in the novel, building up readers' appetite for an interesting, revisionist tale, and meanwhile, this part of our history has only been touched on. (Cichy 2013)

[4.3] Books describing Polish matters (and especially those written by foreigners and regarded as a representation of Poland abroad) are expected to adhere to a series of high standards, including good-quality writing, a detailed and in-depth approach to historical events, a fresh perspective, and a narrative fidelity to what Polish fans perceive to constitute a Polish character.

[4.4] The importance ascribed by Polish fans to historical and political fiction is an especially interesting issue, and one partially connected with the inclination toward considering speculative fiction in social and political terms. Although the expectations of verisimilitude are held for all works touching on Polish matters, they are especially strong and prevalent in case of narratives that use parts of Polish history, even if these texts represent historical fiction with SF&F elements or alternate history fiction. Some of these texts form distinct thematic groups, such as books and games set in the 17th century in the so-called Sarmatian period of Polish history, commonly regarded as one of the high points of national splendor, but also an era marked by fights with external enemies. Most of these historical narratives tend to reproduce the vision of patriotism grounded in the Polish 19th-century romanticism, with its focus on national history, the values of chivalry, the social and moral significance of the noble class, and an idealization of fighting for a just cause. Although alternative and revisionist versions of history are present in Polish SF&F, works pertaining to these matters need to follow the established beats of national identity and character. In the case of alternate histories, changes are allowed as long as they adhere to Poland's dual role as a potential global power (stemming from times of geopolitical importance) or as the martyr of nations, a notion reinforced by annexations, failed uprisings, and two world wars. This dichotomy influences fans' need for accurate representation—as much as is possible to reconcile both of these notions. The amount of attention devoted to Polish historical themes, especially those underlining the significance and exceptionality of the country, is evidence of the hopes and aspirations of Polish fans for Poland to be noted and appreciated on international level.

[4.5] Polish fans direct scrutiny and attention to works even tangentially related to the country and its people. Fans follow Polish SF&F works and authors abroad, especially in those rare instances when they receive worldwide success. In recent years, this is best visible in the case of *The Witcher* (CD Projekt RED, 2007) video game series. Fans also display a tendency to feel protective of Polish works and authors, as well as their perceived Polish and Slavic attributes. However, the practice is dual in nature: Polish fandom is prone to displays of national pride in relation to works and creators who succeeded on the international stage, as well as prone to treating such success with distrust and criticisms of selling out. At the same time, fans call out for support for the national market and for Polish works, which are perceived as fragile and threatened by the outpouring of Western, and especially American, offerings. Although the realm of Polish production is sometimes depicted as troubled by conflicts and rivalries, as well as afflicted by poor quality, fans routinely appeal to others to protect Polish works' integrity and to offer encouragement and financial support.

[4.6] Similar bidirectional tendencies can be observed in case of Polish fan conventions. Most Polish fandom activity had been connected to localized grassroots efforts of city- and region-

based fan organizations. Local organizations emphasize their roots in this area, tying conventions to their places of origin. Almost all cons have historically been run by volunteers and have never been considered to be a substantially commercial venture. The last few years, however, have brought calls for a greater level of professionalization of events, citing the fact that because the majority of cons charge the attendees, the attendees are within their rights to demand more value for their money. An important factor here is also increased exposure of fans to Western-style fan conventions. The institution of cons can be thus seen as undergoing constant change in response to Western patterns and the demands of fandom.

[4.7] According to our analysis of *Polter*, another area that fans consider to be in need of protection is the realm of language. Fans borrow from other languages, especially English, because many media texts enter the Polish market in either the original-language version or translated into Polish with many word borrowings and English-based neologisms. The debate on the use of Anglicisms is far from conclusive, but its constant renewal attests to the fact that the Polish language is also an area of negotiation between the needs of keeping in touch with Anglophone media texts and maintaining a national specificity (Polter 2013).

5. Conclusions: Finding Poland in between

[5.1] All the phenomena we describe support the view of Polish SF&F and RPG fandoms' unsteady status as semiperipheral in a cultural sense. Polish fandom is strongly rooted in its historically, politically, and economically conditioned local specificity and its need to maintain autonomy while simultaneously aspiring to participate in global fandom and pop culture. Polish fans strongly value their culture, language, and fandom-related market, but they constantly refer to and position themselves in relation to Western, English-speaking fandom, considered by the Polish fans to be the ultimate mainstream. Polish fans look for a validation of their place in fandom as well as a confirmation of the value of Polish culture and fandom. Fans' views of their own identity and produced works are in constant flux, part of a process of negotiation between national and cultural pride and feelings of inferiority. This dichotomy is reflected and repeated in the approach to the external, especially American, cultural offerings, which are derided and admired in equal measure.

[5.2] The desires for recognition and an entrance to the global stage are tied to a careful analysis of the fate of Polish works abroad and are visible in the attention devoted to tracing all the references to Poland and related matters in genre texts created abroad. The presence of such ambivalent approaches, the evidence of constant negotiation between global and local, the tension between strong national pride and the need of belonging and recognition on the international stage, and, most importantly, the fact that these processes and strategies are increasingly frequently noted, discussed, and commented on within fan circles support our conclusion that this is a crucial area of research on the subject of Polish fan identity. We hope that our findings are helpful in diagnosing parallel or divergent tendencies in other non-Anglophone fandoms.

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