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Banal cosmopolitanism and *The Lord of the Rings*: The limited role of national differences in global media consumption

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Abstract

Comparative reception studies are generally built around the expectation to find national cultural differences. Using data from a comparative study on *The Lord of the Rings, Return of the King*, this paper investigates the role of nationality in the reception of global media texts. Analysis of differences in appreciation, interpretation and involvement in an online survey ($N = 24,747$) showed great variation in audience reception, especially in interpretation, but no cultural or national patterns. Cluster analysis of response patterns yielded two clusters. The first cluster had greater levels of involvement and appreciation, strong allegiance to the preferred reading, and higher prevalence in the Anglophone world; the second contained more diverse interpretations by respondents further from the global “center” both geographically and demographically (gender, age). The paper argues that for global media texts like LotR, national “repertoires of evaluation” are superseded by global or transnational repertoires, which are more readily available to viewers closer to the cultural and geographic center. This calls into question the use of the nation-state as the fundamental unit of analysis for comparative research. Globalized, market-driven cultural expressions produce patterns of reception characterized by what Beck described as “banal cosmopolitanism”: the experience of “globality” embedded in everyday life.

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1. Introduction

On December 17, 2003, the third part of the film trilogy *The Lord of the Rings, The Return of the King*, premiered simultaneously in over thirty countries around the world: in Europe and North America but also in countries like China, Chile, South Africa, and South Korea. “The Epic Continues” was the tagline accompanying the launch of *The Return of the King*, the final part of the extremely successful trilogy filmed by Peter Jackson, and based on the books by J.R.R. Tolkien. The movie had the second highest worldwide box office returns ever, after *Titanic* (1997), grossing \$1119.3 million, with 66.3% of its profits made outside Canada and the US.¹ This makes *The Return of the King* a notably global success, doing well Europe and the Anglophone world, but also outside the Western world.

Like the previous two episodes of *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Return of the King* presents a fantasy world, Middle Earth, inhabited by, among others, humans, dwarfs, hobbits, elves, orks, wizards and the Dark Lord Sauron. Hobbit Frodo, the protagonist, embarks on a long and dangerous journey to destroy the Ring that would give Sauron the power to rule Middle Earth in the fires of Mount Doom. The final part of the trilogy has different storylines: it follows Frodo to the end of his quest, and also tracks the other members of the “fellowship of the ring” that set out to destroy the Ring in the first part of the trilogy. The classic quest narrative, the universal theme of good versus evil, and the fantastic characters and otherworldly setting all may be elements of the trilogy’s global appeal.

The launch of the third part of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy provides a unique opportunity to study the global reception of a blockbuster movie. It allows us to explore the global appeal of *The Lord of the Rings*, and cross-national variations in the appreciation and understanding of this movie. In 2003, Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs from Aberystwyth University in Wales initiated a large-scale international comparative research project studying the launch and reception of *The Lord of the Rings, Return of the King*. Scholars from twenty countries participated in this project. The aim was to “use the opportunity presented by the launch of the final film in The Lord of the Rings trilogy, The Return of the King, in December 2003, to contribute to three important areas of knowledge, namely: (1) the cross-national reception of international communications; (2) the functions and role of fantasy within contemporary culture; and (3) the role of marketing and publicity regimes in prefiguring the reception of a film.” (Barker and Mathijs, 2003:1) The figures of the study are quite staggering: 24,747 respondents² in more than 150 countries filled out the online questionnaire. Results of this project have been published in Biltereyst and Kuipers (2006), Mathijs (2006), and Barker and Mathijs (2008).

This project, with its unique international data set, inspires reflection upon the possibilities and limitations of cross-national comparative research. As in many comparative projects, the expectation of cross-national differences was “built into” the project. The research proposal explicitly states that the research was meant to study the “cross-national reception” of the movie, singling out national differences above other background characteristics as the central independent variable. As Martin Barker, the initiator of the project, puts it: “in its design, it was intended to permit cross-country, thence cross-cultural, comparisons of responses.” (Barker, 2008:149) Moreover, the project was carried out by scholars working in “national

¹ Source: www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=returnoftheking.htm. Consulted May 5, 2008. Additionally, the films made a lot of money worldwide with DVD sales and merchandise (Wasko, 2008).

² Barker and Mathijs (2008:19) cite a slightly different number, 24,739. Since we used a limited number of variables, more cases could be retained for analysis.

teams”, mostly analyzing their “national datasets” (cf. Aranda et al., 2008; Barker et al., 2008; Biltreyst and Kuipers, 2006; Klinger, 2008). Finally, analyses dealing with the entire dataset focused on comparisons of “national samples” in order to “examine how the film’s reception was shaped by the cultural conditions in different countries.” (Barker et al., 2008:213; cf. Barker, 2008).

Using the international dataset of the *Lord of the Rings* research, this article investigates the role of nationality in the study of global media reception. Is nationality indeed the crucial variable it is made to be in comparative media research? To what extent can we find national differences in reception of *The Lord of the Rings* (*LotR*)? What is the influence of nationality relative to other background variables? Can we conceptualize national differences in media reception as cultural differences, as seems to be the assumption in comparative work on media reception? We are using this project as our starting point not because we intend to criticize the project (after all, we were part of it). Rather, because of its unprecedented breadth, the *LotR* project enables us to explore some fundamental questions underlying cross-national research.

We aim to answer these questions by analyzing patterns of appreciation, interpretation, and involvement with the movie in the total dataset of the *LotR* project. Like many other cross-national projects, this project has made the nation-state its starting point. Our analysis will demonstrate that nationality plays a relatively minor role in the reception of the movie—at least among the involved fan audiences that constitute the majority of our respondents. Moreover, it is dubious whether these national differences can be attributed to cultural background. We will argue that in the case of global blockbusters like *The Lord of the Rings*, national “repertoires of evaluation” are superseded by more global repertoires. This calls into question the use of the nation-state as the central unit of analysis for comparative social research. Instead, highly globalized, market-driven cultural expressions such as *The Lord of the Rings* produce a cultural sphere and patterns of reception characterized by what Beck (2002) has described as “banal cosmopolitanism”: the experience of “globality” embedded in everyday life.

2. Media reception in a comparative perspective

The nation-state remains an important, if not the most important, organizing principle in social research. In our increasingly globalized world, comparative research has swiftly gained importance in the social sciences. The nation-state generally serves as the main unit of analysis in such comparative research, either implicitly or explicitly (Beck, 2002; Crofts Wiley, 2004; Livingstone, 2003). Beck (2002), in a critique of this focus on the nation-state, refers to this as “methodological nationalism”.

Media present people with the most visible manifestations of globalization, confronting them with images and stories from around the world on a daily basis. Increasingly, media products do not have a clear nationality anymore. The *LotR* trilogy is a case in point: an English story, produced by an American company, directed and filmed in New Zealand by a New Zealand director, with actors from many different countries. Despite this “denationalizing” of media production, communications and media research is surprisingly nationally oriented. International comparative research in the field of media consumption and reception is rare, especially compared with a related discipline like cultural sociology (cf. Janssen and Peterson, 2005; Lamont and Thévenot, 2000; Katz-Gerro, 2002).

But in sociology too, the nation-state remains firmly in place. When Richard Peterson, in his essay on comparative research, writes that “comparative research faces a special challenge because the set of indicators that fit well in one country at one time probably will not serve well

across countries and over time,” (Peterson, 2005:267) he rightly questions the global applicability of concepts, yet fails to question the organizing principle for comparative research: the nation-state. However, as Livingstone (2003:480) observed: “Any project seeking to conduct cross-national comparisons must surely argue the case for treating the nation as a unit, rather than simply presuming the legitimacy of such a research strategy.” This observation underlines the issue we want to address here: we are not arguing against taking the nation-state as unit of analysis. On the contrary, our analysis is also based on a cross-national comparative research design. However, we want to stress, in line with Livingstone’s comment, that the nation-state should be seen as one possible unit of analysis, rather than the a priori central explanatory variable.

In media and communication studies, the widely cited study by Liebes and Katz (1993) on the reception of *Dallas* is the classic example of a comparative project. This study takes nationality and ethnicity as the independent variable, comparing readings of *Dallas* by Russian Jews, kibbutzniks, Arabs, Moroccans, Americans, and Japanese. Conceptually, their study makes a strong case by distinguishing three modes of retelling: linear (or “distributive”), focusing on the narrative structure; segmented (or “indexical”), focusing on the characters; and thematic (or “paradigmatic”), focusing on the moral structure. These differences can be traced back to a distinction between “traditional” groups – Arabs and Moroccans – following the linear storyline and “modern” Americans and kibbutzniks with segmented, psychological readings; with a third group of immigrants from the Soviet Union concentrating on the moral and political message. The *Dallas* study singles out cultural background as the basis for interpretation of global media texts, leaving little room for in-group differences.

Recent comparative reception studies are generally joint enterprises, organized around contributions by scholars from different countries, each analyzing the reception of a specific media product in their own country. For example, in the book about global Disney audiences by Wasko et al. (2001), each country is discussed in a separate chapter. Only one contribution attempts a comparison across the entire sample (Phillips, 2001). This chapter concludes – rather inconsistently with the structuring of the project – that the values attached to *Disney* are globally by and large the same. A volume by Mathijs and Jones (2004) on the various national incarnations of reality format *Big Brother* has a similar country-driven structure, with an additional specific theme per chapter. The book has only one comparative chapter, which analyzes moral panics in different countries (Biltreyst, 2004). Finally, Cooper-Chen’s volume on global media entertainment (2005) is also structured by country, except for chapters on the Olympics and global TV game shows. All these studies take the nation-state for granted. Moreover, they tend to conflate nationality with culture, assuming that each nation-state has a specific national culture that sets its citizens apart from those of other nation-states.

Recently, scholars have attempted to study and conceptualize media from a more transnational perspective. Examples of this are the work of Larkin (2003) on Bollywood movies in Africa, and the work of Bielby and Harrington (2008) on global television markets. A notable attempt to break away from methodological nationalism in communication studies can be found in Straubhaar’s (2007) work on the “polycentric” world television system, with transnational television audiences organized around several centers of television production.

3. Explaining national variations in media reception

The notion of national cultural differences suggests that countries have a particular national “taste”, and that people in countries with kindred cultures or shared histories have similar tastes.

This leads us to expect significant national differences between the “taste” of different countries. Moreover, we expect to find clusters of related countries, rather like Liebes and Katz’ finding that “modern” kibbutzniks and Americans, and “traditional” Moroccans and Arabs resembled each other. Similarly, Livingstone and Bovill (2001), in their comparative project on children’s media use in Europe, distinguish “peer oriented” cultures, mainly in Northern and Western Europe, and mostly Southern European “family oriented” cultures.³

Most comparative media reception research is informed by Hall’s encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1980). According to this model, the dominant ideology in society is inscribed (“encoded”) into media texts. But this intended meaning is not always accepted uncritically. People can interpret (“decode”) a text in line with the dominant ideology – the preferred reading – but also take a position of negotiation or opposition towards the text. In the *Dallas* study, the psychological readings of American and kibbutzniks, the groups culturally closest to the producers of *Dallas*, were most reflexive and “negotiated”. The politicized interpretations of the Russian (Soviet) Jews were most oppositional. Hence, cultural differences lead to different interpretations of the same text. The model also allows for the possibility that cultural distance is too large to make meaningful or pleasurable decoding possible: according to Liebes and Katz, *Dallas* failed in Japan because of lack of cultural affinity.

The encoding/decoding model stipulates that audiences that share the dominant ideology are more capable of “decoding” media texts. Conversely, audiences that are less aware of this ideology are less likely to achieve a pleasurable decoding. Studies adopting this model argue that in particular audiences with strong involvement with the media text – fan communities – take a reflexive and critical position towards this text (Fiske, 1989; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992).

A second framework for exploring differences in media reception is derived from media psychology, and revolves around the concepts of “identification” and “parasocial interaction” with characters (Cohen, 2001; Giles, 2002; Livingstone, 1998). This paradigm has been influential in research on gender, age and educational effects on media reception, but less so in cross-cultural research. However, national and cultural differences are likely to affect possibilities for identification and the development of parasocial interaction. Great cultural distance may make identification simply impossible. Also, cultural distance may lead to less complex forms of identification, or identification with the more “flat”, one-dimensional characters. Finally, people of different cultural or national backgrounds may identify with specific characters, or relate more to specific storylines (Livingstone, 1998).

Livingstone (1998) has successfully combined insights from this psychological model with the encoding/decoding model. She found that differences between audiences are often related to different decodings, which in turn affect appreciation of and identification with characters. The same mixed cultural studies and media psychology approach was used to understand national differences in the outstanding comparative study of children’s media use in various European countries, which was co-directed by Livingstone (Livingstone and Bovill, 2001).

For our analysis of the cross-national reception of the *Lord of the Rings*, we also draw on a third framework for interpreting national differences, which has its roots in cultural sociology rather than media studies. Lamont and her collaborators (Lamont, 1992; Lamont and Thévenot, 2000) have argued that inhabitants of different countries have at their disposal different “repertoires of evaluation” with which to judge and evaluate things, leading eventually to different preferences. For instance, French repertoires tend to be oriented towards high culture –

³ Arguably, this distinction, like the one made by Liebes and Katz, can be traced back to a distinction between “traditional” and “modern” cultures.

sophistication, good manners, the “negation” of morality – whereas American national repertoires are more pragmatic, focusing on economic success, morality, and usefulness. These national repertoires are rooted not only in rather transcendent cultural characteristics of a nation, but also in structural and institutional factors: the organization of the educational system, the role of the state in the cultural field, and the relative autonomy of the cultural field vis-à-vis the economy. Hence, national repertoires are firmly based in social structure, particularly in the central institutions of the nation-state.

The theories on encoding and decoding, on parasocial interaction and identification, and on cultural repertoires provide different frameworks for the interpretation and explanation of national differences in media reception. These theories are generally applied in specific national contexts or in cross-national comparative research. However, the mechanisms that explain differences in reception – shared ideologies, possibilities for identification and parasocial interaction, and social and institutional production of repertoires of evaluation – are not necessarily bound by the nation-state. At this stage of globalization the processes they identify as central to the formation of taste may increasingly take place on a transnational, rather than a national, scale.

4. Method and data

The data for the *Lord of the Rings* project were collected using an online questionnaire in fourteen languages. The questionnaire was launched in December 2003, and stayed online for 6 months. During this period 24,747 responses were collected. Many respondents were informed of the research through fan sites and fan networks. Moreover, some research teams approached people in movie theaters, and in some countries (Belgium, The Netherlands, Slovenia, UK), the project received considerable press attention, resulting in high response rates in these countries.

Since all informants voluntarily filled out an extensive online survey, this sample is probably not representative. The overall appreciation of the movie is very high (see below), so it seems justified to conclude that the *Lord of the Rings* project is a study of global fans and lovers of the trilogy rather than global film viewers. Since the survey was held online, and most respondents were recruited through fan networks and online communities, the sample consists of people who are active on the Internet. These people are probably linked to networks beyond their local communities, and less locally oriented than people who use the Internet less or not at all. Hence, the sample has an overrepresentation not only of fans, but also of what Hannerz (1990) called “cosmopolitans”: people whose life orientation revolves around global interconnectedness rather than their local communities. Clearly, this affects our results, which would undoubtedly have been different had we worked with a fully representative sample.

These respondents live in over 150 different countries (including Antarctica, Vatican City, and various Pacific island nations). In 24 countries, over 100 people filled out the survey (see Table 1). We limit our analysis to a comparison of these 24 countries. In the entire dataset, the gender division is almost evenly balanced (52.2% women). Most respondents were between 16 and 34 (47.9% in age group 16–24; 24.3% between 25 and 34), which probably is a fair reflection of the trilogy’s audience. Respondents were asked closed questions about social background, appreciation, and their previous experiences with the books and earlier parts of the trilogy; but the questionnaire consisted mainly of open questions.

The question we want to address here is to what extent variations in the appreciation and interpretation of the *Return of the King* are mediated by national background. We have selected a number of variables from the questionnaire that we expect to differ cross-nationally, and that can

Table 1

Appreciation of *Lord of the Rings*, *Return of the King* and familiarity with books and earlier parts of the trilogy for each national sample, ranked by size of national sample.

	Mean rating ^a	S.D. rating ^a	Ranking	Seen part 1 more than once	Seen part 2 more than once	<i>N</i>	Respondents per 100,000 inhabitants ^b
United States	1.23	.550	2	95%	99%	4,744	1.63
Netherlands	1.34	.658	9	83%	99%	3,245	20.05
UK	1.41	.734	13	85%	100%	3,064	5.16
Denmark	1.49	.685	19	84%	78%	1,675	30.75
Spain	1.37	.688	11	97%	94%	1,564	3.72
Belgium	1.33	.629	7	73%	96%	1,376	13.34
Germany	1.48	.706	18	90%	85%	1,161	1.41
China	1.47	.727	17	56%	53%	1,083	.09
Slovenia	1.88	1.102	23	62%	56%	910	45.58
France	1.51	.839	20	90%	87%	649	1.05
Australia	1.33	.623	7	91%	87%	551	2.78
Greece	1.71	.927	22	77%	67%	500	4.51
Canada	1.26	.610	5	94%	92%	485	1.53
Italy	2.07	1.062	24	85%	75%	480	.82
Turkey	1.61	.925	21	79%	78%	334	.47
Norway	1.25	.537	4	97%	94%	296	6.45
Chile	1.16	.465	1	96%	89%	224	1.40
Colombia	1.44	.801	15	81%	73%	194	.44
New Zealand	1.29	.645	6	91%	90%	156	3.90
Sweden	1.44	.652	15	93%	88%	148	1.65
Mexico	1.24	.545	3	90%	92%	142	.14
Argentina	1.37	.897	11	90%	83%	124	.33
Malaysia	1.35	.618	10	89%	81%	118	.48
Austria	1.41	.738	13	85%	79%	114	1.39
Other	1.44	.778	–	86%	84%	1,311	
Total	1.40	.728	–	85.5%	83%	24,747	

^a 5-Point scale, with 1 = appreciate very much; 5 = do not appreciate at all.

^b Source UN Population Division (2006).

be quantified to allow statistical analysis. Earlier studies on media appreciation, and the three paradigms for comparative reception research outlined above, lead us to expect that cultural differences are apparent in appreciation as well as interpretation of media texts. We will thus look at two variables in the dataset that we expect to reflect the interpretation of the film: favorite character and ascription of genre (modality).

The choice of favorite character is expected to signal with whom audiences identify, and hence what storyline (the movie contained many different storylines, each with different protagonists) is most important to them. The question about favourite character was an open question. For further statistical manipulation this text variable was recoded into dummy variables.⁴ The questionnaire measured the ascription of genre, or “modality” by asking the following question:

⁴ Given the large number of respondents and the different languages in which they had answered this open question, we resorted to a rather crude technique to construct this dummy variable. Each response containing a specific name was considered a mention of this character as favorite. Occasionally, this means that recoding may not entirely do justice to the respondent's intention, for instance with answers like “it was Frodo in the book, but Aragorn in the movie”. Also, it misses some cases where respondents were rather vague in their description (“the dwarf”), although such answers were rare. Also, it was not possible to recode answers in non-Roman script (Chinese, Russian, Greek).

“What sort of story is *The Lord of the Rings, Return of the King* according to you?” Respondents could choose a maximum of three options from the following list: allegory; epic; fantasy; game world; good versus evil; myth; quest; special effects; spiritual journey; threatened homeland; war story. This allows us to gauge how respondents interpreted, rather than appreciated, the movie.

Furthermore, to establish the relative importance of nationality we also look at two independent variables that are important in studies of media reception: gender and age.⁵ Finally, we include in our analysis the number of times respondents have seen the other movies from the trilogy, taking this as a measure of the level of involvement.

If nationality is important for the movie’s reception, we expect not only to find significant differences and similarities across countries, but also clusters of similar countries. We assume that countries that are similar culturally or linguistically resemble each other in their choices for characters or modalities. Also, we expect that similar combinations of characters and genres occur in countries that are culturally, linguistically, or geographically close. Such recurrent combinations would point to a specific patterning of interpretation of the film. We do not, however, have specific hypotheses about the relationship between nationality, genre choice, character, and appreciation. Hence, our analysis is exploratory in character, using descriptive statistics such as crosstabs, χ^2 tests, and cluster analysis.

5. Results

5.1. *Appreciation, interpretation and national background*

As Table 1 shows, appreciation for the film is very high in all national samples. National differences in appreciation are statistically significant – which can be expected with a dataset this size – but given the high ratings these differences are not very meaningful. There is no particular cultural or linguistic region where the film was appreciated more, or less, than average. The same goes for gender and age differences. These are statistically significant but small, with high overall appreciation. Average appreciation by men and women is 1.45 and 1.35, which means that, contrary to stereotype, female viewers like the film slightly better. Differences between age groups yield no clear pattern, with the exception of the oldest (and smallest) group of informants, over 70: in this group, appreciation is relatively low (1.82 on a scale from 1 = highest to 5 = lowest).

As mentioned above, the survey results probably reflect the opinions of global fans rather than global viewers. However, different countries have different response rates, ranging from 45.58 out of every 100,000 people in Slovenia (where the project was heavily publicized as the first reception research ever done in the country) to under 1 out of every 100,000 people in China. This may have influenced appreciation rates, although it is hard to say how. Possibly, samples from countries with higher response rates have a smaller proportion of devoted fans. However, we found no significant correlation between response ranking and average appreciation.

For favorite character and modality choice we find similar response patterns: a wide variety of answers across the dataset, but little difference between countries in the ranking or relative frequency of these answers. This is illustrated in Table 2, which shows the “first choice” in each country. Whereas the respondents name a wide variety of characters as their favorite, the popular characters are more or less the same in all countries. Aragorn, the returning king of the title, usually comes first, getting about 25% of the “votes”; closely followed by Sam, the loyal servant

⁵ Sadly, no usable question on educational level or socio-economic status was included in the questionnaire.

Table 2
Most frequently named favorite character and genre ascription by country.

Country	Character	%	Genre	%
US	Sam	28.6	Epic	67.6
Netherlands	Aragorn	23.5	Fantasy	45.2
UK	Aragorn	23.3	Epic	57.6
Denmark	Aragorn	20.8	Good vs. evil	41.4
Spain	Sam	24.0	Epic	71.9
Belgium	Aragorn	26.8	Quest	56.3
Germany	Aragorn	25.3	Epic	47.6
China	^a		Fantasy	60.1
Slovenia	Aragorn	20.2	Good vs. evil	50.1
France	Aragorn	26.0	Epic	58.2
Australia	Aragorn	25.0	Epic	58.3
Greece	^a		Epic	58.6
Canada	Aragorn	25.6	Epic	59.2
Italy	Aragorn	18.8	Epic	61.7
Turkey	Aragorn	30.5	Epic	49.7
Norway	Aragorn	24.7	Fantasy	45.6
Chile	Aragorn	20.5	Epic	70.1
Colombia	Aragorn	23.7	Epic	51.5
New Zealand	Aragorn	27.6	Epic	62.8
Sweden	Sam	27.0	Epic	51.4
Mexico	Sam	21.1	Epic	66.9
Argentina	Sam	24.2	Epic	62.1
Malaysia	Aragorn	33.9	Epic	45.8
Austria	Sam	25.4	Epic	43.9
<i>All</i>	<i>Aragorn</i>	<i>21.7</i>	<i>Epic</i>	<i>51.1</i>
	<i>Sam</i>	<i>19.1</i>	<i>Good vs. evil</i>	<i>38.2</i>
	<i>Gandalf</i>	<i>13.4</i>	<i>Fantasy</i>	<i>34.5</i>

^a No favorite characters because these data were not in Roman script.

and friend of the protagonist Frodo, who in some countries tops the list. Statistical analysis (χ^2 test) shows some significant cross-national variations in character preferences, but these are hard to interpret and unsystematic and deviate only marginally from the general rank order.⁶ Attempts to find clusters of nations with similar character preferences do not produce interpretable results. Culturally and linguistically kindred countries such as the Latin-American countries, the Anglophone countries, or the countries of Northwest or Southern European countries show great overlap in some cases, but in other instances are not similar at all.

Relationships between age, gender and favorite character, by contrast, are easier to interpret, although here, too, the overall pattern for different social categories is rather uniform. Aragorn is the most popular character in almost all groups: favourite among both men and women; and among all age groups except for the youngest (where he shares the lead with Legolas); and people over 50, who generally prefer Sam. However, closer analysis uncovers gendered and age-specific patterns of appreciation. For instance, women are significantly fonder of the attractive male

⁶ The full results of this analysis – which did not yield interpretable results – can be found in Kuipers and de Kloet (2008). We used odds ratios to compare the likelihood of specific characters and modalities being chosen in a particular country. These analyses led to huge and very unsystematic tables which can be consulted in Kuipers and de Kloet (2008:139 and 141).

heroes Aragorn and Legolas (16 and 9% of men choose them, against 25 and 19% of women). Also, women mention female protagonists Arwen and Eowyn significantly more than men (resp. 3 and 5% of female respondents, against 1 and 2% of males). This points to a tendency for female viewers to identify with female characters and romantic storylines. Men, on the other hand, have a higher preference for heroic characters like the wizard Gandalf (18% versus 9%), the comic dwarf Gimli (6% versus 2%), and the ambiguous creature Gollum, also one of the most impressive technological achievements of the film (9% versus 5%).

Age differences too can be explained partly from the framework of identification. For instance, age is positively correlated with the mention of Gandalf, by far the most senior in the fellowship of the ring. Older viewers also profess a liking for the hobbit Sam, the central figure in the most “interpersonal” or “relational” storyline of the movie: the quest of Frodo and his loyal servant Sam. Young people tend to name younger and more energetic characters such as the cheerful young hobbits Merry and Pippin, the elf princess Arwen and the people princess Eowyn (both at the center of a romantic storyline), and especially the handsome and heroic young elf Legolas.

Hence, psychologically oriented explanations work well for explaining gender and age differences: identification with people of similar age, gender, or living conditions; sexual attraction; and identification with heroic, romantic, or interpersonal storylines. However, these psychologically oriented concepts do not provide much insight into national differences.

What is most striking in our analysis of favorite characters are not only the great international similarity in preferences, but also the enormous variation in favorite characters in all countries. Probably every character in the movie, and some characters that did not even appear in *The Return of the King* (Saruman, Tom Bombadil), were mentioned in every national sample. The inclusion of many characters and storylines in a movie to have “something for everyone” has been a blockbuster strategy for some time (Biltereyst, 2006), and in itself may be one of the strengths of *The Return of the King*.

As Table 2 shows, the question about modality similarly shows great international agreement: in 18 out of the 24 countries, the majority of the respondents saw the movie primarily as an “epic”, and this label was generally selected by at least half of the respondents in each country. As with the character preferences, rankings for each country are quite similar. We found no significant correlations between character preferences and modality choice, nor did we find any relation between these variables and appreciation. As with character preferences, there are some statistically significant differences (χ^2 test) between countries, but no differences that we can interpret easily. Geographical or cultural closeness does not lead to clear patterns of modality choice. The one notable pattern is that the most popular option, epic, was relatively rare in North-west Europe: in the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark and Norway most respondents saw the movie as something other than “epic”.

Language is likely to be significant in this part of the questionnaire: genre labels can have different connotations in different countries. For instance, the Danish researchers in the project pointed out that “fairy tale” is an important cultural category in the country of Hans Christian Andersen. Indeed, Danes choose this option significantly more often than others (21%), although their first choice is “good versus evil”. Moreover, genres not always have an equivalent in all languages. For instance, for the translation of “fantasy”, often a choice had to be made between the local word for imagination, and the English word “fantasy” referring to the fictional genre, whereas the English term covers both. Nevertheless, the Spanish-speaking countries do not show stronger resemblances with each other than with other countries. Shared language apparently does not automatically lead to similar genre ascriptions.

However, respondents from English-speaking countries tend to be similar in genre ascription. In almost all cases the US, Great-Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand are closer to each other than other countries in their modality choices.⁷ In this respect, language may be relevant not only because it is shared: English is not only the language spoken in all these countries, but also the language of the book, the film, the merchandising, and the movie industry that produced the trilogy.

Correlations between modalities and other background characteristics are weak. Gender differences are statistically significant at times, but differences are small: men are somewhat more likely to describe the movie as “epic” and “war story”, whereas women more often label it as “special effects movie” and “quest”. The distribution across age groups shows no patterning at all.

5.2. *Looking for patterns of appreciation in a global data set*

Since analyses for separate variables related to interpretation and appreciation did not produce clear national patterns, we performed a cluster analysis. This is a more inductive statistical method to find patterns in groups of variables. Attempts to do such an analysis only on the basis of the genre and character variables led to unstable and not very robust solutions.⁸ In the end, we did a cluster analysis that, along with the previous variables, included another variable that can be read as signalling involvement with the movie: the number of times that someone had seen the previous two parts of the trilogy.

This analysis led to a robust and rather simple solution, with two clusters of roughly equal size (11,536 and 12,489 respondents). [Table 3](#) presents an overview of these clusters, showing all variables used in the analysis. By far the most important distinguishing variable is the choice for the “epic” genre. “Epic” was the modality chosen most frequently in the entire dataset, selected by more than half of the respondents. The first cluster consists almost entirely of respondents selecting “epic”, while the second cluster is made up almost exclusively of people who chose something other than “epic”. All modalities other than epic are chosen more often by respondents in Cluster 2. Interestingly, “epic” is the label used in the global launch of the movie: “the epic continues”. Therefore, it can be considered the “preferred” modality, encoded into the text by the makers and the marketing campaign.

The first cluster also contains the more enthusiastic and devoted fans: the average appreciation is higher; respondents have on average seen the previous parts of the trilogy more often; and name more favorite characters. There are differences in character preferences, as well: Sam, the loyal hobbit friend of the main character Frodo, is mentioned more in the first cluster; Legolas and Gandalf are more popular in the second cluster, and there are also differences among less prominent characters. Roughly the differences can be summarized as: respondents in the first cluster prefer human and hobbit characters, and these are also the layered, complex, or “round” characters. In the second cluster, respondents tend to prefer the fantastic, one-dimensional “flat” characters: elves, dwarfs, and wizards.

The decisive distinction between the two clusters seems to be viewing position: the first cluster contains the more involved viewers. They follow the preferred reading of the film as “epic”; this coincides with a preference for “layered” characters. In the second cluster we find a variety of

⁷ Again, for a more detailed report of these inconclusive analyses, see [Kuipers and de Kloet \(2008\)](#).

⁸ This is because there are hardly any significant correlations between character preference, modality choice, and appreciation. Non-linear factor analysis (PRINCALS), another method for analyzing such data, did not yield robust solutions either.

Table 3

Cluster analyses of rating, modality choice, favorite character, and number of viewings.

	Cluster 1	Cluster 2	% in cluster 2 NOTE 1	All respondents
Average rating (1–5, 1 = highest)	1.30	1.51**	–	–
Seen part 1 more than once (in %)	93.0	79.9	44.2**	86.6
Seen part 2 more than once (in %)	89.0	75.8	44.0**	82.7
Modality choice: % of respondents in cluster choosing modality NOTE 2				
Epic	99.7	2.5	2.3**	52.1
Good vs. evil	29.0	48.7	60.8**	38.2
Fantasy	25.4	44.1	61.6**	34.5
Myth	27.6	35.2	54.1**	30.8
Quest	23.2	36.0	58.9**	29.7
Special effects	19.9	25.3	54.0**	22.3
Allegory	6.8	14.1	65.6**	10.4
Fairy tale	4.0	13.6	75.9**	8.9
War story	5.2	9.7	63.2**	7.4
Threatened homeland	4.1	10.7	70.4**	7.3
Spiritual journey	2.7	10.5	78.1**	6.6
Game world	1.4	3.1	64.6**	2.2
Mean number modalities named	2.49	2.53	–	–
Favorite character: % of respondents in cluster choosing character NOTE 2 NOTE 3				
Aragorn	23.3	22.5	47.0	22.9
Sam	22.2	18.9	43.8**	20.6
Frodo	14.5	15.2	49.0	14.9
Gandalf	14.4	12.8	44.9*	13.6
Legolas	11.2	14.1	53.6**	12.6
Gollem/Smeagol	7.7	6.9	45.2	7.3
Gimli	3.8	4.7	53.1*	4.2
Pippin	4.6	3.1	38.5**	3.9
Eowyn	4.4	2.9	37.9**	3.7
Faramir	2.8	2.0	40.0**	2.4
Arwen	1.8	2.4	54.6**	2.1
Boromir	2.3	1.5	37.7**	1.9
Merry	2.3	1.2	33.4**	1.8
Mean number of characters named	1.16	1.09**	–	–
<i>N</i>	11.536 (48%)	12.489 (52.0%)		24.747

NOTE 1: This column shows the percentage of all respondents choosing a value for a specific variable (e.g. epic as genre) in cluster 2. The percentage of respondents in cluster 1 therefore is this number. NOTE 2: Sum of percentages may be more than 100% because respondents could choose more than 1 option. NOTE 3: Only shows percentages for countries with Romanic script.

* $p < .01$.

** $p < .001$.

readings that correspond with, on average, lower levels of involvement—even though the variety is much larger in this cluster. For instance, this cluster also contains respondents who labelled the movie “spiritual journey”, a modality choice correlated with high involvement (de Kloet and Kuipers, 2007).

This relation between the clusters and involvement is confirmed in Table 4, which shows that respondents in Cluster 1 are more dedicated readers of the books. The second cluster also contains the older and very young respondents, and has more women than men: this means it has

Table 4
Clusters and social background.

	% of respondents in cluster 2	Deviation from mean in cluster 2 (in standardized values) ^a
Spain	28.6	-11.1
Chile	30.4	-3.8
Mexico	33.8	-2.4
New Zealand	37.2	-2.0
Argentina	37.9	-1.6
Italy	38.8	-2.9
US	41.4	-15.2
Canada	41.4	-2.1
Australia	42.3	-1.9
France	42.7	-2.0
UK	43.3	-3.8
Other	44.9	-1.6
Greece	46.4	-0.5
Sweden	49.0	+0.2
Colombia	49.5	+0.3
Turkey	52.4	+1.2
Germany	52.7	+2.3
Malaysia	53.4	+0.8
China	54.8	+3.2
Norway	58.1	+2.5
Austria	58.8	+1.7
Denmark	63.2	+9.0
Belgium	66.1	+8.2
Netherlands	68.0	+16.1
Slovenia	70.5	+9.6
Men	44.4	-5.5
Women	51.5	+5.5
<16	58.5	+7.6
16–25	47.1	-1.2
26–35	43.9	-4.4
36–45	47.2	-0.5
46–55	51.7	+1.9
56–65	53.4	+1.5
>65	66.0	+2.6
Never read books	67.3	+18.0
Read books partly	53.5	+4.6
Read books once	46.9	-1.0
Read books more than once	40.2	-12.5

^a This numbers in this column denote how frequent a particular value for a variable is in the second cluster, as compared with this value for the entire dataset, converted to standardized values. In other words: in the second cluster, the share of respondents from the US is 15.2 standard deviations smaller than in the entire dataset, whereas the share of respondents from the Netherlands is 16.1 S.D.s higher. Similarly, the share of male respondents in cluster 2 is 5.5 standard deviations smaller than for the entire dataset; and the share of female respondents was 5.5 standard deviations higher.

an overrepresentation of the groups that diverge from the standard audience for a fantasy blockbuster like *The Return of the King*: adolescents, young adults, and males. This supports our interpretation of Cluster 1 as consisting of people following the “standard” reading: the first cluster has a larger proportion of the intended audience.

Table 4 also shows that the clusters are somewhat related to cross-national differences. The first cluster is dominant in English language countries, especially the US; in Greece (although not very significantly); and in the countries that can be summarized as “Latin”: France, Italy, Spain, and Latin-America with the exception of Colombia. The second cluster is dominant in all other countries, from the Netherlands to Slovenia to China. These differences are significant, and rather large in some cases. Still, representatives of both clusters are present in all countries.

This national pattern supports our interpretation of the clusters in terms of viewing position. The intended reading of the film is dominant in the countries in which the language of film and book is spoken. Both the story and the genre are rooted in an Anglophone tradition: a British book, American production and film conventions, and a New Zealand setting and director. Moreover, the trilogy is produced and distributed by global media conglomerates that, although “denationalized”, have their bases in the US and are dominated by English speakers. While the trilogy is not strictly speaking an American product, it is very much a “Hollywood” production, based in an Anglophone cultural sphere. Despite increasing “Americanization” of global audiences, audiences further removed from this Anglophone sphere of influence are likely to be, on average, less involved viewers. Greater cultural distance has probably led to the larger variety of alternative interpretations in the countries overrepresented in the second cluster.

The dominance of the involved reading in the “Latin” countries is more puzzling. It may be due to the relatively small response in these countries: perhaps only devoted fans participated in the study. Furthermore, our respondents may be part of a more educated, cosmopolitan elite, which is oriented towards global – mainly American – culture. Straubhaar (2007) found that consumption of global and American culture signals high status among Latin-American elites. Latin-American respondents in this sample may well be members of this American-oriented elite, and hence skewed towards dominant “Anglophone” readings of the movie.

To what extent can these results be interpreted as indicators for the prominence of nationality and the nation-state in media reception? The cluster analysis gives some support for a cultural patterning of audience perception, showing that shared language and cultural distance affect the appreciation of media products. However, insofar as this patterning points to a shared cultural frame of reference, this is a greater region than the nation-state: the English-speaking countries (cf. Straubhaar, 1991, 2007).

This cultural/linguistic closeness is best understood as one of the factors underlying a more basic variable, which influences viewing position and degree of involvement. This underlying variable is best summarized as “distance from the center”, whether it be geographically, demographically, or socially. The global media conglomerates that produce blockbusters such as *The Lord of the Rings* span the world and target audiences worldwide, but have their basis in the US, are overwhelmingly Anglophone, and clearly rooted in Western culture. At the center of this global media system is the US, or more specifically the clustering of media conglomerates generally summarized as “Hollywood”—although this geographic designation increasingly fails to capture the decentralized production processes in the global media industry (Miller et al., 2008).⁹

People in countries that are culturally or linguistically closer to this Anglophone sphere of influence are more likely to share the involved viewing position of Cluster 1. The second cluster is characterized by pluriformity and deviation from the mean: people in this cluster, on average, are less involved, and choose a wider variety of interpretations. This does not point to a specific

⁹ Hollywood is by no means the only global center of media production. Rather, Hollywood is the largest center in a polycentric system, with the widest global reach (Cooper-Chen, 2005; Miller et al., 2008; Straubhaar, 2007).

effect of the nation-state, but rather to larger diversity as a result of cultural and social distance to the center of global media culture.

However, the distance from this global media culture cannot be expressed exclusively in terms of geographical distance. Cosmopolitans in countries quite removed from the US may orient themselves towards American or Western media culture. Although we cannot tell from our dataset, these cosmopolitan viewers are likely to belong to higher social strata. On the other hand, Hollywood culture does not equally appeal to all audiences in Anglophone countries. Hollywood productions primarily target young white males (Klinger, 2008; Miller et al., 2008). This explains why women, older people, and very young viewers are less likely to follow the involved and preferred readings. Thus, the distance from the center of this Hollywood sphere of influence can be geographical but also social, cultural, or demographic. In this reasoning, American-oriented elites in Latin-America or China are conceptualized as closer to the center than American or British women, seniors, or ethnic minorities.

6. Conclusion: banal cosmopolitanism and global media culture

Beck (2002, p. 21) refers to the predominance of the nation-state in social science research as methodological nationalism: “This term can be defined by the explicit or implicit assumptions about the nation-state being the power container of social processes and the national being the key-order for studying major social, economic and political processes.” In this article, we have tried to answer the question whether the national is the “key-order” in the reception of global media, using the international dataset of the *Lord of the Rings* project.

Our analysis suggests that nationality is not central to the reception of the global blockbuster *The Return of the King*. We found no distinct national or cultural patterns in the reception of the movie. In our sample, which is arguably biased, the patterning of appreciation, choice of favorite character, and the ascription of modality were quite similar across countries, with more or less the same modalities and characters topping the list in each country, and appreciation very high everywhere. Moreover, in each country variations in responses were high.

Cluster analysis of the reception patterns points to viewing position, rather than nationality or other social background variables, as the central variable in the explanation of variations in the reception of this movie. The more fanatic audiences, who have seen the movie frequently and like it better, tend to label the movie an “epic”. This is the label central to the marketing of the movie: “The epic continues”. A second, slightly smaller, group of viewers is more diverse, generally less involved with the movie, employs a broader range of modality choices, and more often expresses appreciation of the “flat” characters.

These clusters are somewhat related to social background factors, including nationality. The first group has more people from English-language and Latin American countries, whereas the second is more prominent in all other countries: in the rest of Europe, but also Turkey and China. Cultural proximity plays a role here: these viewers are more often located outside the English-speaking world. The second cluster contains more people who are remote from the cultural “center” in non-geographic ways as well: women, old and very young viewers. Nationality, in this cluster analysis, therefore emerges as one of the factors influencing the likelihood of following the more involved reading of the text, which also happens to be the “standard” reading.

However, beyond this broad division in two clusters that are unevenly represented in different countries, we did not find much evidence of nationally specific decodings, identifications, or repertoires of evaluation. This may be partly the result of the composition of our sample, which not only overwhelmingly consists of people who loved *The Lord of the Rings*, but also of

connected, Internet-savvy cosmopolitans who were able to hear about, find, and fill out an online questionnaire (however, in their own language). The composition of our sample probably explains to some extent the small effect of nationality in our results. Inclusion of more nationally or locally oriented respondents might have generated different results, as such respondents are less likely to draw on transnational repertoires of evaluation. Yet, the very existence of such a globally connected fan community points at the emergence of a cosmopolitan audience for whom the nation-state is of less importance. Hence, it underscores our argument that the nation-state can no longer be taken for granted as the starting point for social scientific research.

Our analysis of the LotR dataset hence challenges the insistence on the national in comparative social science research and underlines the importance of a more globalized understanding of media reception. The three paradigms of audience reception studies outlined above – encoding/decoding; media psychology; and national repertoires – each point to mechanisms at work in transnational as well as national media reception.

First, our interpretation of an “involved” first cluster and the more “diverse” second cluster is informed by the encoding/decoding model. It shows that people with different viewing positions develop different readings of, and different levels of involvement with, the same text. However, the LotR data show that cultural background is not the main factor influencing the reading of the text, although cultural distance plays an indirect role.

Interestingly, higher involvement with the story, as evidenced by higher liking, more favorite characters listed, and repeat viewing, does not produce more oppositional or negotiated readings of the movie. On the contrary, the involved viewers in the first cluster are characterized first and foremost by their following of the intended reading. Barker (2008) refers to “epic” as the “modality of least resistance”. This is at odds with findings from fan studies, which generally show that highly involved viewers – fans – are more creative in their employment of media texts and less likely to comply with dominant readings (Jenkins, 1992; Fiske, 1989; Hills, 2002). More generally, the encoding/decoding model stipulates that groups that share the encoded ideology produce more complex and diverse readings of media texts. Our results appear to contradict this assumption. However, the quantitative methods and straightforward operationalizations employed in this study are not capable of grasping the more refined, discursive audience readings that may differ across people and places. Qualitative research, for instance studying how different groups interpret and use the label “epic”, could shed more light on this issue.

Second, although the media psychology model did not prove helpful in the interpretation of national differences, mechanisms from this paradigm, such as identification and attraction, did play a role in gender and age differences in the nomination of favorite characters. Moreover, our data point to a relationship between level of involvement and identification processes, which would be interesting to explore further. The two clusters showed different patterns in the choice of favorite characters, with the more involved viewers choosing the more complex, “round” characters. These findings indicate that greater cultural and linguistic distance is related to preference for less complex or more fantastic characters. This, again, raises the question whether the fantastic character of the movie facilitates a globally shared liking of its characters. More “human” characters may generate more culturally specific – and hence less exportable – patterns of identification.

Finally, our results do not show a significant impact of “national repertoires” on the evaluation of the *Lord of the Rings*. Lamont and her colleagues have located the production of repertoires of evaluation in national, mainly structural, factors such as school systems, state interventions, and the structure of the cultural field. It seems plausible that the current rise of transnational institutions and increasing transnational integration will result in a proliferation of

transnational or cosmopolitan “repertoires of evaluation”, at least for certain audiences (cf. Crane, 2002; Lizardo, 2005; Meyer et al., 1997). A global production like LotR is embedded in the global media industry, which increasingly constitutes a transnational “field of cultural production” (Bourdieu, 1993). This transnational field has its own dynamics, and probably also produces its own global or transnational taste cultures, standards, and repertoires of evaluation.

We want to argue that *The Lord of the Rings*, rather than drawing on national tastes and evaluative repertoires, is best interpreted as a case of *banal cosmopolitanism*: the experience of “globality” embedded in everyday life. Beck (2002) coined this term, inspired by Billig’s idea of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995). This concept refers to everyday articulations of the nation-state, ranging from the waving of the flag, celebrating holidays, or eating national dishes, to international sport competitions and the Eurovision Song contest—all activities that draw on national repertoires and appeal to national identities. Parallel to such articulations of banal nationalism, contemporary identity formations are equally grounded in articulations of banal cosmopolitanism, “in which everyday nationalism is circumvented and undermined and we experience ourselves integrated into global processes and phenomena” (Beck, 2002, p. 12).

In particular in the case of a global fantasy blockbuster like *The Lord of the Rings*, a trilogy that focuses on universal themes like good against evil, and that is promoted through a global marketing campaign, nationality is probably less relevant. Much was made of the simultaneous premiere around the world and the global launch of the movies (including English billboards in non-Anglophone countries) and later the DVDs, speaking explicitly to the audience’s experience of globality. In such conditions, national background is only one of the variables influencing the reception of this blockbuster—and likely not the main one.

The production of a banal cosmopolitan text is inspired by the desire to attract as large (and therefore diverse) an audience as possible. In the logic of the global media industry, movies need to attract audiences outside North-America, and even outside the Western world, in order to be profitable (Miller et al., 2008; Wasko, 2008). Hence, producers employ encoding strategies that deliberately aim to attract a broad audience. They do so by developing multiple storylines, offering a wide range of characters, fantastic and human, young and old, male and female, and by adding a variety of attractions: spectacular action scenes, comic relief, beautiful nature, cute creatures, great romance. The great variation in responses regarding genre ascription and character preferences in all national samples demonstrates that this “diversification” strategy has worked.

Seeing how central the categories of age and gender – as well as the mechanisms of identification – are to the media industry’s perception of audiences, the gender and age differences we found may have been consciously “encoded” by the makers as part of this targeting strategy. For instance, in the movie, the romantic subplots were much more elaborate than in the books, allegedly mostly for the benefit of female viewers who had to be compensated for the battle scenes and special effects (Klinger, 2008). According to our data, this strategy seems to have worked: we did uncover a (transnational) gendered pattern of appreciation, and women showed greater preference for the protagonists of these romantic storylines: the heroines Arwen and Eowyn, and the male romantic lead Aragorn.

In catering to diverse audiences, the trilogy optimizes the possibility for global audiences to relate to the characters and the storylines. Identification with the characters creates a sense of uniqueness and individuality, yet this individuality is shared by massive audiences worldwide. In this sense, global blockbusters like *The Lord of the Rings* operate as a homogenizing cultural force, in spite of many scholars’ insistence that cultural globalization results in cultural heterogenization (cf. Appadurai, 1996; Crane, 2002). The marketing campaign, stressing how the

movie premiered worldwide at the same moment, positions the trilogy as a global spectacle. Interestingly, in particular the fans classify the movie as an epic, following the marketing rhetoric. This points to the paramount importance of marketing in the positioning of blockbusters like *The Lord of the Rings* (cf. Biltereyst et al., 2008).

The cultural industry capitalizes on – and creates – the wish of audiences to experience globality in their everyday lives. Our discovery of identical or similar modes of reception of *The Lord of the Rings* in various countries inspired us to label it as an exemplary case of banal cosmopolitanism. The diverse decodings of the LotR text by audiences worldwide do not signal the emergence of a pan-national media sphere in which culturally diverse audiences creatively decode and appropriate cultural products. Rather, we suggest that these diverse decodings are to some extent orchestrated and “encoded” by international media conglomerates.

The LotR project inspires us consequently to question two central assumptions in global media research. First, it calls into question the omnipresence of the nation-state in cultural sociology and media studies. The reception of a global media text like LotR is not primarily determined by national background. Instead, we found a stratification of global audiences, related to national background as well as other social background variables such as gender and age. This stratification is keyed to globality itself: it separates audiences privileged to participate in transnational communities of consumption from those that do not have this privilege. Second, our study of *The Lord of the Rings* leads us to reconsider the opposition between homogenization and heterogenization, so often invoked in debates on the impact of globalization. The production and consumption of global blockbusters such as LotR is embedded in a global cultural industry operated by executives for whom the nation-state, like other sources of diversity, is primarily a marketing challenge. Hence, diversity is not the antithesis of global cultural production. Rather, it is a central characteristic of cultural production under conditions of globalization.

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