

Transcultural icons of East-Central Europe

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In this issue of *WORLD LITERATURE STUDIES*, the “cultural icon” is both a comparative interpretation and a term analytically applied to a well-chosen range of examples from East-Central Europe. According to North American cultural studies, a field where this concept has actively been developed, the cultural icon defines a historically and often geographically determined representation of collective identities in which, first and foremost, discourses surrounding identity, self-assurance, membership, and affiliation are solidified. In the perspective suggested here, these representations of collective identity may be historical agents or the fictional and fictionalized heroes and heroines of literature, films and other media. Likewise, places and their narratives, as well as particular objects of material culture, may also be such icons insofar as they share, embody, or stage features said to be essential of a culture. In this understanding, icons are repositories of certain features, but above all, they are entities that collectives discover to have an exceptional capacity for bearing this representative function. These entities, therefore, do not truly “become” iconic by themselves, but are made discursively. Icons are thus utilized as “strong figurations” with a “straight” and highly “immediate” link to a cultural identity, the role of which they are made to assume.

In contrast to cultural research on icons as representatives of the shaping and fashioning of a single national identity, this issue collects case studies for which such an understanding is merely one possible starting point. Icons can experience an after-life in fictional literature, art, and other mediums while leaving their original historical and sociocultural contexts behind. Moreover, they may very well drift beyond original cultural lodgings and thereby establish transcultural careers.

The articles collected here concentrate on cases where these icons gained narrative or visual relevance in the historical region of East-Central Europe. This spatial focus is particularly suited for the study of transcultural icons, as the region is often characterized by diverse cultural interactions (from hybridization to assimilation or annihilation). These reactions are due to the region’s multilingual character, its national and ethnic interference zones, and the exchanges between nations and cultures across shifting borders.

A scan through these investigations shows both a wide thematic range of studies

and a variety of theoretical takes on the concept of (trans)cultural icons. Most contributions assume a comparative approach and scrutinize processes of transposition throughout Eastern and East-Central Europe and beyond, with some also considering extended transcultural careers in the West. In the case study „*In dem kleinen Karpatenbade*“: *Venus im Pelz als (trans)kulturelle Ikone Ostmitteleuropas*, Olga Kulishkina and Larissa Polubojarinova examine why Leopold Sacher-Masoch's figure of the *femme fatale* has proved itself as highly suitable for global iconization. Possible answers are found in the narration itself, where the Venus in Furs is shown duplicated already into different medial incarnations and marked as the attractive “other” by her Galician provenience. Additionally, the novel's setting, the resort as literary topos of “conventional deviance,” opens an intertextually based global context in which the unconventionality and uniqueness of the powerful domina figure become obvious. Ján Gavura's *Political input in making poets cultural icons* discusses how literary (self-)canonization of the Polish poets Zbigniew Herbert and Czesław Miłosz and of the Slovak poet Laco Novomeský relies on the iconic emphasis put on specific aspects of their lives and works. This emphasis can highlight transcultural elements in the authors' biographies and literary outputs (Herbert's and Miłosz's migration experience and, respectively, their consideration and award from the Nobel Committee for Literature) but also suppress them (Novomeský meeting with the beat poet Allen Ginsberg). Gyöngyi Heltai's *Star prima donnas as lieux de mémoire at home and abroad* follows the artistic careers of three Hungarian operetta singers of the interwar years from the perspective of entertainment theatre and film industry. The women were national icons performing internationally, which often brought about politicized interpretations or very real political consequences. Like Heltai, Kristóf Nagy also expands the disciplinary focus of this issue beyond literature to other forms of creative expression: The essay *Angela Davis goes east? White skin and black masks in the art of socialist Hungary* focuses on the reception of the African-American revolutionary figure Angela Davis in mid-1970s Hungary. In it, an intermingling of “high” and “low” culture can be observed as, in the representations discussed, elements of pop mix with established visual arts. Charles Sabatos brings another case in which East-Central European icons do not necessarily originate in the region itself: They may also be imported from other cultures or from global culture, and during this process, they witness various forms of appropriation or subversion. In *Nasreddin Hodja's foolish wisdom: Slavic literary adaptations of a Turkish folk hero*, Sabatos explores the reception and afterlife of Nasreddin Hodja in modern Bosnian/Serbian, Bulgarian, Czech, and Russian/Soviet literature and other forms of creative expression. The formal aspects of iconization are interrogated by Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó in an analysis of a novel cycle by Sándor Márai. In this inquiry, *Bürgerstadt und Stadtfiktion in Sándor Márais Romanzyklus „A Garrenek műve“*, the fictionality of the reputation of Košice/Kassa/Kaschau as a bourgeois city par excellence is exposed. As Kulcsár-Szabó suggests, fictionalization is a powerful representational tool, allowing for the referentiality of the icon(s) to be played with.

Several studies indicate the importance of historical transformation for processes of iconization – whether the change is in politics or the media. On the one hand,

Sabatos, Gavura, Heltai, and Nagy investigate diverging patterns of iconization within official and oppositional cultural scenes under oppressive or democratic regimes, showing how cultural icons experience new interpretations in changing political systems, in new contexts of reception, or in shifting semantic functions and connected applications. On the other hand, Kulishkina and Polubojarinova stress the impact of media evolution, which makes possible a globalized circulation of images. All articles cogently combine the affective significance assumed by the icon and a spatial focus on East-Central Europe. The studies assembled in this issue of **WORLD LITERATURE STUDIES** show to what extent the treated phenomena are aesthetically productive; they also underpin the analytical surplus provided by the application of the concept of a “cultural icon.”

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