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The Amateur as a Cultural Phenomenon

Abstract
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The dissertation is developed in a total of 255 pages, containing an introduction, 3 main chapters, conclusion, bibliography and appendix. The bibliography lists 170 titles of cited literature, of which 109 in English, 30 in Bulgarian, 4 in French and 27 internet sources. The number of illustrations is 43.

There are 5 publications in the thematic area of the thesis, all of which are in Bulgarian.

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Subject and relevance of research

The object of study is the new amateur, which will be represented through three different cultural practices in which it engages. These are 1. LARP (Live Action Role-Playing), 2. Cosplay and 3. The proliferation of internet memes. These are relatively new phenomena, as they are little researched in Bulgaria, but interest in them is growing. The object of the research is the practices of cultural consumption. The aim of the study is to present the phenomena as part of the so-called “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2013), entailing concepts such as interactivity, co-participation through do-it-yourself techniques and remixing (Lessig, 2008). The main focus will be on the role of the amateur, in this case the participants in these practices. This new amateur is interactive, a product of global cultural scenes and occurs through new media. What unites the studies is that they are presented as practices that any amateur non-professional could engage in. All that is required is that the participant has a passion for a particular product, genre or style of popular culture and is able to use specific codes associated with the appropriate use of the particular practice. Participants in such cultural activities are largely fans of particular popular culture subjects, and through the analysis of practices, new fashions, art movements and aesthetics are parsed. What unites the three phenomena under study is spontaneous reaction, imitation, taking ready-made plots, genres and images from popular culture and re-enacting them. Furthermore, in all three activities there is the so-called “craftification” associated with crafting, making something with the hands. It has both material expressions, e.g. in LARP and cosplay – the making of inventory, costumes, and overall look taken from famous characters from popular culture, the genres of fantasy and science fiction, etc. – and it manifests itself through internet memes in digital environments through certain work with computer programs, a certain code of humour, and a mastery of the grammar of so-called “memetics” (Milner, 2016). This digital language is necessary for any internet user, at the very least to keep up to date with developments in technology that would help the potential in which new cultural practices could be thought of.

The current situation of web 2.0 opens up a wide field for internet users to express a variety of non-professional talents. In these sense, the traditionally presented dichotomy of cultural consumption between “high” and “low” begins to be seen in a new way. The boundaries between amateur and professional begin to blur. Through numerous video lessons, a person could acquire a skill that could become his lucrative profession, and an

amateur hobbyist could make a business out of his avocations. The boom of influencers who give advice on how to live, entice users by being friendly, attentive to their audience, communicating with them and instilling confidence that anyone could be in their shoes. It is this transparency of digital media that elevates the amateur (from the French verb *aimer* – to love), who practices out of love, without the pretense of any exclusivity. The high erudition of the craft, requiring years of experience in a specific field, scares the consumer, as he suffers from a lack of time due to the fast pace that characterizes modernity. Multimodality and transmediality are concepts that portray the multiple interests of a person, split between several screens from which he draws information at any given moment. Increasingly, there are advertisements, programmes, YouTube videos, etc. giving advice on how to make a living from one's hobby, and it is the reduction of time that is key. Identity is heterogeneous, floating in a pool of possibilities, multiplying and inventing daily. The individual on a daily basis inspiration from global narratives, cutting some of them through his own interpretation, gluing the newly acquired product and updating it for his own needs related to his surroundings, his birthplace and his personal life. The author and the reader, the user and the consumer, the actor and the spectator intertwine, taking on several roles previously seen as differentiation. It is not enough for a viewer to look at a work, they want to actively participate in the process of its creation, and social networks mediate this relationship. In platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, we observe a tension between an emphasis on a particular individuality distinct from all others, the so-called "networked self" (Shifman, 2014), and the submergence of this same "networked self" in the fluidity of a vast number of people doing the same activity. Initially it was thought of as something that would show the individual as a different from the rest, but also, it enters the unification from the technique of selfies, challenges and new trends.

Dissertation abstract work

The dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography.

Chapter One: LARP: the game of serious actors

The first chapter presents a study conducted between 2016 and 2019 related to LARP (Live Action Role-Playing) in Bulgaria. In the first part of the chapter, theoretical concepts from post-subcultural theory and concepts such as neo-tribe (Maffesoli, 1985), scene (Straw, 2005), lifestyle, etc. and fan practices (Jenkins, 2006) are presented as guiding concepts for the whole study in terms of the attempt to define the communities under study. Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion of "cultural bricolage" (Lévi-Strauss, 2002:33) helps to interpret the players' worldview and their eclectic mix of different cultural elements. The specific role of the set (created in most cases by gamemasters) as a literary form that only sets the direction and setting of the action but does not have the character of something complete leads to Roland Barthes' idea of the "death of the author" (Barthes, 2003) and the "birth of the reader" (ibid.) precisely through his agency and specific, different from everyone else's, interpretation in the game. Research and theories related to LARP written in the last few years, and literature related to role-playing games in general (RPGs, MMORPGs, tabletop RPGs, etc.) are presented. The precursors of LARP are introduced in the section. These are believed to be the tabletop RPGs, which were gaining interest in Bulgaria in the late 1980s. Tabletop role-playing games have a narrator, which in LARP is called a gamemaster. He sets the basic framework of the game and the participants, who through their imagination and personal interpretation, enter into their character and together create a fictional world for a specific period of time. As the participants have strong interests in specific genres of popular culture, mainly fantasy and science fiction, the role of fandom in this type of practice is presented. The second part of the chapter compares practices in Bulgaria with those abroad. The author in LARP is both audience, reader and interpreter, and the collectively invented reality points to the possibility of viewing this cultural practice as contemporary folklore and even celebration, because of the importance of oral creativity in play, inspired by various literary, film and game plots, as well as game rituals borrowed from famous practices associated with festivity. The basic concepts needed to understand LARP are explored – player, gamemaster, sensemaking, play space, in-game and

off-game. The types of LARP are presented – serial type, 360-degree type, pervasive type, and styles according to the genre of the setting (post-apocalyptic, fantasy, historical, etc.). This section also discusses the juxtaposition between LARP and similar cultural practices. Although LARP resembles improvisational theatre and historical reenactments, there is an audience in the latter, in contrast to its absence in live-action role-playing. The third part of the chapter discusses the development of LARP in Bulgaria. This part describes the game worlds, the organizing activities, and the impressions of visitors external to the community. Information is presented from two included observations of different types ofLARPs in Bulgaria – the first focuses on the largest international fantasy LARP, Dragon World (now called The Fog), and the other is of a smaller, pervasive type LARP, Night of the Old Gods. Whether is be basic frameworks devised by the gamemaster, as in the first case, or ones taken from an already finished literary work, the participants through their actions, interpretation and interaction modify the original literary work. In this sense, the readers/participants are the authors. In this way, the interpretation from beloved works is literally recreated and embodied on the LARP terrain and a new art form is created – art created by the fan. Also included is information on another type of live-action role-playing, the post-apocalyptic “Stalker”, for which I drew information from respondents’ accounts and a review of online sources. This LARP again focuses on the rewriting of the beloved work, which is seen as a collective narrative and folklore. LARP is represented through its socializing function and the shared skills acquired by the respondents.

In the course of the research, some of the concepts considered in the initial phase of the study were redefined. Regarding the consideration of LARP as a specific community, the research initially emphasized the term "neo-tribe" (Maffesoli, 1996), but given the position of larpers, regarding the media representation of their hobby, as well as the closedness of the community, the representation of the LARP community was considered as a subculture (Hebdige, 1979). The “us”- “others” position is presented, with respondents often adopting a distorted and misunderstood view of the latter in relation to the former. The original hypothesis that the LARP was accepted as an infantile practice, given its playful nature, has been modified. The acquired skills, during LARP, actively enter into reality, this can be clearly seen through the voluntary activities of some of the larpers. Their technique and preparation needed for participation are also observed during the LARP when the organizers monitor the safety of the participants. The serious attention the pay during LARP is also evident in the

unacceptable use of alcohol for most of them, during such an event. Behaviour that is not coordinated with the game reality and the subsequent role-playing are some of the biggest threats leading to the breakdown of the collective illusion. Just as the cultural background influences a larper's game, so too does the game in some way affect their everyday life. It is more difficult to integrate outsiders, especially if they are not familiar with the previously established relationships, structures and history of the game world. In the method mentioned "craftification" larpers collect and combine different materials to create their desired character. They draw resources from global narratives from which they borrow, but rework to manifest local specificity – an example of which is the LARP Club "The Kingdom of the Seven Hills". It explores the possibility of thinking of LARP as a form of collective creativity, as it educates, teaches specific skills, and encourages participants to seek out additional information about particular topics, as well as to create hobby-inspired objects with aesthetic dimensions. LARP could be thought of as a source of cultural memory, as with the development of live action role-playing games, one begins to take more seriously the overall construction of a game story, profiling the players, the stages they have gone through and creating a potentially unfinished collective story in which one nevertheless has "enduring" (stable but in process, directed towards future game events) participation and meaning. It is open to question whether LARP in Bulgaria could be seen for commercial purposes, as at this point active larpers have not expressed interest in this direction. Involving an outside participant, especially in the largest LARP "The Fog" is extremely difficult, as one has to familiarize oneself with a lot of literature related to the game world beforehand, as well as participate in many training sessions.

The methods used to collect the empirical material were auto-ethnography, 10 in-depth interviews with 5 organizers and 5 participants aged between 19 and 39, with different occupations, activities and hobbies, who have been participating in live action role-playing games for different lengths of time. Methods used were online ethnography, review of websites and Facebook groups related to the activity. Information from the public social network profiles of respondent role-players was used in the analysis.

Chapter Two: Cosplay: the new masquerade

Chapter two presents research that was conducted from 2017 to 2019. The first part of the chapter describes the theoretical framework, which is based on research on fan practices

(Jenkins, 2006), dissertations and publications specifically related to cosplay (Lamerichs, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2018), and research related to participatory culture (Jenkins, 2013), fluid identities, and the topic of global cultural scenes (Appadurai, 2006) in the context of an environment characterized by ephemerality, transience, periodization, novelty, brevity, and rapid speeds where different cultures interact and influence one another. In cultural studies, “appropriation” is the process of taking a pre-existing idea or cultural artifact and transforming it for new purposes. The background of such cultural phenomenon is discussed. The mask and its role as an identity-concealing element and a transformative tool is examined. A brief overview of changing practices, different uses of costumes, but also the central idea of overturning established norms and order is presented. Living paintings are taken as the precursors of cosplay, their relationship to the phenomenon under study is described, and as a corollary a history of what are taken to be the first cosplay events is provided. A central point is the confluence of cultural elements from Japan and USA, which are considered the mother countries of cosplay events. In this chapter, the development of cosplay around the world is presented in order to distinguish it from practices in Bulgaria. Important concepts such as otaku, weaboo/koreaboo, wifoo, moe are described, which present a more detailed picture of the mass spread of this hobby around the world and the relationship with androgyny coming from Asian culture. The subdivisions of cosplay – namely hijab cosplay and crossplay separate important themes. Hijab cosplay is an example of assimilating cultural specificity through the technique of a global genre. Important for understanding of crossplay is to distinguish it from other cultural practices. Given that crossplay resembles the practice of drag, the research was complemented by including observation and participation in the first drag workshop in Bulgaria in 2021. The second chapter presents the history of cosplay in Bulgaria. The interest in Asian traditional/contemporary culture and the so-called Hallyu (Korean) wave are described. A fan community focusing on Asian cultures has been emerging in our country for over a decade. There are more and more fans of Korean popular music (k-pop) who are often woven into the cosplayer community. Consequently, specific communities inhabit global pop culture scenes. Through included observations of individual cosplay events, the setting, participants, and overall atmosphere are described. At such events, there are revues and skits focusing on popular characters from video games, anime, manga, movies, and comics, i.e., any visually-oriented media. The third part of the chapter presents Bulgarian cosplayers, focusing on their stories related to costume making, how they choose their characters, whether there

is an element of LARP-like role-play, and whether one could talk about a community of cosplayers. Cosplay practice is thought of as costplay (by cost and play) as it is an expensive hobby. The dichotomy between fun and serious is represented by the necessary multiple criteria regarding costume making that participants have to follow in order to be accepted on stage. The relationship between reality and fiction is blurred by concepts such as “moe”, which represent the ever-propagating opportunity offered by digital media to experience real feelings for a fictional character. The notion of fandom takes on increasingly literal dimensions, as in this case it is a shift from fan passion and reverence to literal affection and physical attachment. The prior hypothesis related to complete imitation underwent a transformation, as the participants, through imagination and personal interpretation, could transform to some extent the original appearance of their character. According to the scholarly literature read, local specificities in costume construction, the way scenes are presented, etc. can also be identified. Costume came to be seen as a cultural product and fan souvenir. Such an event could also be thought of in terms of generational studies, as the majority of participants are between the ages of 12-18 and come from fan communities centered around Asian culture. The community of cosplayers is not cohesive, it has a certain chronotope that is linked to the event of cosplay. The cosplay community is thought of as part of a larger community – that of fans, geeks, gamers, anime and manga fans. The native cosplayers are considered among the best on the Balkan Peninsula, but in Bulgaria we still cannot speak of a distinct cosplay profession, as exists abroad. Some of the Bulgarian cosplayers sell costumes or prints, and the hobby is more lucrative for them than their main profession. There is a division between professional cosplayers, who have received many awards at home and abroad, and amateur novices who are just entering the hobby. The hobby is seen as a kind of escapism that teaches socialization, different skills, dexterity, working with numerous tools, techniques and materials. The hypothesis related to the sexualization of female characters at this type of events was modified and complemented by terms such as slut-shaming, which led to a research self-reflection. Female characters in popular culture are largely eroticized, and a successful cosplay requires as complete a resemblance to the original image as possible. Many girls decide to cosplay for this reason, and the practice of distorting the character, for whatever purpose, is not accepted. Such an event gives amateur participants the opportunity to showcase their talents and fan appreciation for free. Moreover, at comic conventions, whether one is a participant or a mere attendee, one feels part of a larger community – that

of passionate fans of a fragment of fragments of popular culture.

The research methods are auto-ethnography, in-depth interviews (as of 2019) with 11 participants (7 girls and 4 boys, aged between 17 and 27), as well as with two organizers (V. B. aged 26 and E. S. aged 25) of two exhibitions on cosplay at the Ethnographic Museum. Attended 4 cosplay events in Bulgaria – in 2017 the first Aniventure Comic-Con, in 2018 – AnimesExpo, Aniplay and the second Aniventure Comic-Con. During the dissertation work, monitoring of official Facebook pages dedicated to cosplay/cosplay events was continued, as well as reviewing respondents' public profiles. Of interest was the development of the hobby during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Chapter Three: Memes: the digital folklore

The most common understanding of memes is that they are a ubiquitous inside joke circulating in digital space. This phenomenon is often thought of in terms of the frivolous and the jokey. Due to the fact that this cultural phenomenon is little researched in Bulgaria, its characteristics sink into the vast pool including all sorts of viral content. The main task of the study is to present the development of internet memes in Bulgaria, showing the point of view of several native meme-artists. In the first part of the chapter, the explanatory model and theoretical framework are presented, serving as a guide for research on memes. These are based on the contextual concepts of spreadable culture (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013), do-it-yourself (DIY) culture and culture jamming. One of the main tentative research hypotheses is that the rough and so-called “unskilled” nature of internet meme content is something that is necessary for a particular publication to be entertaining enough to be easily assimilated by wider audience. This idea fits with what Nick Douglas calls the aesthetics of the “internet ugly” (Douglas, 2014, cited in Milner, 2016: 82). The history of the term is described, from Dawkins's “meme” (Dawkins, 1976), which leaves human activity in the background, to the contemporary context in which it is seen – namely as in internet meme, or its common linguistic variant “meme”. Emphasis is placed on memetics as a type of language and grammar into which all Internet content merges. It is important to differentiate meme content from viral content, as well as from the precursors of meme – cave drawings, cartoon, pastiche, collage, satire, parody, comics, etc. Viral content, if not creatively remixed and overused, cannot be thought of in the meme genre. Nor does the practice associated with its predecessors always constitute meme per se. The second part of the chapter details the internal structure of a

meme, which includes text, typeface, type of humour, pictures of people, and through individual examples, possible reasons why a meme might not be understood – be it lack of awareness, age difference, etc. To grasp a meme requires prior context and a command of memetic language. It implies knowledge of templates, working with computer programs, perception of online aesthetics, humor, etc. The topic of copyright is a very important part of understanding memes, as at their core lies imitation, copying and reinterpretation. Rarely do memes have its original author, therefore collective participation takes precedence. This internal dimension of memes contrasts with their external influence, illustrated in the second part of the chapter. Memes become a means of constructing macro and micro-communities. The latter borrow global themes, patterns and techniques to represent their individuality, which is represented through examples of memes framed around so-called “Balkan humour”. Political memes are one eloquent example of the delineation of macro-communities expressing their civic stance by participating in political discourse and gathering outside the digital environment – in the protest or in social movement. The meme genre enters advertisements and becomes a lucrative business. Advertising agents draw resources from memes to speak a memetic language that attracts larger audiences. Memes become news feeds, which, unlike the latter, are shorter, clearer, and deliver the information directly without the need of long reading or watching. They also enter as artefacts in libraries, galleries, museums, we see them on mugs, clothes and stickers, mostly because of their main function – to reflect reality. The third part of the chapter presents the situation in Bulgaria. It was important for the research to identify the main themes, subjects and practices related to the activity in Bulgaria. Through the information obtained from meme respondents, two aspects through which meme practice can be viewed were distinguished. One aspect relates to the creation of meme content for the purpose of a hobby and the other for the purpose of a profession. In this sense, whether one could view memes as art is a problematic question, precisely because of many overlaying authorship whose traces subsequently disappear completely. Nevertheless, in the final part of the text I present an example from a respondent involved in a meme company. The meme genre is becoming a business, and the jokey, infantile picture, of poor quality at first sight, is selling very dearly, and the clients are multiplying by the minute.

The research methods are auto-ethnography, daily review of Bulgarian and foreign meme pages, and in-depth interviews with Bulgarian meme artists. A meme page was created

as an attempt at participant observation in order to understand the technical details around meme content creation as well as the creation of memes in a particular genre.

Key findings and directions for future research

Contemporaneity predisposes to practices associated with remix, bricolage, eclecticism and fluidity, often combining elements that were originally thought of as mutually exclusive. Fans of various fragments of popular culture are willing to actively participate in the process of creating a kind of creativity, by elaborating culture and replaying it. This happens through the appropriation of ready-made global narratives by adapting them to new contexts. In this line of thought, the three phenomena studied are not specifically Bulgarian, they are part of a global popular scene. To what extent, and whether any specific local character stands out at all, is difficult to define clearly. In the case of LARP in Bulgaria, the vast majority of the elements related to the game are presented in English, and sometimes there is even no translation to Bulgarian. Popular races and character types familiar from popular culture are taken. Cosplay lacks the choice to recreate a character from Bulgarian culture because, according to respondents, there is no standout character. Bulgarian memes are often literal translations from foreign pages. In a sense, originality and authorship scare with the possible distance with which they separate themselves from the audience, and the possibility of collective creation takes the more alluring role. In LARP, even if some specific frameworks are set by the gamemasters, the actions of the participants cannot always be predicted and improvisation is the guiding mechanism. The original author in cosplay can be assumed to be the artist who painted the particular (cartoon) character or the stylist who made the actor's look that the cosplayer subsequently recreates. Through the specificity of the actor's body and their imagination to recreate the character, it also changes the character itself, like a meme in which images are endlessly superimposed on each other. It is rare to know where the spread of a meme began and who its first creator was. All three phenomena can therefore be seen as a kind of collective creativity, referring back to concepts such as folklore, which is usually local, but in this case a new light in which it could be thought of is put forward. However, elements of rebelliousness, a purposeful display of individuality and a desire to be different can be identified here. They are influenced by digital media, creating a spectacle and a stage on which the consumer is attracted by the possibility of expressing their identity. Often, however, it pays the high price of sinking and diluting its otherness in the newly emerging global virality. In each of the cultural practices examined, there is an emphasis on craftsmanship and artisanship, but in this case it is available to anyone who has the desire, not to those with a

particular talent. This craftsmanship is considered along the amateur-professional axis. Usually, craftsmen are masters, i.e. professionals, but in the case studies the process is traced in which they are between hobby and profession. Whether we are talking about professional gamemasters (organizers of live action role-playing games), (non-)game characters, especially if the LARP has more closed frames resembling improvised theatre, whether we are talking about cosplay models or tailors or meme companies that can advertise any business through humour, the hobbies considered have the potential to be seen as a profession. In Bulgaria, the three phenomena studied have yet to develop and change. Previously, such practices were seen as child's play, but now they represent a sophisticated activity that brings in its wake commercial objects actively entering the industry. Whether they will become fully business and the commercial aspect will prevail is not easy to predict.

Contributions of the dissertation work

The dissertation analyses cultural practices in Bulgaria that have been very little studied. A conceptual model is put forward that considers them as a new form of festivity.

Along with outlining the common worldview ideological framework of the three cultural practices, the study delves deeply into and details the specific jargon of the communities. It presents a dense terminology with which they position and differentiate themselves in cultural space.

The study makes a special contribution to the conceptual apparatus related to Internet memes. The latter are differentiated against terms such as a caricature, parody, collage, satire, pastiche, etc. An original and innovative line of interpretation unfolds – memes as global collective creativity and as a symbolic reservoir of social movements and political discourses.

In addition to analyzing the semantic layers of meme culture, the dissertation contributes to anthropological research on meme creativity in Bulgaria by presenting a rich archive of in-depth interviews with popular and emerging meme artists.

The dissertation presents and summarizes innovative educational approaches, based on LARP, cosplay and meme practices, which can find wide application in Bulgarian schools and help Bulgarian students to acquire knowledge in an interactive way.

It is also beneficial to see the cultural practices in question as a lucrative business and a promising career route. This provides an interesting perspective on the cultural market in Bulgaria.

Consumer criticality of web content and memetic literacy is stimulated, as well as opportunities to capitalize on small cultural scenes.

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