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Cover Page Footnote

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This commentary intends to extend knowledge about local identities with regard to their representations in the mediascape. It uses two focal papers (Firat 2016; Zhao 2019) to uncover the opportunities for local identities to develop in global-local dynamics. In the first paper, Firat (2016) presents a reflection on the interdependence of the local and the global and its implications for the development of local identities. In the second paper, Zhao (2019) examines the movie *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) through the lens of the representations of a minority in Hollywood and beyond. These two MGDR items have been selected for this commentary not only for their contents and insights but also for their popularity with MGDR readers. Both items have been on the [self-generating top-10 download](#) list of MGDR for several months.

This commentary starts with a presentation of the interdependence between the global and the local and qualifies local identities (Firat 2016). The commentary continues with reflections on the formation of local representations (Zhao 2019) in the mediascape, with a specific focus on movies and bandes dessinées (French original for 'comic strips', elaborated later in the document). The commentary ends with a discussion on the accessibility of local cultures.

The Dynamics of the Local and Global – Insight from Firat (2016)

In his 2016 piece, Fuat Firat claims that globalization is often conceived as two sided, which is at the heart of many debates. On the one hand, it is an inevitable force that can conflict with local interests. On the other hand, globalization can be seen as a positive force that drives knowledge and economic development.

Meanwhile, antagonist trends pervade the global-local divide. The modern order, which supports globalization, can be a means to achieve better development. Locals, however, may refute modern globalization due to the destruction of their local values and traditions. The dynamics between the global and the local are, therefore, complex and still need further explorations.

To obtain a better understanding of local/global dynamics, Firat (2016) contends that the dichotomy between local and global dynamics may be blurred. Rather than taking a sharp position for or against the local or the global, some local communities choose to accommodate different orders. Thus, rather than fully embracing a global or a local path of development, local identities opt for a blend, allowing the global to appear as a “mosaic of multiple locals in many localities” (Firat 2016 p. 3)

Qualifying Local Identities

In this context, how can “local” be identified and qualified? Firat (2016) claims that the local needs another entity in order to be recognized as local. Otherwise, the local resembles the water in which fish swim: something that is around us, but whose presence remains unnoticed. “Without the presence of the other, there can be no cognition of the local” (Firat 2016, p.2).

In this sense, being geographically close to an entity facilitates distinction and defines the specificities of a local. For instance, Belgians define their “Belgitude” (The Economist 2021), in contrast with its geographical neighbors, the French and the Dutch identities. That is, Belgians think of themselves as more compliant than French and define themselves against the French tendency to protest overtly. Furthermore, Belgians like self-mockery and think that they are *bon vivant*, that their happy-go-lucky manners distinguish them from Dutch[wo]men, who are believed to be more hardworking and well-organized than Belgians.

Firat (2016) notes how global communications and global media have enabled access to a wide set of local cultures. Thus, beyond geographical spaces, more immaterial spaces, such as the movie industry, are also useful for contrasting and identifying local identities. For instance, Netflix offers easy access to Korean films and Belgian films, among others. The South Korean movie industry provides interesting contrasts with Belgian productions. The importance of hard work, social conventions, and social hierarchy (An 2016) infuses many Korean movies and film series (see also the MGDR issue, led by the editorial Hong 2021). In the *Squid Games*, a small group of elite individuals run the game, turning employees and guards into silent, obedient servants. In *Vincenzo*, a mafia consigliere quickly becomes the leader of a group of inhabitants of a deserted shopping mall and negotiates with powerful local stakeholders. Vincenzo establishes his elite position in many ways: how he dresses, wearing expensive costumes, and how he addresses others in his local language using linguistic techniques to manifest his higher social status (Agha 1998).

Belgian movies are of a different type, characterized by both darkness and self-mockery. For instance, the cult *Man Bites Dog* (1992) is a black comedy crime mockumentary. It features Ben, a charismatic and narcissistic serial killer who thinks of himself as an expert in architecture, poetry and classical music, while he boasts killing randomly. The movie's success lies in the derision (Turan 1993).

Netflix thus offers a wide variety of distinct movies (Treske and Ozgun 2018). The consumer who watches Netflix movies from the Belgian, Korean or Turkish film industry obtains a sense of the specificities of these local cultures and identities.

It can be questioned, however, whether movies capture the complexity of the local, and if so, how. Firat (2016) advocates that, in a contemporary globalized world, the representations of locals take marketable, commoditized, commercialized forms. Local cultures are reduced to mere "façades." In other words, the rich and deep cultural space is shrunken into a simplistic flat façade. "The texture and textuality that enables immersion into cultures is thus lost at a time when consumers increasingly seek greater immersion into and navigation through a multiplicity of cultures" (Firat 2016 p. 4). The local in movies and other media is a simplified, flat representation of the complexity of cultural diversity. The following section examines the representations of locals in two mediascapes, the movies and the bandes dessinées.

Representing Local Identities in the Mediascape

The mediascape, with movies and bandes dessinées, holds an important potential to transmit cultural representations, a form of knowledge that is socially constructed and shared, which aims to build a collective imaginary for a social ensemble (Jodelet 1994). In this sense, movies and bandes dessinées (comic strips) bring representations of localities to a larger social group. It is therefore interesting to examine representations within these two media spaces.

The Representations of Locals in Movies – Insight from Zhao (2019)

The movie industry provides spaces for groups to be represented and facilitates the diffusion of local representations to a larger audience. Yikun Zhao (2019) provides an interesting reading of the movie *Crazy Rich Asians*. During several decades, the Hollywood industry has mainly focused on white Caucasian actors targeting a Caucasian audience. In this context, *Crazy Rich Asians* was announced as the first Hollywood to feature an all-

Asian principal cast. It was meant to be a significant breakthrough for Asian American representation in American society. Indeed, the Asian-American community accounts for only 5.7% of American society (Budiman and Ruiz 2021), and few Hollywood movies account for this U.S. minority. *Crazy Rich Asians* is a romantic comedy among the rising economic elites in Asia. The movie represents an interesting case on minority representation.

Crazy Rich Asians was prepared and released during a climate of an anti-whitewashing campaign (Zhao 2019; see the MGDR piece by Mizukoshi 2018 for more on 'whitewashing'). Asians were seen as protagonists for the first time in a Hollywood production and aimed to break away from the usual stereotypes of Asians in Hollywood as Kung-Fu masters or geeky men. In this sense, the movie strove to provide a more accurate representation of Asians. As Zhao (2019) notes, "The Asian-American audience's enthusiastic reception of this film is [...] a definite sign of the long-existing void of cinematic representation of ethnic minorities' experiences in Hollywood" (Zhao 2019 p. 8). *Crazy Rich Asians* generated public attention on the representation of ethnic minorities (Zhao 2019).

While achieving Asian representation, *Crazy Rich Asians* misrepresented social diversity. The movie focuses on an upper-class elite in Singapore with relations in America. But it does not offer more subtle representations of the various social classes, ethnic groups and intercultural nuances that constitute Asian society (Zhao 2019). The U.S.-Asian population has distinct origins – Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese, among others – and the income varies widely across these groups, with Indian Americans being the wealthiest (Budiman and Ruiz 2021). *Crazy Rich Asians* only features an upper-class group with Chinese origins. Thus, while marketers strove to sell the movie as a symbol of diversity representation, the movie however did not show "fine-grained cultural differences" (Zhao 2019 p. 9).

The success of *Crazy Rich Asians* may be due to the use of universal and easy-to-understand languages of love and glamour. In the movie, the Asian complex cultural space is thus reduced to a flat linear representation (Firat 2016), which is easily understandable for many. A more accurate representation of the subtleties of the Asian minority would have fallen short for an audience that is not deeply familiar with this cultural space. Providing accurate representation of the diversity among minorities requires that audiences hold a sensitivity to this issue (Zhao 2019) and possess an ability to analyze the prevalent complexity of the cultural space (Firat 2016).

The Representations of Locals in Bandes Dessinées

In terms of keeping the local simple, the Bandes dessinées industry is one of the most flourishing mediascapes. Bandes dessinées stands for comic books, literally drawn strips. They were originally in French and were created for readership in Belgium and France. The first bandes dessinées appeared in the 19th century and developed further in the 20th century. Bande dessinée may be one of the most successful formats in the contemporary book industry. In Belgium, bandes dessinées experienced 35% growth in 2021 (Actualitte 2022).

Among the famous Bandes dessinées characters, Tintin, a fictional reporter, contributed to the fame of the local Belgian culture and to a better knowledge of the various locals. Hergé, his cartoonist, makes him travel the world in 24 bande dessinée albums. Each album is focused on making the reader discover other locals. When Hergé drew his first bandes dessinées, travel was scarce, travel by plane was exceptional, and television was just beginning. The albums were for Belgian readers a unique easy means of accessing and apprehending another local, such as the Peruvian Andes, the Amazon River, or Egypt.

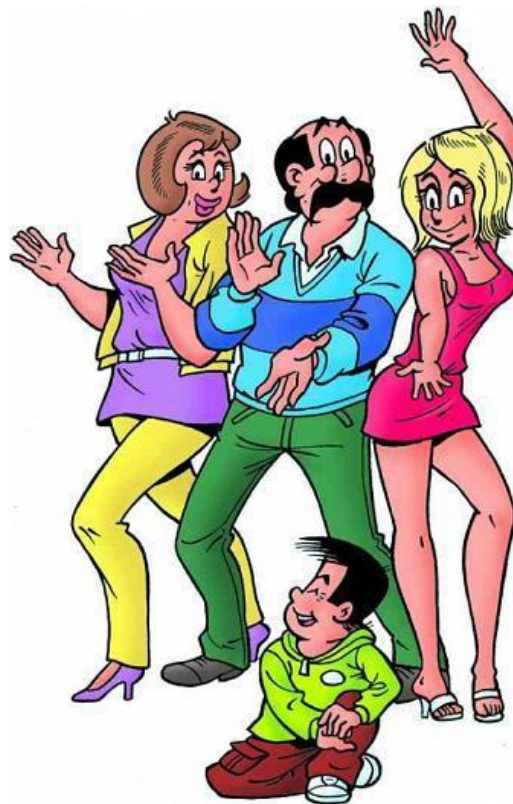
Each album holds many references to the Belgian local culture, making it easy for the Belgian reader to relate to. References to the Belgian culture include the use of a Belgian dialect in *King's Ottokar's Scepter*, the representation of the Belgian Meteorological Institute in the *Shooting Star*, or the Jeu de Balle flea market in the *Secret of the Unicorn*, among other examples.

The albums provide interesting insight into the countries where Tintin travels. Although often criticized for racist allusions, Tintin offers an easy-to-understand representation of the local cultures that he visits (Carbonnell 1975). The albums are a “documentary treasure” for those who have little cultural expertise and few opportunities to travel abroad (Bouchard 2010).

What makes Tintin successful is, perhaps, its ability to make accessible a representation of the “other” to a large audience. Hergé used to put a lot of effort in simplifying the complexity of local cultures. He used to gain deep knowledge about the cultures he wanted to represent. At the same time, however, he wanted the masses to read his bandes dessinées and worked to offer a representation that would be easily grasped. In the *Cigars of the Pharaoh*, Hergé does not surprise his reader when Tintin copes with encoded hieroglyphs and a crazy Egyptologist during his trip in Egypt. In addition, the reader is not astonished that Tintin rides a horse with an Arab sheik, and an elephant with an Indian maharajah – the opposite may have looked weird. This simplified representation of the complex Egyptian and Indian cultures is the result of a conscious strategy. In one of

his interviews, Hergé said, “It’s for a better understanding: once again, I am obsessed with readability” (Peeters 2002 p. 435).

Other cartoonists have foregone such simplification and have instead chosen to preserve the complexity of the locals. Merho is a Belgian Flemish cartoonist, the creator of the funny family comic *De Kiekeboes*, the best-selling comic series in Flanders¹. Marcel Kiekeboe is the big-moustached father who has two children with his wife Charlotte and lives in a small typical Flemish town. The stories are set in the present and portray plausible reality (Knudde 2022).



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Storylines handle regional politics, business fraud, and violent death in an amusing manner. From the beginning, Kiekeboes was rooted in the Flemish humorous family comic tradition. Self-mockery is ever present. As

¹ Flanders is the Flemish-speaking northern area of Belgium, with a population of 6.6 million

an example, Marcel Kiekeboe is frequently a victim of unwanted visitors. His mother, Moemoe, obliges him to do whatever she wants, without showing gratitude. The pessimist neighbor Leon Van Der Baffe and the saliva-spitting Fernand Goegebuer are relentless disturbers. Kiekeboe's boss is arrogant and benefits from Kiekeboe's naivety. The albums are further filled with Flemish wordplays, background gags and throwaway jokes. For instance, the boss of a factory in *Het Lot van Charlotte* is called W.C. Roll – toilet roll – and one of the characters is Dan Q. – “Dank u” which means thank you. In *Met De Franse Slag*, Kiekeboe translates Flemish expressions and sayings literally in French, jokes that most Flemish readers – who understand French – can get. Fans enjoy deciphering these puns, even though they are not clear upon first reading (Knudde 2022).

Although best-selling in Flanders, Kiekeboes has never experienced success beyond the Flemish borders. Attempts to launch the series in other languages have failed. In English, *Jo & Co*, or in German, *Die Kuckucks*, have never succeeded. The French version counts only three albums – compared to the 130 albums in Flemish. A fan writes on social media: “Scenarii are very predictable, but they have a heavy dosis of humor. This is Flemish humor. Sometimes, it is absurd, and not truly compatible with French speaking readers. [...] there is a lot of wordplay, sometimes difficult to translate in French” (BD The Que 2022). Even in the Netherlands, where people speak the same language as in the original Flemish version, Kiekeboe sounds too imbedded with the Flemish local to be appreciated by other locals. Using a “similar language” is not enough for success. Local specificities need to be accounted for.

Conclusion

The mediascape offers opportunities for many representations of the local. Whether in box office movies or in successful *bandes dessinées*, the subtleties and cultural complexities are eroded. This may be the key success of these local representations on a global stage. Cultural localities are an important barrier to exporting content. We agree with Firat (2016) and advocate that in this contemporary globalized world, the representations of locals take marketable, commoditized, commercialized forms.

Increasingly, the local has become accessible to other locals. For instance, *Crazy Rich Asians* renders visible local, upper-class Chinese families in Singapore, to another local, the largely middle-class American audience. The effects of the representations of locals may extend beyond the doors of the movie theater or Netflix screens. As an illustration, after the *Squid Game*'s release, Memrise, an online platform to learn a foreign

language, saw a 94% jump in people starting to learn Korean courses in the UK (Mem Rise 2021).

The cost for the spread of these local cultures is the removal of the subtleties that make-up the essence of culture. A major example may be the movie industry in Flanders and the Netherlands. Although the two locals share the almost same Dutch/Flemish language and are geographically close, movies and series are often remade rather than watched in their original form (Cuelenaere, Joye and Willems 2019). The nuances may be too subtle for an outsider to notice. Yet, Dutchmen and Flemings notice variations. They have the cultural sensitivity to access the local nuances.

Indeed, globalization has given access to a multiplicity of locals. Grasping the essence of a local culture, however, is often the privilege of an insider. The others benefit from globalization, while navigating through a rich range of weakened, flattened, yet colorful and intriguing façades of culture. It is for the individual to choose whether to get deeper, and if so, how deep to go, into the complexity of the localness.

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