



# Travelling Songs: On Popular Music Transfer and Translation

Isabelle Marc

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

*isabelle.marc@filol.ucm.es*

## Abstract

Even though a song is created in a specific national or communitarian context, which determines to various degrees its production and reception processes, once it is recorded, reproduced and disseminated, especially via the global music market, it travels and wanders through time and place, thus becoming a transcultural product. The fruits of these transfers are what I call a “travelling song” and, by extension, “travelling music”. In this article, I will argue that travelling songs are dramatically transformed by their new contexts of reception. Focusing on alterity and diversity over sameness and isomorphism, the main objective of this work is to provide a general typology of music transfers that draws on translation and cultural transfer theories. Such musical transfers can be categorized in four ways: a) cultural reception; b) musical reprise; c) translation and adaptation; d) stylistic emulation. Such as distinction will lead the discussion to insights into how music transfers relate to such concepts as fidelity, authorship and creativity within a polycentric dynamic.

KEYWORDS: popular music, popular music transfers, translation, translation theories, isomorphism, alterity

## Introduction

According to Regev (2013: 3), national cultures have been increasingly interrelated and to some extent replaced by a world culture one which may be defined as “a complexly interconnected entity, in which social groupings of all types around the globe growingly share wide common grounds in their aesthetic perceptions, expressive forms, and cultural practices”. From a protectionist

perspective, this process can be understood as a form of cultural homogenization, of cultural imperialism by which Western, mainly Anglo-American, culture and the transnational companies that control it dominate local cultures. By contrast, this process may be regarded as a form of hybridization, creolization, indigenization, and mixing that enables transnational culture to be transformed, appropriated and reshaped by vernacular culture (Appadurai 1996, Glissant 2005). These interpretations are not exclusive or opposed; on the contrary, they coexist and to some extent complement each other. Transcultural flows do not work within an arborescent or hierarchic logic but rather in a rhizomatic, interconnected and interdependent manner (Deleuze et Guattari 1980). In this sense, it is necessary to limit an all-cosmopolitan view, because the existence of world culture does not invalidate that of national cultures, as nations and borders still very much exist in every aspect, whether political, economic, ideological, aesthetic or symbolic. Their significance, for bad or for worse, remains “massive” (Hesmondhalgh 2013: 152). As world literature studies have shown (Damrosch 2003: 281), what characterises world culture is not isomorphism or standardization but variability and multiplicity. However, among the almost incommensurable variety of artistic products that circulate around the globe today, there are patterns and concomitances to be identified and apprehended.

Popular music is one of the main cultural fields in which the flows of global culture are particularly noticeable. A musical transfer, that is the circulation of music, including its styles, genres and instrumentation, in different forms and by various means, are not new and can be traced back historically. An example of the transformation of a musical instrument is the Arab *ud*, a string instrument that morphed in Europe as the guitar during the Middle Ages. In terms of the reinterpretation of a music genre, the globalization of contemporary hip-hop is a case in point (Mitchell 2001). However, as shown by Toynbee and Dueck (2011: 4), contemporary popular music is especially prone to movement as transcultural flows are reinforced by the global economy, by ubiquitous access to technologies of music distribution, and by increasingly complex and intensifying migratory movements, as well as by cosmopolitan cultural practices (Vertovec and Cohen 2002; Jenkins 2004). Indeed, popular music creation and consumption are increasingly characterized by these constant, intricate and protean transfers, which can be labelled as forms of “musical cosmopolitanism” (Stokes 2007) or “aesthetic cosmopolitanism” (Regev 2013). Transcultural flows in the realm of popular music can also be viewed as forms of homogenization, imposing an arguably Western, or Anglo-American, canon on the rest of the world; however, they can also be interpreted as part of a much more complex, rhizomatic flux, that reaches not only from the centre to the margins of Western culture, but in every direction (Toynbee and Dueck 2011: 5). Furthermore, the very concept of popular music is far from being universal and varies greatly from one culture to another. This has indeed given rise to regular animated debate within the Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM; Fabbri 2013). Even within the restriction of a European context, the terms “popular music”, “*musique populaire*”, “*música popular*” and “*musica popolare*” do not refer to exactly the same realities and include very different musical styles or genres that do not necessarily comply to a model described by Regev as “pop-rock music” (2013).

Because meaning or significance is essentially a cultural construct, what music means is determined by its cultures of production, distribution and reception. As Richard Middleton (2000: 13) points out, echoing Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, musical "meaning is always both socially and historically situated, and generically specific". The immanent meanings of the semiotic layers that constitute music (musical, verbal and performative) are then completed by historical and spatial circumstances (the chronotope), which all concur to create significance. Therefore, the study of music, and of songs in particular as individual and minimal objects of scrutiny, requires an acknowledgement of its different semiotic levels as well as the heteroglot social, historical and aesthetic discourses working with and within it. Yet, as we know, even though a song is created in a specific national or communitarian context that determines to various extents its production and reception processes, once it is released and disseminated, especially via the global music market, it travels and wanders through time and place, thus becoming a transcultural product. The fruit of these voyages is what I call a "travelling song" and by extension "travelling music".<sup>1</sup>

What I would like to stress here is that these journeys do not necessarily imply homogenization or derivativeness from the Anglo-American dominance in global culture but that they cause significant changes to the songs in particular (their meaning, their reception and their value) and to musical styles or genres in general; travelling songs and travelling styles are not globally uniform but are modified by the different contexts in which they are produced and received. Using a translation and cultural studies<sup>2</sup> point of view, I will now present a few examples which will serve as preliminary case studies to introduce a general typology of transfers in popular music and which will focus on alterity and diversity over sameness and isomorphism.

## Travel changes music

My first case refers to the multi-award winning documentary *Searching for Sugar Man* (Bendjelloul 2012), which eloquently shows the transformation process that music undergoes when received in a culture different from the one it was created in. The film describes how the US singer-songwriter Sixto Díaz Rodríguez, usually referred to as Rodríguez, became a huge success in South-Africa under Apartheid with albums such as *Cold Fact* (Sussex 1970) including singles like "Sugar Man" while he was almost unknown in his home country. Indeed, for South-African white progressive youth, Rodríguez was a major figure of protest song and acquired a quasi-mythical status based on a mysterious aura that surrounded Rodríguez and on what was perceived to be his socially committed message. Thanks to the success of the documentary, Rodríguez is now globally well-known and praised as a rediscovered figure of the 1960s; after several decades of media silence, he has given concerts in many major Western cities and his albums are sold everywhere. This journey of improbable and late success is paradigmatic of the dramatic changes that can be experienced by the same song or album depending on the place and the time in which it is received and consumed.

There are many other ways in which a song can be transformed when taken from one context, whether cultural, historical, or aesthetic, to another. One of the

most common and significant transformations is that of covers. From tribute bands to subversive or ironic versions, covers deserve a special critical approach.<sup>3</sup> Among the myriad of covers which produce changes in gender, race, ideology and aesthetics, I'd like to comment on an instance, also drawn from cinema, found in the film adaptation of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (Alfredson 2011). The film's last scene is built upon a song, "La Mer" ("The Sea"), a French classic by Charles Trenet (1946), who is also known as *le fou chantant* ("the singing fool"). Here, however, it is performed by Julio Iglesias, the epitome of the Latin lover during the 1970s. The song, which describes the beauty of the sea in a poetic style, is sung in French but with such a powerful Spanish accent (not hidden, but stressed even), that it becomes something entirely different from the original, making the French lyrics difficult to be understood. Thanks to Julio Iglesias's warm voice and to the musical arrangement, it becomes more colourful, warmer and epicurean, in contrast to the bleak greys and bleached colours of the film's palette. "La Mer" works most likely as a musical coda to the film for stylistic reasons. While the images tell a story of deceit and violence, the song celebrates natural beauty and joyfulness. The visual and the audio text work respectively as opposites, creating a meaningful oxymoron. But this semantic and rhetorical paradox is also a cultural one: the images and the music belong to completely different imaginaries, locations and references. In that sense, the use of French, in its Hispanicized version, works as a cultural barrier and as a dramatic distancing effect, at least for the contemporary public of the film; using Griffiths' terms, it takes the song somewhere else, it takes it to Julio Iglesias' imaginary "home" (Griffiths 2002: 59). Therefore, the otherness of "La Mer" is aesthetic, linguistic and cultural and acts as counterpoint to the visual discourse. With Julio Iglesias, the song has travelled the journey from 1940s France to 1970s UK and Spain, and the "Latin sphere"; then, by its inclusion in the film it has eventually been appropriated by contemporary British and global audiences. Trenet's song is no longer only French. As the result of these transcultural processes, the song has been incorporated into British and global culture; for non-Hispanic audiences, it acts as a means of introducing exoticism and a certain local flavour, even a touch of nostalgic tackiness.

"La Mer" is indeed an excellent example of a song's plausible avatars. In Bobby Darin's cover, it becomes "Beyond the Sea", which reached top positions in the American charts (1959), and represents another step towards transformation: original French lyrics, including their main topic, disappear and are replaced by English versions. The song by Charles Trenet is thus altered and is, to some extent, erased from its English version,<sup>4</sup> which could be seen as a musical palimpsest. It was then fully appropriated by American culture and covered in turn by many other English-speaking artists, becoming an original in its own right, without any or nearly no reference for much of this new audience to "La Mer". Such extreme cultural and linguistic transformations are not rare, as can be seen in the case of "La Foule" (1958), by Édith Piaf or Frank Sinatra's "My Way"<sup>5</sup> (1969). Indeed, one can hardly think of anything more significantly French or American than, respectively, these two singers performing these two particular songs. Yet, both originated from elsewhere: "La Foule" takes the melody of "Que Nadie Sepa Mi Sufrir", composed by the Argentinean Ángel Cabral with lyrics of Enrique Dizeo (Viladomat 1937); in turn, "My Way" is based on "Comme

d'Habitude" (1967), by Claude François and Jacques Revaux. The melodies of both songs are taken from their original settings and are appropriated by a target culture, whereby the lyrics are replaced and changed in the target language. Since then, these two songs have been canonized as emblematic products of French and American culture respectively though they are indeed the result of a transfer between cultures, languages, musical styles and, even, genders.

My final example of musical transfer is "Submarino Amarillo", a cover version of a 1966 hit of The Beatles, "Yellow Submarine", by the Spanish band Los Mustang in 1966. A "faithful" translation, it reached top positions in the Spanish charts and sold more copies than the English original, somehow managing to eclipse it for the general Spanish public of the time. Their record company (EMI's Spanish branch) decided to release Los Mustang's version before The Beatles' original. To understand this local success and supremacy, it is necessary to take into account the contemporary Spanish cultural context that in the 1960s, after the first autarkic years (1939-1959) of General Francisco Franco's dictatorship, was starting to open up, with some trepidation, to international cultural trends.<sup>6</sup> Alongside the desire of younger generations to experience modern life and culture, at the time associated with democratic Western Europe and the USA, Franco's authoritarian, ultra-catholic, and nationalist regime tried to control and to prevent the "dangers" entering from foreign "ungodly" music.<sup>7</sup> In the case of The Beatles, the official media campaign described them in nuanced terms, in any case as not being as fabulous as depicted by international media.<sup>8</sup> In turn, Los Mustang offered softened, unthreatening versions to satisfy the youth needs (Marc 2013b). Translation was, as in other European countries at that time, a necessary step to promote Anglo-American music into the vernacular music scenes, a process that revealed not only commercial interest, but also a will to modernize popular music and culture in general.

The previous examples show some of the various ways in which songs can be transformed when subjected to transfers in terms of place, time, culture, gender, language and aesthetics, and how they may in turn impact on the new contexts, which import and receive them. They each share the fact that there is an original song, stemming from an original source context, which is received and appropriated within a new "target" context. There is, thus, a process which implies carrying, bringing, and leading a song, a text, and its materiality (lyrics, melody, instruments, arrangements) across cultures, one in which the primary or source text is actualized, complexly reshaped by the "target" cultural chronotope, a process which can thus be called translation. This translation, in whichever form, inevitably alters and modifies the meaning of a song. As in every translation, there is permanence and there is transformation, continuity and change, gain and loss, a duality shaped in as many forms or degrees as there are transfers.

Drawing on classic translation theory (Bassnett 2002), I identify strategies such as faithful rendering in the case of "Submarino Amarillo" yet simultaneously deeply different from it in the ways it is received and perceived by Spanish audiences. In turn, "La Foule", "My Way", and "Beyond the Sea" can be considered as free adaptations. As for the work of Rodríguez addressed in *Searching for Sugar Man* and the version of "La Mer" by Julio Iglesias, they cannot be labelled as translations *sensu stricto* because the source language is not changed, but *de facto* they imply a deep transformation of the original meaning

carried out within the receiving culture. Such versions can be viewed as dependent copies, reformulations of their respective source texts. However, in all these travelling songs, the dependence from the original is blurred or even erased by their proven autonomy in the target context. Even though they stem from an identified source, they evolve autonomously; their target audiences do not necessarily refer to that primal source to use or enjoy them, to make sense of them, and they acquire independent status, similarly to an original creation. Hence, we could ask whether these travelling songs work as originals, whether they are faithful or not to their sources and what becomes of them once they settle in their new context.

Indeed, when addressing popular music transfers, it seems necessary to question traditional concepts of originality, dependency, fidelity, novelty, and creation, issues which are not much unlike those raised in the field of literature, as already pointed out by Martin Stokes (2007: 10), when he wonders if musical practices travel across the globe in ways similar to literary genres. In that respect, because they work with analogous questions in their own field of expertise, translation and comparative studies can fruitfully be applied to popular music that travels across time and space. Drawing on these initial comments, in the next section I will propose a typology of travelling songs and travelling styles.

## Travelling songs and travelling styles: Transfer, translation and creativity

Popular music transfers have been addressed as a form of cultural cosmopolitanism (Regev 2013 and 2011; Stokes 2007), as a result of migrant and diasporic flows (Gilroy 1993), mainly referring to case studies and specific musical styles, such as Afro-American music in general and especially rap (Mitchell 2001; Green 2013a). These approaches are undoubtedly necessary and useful and need to be carried out on a global scale. As for me, I do not intend to reinvent the wheel, but simply to propose a general typology of these transfers, bearing in mind that it may not be exhaustive and that there are intermediate spaces between my proposed categories.

From what has been said in the above section, I believe it is possible to identify four main forms of transcultural flows in the realm of popular music, all of which imply a translation of the materiality of the song and a drift, deviation or change from its original meaning: a) the cultural reception of an imported song in its original version; b) a musical reprise with completely new lyrics and which bears almost no cultural traces of the original; c) the translation or adaptation of lyrics that, although currently a limited practice, was very popular a few decades ago, and d) the emulation of imported musical styles or genres to different degrees, according to varying musical and cultural strategies.

### a) Cultural reception

A very common type of transfer is when a song is received in its original form in a target culture, apparently without any alterations: today, in nearly every corner of the globe, people sing along to Beyoncé and dance to David Guetta's music and

tomorrow the same thing will happen with the next global pop hit. However, it does not mean that everybody everywhere reacts to those songs identically. Even if the imported songs are not adapted to a local market, vernacular audiences actively transform these songs, perceiving them according to their own culture and to the vision offered by the local media (mediation). Such travelling songs become localized by vernacular artists, industry and audiences. For this reason, "Sugar Man" is radically different when listened to in South Africa and Australia; that is also why "Le Déserteur" (1956) by Boris Vian, an antimilitarist song that suffered censorship in France during Algeria's War of Independence, will never be perceived in the same way in Algiers as in Paris; nor will Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA" (1984) mean the same thing in Madrid as in Washington DC or Kansas City. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to think that a young Parisian bourgeois cannot possibly perceive "Fight the Power" (1989) by Public Enemy in the same way as a senior member of the Chinese government. This requires us to be aware that besides the impact of socio-cultural and historical context, reception is also determined by individual factors and agendas (political, ethnic, religious, gender).<sup>9</sup> However obvious these examples may seem, they draw attention to the fact that direct musical imports are far from being universally identical; their significance is subject to cultural and individual appropriation. Their presence therefore cannot be considered a form of cultural isomorphism because target audiences and scenes, consciously or not, play an essential role in their reception and appropriation, resignifying them into their own target contexts.

#### b) Musical reprise

The second form of transfer that I would like to comment on consists of the use of the melody of a source song with new lyrics in the target language. In order to differentiate this type of transfer from translations and cover versions, I call it musical reprise.<sup>10</sup> Musical reprise then keeps some of the musical original elements (melody theme) but include lyrics and cultural references that have nothing in common with the original, such as in "La Foule", "My Way" or "Beyond the Sea". In these cases, the original cultural component disappears almost completely. "Que Nadie Sepa Mi Sufrir" in Piaf's version is substantially transformed: on the verbal side, the French lyrics narrate an ephemeral encounter between the female persona and an unknown lover, whereas the Spanish text presents the mourning of a male first person for a lost love; on the musical side, even though the melody remains, new rhythm and arrangements profoundly reshape the song. These linguistic and musical modifications, together with Piaf's image and voice as the epitome of French female *chanson*, result in a cultural product that is now globally perceived as quintessentially French. Something similar happens with "My Way": in spite of its French origins, it has become a symbol of American values and popular culture, namely male self-sufficiency and individualism. There are many other examples of musical reprise, such as the famous song "It's Now or Never" (1960) by Elvis Presley, which uses the melody theme from "classic" Neapolitan song "O Sole Mio" (Janovitz n.d.) that is in turn an *habanera*, a Cuban dance. Elvis' reprise, in spite of preserving what could be called Italian characteristics, vocal qualities owing to operatic singing and the mandolin sound, is dramatically transformed by reason of the English lyrics,

bearing no resemblance to the Italian text, and of the intrinsic Americanness of Presley. In such reprises, the mark of the original culture is practically erased on account of transformations and adaptations realized in the target culture by local artists and the music industry. The reasons behind these musical translations seem to be more aesthetic, often using a good or catchy melodic theme, than for the other forms of transfer.

#### c) Translation and adaptation

The third form of transfer is the translation and the adaptation of songs, which involve the music musical and the lyrics. Today, this is mostly visible in the translations and adaptations of Anglo-American musicals, on the screen or on the stage, that have been dubbed, subtitled or surtitled. However, during the 1950s and the 1960s and even later, when English had not reached the omnipresence it boasts today, artists often recorded their songs in the language of the target markets. Thus, when Charles Aznavour, Petula Clark, Nat King Cole and many others wanted to export their songs abroad, they recorded them in translation. Moreover, local artists would often sing foreign hits in the vernacular language. For instance, in Spain in the 1960s, international stars would sing their songs in Spanish while local artists included translations of international chart-toppers in their EPs, which in turn became national hits. There were also bands, such as the already mentioned Los Mustang, which were specialized in translations only (Marc 2013b). In France too, stars like Johnny Hallyday attained part of their celebrity via translations or adaptations of Anglo-American hits, such as "Let's Twist Again", which he turned into "Viens Danser le Twist" (1961). Behind these vernacular versions lay both an aesthetic interest and a commercial one: translating or adapting in order to reproduce the original success. In general, vernacular audiences perceived those translations as autonomous songs, with no ties to the original and only a few connoisseurs would care to recognize the traces of Elvis or The Everly Brothers in them. The golden age of translations (1950s and 1960s in Western Europe) usually coincided with the first stages in the penetration of foreign music, especially Anglo-American rock, but not exclusively, in non-Anglophone countries. After this first phase, based on a mimetic impulse and conveying foreign modernity and otherness, at least both in Spain and in France, generally local artists would follow a more autonomous path, recording their own songs, but still recreating what is perceived as a foreign style. Here, it is important to stress that "copying does not necessarily result in sameness" (Toynbee and Dueck 2011: 8), that translations, as we have already seen in the first examples, can have autonomous destinies which can in turn influence other originals, contributing to the creation of interconnected music which does not rely on a clear centre-periphery dynamics, namely where Anglo-American popular music stands in the centre around which the rest of national popular musics revolve.

#### d) Stylistic emulation

This somewhat more mature phase in the development of national popular music, leads us to the fourth form of transfer: the direct or indirect emulation<sup>11</sup> of foreign styles and genres in national popular musical scenes. Thanks to these constant



flows, it is nowadays possible to listen to vernacular rock, hip hop or techno in New York, Delhi, Marseille or Dakar in ways that mingle the local and the global, as it is possible to recognize Latin beats in the rock sound of Vampire Weekend's *Contra* (2010) and rock guitars in contemporary flamenco. Indeed, this fourth category is complex, and comprises degrees of transfer, from the general to the minimal. Firstly, there is the transfer of genres, including their ideological and social conventions (as may be the case of metal scenes around the globe). Secondly, the transfer of styles produces changes in the aesthetic features of music (Moore 2012: 119). Finally, the transfer of specific instruments can take place, whether it be the addition of electric guitar, the use of African percussion, or the orchestral translation of electronic music. Focusing on genre and style transfers, it is not always easy to differentiate these two concepts, especially in translation as is the case, for example, with hip hop (Mitchell 2001), when foreign imports incorporate local features that transform it significantly. In the Spanish case, for example, the French *auteur-compositeur-interprète* style, epitomized by George Brassens, was appropriated by Spanish *cantautores* and Catalan *Nova cançó*, who in turn domesticized it, adding local references and meanings. For example, Paco Ibáñez, following Georges Brassens, who had put into music several French poems, did the same with Spanish poets like Lorca and Alberti (Marc 2013c). The *cantautor*, who could be perceived as an equivalent to the Anglo-American singer-songwriter, stems from a mixture of musical influences, including French, Latin-American and American models.<sup>12</sup> This is one of the many and well documented cases of travelling genres and styles, such as different kinds of Afro-American musics, Latin styles and electronica, which show that stylistic and aesthetic emulation is probably the most conspicuous and fruitful transcultural phenomena on a global scale.

Direct listening, translation and stylistic emulations of foreign or other music imply cultural transfers and therefore cultural translation, transformation, and change – musical reprise implies a translation so extreme that it usually bears no traces of the original culture. These three forms of musical transfer are essential in the configuration of both national and global popular music. From a historical point of view and drawing from the French and Spanish cases,<sup>13</sup> direct listening, generally by a minority of connoisseurs and cultural elites, constitutes the first and preliminary step, introducing the new sounds and the new aesthetics to a local scene. Then, translation represents the second or intermediary phase, in which wider local audiences become familiarized with the new music that allegedly conveys modernity and innovation and helps burgeoning youth cultures in both countries. Finally, stylistic emulation confirms the anchorage of imported, foreign, music in a local scene, its domestication or indigenization. What is more, from a diachronic perspective, Motti Regev identifies four main steps in the process of aesthetic cosmopolitanization that leads to what he considers to be the “global field of pop rock music”: “an *early historical phase*, a period of *consecrated beginnings*, a phase of *consolidation and rise to dominance*, and a phase of *diversification and glorification*” (Regev 2013: 105; author's italics). This description of the gradual appropriation of foreign styles into national scenes is supported by Regev with Argentinian and Israeli examples. However, because it is focused on the similarities and concomitances, this model fails to take into account the weight of difference and alterity that is involved in every such transfer

and that dramatically distinguishes national scenes from global popular music. Indeed, in cultural transfers, there is a “generative impulse to copy the music of the other” (Toynbee and Dueck 2011: 2) but this mimetic disposition does not necessarily feed from the same original, as we see clearly in the case of the singer-songwriter, namely, the Anglo-American original, the pop-rock canon, nor does it result in strict isomorphism. On the contrary, there is not one, but several, diverse and simultaneous patterns, which circulate unevenly throughout the globe. At this point, we should then ask ourselves what we understand by original, what fidelity means, and what the causes and the consequences of the mimetic process in the realm of popular music transfer might be.

First, as far as the original or source text and style is concerned, we should question the centre-periphery hypothesis as one applied equally across the globe. Western predominance in terms of market, mainly identified with Anglo-American music, is undeniable. However, as I have already suggested, it is not unique or unidirectional; musical flows are more intricate, more complex, they do not evolve vertically but rather horizontally, in a rhizomatic way. For example, West-African music is rhizomically an important part of the Anglo-American rock and pop canon. There are other examples that confirm the existence of polycentric models in transcultural music. French popular music, for instance, has exerted a great influence as a global model during the last sixty years, especially in the form of post-war *chanson* and the figure of the *auteur-compositeur-interprète*.<sup>14</sup> Even in less discursive and allegedly less originally French styles like electronica, French artists such as Air or Daft Punk, the so called “French Touch” because of their success and influence outside national borders, have been crucial in its global circulation. The same thing is true for music coming from other latitudes, like Central and South America, whose styles have entered global markets.

Secondly, and drawing on post-colonial translation theories (Bassnett 1999), the very idea of the original or source can be deconstructed. The primary text, here the song and the musical style, does have a diachronic primacy, but not an ontological one, as we have seen in the examples of musical reprise. Translation is not a matter of superiority or pre-eminence of the original text over the translated and adapted version, “My Way” is better known and much more successful than its original ‘Comme d’habitude’. Contradicting the assumption of the original’s superiority, the translator is not a secondary figure: he or she is central to cultural transfer. In this sense, he or she becomes the author, even the message itself, because he or she is free to suppress or enhance one particular feature over another, to introduce new, vernacular or not, elements into his or her own work. He or she makes choices constantly, and in those choices lay the key to the new cultural texts. The figure of the translator in popular music could be replaced by a collective author, the combination of composer, interpreter, arranger, sound-engineer and music producer. These teams of professionals make choices, decide what to keep, what to eliminate, what to add, in short, how to translate the song or the style in their own context; thus they become visible;<sup>15</sup> some even become stars in their own right. The translation, the travelling song, then becomes not only a new, autonomous text, but also guarantees the original’s perdurability in a different chronotope. Thus the relationship between the original and the translation, between the primary song or style and its versions (mimesis),

is not a hierarchic one.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, and just as the idea of the “great European original” (Bassnett 1999: 4) in the literary field has already been questioned, the idea of the “great Anglo-American model” in the realm of popular music must be challenged and replaced by that of a rhizomatic, ever-evolving logic of transfers.

The figure of the visible translator, here the visible collective author of the transcultural song or style, raises the question of agency and the nature of the acts of mimesis, translation and copying. Travelling songs and styles are actively appropriated and reinterpreted by local actors. In these processes of cultural localization, travelling songs and styles change, and acquire different meanings and values. As cannibalistic approaches in translation studies have shown, and also recently in popular music studies (Moehn 2012),<sup>17</sup> music transfers imply a devouring of the other, the original, that is both violating, even destroying, it and honouring it. Cannibalism as a metaphor for musical appropriation seems an adequate one for it shows the active role played by the vernacular devouring listener, towards the foreign coloniser. The music resulting from this act of local agency both respects and transgresses what comes from across the border.

This cannibalistic approach helps us understand why it seems so difficult to perceive isomorphism in global popular music as something more than just a limited, superficial resemblance. Isomorphism means sameness. However, as we have seen, in musical transfers, sameness is just apparent, even in direct imports where the materiality of the song (its lyrics, its instrumentation) stays unaltered. At stake here is the concept of fidelity, central and much discussed in translation studies, yet questionable and indeed questioned and, as has been shown above, is inadequate in the case of musical transfer. Undoubtedly, there are similarities and common trends; travelling songs and travelling styles look to their sources and models, but they also look to their target contexts; this is why differences, or national cultural uniqueness, prevail over concomitances. If pop-rock was a cosmopolitan mould in which national idiosyncrasies could express their respective uniqueness, then global audiences should be able to recognize these similarities at a deeper level than just as a label in music shops. But this is just not the case. For instance, listening to Turk Arabesque or to Japanese progressive rock when one is not Turk or Japanese is a rather a bizarre or odd experience. Moreover, as David Hesmondhalgh argues, most national music rarely crosses “national boundaries to be heard by people in other countries” (Hesmondhalgh 2013: 154); when it does so, it provokes a sense of strangeness, where concomitances can be perceived, but where differences seem to be more salient. When it does cross its national borders, it is often labelled as “world music”, implying that it is rather an exotic, alien product, not to be assimilated within a canon of Anglo-American music. To illustrate this point, here the views of two of British colleagues’ on cultural differences between Anglo-American and Spanish rock:<sup>18</sup>

I tend to like rock which displays the influence of African-American music particularly strongly. [...] I find Spanish rock lacking in this respect. Could this be the result of the greater cultural presence of those of African origin in USA and Britain? [...] Could this also be the result of the rhythms of the Spanish language, which don't fit the rhythms of rock and roll? [...] I'm very selective as regards the particular sounds of guitar and voice. I like rougher

sounds much more than clean sounds; and warmer tones than harsh ones. As above, I find the sounds of Spanish rock (and Spanish music in general) too polished. [...] Finally, I find that Spanish rock and roll, aesthetic and musical matters aside, lacks the attitude that some see as characteristic of this genre. This attitude is of mild rebellion. (Green 2013b)

Rock'n'roll mythology is [...] steeped in romanticism; imitation, however proficient, is no substitute for the individual expression of inner torment. These are, I would suggest, the two vital criteria absent from even the most ostensibly rock'n'roll bands from Spain. The originality of Spanish bands tends to reside in the fusion with autochthonous musical traditions through, say, the incorporation of Celtic incorporation in Galicia, or the introduction of lyrics specific to the local socio-political context. Successful translation into the vernacular can, on the one hand, be an enjoyable exercise in musical and lyrical prowess [...]. On the other hand, however, it circumscribes rock'n'roll within somewhat limited and limiting iconographical and musical parameters; for this reason, I suspect that Spain's not inconsiderable contribution to European and global popular music(s) is more likely to be found in other forms and genres. (Wheeler 2013)

In spite of their essential subjectivity, these comments are similar to what I hear in everyday experience;<sup>19</sup> they can help infer that beyond shared features, Anglo-American rock is different from Spanish rock and that they do seem to have different cultural, aesthetic and ideological characteristics. On account of linguistic, historical and cultural specificities, Joaquín Sabina, Rosendo and Vetusta Morla are different from Neil Young, Bruce Springsteen and Arcade Fire. Thus, the translation process is not faithful, the original is transgressed, willingly or not, and audiences local and foreign, do not fail to perceive it. Hence, is it possible to talk about fidelity, mimesis and consequently about isomorphism in global contemporary popular music? The answer is partially affirmative, as there are several (not just one) global patterns that circulate around the globe, but it is also negative, as the above comments show, for national and vernacular music does “sound different”, both home and abroad. In any case, and coinciding with Martin Stokes (2014) in his discussion of creativity and globalization in music, musical transfers are important sources for creativity that are not only individual and instantly ground-breaking but also collective and transformative in the long-term (2014: 41).

As to the question of what our reasons to listen to, to translate or to emulate the music of the other are, the answer is not a simple one. As we have seen, during the 1960s in continental Europe, the quest for modernity by a new generation of young artists and their public explains the abundance of translations from Anglo-American rock and its emulation later on, facilitated by the commercial interests of the music industry and the entertainment sector. This aspiration to modernity and novelty is still at work nowadays, but it comes from other latitudes. The “dynamics of exoticism” (Toynbee and Dueck 2011: 7), that is the “appeal to Western publics to musics of non-Western others” is a powerful and well-documented one (Hesmondhalgh 2013; Stokes 2007; Tylor 1997), stemming both from genuine fascination and from a need to renew Western markets. Besides, the increase in diasporic populations and the progress in music technologies foster

the circulation of music worldwide. Case studies could be endless, as every nation or communitarian space presents different reasons to import and appropriate foreign music. However, as Stokes (2007: 15) points out, these political, ideological and aesthetic reasons work not only at the superstructure level but also at the individual level, stressing that the agency, and the pleasure, of the active listener of musical imports lies behind music circulation.

## Conclusion

As shown in the examples above, from marketing reasons to genuinely aesthetic motivations, as transcultural products, travelling songs and their styles occupy a precise position in the target culture that does not necessarily coincide with the one they held in their original context: they establish new links with the works already configuring local systems, that are subsequently transformed by these new arrivals. Music does not expand “globally in an isomorphic manner to create similar soundscapes and aesthetic environments” (Regev 2011: 10) but changes, often dramatically, when transferred from one culture to another, generating specific soundscapes in each culture. Its significance changes because the heteroglot social, historical and aesthetic conditions to which it was originally linked would have changed too. Travelling music can foster progressive values or reinforce conventional ones; it can be just for fun or for political ends; it can be meaningful or frivolous. Imported music can play different roles in the target culture, specific to each transfer, ranging from the confirmation or consolidation of cultural *doxa* (when the host culture is confident in itself), to the innovation and creation of new aesthetic or ideological models (when the target system is young or somehow incomplete). The peripheral or dominant position of the imports may change over the course of time as new socio-cultural contexts emerge. Therefore, the logic of popular music transfers is related to the configuration both of the source and of the target system, as well as to their power relations, their interaction with other systems, the role of markets, the sociology of audiences and so on.

In this sense, as suggested in the introduction of this article, transfers in popular music work in a manner similar to transfers of literary texts. *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert 1857), disseminated and read throughout Europe, created a type of literary genre and syndrome: the *femme de trente ans* (the thirty-year-old woman), unsatisfied, adulterous and damned, found in novels such as Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877) and *La Regenta* by Leopoldo Alas “Clarín” (1885).<sup>20</sup> It would be hazardous to conclude that Emma Bovary had generated isomorphic clones throughout Europe, because each novel has become independently valuable in its own right. Certainly, the three of them display common features, ideologically and aesthetically, but each one of them creates its own fictional world, referring to and criticizing its own respective chronotope. In a similar way, perceiving French or Spanish rock and rap as more or less successful imitations of American models would fail to understand the processes of cultural appropriation and transformation undertaken in each vernacular context. Hence, polysystem theory (Shuttleworth 1998: 176-179) and transfer theory (Espagne and Werner 1987) can become essential tools for the study of transculturality in popular music.

These approaches can help us understand how the choice of a song, a style or an instrument for transferral is determined by the configuration of the target culture and by its relationship with the source culture (Even-Zohar 1976: 25). They also view reception as a form of “reinterpretation” (Espagne and Werner 1987: 172), as an act of intervention, of agency both at superstructural and at individual levels. Isomorphism fails to describe the way in which music travels and changes in every act of cultural reception, adaptation and emulation; such music becomes a different object, notwithstanding the concomitances with others – from the past or in the future. In this sense, literary comparative studies and translation studies can contribute to a useful nuanced understanding of transcultural phenomena in music by questioning or reframing concepts such as influence, intertextuality, originality, authorship, autonomy, world music and vernacular music. As the history of Western arts tells us, cultural transfers are an on-going source of creativity and can show us how specific cultures relate to sameness and otherness, how the foreign and the vernacular exist in dialogue about cultural practice and experience. Music is no exception to this: there is, and there cannot be, a universally homogenous global music; there can only be differences of music.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Dr. Stuart Green and Dr. Duncan Wheeler for allowing the presentation of their views on Spanish popular music in the context of my work. I would also like to thank Dr. Richard Hibbitt and Dr. Stuart Green for their help in reviewing and commenting this article.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Toynbee and Dueck (2011) in their edited volume about migrating music explore similar phenomena and use the term “travelling styles”. I first used the term “travelling songs” in a research paper hosted by the Popular Cultures Research Network in March 2011 at the University of Leeds.

<sup>2</sup> Şebnem Susam-Sarajeva edited a special volume (2008) where she raises relevant questions on the relations between translation and music. Contributions to that special volume focus on various case studies of translated music in different contexts and from different academic perspectives. My own work tries to answer some of these questions providing a more general reflection on music transfers in the contemporary context. Currently, there are several research projects focusing on Translation and Music. See for example the project “Translating Music” (<http://www.translatingmusic.com/index.html>) and the Symposium organized at Cardiff University on Translation in Music in May 2014.

<sup>3</sup> See Griffiths 2002 and the two special volumes of *Volume!* (2010a and 2010b).

<sup>4</sup> There are many other cover versions of “La Mer”, in English and in other languages. See *Second Hand Songs* (n.d.).

<sup>5</sup> Klaus Kaindl (2005) refers to this example in his study of pop songs translation.

<sup>6</sup> For more information about Spanish historic context, see Townson 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Musical censorship was not as straightforward as in the case of film. However, the regime did censor cultural activities related to popular music such as “modern music” concerts, which took place in Madrid on Sunday mornings at the Circo Price matinées (Marc 2013b).

<sup>8</sup> See the documentary film *¡Que vienen los Beatles!* (Costa 1995).

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the impact of contextual and individual circumstances in the reception of popular music, see Marc 2013a.

<sup>10</sup> This French loanword may not be satisfactory, but I could not find a term in English with that particular meaning, broader than “cover”.

<sup>11</sup> Here, terms such as “appropriation”, “domestication”, “indigenization”, “glocalization” could be used as synonyms.

<sup>12</sup> Georges Brassens is internationally influential and can be considered as one of the main models for singer-songwriters on a global scale. The genre singer-songwriter is theorized in its various vernacular formulations in a forthcoming monograph edited by Stuart Green and Isabelle Marc and to be published by Ashgate in Spring 2016 (Green and Marc 2016).

<sup>13</sup> For the French case, see Looseley 2003; for Spain, see Marc 2013b.

<sup>14</sup> For the influence of *auteur-compositeur-interprète* see for instance Marc (2013c) and Tomatis (2014).

<sup>15</sup> The debate on the invisibility of the translator and on the necessary transparency of his/her work is still at the core of translation and adaptation theories. See for example Venuti 2008.

<sup>16</sup> In fact, the very idea of the original, even in the history of translation, is relatively new and coincides with the beginning of the colonial era (Bassnett 1999: 2). In the history of Western arts before modernist aesthetics, based on individual genius and “originality”, emulating and reconstructing previous models constituted the major artistic practice.

<sup>17</sup> I would like to thank Martha Ulhoa for her help with “cannibal” views on music.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to stress that these comments convey Dr. Green and Dr. Wheeler’s personal aesthetic views and that they are used here as examples of cultural differences.

<sup>19</sup> In my on-going research project on the reception of French and Spanish popular music in contemporary Britain, qualitative evidence seems to point out similar views.

<sup>20</sup> In 1896, the German realist writer Theodor Fontane published *Effi Briest* whose main character, though younger and from a different social origin, holds many resemblances with Emma Bovary, Ana Ozores and Anna Karenina.

## References

### *Bibliography*

- Alas “Clarín”, L. 1885. *La Regenta*. Barcelona: Daniel Cortezo.
- Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Bassnett, S. and Trivedi, H. Eds. 1999. *Postcolonial Translation. Theory and Practice*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bassnett, S. 2002. *Translation Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Damrosch, D. 2003. *What is World Literature?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. 1980. *Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2. Mille plateaux*. Paris: Minuit.
- Espagne, M. and Werner, M. 1987. La construction d'une référence culturelle allemande en France: Genèse et histoire (1750-1914). *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 42 (4): 969-992.
- Even-Zohar, I. 1976. The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem. Paper presented to the Leuven International Symposium *Literature and Translation: New Perspective in Literary Studies*, The Catholic University of Leuven, 27-30 April 1976.
- Fabbri, F. –  
 1982. A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications. In D. Horn and P. Tagg Eds. 1982. *Popular Music Perspectives*. Gothenburg and Exeter: International Association for the Study of Popular Music: 52-81.  
 2013. Is There Popular Music Out There? *Journal of European Popular Culture* 4 (1): 9-18.
- Flaubert, G. 1857. *Madame Bovary*. Paris: Michel Lévy Frères.
- Fontane, T. 1896. *Effi Briest*. Berlin: Fontane.
- Gilroy, P. 1993. *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Glissant, E. 2005. La Cohée du Lamentin. *Poétique* V. Paris: Gallimard.
- Green, S. 2013a. The Musical Routes of the Spanish Black Atlantic: The Performance of Identities in the Rap of Frank T and El Chojín. *Journal of Popular Music and Society* 36 (4): 505-522.
- Green, S. and Marc, I. Eds. 2016 (forthcoming). *The Singer-Songwriter in Europe. Paradigms, Politics and Place*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate.
- Griffiths, D. 2002. Cover Versions and the Sound of Identity in Motion. In D. Hesmondhalgh and K. Negus Eds. *Popular Music Studies*. London: Arnold: 51-64.
- Hesmondhalgh, D. 2013. *Why Music Matters*. London: Wiley Blackwell.
- Holt, F. 2007. *Genre in Popular Music*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Janovitz, B. n.d. "It's Now or Never". Song review in *All Music*. <http://www.allmusic.com/song/its-now-or-never-mt0000003748>. Accessed 09 June 2015.
- Jenkins, H. 2004. Pop Cosmopolitanism: Mapping Cultural Flows in an Age of Media Convergence. In M. M. Suarez-Orozco and D. Baolian Qin-Hillard Eds. *Globalization: Culture and Education in the New Millennium*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 152-172.
- Kaindl, K. 2005. The Plurisemiotics of Pop Song Translation: Words, Music, Voice and Image. In D. Gorlée Ed. *Song and Significance. Virtues and Vices of Vocal Translation*. Amsterdam: Rodopi: 235-262.
- Looseley, D. L. 2003. *Popular Music in Contemporary France: Authenticity, Politics, Debate*. Oxford and New York: Berg.



Marc, I. –

2013a. How Do We Listen to Popular Music in Europe? *Journal of European Popular Culture*, European Popular Musics 4 (1): 29-35.

2013b. *Submarinos amarillos* and Other Transcultural Objects in Spanish Popular Music During Late Francoism. In S. Martínez and H. Fouce Eds. *Made in Spain. Studies in Popular Music*. London: Routledge: 115-124.

2013c. Brassens en España. Un ejemplo de transferencia cultural. *Trans. Revista de Traductología* 17: 139-149.

Middleton, R. Ed. 2000. *Reading Pop: Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mitchell, T. 2012. *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop outside the USA*. Middleton, Wesleyan University Press.

Moehn, F. 2012. *On Cannibals and Chameleons. Contemporary Carioca: Technologies of Mixing in a Brazilian Music Scene*. Durham and London: Duke University Press: 204-210.

Moore, A. F. 2012. *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate.

Regev, M. –

2002. The Pop-Rockisation of Popular music. In D. Hesmondhalgh and K. Negus Eds. *Popular Music Studies*. London: Arnold: 251-264.

2011. Pop-Rock Music as Expressive Isomorphism: Blurring the National, the Exotic, and the Cosmopolitan in Popular Music. *American Behavioral Scientist* 20 (10): 1-16.

2013. *Pop-Rock Music. Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism in Late Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.

Ritzer, G. 1993. *The Mcdonaldization of Society. An Investigation in the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life*. London: Sage, Thousand Oaks: Fine Forge Press.

Shuttleworth, M. 2001. Polysystem Theory. In M. Baker Ed. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, London and New York: Routledge: 176-179.

Second Hand Songs. n.d. "La mer".

<http://www.secondhandsongs.com/work/9271>; Accessed: 25 November 2015.

Stokes, M. –

2007. On Musical Cosmopolitanism. The Macalester International Roundtable 2007. <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/intlrtable/3/>; Accessed: 18 January 2015.

2014. Créativité, globalisation et musique. *Volume! La revue des musiques populaires* 10 (2): 29-45.

Susam-Sareava, S. 2008. Translation and Music: Changing Perspectives, Frameworks and Significance. *The Translator* 14 (2), special issue *Translation and Music*: 187-200

Tagg, P. 2012. *Music's Meanings. A Modern Musicology for Non-Musos*. New York and Huddersfield: Mass Media Music Scholars' Press.

Tolstoy, L. 1877. *Anna Karenina*. Moscow: *The Russian Messenger*.

Tomatis, J. 2014. A Portrait of the Author as an Artist. *Cantautori and Canzone d'autore: Ideology, Authenticity, Stylization*. In G. Plastino and F. Fabbri Eds.

- Made in Italy. Studies in Italian Popular Music.* London and New York: Routledge: 87-99.
- Townson, N. Ed. 2007. *Spain Transformed: the Late Franco Dictatorship, 1959-1975.* Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan.
- Toynbee, J. and Dueck, B. Eds. 2011. *Migrating Music.* New York and London: Routledge.
- Taylor, T. D. 1997. *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets.* New York and London: Routledge.
- Venuti, L. 2008. *The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation.* London and New York: Routledge.
- Vertovec, S. and Cohen, R. Eds. 2002. *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice.* Oxford: Oxford University Press:1-22.
- Volume! La revue des musiques populaires –*  
 2010a. La reprise dans les musiques populaires 7 (1).  
 2010b. La reprise dans les musiques populaires / bis 7 (2).

### *Discography*

- Bobby Darin. 1959. "Beyond the Sea", *That's All*, ATCO Records, US.
- Boris Vian. 1956. "Le Déserteur", *Chansons "Possibles" et "Impossibles"*, Philips, France.
- Bruce Springsteen. 1984. "Born in the USA", *Born in the USA*, Columbia, US.
- Claude François. 1967. "Comme d'Habitude". *Comme d'Habitude*, Disques Flèche- Philips, France.
- Édith Piaf. 1958. "La Foule", *La Foule*, Columbia, France.
- Elvis Presley. 1960. "It's Now or Never", *It's Now or Never*, RCA, US.
- Frank Sinatra. 1969. "My Way", *My Way*, Reprise Records, US.
- Johnny Hallyday. 1961. "Viens Danser le Twist", *Viens danser le Twist*, Philips, France.
- Julio Iglesias. 1976. "La Mer", *En el Olympia*, Columbia, Spain.
- Los Mustang. 1966. "Submarino Amarillo", *Submarino Amarillo*, La Voz de su Amo, Spain.
- Public Enemy. 1989. "Fight the Power", *Fight the Power*, Motown, US.
- Charles Trenet. 1946. "La Mer", *La Mer – Seul depuis Toujours*, Columbia, France.
- Sixto Díaz Rodríguez. 1970. "Sugar Man", *Cold Fact*. Sussex, March, US.
- The Beatles. 1966. "Yellow Submarine", *Revolver*, Capitol. UK.
- Vampire Weekend. 2010. *Contra*, XL Records, US.
- Viladomat, Juan. (1937). "Que Nadie Sepa Mi Sufrir", *Fumando espero. Tango*, CBS, Argentina.

### *Videography*

- ¡Que vienen los Beatles!* 1995. Dir. Pedro Costa. Radio y Televisión Española.
- Searching for Sugar Man.* 2012. Dir. Malik Bendjelloul, Red Box Films, Passion Pictures, Canfield Pictures.

*Tinker, Taylor, Soldier, Spy*. 2011. Dir. Thomas Alfredson, StudioCanal, Karla Films, Paradis Films.

### *Interviews*

Green, S. 2013b. Interviewed by the author, email, 7 October.

Wheeler, D. 2013. Interviewed by the author, email, 19 September.