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Rap as a new type of poetry?

A discussion of the genre within the scope of Holi's *Roadmovie (Sírok és nevetek)*

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The tradition of reciting texts is the fundamental base of every culture and was used for centuries to pass on the mythology or history of a nation from antecedents to descendants. Rap, which has gained enormous popularity over the past decades all around the world under the more common name of hip-hop, can be regarded also as a type of poetry – moreover, it is titled under the folk-poetry category in the Modern Language Association's list (Wood 1999). In fact, rap lives precisely on the border between poetry and music, thereby setting itself to music. The aim of the following essay is to highlight the relevance of rap as a type of poetry according to Wood's (1999) three R's (rhythm, rhyme and rhetoric) by investigating a Hungarian rapper Holi and his 2021 work, called *Roadmovie (Sírok és nevetek)* [I laugh and cry]. Furthermore, by tapping into the field and methodology of linguistics, I will take a visual direction as well: I will examine the road movie film genre based on the lyrics themselves to determine whether the verbs of the work can be associated with the notion of movement. That is, do the verbs themselves create or contribute to the mental images of movement on the road? In order to achieve this, I used the WebAnno 2.0. software to annotate the text. Also, I will present the results of a questionnaire that recorded the first impressions of seventeen Hungarians on the lyrics and analyze whether they can relate the song to the road movie genre. The presentation will also highlight the differences between the results of the annotating software and those of the human readers. The overall aim is to present a Hungarian rapper and his work, to highlight

the relevance of linguistic analyses on literary works, and to examine the intersections of image, text, and music in a single song.

Firstly, I would like to introduce the lyrics that I will work with (in my English translation)¹. The song itself is more than eighteen minutes long and can be easily divided into three main parts. The first part introduces the lyrical subject's previous life experiences – which are mostly lonely and express his desperate need for a companion. At this point the “road movie” effect starts as we accompany the singer on a walk into a botanic garden. The second part comes with the appearance of an unknown girl with whom the lyrical subject continues the walk out of the botanic garden to different parts of a city. The last part is when the two characters go on a road trip to Venice by a lucky accident.

In the first part of this essay, I would like to present the three R's (rhythm, rhyme and rhetoric) to argue that rap can be considered as a type of poetry.

The rhythm of the song is strongly connected to the lyrics. The baseline is monotonous low-beat hip-hop music; however, we can experience several changes in connection with the text itself. There are parts when the lyrics state a pause and the music stops, or we can hear some tunes of a pipe-organ at the same time that the instrument is mentioned. From the very beginning, the rhythm follows the changes within the text, so that in the first few lines, there is a harmony between it and the speaker's agony and low self-esteem:

The last fifteen years of my life / Active experiences make up only a negligible part /
When things have real weight or I feel one with someone at a given moment / The
biggest part, and this is what I remember most: / I walk alone, haunted all the way

From this point on there are four stages of changes that I would like to present through a description of the lyrics and the underlying music.

¹ As the song is quite long I will only present examples from the text later in this paper. The full Hungarian text, as well as the recording, can be found at <https://open.spotify.com/track/2gxP3hO5ewu7HRZgx77rEG>.

The first occurs when the girl offers the boy to walk together and the protagonist is out of his agony, he realizes the happy chance of introducing himself more properly:

Despite all the nagging, it's still just being alone / I love the most, but something switches in me / When she asks if I don't mind walking together more / I suddenly calm down in that moment / I don't just have three sentences to prove it: / How good I am anyway / Now I have a whole afternoon.

As the music reflects more positive thoughts, the beat becomes faster and the tune changes more frequently.

The second change happens when the perspective turns from our protagonist to his partner, and she starts singing her self-written song. Even though in the music the singer remains the same, he tries to imitate the girl's voice and uses a different tune from the hip-hop base. We can also feel by reading the lyrics that it is a different part of the song – more likely connected to the pop music genre:

There are times when I feel like more / And I'm not limited to just one role / to have boring behavior but everything, the whole / The sky and the moon / The kid who laughs at the dog / the dandelion wreath on her forehead / All my desires are lost / I go aimlessly, the Sun leads me

It is worth noting that not only does the rhythm change, but the text becomes poetry-like, as we can discover paired rhymes at the end of lines, or a personalization of the sun. It is a very interesting part of the song with the changes of perspectives and narration, and with the structure of having a text within a text.

The third change happens when they decide to hop on a bus that goes to Venice. Here the title finally meets with the definition of the film genre: the road movie genre is realized as a series of events that show movement, and the baseline for this movement is to be on the road (Hurault-Paupe 2014). With the new basis of events, being on the road, the music turns euphoric and continues for a long stretch with no singing. At this point, the music starts to grow more exciting and build toward a catharsis, where the last change happens. The peak is reached when

the two of them start kissing; with the last lines of the song, the music gives the feeling of flying to the sky and above, as it slowly fades away:

I can't find bad feelings, even if I should look for them / We lie before a Venetian scene
up in the sky / The swirling infinity kisses us goodnight...

We can also state that, just as in poems, there is (in the Hungarian text) a quite strict paired rhyme at the end of every line. Reading and listening to the whole text may also remind the readers of the genre of slam poetry as it has the feeling of improvisation, although the whole text is well composed. As for the rhetoric, we see a first-person monologue from the beginning to the end, and the reader only sees the perspective of the protagonist. However, there is a point when this monologue is given to the other party, the girl. Despite this part, the reader (or listener) can see (or hear) the inner thoughts and feelings of the protagonist just as clearly as what happens outside of his head.

Taking these into consideration, I believe it is not a mistake to state that Holi's *Roadmovie* can function as a poem – or more accurately as a sub-genre of slam-poetry – and that the reconsideration of other rap lyrics could be advisable.

As I highlighted the similarities between rap and poetry above, I would like to continue with the analysis of the text with the help of the linguistic perspective, which connects in turn with the visual. As the title signals the genre, road movie, the reader may have the assumption of experiencing a text full of movement, produced through the use of movement verbs (such as go, come, run, etc.). Within the filmic genre, movement is created visually through different effects including camera movements, the narrative flows of the films and several other devices (according to Hurault Paupe 2014, there are seven of these). As a text cannot express the visuals of movement directly, I concentrated on the verbs to check the hypothesis that these verbs are the main movement-creating factors. To this end, I used the WebAnno 2.0. annotating software, where I uploaded the text and annotated all the verbs according to four categories: static elements (STAT); reflective elements (REFL); elements connected to remembering (REM);

and elements creating continuousness—that is, motion (CONT). All in all, 366 verbs or structures of verb elements were analyzed – not counting the verb BE, which, in the Hungarian language can be omitted, but would be in the STAT category anyway. According to the results, 60% of the verbs were in the STAT category which was a surprising result – and meant that the initial hypothesis was incorrect. Thus the visual effect is produced not directly, in expected ways, but indirectly. This could be explained partly by the fact that road movies can be also considered ballads, and as such, the fragmented elements and the narrator’s shifting perspective give the feeling of moving (Deluze 1997). We can also imagine it as photo shoots of every second put together to form a film. Furthermore, these stills can help with Nietzsche’s “slow reading” technique for highlighting the meaning of the main actions (Morris 2003:31). As it can be seen, the initial hypothesis was incorrect and movement is made not by verbs but by the changes of perspectives and the still images.

However, I was also interested in the reader’s first impressions. Therefore, I made a Google Poll with 17 Hungarian participants, using the “thinking aloud” technique to check the first thoughts and realizations of the readers (read more about the technique in Gibson–Whitely 2018). I chose three main parts of the lyrics: the first 8 lines from the beginning; 7 lines at the point of the protagonist decides to go back to the girl; and 7 lines when the road movie itself starts.

The first:

The last 15 years of my life / Active experiences make up only a negligible part / When things have real weight or I feel one with someone at a given moment / The biggest part, and this is what I remember most: / I walk alone, haunted all the way / On a mountain or in a meadow, in a city, on a main square... / That’s all I can see clearly when I look back

The second:

I go home with the peace of eternal losers / ‘There is no such thing, there is no such thing!’- that’s all I repeat / My whole life is spinning before me / I look back suddenly, but I can’t see her anymore / Suddenly, I start running frantically to see if I can find her

/ I pause when my mind switches back on: / ‘Wow, this is going to be fucking shitty, old man, you better calm down’

The last part:

When we see a bus with Italy written on its side / We move closer, people are packing, we look at each other / Someone laughs and points out from behind the clouds: this is our part / The bus goes to Venice, it leaves in twenty minutes / There is no sign of driver here, Zsófi is already upstairs / We sit in the back among smiling Italians / We’re scared and happy, engine sound, we’re off

The participants’ average age was 35; among them were 11 women and 6 men, mostly from cities. The received answers were put into categories according to the tags used above, such as STAT, REM REFL, and CONT. To the STAT category those answers were collected that reflected only on the lyrics themselves. The REM category was given to those that are connected to remembering, the REFL was for answers made on the emotional parts of the lyrics. The last CONT category collected all the answers that stated movement exactly. According to these answers I could find a correlation between the readers’ impressions and the changes of the events in the lyrics. The first part was signed as mostly reflective according to the participants: REFL>STAT>REM>CONT. The second was quite similar to the previous one, albeit with more elements connected to movement: REFL>STAT>CONT>REM. The last part, which included the most movement, also left a similar impression on the readers, they highlighted movement as the main element: CONT>STAT>REFL>REM.

As it can be seen the last part reflected more on the genre of road movie, and was considered to be the most evolving structure. The aim of this questionnaire was not only to check readers’ assumptions but to illustrate a difference between the annotation and human readers. Therefore, it is important to not only rely on a computer-based analysis but on the human perspective also; as it can be seen, different parts can have different meanings for them, despite the fact that the annotated text showed more STAT elements throughout. Thus the poem has a subtle relationship not only with its music, but with the visual genre that it invokes.

The overall aim of this paper is to apply linguistic techniques to literature, and to highlight the importance of reconsidering the borderline between rap and poetry. Beyond that, it considers the triad of poetry, music, and (imagined) moving image in a single work.

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