

50 YEARS OF *ETHNOLOGIA EUROPAEA*

Readers' Choices from Half a Century

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Editorial

Awards for movies and TV shows are called “Critics’ Choice” and “People’s Choice”; even a famous instant coffee brand is called “Taster’s Choice”. When one considers the extent to which the notion of “choice” is instrumentalized for the purposes not only of marketing products but also producing the illusion of a democratic process (voting for “the best”), it might seem odd that *Ethnologia Europaea* has picked up on this idea for its anniversary edition. But as we pondered the various formats with which we could adequately commemorate the 50th year of the publishing of the journal’s very first volume in 1967, the other options seemed equally embedded in (neo)liberal ideologies, particularly of meritocracy, that is, ranking and competition. It is a rather common practice to provide an overview or retrospective of an artist’s work by publishing a “best of” anthology (certainly the recent awarding of the Nobel Prize to Bob Dylan will be generating a number of these). But what does this title “best of” actually reflect? Who decides which works are the “best” ones? Would they have to be the “best” in terms of artistic quality, in terms of popularity, in terms of representativity?

Even the daunting task of picking from the opus of a single artist appears rather simple compared to compiling a “best of” from a whole community of scholars. How could we possibly choose the “best of” 50 years of *Ethnologia Europaea*, what would be the criteria? As the last few decades have seen a dramatic increase in pressure for scholars in the humanities

to submit to the same kinds of evaluation mechanisms that were developed for the natural sciences, it would seem quite inappropriate to present a compendium of articles with the highest “impact factor” or number of citations according to Google scholar. In our rather small fields in particular, we know all too well how inaccurate and irrelevant these measurements can be. But it is all around us. In the digital age, ranking and rating has become a participatory activity all over the social media and on shopping platforms. The various forms of “liking” and “reviewing” seem to democratize the decision-making around quality – but also increase our sense that the whole process of ranking is somehow deeply flawed.

However, compiling a “best of” collection is not only an exercise in marketing, but also an everyday practice. The young bachelor in Nick Hornby’s novel *High Fidelity* just cannot stop making Top-5 lists; being obsessed with choosing which should go first among his favourite rock-bands, movie-screens, or guitar-solos, his whole life turns into an enumerated assessment, including his ex-girlfriends. Perhaps in less fanatic ways, “best of” lists are also linked to personal commemorations, where the payback is merely the enjoyment of looking back and immersing oneself in the sense of how much time has passed. Every scrapbook, every photo album represents a kind of selection of highlights one wants to remember. Playlists, and in previous generations mixed tapes, might also serve this purpose, especially when prepared for someone as a gift: our favourite songs, the best

ones from our youth, the best ones from our favourite band. Some of these are also uploaded to social media, blurring the lines between “participatory marketing” and simple sharing of personal favourites. But this practice does make clear that there is a great deal of pleasure to be derived from reviewing someone’s selection of funniest TV-show punch lines, cutest kitten antics, or soccer goals.

Clearly, this is the effect we are aiming for by presenting a collection of articles from over the last 50 years of this journal: a celebratory retrospective. Beginning with the first issue from 1967, we sought to represent each decade, spreading the five articles out over the whole time period of publication. Our method of selection was, however, not based on any sort of quantitative ranking but – perhaps in accordance with the methodology of our disciplines – in asking some of our regular readers to pick an article they found particularly appealing. Their reasons for doing so are outlined in the comments accompanying each article. By this process we are hoping to remind present and future *Ethnologia Europaea* readers not only of some really great articles in past issues but also to allow some reflection on the continuities and changes within our field over these 50 years. The “reader’s choice” collection is something in between a retrospective “best of” anthology and a *Reader’s Digest*. But instead of presenting only excerpts of articles – and far from drawing on the white American middle-class Cold War culture that this magazine represented for decades – our idea was

that the readers “digest” the articles they selected by discussing their choices from a personal as well as a scholarly point of view.

We also thought that the 50th birthday of *Ethnologia Europaea* would present a nice occasion for two of the previous editors, who each put their mark on the journal for several years, to look back at its journey. In his afterword, Orvar Löfgren thinks about how *Ethnologia Europaea* has reflected processes of inventing and re-inventing Europe, perhaps now even de-constructing it. The ways that *Ethnologia Europaea* participates are reflected in our choice of cover illustration: a “remake” of the original illustration that graced so many volumes in the past, *Allegory of Europe* by the Danish artist Nicolai Abildgaard (1743–1809).

The celebratory retrospective is, inevitably, also a view into the future. The comments on the articles show this well, and highlight the temporal experiences and perceptions of this undertaking. Löfgren makes use of *Ethnologia Europaea* as a time machine; one can go back and forth in time by diving into past volumes and papers of the journal, and Regina F. Bendix declares the journal to be taking an opposite course to aging, since it seems to grow younger every year. We very much like the idea of *Ethnologia Europaea* as a healthily aging spaceship warp-speeding our field into promising futures.

Here’s to another 50 years!