



CELEBRITY STORIES AS A GENRE OF MEDIA CULTURE¹

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The article focuses on celebrity narratives circulating in the mass media in printed text forms and on their specific features within the American and Russian cultures. Among the variety of journalism genres, to a lesser or greater extent making use of narrative patterns (newspaper and magazine informational and feature articles, non-fiction novels, television documentaries, video game journalism, radio and Internet websites on politics, wars, economic crisis etc.), we focus on celebrity stories. We do it for three reasons. Firstly, because celebrity narratives are central for today's American and Russian mass culture and it is important to look for the clues for their hypnotic power. Secondly, the forms they take in the two cultures are bearing on the issues of national mentalities and political strategies. Thirdly, celebrity stories are a fascinating stuff that can motivate academicians in a wide area of disciplines – cultural studies, pedagogy, journalism, linguistics, narratology, perhaps in sociology and psychology as well, to use them in class for interpretations.

Keywords: Journalistic narrative, Media culture, Celebrity story, Point of view.

Introduction

The purpose of the paper is to present an interpretation of narrative as a cultural phenomenon. The theoretical model of narrative is the result of our research in the linguistic theory of narrative with some aspects bearing on the issues of cognitive narratology. The basic principle on which our model rests is the rhythm of narrative points of view. The point of view is treated as a multifaceted narrative unit, embracing representations of the speaker's/writer's cognitive-discursive acts (his individual perception of space and time, their evaluation through his speech, thought and modality) and their representations in the text.

Narrative Journalism and the Genre of Celebrity Stories

New journalism of the 1970s and literary journalism of the 1980s have combined to produce narrative journalism. It is defined as a written text that contains the following elements: 1) scene; 2) characters; 3) action developing in time; 4) voice; 5) interaction with the audience [Sims, Kramer 1995]. It sticks to an honest presentation of facts but relies more on conversational and literary styles to the reader see an ideological, moral and aesthetic content beyond a real life story. Narrative journalism is foregrounding an individual perspective of representing events (the writer's voice) and an intriguing fabula (story), emotions and feelings against the background of social context. Narrative journalism requires a thorough "hands on" investigation of the events and their detailed presentation – it is also known as "immersion

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journalism” [Sims 1990]. The Nieman Program on Narrative Journalism, an organization centre for instructing journalists in the narrative techniques, assumes that, if properly used, narrative journalism can reform newspapers in making them more fascinating and persuasive [Narrative Journalism 2012].

The term “journalism genres” refers to various journalism styles and topics or separate text types, in writing accounts of events. The basic difference is between the informational, “straight news” genres (brief news, reports, articles informational in character) and the “features” as a form of publicist, in-depth journalistic writing employing artistic and creative ways to present an event. Because of its unorthodox style, new journalism is typically employed in lengthy magazine articles or book-length projects – non-fiction novels.

The genre of celebrity stories stands out on the background of the other genres of narrative journalism. Once the province of newspaper gossip columnists, it has become the focus of tabloid newspapers like the National Enquirer, magazines like People and Us Weekly, syndicated television shows like Entertainment Tonight, Inside, The Insider, Access Hollywood, cable networks like E! and The Biography Channel, and numerous other television productions and thousands of websites. Most other news media provide some coverage of celebrities and people as well. Celebrity journalism differs from feature writing in that it focuses on people who are already famous, and in that journalists, especially paparazzi, often behave unethically in order to provide coverage [Journalism genres 2012]. The Hacking Scandal that broke out in Britain in 2011 to bring journalism on trial, is an evidence to an increasing disregard of professional ethics by journalists who more often than not accept false stories forcing celebrities to sue for libel [Cathcart 2012]. The hacking scandal, the biggest scandal to engulf the British mainstream press in decades, had been ignited by Chris Atkins’ Starsuckers documentary (2009) and followed by the book “The phone hacking scandal: journalism on trial”, exposing the deceit involved in celebrity reporting [The phone hacking scandal 2012].

The term *celebrity* was epigrammatically defined by Daniel Boorstin as early as in 1961: “*A celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness*”, “*a human pseudo-event*” [Boorstin 1992]. Boorstin suggested that mass media had produced their own semiotics of celebrities by means of special language and imagery. Any mediocrity popping up in that system is immediately granted with well-knownness, meaning that non-celebrities receive the celebrity treatment, so that people may confuse them with real celebrities.

With increasing centrality of celebrities in American life Boorstin’s definition is no longer quite true. The class of celebrities includes not only movie-stars and pop-divas, but also politicians like John Kennedy and Bill Clinton, fashion designers like John Galliano (who has been inspiring an avalanche of gossips for the last 14 months following his arrest for making anti-Semitic remarks), alleged criminals like O.J. Simpson, sportsmen like Tiger Woods. Many of them do have serious attainments and their publicity is justified. Neal Gabler, cultural historian and film critic, claims that they have created “a new great art form of the 21st century”, “a fund of common experience around which we can form a national community” [Gabler 2009]. Celebrity stories have also become one of the few forms of cultural discourse that supports national ties, an only common subject to talk on.

Gabler offers a new definition of celebrity: “What all these people have in common is that they are living out **narratives** that capture our interest and the interest of the media – **narratives** that have entertainment value” [Gabler 2007, p. 6]. Stars generate plot-driven, soap-operatic narratives that are “life-movies” to us. Personalities of no great accomplishment can also be celebrities, as soon as they make up episodes in real stars’ life stories.

Seeing celebrity as a narrative better enables us to understand how celebrity story functions.

Firstly, celebrity stories are a more easily-accessible way of affecting national consciousness than traditional art forms. Their primary attraction is that they narrate real-life marriages, divorces, sex and violence, giving the public an almost voyeuristic experience.

Secondly, celebrities, unlike characters of novels or movies, have no “last chapter” and we are in a constant suspense, waiting for the next installment, where there may be a jail, a clinic, an accident, a pregnancy or whatever.

Thirdly, celebrity stories' psychological functions are similar to those of traditional art. They carry certain archetypes functioning in any modern culture as projections of archaic thought. Their eternal plots – betrayal (Woody Allen and Mia Farrow), lust and violence (Roman Polansky), divorce (Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt, whose story was christened “Brangelina”) – all are actualizations of one and the same “path mythologeme”: the hero embarks on a quest, finds himself in the realm where there dwell Gods, undergoes a series of trials and temptations and comes back to the real world to share a new knowledge he has acquired and to gain a new status. A celebrity also comes to fame from ordinary origins, in the supernatural world of show business he or she comes face to face with temptations and trials, and, having gone through numerous pitfalls, from addiction and sex to career ruining, he or she returns to ordinary people to pass on the lesson he or she has learned.

Finally, a celebrity story is a cultural concept, rooted in the famous American Dream. It seems available, but is seen as “a kind of secular blessedness so special that only the chosen get it”, “a kind of new Calvinism” [Gabler 2007, p.16]. Those having life narratives are “the most deserving”, while the fans are only granted the right to appreciate the world of Supermen and to imagine that they might have a narrative of their own some day.

Celebrities are something more than just a means of therapy, escapism or an excuse for chatting. Like an epic novel or a film, the best celebrity stories transform a real fact or detail into a metaphor, entertainment – into art, gossips – into an epic. Such are the narratives of the Kennedy family, Marline Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor whose stories continue in new publications, discoveries and interpretations. They keep going after their deaths like ancient texts, though they tend to be more of a scandalous character. A recent example is another tale told by a formerly JFK's intern mistress Mimi Alford, who wrote a book about her obedient sex services to the president of the United States [Bennetts 2012, p. 8]. In general their triumph is in possessing the minds of the nation far more powerfully than cinema and TV were possessing the minds of the previous generation.

Russian Celebrity Stories

The effect American tabloid culture makes on the Russian national consciousness is more than noticeable. The Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper, for one, launched in 1925 as an official mouthpiece of “komsomol” (the communist union of the youth), today is a tabloid, making its name mostly on journalistic investigations of the officials' corruption, violence and gossips. In the past The Komsomolskaya Pravda was awarded by the Soviet Government by five honorable orders. Today their icons, preserved for some reasons on the front page, are nothing but postmodern irony. The Moskovsky Komsomoletz, another widely popular newspaper of the formerly communist bias, is specializing in scathing criminal stories. There's also a regular growth in the popularity of non-fiction books in Russia.

There is serious evidence to “a catastrophic downfall” of the Russian professional journalism, where “ethics and strict standards of facts verification are almost inconceivable” [Федоров 2010]. Leonid Parfenov, once the author of snappy narrative documentary series, journalistic investigations and history programs («Намедни. Наша эра. 1961 – 91», «Российская империя», «Живой Пушкин» etc.), acknowledged at the ceremony of Vlad Listyev Reward in 2010, that there isn't any place left for honest television journalism in Russia as well: “Institutionally a correspondent is not a journalist at all, but a functionary following the logic of service and obedience” [Парфенов 2010].

There is also a palpable lack of theoretical interest to the Western narrative journalism techniques, so energetically exploited by the Russian press, radio stations, TV and Internet sites.

Another point of interest is the quality of the Russian celebrities themselves. Most of them are women and men with no ostensible talent or accomplishment to justify the attention. Not only are they unequal in glamour to Michael Jackson, Angelina Jolie or Michael Jordan, their narratives are also pitifully shallow in comparison with those of the Soviet movie-stars of the 1930s-1960s – like Valentina Serova and her husband, poet and WWII journalist Konstantin Simonov and Tatyana Okunevskaya and an array of her admirers, Lavrenty Beria, the most wicked of Stalin's Commissioners, among them. The

list is certainly incomplete. Today's celebrity stories are circulating on TV broadcasts and in the glossy tabloids of British and American formats – Hello!, Celebrities Russia, Glamour, Caravan of Stories, Tatler Russia. Thus, their consumers have no choice but to enjoy faded replicas of British and American celebrities and still duller imitations of their stories.

A Sample Comparative Analysis of an American and a Russian Celebrity Stories

A comparison of two celebrity stories seems sufficient to illustrate the current state of affairs in the mass culture of the two countries. One is the story of Tiger Woods [Seal 2010], the other is about the stormy relationship between the Russian pianist Oksana Grigoryeva and Mel Gibson [Мурашкина 2010].

Volume. The Internet version of Tiger Woods' story takes up 12 pages. The article about Grigoryeva and Gibson – two pages.

1. *The story.* The article about Tiger Woods is a classical example of narrative journalism in its "celebrity story" variation. It contains artistically depicted scenes and portraits, exclusive photos, the participants' "voices" and a fascinating fabula (story) processed through the point of view of the I-narrator. The fabula is a bright variation on the American Dream theme: a talented black boy ascends the top of fame, having overcome racial contempt only to fall down due to his inability to resist a massive appetite for extramarital sex and high-stake gambling. The article in The Komsomolskaya Pravda is in the genre of interview and features a couple pictures, "borrowed" from other sources (Fotobank), an introduction summarizing Oksana and Mel's story and a telephone talk with a woman who claims to be Oksana's close friend. The interview does expose an intriguing fabula, with the episodes of Gibson's fits of rage, infidelities, Oksana's knocked out teeth, etc. Russian tabloids were treating Grigoryeva's story as a fairytale with an unhappy end, and so does the publication we are talking about. However, it lays more accent on Gibson's outrageous behavior only to prove that the Russian pianist didn't manage to go any further than a pseudo-celebrity, lucky enough to get into the orbit of the American star. A traditional form of interview aims at highlighting Oksana's stressful situation, but turns out to be more about Gibson's mental problems, which actually are a retribution for fame.
2. *The title.* "The Temptation of Tiger Woods" is alluding to the character's "secular blessedness". The journalist presents this quality from the points of view of the people who were close to Tiger and whose sincere pathos reinforces the effect of deceived expectancy, the Americans must have experienced when their idol fell. The headline in The Komsomolskaya Pravda is a syntactically cumbersome "quotation within quotation": "Oksana Grigoryeva's Close Friend: Mel Gibson Put a Pistol Against Oksana's Temple and Yelled: 'I'll Kill You!'".
3. *Temporal structure.* The American golfer's story is presented in anachrony (Gerard Genette's term for breaking the chronology of events in the narrative) [Genette 1980]. It opens with the scene "in front of Woods' mansion", where the journalist, Mark Seal, meets Mindy Lawton, one of the golfer's ex-mistresses. The compositional parts bear headings as if taken from a pulp fiction novel. The first part has no heading and recalls the events of 2006, when Mindy Lawton stepped into Tiger's life story (a temporal "jump forward"); the second part, "Daddy's Boy", is a "flash back", a recount of Tiger Woods' childhood traumatic experience, where there were his father's love affairs, racial prejudices, etc.; the fourth and the fifth parts, "Dirty Secrets" and "Swimming with the Whales", narrate the golfer's sexual feats and gambling addiction episodes, which cover one period of his life (parallelism); etc.
4. Raisa Murashkina keeps to the requirements of the reporting style. Compositional parts follow a direct sequence of events and carry matter-of-fact headings summarizing the contents: "Just Ring Off and I'll Kill You!", "Ex-wife Took Gibson's Side", "Mel Was Unfaithful to Oksana in Their Malibu House", etc.
5. *Imagery and space representation.* Mark Seal's skills in using literary techniques of writing are also palpable in scenes depiction and character drawing. These are marked by a combination of

precision and artistic imagery, casting an individual evaluative tint on the story world. The magnificent mansion of Woods in the community of Isleworth, Florida, is introduced as *Woods's small, self-contained bubble of a world*, Tiger's wife Elin Nordegren becomes a figure foregrounded against the crowd of Playboy models, restaurant hostesses and other girls thanks to a rich collection of metaphors: *the gorgeous, blonde Swedish ice queen, a perfect specimen of Nordic beauty, a gorgeous sphinx*. The few tropes appearing in Raisa Murashkina's text are as trivial as could be: *And here the thunderstorm broke out; A romantic fairytale turned suddenly into a gangster saga*.

The rhythm of the spatial net of Woods' story is felt in the recurrent alternations of the I-narrator's scene representations, scarce reflective, publicist passages, and the frequent close-up representations of details. Through details, which are the focal objects of the presumably depersonalized narrator's point of view, he reveals his attitude to the story's unbelievably flashy and at the same time nauseously naturalistic world. The details are of two types: decorative and realistic. The first help to recreate the protagonist's surrealistic environment. Such is the description of Tiger Woods's Las Vegas hotel of choice: *The Mansion looks like a Tuscan villa on steroids, a profusion of ochre-colored terra-cotta walls, Rolls-Royces, hovering butlers, bubbling fountains, and swimming pools*. Realistic details are actualizations of the sordid side of the story and, unlike individual, decorative ones, created by the author, they come up in the witnesses' speech. Just two of such details are Earl Woods' "little hot pants – short-shorts" he had on as he was getting a Father of the Year Award with "a big old vodka gimlet going and a cigarette burning", and Mindy Lawton's cherry-red panties. Some other details of Tiger Woods' dates are close to the "Freudian" passages from "Ulysses", save that instead of James Joyce's ingenious stream-of-consciousness representation they are brought out in real character's direct speech: "You have a perfect body", he told her. She took his penis in her hand and said, "Wow", she tells me. "It was the biggest I've ever seen".

Celebrity Stories as a Reflection of Culture

Other stories we scanned in the Russian glossy magazines are mostly interviews in which pseudo-celebrities expose the episodes of their insignificant careers and seemingly exciting private lives, their loudest stories being about divorces and weddings. In the Soviet era the press was totally dominated by the ideology, yet the characters chosen for the public attention were undoubtedly deserving it – cosmonauts, heroes of war and labor, talented artists, sportsmen, writers, poets, actors. Today Russia's celebrities are almost 100 % pop singers and the figures close to the glamorous world of show business. To make things worse, Russian celebrities, having no worthy narratives of their own, are prone to stimulate interest to their personas by approaching the others' star narratives. Oksana Grigoryeva's story had an installment in another issue of *The Komsomolskaya Pravda*, in the same format of an interview, this time with Dima Bilan, another Russian top pop star best known for winning the Eurovision song contest in 2008 [Ремизова 2010]. Dima narrates about his visit to Oksana's house in America and possibilities for an artistic project in duo. Oksana attained little as a musician, and Dima would have hardly endeavored this excursion had she not been an episode of Mel Gibson's narrative. Dima was content enough to become an episode of the episode.

That personalities whose narratives are deprived of the lessons worthy to be passed over to the audience, have become central in Russian culture is the fact that can, at least partly, justify the lack of quality journalistic stories about them. Why create a narrative pregnant with imagery and moral pathos when you write about a doll, unable of an individual achievement without promoters?

Of the latest publications the one illustrative of the cultural situation is about Filipp Kirkorov – the Russian pop star who can boast a lasting popularity (he has endured into the 21st century after first becoming popular in the early 1990s) and an ability to dazzle the public by increasingly complicated outfits and shows [Antonova 2012]. The article is in the genre of feature and is more publicist than narrative. It does carry the episodes of Kirkorov's life story but, unlike tabloid stories, this article is not

about his musical career, nor about his marriage to the number one Russian pop diva Alla Pugacheva that ended in divorce, neither there is any reference to his daughter, newly-born by an allegedly surrogate mother. The episodes selected for this publication have to do with Kirkorov's image and real character. The event that made Natalya Antonova take time to write about this "bedazzled peacock of a man" was the results of a poll conducted by the Russia's biggest polling agency Levada Center, which showed that Filipp Kirkorov is Russia's sexiest man. The journalist mentions in passing, that Kirkorov's nearest company in the top rating are "the stripper Tarzan, most famous for being married to singer Natasha Korolyova, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (who, I'm sure, was delighted to find himself in such exalted company), billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov (possibly the only predictable member of this list and he isn't even half bad to look at), and cheesy tenor Nikolai Baskov" [ibid.]. According to the Levada Center, most of Kirkorov's admirers are poor and middle aged women, and Kirkorov's rating would seem counterintuitive, since his lavish appearance is really at odds with traditional notions of Russian masculinity. In fact it makes sense, as his shows in the style of "the court of Louis XIV" should suggest a peculiar fairy tale for the people whose lives are joyless and drab. Also it is Kirkorov's inner, darker side, that may appeal to Russian women. A series of incidents of his violence to women, with a brief stay in a psychiatric clinic in Israel that followed the latest one in 2010, allow Natalya Antonova qualify him as a misogynist. Women taking fancy to a celebrity famous for violence against other women is not a phenomenon unique to Russia, the journalist says. While in the clinic, Kirkorov offered a weak official *mea culpa*. Explaining and excusing man's violent behavior is still a kind of psychological defense tactic for many.

There is another cultural feature, the so-called "Russian soul" (*dusha*), or just Russian mentality, that tells on the quality of Russian celebrity stories. The very notion of celebrity is still alien to the Russian mentality with its "non-agentive" fatalism, reflected in the three unique concepts: "soul, destiny and nostalgia" (the last concept sounds *toska* and is practically untranslatable) [Вежбицкая 1996, с. 33]. Russian soul – a metaphysical concept that Russians themselves often fail to define – is better manifests itself in the arts as sentimentality, broad scale of emotions, exuberance of feeling. *Dusha*, however, transcends the arts and manifests itself in behavior, often irrational, in feeling rather than reason, in sentiment over certainty and readiness to suffer and sacrifice rather than seek satisfaction, nostalgia for the past rather than the reality of the present. It is also "a reaffirmation of the purity of traditional Russian values against the encroachment of Western enlightenment, rationalism, and secularism, especially in things cultural" [Richmond 1992, p. 46-47]. Although in the post-perestroika times, as the traditionally agricultural and communal character of the Russians is being quickly overwhelmed by the near-western materialism, pragmatism and realism, Russian sensitivity and metaphysical reflection are still permeating the whole culture. Logic is not enough, it is sensation, emotion, dreams and tears that matter. While in the USA, with their new Calvinistic belief in predetermination, Anglo-Saxon pragmatism and the American Dream myth, celebrity narratives appeal more to their fans' minds, to their hopes for personal success and happiness, in Russia it is the fairy tale projections of celebrities that are touching the strings of the soul. Tabloids are using them to distract people from the harsh reality and give them a chance to dream, cry and enjoy "beauty", however fake it may be.

Yet, Russian media culture is maybe just a condensed form reflecting the state of Western media culture in general. The Top huge celebrity stories of 2011 are more varied, yet exemplary of similar narrowing of the cultural spectrum. Almost all of them are about weddings and divorces: beginning from Prince William's and Kim Kardashian's weddings to Arnold Schwarzenegger's and Demi Moor's split-ups. Three exceptions were the end of Harry Potter's series, the tragic death of the young singer Amy Winehouse and a Hackers' raid on Scarlett Johansson's phone. Particularly emblematic was the number one rating of the royal wedding. Though an authentically British national event, a potent script of historical bonding, Prince William and Kate Middleton's wedding was too fascinating a fairy tale (or, rather, a soap opera) for the people worldwide to resist. The glamorous ceremony at Westminster Abbey was a dream-come-true moment for millions, a summarized scenario of a glimmering bride driven slowly on her mystical journey from the commoner to Her Royal Highness.

This bright variation of an archetypal plot is part of the reproductive, rhythmical and educational, cycle of carrying over the same cautionary message – the one that the boundaries between the wondrous world of gods and the ordinary world are blurred, that we should avoid making the mistakes our “heroes” have made. Today celebrity stories are an endless serial that entertains, fixes the fragments of culture, unifies the nation and sometimes teaches valuable life lessons.

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The media and celebrities have a significant relationship, they depend on each other for their existence. Celebrities will willingly seek media exposure to promote their work or to boost their profiles. And the media, are aware of the commercial benefits of feeding the public's appetite for celebrity stories and photographs. With this in mind, celebrity journalism works to the advantage of both sides. Celebrities are happy with the coverage and the media are happy to be meeting the needs of their readers. Media representation is the cement that creates the popularity of a certain person as it