

Media and Information Literate Cities:

Voices, Powers and Change Makers

Wiesław Godzic, Ph.D.

SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw

### Media plus celebrities equals power. The case of Poland

Poland is a unique country. But then almost any EU citizen will say that about his motherland, so the statement is hardly surprising. But Poland really is unique because in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was involuntarily made to leave a large industrial modernisation programme, it missed out on the opportunity to participate in the building of modern democracy and, on top of all that, it was shattered by World War II. For 25 years now Poles have been struggling to come to terms with a modern democracy. And in a modern democracy the role of media, media education and the celebrities produced by them – is of particular importance.

In this paper I examine the historical approach to the celebrity phenomenon in my country. I question what was the main problem of producing celebrities during the communist regime after WWII until 1990s. One can say that potential answers are linked with culture and education, while others focus on the economy. But according to the majority of researchers it is clear: you cannot build a celebrity system without a free market economy as well as without interest for long time education of consumer attitude, namely the media. It becomes more complicated when we take into consideration the cultural and educational context of „celebrities out of the consumer system”. Pop culture producers as well as users of that period imported (and reproduced) things, ideas and ideologies from mature consumerism, calling them “Western.” Visual variety of empty beer cans in 70s until 90s, clothes of the youngsters, and the models of reception of “bourgeois” movies – may serve as examples. I admit that from a semiotic point of view, a celebrity is not a natural object but a phenomenon to-be-learn.

Celebrities – global entities therefore out of any city/cities. Celebrities - a phenomenon

to-be-learned as well as to-be-taught: by whom, how, and in what circumstances? Celebrity - making illusions of delivering a massive bunch of information, which is mostly fake or only pretend to be worth valuable to the user.

I distinctly remember this picture: being less than ten years old, during a premiere show of a Polish historical comedy entitled "Panienska z okienka" I won a toy mirror with the photograph of the gorgeous actress Pola Raksa who performed that role. The mirror was not very functional, as it only showed one thing - the portrait of a beauty. As the years went by I lost interest in the toy, and new images of beauty emerged. But I remembered about it when I was riding a taxi in Beijing in 2010. The Chinese driver had placed an assortment of Chairman Mao miniatures on the dashboard. Upon inquiry, he explained the reason of this installation in much the same way as I would expect it back in 1964, on the day of the premiere show of the Pola Raksa film. He said that Mao was such a great figure, almost divine, moral beauty, that everybody loved him. He didn't so much try to individualise his relationship with his idol, but rather resorted to social arguments of common practice - everybody does that so I do it as well. It was then that I realised I wasn't really interested in reconstructing memories, which is hardly accurate, but rather in understanding the social role of celebrities at a given time. That is why in this article I will pose questions of various intellectual potential. These will range from the most trivial ones, such as why there were no celebrities in the Polish People's Republic, PRL? As well as more sophisticated ones, like which characters or what set of traits were more symptomatic of a celebrity-like figure, if genuine celebrities were in fact absent. I will also pose questions relating to the nature of the changes which took place following 1989, when PRL's pseudo-celebrities either became proper celebrities or, that way or another, removed themselves from the scene.

I will focus on three groups of problems. The first one concerns the "retro" - an important and multi-layered concept with possibly numerous meanings, which I will use to relate to a slightly trivial(?) idea of old age and the process of ageing of celebrities. The second group of problems is described by multicultural (as it turns out) economic categories. These are associated with our main subject matter in the sense that they relate to celebrities functioning (also) in economic systems other than a free-market economy with a consumptionist profile. The third group of problems is free from the boundaries of economics and cultural relations (to the extent it is at all possible) and

turns to the psychological aspects of narcissism understood by many theoreticians as the backbone of modern celebrityism.

=> Retro, meaning an idealized past in a present role

Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz (1972), an insightful critic and promoter of a more gracious perspective of popular culture in Poland, wrote in 1972 (beginnings of the era of the “western” oriented first secretary Edward Gierek) that since we somehow must build consumptionism in Poland, we should ground it in beautiful and transcendent principles of love and social solidarity, and also continence and equalitarianism. As beautiful as the call was, Toeplitz must have known it was just a pipe dream. At least then, when the society only begun embracing the “rotten west” and a new Polish reality. But it was also clear that even a liberal critic such as himself could not admit the contribution of egocentric, narcissistic and generally not so selfless attitudes in that process.

Six years earlier, Jerzy Passendorfer directed a funny musical comedy in the Kadr film company which was entitled “Mocne Uderzenie” (“A Powerful Blow”) and featured Magdalena Zawadzka, Jerzy Turek, some very good actors and two popular big-beat bands: Skaldowie and Niebiesko-Czarni. The script, written by Ludwik Starski, describes a funny situation in which a boy named Kuba and a girl called Majka cannot get married because of another girl named Lola, who claims Kuba proposed to her first. After a lot of entertaining plot twists it turns out that there’s another character on the scene - Johnny Tomala - a guitarist and Kuba’s lookalike. And Kuba, for a certain period of time, has to pretend he’s Johnny - who vanishes into thin air - and be himself at the same time. To make matters worse, the girls’ feelings get mixed up as well - Majka falls in love with the character while Lola loses her mind for the real (whatever that means) Kuba.

I’m not only mentioning the story of this popular comedy because I think it’s good material for a psychoanalysis class on the problem of doppelganger. First of all, it makes me think of some contexts which are associated with celebrities. For example Rudolf Valentino, the famous lover of the silent film era who was well aware that the female audience loved the characters he played, not the real him. Or Cary Grant, famous a while later, who cursed the fact that everybody loved “Grant” - which was his dream as well. It’s about falling in love with your own mask, in an ideal known by your name. Actors despise the situation in which the audience like them for what is really

not their nature at all. They love the character played by them. But the actor, too, wants to live the dream life of the idealised character.

Kuba, who appears in the film I mentioned, is just a regular boy who pretends to be a celebrity musician - and has to put on a mask to do that. That reminds me of another rank-and-file figure, a character from Woody Allen's 2012 film "To Rome with Love". A humble Italian civil servant, played by Robert Benigni, suddenly and unexpectedly becomes a celebrity for a day. He is terrified at first, then he starts to like his new role, but only falls in love with it when the media forget about him and leave him alone again. I think that the character of Kuba from "Mocne Uderzenie" is a prototype of the Polish celebrity - and although the universe as depicted in the Polish films after 1966 didn't really go that way, the important thing was that the process had started - and in a couple of decades those ideas could be reanimated.

Let's take a moment to think about what it means to be a celebrity because Daniel Boorstin's (1964) definition of being famous, in spite of being beautifully succinct, is not very useful from an operational perspective. That is why I put together a set of 6 features which, in my opinion, are predominant here. It is possible not all of them will be present in each such phenomenon, and furthermore they tend to appear with varying intensity. However, I think it's a good idea to define them. Here they are:

1. Public nature - a celebrity does not have to be known by everybody, but you can't become one if you are not known at all, or isolated from other people. So this includes the so-called cewebrities (appearing only online), celetoids (appearing mostly in tabloids), localebrities (popular in a specific location, not really owing to the media) and travelebrities (well known travellers) - but never such people who deliberately avoid contact with an audience.
2. An individual - a band never becomes a celebrity, it's the particular members (not all of them) that do. The popular show "Dance with the stars" is not a collective celebrity - it's the people it features that can become one.
3. Sympathy for the media - celebrities do not avoid the microphone or the cameras. On the contrary - they stay within their reach and know how to work with them (including the paparazzi). In fact, celebrities often work in the media industry.
4. A combination of amateur and professional: each can become a celebrity. The former does not always try to become the latter although it seems only natural. The professional, on the other hand, sometimes pretends to be an amateur using their unique skills.

5. It's not an obligation, it's a decision - the celebrity must agree to become one and accept all the consequences of that decision - some Polish stars find it particularly difficult and want to get out the very first time they are confronted with a more aggressive attitude from the media. But the decision is not theirs to make - it's the audience and the media, but not the celebrities themselves who decide when it's time to quit.

6. Celebrity style - this category is a must - and it's the strongest of the lot. Politicians, professors, priests - they don't even have to follow the other rules just as long as they know how to use celebrity style. Then they are well underway to achieve full celebrity status.

\*Before we consider celebrities of the PRL, let's think about the meaning of "retro" (see Reynolds, 2011): this category seems less than obvious (upon second glance) and undoubtedly very dynamic, which a lot of critics seem to forget about. Retro describes a relatively close past, a memory which is still alive today. We can roughly assume that it encompasses two full generations - from grandparents to their children, and from them to their children's children (their grandchildren): which means it relates to the situations where there's still an oral account of someone who's seen something happen themselves. Retro is very special, because apart from its distortion of meaning which is an inevitable consequence of relying on our imperfect memory - it leads to very precise statements. The account is easily verifiable: we have the witnesses, we have access to the evidence. It seems that pop culture is retro's favourite communication channel. Or rather channels, because popular culture uses plenty. And most of all - retro should not idealise the past or be sentimental about it. It should create such an image of the past which is gracious and entertaining. Therefore, a retro-style text is usually far from academic nature and scientific purity, and more resemblant of eclectic and a little ironic style (Reynolds, 2011).

If we were to treat the above definition of celebrityism rigorously, we could hardly find any social phenomena in the history of the PRL that meet most of its criteria. The intensity of media presence is particularly doubtful here - or rather the fact that the presence was not deliberate, but controlled by ideology. Any figure subject to state censorship had no chance of emerging as a celebrity even if they had exactly what it takes to be one. To put it simply - there was no Celebrity Industrial Complex (as mentioned by some researchers: Orth, 2004, Pinsky, 2009, Young 2009), or the industry was extremely underdeveloped.

The question whether there was common social acceptance of playing such roles is a completely different story altogether. Psychologists, who consider narcissism a backbone of this phenomenon, say that it can be described as follows: a media entity emerges which creates our reality - the reality which we believe we are observing at the moment. And another thing: the complex includes people who thrive thanks to the existence of celebrities as well as those who are devastated by their influence. Let's consider the manichaeistic duality of the phenomenon. Looking at celebrityism from only one perspective, i.e. from the viewpoint of the balance between what someone has and what they owe others, is a huge simplification. It's more of an eclectic and ironic game - the same adjectives which I just used to describe the phenomenon of "retro" may also denote the basics of celebrityism. Let's take a look at how these phenomena functioned not such a long, long time ago...

\*Maryla Rodowicz could only be a popular singer, but not a celebrity. That's because there was no industrial complex for celebrities that would make it possible for her to emerge with enough power in the minds of the consumers of culture and earn some serious money - much more than she in fact did earn. Therefore, if we were to use the definition as the only criterion, the conclusion would be that there were no celebrities in the PRL. And that's not entirely true because the idea of celebrity stretches like a rubber band. We can definitely agree that in the PRL times there were certain very popular figures with multiple skills: they could sing (usually), or they were outstanding actresses or actors. Both themselves and their managers were well aware of the rules applicable to this area in the West, but at the same time they knew those rules couldn't be applied in the given circumstances. I said "multiple skills" deliberately, as we are currently also dealing with the concept of "celebrity plankton". That includes usually very young people with no skills whatsoever, whose only talent is an attractive body. It is impossible to compare our present reality with the times of the PRL also due to the technological divide. Today's society is able to craft a new celebrity in a matter of weeks while in the past the process took much longer as it was associated with learning and striving to become a professional. That is because a PRL-era star resembled a diva of the cinema much more closely than today's young celebrity who has a record of appearance in three television series and co-hosting two major shows, but, unsurprisingly, had not time to finish secondary school.

Today's celebrity is just your neighbourhood boy or girl who happened to make it. And you know them rather due to the omnipresence of the modern media than their own

effort. They're more ordinary than they are unique. These are people who have some sort of unique trait, people who happened to be on television in just the right time and made it. But these are also people that I, as a viewer, do not envy at all. I envied stars like Marilyn Monroe or Pola Raksa enormously because there was such a thick glass wall between us. I could observe what they do - to a certain extent as only some of their actions were made public - but I was never able to get near them. But today there is no glass wall. Thanks to the paparazzi we know almost everything about them, even the most intimate details - who they are currently dating, who they had lunch with, who they went shopping with or what they like to eat for breakfast. The barrier is gone now, but I think we needed it, after all we want some boundaries to exist because they help shape the identity of the recipients.

It's worth mentioning at this point that people were very interested in culture at that time. Reading was extremely popular and watching film was commonplace. People watched films by Stanisław Bareja, Andrzej Wajda, Krzysztof Zanussi and Bohdan Poręba and eagerly talked about them at family parties. It is especially important because now we are observing a considerable weakening of this cultural community. And back then, the interest was genuine. The attraction to arts, especially literature, was on the one hand authentic (people wanted to make up for what was lost because of Stalin's regime) and on the other hand - pleasantly snobbish. Especially after 1956 when Poland started embrace the West, reading became extremely popular. Long lines of people waited in front of bookstores to buy a copy of Joyce's "Ulysses" - albeit more likely because they wanted to have it on their bookshelf than actually read it. But the important thing was that seeing a man with a book or buying a cinema ticket from a tout was something that in fact advanced culture as a whole. And it did so because it turned out there were consumers willing to pay for it and champions ready to fight for it. And they made the authorities embrace culture that way.

This should be viewed as a very dynamic and extremely complex sort of game. The society was not stupid and it opposed real socialism - which was proven by the emergence of the "Solidarity" movement in 1980. But that apparent unanimity quickly fell apart once the movement came to being. Opposing the government was not enough anymore. It didn't work. Now you had to be somebody. You had to build something new. And opposing is rarely associated with building new things. It doesn't add value. On the contrary - it's a negative value, a potential to destroy. In this respect one could say that all those idols - as typical representatives of free market

consumptionism - acted against the imposed order and the strange socialist economy. When idols turn to their fans, they have no need for a political party, they need exactly fans (ideally) and (regular) recipients ready to consume content provided by the entire celebrity-related industry.

\*Were the stars corrupt and somehow particularly inclined to collaborate with the authorities? I don't think so, but there was a thin red line which separated those celebrities who were on good terms with the authorities (or were even promoted by the government) from those who were more on the citizen's side. Furthermore, apart from the established system of censorship, every artist and art manager had a poisonous mechanism of self-censorship ingrained deep in their soul. Artists knew very well that if they say something inappropriate, they will not get a passport for their next foreign tour. This situation was cleverly depicted in Polish film in the second half of the 1970s. I don't think that environment should be viewed solely as a group of people contesting the current political system. But let's not be too extreme: the celebrities of that time were complete compromisers willing to collaborate with any authority. They were not completely spineless. A film entitled "Wodzirej" by Feliks Falk shows in a very interesting perspective the dilemmas of the show business of that time and the people in it - people who are morally weak, but capable of feeling emotions and behaving selflessly. They are somewhere in the middle - not tragic heroes, but not minions of the authority either. And besides, in the PRL nobody was completely clean. It's not like "we weren't there". We should perceive an artist as a person who has more social obligations, but in exchange has more freedom to do what they want. These are very individual issues, for example the question whether the authority expects specific behaviours in exchange for providing someone with a commodity coupon.

\*If we think about the role of media in creating celebrities in the PRL, we must focus on the direction of change. The trend for reading literature and listening to the radio was beyond doubt a very strong cultural background here. That was where the basic, traditional knowledge was deposited, and it was available to educated Poles. Film also gained a very strong position as a culture channel. In spite of the fact it never became a medium of entertainment, it developed as a carrier of historical, intellectual and even philosophical content. But from the 1970s onwards, film had to share its status with the newest medium - the television. Its potential for entertainment was less important, and its political usefulness was only discovered by the government in the middle of the 1970s. And so television became a major player in the world of arts. Everybody



followed the news: who Irena Dziedzic talked to, whose play was performed and which actors took part (see Imre, 2016). And all of that was directed by television decision-makers, editors and executive management. Working for television was not just a social promotion, it also meant artistic advancement. All in all the system would have been quite healthy if it hadn't been for the fact that at that time television was strictly controlled by government bureaucracy. But if we forgot about that for a second - it would have been clear that in a normal celebrity system, the media are the most effective tool for creating stars. Even today it's television that picks the people who will soon be on everybody's mind - even though the Internet is taking over more and more of that too. I described that process in my book (Godzic, 2007): a great majority of stars and starlets "were born" owing to the television show "Dance with the stars" between 2005 and 2007. Every once in a while a groundbreaking show appears on air which is so well received by the audience that they want to identify with the contestants, they want to learn as much as possible about their lives. And that is when this whole machine starts: gossip is spread, paparazzi appear, contestants set up their own dance studios... Of course television teamed up with the radio which played an important role in attracting the future consumers, not to mention series like "Matysiakowie" or "W Jezioranach" - what was really important was to frequently talk to society's chosen ones - a sort of radio spectacle.

\*Politicians of the PRL - were they celebrities?

The politicians of that time could not become celebrities because they couldn't accept the specific communication strategy. They were supposed to symbolise an authority of the working people and lead us through life - and in that they should function as headstrong leaders, rather than sensitive narcissists suffering from all kinds of emotional trauma. They always wore suits: a politician wears a suit and that is the only way it could be. The only possible exception from a formal suit was hunting attire, but even that was not always the case. So what was necessary was a sort of breakthrough, after which communication with voters changed forever - after all the dress code is an important element of this communication. A celebrity must dress in the way we want to dress, but for some reason don't. The moment when this started to change is important here - this was the time of the Workers' Defence Committee, then Mr. Leszek Miller and Mr. Aleksander Kwaśniewski. Members of the opposition were usually dressed in worn out sweaters - it was very typical of them. But then the middle generation of authority began to emerge: although they represented the "other side,"

they had enough courage to face the young, desperate masses demanding serious treatment. It doesn't matter that they didn't achieve much politically - they managed to establish a connection. In the 1980s, in a film entitled "Robotnicy '80," (Workers 1980) deputy PM, Mr. Jagielski, was utterly shocked by the fact that people dared to criticise him, that a simple worker would shout out that the authorities were lying to people.

In general, I think the politicians of that time completely lacked the incentive and the communication skills you need to become a celebrity. Therefore, although politicians could possess some of the features of a celebrity, it's not possible to be one if you can't communicate with your background, your fans and your audience.

So the question arises - could their wives fulfil that role for them? Two wives of Prime Minister Mieczysław Rakowski, i.e. Wanda Wiłkomirska and Elżbieta Kępińska, were also artists. But both of them, inasmuch as Nina Andrycz, the wife of Józef Cyrankiewicz, themselves had to work hard to become famous. Their fame escapes the ideological system, it was autonomous and belonged to the domain of arts and entertainment. They were simply good at what they did. And they would have been in any other system as well: they shone with their own light, not with a reflection of somebody else's. It wasn't possible to use a free-market system with respect to those artists since all the other sectors of the economy worked under the command-distributive paradigm. And so, in spite of various restrictions, the authorities began to realise that having outstanding artists in Poland and letting them (temporarily) travel abroad works in line with their agenda. And it also serves the interests of the state, its culture and those people themselves - after all we had some excellent artists comparable to Marilyn Monroe, Marlon Brando or James Dean.

\*Party celebrities

At that time nobody heard about politicians' children. Maybe with one exception. It was the Prime Minister's son, Andrzej Jaroszewicz, known as the Red Prince. Although he finished legal studies, he was known as a race driver and generally someone who loved to party. He was a typical heir to the throne with no chance of actually sitting on it. The book by Ewa Morelle (Ewa Frykowska) entitled "Słodkie życie" refers to Federico Fellini's "La dolce vita." The Italian director very accurately interpreted the life of Rome's artistic society: the stars, the news reporters following their every move (it's the first time we encounter the phenomenon of the paparazzi) and the bored literary

elites. Frykowska tried to describe the party-loving lifestyle of our stars and artists from a similar angle - but her accounts were a lot richer in sex and vodka than Fellini's. The idea of "rich kids" which functioned at that time was related to the entire diverse group of children of high state officials and renowned artists. The group was by no means homogeneous enough to establish a single club (on several occasions film directors tried to gently touch upon this phenomenon in their work). Young Mr. Jaroszewicz was the only odd one out in this group - he made himself known as a fun-loving party goer. That was quite close to celebrity style, which you can either work out or inherit from your parents. And in fact many celebrities were created that way - it was enough to be born into the right family and the rest was easy - just play by the rules. In today's Poland there are many famous politicians' children we know a lot about, like for instance the offspring of Mr. Lech Wałęsa, Ms. Agata Buzek, Ms. Ola Kwaśniewska. Ms. Monika Jaruzelska - she's an extreme case, somebody who'd rather separate themselves from their roots and at the same time knows they can't - for emotional and purely human reasons. Today, these people (slightly younger than Ms. Jaruzelska) start becoming regular celebrities as we understand it. You were born as an X and that gives you a 500-point head start over the others. You have the right name (similarly to aristocracy), you're one of "them."

\*Popular actor - must be a celebrity.

Poland had its own James Dean - Mr. Zbigniew Cybulski, actor who played Maciek Chełmicki in "Popiół i diament" by Andrzej Wajda. He was accompanied by Ms. Ewa Krzyżewska playing a beautiful outsider girl who craved for love and at the same time knew she would never find it. The 1958 film entitled "Niewinni czarodzieje" follows the model established by Italian cinema (Accattone by Pasolini) and shows an interesting aspect of young people's frustration: their hinger for love, concealed under a layer of inherent irony. Nothing can be serious - as depicted in "Rozwódów nie będzie" and a lot of other films.

Teresa Tuszyńska - a natural celebrity of the PRL, was an outstanding example. She started as a 16 year old model - the best age and the most natural profession to start with for a future celebrity. In a lot of her films (today we would say "iconic" ones, like "Do Widzenia, do Jutra" starring Zbigniew Cybulski) she played mysterious, metaphysical women who sometimes enjoyed a dash of wild craziness. Appreciated abroad (as a top Polish model she often travelled past the iron curtain), she was married three times and had alcohol issues - a typical case of wasted talent. Just like

Mr. Cybulski - potentially a Polish representative of the young, rebellious generation - another great talent lost because of an accident. But some of their friends still doubt if most of the Polish talent could have really been put to better use. There is a common opinion that in these conditions - with no professional managers to guide them - these people couldn't have performed much better. There's one more thing to say about Tuszyńska and other women like her. In a lot of ways she resembled Brigitte Bardot if we look at the French actress as part of a larger structure of social discourse (see Holmes, 2007). The plot always positioned them as a fragment of the male universe - they belonged to men's world and always depended on them. But at the same time they marked a certain type of strong tension between the domain of consumptionism and sexuality (detached from the institution of marriage) and conservative values.

On the other hand, the careers of many actors who started in the PRL and continued in the Third Polish Republic were much more successful. With extremely popular actors of "Stawka Większa niż Życie" we could now ask if the mask of officer Hans Kloss consumed the face of actor Stanisław Mikulski, and if the mask of the series' Sturmbannführer Brunner devoured the face of Emil Karewicz? (The reference to "an authentic face being consumed by an artificial mask" constitutes one of the various types of discourse on the identity of celebrities). I'm afraid that this continuation did not favour the actors in German uniforms much - now it acts as a sort of warning against putting too much faith in former fame. Today, Mikulski and Karewicz don't know who they are playing anymore - while it's true they are still likeable and quite able 80 year olds pretending to be much younger, but it usually comes out rather pathetic.

According to a historian working on the phenomenon of celebrityism, Mr. Fred Inglis, the period between 1935 and 1970 was an important time of formation of key celebrity mechanisms which were based on actors. Although at early stages of silent film actors were recruited in much the same way as footballers are transferred between clubs today, later on the audience began to actually distinguish and recognise them. Actors became a brand, a hallmark (Inglis, 2010). But things went even further: when, as we are told, Grant said that he too wanted to become the film's "Grant" - an ideal, and at the same time a mask, that marked an important moment in the evolution of this phenomenon. The historian goes on to say that towards the end of this period stars stopped looking down on celebrities, who were the product of a certain type of "democracy". And then there was a "demotic" shift when our tastes and our intellectual lives went downstairs to one, common level - pop culture. In the PRL it was

considerably harder but we still managed to produce many stars. “We” means the society - because this is the system in which stars can actually function. They emerged, and we gave them our trust. It couldn’t get any better than that, could it?

\*Let’s add another professional category, very attractive, and one which only started to appear in the PRL. The author of “Prezenterki” has no doubt when she outlines the social role of this (very sparse) professional group - “Female presenters of the PRL are a real legend today. Not only did they announce the upcoming programs, but they shaped the tastes of the viewers - they promoted fashions, ways of speaking and behaviours. Through the television screens they entered the modest households of post-war Poland and became role models for the viewers. They were the real celebrities of those times, and to a much greater extent than today’s tabloid faces. People watched the shows for years. It was enough to appear on the screen once, and the next day you were famous.” (Szarlát, 2012: 9-10). Let’s also add that female presenters were perfect material for a celebrity - but not many of them wanted to, or actually could, become ones.

However, the Polish show business did create a few charismatic figures who sooner or later went on to test their skill in Europe. Of course the name of Roman Polański immediately springs to mind. Or another exciting figure, director Andrzej Żuławski. The latter, as recounted by his partners, wives and mothers of his children, would create an out of this world vibe about him, made himself seem almost god-like. Ms. Małgorzata Braunek says, “He came from Paris in a Porsche. He was mysterious. Beautiful. It was impossible not to love him.” It’s an example of a celebrity who owed his status not only to his own qualities, but to a large extent also a unique ability to transcend the very tangible (but also magical) boundary between political and economic systems (see [http://www.plotek.pl/plotek/56,79592,12746519,Zycie\\_erotyczne\\_gwiazd\\_Wychowywal\\_swoje\\_partnerki.html](http://www.plotek.pl/plotek/56,79592,12746519,Zycie_erotyczne_gwiazd_Wychowywal_swoje_partnerki.html)).

\*Communist-capitalist celebrity

In his book “The empire of lies” Guy Sorman offers an interpretation of the phenomenon of an intriguing Chinese female celebrity. Twenty-one year old Li Yuchun from Sichuan made a sensational career in 2005 when she appeared in “Super Girl,” the Chinese version of “American Idol.” Trouble started when it turned out that on the night of the show’s finale, Ms. Li was watched by 400 million Chinese viewers, out of which 4 million voted for her via text message. That was it for party officials - what

followed was a campaign of slander which was apparently motivated by mere envy. They did not like the fact that Ms. Li wore jeans and a black top, which was not very “Chinese,” and that she sang in English and Spanish or that her stage image was closer to the male model than traditional Chinese female.

And so Yuchun fell into the trap set for products of pop culture trying to function in the somewhat incomplete system of celebrityism. But then you have to be “for” and “against” at the same time, which means you need to carry (to a certain extent) the meanings undermining the culture of consumptionism, which is why this phenomenon exists in the first place. In a way it’s normal and every idol has to struggle with the same problem: to what extent can they complain about corporations and the proponents of consumerism on the stage, and then charge them for their performance. But when the artist also has to be careful not to offend ideological policymakers, this is when things get strange.

But the extravagant Li managed to make a career after all: she produced records, starred in a film, she organises charity events and has her own, unique style. The political system gave in to cultural economics and once more confirmed that in this world “celebrities rule.” This is just one element of a larger issue - which is proven by the book entitled “Celebrity in China” (Edwards, Jeffreys, 2010). The authors of the particular chapters conclude with certainty that mockingly classifying people who are “famous for being famous” as poor entertainers does not lead to anything interesting other than shallow satisfaction of conceited journalists or scientists. That is because the celebrity phenomenon says a lot about the society which loves and adores them and which mimics them or hates them - which often doesn’t necessarily cancel out the former.

The authors put together a book whose chapters - case studies - show a new group of celebrities, which are, however, unilaterally associated with often somewhat primitive musical feats on television. For example: a new type of role model emerged - a soldier or police officer fighting hooliganism and aggression in their neighbourhood after duty - like a Chinese superman. Or a new Chinese mother model bringing up her children in an exemplary (and not so liberal) way. And on top of that there are stories of difficult young girls who managed to get out of prostitution and got back to the world of acceptable values. Social activists fighting the outbreak of AIDS become recognisable and invited to meetings, or even series of meetings. Many athletes are now considered role models, especially people like Jet Li, film star and martial arts champion who

announced that he would not play president Nixon's bodyguard (which was suggested) because he needed to defend a billion of his compatriots.

It's only against that background - normal folk who became celebrities, proponents of the value propaganda, that the typical Western or global trends are visible. These include examples of famous writers and artists and scores of celewebs - the more or lesser known ones - active solely on the internet, or singers who announce they wish to undergo gender reassignment surgery after years on the stage.

It's true that we are dealing with a mixture of propaganda, manipulation and persuasion of models endorsed by the state and the ruling party and that this mixture is particularly resistant to judgment. But all of this is, in a way, starkly different from our own attitude, and the difference is that the communist authority, in close collaboration with quite typical capitalism, allow (with considerable leeway) pop culture to flourish. It exploits some of its aspects for its own purposes while (only) frowning upon others. But it knows very well that what it tries to achieve is possible only in cooperation with a dynamic, lively and authentic popular culture, but never against it.

\*Mikhalkov – three in one

Many celebrities were born and raised in famous families (aristocratic, royal, banker or artist). Such people belong to the celebrity society (they are *ascribed* to it). Others decided that this status can be achieved with their own work, talent or looks, without being bound by family ties (they, on the other hand, *achieve* that status). But there's a third category which numerous researchers propose as justified - when the celebrity status is *attributed* to someone, it's associated with the expansion of the media (although it has existed since the 17th century) and was first described by Daniel Boorstin (see Rojek, 2001). And lastly, the fourth category, referred to by some as the "celtoid," which is special variety of the third type and which it differs from by its condensed and compressed nature - it's present mainly in tabloids.

Interestingly, one of the most important celebrity in modern Russia fulfils all of the above functions. In this film director's Moscow office there is a large depiction of the mighty family tree of the Mikhalkovs. His mother, Natalia Konchalovskaya, is the daughter of painter Pyotr Konchalovsky and granddaughter of Vasily Surikov. It is a powerful family of artistic aristocracy who never disconnected from the motherland or lost its impact after the post-revolutionary Russia. Nikita's father was also one of the most famous authors of children's books. He is the author of the national anthem of

the USSR and the Russian Federation. He received numerous distinctions from Stalin, and his son was awarded by Vladimir Putin for his loyal service.

This is one of Nikita's faces - with a renowned and famous name. The name is known also - or perhaps mostly - for its bearer's outstanding achievements as an actor and director. In his films he ingeniously depicted the old (sometimes even frowning upon it being called "common") Russian "character", but at the same time referred mostly to recent history and the present times. The film "Burnt by the Sun", a crackdown on the cruel practices of Stalin's Russia of the 1930s was an analysis of the system of enslavement.

And finally Mikhalkov's third face - the man who knows other people. First of all - the prime minister/president Putin and his associates, also in the role of an ardent member of the Orthodox Church. The combination of these two elements made Mikhalkov believe in Putin's "political miracles" and almost consider him Russia's saviour. And he himself - with his quasi-religious faith in the president - wages an intellectual and emotional war claiming that Russia doesn't need any external laws and can manage with its own - purely Russian - original moral rules and values (Norris, 2011: 122).

You won't find a similar case on the Polish celebrity scene. Beata Tyszkiewicz alone is not enough, I'm afraid. And no wonder: admitting to aristocratic origin in the times of the PRL wasn't exactly the best career choice. Only after several years after free media appeared can we start talking about the market for aristocratic celebrities - however at the moment it's enough they're there - they mostly occupy themselves with business and renovating their family real estate anyway. It's quite similar if we think about the presence of aristocracy in modern film. The Polish film stars usually came from nowhere. Mr. Cybulski (in most films), Ms. Krzyżewska (in "Ashes and Diamonds"), Ms. Tuszyńska (a little less in "See you Tomorrow" and a little more in "Tarpany") - had no aristocratic background apart from a souvenir from the old days and an old-fashioned handbag.

#### \*Celebrities and old age

"Old age is not a time in your life, it's a state of mind - and also it's a process, not a one-time event with no reason." That seems to add up well if we look at the seniors in pop culture of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But there are doubts as well - especially if we ask who it applies to and where are the perky old-timers going.



First of all: we won't explain much if we refer to examples of ninety-something year olds in the USA or Japan. And then contrast them with a sixty year old Russian. Average life expectancy is what it is for all three of them. So this issue is, like many others - one of culture, and at the same time - genes.

Secondly: even in the previous century the word "old-timer" was used to denote people at various ages. 30 years ago in Poland it would have been used for a sixty year old man (as soon as he successfully reached his retirement). But his today's counterpart is someone closer to seventy-something. The elderly won themselves the right to be at the spotlight of social life, just like the disabled, and to make their voices heard. But at the same time they are made to learn the language and tools of communication of the younger generations - because only that way they can establish communication channels and feel valuable to others.

And thirdly: pop culture is based on youth, so at first glance there's no room for the elderly here. But pop culture does need them - who doesn't believe it should watch Monty Python's Hell's Grannies! Their well noticed aggression and rejection of the young (or not so old) reality is food for thought. But they are needed in another sense as well. It's them who may turn out to be most authentic among all the age groups, which pop culture (albeit not always) appreciates. They rely on nobody (pension!), they have plenty of experience (although a bit dated, but generally still extremely valuable). Nobody else but them - freaky and awesome (but within well established limits) - can order a balloon flight and hang a giant "worst boss ever" sign over their manager's mansion. It's them - like the savvy granny riding her motorcycle in a petrol chain commercial, or the seniors joyfully fulfilling their life's dreams in the "Lotto milionerzy" ad series. We wish all elderly people were like that. Let's help them find their place, which will soon enough be our place as well. But for a while now let's forget about money, which is probably essential to fulfil one's dreams.

Not all elderly people in the media are alike. There are analytical studies into the models of elderly man in different types of media. Old age is not always favoured by filmmakers. Although there are numerous depictions of old people on the big screen, old age as an issue does not appear that frequently. The author of an essay on the problem of old age in film recounts, "(...) old age, as it is depicted in film, is not just a process, or an abstract concept. Old age in film is faces, names, life stories. Specific people, set in specific realities, subjected to the merciless flow of time and accompanied by less and less friends as the years go by. (...) Each film character is

different and experiences the last years of their life in different ways” (Maszewska-Łupiniak, 2004). Everyone has a different experience of it - a simple truth. But some, our special representatives, experience it uniquely. I’m convinced that among all the problems which representation of old age poses to humanities alone, one of the key issues is the ageing of the young and beautiful - and those are the qualities usually attributed to celebrities.

The nature of film-related professions in Hollywood has always been dominated by men and ruled by a regime of youth. A stark exception here would be the 2008 “Mamma Mia!” musical, which became particularly successful (also financially) for older stars, including Meryl Streep and Pierce Brosnan. The 59 year old actress (and her 4 years younger partner) play a couple who declare love to each other many years after their first crush. And, typically for an American musical, they dance (almost acrobatically) and sing in extreme ways. The film is especially intriguing since the background for the story are the preparations for the wedding of Streep’s young daughter character with her boyfriend. The makers successfully managed this comparison, which was risky because it was against old Hollywood myths and, at the same time, almost comic because of the sometimes clumsy moves of the almost sixty year olds.

One swallow doesn’t make a summer, though. It turns out though that there are not many parts for older actors. And if there are, they are mostly male. It’s good we have the example of Jack Nicholson as an older actor playing an older man with all his quirky mannerisms and eccentricities (“As Good as It Gets”) and we can name a few well-made and splendidly played stories about the adventures of various elderly characters (e.g. “No Country for Old Men” or the Polish “Zróbmy Sobie Wnuka” – “Let’s Us Make a Grandchild”).

But these examples don’t prove that there is a predominant gender focus among filmmakers. The British Film Council estimates that women over 40 are unlikely to get a part. Any part. a 2011 study showed that 69% of women between 50 and 75 feel poorly represented on the screen ([www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk](http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk) 2011). The study was about regular people - the viewers. On the other hand it’s interesting that Hollywood (or the men that run it) have never looked after the needs of ordinary audiences and always settled for a shallow, superficial perspective without showings their complex nature on the screen. The images of ageing film stars, however, have been very popular: “Sunset Boulevard” for instance shows Gloria Swanson as a “forgotten” silent

film star - her dilemmas, traumas and the clash between her dreams and the present reality are the driving force behind the entire plot. In "All About Eve" Betty Davies - also a former film star - goes through a rough time when everybody loses interest in her and her achievements. All these roles were traumatic for the stars (after all the films are a prediction of exactly what will happen to every goddess of the screen) and they also played an important role for the society, but it was different for the older and the younger audiences. The older viewers probably remembered the times of silent film and the forever young stars of that period. Nobody dared to think about ageing then - they behaved as if the problem was someone else's. On the other hand, in the opinion of the younger folk, the oldish (new age category?) stars had no aesthetic or erotic attributes - they were rather cases of traumatic (and probably toxic) characters.

Hollywood did not provide a place for ageing actresses - that's fairly obvious. But the question arises - how to mitigate that process, or stop it - or even reverse it altogether? Israeli director Ari Folman had a fantastic idea in his film "The Congress" based on Stanisław Lem's novel. Robin Wright, an actress playing in the movie under her own name, is soon to be scanned and made into a forever young digital representation for countless film productions. The audience and the new generations of viewers love an ever young actress, but she will inevitably someday stop resembling her on-screen image. And that is a very legitimate reason to protest.

If you look at television from that point of view, it seems that it's always loved youth captivating both the young people themselves and their parents by means of its numerous family series. While it's true that ageing as a process and as a challenge did exist before, it became a reason for strict control. In 2007 BBC fired 55 year old Moira Stuart from her position as a presenter, which caused tensions between the management of the station and her fans. A year later 57 year old Celina Scott won a trial against a perfume manufacturer who wanted to replace her with a much younger woman.

In the history of British TV women have often been dismissed due to their age, but not the lack of skill or professionalism (for instance, 66 year old juror Arlena Philips was bluntly fired from a popular dance show). In Polish television there are not many women over 45 - in any way much fewer than there should be. And examples of men would include Mr. Andrzej Turski or Mr. Jarosław Gugąła (albeit the latter is younger, barely over 50).

Let's take a look at a real film (and also TV) star: Elizabeth Taylor. In the prime of her career she was called "the most famous actress in Hollywood." However, her later television career (lasting for 3 decades) became a caricature of her outstanding achievements earlier on. That period in her professional life is considered a downward spiral, a time of exaggerated eccentricity. Known and admired in films like "Cleopatra" from 1968, she wasn't noticed again in the future - or if she was, she was quoted as an example of a lost acting career and a wasted talent at the time when the cinema began to be replaced by television. The author of the article, Susan Smith, analyses television films in which Taylor is aware of, and concerned about, the possibility (or necessity) of a comeback this ageing female star must go through. This is how Taylor herself commented on the situation: it's the old years (which are long gone) in contrast with the hostile present. That was also an area in which the actor's identity (and the star's persona in general) was developed.

Researchers of the phenomenon of celebrityism - a formation understood as an important component of the consumptionist culture - emphasise the contents of gossip blogs for women. Kirsty Fairclough shows how the narration on the ageing of female celebrities constitutes part of the discourse on never-ending transformation. Now an intriguing suggestion arises - it's that consumption (even on an exaggerated level) becomes a necessity for these stars, as well as a type of reward: although my body is not as beautiful as it used to be, but at least I can indulge in consumption.

Therefore it's not surprising that we should turn our attention towards another perspective owing to which the problem of ageing in the media might be understood better. I'm thinking about a perspective which the author of the book on media and the culture of transformation describes as follows, "The main idea of the culture of transformation is a self-aware change in an individual's identity - from non-functional and unsatisfactory into one which brings self-fulfilment and successful communication with others. This change/transformation/metamorphosis takes place under the influence and with the participation of the mass media" (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2012). Further the author stresses the importance of the body - it is exactly through the body that the transformation culture manifests itself. The body is a hub coupling the human sexuality, family life and social sphere. An ageing body means a completely different state of consciousness as well. In the case of ageing we are dealing with transformation which is undesirable in popular culture - at least in the physical sense. So what's the purpose of imagination?

I think that considerations regarding the media image of old age may be summarised as follows: It appears there is no ageing discourse, or a homogeneous way of answering questions, a sort of strategy involving a broader cultural context. There are depictions of elderly people - some trivial and pathetic, others deep and shocking (e.g. „Amour” by Michael Haneke). There are no visible attempts to organise that discourse though, meaning a possibly uniform strategy of answering questions related to old age in the cultural space. We don't know if elderly people should be revered forever - and the attributes of old age (dialogicality, cold calculation and a large emotional load) will defend the society against the many traps. Or should we adopt the “depletion” model - old people did their job, and now it's time to take them to the woods to die, as the old joke goes.

The society is faced with a whole new range of problems associated with old age. It's not that bad yet, but it's not “good” either. In order to fully participate in social discourse, elderly people have to become partners for the young (which requires constant education - from them, the old ones). Partnership, especially at the time of the Net, requires dialogue and shuns authoritarian attitudes. We need to look after the media and nurse honest and reliable forms of media expression - because this is exactly the arena on which this conflict will be settled.

\*Mirror effect?

Let's conclude the study with a quote from a book by psychologists Pinsky and Young entitled “The Mirror Effect: How Celebrity Narcissism Is Seducing America”. (2009). The authors see a very strong connection between the phenomenon of celebrity and narcissism - which does not seem very original at all. But it's their definition of narcissism that is intriguing.

Pinsky and Young claim that we are living in a time of extreme behaviours. And those facilitate the consolidation of egotism - an egotistic person is someone who is extremely self-oriented. Their self-assessment is very high and stable and they can easily ignore, or at least be indifferent to, the surrounding reality. But narcissism is a different story. Narcissism stems from relationships - communication with oneself: a narcissist is someone who can't communicate with themselves at all. This is not the case - the authors continue - the mythical Narcissus fell in love with himself or his own reflection, by that “he was not capable of recognising himself in his mirror reflection” (Pinsky, Young, 2009). A real narcissist is detached from his “self” and doesn't feel any emotion. The state which characterises him is called Narcissistic Personal Disorder -

and it consists in the entire world being a mirror. A narcissist seeks gratification in beautiful reflections of themselves just to be able to fill a void inside of them.

The key argument of the authors here is to show that the narcissist is the main motor of celebrityism, and celebrities are, in a majority of cases, narcissists. That may indeed be so. But this judgment requires verification in various cultural, economic, political and ideological systems. But one of the points made by the authors already seems to apply to the not-so-distant Polish past. It's that people who we consider to be real celebrities in the PRL, with no cultural industry supporting them, did not possess this extremely important feature - a beautiful mirror, attractive images of themselves. PRL was grey and dull, and the beautiful colorful world behind the curtain was usually lesser known or simply faked by the very few eye witnesses. However, a great majority of the inhabitants of that beautiful world only found out about the alternative when they were faced with this "other beauty" - the plastic culture of consumptionism.

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