

The multicultural celebrities or Asia in Warsaw

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Abstract

The goal of the paper is a multidisciplinary and multicultural analysis and interpretation of the particular aspects of celebrity culture – relations of social actors “known for its well-knownness”. Speaking of celebrities in post-communist countries means speaking of hedonism, narcissism and entertainment as well as cultural and economic power, gender and identity management. Eventually, it is a discourse about consumption and media oriented culture. Employing two additional levels: the ethnic and comparative one broadens the methodological field. The first level teaches a researcher that there is nothing global in the celebrity system. As far as the latter is concerned, a question concerning the equality of the means of expression arises: does one overwhelming celebrity system exist?

In that sense I am going to enlarge the methodological approach. While taking into consideration the paradigm created by Vilem Flusser and Paul Virilio (what seems to be typical for the media studies), what we also need is the Foucauldian paradigm, Zygmunt Bauman’s and David Morley’s sociology of “liquid reality” and mobile territory as well as the idea of comparison of ethnic popular cultures.

I am going to analyze an image of Asian celebrities in Poland having into consideration the press (two opinion daily and weekly, two tabloids), television (two popular entertainment shows) and two Internet celebrity sites: Pudelek and Plotek. The questions about cultural differences, social power (political, economic and symbolic) as well as condition of being strange will be posed.

“*Fame Attack* is not just about ‘them’, it is about ‘us’”
Rojek (2012: ix).

“Representation is control. The power to represent the world is the power to represent us in it or it in us, for the final stage of representing merges representator and the represented into one” (Fiske 2003: 285).

My research began with something rather naïve. Enthralled by the Orient (while staying in China, India, and several post-Soviet republics), I thought that this fascination, which my fellow countrymen appeared to share, would sooner or later materialize; that the popular icons of the East would mark their presence in Polish culture. Murakami’s literary success, the ever-closer economic ties with China and South Korea, or the strong presence of Japanese popular culture (especially anime) in the Polish market are among many examples of the relations between the Polish culture and Asian cultures. There are certain similarities in the political dates, too, though the meaning of these is different. June 4, 1989 – when Poland held the first (partially free) parliamentary elections, Beijing witnessed demonstrations followed by the students’ massacre.

But the choice of celebrities as the main subject of this research came from my understanding of their social role. I am more and more convinced that there exists a common view of the phenomenon (as proposed by David Marshall, Zygmunt Bauman or myself), which revolves around the following questions and possible answers:

- Are celebrities simply reproducing and copying the system in which they function, or do they have revolutionary goals: they want to fundamentally change this system so that it is more favorable to them?
- Do they not, in fact, build a new public sphere, generated by the ecological system of media? Quite often, they play the two roles simultaneously: on the one hand, they legitimize the system through their spectacular existence, on the other – they undermine its foundations, as this... lies in their nature. The latter, they may as well only pretend to be doing.

With all this in mind, I was hoping my research would provide at least partial answers to the following questions: Is the Polish scene interested in Asia in terms of culture, and, in particular, different kinds of celebrities? If so, how is it manifested? At first glance, it seems that this interest should be naturally fostered by the economy and the many geopolitical features (neighborhood with Russia). To what extent are Asian popular cultures present in the Polish media in a given period of time? What methods do they use in order to appeal to the broadcasting media? Do celebrities have a nationality or are they by definition global?

The focus of my research was press (leading daily newspapers, opinion-making weeklies, and major tabloids), television (selected breakfast television programs and a popular talk show) and web portals dedicated to celebrities. The research was conducted between 21 and 27 March 2013, that is precisely during the week before Easter, a very important holiday in Poland. For the purpose of this talk, I also decided

to provide some background information, i.e., the results of my analysis of how news programs functioned during one and the same day in several countries.

1. Glocal, mobile, fluid world of culture (including that of celebrities)

First, I decided to outline the theoretical horizon of the problem of ethnic alienation and celebrityism. I considered it crucial to establish these characteristics because news broadcasting is a powerful tool legitimized in the area of cultural and ethnic identity.

A. Every consumer can be a local

A couple of years ago, the Daewoo Group released an advertisement promoting their cars. The idea was based on the strongly positive valorization of cultural affinity between the two nations: that of Poland and of South Korea (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2nv1wYQ_nmA). The image was intentionally blurred, as if to imply the dynamics of the events presented. The first slogan was archery and sport: the advert showed a Polish and a Korean sportswoman. The second slogan was dance: Korean dancers and a flash showing a couple dressed in Polish folk costumes. Next, hospitality: pouring tea and smiling faces of the representatives of the other culture as the main focus. Then the sound of symphonic music, the semantic globality of which was signaled (with a slightly audible dissonance) by the soundtrack: the advert portrayed a symphonic orchestra as a unity of various musical instruments. The advert ended with a phrase: “Poland – Korea. 40 million people. We have so much in common. Daewoo. So good to be with you.”

The essential idea behind this advert was to tone down contrasts, and thus create a feeling of affinity and unity of cultures. The Korean experts in branding the image of Daewoo settled on a rather simple approach to the issue (if not a too simplistic one). The problem of comparing cultures is always much more complicated than it first seems. What is more, I am not convinced whether it is effective to adopt the strategy of domestication by showing the product’s similarity to the consumer’s culture.

B. Can a local be a bit more or a bit less local?

The categories “local – regional – global” are separable yet hierarchical spheres. They are interdependent, but rarely in cooperation. Besides, one can introduce some intermediate states between them. Stuart Hall, one of the leading representatives of the Birmingham School, called for the need to develop a new ethnicity concept, including the ethnicity of margins and peripheries: “That is to say, a recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position as ‘ethnic artists’ or film-makers. We are all, in that sense, *ethnically* located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are” (Hall 1996: 447). Hall’s reflection provokes further questions: Can this “local guy” become gradually more familiar? Even if a positive answer seems logical, the contemporary post-communist examples prove something quite different. Artificial ties that bound the Slavic countries together in the camp dominated by Russia broke down after 1989, and from then onwards the ethnically close countries could communicate directly with the “headquarters” in Brussels.

C. Can the terms “transnational” and “glocalism” help describe our situation?

Researchers who deal with the celebrity phenomenon have observed the problem of transnationality and acknowledged it as one of the most momentous ones (*Celebrity Studies*, March 2011 Vol. 2, No. 1). The concept is important also because of the fact that stars come from many places, but they are mobile: they often travel for various purposes (Brangelina’s trip to Namibia to give birth to their child is just one of the extravagant examples). The semantic difficulties posed by “glocalism” (as one of the intermediate states) is that the concept of globalism is not standardized. I mean not only the process of perception of such a celebrity, but also the production of meanings. What seems fascinating about that latter case are the strategies which result in the British producing their celebrities who are to be familiar, while their American counterparts remain far more detached. And if celebrities travel, they indeed can mould our sense of national or transnational existence.

D. Global, dissolved and ethereal – here we meet the media!

Years ago McLuhan joked about the media being not the message, but the massage; that coexisting with them means you and all around you getting a full body massage; that the media have disappeared because they are everywhere – they are the background noise and air at the same time. Here is how another American researcher formulates his uncompromising attitude: “The newness of the contemporary human condition can perhaps best be understood in an abstract sense as a socio-technical experience of reality – a reality that seems to submit itself (potentially) to the affordances (or, as Deleuze and Guattari have suggested, ‘agencements’) of media: a reality that could be cut, pasted, edited, remixed and forwarded. This argument builds on my earlier suggestion that media should not be seen as somehow located outside of lived experience, but rather should be seen as intrinsically part of it. Our life is lived *in*, rather than *with*, media – we are living a *media life*” (Deuze 2011: 242). Let us see to what extent the media life is restricted by the rules of ethnic culture.

II. When our small world pretends to be global – according to TV news magazines

A question arises: where does the “local” end and the “global” begin? In 1992, Graham Chapman, Professor of Geography at the University of London, conducted an intriguing comparative study of news programs, which he entitled: “TV: the World Next Door?” (Chapman 1992). It was based on the analysis of data collected from various broadcasters, and described news programs from several countries across the world but broadcast during a single day – November 19, 1991. In order to arrange the material in homogeneous groups of subjects, 23 descriptors were created according to Western European standards. The methodology of this study proved a great success as it introduced combined descriptors, which combined geographic regions with much less stable descriptors concerning widely understood values and abstract concepts.

The study was very impressive, indeed, if we take into account its territorial impact. Still, it had significant limitations if we look at it from a media expert’s perspective. The subject of Chapman’s study was over a thousand cases that he analyzed in terms of their content while ignoring the form of presentation. Another issue is that it is hard even to imagine that the material could have been analyzed using both parameters, if we consider the amount of the data. The main asset of Chapman’s study, however, is that he paid significant attention to the impact of cultural

parameters. The British scholar outlined the areas of interest according to local and global issues. His analysis showed that particular regions were interested in themselves only. But those choices did not seem consistent. It is an illusion to think that big stories of global broadcasters are widely present; we will usually find them only in the stations of the so-called West (i.e., Western Europe and the USA). It seems that the world is just “behind the door” (we all know the power of TV when it reports on the famine in Africa), as Chapman concludes. He also points out that a significant part of the world is nevertheless ignored.

What the British author states in the conclusion to his report does not sound new to the experts who deal with the media. They have long known that the general interest in local programs is high – the same is true in the case of global programs. But a totally new challenge is only to be faced due to the changes that are happening, and will be happening, in this structure of broadcasting. Eighteen years after Chapman’s experiment, on May 21, 2009, I recorded 12 evening news programs and subjected them to analysis: “Wiadomości”(TVP1, Polish public TV), “Wydarzenia” (Polsat, Polish commercial TV), “Fakty” (TVN, Polish commercial TV), “BBC World News”, EuroNews, “Your World Today” (CNN), “Tagesschau 1” (ARD, German), “ZDF Heute” (ZDF, German), “TG1” (RAI1, Italian), “CCTV9 News” (CCTV9, Chinese), “Vesti” (Russia 24), “Al Jazeera Live” (Al Jazeera English).

I modified the methodology of Chapman’s study as it was focused on combined descriptors. I added an important element absent in the study, namely, the rhetoric of the visual presentation: I introduced the analysis of scenography, dress, and presenters’ (or hosts’) behavior. I also paid attention to the importance of the duration and the amount of journalistic material. The analysis resulted in a general statement: May 21, 2009 – on that day no celebrity tripped up in the shopping mall, there was no assassination attempt on a head of state, no disaster that would claim hundreds or thousands of victims happened in any of the distant countries.

I also reached a number of interesting conclusions concerning proportions. For example, the decision to select these parameters proved particularly important for the analysis of the material coming from non-native ethnic context. It would be hard to disregard the fact that Polish magazines presented only two selections from abroad on that day, just like the Italians who showed only two foreign events; the Russians were focused solely on themselves. It is striking that Germany had four to five events from outside the country. In the case of global news channels, the proportions were obviously different, presenting a chaotic, kaleidoscopic jigsaw puzzle. But in this case, “they” and “theirness” are not the opposite of “us”: rather, “they” are “not us”, or “not us” yet. The news is another aspect of this “we”. The former understanding was emotional in nature and it consisted in incorporation (if not in the interpreter’s conquistador-like ambitions). The latter is more collective: “we” (watching the news live here and now) can become a depository of group/universal values. The “door to the global world” is open, but some regions pass unnoticed in the global perspective. Growing out of that is the conclusion – to add what Chapman did not say – that the world is a federation of regions governed by their own rules rather than a uniform structure. This is not, however, a good reason to rejoice, as it may also mean the collapse of global communication, which is particularly evident in my 2009 study. Does the metaphor of the choir of authors with a conductor in the background aptly describe the situation of the anchorman

and the reporters in a news program? It sounds interesting, even if it does not apply to all television broadcasts of this kind.

3. Our Asian – local or foreign

Unfortunately, the results of my main research came into a serious conflict with the expectations. Within the said period of one week, none of the two dailies, “Gazeta Wyborcza” and “Rzeczpospolita”, mentioned any Asian star. The same was the case with the three leading weeklies: “Polityka”, “Sieć” and “Newsweek”, and also (rather surprisingly) with the two major tabloids: “Fakt” and “Superexpress”. Still, I was hoping that the popular breakfast television programs, “Dzień dobry TVN” (TVN is a commercial station) or “Pytanie na śniadanie” (TVP 2 is a public station), would notice the phenomenon that I was interested in. But among the topics such as diet, education, children, football matches, breast enlargement, actors’ love life, ecology, style, dress code in the workplace and fashion in general, they did not touch upon the topic that could be connected with an “Asian celebrity”. The private station (TVN, March 21, 2013) nearly did it when it broadcast the material about Lana Nguen’s dresses. These colorful outfits designed by the young Vietnamese-Polish artist (who speaks fluent Polish) can be regarded as examples of postmodern art. As part of my research I also examined two web portals: www.plejada.pl and www.pudelek.pl. While the former has the ambition to critically assess the celebrity scene, the latter, as the name “Pudelek” (a poodle) suggests, is full of tabloid news from the world of famous people. In none of them did I find the key words that interested me: Asia + celebrities. “Plejada”, however, did mention Alexia (on March 19, 2013), a Polish beauty who has made a sensation in Japan (<http://www.plejada.pl/2,fotogalerie.html>).

My research would have been a complete failure and I would probably not venture to present the results, were it not for the example of Bilguun Ariunbaatar. Born in Mongolia in 1987, he migrated to Poland a couple of years later. In 2010, he joined the popular TV show titled “Szymon Majewski Show”. The part he was responsible for evolved into a kind of separate show, renamed in the next edition as “Szymon na żywo” (“Szymon Live”). One event in particular contributed to Ariunbaatar’s popularity: he competed in Season 13 of the Polish “Dancing with the Stars” (“Taniec z gwiazdami”, TVN, 2011), finishing in the 2nd place. I decided to broaden the scope of my research when I learned that on April 1, 2013 the “VIVA Polska” station started broadcasting a weekly show called “Spanie z gwiazdami” (“Sleeping with the Stars”) in which Bilguun sleeps with the stars. This seems an important step in Bilguun’s career, especially that he first appeared on Polish television only three years earlier. I am much interested in a very important aspect of the show – let me call it a stereotype of mass (meaning: popular) “Asianness” of the show’s leader.

But before all that happened, the Polish audience had got to know Bilguun Ariunbaatar as a somewhat unclever reporter of the Mongolian station, U1 Bator, in the “Szymon Majewski” show. The station’s name contains a funny acronym which sounds like the name of the capital of Mongolia (in Polish: Ułan Bator), only it is written in a way that suggests the name of a television station. While on the show, Bilguun would, for instance, easily describe the skirmishes between Poles and both Russians and Ukrainians, by pointing out that the first of these Eastern neighbors are heavy drinkers with an unhealthy sense of superiority, while the others lack good manners and are even primitive. Half-Mongolian and half-Polish, Bilguun would

now and then use the pronoun “we” (meaning: Poles), which would make the term function as a stigma and a symbol. But the amusingly awkward reporter of a non-existent station would most often suggest that he had problems with the Polish language. He did not understand what the idiomatic expression “to take up the baton” meant and so he caused much confusion when he heard that Adam Małysz, a Polish world champion in ski jumping, ended his career and someone else could “take up the baton” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zO8o2x0ZRfA>). Earlier in the episode, he collected mustaches for Małysz and held rather surreal conversations with athletes, local politicians, journalists and football fans. He visited the set of “Top Model” where he had business conversations with fashion designers, offering them yak fur (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZrqvHypHrE>). Our hero is also looking for a wife, so he asks a quick, casual question “Will you be my wife?” and goes on to propose living together... in a yurt. Bilguun is like a character in silent films: he gets a cake in the face which he then smears happily all over his torso. He keeps making his audience believe that he does not comprehend the subtleties of the Polish language.

As a journalist, Bilguun exposes all the major drawbacks of the profession: lack of preparation, nonchalance and blind persistence (after the premiere screening of a film he asks the director: “What is the movie about?” and he insists on using the word “bumpires” instead of “vampires” because this is how someone has put it down in his notes). He confuses people, does not recognize celebrities, spreads false information about his birthday in order to receive gifts. Celebrities often treat him with superiority, but also manifest a range of other behaviors: they run away from him, they are irritated and get really cross with him. No wonder: our hero is often mischievous and straightforward. He uncovers celebrities’ weak points or inquires into their family life (for example, when he addresses a celebrity using his or her ex-partner’s new partner’s name). Bilguun’s natural inclination to laugh is also striking. First of all, it is very easy for a Polish person to interpret his face expression as laughing-all-the-time (especially because of the raised corners of his mouth and how his eyes are set). Second, Bilguun makes the Polish audience consider him a person who does not-understand-much: he repeats the questions that he is addressed with, suspends the answer, and often declares that he cannot comprehend his interlocutor).

The “Sleeping with the Stars” program (launched on April 1, 2013) is based on following the adventures that Bilguun had with Polish stars. The celebrities allowed Bilguun to spend the night at their houses. They included a younger generation actor, the drummer of the Afromental band, a comedian, a well-known singer. It is a typical post-Big Brother program in which the simulation of peeping through a key hole aims to bring the viewer (often an indiscriminate one) a voyeuristic satisfaction and much fun.

The successive episodes show the clumsy reporter of the fictional TV channel acting out as an intellectually slow man from another planet: but in this case, we are not quite sure which of the two worlds is more bizarre: the one that he has come from or the one that he has arrived in. We can hear a number of comments on the visual features of his “Asianness”. For instance, one of the stars advises him to have a plastic surgery to remake his eyelids; a friend of the younger generation actor states “on the side”: “You mentioned a friend, but you didn’t mention he was yellow.” I do not consider this statement racist. Or, in other words, I do not see any other signs of racism in it. The statement, however unfortunate, is neutral in the Polish language.

The third TV show that featured Ariunbataar within the period of time that interested me was titled “Ale maḍrale” (“Smart Alecs”, TVP1, 27.04.2013). It is a typical example of a program for adults in which children take part as well. One can observe that communication in this genre is double-leveled. On the first level, the meaning of all the jokes, allusions and contexts can be understood by both adults and children; on the second level, children can understand only those messages that are addressed to them. The characteristic feature of this program is a rather frivolous language game that the adults play with the children – the game which is all the more strange because Ariunbataar participates in it as one of the invited guests. First, the children are asked to guess who the guest is. The reply comes right away: “He is from Korea” (a typical presumption that “who we are is where we are from”; that geography determines our personality). “North Korea”, Bilguun adds, and the adults laugh while the children are silent. The fact that they chose Korea as the first possible answer was surely influenced by the rush of news about the military aggression in North Korea at that time – and children do not see these countries as separate. The second guess is connected with entertainment: “This is the man who dances Gangnam Style!” Only the third guess is right: “This is the man who does anything to be funny on television”. What seems striking is the fact that the children are not really stirred by his facial features nor by his strange behavioral or linguistic expressions. The anchorwoman’s remark about Bilguun’s motherland, where it is appropriate to belch after the meal, is followed by the guest’s loud retort and laughter, but does not seem to surprise the children.

IV. We accept a foreign culture, provided that it is “ours”

Due to his name, appearance and affiliation, Bilguun Ariunbataar is the stereotype of “Asianness” for the Polish television audience. So who is he? It seems that the primary feature of his personality is being foreign rather than being funny – or at least it is a combination of the two. Being foreign is subject to gradation: one can not only be “less” or “more” foreign, but in addition to those general categories, one can both play the role of a buddy and remain deaf to the buddy’s messages. This is precisely the case in question: the communication between the show’s host and the Polish celebrities is very good when they talk about sex, alcohol, drugs, parties, or about keeping the house in order. No problem, we work on the same wavelength: we are metrosexual men (or liberated celebrities), and no ethnic culture whatsoever can disturb our communication. Not only does our behavioral communication include the language but it also dominates it. The problem is that language can be metaphorical and we often deal with communication fraud, when one of the parties takes this metaphorical meaning for a literal one. Bilguun’s eyes are wide with amazement: because in “our” country it means something completely different. Let us make an attempt at creating a catalog of traits that summarize our adventure with both the Polish-Mongolian quasi-journalist and the “lack” of any other examples of cross-cultural relationships in this area:

1. Asian culture is foreign to Polish popular media consumers. In any case, it is very rarely present in the media, which seems all the more peculiar if we consider the declaration of strengthening economic ties between the two cultures.
2. Half of this otherness is dimmed and reduced, as it is gradated. However, it seems that Asia has been deprived of mystery and ambiguity. Since there is no requirement to learn the language (for our Asian speaks Polish), then this throng of

cultures to the East of Poland does not have to be seen as a throng, but as a quasi-diversity. We all dance Gangnam Style, we are hospitable, we are archers and we speak Polish. We are tempted to say: so what is this globalism about? Otherness is not so much noticed, if a “foreigner” speaks some Polish and knows the global context of popular culture. Verbal language is possibly the most powerful means of “taming” other people.

4. It seems that this kind of communication has its limit which consists in creating a tangle of misunderstandings and in communication beyond contexts. This happens when the semantic content and the behavioral content of a visual message are recognized by both sides, but one of the aspects is not recognized or is recognized incorrectly. Is this what awaits ethnic cultures? Are Chinese people only to be known as the characters in films about James Bond and Charlie Chan?

If it is true that “What is certain is that societies touched by contemporary Western culture in any or all of its forms cannot remain as they are” (Craig 2002: 7), then the argument should be confronted with numerous opinions saying that the concept of globalization is outdated and does not describe the dynamics of contemporary cultural flow. Rather, it is suggested that we keep asking where the center of culture / cultural needs is. To discuss the issues of Americanization, Japanization or the expansion of Bollywood is now considered old style and reduced to mere labeling (Nakano, 2002).

In his introduction to an important study of the celebrityism phenomenon, Bonnie Fuller proposes the following global vision: “I could enter almost any dinner in the world and someone will ask me what’s going on with Lindsay Lohan, Kim Kardashian, Britney Spears, Mel Gibson, or whichever celebrity is currently squirming under the spotlight. Why? Because celebrities are a shared experience. They’re the universal water cooler topic. No one is entirely immune to their charms, and if anyone says they are, they’re hiding a People magazine in their briefcase” (Piazza, 2011). It is worth contrasting this statement with Fuller’s rather cool analysis, which also appears to be the most humanistic assessment of the celebrityism phenomenon: “Asian idols may not be the most talented singers and actors in the world, but as long as they continue to reflect the concerns and dreams of their audience, and to offer models of attractive new lifestyles and cross-cultural friendship, theirs will be a strong, and profitable, presence in the pop culture world” (Aoyagi, 2000: 324-325). The purpose of this paper was only to highlight some cultural factors that still contribute to our understanding of the present.

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