

From the Olympians to the Ordinary Heroes : Stars in the French Popular Press

Jamil Dakhli

University of Nancy 2, CREM (University of Metz) / CNRS, Paris, jamdak@free.fr

Obsessed by famous people's private lives : this is how the French could be described nowadays, since one third of them read gossip papers every week¹, not to mention the success of this sort of information in the other medias and in everyday conversations. Moreover, a new crucial border has apparently been crossed, that of the politicians' intimacy, as is testified by the publication of the photographs of the Socialist Ségolène Royal in a blue bikini on a beach this summer and the saga about Nicolas Sarkozy, the right-wing candidate, being abandoned by his wife in the summer of 2005, and their difficult reconciliation. This new infatuation with the private sphere represents the breach of a cultural tradition extremely protective of private life. In France, the ninth article of the Civil Code which stipulates that "everyone is entitled to the respect of their private life" was indeed considerably reinforced by a law of July 17, 1970, on which many celebrities rely to attack the scandal sheets and to get comfortable financial compensations. Now ubiquitous, the very term used to name the celebrity news is the English word 'people': in France, celebrity magazines are referred to as 'les journaux people'. This suggests how unfamiliar this kind of information is to the usual French journalistic forms. Analysing the content and the discourse of the two most popular areas of the French press, gossip weeklies and TV guides, can help illuminate the success of celebrity news. To begin with, due to particular legal and commercial circumstances, stars mainly illustrate consensual values like familialism and conjugality. Nevertheless, the relationship of the French popular press with stardom is riven with a contradiction between, on the one hand, idealization and, on the other hand, trivialization. Therefore, the intention here is to explore how these two principal ways of dealing with stars can lead to particular enunciative strategies by which each magazine address a specific audience. Eventually, various studies about popular press and the public sphere will help identify the gratifications offered by celebrity news: a form of escape, the excitement of uncertainty and finally a symbolic compensation for social inequalities.

Stars as Embodiment of the Doxa

French TV and celebrity magazines correspond with at least two senses of the word 'popular' given by Raymond Williams (1983: 237):

- 'well-liked by many people' which refers to a quantitative definition of the popular. Indeed, it is important to note that in France the TV press is the most widely read and celebrity papers are characterized by being the fastest growing.
- 'deliberately setting out to win favour with the people'. As mass culture products, French popular magazines aim at the widest audience, so they advocate the most consensual values.

In addition to this commercial priority given to the 'less objectionable content', with regard to the French legal framework, any violation of private life can be drastically penalized. Consequently, in spite of its nefarious reputation, the French popular press is far more respectful than it is usually believed. Though the front pages always

try to make an impact by announcing extraordinary disclosures and breathtaking scoops or scandals, the news in question is all in all extremely selective and innocuous. It overwhelmingly deals with foreign, and especially British and US celebs, more used to be given a rough ride and less inclined to start proceedings on French soil. Gossip weeklies would only take it out on those French citizens who once indulged themselves with the media coverage of their intimacy, and as a result, undermined their potential defence during hypothetical proceedings. Moreover, gossip news limits itself almost systematically to secondhand information, from a TV or a radio network or another paper or book, in order to reduce the risks of prosecution.

Therefore, scandal in the French popular press is almost always a mere rhetorical matter. The front page of the gossip sheet *France Dimanche* announces for example: 'Exclusive. Céline Dion. Her terrible confession. This woman carried my child ! All the truth about René-Charles' second mother'². A blurred picture of the woman is displayed on the same page. Did the Canadian singer call on a surrogate mother ? Actually, we discover on page 10 that 'this woman' is just the artist's sister who assisted her during her pregnancy and after her child was born. She indeed had the opportunity of carrying Céline Dion's son but only... in her arms !

Besides, scandal is not only constrained by a restrictive legal culture. In order to satisfy the widest readership, the coverage of stars' private lives serves to celebrate common opinion. An average morality is delivered, sharing some characteristics of the English popular culture described by Richard Hoggart, especially friendship, modesty and sense of family (Hoggart, 1958). Subsequently, any form of exhibitionism is officially condemned and the celebrities associated with this kind of behaviour are treated like counterexamples: Paris Hilton, for instance, is regularly denigrated for her provocative clothes and her needless libertinism. On the contrary, however, the treatment of the most popular stars is always an opportunity of glorifying family and the marital model. Stars are reconfigured as the embodiment of these ideals: posing at home with their lover and/or children, they display a sanctimonious happiness and offer the same cliché that Karin E. Becker pointed out in the British and American tabloids (Dahlgren, Sparks *et al.*, 1992 : 141). Similarly, the celebrities whose lives wouldn't exactly fit those conventions can also pay homage to them whether by their own declarations or by being unwillingly revised to look more acceptable. Singles formulate common dreams like finding a soul mate and starting a family. The representation of homosexuality can be just as meaningful: in such conservative magazines as *France Dimanche* or *Ici Paris*, a same-sex relationship may be treated with sympathy only if it is particularly long-lasting and if it involves celebrities who were already known and appreciated long ago before they came out. In the case of the Dutch singer Dave, *France Dimanche* argues : 'Dave and Patrick Loiseau have indeed been making one of the closest couples of showbiz for 32 years now'³. Here we find a gay version of Philemon and Baucis, matching the marital ideal professed. In the new generation of gossip papers, developed during the last two decades, and aimed at a young audience, same-sex relationships are made commonplace and treated in the same idyllic and sympathetic way as heterosexual love stories. They are equally entitled to illustrate the sublimation and the seeking of reciprocity characteristic of romance, according to Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 1992: chap. III).

In short, the imagery of French celebrity news is designed to exalt common sense, and in particular modesty, family happiness or at least conjugality. This moral standardization is determined not only by restrictive laws but also by a high degree of competition, in so much as five new popular sheets have been launched during the last three years⁴. But quite paradoxically this competition which leads to a form of homogenisation at the same time fosters a differentiation since each paper seeks to attract its readership in a special way, to distinguish itself from its competitors and to assert its position on the market. As Eliseo Veron suggests, this differentiation, as in any highly competitive media sector, operates on the enunciative level (Veron, 1985: 203-205). In order to address its reader in a special way and to ensure his/her loyalty, each popular magazine grounds its discourse on a particular symbolic relationship with celebrities. The various enunciative exploitations of stardom are then located between idealization and trivialization.

The Dialectic between Perfection and Commonplace

The relationship with stars proposed by French popular papers follow two main patterns which we can compare to two of the fictional modes Northrop Frye extracted from Aristotle's *Poetics*: the 'high mimetic mode' and the 'low mimetic mode' (Frye, 1990 : 33-34). The first one shows heroes with superior capacities compared to the rest of humanity. In this case, distant and gifted with outstanding capacities, stars are supposed to make us dream. The latter presents ordinary characters whose appallingly trite qualities and shortcomings position them on a level with the audience.

Each title gives a priority to one of these modes in order to establish its own enunciative contract.

Among the weeklies privileging an idealization logic, the celebrity magazines *Gala* and *Point de vue* and the TV guide *Télé Star* are the most emblematic. The discourse of *Gala* and *Télé Star* is grounded upon an initiatic pattern, giving directions to a Platonic transcendence portrayed by the star's perfect body, very similar to Hollywood schemes. Most of the photographs are posed and every element – lights, make-up, hairdo and clothes – is carefully selected to make any star look his/her best. Thanks to so-called 'confessions', enunciation is often delegated to the celebrity, as if he/she talked directly to the reader. The reader is also invited to discover the stars' favorite spots: dream estates, posh resorts and luxury hotels: here we find again a device similar to those of the Hollywood press relations departments. As for *Point de vue*, specializing in nobility and royal families, nation- and world-wide coverage is always deferential and aristocrats are seen as paragons of elegance and good manners.

In the magazines privileging the 'low mimetic mode', celebrities seldom look their best. Most of the photographs seem candid as in the tabloids' iconography analysed by Karin E. Becker (Dahlgren, Sparks, *et al.*, 1992 : 142). They are supposed to unveil the unofficial truth, carefully smothered by the show-biz. This is obviously a rhetorical device by means of which the enunciation's prestige is reinforced. The 'low mimetic mode' fosters two antagonistic visions of reality, but equally aimed at winning the reader's complicity. The first one is optimistic. In *Voici*, the most widely read gossip paper in France and *Public*, elected by the younger generation, pictures are surrounded by ironical comments in order to establish a collusion with the reader to the expense of the stars. Founded just after World War II, *France Dimanche* and *Ici Paris*⁵, display a much more pessimistic vision of life, as they focus on health and security issues to create an empathy with a much older audience⁶.

Nevertheless, we should also note that idealization and trivialization are characterized by a dialectical relationship in the French popular press.

From a diachronic point of view, the low mimetic mode has spread at the expense of the high mimetic mode.

During the interwar period, the French popular press would primarily pay respect and admiration to the show-business creatures. As Edgar Morin (1983 :143-149) argues, this admiration echoed the almost divine status of the Hollywood stars, whose sublimated and excessive image was meticulously outlined by the Dream Factory. But this deference would also concern local singers or actors, like Danielle Darrieux, Jean Gabin or Mistinguett.

Yet, throughout the twentieth century, but more decisively since the Sixties, stardom experiences a radical democratization. The stardom circle has been enlarged to such an extent that the very word 'star' became over-used, referring to anyone casually touched by fame: not only the usual actors and singers but also TV hosts, journalists, athletes or game show contestants. This dilution of the star concept was especially facilitated by TV papers which amplified the reputation of whomever could enliven the small screen. This is why we should consider the Sixties as a pivotal decade insofar as the weekly *Télé 7 Jours* was founded in 1960 and rapidly established itself as the pre-eminent magazine in France. Indeed, *Télé 7 Jours* and its counterparts, while turning towards this new population of celebrities, provided a much more plebeian image of stardom. Sabine Chalvon-Demersay and Dominique Pasquier studied this phenomenon in the particular case of TV hosts, who they define as 'Peculiar stars' (in French 'Drôles de stars') since TV guides, far from the Hollywood idealization described by Morin, depicts them as sensible ordinary individuals, appreciating good food, sometimes subject to overweight or a bad cold, like anybody else (Chalvon-Demersay and Pasquier, 1990).

Moreover, stardom became even more altered from the beginning of the nineties, when *Voici*, a mere women's magazine at the beginning, inaugurated a new paparazzi-style formula which quickly turned out to be seminal. French papers, even a picture magazine like *Paris Match*, no longer hesitated to show celebrities dishevelled in trivial or ridiculous situations: taking their children for a walk, pushing their trolley at the supermarket or putting the waste into the garbage, for example in the 'They're just like us'⁷ column of *Public*.

Actually, idealization and trivialization are not exclusive of one another. It seems necessary to the magazines preaching sublimation to show that stars may share the same concerns and interests as the ordinary man or woman: hence, the reports on their home and family life. Conversely in *Voici*, *Public* or *Closer*, celebrities can be denigrated on one page and on the other shown in situations like previews or receptions, emphasizing their beauty or their fashion taste. In the Sixties already, Edgar Morin had noticed this paradox and evoked the 'double nature' of the 'new Olympians', 'polarized on the imaginary and the real worlds at the same time', 'personifying the myths of private life's autoaccomplishment'⁸ (Morin, 1983: 145-146). The explanation of this paradox lies in a commercial prescription, sustained at all costs. Celebs are human billboards, a phenomenon that advertisers have understood very well, since they shower stars with clothes, fashion accessories and high-tech gadgets, hoping these products will be photographed and consequently noticed by readers. Gossip papers try to exploit this commercial manna by facilitating a mimetic relationship with stars. Thus, celebrities must be beautiful enough so that the reader would like to imitate them and close enough so that the reader would feel able to imitate them. Hence are reformulated the usual fashion, beauty and health columns of women's magazines in an assimilation to the stars:

take care of yourself like your star does. Sometimes, in a supposedly informal way, stars are brought to whisper their beauty or health secrets but other times their appearance is literally scanned in a systematic way as in the 'Starlook' and 'Starlook Copié/collé' (i.e. 'Copy and paste') headings of *Voici*, or the makeover column of *Public*, aimed to make a young reader look like her favorite star.

However, it should be noted that an advertising premium is granted to the meliorative representation of stardom. Trademarks are indeed reluctant to associate their products with aggressive publications mainly focused on the celebrities' cellulite, acne or wrinkles. That is why, in spite of a narrower audience, the more prestigious *Gala* comprises 25% more advertising pages than *Voici* (Si Ammour, 2005), especially for top-of-the-range products like perfume, jewellery or watches.

At any rate, celebrities fulfil a highly strategic function in French popular papers since each magazine assess its own imaginary world and the way it addresses the reader on a specific relationship with stardom: appreciative or derogatory but most of the time ambivalent. Using sociological works and especially reception studies about popular medias and the public sphere, it is now necessary to examine which social meanings and uses those discourses can relate to.

The Social Stakes of Gossip News

The gratifications created by celebrity news can be grouped into three categories: escape, fun and consolation.

Some of the characteristics of the popular press, especially what we could call the idealization press, seem to match the usual theories about escapism in mass culture: romance narrative patterns, endlessly repeated and thus conveying a mythical circular temporality, exoticism both geographical (dream spots where the jet set evolves) and social (the world of the rich and famous). Some investigations about the uses of the 'presse people' (Bardelot, 1999 : 75-78; Dakhli, to be published) corroborate a feeling of evasion, which is also confirmed by the relaxation context to which the people interviewed associate their reading: holiday, after meal nap, break after work.

This escape relies on the aesthetic pleasure provided by expensive clothes and sophisticated settings but also by the serial effect felt when the reader follows the succession of good or bad events occurring in celebrities life week after week⁹.

Such pleasure may be compared to the melodramatic pleasure noticed by Ien Ang about Dallas lovers. When they witness the succession of joys and griefs of the celebs, the readers can also experience a 'tragic structure of feeling'. Like *Dallas*, French popular magazines foster a melodramatic imagination to be regarded 'as a psychological strategy to overcome the material meaningless of everyday existence' expressed by the popular saying 'You win some, you lose some' (Ang, 1996 : 79).

Therefore, this escape must not be understood as a 'flight from reality' but rather as a means of 'playing with it' (Ang, 1996 : 49). Part of the fun raised by gossip news lies precisely in the excitement of merging fiction with news. Comparing the reception of gossip magazines to *Dynasty* viewing, Joke Hermes suggests a jigsaw metaphor. Fully aware of not being confronted with *the* truth, but to partial and uncertain information, the reader would constantly seek new pieces, in order to fill the holes of narrative structures and relationships between characters. As John Fiske recalls, popular knowledge "is a relational knowledge constantly in play between belief and disbelief, shot through with contradictions, always in process, always characterized by pleasurable scepticism." (Fiske, in Dahlgren, Sparks *et al.*: 52). In French popular papers, truth is not the point: what is at stake is the reader's ability to guess what is likely and what is not, to the advantage of the enunciative power.

Likewise, the sense of reality and especially of social inequalities is confirmed by a feeling of symbolic compensation. According to Alain Ehrenberg, insofar as our society has internalised democracy, a growing 'egalitarian passion' would explain the decline of the ultra-powerful heroes of the past and the success of the ordinary man or woman, particularly in reality shows (Ehrenberg, 1993 : 15-17, 1995 : 181-205). The same conclusion can be drawn about the popular press: by showing how others make it through, it gives the reader "fighting spirit to live as an individual"¹⁰ (Ehrenberg, 1995 : 185). It is interesting to note in passing the great solidarity between the popular news and reality TV: both live on an instant star-making process, which seems to put social achievement within everybody's grasp, although upward mobility appears to be harder than ever.

Besides, readers can take delight in the celebrities' misfortunes in so much as they prove that 'money can't buy happiness', which can provide some kind of consolation. But this symbolic compensation can become even more aggressive. When interviewed or in their letters to the Editor, readers generally approve the bad treatments inflicted on some stars as far as these are believed to misuse their privileges : here we may apply, on a mediatic scale, the useful distinction Norbert Elias makes between on the one hand, 'praise gossips' enhancing supposedly

positive and group-uniting behaviours like loyalty and humility, and on the other hand, 'blame gossips' denigrating transgressive attitudes (Elias, 1965) : here, for instance, celebrities flaunting their wealth or libido.

Therefore, mockery is synonymous with a revenge on the new aristocracy composed by those who once had the opportunity of being famous.

Conclusion

The French popular press shows a political paradox. As a mass culture product, it seems thoroughly normative since it privileges mainstream values in order to attract the widest audience. Besides, according to a promotional logic, it presents canons of life and beauty and suggests how to conform to them. However, reading popular news can be a primarily egalitarian experience insofar as many magazines disclose the moral or physical defects of the stars, thus questioning their exemplarity. Whatever the magazine, an opposition is displayed between 'us' – the readers and their paper – and 'them', the privileged caste. As Ian Connell points out about tabloids, the recriminations against celebrities still remain quite conservative: these stories "are not against privileges being granted, merely angry that they have been granted to the wrong people" (Connell, in Dahlgren, Sparks *et al.*, 1992 : 82). But while it exhibits its own power of stardom making and unmaking in a world where fame is the supreme reward, the popular press puts normativity at stake by its radical ambivalence and by describing more and more varied individual trajectories. To the same extent, even the evasion provided by the celebs' private life can be understood, from a fiskian perspective, not as much as a flight from reality but actually as a political resistance since, as Eric Maigret puts it, "aesthetics as a oneself technique" is "an ethic power which deactivates domination on ourselves and on the others by allowing us to retire temporarily from the mundane and make us reappear in other places."¹¹ (Maigret, *in* Maigret, Macé *et al.*, 2005 : 140)

Notes

¹ Lutaud, Dromard, 2006 : 7.

² 'Exclusif. Céline Dion. Son terrible aveu. Cette femme a porté mon enfant ! Toute la vérité sur la seconde mère de René-Charles' (*France Dimanche*, 03/15/2002).

³ 'cela fait en effet trente-deux ans que Dave et Patrick Loiseau forment l'un des couples les plus unis du show-biz' (*France Dimanche* n° 2943).

⁴ The youngest French popular titles consist of two TVguides - *Télé 2 semaines* and *TV grandes chaînes* (Prisma Presse, 2004) - and three gossip magazines – *Public* (Hachette Filipacchi Médias, 2003), *Closer* (EMAP France, now Mondadori France, 2005) and *Bon Week* (Springer, 2006).

⁵ *France Dimanche* and *Ici Paris* were founded in June and October 1945 by Hachette.

⁶ Half of their readership is more than 50 (AEPM 2005).

⁷ 'Il sont comme nous'.

⁸ Les « nouveaux olympiens », « à la fois aimantés sur l'imaginaire et le réel, à la fois idéaux inimitables et modèles imitables » incarnant « les mythes d'autoréalisation de la vie privée » (my translation).

⁹ For example: "Ce sont des gens qu'on finit par connaître et on suit leur vie, c'est tout. Mais c'est un feuilleton, moi je le prends comme ça. Les avancées de chacun." "We end up by knowing those people and we follow their life, that's all. But this is a serial, anyway this is how I take things. Each one's progression." (interview *in* Dakhliya, to be published).

¹⁰ « du punch pour qu'il vive en individu » (my translation).

¹¹ « l'esthétique comme technique de soi » est « une force éthique qui désactive la domination à l'égard de nous-mêmes et des autres en nous permettant de nous retirer momentanément des activités mondaines pour nous faire surgir en d'autres points. » (my translation).

References

- Ang, Ien. *Watching Dallas. Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination*. London, New York : Routledge, 1985.
- Bardelot, Estelle. *Lire la 'presse people'*, master's thesis, University Lumière of Lyon II, 1999.
- Becker, Karin E. "Photojournalism and the Tabloid Press." In *Journalism and Popular Culture*. ed. by Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks, 130–153. London: Sage Publications, 1992.
- Chalvon-Demersay, Sabine, Pasquier, Dominique, *Drôles de stars. La télévision des animateurs*. Paris : Aubier, 1990.
- Connell, Ian. "Personalities in the Popular Media." In *Journalism and Popular Culture*. ed. by Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks, 64–83. London: Sage Publications, 1992.
- Ehrenberg, Alain. "La vie en direct ou les shows de l'authenticité." *Esprit* 188 (1) (1993) : 13–35.
- Ehrenberg, Alain. *L'individu incertain*. Paris : Hachette Littératures, 1995.
- Elias, Norbert. *The Established and the Outsiders*. London : Frank Cass and Co, 1965.
- Fiske, John. "Popularity and the Politics of Information." In *Journalism and Popular Culture*. ed. by Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks, 45–63.

London: Sage Publications, 1992.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays*. Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1990.

Giddens, Anthony. *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1992.

Hermes, Joke. *Reading women's magazines. An analysis of Everyday Media Use*. Cambridge : Polity Press, 1995.

Hoggart, Richard. *The Uses of Literacy*. London: Penguin, 1958.

Lutaud, Léna, Dromard, Thiébault. *Les dessous de la presse people*. Paris : Éditions de la Martinière, 2006.

Maigret, Éric. " Esthétiques des médiacultures. " In *Penser les médiacultures. Nouvelles pratiques et nouvelles approches de la représentation du monde*, ed. by Éric Maigret and Éric Macé, 123–144. Paris : INA / Armand Colin, 2005.

Morin, Edgar. *L'esprit du temps*, vol. 1. *Névrose*. Paris : Grasset, 1983.

Morin, Edgar. *Les Stars*. Paris : Galilée, 1984.

Si Ammour, Didier. " Le marketing proctérien de la presse *people*. " *CB News* 847 (9) (2005) : 6–7.

Veron, Eliseo. " L'analyse du 'contrat de lecture' : une nouvelle méthode pour les études de positionnement dans les supports presse. ", In *Les médias : expériences, recherches actuelles, applications*, 203–228. Paris : IREP, 1985.

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords*, London : Fontana, 1983.

Please mention the bibliographic information when referring to this book:

History of Stardom Reconsidered. Edited by Kari Kallioniemi, Kimi Kärki, Janne Mäkelä and Hannu Salmi. Turku: International Institute for Popular Culture, 2007. (Available as an eBook at <http://iipc.utu.fi/reconsidered/>)