

National Characteristics of Hungarian Celebrity Culture

Andrea Viniczai
University of Pécs, vinca7@yahoo.com

Hungary is a small country in the heart of Europe. Despite being so tiny, we have our own history, our own cultural roots and of course we have our own celebrities. Studying celebrity culture has its tradition in Western Europe and in the US, but not yet in Hungary. I might have attempted a difficult task when I decided to study Hungarian celebrities in my PhD work but nowadays celebrities unavoidably belong to the national culture, they are part of a cultural 'industry' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979/1944).

In this study I would like to give some insights into Hungarian celebrity culture, showing two examples of how one can become famous in Hungary. Moreover I would like to share the results I got from my first celebrity survey.

Cultural Roots of the Celebrities of Today

After the system change in Hungary the incoming cultural impulses have increased. Cultural globalization made our country one of the stages of world-wide competition of cultural products and services. Joining this global net gave us the possibility of absolute orientation but at the same time it transformed the frameworks of relationships between individuals and communities up till then. Our cultural traditions and forms of expression had to renew and transform themselves. The growing number of international and local TV channels, the appearance of new types of daily papers and weekly magazines result in 24 hours infotainment. Hungarians welcomed the changes and got accustomed to new cultural influences. However their interest in local and national traditional characteristics of culture remained. Individuals and small communities are getting closer to those national, distinguishing symbols that represent their togetherness in this multicultural media era.

As David Giles says national fame could be described as mass media recognition (Giles, 118). Our socialist stars -cinema celebrities, star workers, successful sportsmen– were national idols and first and foremost followers of social idealism. They all became stars as a result of special political and professional mechanisms – continuously reported on television and in newspapers. After the change of the Hungarian political system in the mid-nineties the daily newspaper market changed as well. Besides the daily political newspapers and weekly magazines a new form of infotainment was born: the tabloids. These celebrity weeklies got interestingly English titles: Star, Hot, Best, Hello, VIP. The style, the form and the tone of these west-imported tabloids has totally changed newspaper-reading habits. While the circulation of national political newspapers keeps on decreasing, the selling of tabloids has increased by 50% since 1996.¹ One of the biggest sensations of the year 2001 was that the daily tabloid Mai Blikk sold more issues than the most popular daily political newspaper, Népszabadság. Without people noticing it, the 'tabloidization' of the media had started in Hungary too.

The tendency of the last years shows that not only newspaper reading habits have changed, but the traditions of television watching as well. People spend more and more time in front of the television while they don't use any other medium as source of entertainment. At the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties Hungarians spent 1.5-2 hours watching television. Today this number has grown to 4 hours.² Of course this can be explained with the flaring of new TV-channels and the commercialisation of programmes. Until 1996 there was only one

national TV channel in Hungary. Today there are dozens of domestic commercial channels, which try to sell their programmes with famous people.

However the nature of fame has changed. "If in the past the ranks of the famous were peopled overwhelmingly by those recognized for meritorious achievement, today the famous are often the visible, rather than talented." (Schmied, 2006, p. 297) 'Fame', 'reputation' or 'celebrity' have lost some of their meanings and cannot reach the full meaning of the original notion: 'star'. In theory, as Schmied says, a person becomes a celebrity as a result of great achievements. In practice, being a celebrity is widely seen as a great achievement in itself. A celebrity does not need to be famous, well known or recognised in the moment of becoming a celebrity. Daniel Boorstin defined 'celebrity' as "a person who is known for his well-knownness". (1961, p. 57) What we have also experienced in Hungary is that today one's being a celebrity is temporal and can be foretold. Star phenomenon in a classical sense seems to disappear. The new celebrity phenomenon is controlled by economic indices –the marker is the audience (viewers and readers). That is why fluctuation is so remarkable among today's celebrities. Viewership indexes matter above all.

Celebrity can be a distant idol, which is attractive because of inaccessibility. In Hungary we do not have unreachable stars. The Hungarian celebrity is often a chosen idol just because he/she is just a boy/girl from next door, someone who the fans can easily achieve and can identify themselves with. In Hungary as Sheryl Garratt argues "the illusion of accessibility is essential." (Garratt, p. 404) Joshua Gamson's opinion about celebrities is true for Hungarian celebrities as well: "Contemporary celebrity is composed of a string of antinomies: public roles opposing private selves, artificial opposing natural, image opposing reality, ideal opposing typical, special opposing ordinary, hierarchy opposing equality." (Gamson, 1994, p. 195)

Celebrities as Role Models – The Hungarian King

Celebrity is not a production of mass-media but it is as old as mankind. History is replete with examples of biblical figures, emperors, heroes and heroines who were/are well-known and recognised. The story of these people has offered the possibility of devotion and identification. Adoring a star or identifying oneself with a celebrity is part of human nature. People always looked for an object for their adoration independently from the technical standards of the era. However the object of adoration has changed a lot in the last century. Tyler Cowen cites Winston Churchill reflecting "Can nations remain healthy, can all nations draw together, in a world whose brightest stars are film stars?" (2000, p. 46) Tyler also confirms how the nature of fame is changing. According to an American survey in 1898 that examined those whom the children want to resemble the most, seventy-eight percent of the respondents (12-14 yrs) selected a famous person from history (including politicians, moral leaders and generals). Another poll was conducted in 1948 with the same topic. In this survey only a third of the respondents chose historical figures. Sportsmen (23%) and entertainers (14%) were famous as well. The World Almanach of 1986 listed the ten figures most admired figures by American teenagers. The top ten were only entertainers, except Ronald Reagan (being a former actor). (Turner, p. 47) As we see on these examples new heroes got the old role models within 88 years.

The lack of real heroes and the appearance of a new type of role models characterised Hungarian celebrity culture from the nineties. Jimmy Zábó, a singer who was known as "Jimmy, the King" for years came from a social class that never before had had the chance to represent itself. Jimmy was born in 1958 in a poor quarter of Budapest. He started his long career as a choirboy in the State Radio Children's Choir. He spent several years touring the United States looking for international success, but eventually returned to Hungary. Starting to tour around Hungary he never betrayed his working class roots. He turned up in different TV-shows. In the late nineties his music was the most sellable - six of his albums went diamond, three platinum and one double-platinum. Even at the peak of his career he did not move from Csepel (working class district, south part of Budapest), to any luxurious surroundings in the city-centre which however he could have afforded. His popularity was enormous especially among the lower class society. They called him 'the King'.

"The fact that celebrity has extended its purchase upon the public imagination across cultures and over time provides at least *prima facie* evidence that it might be performing some kind of social function for its consumers." (Turner, p.23) On 2nd January 2001 Jimmy shot himself in the head. Although on arrival at the Military Hospital (where the best facilities for dealing with gunshot wounds exist) surgeons began operating on him immediately, he died of his injuries. The case shocked the country and the news - of course - got extraordinary publicity in the media. Television channels broadcast his funeral live which was without precedent and became a national social event. Never before had an entertainer's funeral been broadcast live on Hungarian television.³ Thousands

of people were present at his burial ceremony; even fans from neighbouring countries came to attend the obsequies. As Turner says “[...] celebrity generates para-social interactions that operate as a means of compensating for changes in the social construction of the communities [...]” (Turner, p. 23)

The cult around him was big when he was alive. When he died his hair was stolen from the hospital by fans where it had been shaved off as doctors tried to save the singer. Six years after Jimmy’s demise, it appears that his cult still lives. His name still sells tons of records. There are 16 different Jimmy records and one DVD on the market, and together they have sold 200.000 copies since his death.

Crime Sells – World Famous Hungarian Highwayman

A real, edifying and again very Hungarian tale is the story of Attila Ambrus also known as, the ‘Whiskey Robber’. Ambrus was born in 1967 in Transylvania. He had trouble with the law from a young age for committing petty thefts. In 1988 he illegally crossed Romania’s borders by riding underneath a freight train and applied for political asylum and citizenship in Hungary, which he never obtained. Ambrus made a living through a variety of odd jobs, including being a grave digger and a pelt smuggler, after which he tried out for the professional hockey team. Despite his success in sport and safe income he committed his first robbery, at a post office, in 1993. After this success, Ambrus continued a string of 27 robberies of banks, post offices, and travel agents that ended with his arrest in 1999, stealing in all about 200 million forints (about 800, 000 euro). He became known as the Whiskey Robber, because he was often seen drinking whiskey at a nearby pub prior to the robbery. Although he later carried a gun, Ambrus never harmed anyone in his robberies, and was famous for presenting bouquets of flowers to the women cashiers at the end of each robbery and sending the police bottles of wine. The continuous over-reporting of crime has led to the birth of a new media icon. According to the myth that has been built around him he never shouted orders, but was always polite and well-spoken, thanking the staff for their co-operation. He was extremely popular at the time of his arrest in 1999. He was sentenced to 17 years in prison, but escaped, using a rope made of shredded sheets, electric cords, and shoe laces. He evaded police custody for three months while living in a downtown Budapest apartment and he was caught again after another robbery, when he returned to recover his dog. It was again a very popular act. Instead of escaping abroad he took time to go home for his sick dog.

He became as famous as a real celebrity over the borders and the international press dealt with him as well: “For many Hungarians, Ambrus is a post-modern role model, who tapped into the peculiar Zeitgeist of the time between Communism and capitalism, when the one-party state dissolved; leaving something of a vacuum in its wake, and everything was up for grabs. When once state-owned companies were simply appropriated by the directors and national assets were sliced up and handed out like pieces of cake, who could criticise a man for doing the same in public as the elite were doing behind closed doors? As the national paper Magyar Hírlap said: ‘He didn’t rob banks. He merely performed a peculiar redistribution of wealth, which differs from the practices of the elite only in its method.’” (LeBor, 2001)

Anyway, the fact that public sympathy can be generated for an underworld figure and one can become an icon through committing crime is not a new phenomenon, even in Hungary. Sándor Rózsa, a XIX century highwayman, enjoyed much the same esteem as Dick Turpin, with elements of Robin Hood thrown in for good measure. Ambrus’s celebrity status can be understood as traditional in this respect. There has, however, been a change in values since the end of the Communist era. During the socialist period the police was known for its unmercifulness and imbecility. Policemen were the target of people’s scorn. Police in the new political system after 1989 tried to change this image stating that they would „serve and protect” the Hungarian citizens. (Csepeli-Mátay, 2001) However the gap between the will and reality was obvious. According to the magazines the police hated Ambrus because he was smarter than them, and people hated the police because they wanted to take their entertainment. At that time trendy caps, T-shirts, bags were sold with the slogan ‘I am with you, Whisky Robber. His story has been made the subject of a Hungarian cabaret and a book by an American writer, Julian Rubinstein, titled *Ballad of the Whiskey Robber*. Warner Bros. bought the film rights to Rubinstein’s book and intends to make a movie starring Johnny Depp as Attila Ambrus.

Research on Hungarians' "Celebrity Consumption"

For this study I conducted research together with a fellow student of mine, Veronika Munk. We wondered what the people's opinion about present-day Hungarian celebrities is. Are the celebrities on the covers of the tabloids really so popular? For the research we wanted to reach as many people as possible so we published our questionnaire on one of the most popular Hungarian online portals Index.hu.⁴ There was another reason why we chose Index.hu. It has its own Hungarian Celebrity Database in which they score the celebrities. Each star gets a HCI-score (HCI - Hungarian Celebrity Index). The HCI shows the present celebrity rankings in Hungary. In the calculation method - not dispensing logarithmisation - the editors take into account how many times a name has been mentioned on the web, how many articles were posted, the date of issue of these articles, how many times they were read and of course the readers' votes. The data is further corrected - due to the distortion caused by the profile of Index.hu - by weighting the scores according to different categories (showbiz, sports and public life). For the survey we made a list of 29 Hungarian celebrities, including the first top ten with the highest HCI scores, ten stars with lower scores and nine other celebrities.

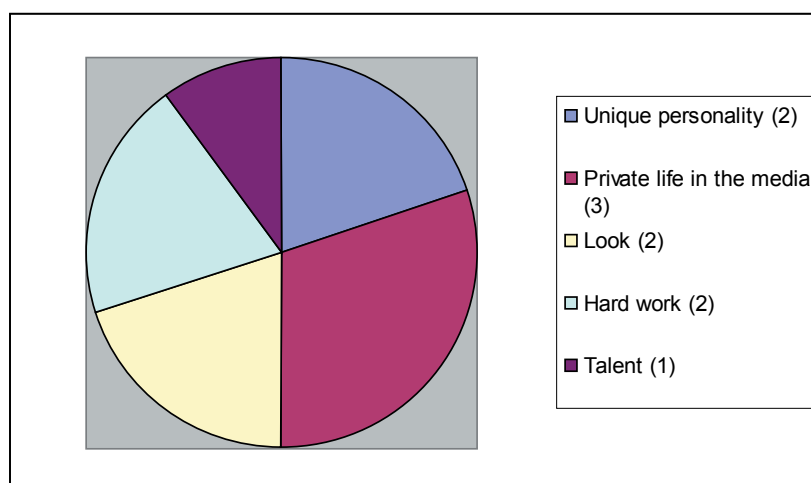
The poll was available for 24 hours on 13th April 2007 and to our greatest surprise it was popular: 7317 readers answered our questions. Detailed results of a domestic survey might not be interesting for foreigners, but some data are really astonishing.

According to the results of the survey⁵ the participants were young (51% were between 25-34 years old) and educated (67 % had higher, 31 % had a secondary qualification). In all, 49% were women, 51% men. We used SPSS 11.0 statistical analysing program for the research.

The Questionnaire

Our first questions focused on Hungarian celebrities in general. 41.6% of the respondents defined celebrities as people who are constantly in the media. 71.5% thought that most of the Hungarian stars couldn't pull through in the international star-world. And who can become a celebrity in Hungary? According to our respondents celebrities have nothing to do with merit, talent or hard work, on the contrary. Sixty percent stated that most of the Hungarian stars are those who became stars for no evident reasons. Three-quarters of the 7317 respondents submitted that the most important thing in becoming a star is the constant support of the media. The second most important factor is the look of the celebrities, the third is their unique personality, the fourth is their positive inner values and last of all comes talent.

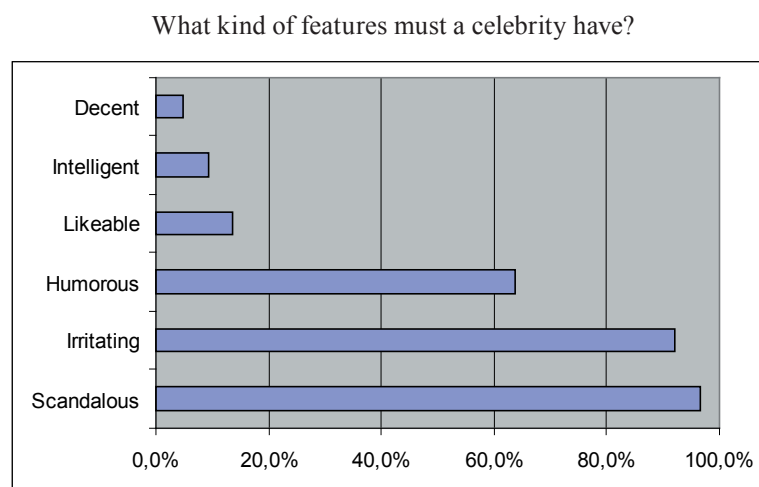
We asked people to say why they think these first top ten celebrities (with the biggest HCI scores) in the spotlight are. Their opinion was as follows:



What made the Top 10 Hungarian Celebrities so famous?

As we can see only 3 out of the 10 most popular celebrities have actually done something to earn their success.

The vast majority of the respondents (77%) stated that nowadays anybody can become a celebrity. Should a celebrity have any specific feature? According to our respondents one has the best opportunity of becoming a celebrity, if one behaves scandalously (97 %) and irritatingly (92%).



The vast majority – 93% - of the respondents does not want to be a Hungarian celebrity; however one third of the answerers would like to be a Hollywood star. More than half of the respondents (54%) do not envy anything of the Hungarian celebrities' lives. Ten percent admit begrudging the star's lifestyle and another ten percent the attractive popularity. 16% clearly confess that the only thing they envy is the money.

Let's Hate a Non-existing Celebrity!

The aim of our survey was to find the real popularity of Hungarian celebrities. We asked the respondents how much they knew about Hungarian stars and how much they liked them. As I mentioned before we listed 29 celebrities in the survey but we put one odd-one-out among them: a fictitious celebrity though a real person, my dentist, Lukács Bíró.⁶ He has never been on the covers of the magazines, he has never been in the spotlight, he is 'just' a dentist. After I had asked his permission he happily agreed to participate in our celebrity-survey. So we hid his name in the list and waited for the result. And the result was really surprising. 25% of the answerers stated knowing Lukács to some degree. There can be two explanations: either they are all patients of my dentists (which is quite unlikely), or (and maybe more likely) the respondents felt that it is better to know everyone in the list. What was even more astonishing was that half of the respondents undertook expressing an opinion about him - twice as many people as those, who stated knowing him. 67 percent of these opinion shapers (2505 people) expressed their dislike for him, and 4 percent (154 respondents) asserted that they were fond of him. Can we assume that the respondents rather dislike someone whom they do not know? From the 29 listed celebrities the eighth most rejected one was my dentist.⁷ Among the ten most "hated" celebrities we find six stars from the top ten HCI scored list. Rudely simplifying, the more the respondents know a celebrity, the bigger the rejection of him is. David Giles' seems to be right saying "[...] on one hand, we adore celebrities as representing success [...]; on the other, we ridicule them for representing 'false' values of commodity and exchange." (p. 19.)

The Real Star-Consumers

As the results of our survey showed the interest for the stars - not surprisingly - is related to tabloid-reading habits. 15.5 percent of the respondents read regularly at least a daily or weekly tabloid. And if we get a closer view of these people, they are those who really honour the celebrities. 26 percent of them had already asked a celebrity for an autograph, 13 percent of them would be a Hungarian-, 39 percent of them a Hollywood celebrity. Three-quarters

of them are women and have only primary school education. They regularly read tabloids and happily buy those products that are advertised by a celebrity.

Brief Conclusion

What I have learnt from my studies so far is that the term 'celebrity' can only be defined in a cultural context – in a cultural, medial and normative system of a certain community. It is easy to restrict the context for the tabloid covers, but in this case the research will only represent the characteristics how tabloids choose their topic. We can compare the celebrities by their life spans, by their essence and appearance or by their 'celebritiness' and by the values they represent. However as the result of my survey shows, according to the respondents most of the Hungarian celebrities do not represent any values, their reputation is only due to fast changing interests of the media that created them as well. We call them celebrities just because the celebrity-makers of the political economy call them so. Therefore it is worth in the future to analyse the celebrities as FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods) products.

Notes

¹ Source: Gulyás, Ágnes: „Bulvárlapok a rendszerváltás utáni Magyarországon.” In Médiakutató, 2003 (http://www.mediakutato.hu/cikk/2000_01_osz/02_bulvarlapok_a_rendszervaltas_utani_magyarorszagon/05.html?q=guly%E1s#guly%E1s)

² Data by AGB Nielsen Hungary Media Research Institute, www.agbnielsen.net

³ Interestingly a few days later the actor Imre Sinkovits (awarded with the 'nation's actor' title) died. Because of the strong social pressure the Hungarian State Television broadcast this funeral as well. That was again without precedent. Never before (and never after) was the funeral of an actor broadcast.

⁴ Index.hu has approximately 350.000 individual visitors a day.

⁵ The article about the results of the survey was published on 24th April 2007

Article available: <http://index.hu/velvet/celeb/sztaros0424/>

⁶ We got the idea from the Hungarian Society Research Institute, TÁRKI. TÁRKI has been researching racism and xenophobia among the adult Hungarian population for one and a half decades with constant methodology. Their last opinion poll (March 2007) showed that Pirese refugees are more hated than any other group. Even those who admitted to disliking Arabs, Chinese and Romanians, said the Pirese were worse. Of course the Pirese nation does not exist. The Pirese were invented by TÁRKI to compare the attitude of Hungarians towards existent minorities – Roma, Germans, Slovaks and Serbs – with their feelings towards a fictitious group.

Original study of TÁRKI: <http://www.tarki.hu/hu/news/2007/kiteint/20070308.html>

⁷ Putting the name of a non-celebrity in our list had its consequences. One day after we had published the results of our survey a journalist published an article, stating Lukács Bíró is a fictitious person.

(Article: <http://www.prherald.hu/cikk2.php?idc=20070425-200940&id2=elso&id1=>)

We also got several e-mails from Lukács Bíró's patients accusing us using their dentist's name without his permission.

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