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## Spectacularity and Stardom versus Truth in Media Communication

Spectacularity and stardom are omnipresent nowadays: they may be encountered in the cinema, the theatre, TV, or in all kinds of journalism. Modern technology facilitates making an interesting spectacle out of anything – and today's culture favors development and popularity of this form of expression and transmission. It has also entered the transmitted news. They are short, dramatic and presented in the spectacular form. Presenters are well dressed and move in elegant way, they are also witty and attractive. They will do anything to find a way to enter the recipients' consciousness, to be remembered and to be returned to eagerly.

Popular culture creates a strong need to experience something extraordinary and media make an effort to meet this need by formulating ordinary things in an extraordinary way. Spectacularity and stardom have entered modern media in such a versatile way that they are present even in the transmissions of religious services. For example, whilst transmitting the liturgy of the Holy Mass everything is done in order to make it interesting, so that those who celebrate it and those who participate in it could have a possibly good image in the eyes of the viewers. Prayer and the contact with God are often left in the background. What is more, some people responsible for the transmission of the sacrum belong to the so-called profane, as they may be non-believers, and at the backstage they may smoke cigarettes, drink beer, or have talks that have nothing in common with the meaning of the words and behaviors contained in the liturgy, but still they are good professionals who can create a spectacle that has a religious character. In this way a religious event is transformed into a spectacle without the essence of religiousness, which is the contact with God.

We have got used to spectacularity and stardom in television programs to such an extent that if one does not offer them we abandon it immediately searching for an alternative. The media managers know that very well, especially managers of the commercial media, and as

they want to have as many recipients as possible, they satiate their media with these phenomena.

### **1. The features of media communication with a spectacular and stardom character**

The spectacle is a phenomenon that is typical to modern society. From its authors' point of view, as Guy Debord emphasizes frequently in his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, it belongs to the world of production, and from the recipients' point of view – to the world of consumption or even the mass consumption<sup>1</sup>. Hence, the profit is the main motif for its creation and satisfying a need to learn something new as well as to experience something interesting in a light and pleasant manner is the main motif for its reception. Those needs are especially acute among young people that are eager to learn and to experience the world. Satisfying them is first of all done by images, for the spectacle is based exactly on the image, which today is ever more clearly strengthened by sound and move. It is not common accumulation of images, sounds and move, but a purposeful composition of them. That is why the spectacle is not a transmission of the reality, or a reflection of the reality, although it appears to the recipients as “indisputable factualness”. It is not even a “complement of the real world”, or its “decorative setting”, but “the very core of the unreality of the real society”<sup>2</sup>. It is a composition of what the recipients expect, and not of what actually exists. If a spectacle mirrors the reality to some extent, then, in Debord's opinion, it trivializes it. According to him, trivialization of the reality is a general feature of the media world as well as of the popular culture<sup>3</sup>. Many critics of modern media and of popular culture have a similar opinion on that matter<sup>4</sup>.

The spectacle is adequate to the taste of an average recipient, and that is why it generally gathers a great audience. And that is why commercial media eagerly reach for it, as they first of all care about maximum ratings, and do everything that can ensure them.

The spectacle is not complicated either in its content or its forms; it is pleasant to watch,

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<sup>1</sup> G. Debord. *Spółczesność spektaklu oraz Rozważania o społeczeństwie spektaklu*. Przełożył oraz wstępem i komentarzami opatrzył. M. Kwaterko. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> A. Lepa, bp. *Kult banału w mediach*. „Niedziela” 2008 nr 38 s. 20-21.

and it arouses strong emotions. It also has its culmination points that strengthen its appeal and attract viewers.

The spectacle has a star who is a person that embodies the values and behaviors contained in the spectacle in the best possible way. Debord calls that person “the servant of the spectacle”<sup>5</sup>, but nowadays we would rather use the term celebrity.

Celebrity has the following features:

He/She does not have his or her own and constant personality, but incarnates into such a personality that is useful for the purposes of the producer of the spectacle, and that is willingly accepted by the viewers.

He/She presents the originality of his or her features, his visuality, and especially his corporeality. With his properties he perfectly well corresponds with popular culture and in a way he forces the viewers to take interest in them; he is inscribed in their imagination and memory. He forces them to talk about him, to have a will to see him and hear him again, to imitate his way of speaking, clothes, gestures, behaviors. A celebrity skillfully shows himself when he presents the weather forecast, when he reports some events, or when he presents important problems. Celebrities are famous for being famous – as Daniel Boorstin described this feature of theirs<sup>6</sup>.

Celebrity has got enough money to satisfy his needs, he does not lack anything, he likes comfort, he is not stressed and is satisfied with his life. Although, he has some personal problems which he does not show to the public.

Celebrity is multioptional, which means he does not have any constant overviews or norms, patterns of behavior or predilections. He gives his face to all kinds of products and services, e.g. perfumes, bank services, alcohols, scientific conferences, social campaigns, etc. He may be anywhere, but the face of a celebrity has a precise, often very high, price. He borrows himself to public life; he accompanies politicians and businessman, he takes part in meetings of various groups and becomes their advisor, he is present at fairs and contests,

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<sup>5</sup> Debord. p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> D. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, New York: Atheneum, 1971. First published as *The Image or What Happened to the American Dream?* (1961). See too: W. Godzic, *Znani z tego, że są znani. Celebrycy w kulturze tabloidów*, Warszawa 2007; P.D. Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997; C. Rojek, *Celebrity*, London: Reaktion Books, 2001.

political party congresses and important academic conferences. Academic Committees of the conferences that are organized nowadays have one, two, or perhaps three people who act as stars. They are popular professors, politicians, high-ranking state and self-government officials, bishops, cardinals.

The features of the spectacle that were mentioned above make it possible for the media communication to be very popular. This is one of the causes why The Summer Olympics Opening Ceremony in Beijing in 2008 was watched all over the world by 4 billion people<sup>7</sup>.

## **2. Effects of domination of spectacularity and stardom in media communication**

Modern spectacles and celebrities do not show the reality as it is, but rather a created reality; first of all, most often they emphasize aesthetic, hedonistic and material values, everything that is connected with the consumer society. In spectacles celebrities demonstrate their wealth, comfort, functionality, satisfaction with life; they emphasize the culture of being and social culture more distinctly than symbolic culture. This was perfectly well formulated by Ryszard Kapuściński, who stated that in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and especially in its last years, “the truth is not important, and even political struggle is not important. What is important in today's information is the spectacle, and the moment we have created this information-spectacle we can sell it anywhere. The more spectacular it is the more money we can earn. In this way information has become separated from culture; it has drifted up into the sky; and the one who can afford it, can reach it, disseminate it, and in this way earn even more money. /.../ This is why out of a sudden at the head of the greatest television companies we find people who have nothing to do with journalism, who only join great businessmen connected with great factories or insurance companies, or any other institutions aiming at generating a possibly greatest profit. Information has become profitable, and very soon it has become a spectacle”<sup>8</sup>.

Spectacles and celebrities do not, as a rule, show a phenomenon or a problem in a comprehensive way, but only give a fragmentary and selective account of it. In any fragment of life, that is in any situation, a celebrity may be someone completely different. And so, at

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<sup>7</sup> “The Washington Post”, Saturday August 9, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> R. Kapuściński. 1994. Rozmowa trzecia. Innego świata nie będzie, czyli media, dusza i pieniądze. W: Kapuściński: nie ogarniam świata. Z Ryszardem Kapuścińskim spotykają się Witold Bereś i Krzysztof Brunetko. Warszawa: Świat Książki 2007 s. 147.

home he may be a democratic, willing to have a dialog, generous husband-father, and at work he may be an authoritarian, ruthless administrator who exploits the employees. This fragmentary character might have negative effects on the formation of the recipients' attitudes towards life.

Spectacularity and stardom borrow a lot of contents and forms from various cultures and time periods. Blending and compiling them, first of all according to the criterion of their attractiveness, forms such an unfavorable phenomena, as: ahistoricity, reductionism, illogicality, lack of continuity of phenomena, mixing events and figures.

Another consequence of spectacularity and stardom is the relatively scarce presence of religious contents and worldview justifications in media communication. It may be said that the sacrum, or religion are “washed out” from modern spectacles in the mass media. Even if there are some elements of these areas of life, they are used rather as a decoration, and not as a manifestation of the bond of the man with the supernatural world, with God. They are peculiar requisites that add variety to the communicated contents, but do not explain religious truths, or religious experiences; they do not show the deep contact between the man and the supernatural world. Modern spectacles and celebrities shut off the man in his earthly life, reduce the vision of his life to the periods of youth and active maturity.

Spectacularity and stardom destroy privacy and intimacy, because everything is for sale here, and the recipients will buy everything. The so-called voyeurism has become a feature wanted in the authors of spectacles and celebrities. An example of this is “Big Brother”.

A consequence of the domination of spectacularity and stardom in media communications is undermining the model of a coherent, teleological world, and the hierarchy of values that has been common for all members of the society. Spectacles and celebrities transmit all kinds of values, and they do it in such a way that makes them difficult to be understood and hierarchized. People may like anything and they may choose anything when they are not guided by any hierarchy. This is the most destructive result of spectacles and stardom.

For the recipients spectacles and celebrities become the source of information, opinions, life experiences – and it is so in all the areas of life. They adopt their values, norms, patterns of behavior, choices. And this can be unfavorable for the development of their personality. Guided by the predilections and by choices made by their favorite celebrities they may make choices that can be wrong for themselves.

Spectacles and celebrities in the mass media favor the formation of an indefinite or blurred

or hybrid identity in the recipients; they do not support their putting down roots in social groups that are important for them. Even the family in which they live may cease being an important community, the basic group for them. Also the religious group to which they have belonged since their childhood, may stop being a reference group for them. Being under the influence of celebrities they become typical cosmopolitans who, according to Zygmunt Bauman's diagnosis, may change their identity like their clothes; but it is a different problem if they feel comfortable with this.

### **3. Spectacularity and stardom versus the truth**

Taking the mentioned features of spectacularity and stardom into consideration, some basic questions appear that have already been posed at the beginning of the study: can spectacularity and stardom be connected with the truth? Can they serve searching for it, formulating it and communicating it? Before I answer those questions, I would like to refer to one of the scenes depicted in St Mark's Gospel (2, 1-12).

Some people want to meet Lord Jesus because they have a paralytic with them. However, they are unable to get to Him as there is a crowd of people around Him and it is impossible to put the paralytic waiting to be miraculously healed in front of Him. So they climb on the roof, remove part of it, and let down the pallet on which the paralytic is lying. What does Jesus do? He heals the paralytic bodily and spiritually.

This is a magnificent spectacle, but Jesus is not concentrated on it. He uses it to show the truth that God has the power to heal, to transcend the laws of nature, as He is its creator. He also tells people who are present there who he really is. He does so in the following words: "your sins are forgiven", "take up your pallet and go home". With the use of the spectacularity that happened in one of the houses of Capernaum He concentrates the attention of the pharisee's and of all the people present there on the questions about what is the connection between the disease and the sin, who may forgive sins, and who Jesus Christ is. Here spectacularity, although evident, is reduced to the background. Searching for the truth, formulating the religious truth God reveals about Himself, is at the foreground. This is a splendid example for the fact that spectacularity might be reconciled with searching for and explicating the truth, that it may be used for showing something very important. It could help people understand God's power and mercy.

If Lord Jesus appeared among modern people, He would surely reach for a camera.

Perhaps He would not do it Himself, but He would make efforts to ensure cooperation of the best film or television cameramen for propagating the Gospel to people. This is exactly what John Paul II did. He did not avoid a spectacle, on the contrary, during his apostolic visits he created lots of extremely spectacular situations. Someone has accurately pointed to the difference between the visit of Pope Benedict XVI's and that of Pope John Paul II in Jerusalem, saying that John Paul II was a pope of the gesture, and the gesture belongs to the basic elements of the spectacle, whereas Benedict XVI was a pope of the word. John Paul II's visit to Jerusalem was more spectacular than Benedict XVI's one, but they both achieved the same goal, although in different ways.

Spectacularity may be reconciled with searching for, formulating and communicating the truth. The only problem is that proper forms of joining spectacularity and the truth should be looked for. Following this path the first Christians introduced the image into communicating their religious truths and moral norms. As soon as in the first centuries of Christianity, for example, the image of the Good Shepherd became popular that showed the kindness and devotion of God as well as the kindness and devotion of the man. God is a good shepherd, and a man may be one as well. The image, an important element of the spectacle, has entered the field of illustrating God's and the man's characteristics.

The spectacle – specularity may serve searching for, formulating and communicating the truth and moral norms. Spectacularity and stardom best and most fully may be used today for searching for, formulating and transmitting the truth and moral norms in the programs that may be defined as testimonies. The one who offers a testimony, does not give the others himself, but he shows the truth and the good in such a way that they may transform the recipients into better people, and he often points to God who plays an important role in a man's change for the better.

### **Summary**

Spectacularity and stardom are omnipresent nowadays: in cinema, theatre, television and in all kinds of journalism. Modern technology facilitates making an interesting spectacle out of everything, and popular culture favors the development and popularity of this form of expression and transmission. A spectacle has a star, meaning a person who personifies the values and behavior present in the spectacle. Guy Debord calls the person "the servant of the

spectacle”, but nowadays we would rather use the term celebrity.

Spectacle – spectacularity can serve to search for, formulate and transmit truth or moral norms. It is worse with stardom. As a principle, today’s celebrities are not interested in the truth, nor fixed moral norms requiring a person to make sacrifices and renouncement. Celebrities expose themselves and serve those who get them involved as well as their recipients. Even the “face” which they so willingly “sell” does not really belong to them. This form of today’s stardom is not so easily adjusted to truth and religious truths, and this is also the case with spectacularity.

Nowadays, spectacularity and stardom can be most fully used in searching for, formulating and transmitting truths and moral norms in programs which can be described as testimonies. The person who gives testimony transfers not himself but the One, who is more wonderful than the person, presenting the truth and good in such a way that they are able to change the recipients and make them become better people.

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